The Scottish Play  Say the name Macbeth backstage within earshot of actors taking part in a production of the play and you will probably be told to leave the theater, spin around three times, spit on the ground, and then ask for permission to return. Superstition holds that the play is cursed; even pronouncing its name backstage is supposed to bring bad luck. For that reason, cast and crew often refer to it as “the Scottish play” or “that play.” Accidents and injuries (particularly sword wounds) have plagued productions of Macbeth throughout the play’s 400-year history. The misfortunes seem to have begun with the very first performance in 1606, when the actor (a boy—more about that later) playing Lady Macbeth died backstage. Shakespeare himself had to step into the role.

The Globe Theater  The first performance of Macbeth was held before King James at Hampton Court Palace. However, in Shakespeare’s time most plays were performed in outdoor public theaters. These theaters resembled courtyards, with the stage surrounded on three sides by tall raised galleries. The best-known of these theaters in London was the Globe, where Shakespeare and his acting company performed.

Macbeth and Shakespeare’s Theater

The Globe was a three-story wooden structure that could hold as many as 3,000 people. Plays were performed on a platform stage in the theater’s center. The poorer patrons, or “groundlings,” stood around the stage to watch the performance. Wealthier patrons sat in the covered galleries. Because the Globe was an open-air theater, performers had to depend on natural lighting for illumination. But Shakespeare found creative ways to work with the natural light. When Macbeth was performed at the Globe, audiences were probably struck by the sight in Act Five, Scene 1, of Lady Macbeth pacing around the stage with a candle. By that point in the play, the eerie scene would probably have been effective because the natural light may well have dimmed.
The Players  Actors worked in close proximity to the groundlings, who stood around the stage, eating and drinking. If they disapproved of certain characters or lines, they would let the actors know by jeering or even throwing food. The large crowds also attracted pickpockets and other rough elements. The rowdiness of the audiences and the location of theaters near taverns and other unsavory establishments gave theaters, and actors, an immoral reputation. Because the theater was viewed as so disreputable, women were not allowed to perform. As with the ill-fated actor who was supposed to play Lady Macbeth in 1606, boys normally played all of the female roles.

The Fate of the Globe  In 1613, the Globe’s thatched roof caught fire during a performance of Henry VIII, and the theater was destroyed. It was quickly rebuilt at the same location, however, this time with a tiled gallery roof. Only 30 years later, Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans shut down the theater, suppressing what they considered a frivolous form of entertainment. But the Globe would rise again. In the 1990s, Shakespeare’s theater was rebuilt to the same size and design of the old Globe. Since its official opening in 1997, the new Globe has become one of London’s most popular tourist attractions.

THEATER STAGING

1. Though scenery was minimal, audiences still demanded a good show. A trapdoor in the stage led to a space below, from which ghosts—or the witches in Macbeth—could emerge.
2. The enclosed tower behind the stage offered a place to create sound effects, such as the thunder, drums, and bells heard in Macbeth.
3. Above the back of the stage and its small balcony was a painted ceiling called “the heavens.” It contained trapdoors for the appearance of angels and spirits from the enclosed tower.
4. Props, such as swords and flags, and elaborate costumes added to the display.

This drawing of the Swan theater, left, is one of the few historical sources of information about the design of Elizabethan public theaters. Because of their open-air design, performances could only take place in daylight and in warm weather. The drawing was used to reconstruct Shakespeare’s Globe theater, right, in which a Zulu version of Macbeth was performed in 1997.
Shakespearean Tragedy

Revenge, intrigue, murder, and insanity—these are just a few of the topics explored in William Shakespeare’s tragedies. Basing his works on the Greek and Roman traditions of drama, Shakespeare created some of the most enduring tragedies, which continue to enthrall audiences to this day.

Renaissance Drama

During the Middle Ages, English drama focused mainly on religious themes, teaching moral lessons or retelling Bible stories to a populace that by and large could not read. With the Renaissance, however, came a rebirth of interest in the dramas of ancient Greece and Rome. First at England’s universities and then among graduates of those universities, plays imitating classical models became increasingly popular. These plays fell into two main categories: comedies and tragedies.

In Renaissance England, comedy was broadly defined as a dramatic work with a happy ending; many comedies contained humor, but humor was not required. A tragedy, in contrast, was a work in which the main character, or tragic hero, came to an unhappy end. In addition to comedies and tragedies, Shakespeare wrote several plays classified as histories, which present stories about England’s earlier monarchs. Of all Shakespeare’s plays, however, his tragedies are the ones most often cited as his greatest.

The Greek Origins of Tragedy

In Western civilization, both comedies and tragedies arose in ancient Greece, where they were performed as part of elaborate outdoor festivals. According to the famous ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, tragedy arouses pity and fear in the audience—pity for the hero and fear for all human beings, who are subject to character flaws and an unknown destiny. Seeing a tragedy unfold produces a catharsis, or cleansing, of these emotions in the audience.

In ancient Greek tragedies, the hero’s tragic flaw is often hubris—excessive pride that leads the tragic hero to challenge the gods. Angered by such hubris, the gods unleash their retribution, or nemesis, on the hero. Ancient Greek tragedies also make use of a chorus, a group of performers who stand outside the action and comment on the events and characters in the play, often hinting at the doom to come and stressing the fatalistic aspect of the hero’s downfall. By Shakespeare’s day, the chorus consisted of only one person—a kind of narrator—or was dispensed with entirely.
Characteristics of Tragedy

The intention of tragedy is to exemplify the idea that human beings are doomed to suffer, fail, or die because of their own flaws, destiny, or fate. As part of this tradition, Shakespeare’s tragedies share the following characteristics with the classic Greek tragedies.

**CHARACTERISTICS OF TRAGEDY**

**THE TRAGIC HERO**
- is the main character who comes to an unhappy or miserable end
- is generally a person of importance in society, such as a king or a queen
- exhibits extraordinary abilities but also a **tragic flaw**, a fatal error in judgment or weakness of character, that leads directly to his or her downfall

**THE PLOT**
- involves a **conflict** between the hero and a person or force, called the **antagonist**, which the hero must battle. Inevitably the conflict contributes to the hero’s downfall.
- is built upon a series of causally related events that lead to the **catastrophe**, or tragic resolution. This final stage of the plot usually involves the death of the hero.
- is resolved when the tragic hero meets his or her doom with courage and dignity, reaffirming the grandeur of the human spirit.

**THE THEME**
- is the central idea conveyed by the work and usually focuses on an aspect of fate, ambition, loss, defeat, death, loyalty, impulse, or desire. Tragedies, such as Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* (page 348), may contain several themes.

Shakespearean tragedy differs somewhat from classic Greek tragedy in that Shakespeare’s works are not unrelentingly serious. For example, he often eased the intensity of the action by using the device of **comic relief**—a light, mildly humorous scene following a serious one.

In the following example from *Macbeth*, Act I, Scene 3, lines 143–147, Macbeth is expressing his thoughts, unheard by Banquo, about the witches’ prophecy that he will be king of Scotland.

**Macbeth.** [Aside] If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me Without my stir.

**Banquo.** New honors come upon him, Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mold But with the aid of use.

**Macbeth.** [Aside] Come what come may, Time and the hour runs through the roughest day.

**Close Read**
In this short dialogue, what characteristics of a tragedy do you recognize?
Shakespeare’s Conventions of Drama

The printed text of Shakespeare's plays, such as Macbeth, is like that of any drama. The play is divided into acts, which are divided into scenes, often marking a change in setting. The dialogue spoken by the characters is labeled to show who is speaking, and stage directions, written in italics and in parentheses, specify the setting (time and place) and how the characters should behave and speak. In addition, Shakespeare typically used the following literary devices in his dramas.

**BLANK VERSE**

Like many plays written before the 20th century, Macbeth is a verse drama, a play in which the dialogue consists almost entirely of poetry with a fixed pattern of rhythm, or meter. Many English verse dramas are written in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter, a meter in which the normal line contains five stressed syllables, each preceded by an unstressed syllable.

> Such foul and fair a day I have not seen.

**SOLiloquy AND ASIDE**

Playwrights rely on certain conventions to give the audience more information about the characters. Two such conventions are the soliloquy and the aside.

- A *soliloquy* is a speech that a character makes while alone on stage, to reveal his or her thoughts to the audience.

- An *aside* is a remark that a character makes in an undertone to the audience or another character but that others on stage are not supposed to hear. A stage direction clarifies that a remark is an aside; unless otherwise specified, the aside is to the audience. Here is an example from Macbeth.

> Macbeth. [Aside] Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor! The greatest is behind.—[To Ross and Angus] Thanks for your pains. [Aside to Banquo] Do you not hope your children shall be kings . . . ?

**DRAMATIC IRONY**

Irony is based on a contrast between appearance or expectation and reality. In dramatic irony, what appears true to one or more characters in a play is seen to be false by the audience, which has a more complete picture of the action. In Act One of Macbeth, dramatic irony can be found in Duncan's words to Lady Macbeth upon his arrival at the Macbeths’ castle.

> Conduct me to mine host. We love him highly And shall continue our graces toward him.
Duncan is sure of Macbeth’s loyalty and says that he will continue to honor Macbeth with marks of his favor. However, the audience knows that Macbeth is planning to murder Duncan to increase his own power. The audience recognizes the irony of Duncan’s trusting remarks.

**FORESHADOWING**

Foreshadowing is a writer’s use of hints or clues to suggest what events will occur later in a work. In Act One, Scene 1, the witches’ dialogue opens the play with clues as to what is to come.

First Witch. When shall we three meet again?  
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?  
Second Witch. When the hurly-burly’s done,  
When the battle’s lost and won.  
Third Witch. That will be ere the set of sun.  
First Witch. Where the place?  
Second Witch. Upon the heath.  
Third Witch. There to meet with Macbeth.

**Shakespearean Language**

The English language in which Shakespeare wrote was quite different from today’s. As you read a Shakespearean play, pay attention to the following.

**SHAKESPEAREAN LANGUAGE**

**GRAMMATICAL FORMS**

In Shakespeare’s day, people still commonly used the pronouns *thou, thee, thy, thine, and thysel* in place of forms of *you*. Verb forms that are now outdated were also in use—*art for are and cometh for comes*, for example.

**UNUSUAL WORD ORDER**

Shakespeare often puts verbs before subjects, objects before verbs, and other sentence parts in positions that now seem unusual. For instance, Lady Macbeth says, “O, never shall sun that morrow see!” instead of “O, that morrow shall never see the sun!”

**UNFAMILIAR VOCABULARY**

Shakespeare’s vocabulary included many words no longer in use (like *seeling*, meaning “blinding”) or words with meanings different from their meanings today (like *choppy* meaning “chapped”). Shakespeare also coined new words, some of which (like *assassination*) have become a permanent part of the language.

**CLOSE READ**

What do these lines of the witches’ dialogue suggest about the conflict that will occur in the play? What might be the result, or *resolution*, of the conflict?
The Tragedy of Macbeth
Drama by William Shakespeare

Meet the Author

William Shakespeare 1564–1616

In 1592—the first time William Shakespeare was recognized as an actor, poet, and playwright—rival dramatist Robert Greene referred to him as an “upstart crow.” Greene was probably jealous. Audiences had already begun to notice the young Shakespeare’s promise. Of course, they couldn’t have foreseen that in time he would be considered the greatest writer in the English language.

Stage-Struck  Shakespeare probably arrived in London and began his career in the late 1580s. He left his wife, Anne Hathaway, and their three children behind in Stratford. Over the next 20 years, Shakespeare rarely returned home. (See the biography on page 324 for more about Shakespeare’s early life in Stratford.)

Unlike most playwrights of his time, Shakespeare also worked as an actor. He even appeared in his own plays; among other roles, he played King Duncan in a stage production of Macbeth.

Public and critical acclaim for his work grew. His audiences craved variety, and Shakespeare responded by mastering all forms of drama. In the 1590s, he concentrated on comedies, such as A Midsummer’s Night Dream, and histories, such as Henry IV, Parts I and II.

Toast of the Town  In 1594, Shakespeare joined the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, the most prestigious theater company in England. A measure of their success was that the theater company frequently performed before Queen Elizabeth I and her court. In 1599, they were also able to purchase and rebuild a theater across the Thames called the Globe.

The company’s domination of the London theater scene continued after Elizabeth’s Scottish cousin James succeeded her in 1603. James became the patron, or chief sponsor, of Shakespeare’s company, thereafter known as the King’s Men.

The Curtain Falls  Between 1600 and 1607, Shakespeare wrote his greatest tragedies, including Hamlet, Macbeth, and King Lear. As he neared the end of his writing career and his life, even his comedies took on a darker tone. He wrote no more plays after 1613.

According to legend, Shakespeare died on April 23, 1616, the day of his 52nd birthday. In 1623, two theater colleagues published his plays in a volume called the First Folio. In an introduction to the volume, playwright Ben Jonson declared with great insight that Shakespeare “was not of an age, but for all time.”
Can you ever be too ambitious?

Ambition is a powerful motivating force. Often it is considered desirable, since it inspires people to realize their dreams. In fact, people without ambition are usually regarded as lazy. But is it possible to be overly ambitious? When might high aspirations lead to terrible consequences? Such questions are explored in the story of Macbeth, a general whose ambition is to become king.

Quickwrite With a partner, brainstorm a list of people—historical and contemporary—whose ambitions had tragic consequences. Beside their names, jot down what they hoped to achieve and the negative results of their ambitions.

Text Analysis: Shakespearean Tragedy

As you’ve learned, a Shakespearean tragedy presents a superior figure—the tragic hero—who comes to ruin because of an error in judgment or a weakness in character—a tragic flaw. One or more antagonists, or opposing characters, also work against the tragic hero, and the action builds to a catastrophe, a disastrous end involving deaths. As you read Macbeth, be aware of these dramatic conventions:

- The play is written in blank verse, or unrhymed iambic pentameter, in which the normal line has five stressed syllables, each preceded by an unstressed syllable.
- Characters often reveal their private thoughts through soliloquies and asides, which other characters cannot hear.
- Enjoyment of the play’s action is sometimes enhanced through the use of foreshadowing—hints about what may happen later—and dramatic irony—the contrast created when the audience knows more about a situation than a character knows.

Reading Strategy: Reading Shakespearean Drama

For centuries, Shakespeare has been celebrated for his powerful poetic language—what Shakespearean characters say defines them as much as what they do. However, the Bard’s language can present a challenge for modern readers. Keep a chart like the one below to record the words and actions of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to uncover their true personalities and motives. To help you understand Shakespearean language:

- Use stage directions, plot summaries, and sidenotes to establish the context, or circumstances, surrounding what characters say.
- Read important speeches aloud, such as soliloquies, focusing on clues they provide to each character’s feelings and motivations.
- Shakespeare’s unusual word order often puts verbs before subjects and objects before verbs. Find the subject, verb, and object in each line and rearrange them to clarify what the line means.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character: Macbeth</th>
<th>His Words or Actions</th>
<th>What They Reveal About Him</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He defeats the enemy on the battlefield.</td>
<td>He’s a brave and inspiring soldier and general.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>