

INTRODUCTION TO MACBETH

Macbeth is among the shortest and most intense of Shakespeare's plays, as well as one of the best known and most widely recognized. Macbeth is generally viewed as one of Shakespeare's four great tragedies, in addition to Hamlet, Othello, and King Lear. The play's penetrating exploration of human nature, ambition, evil, gender, human relationships, and kingship — along with the periodic appearance of supernatural forces — has captivated audiences and critics for centuries.

THE RISE AND FALL OF MACBETH

Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's fastest and most straight-forward tragedies in its portrayal of the rise and fall of Macbeth, a nobleman of Scotland who is also a successful military leader. Early in the play, he encounters three "weird sisters," usually referred to as witches. These witches refer to him by his current title, Thane of Glamis; then by a title that he is not yet aware of, Thane of Cawdor; and finally by a title that he does not yet possess, King of Scotland.

When Macbeth later learns that he has been named Thane of Cawdor, he begins to believe that the weird sisters have the gift of prophecy. He then must decide between waiting patiently for the prophecy to come true or killing the current king, Duncan, and forcing it to come true. Prompted by his wife (and by the announcement that Malcolm, Duncan's son, is the heir to throne), Macbeth kills Duncan and becomes the King of Scotland.

Unfortunately for Macbeth, the witches' prophecy also indicated that although he would be king, his friend Banquo's descendants would establish a line of kings after Macbeth. (An apparition that Macbeth sees in Act IV, Scene 1 of the play indicates that Banquo's line stretches all the way to King James VI of Scotland, who became King James I of England during Shakespeare's lifetime.)

Threatened by Banquo's prophecy, Macbeth begins to behave like a tyrant, killing Banquo and trying to kill his son, Fleance. His paranoia takes over, and he begins to kill anyone who seems to pose a threat to his reign. Literally haunted by apparitions, Macbeth continues his horrific behaviour until Malcolm returns with the help of Macduff, another Scottish nobleman, and support from England. Macbeth is killed, and at the play's end, Malcolm becomes king and restores Duncan's line to the Scottish throne. We do not see the witches' prophecy for Banquo come true, but because Fleance survives the attempt against his life, the possibility exist that Banquo's line will someday assume the throne.

HISTORICAL SOURCES OF THE STORY

Though Macbeth is not considered a history play, the title character is a Scottish historical figure. As we shall see when we look at its cultural context, this play also has intimate links with Early Modern England. Historically, Macbeth ruled as King of Scotland for 17 years, from 1040 to 1057. The accounts of this period in Scottish history vary. They all agree, however, that Macbeth gained the throne by killing King Duncan and lost the throne to

Malcolm by being killed. Shakespeare relied upon these histories as well as other sources in the composition of this play. Specifically, he drew heavily from Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587), but he may also have been familiar with George Buchanan's *RerumScoticarumHistorae* (1582).

Shakespeare deviates from these historical sources a great deal in his exploration of the themes of kingship, human nature, and evil. These alterations to the story include portraying the tragic hero in a more evil manner while painting Banquo (King James I's ancestor) in a more sympathetic light. For example, Holinshed's and Shakespeare's depictions of Duncan differ wildly. Historically, Duncan is described as a young, weak, and ineffective king. But Shakespeare's Duncan is an older, benevolent, influential, and virtuous king, whose murder is a crime against nature itself.

Furthermore, in Holinshed's account, Banquo figures more prominently in Macbeth's ascension to the throne because he serves as Macbeth's accomplice in Duncan's murder. Shakespeare's Banquo maintains his loyalty to Duncan, telling Macbeth that he will help as long as it does not compromise this loyalty: "So I lose none / In seeking to augment it, but still keep / My bosom franchis'd and allegiance clear, / I shall be counsell'd" (II.1.26–29).

In Shakespeare's play, Macbeth's descent into tyranny occurs over what seems a matter of weeks, and there is no mention of the ten years of peaceful rule that Scotland enjoyed under Macbeth. The final major alteration concerns Lady Macbeth, who figures very little in the historical accounts but is quite prominent in Shakespeare's play. Lady Macbeth appears only once in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, and her only action is to persuade her husband to commit regicide (the murder of a king). Critics have speculated that Shakespeare's depiction of Duncan's murder and Lady Macbeth's active and ambitious role may be borrowed from Holinshed's account of Captain Donwald and his wife's murder of King Duffe. As we can see, in addition to revising historical sources, Shakespeare frequently integrated various accounts to construct one coherent story.

THE BIRTH OF THE PLAY

The earliest published version of *Macbeth* appears in the First Folio in 1623, though many critics feel that this edition of the play is modified from the lost original. The first reference to a production of *Macbeth* pushes the play's date back to 1611. A Jacobean playgoer named Simon Forman recorded in his *Book of Plays* that he saw this work performed on April 20, 1611 at the Globe theatre.

Upon examining references to contemporary events and people, however, critics have concluded that *Macbeth* was most likely written and first performed in 1606. In the intervening 17 years, the play was revised (around 1609), most likely by dramatist Thomas Middleton, who added some of the witches' songs in Act III, Scene 5 and Act IV, Scene 1. Middleton may also be responsible for other lines in the play, though we cannot be certain. In Shakespeare's age a play belonged to the theatre company. Therefore, revisions by other playwrights were common. Middleton's additions to *Macbeth* do not detract from the quality

of Shakespeare's work; rather, they provide scholars and critics with opportunities to learn more about the ways in which plays were produced in Early Modern England.

THE ASCENSION OF JAMES I

The event that had the biggest impact on the 1606 production of *Macbeth* — and which may have been responsible for Shakespeare writing this play — is the ascension of King James VI of Scotland to the English throne, thus becoming King James I of England. In May 1603, shortly after he became king, James became the personal patron of Shakespeare's acting company, causing it to change names from the Lord Chamberlain's Men to the King's Men. This patronage provided many benefits to the theatrical company, including increased opportunities to perform at court and financial assistance when the theatres were closed because of plague. Because of this, some critics view the production of *Macbeth* a mere three years after James's ascension to the English throne as Shakespeare's tribute to his company's patron. Others have argued the opposite — that this play is more a criticism of King James than a tribute to him.

DIVINE RIGHT VERSUS ELECTED KINGSHIP

Regardless of Shakespeare's intentions toward the king, James and his beliefs play a large part in this play. James was supposedly a direct descendent of Banquo, and critics assert that in *Macbeth's* apparition of Banquo's royal descendants (in Act IV, Scene 1), James is the last king portrayed in the vision. King James believed in the divine right of kings, which is the assertion that the king is God's emissary on Earth and that kingship is passed in patrilineal way through the father. This belief system led to the practice of primogeniture, which meant that a king's eldest son inherited the throne.

In the eleventh century, Scotland changed the way it selected its kings. Prior to that time, kings were elected by a council of noblemen (or thanes). In the eleventh century, Scotland adopted the patrilineal system, so the throne was passed from father to eldest son. This historical information is important to our understanding of the play. After *Macbeth* kills Duncan, Malcolm and Donalbain fear for their lives and flee the country. Thus, Duncan's sons are suspected of playing an active role in their father's death. This implication and their absence leave the throne available to *Macbeth*. In Act II, Scene 4, Macduff tells fellow nobleman Ross that *Macbeth* "is already nam'd, and gone to Scone / To be invested." That *Macbeth* is named king implies a reversion to the process of election to the throne.

These questions of kingship could be found in Shakespeare's England as well. Because Elizabeth did not marry, she never produced a male heir. This fact prompted anxieties and questions over succession in the minds of many people in Early Modern England. Without a male heir, Elizabeth named James VI of Scotland as King of England on her deathbed. Though James's succession did not face much opposition, Shakespeare is clearly grappling with questions of kingship that were raised during James's succession of Elizabeth.

THE GUNPOWDER PLOT

Macbeth also mirrors a plot to assassinate King James that had been discovered in 1605 — a year before Shakespeare’s play appeared on stage. This curtailed attempt at James’s life is commonly referred to as the Gunpowder Plot, because officials found a large amount of gunpowder and iron bars in a basement below Parliament the day before King James was to personally open a new session. Under divine right, regicide was the worst crime possible. It is no coincidence that one of the most striking references to early seventeenth-century England in *Macbeth* appears directly after Macbeth kills Duncan.

At the beginning of Act II, Scene 3, Macbeth’s porter answers the knocking at Macbeth’s gate that began in the previous scene. While complaining about the incessant pounding, the porter refers to the person knocking as an “equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale” (II.3.8–10). Modern editors and scholars, such as Stephen Greenblatt and David Bevington, assert that this line is a direct reference to the Jesuit thinker Henry Garnet. In addition to being executed for his participation in the Gunpowder Plot, Garnet wrote *A Treatise of Equivocation*, which provided a justification for lying. The treatise argued that a statement was not a lie if it could possibly be true from another perspective. Consequently, this reference is one of the ways in which modern editors have placed *Macbeth*’s composition in 1606.

FOCUS ON THE SUPERNATURAL

In addition to exploring theories of kingship in the play, Shakespeare also capitalized on James’s interest in the supernatural. Though interest in witches and the supernatural existed during Elizabeth’s reign, James’s fascination extended to a personal interaction with these forces.

News from Scotland (1591) recounts the trial of Scottish witches from the town of Forres. The witches allegedly had attempted to kill James while he was king of Scotland by trying to cause a shipwreck during his voyage to Denmark. The publication includes a woodcut of James, who had presided over the trial, personally interrogating the witches.

The weird sisters in *Macbeth* resemble these witches in their activity. Before Banquo and Macbeth encounter them in Act I, Scene 3, the weird sisters discuss sending tempestuous storms to a sailor’s ship because his wife would not share her chestnuts with one of them. In addition, Banquo, just before he sees the weird sisters, asks Macbeth, “How far is’t call’d to Forres?” (I.3.39). Thus, these weird sisters are linked to the witches in *News from Scotland* both by their behaviour and their geographical location.

James himself wrote a work about witches called *Daemonologie* (1597). In this work, James discusses not only how witches operate and the extent of their power, but also their relationship to the Devil. According to James, the purpose of witches was to harm the king; thus, witchcraft was considered treason. Certainly, the witches in *Macbeth* wield considerable influence over the regicide of Duncan.

James also believed that witches were agents of the Devil who could bestow prophecies. Witches would use these prophecies to tempt the faith and virtue of men. Interestingly, the

weird sisters tempt both Banquo and Macbeth in the play. Macbeth succumbs to his desires and ambitions while Banquo remains loyal and virtuous.

However, the presentation of the witches may not be as flattering to James as it appears. In his Bedford Cultural edition of the play, William C. Carroll notes that under James's influence, the Scottish people believed in and hunted witches. The English, on the other hand, were slightly more sceptical about the existence of witches. Obviously, the presence of a king who believed in witches caused a stir in England.

The controversy over the existence of witches may be reflected in this play. As Greenblatt points out in his introduction to Macbeth in the Norton Shakespeare, while these weird sisters seem to figure prominently, only Banquo and Macbeth see them or know of their existence and their role in the rise of Macbeth to the throne of Scotland. This obscurity, some critics argue, pushes them to the margins of the play. Thus, Shakespeare presents their influence and even existence ambiguously. Some modern critics have even speculated that they might be a psychic projection by Macbeth, though this would not explain why Banquo sees them as well.