

# MACBETH IN CONTEXT

## Reality & Fiction

Scholars do not list *Macbeth* among Shakespeare's history plays, which include *Henry V* and *Richard II*, but there is a historical basis for the play. The actual Macbeth ruled Scotland from 1040 until 1057 and killed his predecessor, Duncan I. However, this killing took place on a battlefield near the Scottish town of Elgin, rather than under Macbeth's own roof. Macbeth later married the granddaughter of another king, Kenneth III, and defeated Duncan I's father in battle in 1045.

Historians characterise the real Macbeth as a fair and law oriented king who encouraged the spread of Christianity in Scotland. This description, too, is a sharp contrast with the "tyrant" of Shakespeare's play, who is obsessed with occult visions and prophecies. Macbeth fought against Siward, Earl of Northumbria, when Siward attempted to bring Duncan I's stepson Malcolm to the Scottish throne in 1054. However, Macbeth rebuffed this challenge and ruled three more years before Malcolm defeated him at the Battle of Lumphanan to become Malcolm III.



Shakespeare's version of Scottish history was likely inspired by one of his own contemporaries, Raphael Holinshed, who published his *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* in 1577. Holinshed's version includes the witches, or weird sisters, and makes Banquo a co-conspirator with Macbeth. The House of Stuart, James I's family line, claimed Banquo among its ancestors, which explains why Shakespeare changed Banquo into the tragic victim of his friend's treachery and why the play emphasises Banquo's role as the father of many kings.

## King James I & Shakespeare



As the primary writer and a performer with the Lord Chamberlain's Men theatre company, Shakespeare was well established in London theatre when James I, formerly James VI of Scotland, became king of England in 1603. The Lord Chamberlain's Men had enjoyed success under Elizabeth I's reign, and when James I was crowned, the king formally took the company into his service. The company then changed its name to the King's Men. The actors attended James I's coronation ceremony as honoured guests, and during the next ten years of his career, Shakespeare's company performed more times at royal performances than any other acting company. It is easy to see how a play that flatters his King would be beneficial for the company's commercial success.

In 1605 conspirators tried to assassinate the king in an incident known as the Gunpowder Plot. Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* shortly afterward, in about 1606 or 1607, and wove allusions to the attempted regicide into his play. Shakespeare and his family may have known some of the Gunpowder Plot conspirators, and his cautionary tale about treason may have been meant to disavow any connection to such



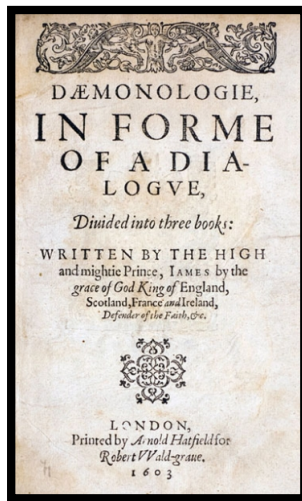
misdeeds. In addition to the Gunpowder Plot, Shakespeare arguably built numerous other references to James I and to contemporary history into *Macbeth*, his one and only Scottish play.

The play includes other elements arguably designed to appeal to James I. Macbeth is defeated by a unified army of English and Scottish soldiers, significant because James I was the king who united England and Scotland under one crown. The defeat of the usurper is important as well, because James I was the target of several plots early in his reign, most notably the Gunpowder Plot.

## Witchcraft & Superstition

James I was known for his opposition to witchcraft and the supernatural. He presided over a few witch trials and, while king of Scotland, published a paper called "Daemonologie," which claims witches are a serious threat to Scotland. In the paper he also claimed that witches were mostly always women, but with male attributes, such as facial hair, and had familiars in the form of cats and toads. There were extremely dangerous since they were in league with the devil: they could curse men, sucking the lifeblood from them, and strike disease in livestock. Accordingly, the witches in *Macbeth* are presented as a malicious force bent on creating chaos in the land. When first encountering them, Macbeth notes they "should be women, and yet your beards forbid me to interpret that you are so." They are also shown summoning their familiars, Grey Malkin the Cat and Paddock the Toad. Interestingly, the Witches are never referred to as 'witches' in the play, but are called 'weyard' or 'wyrd' sisters. This is not to be confused with today's meaning of the word 'weird,' but rather signifies the idea of fate and the control of human destiny.

Even though the witches were written in a way that reflects James I's views on witchcraft, the devoutly Christian king banned the play from performance for five years. This is



the same James I who commissioned the first English translation of the Bible in 1604, and he may have objected to the play's use of allegedly authentic witches' incantations in the dialogue.

The king may not have been the only one to object to the witchcraft in the play. Legend has it that a coven of witches cursed *Macbeth* after its early performances, ostensibly because they didn't want their secret incantations going public. Whether this story is true, a superstition took hold in the theatre community that forbade performers and crew members from speaking the play's name aloud. Even today, many performers refer to the work as "the Scottish Play" to keep the curse at bay.

There have been notable instances of bad luck associated with performances of *Macbeth*, such as falling equipment and actors falling from the stage. One of the best-known instances was an 1849 riot in New York City's Astor Place, which was sparked by fans of two different actors performing the title role in different venues. Twenty-two people were killed during the riot.

According to legend, during the very first production of the play an actor was killed when a prop dagger was mysteriously replaced with a real one. Many actors still today never utter the word 'Macbeth', which if heard mentioned in a theatre, means they have to undergo laborious cleansing rituals to rid themselves of the witches' curse. Such as turning around on the spot three times, spitting over one's left shoulder and then reciting a line from another of Shakespeare's plays. An even more thorough cleansing ritual involves leaving the theatre, brushing oneself down, and saying "Macbeth" three times before coming back into the theatre.

