

William Shakespeare's  
**Machbeth**  
A Sourcebook

**Contextual Overview**

Edited by Alexander Leggatt

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The chief historical event that lies behind the creation of *Machbeth* was the accession in 1603 of James VI of Scotland to the English throne. He took the title James I of England, but he remained King of Scotland, and he brought with him a retinue of Scots, triggering in the English a new, sometimes anxious consciousness of the land to the north to which they were now joined by a shared monarchy. The English had regarded the Scots as a barbarous nation, and they were a traditional enemy. There was a long history of conflict along the border, from cattle raids to outright war. James's mother, Mary Queen of Scots, was a political prisoner in England for eighteen years, and in 1587 Queen Elizabeth finally had her executed. In Shakespeare's *Henry V* the King is warned that before he attacks France he should secure his northern border, for when the English eagle is at prey abroad 'the weasel Scot' (1.2.170) is liable to raid the nest. Yet in the same play a Scot, Captain Jamy, appears as one of King Henry's loyal soldiers. While many of his countrymen were suspicious of their northern neighbours, Shakespeare presents a characteristic ambiguity about whether the Scots are enemies or friends.

Throughout the 1590s Shakespeare had written a series of English history plays, taking Holinshed's *Chronicle* as his principal source. When in *Machbeth* he turned to Scotland – and this is his only play set in that country – he turned again to Holinshed. The history of Scotland was of course much less well known to his audiences than was the history of England, and as the extracts given here will show, he took even greater liberties than he did in the English history plays, combining characters and events from different reigns into a single story, and suppressing the fact that the historical Machbeth was for much of his reign a wise and just ruler.

The history of Scotland up to Shakespeare's time makes the history of England seem peaceful by comparison. To be king of Scotland was to be a poor insurance risk; in 1607 Sir Christopher Piggott, during a debate on the union of the two kingdoms, told the House of Commons that the Scots 'have not suffered for this two kinges to die in their beds, these 200 years'. Piggott was rewarded for this historical insight by a stay in the Tower of London,<sup>1</sup> but his sense that Scottish

<sup>1</sup> A. R. Braunmuller, introduction to the New Cambridge Shakespeare edition of *Machbeth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 13.

history was a tale of concentrated violence was not far off the truth. The play bears out this impression. It begins in war, with rebellion and invasion. No sooner is peace restored than Macbeth murders Duncan, and while this makes him king it is only the beginning of a line of killings, ending with an invasion by Scottish exiles and English troops in which Macbeth himself is killed. If there is a prospect of a more peaceable Scotland at the end of the play, it lies in the way the new King Malcolm introduces English terminology, turning thanes into earls. England in the play has been a peaceable kingdom under a good king (see Key Passages, pp. 175–7), and Malcolm seems to want to import some of its values. Is there a hint here of James's desire to unite his two kingdoms in one?

At the time of the play's writings, however, England, far from being a peaceable kingdom, had just been through a trauma of its own. In our time we are haunted by 11 September 2001. The equivalent date for the Jacobean English – a date still commemorated in England – was 5 November 1605. A group of Catholic extremists had planned to blow up the King and Parliament with barrels of gunpowder stored in an adjacent building. The plot was foiled at the last minute, and was followed by a series of arrests, interrogations and executions. How much *Macbeth* owes to the Gunpowder Plot is debatable. In 2.3 a drunken porter imagines himself as the porter of hell-gate, admitting damned souls to the everlasting bonfire. One of these is 'an equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale; who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven' (2.3.9–12). This is frequently taken as a reference to the Jesuit superior Henry Garnet, executed for his role in the Gunpowder Plot. Garnet had written a treatise on equivocation, arguing that a person could tell less than the truth without being guilty of lying, so long as he held the full truth in his heart – an idea that applied particularly to a person under interrogation. Arguably, the witches' prophecies, especially the second set, deal with Macbeth in just this equivocal way (see Key Passages, pp. 167–9). But this sort of riddling goes back at least to classical Greece, with its tales of the oracle at Delphi and the ambiguous pronouncements it made to those who sought its advice. It may be that the chief contribution the Gunpowder Plot made to *Macbeth*, if indeed it made any contribution at all, was a generalized sense of menace and anxiety, the feeling of a kingdom living on its nerves. The shock the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot produced may have an onstage equivalent in the shock produced by Duncan's murder. The fear of living under a tyranny that haunts the second half of the play may link with the fear of what might have followed the Gunpowder Plot. The political atmosphere of the time was not unlike that of the Cold War in the middle of the twentieth century, and part of the atmosphere of terror the play generates is political terror.

In any case the play is not overtly about the Gunpowder Plot. The connection, if any, operates at a general, even subliminal level. In fact acting companies had to beware of being too topical. Less than two years after James came to the throne Shakespeare's own company had produced *The Tragedy of Gowrie*, evidently based on a plot (not long previously, in 1600) to assassinate King James. The play was suppressed. Since the text is lost, we can only guess at the cause of the offence; but we have evidence from other cases of censorship that the authorities did not like the representation of living persons on the stage, and to deal too directly with contemporary events was to court trouble. The paradox is that

James had on his accession taken the acting companies under royal patronage; and Shakespeare's company, who performed *The Tragedy of Gowrie*, was the King's Men. They may have intended to compliment their new patron by showing the defeat of a conspiracy against him. But even a compliment could cause trouble if it involved dramatizing events that were too close to home. The events of *Macbeth* are well in the past.

Some scholars have speculated that *Macbeth* was written as a compliment to King James, and designed to appeal to his interests.<sup>2</sup> Probably the strongest argument for this view is the survival of the line of Banquo, which became the House of Stuart to which King James belonged. Banquo's line is dramatized in the cauldron scene, in the vision of eight kings, the last holding a magic glass that shows an even longer procession, stretching 'to the crack of doom'; some with 'two-fold balls and treble sceptres' that figure not only the union of England and Scotland under James but the spread of empire (4.1.117–21). This is certainly a tribute to the royal house to which the King belonged; and Banquo's fertility may also acknowledge the fact that James, unlike the three childless Tudors who preceded him, had two sons.

James's interest in the nature of kingship is another possible link with the play. He had years of experience as King of Scotland before he came to England, and regarded himself as an expert on the art of monarchy, on which he was inclined to lecture. He believed kings were divinely appointed, and answerable not to any human authority, but to God alone. While still in Scotland, he wrote treatises on kingship, *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* (1598) and *Basilicon Doron* (1599); and once he came to England he lectured Parliament on the subject.<sup>3</sup> The mystique that surrounds Duncan – his murder is a violation of 'The Lord's anointed Temple' (2.3.69) – may feed into James's view of the divine right of kings. However, no such divine right protects Macbeth when his subjects, joined with the English, rise against his tyranny. Even without James's theory of kingship the official doctrine proclaimed in the churches of England by the 'Homily against Disobedience and Wilful Rebellion' (1570) was that the people had no right to rebel even against a wicked king. God had appointed him, and God would deal with him. Malcolm and Macduff do not wait for God. *Macbeth* lines up most directly not with the divine right theory of *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* but with the more pragmatic *Basilicon Doron*, James's advice to his son Prince Henry on the art of government. The extract given here (see Contemporary Documents, pp. 30–2), with its contrast of good and evil rulers, serves as a gloss on the contrast between Macbeth on the one side and, aligned against him, Duncan, the English King Edward and the hope that rests on Malcolm. In any case Shakespeare did not have to wait for the accession of King James to start thinking about kingship: he had already written nine English history plays. *Richard II* presents his most searching examination of the institution, with a tense

2 For a long time the most influential study in this vein was Henry N. Paul, *The Royal Play of Macbeth* (New York: Macmillan, 1950). Paul's argument – which includes imagining that King James himself commissioned the play – now seems exaggerated.

3 James's views are conveniently collected in King James VI and I, *Political Writings*, ed. Johann P. Sommerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

opposition of the claims of divine appointment and political ability that goes far beyond anything in *Macbeth*.<sup>4</sup>

Another of James's interests was witchcraft, and in this case the play draws closer to him. The persecution of witches was widespread in England, and while in theory it was possible for a man or a woman to be a witch, in practice the accused were mostly women. The crimes they were accused of were at the local, domestic level: ruining crops, killing cattle, causing impotence. Witch trials seem to have been the product of hostility between neighbours in local communities. We glimpse this level of witchcraft in 1.3 of the play (see Key Passages, pp. 132–4), and in the extract given here from a later play, *The Witch of Edmonston* (see Contemporary Documents, pp. 32–6). In both cases the witches' powers are real; but we can also see a shadow of what may have been the actual situation: an unpopular old woman, at odds with her neighbours, becomes their scapegoat when crops fail or cattle die. Reginald Scot, in *The Discovery of Witchcraft* (1584), warned his countrymen against believing in the power of witches. King James, on the other hand, was a believer, and in his *Demonology* (1597) he argued against Scot, claiming that witches had real power, which came from the Devil. At first glance, *Macbeth* appears to side with James: the witches' prophecies do come true. But in the action itself the witches do no direct harm; it is Macbeth who does the killing. In 1.3 they make threats about what they are going to do to the sailor's wife; but we never see them do it. In one of the critical extracts later in this volume, Stephen Greenblatt argues that the play is in fact quite tentative about the belief in witchcraft (see Modern Criticism, pp. 83–6). On the issue of witchcraft as on the issue of kingship, *Macbeth* in the last analysis is not King James's play but Shakespeare's, with all the ambiguity, the refusal of commitment, we expect from him.

That having been said, the witches are still a powerful, haunting presence; their role in the action is arguably even more disturbing because we cannot quite pin it down. And they bring into focus other anxieties: a fear of the supernatural; a fear of female power, exercised from the margins in a male-dominated world; and more fundamentally the fear of whatever is other, strange, unnameable. Lady Macbeth has no direct dealings with the witches, but throughout the history of the play's reception, as we shall see, she has aroused profound disturbance by her refusal to play the silent, submissive, nurturing role assigned to women by generations of conventional thinking. In that way she links with the witches, who are women but do not look like women, who have a profound and destructive effect on the war hero Macbeth, and who live a strange, half-glimpsed life of their own on the margins of the world, disappearing from sight but never from thought. When they vanish, we do not know where they go; and when Lady Macbeth dies, we do not know how. This anxiety about the other ran deep in Shakespeare's culture, and he himself had already tapped into it: in the extract from *Henry VI Part One* given here (see Contemporary Documents, pp. 28–30), and in the story reported early in *Henry IV Part One* of dead English soldiers castrated by Welsh

women (1.1.43–6). On this issue, as on kingship, Shakespeare did not have to wait for the accession of James.

The extracts from contemporary documents given here concentrate on the issue of witchcraft, since this is where the play responds most vividly to its surrounding culture. *News from Scotland* (see Contemporary Documents, pp. 25–8) is particularly important. It shows the anxiety produced by witchcraft, and the anxieties about sex and gender that cluster around it. It shows witches operating not just at the domestic level, as in most English witch trials, but at the level of royalty, as in *Macbeth*. It depicts King James's interest in the subject, and his credulity. Finally, it gives a glimpse, before James's accession, of that strange kingdom to the north. The accession of James in 1603 may indeed have encouraged a new focus on kingship and witchcraft, two of his pet subjects; it certainly triggered a new interest in Scotland. But if *Macbeth* is a compliment to the new King, the patron of Shakespeare's company, it is (appropriately) a somewhat equivocal one; and it draws on anxieties that already ran deep in its own culture.

4 For David Scott Kastan's view of the problematic relationship between *Macbeth* and James's view of kingship, see *Modern Criticism*, pp. 86–8.

# Chronology

Bullet points are used to indicate events in Shakespeare's life, asterisks to denote historical and literary events.

- 1558
  - \* Accession of Queen Elizabeth
- 1564
  - William Shakespeare born on or near 23 April, in Stratford-upon-Avon
- 1568
  - William Shakespeare's father John becomes Bailiff of Stratford
- 1577
  - John Shakespeare falls on hard times, increasingly troubled by debt
  - \* First publication of Holinshed's *Chronicles*
- 1582
  - William Shakespeare marries Anne Hathaway
- 1583
  - Birth of Shakespeare's daughter Susannah, six months after the marriage
- 1584
  - \* Publication of Reginald Scot's *Discovery of Witchcraft*, urging a sceptical view of witchcraft
- 1585
  - Birth of the twins Hamnet and Judith, after this the Shakespeares have no more children
- 1586
  - Around this time Shakespeare leaves Stratford; nothing is known of his whereabouts for the next six years
- 1587
  - Queen Elizabeth orders the death of Mary Queen of Scots, mother of King James VI of Scotland
  - Second edition of Holinshed's *Chronicles*; this edition is the principal source for *Macbeth*
- 1588
  - Defeat of the Spanish Armada
- 1591
  - \* First publication of *News from Scotland*, an account of Scottish witchcraft
- 1592
  - Shakespeare attacked by a jealous older playwright, Robert Greene; we know from this that he is now active as a playwright in London, and beginning to make his name
- 1593
  - \* Death of Christopher Marlowe, Shakespeare's leading predecessor
- 1594
  - Formation of the Chamberlain's Company; Shakespeare is a 'sharer' (shareholder)
- 1596
  - John Shakespeare granted a coat of arms and the right to style himself Gentleman, an important step up the social ladder for him and his son William
  - Death of Shakespeare's son Hamnet
- 1597
  - King James publishes *Demonology*, urging a serious view of witchcraft
- 1598
  - Frances Meres, in *Pallas Tamia*, praises Shakespeare as 'among the English . . . the most excellent' author of comedy and tragedy, ranking him with the great classical authors
- 1599
  - Opening of the Globe Playhouse, which was to be the principal venue for Shakespeare's work
  - Publication of James VI, *Basilicon Doron*
- 1600
  - \* The Gowrie conspiracy, an unsuccessful attempt to assassinate King James
- 1601
  - Death of John Shakespeare

- 1603
  - \* Death of Queen Elizabeth; James VI of Scotland becomes James I of England
  - Shakespeare's company taken under royal patronage, becoming the King's Men
- 1605
  - \* Discovery of the Gunpowder Plot, an attempt by Catholic conspirators to blow up the King and Parliament
- 1606
  - Shakespeare writes *Macbeth*
- 1608
  - Birth of Shakespeare's granddaughter Elizabeth Hall (with her death in 1670, Shakespeare's line will die out); death of Shakespeare's mother Mary
- 1610
  - Around this time Shakespeare may have returned to Stratford to live, though he maintains interests in London
- 1611
  - Simon Forman records seeing a performance of *Macbeth* at the Globe
  - \* Publication of the King James Bible
- 1616
  - Death of William Shakespeare on 23 April at Stratford-upon-Avon
- 1623
  - Posthumous publication of Shakespeare's collected works, the Folio, in which *Macbeth* is published for the first time