

# Macbeth

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(ADAPTED BY THOMAS MIDDLETON)

## INTRODUCTION

SHORTLY after James VI of Scotland succeeded to the English throne, in 1603, he gave his patronage to Shakespeare's company; the Lord Chamberlain's Men became the King's Men, entering into a special relationship with their sovereign. *Macbeth* is the play of Shakespeare's that most clearly reflects this relationship. James regarded the virtuous and noble Banquo, Macbeth's comrade at the start of the action, as his direct ancestor; eight Stuart kings were said to have preceded James, just as, in the play, Banquo points to 'a show of eight kings' as his descendants (4.1.127.1±±140); and in the play the English king (historically Edward the Confessor) is praised for the capacity, on which James also prided himself, to cure 'the king's evil' (scrofula). *Macbeth* is obviously a Jacobean play, composed probably in 1606.

But the first printed text, in the 1623 Folio, shows signs of having been adapted at a later date. It is exceptionally short by comparison with Shakespeare's other tragedies; and it includes episodes which there is good reason to believe are not by Shakespeare. These are Act 3, Scene 5 and parts of Act 4, Scene 1: 38.1±±60 and 141±±8.1. These episodes feature Hecate, who does not appear elsewhere in the play; they are composed largely in octosyllabic couplets in a style conspicuously different from the rest of the play; and they call for the performance of two songs that are found in *The Witch*, a play of uncertain date by Thomas Middleton. Probably Middleton himself adapted Shakespeare's play some years after its first performance. We do not attempt to excise passages probably not written by Shakespeare, because the adapter's hand may have affected the text at other, indeterminable points. The Folio text of *Macbeth* cites only the opening words of the songs; drawing on *The Witch*, we attempt a

reconstruction of their staging in *Macbeth*.

Shakespeare took materials for his story from the account in Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicle* of the reigns of Duncan and Macbeth (ad 1034±±57). Occasionally (especially in the English episodes of Act 4, Scene 2) he closely followed Holinshed's wording; but essentially the play's structure is his own. He invented the framework of the three witches who tempted both Macbeth and Banquo with prophecies of greatness. His Macbeth is both more introspective and more intensely evil than the competent warrior-king portrayed by Holinshed; conversely, Shakespeare made Duncan, the king whom Macbeth murders, far more venerable and saintly. Some of the play's features, notably the character of Lady Macbeth, originate in Holinshed's account of the murder of an earlier Scottish king, Duff; he was killed in his castle at Forres by Donwald, who had been 'set on' by his wife.

*Macbeth* can be enjoyed at many levels. It is an exciting story of witchcraft, murder, and retribution that can also be seen as a study in the philosophy and psychology of evil. The witches are not easily made credible in modern performances, and Shakespeare seems deliberately to have drained colour away from some parts of his composition in order to concentrate attention on Macbeth and his Lady. It is Macbeth's neurotic self-absorption, his fear, his anger, and his despair, along with his wife's steely determination, her invoking of the powers of evil, and her eventual revelation in sleep of her repressed humanity, that have given the play its long-proven power to fascinate readers and to challenge performers.