William Shakespeare's Macbeth
A Sourcebook

Edited by
Alexander Leggatt

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William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*

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Contents

List of Illustrations xi
Editor's Note xii
Acknowledgements xiii

Introduction 1

1: Contexts

Contextual Overview 7
Chronology 12
Source 15

From Raphael Holinshed, The Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Ireland (1587) 15

Contemporary Documents 25

From Newes from Scotland (1591) 25
From William Shakespeare, Henry VI Part One (c.1590) 28
From James VI and I, Basilicon Doron (1599) 30
From Thomas Dekker, John Ford and William Rowley, The Witch of Edmonton (1621) 32

2: Interpretations

Critical History 39
Early Critical Reception 44


**CONTENTS**

From Arthur Murphy, ‘Criticism on the Tragedy of Macbeth’ (1753) 45
From Elizabeth Montagu, *An Essay on the Writings and Genius of Shakespeare* (1769) 46
From Francis Gentleman, *The Dramatic Censor; or, Critical Companion* (1770) 49
From Thomas De Quincey, ‘On the Knocking on the Gate in “Macbeth” ’ (1823) 54
From A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear and Macbeth* (1904) 54

**Modern Criticism** 58

From Joan Larsen Klein, ‘Lady Macbeth: “Infirm of Purpose” ’ (1980) 68
From Jenijoy La Belle, ‘“A Strange Infirmity”: Lady Macbeth’s Amenorrhea’ (1980) 71
From Stephen Booth, *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefinition, and Tragedy* (1983) 74
From Barbara Everett, *Young Hamlet: Essays on Shakespeare’s Tragedies* (1989) 75
From Stephen Greenblatt, ‘Shakespeare Bewitched’ (1994) 83

**The Work in Performance** 89

Introduction 89
Performance 94

From Simon Forman, *The Book of Plays and Notes thereof per Forman for Common Policy* (1611) 94
From Sir William D’Avenant, *Macbeth a Tragedy. With all the Alterations, Amendments, Additions and New Songs* (1664) 100
From David Garrick’s adaptation of *Macbeth* (1744) 106
From Kenneth Tynan, *Curtains* (1961) 107
Marion D. Perret, ‘Double, Double: Trevor Nunn’s *Macbeth* for Television’ (1992) 113
3: Key Passages

Introduction

Summary of the Action

The Characters

Key Passages

Act 1, Scene 1: The witches
Act 1, Scene 2: Rebellion and enemy invasion; Macbeth as war hero
Act 1, Scene 3: Macbeth and Banquo encounter the witches
Act 1, Scene 5: Lady Macbeth reads Macbeth’s letter, and prepares to urge him to murder
Act 1, Scene 7: Macbeth hesitates; Lady Macbeth breaks his reluctance
Act 2, Scene 1, lines 33–64: Macbeth sees ‘a dagger of the mind’
Act 2, Scene 2: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth react to the murder
Act 3, Scene 4: The banquet; Banquo’s ghost
Act 4, Scene 1: The witches’ cauldron; the riddling prophecies
Act 4, Scene 2: Lady Macduff and her son
Act 4, Scene 3, lines 139–73: Edward the Confessor and Macbeth: a good king and a tyrant
Act 5, Scene 1: Lady Macbeth sleepwalks
Act 5, Scene 5: Macbeth hears of the death of Lady Macbeth

4: Further Reading

Recommended Editions of Macbeth
Contexts
The Play in Performance
Film Versions
Criticism

Index
Illustrations

Figure 1: Macbeth and Banquo encounter the witches (Holinshed’s *History of Scotland*, 1577).

Figure 2: Laurence Olivier as Macbeth and Vivien Leigh as Lady Macbeth in the 1955 production at Stratford-upon-Avon.

Figure 3: Ian McKellen (as Macbeth) and the witches in the 1976–8 Royal Shakespeare Company production.

Figure 4: Sinead Cusack as Lady Macbeth in the 1986 Royal Shakespeare Company production.
Editor's Note

Throughout this book including the Key Passages, act, scene and line numbers for *Macbeth* refer to the Arden edition, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1951, frequently reprinted). In the extracts from criticism and performance reviews, references to this edition have been added to quotations from the play, substituting for the act, scene and line references in the original where these differ. References to Shakespeare plays other than *Macbeth* are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans and J. J. M. Tobin (second edition: Boston and New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). Unless otherwise specified, footnotes are by the editor of this volume.
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Introduction

There is a theatrical anecdote, one of many, that sums up the curious power of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. It concerns a production at the Prince's Theatre in London in 1926, in which Sybil Thorndike played Lady Macbeth and her husband Lewis Casson played Banquo. The production had been accident-prone:

such terrible things kept on happening that one night Lewis came into her dressing room and said, 'Sybil, the Devil does work in this play – there is horror behind it – we must do something positive against it'. And together they read aloud the 91st Psalm, which calmed and strengthened them.¹

The psalm in question is a statement of confidence in God's protection. Verses 5 and 11 are characteristic: 'Thou shalt not be afraid for any terror by night: nor for the arrow that flieth by day'; 'For he shall give his angels charge over thee: to keep thee in all thy ways'.

In the theatre *Macbeth* is regarded as a haunted, unlucky play. Stories of accident, illness, even death abound. I recall a production at my own university in which, during rehearsals, the lighting designer broke his ankle and the costume designer suffered a heart attack. Actors consider it bad luck to speak the play's name: it is usually called 'the Scottish play'. It is certainly bad luck to quote it in the dressing room, though there are traditional ways of counteracting the curse. These include quoting an equivalent number of lines from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or, more elaborately, leaving the dressing room, turning around three times, spitting, swearing and knocking to be readmitted.

Though there are unsupported legends of the curse at work even in the play's first production, including a story that at the first performance the boy actor playing Lady Macbeth fell ill and Shakespeare himself took over,² the verifiable stories of misfortune, and the superstition itself, cannot confidently be traced.

before the 1920s. The sense that evil forces are at work in Macbeth may be a product of the aftermath of the First World War, whose horrific death toll produced a new interest in the spirit world, as those who had lost loved ones tried to contact them through ouija boards and table-rapping. Those beliefs have faded (though not vanished); the belief in the Macbeth curse remains. So far as we can tell earlier actors – David Garrick, W. C. Macready, Henry Irving – produced the play with no sense that they were courting any special danger. And yet the superstition about Macbeth, even if it is more recent than legend would have it, embodies a truth about the play. There is no work of Shakespeare’s, and arguably no work of Western art, that evokes such a powerful sense of evil. The dialogue is full of invocations of the powers of darkness (see Key Passages, p. 142) and one can sympathize with the belief current among actors that those invocations are genuine, and actually work.

Macbeth was written, probably in 1606, when Shakespeare was at the height of his powers as a writer of tragedy. He had just written Othello and King Lear; Antony and Cleopatra and Coriolanus lay ahead. He may also have drawn on Hamlet: in its close examination of the mind of a murderer, the play elaborates on the figure of Claudius in the earlier tragedy. However, there is nothing standardized about Shakespeare’s tragedies: each is a fresh experiment, with its own distinct methods and atmosphere. Macbeth stands out in a number of ways. Not even Hamlet, with its striking Ghost, makes such pervasive use of the supernatural. The evil of Iago in Othello is a function of his own nature; the evil that grips Macbeth seems to be a force at work in the spiritual world. (Does Macbeth use that force or is it using him? Can we tell?) In its treatment of the supernatural, the play makes fuller use of music and spectacle than the other tragedies do; in this it looks forward to Shakespeare’s final romances, especially Pericles and The Tempest, where music and spectacle present supernatural powers that are more (though not completely) benign.

The play is also unusual in its close concentration on two central figures, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Romeo and Juliet and Hamlet are full of lively, vividly realized secondary characters: the Nurse, Mercutio, Ophelia, Polonius, the Gravediggers. The secondary characters of King Lear (Gloucester, Edmund, Edgar, Lear’s daughters, the Fool) are so fully developed that the play seems more an ensemble piece than a vehicle for a star actor. In Julius Caesar and Coriolanus even the nameless citizens have distinctive voices and ideas of their own. It is not that the supporting roles in Macbeth are uninteresting or unrewarding. But the focus is so strongly on the two leading characters that the lives of the others seem stunted by comparison. One reason is that the evil which grips Scotland with Macbeth’s murder of Duncan is so overwhelming that in the later scenes in particular other characters are swept along with the tide, with little to do but react to what Macbeth has done. Another is that in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth Shakespeare has created, even by his standards, an unusually searching portrait of two people going through a crisis together. We see, with alarming intimacy, what it is like to think of a murder, to do it, and to suffer the consequences. This intimacy includes Shakespeare’s most searching depiction of a marriage, and in the
pressure Lady Macbeth puts on her husband, and herself, one of his most radical examinations of the whole question of gender, of what it means to be a woman or a man.

In its own time Macbeth may have had topical impact. England had a new king, James VI of Scotland, who in 1603 had succeeded Queen Elizabeth as James I of England. The two kingdoms, England and Scotland, were now under a single monarch. A northern country that for the English had been strange and little known, in popular culture the setting of ballads and in history a troublesome enemy, was now politically linked with England, and many Scots had come south with the new King, in search of pickings in a richer land. They were not always welcome: three of Shakespeare’s fellow playwrights, George Chapman, Ben Jonson and John Marston, had landed in trouble with the authorities for some anti-Scottish jokes in their 1605 comedy Eastward Ho. Chapman and Jonson were imprisoned; Marston fled. Shakespeare was characteristically ambiguous. In the only play he ever set in Scotland, he presents it as a troubled, violent land where evil powers, both human and supernatural, are abroad. But in the survival of the line of Banquo, to which King James belonged, he paid a kind of tribute to the new King; and he played on two of the King’s known interests, kingship and witchcraft. James had written treatises on both. Whether the play was written specifically for James, and in any case what James might have thought of it – these remain open questions. But it would have certainly piqued the curiosity of its original audience in its depiction of the history of the country to which, like it or not, they were now joined.

Even if it is a topical work, Macbeth is the sort of topical work that can live outside its original context. The near-universality of Shakespeare’s appeal is unquestioned, though its causes can be debated. And Macbeth is popular, even by his standards. Though it is notoriously difficult for actors and directors, it is one of Shakespeare’s most frequently produced plays. In schools, it is one of his most frequently studied. Shakespeare specialists debate whether Hamlet or King Lear is his greatest achievement; but non-specialists who encounter Shakespeare at school or in the theatre often name Macbeth as their favourite Shakespeare play. There is, to begin with, the endless and disturbing fascination of murder itself. We see this fascination at work at every level of culture from Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex and Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov to mass-market paperback whodunits. What does it take for one human being to kill another? What does it mean, and what are the consequences? The story of Macbeth has been re-told in many different cultures. Akira Kurosawa turned it into a film set in mediaeval Japan, in the world of the samurai (see The Work in Performance, pp. 109–11). For the stage, Welcome Msomi created a Zulu version, uMabatha. Two gangster movies, Joe Macbeth (dir. Ken Hughes, 1955) and Men of Respect (dir. William

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4 He wrote on witchcraft in Demonology (1597) and on kingship in The Trew Law of Free Monarchies (1598) and Basilicon Doron (1599). On the latter, see Contemporary Documents, pp. 30–2.

5 There is a link between Macbeth and detective fiction in James Thurber’s short story ‘The Macbeth Murder Mystery’, whose central character, a reader of whodunits, decides that for Macbeth to be Duncan’s murderer violates the conventions of the genre (too obvious) and comes up with a different, quite unexpected solution, which I will not reveal.

6 Pretoria: Via Afrika/Skataville Publishers, 1996. The work was originally created in the 1970s.
Reilly, 1991), use *Macbeth* as a source. A more recent film, *Scotland, Pa.* (dir. Billy Morissonette, 2001), makes a quirkier transfer to small-town Pennsylvania, and to strife in the fast-food business (playing of course on the names Macbeth and McDonald’s). Each version, while drawing on its own culture, pays implicit tribute to the basic story of the original play, with its depiction of the human desire for power and the violent consequences of that desire.

In fact the play we think of as Shakespeare’s original is also an adaptation. It was published in the Folio of 1623, a posthumous collection of Shakespeare’s work put together by two of his fellow actors. The Folio *Macbeth* is the only text we have. In other cases, notably *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, we have Quarto texts as well, and we can see that the Folio text has been cut, possibly by Shakespeare himself. If we had a Quarto text of *Macbeth* would we find that it too was cut in the Folio version? Were there some passages that have now been lost, presumably for ever? Certainly there are additions. There is an unusually strong consensus among scholars that the scenes involving Hecate, with their songs and dances, are not by Shakespeare; they are sometimes attributed to his younger contemporary Thomas Middleton (see *The Work in Performance*, pp. 89–90). At this early date, Shakespeare’s interest in music and spectacle was elaborated in his own company’s production. After the reopening of the theatres at the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, it was further elaborated by William Davenant’s spectacular new version (see *The Work in Performance*, pp. 100–6), which the ‘original’ Shakespeare was slow to replace. That *Macbeth* creates an urge not just to perform it but to adapt it is a quality it shares with *King Lear* and *The Tempest*. These three works, to an unusual degree, have inspired rewriting, as though later artists, recognizing the power of the original material, want to seize on it and make it their own.

It is the business of this Sourcebook to help readers of our time, especially readers beginning their study of Shakespeare, seize on the play and make it their own. Part 1 puts the play in its original context, with extracts from Shakespeare’s primary source, Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, and from contemporary documents, theatrical and non-theatrical, that show how Shakespeare’s contemporaries thought about some of the play’s issues. There is a special emphasis here on witchcraft, as a key to the play’s depiction of the power of evil. This is followed by extracts from criticism, from the beginnings of the play’s critical reception down to our own time; and in turn by material relating to its performance history. Part 3 presents key passages from the play itself, with commentary designed not just to explain some unfamiliar language but to alert the reader to points of interpretation, and to suggest by example strategies for a fuller reading of the play as a whole.

Through all this material we will see how the play grew out of its world, how its life has continued in the work of readers and performers since then, and how it continues now in our own acts of reading. The issues raised briefly in this introduction will recur: the power of evil, the impact of the central characters, the role of gender, the importance of adaptation and interpretation in a play’s reception. We shall see how the play has affected other minds, in worlds remote from both Shakespeare’s and our own; and the hope is that this will help free the reader’s own interpretation of the play, serving as an introduction to an experience that is both disturbing and inexhaustible, the experience of encountering *Macbeth*.