# Synopsis of *Macbeth*

On the outskirts of a battlefield, three witches meet and plot to encounter Macbeth "after the deed is done," then disappear. Duncan, King of Scotland, along with his sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, hears reports of Macbeth's valor in battle and news that the rebel, Macdonwald, is slain and Norway driven back. In return for his bravery, Duncan sends a messenger to grant Macbeth the title Thane of Cawdor.

Macbeth and his friend and fellow soldier Banquo make their way home after the victory and encounter the three witches. Taken aback by their unearthly appearance, Macbeth and Banquo listen amazed as the witches call Macbeth Thane of Glamis, then Thane of Cawdor and future King of Scotland. The witches go on to prophesy that Banquo, though never a king himself, will beget kings. Macbeth demands to know where the witches came by this information, but the witches disappear. Macbeth and Banquo agree never to speak about the witches' words.

Reeling from this seemingly supernatural occurrence, Macbeth and Banquo are further amazed when messengers from King Duncan, lords Ross and Angus, deliver the news that Macbeth has been granted the title Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth contemplates the witches' predictions and wonders if he should assist fate by doing away with King Duncan himself. Suppressing these murderous thoughts, Macbeth accompanies Ross, Angus and Banquo to see the king. Duncan honors Macbeth and Banquo for their deeds in battle and then declares his son, Malcolm, Prince of Cumberland, the official heir to the throne. The entire party departs to Inverness, Macbeth's home: Macbeth hurries ahead to prepare for their coming.

Having sent word home to his wife about the predictions of the three witches, Macbeth arrives to find her already plotting the king's murder. Macbeth, at first horrified by his wife's plans, agrees to kill the king. That night, Lady Macbeth drugs the wine of the king's guards, which lulls them to sleep. On the way to murder Duncan, Macbeth sees a dagger floating in the air before him, leading him to the king's chamber. Macbeth kills Duncan with the guards' daggers; consumed by guilt, he flees with the daggers and describes the murders to Lady Macbeth. Confronted by the reality of his actions, Macbeth is afraid to return to the king's chamber with the guards' daggers; Lady Macbeth replaces them herself, setting the scene for the guards to be blamed for the king's murder.

John Singer Sargent's portrait of Dame Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth (1889).

Early in the morning, Macduff and Lennox arrive to meet the king and discover his bloody body. Macbeth rushes into the chamber and kills the two sleeping guards with their daggers. In the ensuing confusion, Malcolm and Donalbain, the king's sons, flee to England and Ireland, respectively. The princes' flight arouses suspicion of their guilt, and Macbeth is crowned King of Scotland.

Having achieved the throne, Macbeth begins to fear Banquo, who witnessed the witches' prophesy and who—according to them—will beget a long line of kings. Macbeth plans a great feast to which he invites Banquo, then arranges to have him and his son, Fleance, murdered. Banquo is killed, but Fleance escapes. At the feast Macbeth sees the ghost of

Banquo sitting at the table. The vision intensifies Macbeth's already erratic behavior and Lady Macbeth sends the lords away. Tormented by guilt and fearing for his future as king, Macbeth decides to visit the witches again.

Some of the Scottish lords have begun to suspect Macbeth's involvement in the murders. Macduff travels to England to meet with Malcolm, who has been taken in by King Edward (Edward the Confessor, 1042-66), in hopes that Edward will support Malcolm by sending an army headed by Siward, Earl of Northumberland. Upon learning of his flight, Macbeth sends murderers to surprise Macduff's castle in his absence and kill his wife and children. Ross delivers this devastating news to Macduff in England. Macduff vows to avenge his family in battle with Macbeth and return the throne to Malcolm, the rightful heir.

Macbeth returns to the witches who summon a series of apparitions with three warnings: first to beware Macduff, second that "none of woman born shall harm Macbeth" and third that Macbeth will never be defeated until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane (the location of Macbeth's castle.) Feeling confident that the woods will never uproot and move themselves to his home, Macbeth returns to prepare for Malcolm's attack. Back at the castle, Lady Macbeth is walking and talking in her sleep. Her nurse summons a doctor and together they watch as Lady Macbeth, sleepwalking, relives the night of Duncan's murder. As Macbeth prepares for war, Lady Macbeth ends her life.

Malcolm rallies the English forces and travels to Birnam Wood, where they are met by Scottish lords who have abandoned "the tyrant" Macbeth. To hide their number as they approach the castle, Malcolm instructs the army to cut branches from the forest and ride with them in front. Macbeth is horrified when a messenger tells him that Birnam Wood appears to be marching towards them. He dons his armor and prepares to fight, still convinced that none of woman born can hurt him. Macbeth meets Macduff on the battlefield and confesses this seeming infallibility, but Macduff tells him he was "from his mother's womb untimely ripped." Macduff defeats Macbeth, and Malcolm is restored to the throne.

Four Lady Macbeths: (clockwise from top left): Maggie Smith in the Stratford Festival production (1978), Judi Dench in the Royal Shakespeare Company's film (1978), Francesca Annis in Roman Polanski's film (1971), and Janet Suzman from a BBC production (1975).

# Changing of the Guard:

## England from Elizabeth to James

Imperialism: The practice of extending the power and wealth of a nation through territorial conquests.

Spanish Armada: Fleet of ships launched by Philip II of Spain in 1588 intended to conquer England. Elizabeth's navy, led by Sir Francis Drake, defeated them soundly.

Parliament: England's legislative branch of government, similar to Congress in the United States.

Queen Elizabeth I's rule is often characterized as a time of glory, a time when England's imperialism ruled the world and prosperity and success reigned. Under Elizabeth I, England defeated the Spanish Armada, sent settlers to America and maintained religious tolerance and peace. However, the end of Elizabeth I's reign was plagued by an increasingly unstable economy and conflict with Ireland. These problems became more apparent after King James I of Scotland inherited the throne, causing the people of England to look back to Elizabeth's rule as the "golden years" in England's history, marking James' rule as one of darkness and corruption.

Queen Elizabeth held off choosing her successor until the very end of her life. Never having married and therefore having no heir, Elizabeth was the last legitimate descendant of King Henry VIII. When in 1603 it became apparent that the Queen was not going to recover from her sickness and an heir must be named, James VI, King of Scotland, was suggested, and Elizabeth is said to have made a gesture that showed her approval. Ironically, James was the son of Mary, Queen of Scots, who had been a constant threat to Elizabeth's rule. Because of her ancestry (Mary was the granddaughter of Henry VIII's sister and King James IV of Scotland), she felt she had a better claim to England's throne than Elizabeth since King Henry VIII married Anne Boleyn, Elizabeth's mother, after he divorced his first wife. Mary was a devout Catholic and did not believe in divorce; therefore, she viewed Elizabeth as an illegitimate child. Even though she posed a threat, Elizabeth held off executing Mary until 1587, when it was discovered that she was associated with a plot to kill Elizabeth.

When James I succeeded Elizabeth, he united the countries of Scotland and England in a peaceful manner. Elizabeth's chief ministers had been planning for this event and smoothed the way for the new king's arrival. His succession was uncontested even though there were objections that could have been raised—one being that King Henry VIII's will could be interpreted as excluding the Scottish royalty from inheriting the English throne. The people of England were optimistic about their new king, but incidents such as the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, where Catholic dissenters contrived to blow up part of Parliament, cemented a climate of shock and suspicion around his rule. Elizabeth's courtiers had flattered and admired her, but such actions only made James suspicious of possible hidden motives.

The public's view of their monarch greatly differed between Elizabeth and James. Queen Elizabeth's public facade was carefully manipulated into one of power. Elizabeth reserved the right to destroy any portraits she deemed unacceptable, resulting in a carefully crafted image of a beautiful and powerful queen. In order to emphasize her importance, her portraits often showed her with symbolic images of her power. In one famous painting by George Gower, the Queen rests her hand on the globe and in the background there is a portrait of the Spanish Armada, alluding to England's defeat of the Armada and its place in the world as an imperial power.

Queen Elizabeth's funeral procession, recorded in a series of drawings, took place on April 28th, 1603.

Portrait of Queen Elizabeth by George Gower (c.1588-89)

Whereas Elizabeth's portraits positively influenced public opinion of the queen throughout her rule, James' efforts to broaden his authority through the publication of his writings had neither the same control nor effect. Contrasted with Elizabeth's limited and well-planned forays into the public eye, James' writings allowed the public extended knowledge of their ruler in a way that Elizabeth never permitted. Furthermore, by assuming a role as an author, James' position as king was weakened. Shakespearean scholar Dennis Kay writes, "Where Elizabeth had been celebrated by Edmund Spenser in *The Faerie Queene* ... James diluted his royal magic by participating in the print culture" (124). Before gaining the crown in England, James had already published poetry and a treatise on kingship dedicated to his son. This *Basilikon Doron* ("King's Gift") focused on James' belief in divine right—that Kings are appointed by God and therefore do not answer to anyone but Him. This belief led to many encounters with Parliament, who was concerned by James' lack of consideration for its affairs and his extravagant disbursing of money and gifts.

Parliament: England's legislative branch of government, similar to Congress in the United States.

In response to James' excessive spending and its dissatisfaction with his rule, Parliament limited the King's funds. A key reason for its dissatisfaction was James' frequent practice of awarding peerages or "landed titles." While Elizabeth had always been wary of dispensing titles and money, James awarded more than 200 peerages during his reign as a way to gain loyalty and as rewards for those who gained his favor. This resulted in the decreasing importance of titles as common citizens could gain a title if they had the money to purchase one. King James also allocated money to support the arts. Patronage was necessary to acting companies of this time for them to be considered reputable. Under James' patronage, Shakespeare's company became known as the King's Men and thanked their king by performing a play, *The Tragedy of Gowrie*, based on an episode from his life.

Some critics believe Shakespeare's great tragedy *Macbeth* was written by royal command. Even if Shakespeare did not receive a specific order, the play definitely aimed to please King James, evidenced by the Scottish setting as well as the focus on witchcraft, a subject James explored in his own writing, *Daemonologie*. In Holinshed's history Banquo is depicted as an accomplice to Duncan's murder, but, as James claimed descent from Banquo, Shakespeare changed the character to one opposed to the killing. Shakespeare's witches show an apparition of eight kings, all ancestors of Banquo and including King James I, supporting his right to the throne.

Holinshed: In 1577, he published *The Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, a history of the region upon which Shakespeare based many of his historical plays.

1600-1608 is generally marked as the period during which Shakespeare wrote his great tragedies, including not only *Macbeth*, but also *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *King Lear*. It is significant that this period occurs during the crossover from the "Golden Rule" of Queen Elizabeth to the troubled times of King James. It can be derived that the widespread dissatisfaction and problems during James' rule revealed themselves in the rise of tragedies written by not only Shakespeare but also by Andrew Webster, Thomas Middleton and many other great writers of the early 17th century.

Portrait of James I (c.1610)

# Don't Know Much About History...

Clan:
A large family group claiming descent from a common ancestor.

Celtic:
Descended from a group of early Indo-European settlers in Scotland, Ireland, Wales and Britain.

Feudalism:
Medieval system in which people were divided into strict social classes and land was divided into large manors, owned by a few lords.

Scotland is a land of geographic variety, from the marshy lowlands of southern Scotland to the craggy highlands of the north. Despite Scotland's lack of agricultural viability, battles have been waged over this territory since the first century AD. At that time, the clan-ruled Picts, descended from Scandinavian tribes to the northeast, inhabited the highlands. The name Pict is derived from the Latin *piclus*, meaning "painted people," because the Picts painted their bodies and faces. Their Celtic neighbors to the south, the Scots, were mostly descended from Irish settlers. The Romans invaded and conquered the area now known as England in the first century. As they made their way north, the Romans were met with more and more resistance, particularly from the "barbaric" Picts. They were eventually forced to abandon their advance northward. To keep the warlike tribes from invading Britannia (as the Romans named their newly conquered land), the emperor Hadrian had a massive wall erected from the east coast to the west, close to the border of present-day Scotland. The ruins of Hadrian's Wall are a modern-day tourist attraction.

Over the next few centuries a growing rift developed between the Picts and the Scots. Their proximity to England enabled the Scots to begin to adopt English culture and language. Feudalism was developed and trade increased. In the ninth century, Scottish king Kenneth MacAlpine united the Picts and Scots under his reign, and he and his descendants began to battle England for land near their shared border. By the time Duncan ascended the Scottish throne, eight generations later, Scottish territory had grown tremendously and included major portions of northern England. Duncan is the reigning king at the start of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, though Shakespeare's dramatization strays from documented Scottish history in a number of ways.

Remnant of Hadrian's wall as it stands today.

Divine Right of Kings:
The law that the king of England was chosen by God.

Ascendancy to the Scottish throne in the 11th century was less formal than the strictly regulated rules of succession of its neighbor England, where the idea of Divine Right of Kings stated that the current ruler was appointed by God, and anyone who removed the king from power was defying God's will. In Scotland, which had a history of family-based clan rule, succession was loosely based on bloodlines; any man descended from a

Engraving of the crowning of Macbeth from Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Ireland and Scotland* (1578).

former king through his father or mother could conceivably claim the throne. In one of Shakespeare's sources for *Macbeth,* Raphael Holinshed's *The Historie of Scotland*, King Duncan is described as "soft and gentle of nature." Most historians agree that this was Holinshed's diplomatic way of describing a weak king, and in Medieval Scotland a weak king was not tolerated for very long. Macbeth had a decent claim to the Scottish throne: his mother was the daughter of King Kenneth II, and his wife, Gruoch (Lady Macbeth), was descended from Kenneth III. It was only natural that a great warrior with a royal heritage like Macbeth should usurp the throne from the weak Duncan.

In *Macbeth*, as in most of his plays derived from historical sources, Shakespeare takes creative liberties with historical truth to "dramatize" the story. In many ways, Shakespeare does a disservice to the real Macbeth, who was a distinguished warrior and a competent ruler. Unlike their dramatic counterparts, Macbeth and King Duncan were pretty close in age, and Macbeth ruled for 17 fairly peaceful years, until Duncan's son Malcolm returned from exile in England and defeated Macbeth. Malcolm was aided by his maternal grandfather, Siward Earl of Northumberland. The new King brought with him English practices and policies learned during his 17-year exile. In 1070, Malcolm married the English Princess Margaret, further strengthening ties with England. Margaret was very influential on her husband's reign, helping him to develop an English-style parliament in Scotland, as well as forging strong ties between the Scottish church and the Roman Catholic Church. Margaret's good deeds were recognized when she was canonized in 1250.

Canonization: To declare someone an officially recognized saint of the church.

Conflict with England began to build up during Malcolm's reign; his marriage to Margaret gave him a fragile claim to the English throne, and he invaded Northern England with the hope of one day conquering the entire country. For 23 years Malcolm vacillated between invading England and making peace agreements with their king, William the Conqueror. Malcolm was finally killed in battle in 1093, but the wars between Scottish and English forces did not end. Malcolm's ninth of 10 children, David I, continued his father's crusades into England, claiming practically all of Northern England for Scotland by 1139. This land was soon lost by David's young grandson Malcolm IV.

Control of Scotland and Northern England fluctuated for over a century, until Scottish King Alexander III died and left as his heir the infant Margaret. Taking advantage of this obviously

Mel Gibson as William Wallace in *Braveheart* (1995).

precarious situation, King Edward I of England suggested Margaret marry his son. The infant died before the marriage was made official, and the Scottish throne was left without an heir. Thirteen different men claimed the crown, which went to John de Balliol, who was supported by King Edward. Later, when Edward asked for de Balliol's assistance and was refused, the English King invaded Scotland. He stole the Stone of Scone, a sacred 340-pound rock on which all Scottish kings were crowned. England now had control of Scotland, though Edward met much resistance, particularly from two famous Scottish nationalists: William Wallace and Robert the Bruce. Wallace led the first strike against English forces, but was captured and executed in 1297 (these events are dramatized in the film *Braveheart*). Robert the Bruce was more successful, gaining independence for Scotland in 1328.

Small skirmishes with England continued to plague Scotland's border until 1603, when Scottish King James VI inherited the English throne from Elizabeth I, who died childless (a more complete description of James' ascension to the throne can be found in the article "Changing of the Guard," on page 14). England and Scotland were now indefinitely tied to the same monarch, and in 1707 the Act of Union joined them officially as Great Britain. In 1801, Ireland became part of what was now called the United Kingdom.

Though Scotland is now a part of the larger nation Great Britain, it retains a sense of separate cultural identity, and a Scottish Parliament was created in 1999 for a limited amount of self-rule. Centuries of border conflict have not left Scotland unscathed, however: the gradual adoption of many English customs and traditions has practically obliterated remnants of Pictish culture and history, and there remains a band of Scottish nationalists vying for an independent kingdom.

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Engraving of the three witches from *Macbeth* from Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Ireland and Scotland* (1578).

# Macbeth and Masques

During the reign of James I, theatrical styles and tastes changed rapidly as the king's personal taste for elaborate, decorative and highly stylized presentations inspired the creation of a new theatrical medium—the masque. Developed from the early 16th-century "disguising," or "mummery," in which disguised guests bearing presents broke into a festival and joined with their hosts in a ceremonial dance, masques eventually evolved to include the use of the mask and the mingling of actors and audience. The Jacobean masque introduced a party or festival atmosphere to the performance and included elaborate sets and costumes for both performers and audience. Masque reached its height of popularity during the reign of James I in the early 17th century, evolving into huge events of spectacular and colorful spectacles presented in public theatres and, with even more splendor, at the royal court. The actors often played pastoral or mythological characters, with a great significance placed on music and dancing.

Masques also became presentations in which important political or social issues of the time were discussed, including race, religion and colonization. The most prolific writer of masques was Ben Johnson, Shakespeare's contemporary, who wrote plays such as *The Masque of Blackness*, which discussed issues of race and England's colonization of native peoples in exotic places. This masque focused on the journey of the people of Niger to find a more suitable "sun" and was supposedly written by Jonson in response to a desire by Queen Anne, James I's wife, to play a black woman on stage. The "sun" that the people pursue in the masque is believed to be both an analogy for Christianity, as the native people pursue this new "son" of God, and the son or chosen of God , as represented by King James himself. This masque complimented the King but also celebrated the beauty and power of the wondrous and, to the English, strange people of Niger. It also served as an argument for colonization, suggesting England was correct to spread its Christianity and culture around the globe. Ben Jonson's collaborator Inigo Jones created elaborate costumes, settings and scenic effects for all of his masques, including this one, and therefore was the one most responsible for making the masque so spectacular and popular during James' reign. This masque was no exception and, although it included throngs of actors, musicians, costumes, sets and amazing effects, and therefore required somewhere between £1,000 and £3,000 to produce, it was performed only once. Spectacle and extravagance became the fashion of the day.

*Macbeth Consulting the Vision of the Armed Head.* Henry Fuseli (1741).

As a tribute to King James I's Scottish background, *Macbeth* was perhaps first presented for the King in 1606 on the occasion of a visit from his brother-in-law, Christian IV of Denmark. By this time Shakespeare's company had royal patronage and was known as the King's Men; they therefore created a play paying tribute to Scottish history that honored the ancestry of the King. The role of Macbeth was originally played by Shakespeare's lead actor Richard Burbage and Lady Macbeth by the boy-actress named Edmans. Aware of James' penchant for spectacular shows, music and dances, Shakespeare's company included elements of the masque within *Macbeth* but may have hired someone else to actually write them. In fact, evidence suggests the lyrical passages in *Macbeth* dealing with the witches were in fact written by Thomas Middleton (1580-1627), a younger contemporary of Shakespeare's. Middleton specialized in writing songs and dances and eventually would write a play called

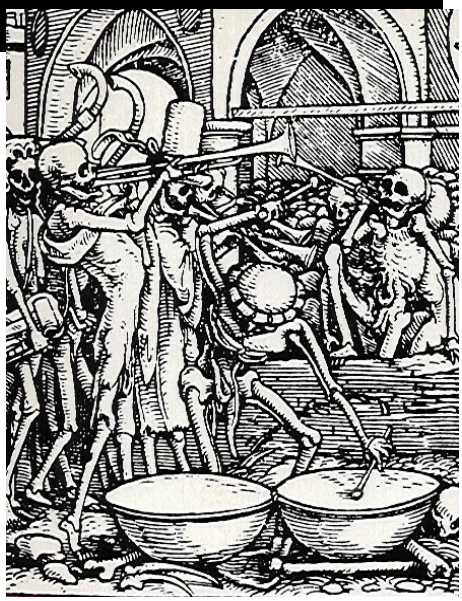
Costume sketch of a knight by Inigo Jones.

*The Witch* in 1610, in which Hecate (the leader of the witches in *Macbeth*) appears and performs two songs originally found in *Macbeth*. Some scholars suggest that Middleton was attempting to create a musical version of *Macbeth* and that the Hecate scenes are a remnant of that. Some argue that the difficulty of playing *Macbeth* and the fact that it is Shakespeare's shortest tragedy prove that there are more songs and dances that have since been lost. The play first appeared in publication in the First Folio of 1623, where it showed some symptoms of having already been cut and edited. James' fear of witches and the historical suggestion that the real Macbeth had in some way consulted with the supernatural during his reign gave Shakespeare a great excuse to include some spectacular songs and dances to please his King.

With the knowledge that this play was inspired by the masque and probably originally intended to be performed in that style before the King, it would be imprudent to play *Macbeth* without a nod to the spectacle and extravagance of the Jacobean masques. A play that includes witches, ghosts and supernatural spirits demands the fantasy and magic in which Shakespeare wishes us to believe.

| Elizabethan Style of Theatre<br>1558-1603 | | Jacobean Style of Theatre<br>1603-1625 |
|---|---|---|
| No elaborate sets; open, bare stage; minimal special effects. | → | Elaborate settings including live animals, waterfalls and amazing special effects. |
| Actors perform in open-air theatre on a stage separated from most audience members. | → | Throngs of extra actors perform and dance amongst audience members with no separation between them. |
| Production costs are kept to a minimum to increase profits; plays are performed multiple times if popular to sell more tickets. | → | Production costs are so high and spectacular shows so expensive that most masques are performed only once. |
| Shakespeare writes *Romeo and Juliet, A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Hamlet*. | → | Shakespeare writes *King Lear, Macbeth* and *The Winter's Tale*. |
| Heightened language and fantastic storytelling are the focus of seeing theatre. | → | Amazing spectacle and extravagant productions are the focus of seeing theatre. |

# Something Wicked This Way Comes...



*A Cemetery,* from Hans Holbein's series *Dance of Death* (1538).

Before the advent of modern medicine to explain the diseases of the body, witchcraft, omens and spells controlled the daily lives of many of the inhabitants of Shakespeare's London. As populations increased, new outbreaks of disease proliferated, and the Church of England continued to wrestle with Catholicism for religious supremacy in England, new superstitions and mass hallucinations appeared almost daily. The diseases of insanity and hypochondria were believed to be afflictions of the devil; stories abounded of men who sometimes believed they were wolves and fled into the mountains, nuns who imagined they were cats, maidens who vomited pins and men who believed they had snakes in their intestines. The fanatical and fantastical remedies for such illnesses included rubbing "magic ointment" on the skin to produce dreams or drinking water out of a murdered man's skull. In the midst of all this confusion and superstition, Elizabethans struggled to find something substantial to blame for these mysteries. Witchcraft quickly became the primary target as a practice believed to be capable of ruling the fates of men. The witches in *Macbeth* are referred to as the "weird" sisters, from the Anglo-Saxon word *wyrd* meaning "fate." Having been familiar with witches and their powers all their lives, Shakespeare's audience would have understood and perhaps believed that these three women could shape and decide Macbeth's fate.

*The Three Witches.* Henry Fuseli (1783).

In Shakespeare's London witches were real and seen on the streets every day. Often men and women who lived on the fringes of their society, "witches" became easy scapegoats for any accidents, illnesses or deaths in their towns or villages. Midwives were often considered witches because of their natural remedies and understandings of the female body. In fact, as early as 1487, the practices and beliefs of witchcraft were associated almost entirely with women and recorded in *Malleus Malificarum* (1486), a document accepted by the church claiming that "all witchcraft comes from carnal lust, which in women is insatiable." In 1508, Maximilian Johannes produced *Antiphonus Maleficiorum*, which established withcraft as fact and taught Christians how to defend themselves against it. The "black magic" activities of witches ranged from the silly to the horrific. They were believed to sometimes keep beer from fermenting or butter from hardening; sometimes they forced men and women to commit adultery; they had the power to prevent women from getting pregnant as well as cause miscarriages or stillbirths.

Midwife:
A woman who assisted with childbirth, gaining her skills from experience and lore passed down through generations.

Familiars:
A spirit embodied in an animal.

Bubonic Plague:
Disease, also called the Black Death, that wiped out 3/4 of Europe in Shakespeare's time.

Witches were believed to have sold their souls to the devil and, in return, to have received animal companions or "familiars," (named for the Latin word "famulus" meaning servant) who would do their bidding and carry out some of their nastier tricks. Often these "familiars" were believed to be black cats or toads. In *Macbeth*, the "Graymalkin" and "Paddock" referred to by the witches in the first scene are believed to be a cat and toad. Ironically, the continual persecution and destruction of witches and their cats during Shakespeare's time helped to speed the spread of diseases like the Bubonic Plague. Jacobeans did not realize rats carried the majority of these diseases and undervalued the presence of cats to destroy these rats.

Although some witches did practice the "black arts" and believed they could curse and disease others, many accused witches were simply helpless innocents. Often a solitary woman such as a widow or homeless woman would become offended by another member of her society and be heard to mutter curses at that person under her breath. Then, when the "cursed" person experienced any hardship or disease (which was extraordinarily common in this age before personal hygiene), they would blame the "witch" and have her either jailed or hung. Some witches created disgusting mixtures of ingredients meant to either cure or curse their patient or victim. Hair, saliva, blood and animal entrails often went into their potions, while some mixtures, similar to the ones in *Macbeth*, actually contained many herbs and other plant life that were used as early medicines. Most witches were wise women and men who knew a great deal about holistic medicine and were often called upon instead of doctors to cure physical ailments with potions and "tricks." As long as their patients were cured, they were considered "white" witches or wizards. If a patient died, however, they were persecuted as "black" witches and therefore evil. Obviously, in an age before modern medicines, the guarantee that witches could cure someone of a disease was shaky at best. The fate of being associated at least once with someone who died was guaranteed. Ironically, some of their successes at curing patients with herbs and natural remedies helped to lead to their demise, as the male-dominated English society sought to purge this female-dominated practice. In 1541 Henry VIII passed the first act against sorcery and magic; in 1562 the law was revived, and by Shakespeare's time the active persecution of witches was a part of daily life. When Queen Elizabeth I died and James I became king, witches faced a new and powerfully paranoid opponent.

During the rein of James I, witch hunts became more and more popular. A self-proclaimed expert on witchcraft, James was notoriously fearful of women and therefore especially afraid of witches. Women in London during James' reign began behaving and dressing more "male," wearing their hair shorter, their doublets pointed and their hats with broader brims. These changes were in part a reaction to the more feminine dress of the men, inspired by James himself, and to the strong and still echoing image of their late Queen Elizabeth, who often appeared in portraits dressed in armor or other traditionally "male" clothes. James ordered the clergy of London to include sermons chastizing women to wear more feminine fashions. James feared that witches were plotting to kill him and, indeed, several assassination attempts during his reign involved witchcraft or "magical potions."

*The Old Woman*, from Hans Holbein's series *Dance of Death* (1538).

In 1597, James published *Daemonologie*, his book on witchcraft in which he described his belief in witches and their practices; advocating for the swift destruction of any discovered witches. Women and men accused of witchcraft were therefore put through ridiculous trials to test if they were truly witches, resulting in the deaths of thousands of innocent people. One common practice was to tie a stone to the witch and throw her in the river. If she floated to the top she was a witch; if she sank to the bottom she was innocent. The only true way to kill a witch was burning, leading to many public burnings of innocent women and men under James' rule. After James' death, the persecution of witches slowly died out in England. The belief in witches, however, would ultimately travel to the New World, leading to the Salem Witch Hunts in Massachusetts and resulting in many more deaths in America before this fanatical fear of witchcraft finally came to an end in the 18th century. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare reminds us of times both in medieval Scotland and Jacobean England when witches inspired terror in a powerful king and helped to guide the decisions of an entire nation.

# *Macbeth:* Adapted

As Shakespeare set pen to paper in the early 17th century to scrawl the first lines of *Macbeth*, he probably didn't think that audiences 400 years later would still be enjoying his work. Even though *Macbeth* is rooted in the history of Scotland, film and theatre-makers have created whole new worlds for the play, sometimes using Shakespeare's text, and sometimes writing a new script based on the story. Adaptations can make Shakespeare's classic texts fresh and exciting by connecting modern audiences and different cultures to the themes of the play.

**On the Stage**

James I:
King of England, 1603-1625. James sponsored Shakespeare's acting company, the King's Men.

When Charles II, James I's grandson, took the throne of Britain in 1660, he assigned the role of Macbeth to William Davenant and the Duke's Company. Davenant altered the work considerably to indulge his two favorite hobbies: operatic scenic splendor and structural balance. He elaborated the witches' scenes, introducing all kinds of dancing, singing and gibberish, some of it taken from Middleton's *The Witch*. He also expanded the role of Lady Macduff, creating numerous scenes between her and her lord symmetrically opposed to the bits between Macbeth and his ambitious wife. Macduff's virtuous lady persuades him away from ambition. Lady Macbeth is given a new scene in which she is haunted by the ghost of Duncan, which convinces her to persuade Macbeth to give up ambition and the crown. Davenant's "adaptation," with Thomas Betterton in the title role, was preferred by audiences and drove Shakespeare's original from the stage until 1744.

The famous actor David Garrick, during his management of the Drury Lane Theatre (1742-1776), revived *Macbeth* as written by Shakespeare, playing the title role. Although Garrick retained Davenant's operatic witch scenes, he cut the extra scenes with Lady MacDuff as well as her original murder scene (IV, 2) and the Porter scene (II, 3). He wrote a new climactic speech for Macbeth, in which the hero-villain mentions, with his dying breath, his guilt, delusion, the witches and horrid visions of future punishment, ushering in the contemporary habit of trying to justify Macbeth's killing. Garrick and his leading lady, Hannah Pritchard, introduced a natural style of acting and became famous as the tortured hero and heroine. Supposedly, Garrick's performance was so convincing that one night when he told the First Murderer, "There's blood upon thy face," the actor involuntarily replied, "Is there, by God?"

Throughout the next 200 years many acting couples became famous playing the Macbeths, each couple contributing its own interpretation of Shakespeare's work, including different reactions to Banquo's ghost and several variations on Lady Macbeth's mad scenes. It was not until the 19th century that Shakespeare's play returned to the stage in its original form. Samuel Phelps (1804-1878) is credited with stripping *Macbeth* of the accumulated adaptations and amendations during his management of Sadler's Wells in London between 1844 and 1862. Unlike his contemporaries, who rearranged the play to avoid scene shifts and made drastic cuts to allow scope for spectacle, Phelps made only minor cuts to the play.

Crowding the streets of Harlem for Orson Welles' 1936 production of *Macbeth*.

The 20th century saw several great revivals, including Orson Welles' *Macbeth* at the Lafayette Theatre in Harlem (1936), which began his directing career. The production was set in 19th-century Haiti with an entirely African-American cast (revolutionary at the time.) This federally funded project transported the Scottish play to a vibrant Haitian jungle in which the witches played voodoo drums and the court swayed to waltzes in their colorful costumes. Welles' use of voodoo as the magic of the play made the Elizabethan belief in witches as servants of the devil more immediate to contemporary audiences. Ten thousand people jammed the streets of Harlem for 10 blocks past the theatre on opening night, trying to catch a glimpse of this wild production.

In 2004, the Perseverance Theatre of Alaska explored the world of *Macbeth* set in an entirely different culture. Director Anita Maynard-Losh set the play within the culture of the Tlingit people, the indigenous people of Southern Alaska. Through the text of Shakespeare, she explored the similarities between the cultures of the clans of Scotland and the clans of the Tlingit through drumming, dance, masks and images of the Tlingit tradition. The audience viewed an adaptation of *Macbeth* that communicated its themes through the shared cultural history of the region.

Stage adaptations of *Macbeth* also have been politically motivated, not always strictly adhering to Shakespeare's text. Barbara Garson was inspired to write *MacBird!* during a 1965 anti-war rally protesting the war in Vietnam. In the middle of this protest, the first line of her play just came to her: "When shall we three meet again / in riot, strike, or stopping train?" The play takes place at the 1960 Democratic Presidential convention. The lead character is an ambitious man named MacBird, a thinly veiled Lyndon B. Johnson, who is forced to take the Vice Presidential nomination even though he wanted to be President. Lady MacBird, his wife, is a reference to Lady Bird Johnson. The character who gets the presidential nomination is named John Ken O'Dunc drawing an analogy between Duncan, the assassinated king in the play, and John F. Kennedy, the assassinated American president. As the play progresses, John Ken O'Dunc is murdered and the MacBirds gain power, only to have to deal with a losing war in Vietland, a clear reference to the war in Vietnam.

Another clever, modern stage version of *Macbeth* is Rick Miller's *MacHomer.* Miller's one-man show was inspired by his own antics at a party, when he started performing *Macbeth* as different characters from the television show *The Simpsons*. Miller took his show to a Fringe Festival in 2000 and it became a pop-culture phenomenon. The show is 85% Shakespeare's text, interlaced with references to *The Simpsons*. With Homer and Marge as Macbeth and his Lady, Rick Miller finds a light-hearted and amusing way to connect modern audiences to the Bard through pop-culture.

**On Film**

When adapting a play like *Macbeth*, a filmmaker, as well as a stage director, must create his own world in which to set the play. After Orson Welles made a big splash with his 1936 stage production, he moved on to Hollywood and made a film adaptation of *Macbeth* in 1948. Welles was one of the innovators of the American film industry and became famous for such classics as *Citizen Kane*. His film of *Macbeth* was shot in film noir style, using severe light and shadow, like early detective films of the day. It was also set in an expressionistic landscape. The non-realistic sets with their jagged rocky slopes and diagonal cliffs reflected Macbeth's inner struggle.

Film noir:
A film style of the early '40s characterized by severe contrast in light and shadow.

Another important film adaptation of the play is Roman Polanski's *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. In this production, evil is not shown in an expressionistic way, but rather in a very gruesome, realistic way. The witches are a group of deformed old hags who live underground. While many productions make the witches a force of supernatural evil, Polanski's witches are creatures of human flesh who come straight out of the dirt. To emphasize the gore, Polanski even makes sure

Expressionism:
An artistic movement of the mid-20th century in which artists attempted to reflect inner thoughts in abstract visual terms.

Rick Miller in *MacHomer* (2000).

Orson Welles as Macbeth (1946).

that every ingredient of the witches brew, the livers, eyes and tongues, are shown on screen in all their slimy glory as they are added into the pot. And even though Shakespeare's text reads that the witches disappear "into the air," Polanski shows Macbeth lying to Banquo as he speaks these words, telling his friend that the witches are disappearing "into the air" while they are actually delving deep into the earth.

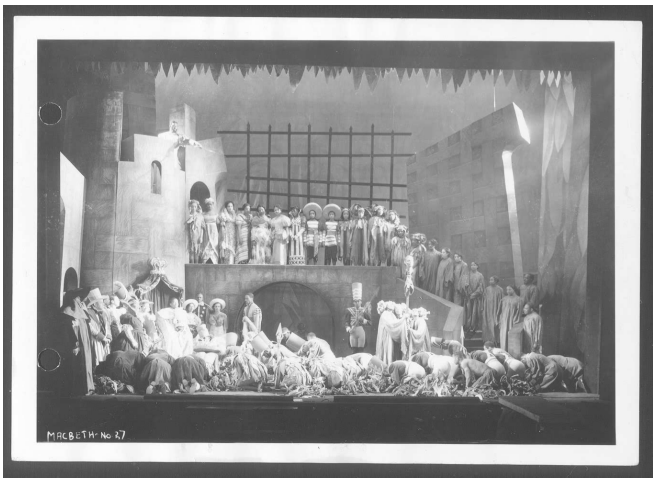
Directors from cultures around the globe have also used the plot of *Macbeth*, abandoning Shakespeare's text to write a script set in an entirely different world. A classic film based on the story is Akira Kurosawa's epic Samurai film, *Throne of Blood* (1957). Kurosawa tells the story of *Macbeth* in a way that is relevant to the history of his own culture, setting the film in medieval Japan. Kurosawa's Macbeth is a prominent Samurai named Washizu, and his wife is named Asaji. The witch in this film is a single glowing white figure, an old woman, slowly chanting a haunting poem and spinning thread. Her poem, which Shakespeare wrote as "Double, double, toil and trouble," starts like this: "All men are mortal / Men are vain / And pride dies first / Within the grave." Asaji is depicted as an emotionless manipulative force who tempts Washizu's ambitions. The rustling of her kimonos is often the only haunting noise one can hear when she is on screen. Evil in this film is supernatural, existing in air and fog, in contrast to Polanski's earthbound adaptation.

Costume sketch from Orson Welles' 1936 stage production.


Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* (1957).

In 1991, writer and director William Reilly made a movie entitled *Men of Respect*, which told the story of *Macbeth* within the world of the mafia. The lead character in the movie is a hitman who visits a spiritualist who tells him he will one day rise to the head of his family. Another very recent modern-day adaptation of *Macbeth* is *Scotland, PA* (2002), written and directed by Billy Morrissette. After reading the play in high school, Morrissette thought that it would be interesting if the story of *Macbeth* took place in a fast food joint. As an adult, Morrissette made his high school musings a reality with the production of his film, which sets the Bard's tale in a rural Pennsylvania town, in which Joe McBeth and his wife Pat's deadly ambition is to become the managers of Norm Duncan's burger restaurant. They achieve their goal by murdering their boss, and a detective named McDuff is called in to investigate their crimes. The witches in this film are three mysterious hippies who hang out on the grounds of a local carnival.

From Haiti to Japan, from high power American politics to a fast food restaurant in the middle of nowhere, from an expressionistic landscape to *The Simpsons*, the story of *Macbeth* has been made relevant to time and place by many directors and writers with imaginative ideas that spring from personal experience and their distinct cultural backgrounds.



Scene from Orson Welles' 1936 stage production.