An Introduction to Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*

John Worston,
*Macbeth and Banquo Meeting the Witches*
Macbeth: An Introduction

- The Tragedy of Macbeth (commonly called Macbeth) is a play by William Shakespeare about a regicide and its aftermath.

- Macbeth is among the best-known of William Shakespeare’s plays.

- It is the first English tragedy about Scotland.

- It is frequently performed at both amateur and professional levels, and has been adapted for opera, film, novels, comic books and screen.
• It is believed to have been written between 1603 and 1607 (with 1606 the most likely date).

• It was first published in the Folio of 1623, possibly from a prompt book. The Folio is the only source for the text. → a cut version?

• Shakespeare’s shortest tragedy.
Historical Context of *Macbeth*

- Shakespeare was a playwright, not an historian. However, he knew that history provided great material for plays: war, conflict, ambition, the downfall of great rulers...
- Eleventh-Century Scotland was a violent and troubled country.
- Feuding families and clans fought to control trade and territory.
- The castle was the power base of each rival war-lord (thane).
- Political murder and revenge killings were commonplace.
The Real Macbeth

• The real Macbeth was born in 1005 and was governor of the Scottish province of Moray.
• He was a military commander for Duncan Ist, probably a cousin of his.
• Possibly of royal descent himself (Malcolm II’s grandson), he acquired a direct claim to the throne through his wife who was a granddaughter of King Kenneth III, who had been overthrown by Duncan's ancestor Malcolm II.
Duncan and Macbeth

• In 1040, Macbeth killed Duncan in battle and seized the throne.

• Macbeth ruled Scotland for 17 years, during which time Scotland became comparatively peaceful and stable.

• In 1054, Siward, earl of Northumbria, invaded parts of Scotland on behalf of Duncan’s son, Malcolm. He was supported by the King of England, Edward the Confessor.

• In 1057, Malcolm himself regained the rest of the kingdom after defeating and killing Macbeth in the battle of Lumphanan.

• He then succeeded to the throne as Malcolm III.
Holinshed’s Chronicles

- Raphael Holinshed (1529–1580): English historian, whose work, commonly known as Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, was one of the major sources used by Shakespeare for a number of his plays.

- Holinshed’s goal was to chronicle British history from the time of the Great Flood (approx. 4000-3000 BC) to Queen Elizabeth (reigning 1558-1603).
A *Macbeth* for King James?

- King James succeeded Queen Elizabeth in 1603 - a Stuart, he was already King of Scotland (James VI).
- Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* may have been performed for the first time before King James in 1606.
- *Macbeth* contains many echoes of King James’ interests...
A *Macbeth* for King James?

- **Banquo** *(pictured at right)*
  
  - an elaborate family tree of the Stuart dynasty suggests that King James is descended from a real Banquo (Holinshed). The truth is that Banquo never existed.

  - Making Banquo a good character (resisting evil while Macbeth embraces it) was probably made to please and appease King James, who hated King-killers (regicides).

  -- Henry Fuseli, *Macbeth, Banquo and the Witches on the Heath*
A Macbeth for King James?

- King James’ interest in witchcraft was well known
- King James visited Oxford in 1605 and was greeted by three witches who hailed him as the descendent of Banquo . . . interesting.

Alexandre-Marie Colin, The Three Witches from Macbeth
History vs fiction

- Unlike the Macbeth in Shakespeare’s play:
  - The real Macbeth had a legitimate claim to the throne
  - Banquo never existed and the one from the *Chronicles* was an accomplice in Duncan’s murder.
  - The real Macbeth was a good ruler, not a tyrant
  - The real Macbeth was killed at Lumphanan as opposed to Dunsinane.
The Gunpowder Plot

• On 5th November 1605 Guy Fawkes and a group of conspirators attempted to blow up parliament. The plot is referred to in the play. Act II sc 3 l. 50 "dire combustion".

• They wanted to bring down the British government and put a Catholic ruler on the throne.

• The plot was discovered and the men involved were tried and killed as traitors. One of the conspirators, was a favourite of the King.

→ *Macbeth* may be in part an analogy of the Gunpowder Plot, with Cawdor as the traitor.
Equivocation

• Henry Garnet, a Catholic priest, was accused of treason for his involvement in the Gunpowder Plot. He was found to have committed perjury, but claimed to have the right to equivocate (tell deliberately misleading half-truths) in self-defense.

• Equivocation is a major theme of the play.

• His execution is referenced in the Porter's scene (Act II, sc 3)
Thomas Middleton’s contribution

- The text that survives has been altered by later hands.
- It is thought that Thomas Middleton, who was working for the King's Men at the time, was asked to tart up this old play by the addition of some new scenes and dialogue featuring Hecate, a character from Middleton's play *The Witch* (1615) for these scenes had proven highly popular with audiences.
- Act III scene 5 and parts of Act IV, scene 1 (lines 39-43 and 125-132) are the result.
The Scottish Play

- A large mythology has built up surrounding this superstition, with countless stories of accidents, misfortunes and even deaths, all mysteriously taking place during runs of Macbeth (or by actors who had uttered the name): actors’ strike, fires, robberies...

- Many actors will not mention the name of the play aloud except during rehearsal or performance, referring to it instead as "The Scottish play" and to its eponymous character as MacBee, Mackers, Mr. and Mrs. M., The Scottish King, MacWhat’s-his-face...
“The Scottish Play”:
Some examples of Misfortunes

• During its first performance, in 1606, Shakespeare himself was forced to play Lady Macbeth when the boy designated to play the part became inexplicably feverish and died.

• When performed in Amsterdam in 1672, the actor playing Macbeth substituted a real dagger for the blunted stage one and with it killed Duncan for real.

• During its 1849 performance at New York's Astor Place, a riot broke out in which 31 people were trampled to death.

• In a 1942 Macbeth production, three actors died, and the costume and set designer committed suicide amidst his devilish Macbeth creations.
“The Scottish Play”

There are many superstitions centered on the belief that the play is somehow cursed.

Explanation #1
- Shakespeare is said to have used the spells of real witches in his text, purportedly angering the witches and causing them to curse the play.

Explanation #2
- It is a very famous play, performed for over 400 years so it is bound to have suffered some accidents and mishaps.
Explanation #3

• Struggling theatres or companies would often put on this popular 'blockbuster' in an effort to save their flagging fortunes.

• However, it is a tall order for any single production to reverse a long-running trend of poor business.

• Therefore, the last play performed before a theatre shut down was often *Macbeth*, and thus the growth of the idea that it was an 'unlucky' play.
MAP OF LOCATIONS IN MACBETH
Macbeth’s setting

- *Macbeth* opens with a fight between Norway and Scotland. King Sweno of Norway [c. 1016-1035] wanted to invade King Duncan I’s Scotland. The Norwegian King had managed to attract discontented Scotsmen to his army of invading Norwegians.

- Macdonwald was the leader of the rebel forces allying themselves with the Norwegians. Among the rebels was the powerful, wealthy Thane of Cawdor.
Macbeth’s Characters

- **King Duncan of Scotland**
  - Murdered by Macbeth
  - Honest and good
  - Malcolm & Donalbain are his sons, Malcolm being the elder
• **Macbeth**

  – Duncan’s cousin, also his most courageous general and a great warrior

  – Already the Thane of Glamis (becomes Thane of Cawdor and then king)

  – As Duncan’s cousin, he is next in line for the throne after Malcolm and Donalbain

  – Ambition to become king corrupts him, causing him to overthrow the rightful King of Scotland, Duncan.
• Lady Macbeth
  – As ambitious as her husband
  – A dark force behind his evil deeds

• The other Scottish noblemen: Lennox, Ross, Menteth, Angus, Caithness
  – They are thanes (lords) of Scotland
  – The Thane of Ross is Lady Macduff’s cousin
  – They eventually turn against the tyrannical Macbeth
• Banquo
  – General and Macbeth’s best friend
  – Suspects Macbeth in connection to Duncan’s murder
  – At the time believed to be an actual ancestor of King James I → in fact, never existed!
  – Fleance is his son

• Macduff
  – Scottish general, suspects Macbeth of murdering the king
  – Old Siward is Macduff’s father and Young Siward his brother
  – Macbeth has his wife and children murdered → swears vengeance
A synopsis of the play

*Macbeth* is a story of power, ambition and ultimately loss.

- Act I, sc 1: the witches
- Act I, sc 2: the Bloody Captain scene
- Act I, sc 3: Macbeth meets the witches
- Act I, sc 4: the honouring of Malcolm scene
- Act I, sc 5: Lady Macbeth’s letter scene
- Act I, sc 6: Duncan’s arrival at Macbeth’s Castle
- Act I, sc 7: Macbeth’s doubt and Lady Macbeth’s persuasion
- Act II, sc 1: the floating dagger scene
- Act II, sc 2: Duncan’s murder
- Act II, sc 3: the Porter and the discovery
- Act II, sc 4: the old man scene
• Act III, sc 1: King Macbeth
• Act III, sc 2: King and Lady Macbeth
• Act III, sc 3: the Banquo and Fleance scene
• Act III, sc 4: the banquet scene
• Act III, sc 5: the Hecat scene
• Act III, sc 6: the Lords’s growing opposition scene

• Act IV, sc 1: the prophecy scene
• Act IV, sc 2: the Macduff family scene
• Act IV, sc 3: the Malcolm scene

• Act V, sc 1: the sleepwalking scene
• Act V, sc 2: the Scottish rebels’ scene
• Act V, sc 3-7: the battle scenes.
Detailed summary

• **Act I, sc 1**: three witches plan to meet Macbeth upon a heath.

• **Sc 2**: King Duncan is told by a wounded captain and then by Ross how brave Macbeth and Banquo (both generals in King Duncan's army) have defeated the Norwegian army and the Scottish rebels. Duncan decides to have the rebel Thane of Cawdor executed and to give Macbeth his title.

• **Sc 3**: Macbeth and Banquo have fought a huge battle and cross a wasteland together. From nowhere three witches appear 'so wither'd and wild in their attire' that they can hardly be described as women. They tell the men their separate fates: Macbeth will become the Thane of Cawdor and then king. Banquo's sons will be kings. After their unlikely prophecies they vanish.
• **Sc 4**: A messenger approaches the generals and tells Macbeth that he has been appointed the Thane of Cawdor. With this, Macbeth now wonders if he might also become king.

• **Sc 5**: His wife Lady Macbeth is very driven and incredibly tough. When he writes to her of his promotion she is both surprised and excited. And fearful...that he will balk at killing the present King Duncan.

• **Sc 6**: The king's party comes that day to stay at their castle. They must kill Duncan tonight. Duncan is welcomed by Lady Macbeth, unaware of her intentions.

• **Sc 7**: Macbeth wavers but then agrees to kill Duncan.
• **Act II, sc 1:** Macbeth experiences hallucinations (a floating dagger covered in blood), and then is off to kill Duncan, once Lady Macbeth has drugged the servants who guard the sleeping Duncan.

• **Sc 2:** After killing the king, Macbeth returns to his wife with the bloodied daggers. She orders him to return the knives. He cannot. Finally she grabs them herself and plants them back at the crime scene, smearing the guards in the king's blood.

• **Sc 3:** after some comic relief with the drunk porter’s speech, the king's general Macduff arrives in the morning. He finds Duncan's butchered body. Macbeth rushes to the crime scene. In a feigned fit of rage, he slaughters the servants. For their own safety, Duncan's sons flee: Malcolm to England and his brother to Ireland.

• **Sc 4:** Ross and an old man talk about the strange events of the previous night. Duncan’s sons are accused because they have fled. Macduff announces Macbeth will succeed to the throne.
- **Act III, sc 1:** Macbeth is now king and Lady Macbeth his queen. But Macbeth is restless, full of doubt. He is terrified that Banquo's son Fleance will supplant him. Macbeth hires two assassins to kill both Banquo and his son Fleance.

- **Sc 2:** Macbeth confides to his wife that his mind is troubled with nightmares. He announces he is determined to have Banquo killed.

- **Sc 3:** The two murderers kill Banquo but Fleance escapes into the night.

- **Sc 4:** At a banquet that same night Macbeth is told of the murder. He looks around to an empty seat and sees Banquo, bloodied, staring at him. Macbeth points at the apparition, screams. The guests imagine that the new King Macbeth is mad. His wife tries to calm him but he sees the ghost again and again. Lady Macbeth clears the room. But Macbeth no longer listens to her. He is plagued by guilt and fear. He can no longer sleep.
• **Sc 5**: Hecate, Queen of the witches asks them to properly greet Macbeth.

• **Sc 6**: Suspicion against Macbeth and fear are growing.

• **Act IV, sc 1**: Macbeth seeks out the witches. What is next for him? They tell him to beware Macduff but that: 'None of woman born shall harm Macbeth' and that until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill, he will be safe. Macbeth orders an attack on Macduff's castle.

• **Sc 2**: His men murder Lady Macduff and all of her children.

• **Sc 3**: in England, Macduff is hungry for revenge and tries to convince Malcolm to go back to Scotland. Malcolm enlists Macduff in his army against Macbeth. A messenger announces that Lady Macduff and her children are dead.
• **Act V, sc 1**: Lady Macbeth sleepwalks every night. She imagines that her hands are always covered in blood. She washes them repeatedly. But she cannot rid herself of the stench and vision of the blood. A doctor watches Lady Macbeth and hears her confession as she sleepwalks. She whispers: 'Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him.'

• **Sc 2**: Malcolm is back with an army and ready to fight Macbeth.

• **Sc 3**: Macbeth arms himself against the oncoming army. His companions begin to leave but he is confident. Every man is born of woman. And whoever saw a forest walk?

• **Sc 4**: The invading army revert to camouflage. They cut down Birnam Wood and advance with the branches shielding them. Macbeth is told that the forest is moving towards him. Impossible!
• **Sc 5**: He hears noises and asks his servant Seyton what it is. Seyton investigates. Lady Macbeth is dead, she has killed herself. Macbeth is alone and like a trapped animal.

• **Sc 6**: The army is determined to fight.

• **Sc 7**: The castle is stormed. Macduff finds Macbeth and they fight, both of them brilliant soldiers. But Macbeth still imagines he is god like. But when he learns Macduff was born by Caesarian section he realizes that he must face death. Macduff cuts off his head and brings it to Malcolm and his army, victorious. Tyranny is defeated. Malcolm is crowned King of Scotland.
Witches & Witchcraft

• A witch-mania characterized the Elizabethan era.

• Most people believed in witches and circulating pamphlets containing tales of witches and witchcraft were the equivalent of today’s popular newspapers.

Henry Fuseli, The Three Witches
• Witches were said to have “diabolical” powers. They could:
  – predict the future
  – bring on night in the daytime
  – cause fogs and tempests
  – kill animals
  – curse enemies with fatal, wasting diseases
  – cause nightmares and sterility
  – take demonic possession of any individual
  – raise evil spirits by concocting a brew

• It was believed that witches allowed the devil to suck their blood. Accused witches were examined for the “Devil’s Mark” - a red mark on their body from which the devil had sucked blood.
• Between 1560 and 1603, hundreds of people, nearly all of them women, were convicted as witches and executed.

• In 1604 an official Act of Parliament decreed that anyone found guilty of practicing witchcraft should be executed.

• Those who confessed to being witches did so under torture or because they were in the grip of delusions recognized today as psychiatric disorders.
The Witches in *Macbeth*

- They tell Macbeth that he is destined to be king, and urge him to do bloody things. The witches never actually tell Macbeth to kill Duncan, but merely tempt him with the idea of becoming king.

- They represent darkness, chaos and confusion: “Fair is foul and foul is fair” - a contradiction.

- Their character is modeled after Norse mythology - the Norns (three Fates): the name Urðr (Wyrd, Weird) means "fate" or simply "future".
The witches were also modeled after the Three Fates (Parcae) of Greek and Roman mythology who controlled the metaphorical thread of life of every mortal and immortal from birth to death.

Their names were:
- **Nona** – she spun the thread of life from her distaff onto her spindle. Her Greek equivalent was *Clotho*;
- **Decima** – she measured the thread of life with her rod. Her Greek equivalent was *Lachesis*;
- **Morta** – she was the cutter of the thread of life. She chose the manner of a person's death. When she cut the thread with "her abhorred shears", someone on Earth died. Her Greek equivalent was *Atropos*. 
Film adaptations of *Macbeth*

Orson Welles 1948

Roman Polanski 1971
Trevor Nunn 1978
(RSC production: stage footage)

Justin Kurzel 2015