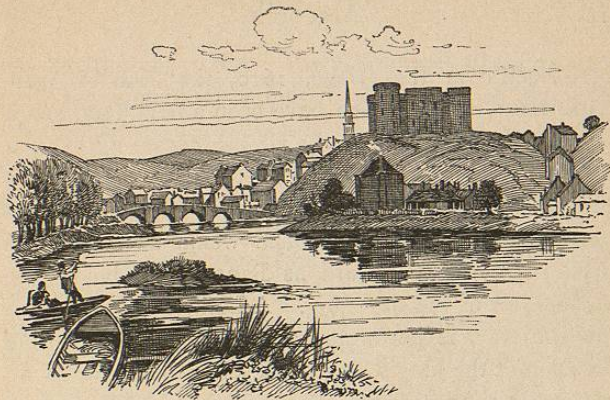


CAWDOR CASTLE



INVERNESS

## INTRODUCTION TO MACBETH

### THE HISTORY OF THE PLAY

*Macbeth* was first printed in the folio of 1623, where it occupies pages 131 to 151 inclusive, in the division of "Tragedies." It was registered in the books of the Stationers' Company, on the 8th of November, 1623, by Blount and Jaggard, the publishers of the folio, as one of the plays "not formerly entered to other men." It was written between 1604 and 1610; the former limit being fixed by the allusion to the union of England and Scotland under James I. (iv. 1. 121), and the latter by the MS. Diary of Dr. Simon Forman, who saw the play

performed "at the Globe, 1610, the 20th of April, Saturday." It may then have been a new play, but it is more probable, as nearly all the critics agree, that it was written in 1605 or 1606. The accession of James made Scottish subjects popular in England, and the tale of *Macbeth and Banquo* would be one of the first to be brought forward, as Banquo was held to be an ancestor of the new king. A Latin "interlude" on this subject was performed at Oxford in 1605, on the occasion of the king's visit to the city; but there is no reason for supposing that Shakespeare got the hint of his tragedy from that source.

It is barely possible that there was an earlier play on the subject of Macbeth. Collier finds in the Registers of the Stationers' Company, under date of August 27, 1596, the entry of a "Ballad of Makdobeth," which he gives plausible reasons for supposing to have been a drama, and not a "ballad" properly so called. There appears to be a reference to the same piece in Kemp's *Nine Days' Wonder*, printed in 1600, where it is called a "miserable stolne story," and said to be the work of "a penny Poet."

Steevens maintained that Shakespeare was indebted, in the supernatural parts of *Macbeth*, to *The Witch*, a play by Thomas Middleton, which was discovered in manuscript towards the end of the eighteenth century. Malone at first took the same view of the subject, but finally came to the conclusion that Middleton's play was the later production, and that he must there-

fore be the plagiarist. The Clarendon Press editors take the ground that there are portions of Macbeth which Shakespeare did not write; that these were interpolated after the poet's death, or at least after he had ceased to be connected with the theatre; and that "the interpolator was, not improbably, Thomas Middleton."

These views have found little favour with other Shakespearian critics. A more satisfactory explanation of the imperfections of the play ascribes them to the haste with which it was written. White, who refers its composition to "the period between October, 1604, and August, 1605," remarks: "I am the more inclined to this opinion from the indications which the play itself affords that it was produced upon an emergency. It exhibits throughout the hasty execution of a grand and clearly conceived design. But the haste is that of a master of his art, who, with conscious command of its resources, and in the frenzy of a grand inspiration, works out his composition to its minutest detail of essential form, leaving the work of surface finish for the occupation of cooler leisure. What the Sistine Madonna was to Raphael, it seems that *Macbeth* was to Shakespeare — a magnificent impromptu; that kind of impromptu which results from the application of well-disciplined powers and rich stores of thought to a subject suggested by occasion. I am inclined to regard *Macbeth* as, for the most part, a specimen of Shakespeare's unelaborated, if not unfinished, writing, in the maturity and highest vitality of his genius. It abounds

in instances of extremest compression and most daring ellipsis, while it exhibits in every scene a union of supreme dramatic and poetic power, and in almost every line an imperially irresponsible control of language. Hence, I think, its lack of completeness of versification in certain passages, and also some of the imperfection of the text, the thought in which the compositors were not always able to follow and apprehend."

#### THE HISTORICAL SOURCES OF THE PLAY

Shakespeare drew the materials for the plot of *Macbeth* from Holinshed's "Chronicles of Englande, Scotlande, and Ireland," the first edition of which was issued in 1577, and the second (which was doubtless the one the poet used) in 1586-87. The extracts from Holinshed in the notes will show that the main incidents are taken from his account of two separate events,—the murder of Duncan by Macbeth, and that of King Duffe, the great-grandfather of Lady Macbeth, by Donwald. It will be seen, too, that Shakespeare has deviated in other respects from the chronicle, especially in the character of Banquo.

Although, as Knight remarks, "the interest of *Macbeth* is not an *historical* interest," so that it matters little whether the action is true or has been related as true, I may add, for the benefit of my younger readers, that the story of the drama is almost wholly apocry-

phal. The more authentic history is thus summarized by Sir Walter Scott:—

"Duncan, by his mother Beatrice a grandson of Malcolm II., succeeded to the throne on his grandfather's death, in 1033: he reigned only six years. Macbeth, his near relation, also a grandchild of Malcolm II., though by the mother's side, was stirred up by ambition to contest the throne with the possessor. The Lady of Macbeth also, whose real name was Graoch, had deadly injuries to avenge on the reigning prince. She was the granddaughter of Kenneth IV., killed 1003, fighting against Malcolm II.; and other causes for revenge animated the mind of her who has been since painted as the sternest of women. The old annals add some instigations of a supernatural kind to the influence of a vindictive woman over an ambitious husband. Three women, of more than human stature and beauty, appeared to Macbeth in a dream or vision, and hailed him successively by the titles of Thane of Cromarty, Thane of Moray, which the king afterwards bestowed on him, and finally by that of King of Scots; this dream, it is said, inspired him with the seductive hopes so well expressed in the drama.

"Macbeth broke no law of hospitality in his attempt on Duncan's life. He attacked and slew the king at a place called Bothgowan, or the Smith's House, near Elgin, in 1039, and not, as has been supposed, in his own castle of Inverness. The act was bloody, as was the complexion of the times; but, in very truth, the

claim of Macbeth to the throne, according to the rule of Scottish succession, was better than that of Duncan. As a king, the tyrant so much exclaimed against was, in reality, a firm, just, and equitable prince.<sup>1</sup> Apprehensions of danger from a party which Malcolm, the eldest son of the slaughtered Duncan, had set on foot in Northumberland, and still maintained in Scotland, seem, in process of time, to have soured the temper of Macbeth, and rendered him formidable to his nobility. Against Macduff, in particular, the powerful Maormor of Fife, he had uttered some threats which occasioned that chief to fly from the court of Scotland. Urged by this new counsellor, Siward, the Danish Earl of Northumberland, invaded Scotland in the year 1054, displaying his banner in behalf of the banished Malcolm. Macbeth engaged the foe in the neighbourhood of his celebrated castle of Dunsinane. He was defeated, but escaped from the battle, and was slain at Lumphanan in 1056."

Whether Shakespeare was ever in Scotland is a question that has been much discussed. Knight (*Biography*, ed. 1865, p. 420 fol.) endeavours to prove that the poet visited that country in 1589, but most of the editors agree that there is no satisfactory evidence of his having ever been there.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This view is confirmed by Mr. E. A. Freeman (*Norman Conquest*, ii. p. 55): "All genuine Scottish tradition points to the reign of Macbeth as a period of unusual peace and prosperity in that disturbed land."

<sup>2</sup> For a good summary of the discussion see Furness's *Macbeth*, p. 407 fol. (488 fol. in revised ed.).

## MACBETH AND LADY MACBETH

Concerning the two leading characters of the play, Macbeth and his Lady, there has been much discussion and a wide divergence of opinion. Let us examine the play for such facts relating to them as we can discover, and consider what inferences we may draw from these facts as to the characters and relations of the pair.

At the opening of the play Macbeth is the thane of Glamis and a captain in the Scottish army, which has just won a victory over the king of Norway, who was aided by a force of rebels under the command of the thane of Cawdor. Macbeth and his fellow-captain Banquo have performed prodigies of valour in the battle, and are on their way home from the field when they are met by the three witches, as Shakespeare calls them, and as they are called in the old chronicle from which he took the main incidents of his plot. They appear to be simply the witches of ancient superstition, — hags who have gained a measure of superhuman knowledge and power by a league with Satan, to whom they have sold their souls and pledged their service. From the first scene of the play we learn that they have planned this meeting with Macbeth, whom, in reply to his startled question, "What are you?" they hail, one after another, as "thane of Glamis," then "thane of Cawdor," and finally, "Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!" Banquo then asks what prediction they have for him; and in turn they address him as

"Lesser than Macbeth and greater," "Not so happy, yet much happier," and add, "Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none." Macbeth would fain have them tell him more, but they vanish with no response to his eager appeal.

A moment later, Ross and Angus arrive as messengers from King Duncan, by whose command they hail Macbeth as "thane of Cawdor."

Here occurs one of the inconsistencies of the play which puzzle the critics. In the interview with the Witches Macbeth had said:—

"By Sinel's death I know I am thane of Glamis,  
But how of Cawdor? the thane of Cawdor lives,  
A prosperous gentleman."

This may have been said merely to draw out an explanation from them, though he must have been aware that Cawdor was a traitor who had just been conquered and taken prisoner in the battle from which he himself was returning. But when Ross hails Macbeth as "thane of Cawdor," the latter replies:—

"The thane of Cawdor lives; why do you dress me  
In borrowed robes?"

Angus then states that Cawdor lives indeed, but is condemned to death for treason; but just what his treason was he does not know. This is not easily explained, as Ross, who is now present with Angus, had in a former scene informed Duncan of Cawdor's presence in the

battle as an ally of the Norwegian king; and Ross himself had been directed to see Cawdor executed, and his title given to Macbeth.

We know, however, that such inconsistencies not unfrequently occur in plays that appear to have been written less hurriedly than *Macbeth* evidently was; and this may be an instance of the kind. If scene 2 of this act is an addition by another hand, as some suppose, Shakespeare may not be responsible for the fault.

In the soliloquy that follows this announcement of the new honour conferred upon him, Macbeth says:—

"Two truths are told  
As happy prologues to the swelling act  
Of the imperial theme.— I thank you, gentlemen.—  
[*Aside.*] This supernatural soliciting  
Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,  
Why hath it given me earnest of success,  
Commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor.  
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion  
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,  
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,  
Against the use of nature? Present fears  
Are less than horrible imaginings.  
My thought, whose murmur yet is but fantastical,  
Shakes so my single state of man that function  
Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is.  
But what is not."

Here, almost at the moment when the prediction concerning the thaneship of Cawdor is fulfilled, we find Macbeth meditating murder, that he may bring about

the fulfilment of the prediction that he shall be king hereafter. To one critic at least this seems rather sudden, but he ascribes it to the rapidity with which the action of this play rushes on from first to last. To my thinking, it is in perfect keeping with one of the most marked characteristics of Macbeth,—his active imagination. This is the key to much that he afterwards says and does.

In *The Tempest*, when Antonio is tempting Sebastian to murder King Alonso, he says:—

“What might,  
Worthy Sebastian?—O, what might? . . .  
The occasion speaks thee, and  
My strong imagination sees a crown  
Dropping upon thy head.”

This might be said of Macbeth at this point in his career. Not only is he sure that the prophecy is to be fulfilled, but, to quote the words of the Lady in another scene, he “feels now the future in the instant.” His strong imagination *sees* the crown suspended over his head, as later he sees the air-drawn dagger marshalling him the way to murder. The golden prize hangs within his reach. It is held only by the slender thread of an old man’s life. He has but to cut that thread, and the crown is his. “Come, let me clutch thee!” is his mental exclamation. But the “horrid image” of the murder comes before his mind’s eye with equal vividness, and makes his seated heart knock at his

ribs. The bloody deed is as yet but “fantastical”—a thing of fancy—but it is as real to him and as frightful as the ghost of Banquo, which is no outward apparition, but

“A [spectre] of the mind, a false creation,  
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain.”

It is the bloody business which informs thus to his eyes—that makes the fearful visions of his excited imagination seem to take palpable shape before him.

Is this the first suggestion of murder that has occurred to Macbeth? Some of the best critics believe that he had meditated this bloody treason before the beginning of the play. They infer this from what Lady Macbeth says, when, in a subsequent scene, he determines that he will proceed no further in this business of murder (i. 7. 49):—

“When you durst do it, then you were a man;  
And, to be more than what you were, you would  
Be so much more the man. *Nor time nor place*  
*Did then adhere, and yet you would make both.*”

This is the only passage in the play that can be construed as a hint that Macbeth had plotted the taking-off of Duncan at some earlier time, and that the Lady had advised him to wait for a more favourable opportunity. I do not think that we are driven to this interpretation, or that it is necessary, if we reject it, to suppose that a scene has been lost or omitted in which the pair had discussed their plans for the crime. There

has been an interval sufficient for such discussion, but Shakespeare did not deem it necessary or desirable to introduce it into the play. We have evidence *in the play as it stands* that the words I have quoted from Lady Macbeth's speech *cannot* refer to a time previous to the dramatic action. Such a supposition is inconsistent with her soliloquy after reading Macbeth's letter in which he tells her the Witches have predicted that he is to be king. She fears his nature, which will not permit him to "catch the nearest way"—that is, to kill Duncan. If at any former time he had proposed to kill him, she could have no doubt of his being willing to do it now. She could not have thought that, though he had ambition, he was without the illness that should attend it, and that the valour of her tongue must overcome his repugnance to the crime. A moment afterwards she asserts that she will have to commit the crime herself. At the close of that terrible apostrophe to the spirits of darkness in which she prays that she may be unsexed and filled with direst cruelty, she says:—

"Come, thick night,  
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,  
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,  
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,  
To cry 'Hold, hold!'"

*She* is to use the knife, not urge her husband to do what she assumes he will fear to do. When Macbeth comes in, she says to *him*:—

"He that 's coming  
Must be provided for; and you shall put  
This night's great business *into my dispatch.*"

*She* will be responsible for dispatching this business. Macbeth says: "We will speak further;" but she tells him that all he is to do is only to "look up clear," and not to betray their purpose by his perturbed countenance. "Leave all the rest to me," are her parting words.

When Macbeth next appears (i. 7), we find that *he* is to "bear the knife" against his kinsman and king, and when the Lady comes in, it is evident that this is the plan on which they have agreed. She tells him that he has "sworn" to do the deed, and after she has satisfied him that there is no danger of failure he is ready for the "terrible feat."

Here we see that there has been a change in their plans. The Lady is not to kill Duncan, but Macbeth is to undertake it. He has "sworn" to do it. This must have been arranged at an interview between the two scenes we have been considering. There was time for such an interview, but if there had not been, it would not have troubled Shakespeare. In this play a whole scene occurs (iii. 6) to which no possible time can be assigned, and such scenes are found in other of the plays.

In the present instance, however, there is no such impossibility. Duncan arrives at the castle before dark, as the dialogue outside the walls (i. 6) clearly shows. The banquet is some hours later. In the interim the king may be supposed to be resting in

his chamber after the journey. Macbeth and the Lady have the opportunity for "speaking further" concerning their plot, as he had proposed. The vision of the crown again rises to his imagination, and he is impatient to cut the thread that prevents his clutching it. He seems to have suggested some rash way of doing this at once, and doing it himself, but the Lady sees that neither the time nor the place which he proposes is suited to the purpose. She suggests that it will be safer to wait until a later hour, when the king and everybody but themselves is in bed. Since she now finds that Macbeth is willing to do the killing, she naturally transfers that part of the business to him; but, lest his fears and scruples should lead him to waver again, she exacts an oath that no compunctious visitings of nature shall shake his fell purpose to bear the knife himself. When, in the scene that follows, his thought of the risk of failure makes him shrink from doing what he has sworn to do, she overwhelms him with bitterest reproaches for his cowardice and perfidy, and, to relieve his apprehensions, adds to the precautions already agreed upon the drugging of the possets furnished to the king's guards when they retire with him to his chamber. This reassures Macbeth, and his courage is at last screwed to the sticking-place.

This may or may not have been precisely what Shakespeare had in mind for filling the gap between the two scenes in which the pair soliloquize and confer

concerning the method of the murder; but it is certain that we are not compelled to assume that the Lady's allusion to Macbeth's readiness to kill the king at some former time and place must refer to a period before the beginning of the play. If that had been Shakespeare's meaning, he would have given us some more distinct intimation of it than this single passage furnishes. This interpretation, I may add, is not only inconsistent with what the Lady says of her husband's nature, but also with what he himself says (or soliloquizes) when he finds the prophecy of the Witches fulfilled in part by his being made thane of Cawdor. If the purpose of killing Duncan had occurred to him before that time, the "horrid image" of the suggestion could not have affected him as it does. Rather would he have welcomed the prophecy as a supernatural encouragement of his plot of murder and usurpation. The obvious meaning of his words is that the plot is then first suggested to him, and that the horror of it almost overwhelms him. His imagination sees not only the crown, but the blood that must stain his hands if they are to clutch it before it falls. No wonder that for the moment the sorry sight of that blood, though only fantastical, makes him hesitate:—

"If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me,  
Without my stir."

But it is only for the moment that he can reason thus rationally and virtuously. Again his eyes turn to the



resplendent prize, and the blood that must be shed to gain it is forgotten.

We may now consider it settled beyond any reasonable doubt that the purpose of attaining the crown by the murder of Duncan occurs independently to both Macbeth and his wife. Neither suggests it to the other; their guilt in this respect is equal.

It may also be noted here that we have no right to say, as certain critics have done, that the Witches instigate Macbeth to the crime. They simply predict what is to be his destiny. They suggest no means or method for bringing about the fulfilment of the predictions; they say not a word to incite him to sinful thought or deed. Their prophetic message once delivered in the briefest form possible, they vanish, paying no attention to the entreaties of Macbeth that they will stay and tell him more.

Their prophecies, moreover, are not addressed to Macbeth alone, but also to Banquo, in whose soul they excite no thought or purpose of evil. He accepts them as prophecies, nothing more, and shows little interest in them until Ross and Angus come and hail Macbeth as thane of Cawdor. Then, so far from welcoming them as propitious intimations of good fortune, he warns his companion that they may prove to be due to the machinations of evil spirits, who

“tell us truths,  
Win us with honest trifles to betray ’s  
In deepest consequence.”

To Macbeth, on the other hand, the very fact that the supernatural soliciting has *begun* with a truth is proof that it *cannot* be ill. Yet, as his conscience admonishes him, it cannot be good, for it tempts him to crime; and he admits that he is ready to “yield” to that temptation.

Here we begin to see what manner of man he really is. Up to this time he has won golden opinions from all sorts of people, and apparently has deserved them. But, like so many other men of excellent reputation, he has hitherto been upright only because his virtue has never been subjected to any severe test. When a great temptation assails him, he falls like Lucifer, never to rise again.

Macbeth is utterly destitute of moral principle. His ambition for the crown once aroused, he determines to murder his king, who has just bestowed new honours upon him, and to whom he is bound by ties of kinship as well as of loyalty. When later he hesitates to commit the crime he has planned, it is not from any compunction of conscience, but from “sheer moral cowardice” — from fear of the consequences in this life. Shakespeare has taken pains to make this clear in Macbeth’s soliloquy (i. 7): —

“If it were done when ’t is done, then ’t were well  
’T were done quickly”;

that is, if the deed were really *done*, if that were the end of it, the quicker it is done the better.