



Oregon
Shakespeare
Festival.

2024 Study Guide



King James I, Wikimedia Commons

It is believed that Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* for his new king and patron, King James I. King James was fascinated with witches — perhaps because of the bloody death of his mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, by the ax at the command of Elizabeth I.

- When he sailed to Denmark to bring back his betrothed, Anne, the return voyage was so plagued by storms that one ship in the royal fleet was lost. James blamed witches.
- Upon landing in England, he had up to 70 “witches” rounded up, and under torture, they confessed and were put to death.
- James went on to write *Daemonologie*, a treatise on killing witches.
- Upon becoming King of England, he made the statutes against witchcraft more strict, ensuring a rise in the death toll of those convicted of witchcraft.
- The apparition shown to Macbeth of Banquo with the glass in his hand represents the line of kings that spring from Banquo. The real Banquo was an accomplice in the death of Duncan, but King James was thought to be a descendant of Banquo’s, so Shakespeare may have changed the nature of his Banquo character to please the king.



Macbeth

by William Shakespeare



Macbeth and the witches, Wikicommons

Historical Figures

There are several historical figures and events that may have influenced Shakespeare in writing *Macbeth*. They are:

- King Duncan in *Macbeth* is a wise, older man but historically was a terrible king who ruled from 1034 to 40 and was probably about 39 when he died. Macbeth, Chief of the Northern Scots, had a strong claim to the throne through his mother’s line. He defeated and killed Duncan in 1040.
- Macbeth married Gruoch, who was of royal blood, being a descendant of a Scottish king herself.
- After killing King Duncan, Macbeth became king, and he and Gruoch ruled for 17 years.
- A 10th-century King of Scotland, Duffe, was murdered by Donwalde at the urging of Donwalde’s wife. Donwalde got Duffe’s attendants drunk and murdered Duffe in their absence.



Cobbe portrait of William Shakespeare, Wikipedia

Shakespeare’s Play

- Written around 1606 and most likely first performed for King James I.
- King James did not like long plays; this perhaps accounts for the play’s short length. It is Shakespeare’s shortest tragedy.
- The source material is *The Chronicles of Holinshed* by Raphael Holinshed, and the reigns of Duncan and Macbeth of Scotland (1034–57).
- *Macbeth* was first performed at court for King James, Queen Anne and her visiting brother from Denmark.



Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research the history behind the story of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Create family trees for the characters in the play. In what ways is the story of *Macbeth* a family drama as well as a political drama? These and other websites provide information:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/macbeth.shtml
<http://www.historic-uk.com/HistoryUK/Scotland-History/DuncanandMacbeth.htm>
http://scottishhistory.suite101.com/article.cfm/macbeth_104057
<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Macbeth-king-of-Scots>
2. Read Act I, scene i. What information do the three witches give us? What disturbances in nature or the weather do they report? What opposites are mentioned in the scene? What might be expected from the play based upon the first scene?
3. Define ambition. What are the benefits of ambition (that is, how does ambition help a person achieve goals)? What are the dangers? What are common things people are ambitious about? What price (both physical and morally) are people willing to pay to achieve their ambitions? What are people willing to sacrifice?
4. Define fate. Define free will. Make the case that life is governed by fate. Make the case that life is governed by free will. In what way can life be governed by both free will and fate?
5. Research the views on witchcraft, magic, and superstition held by people in Shakespeare's day. How do you think these views will influence the play? What are current views on the supernatural? How do you think modern views will influence this production? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.elizabethan-era.org.uk/elizabethan-witchcraft-and-witches.htm>
<https://www.nls.uk/learning-zone/literature-and-language/themes-in-focus/witches/source-2/>
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/teach/teach/shakespeare-witchcraft-and-the-supernatural/zvfyd6f>
6. Research the social and political structure of medieval Scotland. What is a Thane? What power did that title hold? What was the traditional way for the next king to be chosen in medieval Scotland? These and other websites provide information:
<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/thane>
<https://www.middleages.org.uk/medieval-scotland/>
<https://poms.ac.uk/about/historical-introduction/>
<https://dundeescottishculture.org/history/scottish-history-at-a-glance-the-meic-uilleim-risings/>

7. What were the attitudes of the Elizabethans toward the Scottish? What was the history of the relationship between these two countries? What were the English perceptions of Scottish men? Scottish women? How did those attitudes change when James I became king? This and other websites provide information:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/james-i_king.shtml
<https://www.history.co.uk/articles/the-life-of-king-james-i-and-vi-the-wisest-fool-in-christendom>

Define ambition. What are the benefits of ambition (that is, how does ambition help a person achieve goals)? What are the dangers?

8. King James I was the patron of Shakespeare's company, which was known as the King's Men. Why might Shakespeare have felt motivated to make sure *Macbeth* pleased his patron, who was also his king? How might the writing of the play have been influenced by the interests of King James I? By his nationality? Which passages in the play seem intended to please him? Which might have displeased him? These and other websites provide information:
<https://www.college.columbia.edu/core/content/macbeth-historical-context>
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A4455434>
<http://www.shakespeare-online.com/faq/macbethfaq.html>



9. Research the history of theatrical productions of *Macbeth*. Who have been the great Macbeths and Lady Macbeths, and what has distinguished their performances? These and other websites provide information:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Macbeth#Performance_history
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lady_Macbeth

10. What theatre superstitions are connected to the play *Macbeth*? What are the traditional methods of counteracting the “curse” on the play? Discuss stories about ways the “curse” has manifested itself. How would this information influence decisions about producing the play? These and other websites provide information:
<http://www.austinchronicle.com/gyrobase/Issue/story?oid=oid%3A78882>
<https://www.rsc.org.uk/macbeth/about-the-play/the-scottish-play>
<https://www.history.com/news/why-do-actors-avoid-the-word-macbeth>
<https://www.folger.edu/blogs/shakespeare-and-beyond/macbeth-curse-scottish-play/>

Films:

Macbeth, with Orson Welles, 1948
Macbeth, with Ian McKellan and Judi Dench, 1978
Macbeth, with Anthony Sher, 2001
Macbeth, with Patrick Stewart, 2010
Macbeth, with Michael Fassbender, 2015
The Tragedy of Macbeth, with Denzel Washington, 2021

Learn more about Shakespeare's life and times at the following websites:

<http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html>
<http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=865&C-FID=6230886&CFTOKEN=25420173>
<http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html>
<http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/life.htm>
<http://www.bardweb.net/man.html>



After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to your conversation on the first scene of the play: what opposites do the witches mention? Find further examples of opposites in the text or in the play. What do these opposing words and ideas reveal about the world of the play? What characters in the play seem to be opposites of each other? Why are they opposites?
2. Read Act I, scene iii, the scene between Macbeth, Banquo and the witches. What do the witches prophecy for Macbeth? For Banquo? How does Macbeth react to the prophecies? How does Banquo react? What is the difference between Banquo's response to the prophecies and Macbeth's? How do these reactions point out the differences between the two men? Based on these differences, what do you expect from them in the play? How did these men defy expectation or did they?
3. Refer to your research on fate and free will. Why does Macbeth think the prophecies about him are destined to come true but the prophecies about Banquo can be avoided? What other interpretations could you give to the prophecies of the witches? If Macbeth believes these prophecies are destined to come true, why doesn't he just let the future unfold? Is Macbeth a victim of fate or does he have free will to choose the outcome? How does Lady Macbeth influence Macbeth's decisions?
4. How do other characters in the play describe Macbeth? What do we learn about who Macbeth is at the beginning of the play and who he becomes from the descriptions? Do people tell the truth about Macbeth? Who speaks truth about him and who doesn't? Why do they tell the truth about him or not?
5. Lady Macbeth advises Macbeth to “look like the innocent flower/but be the serpent under it.” How is the idea that reality can be hidden by appearances explored in the play? What characters are deceived by appearances? Which characters deceive by appearing to be something they are not?
6. What price do Macbeth and Lady Macbeth pay for their ambition? Find modern couple relationships that parallel Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Find examples of modern leaders who have made questionable choices or unethical decisions to achieve and maintain power and success. What price have they paid for their ambition?
7. Plot each character's ambition: Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Banquo, Lennox, Ross, Angus, Macduff, Malcolm. What is their ambition? What dangers come along with their ambition? What price is the character willing to pay? What sacrifices do they make to gain their ambition? If the character achieves their ambition, how do they do it? If they do not achieve their ambition, what stops them?

“What’s done can not be undone.”

—Lady Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 1

8. What are Macbeth’s faults and character flaws? What are Lady Macbeth’s? Make the case that Macbeth is a villain. Make the case that he is a hero with a tragic flaw. Make these two cases for Lady Macbeth.
9. Why doesn’t Macbeth stop killing after he has killed Duncan? Why does every single death seem necessary to Macbeth? How does one act of evil or violence seem to demand another? At what point could Macbeth change the path he is going down, or can he? What does this play reveal about the psychology of evil and violence? How does this story shed light on modern acts of evil and violence? How do people today justify violence? Is it the same today as during the time of Macbeth? Why? What are some modern examples?
10. Several characters express ideas about manhood in the play. How does Macbeth’s society define what it is to be a man? Does Macbeth’s view of manhood line up with Malcolm’s? With Macduff’s? With Lady Macbeth’s? How does this same society define what it is to be a woman? What role do these gender expectations play in the actions of the characters? At what times do the characters subvert gender expectations or lean into them? Discuss the outcome of the play and how it could have been different if gender expectations were different in this society?
11. *Macbeth* contains three sets of fathers and sons: Duncan and Malcolm (and Donalbain,) Banquo and Fleance, Macduff and his son. What do the fathers and sons have in common? How does each father treat his son? How does each son defend his father? Given this pattern in the play, what is the significance of the fact that Macbeth has no children?
12. Why does Macduff flee to England? What does he hope to accomplish there? Why does he leave his family behind?
13. Why is Malcolm suspicious of Macduff? What does he suspect him of? How does he test Macduff? Why does he decide to trust him? What does this interaction tell you about Malcolm and his fitness to rule Scotland?
14. In Act IV, scene iii, Malcolm lists the “king becoming graces.” Which of these graces does Duncan possess? Macbeth? Malcolm himself? What are the qualities of a good king? What are the qualities of a tyrant? What are the qualities of a traitor? What characters display these qualities and why?
15. What role do supernatural events play in this production? What is the function of the witches? What is the function of Banquo’s ghost? Refer to your research on witches, magic and superstition. How did the roles of witches, ghosts, magic, and superstition in the play tie into supernatural views in Shakespeare’s time?
16. Refer to your research on theatre superstitions connected to the play *Macbeth*. How could these superstitions lead to negative outcomes? In what ways could these superstitions bring people in the theatre together or drive them apart? If you watched the play, did anything go wrong? Discuss the superstition and the role it had or didn’t have on any mishap that occurred. Compare and contrast how Macbeth behaved in the face of a superstition and how those in theatre behave or might behave regarding the “curse.”
17. Think back on the ending scenes of *Macbeth*. How prepared do you think Macbeth was for his death? In what ways did he embrace death? In what ways did he think it was not to come yet? What role did his superstitions play in his downfall? How did Macduff use Macbeth’s superstitions against him?
18. If seeing *Much Ado About Nothing*, compare and contrast Benedick and Beatrice with Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. What makes these couples strong? What makes them weak? What are their ambitions? What power do Beatrice and Lady Macbeth have over the Benedick and Macbeth? How are these couples opposite of each other? How are they similar?



2024 *Macbeth* costume designs for Macbeth, Lady Macbeth and Banquo by Melissa Torchia.



Mac Bethad mac Findlaich, King of Scotland, Wikimedia Commons

King Macbeth

Defeated King Duncan in battle to become king

King of Scotland, 11th century

Protected kingdom from outside attacks

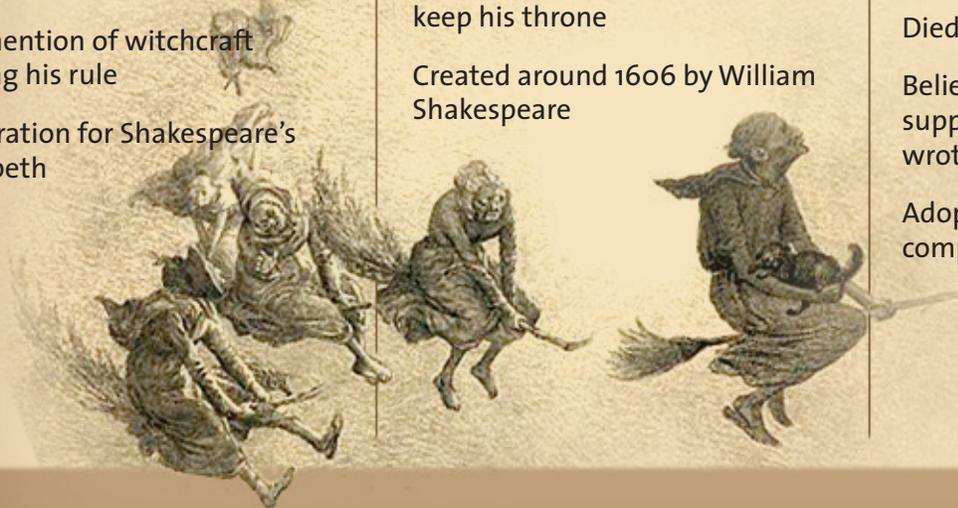
Was liked by his people

Peaceful kingdom

Killed in battle by Malcom III

No mention of witchcraft during his rule

Inspiration for Shakespeare's Macbeth



The Witches Ride. By William Beard. Wikicommons.



Herbert Beerbohm Tree as Macbeth, Charles A. Buchel

Shakespeare's Macbeth

Murders King Duncan to become king

King of Scotland, 11th century

Murders more people to protect his throne

Dangerous and impulsive leader

Killed in battle by Macduff

Consults witches to acquire and keep his throne

Created around 1606 by William Shakespeare



King James I of England and Scotland

King James I

His cousin Queen Elizabeth I died with no direct heirs, making him king

King of Scotland and England, 17th century

War with Spain

Problems with Parliament, public opinion, Catholics, and Puritans

Died of natural causes

Believed in witches, supported witch hunts, wrote a book on them

Adopted Shakespeare's company, "The King's Men."

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