



Macbeth

by William Shakespeare

In a Nutshell

Macbeth is a tragedy by William Shakespeare written around 1606. The only Shakespearean drama set in Scotland, *Macbeth* follows the story of a Scottish nobleman (Macbeth) who hears a prophecy that he will become king and is tempted to evil by the promise of power. *Macbeth* deals with the themes of evil in the individual and in the world more closely than any of Shakespeare's other works. Shakespeare draws on [Holinshed's Chronicles](#) as Macbeth's historical source, but he makes some adjustments to Holinshed's depiction of the real-life Macbeth. Holinshed's Macbeth was a soldier, and not much more; he was capable, and not too thoughtful or self-doubting. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, it is the internal tension and crumbling of Macbeth, entirely Shakespeare's inventions, that give the play such literary traction.

Macbeth is also unique among Shakespeare's plays for dealing so explicitly with material that was relevant to England's contemporary political situation. The play is thought to have been written in the later part of 1606, three years after [James I](#), the first Stuart king, took up the crown of England. James I was the son of [Mary, Queen of Scots](#) (cousin to [Elizabeth I](#)) and this less-than-direct connection meant that James was eager to assert any legitimacy he could over his right to the English throne (even though he was a Scot).

Shakespeare's portrayal of Banquo as one of the play's few unsoiled characters (in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, Banquo helps Macbeth murder the King) is a nod to the Stuart political myth. King James traced his lineage to Banquo, who is thought to be the founder of the Stuart line. In Act I, scene iii, the witches predict that Banquo's heirs will rule Scotland and later, the witches conjure a vision of Banquo's descendants—a line of eight kings that culminates in a symbolic vision of King James, who was crowned King of Scotland and England (and also claimed to be king of France and Ireland).

Shakespeare, whose theater company (the Lord Chamberlain's Men) became the King's Men under James's rule, seems intent on flattering the King. Shakespeare also dramatizes one of the king's special interests: witchcraft. In *Macbeth* the three "weird sisters" feature centrally in the plot. They show Macbeth visions of the future and manipulate his murderous ambition in a play full of dark forces and black magic. Witchcraft was a hot topic in England at the time and James even published his own treatise on the subject in 1597, entitled [Daemonologie](#). As James's court play-maker, Shakespeare would've known that inclusion of the dark arts would interest the King.

Beyond the abstract of evil, James was also the target of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, where a group of rebel Catholics tried to blow up the King and Parliament (this is the historical version of [Guy Fawkes](#), that guy in [V for Vendetta](#)). Macbeth's murder of King Duncan, then, would have struck a sensitive chord with the play's audience. There's also another allusion to the Gunpowder plot during the Porter's infamous comic routine in Act II, scene iii. The Porter refers to Catholic "equivocators," which is a reference to Jesuit Henry

Garnet, a man who was tried and executed for his role in the Gunpowder Plot. Garnet wrote "Treatise on Equivocation," a document that encouraged Catholics to speak ambiguously or, "equivocate" when they were being questioned by Protestant inquisitors (so they wouldn't be persecuted for their religious beliefs).

Why Should I Care?

Macbeth is a story about power struggles among the elite. What makes *Macbeth* great is its incredible insights into what the lure of power can do, and how blind it can make a person to moral reason and common sense. By studying men (and one woman) of great power, we get a glimpse into their minds. As it turns out, they're not as infallible as we sometimes think they are. They suffer the same feelings that all regular people suffer.

It isn't just power politics, but human emotion that *Macbeth* focuses on. These things still influence the world. For example, [Angelina Jolie](#) has the power inspire you to listen up about genocide or human rights. *Macbeth* is no less subject to sticky human emotions, especially as they apply to the realm of attraction - just check out *Macbeth*'s interaction with his wife as she inspires, or shames, him to action. Lady *Macbeth* constantly references his manhood, which is tied to his emotional state, but also plays out in his physical courage. Many critics contend that the seat of Lady *Macbeth*'s power is not only her sharp mind, but her sexual appeal. Just imagine Lady *Macbeth* as Angelina Jolie. She's giving the speech about how she'd dash out her child's brains while it suckled at her breast. You kind of see why *Macbeth* is so messed up, right?

Power is attractive, and you can't deal with *Macbeth* without getting into the individual psyche (mind) of a man. *Macbeth* is at first determined to not murder Duncan (the King), is convinced by his wife to kill the King, and then is so destroyed by the consequences that he seems to be numb when Lady *Macbeth* dies. Let's not beat around the bush - the man is whipped, but he's also just a man.

So read *Macbeth*. Once you crack the tough language, you'll get a glimpse into the raunchy, grotesque, beautiful human emotions that are timeless and universal.