

WILLIAM AND THE WITCHES

A Conjecture On How Shakespeare Wrote *Macbeth*

“Rumour is a pipe blown by surmises, jealousies, conjectures.”—*Henry IV, Pt. 2*



On March 24, 1603, Elizabeth I died after a reign of 44 years, having famously refused to name her successor. Fortunately, her chief ministers had long been in contact with James VI, King of Scotland and great-great-grandson of Henry VII. He immediately became James I, King of England, Scotland and Ireland—the Designated Successor.

While most subjects of the crown were happy just to avoid civil war, William Shakespeare might not have been one of them. No longer the

young man who had arrived in London from Stratford-upon-Avon some twenty-odd years earlier with “small Latin and less Greek,” he now had something to lose.

The Shakespeare of 1603 owned New Place, the finest house in Stratford; his family lived there. And since 1594, his company of London actors had been the Lord Chamberlain’s Men, under his protection.

But the Lord Chamberlain had been a cousin of

the queen. What now? Happily, the new king loved plays—he would see them five times as often as Elizabeth—and with the addition of one of James’ favorite actors, Shakespeare’s troupe now became the King’s Men.

But with royal patronage came royal obligations—and the King’s Men hit upon a daring scheme by which to fulfill them: they would put King James himself onstage as a hero. An ingenious idea that was also illegal.

Stephen Greenblatt relates:

In 1559...the queen instructed her officers not to permit any “interlude” to be “played wherein either matters of religion or of the governance of the estate of the commonweal shall be handled or treated.”

This was widely understood to prohibit any depiction of contemporary events or personages, lest the theatre “mak[e] greatness familiar.” But a new monarch might mean a new understanding.

Shakespeare had already pushed this particular envelope, cannily putting the infant Elizabeth (cushioned with effusive praise) onstage in the final scene of *Henry VIII*. But now, the King’s Men would push harder, daring to present the king himself before the king, as they told the story of the treason at Gowrie House.

In August 1600, the story went, the Earl of Gowrie and his brother Alexander had lured King James to their home, persuaded him to ascend a tower without attendants and attempted to kill him. The assassination failed only when James, while heroically holding off Alexander, called out for help from a window. His attendants then dispatched the Gowries, and all Scotland hailed the king’s deliverance.

Cold-eyed readers of the official record noted that the king had been in debt to the Gowries for £80,000—and held their tongues.

The King’s Men, their courage screwed to the sticking place, hazarded all they had and played *The Tragedy of Gowrie* before King James in

December 1604, hoping for a Jacobean smash. (Greenblatt suggests that Shakespeare himself might have played the king.)

The play was done twice, before large audiences, and proved not a smash but a petard—a bomb. Greenblatt tells us of a court spy, who noted the play did not please everyone. “I hear that some great Councilors are much displeased with it, and so ‘tis thought shall be forbidden.”

Was it? Maybe, for neither the play’s text nor its author’s name has survived. And when the Gunpowder Plot was uncovered the next year, Shakespeare knew better than to write about it.

As these plots suggest, uneasy lay James’ crowned head. His mother was Mary, Queen of Scots, beheaded by Elizabeth after being implicated in the plot that murdered James’ father. And now James sat on Elizabeth’s throne as the Designated Successor. Others had claims to that throne. To please King James, Shakespeare’s plan would have to bolster *his* claim.

Shakespeare took down from the shelf his trusty volume of Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*, which had stood him in such good stead while writing his history plays, and turned to the year 1040, where he found Macbeth considering the murder of Duncan:

“At length, communicating his purposed intent with his trusty friends, among whom Banquo was the chiefest, upon confidence of their promised aid, he slew the king.”

The king’s ancestor had not been Macbeth’s antagonist but his accomplice. It was a problem that would have daunted a lesser man, because putting that in a play might well get you hanged, drawn and quartered

But this was William Shakespeare, the man who had smeared Joan of Arc (*Henry VI, Pt. 1*). He was not about to let mere historical fact

stand in the way of regaining the king's favor.

Banquo would instead be written as an exemplar of probity, the moral center of the play. And Shakespeare, in telling the tale of the murder of Donnchad mac Crínáinof by Mac Bethad mac Findlaích and what came after, would do for Macbeth what he had done for Richard III.

Much of Holinshed needed to be altered or omitted. For one thing, the historical Duncan was a usurper. That's what the battle at the beginning of the play is about. The birthright heir to the throne was Luchlan, son of the second Lady Macbeth, from her first marriage. Shakespeare glided by the battle and elided the son.

Historically, Macbeth and Duncan, who was much younger than Shakespeare's king, were both grandsons of Malcolm II, and so had the same claim to the crown. And Duncan was unpopular, having led the Scots in a disastrous invasion of Northumberland.

The last straw was Duncan's naming his son Malcolm as Prince of Cumberland. Not only was Cumberland an English county temporarily held by Scotland—the title willfully echoed that of Prince of Wales—but the Scots didn't choose their king that way. Instead, their thanes cast votes, as the Danes do in *Hamlet*.

True, these votes often favored the birthright claim, but this was not a requirement. Tellingly, after the death of Duncan, the thanes voted in Macbeth as regent until Luchlan should reach his majority. And his reign was so stable, Maurice Fleming points out, that around 1050, Macbeth was able to leave Scotland for several months and go on a pilgrimage to Rome.

Further on in Holinshed, Shakespeare found that Macbeth had killed Duncan in an attack at Bothgowan. This would never do, for it in no way broke the laws of hospitality. Shakespeare shrugged and borrowed Holinshed's account of

the killing of King Duffe by Donwald, changing the names. But he added Lady Macbeth as co-conspirator.

Holinshed covered the flight of Malcolm and Donalbain; the killing of Banquo; the flights of Fleance and Macduff; the murders of Lady Macduff and son; and the prophecies regarding Macduff and Birnam Wood.

Seven-and-a-half paragraphs of genealogy proving that James was directly descended from Fleance (and from King Arthur, for that matter) were packed into the witches' masque of eight kings. (In the 18th century, research would determine that neither Banquo nor Fleance ever existed.)

Holinshed also furnished Malcolm and Macduff in England; their invasion with an English army led by Siward, a Danish earl in the service of England; and the Battle of Dunsinane, complete with Birnam Wood, on July 27, 1054.

Holinshed ended with the crowning of Malcolm—the Designated Successor—as a consequence of the saving of Scotland by an incursion from England, very useful things to communicate both to the king and to the realm. Fleance was conveniently forgotten, enabling Shakespeare to praise the Designated Successor without dishonoring Banquo.

Historically, however, Malcolm withdrew to Cambria and stayed there for three years before returning to defeat Macbeth at Lumphanan. Macbeth's Stone marks the spot where he was killed leading a final charge. He is buried on Iona.

And what of Lulach, for whom Macbeth reigned as regent? King Lulach the Simple—he was apparently mentally challenged—was crowned on the Coronation Stone at Scone in August 1057. A scant seven months later, he was killed by Malcolm on March 17, 1058. He is buried next to Macbeth.

Malcolm and his son died in battle against the English on November 13, 1093. Margaret, his queen, died nine days later, upon hearing the news. They may also be buried on Iona. In 1250, Margaret was canonized and named the patron saint of Scotland. Sir Walter Scott termed the whole thing, “Bloody, as was the complexion of the times.”

And now, about the witches, those “three women in strange and wild apparel,” so thoughtfully furnished by Holinshed in order that Shakespeare might wind up his charm.

James was a learned man. He had published perhaps eight books and pamphlets, unheard of for a monarch. Chief among these was *Demonology* (1597), a treatise on witchcraft.

James’ interest in witches was personal. Firmly convinced that witchcraft was behind the storm that had disrupted his wedding plans in 1589, the king himself led a witch hunt, the first major one in Scotland. A coven was conveniently (albeit suspiciously) discovered only twenty miles from the palace.

One Agnes Sampson confessed to James that 200 witches had sailed to a meeting in sieves (like the First Witch). In a church, they all worshipped Satan, who draped his buttocks over the pulpit railing for the witches to kiss. Sampson also said that had she gotten hold of any article of the king’s unwashed clothing, he would now be dead.

James found this threat unconvincing, until Sampson told him the exact words he had exchanged with his bride on their wedding night. Sampson was promptly tortured and burned. These events were reported in a 1591 pamphlet, *News from Scotland*, available to anyone who might be looking for it.

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And so, the Bard of Avon had done it again. The witches were socko box office, and the King’s Men remained the King’s Men. But Stephen Orgel mentions a few curious facts.

Not only is there no mention of a court performance, but, except for one 1611 account, there is no record of any performance at all before the Restoration (1660). And only three allusions to performances have been found. In contrast, “there are 58 to *Hamlet*, 36 to *Romeo and Juliet*...”

Still, it seems inconceivable that James would not have wanted to see a play inspired by his ancestor. So?

Well, Orgel also points out that the version of *Macbeth* we have is not the original text. That has been lost. But certain references (“this great king”) hint that this script might have been put together specifically to be performed before the king, with the roles of Hecate and the witches expanded, in deference to James’ interests. Indeed, their songs are taken from Thomas Middleton’s earlier play, *The Witch*.

Whatever its provenance, it seems certain that by the time the First Folio was published in 1623, the text we have had become the standard acting version of *Macbeth*, in the same way that *Cabaret* is performed today with the addition of songs from the movie.

And the witches? Transformed from secret, black and midnight hags to a hearty English music hall trio cum ballet, they became so popular that at a 1680 performance, a woman was heard to ask loudly, “When will the dear witches enter?”