

## Folger Edition: Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

In 1603, at about the middle of Shakespeare's career as a playwright, a new monarch ascended the throne of England. He was James VI of Scotland, who then also became James I of England. Immediately, Shakespeare's London was alive with an interest in things Scottish. Many Scots followed their king to London and attended the theaters there. Shakespeare's company, which became the King's Men under James's patronage, now sometimes staged their plays for the new monarch's entertainment, just as they had for Queen Elizabeth before him. It was probably within this context that Shakespeare turned to Raphael Holinshed's history of Scotland for material for a tragedy.

In Scottish history of the eleventh century, Shakespeare found a spectacle of violence – the slaughter of whole armies and of innocent families, the assassination of kings, the ambush of nobles by murderers, the brutal execution of rebels. He also came upon stories of witches and wizards providing advice to traitors. Such accounts could feed the new Scottish King James's belief in a connection between treason and witchcraft. James had already himself executed women as witches. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* supplied its audience with a sensational view of witches and supernatural apparitions and equally sensational accounts of bloody battles in which, for example, a rebel was “unseamed...from the nave [navel] to th' chops [jaws].”

It is possible, then, that in writing *Macbeth* Shakespeare was mainly intent upon appealing to the new interests in London brought about by James's kingship. What he created, though, is a play that has fascinated generations of readers and audiences that care little about Scottish history. In its depiction of a man who murders his king and kinsmen in order to gain the crown, only to lose all that humans seem to need in order to be happy – sleep, nourishment, friends, love – *Macbeth* teases us with huge questions. Why do people do evil knowing that it is evil? Does Macbeth represent someone who murders because fate tempts him? Because his wife pushes him into it? Because he is overly ambitious? Having killed Duncan, why does Macbeth fall apart, unable to sleep, seeing ghosts, putting spies in everyone's home, killing his friends and innocent women and children? Why does the success of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth – prophesied by the witches, promising the couple power and riches and “peace to all their nights and days to come” – turn so quickly to ashes, destroying the Macbeths' relationship, their world, and, finally, both of them?

In earlier centuries, Macbeth's story was seen as a powerful study of a heroic individual who commits an evil act and pays an enormous price as his conscience – and the natural forces for good in the universe – destroy him. More recently, his story has been applied to nations that overreach themselves, his speeches of despair quoted to show that Shakespeare shared late-twentieth-century feelings of alienation. Today, as Professor Susan Snyder describes in her “Modern Perspective” on the play, the line between Macbeth's evil and the supposed good of those who oppose him is being blurred, new attitudes about witches and witchcraft are being expressed, new questions raised about the ways that maleness and femaleness are portrayed in the play. As with so many of Shakespeare's plays, *Macbeth* speaks to each generation with a new voice.