

A SCOTTISH PLAY?

First performed some three years after James VI of Scotland assumed the throne of England, *Macbeth* reveals a great deal about contemporary English attitudes to their northern neighbours, as **Rob Maslen** explains.



17th-century map of Scotland by John Speed. National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh. Bridgeman Art Library

How Scottish is *Macbeth*? The answer, of course, is not at all. It's a play written by an Englishman, performed in England, to an audience the bulk of whom would have been English – and Southerners at that. But the play is also evidence of Shakespeare's intense interest in Scottish history; hardly surprising given his status as chief playwright for a company newly christened the King's Men, patronized by King James VI of Scotland who had assumed the English throne in 1603. And it's evidence, too, of just how unsettling the rapprochement between these two nations, which had for centuries shared little but a border and an intense mutual hatred, must have been for everyone involved.

Macbeth is about the near impossibility of holding a single kingdom together, or even of defining its limits: an impossibility that manifests itself in the dreadful trouble the play's characters have in holding themselves together – that is, in keeping body and soul in one piece, or in reconciling their convictions with their actions, or in saying what they think. The threatened dismemberment of Scotland and its inhabitants in the play neatly parallels the religious, regional and factional divisions that had split the northern kingdom throughout the 16th century. And the Scottish royal family had felt the effects of these internal conflicts for generations before they were exacerbated by the Reformation. As Sir Charles Piggott pointed

out to the English parliament in 1606 – the year *Macbeth* was written – the Scots 'have not suffered above two kings to die in their beds, these 200 years'. The Stuarts had been subjected to a seemingly endless series of assassinations and massacres, more often at the hands of their own subjects than those of their English neighbours.

Ancient Scotland was no better, as Shakespeare would have seen as he browsed through Holinshed's chronicle seeking plots for James's entertainment. The kings who reigned before and after the 11th-century monarch *Macbeth* met their ends in appallingly inventive ways: by poison, witchcraft, or (in one case) an elaborate trap involving a golden apple and hidden crossbows, whose quarrels were launched at Kenneth II 'with great force and violence' when the apple was touched. And the Scots had a habit of importing their violent ways into the neighbouring kingdom. The last Scottish monarch before James – his mother, Mary Queen of Scots – was accused of murdering James's father (which led to her exile in England), then hatching a series of plots against her cousin Elizabeth I (which led to her execution). James himself had twice been kidnapped, in 1582 and 1600; and his experience of near shipwreck en route to

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collect his wife Anne of Denmark in 1587 left him certain that he had narrowly avoided murder by witchcraft. The Gunpowder Plot of 1605, whereby disaffected Catholics planned to destroy James and the English Parliament in one devastating explosion, may have convinced some Englishmen that the Scots had transplanted their own particular version of political Hell into English soil.

A whiff of sulphur accompanied the stench of gunpowder. Scotland seems to have been associated in England with the supernatural: partly perhaps because of the spooky ballads that spread through England from north of the Border (think of Tam Lin and Thomas the Rhymer), and partly because of James VI’s own treatise on witchcraft, which insisted on the material dangers it posed as fiercely as the Englishman Reginald Scot had insisted on its non-existence. The witches in *Macbeth*, whose agency is so hotly disputed (did they drive Macbeth to murder, or did they merely unlock a murderous tendency he already possessed?), cater for both the English and Scottish views of witchcraft. They introduce the theme of double-talk or ‘equivocation’ – saying one thing and meaning another, or convincing yourself through chop-logic that it’s permissible to do the unforgivable – that pervades the play. For them, ‘fair is foul and foul is fair’, and their delight in reversing moral polarities infects Macbeth’s language, so that he can persuade himself that in a world where ‘nothing is but what is not’ he might get away with regicide. The witches’ later

prophecies – that Macbeth cannot be killed by a man born of woman, that he will be safe till Burnam Wood comes to Dunsinane – are classic examples of equivocation: they sound impossible, yet prove accurate because of unforeseeable circumstances (Macbeth’s killer was born by Cesarean section; the wood is uprooted to be used as camouflage by an invading army). The witches’ double-speak reflects both the treachery associated with Scotland by the English, and the merging of two cultures and two languages under James, which transformed the English court into a hotbed of mutual misunderstandings.

The Scottish King’s inheritance of England had been anticipated for years, as the English panicked over the ageing Elizabeth’s refusal to name an heir. That period of anxiety has its aftershocks in *Macbeth*. Problems of succession had often been solved in Scotland by spates of blood-letting – as when Kenneth II murdered the heir to the throne, Prince Malcolm, to ensure that his own son wore the crown. Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* re-enacts all the atrocities perpetrated by Scots through history against inconvenient heirs. His massacre of MacDuff’s children stands in for his desire to massacre Duncan’s sons Malcolm and Donalbain, Banquo’s heir Fleance, and with them the whole line of monarchs that descended from Banquo to James. Each time he thinks he has the kingdom and its succession under control a new child emerges to taunt him. Young Fleance escapes from the scene of his father’s murder, and

his escape leaves Macbeth ‘bound in / To saucy doubts and fears’. Later the witches summon up two infant spirits to taunt Macbeth with the fact that his children will not succeed him. At the end of the play, a Scottish Prince, Malcolm, defeats Macbeth at the head of an English army composed largely of ‘unrough youths’. Children die at Macbeth’s hands only to be resurrected like a succession of vengeful ‘newborn babes / Striding the blast.’

The reign of the ‘boy Malcolm’ promises fresh new possibilities for the kingdoms that have combined to put him on the throne. The new king promises to make himself ‘even with’ his helpers of all ranks, thus anticipating a fair and equal partnership between Scottish ruler and subject, and between the erstwhile enemy nations. But the bloody head of Macbeth, dangling like a chunk of Scotland’s history from the fist of his killer MacDuff, may be seen as undermining Malcolm’s self-assurance with a second promise: that the Stuart dynasty will continue to encounter more than its share of rebels and regicides – including, as we now know, the decapitation of James’s son. Accompanied by omens like this, it’s no wonder that a hundred years would pass before the union of England and Scotland would be finally ratified.

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