

Murdering Ministers

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*A Close Look at Shakespeare's
Macbeth in Text, Context and
Performance*

By

Lars Kaaber

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To Ingeborg Nixon

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PREFACE

This book investigates Shakespeare's *Macbeth* through textual analysis, performance history, and the historical context in which the play was written. It has all been excellently done before: performance history of the play notably by Dennis Bartholomeusz in *Macbeth and the Players* (1969); scene-by-scene analysis by Marvin Rosenberg in *The Masks of Macbeth* (1978); historical background by Henry N. Paul in *The Royal Play of Macbeth* (1950) and by Garry Wills in *Witches and Jesuits* (1995)—but an updating would not go amiss, and, moreover, all aspects deserve to be included in one comprehensive volume.

Performance history of Shakespearean drama is usually relegated to individual monographs—but unjustly so. Shakespeare was theatre before he became literature, and his texts bear all the marks of having been written specifically as a tool for stage performers. Reading Shakespeare exclusively as poetry fails to give us the full picture. Moreover, even the most intransigent armchair Shakespeareans still form their ideas of the characters on some performance or other (the first Hamlet they saw, the best Juliet or Lady Macbeth, etc.) and rely more on received tradition than they realize or are willing to admit.

Murdering Ministers includes a profusion of critical approaches to *Macbeth*: opinions on the play, the plot, and the characters in it; on what Shakespeare meant and what actors and actresses have done right or what they ought to have done instead. Critics from Malone and Dr Johnson through Bradley and onwards all contribute in some way to our

understanding of Shakespeare. These experts were all inspired, and at times misled, by performances of their own time and have in turn influenced (or confused) future performances and criticism.

Last but not least, *Murdering Ministers* views *Macbeth* as a product of the politico-religious turmoil in which the play was first performed. Although partly based on conjecture, such an undertaking at least bears the blessing of the eminent Dr Johnson who suspected that Shakespeare crammed his plays with allusions to events and people in his day,¹ or, as Garry Wills puts it, that Shakespeare's general aim was "to make contemporary excitement work to the advantage of his art."² It may be argued that references to bygone incidents are of little practical use to modern readers or audiences, and that the Porter's jokes in II.3 of *Macbeth* are no funnier for referring to people long dead, but I still find it important to appreciate that Shakespeare was very far from working in blithe indifference to the world around him, and that part of his genius was his ability to translate something specific and temporal into something universal and timeless.

What to do with these topical references in modern performances is for any director or actor to decide. No production is obliged to include every single syllable, and Shakespeare would hardly expect anyone in the 21st century to catch all his allusions. In fact, I would not be surprised to learn that Shakespeare refrained from publishing his plays because he was convinced that his references to recent events would be undecipherable in a matter of few years, so why bother?

Little could he know that we still bother four centuries later.

¹ Walter Raleigh (ed.), *Johnson on Shakespeare*, 1925, p. 81.

² Garry Wills, *Witches and Jesuits*, p. 109.

I would like to thank Vibeke Geyer and Siff Pors for proofreading, Gitte Olito for dotting the i's and crossing the t's, Simon Bennebjerg for being an eminent listener, Tue Barfod for his technical assistance, Kaj Lergaard for his cover photo, and Irene & Peter for their unfailing support while I was working on this publication.

A PREFATORY NOTE ON *MACBETH* FILMS

Murdering Ministers does not include all film versions of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. It omits translations as well as adaptations merely inspired by the play such as Ken Hughes' 1955 film noir *Joe Macbeth*, Sande N. Johnsen's *Teenage Gang Debs* (1966), William Reilly's mobster drama *Men of Respect* (1991), William Morissette's *Scotland, PA* (2001), Vishal Bhardwaj's Indian *Maqbool* (2004), and Mark Brozel's *Macbeth* episode of BBC's *ShakespeaRe-Told* series from 2005. Several of these adaptations richly deserve mention and in many ways surpass some of the "straight" *Macbeth* films, but the business of *Murdering Ministers* is Shakespeare's text, and besides, this publication is long enough as it is.

I have made a single exception with *Throne of Blood* (1957) to which I refer on a few occasions, but only because Kurosawa's Japanese drama has been so doggedly touted as a genuine Shakespeare representation and so persistently included in works on Shakespeare-on-screen that I dared not leave it out. Michael Mullins goes as far as to state that "what Kurosawa shows in images, Shakespeare shows in words,"¹ but, in all fairness, this is a bit of a stretch. If we remain soberly objective, we may find that Kurosawa leans far more on the fairy-tale qualities of Charles and Mary Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807) than on Shakespeare's original tragedy.

¹ Michael Mullin, "Macbeth on Film," *Literature Film Quarterly*, 1973, vol. 1, issue 4, p. 340.

The two silent film versions of *Macbeth* from 1908 and 1916 (the latter featuring the once famous Herbert Beerbohm Tree) have also been omitted for the obvious reason that we cannot hear the actors speak their lines.

As for the four feature films made on the basis of the play text of *Macbeth*, I do not discuss their cinematographic virtues or shortcomings as such since my focus is what has been done with, or indeed to, Shakespeare's dialogue.

The earliest *Macbeth* feature film was made by American filmmaker Orson Welles in 1948, by which time Welles had already risen to fame with his 1936 *Voodoo Macbeth* (with an entirely African-American cast) and followed it up with his notorious 1938 radio broadcast of *War of the Worlds*. Welles reached an early zenith in 1941 with *Citizen Kane*, the undisputed masterpiece which earned him the enmity of the powerful newspaper tycoon William Randolph Hearst and sent Welles on a downward spiral as far as a Hollywood career and financial backing were concerned, and, ultimately, into professional exile.

Welles' *Macbeth* has divided both critics and audiences. In 1963, Claude Beylie dubbed it "one of the most beautiful films ever created" because it illustrates that "cinema is only [...] a shadow of a shadow, projected upon the wall of a cave."² With this Platonic allusion, Beylie probably tries to make a virtue out of the film's transition from Act III to IV in which Welles' own shadow is indeed projected upon a painted backdrop of stormy skies, a cinematographic faux pas less due to artistic intentions than to a scraped budget and only twenty-one days of shooting. In *Orson Welles, Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, Michael Anderegg makes a valiant effort to defend the film when he suggests that Welles

² Beylie in Charles W. Eckert, *Focus on Shakespearean Film*, Prentice Hall, 1972, pp. 74-5.

may have deliberately copied the style of the B-movies for which Republic, the film's production company, was known, and that Welles' technique of "displaced diegetic sound" creates a *Verfremdungseffekt* akin to the Epic Theatre tradition of Bertolt Brecht.³ But what audiences actually witnessed (and Anderegg reports as much) was a rather tacky sound studio production and a film that had to be redubbed because the dialogue was so hard to follow that only moviegoers who knew the play by heart understood a word. It did not help Welles' film at all that Laurence Olivier's *Hamlet* was released to critical acclaim that same year and made off with four Academy Awards. However, as Anderegg notes, Welles had more luck in Europe: whereas the British viewed his film as failed Shakespeare and the Americans dismissed it as flawed filmmaking, Europeans professed to see in it the work of an auteur:

The American reviewers, even the sympathetic ones, saw papier-mâché sets and road company costumes; the European critics saw absurdist poetry or surrealism or expressionism or alienation effect or the unconscious. Some of the American critics [...] saw an egocentric ham hogging the screen; the European critics saw *un grand cineaste* exploring the contours of an individual consciousness.⁴

Anderegg correctly concludes that "the Anglophone critics failed, for the most part, to allegorize Welles' *mise-en-scène*; the European critics, probably, overalllegorized it."⁵

French-Polish director Roman Polanski's *Macbeth* from 1971 was not saddled with a tight budget: Hugh Hefner and *Playboy* Magazine

³ Michael Anderegg, *Orson Welles, Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, Columbia University Press, 1999, p. 91

⁴ Anderegg, p. 96.

⁵ Anderegg, p. 96.

bankrolled the project when major Hollywood studios turned it down, and the two nude scenes in the film may have been inserted to give Hefner a bang for his buck, although E. Pearlman prefers to view the naked witches as “an imaginative expansion of the misogyny” which Pearlman claims to find in the original play.⁶ If Bernice W. Kliman is right, the Nazi terror experienced by Polanski in his Eastern European childhood haunts this violent film, as does the fact that Polanski’s pregnant wife, Sharon Tate, had been savagely slaughtered by the Manson family shortly before filming began.⁷ The 1971 film is brutal, to be sure, and it is the only *Macbeth* film that actually shows the decapitation of the protagonist, but, as Kliman states, “Although Polanski rubs our noses in violence, the film continually exhibits a curious constraint” in its numerous cutaways from death.⁸ Polanski had learned a trick or two from Hitchcock and knew that no graphic horrors can match what spectators are left to imagine on their own.

Most likely with Schaefer’s 1954 TV production in mind, Kenneth Tynan, Polanski’s artistic advisor, stated that it is “nonsense to have Macbeth and Lady Macbeth performed by 60-year-olds and menopausal. It’s too late for them to be ambitious,”⁹ but reviewer Pauline Kael still found the stars, Jon Finch and Francesca Annis, “too callow to express Shakespeare’s emotions.”¹⁰ As for age, however, we must remember that the very first Lady Macbeth, an actor’s apprentice in Shakespeare’s troupe,

⁶ Pearlman in Catherine M. S. Alexander, *Shakespeare and Politics*, University of Birmingham, 2004, p. 240.

⁷ Bernice W. Kliman, *Shakespeare in Performance: Macbeth*, Manchester University Press, 2004 edition, pp. 190-1.

⁸ Kliman, p. 193.

⁹ Tynan quoted in Mullin, p. 333.

¹⁰ Kael quoted in Mullin, p. 333.

must have been considerably younger than Polanski's 26-year-old leading lady.

Pearlman may be right in stating that the Christian element in Welles' 1948 *Macbeth* (represented by the additional character of a Rasputinesque priest who is ultimately skewered by Macbeth's pagan spear) was replaced by Polanski with politics. The only trace of Christianity in the 1971 *Macbeth* is a burning cross briefly spotted at the Fife massacre, in a scene which, according to Pearlman, "recalls an SS intrusion into [Polanski's] own home during the Second World War."¹¹

What most 21st-century viewers may find objectionable in the Polanski version is not the violence but the lack of impetus in the dialogue. A case in point could be the fifteen seconds that slip by in II.3 before Macduff is allowed to ask "Wherefore did you so?" in response to Macbeth's announcement that he has killed Duncan's grooms. The overall lack of tempo in the 1971 film (which ekes out Shakespeare's shortest tragedy to 140 minutes) may be partly explained by the sumptuous locations; Polanski is rather fond of dwelling on the rolling hills and rocky terrain of the various British isles where the film was shot.

The third *Macbeth* feature film made on the basis of the original play text was directed by Australian Geoffrey Wright in 2006 and is an example of what Maurice Hindle dubs "the periodising mode" of Shakespeare films in which the play is transported "wholesale into the cultural trappings and social dynamic of a distinctly recognisable historical period."¹² Wright chooses to take us to the present-day ganglands of Melbourne and treats us to even more graphic violence than Polanski did.

¹¹ Pearlman, p. 239.

¹² Maurice Hindle, *Studying Shakespeare on Film*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. 82.

Indeed, we sup full with it.

Wright liberally shuffles and deconstructs Shakespeare's dialogue, most conspicuously with Macbeth's final soliloquy ("Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow") which comes to serve as a voice-over epilogue.

Whereas Orson Welles may have hinted at Shakespeare's timeless topicality through subtle allusions to the horrors of World War II, and Polanski, as Kliman suggests, may have alluded obliquely to the brutal repression of Soviet satellite states or US governmental responses to anti-Vietnam activism in the late sixties,¹³ Wright's film goes the whole hog and applies a modern setting to the old play, a manoeuvre introduced on stage by Barry Jackson in 1928 but a first in the case of *Macbeth* films.

It is unlikely that Shakespeare, himself so keen on anachronisms, would have objected to Wright's modernizations. Since doublet and hose were the height of fashion in 1606, his plays can be said to have been first performed mostly in modern dress, and the Peacham drawing of a scene from *Titus Andronicus*, probably from 1595, leaves us with the impression that Shakespeare's own productions took a rather lax attitude to historical correctness, for the illustration shows a motley melange of halberds, Roman togas, and the last word in Elizabethan fashion. Nor would the introduction of firearms have upset the playwright who gladly introduced cannons in *Macbeth* (I.2, 37) and *Hamlet* although both these plays are set in times when gunpowder was unknown to the western world.

Wright's film is basically a love story, and his Macbeth (Sam Worthington) seems solely motivated by a wish to bring his wife (Victoria Hill) out of her depression after the death of their young son. But Wright's desire to make us sympathize with malefactors is not confined to the

¹³ Kliman, p. 191.

Macbeths: in an un-Shakespearean interpolation, the two murderers—Macbeth's henchmen—are executed by Macduff, and when they realize that no escape is possible, they take each other's hand while they wait for the shots. With this minute gesture, Wright actually manages to establish a hint of pity for the men who had none when they murdered Lady Macduff and her son, and it is a singularly Shakespearean feature, methinks, that we are denied the chance to gloat and are prompted to reluctant compassion instead.

Australian director Justin Kurzel's 2015 *Macbeth* revisits Polanski's breathtakingly beautiful Highlands, but like Wright, Kurzel seems to have few moral or political messages to convey. Kurzel's Macbeth (Michael Fassbender) suffers from a Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder triggered by the loss of his infant son and heir. This idea, inspired by Freud's 1916 analysis of the play and subtly suggested in Wright's version, is carried through with great consistency by Kurzel, and the entire 2015 film is fraught with sympathy for the emotionally paralyzed protagonist. Kurzel's Weird Sisters (who must be the kindest witches in the performance history of the play) deliver their prophecies with great tenderness, and Kurzel lets Malcolm's Act V obituary on Young Siward, "He's worth more sorrow/ And that I'll spend for him," apply to the recently slain Macbeth instead.

Thus much for the *Macbeth* feature films, at least if this term refers exclusively to big-screen ventures with all the brouhaha of elaborate cinema premieres, for it must be stated that recent TV productions, perhaps especially those by Freeston, Doran, and Goold, display sufficient production value to pass for feature films.

The earliest TV production of *Macbeth*, directed by George Schaefer in 1954, can hardly impress modern audiences as far as cinematic splendour is concerned, but Maurice Evans and Judith Anderson—although

advanced in years as Kenneth Tynan so heartlessly hinted—offer many interesting solutions, not least an unflinching affection between the Macbeths. Schaefer remade his *Macbeth* in colour in 1960, still casting Evans and Anderson (now even older), but like the Weird Sisters, this production seems to have vanished into the air and I have failed to find it.

Paul Almond's TV production (1961) is mainly interesting because Macbeth is performed by Sean Connery, then a relatively unknown actor fresh from playing Hotspur in BBC's Shakespeare collage *An Age of Kings* (1960), and with his major breakthrough as Agent 007 still a couple of years ahead.

1978 brought us Trevor Nunn's TV production which, like Welles' film, was very poorly funded, but Nunn had far more luck than Welles in concealing this fact; the paucity (or absence, rather) of sets either strikes us as artistic intention or is readily forgotten amid the performances of Ian McKellen and Judi Dench. By presenting a saintly and ecclesiastically attired king Duncan, Nunn brings Christian imagery back into the play.

Arthur Allan Seidelman's 1981 production is televised theatre in the strictest sense: a recording of a stage performance in which Jeremy Brett, Granada Television's Sherlock Holmes, crosses over to the dark side as Shakespeare's murderous thane. This production is interesting because Seidelman in no way attempts to make us sympathize with Macbeth and his lady (Piper Laurie)—both are meant to be excessively unpleasant throughout.

Jack Gold's 1983 film, part of BBC's elaborate filming of the entire canon, offers a Macbeth (Nicol Williamson) who is every bit as disagreeable as Jeremy Brett's, but this production is balanced, in my opinion, by an unprecedented amount of sympathy for Jane Lapotaire's frail and pitiful Lady Macbeth, a truly touching performance.

In Jeremy Freeston's 1997 TV film, Jason Connery fares better with the thane than his father did in 1961; Freeston presents Connery Jr. as one of the most innocent and amiable Macbeths seen on film and turns the play into a tragic love story. In this version, Lady Macbeth (Helen Baxendale) participates more actively in the regicide, for she has to kill Duncan when her husband bungles the job. Oddly enough, this is the first film version that actually allows us to see the witches disappearing like bubbles (as Banquo has it) by way of screen magic.

Courtney Lehmann finds that Michael Bogdanov's futuristic TV film from 1998 "like no other version of Macbeth before it [...] implies that Duncan gets exactly what he deserves." Macbeth (Sean Pertwee) and his wife (Greta Scacchi) are no worse than any of the other characters, for Bogdanov's Scotland is rotten through and through, an image of "the late twilight of capitalism" (a phrase perhaps implying that Lehmann expects capitalism to end soon).¹⁴ Bogdanov brings politics back into *Macbeth*.

Gregory Doran's TV *Macbeth* from 2001, set in modern times, is yet another love story, although more Strindbergian than Freeston's 1997 version, and Doran suggests that the regicide is in fact the attempt of the childless Macbeths (Antony Sher and Harriet Walter) to hold their marriage together. As in Bogdanov, the military aspects of Macbeth are emphasized; Sher's thane begins and ends as a professional commander, although with a serious mental breakdown in between.

Politics is more conspicuous than ever before in Rupert Goold's 2010 *Macbeth* in which our protagonist (Patrick Stewart) is a thinly veiled portrait of Joseph Stalin—insofar as the portrait can be called veiled at all.

¹⁴ Courtney Lehmann, "Out Damned Scot," printed in Richard Burt and Lynda E. Boose (eds.), *Shakespeare, the Movie II: Popularizing the Plays on Film, TV, Video, and DVD*, Routledge, New York, 2003, pp. 231ff.

There is no saving his marriage and not much love lost between the Macbeths apart from a crude, physical attraction, and the lady (Kate Fleetwood) is utterly ambitious and tough as nails. If Courtney Lehman found traces of late capitalism in Bogdanov's film, Goold's *Macbeth* depicts the colossal collapse of communism.

Like Seidelman's 1981 production, the last non-feature film of *Macbeth* produced in time to make it into this publication is filmed theatre. Eve Best's Globe Theatre production from 2013 (subsequently available on DVD) stands out among all other available productions by the director's efforts to squeeze every bit of comedy out of the text. *Macbeth* performances usually make do with the flashes of merriment supplied by the Porter in Act II, but, undeterred by tradition, Best seems to have observed Chris Crutcher's maxim that "comedy is tragedy standing on its head with its pants falling down." At the Globe in 2013, Joseph Millson's Macbeth most insistently addressed his soliloquies to the audience and seemed nonplussed when we did not reply; he resorted to slapstick in the most dramatic moments of the Banquet Scene and even in the final duel with Macduff. This may sound like sacrilege, but to those of us who saw the show at the Globe, it brought the strange sensation of cobwebs blown away and, at the same time, of the 21st century shaking hands with the past—a feeling that this may indeed have been Shakespeare's intention.

BEFORE THE PLAY: JAMES THE FIRST, THE WITCHES AND THE BIBLE

Although the matter continues to be debated, there is ample reason to believe that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* had its world premiere on 7 August 1606 at Hampton Court and that this was the play so modestly listed in the Court Calendar as "play by King's [Men]." Several things indicate that *Macbeth* was written, perhaps even commissioned, to entertain James I and his young brother-in-law, Christian IV of Denmark, who was in England from 17 July to 11 August that summer. The royal visit included banquets, hunting, tennis matches, pageants, plays by dramatists Ben Jonson, John Ford, and John Marston, a song by John Lyly, and, in all likelihood, Shakespeare's Scottish drama.¹ The fact that the Danish king's

¹ In 1790, Edmond Malone was the first to surmise that the play may have premiered at Christian IV's state visit: "In July, 1606, the King of Denmark came to England on a visit to his sister Queen Anne, and on the third of August was installed a Knight of the Garter. 'There is nothing to be heard at court,' says Drummond of Hawthornden in a letter dated on that day, 'but sounding of trumpets, hautboys, musick, revellings and comedies.' Perhaps during this visit *Macbeth* was first exhibited" (Malone printed in Furness, *New Variorum*, 1963, p. 356). Doubts concerning the Hampton Court premiere have since been raised by E.K. Chambers who assigns *Macbeth* to 1605 but is among the few to do so (Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage*, vol. II, p. 212); by Braunmuller, who thinks it odd that Shakespeare's company was only paid £10 if *Macbeth* was a new play (A.R. Braunmuller (ed.), *The New Cambridge Shakespeare*, 2008, p. 8); and by Geoffrey Bullough who does not reject the idea but wants more evidence (Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare VII*, 1966, pp. 423-4). W.W. Greg cautiously proposes that the brevity of *Macbeth* makes the play suited for the festivities at Hampton Court in August 1606 (Greg, *The Shakespeare First*

mastery of English was scant, to say the very least, and that England's King James I was rumoured to have a notoriously short concentration span² may explain the play's propensity to spectacle and action as well as account for its brevity; of all the dramas in the Shakespeare canon, only *Comedy of Errors* is more sparing of words.

However, *Macbeth* appears custom-made for King James and King Christian in various other ways. Although Jacobean theatres had plenty of stage technology, lifts and hoists and whatnot, and the use of such appears in many other performances of the time, Shakespeare usually made do without.³ Not so in *Macbeth*: the play opens with a thunderstorm and sound effects galore which, as Jonathan Gil Harris argues, were probably produced with "rosin-lightning flashes" and "squibs" of the kind that had

Folio, 1955, p. 389). John Dover Wilson favours the Hampton Court premiere (John Dover Wilson (ed.), *Macbeth*, New Shakespeare Edition, 1947, p. xxxi) and Henry N. Paul presents the most elaborate case for it in *The Royal Play of Macbeth* (1950). Paul points out that numerous topical references in the play allude to events in close proximity to the summer of 1606, such as First Witch's reference to "the Tiger" (I.3.6)—the fate of this bark was only known when the ship, which had been on a calamitous voyage since 1604, arrived back in Milford Haven on 27 June 1606 (Paul, *The Royal Play of Macbeth*, 1950, pp. 302-3). Moreover, Paul observes that the "*Act of Abuses*" which outlawed the profane use of God's names on the stage became effective on May 27, 1606 (Paul, pp. 304-5). Offenders would be punished to the tune of £10 (benedictions, such as in "God save the King" did not count), and whereas earlier Shakespeare plays frequently drop the name of the Almighty (we need only think of Mistress Quickley's report of the last hour of the highly profane Falstaff, "So 'a cried out '*God, God, God!*' three or four times,'" *Henry IV*, II, 3), *Macbeth* contains no such profanity. Although the matter may not be conclusively put to rest, I choose to support the theory that the "Play by King's" in the deplorably unitemized Court Calendar refers to *Macbeth*.

² Paul, p. 22; Bullough, p. 423

³ As J.W. Saunders writes, "no other dramatist exploited less the machinery of his theatre." ("Staging at the Globe," in Bentley (ed.), *The Seventeenth-Century Stage*, 1968, p. 238.

been previously required in the stage directions of Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* (1594).⁴ We can count on the use of the trapdoor when the three witches disappear suddenly and mysteriously in I.3, and again when their cauldron sinks into the ground in IV.1. Shakespeare seems to have pulled out all the stops to keep the English king and his Danish guest of honour awake for the duration of *Macbeth*, and even inserted a song-and-dance act from the witches in Act III, although E.K. Chambers may be right in supposing that this extravaganza was supplied by Shakespeare's fellow playwright Thomas Middleton.⁵

Dr Johnson, the 18th-century critic *par excellence*, was "always inclined to believe that Shakespeare has more allusions to particular facts and persons than his readers commonly suppose."⁶ Johnson is likely to be right, also in the case of *Macbeth*. A few royal ancestors are smuggled into the play; not only Banquo, the alleged distant relative of King James, but also Siward the Dane and his son, James' and Christian IV's cousins many times removed (and as for Young Siward, irrevocably removed by Macbeth in Act V).⁷ At the end of the play, we witness a successful

⁴ Jonathan Gil Harris: "The Smell of Macbeth," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 58:4, 2007, p. 466. Harris states that since "squibs" were made from sulphurous brimstone, coal and saltpetre, they would raise a stink when detonated, and this may account for Shakespeare's mention of the "filthy air" in I.1, 11, as well as "the dunest smoke of Hell" in I.5, 49.

⁵ E.K. Chambers, *William Shakespeare: A Study of Facts and Problems*, 1930, vol. I, p. 472. In 1948, J.M. Nosworthy found Middleton to be the "weakest" candidate for the Hecate scenes and presented the theory that Middleton may have written the songs, but that someone else, possibly Shakespeare, composed the dialogue (Nosworthy, "The Hecate Scenes in Macbeth," *RES*, 1948, p. 138).

⁶ Walter Raleigh (ed.), *Johnson on Shakespeare*, 1925, p. 81.

⁷ "Siward, usually referred to in history as "the great Dane, Siward the Strong" was [...] no doubt well known to King Christian. Shakespeare followed authentic history in making him a supporter both of the English king, Edward the Confessor,

collaboration between England and Scotland very much like the union which King James hoped to bring about with his novel concept of “Great Britain.”

Besides, the very fact that the play opens with three witches would be enough to pique the interest of the two kings. Christian IV believed in the power of hexes, and his 1617 edict against black magic would later occasion a fierce witch-hunt that claimed hundreds of lives in Denmark. King James also took a keen interest in the occult. In 1589, when his wedding to Christian IV’s sister Anne had been marred by bad weather and the ship bearing all Anne’s precious wedding gifts was wrecked at sea, James was informed that these calamities were caused by a spell cast by a group of witches in North Berwickshire where a man by the name of Seaton had denounced his maid as a witch. Under torture, the girl named numerous other practitioners of witchcraft among whom were Agnes Sampson, Agnes Tompson, a schoolmaster called Doctor Fian, and a porter’s wife, all allegedly part of a conspiracy against King James. Strongly urged, Agnes Tompson eventually confessed, and the story was printed in *Newes from Scotland* in 1591. It must be stated in James’ defence that he viewed the witchcraft story with much scepticism at first, but, according to *Newes*, Agnes Sampson removed all his doubt when she repeated verbatim what James had spoken to his queen on their wedding night.⁸ Thus convinced, James went on to compose *Daemonologie*, a book on witchcraft & how to detect it, published in 1597.⁹

and of Malcolm Canmore, the heir to the Scottish throne” (Henry N. Paul, *The Royal Play of Macbeth*, p. 156).

⁸ *Newes from Scotland* (1591), London, 1924, p. 15

⁹ In 1584, Reginald Scot published *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* in which he condemned the inhumane treatment of those suspected of witchcraft, but Neil McGregor doubts that sensible arguments such as Scot’s were likely to be

Moreover, there is the King James Bible to take into account when reading *Macbeth*. At the Hampton Court conference in January of 1604, Dr John Reynolds from Oxford impressed upon James the necessity of an English Bible that could compete with the Geneva Bible and the Bishop's Bible, the authorized versions of the Scripture in English until then.¹⁰ James voiced his compliance, "I wish some special pains were taken for an uniform translation, which should be done by the best learned men in both Universities."¹¹ The plans materialized when 54 men from Cambridge and Oxford ("both universities") set promptly to work, and the King James Bible was published in 1611. In 1970, Anthony Burgess suggested that Shakespeare may have assisted in James' Bible project.¹² Not that Shakespeare actually translated (according to his old friend and colleague Ben Jonson, Shakespeare had "small Latin and less Greek"¹³), but that the poet was summoned to refine the phrases of the rough draft. Burgess' theory centres on Psalm 46 in which the 46th word from the top is "shake,"

observed after King James had endorsed superstition with his *Daemonologie*. (McGregor, *Shakespeare's Restless World*, 2012, p. 136). Other opponents of witch-hunts were Samuel Harsnett, Edward Jorden, and Montaigne, all of whom had their works published in 1603 (Montaigne in John Florio's English translation). According to Henry N. Paul, all of these, and indeed James I's chief adviser, Robert Cecil, made the king seriously doubt his former conviction in witchcraft. (Paul, p. 102-3).

¹⁰ The *Geneva Bible* was the authorized edition of the Bible in England since 1575. The English *Bishops' Bible* was commissioned by the established Church of England in 1568 because the bishops found the Geneva Bible too Calvinist in its approach to Christianity.

¹¹ Paul A. Welsby, *Lancelot Andrewes, 1555-1626*, 1958, p. 82.

¹² Anthony Burgess, *Shakespeare* (1970), 1972, pp. 233-4. Burgess was inspired by Kipling's short story *Proofs of Holy Writ* (1934) in which William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson discuss the translation of a passage from Isaiah for the King James Bible.

¹³ From Jonson's homage, *To the Memory of my Beloued, the AUTHOR, William Shakespeare and what he hath left us*, printed in the *First Folio* (1623).

the 46th word from the bottom (not counting the conclusive *selah*) is “spear”—and if Shakespeare had been on the job in 1610, he would have been 46 years old. It will require a thorough knowledge of the rough draft of the King James Bible absolutely to dismiss the thought that Shakespeare helped out and failed to resist the temptation of putting his fingerprint on the new edition of the Holy Writ. The charm of the theory is that if it be true, Shakespeare is present in the two most important English publications of all time: the King James Bible from 1611 and, of course, the first collection of his own works, the *First Folio* from 1623. The fact that Shakespeare and his colleagues had been taken under royal patronage in 1603 and that the actors, formerly “The Lord Chamberlain’s Men,” were now “The King’s Men,” no less, gives some credibility to the alluring Bible theory. As a court poet, Shakespeare may have been invited to amend or beautify a line here and there. If he had commenced this job in 1604, his head was already full of Bible excerpts when he started work on *Macbeth*—and the tragedy is teeming with Scripture in various guises. Biblical references also abound in his dark comedy *Measure for Measure* (1604), a daring attack (or shameless, as the case might be) on the fundamentalist Christian zeal displayed by the Puritans of the age.

Macbeth may have been written especially for James’ festivities at Hampton Court, and much of it seems to allude unmistakably, if subtly, to James I, but it is still hard to recognize an obedient dramatist insinuating himself into the favour of his royal patron with this play; in fact, *Macbeth* appears in many ways and places to poke fun at the Stuart monarch.¹⁴

¹⁴ Stephen Greenblatt detects a reference to James in IV.1. 131-2 when the witches perform a song and dance, “That this great king may kindly say/ Our duties did his welcome pay.” Greenblatt sees this as being addressed to the king who craved demonic entertainment—James I (Greenblatt, *Will in the World*, 2004, p. 350). To

James lived in constant fear of assassination, and Shakespeare gave him a play about the murder of a king seen almost entirely from the assassin's point of view; a drama in which a usurper is crowned only to be toppled in a coup—two royal Scots perish in one play, and in the process, Shakespeare contrives to butcher Banquo, King James' purported ancestor. Furthermore, James was neurotically terrified of sharpened steel in general,¹⁵ and not only do knives and swords flash throughout all five acts of *Macbeth*, but the dramatist also devotes unprecedented attention to these weapons and describes the havoc they cause in gory detail. We can only imagine how uneasy King James must have been at the premiere of *Macbeth*.

Robert Speaight dubs *Macbeth* “the most literally Jacobean of all the plays in the Shakespeare canon”¹⁶ and John Wain regards the play as “the most Christian of Shakespeare's works.”¹⁷ As will appear in the following, the text of *Macbeth* is brimming with Biblical allusions as well as topical references to nearly everything we know about James, his public as well as his private life, and about England in the early years of his reign.

my knowledge, Jeremy Freeston's 1997 *Macbeth* is the only film version that includes this passage.

¹⁵ King James' fear of weapons was said to have begun when his mother, Mary, Queen of Scots, witnessed the assassination of David Riccio while she was still expecting James. G.P.V. Akrigg reports: “Some of King James's subjects always believed that his dread of bared weapons, so acute that he dissolved in panic when his own queen came to him, sword in hand, though only to propose a ceremony of knightng, sprang from the prenatal effects on Mary's child as she saw the swords and daggers drawn against Riccio.” (Akrigg, *Jacobean Pageant*, 1962, p. 6) Antonia Fraser comments on a coin from 1576 showing the ten-year-old James holding a sword: “a weapon from which the pacific James would have flinched in real life.” (Fraser, *King James, VI of Scotland, I of England*, 1974, p. 35).

¹⁶ Robert Speaight, *Shakespeare, The Man and his Achievement*, 1977, p. 299

¹⁷ John Wain, *The Living World of Shakespeare*, 1964, p. 209.

