

THE INFLUENCES

HOLINSHED'S CHRONICLES

Shakespeare's primary source for *Macbeth* was a hugely popular 16th-century book written by Raphael Holinshed in 1577 (and revised in 1587) called *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland*. This collection of historic events and popular legends included the story of an 11th-century Scottish king named Macbeth. Like many writers, Shakespeare used Holinshed's stories as source material, but then engaged his imagination to create his own dramatic re-telling. Some of the changes included:

- The real Duncan was a young, weak king, while Shakespeare's Duncan is an old, wise, and popular king.
- The real Macbeth had the support of Scottish chieftains and Banquo when he murdered Duncan, whereas Shakespeare's Macbeth has only Lady Macbeth supporting him.
- The real Macbeth was a successful king for ten years before he was overthrown, unlike Shakespeare's Macbeth who is overthrown and beheaded soon after taking the throne.

PRIMARY SOURCE: View excerpts from *Holinshed's Chronicles* that correspond to *Macbeth* here:

<http://bit.ly/18wa9WY>.



Raphael Holinshed. *Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande*. London, 1577. By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.

JAMES I

During the middle of Shakespeare's career as a playwright, and three years before he wrote *Macbeth*, James I became King of England. Scholars have noted the following connections:

- Before James I inherited the throne of England he was the King of Scotland. When James took the crown, Shakespeare's London became passionately interested in all things Scottish. Also, many Scots followed their king to London, where they often attended the theater.
- James I became a patron of Shakespeare's theater company and they often staged plays for him.
- Banquo was generally thought to be an ancestor of James I. It is believed that Shakespeare might have been paying a compliment to the new king with his flattering portrayal of Banquo.
- James I authored a treatise called *Basilikon Doron* that defends the idea that rulers are given the right to reign by God, an idea echoed in *Macbeth*'s speeches about kingship.

PRIMARY SOURCE: View excerpts from the *Basilikon Doron* here: <http://bit.ly/1aVDgca>.

WITCHCRAFT AND THE SUPERNATURAL

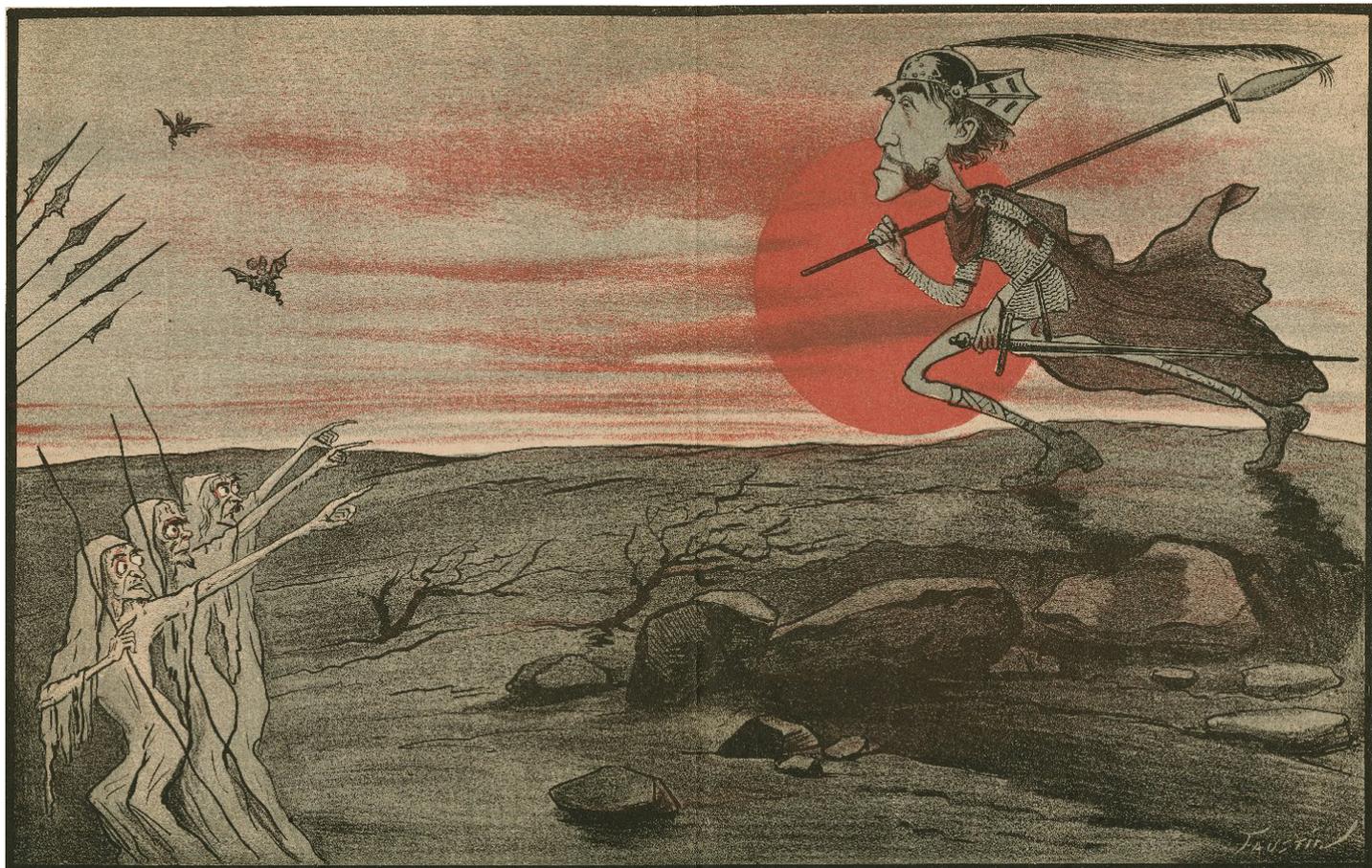
The witches in *Macbeth* were influenced by three strange women described in *Holinshed's Chronicles*, as "nymphs," "fairies," and "goddesses of destiny." Scholars believe that Shakespeare might have included witches in *Macbeth* because of the following:

- Belief in witches was common in Shakespeare's day. During Queen Elizabeth's reign, there were 247 witch trials.
- James I had an avid interest in witchcraft and was thought to be the instigator of a witch hunt during his reign in Scotland.
- James I wrote a book on supernatural creatures and demons called *Daemonologie*.
- By calling them the "Weird Sisters," Shakespeare seemed to be tying them to the Wyrd, the goddess of fate in Anglo-Saxon literature. Fate is a significant theme in *Macbeth*.

PRIMARY SOURCE: View excerpts from *Daemonologie* here: <http://bit.ly/19nh8kB>.



TOP: James I. Source: Library of Congress. BOTTOM: Pocahontas at the court of King James. Source: Library of Congress.



THE MACBETH CURSE

Mention “Macbeth” in a theater and it will surely elicit gasps of horror from all those “in the know.” As the legend goes, the spells that *Macbeth’s* witches use came from an authentic black-magic ritual that Shakespeare observed. When the witches found out that he had used their sacred incantations, they put a curse on the play. Beginning with the first performance in 1606, when Hal Berridge, the boy playing Lady Macbeth suddenly died backstage, there have been disaster stories galore about productions of *Macbeth* that have felt the impact of the “curse.”

Next time you are in a theater, make sure to call *Macbeth* “the Scottish play.” If the actual title happens to slip out, be sure to run out of the theater, spin around three times, spit, and ask to be let back in. And then just hope that the curse has been reversed!

TO EXPLORE: Watch the following videos with the star of Lincoln Center Theater’s Production, Ethan Hawke, speak about witchcraft in *Macbeth* on the PBS Shakespeare Uncovered website:

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/shakespeare-uncovered/education/lesson-overview/supernatural-shakespeare-and-macbeth-video-segments/>

Also see: “Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! Is the Cast of “The Scottish Play” Superstitious?”

http://www.theatermania.com/video/macbeth-macbeth-macbeth-is-the-cast-of-the-scottis_482.html?cid=homepage_news

TO DISCUSS: What are your thoughts and beliefs about the supernatural and superstitions? How much do you let them guide or affect your choices?

COMMON CORE CONNECTION: [CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.9-10.2](#) Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of how key events or ideas develop over the course of the text.

THE LANGUAGE

“The Elizabethans were an audience of listeners. They would say, ‘I’m going to hear a play,’ not ‘I’m going to see a play.’ The Elizabethan audience would pick up on words and their various meanings that we wouldn’t.”

MARJORIE GARBER, SHAKESPEAREAN SCHOLAR

Shakespeare was a master wordsmith who had an unrivaled command over the English language. Shakespeare used at least 15,000 different words in his plays and poems (and some attest, close to 30,000), compared to the King James Bible, which used only 8,000. In addition, as Michael Macrone, author of the book *Brush Up Your Shakespeare!* explains, it’s difficult to figure out who first coined a word or phrase, but the Oxford English Dictionary credits Shakespeare with coming up with over 500 original words.

You can find a great list of Shakespeare’s “Frequently Encountered Words” at the Shakespeare’s Words website: <http://www.shakespeareswords.com/FEW>

SHAKESPEARE’S STYLE

Understanding the way Shakespeare structured his verse can be a great tool when trying to unlock more about a character’s emotional state, mood, and intentions. Also, like a musical score, the structural choices Shakespeare made help the reader and/or speaker to naturally feel the tempos and rhythms of the language. There was very little time to rehearse in Shakespeare’s days, so this was a quick way for actors to get inside the minds and hearts of his characters.

Today we speak in what is called **prose**, ordinary speech that doesn’t have a specific pattern or rhythm to it. While Shakespeare sometimes wrote in prose (Macbeth’s letter to Lady Macbeth is in prose), most of *Macbeth* is written in a specific type of **verse** (poetry), called **blank verse**. Blank verse is **unrhymed iambic pentameter**—a line of ten syllables that has a rhythm like a heartbeat. The first syllable/beat is unstressed and the second is stressed (the stressed one is called the “iamb.”) Here’s a line of unrhymed iambic pentameter from Act 1, Scene 7 of *Macbeth*:

False face must hide what the false heart doth know.

Here’s how you would read it aloud:

False **face** must **hide** what **the** false **heart** doth **know**.

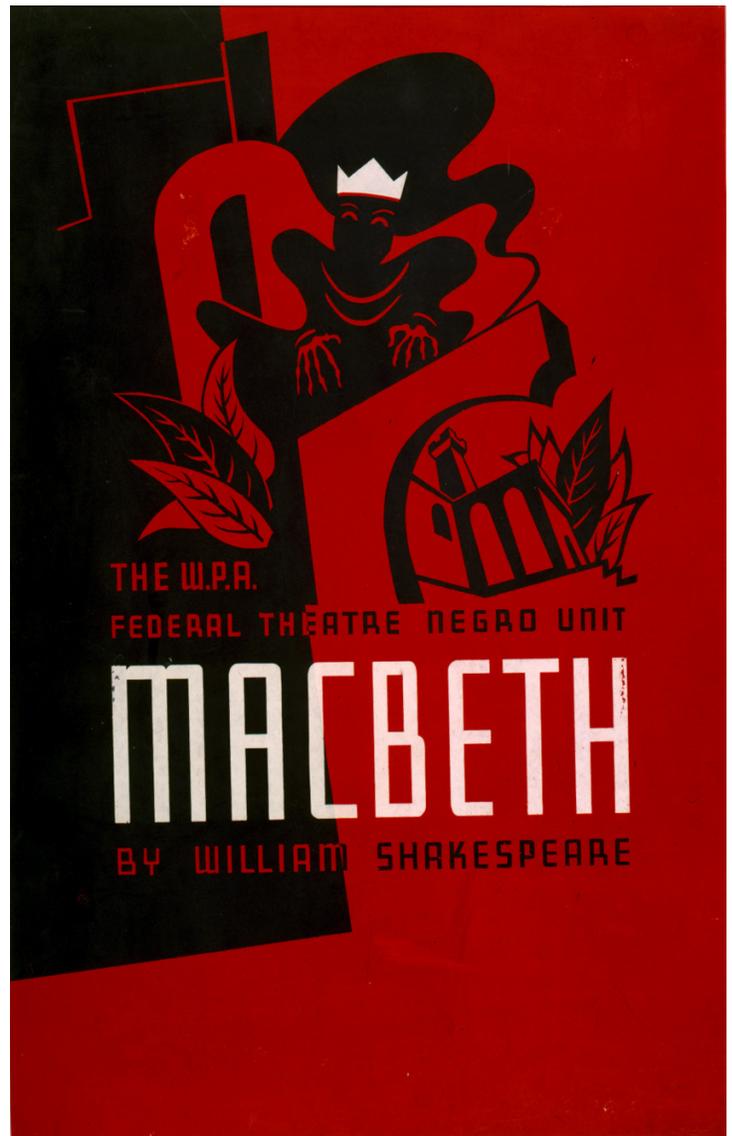
While this is the basic structure of unrhymed iambic pentameter, Shakespeare loved to break his own “rules,” and did so intentionally to create different emotional affects. For example, in Macbeth’s famous speech from Act 5, Scene 5, he adds a syllable to the first line giving it what is called a “feminine ending” (eleven beats instead of ten):

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.

Some questions to consider when analyzing a line like this with students could be:

- Why do you think Shakespeare chose to end the line with an unstressed syllable? (A “feminine ending?”) What does that tell us about how Macbeth feels about “tomorrow?”
- Shakespeare also ends the first line of Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” speech from Act 3, Scene 1 with a feminine ending. How are these two speeches similar?
- How would the meaning be different if the “ands” were not stressed?
- What has happened the moment before Macbeth begins this speech, and how might that influence how it is spoken?
- Why does Shakespeare have Macbeth repeat the word “tomorrow” three times?
- If iambic pentameter represents a normal heartbeat, how do you think Shakespeare’s language changes when a character is terrified, excited, depressed, angry, etc. (Helpful hint: have students imagine what happens to their heartbeat when they experience these emotions.)

See actor Patrick Stewart discuss this famous speech here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HZnaXDRwu84> . Watch him perform it here: <http://bit.ly/5fCSGi> .



New York: Federal Art Project, between 1936 and 1938. Source: Library of Congress.

LITERARY DEVICES

The majority of Shakespeare’s plays were performed at the Globe, an open-spaced stage that was lit by sunlight, and had no curtain and little scenery. It was up to Shakespeare to use his words to “paint a picture.” Shakespeare’s language, rich with literary devices like similes, metaphors, foreshadowing, dramatic irony, and imagery, offer numerous Common Core entry-points for an in-depth analysis of the text.

A SAMPLING OF LITERARY DEVICES FOUND IN MACBETH

Simile: a comparison of two different things that often uses like, than, or as.

Look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under it.
(LADY MACBETH; ACT 1, SCENE 5)

Metaphor: a “condensed” comparison that expresses a complex idea in a precise way.

O full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife.
(MACBETH; ACT 3, SCENE 2)

Foreshadowing: an indication of what is to come in the future.

Fair is foul and foul is fair.
(WITCHES; ACT 1, SCENE 1)

Dramatic Irony: irony that occurs when the meaning of the situation is understood by the audience but not by the characters in the play.

For none of woman born shall harm Macbeth. (We find out that Macduff was born via caesarean.)
(WITCHES; ACT 4, SCENE 1)

Alliteration: The repetition of the same sounds or of the same kinds of sounds (often consonants) in a series of words.

But now I am cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in
To saucy doubts and fears.
(MACBETH; ACT. 3, SCENE 4)

Personification: giving human characteristics to an abstract idea or something which is not human.

Was the hope drunk
Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since?
(LADY MACBETH; ACT 1, SCENE 7)

Imagery

Macbeth is rich with imagery! Challenge students to find examples of the following imagery in Macbeth:

Nature
Night/Darkness
Blood
Sleep
Clothing



LEFT: *Macbeth*. London : J.& J. Boydell, 1799. Source: Horace Howard Furness Memorial Library, University of Pennsylvania. RIGHT: *Macbeth*, Act 5, scene 1, Lady Macbeth sleepwalking, 1797. By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library.