

First thoughts

Before anything else, it needs to be understood that the text that we find in Folio is problematic. It cannot be taken for granted as it stands. We might start by deciding to ignore some unnecessary interpolations: Hecate and the singing witches (III v, IV i 41-7), the show of kings (IV i 119-55), the scene where we become acquainted with Macduff's family (IV ii), the king's evil episode (IV iii 157-80), perhaps also the sleepwalking scene (V i). *Macbeth*, even then, is not a single play. It is two incomplete plays awkwardly grafted together.

The first play is the play which the title leads us to expect: *The tragedy of Macbeth*. Macbeth is a Scottish noble, a brave soldier, respected by all around him. But the powers of darkness have their eyes on him, and they have found out the flaw in his character. He wants to be king -- and he wants it so badly that he is prepared to commit murder. The existing king, an amiable old gentleman named Duncan, suspects nothing. He invites himself to Macbeth's castle -- and by doing that he is inviting Macbeth to murder him. Goaded by his wife, who is just as ambitious as he is, Macbeth does the deed. When the murder is discovered, the king's two young sons, by running away, bring suspicion on themselves. Macbeth is chosen king. He seems to have achieved his heart's desire. ... Years pass. ... When we meet him again, he is a changed character. He is tormented by guilt, and guilt has made him paranoid. He is in constant fear of being done by as he did, and that fear has turned him into a tyrant. Scotland by now is in the grip of a reign of terror. At length Macbeth commits an atrocity which turns everyone against him. One of Duncan's sons returns to Scotland, supported by an English army, and Macbeth is overthrown. The play ends like this, with defeat and death for him in this world, damnation in the next.

The second play revolves around a self-assured, well-spoken young man. At first we do not know who he is; but then we learn that he is king Duncan's eldest son, Malcolm by name. We see the king appoint him prince of Cumberland -- and that title, so we are expected to assume, is the Scottish equivalent of the title prince of Wales, a title which a king would regularly confer upon his eldest son (if he had one), and which would designate this son (if he survived his father) as the king to be. On the very night after that appointment is made, Duncan is murdered. Not knowing who can be trusted, Malcolm heads for England, and the English king lends him an army, to be commanded by the earl of

Northumberland, who happens to be Malcolm's uncle. Without undue delay, Malcolm returns to Scotland. The lords and commoners rally to his side. The usurper who had briefly got possession of the throne is defeated and done to death. And the play ends with Malcolm being acclaimed king, his father's legitimate successor.

Much of the story is the same in either play, but the differences are more important than the similarities. The first play is a tragedy. Macbeth is the hero -- a man with many good qualities, doomed by one fatal weakness. Malcolm is nobody special -- just one of the instruments used by the forces of evil to bring about the destruction of their chosen victim. The second play is a history. Malcolm is the hero. Macbeth is just the villain of the piece.

The first play is the one which Shakespeare set out to write. The new king, he thought, would appreciate a play with a Scottish flavour to it. Reading what Holinshed had to say about the history of Scotland, he came across two stories which piqued his interest -- one about the murder of king Duff in 972 (1587:150), the other about the murder of king Duncan in 1040 (1587:171).^{*} Letting his imagination go to work on these two stories, he came up with the plot for a play. It was not meant to be a history: the anachronism did not concern him in the least. It was a tragedy set against a Scottish background.

^{*} In this edition the date is given as "1046", but that is a miscorrection. Not that Shakespeare would have cared.

At some point, it was made known to Shakespeare that this play of his would not appeal to King James in the least degree. On the contrary, it risked causing great offence. The play ended with a king being turned on by his own people. They take up arms against him: he is overthrown, he is done to death and decapitated by one of his subjects. For James, such behaviour was absolutely unacceptable. However tyrannical he might become, a king was answerable only to God, not to anyone in this world. If his people disobeyed him, they were disobeying God, and divine retribution would follow, sooner or later. James knew, of course, that Scottish kings had not infrequently been killed (though Macbeth, I think,^{*} was the only one who had his head cut off); but that just went to prove the sinfulness of their people. A play which seemed to justify -- even to celebrate -- sinful conduct of that kind was not going to find a favourable reception from King James.

^{*} James's mother, I take it, is not a comparable case.

Once Shakespeare understood that, he set about rewriting some parts of the play -- those which he thought the king might find obnoxious -- in, I think it is fair to say, a pretty perfunctory fashion. The first play was an inspired piece of work; the second is just a piece of work. Shakespeare's initial move was to telescope the timescale. Instead of spanning the whole length of Macbeth's reign (which lasted for 17 years, according to Holinshed), the action is over in a short space of time -- a matter of weeks, if we think that Malcolm has to travel as far as the south of England, perhaps even just a matter of days, if we think that he only has to cross the border into Northumberland. As for Malcolm, instead of being one of two timid teenagers, now he is a grown man from the beginning, already understood to be in line to succeed his father. When Duncan is murdered, Malcolm at that very moment becomes the rightful king. Macbeth is an outlaw, a murderer as well as a usurper, never properly a king. So it is only justice for him to be killed and have his head chopped off.

The play that we find in Folio is, at bottom, the product of this half-hearted reworking of the play. It is no longer the play that Shakespeare wanted to write and thought that he had written. Whether it was ever performed in its original shape, how much time elapsed before it was given a new shape -- such questions as these, since the answers are unknowable, are simply not worth asking. The most that we can hope for is to form some idea of the play as Shakespeare wrote it -- before, unhappily for him and for us, he felt obliged to rewrite it.

C.F. Jun 2026