



# Machbeth



*A Shakespeare Story*

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For the Michaels

A.M.

For Zoë

T.R.



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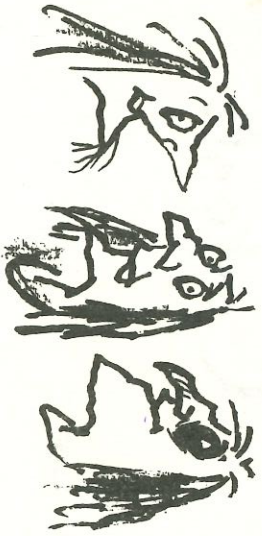
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# Cast list



The Three Witches - or Weird Sisters



Macbeth

Thane of Glamis  
General to King Duncan



Lady Macbeth  
Wife to Macbeth



Banquo

General to King Duncan



King Duncan

King of Scotland



Malcolm and Donalbain



The King's sons



Macduff

Thane of Fife



A servant of  
Glamis Castle



Two  
Murderers

## The Scene

Scotland in the eleventh century.

# Macbeth



*When shall we three meet again?  
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?  
When the burly-burly's done,  
When the battle's lost and won.*

First and Second Witches; I.i.

All day, the three witches waited on the edge of the battlefield. Hidden by mist and magic, they watched the Scottish army win a victory over the invading forces of Norway, and after the fight was done they lingered on, gloating over the moans of the dying.

As thunder rolled overhead and rain lashed down, one of the witches raised her long, hooked nose to the wind and sniffed like a dog taking a scent. "He will be here soon," she said.



The second witch stroked the tuft of silvery hair that sprouted from her chin, and grinned, showing her gums. "I hear the sound of hooves, sisters," she said.

The third witch held up a piece of rock crystal in front of her milky, blind eyes. Inside the crystal, something seemed to move. "I see him!" she screamed. "He comes! Let the spell begin."



Two Scottish generals rode slowly away  
from the battlefield, their heads lowered  
against the driving rain.

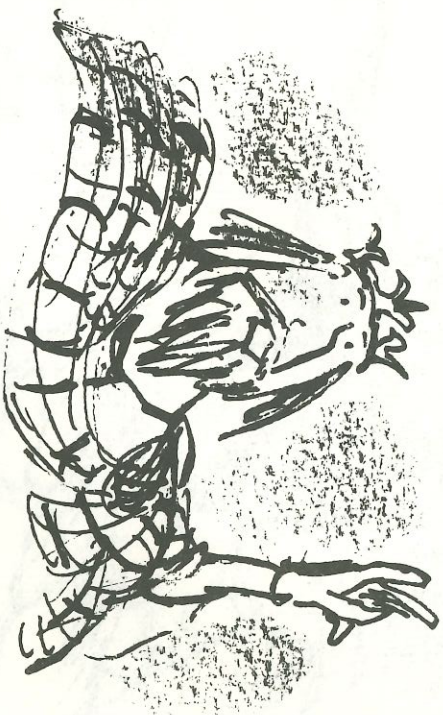
\* \* \*



One was Macbeth, the Thane of Glamis,  
the bravest soldier in King Duncan's army.  
He was tall, broad-shouldered and had a  
warrior's face, broken-nosed and scarred  
from old fights.

His companion and friend, Banquo was  
younger and slimmer, with a mouth that  
was quick to smile, although he wasn't  
smiling now.

Macbeth's dark eyes were distant as he  
recalled the details of the day's slaughter.  
'A hard fight to protect an old, feeble  
King,' he thought. 'If I ruled Scotland...'  
His mind drifted off into a familiar  
daydream: he saw himself seated on the  
throne, with the golden crown of Scotland  
circling his brow...



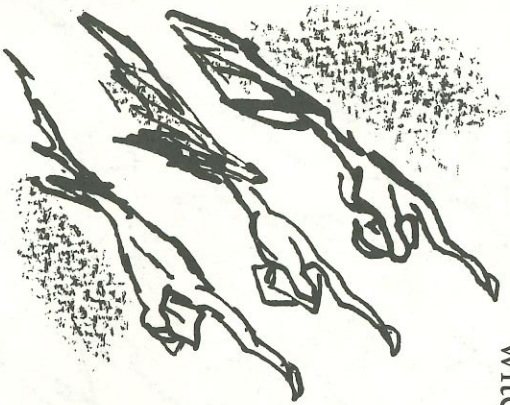
Suddenly his horse reared and whinnied, its eyes rolling in terror. Macbeth struggled to control the horse, and at that moment a bolt of lightning turned the air violet. In the eerie light he saw three weird hags barring the way, their wild hair and ragged robes streaming like tattered flags in the wind.



Machbeth's hand  
flew to his sword,  
but Banquo hissed  
out an urgent  
warning. "No, my  
friend! I do not think  
swords can harm creatures like these."

A small, cold fear entered Machbeth's  
heart, and he snarled to conceal it.

"What do you want?" he demanded of the  
witches. "Stand aside!"



Moving as one,  
the witches raised  
their left arms and  
pointed crooked  
fingers at Machbeth.  
They spoke, and  
their voices grated  
like iron on stone.



"All hail, Machbeth, Thane of Glamis!"  
"All hail, Machbeth, Thane of Cawdor!"  
"All hail, Machbeth, who shall be King!"  
Machbeth gave a startled gasp – how  
had these withered crones come to read  
his secret thoughts?

The witches turned their fingers to  
Banquo. "All hail, Banquo!" they  
chanted. "Your children shall be kings!"  
And they vanished like a mist of breath  
on a mirror.





“Were they ghosts?” Banquo whispered in amazement.

“They were madwomen!” snorted Macbeth. “How can I be Thane of Cawdor? He is alive and well and one of King Duncan’s most trusted friends.”

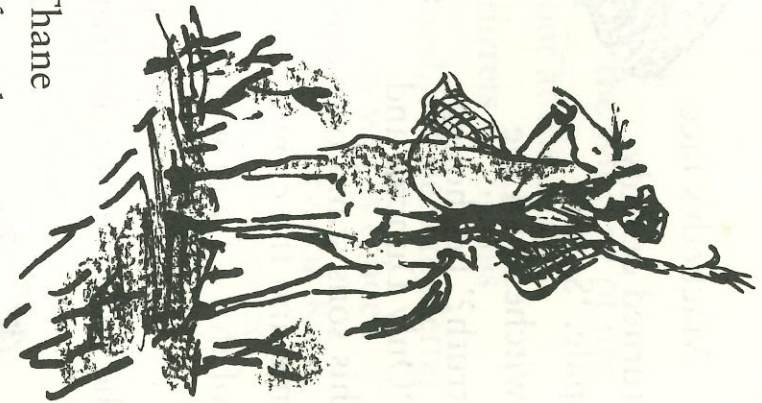
“And how could my children be kings if you took the throne?” Banquo asked.



16

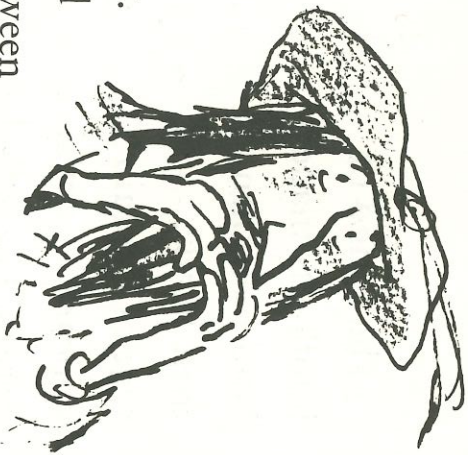
The sound of hoofbeats made both men turn their heads.

Out of the rain appeared a royal herald. He pulled his horse to a halt and lifted a hand in salute. “I bring great news!” he announced. “The Thane of Cawdor has confessed to treason and has been executed. The King has given his title and lands to you, noble Macbeth. He has proclaimed you as his heir, after his sons Malcolm and Donalbain. All hail, Macbeth, Thane of Glamis and Cawdor!”



17

Macbeth's face  
turned deathly  
pale. 'So the  
witches told the  
truth?' he thought.  
'Only Duncan and  
his sons stand between  
me and the crown! My wife must know  
of this - I will write to her tonight.'

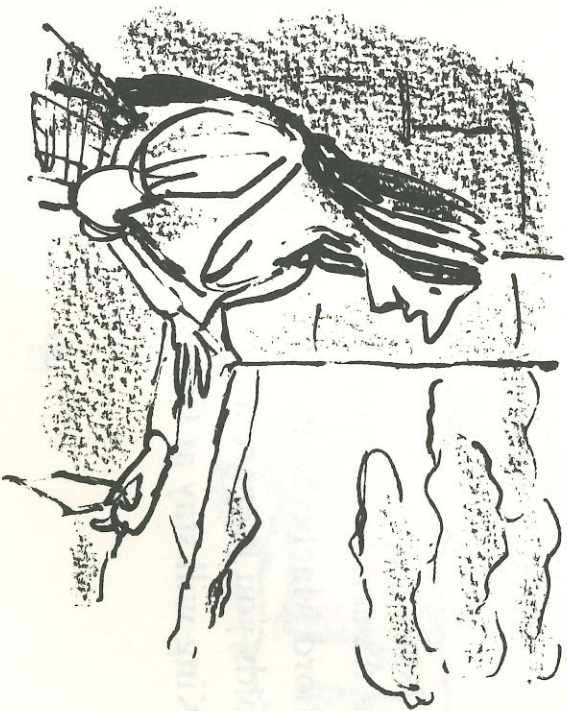


Macbeth was so deep in thought that  
he didn't notice the troubled look that



Banquo gave him.  
The witches had  
left a scent of  
evil in the air,  
and Banquo  
seemed to smell  
it clinging to  
his friend.

\* \* \*  
Lady Macbeth stood at the window of her  
bedchamber, gazing out at the clouds  
gathering above the turrets of Glamis  
Castle. In her right hand, she held the letter  
from her husband, and its words echoed  
through her mind. "Glamis, Cawdor, King,  
you could have them all!" she whispered.  
"But I know you too well, my lord. You  
want greatness, but you shrink from what  
you must do to get it. If only..."



There was a knock at the door. Lady Macbeth started and turned, her long black hair whispering against the green silk of her gown. "Come!" she called.



A servant entered. "A message from Lord Macbeth, my lady," he said. "He bids you prepare a royal banquet, for the King will stay at Glamis tomorrow night."

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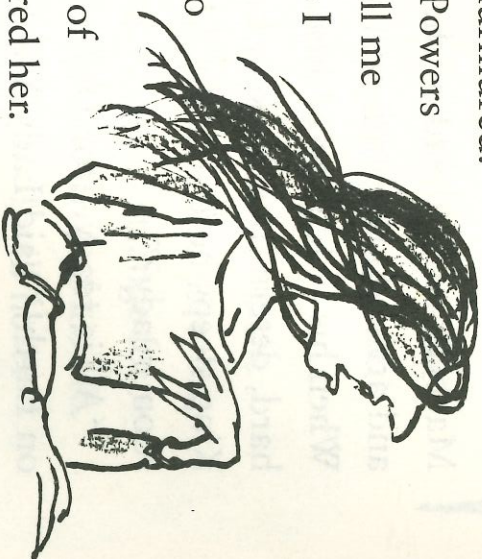
"What?" Lady Macbeth gasped in amazement. "Are you mad?" She quickly recovered herself. "Go and tell the other servants to make ready for the King!" she commanded.

When she was alone again, Lady Macbeth opened the window, and a blast of cold air caught her hair and swirled it about her face. "Fate leads Duncan to Glamis!" she murmured.

"Come to me, Powers of Darkness! Fill me with cruelty, so I may teach my husband how to be ruthless!"

A low growl of thunder answered her.

\* \* \*



21



Machbeth rode ahead of the King's party, and arrived at Glamis just after sunrise. When his wife greeted him he noticed a hard, determined look in her eyes. "The King sleeps here tonight," he said. "Is his room ready?"

"All is ready...for Duncan's last night on Earth!" said Lady Machbeth.

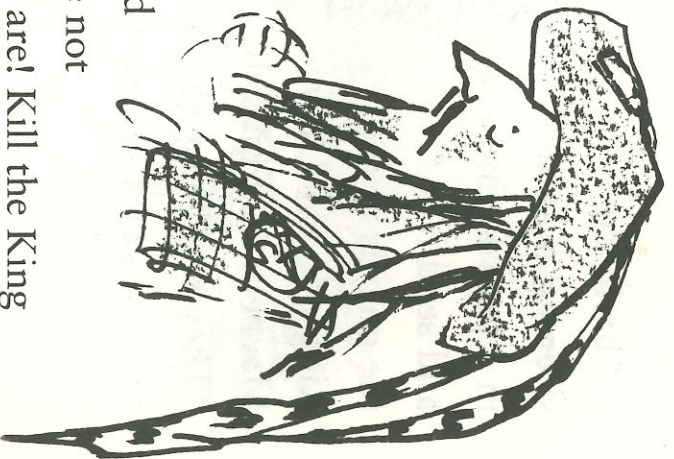
"What do you mean?" Machbeth asked.

Lady Machbeth

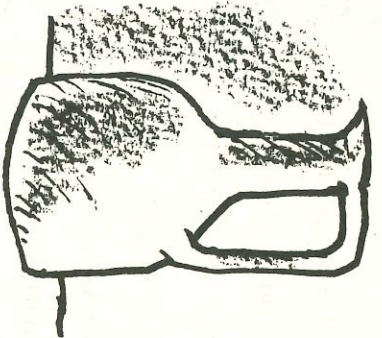
moved closer, and spoke in a low voice. "I guessed the thoughts that lay behind your letter," she said.

"Duncan is old and weak. His sons are not fit to rule, but you are! Kill the King while he sleeps, and let Malcolm and Donalbain bear the blame!"

Machbeth was astonished – first the witches, and now his wife had seen his innermost thoughts. Some strange force seemed to have taken control of his life, and he fought against it. "I will never commit murder and treason!" he declared.



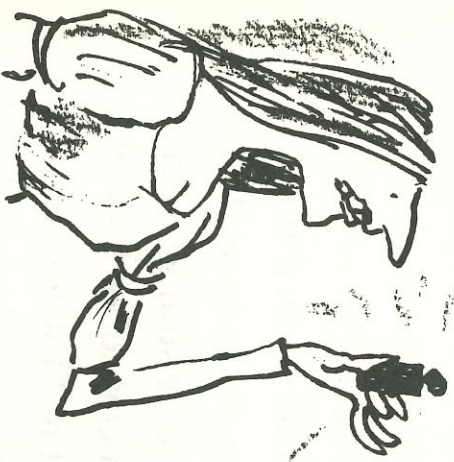
"I will put a sleeping-potion in a jug of wine and send it to the guards at the King's door," Lady Macbeth said quickly.



"They will sleep like babes. It will be easy for you to slip into Duncan's room."

"No! I cannot!" Macbeth groaned.

Lady Macbeth's face twisted into a sneer. "This is your real chance to be King," she said. "Are you too cowardly to take it?"



"I am no coward!" snapped Macbeth. "Then prove it!" Lady Macbeth hissed. "Kill the old man and take the throne!"



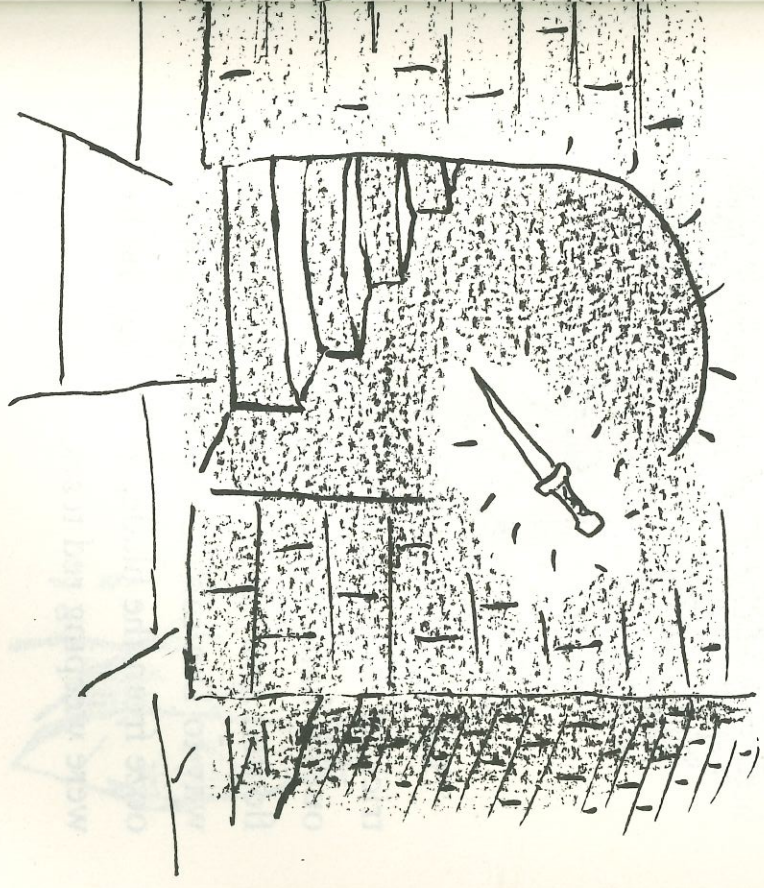
Once more, the strange force moved through Macbeth, flowing into him from his wife until he was unable to resist. 'All hail, Macbeth, who shall be King!' he thought, and he could almost feel the crown upon his head.

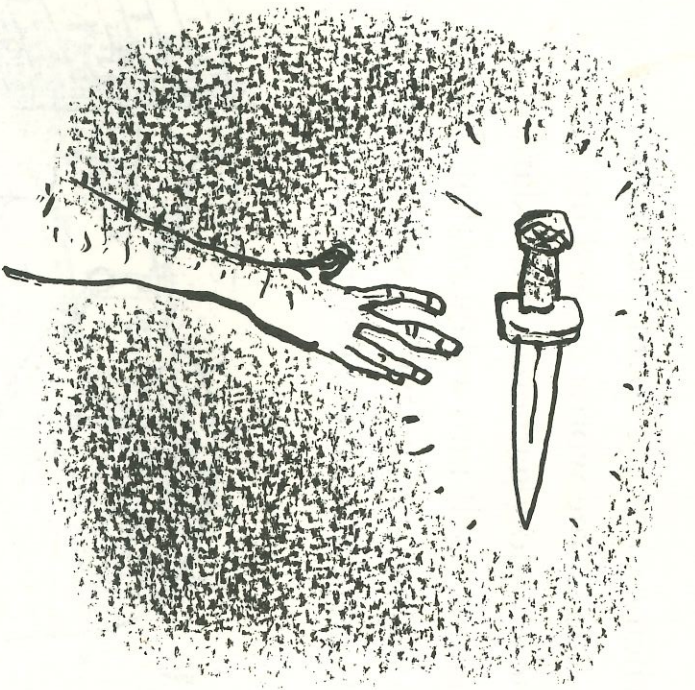
\* \* \*

Long after the castle had fallen silent,  
Macbeth left his room and crept along the  
corridors. His hands trembled, and the  
sound of his pulse in his ears was like the  
beating of a battle drum. 'This is the hour  
of the wolf and the witch,' he thought,



'when evil spirits roam the night.'  
And as the words crossed his mind, a  
ghostly glow gathered in the darkness,  
shaping itself into a dagger that floated  
in the air, shining with a sickly green light.  
Macbeth almost cried out in terror.





“Be calm!” he told himself. “This is a trick of the mind!” To prove it, he reached out his hand to take the dagger, but it floated away from him and pointed the way to Duncan’s door. Blood began to ooze from the blade, as though the iron were weeping red tears.

A bell tolled midnight. “Duncan’s funeral bell is ringing!” muttered Macbeth, and he followed the dagger through the gloom.



Lady Macbeth also heard the bell toll, and it seemed a long time before her husband returned. There was blood on his face and hands, and he carried two daggers.



"You should not have brought the daggers here!" said Lady Macbeth. "Go back and put them into the guards' hands, as we planned!"

Macbeth's eyes were blank. He shook his head. "I will not go back there!" he said hoarsely.

"Then *I will!*" said Lady Macbeth, and snatched the daggers from Macbeth's hands and left the room.



Macbeth stood where he was, shivering uncontrollably, seeing nothing but Duncan's dead eyes staring. He tried to pray, but his lips and tongue would not form the words.

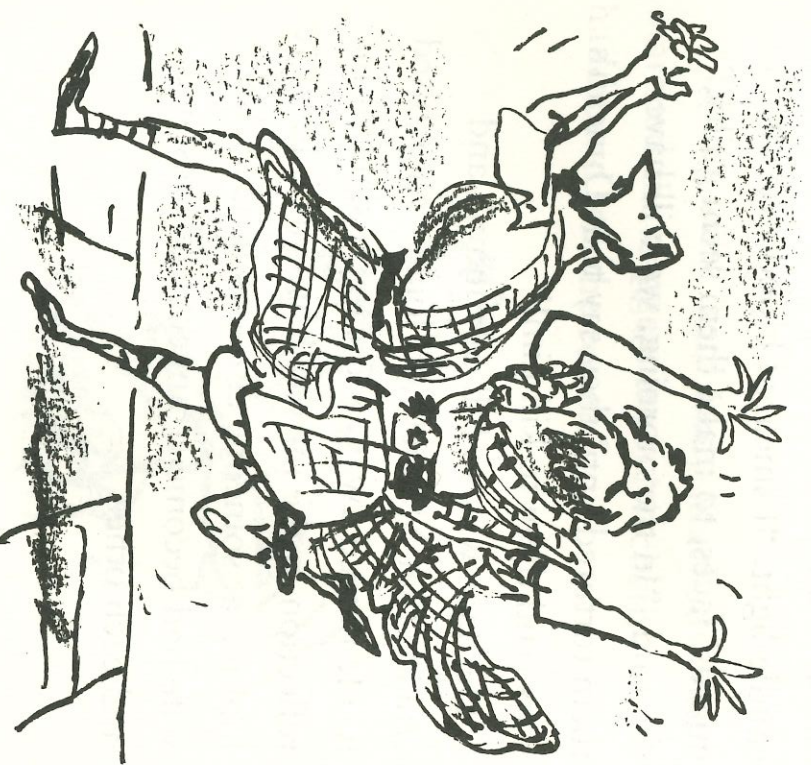
In a short while, Lady Macbeth came back, holding her red hands up to the candle-light. "I smeared blood over the guards' faces, to make them seem guilty," she said. "In the morning, we will have them tortured until they say that Duncan's sons paid them to kill him!"

Her face was so full of triumph and cruelty, that Macbeth no longer recognised it. He turned away, and caught sight of his reflection in the mirror. It was as if he were looking at someone else – as if he and his wife had become strangers to themselves and each other.





Glamis Castle was woken in the grey light of dawn by voices shouting, "Murder! The King is slain!" Shocked guests ran from their rooms and spoke in whispers. Who could have murdered the King?



Rumours flew through the castle like swallows – and suspicion fell on Malcolm and Donalbain, who had the most to gain from their father's death.



Malcolm and Donalbain were convinced that Macbeth was the murderer, but they did not dare to accuse him – who would believe that the hero of the battle against the Norwegians would slay his own King?

Though they knew it would be taken as proof of their guilt, Duncan's sons fled for their lives. Donalbain sailed for Ireland,



and Malcolm rode across the border into England, to put himself under the protection of the English King.



Now nothing stood between Macbeth and the throne.

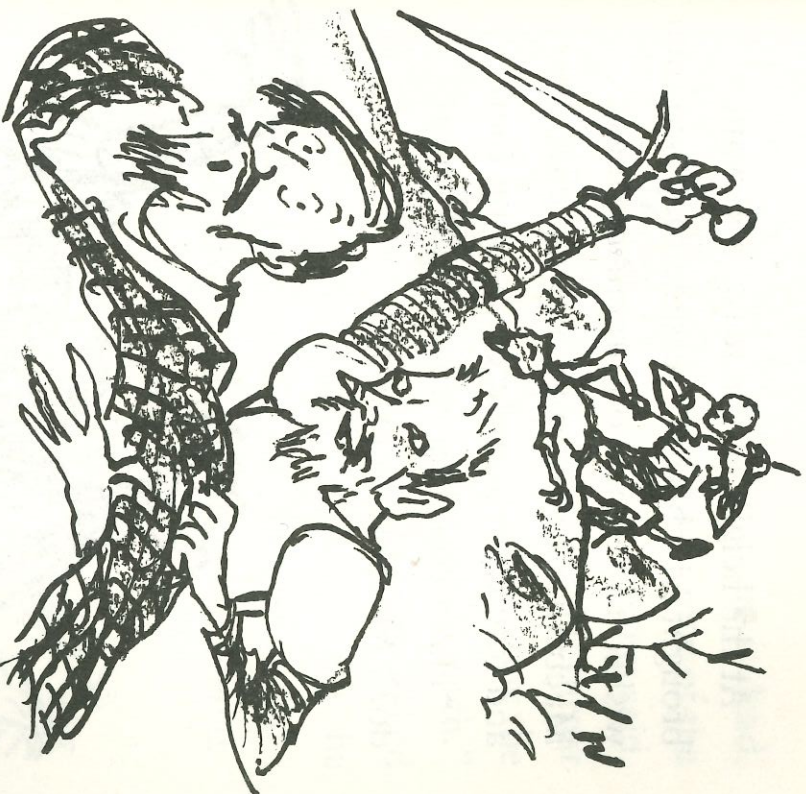
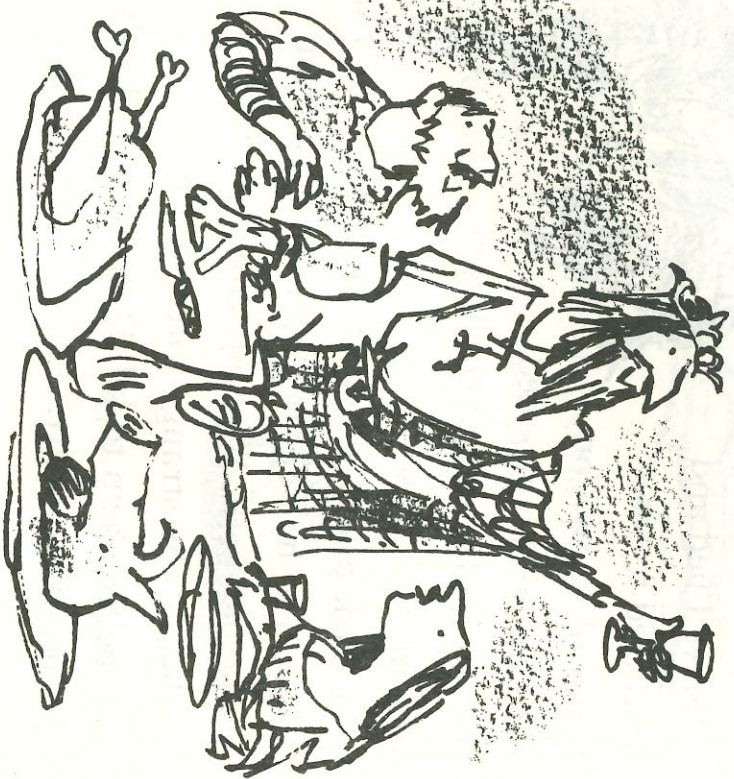
He was crowned, but the crown did not bring him the pleasure he had imagined. His secret dream had come true, but he was disturbed by other dreams – dreams of what the witches had foretold for Banquo's descendants.

'Have I lied and murdered to set Banquo's spawn on the throne?' he brooded. 'I must find a way to rid myself of him, and his son.'

A dark plan formed in Macbeth's mind, and he kept it a secret – even from Lady Macbeth. Without either of them realising, the strange force that had compelled them to kill Duncan was slowly driving them apart.



\* \* \*  
Macbeth held a coronation feast in the royal castle at Dunsinane. Many of the nobles who attended remarked that Macbeth's old friend, Banquo, was not present, but Macbeth laughed when they mentioned it.



“Lord Banquo and his son must have been delayed on their way,” he said lightly. Only he knew what had delayed them, for he had hired two murderers to ambush them on the road.

At the height of the feast, a servant brought Macbeth a message that two men wished to see him on urgent business. Macbeth hurried to his private chambers, and found the murderers waiting there.

“Have you done what I paid you to do?” Macbeth demanded.



would sleep peacefully. But then he sensed something wrong: neither of the murderers would look at him, and they kept anxiously shuffling their feet.

“And his son?” said Macbeth.

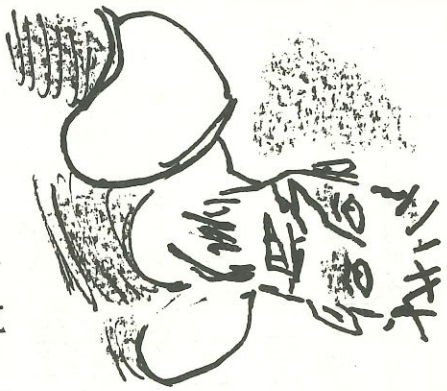
The reply was shattering. “He escaped, my lord. Banquo’s son still lives.”



“Banquo is dead, my lord,” one of the murderers said.

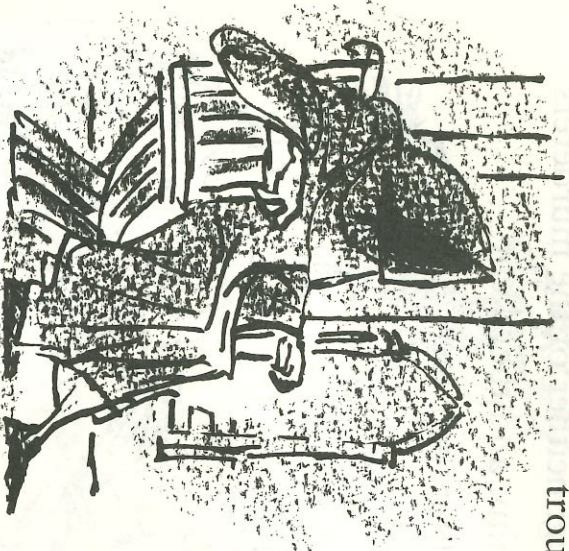
“We cut his throat and threw the body into a ditch.”

Macbeth sighed with relief – perhaps now he



As he returned to the banquetting hall,  
doubts tortured Macbeth like scorpions'  
stings. 'Banquo's son still lives!' he thought.  
'Lives to take his revenge on me, to claim  
the throne and father sons who will rule  
after him. Is there no end to the blood that  
must be shed before I find peace?'

As he entered the hall, Macbeth put on  
a false smile to hide his  
troubled mind; but  
the smile froze



when he saw  
a hooded  
figure seated  
in his chair.  
"Who dares  
to sit in my  
place?" he  
roared.

The guests fell silent and looked  
bewildered: the King's chair was empty.



"Why...no one, my lord!" said Lady  
Macbeth, with a forced laugh. She could  
see that something was wrong with her  
husband, but she could not guess what.  
"The King is jesting!" she told the nobles.  
"This is no jest!" barked Macbeth. He  
strode angrily towards the figure, then  
recoiled in horror as it drew back its hood.



For what he saw was Banquo – with  
weed tangled in his hair, and mud streaked  
across his face, with a deep gash in his  
neck that sent a stream of blood pattering  
onto the flagstones and haunting, glassy  
eyes that stared and stared.

“Get rid of him!” Macbeth screeched.



The nobles sprang to their feet, drawing  
their daggers, knocking over chairs and  
wine cups in the confusion.

“Back to your grave!” sobbed Macbeth.

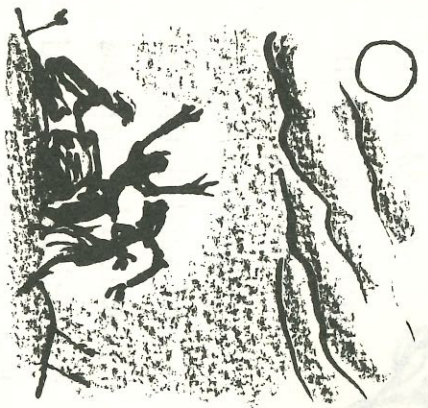
Banquo smiled – there was blood in his  
mouth, and his teeth shone white through  
it, then he faded into the shadows and the  
torchlight.

“My lords, the King is ill,” Lady Macbeth said desperately. “Leave us now, and let him rest. In the morning, he will be himself again.”



“Myself?” Macbeth moaned softly to himself. “I will not be myself again until Banquo’s spirit is laid to rest. Only the witches can set me free!”

\* \* \*



The witches were seated in a huddle around a fire, over which a cauldron bubbled. In the sky above their heads a full moon sailed, casting silver light over the battlefield, still littered with unburied corpses.

The blind witch held up her crystal. Deep inside, a tiny horse and rider galloped wildly through the night. “He comes!” she cackled. “The spell is still strong!”





And Macbeth  
came out of the  
moonlight, his  
horse's flanks  
white with lathered  
sweat. He climbed  
from the saddle and  
was about to speak when  
the hook-nosed witch called out, "The  
King wishes to know the future!"  
"It is not for the faint-hearted!" warned  
the bearded witch.

"I have courage enough!" Macbeth  
growled.

The blind witch dipped a wooden cup  
into the cauldron, and held it out.  
"Drink!" she said.

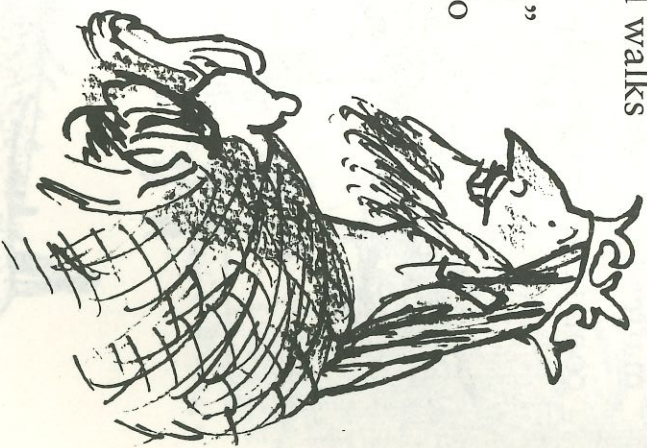
Macbeth took the cup and lifted it to  
his lips, shuddering as he swallowed.

Fire, and ice, and the light of the moon  
burned in his brain.

The blind witch's face melted like the  
edge of a cloud, and became the face of  
Duncan, his silver hair dark with blood.  
"Beware Macduff, the Thane of Fife!"  
Duncan said, and then he changed into  
Banquo. "No man born of a woman can  
harm you," Banquo said. "You will rule  
until Birnam Wood walks  
to Dunsinane."

"Then I am safe!"  
cried Macbeth. "No  
one can stop me!"

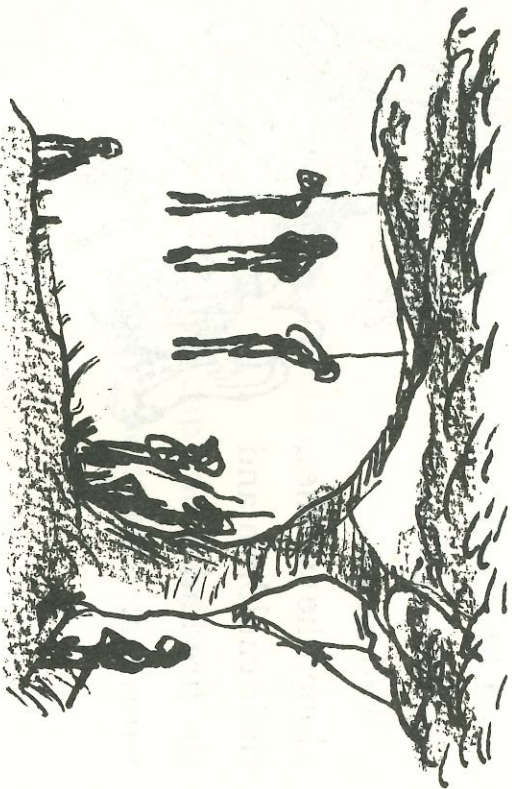
And he was  
alone: the witches,  
their cauldron and  
the fire had  
vanished.





\* \* \*

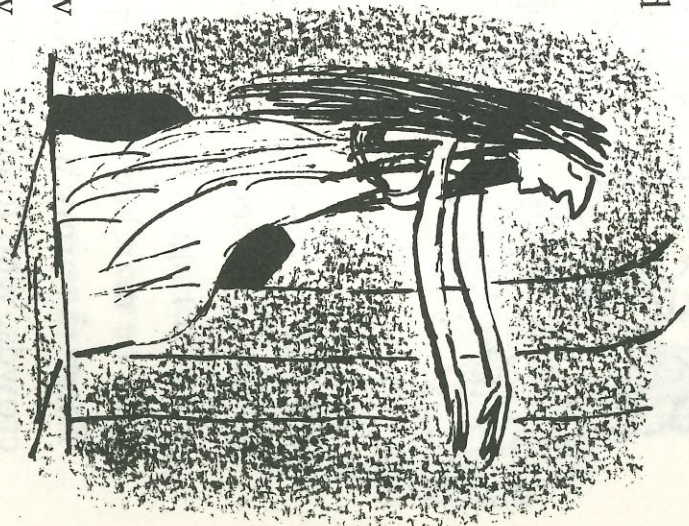
It was the start of a fearful time. On his return to Dunsinane, Macbeth ordered that Macduff be arrested. When he heard that Macduff had fled to England to join Malcolm, Macbeth had Macduff's castle burned, and his wife and children put to death. From then on, anyone who questioned the King's commands – no matter how harsh or unjust those commands might be – was executed.



The gap between Macbeth and his wife grew wider. The guilty secret of Duncan's murder gnawed at Lady Macbeth's mind like a maggot inside an apple. She fell ill and began to walk in her sleep, dreaming that she and Macbeth

were still covered with Duncan's blood. "Out, damned stain!" she croaked. "Will nothing make me clean?" Doctors could do nothing for her, and she grew weaker every day.

\* \* \*





Then at last hope came to Macbeth's suffering subjects. Malcolm had raised an army in England and, with Macduff at his side, he marched his troops into Scotland. There the army was greeted by cheering crowds, who longed to be freed from the tyrant Macbeth.

First Glamis Castle was captured and burned, and then Malcolm's forces marched on to Dunsinane. To the despair of Macbeth's generals, he did nothing.



Each time they advised him to go to battle, he laughed and said, "I have nothing to fear until the day that Birnam Wood walks to Dunsinane."

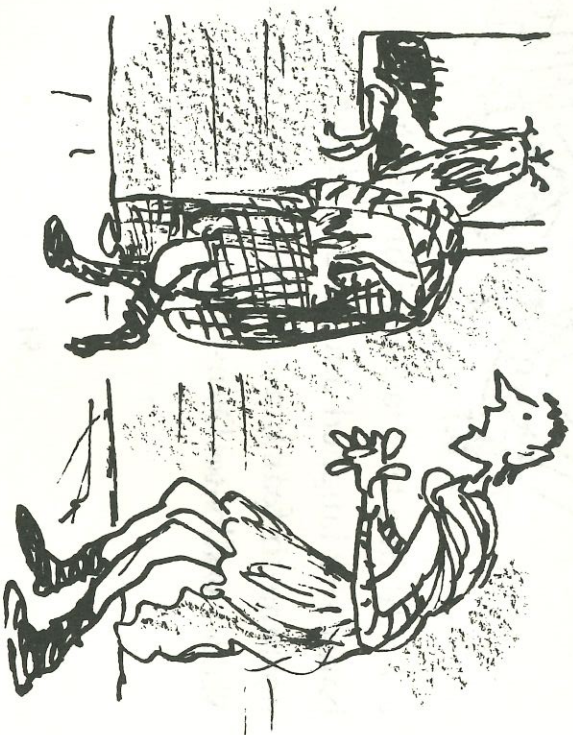
\* \* \*

Through the windows of the throne room, Macbeth could see the distant campfires of Malcolm's army. He raised a cup of wine to them. "Fools!" he jeered. "You cannot overthrow me!"

A sound made him turn. A servant was standing at the door, wringing his hands and weeping.

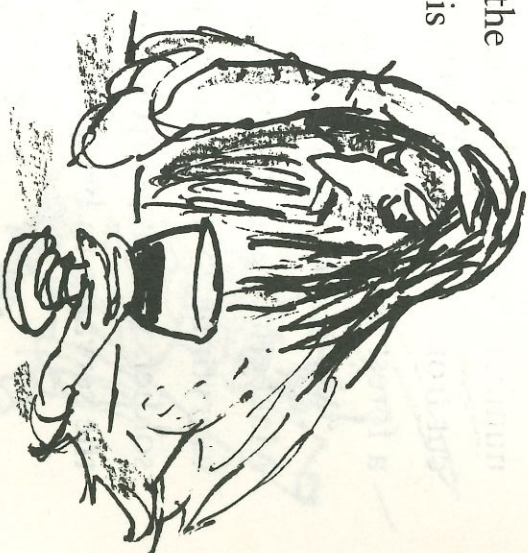
"What is it?" Macbeth asked gruffly.

"The Queen, my lord," said the servant. "She is... dead."



For a long time, Macbeth was silent, remembering the early years of his marriage, when the world had seemed bright. "Life goes on, day after day, but it means nothing," he said in a cracked whisper. "It ends in despair, and darkness... and death."

Macbeth did not sleep that night. He drank cup after cup of wine, but it brought him no comfort. Only the certainty that his enemies would be defeated and that he would remain unharmed, gave him any hope.





At dawn, an anxious-faced captain brought the King strange news. "The enemy is approaching, my lord," he said. "To conceal the strength of their numbers, they are hiding behind branches cut from Birnam Wood. It looks as though a forest is on the march."

"My curse upon you, witches!" howled Macbeth. "You deceived me! I have lost everything, but at least I can die like a soldier, with a sword in my hand! Go tell the servants to bring my armour!"

\* \* \*

It was a short battle. Macbeth's army had no stomach for a fight to protect a king they now hated, and the soldiers began to surrender to Malcolm's men – first in a trickle, then in a flood.

Macbeth fought recklessly, as though he wished to be killed, but he hacked down opponent after opponent, shouting, "You were born of woman!" as he delivered the death blow.



At last, Macbeth

found himself  
alone. He was  
resting against  
a cart, when he  
heard someone  
call his name.

It was Macduff,  
striding through  
the smoke of battle,

his broadsword at the ready. "I have come  
to avenge my wife and children!" Macduff  
said through clenched teeth.

"Stay back!" warned Macbeth. "I cannot  
be harmed by a man born of woman."

"My mother died before I was born,"  
said Macduff, his eyes blazing with hate.

"To save me, the doctor cut me from  
her body."



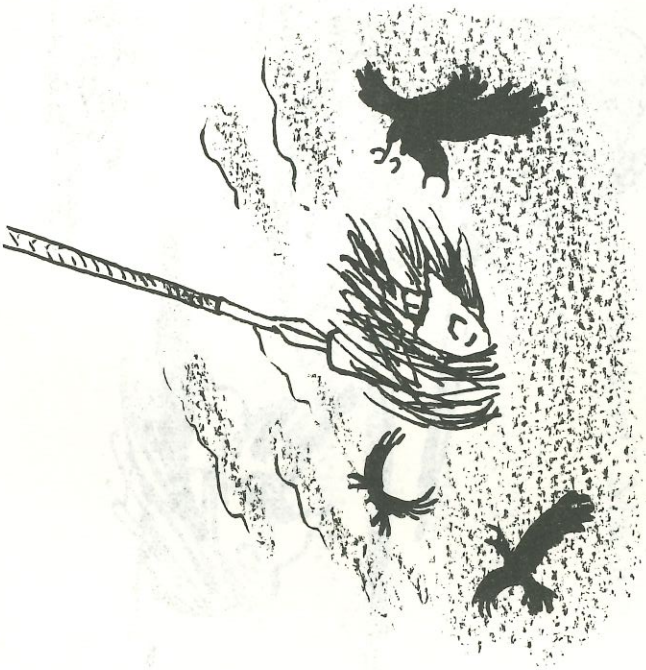
Macbeth threw back his head and  
laughed bitterly. He saw now that all the  
witches' promises had been lies, and that  
by believing them, he had betrayed  
himself. The force that had dominated  
him was gone, and only his courage  
remained. "Come then, Macduff!" he  
cried. "Make an end of me!"  
Macduff struck off Macbeth's head with  
a single sweep of his sword.



\* \* \*

The head was placed on top of a spear  
that had been driven into the ground  
outside the gates of Dunsinane. The  
victorious army cheered, then marched  
away to see Malcolm crowned King.

As the sun set, three ravens flapped down  
from the castle walls and fluttered around  
Macbeth's head. "All hail, Macbeth!" they  
cawed. "All hail! All hail!"



*Out, out, brief candle.*

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player*

*That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,*

*And then is heard no more.*

Macbeth; V.v.

## Evil in Macbeth

Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* in 1605, four years after James I came to the throne. King James had written a book about witchcraft, and Shakespeare wove three witches into *Macbeth*, to flatter the new monarch, who had granted Shakespeare's acting company the title of *The King's Men* in 1603.

Shakespeare's witches do not simply cast wicked spells. Their prophecies and promises play on Macbeth's mind, bringing out a long-kept secret – his ambition to be king.

The evil in the play does not come from the witches, but from Macbeth himself. Urged on by his wife, Macbeth murders the saintly King Duncan, condemns the king's sons as murderers, and is proclaimed king by the Scots noblemen.

Macbeth's dark dream has come true, but his life turns into a nightmare. To keep the throne he has his best friend murdered, and puts to death anyone who dares oppose him. The brave general has become a cruel tyrant.

In the end, Macbeth loses everything. His wife goes mad and dies, and when an English army invades Scotland his noblemen turn against him. The promises the witches made to Macbeth prove to be hollow, and he dies at the hands of Macduff, whose wife and children he had executed.

With its three witches, a ghost and a phantom dagger, *Macbeth* was the sixteenth century equivalent of a modern horror movie. But the real horror lies in the change that comes over Macbeth's character. The potential for evil, Shakespeare seems to suggest, is lurking inside us all, and we must constantly be on guard against it.



## Shakespeare and the Globe Theatre

Some of Shakespeare's most famous plays were first performed at the Globe Theatre, which was built on the South Bank of the River Thames in 1599.

Going to the Globe was a different experience from going to the theatre today. The building was roughly circular in shape, but with flat sides: a little like a doughnut crossed with a fifty-pence piece. Because the Globe was an open-air theatre, plays were only put on during daylight hours in spring and summer. People paid a penny to stand in the central space and watch a play, and this part of the audience became known as 'the groundlings' because they stood on the ground. A place in the tiers of seating beneath the thatched roof, where there was a slightly better view and less chance of being rained on, cost extra.

The Elizabethans did not bath very often and the audiences at the Globe were smelly. Fine ladies and gentlemen in the more expensive seats sniffed perfume and bags of sweetly-scented herbs to cover the stink rising from the groundlings.

There were no actresses on the stage; all the female characters in Shakespeare's plays would have been acted by boys, wearing wigs and make-up. Audiences were not well-behaved. People clapped and cheered when their favourite actors came on stage; bad actors were jeered at and sometimes pelted with whatever came to hand.

Most Londoners worked hard to make a living and in their precious free time they liked to be entertained. Shakespeare understood the magic of the theatre so well that today, almost four hundred years after his death, his plays still cast a spell over the thousands of people that go to see them.

