

King Saul and Macbeth

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Abstract

A careful comparison of *Macbeth* with the story of King Saul in First Samuel provides evidence that Shakespeare made much use of this story in writing the play. It also suggests that, if Saul is compared to Macbeth, Banquo, whom King James regarded as his ancestor, is compared to David.

“If ancient Israel had had a theatre, or if Aeschylus or Sophocles had known the story of Saul, Israel’s first king, it might have become a great tragic drama for the stage,” I sometimes say to students reading the Bible and Greek classics together. Now, after repeated reading of Saul’s tragedy in the First Book of Samuel, I have come to think that it did become a famous tragedy on a much later stage, its scene transferred to Scotland and its hero blended with the figure of an old Scottish king. If it is possible to say that “Lady Macbeth is modelled partly on Clytemnestra¹⁾”, we may also say that Macbeth is modelled partly upon King Saul.

Apart from the fact that Saul’s Kingship did not begin with a crime and that he was finally killed not by outraged countrymen but by his country’s enemies, there is a remarkable correspondence between Saul’s story and

Macbeth’s, both in the play and in Shakespeare’s main source, Holinshed’s *Chronicles of Scotland*. On one point, the latter comes closer to the Bible than does the play, for in Holinshed Macbeth was a good king for the first ten years before “his natural inclination . . . to cruelty” showed itself²⁾. On other points, however, the play is closer to the Bible story, and these will be our evidence that Shakespeare indeed had First Samuel in mind — maybe open before him — as he wrote. As far as I know, no one has suspected this possibility. I came to notice it because, when reading First Samuel with English literature students, I found myself asking them — beginning with Saul’s visit to the witch of Endor³⁾ — “Doesn’t this remind you of something in Shakespeare?”

There is one place where probably all annotated editions of *Macbeth* recognize a

reference to First Samuel. When Macduff has discovered King Duncan murdered in his bed at Macbeth's castle, he exclaims:

Most sacrilegious Murther hath broke
ope The Lord's anointed Temple. . . . (II.
iii. 66-67)

Macduff's words recall two occasions in First Samuel where David, the future king, could have killed his persecutor, King Saul, but did not,

for who can stretch forth his hand
against the LORD's anointed and be
guiltless? (I Sam. 26:9, cf. 24:6)

One scholar "regards the passage as a reference to James I's favourite theory of Divine Right [of kings]⁴." Anointing with oil to mark a man out as king (or a woman as queen) was not only an ancient Hebrew custom, but was and is part of the Coronation ceremony of a British monarch, including of course James I before whom, together with his guest the king of Denmark, *Macbeth* was probably first performed on August 7, 1606.

But beyond this short but important reference, what other points suggest that Shakespeare *throughout* was thinking of Saul and David? In the section on "Sources" in Muir's Introduction to the Arden Shakespeare *Macbeth*, there is a list of twelve "most striking alterations" that Shakespeare made to the story he read in Holinshed⁵. Number vi is "the banquet scene and the appearance of Banquo's ghost" (most of Act III) which "Shakespeare apparently invented." Number viii is Macbeth's visit to the witches after the murder of Banquo. "Although the cauldron scene is based on the three prophecies mentioned by Holinshed, Shakespeare for reasons of dramatic economy substitutes the Weird Sisters [also called witches] for 'a certain witch, whom he had in great trust'."

Holinshed does not say that Macbeth *visited* this witch⁶.

Shakespeare, who must have had an eye for dramatic situations wherever he found them, could find models for these two scenes in First Samuel chapters 20 and 28.

The empty place at the the table

In Holinshed Macbeth hired murderers to kill Banquo and his son "as they returned to their lodgings" after having supper with Macbeth at the palace. In the play Banquo is killed (and his son escapes) on the way to a banquet at the palace to which Banquo had been invited earlier in the day.

Macb. Here's our chief guest.

Lady M. If he had been forgotten It had
been as a gap in our great feast And
all-thing unbecoming.

Macb. Tonight we hold a solemn supper,
Sir, And I'll request your presence.
. . . . Fail not our feast. (III. i. 11-27)

Banquo promises to come, though he must ride somewhere with his son that afternoon.

That night Macbeth, after hearing the murderer's report, returns to sit with his guests at the table.

Macb. Here had we now our country's
honour roof'd,
Were the grac'd person of our
Banquo present;
Who may I rather challenge for
unkindness,
Than pity for mischance!
(III. iv. 39-42)

But when Macbeth goes to sit in the empty place he sees Banquo's ghost there, invisible to others. The ghost appears a second time just after Macbeth drinks

. . . . to our dear friend Banquo, whom we

miss; would he were here! (III. iii. 89-90)

David was absent from King Saul's solemn feast not because Saul had killed him, but to test whether Saul intended to kill him. Jonathan, the king's son and David's loyal friend, was there to observe the king's reaction to the empty place.

And David said unto Jonathan, Behold, to morrow is the new moon, and I should not fail to sit with the king at meat: [but I will hide]. If thy father at all miss me, then, [Jonathan is to give an excuse]. (20: 5-6)

Jonathan says:

thou shalt be missed, because thy seat will be empty. (20:18)

On the first day of the three-day feast, the king said nothing, even though "David's place was empty for he thought, Something hath befallen him, he is not clean." (20:25-26) But on the second day, when Saul asked Jonathan why the son of Jesse [David] had been absent two days in a row and Jonathan had given David's excuse,

"Then Saul's anger was kindled against Jonathan" whom he bitterly blamed for taking David's side against his own family. "For as long as the son of Jesse liveth upon the ground, thou shalt not be established, nor thy kingdom" (20:30-31) — to which we can compare Macbeth's words when he hears that Banquo's son has escaped:

. . . . I had else been perfect,
Whole as the marble, founded as the rock
. . . . (III. iv. 20-21)

When Jonathan asks his father why David must die, Saul throws a javelin at him. "So Jonathan arose from the table in fierce anger" (20:34). If Jonathan's mother (referred

to in 20:34) had been present, she might, like Lady Macbeth, have said to her husband,

You have displac'd the mirth, broke the
good meeting
With most admir'd disorder.
(III. iv. 108-9)

Why should Macbeth kill Banquo, or Saul, David?

In his soliloquy before the murder of Banquo Macbeth tells us two reasons which agree with those of Saul.

(1) *"Father to a line of kings"*

(Banquo) chid the Sisters,
When first they put the name of King
upon me
then, prophet-like,
They hail'd him father to a line of kings:
Upon my head they plac'd a fruitless
crown, And put a barren sceptre in my
gripe, Thence to be wrench'd with an
unlineal hand, No son of mine succeed-
ing. (III. i. 57-63)

The Macbeths had no child. The babe to whom Lady Macbeth had "given suck" (I. vii. 54) must have died — a familiar fact for Shakespeare's audience, both in common and in royal households. For such a reason Henry VIII had divorced his queen⁷⁾ and the Tudor line had died with the great Elizabeth. James I was her successor, of the House of Stuart, hereditary kings of Scotland from 1371, descended according to legend from Banquo. May not the scholarly James as he watched the play have guessed that his ancestor was being compared to David? May not Shakespeare have so intended⁸⁾?

In the Bible story, even before David is mentioned, Saul had twice been told by Samuel, the prophet who had anointed him king (10:1), that for failures to obey Samuel's

Sion” had expected that “upon the setting of that bright *Occidental Star*, Queen Elizabeth . . . , darkness would so have overshadowed this Land, that men should have been in doubt which way they were to walk; . . . the appearance of Your Majesty, as of the *Sun* in his strength, instantly dispelled those . . . mists . . . ; especially when we beheld the Government established in Your Highness, and Your hopeful Seed” [17 year old Prince

Henry who died in 1612 and 10 year old Prince Charles]. (Italics in original)

“Sion” was the mountain of Jerusalem which King David made the capital of *his* United Kingdom of Judah and North Israel. Other themes in this dedication, too — Light and darkness, order and disorder, and hopeful seed of a royal Line that would continue — remind us of *Macbeth*.

Sequels to “the empty place at the table”

First Samuel

David escapes from Saul’s court. (20:42)

(Saul consults a witch later.)

The priest at Nob innocently helps David not knowing it will offend Saul (21:1-9)

An informer is present. (21:7)

Outlaws gather around David. (22:1-2)

Macbeth

Macduff has fled to England. (III. vi. 29f.)

Macbeth consults the witches. (IV. i)

“But cruel are the times when we are traitors And do not know, ourselves;” (IV. ii. 18-19)

Macbeth has a spy in Macduff’s and others’ houses. (III. iv. 130-131)

Ross reports a rumour “of many worthy fellows that were out.” (IV. iii. 182-3)

“His crueltie caused through feare¹²⁾”

Saul’s insecurity: he *believes* everyone is conspiring against him. (22:6-8)

He stands holding his spear even when surrounded by his own men. (22:6)

Saul’s atrocity against the priests at Nob. Not his own men, only the informer will obey his order to slay 85 priests and all in their city: “men and women, children and sucklings, and oxen, and asses, and sheep . . .” (22:17-19)

One priest escapes to David, who blames himself: “I have occasioned the death of all the persons of thy father’s house.” (22:22)

Saul’s enemies, the Philistines, gather to fight against Israel. (28:1)

Saul consults a witch. (28:3-25) The ghost of Samuel whom she raises for Saul gives him no hope. This scene is more eerie, if anything, than Shakespeare’s cauldron scene (IV. i) *because* this witch is a kindly woman who cooks Saul a meal and persuades him to eat.

Saul’s last battle. (31:1-10) Saul, defeated, rather than be captured and mocked, falls on his sword. (31:4) Unlike Macbeth, Saul is mourned (II Samuel 1) and men grateful for Saul’s saving them years before, risk their lives to save his body. (I Samuel 31:11-13, cf. ch. 12)

Macbeth *knows* he can trust no one — increasingly so throughout Act V.

Macbeth puts on his armour before it is needed. (V. iii. 33)

Macbeth’s atrocity: his murderers slaughter Macduff’s family (IV. ii), “Wife, children, servants, all That could be found.” (IV. iii. 211-12)

Macduff blames himself: “Sinful Macduff! They were all struck for thee.” (IV. iii. 224f.)

Macbeth’s enemies gather to fight for Scotland. (V. ii & iv & vi)

Macbeth’s last battle. He decides not to die on his sword like a “Roman fool” but dies fighting Macduff who had threatened to exhibit him as a “rarer monster.” (V. viii)

References

The Arden Shakespeare Macbeth, edited by Kenneth Muir, reprinted with new introduction 1984, Routledge, London, 1992. Appendix A includes relevant parts of Holinshed's *Chronicles*.

The Holy Bible, Authorized Version of 1611 ("King James Version") printed in England, including the dedication to King James and the original marginalia. These marginalia may at times reflect earlier translations which Shakespeare knew, unavailable for this paper. One example is "witch" for "a woman that hath a familiar spirit" at I Samuel 28:7. (The American edition has "the woman of En-dor" instead of "a witch at En-dor" at the top of the page, and of course it omits the dedication to the king, reflecting both the Revolution and the Enlightenment.)

Another example related to *Macbeth* is "man of blood" (a Hebraism) in the margin for "bloody man" in the text at II Samuel 16:7. Here, as in *Macbeth* III. iv. 125, "man of blood" means "a man who has killed many people" while "bloody man" in I. ii. 1 just means "a man covered with blood."

Notes

- 1) Muir, *op. cit.*, page xlii. (See "References.")
- 2) *ibid.*, page 173.
- 3) First Samuel, chapter 28.
- 4) Muir, *op. cit.*, page 63, note.
- 5) *ibid.*, pages xxxvii f.
- 6) *ibid.*, page 175.
- 7) In the divorce trial scene in Shakespeare's *King Henry the Eighth* (1613) Queen Katharine tells Henry she has "been blest with many children by[him]" (II. 4. 36f.) while Henry tells the Court how he had come to think the marriage had not been blessed by heaven — "for her male issue Or died where they were made, or shortly after [birth]." (II. 4. 191f.) Only one sickly daughter, Mary, lived.
- 8) I do not think he intended the rest of the audience to be thinking of Saul and David. If he had wanted to write a Biblical play he would have done so openly, like Milton and Racine later in the century.
- 9) Muir, *op. cit.*, page 75, note.
- 10) *The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, 15th edition, Chicago, 1974, 1989, volume 6, page 481.
- 11) In *Macbeth* III. i. 56 Shakespeare chooses Mark Antony and Caesar, not Saul and David; in V. viii. 1 it is "the Roman fool" who dies on his own sword, not Saul, although an 11th century Scottish king might be presumed to know more of the Bible than of Plutarch. Shakespeare did not want to call his audience's attention too obviously to the Bible story.
- 12) Holinshed's marginalia in Muir, *op. cit.*, page xxxvii.
- 13) See *Encyclopedia Britannica*, *loc. cit.* As king of Scotland before 1603, James "considered his differences with the Presbyterian ministers . . . as political rather than doctrinal. Their form of rule was ultimately theocratic and therefore incompatible with his idea of monarchy." So James probably sympathized with Saul against Samuel.

ソウル王とマクベス

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要 約

シェイクスピアの「マクベス」とサムエル記上のサウル王の物語とを詳細に比較検討した結果、シェイクスピアが「マクベス」著作に際して、サウル王の物語を念頭に置いていたことが明白であることを論じる。また、その結果は、もしサウル王がマクベスに該当しているなら、ジェイムズ王が自分の祖先と考えているバンコーはダビデに該当していることを示唆していることも併せて論じる。