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CRITICAL HISTORY

CONTEXT

The first printed mention of Shakespeare, in a pamphlet of 1592 called *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*, is written in the spirit of rivalry. He is an 'upstart crow' who thinks he is 'as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you' and 'is in his own conceit the only Shakespeare in a country'.



CHECK THE BOOK

The six-volume *Critical Heritage: Shakespeare* (edited by Brian Vickers, 1995) brings together critical writing about Shakespeare from 1623 to 1802.

SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES

It is commonly held that *Macbeth* was first performed in 1606, and it has been popular ever since. It is one of the few plays by Shakespeare for which we have an eyewitness account in the playwright's lifetime. Simon Forman wrote a rough summary of the play when he saw it performed in 1611. After the Restoration and the reopening of the theatres, Sir William Davenant redivided *Macbeth* to include song and dance routines for the Witches and he regularised, in his view, some of the language and the verse. It would have been this heavily revised version of the play that Samuel Pepys saw and described in his diary in 1667, and the many productions until late in the nineteenth century were based on substantial adaptations of the text as we know it. Samuel Johnson in his edition of *The Plays of Shakespeare* (1765) gathered together notes on *Macbeth* written twenty years earlier, in which he concentrated on a moral reading of the play and how the Witches would have been seen in Shakespeare's time: 'The danger of ambition is well described; and I know not whether it may be said in defence of some parts which now seem improbable, that, in Shakespeare's time, it was necessary to warn credulity against vain and illusive predictions. The passions [of the audience] are directed to their true end. Lady Macbeth is merely detested; and though the courage of Macbeth preserves some esteem, yet every reader rejoices in his fall.' About the same time as Johnson and sometimes after consultation with him, David Garrick, the most famous actor of the eighteenth century, restored much of the text which had been altered by Davenant but also introduced some changes, for example the removal of the Porter's scene and the presentation on stage of the death of Macbeth. Up to the end of the eighteenth century, the emphasis in writings on Shakespeare was on moral questions and on characters as representative of types of people.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

In 1794 Walter Whiter published his *Specimen of a Commentary on Shakespeare*, in which he analyses the language and characters in terms of word association. By tracing the recurrence of images in a speech he identifies patterns in the mentality of a character. This more psychological reading of the plays anticipates the subtle interpretations of the inner lives of characters as practised by Thomas De Quincey, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Hazlitt in the first half of the century. De Quincey's essay, 'On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*' (1823) is wonderfully acute on the details of one scene. Some of the best criticism was based on particular productions of the play and the acting of such famous figures as J. P. Kemble, Edmund Kean and Henry Irving as Macbeth; and Mrs Sarah Siddons and Ellen Terry as Lady Macbeth. A Scottish professor of law, C. J. Bell, wrote in 1809 a fascinating, very detailed description of Mrs Siddons showing how every intonation, gesture and movement caught a nuance of Lady Macbeth's personality. The essence of nineteenth-century criticism of the play was in examining the mystery and contradictoriness of the characters Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. This emphasis was taken up but largely removed from theatrical concerns by A. C. Bradley, whose book *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) analyses the main characters as if they were actual people. His study was massively influential for the first half of the twentieth century and remains very readable and rewarding.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

A play dealing with hidden desires, dark forces, guilt, sleepwalking and repressed fears could not but appeal to some of the new psychological thinkers early in the century, and Sigmund Freud showed a considerable if hurried interest in *Macbeth*. The different toughnesses of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth fascinated him and he offers an interesting suggestion that the husband and wife are really aspects of one personality dramatically presented. Although various psychological theories help to shape most readings of the play, it is

WWW. CHECK THE NET

Search the Internet for short critical comments and observations on *Macbeth* by authors such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) and William Hazlitt (1778–1830).

WWW. CHECK THE NET

The full text of A. C. Bradley's famous *Shakespearean Tragedy* is available at <http://www.clicknotes.com>

World events

1040 Macbeth kills Duncan
1057 Macbeth is killed
1492 Christopher Columbus sails to America

1534 Henry VIII breaks with Rome and declares himself head of the Church of England
1556 Archbishop Thomas Cranmer burned at the stake
1558 Elizabeth I accedes to throne
1564 Galileo Galilei born; Michelangelo dies

1568 Mary Queen of Scots taken prisoner by Elizabeth I
1570 Elizabeth I excommunicated by Pope Pius V
1571 Battle of Lepanto
1572 Massacre on St Bartholomew's Day in Paris

1577 Francis Drake sets out on round the world voyage

1582 Outbreak of the plague in London

1584 Walter Raleigh's sailors land in Virginia

Shakespeare's life

(dates for plays are approximate)

1564 Born in Stratford-upon-Avon

1582 Marries Anne Hathaway

1583 Daughter, Susanna, is born

1585 Twins, Hamnet and Judith, born

c.1585–92 Moves to London

Literature and the arts

1513 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince*

1565–7 English translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* by Arthur Golding

1572 John Donne and Ben Jonson born

1576 Erection of first specially built public theatres in London – the Theatre and the Curtain

1577 Raphael Holinshed, *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (reprinted in 1587)

1581 Barnabe Rich, *Farewell to the Military Profession*

1584 Reginald Scot, *The Discovery of Witchcraft*

World events

1587 Execution of Mary Queen of Scots after implicated in plot to murder Elizabeth I
1588 Spanish Armada defeated
1589 Accession of Henri IV to French throne

1592 Plague in London closes theatres

1596 Francis Drake perishes on expedition to West Indies

1601 Essex is executed for treason

Shakespeare's life

(dates for plays are approximate)

LATE 1580s – EARLY 1590s Probably writes *1–3 Henry VI* and *Richard III*

c.1590–5 Writes *King John*

1592 Writes *The Comedy of Errors*

1593 Writes *Titus Andronicus*, *The Taming of the Shrew*

1594 ONWARDS Writes exclusively for the Lord Chamberlain's Men; writes *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *Richard II*

1595 Writes *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

1596 Hamnet dies; William granted coat of arms

1597 Writes *1–2 Henry IV*

1598 Writes *Much Ado About Nothing*

1599 Buys share in the Globe Theatre; writes *Julius Caesar*, *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*

1600 *The Merchant of Venice* printed

1600–1 Writes *Hamlet*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*

1601 Writes *Troilus and Cressida*

1602 Writes *All's Well That Ends Well*

1602–4 Probably writes *Othello*

Literature and the arts

1587 Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine the Great*

c.1589 Thomas Kyd, *The Spanish Tragedy* (first revenge tragedy)

1590 Sir Philip Sidney, *Arcadia*; Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene* (Books I–III)

1592 Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*

1597 James VI of Scotland, *Demonologies*

1598 Christopher Marlowe, *Hero and Leander*

1599 Translation, by Sir Lewis Lewkenor, of Cardinal Contarini's *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice*; James VI of Scotland, *Basilikon Doron*

1600 John Parry, *History and Description of Africa*