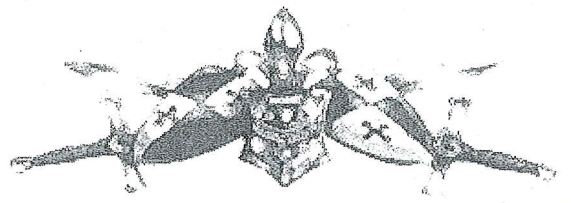


Historical Background



KING JAMES

- In 1603, Elizabeth I of England died without any children to claim her throne.
- Before her death, she named James VI of Scotland as successor, and he became James I of England, the country's first Stuart king.

THE GUNPOWDER PLOT

- In 1605, a group of Catholics, discontented with laws which prevented them from worshipping openly, hid thirty-six (36) barrels of gunpowder in the vaults beneath the House of Lords with the intention of killing the King when he opened Parliament and ultimately seizing power with the aid of Spain. The plot was discovered and the conspirators were hunted down and executed, as were many who were thought to have been involved in the plot.

MACBETH

- James had a great interest in the theatre and quickly became the new patron of Shakespeare's company, who changed their name accordingly from the Lord Chamberlain's Men to the King's Men.
- In August of 1606, James was at Hampton Court (a palace near London) where he entertained his cousin, King Christian of Denmark.
- At Hampton Court, they viewed the first performance of Macbeth; it was the story of James I's ancestors, Banquo and Fleance, through whom he had inherited the throne.
- This accounts for the fact that Shakespeare seems to have included a number of subjects which were known to be of interest to James:
 - First of all, the play is based on elements of Holinshed's Chronicles by Raphael Holinshed, which had been published in 1587 and told of the history of Britain. To make sure that the play was not offensive to James, Shakespeare made several changes from the original text to the play. For example, in Holinshed's Chronicles, Banquo is said to have joined with Macbeth in the killing of Duncan. However, in the play, Shakespeare's Banquo is innocent. This change was made because it would have been rather tactless to remind King James that he had indirectly claimed the throne through regicide (the murder of the king).
 - Also, in a court performance, the "glass" carried by the eighth king in one of the apparitions witnessed by Macbeth while in the witches' presence might well have been held in front of James so that he could see himself reflected.