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Shakespeare's dark portrait of ambition begins when the eponymous hero, a Scottish soldier, encounters three witches, who mysteriously refer to him as the future king. As, step by step, their prophecy begins to be fulfilled, the seeds of ambition are planted not only in Macbeth but in his scheming wife, who soon is plotting the murder of Duncan, King of Scotland. This murder--and the string of killings that inevitably follow--sets in motion a series of dark deeds that torment Macbeth and Lady Macbeth with guilt, which manifests itself most pointedly when a sleepwalking Lady Macbeth attempts to wash the blood from her hands, famously uttering "Out, damn'd spot!" MACBETH was probably written between 1603 and 1606; it is the last of Shakespeare's major tragedies and is peculiarly concise, perhaps because Shakespeare had learned of King James's penchant for shorter works. The plot was inspired by the Chronicles of Holinshed's narrative of the reigns of Duncan and Macbeth in Scotland. Richard Burbage, one of the most prominent actors of the Elizabethan stage, is said to have originated the title role.