

Jasper



ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Woman of the day:

Saint Margaret of Scotland

A long time ago, I saw a professional company in Providence put on Shakespeare's play, *Macbeth*. That was a mistake.

Shakespeare was a Christian playwright, and *Macbeth* is a deeply Christian play. Who do you think Macbeth most resembles, in the Christian faith? Let me set the stage for you. At the beginning of the play Macbeth has been fighting with tremendous courage for his lord Duncan, the king of Scotland. The king has been attacked by one of his men, the Thane of Cawdor, who got in cahoots with the king of Norway to try to steal Duncan's crown. But the Scots win, against the odds, and King Duncan is so delighted and grateful, he makes Macbeth the Thane of Cawdor in place of the traitor, and he promises more. "I have begun to plant thee, and will labor / To make thee full of growing," says King Duncan to Macbeth.

By the way, don't be timid. You might find Shakespeare a little tricky at first, but there are a lot of good editions with glosses on the page to help you with the rough spots. You didn't understand what was going on at the first baseball game you

saw, either, but you did something that human beings find natural. You learned.

In any case, Macbeth wants to be more than Thane of Cawdor. He wants to be king of Scotland. But there already is a king of Scotland. So in his ingratitude Macbeth will invite Duncan to his castle and murder him there. Think about it. Who was the brightest among the angels, but that was not good

enough for him? Which angel wanted to be God instead? "Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell," says Duncan's son Malcolm. So Macbeth too will fall as Satan fell, like lightning.

Someone did not get that news to the director of the play I saw. There are two very good men in the play, Malcolm and Macduff. But the Macduff I saw was ripping pages out of a Bible and throwing them away. The Malcolm I saw was just as vicious and ambitious as Macbeth, so that going from Macbeth to Malcolm would be like going from cancer in one lung to cancer in the other.

That's not what Shakespeare wrote. Shakespeare had Malcolm at the end of the play call upon "the grace of Grace" as he promises to reward every man who helped Scotland get rid of the butcher Macbeth, and he invites them to see him crowned as the rightful king at the royal palace in Scone.

The actors probably didn't know anything about Scotland and her history. Malcolm was a real person. He went on to marry a woman named



Margaret, whom we know as Saint Margaret, the queen and patron saint of Scotland.

Margaret was a native English woman but also a cousin of Saint Stephen, King of Hungary. That's where she lived when she was a girl. They say that she and her family had to flee England for the same reason Malcolm had to flee Scotland, after Macbeth had murdered King Duncan and stolen the crown. Her family fled from the vengeance of the Dane, King Canute, who was ruling in the southeastern part of England. They came back to England after Canute died, but they were going to flee again to the continent after the invasion of William of Normandy in 1066. That is when we could say that God stepped in, with a terrible storm at sea.

Shakespeare may have known about that storm. After the great battle at the beginning of the play, when he is still a loyal man, Macbeth says, "So foul and fair a day I have not seen." They've won the day, but the weather is dreadful, and things are going to get worse, when Macbeth meets the three "weird sisters," that is, three witches, with their cauldron, their "eye of newt and toe of frog, / Wool of bat and tongue of dog," their skinny fingers, and their beards. Read the play! But the storm in 1066 drove the Hungarian ship north to the coast of Scotland, where Malcolm took the passengers under his protection. He fell in love with Margaret, and though she held out a while because she wanted to become a nun, at last she gave her hand to him in marriage, and so she was crowned Queen of

Scotland.

The real-life Malcolm had a hot temper, Scot that he was, but Margaret tempered his temper, and set his attention toward the things of God. He knelt beside her regularly in prayer. She called churchmen together to make sure that the Lenten fast was kept, and that the faithful would receive Communion during the Eastertide. She founded churches and abbeys. She relieved the needs of the poor, and Malcolm was moved by her mercy. But you shouldn't think that their house was all hushed

and somber, not with six sons and two daughters! If you want to see what a Christian home looks like, what we call the domestic church, the royal house of Scotland when Margaret was queen could give you a good model.

Malcolm loved her dearly and gave her what royal gifts he could. You can view one of

them at a famous library in London, called the Bodleian. It's an illuminated book of the Gospels, embellished in the bright blue, green, red, and gold that artists in the middle ages loved so well. It's said that one day Queen Margaret was carrying this book with her when it fell from her saddlebag into a river. When they found it, the silk covers were torn off, but the pages were intact, as if the water had never touched them. Margaret believed its preservation was a miracle. Maybe it was, but the life of Margaret in such a wild land was more miraculous still.

Shakespeare knew about that. Now you know about it too.



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