
Historical Source for *Macbeth*

Shakespeare's primary source for *Macbeth* was Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*. Rather than following history as related by Holinshed, Shakespeare combined two separate incidents: Donwald's murder of King Duff in 967 A.D. and Macbeth's murder of Duncan in 1040 A.D. The themes of the power of guilt and evil came from Shakespeare's imagination, since there was no way to know from historical facts how the real Macbeth felt after he wrested the throne from Duncan.

In the first historical incident, King Duff executed several nobleman whom he felt were conspiring against him with the aid of witches. Donwald, a nobleman who objected to the executions, plotted with his wife to kill Duff by making sure his bodyguards drank too much and left Duff unprotected. Donwald paid four servants to cut Duff's throat.

In the second incident recorded by Holinshed, Macbeth and his friend Banquo, on their return from a battle with the Norwegian king, encountered three wild-looking women who predicted that Macbeth would be Thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland, and that Banquo's descendants would be kings. Apparently the real Macbeth took the predictions quite seriously from the start, and began plotting to attain the throne then occupied by the extremely kind and benevolent King Duncan I. Macbeth, with the help of Banquo, soon killed Duncan in battle and proclaimed himself king, causing Duncan's two sons to flee in fear for their own lives.

Macbeth ruled for ten years and was considered a good king, but he was haunted by the prophecy that Banquo's sons would inherit the kingdom. Finally he hired murderers to kill Banquo and his son, Fleance. Banquo died but Fleance escaped. After this incident, Macbeth became ruthless and unpredictable. He feared Macduff so much that he himself killed Macduff's family and banished Macduff from Scotland, calling him a traitor.

Macduff gathered an army and had them advance on Macbeth's castle by using boughs from trees as camouflage. Macduff then beheaded Macbeth and carried his head to Malcolm.

(As students make comparisons, they should note that it was Donwald's wife who plotted to kill Duff, not Macbeth's; that Banquo was involved in the real death of Duncan while in Shakespeare's version Banquo is "pure"; that Macbeth reigned without tyranny for ten years. Shakespeare also added the cauldron scene with the three witches and Hecate, probably to make the play more exciting to his audiences, most of whom would have firmly believed in the existence of witches.)

Key: Cities in ALL CAPS are found in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

