

The Historical Context of Macbeth

EXPLORING Shakespeare, 2003

Shakespeare wrote **Macbeth** sometime between 1605 and 1606, shortly after the ascension of King James of Scotland to the English throne. The new monarch brought Scotland—previously known to the English only as a mysterious, conquered neighbor—into the public limelight. The period of James' reign was further marked by political and religious conflict, much of which focused the kingdom's attention on the danger of regicide.

Events in History at the Time of the Play

Sources

Following the process used in the creation of many of his plays, Shakespeare drew the plot for **Macbeth** from historical sources—particularly Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577), the authoritative historical text of the period. Although Holinshed contains the story of Macbeth and Duncan, Shakespeare did not rely on this only; rather, he combined different stories and different versions of the same story to create his drama. The *Chronicles* include an account of King Malcolm II (reigned 1005-34), whose throne passed first to Duncan I (reigned 1034-40) and then to Macbeth (reigned 1040-57), both of whom were his grandsons. For his portrayal of the murder through which Macbeth took Duncan's throne, Shakespeare mined another vein of the *Chronicles*—King Duff's death at the hands of one of his retainers, Donwald. In combining the two events, Shakespeare crafted a specific tone for the tale of regicide.

When King Malcolm II of Scotland died in 1034, his last command was that the throne should pass to his oldest grandson, Duncan. This last request went against the Celtic tradition of succession, which stipulated that the inheritance of the throne alternate between different branches of the family, and simultaneously cut out another grandson, Macbeth, from the line of inheritance. Macbeth nevertheless pursued his claim to the throne as prescribed by tradition. He further supported his claim through the ancestry of his wife, Lady Gruoch, who was a direct descendent of two earlier Scottish kings, Malcolm I and Kenneth III. Nonetheless, Macbeth's claim was rejected in favor of Duncan's. Macbeth was not immediately hostile to the new king, but several years into Duncan's reign he raised an army and openly opposed the monarch. Duncan led his own forces against Macbeth and was killed in the ensuing battle. With Duncan out of the way, and his two sons out of the country, Macbeth became king of Scotland. He held the throne without incident for seventeen years until Duncan's oldest son, Malcolm III, returned to Scotland with an army. Malcolm killed Macbeth when their armies met at the Battle of Lumphanan. With Macbeth's death, Malcolm faced one final obstacle to the throne: Lulach, the son of Lady Gruoch from an earlier marriage. Lulach, who was actually crowned king immediately following Macbeth's death, claimed the Scottish throne through the ancestry of his mother. Malcolm did not let this development deter him; he had Lulach murdered and took the crown in 1058.

Shakespeare's version of Macbeth's relationship with his king comes from several places in Holinshed. The murder mostly derives from Holinshed's description of King Duff's death at the hands of Donwald: King Duff, like Duncan, is murdered by a nobleman he trusts. Donwald, like Shakespeare's Macbeth, acts with the support of an ambitious wife. Furthermore, in his account of the later history, Holinshed describes Duncan as an ineffective monarch who realized his own weakness enough to enlist the aid of Macbeth and Banquo to fight off Macdonwald's invasion from the Hebrides. Macbeth and Banquo defeated this invasion, as well as a subsequent invasion by Sweno of Norway. Other elements of **Macbeth** that can be traced to Holinshed's *Chronicles* include Macbeth's attempt to murder Banquo and Fleance and Macbeth's death at the hands of Macduff.

Macbeth's Scotland

Shakespeare sets his drama at a moment in Scottish history soon after the end of English rule, which had dominated Scotland from the beginning of the tenth century. Although the sources from which Shakespeare worked all referred to events that had taken place in eleventh-century Scotland, the play itself was not a narrowly historical document. Shakespeare adopted and adapted the time and setting for the purposes of his drama, creating an evocation of medieval Scotland whose mood would frame the actions of his fictional Macbeth. Nonetheless, the play refers often to details of Scottish culture at that time, without an understanding of which the audience can miss some of the play's meaning.

The Norse invasion—raiders and settlers

During the ninth century Scotland found itself under invasion by raiders from Norway and Denmark, commonly known as Vikings or Norsemen, who dominated the northern seas for several hundred years. The villages and monasteries of Scotland, often isolated in a landscape comprised of offshore island chains, deep inlets or fjords, and rugged mountains, were easy targets for the Norse rovers. The Scandinavian pirates launched raids on Scotland from the surrounding islands, and few monasteries or villages could hope to defend themselves from these attacks. The Hebrides island chain off the western coast of Scotland, from which Sweno led the attack that Macbeth repulses at the beginning of the play, often served as bases for the Vikings, who controlled the region. Over time, however, some of the invaders settled in Scotland, discovering that the land was fertile for farming. Through intermarriage and conversion to Christianity in the tenth century, these settlers assimilated completely into the Scottish culture.

Witchcraft and the supernatural

Like many European cultures of the period, medieval Scotland maintained a belief in witches, including their ability to make prophecies and to affect the outcome of certain events. Shakespeare's depiction of Macbeth's encounters with the witches drew on both eleventh-century Scottish belief in witches and Renaissance English belief in witches. For his specific images, the playwright could cull from a variety of sources, including Holinshed's *Chronicles*. In general, witchcraft was regarded as an evil practice, involving some kind of relationship with the devil, and was therefore considered a threat to social stability. Scottish authorities often took extreme measures against witchcraft, such as King Kenneth's proclamation that witches who called up spirits for supernatural aid should be burned to death.

Historical Events at the Time the Play Was Written

King James I

When Queen Elizabeth's rule ended in 1603, she was succeeded to the throne by King James I, the son of Mary, Queen of Scots. He had ruled Scotland as King James IV since 1581. Scholarly discussions of *Macbeth* have often assumed a significant correspondence between James I's ascension to the throne in 1603 and Shakespeare's composition of *Macbeth* sometime soon after; some critics further contend that the play was written to be played not in the Globe theater, but as a private performance before the king. The story contains many reflections of James' interests: the family tree of Scottish royalty, the issue of "just" kingship, the threat of regicide, and witchcraft. Shakespeare addresses his monarch's interest in ancestry by including a scene in which the witches conjure an image of King James's ascent to the throne through a family tree traced back to Banquo.

The Gowrie Conspiracy

On August 5, 1600, an assassination attempt on King James, then of Scotland, nearly succeeded. The Earl of Gowrie and his eldest brother, Alexander Ruthven, deceived the King into meeting alone with a man supposedly charged with theft, but actually armed to kill the monarch who was, at that moment, without the protection of his retinue. The attempt on the king's life captured the public's attention—a deluge of pamphlets about the affair appeared, including one penned by the king himself. Sermons presented throughout England and Scotland focused on the blasphemy of the attempted murder. At this time, while murder itself was considered a crime and

a sin, regicide—specifically, the murder of a king—was an even greater crime and sin. A murderer who assaulted a king took not only a human life, but also, according to popular belief, a ruler whose monarchy was determined by God.

The Gunpowder Plot

On November 5, 1605, another attempt at regicide came to light: the Gunpowder Plot, motivated by the religious strife between Protestants and Catholics in general and by James' severe measures against Roman Catholics in particular. The plotters, a group of Catholics opposed to the Protestant monarchy, formulated a plan to kill King James, the royal family, and dozens of government officials. On the night before a ceremony to be held in the Parliament House and to be attended by the majority of the English government, including the royal family, an inspection of the cellar found Guy Fawkes, one of the conspirators, waiting in the basement with a match and large quantities of gunpowder. The traitors were tried in court, convicted of treason, and executed on January 30, 1606. One of the conspirators, Robert Catesby, was a young nobleman from a distinguished family. His role as a conspirator in the Gunpowder Plot came as a shock to King James, who regarded Catesby as one of his dearest subjects. Some scholars have speculated that Catesby was the model for Macbeth.

The trial of Father Henry Garnet, the great equivocator

During this period of religious persecution, Jesuits developed the practice of equivocation in order to facilitate giving untruthful responses while under interrogation about their religious actions. A person being interrogated would speak words with equivocal or unclear meanings so as to avoid self-incrimination. This practice became crucial for staunch Catholics in Protestant England, where one's Catholic faith could have dire consequences; under the Protestant King James, being Catholic was considered a crime.

Equivocation came to be regarded as a punishable form of treason in England. The trial of Father Henry Garnet, who was on trial for his role in the Gunpowder Plot, stands out as the climax of the Protestant attack on equivocators. At the trial, which took place in March 1606, Garnet was found guilty in fifteen minutes and sentenced to death. Shakespeare undoubtedly followed the event, as did the rest of London, and although *Macbeth* was almost completed at the time of the trial, he could still incorporate the subject of equivocation into his text. In the scene following Duncan's death, a porter appears who remarks, "Faith, here's an equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale; who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven" (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 2.3.8-11). Every member of the play's original audience would have understood this episode as a mockery of Catholics and the practice of equivocation.

King James on Witchcraft

One of King James' greatest passions was the study of witchcraft. In 1597 he wrote *Daemonologie*, an influential text in which he contended that witchcraft was a reality and that its practitioners must be punished. King James also attended trials and examinations regarding witchcraft, including the examination of Dr. Fian, a Scottish schoolmaster who was an alleged witch. The charges levelled against Fian included practicing wicked acts with other witches, possessing an attendant spirit, and making curses against the king. Most significantly, Fian's spirit was reputed to have caused several marine disasters, including an attempt against the ship of King James himself.

- [Song: "The Silver Swan"](#)
- [James I](#)

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