

THE MURDER OF KING DUFFE

*Shakespeare took many details of Duncan's death from an actual murder recorded in Holinshed's **Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Ireland** (1587). This excerpt describes the death of King Duffe (968–972), who was Lady Macbeth's great-grandfather.*

[No one knew why King Duffe kept losing weight until Donwald's soldiers found witches melting a wax image of the king over a fire. When the witches were executed, the king was immediately restored to health. He then led an army against rebels in the north of Scotland. He hanged many of the rebels, including some relatives of Donwald, the captain of Fores castle. Donwald had been loyal to Duffe; in fact, his soldiers had discovered the witches' plot against the king.]

Donwald...made earnest suite to the king to have begged [his relatives'] pardon; but having a plaine denial, he conceived such an inward malice towards the king (though he shewed it not outwardlie at the first), that the same continued still boiling in his stomach, and ceased not, till through setting on¹ of his wife, and in revenge of such unthankfulnesse, hee found meanes to murder the king within the forsaid castell of Fores where he used to sojourne. For the king being in that countrie, was accustomed to lie most commonlie within the same castell, having a speciall trust in Donwald, as a man whom he never suspected.

...his wife perceiving [Donwald's grief at the death of his kinsmen]...bare no

lesse malice in her heart towards the king, [and] counselled him to make him away and shewed him the meanes whereby he might soonest accomplish it.

Donwald thus being the more kindled in wrath by the words of his wife, determined to follow her advice in the execution of so heinous an act....

Then Donwald, though he abhorred² the act greatlie in his heart, yet through instigation of his wife, hee called foure of his servants unto him (whom he had made privie to his wicked intent before, and framed to his purpose with large gifts) and now declaring unto them, after what sort they should worke the feat, they gladlie obeyed his instructions, & speedilie going about the murther, they enter the chamber (in which the king laie) a little before cocks crow, where they secretlie cut his throte as he lay sleeping, without any [sound] at all: and immediatlie by a posterne gate they carried forth the dead bodie into the fields, and throwing it upon an horse there provided readie for that purpose, they convey it unto a place, about two miles distant from the castell, where they [altered the course of a small river, buried the king in the river channel, and restored the river to its

continued

¹ *setting on*: encouragement

² *abhorred*: felt distaste or loathing

The Murder of King Duffe *continued*

course]. This they did...for that the bodie should not be found, & by bleeding (when Donwald should be present) declare him to be guiltie of the murther. For such an opinion men have, that the dead corpse of any man being slaine, will bleed abundantlie if the murtherer be present.³

Donwald, about the time that the murther was in dooing, got him amongst them that kept the watch, and so continued in companie with them all the residue of the night. But in the morning when the noise was raised in the kings chamber...he with the watch ran thither...and finding cakes of blood in the bed, he forthwith slew the chamberleins as guiltie of that heinous murther, an then like a mad man running to and fro, he ransacked every corner within the castell.

...For the space of six months together, after this heinous murther thus committed, there appeered no sunne by day, nor moone by night in any part of the realme, but still was the skie covered with

continuall clouds, and sometimes such outrageous winds arose, with lightnings and tempests, that the people were in great feare of present⁴ destruction.

Monstrous sights also that were seen within the Scottish kingdome that yeere⁵ were these, horses in Louthian, being of singular beautie and swiftnesse, did eate their owne flesh, and would in no wise taste any other meate. In Angus there was a gentlewoman brought forth a child without eyes, nose, hand, or foot. There was a sparhawke also strangled by an owle.⁶

³ Shakespeare attributes this same fear to Macbeth (3.4.152–157).

⁴ *present*: immediate

⁵ *that yeere*: King Duffe was murdered in 972.

⁶ See *Macbeth* 2.4.8–24. In *The Royal Play of Macbeth*, H. N. Paul suggests that these lines refer to Harpier, the familiar of the third witch. Paul believes that Shakespeare's repeated references to owls are intended "to keep the audience conscious of the presence of evil spirits who are working Macbeth's destruction."



Macbeth (Laurence Olivier) and his wife (Vivien Leigh) plot to kill the king in a 1950s production of the "Scottish play."