

The historical inaccuracies of Shakespeare's Macbeth

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The Tragedy of Macbeth will forever be recognized as one of William Shakespeare's greatest plays. Like many of his historical plays, Shakespeare used the Holinshed's Chronicles, as a source for the plot of Macbeth.

The play centers a regicide and the aftermath by the accounts of King Macbeth of Scotland, Macduff, and Duncan I of Scotland. However, Shakespeare's Macbeth bears little resemblance to the real events of Scottish history. Written sometime between 1603 and 1607, William Shakespeare wrote the play specifically for King James I, who was the new reigning king during that time and a huge supporter of theater. King James played a huge part in the changing of Macbeth. During that time, it was believed that the king was a direct descendant of Banquo. Records, from the Holinshed's Chronicles, shows Banquo as accomplice to Macbeth in the murder of the king, and insures that Macbeth takes the throne, instead of the contrast of Macbeth, who resisted evil, and was murdered out of fear and lust for power (The Holinshed Project Texts).

Because it was thought that King James I was descended from Macbeth, it is most likely that Shakespeare changed Banquo's character drastically to avoid putting the king's ancestor as a murderer. The play Macbeth begins with three witches who have been waiting for Macbeth and Banquo. Although Macbeth was never visited by the Weird Sisters, it was recorded in the Holinshed's Chronicles that he was visited by the three Norns of Norse mythology (comparable to the Fates in classical mythology), female beings who rule the destiny of gods and men (BBC). It is said that Malcolm made the tale of the Norns and Macbeth up in order to blanken the previous king's

name. Further on in the play, Macbeth kills King Duncan in his house, loses sleep over it.

“ Still it cried ‘ Sleep no more!’ to all the house: / ‘ Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor / Shall sleep no more: Macbeth shall sleep no more” (2. 2. 40-42). This greatly differs from the actual events, in which Macbeth kills Duncan in battle—a very honorable way to die at that time. And murder was the common way people came to power and because of this, it is unlikely that Macbeth lost any sleep over it.

Furthermore, Duncan was actually a reckless, young man, who was greatly disliked by his people, and not the kind, old king as Shakespeare portrays him as. After the death of their father, Duncan’s two sons: Malcolm and Donald (Donaldbain in the play), who were children at the time, fled Scotland for safety; Malcolm stayed in England and Donald was sent to the Isles. Malcolm, who was about nine at the time of the regicide, spent most of Macbeth’s ruling in the Kingdom of England at the court of Edward the Confessor. His family attempted to overthrow Macbeth about five years into his reign, however this proved unsuccessful and Malcolm and Donald’s grandfather, Crinan of Dunkeld, was killed in the attempt. Shakespeare portrays Macbeth as a power-hungry anti-hero, who commits regicide and leads Scotland through terror and fear until his murder.

This is hugely inaccurate as Macbeth was actually very well-liked by his people (BBC). Although it is excepted that some people did not like Macbeth coming to power, his reign lasting seventeen years, which is above average, as most kings didn’t even have ten. During his ruling, Macbeth gave to the

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poor, impose law and order, and encouraged Christianity. The Duan Albanach, which survives in a form dating to the reign of Malcolm III, calls him "Mac Bethad the renowned," whereas The Prophecy of Berchan, a verse history which purports to be a prophecy, describes him as "the generous king of Fortriu" (BBC). Throughout Macbeth, Lady Macbeth is seen as a Lady who does much to encourage her husband into regicide, but the actual story of Lady Macbeth- or Gruoch of Scotland, as she is known in history- is much unknown. It is likely that there was a very strong relationship between Macbeth and Gruoch, as when Macbeth claimed the throne after the murder of Duncan, he claimed it both his and his wife's name.

This was unheard of and Gruoch of Scotland is the first queen ever recorded in Scottish history. Shakespeare also leaves out the fact that Gruoch was previously married, and had a child, although he does imply this in Act I: "I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me: / I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have plucked my nipple from his bone gums, / And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you / Have done to this" (1. 7. 44-49). Probably the biggest change Shakespeare made in Macbeth was his death.

In the play it is Macduff who murders Macbeth. This is actually not true, as it is actually Duncan's son, Malcolm Canmore (later Malcolm III), who kills Macbeth with the help of the English army, but sadly for Malcolm, his attempt for the crown was ruined once again, when the king's followers placed Macbeth's stepson on the throne (The Holinshed Project Texts). It wasn't until after Malcolm assassinated Macbeth's stepson, Lulach, who was only

king for a few months, that he was able to seize the throne and rule for thirty-five years. The changes that William Shakespeare made in The Tragedy of Macbeth, were many and dramatic. Even though Shakespeare used the Holinshed's Chronicles as a source for Macbeth, he still managed to change the written history for his play. Although the story of Macbeth and the changes Shakespeare made for his play are dramatic different in many ways, and have few similarities, both stories have made a huge impact on history, and both stories will be remembered in the years to come.