

Shakespeare's Sources for *Macbeth*

Shakespeare's chief source for [Macbeth](#) was Holinshed's *Chronicles (Macbeth)*, who based his account of Scotland's history, and Macbeth's in particular, on the *Scotorum Historiae*, written in 1527 by Hector Boece. Other minor sources contributed to Shakespeare's dramatic version of history, including Reginald Scot's *Discovery of Witchcraft*, and *Daemonologie*, written in 1599 by [King James I](#). Macbeth's words on dogs and men in Act 3, scene 1, (91-100), likely came from *Colloquia*, the memoirs of Erasmus (edition circa 1500). The plays of Seneca seem to have had great influence on Shakespeare, and, although no direct similarities to the work of [Seneca](#) can be seen in *Macbeth*, the overall atmosphere of the play and the depiction of [Lady Macbeth](#) can be attributed to the Latin author.

An examination of *Macbeth* and Shakespeare's sources leads us to formulate several conclusions concerning the motives behind the dramatist's alterations. It can be argued that the changes serve three main purposes: the dramatic purpose of producing a more exciting story than is found in the sources; the thematic purpose of creating a more complex characterization of Macbeth; and the political purpose of catering to the beliefs of the reigning monarch, King James the First. And, in the grander scheme, Shakespeare's alterations function to convey the sentiment echoed in many of his works – that there is a divine right of kings, and that to usurp the throne is a nefarious crime against all of humanity.

In Holinshed's *Chronicles*, Macbeth is introduced as a valiant gentleman, and, as in Shakespeare's play, Macbeth is sent by King Duncan to crush the rebellion led by Mackdonwald. However, to ensure Macbeth is viewed early in the play as extraordinarily courageous, Shakespeare changes Macbeth's role in the demise of Mackdonwald as presented in the *Chronicles*:

... [Mackdonwald] slue his wife and children, and lastlie himself, least if he had yeelded simplie, he should have beene executed in most cruell wise for an example to other. Macbeth entering into the castell by the gates, found the carcasse of Mackdonwald lieng dead there amongst the residue of the slaine bodies, which when he beheld, remitting no peece of his cruell nature with that pitiful sight, he caused the head to be cut off, and set upon a poles end, and so sent it as a present to the king.

Contrasting with the above passage, in the drama Macbeth has not simply stumbled upon the body of the rebel, he has instead heroically killed Mackdonwald in battle:

Captain: ... For brave Macbeth – well he
deserves that name – Disdaining Fortune, with his
brandish'd steel,
Which smok'd with bloody execution,
Like Valor's minion carv'd out his passage
Till he faced the slave;
Which nev'r shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th' chops,
And fix'd his head upon our battlements (I.i.15-23).

In addition to the dramatic effect of making the report from the Captain more exciting, enhancing the bravery of Macbeth by altering his part in the defeat of Mackdonwald aids Shakespeare's construction of Macbeth as a tragic hero. Our first impression of Macbeth must be one of grandeur; he must command our attention at once for what occurs in the rest of the play to be significant. As a brave warrior and leader, Macbeth is capable of taking others' burdens upon himself. Our awareness of the strength and assuredness Macbeth possesses early in the drama is important when we later witness his downfall and mental decay to the point where he is not capable of handling even his own burdens.

To assist in his more complex interpretation of Macbeth, Shakespeare had to move outside of Holinshed's account which gives no real analysis of Macbeth's character or motivation. Shakespeare turned to George Buchanan's *Rerum Scoticarum Historia*, and to other previous passages in Holinshed's own work. Buchanan relays the following:

Macbeth was a man of penetrating genius, a high spirit, unbounded ambition, and, if he had possessed moderation, was worthy of any command however great; but in punishing crimes he exercised a severity, which, exceeding the bounds of the laws, appeared apt to degenerate into cruelty.

Shakespeare's Macbeth is indeed an intelligent man, ambitious and spirited. However, Shakespeare deviates from Buchanan's depiction of Macbeth as a cruel, barbarous man, a notion also put forth by Holinshed. Despite the murders Macbeth will commit, Shakespeare presents him as a gentle, thoughtful man who can love wholeheartedly, as we see in his interactions with his wife. Lady Macbeth herself illustrates that Macbeth's nature is "... too full o' th' milk of human kindness/To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,/Art not without ambition, but without/The illness should attend it." (1.5.15-19)

The probable source for Macbeth's feelings of guilt after he has murdered King Duncan comes mere pages before Holinshed's report of Duncan and Macbeth. Here Holinshed relates

the story of King Kenneth, tormented by a guilty conscience after he has butchered his nephew:

[A voice heard by the King] 'Think not Kenneth that the wicked slaughter of Malcolme Duffe by thee contrived, is kept secret from the knowledge of the eternall God: thou art he that didst conspire the innocents death ... It shall therefore come to pass, that both thou thy self, and thy issue, through the just vengeance of almightie God, shall suffer woorthie punishment' ... The King with this voice being stricken into great dred and terror, passed the night without any sleep coming in his eyes. (Holinshed, 247)

Also apparent in Shakespeare's text are elements of Buchanan's dramatization of the voice King Kenneth hears:

At last, whether in truth an audible voice from heaven addressed him, as is reported, or whether it were the suggestion of his own guilty mind, as often happens to the wicked, in the silent watches of the night... (Buchanan, 310)

Clearly, the two aforementioned depictions of Kenneth's experience are recognizable in Shakespeare's Macbeth who is also plagued by a guilty conscience:

Macbeth: Methought, I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more!

Macbeth doth murther Sleep,' --the innocent Sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care ...

Still it cried 'Sleep no more!' to all the
House;

'Glamis hath murther'd sleep, and therefore Cawdor

Shall sleep no more: Macbeth shall sleep no more!'(II.II.32-41).

The dramatic purposes served by Shakespeare's unique portrait of a compassionate, tender Macbeth, and his adaptation of Kenneth's eerie story are obvious – who would care to sit through the play if Macbeth were the static character found in Holinshed? Alien voices make for spine-tingling drama, capturing the attention of even the most apathetic audience. But the changes also enhance the thematic content of the play, blurring the line between the two extremes of good and evil within Macbeth himself. His commiseration in the play, and his intense feelings of guilt before and after the regicide clash with his "passion or infatuation beyond the reach of reason" that propels him to commit the murder. By representing Macbeth's nature in this way, Shakespeare "rescues Macbeth from the category of melodramatic villain, the kind of character we can dismiss with a snap moral judgment, and elevates him to that of tragic hero toward whom we must exercise a most careful moral and human discrimination if we are to do him even partial justice" (Calderwood, 52).

The attention Shakespeare pays to Macbeth's conscience would have been of particular interest to King James. In his book the *Basilicon Doron*, written to teach his son, Henry, the ways of morality and kingly duties, James discusses the human conscience at great length, beginning with the statement: "Conscience ... it is nothing els but the light of knowledge that God hath planted in man; which choppeth him with a feeling that hee hath done wrong when ever he committeth any sinne ..." (*Basilicon Doron*, 17). Certainly Shakespeare was well-acquainted with this short but popular didactic treatise, and, keeping in mind that Macbeth was specifically written as entertainment for the royal court, Shakespeare's inclusion of Macbeth's guilty conscience was a way in which he could both intrigue and compliment King James.

Notable changes were made by Shakespeare in his depiction of Holinshed's three weird sisters, and it is apparent that the alterations were implemented partially to instill trepidation in the audience. Holinshed's sisters are "creatures of the elderwood ... nymphs or fairies" (*Chronicles* 268). Nymphs are generally regarded as goddesses of the mountains, forests, or waters, and they possess a great deal of youthful beauty. And similarly, fairies are defined as enchantresses, commonly taking a small and dainty human form. Holinshed's illustration of the creatures Macbeth chances upon is far removed from the portrayal Shakespeare gives us through Banquo:

What are these,
So wither'd and so wild in their attire,
That look not like th' inhabitants o' th' earth,
And yet are on't? Live you? or are you aught
That man may question? . . .
By each one her choppy finger laying
Upon her skinny lips. You should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so (I.III.39-46).

Shakespeare transforms the weird sisters into ugly, androgynous hags, and they distinctly take on a more sinister role than was assigned to them in Holinshed's *Chronicles*. Shakespeare's sisters are far more theatrically captivating than the nymphs found in Holinshed's text, and as a guide, Shakespeare may have consulted Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*. The *Discoverie* contains a brilliant description of witches, and it is possible Shakespeare used it as a basis for purely dramatic reasons:

One sort of such said to bee witches, are women which be commonly old, lame ... poor, sullen, superstitious ... They are leane and deformed, shewing melancholie in their faces, to the horror of all that see them (*Discoverie*, Chapter 3).

Shakespeare's hags, fascinating and frightening, appeal to our interest in the demonic supernatural. Most people do not believe in fairies, but many acknowledge the presence of evil in our world. A known believer in witchcraft during the time Shakespeare was writing *Macbeth* was King James himself. King James was so enthralled with contemporary necromancy that he wrote a book on the subject entitled *Daemonologie*.

As with the dramatist's incorporation of the effects of the human conscience in *Macbeth*, it is probable that Shakespeare took into account his monarch's position regarding witches when he altered the portrait of the weird sisters in Holinshed's work, thus capitalizing on the opportunity to subtly acknowledge and please King James. In *Daemonologie* King James writes:

For where the Magicians, as allured by curiositie, in the most parte of their practices, seekes principallie the satisfying of the same, and to winne to themselves a popular honoure and estimation: These witches on the other patre, being intised either for the desire of revenge, or of worldly riches, their whole practices are either to hurte men and their gudes, or what they possesse... (*Daemonologie*, Second Book, Chapter III)

Compare this to the actions of Shakespeare's weird sisters in Act I, scene iii:

1 Witch: Where has thou been, sister?

2 Witch: Killing swine.

3 Witch: Sister, Where thou?

1 Witch: A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap,
And mounch'd, and mounch'd, and mounch'd: 'Give me,'
quoth I:

'Aroint thee, witch!' the rump-fed ronyon cries.

[So they seek revenge]

1 Witch: And the very ports they blow,
And all the quarters that they know
I' th' shipman's card.

I'll drain him dry as hay...(I.iii.1-29)

King James also states that witches can "rayse stromes and tempestes in the aire, either upon land or sea, though not universally; but in such a particular place and prescribed bunds as

God will permitte them so to trouble" (*Daemonologie* Book Three, Chapter V). This is visible in Shakespeare's play (Act I, scene iii), where the second witch can give the first witch *a wind*.

Shakespeare's reshaping of Holinshed's weird sisters also performs the thematic function of introducing a significant presence of evil with which Macbeth is confronted. The malignant hags are the primary reason for our ability to feel true sympathy for Macbeth despite his heinous crimes. "[Macbeth and his Lady] breathe in a region so vast that good and evil, viewed from very high, become almost indifferent and much less important than the sheer act of breathing" (Rosenberg, 24). The metamorphosis of Holinshed's nymphs into demonic agents lessens somewhat the tragic hero's culpability; "[Macbeth's] will to act diminishes, in favour of degrees of slavery to fate." (Ibid).

In *Macbeth*, the role and characterization of Banquo differs considerably from Holinshed's *Chronicles*. In both texts, Banquo initially is a noble soldier fighting along side Macbeth. However, Holinshed reports that Banquo becomes an accomplice in the murder of King Duncan:

At length therefore, communicating his purposed intent with his trustie friends, amongst whome Banquo was the chieftest, upon confidence of their promised aid, he slue the King ... (*Chronicles*, 269).

In contrast, Shakespeare presents Banquo as being noble and good throughout the play, unaware of the ominous plot concocted by Macbeth and his Lady. As with most of the changes implemented by Shakespeare from the original source, Banquo's portrayal serves all three purposes: dramatic, thematic, and political. It is theatrically more interesting to have Banquo seen as the antithesis of Macbeth -- a pure, moral character foil. And Shakespeare's alterations transform the murder of Banquo into a caustic and loathsome act; a tragic episode which heightens the emotional state of the audience. We care little when Holinshed narrates the slaying of Banquo *the accomplice*. In addition, the play is far more effective with the villainy limited to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth alone.

The good and honourable Banquo is also crucial to the thematic issues of evil and its influences upon mortal men. Shakespeare's Banquo is a voice of reason and wisdom that warns Macbeth:

That, trusted home,
Might yet enkindle you unto the crown,
Besides the Thane of Cawdor. But 'tis strange:
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles to betray's
In deepest consequence. (I.iii.123-129)

Banquo's ability to resist the forces of darkness "points up Macbeth's failure to resist, and stresses his tendency towards evil, the flaw that makes the tragedy possible" (Boyce, 48).

Another possible reason for the changes made by Shakespeare to Banquo is of a political nature. It was believed at the time *Macbeth* was written that King James was Banquo's direct descendant, and this presumption might have influenced Shakespeare's characterization of Banquo as an innocent victim rather than an assassin. What would Shakespeare have to lose by pleasing his king and portraying James' ancestor in a positive light? However, Shakespeare has masterfully and subtly crafted the character of Banquo to ensure that his is not totally exonerated. Shortly after the murder of Duncan, Banquo suspects Macbeth's involvement, saying "and I fear/Thou play'dst most foully for't ..." (III.i.2). Yet Banquo lets no one know of his suspicions. And Shakespeare makes it clear that Banquo is pondering what the witches have told him:

Yet it was said
It should not stand in thy posterity,
But that myself should be the root, and father
Of many kings. (III.i.5-8)

"The anxiety he had earlier about the instruments of darkness seems now to have disappeared" (Rosenberg, 391). It could be that Banquo is dreaming of the lineage promised too him by the hags, and it is only because of his own murder that the real Banquo has no time to show through. Maybe Banquo, given time, would be compelled to see Macbeth receive the same treatment that is administered to King Duncan. The fact that Shakespeare leaves a little room for speculation about the true motivation and thoughts of Banquo, and sees to it that Banquo does not vocalize his suspicions about Macbeth, enables Shakespeare to hold Banquo somewhat accountable -- if not for the direct murder of King Duncan, at least for his lack of gumption in seeking justice rendered to Macbeth. It is certainly possible that the reason Shakespeare leaves in our minds doubts about Banquo is that he felt so strongly about regicide that he could not completely exonerate a known accomplice even in a work of fiction.

A case for Shakespeare's feelings regarding kingship can also be made by examining the changes he makes to King Duncan and the events surrounding Duncan's death, which, in addition to working for dramatic and thematic effects, all serve to illustrate Duncan's virtues, and to emphasize the cataclysmic severity of killing the monarch. Shakespeare changes the King Duncan found in Holinshed's *Chronicles* into a respected and ideal leader. Macbeth recognizes Duncan's perfection in the following passage:

Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angles, trumpet-tongu'd against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And Pity...shall blow the horrid deed in every eye... (I.vii.16-21)

Furthermore, Shakespeare has created an old King Duncan, with Lady Macbeth remarking, "I laid their daggers ready ... Had he not resembled my father as he slept I had done't" (I.vii.12-14). As James Calderwood suggests in his book *If it Were Done*: "[Holinshed's historical King Duncan] was simply one of a series of eleventh-century Scottish kings who were slain by their successors. But as Shakespeare has dramatized it, Duncan is more than merely a tribal chieftain with a crown up for grabs; he is a secular divinity of sorts, different not merely in "degree" but almost in kind from other men" (Calderwood, 82). Shakespeare's Duncan is given near mythological qualities, comparable to the Norse god Freyr who cared for and harvested the fruits of the earth:

Duncan: Welcome hither:
I have begun to plant thee, and will labour
To make thee full of growing. Noble Banquo,
That hast no less deserved...

Banquo: There if I grow,
The harvest is your own. (I.iv.29-34)

Shakespeare has not only changed the attributes of Holinshed's King Duncan, he has also altered the events surrounding Duncan's murder. In the *Chronicles*, the details of the regicide are brief and lackluster: "upon confidence of [his friend's] promised aid, he slue the king at Enverns, or (as some say) at Botgosuane, in the sixt yeare of his reigne" (*Chronicles*, 269). So Shakespeare ventures outside Holinshed's report of Duncan and Macbeth to another passage within the *Chronicles*, namely, Holinshed's narration of King Duffe and his murderer, Donwald. This is illustrated in two excerpts from Holinshed's *Duffe*:

At the last, comming foorth, he called such afore him as had faithfullie served him in pursute and apprehension of the rebels, and giving them heartie thanks, he bestowed sundrie

honourable gifts amongst them, of the which number Donwald was one, as he that had beene ever accounted a most faithful servant to the King. (*Chronicles*, 235)

Compare this to Macbeth's words in Shakespeare's text:

We will proceed no further in this business'
He hath honour'd me of late, and I have bought
Golden opinions from all sorts of people...(I.vii.31-34)
The second excerpt from Holinshed's King Duffe is as follows:

At length, having talked with them a long time, he got him [Duffe] into his privy chamber, onelie with two of his chamberlains, who having brought him to bed, came foorth again, and then fell to banketting with Donwald and his wife, who had prepared diverse delicate dishes ... wherat they sate up so long, till they had charged their stomachs with such full gorges, that their heads were no sooner got to the pillow but asleep they were so fast that a man might have removed the chamber over them, sooner than to have awakened them out of their droonken sleep. (*Chronicles*, 235)

Again, notice the parallels to Shakespeare's text:

Lady Macbeth: When Duncan is asleep --
Whereto the rather shall his day's hard journey
Soundly invite him--his two chamberlains
Will I with wine and wassail so convince
That memory, the warder of the brain,
Shall be a fume, and the receipt of reason
A limbeck only. When in swinish sleep
Their drenched natures lie as in a death,
What cannot you and I perform upon
Th' unguarded Duncan? (I.vii.60-70)

After examining these alterations to the character of King Duncan, and the addition of the events that beset his death, one can claim that Shakespeare's game plan was multifaceted. The obvious goal of elaborating on Duncan and his murder is to treat the audience to an enthralling story. The statuesque and splendid king Shakespeare creates is far more captivating than Holinshed's Duncan. And would any theatre-goer not appreciate the concentrated dramatic action Shakespeare has inserted surrounding King Duncan's slaying?

Thematically, Duncan's goodness allows Macbeth's feelings of guilt to surface, and become momentous, thereby enhancing the complex characterization of Macbeth. Being a soldier, Macbeth has killed many a man in battle without feeling greatly perplexed. His feelings about killing a corrupt or incompetent king would probably not be much more upsetting to Macbeth -- he would see it as a just action. However, Shakespeare's portrayal of Duncan as a gentle,

compassionate, trusting, and magnificent monarch, presents a tangible reason why Macbeth has a tormented conscience. And subsequently, this conscience, which is the backbone of Macbeth's complexity, can be fully explored. Duncan's characterization enables us to believe Macbeth is racked with guilt.

Not only does Shakespeare's depiction of Duncan serve a dramatic and thematic purpose, but, as I mentioned earlier, one could argue that it also illuminates Shakespeare's attitude towards the killing of a rightful ruler. Duncan is seemingly infallible -- sacred. As Macduff exclaims, "Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope/The Lord's anointed temple, and stole thence/The life o' th' building!" (II.iii.70-73). We begin to get the sense that Duncan's murder has extraordinary significance. This feeling is intensified after the murder when anomalous things begin to occur:

Old Man: Threescore and ten I can remember well,
Within the volume of which time I have seen
Hours dreadful and things strange, but this sore
night
Hath trifled former knowings...
'Tis unnatural...A falcon, tow'ring in her pride of
place,
Was by a mousing owl hawk'd at and kill'd. (II.iv.1-10)

Ross: And Duncan's horses--a thing most strange
And certain--,
Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race,
Turn'd wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,
...as they would make war with mankind

Old Man: 'Tis said they eat each other. (II.iv.13-10)

It should be noted that, for Act II, scene iv, Shakespeare extracted three of the four omens associated with King Duffe's murder from the *Chronicles*, and applied them to the murder of Duncan. Holinshed writes: "Monsterous sights also that were seene within the Scottish kingdome that yeere were these: horses in Louthian, being of a singular beautie and awifnesse, did eate their own flesh, and would in no wise taste anie other meate ... There was a sparhawke also strangled by an owl. Neither was it anie lesse woonder that the sunne, as before is said, was continuallie covered with clouds for six monthe space" (237). As Henry Paul points out in his book *The Royal Play of Macbeth*: "[Shakespeare] improved Holinshed's portents (1) by assigning the horses to Duncan, thus dramatizing the events; and by converting the strange behaviour of the horses into a protest against the inhumanity of man ... (2) by transforming the hawking owl into an image of the witches malign power;

and (3) by confining to the murder day the darkness which the *Chronicle* ruinously diluted by protracting it for six months" (200).

A divinely appointed monarch has been assassinated, and it is a calamity of such epic proportion that even the workings of nature are disrupted. This is reminiscent of the events following the death of Christ:

And, behold, the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom; and the earth did quake, and the rocks rent; And the graves were opened; and many bodies of the Saints which slept arose... (Matthew: 27:51)

Presenting Duncan's murder in this way diminishes Macbeth's place in the grander scheme of the play. Like those who sought to crucify Christ, Macbeth and his Lady are relegated to mere player status -- they become, if only briefly, instruments whose crime against all of humanity has surpassed their collective motive of ambition; they have done a deed of apocalyptic consequence. Through them evil has been unleashed, and it has destroyed God's beloved.

The belief in the divine right of kings was voiced with equal vehemence by James. While Shakespeare arguably indirectly inserts his beliefs into his fiction, King James writes directly about his convictions in both the *Basilicon Doron* (1599), and *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (1598). The books of King James undoubtedly enhanced and reaffirmed Shakespeare's already developed ideas on kingship -- specifically, that the usurpation or regicide of a righteously titled ruler was wrong without exception.

Whether one agrees with the postulations regarding Shakespeare's authorial intentions, one would be hard pressed to refute the claim that Shakespeare has taken his semi-historical sources and made alterations that allow for a more exciting, thought-provoking and tragic story.