

Summary

The Three MacBeths of this paper are, first, the real King of Scotland from 1040 to 1057; second, the character from Holinshed's Chronicles, Shakespeare's source; and third, Shakespeare's character in his eponymous play. This

The Three MacBeths: study examines the

Fact and Fiction

interrelationships of fact and fiction in the three MacBeths of history, chronicle, and literature, as well as significant changes made by Shakespeare in the interests of a more dramatic and politically acceptable work.

Os Três MacBeths: Fato e Ficção

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Resumo

Os três Macbeths discutidos neste ensaio são, primeiro, o rei da Escócia entre 1040 e 1057; em segundo lugar, o personagem das Crônicas de Holinshed, fonte utilizada por Shakespeare; e, finalmente, o personagem da peça shakespeareana. Este estudo examina as interrelações entre fato e ficção nos três Macbeths – o da história, o da crônica e o da literatura. Examina, ainda, as alterações significativas efetuadas por Shakespeare a fim de criar um texto mais teatral e mais aceitável politicamente.

Imagine a nobleman of eleventh-century Scotland, an accomplished warrior and military leader, yet a man

of exceptional piety and devotion to God, who even made a pilgrimage to Rome. The man in question had the strongest claim to the throne of Scotland, stronger even than the young and irresponsible King Duncan. The bishops and magnates agreed to get rid of Duncan and asked the strongest claimant to the throne to lead an army to depose and kill the king, which was duly done. The new king's main accomplice in the overthrow of Duncan was a certain Banquo, but we must remember that this is an age in which the majority of kings and claimants are murdered, usually much more furtively than in the case of Duncan. His successor manages to establish peace and order, where many monarchs before him have failed. During his seventeen-year reign churches are built, many wise laws enacted, and much of the endemic civil strife is quelled. In the normal course of events, a rival claimant to the throne, Malcolm, son of Duncan, raises an army and succeeds in defeating and killing the king, who, as you are probably all aware by now, was MacBeth, but not the MacBeth of Shakespeare, nor even of Shakespeare's primary source, Holinshed. The man I have introduced to you is a stranger, the unknown MacBeth of modern historical research, king of Scotland from 1040 to 1057. This Macbeth of fact can tell us a great deal about the great MacBeth of fiction, without whom the real MacBeth would long ago have fallen into obscurity.

It is well-known that Shakespeare gleaned most of the plot for *MacBeth* from the *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, to which Holinshed put his name. The preface informs us that the main source for volume five, which deals with Scotland, was the Latin text of Hector

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Boethius translated into Scots (a dialect of English) by John Bellenden, Archdeacon of Murray, and thence into English by Holinshed, who takes credit for the period ending in 1571, after which the *Chronicles* were taken to 1587 by others. Apart from Boethius, Holinshed cites many other named and unnamed sources. Nevertheless, Holinshed is truly the author of the *Chronicles*, which are primarily a literary work, similar in this respect, to the histories of Herodotus, Thucydides and Tacitus and other historical writers, who made use of mythology, personal opinion, legends and a hotch potch of fact and fiction, to record the epic feats of men and nations.

For Holinshed, the truth was subjective and in accordance with his religion and other beliefs. What modern historian nowadays could get away with starting an historical work (as Holinshed does in Volume V of the *Chronicles*) by delivering an excoriating condemnation of intemperance and its evil consequences, of which the worst, he warns us, is sterility? He further admonishes the British people for their slothfulness in not exploiting the abundant resources with which God has blessed their nations. If this sounds like the protestant work ethic that is exactly what it is. Throughout the *Chronicles* protestants are referred to as "the people of the religion" and neither catholics, nor the enemies of England get a fair press. The subjective points of view in such a work are only to be expected in the century of Reformation in which, depending what country you lived in, there was a right and a wrong way of looking at religion, politics and personal morality. Apart from this, historians had to rely on biased and incomplete sources, and objective empirical methods of research were largely unknown.

However, none of this was terribly important to Shakespeare, who only wanted to find a plot for a play in which the action would take place in Scotland and would in some way involve the ancestors of the reigning king, Shakespeare's patron James VI of Scotland and I of England, who was the first Scottish king to rule over both England and Scotland. James' catholic mother, Mary, had been put to death by his immediate predecessor on the English throne, Elizabeth Tudor, who left no direct heirs. James, as protestant and an heir to the throne, was invited to England as king to establish peace and to secure the dominion of Protestantism, which had already once been challenged and briefly overthrown, by the catholic daughter of Henry VIII, Queen Mary Tudor. James, therefore, needed to do everything he could to assure his power and the succession of his line, which was directly threatened more than once. When king of Scotland, before also becoming king of England in 1603, James' life had been threatened by the Earl of Gowrie in 1600. In 1605 James and the entire parliament narrowly escaped assassination from the conspirators in the Gunpowder Plot, who almost managed to blow up the Houses of Parliament.

Shakespeare was greatly indebted to King James. His predecessor, Elizabeth, had outlawed professional actors, unless they obtained the official patronage and protection of a nobleman. James further restricted this by permitting professional actors, only under his own personal patronage. Shakespeare and his actors were chosen, and James was generous to them, increasing the remuneration for each court performance from ten to twenty pounds, more than doubling the number of court performances, and by granting the actors permanent status as grooms of the chamber. It was therefore very much in Shakespeare's interest, as official court playwright, to

adapt his work to the needs and tastes of his patron, and this is particularly clear in *MacBeth*.

Banquo appears as an heroic character without blemish, although Holinshed states that Banquo was MacBeth's chief confederate in the murder of Duncan (269). Banquo was claimed by James VI and I as an ancestor of the Stuart family, and this is corroborated by the witches' prophecy in Holinshed (268), cited in act I of *MacBeth*, that Banquo would not be king, but that his heirs would:

govern the Scottish kingdome by long order of continuall descent (268)

The procession of eight kings in Act IV, Sc. I, the last of them holding a mirror to show infinite succession, and followed by the ghost of Banquo, is introduced by Shakespeare, as an original invention, which serves as propaganda, to affirm the unbroken line of kings of the family of James Stuart through the centuries, although the claim does not bear up to close historical scrutiny. Even in the *Chronicles* Holinshed informs us that Fleance, the son of Banquo, escaped to Wales after the murder of his father. There Fleance was put to death by the Welsh king, for getting his daughter with child without marrying her. This effectively makes the entire line of Banquo and James Stuart illegitimate. It is not surprising to see that, although Shakespeare follows Holinshed closely elsewhere, this entire episode is omitted.

Shakespeare was not concerned with historical truth, which was not as important to his contemporaries as it is to us, but with adapting history to suit his artistic and political purposes. One case in which this is particularly true, is in the treatment of Duncan. We all know the saintly, old king of Shakespeare's creation, who was perhaps modelled on an English eleventh-century king, Edward the Confessor. Holinshed does not state

whether Duncan was old or young, but he does call him a “dull, coward and slouthfull person” and an ineffectual ruler (267) and has very little to say in his favour.

More recent historical scholarship reveals a Duncan diametrically opposed to that of Shakespeare: a young, impulsive king, in the habit of ordering disastrous raids on England, in which many of his finest warriors were slain, without any benefit to Scotland. As I have mentioned, the bishops and magnates of Scotland finally rebelled and sent MacBeth and Banquo with an army to depose Duncan. A battle was fought in the northeast, at Burghead, where Duncan was defeated and killed, either during, or shortly after the battle. This happened in 1040, so it is understandable that Holinshed, writing over five centuries later, should have recorded a rather diluted and unclear version of events. However, despite the primitive methods of research available to him, Holinshed did record that Duncan was a poor ruler and yet Shakespeare portrays him as a saintly, old man, a lamb to the slaughter, for dramatic reasons.

Even if Shakespeare had been aware of the historical facts as we know them, he would probably have ignored or altered them, as he did in many cases with the account given in the *Chronicles*. In the case of Duncan it is not hard to see why Shakespeare made this decision. MacBeth is depicted as a fallen hero, a man of extremes and so his bad deeds have to be truly evil. Therefore Duncan is defenceless, asleep, a friend and kinsman of MacBeth (on this last point, Shakespeare is accurate historically). The murder is plotted and premeditated, and innocent people are inculpated, so that the whole deed reeks of unhealthy ambition, treachery and sacrilege. The remorse felt by MacBeth and Lady

MacBeth and the entire emotional development of the plot can be traced to this murder, but imagine how different and how dull the play would be if the death of Duncan were portrayed exactly as it occurred in history!

The murder of Duncan is described very briefly in the *Chronicles* (269) and, as pointed out by both Kenneth Adger and R. A. Law, it is probable that Shakespeare borrowed episodes unrelated to the story of MacBeth, from elsewhere in the *Chronicles*, such as the murder of King Duffe, in which the murderer intoxicates the king's bodyguards, prior to the murder, or the episode in which the guilt of King Kenneth is described, after the murder of his nephew. While Shakespeare may have borrowed in this way, it seems equally possible for him to have invented these alterations to the historical narrative, as he did so freely elsewhere, notably in the legitimacy of MacBeth's claim to the throne.

Earlier I mentioned how Shakespeare used *MacBeth* as a vehicle to support the succession of James Stuart, but this also depends, in the play, upon diminishing or omitting the historically strong claim to the throne of Scotland which MacBeth had, which is carefully excised by Shakespeare. His contemporaries were used to succession remaining within one family and crowns being passed from father to son or daughter and even Holinshed seems to have been unaware of the system of succession which operated in Scotland in the eleventh century, which followed the Gaelic tradition of tanistry, by which the right to be king fell to the “most worthy” male relative of the reigning monarch. The abuse inherent in such a system can well be imagined, although it was designed to keep those who were too young, or infirm, or in some other way unsuitable, from the throne. This was

a purely practical measure, necessary in a brutal world in which kings had to be strong, cunning, ruthless and lucky, just to survive.

At the end of the tenth century certain kings had tried to establish hereditary succession, but it was not legally recognized in Scotland until well into the thirteenth century. Duncan was nominated by his grandfather (his father being dead) Malcolm II (1005-34), but the former only succeeded to the throne, because two other claimants were murdered shortly before his investiture, and the other, Lulach, was a child, reputed to be simple-minded. The system of tanists (as all the possible heirs were known) effectively established a succession of the fittest, that man being the one who could kill his rivals and avoid being killed himself. Between 943 and 1097 there were fourteen kings of Scotland, of whom ten were murdered. Of course many more tanists were also killed in that period. Compared to other kings MacBeth came to the throne in the least reprehensible of ways, in broad daylight, as it were, and with the full backing of the clergy and nobility. MacBeth was also the most obvious candidate to succeed Duncan, for not only was he the most accomplished military leader, but his claim was actually stronger than that of either Duncan, or his son Malcolm. The genealogy is complex, but suffice it to say that MacBeth was not merely a grandson of Malcolm II, as was Duncan, but was also related by blood and by marriage, to Malcolm II's immediate predecessor, Kenneth III (997-1005). MacBeth would have been unable to rule in peace for so long, had his claim not been recognized by the great majority of the other magnates and tanists. Here again, even if Shakespeare had been aware of these facts, they would not have been used in the plot, as they do not serve either the artistic or the

political purposes of the play of *MacBeth*.

These political purposes are further underscored by Henry N. Paul in his book, *The Royal Play of MacBeth*. He maintains convincingly, that the play was ordered expressly for a court performance to celebrate a visit of the king of Denmark. (James was married to a Danish princess.) This certainly would explain, as Paul asserts, why the Danes of Holinshed's *Chronicles*, vanquished by MacBeth and Banquo in Act I, have been diplomatically transformed by Shakespeare into Norwegians. The Danish king could familiarize himself a little with Scotland and with James through this play and could feel reassured that the protestant succession was secure in England and Scotland.

The play also gives evidence of James' great interest in the occult, which inspired him to write a book on demonology. Shakespeare knew his patron well, and when he read in the *Chronicles* about a Scottish king, ruled by witches and dependent upon their prophecies, and who was also such a fascinating mixture of great good and great evil, it is little wonder that he chose MacBeth as the subject of his Scottish play – a character which could satisfy Shakespeare's fascination with human psychology and at the same time incorporate not only an ancestor of James, but also one of his favorite interests: witches and the occult. Here again Shakespeare borrows what he wants from the *Chronicles* in the form of the witches' prophecies in Act I, Sc. III and again in Act IV, Ac. I. In the latter case though, Shakespeare has fun with the idea, introducing symbolic apparitions, including the procession of kings. Act I opens with the witches concocting a foul brew and the whole play is thereby given a brooding, evil atmosphere which is dramatically most effective, as well as being

appropriate to the subject and pleasing to James Stuart.

Quite aside from the symbolic power of Hecate and the witches and their dramatic effectiveness, we must bear in mind that they were real to most people in early seventeenth century Britain. Women were quite legally put to death for being witches. The weird sisters or faeries or spirits mentioned by Holinshed are worthy material for history, and the common explanation he gives for MacBeth's transformation from a good to an evil king is his association with witches and wizards, who were seen as a real source of evil (274). Although the witches are evil, it is a neat irony to notice that it is through these evil apparitions in Act IV, Sc. I, that James Stuart affirms the ancient, divinely appointed succession of his family as kings, by means of the procession of kings.

Of course those parts of the play which do not derive from the *Chronicles* and which are Shakespeare's pure invention, are arguably more important than the sources from which they ultimately derive. Lady MacBeth for example, possibly one of the greatest female dramatic roles ever created, is mentioned by Holinshed only in the briefest of terms in reference to the murder of Duncan, as the wife of MacBeth thus:

His wife lay sore upon him to attempt the thing, as she that was verie ambitious, burning in inquenchangeable desire, to bear the name of a queene. (269)

Certainly the germ of the entire character is there already, but it took the genius of Shakespeare to develop it to full fruition.

Holinshed may well be correct in his description of MacBeth's wife, whose real name was Gruoch. She was the daughter of Boite, a man murdered by Malcolm II, to assure the succession of his grandson Duncan.

Gruoch's first husband had been Gillacomgain, the virtually autonomous ruler of Moray, who was a cousin of Macbeth. MacBeth's father had also been ruler of Moray, and MacBeth is often called MacBeth of Moray in historical sources. Gruoch's son by her first marriage was Lulach, and she may well have been behind the ill-fated attempt to put him on the throne after the death of MacBeth. She certainly had a reputation as a tough and ambitious woman, so much so in fact, that she is one of the few women who stand out in the sources of early Scottish history.

Shakespeare has such a vivid idea of his characters, that it is tempting to believe them to have been historically, exactly as he portrayed them. In Act II the Porter is pure Shakespeare, comic relief, like the gravediggers in Hamlet, and yet the castle of MacBeth may well have had such a man with such feelings and a similar character. In this way Shakespeare brings history to life by transporting us into another place and another century, while at the same time making us keenly aware of the common bond of humanity which links us all to one another.

One of the great set pieces of *MacBeth* is also Shakespeare's invention: the banquet in Act III, Sc. IV. Of course it is quite probable that such a banquet could actually have taken place, but history is only one colour in the palette which Shakespeare uses to paint countless universal portraits of humanity.

In Act IV, Sc. III, Shakespeare chooses to ignore the evidence of Holinshed, that MacDuff was aware of the slaughter of his family (274-5), before he went to England. The audience has just witnessed the murder of MacDuff's wife, servants and children, and it is dramatically most effective for us to wonder how MacDuff will react when he hears the news. Historical veracity is quite

rightly sacrificed for dramatic effectiveness.

The relationship between history and Shakespeare's drama is complex, because it can be understood on many levels: Shakespeare's use of sources, alterations made to those sources, the accuracy or inaccuracy of those sources, the relationship between history as we see it, as Shakespeare saw it and as Holinshed saw it; but to get things into perspective, it is a testimony to Shakespeare that very few people would have any interest in MacBeth of Moray at all, were it not for the play, written in 1606. It is only a matter of interest to us that MacBeth was in fact slain near Lumphanan near Mar in the Moray country, far from Dunsinane or Birnam Wood, because we know the fictional MacBeth. It is the greatness therefore, of the fictional MacBeth which inspires in us a desire to become acquainted with the real MacBeth of history. Neither Shakespeare, nor Holinshed were aware of the truly historical MacBeth, and there is no way that they could have been, but it is curious to note that the truth about an eleventh-century king, who became a legend due to a seventeenth-century myth, long accepted by many as a real mirror to history, should have had to wait for nineteenth and twentieth-century historical research to come to the light

of day. We know who the different MacBeths are, but I do not think anyone would like to label one of them the "true MacBeth", since each one contains important truths, and it is only when seen together, side by side, that we can begin to see the whole truth about MacBeth.

Of the three MacBeths I have mentioned, even the true MacBeth of history is well-known today, if only to thousands of Scottish school-children. However we must guard ourselves from thinking that we know all that there is to know on the subject, because although all Scottish history books written this century have a better grasp of the truth, than did Holinshed in the 1570s, the life of MacBeth, which occurred nearly a thousand years ago now, is in a period of history for which, although there is evidence, it is scanty and has to be pieced together like a jigsaw puzzle. If another piece is discovered, then the sense we have made from the evidence we possess may become nonsense.

We may be tempted to think that this is not true of the MacBeth of Shakespeare, because he was created once forever. However, successive interpretations of *MacBeth* do reveal new aspects of the work, in a similar way that historical research constantly uncovers new areas of knowledge.

When put together, the historical, literary and dramatic elements of MacBeth are constantly evolving and changing, like images in a kaleidoscope.

The insights of History can enrich studies of Theatre and English, and I wish the converse were true, although I must admit I have read many scornful remarks about Shakespeare's MacBeth in books on Scottish history! Be that as it may, I do believe that a truly interdisciplinary approach within the academic field and an abandonment of the prejudices and superiorities felt between different departments in most universities are long overdue. This can be achieved equally successfully through the study of MacBeth, as by the study of any subject worthy of human attention.

My purpose in examining the different MacBeths of fact and fiction has not been to make any definite parallels, or to establish any fixed relationships between them, but rather to present them in such a way that each one of us may decide their significance, not only in historical, literary, or dramatic terms, but also in terms of the more personal impression that the three faces of this man, presented to us over a period of nearly one thousand years, has on each one of us. □

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