

MACBETH
BACKGROUND
RESEARCH QUESTIONS

**Students can research the terms,
historical relevance, myths,
and true facts behind
Shakespeare's Macbeth**

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Macbeth Background Research Questions

To answer these questions, you may use online resources and from the handouts that are included in this packet. Go beyond superficially answer the questions – demonstrate intellectual curiosity by educating yourself about the play! (Some of it is fascinating stuff!)

1. What are/were the Fates? The Norns? Who was/is Hecate?
2. What was the prevailing attitude toward witchcraft in England during Shakespeare's time? What superstitions/beliefs about witchcraft existed? What was a witch's "familiar"?
3. What is Scotland's connection to witches during this time frame?
4. What was Shakespeare's primary historical source for Macbeth? To what extent is Macbeth a "history play"? Why is it more often included as a tragedy?
5. For whom was the play Macbeth first performed? What influence(s) might that have had on the play's production?
6. How was King James connected to witchcraft?
7. What was a "Thane"?

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1. What are/were the Fates? The Norns? Who was/is Hecate?

-Fates were three women from mythology that were thought to influence a man's destiny. The Norns were the Fates in Norse Mythology. Hecate was the Goddess of the Supernatural.

2. What was the prevailing attitude toward witchcraft in England during Shakespeare's time? What superstitions/beliefs about witchcraft existed? What was/is a witch's "familiar"?

Witches were reviled and feared across the continent. Witch hunts were common during the 15th and 16th century. They believed that witches could curse a person, fly, create spells that would bewitch someone and influence the supernatural. A witch's "familiar" is an animal that does the witch's bidding.

3. What is Scotland's connection to witches during this time frame?

King James believed that he was an "expert" in witches and their history. King James was King of Scotland.

4. What was Shakespeare's primary historical source for Macbeth? To what extent is Macbeth a "history play"? Why is it more often included as a tragedy?

Historical source from Raphael Holinshed's Chronicles. However, Shakespeare changed the story so that Banquo, King James' legendary ancestor, was not a part of the murder conspiracy toward King Duncan.

Historical places and concepts, but not History in the correct sense. Considered a tragedy because it includes a Tragic Hero.

5. For whom was the play Macbeth first performed? What influence(s) might that have had on the play's production?

King James of Scotland and England. Shakespeare took great pains to increase the connection of Banquo to King James, even indicating that Fleance, Banquo's son is a

relative of King James. There are certain parts of the play where the actors are asked to provide a mirror or other prop to the King.

6. How was King James connected to witchcraft?

King James wrote a book on witchcraft called *Demonology*. He may have really believed that there was a secretive sect devoted to malicious evil, or he may have been just another cynical Politian trying to unite people against a common imagined enemy with different cultural practices.

7. What was a “Thane”?

A Thane was a Scottish nobleman who was close to the King and held land and power.