**The Historical Macbeth: Unraveling the Truths, Lies, and Misrepresentations**

In Shakespeare’s tragedy, Macbeth’s killing of the kindly King Duncan sets into motion a tumultuous and destructive pattern of treachery and bloodshed in Scotland. It is not until Macduff beheads the bloody “butcher” (V. viii. 82) that Malcolm ascends to his “rightful” role as king.

What about the real King Macbeth?

* He was very different!
* The historical Macbeth was born around 1005
* His father was Mormaer of Moray (a royal administrator above a thane)
	+ Note: the term “thane” did not exist until the 12th century and Glamis did not become a thanage until the middle of the 13th century.
	+ Shakespeare’s use of “Thane of Glamis” is anachronistic – befitting another time period
* Macbeth’s father died tragically when Macbeth was 15
	+ Macbeth should have been given his father’s title, but it was taken by his father’s murderer (another noble)
	+ Macbeth sought revenge for the murder of his father and took the title for himself
* Macbeth then married his father’s murderer’s widow and adopted her son
	+ He then had a logical claim for the High Kingship on his father’s side and through his new wife
* The rules of succession: tanistry
	+ We are used to the tradition of primogeniture – passing on inheritance and titles through the father’s lineage
	+ Scotland during the 11th century was quite different
		- Tanistry – “a system of life-tenure among the ancient Irish and Gaels, whereby succession to an estate or dignity was conferred by election upon the ‘eldest and worthiest’ among the surviving kinsmen of the deceased lord.”
		- A proposed tanist must be able to trace his ancestry to a common royal ancestor and the royal kin group must agree
		- In the play, King Duncan breaks the rules of tanistry by naming his son Prince of Cumberland
* Historical Macbeth killed King Duncan on the battlefield of Inverness, not at his home in cold blood
	+ King Duncan was a weak leader and too easy on criminals
		- Macdonwald grew tired of his poor leadership and led a group of rebels, including Macbeth and Banquo, to kill the king
		- According to Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, Macbeth and Banquo encountered three witches that told them of the now infamous prophecy that forms the beginning of Shakespeare’s play
			* Much of *Macbeth*’s plot was taken directly from Holinshed
	+ Macbeth was generally considered a fair and just king, but he changed after making a pilgrimage to Rome
* The other source material Shakespeare used for Macbeth comes more than 70 years before Macbeth’s reign
	+ King Duff (966) was assassinated by Donwald and aided by the guidance of his conniving wife
	+ Supposedly, King Duff was suffering from a fever when three witches were discovered on a heath roasting an image of Duff and chanting incantations
		- The “witches”, some of whom were relatives of Donwald, were executed
	+ Seeking revenge, Donwald welcomed King Duff to his home and ordered servants to cut his throat while he slept
		- The following morning, Donwald murdered the chamberlains, blaming them for the murder

Why would Shakespeare change history like this?

* James I
	+ James I had a deep and rich understanding of the history of his homeland (Scotland)
	+ The murder of King Duff parallels the murder of James I’s father, Lord Darnley
		- James had an extreme fear of suffering the same fate as his father
* The rest of the audience
	+ Other members of Shakespeare’s audience, however, knew very little Scottish history
	+ This allowed for some “creativity” with the historical accounts Shakespeare studied
* Interest levels
	+ Violence and superstition played well with Elizabethan/Jacobean audiences
	+ Scotland was of new interest to English audiences because of their new king
	+ James I preferred hunting to plays, so Shakespeare sought to make this one brief
	+ James I was infatuated with his Scottish lineage and was proud to trace his ancestry to the characters of Banquo and Fleance
* Current Events
	+ Gowrie Conspiracy – James I, prior to becoming King of England, believed that he was lured by Gowrie to his home because Gowrie wanted to murder him. In the ensuing brawl, Gowrie was killed.
		- Conspiracy theorists argue that James I made this up as an excuse to kill Gowrie
	+ Gunpowder Plot- failed assassination attempt against James I by a group of English Catholics in 1605
		- They planned to blow up the House of Lords during the State Opening of England’s Parliament
		- Many Catholics were disappointed that James I’s rule didn’t lead to more religious tolerance
		- The lead Jesuit of England knew of the plot, but learned about it through confession and could not reveal his knowledge
* Raphael Holinshead’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland, 2nd edition*
	+ This primary source, utilized by Shakespeare, has many inaccuracies
* Expense!
	+ Staging a battlefield scene would have increased the cost of production, so it was cheaper to model Duncan’s death after King Duff’s
	+ Think about how the play begins in media res and we are only told of the prior battle
* Characterization
	+ By supplanting King Duncan with King Duff, Shakespeare can delve into the decisions Macbeth makes and how far he falls