The Historical Inaccuracies of Shakespeare’s MacBeth

The Tragedy of MacBeth will forever be recognized as one of William Shakespeare’s greatest plays. The play centers around 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 (VI of Scotland and I of England), who became the new reigning king in 1603 and was a huge supporter of theater. During those days, it was believed that the king (in the line of Stuarts) was a direct descendant of Banquo. Records, from the Holinshed’s Chronicles, shows Banquo as accomplice to MacBeth, who insures that MacBeth takes the throne; instead of Shakespeare’s contrast to MacBeth, who resisted evil and was murdered out of fear and lust for power. 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. MacBeth was never visited by the Weird Sisters. It is said that Duncan’s son, Malcolm, made up the tale of the Norns of Norse mythology in order to blacken MacBeth’s name. (Norns are comparable to the Fates in classical mythology; female beings who rule the destiny of gods and men). Now, King [James](http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/history/james/james.html) took a special interest in the subject of witches. In 1597 he had published a book that he had written on the subject of witchcraft, his Daemonologie. In this work, James put the traditional arguments in favour of a belief in witchcraft. His lifelong interest in the subject is evidenced by the fact that he himself participated in a number of trials of alleged witches. Again, we see Shakespeare appealing to audience rather than sticking to the facts.

Further on in the play, MacBeth kills King Duncan while asleep in his house, and 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. Battle was a common way people came to power and because of this, it is unlikely that MacBeth lost any sleep over it.

Furthermore, the real Duncan was actually a reckless, young man, who was greatly disliked by his people, and not the kind, old king as Shakespeare portrays him.

Shakespeare portrays MacBeth as a power-hungry anti-hero, who commits regicide and leads Scotland through terror and fear until his death. This is hugely inaccurate as MacBeth was actually very well-liked by his people. Although it is accepted that some people did not like MacBeth coming to power, his reign lasted seventeen years, which is above average, as most kings didn’t even have ten. During his rule, MacBeth gave to the poor, imposed 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 Berchán, a verse history which purports to be a prophecy, describes him as "the generous king of Fortriu".

Throughout the play MacBeth, Lady MacBeth is seen as a person who does much to encourage her husband into regicide, but the actual story of Lady MacBeth-- or Gruoch of Scotland, as she is known is history-- is much less known. It is likely that there was a very strong relationship between MacBeth and Gruoch, as when MacBeth claimed the throne after the death of Duncan, he claimed it in both his and his wife’s name. This was unheard of, and Gruoch of Scotland may be the first such queen ever recorded in Scottish history.

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, Lulach, on the throne. It wasn’t until after Malcolm assassinated Lulach, who was only king for 7 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. It is widely accepted that Shakespeare used the historically inaccurate Holinshed's Chronicles as a source for MacBeth. He changed history to serve his play and to appease his audience.