
Murderous Villain?

Was Macbeth really the violent usurper that Shakespeare makes him out to be? All signs point to “NO” and there is a movement underway to try to clear Macbeth’s name.

Macleod, Angus. *Is this a murderous villain I see before me? No, it’s a cuddly, peace-loving king.* TIMES ONLINE. February 3, 2005. www.timesonline.co.uk

Double, double toil and trouble: Shakespeare’s portrayal of Macbeth as a blood-soaked assassin manipulated by a cunning wife has been branded a travesty by politicians who want to restore the king to his proper place in his nation’s history – and cash in on it.

Members of the Scottish Parliament want to rescue the 11th-century monarch from what they claim is the “bad press” of the play.

The MSPs have submitted a motion to the Scottish Parliament which, if agreed, will see 2005, the 1,000th anniversary of Macbeth’s birth, as the year in which he acquires a new halo and his image as the tragic, twisted villain of the Scottish play is dumped in favour of that of a cuddly, peace-loving monarch.

The motion calls for the Parliament to make arrangements to mark Macbeth’s birthday and regrets that he is “misportrayed in the inaccurate Shakespeare play when he was in fact a successful Scottish king”.

The 20 MSPs who have signed the motion are also calling for the establishment of a Macbeth heritage trail in the north-east of Scotland to boost both tourism in the area, which contains a Macbeth Well and a Macbeth Cairn.

Alex Johnstone, the Conservative MSP who is spearheading the Save Macbeth campaign, said yesterday: “Macbeth gets a bad press from his association with Shakespeare. He was very probably a good king and he should be given an amnesty.

“Of course Shakespeare used sources for his plays and of course he is allowed dramatic license. But the issue here is that everyone assumes it is Scottish history,” Mr. Johnstone said.

“Many people feel that Mel Gibson’s interpretation of William Wallace in the film *Braveheart* was far from accurate and this is precisely the same thing. It is about recapturing our true history rather than settling for the myths that surround it.”

He revealed that his interest in the issue was sparked after being contacted by Professor John Beatty of Brooklyn College, part of the City University of New York, who says that too many students who study the play do not realize that Macbeth was a real person and that Shakespeare “defamed” him. Professor Beatty said: “Naming 2005 the Year of Macbeth would help to correct the misconceptions of a long-reigning Scottish king (1040-1057) and the misunderstandings that led to his depiction as a usurper of the throne.”

Certainly, many historians agree with Mr. Johnstone and Professor Beatty that Shakespeare’s version bears little resemblance to the real Macbeth.

Duncan, who is murdered in the play by Macbeth, was not a venerable, elderly monarch but a young king who was killed in battle, although Macbeth may have played a role in his death.

Macbeth, King of Moray, was made King of Scotland in place of Duncan's son Malcolm, who was a child, and for 14 years he is thought to have ruled with relative benevolence, imposing law and order on a previously lawless country and encouraging Christianity.

So confident was Macbeth that he would not be replaced in his absence that he even traveled to Rome for a papal jubilee, as well as making more warlike forays over the border into England. In 1054, Macbeth was challenged by the Earl of Northumbria who wanted Malcolm returned to the throne. In 1057, Macbeth was killed at the Battle of Lumphanan in Aberdeenshire, but probably by Malcolm and not by Macduff. There was a Battle of Dunsinane, but that happened years earlier.

The play was written for James I (James VI of Scotland) and was first performed in 1606.

Response

What is your response to this article? Do you agree with Johnstone and Beatty that Macbeth's name should be cleared? Does learning about the "real" Macbeth change the way you read or view the play? Why or why not? To what extent should art be allowed to embellish history (such as in the case mentioned of *Braveheart*)? Whose responsibility is it to set the record straight or should the matter simply be left alone?