**Shakespeare and the Gunpowder Plot**

It was November, 1605, and high treason was on the mind of every English subject. A small group of angry Catholics, fed up with ongoing persecution at the hands of the Protestant monarchy, hatched an elaborate plot to blow King James I and his government to smithereens. As luck would have it, a warning letter surfaced at the last minute and James ordered a search of his palace. The most notorious conspirator, Guy Fawkes, was discovered in the cellar, match in hand, ready to ignite twenty barrels of gunpowder "all at one thunderclap."

Shakespeare obviously knew about this plot. These traitors of the realm had some deep connections to Shakespeare and his family: Shakespeare's father, John was known to be a secret Catholic and was friends with William Catesby, the father of the head conspirator, Robert Catesby. Moreover, the Mermaid Tavern in London, owned by one of Shakespeare’s closest friends, was a preferred meeting spot of the traitors as they schemed to obliterate the Protestants once and for all.

Shakespeare felt that he might be under suspicion; he knew some of the people involved, was known to drink where they drank, and his father was a closet Catholic who was close to the conspirators.

While the captured traitors suffered the ultimate punishment of being disembowelled and beheaded in front of the cheering masses, Shakespeare would likely have been only a few miles away, holed up in his estate in Stratford, piecing together tales about different Scottish kings from old history books. Change after change was made until the play became a perfect propaganda machine that seemed to clear Shakespeare of any suspicion.

James’ favourite part of Shakespeare’s new take on history would be the near mythological qualities given to the character created in his image – Macbeth’s victim, King Duncan. While the real Duncan was a war-loving brute, Shakespeare’s Duncan is a thoughtful, infallible, divinely-appointed ruler with “silver skin” and “golden blood.” Killing old Duncan is a calamity of such epic proportion that it sends the kingdom into total chaos and bloodshed.

A master of details, Shakespeare wove direct references to the Gunpowder plot right into *Macbeth.* To commemorate the discovery of the heinous scheme, King James had a medal created picturing a snake hiding amongst flowers. Unsurprisingly, we find a reference to the medal right in the play when Lady Macbeth tells her husband to [look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it.](http://www.shakespeare-online.com/plays/macbeth/macbethglossary/macbeth1_1/macbethglos_innocentflower.html)

**How is the gunpowder plot similar to Macbeth’s plot?**

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