***Macbeth*: Act 1** – Literary Theory Introduction and New Historicism

Literary theories/criticism: different perspectives/approaches to a piece of literature (set of glasses a reader puts on to “study” or think about a piece of literature)

Formalism: look at a piece of literature as a whole, as if it exists in isolation, ex. using TPCASTT, looking at how a piece of literature “makes meaning” within itself

Cultural Study: look at a piece of literature as it exists within a culture – as a reflection of its culture or a reaction to it

**A. Aristotle’s *Poetics*:** Aristotelian Tragedy – tragedy is meant to arouse emotions of fear and pity, to produce *catharsis*: cleansing; tragic hero was noble and had a “tragic flaw” (*hubris*) – weakness in character that leads to the hero’s downfall

- monolithic perspective: ONE theory, Macbeth’s flaw: ambition, R & J flaw: impetuous

- BUT – impossible to explain the complexity of Shakespeare’s plays under one, overriding theory because there’s more than just ONE way to read Shakespeare

**B. Reader Response Theories** offered the possibility of multiplicity in approaches

**Act One: New Historicism** – read the text with the historical background/context in mind

1. Macbeth reigned from 1040-57 as Scotland’s king; killed his predecessor, Duncan, but Duncan (according to *Holinshed’s Chronicles*) was not a gentle, old guy, but a violent, ruthless leader and his reign was brief and tumultuous; Macbeth went on religious pilgrimage; Macbeth’s son, Lulach (called Lulach the Idiot) was deposed by Malcolm, Duncan’s son

-- Why did Shakespeare change the history?

2. Shakespeare probably “rewrote” this history because Duncan was related to James I of England (James VI was King of Scotland – took Engl. throne in 1603); Shakespeare’s Theatre Company was called The Kings Men, wrote for James; *Macbeth* written in 1605-06 to “honour” Scotland

3. James well-educated, intellectual; wrote *Daemonologie* (1597) text about witchcraft and witch hunting, (hence the “curse” play because the witches’ curses are accurate – The Scottish Play); instigated *King James Version* of Bible, believed in Divine Right of Kings

4. Gunpowder Plot (Nov. 5, 1605) – Guy Fawkes…. Jesuit (RC fundamentalist) wanted to destroy the Protestant Government; hatched a plan to blow up parliament when King, his sons and all Prot. members of Parliament at the opening of Parliament; plan and kegs of gunpowder were “discovered”; Jesuits were put on trial – linked to witches, equivocation (ambiguity), and “blowing things up” – echoed in *Macbeth*