

***William Shakespeare's  
Macbeth:  
The Moral Agency of  
Humankind***



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**READING SHAKESPEARE WITH FILM**  
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10:00 a.m. to 11:15 a.m. (CDT)  
Russ Heldman – heldman.russ@gmail.com  
(*The Complete Pelican Shakespeare, Eds. 2002; 1997*)

October 10, 2023 **Macbeth** (“The Moral Agency of Humankind”) (1605-1606)

Film: Trevor Nunn – Ian McKellen/Judi Dench (1978)

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Other Films: Rupert Goold – Patrick Stewart / Kate Fleetwood (2010)

Rob Ashford – Tim Van Someren / Kenneth Branagh / Alex Kingston (2013)

Joel Coen – Denzel Washington / Frances McDormand (2021)

## Macbeth Definitions

### **Moral Agency:**

An individual's ability to make moral choices based on some notion of right and wrong, with accountability.

### **Moral Agent:**

A moral agent is a person who has the ability to discern right and wrong or who is capable of acting with reference to right and wrong.

### **Moral Disengagement:**

The process of convincing the self that a standard of right and wrong does not apply to oneself in a particular context. This is done by separating moral reactions from inhumane conduct and disabling the awareness of self-condemnation. Thus, moral disengagement involves a process of cognitive re-construing or re-framing of destructive behavior as being morally acceptable without changing the behavior or the moral standards. Moral disengagement functions in the perpetration of inhumanities through moral justification, disregarding or misrepresenting injurious consequences and dehumanizing the victim.

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### **Fantastical:**

Produced by the imagination or like something produced by the imagination.

### **Rapt:**

Completely fascinated by what one is seeing or hearing; Having been carried away bodily or transported to heaven.

### **Assassination:**

Murder by sudden or secret attack often for political reasons; the act or an instance of assassinating someone.

### **Surcease:**

The coming to an end; the ending of the end.

### **Incarnadine:**

A crimson or pinkish-red color.

# Macbeth

## Act I.III

MACBETH:

So foul and fair a day I have not seen.  
Speak, if you can. What are you?

1 WITCH:

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!

2 WITCH:

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!

3 WITCH

All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter!

BANQUO:

If you can look into the seeds of time  
And say which grain will grow and which will not,  
Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear  
Your favors nor your hate.

1 WITCH:

Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.

2 WITCH:

Not so happy, yet much happier.

3 WITCH

Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.

So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!



THEODORE CHASSERIAU

# Macbeth

## Act I.I

MACBETH

So foul and fair a day I have not seen

BANQUO

How far is't called to Forres? What are these,  
So withered and so wild in their attire  
That look not like th' inhabitants o' th' earth  
And yet are on't? Live you, or are you aught  
That man may question? You seem to understand me,  
By each at once her choppy finger laying  
Upon her skinny lips You should be women,  
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret  
That you are so.

43

44

MACBETH            Speak, if you can. What are you?

1. WITCH

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!

2. WITCH

All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!

3. WITCH

All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter!

## BANQUO

Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear

Things that do sound so fair? I' th' name of truth,

Are ye fantastical, or that indeed

53

Which outwardly ye show? My noble partner

You greet with present grace and great prediction

55

Of noble having and of royal hope,

That he seems **rapt** withal. To me you speak not.

57

If you can look into the seeds of time

58

And say which grain will grow and which will not,

Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear

Your favors nor your hate.

### 1. WITCH

Hail!

### 2. WITCH

Hail!

### 3. WITCH

Hail!

1. WITCH

Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.

2. WITCH

Not so happy, yet much happier.

66

3. WITCH

Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.  
So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!

67

1. WITCH

Banquo and Macbeth, all hail!

MACBETH

Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more:  
By Sinel's death I know I am Thane of Glamis,  
But how of Cawdor? The Thane of Cawdor lives,  
A prosperous gentleman; and to be King  
Stands not within the prospect of belief,  
No more than to be Cawdor. Say from whence  
You owe this strange intelligence, or why  
Upon this blasted heath you stop our way  
With such prophetic greeting. Speak, I charge you.

70

71

BANQUO

The earth hath bubbles as the water has,  
And these are of them. Whither are they vanished?

MACBETH

Into the air, and what seemed corporal melted,  
As breath into the wind. Would they had stayed!

81

BANQUO

Were such things here as we do speak about?  
Or have we eaten on the insane root  
That takes the reason prisoner?

84

MACBETH

Your children shall be kings.

BANQUO

You shall be king.

MACBETH

And Thane of Cawdor too. Went it not so?

BANQUO

To th' selfsame tune and words.



**MACBETH**  
**Act I.III**

ROSS:  
And for an earnest of a greater honor,  
He bade me, from him, call thee Thane of Cawdor;  
In which addition, hail, most worthy of Thane, 106  
For it is thine.

BANQUO:  
What, can the devil speak true?

MACBETH: The Thane of Cawdor lives. Why do you dress me  
In borrowed robes?

ANGUS:  
Who was the Thane lives yet,  
But under heavy judgment bears that life 111  
Which he deserves to lose. Whether he was combined 112  
With those of Norway, or did line the rebel 113  
With hidden help and vantage, or that with both  
He labored in his country's wrack, I know not;  
But treasons capital, confessed and proved,  
Have overthrown him.

MACBETH:  
Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor –  
The greatest is behind! 117  
[*To Ross and Angus*] Thanks for your pains.  
[*Aside to Banquo*]  
Do you not hope your children shall be kings,  
When those that gave the Thane of Cawdor to me  
Promised no less to them?

BANQUO: [*To Macbeth*]  
That, trusted home, 120  
Might yet enkindled you unto the crown,  
Besides the Thane of Cawdor. But 'tis strange:  
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,  
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,  
Win us with honest trifles, to betray  
In deepest consequence. – 126  
Cousins, a word, I pray you.

MACBETH:  
Two truths are told,  
As happy prologues to the swelling act 128  
Of the imperial theme. – I thank you, gentlemen. –

**This supernatural soliciting 130  
Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,  
Why hath it given me earnest of success,  
Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.  
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion  
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair  
And make my seated heart knock at my rib 136  
Against the use of nature? Present fears 137  
Are less than horrible imaginings.  
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical, 139  
Shakes so my single state of man that function 140  
Is smothered in surmise and nothing is  
But what is not.**

BANQUO:  
Look how our partner's rapt. 142

MACBETH: [*aside*]  
If chance will have me King, why chance may crown me  
Without my stir.

BANQUO:  
New honors come upon him,  
Like our strange, garments, cleave not to their mould 145  
But with the aid of use.

MACBETH:  
Come what may  
Time and the hour runs through the roughest day.

#### **Act I. Scene 4**

KING: My worthy Cawdor!

MACBETH:  
The Prince of Cumberland – that is a step  
On which I must fall down or else o'erleap,  
For in my way it lies. **Stars, hide your fires;**  
**Let not light see my black and deep desires.**  
**The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be** 52  
**Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.**

**MACBETH –  
ACT I.VII**

**MACBETH:**

It if were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well	1	
It were done quickly. If th' assassination	3	
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch		4
With his surcease success, that but this blow		
Might be the be-all and the end-all-; here,		
But here upon this bank and shoal of time,		
We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases	7	
We still have judgment here, that we but teach		
Bloody instructions, which being taught, return	9	
To plague th' inventor. This even-handed justice		
Commends th' ingredience of our poisoned chalice		
To our own lips. He's here in double trust:		
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,		
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,		
Who should against his murderer shut the door,		
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan		
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been		17
So clear in his great office, this his virtues		18
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued against		
The deep damnation of his taking-off;		
And pity like a naked new-born babe		
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin horsed		
Upon the sightless couriers of the air	23	
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye		
The tears shall down the wind. I have no spur		
To prick the sides of the intent, but only		
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself		
And fall on th' other –		
How now? What news?		

LADY:  
He has almost supped. Why have you left the chamber?

MACBETH:  
Hath he asked for me?

LADY:  
Know you not he has?

MACBETH:  
**We will proceed no further in this business.**  
He hath honored me of late, and I have bought 32  
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,  
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,  
Not cast aside so soon.

LADY:  
Was the hope drunk  
Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since?  
And wakes it now to look so green and pale 37  
At what it did so freely? From this time  
Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard  
To be the same in thine own act and valor  
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that  
Which thou esteem 'st the ornament of life,  
And live a coward in thine own esteem,  
Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would,'  
Like the poor cat I' th' adage? 45

MACBETH:

Prithee peace!

I dare do all that may become a man;

Who dares do more is none.

LADY:

What beast was it then

That made you break this enterprise to me? 48

When you durst do it, then you were a man;

And to be more than what you were, you would

Be so much more the man Nor time nor place

Did then adhere, and yet you would make both. 52

They have made themselves, and that their fitness now 53

Does unmake you. I have given suck, and know

How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:

I would, while it was smiling in my face,

Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums

And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you

Have done to this.

MACBETH:  
If we should fail?

LADY:  
We fail?  
But screw your courage to the sticking place  
And we'll not fail.

60

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MACBETH:  
**I am settled, and bend up  
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.  
Away, and mock the time with fairest show;  
False face must hide what the false heart doth know.**

81

## **MACBETH**

### **Act II.II**

LADY MACBETH:

The deeds must not be thought!

After these ways; so, it will make us mad.

MACBETH:

Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more!

Macbeth does murder sleep' – the innocent sleep,

Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care,

36

The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath,

Balm of hurts minds, great nature's second course,

38

Chief nourisher in life's feast.

LADY MACBETH:

What do you mean?

MACBETH:

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.



LADY MACBETH:  
Who was it that thus cried? Why, worthy Thane,  
You do unbend your noble strength to think  
So brainsickly of things. Go get some water  
And wash this filthy witness from your hand.  
Why did you bring these daggers from the place?  
They must lie there: go carry them and smear  
The sleep grooms with blood.

MACBETH:  
I am afraid to think what I have done;  
Look on't again I dare not.

LADY MACBETH:  
Infirm of purpose!  
Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead  
Are but as pictures. 'Tis the eye of childhood  
That fears a painted devil. If he do bleed,  
I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal,  
For it must seem their guilt.



daggers...”

MACBETH:

**Whence is that knocking?**

**How is't with me when every noise appalls me?**

**What hands are here? Ha! they pluck out mine eyes.**

**Will all great Neptune's Ocean wash this blood**

**Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather**

**The multitudinous seas incarnadine,**

61

**Making the green one red.**

62

LADY MACBETH:

My hands are of your color, but I shame

To wear a heart so white. I hear a knocking

At the south entry. Retire we to our chamber.

**A little water clears us of this deed.**

Macbeth  
Act III.IV

MACBETH:

Avaunt, and quit my sight! Let the earth hide thee!  
Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold;  
Thou hast no speculation in those eyes           95  
Which thou dost glare with!

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Hence, horrible shadow!  
Unreal mock'ry, hence!



**MACBETH**  
**Act V.I**

**Enter Lady Macbeth, with a taper**

Lo you, here she comes! This is her very guise, and 17  
Upon my life, fast asleep! Observe her; stand close. 18

DOCTOR:  
How came she by that light?

GENTLEWOMAN:  
Why, it stood by her. She has light by  
Her continually. 'Tis her command.

DOCTOR:  
You see her eyes are open.

GENTLEWOMAN: 23  
Ay, but their sense are shut.

DOCTOR:  
What is it she does now? Look how she rubs her  
Hands.

GENTLEWOMAN:  
It is an accustomed action with her, to  
Seem thus washing her hands. I have known her continue  
In this a quarter of an hour.

LADY MACBETH:  
Yet here's a spot.

DOCTOR:  
Hark, she speaks. I will set down what comes  
From her, to satisfy my remembrance the more strongly.

LADY MACBETH:  
Out, damned spot! Out, I say! One – two – why  
Then 'tis time to do't. Hell is murky. Fie, my lord, fie! A  
Soldier and afeard? What need we fear who knows it,  
When none can call our power to account? Yet who  
Would have thought the old man to have had so much  
Blood in him? 35

DOCTOR:  
Do you mark that?

LADY MACBETH:  
The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now?  
What, will these hands ne'er be clean? No more o' that,  
My lord, no more o' that! You mar all with this starting. 42

DOCTOR:  
Go to, go to! You have known what you should not.

GENTLEWOMAN:

She has spoke what she should not, I  
Am sure of that. Heaven knows what she has known.

LADY MACBETH:

Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes  
Of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!

DOCTOR:

What a sign is there! The heart is sorely charged.

49

GENTLEWOMAN:

I would not have such a heart in my  
Bosom for the dignity of the whole body.

DOCTOR:

Well, well, well.

GENTLEWOMAN:

Pray God it be, sir.

DOCTOR:

This disease is beyond my practice. Yet I have known those which have walked in their sleep who have died holily in thief beds. 54

LADY MACBETH:

Wash your hands, put on your nightgown, look  
Not so pale! I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried. He  
Cannot come out on's grave.

DOCTOR:

Even so?

LADY MACBETH:

To bed, to bed! There's knocking at the gate.  
Come, come, come, come, give me your hand! What's  
Done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed! *Exit.*

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**MACBETH**  
**ACT V.III**

SERVANT:  
Soldiers, sir. 13

MACBETH:  
Go prick thy face and over-red thy fear, 14  
Thou lily-livered boy. What soldiers, patch? 15  
Death of thy soul! Those linen cheeks of thine  
Are counsellors to fear. What soldiers, whey-face?

SERVANT:  
The English force, so please you.

MACBETH:  
Take thy face hence.  
Seyton! – I am sick at heart,  
When I behold – Seyton, I say! – This push 20  
Will cheer me over, or disseat me now.  
I have lived long enough. My way of life  
Is fall'n into the sear, they yellow leaf, 23  
And that which should accompany old age,  
As honor, love obedience, troops of friends,  
I must not look to have; but, in their stead,  
Curses not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath,  
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.  
Seyton!



SEYTON:  
What's your gracious pleasure:

MACBETH:  
What news more?

SEYTON:  
All is confirmed, my lord, which was reported.

MACBETH:  
I'll fight till from my bones my flesh be hacked.  
Give me my armor.

SEYTON:  
'Tis not needed yet.

MACBETH:  
I'll put it on.  
Send out moe horses, skirr the county round,  
Hang those that talk of fear. Give me mine armor.  
How does your patient, doctor?

35

DOCTOR:  
Not so sick, my lord,  
As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies  
That keep her from her rest.

MACBETH:  
Cure her of that!  
Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,  
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow, 42  
Raze out the written troubles of the brain, 43  
And with some sweet oblivious antidote 44  
Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff  
Which weighs upon the heart?

DOCTOR:  
Therein the patient  
Must minister to himself.

MACBETH:  
Throw physic to the dogs, I'll none of it! 47

# MACBETH

## Act V.V

MACBETH:

A cry within of women. What is that noise?

SEYTON:

Is it the cry of women, my good lord.

MACBETH:

I have almost forgot the taste of fears.

The time has been my sense would have cooled

To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair

11

Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir

12

As life weren't. I have supped full with horrors.

Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,

14

Cannot once start me.

15

**SEYTON:**

**The Queen, my lord, is dead.**

**MACBETH:**

**She should have died hereafter:**

**There would have been a time for such a word.**

**To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow**

**Creeps in this petty pace from day to day**

**To the last syllable of recorded time,**

**And all our yesterdays have lighted fools**

**The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!**

**Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player**

**That struts and frets his hour upon the stage**

**And then is heard no more. It is a tale**

**Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,**

**Signifying nothing.**

## **This is Shakespeare: *Macbeth***

By: Emma Smith

(Pages 245-246; 251-252)

As so often in Shakespeare's work, what happens to dramatic characters often echoes reflexively some aspect of the craft of writing itself. So, we could refigure Macbeth's dilemma in the early scenes as the question of who is writing this story, and as often, the story has its own prior ideas about where it wants to go. Shakespeare's source for *Macbeth* is the compendium of historical sources collected by Raphael Holinshed as his *Chronicles* (1578) – this is the same source that Shakespeare turned to for his history plays. He has his work cut out to rewrite it as a tragedy. This tragedy is not, as we might expect from his earlier plays on English historical subjects, that of the king, but rather of his usurper: it's the reverse of the story of *Richard II*. In part Shakespeare achieves this by sacralizing the sources from Scottish history. In Holinshed, Macbeth emerges from a violent, dog-eat-dog world of thanes jockeying for position and power: King Duncan had gained the throne through violence, and in turn grown weak; Macbeth's rise, supported by Banquo, is figured as inevitable in a society that has no principle of rule other than strength (Holinshed's Macbeth is also a good ruler for his term, until he, too is superseded)...In Shakespeare's play, Macbeth's own description of Duncan's "silver skin laced with his golden blood" as "a breach in nature" (2.3.112-13) turns the murder into a crime against natural order. For all his fascination with regime change and weak kings, and the question of what makes a good ruler, Shakespeare is here the mouthpiece for Jacobean hereditary monarchy, for his new king James, and for the Stuart dynasty safely cushioned by two young princes. The sense of moral outrage and disturbance in *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's invention, turning the brutal chaos of the sources into a story of rightful succession interrupted by the terrible ambitious agency of Macbeth.

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Perhaps, rather than blaming Lady Macbeth, we should recover the true synergy between the Macbeths, Shakespeare's only sustained portrait of an operative, adult marriage in process. Separating out who is responsible for what may undo what Shakespeare is trying to present – a passionate *folie a deux*, perhaps, committed by a partnership. After all, unlike other powerful women in Shakespeare's plays, Lady Macbeth never expresses personal ambition or avarice, and neither does she correspond to the standard denigration for transgressive women as sexual adulterers. She does not draw on the available theatrical shorthand for depicting wicked women. Lady Macbeth's particular characterization, and her ongoing fascination for actors and for critics, suggest her active agency – but her marginalization both from Macbeth's and from Shakespeare's plotting later in the play erases that early significance. Malcolm's judgment is of a 'dead butcher' and a 'fiend-like-queen' (5.11.35), but like so many of figures – think of Fortinbras or Octavius Caesar – who step onto the corpse-strewn stage of the end of a tragedy, his analysis is politicized, self-interested and anti-climactic. The question of Lady Macbeth's agency in the play is asked, but Shakespeare doesn't answer it. Like Macbeth himself, that's to say, and like the witches, Lady Macbeth has claim to be the answer to the question "Who makes the things that happen happen? – but the fact that there are so many claimants keeps the question, rather than its answer, at the forefront.

That these questions might always have been part of the reception of the play is suggested in one intriguing and rare archival survival: a contemporary account of *Macbeth* in early modern performance. Thousands of people went to the theatre in early modern London every week, but almost no one ever wrote about what they saw there, which makes the visit of the astrologer and medicine man Simon Forman to the Globe in 1611 even more interesting. For Forman, the play's most compelling scene was the banquet at which Banquo's ghost appears. When Macbeth stood to toast Banquo, "the ghost of Banquo came and sat down in his chair behind him. And he, turning about to sit down again, saw the ghost of Banquo, which fronted him so, that he fell into a great passion of fear and fury, uttering many words about his murder, by which, when they heard that Banquo was murdered, they suspected Macbeth." Forman also takes a view on the question of agency. He suggests both that Macbeth is responsible for the killing of Duncan, *and* that Lady Macbeth is: "and Macbeth contrived to kill Duncan, and through the persuasion of his wife did that night murder the King in his own castle." The description suggests this confusion of agency was always part of the play: the murder of Duncan becomes overdetermined, in that it has too many, rather than too few, causes and agents.

## Introduction to *Macbeth*

By Jesse M. Lender

Barnes & Noble Shakespeare

(Pages 3-6)

The play opens on a “hurly-burly” world a violent and tumultuous place in which loyalty already seems precarious. First the witches appear, accompanied by thunder and lightning, to announce that they will meet again after “the battle’s lost and won” (1.1.4); next King Duncan and his party meet a bloody Captain, who graphically describes how “brave Macbeth” (1.2.16) has “unseamed” (1.2.22) and beheaded the rebellious Macdonwald. [The King’s first words are: “What bloody man is that?”] The battle also includes the defeat of Norwegian forces allied with the rebels and the capture of “that most disloyal traitor,/ The Thane of Cawdor” (1.2.53-53). Duncan’s disappointment with the Thane of Cawdor, on whom he “built an absolute trust,” forces him to concede that

**“There’s no art/To Find the mind’s construction in the face” (1.4.11-12).**

Though Duncan’s belated understanding and misplaced trust do not speak well for his political wisdom, this moment points to a significant problem not only in the world of *Macbeth* but in Shakespeare’s tragedies more generally, and indeed in the wider world of early modern Europe.

The possibility that people were not what they appeared or claimed to be was given new urgency by the religious changes that transformed early modern Europe. The struggles between Catholics and Protestants in post-Reformation Europe led to a widespread sense that one's neighbors, friends, even family might entertain secret and alien religious affiliations or convictions. In a world unprepared to accept religious pluralism, the split in Western Christianity led to the persecution of religious minorities. The Protestant Reformation not only produced controversy and conflict, religious wars being the most extreme form, but also contributed to a new sense of religious identity as an interior experience – a dynamic that held true for the godly minority, who felt themselves to be the only “true” Protestants in a mass of unregenerate sinners, as well as for those Catholics who outwardly conformed to the liturgical demands of the English church while secretly maintaining allegiance to the Church of Rome. The situation produced a new emphasis on the distinction between inward disposition and outward conformity; Elizabeth I famously declared that she had no desire to make “window into men’s souls,” but she did insist that her subjects worship according to a uniform liturgy. Those who refused to comply were labeled “recusants” and were subject to fines and, in some cases, imprisonment. The essayist Michel de Montaigne, who experienced the deadly turmoil of religious warfare in France, remarked that “the worst of these wars is that the cards are so shuffled that your enemy is distinguished from yourself by no apparent mark either of language or bearing, and has been brought up in the same law and customs and the same atmosphere, so that it is hard to avoid confusion and disorder.” The unnerving possibility of home-bred enemies who are indistinguishable from the rest of the population could and did breed paranoia, but not all persecutions and conspiracies were imagined.



Paranoia and anxiety about the loyalty of English Catholics were given new momentum in November 1605, when a small group of militant Catholics, disappointed in their hopes for a Catholic succession in 1603 and increasingly convinced that the new King would not reverse the strict penal statutes on Catholics, attempted to blow up the King at the opening of Parliament. While many of the details of the Gunpowder Plot remain believed that there had been a Jesuit-inspired plot to destroy the King and Parliament – a plot that was providentially exposed through the wisdom of King James himself. The Gunpowder Plot, sensational evidence of a Catholic fifth column committed to the destruction of Protestant England, reverberates throughout *Macbeth*. Its echoes can be heard not only in the play's focus on political assassination but also in its fascination with *equivocation* – a term that became notorious in the wake of the plot. Father Garnet, one of the Jesuits implicated in the conspiracy, defended the practice of mental reservation or equivocation that sanctioned giving misleading answers when being interrogated by a hostile authority. The most explicit reference to the Gunpowder Plot appears in the Porter's remark:

**“here's an equivocator that could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to Heaven” (2.3.8-11).**

Beyond this specific example, the theme of ambiguous and equivocal speech is suffused throughout the play.

The witches speak strange paradoxes – “When the battle's lost and won” (1.1.4); Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (1.1.11) – that defy resolution. Macbeth, of course, only discovers this at the play's end when, facing defeat, he comes to “doubt th' equivocation of the fiend / That lies like truth.” 5.5.43-44).....

The play's emphasis on the shiftiness of language is, of course, not only a response to the Gunpowder Plot; it points to a more general social condition in which language, rather than serving as a social cement, becomes instead a vehicle for hypocrisy and subterfuge. This situation was surely exacerbated by the perception of a new social mobility, especially in London, a city that had seen enormous population growth largely as a consequence of immigration. The city held forth the promise of advancement for the industrious, but the underside of this fantasy was a substantial anxiety about upstarts and imposters. The social conditions, along with the fact of religious division, created a deep unease about the legibility as well as the legitimacy of the social world.

In England, where the official religion was repeatedly and drastically altered during the course of the sixteenth century, access to the sacred became a deeply divisive issue. The Reformation's promotion of the priesthood of all believers raised enduring questions about the authority of the ecclesiastical institutions that claimed to administer the sacred. In addition, debates about the clergy, the sacraments, and practices like pilgrimage and the veneration of saints cast doubt on traditional practices that had offered a coherent vision of the universe and the relationship between the supernatural and natural worlds. *Macbeth*, like *Hamlet*, reveals an almost obsessive concern with what Macbeth call "supernatural soliciting" (1.3.131). Both plays offer oblique commentary on the difficulties of interpreting the supernatural in order to warrant human action, a commentary that is directly relevant to the struggles over ecclesiastical authority that were rolling Europe.

## Of Witches and Kings

In 1603 Queen Elizabeth died and her first cousin (twice removed) James VI of Scotland became King James I of the combined realm. In addition to being king of Scotland, James was also a famous witch hunter. He was obsessed with witchcraft. An admiral had blamed witches for storms that beset the king's ship on its way home from the royal wedding in Denmark in 1589. This accusation led to the North Berwick witch trials, the earliest of the mass witch trials that took place between the late sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Some 200 witches were accused of having attempted to use black magic to kill the king, and dozens were eventually executed (the exact number is unknown). King James, who had once ignored accusations of witchcraft, personally tortured some of the accused until they confessed. Later he wrote a book titled *Daemonologie*, in which he described how to ferret out a witch and what should be done with one. Among the accused were the Earl of Bothwell, the king's cousin and a constant conspirator against James, who was accused of high treason. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that to honor James's coronation, Shakespeare should write his great horror story, *Macbeth*.

As with many of his plays, Shakespeare based *Macbeth* on a story from *Holinshed's Chronicles*, a popular history published in 1587, but he took several liberties. While Shakespeare's *Macbeth* reigns a relatively short time (the play is unclear exactly how long), the real *Macbeth* was king of Scotland from 1040 to 1057. The *Macbeth* of the play, as in the *Chronicles*, is a paranoid tyrant but the witches are much darker. The real *Macbeth* was apparently a well-regarded king—although he did kill Duncan in battle, after Duncan had invaded his lands, and was eventually killed himself by Duncan's son Malcom, much like in the play. According to *Holinshed*, *Macbeth* and an accomplice named Banquo murdered the king together and then plotted to keep Malcom off the throne. In reality, Banquo probably never existed, but he was an important part of Scottish propaganda in the sixteenth century, as James asserted himself Scottish by descent from Banquo, the basis for the Stuart claim to the throne (in fact, the Stuarts came from France with the Norman conquest).

*Macbeth* is the closest thing Shakespeare wrote to a classic tragedy. A noble thane, deceived by three witches, plots treason against the king, murders him in his sleep, and then slowly goes mad. Macbeth is a king whose greed and hubris bring about his end – the classic tragic plot. The play is also a homage to King James because it includes not only witches but James’s origin story – the witches prophesy the Banquo-Stuart lineage. *Macbeth* is also Shakespeare’s shortest tragedy, and his most thrilling. It’s got king murder, child murder, wife murder – lots of murder. It’s got battle scenes, mad scenes, magic scenes, and a wicked beheading. From the murder of Duncan to the fight with Malcolm, the action in the play flies fast. The witches lend it a weird, creepy feeling. As Macbeth is slowly driven mad by his lust for power, it is like *The Shining* in armor. But it should never be forgotten that it was also a gift to a new patron. When James became king of England, he also adopted Shakespeare’s company as his personal players. They went from being the Lord Chamberlain’s Men to the King’s Men and, as Stephen Greenblatt points out in *Will in the World*, Shakespeare became the king’s vassal, and even wore the king’s livery. *Macbeth* is therefore also the most political of Shakespeare’s plays. While *King Richard III* touted the official Tudor line as to the evil of the Last Plantagenet king, *Macbeth* portrays not only King James’s claim to the throne but also the evil of witchcraft and, ergo, the righteousness of the king’s main project, rooting out the dames of Satan. *Macbeth* is King James’s reign set to poetry.

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## JOHN 13: 21-27

**21** When Jesus had said these things, he was troubled in the Spirit, and testified, and said, Verily, verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me.

**22** Then the disciples looked one on another, doubting of whom he spake.

**23** Now there was one of his disciples, which leaned on Jesus' bosom, whom Jesus loved.

**24** To him beckoned therefore Simon Peter, that he should ask who it was of whom he spake.

**25** He then as he leaned on Jesus' breast, said unto him, Lord, who is it?

**26** Jesus answered, He it is, to whom I shall give a sop, when I have dipped it: and he wet a sop, and gave it to Judas Iscariot, Simon's son.

**27** And after the sop, Satan entered into him. Then said Jesus unto him, That thou doest, do quickly.

## ISAIAH 1:15-20

**15** When you spread out your hands in prayer,  
I hid my eyes from you;  
Even when you offer many prayers,  
I am not listening.

Your hands are full of blood!

**16** Wash and make yourselves clean.  
Take your evil deeds out of my sight;  
Stop doing wrong.

**17** Learn to do right; seek justice.  
Defend the oppressed.  
Take up the cause of the fatherless;  
Please the case of the widow.

**18** “Come now, let us settle the matter,”  
Says the Lord.  
“Though your sins are like scarlet,  
They shall be as white as snow;  
Though they are red as crimson;  
They shall be like wool.

**19** If you are willing and obedient,  
You will eat the good things of the land;

**20** but if you resist and rebel,  
You will be devoured by the sword.”  
For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.