

The Sinister and the Supernatural in *Macbeth*  
Lawrence McDonald 2012

William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* contains elements of the supernatural and witchcraft in its portrayal of a Scottish war hero's lust for power. By incorporating elements of magic, Shakespeare's classic tragedy has become, perhaps, his most controversial play. Shakespeare uses the darker themes of Paganism and the occult to show how Macbeth is corrupted from a revered general in the service of King Duncan into a power-hungry murderer and tyrant. The play contrasts Macbeth's faith in the supernatural with Christian themes, to explain how Macbeth has gone so radically astray from his initial honorable qualities as a warrior in the service of King Duncan.

Beginning in Act I, Scene i Shakespeare introduces the *Three* Witches. Here Shakespeare utilizes the atmospheric effects of thunder and lightning to conjure up themes of the supernatural. The first line of the play details: "When shall we three meet again? In thunder, lightning, or in rain?" Using this imagery, Shakespeare foreshadows the killing of Duncan, and Macbeth's unsavory rise to power. In her article, "Macbeth, King James and the Bible," Jane Jack writes about how Shakespeare juxtaposes King James' Christian themes (thought to be "good") with the Pagan beliefs of Macbeth, who clearly, because of his failures as King of Scotland, has taken the lower moral ground by dabbling in the occult. She writes: "Shakespeare found the story of Macbeth and the witches in Holinshed: in the works of James and in the books of the bible to which James constantly refers, he found many suggestions which helped him turn this tale of ambition, 'supernatural soliciting,' regicide and tyranny into a tragedy of extraordinary economy

and unity” (Jack, 174). By borrowing the works of Holinshed, Shakespeare uses the witches to show Macbeth’s weakness in choosing the “wrong” spiritual path to follow—leading to his downfall. Jack continues: “The works of James are part of the ‘background’ of the tragedy of *Macbeth*. Their uniformly Hebraic and Christian quality serves to illuminate that part of the common Jacobean stock of knowledge and ideas which is most relevant to the interpretation of *Macbeth*” (Jack, 174).

Shakespeare’s next appearance of the Weird Sisters is contained in Act I, scene iii. In this instance, Shakespeare introduces Macbeth’s friend and fellow general in the King’s army, Banquo. Here the two generals happen upon the witches who predict their future. The third Witch’s comment: “All hail Macbeth, that shall be King hereafter,” is a clear foreshadowing of things to come. Shakespeare’s use of *Thunder* to make the setting of Act I, Scene iii just as spooky as the witches first appearance in the play, again, conjures up a dark and supernatural aura. Before Macbeth comments on the seemingly transient nature of the Weird Sisters disappearing “Into the air; and what seemed corporal melted, as breath into the wind” (line 81), Banquo also comments that the Weird Sisters are (in his opinion) nothing more than common hags. He observes at line 45: “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.” Walter Clyde Curry’s essay “The Demonic Metaphysics of *Macbeth*” points out that the witches function to show Macbeth’s inclination toward wicked behavior. He writes: “That the

Weird Sisters possess in this capacity a perennial and astounding vitality is attested by the whole sweep of Shakespearean criticism. All hands seem to be convinced that they symbolize or represent evil in its most malignant form, though there is to be found little unanimity of opinion regarding the precise nature of that evil, whether it is subjective or objective or both, whether mental or metaphysical” (Curry, 397).

In Act IV, scene i, the play’s final scene in which the Weird Sisters appear, Shakespeare (again) calls for *Thunder* to illuminate the setting. Shakespeare develops his depiction of Act IV, scene i, by placing many witches on stage, creating a sense of claustrophobia around Macbeth. After the second Witch speaks at line 36: “Cool it with a baboon’s blood, then the charm is firm and good,” Macbeth drinks from the goblet the Weird Sisters have supplied for him. Shakespeare keenly uses different voices for the Apparitions, some of which appear as children, such as (plausibly) what appears to be Duncans’s son, Malcolm who states: “The pow’r of man; for none of women born, Shall harm Macbeth” (line 80). In his article, “The Apparitions in Macbeth,” A.W. Crawford believes the third apparition to be that of Malcolm claiming, “The third apparition, the ‘Child crowned, with a tree in his hand,’ seems to point clearly to Malcolm, the son and heir of Duncan. The play itself later makes Malcolm the direst fulfillment of this prophecy when he ordered his soldiers to hew them down boughs and bear them before them” (Crawford, 346). As Macbeth watches theses apparitions it comes into question whether or not he can alter his destiny—does he even have free will to do so.

Macbeth’s slaying of Duncan in Act II contrasts the good-natured, Christian King Duncan with the unholy plotting of both Lady Macbeth and her husband. By juxtaposing

the two characters of Duncan and Macbeth there is clearly a struggle for power between good and evil. Barbara Riebling's article, "Virtue's Sacrifice: A Machiavellian Reading of Macbeth," states that Duncan's mistaken, good-natured trust in Macbeth represents a chink in his armor. She writes: "Duncan, however admirable a man, is by Machiavellian standards a dangerous king—a ruler whose gentle and trusting character has invited treason, civil war and foreign invasion. By being a perfect Christian, Duncan succeeds in becoming a perfect lamb—a sacrificial offering" (Riebling, 276). Thus perhaps it is not Macbeth's wickedness that makes him "bad" but it is his belief in the supernatural and unchristian.

Another interesting scene in the play is the feast Lady Macbeth, Macbeth and several others attend after Banquo's murder. Shakespeare eerily conjures up themes of Christ last supper where there is an empty seat at the table for Judas who has betrayed Christ. However, Shakespeare writes from an inverse perspective—in that Banquo's empty seat does not represent betrayal and Macbeth's behavior is anything but Christian. Macbeth speaks to Lennox in Act III scene iv at line 45: "The table's full." Here Lennox comments suggest that Macbeth's inclusion of the Ghost at the table is an apparition only he is aware of. Lennox reply to Macbeth that the table is not full at line 46, "Here's a place reserv'd sir" suggest the antithesis of Christ's last supper in that only Macbeth cannot see the empty chair and instead sees the Banquo's ghost. In a sense Banquo's ghost can be seen as a manifestation of Macbeth's guilt ridden conscience (turning away from Christianity) which has arrived at the table to feast upon Macbeth's fears. Arthur Kirsch sheds light on the unchristian emotions that prey upon Macbeth's psyche: "An

illuminating way to begin is to focus upon Macbeth's ambition and fear, the two emotions or drives--'passions of the mind,' as they were called in the Renaissance—that most dominate him, usually simultaneously, and that constitute the deepest as well as most ostensive manifestations of his self-absorption. Kirsch asserts that these emotions deserve more scrutiny when evaluating Macbeth's motivations in turning away from Christian ideals and embracing Pagan Scottish beliefs. He writes "Analogies among the bonds of obedience between God and man, sovereign and subject, parent and child, master and servant, and reason and passion are commonplace in the Elizabethan period. In a universe so conceived, ambition is inescapably associated with primal images of usurpation: with the diabolic envy and usurpation upon God of Satan's rebellion, as well as what the presumption and disobedience within the soul of man at the fall" (Kirsch, 270).

In a sense Macbeth's real *tragedy* is his turning away from the writings of King James I and embracing traditional Scottish Celtic beliefs, frowned upon by Englanders during Shakespeare's time. Henry Paul's book, *The Royal Play of Macbeth*, posits that in writing Macbeth, Shakespeare was careful to consider the views and opinions of James surmising that a play for a king should accord with the thoughts of the king. He writes: "When Macbeth hears the prophecies of the witches, he falls at once under the thrall of 'superstition,' which James calls the mother of heresies, instancing two varieties: that grounded upon the arrogant vanities of the Church's authority, and that of those who are ruled by the 'ignorant fantasy' of 'your own conceites and dreamed revelations'" (Paul, 135). In addition Paul cites the fact that ideas about witchcraft in England during

Shakespeare's time were inane and unsophisticated—therefore he looked toward Scotland for influence. He continues: “Shakespeare in writing this play wished to show a picture of the witchcraft of Scotland. The English ideas about witches, which he had known from his childhood, were too vulgar and stupid” (Paul, 52). Here Paul suggests that although English ideas about witches were ‘vulgar’ Shakespeare did indeed look toward Scotland as a haven for the occult and demonic rituals. This would also suggest that Scotland was of lower moral standing (or at least less virtuous) than England. This theory clarifies why Macbeth is doomed to fail as King.

The interesting dynamic between Lady Macbeth and her husband is also a bond that becomes ever more demonic—she, playing upon his insecurities, drives him to commit the murder of Duncan. Lady Macbeth speaks of this matter in Act I, vii, line 49: “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.” In this instance Lady Macbeth clearly “wears the pants” in the relationship. What Macbeth lacks in resolve, courage and outright wickedness, Lady Macbeth more than makes up for in her purely evil demeanor, intent on committing murder. Her appeal to unholy spirits in Act I, iv, beginning at line 39 is telling of her trust in the occult: “Come, you spirits, That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull, Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood, Stop up th’ access and passage to remorse, That no compunctious visitings of nature, Shake my fell purpose.” These lines suggest Lady Macbeth’s unholy faith in cruel spirits—her invocation of these “spirits” would also suggest that she had solicited help from demonic spirits previously. In her article, “Bewitched, Bothered and

Bewildered': Lady Macbeth, Sleepwalking, and the Demonic," Jane Bernstein posits how Lady Macbeth became a diabolical figure, and what effect her sexually ambiguous nature has on the play. She writes: "Lady Macbeth is depicted as the dominating evil force, where she goads her husband into murdering the king. She appears even more supernatural than the witches" (Bernstein, 34). Because Macbeth falls prey to his wife's bidding to kill Duncan, Lady Macbeth can be seen as the catalyst for downfall. Her embracement of supernatural spirits and her ability to corrupt her husband suggest a weakness in the character of Macbeth. In contrast to Lady Macduff, who represents a much more matriarchal figure—tending to her children's needs and to her husband's castle, Lady Macbeth is dark, cold and wicked—all qualities associated with the occult.

England's view that the Scottish crown had fallen from grace after Duncan's murder (and was a territory that could only benefit from England's influence) is expressed in Act IV, iii, beginning at line 188. Here Malcolm consults with Rosse about the impending attack on Macbeth's castle: "Be't their comfort, We are coming thither. Gracious England hath, Lent us good Siward, and ten thousand men; An older and a better soldier none, That Christendom gives out." Shakespeare's use of the word "Christendom" to describe Siward is in direct contrast to Macbeth's unholy nature. Because the Scottish crown had fallen into unchristian hands, Scotland could only benefit (in Shakespeare's opinion) from the influence of "good" Christian moral standards—which Siward threatens to impose. In this way Malcolm's description of what is "bad" about Scotland is that it is not governed under Christian rule. This also sets up an interesting theory that the English felt that the Scots could not govern their own

country and thus needed the “help” of a Christian colonizer. In this case Macbeth’s “supernatural soliciting” only more readily invites the fall of Scottish Paganism and the dominance of England’s Christian (and eventually Protestant) rule.



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