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## **Macbeth and Witchcraft: A Study of Sources, Influence and the Fall**

### **Abstract**

It is common in productions of *Macbeth* to present three sisters on a balcony or raised platform, the whole action of the play. Although this direction runs the risk of attributing too much responsibility to the sisters for Macbeth's behaviour through suggesting that they are stage managing the whole action, it does impress dramatically the extent to which the play is imaginatively controlled by the type of evil they propagate. Type of magic by their language and their ritualistic chanting is directly correspondent to the unnatural phenomena that occur the night of Duncan's murder. Shakespeare leaves the role of the witches as somewhat ambiguous. However, there is enough evidence in *Macbeth*, along with a consideration of Renaissance beliefs in witches as evil or having the capability to inflict harm, to suggest that the witches of *Macbeth* are agents of the Devil. Despite all this, Macbeth turns out to be the most powerful source of the supernatural, which most of us identify with man's nature to transform into, what one can call, Faustian. The paper tries to badger the balance out in the favour of the witches, but concludes otherwise. Macbeth does come out the "author of his proper woe," the wizard behind all that dwells in the realm of idiopathic construct.

## Introduction

Macbeth, seems to be motivated by three apparently mutually exclusive forces. The first is his strong sense of moral obligation dictated by his active conscience. His awareness of the moral significance of his actions is reiterated throughout and serves to mark him out as an acutely morally sensitive character:

And pity, like a naked new-born babe,  
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed  
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,  
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,  
That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself  
And falls on the other. (1.7. 21-28)

Macbeth, having chosen a destructive course which — a negative response to creative thought, cannot respond in a positive emotional manner to the news; the greatest he can do is to recognize his flatness of vision.:

as they say,  
Lamentings heard i' th' air, strange screams of death,  
And prophesying with accents terrible  
Of dire combustion and confused events  
New hatched to the woeful time. (2.2.29-34)

Like the rest of the world that is now Christian, England believed in witches and practiced witchcraft long before it believed in and practiced Christianity. After Christianity came to England in the sixth century, witch belief and witchcraft practice were forced underground, but “the old faith” did not at all die out. Although witchcraft was treated by the authorities as a crime, it was treated as a relatively minor crime, a “crime against man,” committed, for example, to get even with an enemy or to get possession of a neighbor’s property. It was not regarded by the Church as a serious threat to itself (Rossell Hale Robbins, *Encyclopedia of Witchcraft and Demonology*, 160-161).

## Macbeth and Witchcraft

In the latter half of sixteenth century, witchcraft in England started to be looked on differently and to be punished more severely, as “a crime against God” (Robbins, 161), just as it had for some time before been regarded and treated on the Continent by the Catholic Inquisition. It has been estimated that at least “200,000 supposed witches were put to death [in Europe] during the witch hunt between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, and many more badly tortured, all in the name of the Christian Church” [Moore, 141]. During Shakespeare’s lifetime, witchcraft accusations in Protestant England reached a peak, and those found guilty were regularly punished by torture or death or both, though the scale and cruelty of punishment, bad as they were, were not nearly as bad as in France and Germany. Even if someone believed to be a witch was not prosecuted and punished under the law, he or she often suffered intense persecution within the community.

Severe punishment was justified because a convicted witch was believed to have “made an agreement with the Devil to deny the Christian God” (Robbins, 550). But witches were believed to engage in and were found guilty of all kinds of other wickedness and mischief: raising a storm to ruin crops; casting a spell to make someone sick; traveling great distances on what was called a “familiar spirit” that might take the form of a pig or a goat or a cat (this was a specifically English and Scottish contribution to witch theory) or, like the First Witch in *Macbeth* “But in a sieve I’ll thither sail, / And, like a rat without a tail, / I’ll do, I’ll do, and I’ll do.” (I.3.9-11),

Much of what is true of the Elizabethans’ beliefs about ghosts is also true of their beliefs about witches: “the attitude toward witchcraft in Shakespeare’s day was anything but single, and anything but overwhelmingly credulous” (Moore, 153). As with ghosts, probably the majority of Elizabethans from all ranks of life did believe in the actual existence of witches; there were some who did not, and the skeptics tended to come from the educated classes. As with ghosts, even among those who did believe, not everyone believed in the same way. “The word ‘witch’ had a . . . double meaning” (Willard Farnham, *Shakespeare's Tragic Frontier*, 97).

Some believed that witches were “essentially tragic beings” who had “sold themselves to the devil” and had the demonic powers which they claimed to have, the power to command nature, to see into the future, to harm people or livestock by the use of magical charms (Curry, 61), but who themselves were human and not supernatural beings (Farnham,

97). Others believed that witches not only had supernatural powers resulting from their bargain with the devil, but were themselves supernatural, “devils” or “fiends” or “demons” or “furies” from hell who were able to take on human form in order to deceive and harm their victims (Farnham, 97)

Although witches could be of both sexes, the worst kind of witch was thought to be female, and there were many more women accused of witchcraft than men. And although female witches could be young or old, in the popular mind they were traditionally pictured as old women, ugly and wrinkled (Robbins, 542-543), as they still are today, probably at least in part because of how Shakespeare represents them in *Macbeth*. (In a somewhat similar way, by his representation of fairies in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* as “diminutive, merry sprites,” Shakespeare “single-handed” altered “the whole tradition of the English fairy,” which until 1594 had been of fairies as full-sized mischiefmakers and evildoers, sometimes indistinguishable from witches [Moore, 144, 146; Farnham, 94].)

### **Shakespeare’s Sources in Witchcraft**

Shakespeare’s source for the Weird Sisters was Raphael Holinshed’s historical *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, which was his basic source for almost everything else in *Macbeth*. (It was an important factual source for most of his history plays as well.) The *Chronicles* was first published in 1577 and was one of the leading historical works of its time. Shakespeare is believed to have used an enlarged edition published in 1587 (Muir, 168; *Cambridge Guide*, 470).

Just as he did with other characters and events in Holinshed’s chronicle of early Scottish history, Shakespeare freely combined various parts of Holinshed’s account of the “weird sisters” (Holinshed did not capitalize the name) and just as freely made changes for dramatic effect (Muir, 175). In Holinshed, the Sisters “are not called witches and are not disgusting old women” (Farnham, 82). In Shakespeare, of course, they are. Holinshed calls the women “the weird sisters” but he leaves open the question of whether they are supernatural beings or not, whether they are good or evil, and whether they are the voices of destiny, as “weird” (Old English “fate”) suggests, “or else some nymphes or feiries, indued with knowledge of prophecie by their necromanticall science, because everie thing came to passe as they had spoken” (Farnham, 82-83).

The prophecies Shakespeare’s Weird Sisters make to *Macbeth* in Act IV, Scene 1, in Holinshed are told to him by “certeine wizzards, in whose words he put great confidence”

and whom he has consulted throughout his reign as king, and by “a certeine witch, whom hee had in great trust” (Farnham, 83). Shakespeare does away with all of these characters and gives their roles to the Weird Sisters. Shakespeare’s “show of eight Kings” that climaxes the Weird Sisters’ Act IV prophecies is based on a long genealogy in Holinshed that unhistorically traces Fleance’s descendents down to King James himself, whose claim to have descended from Banquo and whose interest in witchcraft are both thought to have turned Shakespeare to the story of Macbeth in the first place (Muir, 167).

Scholars have identified other likely or possible sources for Shakespeare’s conception of the Weird Sisters. One is King James’s *Daemonologie*, published in 1597 when James was still king of Scotland only. Kenneth Muir in *Shakespeare’s Sources* says of *Daemonologie* that it “has clearly left its mark on all those scenes in which the weird sisters appear” (178). As examples, he cites its telling of how witches can foretell the future, but in strictly limited ways, and how witches are the devil’s means to “creepe in credite with Princes” by telling half-truths, and then “deceiv[ing] them in the end with a tricke once for all; I meane the everlasting perdition of their soul and body” (178). Muir suggests that Shakespeare’s ideas about witches may also have been shaped by Reginald Scot’s *Discovery of Witchcraft* of 1584 (178), just as his ideas about ghosts were influenced by Scot’s “Discourse upon Devils and Spirits.”

Another possible influence was a short play in Latin and English, *Tres Sibyllae* (“Three Prophetesses”), by an Oxford University scholar named Matthew Gwinn, written in honor of a visit by King James to the university in the summer of 1605 (Muir, 167-168). In the play, which is based on Holinshed’s *Chronicles*, three boys dressed as sibyls in turn “hailed the king by all his titles as a member of a royal house which, as was foretold to Banquo by ‘prophetic sisters,’ should never come to an end” (Farnham, 86). It is believed that Shakespeare either attended this royal performance or at least had heard about it, and modeled the Weird Sisters’ greeting of Macbeth in Act I, Scene 3 on it (Muir, 167-168). Here as everywhere else, Shakespeare took the raw material of history and experience and, like every imaginative writer worthy of the name, freely shaped it to suit his entertainment and artistic purposes.

Just as with *Hamlet*, the supernatural appears from the very beginning of the action of *Macbeth* and, even more than in *Hamlet*, it sets the tone and atmosphere for the whole play. But while in *Hamlet* it takes just one form, the Ghost, in *Macbeth* it takes several. The three

Weird Sisters are by far the most prominent, and I will be concentrating on them. But there is also the dagger floating in the air that appears to Macbeth just before he enters King Duncan's bedchamber to murder him (II.1.33-44); there is the voice that cries to Macbeth: "Sleep no more! / Macbeth does murder sleep" (II.2.38-39); and there is the ghost of the murdered Banquo that appears to Macbeth at the banquet in III.4, but to no one else. As with the ghost of King Hamlet that appears to Hamlet in the boudoir scene but not to his mother, it is possible to argue that the floating dagger, the voice out of the dark, and Banquo's ghost are not real but hallucinations, products of Macbeth's overactive imagination and guilty conscience. But as with the Ghost of the opening scenes of Hamlet, the Weird Sisters, who are seen and spoken to by Banquo and Macbeth and are known to the world for their "more than mortal knowledge" (as Macbeth's letter to Lady Macbeth shows), are really and truly there.

If the Hecate's scene is not counted (III.5), which most scholars agree was written into the play by someone else than Shakespeare, the Sisters are in just three scenes of Macbeth, I.1, I.3, and IV.1, they speak altogether just sixty-three lines out of the play's total of two thousand. (Macbeth is by far the shortest of Shakespeare's tragedies, is half the length of Hamlet, and except for *The Comedy of Errors* is the shortest of all of Shakespeare's plays [Orgel, xxx].) Yet it is impossible to think of Macbeth without thinking of them.

### **Witchcraft and Macbeth's Wizardry**

Witches are the first characters on stage in the play. Even before they speak, the audience recognizes that they are not good witches because it is storming, with "thunder and lightning" (stage direction, I.1.1), and when they do speak they speak of cats ("I come, Graymalkin!" [9]) and toads ("Paddock calls" [10]) and of "fog and filthy air" (13), all of which are associated with black magic. Their entrance and exit from Shakespeare's stage, which did not make use of a curtain, was probably under the cover of some special-effect smoke device (Banquo: "Whither are they vanished?" Macbeth: "Into the air, and what seemed corporal melted / As breath into the wind" [I.3.80-82]), so that they would appear much more spooky to an audience that had a stronger belief in witches than theatregoers do today. What the audience is not aware of at the moment but will come to appreciate by the end of the play is that what all three Sisters chorus as they seemingly vanish into the air, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (12), sums up what Macbeth is about to experience in the next five acts, very much to his grief.

Act I, Scene 3 opens on a wild and wasted landscape, what Macbeth later in the scene calls “this blasted heath” (77), and, like every other appearance of the Sisters, with “thunder.” We know that scenery was not used in Shakespeare’s theatre, but still it is a set worthy of Hollywood. Once again it is only the three Witches on stage. They make themselves seem that much more frightful by talking of how they will cruelly punish the sailor-husband of a woman who had been rude to one of them. The punishment they are planning, loss of sleep, is what Macbeth will later suffer owing to his guilty conscience. A reader cannot help wondering why the Sisters do not simply punish the woman who committed the offense rather than her husband. If their evil power can reach from Scotland to Aleppo in Syria, where the sailor-husband has gone, and if, as they claim, they can control the winds, it seems a bit strange that they should not be able to get even with the offender directly and without delay.

Just as the First Witch gruesomely takes out “a pilot’s thumb” to show to the others, and as the three of them chant a spell that turns on the magical number three (Macbeth is full of threes), Macbeth and Banquo enter. They are coming directly from the bloody battlefield (Macbeth is also full of blood) and are on their way to King Duncan’s camp after their double victory over the invading Norwegians and the Scottish rebels led by the traitorous Thane of Cawdor. Their meeting with the Witches is not a coincidence, at least not for the Witches, since in Scene 1 the Witches have spoken of its taking place “ere the set of sun” (I.1.5).

Macbeth’s first words in the play echo the Witches’ Scene 1 chant: “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (I.3.38). The alarm Macbeth expresses when he hears the Witch’s prophecy and that Banquo finds puzzling suggests that even before this meeting with the Weird Sisters, before, the play began, he had allowed himself to think wicked thoughts of becoming king one day. He “starts” and “seems to fear” because it seems to him that the Witch has, by some magical means or other, read his guilty mind.

A few lines earlier (39-43), Banquo wondered out loud whether the Witches were “inhabitants o’ th’ earth” or supernatural beings, whether they were living or not. Now he questions them directly--are they real or hallucinations? (52-54)--and then, without waiting for an answer which he never gets, demands that they prophesy for himself as they have just hopefully prophesied for his “noble partner” (54). The openness of his manner and evenness of his voice--“Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear / Your favors nor your hate” (59-60)--stand out in contrast to Macbeth’s nervous demand and guilty start.

The Witches reply to Banquo's frank demand first by hailing him one after the other and then, in turn as with Macbeth, by giving out a series of prophecies. Unlike the ones they have just given Macbeth, these prophecies are not explicit and are as much riddles as prophecies. Banquo will be "Lesser than Macbeth, and greater"; he will be "Not so happy, yet much happier"; he will beget kings though will not be one himself (65-67). They round out their prophesying by again hailing "Macbeth and Banquo! / Banquo and Macbeth!" (68-69), and without answering Macbeth's urgent questions concerning the source of their prophetic knowledge or "why / Upon this blasted heath you stop our way / With such prophetic greeting" (76-78), they "vanish."

There is a long gap before the Weird Sisters next appear on stage, in IV.1 (again not counting the Hecate scene, III.5), just as there is a long space between the appearance of King Hamlet's ghost in Act I of Hamlet and its reappearance in Act III. But that does not mean that they and their prophecies disappear from dramatic sight. The next scene, I.5, opens with Lady Macbeth reading out loud the letter her husband has sent her in which he describes his meeting with the Witches and their prophecies.

He says that he has received thoroughly reliable information that "they have more in them than mortal knowledge" (2-3). This, even if it is true, does not necessarily mean that the Sisters are themselves "more than mortal." But Macbeth goes on to describe how, "When I burned to question them further, they made themselves air, into which they vanished" (3-5) and this does sound supernatural, "manifesting some agency above the forces of nature" (Concise Oxford Dictionary). Since Shakespeare gives no hint that the Witches got their information in a rationally explainable way, their greeting Macbeth as Thane of Cawdor also strongly suggests supernatural agency. Macbeth and Banquo are certainly both convinced that the Witches' "soliciting" is "supernatural" (I.3.130).

The next two times the Weird Sisters are mentioned before they reappear in IV.1 is when they are spoken of by Banquo. What he says shows clearly that meeting with them has left just as deep an impression on his mind as it has on Macbeth's. The difference is maybe only that Banquo's mind was not stained beforehand in a way that Macbeth's was. In II.1, at Macbeth's castle of Inverness where Duncan is staying the night he is murdered, before going to bed, Banquo acknowledges that he is struggling to suppress the "cursed thoughts" (9) that the Witches' predictions have inspired in him. What these cursed thoughts are, the audience can easily guess

. When Macbeth joins him, Banquo remarks, “I dreamt last night of the three Weird Sisters,” and pointedly observes that part of their prophecies concerning Macbeth have come true (21-22). In reply, Macbeth tries to make it sound as though “I think not of them,” but nevertheless suggests that the two of them get together some time to talk over “that business” (22-25). He uses code language to further suggest that Banquo will have much to gain if he supports his (Macbeth’s) interests at the right time (26-27). Banquo’s reply shows that he is prepared to go along, but also shows that he has doubts about the honesty of Macbeth’s intentions, doubts he had expressed as early as I.4.121- 122 (“That, trusted home, / Might yet enkindle you unto the crown”). He was, after all, a witness to “shalt be king hereafter,” and he knows enough about his fellow general’s character to suspect it. The Witches’ prophecies may have taken as deep hold of his mind as they have of Macbeth’s, he may even be almost as tempted as Macbeth is to act in order to fulfil them, but his strength of character is greater than Macbeth’s (Macbeth later speaks of “his royalty of nature” [III.1.50])

In his desperate state of mind right after seeing Banquo’s ghost, Macbeth had expressed to Lady Macbeth his determination to go “tomorrow, / And betimes” (that is, both speedily and early) to find out the Weird Sisters (III.4.133-134). (Shakespeare gives no hint of how he knows where to look for them.) For their last appearance in the play, the Witches are once again alone on stage when the scene (IV.1) opens. This time they are chanting their spells as they stand around a cauldron bubbling with a stew made up of the body parts of a disgusting and even horrifying assortment of animals and humans: “Eye of newt, and toe of frog, . . . Nose of Turk, and Tartar’s lips, / Finger of birth-strangled babe / Ditch-delivered by a drab [whore]” (IV.1.12-34).

### **Macbeth’s Fall and the Audience’s Catharsis**

Like any horror-film writer of today, Shakespeare wants to thrill his audience with fear and disgust and a sense of the uncanny. He wants the audience to feel that beings who engage in such horrific rituals, even if they themselves are not supernatural, really do have supernatural powers, including the power to see into the future. The audiences of Shakespeare’s time were generally more ready to believe in the supernatural and witchcraft than audiences now, so their theatrical experience of the witch scenes (and of the ghost scenes in Hamlet) was probably a lot more intense than ours.

Maybe on the principle that “it takes one to know one,” the Second Witch welcomes Macbeth’s entrance on stage with the words: “Something wicked this way comes” (IV.1.67).

It is clear from this that the Witches know all the truth of Macbeth's hidden criminality, just as the Ghost in the boudoir scene knows how far Prince Hamlet has gotten in carrying out its command of revenge. Addressing the Sisters as "you secret, black, and midnight hags" (70), Macbeth demands that they "answer me . . . / To what I ask you," even if the destruction of all of Nature and man's works is the price (72-83). The measure of his desperation is shown by the way he piles the items of imagined universal destruction one on top of the other for nine powerful lines. In fact, Macbeth does not demand, he "conjures" (72), which, in the sense of to "constrain (spirit) to appear by invocation" (Concise Oxford Dictionary), is exactly what witches and magicians do.

Robert H. West's view of the Witches in Macbeth is very much like his view of the Ghost in Hamlet. West does not think that Shakespeare tried to make the Witches embody in any consistent, coherent, complete way the popular Elizabethan beliefs about witches and demons, any more than he tried to embody in King Hamlet's ghost popular beliefs about spirits. Not only didn't Shakespeare try, he purposely left out from Macbeth anything that would fix in the audience's mind either the Witches identity or the source of their power. West recognizes that "More than any of the other plays of Shakespeare Macbeth seems pervaded by some kind of superhuman evil" (69), and he says that "beyond a reasonable doubt" the Witches are the personification of that evil (69, 76). He allows that Shakespeare's representation of the Weird Sisters conforms in a number of ways to the orthodox witch beliefs of his time, for example, to what King James set out in his *Daemonologie*. But as with Hamlet and Elizabethan ghost beliefs, he believes that "The generous efforts of scholars to key [Macbeth] to demonology have . . . never quite succeeded" for the very good reason that Shakespeare himself did not try to "key" it.

West contrasts Macbeth with Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. The basic story of *Doctor Faustus* is "the demonological commonplace that the devil to enlarge his kingdom and spite God" tempts a man to make a bargain with him that "damns the human signer to a fiery hell." "But Shakespeare, though he too is treating a man's fall and the superhuman powers that drew him toward it, does not bind his play to this basic pattern of the apostate angel as tempter, partner, and destroyer, nor to any other simple explanatory demonological scheme" (71). Shakespeare certainly does show the temptation and destruction of Macbeth but, according to West, he leaves out all the many details that belong to the "routine Christian account" of a soul's damnation (for example, there is no pact with the devil; at the end, Macbeth is not carried off to hell). And he leaves the Witches ambiguous for the same reason

that he made King Hamlet's ghost ambiguous. "By indefiniteness about the Sisters and the phenomena related to them Shakespeare preserves awe and mystery," the same awe and mystery he tried for and achieved with the Ghost. At the same time, also as with the Ghost, he brings home to us the unknowableness of the world outside ourselves, the "outer mystery" (79).

There is another reason why West's general approach of leaving room for "inconsistency or chance or unreason" (Shaaber 247) in the plays may make good sense. Shakespeare was a working man of the theatre, supplying popular entertainment week after week and year after year in his roles as company shareholder, actor, and playwright, and without any idea that his plays would outlive him as they have. It does not seem plausible that he could have had the time or the energy or the foresight necessary to pack into them as many subtle and different meanings as generations of critics writing in the leisure of their studies have been able to extract from them. Similarly, when it comes to the many inconsistencies that critics have discovered in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, I think that it makes at least as much sense to blame them on hasty composition by a busy and pressured playwright who knew that they would be overlooked by audiences in the theatre, as to try and make sense of them by engaging in elaborate intellectual gymnastics that only other intellectual gymnasts can fully understand or appreciate. Shakespeare is good enough not to have to be perfect.

In *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Thomas explains the varying beliefs about witchcraft in Renaissance Europe. He states that demons were responsible for "thunder and lightning," which accompanies the witches in each of their appearances in *Macbeth* (Thomas 34). The witches of *Macbeth* have familiars<sup>7</sup>, "who performed useful magical services for [their] mistress[es] and were "supposed to have been given by the Devil himself" (Thomas 530). The association between witches and the Devil was never universally acknowledged with certainty, but the implication did abound. People, however, hated witches more "from fear of their hostile acts towards their neighbors" (Thomas 534)<sup>8</sup>. However, in 1604 a "covenant with the Devil" did become an actual crime (Thomas 543). Thus, at the time of *Macbeth's* originally production, the crime of associating with the Devil was a major component of people's perception of witchcraft. The strength of Satan's power as depicted in the force of evil in *Macbeth* comes from the belief that Satan was "God's grand cosmic antagonist. He was an omnipresent force, ever ready to prey upon man's weaker instincts and to tempt him away in paths of evil... To help him in his task he had an army of demons and evil spirits" (Thomas 557). As Banquo refers to the witches as "instruments of Darkness" he

alludes to their role as members of Satan's army, serving his mission of luring weak men down "paths of evil" (1.3.124).

### **Villainy Incarnate**

As Muir explains in his note on the text, "Macbeth apparently appeals to the stars because he is contemplating night as the time for the perpetration of the deed" (Muir 25). Macbeth is aware that his "deed" would be shameful. Unlike his previous resolution to allow "Chance" to "crown [him], / Without [his] stir," Macbeth's resolve now is to take this future promised kingship into his own hands (1.3.143-144). He has already revealed to the audience that his desire to become king involves the possibility of killing Duncan so that he may be sure of attaining the crown when he speaks of the "horrid image" that is "against the use of nature" (1.3.135, 137). Now that Malcolm becomes an added obstacle, moving his own procurement of the crown further out of reach, he resolves to commit the assassination. Through this recognition of "black and deep desires," Macbeth is revealing his awareness that his thoughts and subsequent actions are evil. He does not dwell on these thoughts absent-mindedly. He willingly allows himself to engage in these sinful thoughts. By commanding the stars to hide their fires, he is both inviting darkness of a supernatural sense to become one with him as he contemplates the killing of Duncan and is seeking to hide from the "light," that is the grace of God.

When Lady Macbeth echoes this sentiment, she too uses images of darkness. Lady Macbeth calls upon the "Spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts" to aid her in her ability to accomplish her plan for Duncan's assassination (1.5.40-41). She directly addresses the "murth'ring ministers" and then promptly implores the darkness to hide her thoughts and actions (1.5.48):

Come, thick Night,  
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell,  
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes, Nor Heaven peep through the blanket  
of the dark, To cry, "Hold, hold!" (1.5.50-54)

As her husband does, Lady Macbeth uses the images of darkness and evil spirits almost interchangeably. Each of these images adds to the other's significance. The darkness adds secrecy to the imagery of Hell, which has the ability to heighten its foreboding. Children are commonly afraid of the dark<sup>13</sup>. The blending of these images preys upon that fear and

elevates it to an overwhelming and insuperable reality. Furthermore, the darkness motif emphasizes the unnatural nature of committing evil. Just as in Scripture Adam and Even hide themselves from God after eating of the forbidden fruit, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth seek to hide their evil desires and deeds from the start.

The darkness motif heightens the dramatic effect of the evil actions of the play. As the stage directions indicate, dark and gloomy weather accompanies the witches. Macbeth even notes the eeriness of the weather prior to meeting them for the first time as he states to Banquo, “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (1.3.38). Banquo then refers to the witches as instruments of Darkness” (1.3.124).

After Duncan’s assassination, the sun remains cloaked in darkness, just as Lady Macbeth foretells by saying to Macbeth “O! never / Shall sun that morrow see!” (1.5.60-61). In scene 4, Rosse and the Old Man discuss the atmosphere of Scotland since Duncan’s murder:

Ah, good father,  
Thou seest, the heavens, as troubled with man's act,  
Threaten his bloody stage: by the clock, 'tis day,  
And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp:  
Is't night's predominance, or the day's shame,  
That darkness does the face of earth entomb,  
When living light should kiss it? (2.4.5-11)

The dichotomy of good and evil is strongly present in the apparent strengthening of evil at night. Night is a time of vulnerability to the attacks of the Devil, much like the vulnerability of Lucrece against the “ravishing strides” of Tarquin. Just as darkness cloaks the play as Macbeth’s association with evil increases, Shakespeare shrouds the language of the play with the motif of light and darkness as a signal to the audience of the ever-present powers of evils both on the stage and in real life.

Considering the prevalence of the Heaven and Hell imagery throughout *Macbeth*, the audience can interpret Lady Macbeth’s “Hell is murky” statement to be a literal observation of her condition rather than a metaphorical or hyperbolic statement (5.1.34). The devilish connections of the three witches, serpentine language and imagery, Lady Macbeth’s association with witchcraft, the Porter’s depiction of the castle as Hell, and the continual

imagery of light and darkness<sup>16</sup> paint a portrait of a present Hell. The audience cannot separate the play from this motif of Hell. Therefore, since it is such an integral part of the play's language, Lady Macbeth's statement illustrates her real and literal experience of Hell. Lady Macbeth's statement, albeit only a brief three words, speaks quite poignantly to the crux of the crisis in which the Macbeths find themselves. Through forging a relationship with the Devil by their murder of Duncan, they thrust themselves onto a path of damnation. They desire the effects of their action that they can see—that is their resulting ascension to the throne—but they fail to see the depths of the underlying consequences. Lady Macbeth's description of their surroundings as “murky” illustrates their inability to foresee what they would be experiencing through their Faustian contracts. The irony of this lies in their trust of the witches' ability to see the future. The Macbeths revel in what they believe to be a gift of supernatural insight to their future and take

### **Conclusion**

Once Macbeth has committed his crimes and seeks to ensure his safety as king, his character becomes like Herod in his attempts to eradicate children who threaten his kingly status. Jack explains that “the child-imagery...often recalls the Christ-child and the Slaughter of the Innocents...Macbeth resembles Herod in that he can kill other children, but not the particular child or children that represent Good” (Jack 192). Here Jack notes Macbeth's attempt to kill Fleance, which fails and his attempts to kill Malcolm<sup>33</sup>, which also fail. He does, however, succeed in killing Macduff's children. While, tragic, the death of Macduff's children do not eliminate any threat to his crown.

Regardless of the reasons why Macbeth achieves the crown, he is King Macbeth by the beginning of act 3. Act 3 opens Shakespeare's *Macbeth* seems to have evidence supporting both trains of thought. Perhaps Macbeth would never have committed the murders if not for the prophecy. Or perhaps the prophecy is a temptation to do evil. Because of the strong focus on consequence in his play, Shakespeare allows the latter to be a plausible, even probable, interpretation of the play.

The consequences that Macbeth suffers are consequences resulting from his actions. Macbeth is well aware of the consequences that he would be subject to as he contemplates whether to kill King Duncan:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well  
It were done quickly: if the assassination  
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch  
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  
We still have judgment here; that we but teach  
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return  
To plague the inventor: this even-handed justice  
Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice  
To our own lips. (1.7.1-11)

*Macbeth* as a play about consequence reveals the allure and complexities of evil as well as the negative consequences of giving in to the temptation of evil. In *Macbeth*, goodness ultimately triumphs over evil—or if one interprets the prophecy as all-controlling, good *is* over evil. Although several permanent scars deface Scotland, namely the several deaths, the conclusion of the play sees an ultimate restoration of balance in Scotland. Through the use of the several instances of Heaven and Hell imagery throughout *Macbeth*, Shakespeare depicts Macbeth's actions as having a moral value. Through the consequences that Macbeth experiences as a result of his actions, Shakespeare seems to be advocating for the belief in free will and moral responsibility of man.

Because of his engagement in sin and failure to pursue atonement for his deeds, Macbeth has no alternative but to face his ultimate death and eternal damnation. Despite the resounding presence of morbidity and damnation, the possibility of redemption is also present in Shakespeare's play, although subtle.

Given the evidence that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* illustrates the fall of a soul corrupted by sin, the witches' scene at the start of the play eerily foreshadows not just the earthly fall of Macbeth, but his spiritual fall to ruin as well. The supernatural medium represented by the weird sisters and Macbeth's subjective visions provides the main source of moral challenge for the hero

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