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# Temptation, Sin, and the Human Condition in Shakespeare's Macbeth

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Temptation, Sin, and the Human Condition in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

A Thesis

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## **Abstract**

William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is colored with religious overtones. His play incorporates elements of religious beliefs of Renaissance England. Aside from its historical basis, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* alludes to stories from Scripture as well as Renaissance religious practices and beliefs, particularly regarding witchcraft, prophecy, and the dangers of sin. Through this myriad of sources, Shakespeare offers a vivid and grotesque depiction of a man demise due to his involvement with sin, offering a profound caution to his audience of the dangers of temptation and sin.

Macbeth, William Shakespeare, Sin, Renaissance Literature, Witchcraft, Prophecy

## Introduction

Shakespeare's England saw the monarch as a direct representative of God, divinely ordained and of spiritual grandeur<sup>1</sup>. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare captures the sacrilege of regicide through the several instances of heaven and hell imagery and the damned nature of Macbeth as he delves further into his sin. Although Shakespeare's play clearly connects to the Gunpowder Plot, which threatened King James I's safety, Shakespeare's use of soliloquies to reveal Macbeth's thoughts and sorrows throughout his pathway to damnation prevents the audience from simply loathing him as a villain. Macbeth's suffering due to his sin of regicide would certainly flatter the king; his suffering due to his temptation and sin is a universal experience and reminds the audience of the dangers of spiritual evil. Through his play, Shakespeare provides an elaborate and shocking portrayal of the human condition as it is affected by temptation and sin.

Here I will attempt to uncover some of the sources of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that relate to its moralistic themes particularly his influences of James' beliefs and the beliefs of Renaissance England. I do not propose that this will be an exhaustive exploration but will attempt to prove that *Macbeth* is a work born of a culture concerned with its relationship to God. In his prologue to *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Keith Thomas states, "This was no simple unified primitive world, but a dynamic and infinitely various society, where social and intellectual change had long been at work and where currents were moving in many different directions" (Thomas 5). Shakespeare's England was a world of confusion and questioning. Regardless of his personal beliefs, Shakespeare's works often reflect the changing tides of his society, both politically and morally. In *Macbeth* Shakespeare has colored the stage with the

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<sup>1</sup> "An Homily Against Disobedience and Willful Rebellion" discusses the gravity of rebellion against the monarch because of his direct ordinance from God. A sin against the king is a sin against God himself.

question of the relevance of good and evil in people's lives, a question just as relevant today as it was in the early seventeenth century.

I will first attempt to establish the presence of moralistic themes in *Macbeth*, particularly through the play's use of motifs, its scriptural allusions, and the Renaissance view of witches as agents of the devil. I will also discuss some of the areas where Shakespeare diverges from the historical account of Macbeth in Holinshed's *Chronicles of Scotland* in an attempt to argue that his changes support the presence of morality in his play. Then I will explore the various beliefs about predestination and free will in Renaissance England and the ways in which Shakespeare reflects this question in Macbeth's entrapment in self-fulfilling prophecy. Through this I will attempt to argue that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* elevates the roll of individual responsibility over the belief that humans are merely subject to the whims of supernatural forces. To support this I will offer that Shakespeare gives an elaborately detailed portrayal of various aspects of sin. Thus, with so much emphasis on consequence, *Macbeth* depicts the dangers of entertaining temptation and conceding to sin. While this is not be an exhaustive study of every spiritual reference and implication of the play, I do suggest that this is a play steeped in religious overtones that warns its audience of the dangers of temptation and sin.

## Chapter 1: Presence of Morality in the *Macbeth*

In their introduction to *Shakespeare and Renaissance Ethics*, Patrick Gray and John D. Cox explain, “Shakespeare’s perspective on morality does not emerge *ex nihilo*... but instead draws upon a rich variety of intellectual traditions, Christian as well as classical, even in its moments of most ardent critique” (Gray and Cox 13). There can be no doubt that an extensive amount of research could provide source material from a myriad of genres and institutions. Here I will explore some of the specifically religious sources for Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* in an attempt to establish the foundation for what he is asserting about the dangers of temptation and sin.

A study of “An Homily Against Disobedience and Willful Rebellion” illuminates the supreme disdain for rebellion against England’s monarch. The sermon draws directly from biblical themes of obedience to God and, consequently, anyone in authority, namely the monarch whom “[God] by his holy word did constitute and ordain in cities and countries several and special governors and rulers, unto whom the residue of his people should be obedient” (“An Homily Against Disobedience and Willful Rebellion [1571]”). St. Paul’s letter to the Romans explains that the monarch “is the minister of God to take vengeance on him that doeth euil” (Rom. 13:4)<sup>2</sup>. The epistle warns against disobedience for this reason as well as “for conscience sake” (Rom. 13:5). The marginal commentary on this passage clarifies that “no priuate man can contemne that gouernemet wc God hathe appointed without ye breache of his coscience.” The admonition emphasizes the sinful nature of rebelling against the king. Earthly punishments are certainly something of which to be afraid, but they pale in comparison to the spiritual consequences that ensue after committing such an act of disobedience.

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<sup>2</sup> All biblical references are from the Geneva edition.

The epistle concludes this warning with stress on the importance of remaining in relationship with God: “let vs therefore cast away the works of darknes, and let vs put on the armour of light, So that we walke honestly, as in the day” (Rom. 13:12-13). St. Paul captures the opposition of sin to the will of God by illustrating it in terms of light and darkness<sup>3</sup>. This imagery, present throughout Scripture, colors the passages of *Macbeth* as well, a clear indication of the conflict between good and evil that wages war in Macbeth’s soul. One of the key components in exploring the play as a conflict between good and evil is acknowledgement of guilt that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth experience as a result of their actions<sup>4</sup>. In “Shakespeare and the Geneva Bible: The Story of King Saul as a Source for Macbeth,” John Parker notes the significance of guilt in the play:

The guilt, as much as the ambition, is at the heart of the play, for only his constant knowledge that he is doing wrong accounts for his misery, petulance, wrath, and desperate and suicidal end. Even as his melancholic despair and ever-present, deep-seated awareness of inevitable destruction that began with and even preceded the moment he first plunged the dagger into Duncan, and awareness that emerges during his angry and frantic interview in Acheron. The play...is not the story of a villain, but of a good man who terrifyingly collapses—morally, psychologically, and spiritually. (Parker 21)

Without guilt, Macbeth’s actions might even seem justified or noble<sup>5</sup>. However, through the immense guilt that he experiences, Shakespeare provides evidence that even Macbeth himself

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<sup>3</sup> A more detailed exploration of the significance of light and dark imagery will come later.

<sup>4</sup> I will further discuss the various effects of sin as illustrated in *Macbeth* in the latter half of this essay.

<sup>5</sup> I am not asserting that his actions are noble but that Macbeth’s guilt is a pivotal component of the play, for it indicates his own awareness of the evil he commits.



acknowledges his own evil. Several instances throughout the play reveal a presence of forces of good and evil. Shakespeare weaves a rich tapestry of heaven and hell imagery, reminding the audience of the ever present roles of God and Satan and the gravity of engaging in sinful acts. In her essay “MacBeth, King James, and the Bible,” Jane Jack explains, “*Macbeth* is a study not only of regicide and tyranny but of a damned soul, of a man who, having destroyed his own conscience, is capable of acting in defiance of the restraints both of human nature and religion” (Jack 183). Macbeth’s crime supersedes that of earthly rebellion. His fall into damnation illustrates the spiritual dangers of sin.

### **Witches as Agents of Satan**

Shakespeare leaves the role of the witches as somewhat ambiguous<sup>6</sup>. 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. 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

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<sup>6</sup> I discuss this ambiguity further in the section on the debate between predestination and free will.

<sup>7</sup> “I come, Graymalkin! / Paddock calls. / Anon!” (1.2.8-10)

<sup>8</sup> This might explain why Macbeth is hated for his crimes against Scotland rather than his diabolical dealings.

become an actual crime (Thomas 543). Thus, at the time of *Macbeth's* original 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)<sup>9</sup>.

### **Imagery and Motifs Illuminate the Play's Moralistic Themes**

*Macbeth's* use of light and darkness imagery enfolds the play in a visual representation of the battle between good and evil occurring on stage. The play's use of the light and darkness motif blends into its use of the heaven and hell motif so much so that "darkness" becomes almost synonymous with Hell. Jack notes the use of light and darkness as imagery to convey holiness and sinfulness in King James' *Basilikon Doron*: "James' concern with evil, his conception of life as a war between Grace and the Devil and his intimate knowledge of Scripture lead him naturally into the use of the symbolism of light and darkness" (Jack 177). For example, Lady Macbeth comments that "hell is murky," an expression that captures both motifs (5.1.34). The murkiness of Hell reflects the current battle over her soul that she experiences after engaging in the sin of killing Duncan. Lady Macbeth also becomes afraid of the dark as revealed by her gentlewoman to the doctor: "she has light by her continually; 'tis her command" (5.1.21-22). For someone who calls upon the "murth'ring ministers" to aid her in her plan to assassinate Duncan<sup>10</sup> and who

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<sup>9</sup> All *Macbeth* quotations are from the Arden Shakespeare edition, edited by Kenneth Muir.

<sup>10</sup> Lady Macbeth invokes "murth'ring ministers," a clear indication that she contemplates murdering Duncan (1.5.48).

berates her husband for being childish in his fears<sup>11</sup>, Lady Macbeth must have since encountered something in the darkness that horrifies her: the cruelty of Hell.

Several other instances connect light to Heaven, or goodness, and darkness to Hell, or evil. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth beckon the darkness and evil spirits during their initial temptations to kill Duncan. After Macbeth hears the witches' prophecy of his future title of Thane of Cawdor and his subsequent kingship, he reacts as if guilty already<sup>12</sup>. Here Banquo comments, "Good Sir, why do you start, and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?" (1.3.51-52). Through this impulsive reaction, Macbeth reveals his inner desire to be that which the witches claim he will become. This root sin of jealousy takes shape inside Macbeth as the possibility of his future kingship becomes more palpable to him. In an aside after learning that the witches' prediction of him becoming Thane of Cawdor comes true, Macbeth dwells on his desire for kingship: "Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor: / The greatest is behind" (1.3.117-118). He begins to envision the steps that he might take to ensure that the witches' prediction of his kingship does indeed come to fruition. Perhaps it is even that the witches' prediction affirms in him that an inclination to procure the kingship through murdering Duncan would prove successful. After hearing Duncan's proclamation of Malcolm as the Prince of Cumberland, Macbeth decides that he must take action to realize his future kingship:

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!

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<sup>11</sup> Lady Macbeth berates Macbeth as if his fears are childish and womanly on multiple occasions, first by suggesting that "'tis the eye of childhood / That fears a painted devil," and later claiming that his reaction to see Banquo's ghost "would well become / A woman's story at a winter's fire, / Authoris'd by her grandam" (2.2.53-54; 3.4.63-65).

<sup>12</sup> According to Coleridge, this reveals Macbeth's "guilty thoughts" (qtd. in Muir 15).

Let not light see my black and deep desires;  
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,  
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. (1.4.48-53)

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 Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's initial summoning of darkness and evil spirits, darkness beyond that of a typical night overshadows the atmosphere during the night of Duncan's death, which is evident through Banquo's comment to Fleance before retreating indoors for the night:

BANQUO. How goes the night, boy?

FLEANCE. The moon is down; I have not heard the clock.

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<sup>13</sup> Ironically, Lady Macbeth literally becomes afraid of the dark even after berating Macbeth for his childish fears.

BANQUO. And she goes down at twelve.

FLEANCE. I take't, 'tis later, Sir.

BANQUO. Hold, take my sword.—There's husbandry in heaven;

    Their candles are all out. (2.1.1-5)

Banquo's observation of the unnaturalness of the moon already having set—or so it seems—and the absence of stars reveals his intuitive anxiety that something evil is lurking. He follows these observations by commenting on his inability to sleep due to nightmares and his prayers to God's angels<sup>14</sup> for protection from "cursed thoughts" (2.1.8). Stage directions do not indicate the atmosphere here as they do when the witches appear, but Banquo's conversation with Fleance serves the purpose of conveying the atmosphere of unnatural darkness, an atmosphere fraught with evil. The darkness of this particular night's sky directly correlates to the summoning of darkness of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in the previous scenes, for this is the night of the murder of Duncan.

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:

    Thou seest the heavens, as troubled with man's act,

    Threatens his bloody stage: by th'clock 'tis day,

    And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp.

    Is't night's predominant, or the day's shame,

    That darkness does the face of earth entomb,

    When living light should kiss it? (2.4.5-10)

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<sup>14</sup> Muir notes, "He importunes precisely that order of angels which God, in his providence, has deputed to be concerned especially with the restraint and coercion of demons" (Muir 45).

Rosse and the Old Man ponder the reasons for the darkness, seeing it as a possible reflection in nature of the “unnatural / ...deed that’s done” (2.4.10-11). Just as Lady Macbeth predicts, the darkness, beyond that of a natural night, persists. The darkness symbolizes the presence of evil as it hovers over, not just Inverness, but all of Scotland.

Darkness again covers the stage when Macbeth orders the murder of Banquo and Fleance, his second major and premeditated act of evil compliance<sup>15</sup>. Prior to the encounter with the murderers, Banquo comments, “It will be rain to-night” (3.3.16). Banquo’s comment indicates that, much like the night of Duncan’s assassination, the cloud coverage is such that no moon or stars are visible. Once again, “Light” is not able to see Macbeth’s “black and deep desires” (1.4.51).

Both Duncan’s and Banquo’s murders occur at night. Prior to killing Duncan Macbeth reflects on the night as the time of witchcraft and evil:

Now o’er the one half-world  
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse  
The curtain’d sleep: Witchcraft celebrates  
Pale Hecate’s off’rings; and wither’d Murther,  
Alarum’d by his sentinel, the wolf,  
Whose howl’s his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,  
With Tarquin’s ravishing strides, towards his design  
Moves like a ghost. (2.1.48-56)

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<sup>15</sup> Macbeth’s murder of the two groomsmen seems to be more impulsive than premeditated. Furthermore, the same atmosphere of darkness present for Duncan’s murder could still be present for their murders as well, depending on how comically the porter’s scene is portrayed, which might possibly distract from that atmosphere. Still, the language of the porter’s scene arguably conveys a more ominously hellish atmosphere.

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 actions that they can see—that is their resulting ascension to the throne—but they fail to see the depths of the underlying<sup>16</sup> 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

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<sup>16</sup> Explanation of each of these exists elsewhere in this essay.



action to ensure that their promised earthly success happens promptly. However, they ultimately realize, as Macbeth expresses, that the Devil is a “fiend, / That lies like truth” (5.5.43-44). In reality, the Macbeths are blinded by their ambition to the true outcome of their sinful actions. Thus, Lady Macbeth is shocked into insanity by true horrors or the murky Hell that she could not foresee and did not anticipate but that she asked for.

### **Shakespeare’s Changes from Holinshed’s Historical Account**

Shakespeare’s use of Holinshed’s *Chronicles of Scotland* as a major source for *Macbeth* is obvious. However, certain changes that Shakespeare made from the historical account add to the moralistic themes of his play. According to Jack, the changes depict the play as “less a story of regicide and tyranny than of the war between the forces of evil and supernatural good” (Jack 180). Shakespeare downplays the historical elements that would potentially justify Macbeth’s actions against Duncan. Instead, Shakespeare has Macbeth hover in indecision over the consequential implications of murdering the king. A. L. Kistner in “Macbeth: A Treatise of Conscience,” explains that “A search of Holinshed’s *Chronicles*... uncovers no mention of concern over the implications of the murder” (Kistner 28). Shakespeare depicts a man who knows he is about to commit an evil and sinful act. According to Harry Morris in his essay “*Macbeth*, Dante, and the Greatest Evil, “[Shakespeare’s] most pointed alteration from Holinshed is his change of site for the murder of Duncan. Holinshed tells us the king was slain in ambush. Shakespeare moves the scene to Glamis’ castle” (Morris 27). This change accentuates Macbeth’s crime against Duncan because Macbeth is now not only “his kinsman and his subject” but also “his host, / Who should against his murtherer shut the door, / Not bear the knife [himself]” (1.7.13-16). Through this, Shakespeare emphasizes Macbeth’s culpability in the assassination.

## The Scriptural Allusions in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

In addition to the changes Shakespeare made from the account of Macbeth in the creation of his play, Shakespeare's extensive use of Biblical allusions highlights the moral culpability of his protagonist. Jack explains, "*Macbeth* is a play about evil which is given dramatic shape by the story of the deterioration in sin of a man who has yielded up his soul to the devil. The nature of evil, its power and pervasiveness, is thrown into relief by a vivid pattern of references to Scripture" (Jack 178). Shakespeare's *Macbeth* reflects the biblical Fall of man and salvation history in several ways. According to Renaissance belief, the serpent of Genesis is a tool or agent of the devil<sup>17</sup>. Likewise, throughout the play serpentine imagery often accompanies the presence of evil is often accompanied by serpentine imagery, such as through the repeated hissing sound of alliteration<sup>18</sup> and even Lady Macbeth's admonition to "look like th'innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't" (1.5.65). The scriptural serpent is described as being "more subtil then anie beast of the field" (Gen. 3:1) The commentary to this passages states that Satan "abuse[d] the wisdom of the Serpent to deceaue man<sup>19</sup>." This idea is also reflected in Lady Macbeth's directive to "beguile the time," a directive that closely precedes her command to "be the serpent" (1.5.63, 66).

Macbeth seeks to be cunning like a serpent but does not realize until too late that the witches' own cunning plans for his destruction lead him to his death and eternal damnation without providing him with the earthly peace for which he desires. The witches, here as

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<sup>17</sup> The Geneva commentary on Genesis 3:1 that "God suffered Satan to make the serpent his instrument and to speak in him."

<sup>18</sup> I will further discuss the significance of this alliteration later in an attempt to forge a connection between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's language and their relationship with the Devil.

<sup>19</sup> Considering the Renaissance belief that the serpent was a tool of Satan, Lady Macbeth's increasing serpentine associations depict her as a sort of tool of Satan as well, even as a witch herself.

representatives of the Devil<sup>20</sup>, beguile Macbeth, fooling him into believing himself invincible.

Hecate later states their intent for this explicitly:

He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear  
His hopes 'bove wisdom, grace, and fear;  
And you all know, security  
Is mortals' chiefest enemy. (3.5.30-33)

By the conclusion of the play, when Macbeth learns of the witches' trickery he exclaims,

I pull in resolution; and begin  
To doubt th'equivocation of the fiend,  
That lies like truth. (5.5.42-44)

After hearing that the trees of Birnam Wood are moving toward his fortification at Dunsinane Hill, Macbeth realizes he has been fooled by the witches. They have deceived him into believing that he is secure, a hubris that leads to his unraveling. Shielding himself with this supposed invincibility, Macbeth lets down his guard, allowing himself to be vulnerable to defeat. The serpent in the biblical Fall convinces Eve that she does not need to obey God but can achieve her own superiority and independence through eating of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Encouraged by the promptings of Lady Macbeth, Macbeth places his trust in the witches' deceitful promise of greatness, ultimately leading to his own fall<sup>21</sup>.

The witches present an appealing promise to Macbeth—"All hail, Macbeth! that shalt be King hereafter"—a promise that is essentially a fulfillment of prideful desires (1.3.50). This

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<sup>20</sup> In *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Keith Thomas discusses the various definitions of witchcraft prevalent during the Renaissance. I will explore Shakespeare's characterization of them as agents of evil later in this essay.

<sup>21</sup> Lady Macbeth, as I will discuss in more depth later, becomes a witch herself, particularly in her role in luring Macbeth toward evil.

reflects the promise of full-knowledge and equality with God in the biblical account of man's original Fall. In Genesis, the serpent states, "when ye shall eat thereof, your eyes shall be opened, & ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Gen. 3:5). Then, just as Eve persuades Adam to partake in the first sin, Lady Macbeth plays a pivotal role in Macbeth's decision to murder Duncan and become king. Ken Colston in his essay "*Macbeth* and the Tragedy of Sin" explains the parallels between Genesis and the story of the Macbeths:

In Genesis 3, the serpent and Eve suborn Adam to disobey; the woman has the more culpable ambition; a childless couple becomes one in sin and loses paradise; compromised sexuality lurks in the shadows; fertility is cursed... The witches treacherously promise greatness and later invulnerability as the serpent falsely promises divinity and immortality... In believing himself vulnerable... he believes himself to be divine. (Colston 73, 86)

In scripture, the allure of the tree of knowledge enralls Eve. She partakes of the fruit herself and then proffers it to Adam. Similarly, Lady Macbeth is enthralled by the prospect of Macbeth and herself procuring the crown, decides on the plan for their success, and convinces Macbeth to act upon the plan of killing Duncan even after he decides otherwise. While this does not excuse Macbeth's role in his own sin, Shakespeare does capture the intricacies of human relationships<sup>22</sup>. Just as sin becomes an interpersonal affair in the biblical account of the Fall, Shakespeare depicts the fall of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth into ruin as intensely intertwined and reliant upon one another's moral decay. Through these correlations, "Macbeth's tragedy might... appear as a second Fall, with Lady Macbeth as a second Eve" (Muir xxvii).

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<sup>22</sup> Later in this essay, I will discuss the negative effects of sin on human relationships.

The biblical reflections in *Macbeth* continue beyond the initial Fall of man to include the breadth of the effects of sin. In scripture, sin continues to affect the whole of humanity, reaching across all generations. With Adam and Eve's initial sin, the devil's influence entered the world. In *Macbeth* Duncan's murder allows evil's presence to enter the stage more fully. The Porter's scene illustrates the arrival of Hell into not only Macbeth's soul but the whole of Scotland. The Porter, speaking of Macbeth's castle as Hell itself, establishes the depths of the effects of Macbeth's crime. No longer is Macbeth's sin confined to internal "black and deep desires" (1.4.51). By outwardly acting upon his lust for greatness by murdering Duncan, Macbeth allows evil a real presence on the stage and in Scotland.

Macbeth's murder of Duncan resonates with the biblical crucifixion of Christ. In his essay "St. Peter and Macbeth's Porter," Christopher Baker elaborates on the connections between the two deaths by saying that, despite their differences, the language regarding the murdered Duncan depicts a similar imagery to that of the crucified Christ: "His silver skin [was] laced with his golden blood / And his gashed stabs looked like a breach in nature / For ruin's wasteful entrance" (2.3.112-114). Baker acknowledges the similarities in the external effects of both the death of Duncan and the death of Christ comparing the storm that Lennox describes the night of Duncan's death to the earthquake that occurs the day of Christ's death. He also notes the similarities of the synoptic Gospels' accounts of the veil of the Temple being torn in two<sup>23</sup> and Macduff's comment regarding Duncan's death that "Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope / The Lord's anointed Temple" (2.3.67-68). According to Baker the connections establish the fact that Duncan "is an exemplary monarch who carries the divinity that hedges a medieval ruler, he suffers an unmerited death, and the language used to describe him carries unmistakably biblical

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<sup>23</sup> Matthew 27:51, Mark 15:38, and Luke 23:45 mention this occurrence in correlation to Christ's crucifixion.

resonances” (Baker 243). Jack adds that the commentary regarding the occurrences in nature the night of Duncan’s death connect Shakespeare’s characterization of Duncan to that of Christ. Ross explains that “by th’clock ’tis day, / And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp” (2.4.6-7). Jack notes that “Duncan is given all the characteristics of a martyr,” connecting Shakespeare’s language to that of Revelation in its description of the darkness: “And the fourth Angel blew the trumpet, and the third parte of the sunne was smitten, & the third parte of the moone, and the third parte of the starres, so that the third parte of them was darkened” (Rev. 8:12). The connections between *Macbeth* and Revelation emphasize the eternal damnation that accompanies Macbeth’s decision to engage in sin without repentance<sup>24</sup>.

Shakespeare further highlights the extent of Macbeth’s guilt through the extensive use of the term “blood” throughout the play. Jack notes that “In *Macbeth* the influence of James’ allusions both to the Old Testament and to Revelation may be seen in the greater logic and subtlety of this kind of imagery” (Jack 191). Jack compares Macbeth’s statement of the impossibility of washing Duncan’s blood from his hands<sup>25</sup> to the passage in Revelation, which states: “And the second Angel powred out his vial vpon the sea, and it became as the blood of a dead man” (Rev. 16:3). As Jack concludes, “Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are haunted by blood” (Jack 191). Although they do literally wash the blood from their hands, Shakespeare’s use of blood-like terminology throughout the play stands as an audible reminder to the audience of their guilt<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Later I will discuss the fact that Macbeth knows he has a choice to repent but decides instead to continue in his sinful path.

<sup>25</sup> After killing Duncan, Macbeth states, “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood / Cleans from my hand? No, this my hand will rather / The multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red” (2.2.59-62).

<sup>26</sup> The futile attempt to wash the imagined blood away can also connect to the Gospel account of Pilate washing his hands of Jesus’ death. As Pilate says, “I am innocent of the blood of this iust

After killing Duncan, a knocking at the gate awakens Macbeth from his reverie. This knocking acts as a scriptural reference in two ways. First, "The knocking on the gate and the entrance of Macduff recall the entrance of Christ into hell. The Townley porter, named Ribald, when he answers Christ's knocking, calls to Belzebub, as Macbeth's porter asks 'Who's there i'th' name of Belzebub?'" (Muir xxvi). With this insight, the audience can rightly predict Macduff's ultimate defeat of Macbeth as he becomes a type of Christ figure. Ultimately, Macbeth faces his death at the hands of Macduff who expresses,

Despair thy charm;  
And let the Angel, whom thou still hast serv'd,  
Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother's womb  
Untimely ripp'd. (5.8.13-16)

Macduff announces to Macbeth that his defeat is accomplished through one who was born in an unnatural way. Macbeth, not foreseeing that this could be possible, has at this point given in to the allure of entrusting himself to the witches' words and illusions. In Scripture, the Devil's power is defeated by the presence of Christ in the world<sup>27</sup>. Jesus becomes man by being born of woman, but without an earthly father, another unnatural birth. Here, Macduff again acts as a figure of Jesus as he is the one who conquers Macbeth, a source of evil to Scotland.

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man: loke you to it," the people respond with "His blood be on vs, and on our children" (Matt. 27:24-25). Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's bloodied hands incriminate them as not only sinning against Duncan, but as sinning against Christ himself.

<sup>27</sup> Various scriptural accounts refer to the power of Christ over the power of the Devil. For example, St. Paul's letter to the Galatians refers to Jesus as the one "who gave himself for our sins so that he might rescue us from this present evil age" (Gal. 1:4).

The knocking at the gate also reflects Scripture's analogy of God's invitation for a personal relationship with him<sup>28</sup>. Revelation states, "Behold, I stand at the dore, and knocke. If anie man heare my voice & ope the dore, I wil come in vnto him, and wil suppe with him, and he with me" (Rev. 3:20). The biblical passage explains that God awaits an invitation and will not force his way into a person's life. Macbeth's invitation, however, is not for God, but for evil to work in and through his actions. Through this knocking, Shakespeare accentuates the damage to Macbeth's soul through his decision to murder Duncan.

Jack notes the similarities between Macbeth's assassination of the king and the "Old Testament histories of kings whose reigns are characterised as good or evil according to their allegiance to false prophets or the true God" (Jack 180). In his *Basilikon Doron*, James warns, "Consult therefore with no Necromancier nor false Prophet, vpon the successe of your warres; remembering on king *Saules* miserable end: but keepe your hand clene of all Suth-sayers, according to the command in the Lawe of God, dilated by *Ieremie*" (qtd. in Jack 181). James' concern with the biblical warning against false prophets is evident. Shakespeare captures this warning quite poignantly in *Macbeth*. Jack explains Shakespeare's allusions to King Saul's crime<sup>29</sup>:

Macbeth's crime here is the same as Saul's, and his end is the same. When his head was borne in impaled on a pole at the end of the play the audience could not have failed to be reminded of I *Samuel*, xxxi, 9: 'And they cut of his head, and stripped him out of his armour, and sent into the land of Philisims on euerie side, that they shulde publish it. (Jack 182)

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<sup>28</sup> A connection could also be made to the Sermon on the Mount, in which Jesus states, "Aske, and it shalbe giuen to you: seke, & ye shal finde: knock, & it shalbe opened unto you" (Matt. 7:7).

<sup>29</sup> I Samuel contains the story of Saul referred to here.



In I Samuel, Saul, afraid of the imminent attack of the Philistines, seeks out the witch of Endor and commands her to summon the spirit of Samuel so that he may consult with him<sup>30</sup>. This account resonates strongly with Macbeth's visit to the witches at Acheron. He seeks them out and has them summon the apparitions<sup>31</sup>. The commentary to the passage about Saul explains that he only sees Samuel in appearance, for "it was Satan who to blinde his eyes toke vpon him the forme of Samuel." Similarly, Macbeth is not able to decipher the truth behind the messages of the apparitions<sup>32</sup>.

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<sup>34</sup>.

*Macbeth* also contains other references to Revelation. For example, after Duncan's death, Macduff announces to everyone still asleep,

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<sup>30</sup> 1 Samuel 28: 7-20

<sup>31</sup> Act 4, scene 1

<sup>32</sup> I will offer a more detailed analysis of Macbeth's inability to see the truth about the apparitions in a later section.

<sup>33</sup> Macbeth's attempts to kill Malcolm are never portrayed on stage. Rather they are alluded to in a couple of places. First, Lennox says "I do think, / That, had [Macbeth] Duncan's sons under his key / (As, and't please Heaven, he shall not), they should find / What 'twere to kill a father" (3.6.17-19). Also, Malcolm himself tells Macduff, "Devilish Macbeth / By many of these trains hath sought to win me / Into his power" (4.3.117-119).

<sup>34</sup> Here, one may even argue that in killing Macduff's children, Macbeth's safety is further jeopardized as this forges Macduff's resolve to kill Macbeth himself.

Shake off this downy sleep, death's counterfeit,  
And look on death itself!—up, up, and see  
The great doom's image!—Malcolm! Banquo!  
As from your graves rise up, and walk like sprites,  
To countenance this horror! (2.3.75-79)

Jack compares this passage to the passage in Revelation, which says, “And the sea gaue vp her dead, which were in her, and death and hell deliuered vp the dead, which were in them” (Rev. 20:13). This reference of rising from the dead present in both instances also contrasts Macbeth's ultimate damnation, an inability to rise from eternal sleep.

### **Self-fulfilling Prophecy: Predestination Versus Free Will**

In *Macbeth*, the prophecy of the witches seems to create the downward spiral of destruction that Macbeth finds himself in as the play progresses. Shakespeare creates the scenario of the self-fulfilling prophecy in such a way that his audience would find difficulty in detecting any resolution to whether the prophecy creates the action, the action occurs regardless of the prophecy, or the subject's free will is strongly swayed by its promise but remains free will nonetheless. One possibility is that the prophecy is solely responsible for the events of the play. In this case, the witches act more as agents of fate than as agents of evil or temptation towards evil<sup>35</sup>. In this possibility, the witches state what is to happen, easily justified as they do speak in the future tense and their predictions do become reality throughout the course of the play. For example, they tell Macbeth that he “shalt be King hereafter!” (1.3.50). Regardless of the reasons why Macbeth achieves the crown, he is King Macbeth by the beginning of act 3. Act 3 opens

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<sup>35</sup> Coming from “wyrd” meaning “fate,” this identification of the witches as “weïrd” allows for the possibility of the witches being agents of fate. Shakespeare allows this debate to occur in his play.

with Banquo's reflections on how the events have unfolded by saying, "Thou hast it now: King, Cawdor, Glamis, all, / As the weird women promis'd" (1.3.1-2). Perhaps the witches are agents of fate with full control over the events of the play. This would seem to resonate with proponents of predestination, as well as pagans and atheists. However, the strong emphasis Shakespeare places upon consequence throughout the play contradicts the individual blamelessness that a fully governing fate would implicate. Shakespeare seems to leave this ambiguity as a reflection of the uncertainty of predestination present during his time when free will was a topic of debate. Martin Luther, in his "An Attack on Free Will," asserted that actions are predestined according to the will of God:

Again, Proverbs 16[:1] says this: "It is man's part to prepare his heart, but it is the Lord's to govern his tongue." That is, a man usually proposed many things, when in fact his deeds are so little in his control that he does not even have within his power the words for this deed of his but rather is forced by the marvelous providence of God both to speak and to act differently from what he had in mind.... [T]he path of a man does not proceed as he think, but as the Lord ordains....Where, then, is free will? It is completely fictitious. (Luther 118)

Desiderius Erasmus, on the other hand, asserted that free will is a necessary part of God's design:

Nearly the whole of Scripture speaks of nothing but conversion, endeavour, and striving to improve. All this would become meaningless once it was accepted that doing good or evil was a matter of necessity; and so too would all the promises, threats, complaints, reproaches, entreaties, blessings, and

curses directed towards those who have amended their ways, or those who have refused to change. (Erasmus 123)

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* seems to have evidence supporting both trains of thought<sup>36</sup>. 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 th' 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'ld 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 th' inventor. This even-handed justice  
Commends th' ingredience of our poison'd chalice  
To our own lips. (1.7.1-12)

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<sup>36</sup> This could reflect the convention of drama to showcase debates.

Macbeth hesitates in his decision to kill Duncan, contemplating the consequences that would follow if his crime were discovered. By showing Macbeth's indecision, Shakespeare allows free will to be present in this riddle of a self-fulfilling prophecy. In his contemplation of the consequences, Macbeth refers to the "even-handed justice" that would govern the pronouncement of his consequences (1.7.10). His hesitation to kill King Duncan suggests that he retains autonomy in his actions. His acknowledgement of justice suggests that he is responsible and culpable for his actions, a condition that would seem unfair he were not at liberty to choose the course of action in the first place. The question remains, however, of whether Macbeth would have killed the king if he had never met the witches and heard their prophecy of his future kingship.

*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.

## Chapter 2: Depiction of Temptation

### Temptation is Powerful

In his *Daemonologie* James says that “assaultes of Sathan are most certainly practized” (James 2). The power of the devil is not greater than the power of God, but his attacks are certainly powerful and dangerous. Jack explains, “It is not merely human weakness that endangers the soul, but the direct attack of well-armed agents of Hell” (Jack 176). In *Macbeth* Shakespeare depicts the dangers of temptation. Macbeth himself falls prey to the allure of the witches’ words by choosing to murder Duncan.

Based on his beliefs expressed in his *Daemonologie*, James would conclude that Macbeth is already a character of weak faith in God. He does not guard himself with the “armour of God” in order to “be able to stand against the assaults of the deuil” (Eph. 6:11). On the other hand, Banquo exemplifies resilience to the witches’ temptations. He expresses doubt regarding the witches’ promises in a cautionary tone towards Macbeth who appears eager to celebrate their truthfulness after being named the Thane of Cawdor<sup>37</sup>. Later, Banquo tells Macbeth that he would be willing to support his claim to the crown if it were to happen as long as in doing so he could “keep / [His] bosom franchis’d, and allegiance clear” (2.1.27-28). After discovering Duncan’s murder Banquo expresses, “In the great hand of God I stand” (2.4.128). Through his adherence to God, Banquo never succumbs to any evil acts for his own gains<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> After asking Banquo if he hopes to see his prophecies come to fruition, Banquo expresses concern: “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’s / In deepest consequence.—” (1.3.122-126).

<sup>38</sup> His early death does leave some room for debate about whether Banquo might have taken action for his own gains eventually. However, based on the examples listed here, I believe Shakespeare is establishing Banquo as having an allegiance to both God and king, unlike Macbeth who does not ever appeal to God for assistance.

The goodness of multiple other characters in the play highlights the weakness of Macbeth's moral resolve, which ultimately leads him to succumb to the witches' temptations. In his conversation with Macduff, Malcolm compares himself to a "weak, poor, innocent lamb / T'appease an angry god" (4.3.16-17). Also Malcolm's speech to Macduff toys with the identification of characters as virtuous instead of morally weak. H. W. Love in "Seeing the Difference: Good and Evil in the World of Macbeth" explains the significance of this speech:

The veracity of this speech, saving its references to the speaker, is confirmed not only by IV.i and by everything that has happened since the murder of Duncan, but by verbal echoes, particularly the image of 'sweet milk of concord'. It picks up Lady Macbeth's earlier references to her dashing out the brains of 'the babe that milks me' (I.vii.55), and to the 'milk of human kindness' (I.v.17) coursing through her husband's veins and exhibited by his soliloquy in Duncan's defence in I.vii. (Love 219)

Malcolm's disavowal of his falsely stated sins conveys a tone of absurdity that he could possibly be that which he previously claimed in his testing of Macduff. Malcolm is even compared to his father, "a most sainted King"<sup>39</sup> (4.3.109). Descriptions associated with Macduff and King Edward also depict them as characters who are holy enough to keep their consciences clear. Lenox refers to Macduff when saying, "Some holy Angel / Fly to the court of England" (3.6.45-46). King Edward of England is described with overtly religious language. Although the audience never sees him, Malcolm explains that King Edward "solicits Heaven" and has

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<sup>39</sup> This particular reference occurs in Macduff's chastisement of Malcolm for not being holy like his parents were. However, as Malcolm is only testing Macduff's loyalty to Scotland through his falsities, this comparison adds to Malcolm's imminent disavowal of his "black scruples" (4.3.116).

miraculous gifts of healing and prophecy<sup>40</sup>. He says that “sundry blessings hang about his throne, / That speak him full of grace” (4.3.149, 158-159). Shakespeare’s use of religious terminology conveys these characters as holy. Even though the audience does not witness them grappling with temptation as Macbeth does<sup>41</sup>, these characters stand as foils to Macbeth in their ability to thwart the devil and be saint-like.

### **Temptation is Alluring and Preys upon Internal Desires**

While it may seem that the witches plant the seed or even control Macbeth’s fate<sup>42</sup>, his reaction to their initial greeting of him by his future titles indicates that Macbeth may have already considered the possibility of his future kingship, perhaps even the possibility of procuring his future kingship through his own means. This is evident in the response from Banquo upon his notice of Macbeth’s reaction to the proclamation of his future titles: “Good Sir, why do you start, and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?” (1.3.51-52). The fact that both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth contemplate murdering Duncan separately from one another and prior to their first meeting after Macbeth’s encounter with the witches also indicates that this course of action is something that they had already considered. These ideas suggest that the witches are simply encouraging the thought that had already originated organically in Macbeth’s

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<sup>40</sup> In *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Keith Thomas notes that there was often an ambiguity surrounding those who claimed to use magic for helpful purposes. Regardless of whether Shakespeare is entering that debate by depicting Edward as having supernatural powers, he does seem to be portraying him as a religious savior, much like biblical figures who performed miraculous deeds through the power of God.

<sup>41</sup> Banquo, however, does have brief moments of intrigue regarding the witches’ prophecies, but does not choose to act upon any evil impulses.

<sup>42</sup> There is certainly evidence that would support the role of the witches as agents of fate rather than agents of evil; however, any evidence that supports them as agents of fate, which would diminish the freedom of Macbeth’s choices, could arguably support James’ belief that the persuasion of the devil is too strong for a man to overcome by his own strength.



mind<sup>43</sup>. Perhaps they have no special ability to predict the future but rather inspire an action that was already on its way to coming to fruition<sup>44</sup>. In Banquo's line that the witches' prophecies "sound so fair," Shakespeare embeds a hint about the danger of sin's false promises (1.3.52). Temptation often looks desirable. In *Macbeth*, his future kingship certainly sounds "fair." However, the cost of giving in to the temptation to take hold of it through killing Duncan is understatedly "foul."<sup>45</sup>

### **Temptation is Deceitful**

The Porter's discussion of equivocation in act 2, although somewhat comically lewd, poignantly captures the trickery of temptation. The Porter first, in his role-playing as the gatekeeper of Hell, admits an equivocator "Knock, knock. Who's there, i'th' other devil's name?—Faith, 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: O! come in, equivocator" (2.3.8-12)<sup>46</sup>. The implications of the Porter's scene of Macbeth's castle now being in a state of Hell heightens the dangers involved in equivocation. Macbeth has been fooled by the witches into believing that his trust in them is worth the sacrifice of his soul. The Porter's

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<sup>43</sup> This connects to the belief that Satan's power could be thwarted by someone morally upright. If someone has already been dwelling on selfish desires, he would be more apt to succumb to the promptings of Satan.

<sup>44</sup> A complication to this argument arises in the witches' ability to predict exactly how Macbeth will die, unless the apparitions' messages are another example of the witches simply encouraging the inclinations in Macbeth to let down his guard, a desire of his because being able to do so would indicate that he is safe in his position as king, thus enabling the situations that allow the messages to come true. In this case, the apparitions' messages become another circumstance where the witches are simply encouraging the inclinations already existing within Macbeth.

<sup>45</sup> In act 1, the witches' paradoxical proclamation that "fair is foul, and foul is fair" foreshadows the deceitful allure of temptation (1.2.11).

<sup>46</sup> Shakespeare's mention of an equivocator also alludes to the act of the Jesuit priest accused of being complicit in the Gunpowder Plot against King James (Muir 59).

conversation with Macduff and Lenox about the effects of alcohol serve as a symbolic illustration of the equivocal effects of sin as well:

Lechery, Sir, it provokes, and unprovokes: it provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance. Therefore, much drink may be said to be an equivocator with lechery: it makes him, and it mars him; it sets him on, and it takes him off; it persuades him, and disheartens him; makes him stand to, and not stand to: in conclusion, equivocates him in a sleep, and giving him the lie, leaves him.

(2.3.28-35)

The Porter's description of the effects of drinking correlates to the effects of temptation and sin because both offer false promises. Just as drink "sets him on, and takes him off," temptation incites a person to sin, but does so with an empty promise of satisfaction. Furthermore, the Porter explains that drink prevents a man from acquiring satisfaction. Similarly, sin prevents a man from acquiring the satisfaction that he believes he can achieve. For example, when Macbeth murders Duncan, he hears a voice that tells him, "Sleep no more! / Macbeth does murder Sleep" (2.2.34-35). Macbeth's inability to sleep after he commits the murder illustrates his inability to acquire peace and satisfaction. He acquires the throne, but he does not feel content with his new state in life. He utters his discontent when he says, "To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus" (3.1.47). However, just as a man will often give in to drunkenness again and again, Macbeth indulges in the temptation to continue sinning in an attempt to feel the satisfaction he craves.

## Chapter 3: Definitions of Sin

With such an extensive use of biblical and moralistic themes and allusions throughout *Macbeth*, one may reasonably assume that Shakespeare is entering the conversation of the relevance of religion in people's lives. While he seems purposely to leave many ideas open to debate, such as whether humans are subject to predestination or free will, he does provide a fairly concrete description of the consequences of sin. Through an exploration of various literary tropes, I will attempt to define sin, both in identity and consequence, according to *Macbeth*. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare provides several definitions of sin: sin is a compliance with the Devil and a perversion of goodness or virtue. Consequently, sin, disrupts human relationships, distorts the ability to reason, creates a Hell on earth, and prohibits life, instead resulting in only death.

### **Sin is Compliance with the Devil**

Sin denotes compliance with the Devil. In his essay, "Tanistry, the 'Due of Birth' and Macbeth's Sin," Michael J. C. Echeruo explains the choice that Macbeth is actually making through his decision to murder Duncan:

[Macbeth's sin] is the result of his willingness to risk the consequences of eternal damnation for the glory of a temporal crown...The preference itself is damnation. Macbeth himself equates it with a selling of his soul to the devil. Yet, he returns to the witches in Act IV, thereby confirming the sale and ensuring that his subsequent career would be analogous to that of a fallen prince, another Lucifer. (Echeruo 450)

Macbeth's willingness to "jump the life to come" and his later acknowledgment that he has given his "eternal jewel... to the common Enemy of man" establishes Echeruo's assertion that Macbeth's actions bind him to the Devil himself (1.7.7; 3.1.67-68). To corroborate this assertion

further, an understanding of the identity of the witches is necessary as they are undoubtedly the source of the commotion and turmoil in which Macbeth finds himself trapped. Witches were often thought to be in compact with the Devil himself, serving him in his plans for human ruin<sup>47</sup>. Just as they beckon foul weather, they concoct a storm of confusion and destruction that entangles Macbeth. The hellish imagery of the play identifies their influence as that of the devil. Banquo recognizes this soon after his and Macbeth's encounter with them, cautioning Macbeth against these "instruments of Darkness" (1.3.124). Dark and stormy weather accompanies them on stage, creating an atmosphere of foreboding. They revel in mischief and destruction. The audience sees this immediately with the play's opening. They discuss their imminent meeting with Macbeth "When the hurlyburly's done, / When the battle's lost and won," a paradox suggestive of the confusion that they will brew around him (1.1.3-4). When the witches appear in act 1, scene 3, they recapitulate their separate antics to one another, a conversation that serves to illustrate the depths of the destruction of which they are capable and in which they revel:

But in a sieve I'll tither sail,  
And like a rat without a tail;  
I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do...  
I'll drain him dry as hay:  
Sleep shall neither night nor day  
Hang upon his penthouse lid;  
He shall live a man forbid.  
Weary sev'n-nights nine times nine,  
Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine:

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<sup>47</sup> I will discuss evidence that Macbeth's witches are agents of the Devil elsewhere.

Though his bark cannot be lost,

Yet it shall be tempest-tost. (1.3.8-10, 18-25)

In her description of her antics with the sailor<sup>48</sup>, the first witch reveals that of which they are capable. Through their influence over the weather, their ability to change forms, and their delight in destruction, the witches foreshadow the threat of temptation and confusion that they will soon pose to Macbeth. In these lines, the witch explains that “Sleep shall neither night nor day / Hang upon his penthouse lid,” which connects to Macbeth’s eventual inability to sleep (1.3.18-19).

This foreshadowing is strengthened by the entrance of Macbeth directly after the witches’ discourse: “A drum! A drum! / Macbeth doth come” (1.3.30-31). These lines follow the first witch’s statement: “Here I have a pilot’s thumb, / Wrack’d, as homeward he did come” (1.3.28-29). The connection between the sailor’s demise and Macbeth’s imminent confusion and subsequent downfall is heightened by the rhyming sound of each line “thumb / ... come / ... drum! / ... come” (1.3.28-31). The witches later repeat this sound, although pluralized, with their announcement of his second meeting with them in Act 4: “By the pricking of my thumbs, / Something wicked this way comes” (4.1.44-45).

The language of the witches and Macbeth connects them further. The witches conclude their first scene with the lines “Fair is foul, and foul is fair: / Hover through the fog and filthy air” (1.1.11-12). In Macbeth’s first appearance in the play, he comments, “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (1.3.38). His literal implication is regarding the victory of battle and the foul weather of the day as they travel to Forres. Even on this level of meaning, the foul weather symbolizes the presence of the witches, as they are always accompanied by foul weather on stage. The underlying meaning, however, contains a clear connection between Macbeth and the

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<sup>48</sup> This could also foreshadow the role of Macbeth as figurative captain of the ship of Scotland and the destruction that will ensue with him at its helm.

witches. This is evidence of the influence that the witches are already having over Macbeth and indication of his vulnerability to their influence over him, their “supernatural soliciting” as he later terms it (1.3.130). Muir notes, “Dowden (p. 249) comments on this parallel that Shakespeare intimated by it ‘that, although Macbeth has not yet set eyes upon these hags, the connection is already established between his soul and them. Their spells have already wrought upon his blood’” (Muir 25). Because of his weak moral resolve, Macbeth concedes to the overwhelming influence of the witches.

Macbeth’s connection with the witches also stems from a possible inclination to procure the crown for himself prior to the start of the play. He has both ambition and gumption, illustrated through his valiant performance on the battlefield against Macdonwald:

For brace Macbeth (well he deserves that name),  
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish’d steel,  
Which smok’d with bloody execution,  
Like Valour’s minion, carv’d out his passage,  
Till he fac’d the slave;  
Which ne’er shook hands, not bad farewell to him,  
Till he unseam’d him from the nave to th’chops,  
And fix’d his head upon our battlements. (1.2.16-23)

Lady Macbeth also reveals Macbeth’s ambition in her reflection on his letter to her about the witches’ predictions of his kingship: “Thou wouldst be great; / Art not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it” (1.5.18-19). Lady Macbeth explains that Macbeth has ambition. Thus, he could easily have desired greatness, even in the form of kingship, prior to the play’s opening. What he does not have prior to the opening of the play is “illness.” He has

proven himself to be loyal to King Duncan, when even others—Macdonwald and the Thane of Cawdor—prove to be treacherous. The witches prey upon Macbeth’s ambition, his lust for greatness. They present him with the possibility of procuring the crown for himself in their prophecy to him:

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

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

All hail, Macbeth! that shalt be King hereafter. (1.3.48-50)

Through responding to Macbeth rather than to Banquo who initially commands them to speak, they invite Macbeth to ally himself with them. When Banquo questions them upon their initial appearance to them he notes,

You seem to understand me,

By each at once her choppy finger laying

Upon her skinny lips. (1.3.43-45).

Muir’s note on the text explains a shared understanding that “the gesture means that the witches refuse to speak to Banquo; they reply directly to Macbeth” (Muir 15). Through this subtle, but effective, invitation to forge a relationship of trust with them, Macbeth begins to attain some of the “illness that should attend” his ambition to be king. Through this the witches allow him to believe that he has some power over them<sup>49</sup> and that they are offering to him a gift that he might not expect to obtain as quickly through virtue. This instills in Macbeth the belief that placing his trust in them will allow him to satisfy his ambition.

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<sup>49</sup> Later, Macbeth seeks out the witches believing they will do what he commands them to do: “I will tomorrow / (And betimes I will) to the Weïrd Sisters: / More shall they speak” (3.4.131-133).

This Faustian contract begins with his summoning of the darkness to shield his actions: “Stars, hide your fires! / Let not light see my black and deep desires” (1.4.50-51). Macbeth later solidifies his relationship with evil by murdering Duncan. Macbeth’s distress about his inability to say “amen” after committing his sin illustrates the spiritual consequences of this deed.

One cried, “God bless us!” and, “Amen,” the other,  
As they had seen me with these hangman’s hands.  
List’ning their fear, I could not say, “Amen,”  
When they did say, “God bless us”...  
But wherefore could not I pronounce “Amen”?  
I had most need of blessing, and “Amen”  
Stuck in my throat. (2.2.26-29, 30-32)

In the Folger Theatre production, Macbeth speaks these lines while on his knees in a gesture of complete grief. Macbeth is not blind to the fact that he has altered the state of his soul through his decision to kill Duncan. After Duncan’s death is apparent to the assembly of Inverness the following morning, Macbeth pronounces to his fellow thanes, “Had I but died an hour before this chance, / I had liv’d a blessed time” (2.3.89-90). The underlying meaning of these lines reveals his awareness that his blessedness, or holiness, has been shattered by his evil deed.

After his coronation, when Macbeth reasons that his feelings of insecurity must be due to Banquo’s possible awareness of his crime, Macbeth again turns to evil to have his friend killed. Physically, he hires men to do the deed for him. However, his words at the end of the conversation with Lady Macbeth are reminiscent of his thoughts after hearing Malcolm named Prince of Cumberland:

Come, seeling Night,



Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful Day,  
And, with thy bloody and invisible hand,  
Cancel, and tear to pieces, that great bond  
Which keep me pale! (3.2.46-50)

His invocation here reflects similar sentiments to his command “Stars, hide your fires” in Act 1. He receives the “illness” to accomplish the deed through his continued relationship with evil.

Lady Macbeth also invokes evil to give her the pluck she needs to encourage her husband in his “illness.”

Come, you Spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full  
Of direst cruelty! ...  
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!’ (1.5.40-43, 50-53)

Through this, Lady Macbeth makes her own Faustian compact with the Devil<sup>50</sup>. She recognizes the promise of Macbeth’s kingship as one that he can attain through murder and, therefore, calls upon the “Spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts” to aid her in playing her part as his accomplice. Her invocation of the “thick Night” harkens to Macbeth’s invocations. Her invocation directly

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<sup>50</sup> As I explain soon after his, Lady Macbeth evolves into a witch herself through this.

requests the “smoke of Hell,” and, like Macbeth, she chooses to separate herself from an alliance with Heaven, choosing instead an alliance with the Devil to fulfill her own ambition.

According to Joanna Levin in “Lady MacBeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria,” Lady’s Macbeth words and actions depict her as a witch herself. Levin notes, “Although Lady Macbeth never obtains the epithet of witch during the play, she would have been considered a witch according to the Witchcraft Statute of 1604” (Levin 39):

the witch was little more than the servant of Satan and did not have independent control over the supernatural. She...formed a voluntary demonic pact with the devil...Continental theories emphasized that the witch had been sexually seduced by the infinitely persuasive devil, partially voiding her own agency...Further, as “weaker vessel[s]” after Eve, women were thought to be more open to satanic influence than men. (Levin 29)

Thus, Lady Macbeth’s calling upon the “Spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts” becomes an invitation for a demonic pact. The overtly sexual language of “Come to my woman’s breasts, / And take my milk for gall”<sup>51</sup> in her invocation lends itself to the theory that she is being seduced by the devil as was conventionally believed to be the allure for a woman to engage in such a pact (1.5.47-48). Lady Macbeth’s initial greeting to Macbeth further establishes this connection between herself and the witches, and subsequently evil, as she says, “Great Glamis! worthy Cawdor! / Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter!” (1.5.54-55). Just as the witches’ first

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<sup>51</sup> Since she specifically addresses the milk of her breasts, one could make an argument that this also suggests that Lady Macbeth is a witch and is inviting her familiar, although unnamed and absent from the play, to nurse from her. In *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Thomas discusses this as a common identifying feature of witches: “This familiar... was supposed to have been given by the Devil himself, or purchased or inherited from another witch. The witch’s mark was sometimes thought of as a teat from which the familiar could suck the witch’s blood as a form of nourishment” (Thomas 530).

words to Macbeth were exultations of his prophesied glory, Lady Macbeth's first words greet with these same promises. The "instruments of Darkness" have become infused into both Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's souls.

In this same scene, multiple incidents of alliteration convey serpent-like imagery. In her prayer to the "Spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts," Lady Macbeth utters a hissing sound as she says, "Stop up th' access and passage of remorse" and then later, "sightless substances" (1.5.40-41; 44; 49). After Macbeth arrives, she begins a passage in which she speaks to him by saying, "O, never / Shall sun that morrow see!" and then ends it with "solely sovereign sway and masterdom" (1.5.60-61; 70). Embedded within this passage is her directive to "look like th' innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't," which serves to materialize the sound imagery conveyed in her alliterative phrases (1.5.65-66).

Lady Macbeth's eventual obsession with washing the "damned spot" from her hands contains another suggestion that she has become a witch herself (5.1.33). In *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Thomas explains the significance of a witch's spot:

The one common feature of English witch-trials which does indicate some sort of association in the popular mind between maleficent magic and the Devil was the notion that the witch bore on her body the mark of her profession in the form of a spot or excrescence, which could be discovered by searching her for an 'unnatural mark.' (Thomas 530)

Shakespeare's use of the term "spot" by Lady Macbeth seems to be deliberate, and because this was such a commonly accepted identifying feature of a witch, his audience would undoubtedly have detected this sign of her transformation into a witch herself.

A circumstance that would suggest another sign of Macbeth's alliance with evil lies in the fact that originally actors would have performed multiple roles throughout the play. A likely doubling are the roles of the three witches<sup>52</sup> and the three murderers of Banquo. If this is the case, then Shakespeare's audience would have witnessed the three actors who tempt Macbeth into sin through their prophecies of his kingship later act in alliance with Macbeth to further his spiraling into sin by murdering Banquo under his command. Macbeth's initial calling upon evil to aid him in his first murder takes a new, much more obvious manifestation with his murder of Banquo.

By the time Macbeth seeks out the witches in Act 4, a marked change in his character has occurred. Macbeth acknowledges his Faustian contract as the shift when he expresses his fears in Banquo and admits that he gave his "eternal jewel / ... to the common Enemy of man" (3.1.67-68). He understands that his choice to assassinate Duncan came with a price, the price of his soul. However, he does not yet recognize the full extent of his sacrifice. He acknowledges his damnation but does not yet understand how devastating his eternal damnation will be, but he does acknowledge damnation. He initially believed his present kingship to be of more value than his future sanctity. Now, however, he begins to see that even his present kingship is not as glorious as he expected it to be<sup>53</sup>. His contract with the devil for present glory as king has not only deprived him of his eternal sanctity but has shattered his earthly happiness as well.

As Macbeth approaches his dethronement, he begins to realize that the witches have fooled him. As he discovers the truth about each apparition's message, he strains to cling on to whatever element of trust in the messages he can muster. He recognizes his fault in trusting

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<sup>52</sup> The witches' masculine attributes add to this possibility: "you should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (1.3.45-47).

<sup>53</sup> "To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus" (3.1.47).

them, but by this point his relationship with the Devil is all he knows. As he prepares himself to fight the oncoming armies of Malcolm and Siward—a battle that ultimately leads to his death—Macbeth summons Seyton to dress him in his armor. Some scholars have suggested that the pronunciation of Seyton’s name could be “a quibble on *Satan*” (Muir 146). Morris suggests, “It is hard to overlook the pronunciation of the name of the last loyal retainer of Macbeth: Seyton. His appearance is timed magnificently” (Morris 36). This idea lends itself to the development of Macbeth’s relationship with evil throughout the play. His initial relationship with the Devil begins with temptation and subtle acceptance, solidifies through Macbeth’s first act of murder, and peaks with the embodiment of the Devil as the one who literally prepares him to meet his death. His summoning of Seyton surrounds a fragmented soliloquy of self-reflection:

Seyton!—I am sick at heart,  
When I behold—Seyton, I say!—This push  
Will cheer me ever, or disseat me now.  
I have liv’d long enough: my way of life  
Is fall’n into the sere, the yellow leaf;  
And that which should accompany old age,  
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,  
I must not look to have; but in their stead,  
Curses, not loud, but deep, mouth-honour, breath,  
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.  
Seyton! — (5.3.19-29)

Macbeth's alliance with the Devil has segregated him from any other relationships<sup>54</sup>. The people that surround him do so out of duty. Macbeth recognizes that instead of the things one should have at the close of his life, he has only "curses," he has only the taunting and subsequent damnation of evil<sup>55</sup>.

As the play nears its conclusion, Macbeth reveals his thoughts on the meaning of life. He acknowledges that he is nearing his own death and that he has never been an admirable king, but he does not explicitly express regret for his decisions to follow the path that he has followed. Instead he reacts to his imminent death with numbness and despondency. In response to Lady Macbeth's death, Macbeth reveals his view on the meaning of life:

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. (5.5.19-28)

According to S. L. Bethell in *Shakespeare and the Popular Dramatic Tradition*, Macbeth reveals through these lines his "hopelessness [as] a hardened sinner, to whom the universe has no

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<sup>54</sup> I will discuss sin's effects on Macbeth's relationships in more detail later.

<sup>55</sup> In Genesis, the serpent's punishment from God is to be "cursed above all cattle, and about every beast of the field" (Gen. 3:14). Like the serpent, Macbeth is cursed and alone.

meaning” (qtd. in Muir 153). Macbeth’s contract with the devil forged through placing his trust in the witches’ promise of his kingship has left him in complete despair, ultimately concluding that life means “nothing.”

## **Sin is a Perversion of Virtue and Goodness**

In his conversation with Macduff, Malcolm states, "Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell" (4.3.22). This allusion to the fall of Lucifer from the brightest angel to Satan encapsulates the identity of evil as a perversion of good. Lucifer should have been good and heavenly, but he chose otherwise. In doing so, his identity was distorted to become evil itself. Shakespeare illustrates this through several instances in *Macbeth*.

First, the three witches demonstrate a perversion of what women, or even humans, should be. Upon seeing the witches, Banquo utters his confusion regarding their identity by saying,

What are these,  
So wither'd 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? (1.3.39-43)

Through these lines he questions the witches' identity as human, even first speaking about them rather than to them and questioning "what" rather than "who." He reasons their possible humanness based only on the fact that they are on the earth as humans are, which indicates his thought of them being possibly supernatural. Then, once concluding that they could be human, he continues to question whether male or female:

You should be women,  
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret

That you are so. (1.3.45-47)

In stating that the witches "*should* be women" (emphasis mine) Banquo addresses the perversion of their identity<sup>56</sup>. They are not as they should be. Even the characters' naming of them as "weird" suggests that they are abnormal and twisted from what they should be<sup>57</sup>.

The repeated use of triads suggests an inversion of the Trinity, the core principle of Christian belief. The motif of threes, especially three prophecies, apparitions, murderers, and witches, illustrates an inversion of the scriptural number of three, such as the Trinity and the instance of Jesus rising on the third day. Shakespeare surrounds *Macbeth* with triadic symbolism, reflecting the counteracting powers of evil and good. This motif illustrates the Renaissance belief that evil was not a separate force, equal in strength and power to good, but a fallen perversion of it. Just as darkness only exists as an absence of light, evil exists as a perversion of goodness<sup>58</sup>.

The triadic motif is present in the three witches, the three prophecies each to Macbeth and Banquo, and the three apparitions that the witches show to Macbeth. The witches sometimes refer to the significance of threes, often using it as a curse upon Macbeth.

Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,

And thrice again, to make up nine

Peace!--the charm's wound up. (1.3.35-37)

This cursing with language of threes calls to mind the blessing of calling upon the heavenly Trinity, representing the inversion of good that the witches embody. Shakespeare suggests the inimical nature of this inversion of goodness in when Macbeth states, "This even-handed Justice / Commends th'ingredience of our poison'd chalice / To our own lips" (1.7.10-12). The chalice,

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<sup>56</sup> As the original staging of this play would have cast male actors in the roles of the witches, as well as female characters, the audience's perception of their gender is further complicated.

<sup>57</sup> Again, "weird" also connects to its origin "fate." Shakespeare toys with the free will debate.

<sup>58</sup> In an earlier section I discussed the light versus darkness motif in more detail.



a possible reference to the liturgical communion chalice, becomes poisoned with the ingredients of evil. This twisting of holiness becomes as a poison, ultimately leading to ruin.

### **Sin is Unnatural; It Acts Contrarily to the Natural Order of the World**

The first major indication that Macbeth's sinful desires to murder Duncan are contrary to his natural instincts is during his aside contemplating whether the witches' initial message to him is "fair" or "foul."

This supernatural soliciting  
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 ribs,  
Against the use of nature? (1.3.130-137)

According to Colston "Conscience knocks well before the deed, the crime, is done; it beats in our hearts" (Colston 69). Colston's suggestion about the role of conscience seems to provide clarity for Macbeth's physical sensations. Macbeth's conscience is attempting to warn him of the dangers of this "supernatural soliciting." By communicating with him through the physical sensation of his hair standing on end and his heart racing in his chest, Shakespeare illustrates the unnaturalness of this "supernatural soliciting." Not only are the witches' promises "supernatural" but they also tempt Macbeth toward an action that is directly against human nature<sup>59</sup>.

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<sup>59</sup> Although the biblical Fall has weakened humanity's resolve against temptation, as described earlier in my essay, *Genesis* asserts that God created humans as inherently good: "And God sawe all that he had made, & lo, it was very good" (*Genesis* 1:31).

Prior to Macbeth's decision to murder Duncan, Lady Macbeth expresses concern that Macbeth's "nature / ... is too full o'th'milk of human kindness, / To catch the nearest way" (1.5.16-18). Richard G. Moulton in *Shakespeare as a Dramatic Artist* suggests that "we should read *humankind* as meaning *human nature*; 'and that the sense of the whole passage would be more obvious if the whole phrase were printed as one word, not "human kindness" but "humankind-ness"—that shrinking from the unnatural which is a marked feature of the practical man" (qtd. in Muir 27). Thus, Lady Macbeth's concern is that her husband is too human to perform a deed that is so contrary to the nature of humanity. Lady Macbeth proceeds to dwell on this idea, claiming that Macbeth does not have enough "illness" to commit such a sinful act as murdering Duncan (1.5.20). The term "illness" is reminiscent of the repetitive use of "foul" throughout the speech of both the witches and Macbeth. The correlation suggests that "illness" refers contextually to actions of evil, implying that evil acts are acts against human nature.

After hearing that Duncan will be "under [her] battlements" for the night, Lady Macbeth relinquishes her own humanness in exchange for the illness she needs to carrying out her own ambition in order to murder him. She summons the "Spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts," asking them to "unsex" her, "stop up the access and passage to remorse," and "come to [her] woman's breasts" (1.5.40-41, 44, 47). Lady Macbeth's bodily terminology highlights the connection between her calling upon the "Spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts" and the opposition of her actions against nature. Through her disavowal of her femininity in explicitly biological terms, Lady Macbeth disavows her own "milk of human kindness."

Lady Macbeth displays this anti-humanness when she challenges Macbeth's indecision about committing the murder:

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 pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,  
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn. (1.7.54-58)

In claiming that she would murder her own child during what is often considered to be the most tender moment between a mother and child, a moment of total dependence and nurturing, Lady Macbeth flaunts her lack of not only femininity but of humanness. This passage also connects to the repeated reference to dead babies<sup>60</sup>. Historically, Lady Macbeth had a child with her first husband. However, she and Macbeth have no children. Their inability to parent children together seems an implicit component of their compact with the Devil. Since God created man and woman, charging them with the duty to “bring forth the fruit and multiply,” this too is another indication of the unnaturalness of their sin (Gen. 2:28).

Throughout *Macbeth*, Shakespeare illustrates the upheaval of human nature once it has been tainted by sin. In response to Macbeth's sin, the natural world also reacts in agitation. For example, Rosse and the Old Man discuss the bizarre events of “A falcon” that “Was by a mousing owl hawk'd at, and kill'd” and “Duncan's horses” that “Turn'd wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out, / Contending 'gainst obedience” and did “eat each other” (2.4.12-14, 16-18). Also, Lenox describes the night of Duncan's assassination as wild and unnatural:

The night has been unruly: where we lay,  
Our chimneys were blown down; and, as they say,  
Lamentings heard i'th' air; strange screams of death,  
And, prophesying with accents terrible

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<sup>60</sup> The witches include a “Finger of birth-strangled babe” in their cauldron (4.1.30).

Of dire combustion, and confus'd events,  
New hatch'd to th'woeful time, the obscure bird  
Clamour'd the livelong night: some say the earth  
Was feverous, and did shake. (2.3.53-60)

J. C. Curry in his *Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns* comments that "the storm which rages over Macbeth's castle... is no ordinary tempest caused by the regular movements of the heavenly bodies, but rather a manifestation of demonic power over the elements of nature... The firm-set earth is so sensitized by the all-pervading demonic energy that it is feverous and shakes" (qtd. in Muir 61-62). The witches' influence over nature foreshadows the effects on nature that the evil of Macbeth's actions have. Because sin is unnatural, the natural world responds in agitation. The earth's shaking specifically acts as a reminder of the biblical account of an earthquake occurring at the time of Jesus's crucifixion<sup>61</sup>. The parallel heightens Macbeth's sin against Duncan, establishing his moral culpability.

Later while Macduff is in England imploring Malcolm for external aid for Scotland, Rosse arrives and comments on the state of Scotland:

Alas, poor country!  
Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot  
Be call'd our mother, but our grave<sup>62</sup>; where nothing,  
But who know nothing, is once seen to smile;  
Where sighs, and groans, and shrieks that rent the air  
Are made, not mark'd; where violent sorrow seems

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<sup>61</sup> "And beholde, the vaile of the Temple was rent in twayne, from the top to the bottom, and the earth did quake" (Matt. 27:51).

<sup>62</sup> They become like dead children also, forsaken by a parent who cannot nourish them.

A modern ecstasy: the dead man's knell  
Is there scarce ask'd for who; and good men's lives  
Expire before the flowers in their caps,  
Dying or ere they sicken. (4.3.164-173)

Rosse's personification of Scotland conveys a sense of lifelessness. Scotland as a land should be lush and thriving. Instead it is not a home, but a "grave." The people of Scotland die even before "the flowers in their caps" die. Death this widespread is suggestive of something as physically inimical as a plague. The hellish atmosphere of Macbeth's castle has become the atmosphere over the entire nation, carrying with it "sighs, and groans, and shrieks."

By the end of the play, Macbeth's sin has distorted his being so much that he lost much of his humanity. Macbeth's opponents eventually refer to him more often as "tyrant" than anything else, let alone by his name. During his confrontation with Macduff, he hears what his countrymen see him as:

Then yield thee, coward,  
And live to be the show and gaze o'th'time:  
We'll have thee, as our rarer monsters are,  
Painted upon a pole, and underwrit,  
'Here may you see the tyrant.' (5.9.23-27)

Macduff's threat to parade him as a "monster" symbolizes Macbeth's abnormality<sup>63</sup>. He is no longer "too full o'th'milk of human kindness" (1.5.17). Now he is hardly human at all. Just as the "weird sisters" are monstrous abnormalities, mere suggestions of what they "should" be,

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<sup>63</sup> According to Renaissance conventions, Lady Macbeth's insanity as illustrated in act 5, scene 1, depicts her as a monster as well.

Macbeth has become an equivocating, emotionless, tyrant, devoid of any life-giving relationship with God.

### **Sin Disrupts and Ruins Relationships, Ultimately Leading to Solitude**

The change in the interactions of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is the strongest depiction of the ability of sin to ruin relationships. At the beginning of the play, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have a relationship of mutual understanding and affection. Macbeth tells no one of his initial encounter with the witches except Lady Macbeth in a letter, a letter including terms of endearment. Despite the strangeness of their inclination to contemplate murder, they at least share and rejoice in the prospect of royalty each for the other. In his letter to her, Macbeth writes, “This have I thought good to deliver thee (my dearest partner of greatness) that thou might’st not lose the dues of rejoicing, by being ignorant of what greatness is promis’d thee. Lay it to thy heart” (1.5.10-14). The relationship of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is such that Macbeth’s prospect of kingship immediately involves Lady Macbeth beyond the simply obligatory partnership as marriage partner. She is immediately involved in orchestrating the plans “to catch the nearest way” (1.5.18). Although Lady Macbeth’s words to her husband are forceful, even condescending at times, the Macbeths still communicate their thoughts to one another and include each other in their desires and plans, even sharing in each other’s sin and guilt<sup>64</sup>.

Upon committing the murder of Duncan, however, the sin on their souls begins to distance Macbeth and Lady Macbeth from one another. In both the Folger Theatre production of *Macbeth* and the Great Performances production of *Macbeth* with Patrick Stewart, the tension between the Macbeths is clear in the scene following Macbeth’s ascension to the throne. When

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<sup>64</sup> Lady Macbeth assumes the outward sign of her complicity in Macbeth’s sin by allowing Duncan’s blood on her hands as well: “My hands are of your colour; but I shame / To wear a heart so white” (2.2.63-64).

Macbeth orders the company at court to “Let every man be master of his time / Till seven at night,” all exit the stage except Macbeth and his servant (3.1.40-41). The actors of both productions depict the tension that arises when Lady Macbeth realizes that Macbeth commands her to leave him along with the rest of the members of court. Afterwards, Macbeth proceeds to plan Banquo’s and Fleance’s assassinations without her knowledge or compliance. Lady Macbeth later approaches him saying, “How now, my Lord? why do you keep alone, / Of sorriest fancies your companions making?” (3.2.8-9). She appeals to her husband with affection, seeking to reestablish the connection they previously had. Harley Granville-Barker in *Prefaces to Shakespeare* suggests that “one of the few strokes of pathos that are let soften the grimness of the tragedy is Lady Macbeth’s wan effort to get near enough to the tortured man to comfort him. But the royal robes, stiff on their bodies—stiff as with caked blood—seem to keep them apart” (qtd. in Muir 81). Macbeth, however, refuses her attempt. He is unable to respond to her attempts because of the detrimental effect of their sin. As he explains, Macbeth’s mind is “full of scorpions” (3.2.35).

Macbeth is unmoved when Lady Macbeth dies, drastically changing from his thoughtfulness for her at the beginning of the play. His numbness toward her death reveals his inability to experience the depth of closeness they once shared. Upon hearing of her death, Macbeth utters, “She should have died hereafter: / There would have been a time for such a word.—” (5.5.17-18). Regardless of the exact meaning of these lines, which is somewhat ambiguous, Macbeth does not express distress at the news. He does express anger at himself for not being with her in her last moments—or preventing her from committing suicide. He does not express anger at the witches for not predicting this aspect of his future. He does not chide the

doctor for not keeping her from death. Instead, he briefly pauses to consider the meaninglessness of life. He is too distanced from her, as well as from his own self, to mourn her death<sup>65</sup>.

Not only does Macbeth's relationship with Lady Macbeth suffer because of his increasing sin, his relationships with his thanes suffer as well. Shakespeare does not illustrate the extent of Macbeth's relationships with his fellow thanes at the beginning of the play, but the general camaraderie of them is evident. Macbeth's particular relationship with Banquo is clearly evident as well. Macbeth and Banquo share their experience of the initial encounter with the witches and immediately confer with one another about it. Their intuition regarding the thoughts and motives of the other also indicates a possible companionship beyond their equal statuses as thanes. For example, Banquo expresses his concern about Macbeth's ascension to the throne by pondering whether Macbeth "play'dst most foully for't" (3.1.3). His knowledge of the witches' prophecies is reason enough for Banquo to express this concern, but he could also be basing his suspicion upon a more intimate knowledge of Macbeth's ambition, as might a close companion.

Duncan also expresses affection for Macbeth in his praise of him toward the play's opening: "O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman!" and later, "O worthiest cousin!" (1.2.24; 1.4.14). Duncan's affirmations of Macbeth's victories result from Macbeth's victories on the battlefield and Duncan's pride in his familial relationship to the brave Macbeth, yet he bestows upon Macbeth the honor of assuming the title of Thane of Cawdor. Banquo also proves valiant in battle. Thus, Duncan's esteem of Macbeth lies in a more intimate relationship than what Shakespeare depicts on the stage<sup>66</sup>.

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<sup>65</sup> Macduff's overt distress and need to "feel it as a man" upon hearing of the deaths of his wife and children accentuate Macbeth's inability to mourn Lady Macbeth's death (4.3.221).

<sup>66</sup> This does not necessitate that Duncan does not have a close relationship with Banquo as well, only that Duncan's relationship with Macbeth is based upon more than the brief encounters that Shakespeare showcases.



Macbeth's ambition, encouraged by the deceit of the witches, leads Macbeth to killing both Duncan and Banquo. Neither Duncan nor Banquo, even if Banquo does have suspicions, expects that Macbeth would go so far as to murder him. Duncan's and Banquo's prior relationships with Macbeth establish their trust in him. Macbeth even contemplates the "double trust" that Duncan has for Macbeth while he considers the consequences of his planned murder of him (1.7.12). In the Great Performances production with Patrick Stewart production of the play, Banquo's character reveals his suspicion of Macbeth's motives but proceeds to reveal information regarding his and Fleance's whereabouts the afternoon preceding his imminent assassination. Ultimately, Macbeth manipulates and abuses the trust of Duncan and Banquo. His ambition, now turned into a sinful lust for the crown and then his safekeeping of his crown, leads him to disregard his relationships with both of them.

Shakespeare hints at the relationships Macbeth has with the rest of Scotland's thanes as Macbeth considers his esteem among them: "I have bought / Golden opinions from all sorts of people" (1.7.32-33). After he yields to his temptation to murder Duncan and then continues in his attempts to secure his kingship, Macbeth's relationship with the thanes evolves from them considering him with "Golden opinions" to considering him the "fiend of Scotland" and a "tyrant"<sup>67</sup> (4.4.233; 5.7.14). After his sinful and murderous acts, Macbeth is unable to maintain the relationships he initially had with his thanes. He even resorts to keeping spies in his thanes' houses, a fact he expresses to Lady Macbeth while discussing his suspicions of Macduff: "There's not a one of them, but in his house / I keep a servant fee'd" (3.4.130-131).

Contemplating the imminent onslaught of Malcolm's army, Macbeth says,

my way of life

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<sup>67</sup> The term "tyrant" is used in reference to Macbeth by various thanes in several places throughout the play.

Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf;  
And that which should accompany old age,  
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,  
I must not look to have; but in their stead,  
Curses, not loud, but deep, mouth-honour, breath,  
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not. (5.3.22-28)

He recognizes the distance that he has created between himself and his thanes. Those that do remain loyal to him, “move only in command, / Nothing in love” (5.2.19-20). John Parker in “Shakespeare and the Geneva Bible: The Story of King Saul as a Source for Macbeth” recognizes the parallels between Macbeth’s actions that leave him in solitude and the commentary in I Samuel 19: “Behold, how the tyrants to accomplish their rage, neither regard oath nor friendship, God nor man” (qtd. in Parker 16). Macbeth’s crimes render him unable to maintain a relationship with anyone. He has no “troops of friends,” only those who fear him. Colston explains, “sin isolates us and leads us to despair, which lies at the end of the path started by absurdity” (Colston 84). In choosing to pursue the path of sinfulness, Macbeth has created a Hell for himself in his bitterness, hardness of heart, and solitude.

## **Sin Begets Sin**

One of the first characteristics the audience sees of Macbeth is his ambition. His actions in the battle<sup>68</sup> at the play’s opening reveal him to be bloody and bold already<sup>69</sup>. In “Tanistry, the ‘Due of Birth’ and Macbeth’s Sin” Echeruo notes the quality of Macbeth’s ambition:

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<sup>68</sup> The bleeding Captain describes Macbeth’s actions and explains that “he unseam’d [Macdonwald] from the nave to th’chops, / And fix’d his head upon [their] battlements” (1.2.22-23).

<sup>69</sup> Later, the second apparition that Macbeth sees in Acheron encourages him to “Be bloody, bold, and resolute” (4.1.79).

[Macbeth's] first sin is a sin against society and order, a sin for which the Elizabethans had a specific name—Ambition. But their ambition was not ours. They distinguished between just and unjust ambition, and would have found Macbeth's kind a very dangerous one indeed. For Macbeth's ambition is to crave a position which by the order of things, but the very fundamental laws of society, cannot be his. (Echeruo 449)

Macbeth's ambition weakens his resolve against further sin. Lady Macbeth recognizes that her husband is "not without ambition," which indicates that this is a character trait that predisposes him to further sin, in this case killing Duncan (1.5.19). This ambition does predispose him to dwell on his "black and deep desires," for as soon as he hears of the hindrance of Malcolm's title as Prince of Cumberland, he retracts his earlier resolve to let "Chance... crown" him (1.4.51; 1.3.144).

Macbeth then hovers in indecision over his plan to kill Duncan<sup>70</sup>. However, killing Duncan quiets his conscience enough that his next two murders, those of the groomsmen that he and Lady Macbeth frame for Duncan's murder, occur almost impulsively. From here, he murders Banquo without any promptings of Lady Macbeth. He is now comfortable enough in sinning to continue along this path alone. When Lady Macbeth advises him against further action saying "You must leave this," Macbeth explains that "Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill" (3.2.35, 55). After his murder of Banquo, Macbeth quickly jump to his next target, bitterness towards Macduff.

At this point, it is not only easier for him to acquiesce to the temptation to sin, he seems to crave it. Regarding this Muir notes, "Banquo being dead, Macbeth is driven towards the next

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<sup>70</sup> As I have discussed, sin acts contrarily to human nature. At this point in the play his conscience is still audible to him.

murder” (Muir 97). At this point he relishes in his sinful acts. He seeks out the witches, which establishes his desire to continue in “ill” antics. Afterwards, he has Macduff’s family slaughtered, arguable the most hideous of his crimes in that these are murders of an innocent and defenseless mother and her children. Sin becomes habitual for Macbeth, a “vicious habit [that] clouds Macbeth’s will” (Colston 64). By the play’s end, Macbeth is hardly himself anymore and is instead only named as a tyrant. Throughout the play, Macbeth’s sins escalate to the point of consuming his identity. He becomes the “disease” of Scotland (5.3.51).

### **Sin Distorts the Ability to Reason or See the World Objectively**

Colston suggests that “sin blurs the vision...it involves faulty seeing, putting on an apparent good ahead of a real good, misconstruing the way things are, being blind to reality. Conversely, the pure of heart shall see God (Mt 5:8)” (Colston 77). As Macbeth progresses in his sinful acts, he becomes less and less sure of reality. Two of the most enigmatic occurrences in *Macbeth* are the scene of the floating dagger and the scene of Banquo’s ghost at the feast. Shakespeare allows both of these instances to remain somewhat ambiguous by leaving open the possibility of the visions being true supernatural apparitions or figments of Macbeth’s imagination.

First, Macbeth sees the floating dagger. At this point, he has committed himself to acting upon his desire to murder Duncan and is waiting on Lady Macbeth’s cue for his commencement of the deed. His questioning of the dagger’s reality presents this same question to the audience. Is the dagger truly present, or is it of Macbeth’s own imagining?

Is this a dagger, which I see before me,

The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee:—

I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.

Art thou, not fatal vision, sensible  
To feeling, as to sight? or are thou but  
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,  
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain? (2.1.33-39)

Macbeth is unable to determine whether this dagger exists of its own accord or within his mind alone. He acknowledges his sense of sight: “I see thee yet, in form as palpable / As that which now I draw” (2.1.40-41). However, he is not able to grasp it physically, which suggests that the dagger is not objectively present. J. C. Curry in *Shakespeare’s Philosophical Patterns* says that it “is an hallucination caused immediately, indeed, by disturbed bodily humours and spirits but ultimately by demonic powers, who have so controlled and manipulated these bodily forces as to produce the effect they desire” (qtd. in Muir 47-48). The root of its appearance lies in Macbeth’s culpability. Macbeth ultimately concludes, “There’s no such thing. / It is the bloody business which informs / Thus to mine eyes” (2.1.47-49). The possibility of this lies in the fact that “such an instrument [Macbeth] was to use,” which dictates that the thought of a dagger, even a bloody one, would be on his mind (2.1.43). Regardless of whether the dagger is objectively present, Macbeth’s fouled soul has tainted his mind beyond the ability to rationalize its presence clearly.

Lady Macbeth’s sanity is also infected by their crimes as she eventually succumbs to sleepwalking, paranoia, and suicide. The first indication of her unraveling occurs as she expresses her grief in her brief soliloquy before her conversation with Macbeth after he has been crowned king:

Nought’s had, all’s spent,  
Where our desire is got without content:  
'Tis safer to be that which we destroy,

Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy. (3.2.4-7)

In the scene of Duncan's murder, Lady Macbeth comments, "A little water clears us of this deed: / How easy is it then!" (2.2.66-67). At the time of the murder, Lady Macbeth fails to comprehend the depths of the consequences that would ensue. Now, however, she does not feel the contentment that she had expected and instead even envies the peace of the dead.

One of the most poignant scenes in *Macbeth* is Lady's Macbeth's sleepwalking episode. Shakespeare effectively captures a mind tormented by sin and regret by having Lady Macbeth express herself at a level deeper than even her own consciousness. The language of Lady Macbeth's lines during this episode adds to the rawness of what her interior life has become. Regarding her lack of poetic meter, Muir quotes J. Wilson's analysis in stating, "It must be in prose... 'because these are the *ipsissima verba*—yea, the escaping sighs and moans of the bared soul. There must be nothing, not even the thin and translucent veil of the verse, betwixt her soul showing itself, and yours beholding'" (Muir 139). The prosy meter, along with Lady Macbeth's actions during the scene, illustrates the torments of her sin. She feels hopeless, lost, and paranoid. While sleepwalking she continually rubs her hands, anxious to remove the blood that she envisions as having stained them: "Out, damned spot! out, I say!" (5.1.33). Her delusional mind is not able to comprehend that her hands have no literal blood on them. Her guilt is so immense that it has extended beyond her past memory and has taken her present rationality prisoner as she constantly relives her past crimes and conversations with Macbeth:

Why, then 'tis time to do't.—Hell is murky.—Fie, my Lord, fie! a soldier, and  
afear'd?—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?...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. (5.1.34-38, 40-43)

Lady Macbeth's fractured statements depict her fractured mind. She is not able to reason clearly that she has no blood on her hands or that she is presently no longer in those moments. Her regret is so intense that she believes herself to be reliving the moments surrounding the root of her anxiety. Her fractured mind prevents her from perceiving any possibility of hope, and she mourns the loss of her sanctity as she expresses, "Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand" (5.1.47-48). Her hyperbolic statement captures the fact that she believes herself to be outside of the reach of redemption, an effect that the Devil would certainly desire through his trickery. Shakespeare asserts this through the doctor's words regarding his inability to heal her both in this scene and later in response to Macbeth's inquiry regarding her health. To the gentlewoman the doctor explains,

Unnatural deeds  
Do breed unnatural troubles: infected minds  
To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets.  
More needs she the divine than the physical.—  
God, God forgive us all! (5.1.68-72)

The doctor explains to the gentlewoman that he cannot heal her. Lady Macbeth's troubles are rooted in her "infected mind," an illness acquired through her "unnatural deeds." The most that he could do for her is instruct the gentlewoman to "remove from her the means of all annoyance," in an attempt to keep her delusional mind from leading her to taking her own life (5.1.73). Other than seeing Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene, the audience does not witness the process of her psychotic breakdown. However, her complete insanity is apparent by act 5,

scene 3. When Macbeth asks the doctor about his “patient,” the doctor explains that she is “not so sick... / As she is troubled with thick-coming fancies” (5.3.37-39) When Macbeth commands him to heal her, the doctor responds by saying “Therein the patient / Must minister to himself” (5.3.45-46). Lady Macbeth’s condition has become such that the “rooted sorrow” has grown like a weed, overtaking her entire being. She alone can “pluck” it out, for it is a battle within her soul that she alone must fight<sup>71</sup>. Ultimately, her illness—both her participation in evil deeds and the physical disease resulting from this participation—overtakes her, and she takes her own life.

Because of his initial sin of assassinating Duncan, Macbeth begins to look at past events through the lens of evil and bitterness. After his coronation, Macbeth reveals his discontent with Banquo. In a soliloquy, Macbeth reflects on his and Banquo’s encounter with the witches. Upon meeting the witches and hearing their separate prophecies, but before Macbeth receives his title of Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth and Banquo express amusement at the idea of the predictions.

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. (1.3.86-88)

Regarding these lines, Muir notes, “J. M. Nosworthy points out that in all accounts of the episode Macbeth and Banquo joke about the ‘prophesies’” (Muir 17-18). After his murder of Duncan, however, Macbeth’s attitude toward the event shifts. He now revisits the event in his mind and views it through a lens of pessimism, bitterness, and jealousy.

He chid the Sisters,

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<sup>71</sup> The doctor acknowledges that her troubles are of a spiritual nature and that he is unable to do anything to heal her. This reflects the debate in the Renaissance of the Church’s role versus a doctor’s role in cases that resembled the effects of witchcraft.



When first they put the name of King upon me,  
And bade them speak to him; then, prophet-like,  
They hail'd him father to a line of kings. (3.1.56-59)

In revisiting the episode in his mind, Macbeth convinces himself that Banquo's plea for his own prophecy was done in an effort to spite Macbeth. Rather than feel satisfied with that which was promised to him, Macbeth begins to feel envious of Banquo's prophecy and ultimately concludes that he must murder him to regain his peace.

After Banquo's death, Macbeth is haunted by another illusory image, that of Banquo's murdered, ghostly body. Like the dagger, Shakespeare allows Banquo's ghost to remain ambiguous. Stage directions indicate that a ghost actually enters the stage during the episode, which allows the audience to perceive the ghost as being objectively present. Shakespeare does this with the witches as well. However, while both Macbeth and Banquo see and interact with the witches, which adds validity to their objective presence, only Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo<sup>72</sup>. Quite possibly, Banquo's ghost exists only in Macbeth's mind. Its presence on both occasions seems to correspond to Macbeth's mentioning of him, first as he says "Here had we now our country's honour roof'd, / Were the grac'd person of our Banquo present," and later as he toasts him saying, "I drink to th' general joy o'th' whole table, / And to our dear friend Banquo, whom we miss; / Would he were here!" (3.4.39-40, 88-89). This correlation between Macbeth's mentioning of Banquo's absence and the ghost's appearance can suggest that the presence of Banquo's ghost occurs inside Macbeth's mind because during these times he is obviously thinking about Banquo. Also, Macbeth's mentioning of Banquo shows that he must be anxious about the fact that he has just had him murdered. Macduff also fails to attend Macbeth's

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<sup>72</sup> Because the audience also sees the ghost, Shakespeare allows the audience to experience Macbeth's confusion as Macbeth does.

banquet, but Macbeth only mentions his absence later to Lady Macbeth<sup>73</sup>, not to the general assembly of thanes. If Macbeth's thoughts were not consumed with angst over his fresh assassination of Banquo, he would probably determine it as wise to make an equal share of comments regarding Macduff's absence.

Furthermore, the detail Macbeth exclaims upon seeing the image of Banquo's ghost can be an indication that the ghost is a fabrication of Macbeth's delusional mind. After Macbeth's commissioning of Banquo's murderers, he acknowledges his plagued state of mind in his conversation with Lady Macbeth:

Better be with the dead,  
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,  
Than on the torture of the mind to lie  
In restless ecstasy...  
O! full of scorpions in my mind, dear wife! (3.2.19-22, 36)

Macbeth falsely believes his anxiety to be the result of his fear of Banquo, easily eliminated by having him murdered. After hearing that Banquo has been murdered but that Fleance has escaped, Macbeth exclaims, "Then comes my fit again: I had else been perfect; / ... But now, I am cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd, bound in / To saucy doubts and fears" (3.4.20, 23-24). Except, unlike the dagger, which Macbeth seems to conclude is "no such thing," Macbeth is fully convinced that the ghost of Banquo is real (2.1.46). At first, he believes its presence must be a cruel trick compliments of one of his thanes as he asks, "Which of you have done this?" (3.4.48). Even after his outbursts<sup>74</sup> have extended for several lines and the ghost has disappeared,

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<sup>73</sup> "How say'st thou, that Macduff denies his person, / At our great bidding?" (3.4.127-128).

<sup>74</sup> In his essay "The Physiology and Psychology of the Renaissance," Lawrence Babb explains the Renaissance belief in the connection between the mind and the body: "The Renaissance

reappeared, and disappeared again, the fact that the others do not see his tormentor<sup>75</sup> confounds Macbeth.

Because of his inability to discern reality accurately, Macbeth is unable to decipher the messages of the apparitions that he sees while consulting with the witches in act 4. The first apparition is an “armed head” and speaks the message “Beware Macduff” (4.1.71). The second apparition is “a bloody child” and speaks the message “laugh to scorn / The power of man, for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (4.1.79-80). Finally, the third apparition is “a child crowned, with a tree in his hand” and speaks the message “Macbeth shall never vanquish’d be, until / Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him” (4.1.92-94). The language of each apparition is purposely deceitful and accomplishes the witches’ goal to convince Macbeth that he is invincible. However, the fulfillment of the prediction of each apparition is visible in the form of each apparition itself. The “armed head” is an image of Macbeth’s severed head after his duel with Malcolm. The “bloody child” represents the bloodied baby Macduff, born of a cesarean section rather than of natural birth. The “child crowned, with a tree in his hand” represents the rightful king of Malcolm who holds a bough of Birnam wood as he marches toward Macbeth’s fortification at Dunsinane hill. A truly discerning eye could recognize the deceit of the witches’ apparition and question the significance of the images themselves. Macbeth, however, cannot reasonably discern the truth of the messages. His inability to reason clouds his judgment so much that he becomes defenseless against the continued deceit of the witches.

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psychology is a physiological psychology. It tends to explain mental conditions in terms of physical causes and vice versa” (Babb 1). This helps illuminate why Macbeth’s internal, spiritual perturbations affect his outward actions.

<sup>75</sup> When Macbeth expresses confusion at his thanes’ ability to maintain their composure at the sight of, although he does not name it specifically, Banquo’s ghost, Rosse responds by questioning, “What sights, my Lord?” (3.4.114).

## Sin Creates Hell on Earth

Morris asserts that “*Macbeth* is a portrait of damnation, a study of evil, and a landscape of Hell” (Morris 36). Because of his concession to sin, Macbeth becomes immersed in the evils of Hell. In his soliloquy concerning the consequences of killing Duncan, Macbeth says

If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well  
It were done quickly: if th'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. (1.7.1-8)

Here Macbeth seems to be more concerned with the earthly consequences that would follow his murder of Duncan. According to Muir, “Macbeth never appeals to moral principles, and he would jump the life to come” (Muir 139). Macbeth proceeds in his soliloquy by listing the reasons that he should not kill Duncan, none of which include the inevitability, or even chance, of his own eternal damnation. However, Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's invocation of evil spirits and subsequent murder of Duncan allow for the torment of damnation to begin in the here and now, “upon this bank and shoal of time.” The reality of this proves to be more torturous than Macbeth and Lady Macbeth predict.

Immediately after Duncan's assassination, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth hear a knocking on the door. This knock startles them because visitors were not part of their plan. For Macbeth, this knock represents a turn in the condition of his soul towards an evil. In Scripture, Christ

speaks of the knocking of the Lord upon one's soul, awaiting the invitation to be present internally<sup>76</sup>. Shakespeare contrasts this with a symbolic knocking of evil in response to the invitation Macbeth has given the devil through his act of murdering the saintly Duncan.

Directly following this intrusion of knocking, the Porter's scene depicts the play's clearest embodiment of Hell's presence on earth. Through the Porter's scene Shakespeare paints the castle at Inverness as Hell itself. The Porter, acting as the gatekeeper to Hell, imagines himself answering the door to a variety of sinners:

Here's a knocking, indeed! If a man were Porter of Hell gate, he should have old turning the key. [*Knocking.*] Knock, knock, knock. Who's there, i'th' name of Belzebub? ... I had thought to have let in some of all professions, that go the primrose way to th'ever-lasting bonfire. (2.3.1-4, 18-20)

This drunken and fanciful monologue of the Porter, despite being possibly humorous, contains a sinister reality of what Macbeth has allowed his castle to become. Muir explains, "It is hell because Lady Macbeth has invoked the murdering ministers, because Macbeth has called on the stars to hide their fires, and because hell is a state, not a place, and the might say with Faustus's tempter, 'where we are is hell, / And where hell is, there must we ever be'" (Muir xxvi). The Porter, of course, has no awareness of the crime that has just happened within the castle, but his musings emphasize the darkness of Macbeth's sin. Even the Porter, thinking his role-playing to be nothing more than just that, eventually throws off his game saying, "But this place is too cold

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<sup>76</sup> Revelation 3:20 reads "Behold, I stand at the door, and knock, If any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come unto him, and will sup with him, and he with me."

for Hell. I'll devil-porter it no further" (2.3.16-18)<sup>77</sup>. He decides that even the castle is too uncomfortable to be Hell, a hyperbolic illustration of how evil Macbeth's castle has become.

In Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene, she exclaims, "Hell is murky" (5.1.34). The present tense usage indicates a current awareness of the state of Hell. She says this in the midst of her unconscious imagining of trying to wash the blood of Duncan from her hands. The proximity of these statements to one another reveals the connection between Lady Macbeth's inability to forgive herself and find peace and her experience of living in Hell because of this. In asking, "Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" Lady Macbeth further reveals her unpreparedness to experience what she now experiences. Like Macbeth, she underestimated the gravity of their sin and failed to anticipate that the spiritual consequences would ensue as quickly as they do.

When Macbeth hears the initial cry of the gentlewomen who witness Lady Macbeth's death, he is unable to experience any shock.

I have almost forgot the taste of fears.  
The time has been, my senses would have cool'd  
To hear a night-shriek; and my fell of hair  
Would at a dismal treatise rouse, and stir,  
As life were in't. I have supp'd full with horrors:  
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,  
Cannot once start me. (5.5.9-15)

Macbeth reveals that his unresponsiveness is due to his present submersion in a world "full of horrors." Macbeth has grown accustomed to the horrors of the Hell he has invited to surround

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<sup>77</sup> Some scholars have drawn a parallel between this and Dante's *Inferno*, which depicts the deepest realm of Hell as made of ice.

him so much so that he no longer experiences shock from any horrific stimuli. He has been submerged into the state of being that is Hell. His description of having “supp’d full” contrasts the scriptural depiction of Heaven as a banquet<sup>78</sup>. Instead of being full of the beatific vision of Heaven, Macbeth knows only “slaughterous thoughts.” His lack of alarm at the women’s shrieks shows that he does not even remember what it is like to be without the horrors that have filled his mind.

### **Sin Cannot Bring Life, Only Death**

In Genesis two of the consequences of Adam and Eve’s sin are removal from the Garden of Eden<sup>79</sup> and difficulty in childbirth<sup>80</sup>. Reflections of each of these consequences of sin occur in *Macbeth* as well. First, Shakespeare incorporates an agricultural motif throughout the play to accentuate the difference between virtue and sin. Much like a garden, virtue cultivates growth and new life. Sin, or the absence of virtue, deprives the soul of what it needs to flourish resulting in death. As a result of Adam and Eve’s sin, God exclaims, “cursed is the earth for thy sake: in sorowe shalt thou eat of it all the dayes of thy life. Thornes also, and thystles shal it bring forth to thee (Gen. 3:17-18). Similarly, Scotland becomes almost uninhabitable because of Macbeth’s sin.

The first instance of this motif is during the witches’ first meeting with Macbeth and Banquo. After hearing the pronouncement of Macbeth’s future, Banquo questions the witches about his own:

If you can look into the seeds of time,

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<sup>78</sup> For example, Matthew 22:2 refers to God and Heaven as being like “unto a certain king who made a marriage for his son.” The chapter then describes the preparations for the feast.

<sup>79</sup> “Therefore ye Lord God sent him for the from the garden of Eden, to til the earth, whence he was taken. Thus he cast out man” (Gen. 3:23-24).

<sup>80</sup> “Vnto the woman he said, I wil greatly increase thy sorowes, & thy conceptios” (Gen. 3:16).

And say which grain will grow, and which will not,  
Speak then to me, who neither beg, nor fear,  
Your favours nor your hate. (1.3.58-61)

Banquo's mentioning of future as growth begins the symbolism that exists throughout the duration of the play. After the play's opening battle, Duncan praises Macbeth by saying, "I have begun to plant thee, and will labour / To make thee full of growing" (1.4.28-29). Immediately after his promise of growth to Macbeth, Duncan addresses Banquo, to which Banquo replies by saying, "There if I grow, / The harvest is your own" (1.4.32-33). Right away, the audience can see a contrast between the growth promised by the witches and the growth promised by Duncan. While Macbeth ultimately chooses to nurture his garden with the witches' promises, Banquo chooses to nurture his garden through virtue.

Macbeth uses this agricultural language in his soliloquy reflecting on his fate in comparison to Banquo's. After Duncan's murder, when Macbeth has begun to feel the effects of his sin on his soul, he reflects on his lack of growth versus Banquo's ample growth.

Then, prophet-like,  
They hail'd him father to a line of kings:  
Upon my head they plac'd a fruitless crown,  
And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,  
Thence to be wrench'd with an unlineal hand,  
No son of mine succeeding. If't be so,  
For Banquo's issue have I fil'd my mind; ...  
To make them kings, the seed of Banquo kings! (3.1. 58-64, 69)



Here Macbeth begins to realize that his path leads to one of death, not one of prosperity. He recognizes his childless kingship as being “fruitless” and “barren,” words associated with fertility, particularly agricultural fertility. Although Macbeth does acknowledge his future as being the result of his own choice to place his trust in the witches’ promises, the continual contrast of good and evil, especially the consequences of the choice to pursue evil, suggests that Macbeth’s fruitlessness and barrenness of his kingship are his own doing. Macbeth delivers the news of Duncan’s death to Malcolm and Donalbain by saying “The spring, the head, the fountain of your blood / Is stopp’d; the very source of it is stopp’d” (2.3.96-97). Through his act of killing Duncan, Macbeth has also stopped his own life source. He has, in a sense, murdered the virtue in himself and is now watching himself wither and die. Meanwhile, he looks on with longing at the royal fruitfulness promised to Banquo.

Lady Macbeth’s unsexing accentuates the correlation between sin and inability to produce life. As Lady Macbeth asks the “Spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts” to “unsex” her and exchange her “milk for gall,” she spiritually disavows her femininity. The terminology of her prayer explicitly addresses womanly qualities associated with fertility. Although she does not request that the spirits prevent her from having any more children<sup>81</sup>, her disavowing of her femininity takes with it her fertility.

The agricultural motif begins to come full circle as the third apparition of a child crowned and with a tree in his hand pronounces Macbeth’s defeat. This time, the motif takes the form of a full-grown tree, rather than of seeds. Ultimately, Macbeth’s “fruitless crown” and “barren sceptre” are stripped from him as he is conquered by the tree-bearing armies of Malcolm.

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<sup>81</sup> Historically, Lady Macbeth is a mother but did not bear any children with Macbeth.

## Conclusion

As St. Paul warned in his letter to the Romans, “The wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). 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. Perhaps it is subtle because to Macbeth, who is undoubtedly the focus of the play, redemption is outside of his view: he is too jaded to perceive it as a possibility for him. Shakespeare refers to the possibility of redemption in a couple of places. First, Macbeth states that he must continue in his sinful pattern because attempting virtue, at this point, would be too difficult:

I am in blood  
Stepp’d in so far, that, should I wade no more,  
Returning were as tedious as go o’er. (3.4.135-137)

Here Macbeth does not say that “returning” is impossible. He does not say that he has only one option. Rather, Macbeth is “stepp’d in so far” of his sinful habits that retreating from this path would require a greater change than he is willing to make. It would be just as “tedious” to go back as to continue; therefore, he concludes that he would rather continue along the sinful path he has already been treading. The Porter echoes the allure of the easier path leading to hell when he states, “I had thought to let in some of all professions, that go the primrose way to th’ever-lasting bonfire,” which reflects the scriptural admonition about the pathway to heaven being as easy as a camel passing through the eye of a needle<sup>82</sup> (2.3.18-20).

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<sup>82</sup> “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (Matt. 19:24).

The second comment on the possibility of redemption occurs after Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking episode. After witnessing Lady Macbeth's nocturnal fit, the doctor states to the gentlewoman, "This disease is beyond my practice: yet I have known those which have walk'd in their sleep, who have died holily in their beds" (5.1.55-57). The reference to death contrasts Lady Macbeth's forthcoming suicide, death without peace, with the death of someone who dies at peace in his bed, presumably from the natural death of old age. The doctor, unable to cure her as her illness is of a spiritual nature, reveals that others who have suffered from demonic disturbances<sup>83</sup> have been able to regain their peace and sanctity.

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.

When the hurlyburly's done,

When the battle's lost and won.

That will be ere the set of sun...

There to meet with Macbeth. (1.1.3-5, 7)

The topsy-turvy nature of their lines indicates that the scenes of the play can fold over onto one another. The play begins and ends with battles. The play begins and ends with the execution of traitors. The play begins and ends with Scotland in a state of turmoil followed by a restoration of peace—for a time at least. Thus, the witches' plan "to meet with Macbeth" does not only refer to their initial meeting with him after the battle of act 1, scene 2. The witches' plan is also "to meet with Macbeth" after the battle of act 5, at that point not to tempt him into an alliance of evil with

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<sup>83</sup> Muir says, "We can suppose that diabolical possession explains the unnatural portents on the night of the murder and what Curry calls the 'demoniacal somnambulism' of the sleep-walking scene" (Muir lix).

them, but to collect the payment of his life, meeting him in death. For them, a battle has been won, the battle over Macbeth's soul—a tragedy among all tragedies.

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## **Vita**

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