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«TURN HELL-HOUND, TURN»: THE SUPERNATURAL AND THE FAITHFUL IN *MACBETH*

The following paper examines the heavy reliance upon the supernatural and the phantasmagoric in Shakespeare's Macbeth, with a particular emphasis on the relations of the Macbeth family to traditional religious notions of guilt, expiation, sin, and damnation. It advocates a reading of these elements that emphasizes the textual association of the Macbeths with the demonic, the supernatural and the unholy, with the simultaneous association of their victims or opponents with the holy, the penitent, and the Christian.

Key words: *Macbeth, supernatural, witches, religion, Christianity.*

The supernatural was perfectly common on the Elizabethan and Jacobean stage. Among only the most notable examples that suggest themselves, Thomas Kyd begins *The Spanish Tragedy* with «the Ghost of Andrea, and with him [embodied] Revenge» [7, p. 5]; Christopher Marlowe shows the demon Mephistopheles and a host of attendant spirits («a devil playing a drum, after him another bearing an ensign, and divers with weapons») [8, p. 227]; and of course Shakespeare is rumored himself to have played the ghost of Hamlet's father. Yet the supernatural and phantasmagoric elements of *Macbeth* are so evident, and so deeply embedded in the events of the play, that as early as 1745 Dr. Johnson felt it necessary to begin his «Miscellaneous Observations on the Tragedy of *Macbeth*» with a consideration of the centrality of the supernatural:

A poet who should now make the whole action of his tragedy depend upon enchantment and procure the chief events by the assistance of supernatural agents would be censured as transgressing the bounds of probability, he would be banished from the theatre to the nursery and be condemned to write fairy-tales instead of tragedies...[but] in the time of Shakespeare was the doctrine of witchcraft at once established by the law and by the fashion, and it became not only unpolite but criminal to doubt it [6, p. 43].

This is persuasive; it was a time of intense religious disputation, no little superstition, and such intense popular belief in witches that (as H. W. Herrington notes) «for the playwrights and the public, witchcraft in general, and known cases thereof, must have been a topic of unceasing conversation» [4, p. 469]. Moreover, and pressingly, he new king was personally fascinated by the existence and actions of demons. Indeed, his impulse to write his

book entitled *Demonologie* was «the fearful abounding at this time in this countrie, of these detestable slaues of the Deuill, the Witches or enchauners» [5, p. xi]. Yet the common identification of *Macbeth's* witches with the King's *Demonologie* is unconvincing to those who bother to read the King's delirious treatise. It is little more than a wild manifest to about the prevalence of witches and their alleged abilities (e.g. teleportation), a rant about who might be attracted to devilry, and a patently monstrous abrogation of human decency at the expense of vulnerable people, particularly women:

Epi: They ought to be put to death according to the Law of God, the ciuill and imperial law, and municipal law of all Christian nations.

Phi: But what kinde of death I pray you?

Epi: It is commonly vsed by fire, but that is an indifferent thing to be vsed in euery cuntrie, according to the Law or custome thereof.

Phi: But ought no sexe age nor ranck to be exempted?

Epi: None at al [5, p. 77].

Thus the identification of *Demonologie* as a notable source for Shakespeare's treatment of witches and the supernatural comes under grievous pressure; he seems not to have derived anything useful from it, beyond the enthusiasm for witches. And his witches do not bear any close relationship to any such figures described by the King, and crucially, Shakespeare's witches go unpunished, except for one brief rebuke by Hecate. Shakespeare, I would propose, could recognize that there was nothing in the King's book worth poaching and repurposing. The supernatural elements appear to go deeper than the bare influence of *Demonologie* would suggest.

Spirits and ghosts appear in other plays, yet *Macbeth* stands out as being peculiarly dependent upon

supernatural agency and otherworldly plot elements: the witches tempt Macbeth with unsought prophecies; ghosts walk among the living; hallucinated daggers appear; witches consort with animal familiars; spells and incantations can summon powerful demons— notably Hecate – whose reality is unquestioned; and one may additionally summon, apparently through black magic, spirits that foretell the future, accurately if with misdirection. This omnipresence of the uncanny—of the potent and baroque macabre—lends the play its peculiarly effective immersive atmosphere. We are in the world of the Macbeths.

Macbeth is not an exercise in theology, yet it is a commonplace observation that the existence of witches, a high-ranking demon, visible apparitions, ghosts of the murdered, and natural atmospheric anomalies suggest powerfully a world dominated by supernatural evil. What is much less clear is what any of the characters mean when speaking of the good, or mentioning God or heaven. The world of Macbeth is strangely divided: the wicked, supernatural, and demonic are visible and influential, whereas the good and the heavenly are so abstracted as to be intangible and vague. Both Macbeths—Macbeth and Lady Macbeth—seem to have Christian notions of damnation, redemption, and hell, yet they traffic in supernatural evil to achieve their ends.

This paper proposes that these intermixtures of supernaturalism and Christianity are not artless incongruities, but are instead carefully manipulated to align the Macbeths with the supernatural and paranormal, and their opponents (and, often, their victims) with more recognizably Christian beliefs.

In order to support this contention, it is perhaps worth examining briefly the most obviously Christian figure in the play—someone who, perhaps unexpectedly, does not even appear on stage, but is merely mentioned. This, of course, is Edward, king of England, who shelters Malcolm, lends him an army, and touches the afflicted of his kingdom in an attempt to heal them. It is nothing surprising that Shakespeare should present the King of England as being a contrastive moral example to the wicked Macbeth. Yet it is perhaps notable that the word «pious» is used only twice in the play, once of Edward, and once (ironically) of Macbeth. When applied to Macbeth, it is cynical, a force amplifying his crime:

Who cannot want the thought how monstrous
It was for Malcolm and for Donalbain
To kill their gracious father? damned fact!
How it did grieve Macbeth! did he not straight

In pious rage the two delinquents tear,
That were the slaves of drink and thralls of sleep?
Was not that nobly done? [III, vi]

Of Edward, however, the piety is sincere, and is the attribute of a true king:

The son of Duncan,
From whom this tyrant holds the due of birth
Lives in the English court, and is received
Of the most pious Edward with such grace
That the malevolence of fortune nothing
Takes from his high respect: thither Macduff
Is gone to pray the holy king, upon his aid
To wake Northumberland and warlike Siward:
That, by the help of these—with Him above
To ratify the work—we may again
Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights... [III, vi]

The contrast of the piety is direct—in a real king, piety is a natural constituent, whereas for the usurping Macbeth the word «pious» can only be used in sarcastic reference to murder committed to conceal other murders. We may also note that the word «holy» is, in Macbeth, again used only of Edward, or the English court, or the «angel» who will carry the appeal of Scotland to the court of England. Indeed, Edward's piety conveys upon him abilities apparently equal to the powers exerted by the dark forces:

'Tis call'd the evil:
A most miraculous work in this good king;
Which often, since my here-remain in England,
I have seen him do. How he solicits heaven,
Himself best knows: but strangely-visited people,
All swoln and ulcerous, pitiful to the eye,
The mere despair of surgery, he cures,
Hanging a golden stamp about their necks,
Put on with holy prayers: and 'tis spoken,
To the succeeding royalty he leaves
The healing benediction. With this strange virtue,
He hath a heavenly gift of prophecy,
And sundry blessings hang about his throne,
That speak him full of grace. [IV,iii]

Edward manually banishes something called «The Evil»: this is not a subtle contrast with Macbeth, whose hands are covered in blood. Thus Edward consorts with the deformed—as Macbeth does with the witches—yet Edward uses heavenly solicitation to heal these unfortunate people, whereas Macbeth depends upon the foresight the hideous witches' black magic allows them. Edward too is accorded «a heavenly gift of prophecy», which presumably equals or compares with the foresight of the witches. In this Edward must be considered to be more holy than

Duncan who, as we observe, is twice surprised in the men he appoints to be the Thane of Cawdor. Duncan's foresight is clearly not his strongest distinction.

What does Macbeth know of God? Crucially, God is almost always invoked by the enemies of Macbeth, as an aide or support against Macbeth. It is worth noting that traditional or polite formulations of God's blessing are here commonly given to those who are soon to be Macbeth's victims—Ross greets King Duncan with the phrase «God save the King» [I, ii] one act before Macbeth kills Duncan; Banquo states that «in the great hand of God I stand», [II, iii] one act before Macbeth has him murdered; and Lady Macduff says to her son «Now, God help thee, poor monkey» [IV, ii] in the very same act and scene in which we witness his murder. Macbeth's actions are placed in direct rhetorical opposition to God. Similarly, Siward twice invokes God's blessing on his son after Macbeth has killed him (both Act V, scene 8), and Malcolm compares «God above» with «devilish Macbeth» when Malcolm accepts Macduff's council:

Devilish Macbeth
By many of these trains hath sought to win me
Into his power, and modest wisdom plucks me
From over-credulous haste: but God above
Deal between thee and me! for even now
I put myself to thy direction, and
Unspeak mine own detraction, here abjure
The taints and blames I laid upon myself,
For strangers to my nature [IV, iii].

Macbeth, by contrast, evokes God only twice, and both in contexts that are either ironic or expose his irreligion. In Act III, when he sends Banquo out to the ride with Fleance that—he hopes—will result in the murder of both, he bids him merely «Farewell,» yet almost immediately he wishes to his assorted ladies, lords and attendants «God be with you».

I wish your horses swift and sure of foot;
And so I do commend you to their backs.
Farewell.

[Exit BANQUO]

Let every man be master of his time
Till seven at night: to make society
The sweeter welcome, we will keep ourself
Till supper-time alone: while then, God be with
you! [III, i]

Banquo alone does not receive Macbeth's blessing of God. This is revealing, and carefully structured. The only other time Macbeth utters the word «God» in the play is previously, in his famous confession that

he was unable to speak the word «Amen» in response to the drunken guard's murmur of «God bless us»:

One cried «God bless us!» and «Amen» the other;
As they had seen me with these hangman's hands.
Listening their fear, I could not say «Amen»,
When they did say 'God bless us'.

Lady M: Consider it not so deeply.

Macbeth: But wherefore could not I pronounce
«Amen»?

I had most need of blessing, and «Amen»
Stuck in my throat [II, ii].

How cleverly Shakespeare has done this. In fact, Macbeth says «Amen» more than any other character in the play: he is simply marveling that he was unable to say a word that, as he says it, is reported speech. The only other character in the play who utters the word «Amen» is, in fact, Ross, whose use of the word is more emphatic than pious. In Act IV, scene iii, when Ross brings the news of the murder of Macduff's family to England, Malcolm greets him with the words «Good God, betimes remove the means that makes us strangers!» to which Ross replies simply, 'Sir, amen.' Thus 'amen' is spoken on the stage of Macbeth only by two people: Macbeth, who marvels at his inability to pronounce the word (although he does so four times in under a minute) and by Ross, giving his assent to the wish that Macbeth be removed.

What is perhaps most strange is that in his first two significant murders, Duncan and Banquo, at both times Macbeth remarks that his victims will soon be judged, in an apparently Christian judgment between Heaven and Hell. As he resolves on murdering Duncan, he states

I go, and it is done: the bell invites me.

Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell

That summons thee to Heaven, or to Hell. [II, i]

Similarly, just as he sends the murderers out to kill Banquo, he remarks,

It is concluded.—Banquo, thy soul's flight

If it find Heaven, must find it out tonight. [III, i]

These are almost exactly identical constructions: a passive statement («it is done» «it is concluded») followed by the recognition that his victim will soon find heaven or hell. It suggests that Macbeth psychologically removes himself from agency in the murders (it is done, it is concluded'), and then the process of Christian judgment takes over. Macbeth clearly believes that there is some manner of judgment of souls, and he comments on this just as he resolves to murder his king and his friend. That he similarly stands in possible peril of that judgment is clear from

his observation that he «had most need of blessing», yet he also commits the transgression of despair: the statement

I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er [III, iv]

is, in its way, a refusal to repent, and a statement that repentance and reformation are not possible for him now—he must go on with the path he has chosen, or so, at least, he believes. As John Cox has observed, «Macbeth's suffering would seem to be the least enigmatic of all the suffering in the tragedies, because he so clearly brings it on himself» [2, p. 235].

If, as this paper has suggested thus far, the mention of God, the pious, and the holy is usually restricted to the opponents or victims of Macbeth, what then distinguishes the Macbeths? There are two answers: they are notable both for their receptiveness to supernatural evil, and to the temptation of ambition. Let us consider ambition first, and briefly, simply because it is such well studied territory already. When the witches make their prophecy, Macbeth is notably stirred by their words—even his friend notices, and asks him

Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear
Things that do sound so fair? [I, iii].

This haste to follow the allure of potential advancement, however, cannot match the speed and ease with which Lady Macbeth essentially instantaneously learns of the prophecy and conceives of a plot to murder Duncan. Her very first line in the play—with the exception of the letter from her husband that she reads aloud—states that he «shalt be what thou art promised» [I, v]. Perhaps the familiarity of the play has rendered us somewhat inured to the breathtaking rapidity with which a lady of high rank (her husband is a thane, and she can read) is willing to accept and encourage the murder of the king. She undergoes no process of accommodation to accepting the monstrous idea; it is, to her, immediately valid.

The Macbeths are also clearly associated with the unholy and the supernatural. For this reason it is crucial that Banquo also sees the witches in Act I, scene iii. When the witches first appear, both Macbeth and Banquo equally see and speak with them. They are emphatically not hallucinations. Yet, later, when Macbeth seeks them out for additional prophecies (Act IV, scene i), Lennox cannot see them:

Lennox: What's your Grace's will?
Macbeth: Saw you the weird sisters?
Lennox: No, indeed, my lord.
Macbeth: Infected be the air whereon they ride,

and damned all those that trust them! [IV, i]

This is notable because—without the clear and unequivocal evidence that Banquo sees the witches in Act I, the audience might well consider the witches merely another Macbeth hallucination, as the dagger is. Indeed, it comes almost directly as a result of the appearance of Banquo's ghost, which itself is unseen by any except Macbeth. It is a worthwhile reflection to note that, in play that seems to teem with spirits, ghosts, and the supernatural, only three people have supernatural experiences (or the hallucination of them) in the entire play—Banquo sees and speaks with the witches; Lady Macbeth apparently dreams that her hands are covered in blood; and Macbeth sees the witches twice, sees Banquo's ghost, and hallucinates the dagger. Thus, the entirety of the supernatural elements of the play befalls the Macbeths alone, with the exception of Banquo and, as suggested above, his experience of the witches is crucial to provide verification that they are not simply additional hallucinations. We do, of course, hear of strange omens—there is darkness, and Duncan's horses rather implausibly «eat each other»—yet the experience of the supernatural that the audience actually sees is restricted to the Macbeths, and to Banquo.

It is perhaps also worth recollecting, at this point, that there is a scene in which Lady Macbeth explicitly seeks to be inhabited by evil spirits. In a modern context, we are more apt to notice the gender implications of Lady Macbeth's «unsex me here» speech, yet to a highly religious audience conditioned to believe in the existence of spirits, her invitation must have been instantly evident:

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! make thick my blood;
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief! 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!» [I, v].

The point should not be lost on us: both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth actively seek the help of dark, supernatural forces or individuals in order to pursue

their ambitions. She offers an explicit invitation to be influenced by «spirits» and «murdering ministers», and wishes to be led by them to act in obscurity so total that even heaven cannot register horror or prevent the crime. Compare this behavior to Banquo's observation, when he too begins to muse on the possibility that the witches gave true prophecies:

Merciful powers,
Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature
Gives way to in repose [II, i].

Instead of seeking the aid of demons, Banquo tries to summon heavenly help to himself. As Walter Clyde Curry wrote,

He prays for divine protection against such dreams, recognizing apparently that their ultimate origin is demonic. At least, in his extremity 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, namely, Powers [3, p. 22].

This refers to the three orders or Christian angelology: Seraphim, Cherubim, Thrones; Dominations, Virtues, Powers; Principalities, Archangels, Angels. Thus, at the moment of temptation, the one person who has seen the witches other than Macbeth properly seeks the assistance of Powers, whilst Lady Macbeth, merely having been informed of the witches' prophecy, issues an invitation to be influenced by «murdering ministers». In sum, neither Macbeth is misled by evil; they actively seek it out, and desire its assistance.

We may now, perhaps, venture towards one final assessment of the notorious «drunken porter» scene that seems so jarring and incongruent. No less a figure than Coleridge pronounced it inauthentic: he referred to it as «the disgusting passage of the Porter, which I dare pledge to myself to demonstrate to be an interpolation of the actors...» [1, p. 235]. His argument, of course, is that the passage is strangely comic at a moment of great tension, and juxtaposes humor weirdly with the just-accomplished murder of Duncan, from which the later crimes and murders spring. It is certainly a strange scene that seems to contrast horror inappropriately with levity. There is perhaps a plausible defense for it: being simply that it shows how inappropriately inebriated and happy the castle is before the discovery of the murder. Yet the reading of the play being advanced here suggests another possibility: that those who openly traffic in witchcraft and the demonic often treat lightly those spiritual matters that are of the highest spiritual consequence. Although it is generally agreed that the individuals imagined by

the porter to seek entrance are distinguished by resemblance to people involved in the Gunpowder Plot, it is also worth noting that they are, most definitely, people who are damned to hell by their own actions. This is not a Calvinist hell to which one is predestined by ill-luck or the mysterious wrath of God. Macbeth's castle, in the Porter's speech, is a hell one chooses for oneself—in the Porter's imagination, it is an amusing diversion, but to the audience—who have just seen the (offstage) murder of Duncan, it is a place of fearful reality. Macbeth and his wife have just entered it, and they know it.

This paper has suggested that, although Macbeth is notably influenced by supernatural actions and atmospherics, it is really only two characters—the Macbeths—who are directly influenced by the supernatural. Banquo, it has been suggested, is there to provide testimony that these influences are real, and to illustrate a decent theological response to the temptations that they offer. The reality, danger, and power of witches is something that would have been uncontroversial to the new Scottish king. Yet what we see in this analysis is the extraordinary level of acceptance of demonic and supernatural evil exhibited by the Macbeths. They are not otherwise good people tricked by ambition; they are, instead, people whose willingness to reject Christian morality, and to pursue—to invite—the assistance of the diabolic and the paranormal, causes their complete destruction. In other words, the play relies heavily upon witches, ghosts, prophecies, and the diabolic because the Macbeths rely upon such forces; Shakespeare is enacting not the reality of the Scotland they inhabit, but the spiritual and psychological «desert place» they allow themselves to inhabit. They were not misled by the supernatural, they were predisposed to it. And this, it seems, helps to explain why they can actively consort with witches and summon «murdering ministers», and yet seem only to have vague presentiments of Christian judgment, redemption, and damnation. They play shows us their reality. Having chosen the path of murder, advised by witches and demons, they can only keep going in their chosen pathway:

I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er

And they never repent adequately because they cannot conceive of repentance. They have regret, but not repentance. The initial crime was one by which they knew they were volitionally forfeiting heavenly grace and invited supernatural assistance to

do it ('come you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts), therefore, the terrible events that ensued from that are the direct consequence of that initial crime. They are left, at the end, only with the comfortless and cryptic mysteries of the witches' prophecies, and the

knowledge that their crimes are irreclaimable. They die, by violence, with no one to say over them, as the Doctor once said of Lady Macbeth before her suicide, More needs she the divine than the physician. God, God forgive us all! [V, i]

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АНОТАЦІЯ

Е. ГУДСПІД

«ОБЕРНИСЬ, ПРОКЛЯТИЙ ПЕС, ОБЕРНИСЬ»: НАДПРИРОДНЕ І ВІРУЮЧІ У «МАКБЕТІ» В. ШЕКСПІРА

Художній світ Макбет розділений на дві частини: з одного боку, злі надприродні сили, що постають видимими та впливовими; з іншого, добрі небесні сили, які проявляються настільки абстраговано, що здаються нематеріальними і невизначеними. Подружжя Макбет має християнські уявлення щодо прокляття, спокути та пекла, проте ці герої роблять вибір на користь надприродного зла, щоб досягти своїх цілей.

У фокусі статті знаходиться тема надприродного і фантасмагоричного у п'єсі Макбет В. Шекспіра. Ця тема досліджується із особливим акцентом на поясненні зв'язків сім'ї Макбет із традиційними релігійними уявленнями про гріх, спокутування і прокляття. Автор статті прочитує ці елементи в системі образів, яку формує, з одного боку, сім'я Макбет (вона асоціюється автором з демонічним, надприродним і нечестивим началом) та, з іншого боку, супротивники (або жертви) подружжя Макбет (автор асоціює цих героїв із християнським світом, поняттями святості та каяття).

Основні висновки, до яких скеровує дослідження, викладене у статті, стосуються того, що лише два герої п'єси – Макбет та Леді Макбет – знаходяться під прямими впливом надприродного. Навіть персонаж Банко в проєкті Шекспіра – як демонструє інтерпретативний аналіз п'єси – стає свідком появи відьом лише заради того, щоб засвідчити справжність надприродних сил та проілюструвати богословську відповідь на спокуси, які ці сили пропонують. Відтак, реальність, небезпека та сила відьом стають безсумнівним фактом для нового шотландського короля. Інший момент, що був висвітлений у процесі аналізу п'єси – це надзвичайний рівень прийняття демонічного та надприродного зла подружжям Макбет. Критичне прочитання п'єси засвідчує, що ці герої не просто люди, які були введені в оману амбіціями; натомість, це люди, які знищили себе власними бажаннями, відкинувши християнську мораль і запросивши на допомогу диявольські й паранормальні сили. Іншими словами, п'єса «Макбет» володіє настільки потужним виміром надприродного (виміром відьом, привидів, пророцтв), позаяк саме Макбети спираються на ці сили.

Таким чином, можна узагальнити, що Шекспір розігрує у «Макбет» не реальність Шотландії, де живе подружжя Макбет, а створює духовно і психологічно «пустельне місце», у якому ці герої дозволяють собі жити.

Ключові слова: Макбет, надприродне, відьми, релігія, християнство.