

The Historical Context of Macbeth

Table of Contents:[View Multimedia File\(s\)](#)

Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* sometime between 1605 and 1606, shortly after the ascension of King James of Scotland to the English throne. The new monarch brought Scotland—previously known to the English only as a mysterious, conquered neighbor—into the public limelight. The period of James' reign was further marked by political and religious conflict, much of which focused the kingdom's attention on the danger of regicide.

Events in History at the Time of the Play

Sources

Following the process used in the creation of many of his plays, Shakespeare drew the plot for *Macbeth* from historical sources—particularly Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577), the authoritative historical text of the period. Although Holinshed contains the story of *Macbeth* and Duncan, Shakespeare did not rely on this only; rather, he combined different stories and different versions of the same story to create his drama. The *Chronicles* include an account of King Malcolm II (reigned 1005-34), whose throne passed first to Duncan I (reigned 1034-40) and then to *Macbeth* (reigned 1040-57), both of whom were his grandsons. For his portrayal of the murder through which *Macbeth* took Duncan's throne, Shakespeare mined another vein of the *Chronicles*—King Duff's death at the hands of one of his retainers, Donwald. In combining the two events, Shakespeare crafted a specific tone for the tale of regicide.

When King Malcolm II of Scotland died in 1034, his last command was that the throne should pass to his oldest grandson, Duncan. This last request went against the Celtic tradition of succession, which stipulated that the inheritance of the throne alternate between different branches of the family, and simultaneously cut out another grandson, *Macbeth*, from the line of inheritance. *Macbeth* nevertheless pursued his claim to the throne as prescribed by tradition. He further supported his claim through the ancestry of his wife, Lady Gruoch, who was a direct descendent of two earlier Scottish kings, Malcolm I and Kenneth III. Nonetheless, *Macbeth*'s claim was rejected in favor of Duncan's. *Macbeth* was not immediately hostile to the new king, but several years into Duncan's reign he raised an army and openly opposed the monarch. Duncan led his own forces against *Macbeth* and was killed in the ensuing battle. With Duncan out of the way, and his two sons out of the country, *Macbeth* became king of Scotland. He held the throne without incident for seventeen years until Duncan's oldest son, Malcolm III, returned to Scotland with an army. Malcolm killed *Macbeth* when their armies met at the Battle of Lumphanan. With *Macbeth*'s death, Malcolm faced one final obstacle to the throne: Lulach, the son of Lady Gruoch from an earlier marriage. Lulach, who was actually crowned king immediately following *Macbeth*'s death, claimed the Scottish throne through the ancestry of his mother. Malcolm did not let this development deter him; he had Lulach murdered and took the crown in 1058.

Shakespeare's version of *Macbeth*'s relationship with his king comes from several places in Holinshed. The murder mostly derives from Holinshed's description of King Duff's death at the hands of Donwald: King Duff, like Duncan, is murdered by a nobleman he trusts. Donwald, like Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, acts with the support of an ambitious wife. Furthermore, in his account of the later history, Holinshed describes Duncan as an ineffective monarch who realized his own weakness enough to enlist the aid of *Macbeth* and Banquo to fight off Macdonwald's invasion from the Hebrides. *Macbeth* and Banquo defeated this invasion, as well as a subsequent invasion by Sweno of Norway. Other elements of *Macbeth* that can be traced to Holinshed's *Chronicles* include *Macbeth*'s attempt to murder Banquo and Fleance and *Macbeth*'s death at the hands of Macduff.

Macbeth's Scotland

Shakespeare sets his drama at a moment in Scottish history soon after the end of English rule, which had dominated Scotland from the beginning of the tenth century. Although the sources from which Shakespeare worked all referred to events that had taken place in eleventh-century Scotland, the play itself was not a narrowly historical document. Shakespeare adopted and adapted the time and setting for the purposes of his drama, creating an evocation of medieval Scotland whose mood would frame the actions of his fictional *Macbeth*. Nonetheless, the play refers often

to details of Scottish culture at that time, without an understanding of which the audience can miss some of the play's meaning.

The Norse invasion—raiders and settlers

During the ninth century Scotland found itself under invasion by raiders from Norway and Denmark, commonly known as Vikings or Norsemen, who dominated the northern seas for several hundred years. The villages and monasteries of Scotland, often isolated in a landscape comprised of offshore island chains, deep inlets or fjords, and rugged mountains, were easy targets for the Norse rovers. The Scandinavian pirates launched raids on Scotland from the surrounding islands, and few monasteries or villages could hope to defend themselves from these attacks. The Hebrides island chain off the western coast of Scotland, from which Sweno led the attack that **Macbeth** repulses at the beginning of the play, often served as bases for the Vikings, who controlled the region. Over time, however, some of the invaders settled in Scotland, discovering that the land was fertile for farming. Through intermarriage and conversion to Christianity in the tenth century, these settlers assimilated completely into the Scottish culture.

Witchcraft and the supernatural

Like many European cultures of the period, medieval Scotland maintained a belief in witches, including their ability to make prophecies and to affect the outcome of certain events. Shakespeare's depiction of **Macbeth**'s encounters with the witches drew on both eleventh-century Scottish belief in witches and Renaissance English belief in witches. For his specific images, the playwright could cull from a variety of sources, including Holinshed's *Chronicles*. In general, witchcraft was regarded as an evil practice, involving some kind of relationship with the devil, and was therefore considered a threat to social stability. Scottish authorities often took extreme measures against witchcraft, such as King Kenneth's proclamation that witches who called up spirits for supernatural aid should be burned to death.

Historical Events at the Time the Play Was Written

King James I

When Queen Elizabeth's rule ended in 1603, she was succeeded to the throne by King James I, the son of Mary, Queen of Scots. He had ruled Scotland as King James IV since 1581. Scholarly discussions of **Macbeth** have often assumed a significant correspondence between James I's ascension to the throne in 1603 and Shakespeare's composition of **Macbeth** sometime soon after; some critics further contend that the play was written to be played not in the Globe theater, but as a private performance before the king. The story contains many reflections of James' interests: the family tree of Scottish royalty, the issue of "just" kingship, the threat of regicide, and witchcraft. Shakespeare addresses his monarch's interest in ancestry by including a scene in which the witches conjure an image of King James's ascent to the throne through a family tree traced back to Banquo.

The Gowrie Conspiracy

On August 5, 1600, an assassination attempt on King James, then of Scotland, nearly succeeded. The Earl of Gowrie and his eldest brother, Alexander Ruthven, deceived the King into meeting alone with a man supposedly charged with theft, but actually armed to kill the monarch who was, at that moment, without the protection of his retinue. The attempt on the king's life captured the public's attention—a deluge of pamphlets about the affair appeared, including one penned by the king himself. Sermons presented throughout England and Scotland focused on the blasphemy of the attempted murder. At this time, while murder itself was considered a crime and a sin, regicide—specifically, the murder of a king—was an even greater crime and sin. A murderer who assaulted a king took not only a human life, but also, according to popular belief, a ruler whose monarchy was determined by God.

The Gunpowder Plot

On November 5, 1605, another attempt at regicide came to light: the Gunpowder Plot, motivated by the religious strife between Protestants and Catholics in general and by James' severe measures against Roman Catholics in particular. The plotters, a group of Catholics opposed to the Protestant monarchy, formulated a plan to kill King James, the royal family, and dozens of government officials. On the night before a ceremony to be held in the Parliament House and to be attended by the majority of the English government, including the royal family, an inspection of the cellar found Guy Fawkes, one of the conspirators, waiting in the basement with a match and large quantities of gunpowder. The traitors were tried in court, convicted of treason, and executed on January 30, 1606. One of the conspirators, Robert

Catesby, was a young nobleman from a distinguished family. His role as a conspirator in the Gunpowder Plot came as a shock to King James, who regarded Catesby as one of his dearest subjects. Some scholars have speculated that Catesby was the model for **Macbeth**.

The trial of Father Henry Garnet, the great equivocator

During this period of religious persecution, Jesuits developed the practice of equivocation in order to facilitate giving untruthful responses while under interrogation about their religious actions. A person being interrogated would speak words with equivocal or unclear meanings so as to avoid self-incrimination. This practice became crucial for staunch Catholics in Protestant England, where one's Catholic faith could have dire consequences; under the Protestant King James, being Catholic was considered a crime.

Equivocation came to be regarded as a punishable form of treason in England. The trial of Father Henry Garnet, who was on trial for his role in the Gunpowder Plot, stands out as the climax of the Protestant attack on equivocators. At the trial, which took place in March 1606, Garnet was found guilty in fifteen minutes and sentenced to death. Shakespeare undoubtedly followed the event, as did the rest of London, and although **Macbeth** was almost completed at the time of the trial, he could still incorporate the subject of equivocation into his text. In the scene following Duncan's death, a porter appears who remarks, "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" (Shakespeare, **Macbeth**, 2.3.8-11). Every member of the play's original audience would have understood this episode as a mockery of Catholics and the practice of equivocation.

King James on Witchcraft

One of King James' greatest passions was the study of witchcraft. In 1597 he wrote *Daemonologie*, an influential text in which he contended that witchcraft was a reality and that its practitioners must be punished. King James also attended trials and examinations regarding witchcraft, including the examination of Dr. Fian, a Scottish schoolmaster who was an alleged witch. The charges levelled against Fian included practicing wicked acts with other witches, possessing an attendant spirit, and making curses against the king. Most significantly, Fian's spirit was reputed to have caused several marine disasters, including an attempt against the ship of King James himself.

Source Citation:

"The Historical Context of Macbeth." *EXPLORING Shakespeare*. Online ed. Detroit: Gale, 2003. *Discovering Collection*. Gale. PRINCE GEORGE HIGH SCHOOL. 23 Sep. 2009
<<http://find.galegroup.com/srcx/infomark.do?&contentSet=GSRC&type=retrieve&tabID=T001&prodId=DC&docId=EJ2115508731&source=gale&srcprod=DISC&userGroupName=prin35678rpa&version=1.0>>.

Macbeth and Witchcraft

Table of Contents: [View Multimedia File\(s\)](#)

"**Macbeth** and Witchcraft," in *Focus on Macbeth*, edited by John Russell Brown, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, pp. 189-209.

In the following essay, Stallybrass analyzes the social and political relevance of witches during Shakespeare's time and examines Shakespeare's use of the witches to affirm the "natural" monarchial and patriarchal order.

For students of **Macbeth**, witchcraft has always presented a problem. At the one extreme, we have scholars like T. A. Spalding and W. C. Curry who have unearthed some of the historical minutiae of medieval and Renaissance concepts of witchcraft [in *Elizabethan Demonology* (1880) and *Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns* (1937), respectively]; at the other extreme, we have critics who accept the play's witchcraft only as a form of psychological

symbolism. Since the publications of Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) and Alan Macfarlane's *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (1970), the latter position has seemed less tenable. But this does not mean that we should return to the (admittedly useful) positivistic data-gathering of Spalding and Curry to understand the function of witchcraft in *Macbeth*. I see little point, for instance, in attempting to *classify* the Weird Sisters as witches or warlocks or norms (distinctions which were rarely observed by Tudor and Stuart witchcraft treatises or reports of trials). Such classifications tend to emphasize the exoticism of witchcraft beliefs without beginning to explain how such beliefs could ever have been held.

It is, indeed, worth emphasizing the 'normality' of witchcraft beliefs. Although witchcraft accusations reached epidemic proportions in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, witchcraft beliefs are endemic in many societies. Their frequency, however, should not be taken as evidence for the truth of witchcraft (there is no proof, for instance, that 'witches' eat their own children, cause sickness, plague or famine, or have sexual relations with devils) but as evidence of the social utility of such beliefs in a variety of societies. An adequate explanation of witchcraft, then, needs to have a double focus: on the one hand, it must describe the actual beliefs and explain how they fit within a particular cosmology; on the other hand, it must take into account the *function* of such beliefs. . . .

Witchcraft beliefs are one way of asserting distinctions; they 'sharpen definitions,' as Mary Douglas puts it [in the introduction to *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations* (1970)], including definitions of political and familial roles. They can be used, for instance, to account for the 'unnatural' ambition of a rival or for the 'unnatural' power of a woman. In doing so, such beliefs imply and legitimate their opposite, the 'natural'. In short, witchcraft beliefs are less a reflection of a real 'evil' than a social construction from which we learn more about the accuser than the accused, more about the social institutions which tolerate/encourage/act on those accusations than about the activities of those people (in England, mainly women, mainly poor) who were prosecuted as witches. What Mary Douglas says of dirt [in *Purity and Danger* (1978)], could be said of witchcraft: it 'is never a unique, isolated event' but rather 'the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification . . . in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements'. Witchcraft accusations are a way of reaffirming a particular order against outsiders, or of attacking an internal rival, or of attacking 'deviance'. Witchcraft in *Macbeth*, I will maintain, is not simply a reflection of a pre-given order of things rather, it is a particular working upon, and legitimation of, the hegemony of patriarchy.

WITCHCRAFT AND MONARCHY

[According to G. L. Kittredge's *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (1929),] the English government had, at least since 1300, been concerned with 'witches'—'with sorcerers, because they might attempt to kill the king, with prophets (including astrologers) because they might forecast the hour of his death.' The Duke of Buckingham, accused of treason in 1521, had been encouraged by a prophecy that he would be king, although he had been warned that the prophet, a Carthusian monk, 'might be deceived by the devil'. In 1558, Sir Anthony Fortescue was arrested for sorcery, having cast a horoscope which stated that the Queen 'should not live passing the next spring', and in 1580, Nicholas Johnson was accused of 'making her Majesty's picture in wax'. This last case was one of the factors in the passing of a new Act in 1580-1 which attacked the 'divers persons wickedly disposed' who had 'not only wished her Majesty's death, but also by divers means practised and sought to know how long her Highness should live, and who should reign after her decease, and what changes and alterations should thereby happen.' The Act went on to attack all those who, 'by any prophesying, witchcraft, conjurations or other like unlawfull means whatsoever', attempted to harm the monarch or to meddle in her affairs. In England, then, there was already a clear connection between prophecy, witchcraft, and monarchy before James ascended the throne.

In Scotland, James was making his own connections. There is little evidence that he had an interest in witchcraft before 1590, but the sensational trials of that year changed his attitude. More than 300 witches were alleged to have met and confessions were extorted, with the aid of torture, which pointed to a conspiracy directed by the Earl of Bothwell against the king himself. James took an active part in the trial, and Agnes Samson's report [in *Newes from Scotland*] of 'the very words which passed between the King's Majesty and his Queen at Oslo in Norway the first night of their marriage' made him give 'more credit to the rest'.

But if the trial triggered James's interest in witchcraft, we may suggest two possible determinants of the actual form his interest took. The first is, paradoxical though it may seem, his very desire to be in the intellectual vanguard. We need to remember that the witch craze was not the last fling of residual medieval 'superstition', but, at least in part, the potent construction of some of the foremost intellectuals of the time, including Bodin. It may well be . . . that it was James's attempt to keep up with intellectual developments on the Continent after his contact with scholars in Denmark in 1589 which first aroused his interest in witchcraft.

But if his interest was stimulated by Continental ideas, his new belief consolidated his pre-existing interest in the theory and practice of godly rule. If the King was God's representative on earth, then who could be a more likely victim of the devil's arts than he? In his early work on the Book of Revelations, James had associated the devil with Antichrist, in his guise of the Pope, but it was not difficult to imagine that the devil employed more than one agency. To suggest, then, that the monarchy was under demonic attack was to glorify the institution of monarchy, since that implied that it was one of the bastions protecting this world from the triumph of Satan. As Stuart Clark says [in *The*

Damned Art (1977)], 'demonism was, logically speaking, one of the presuppositions of the metaphysics of order on which James's political ideas ultimately rested.' Clark also shows how this kind of *antithetical* thinking is the logical corollary of *analogical* thinking. If kingship is legitimated by analogy to God's rule over the earth, and the father's rule over the family and the head's rule over the body, witchcraft establishes the opposite analogies, whereby the Devil attempts to rule over the earth, and the woman over the family, and the body over the head.

Henry Paul, [*The Royal Play of Macbeth* (1950)], argues in great detail for the indebtedness of the play to James's views on the nature of witchcraft and kingship. The play was performed before James and his father-in-law, the King of Denmark, at Hampton Court in 1606, and Paul argues that the play was shaped in important ways by royal patronage. But it is not demonstrable, in my view, that James's views (as set forth in his *Daemonologie*, for instance) were *sources* for the play, although they undoubtedly set ideological limits to it. In 1604, a play called *Gowrie*, performed by the King's Men, had been banned. The play was presumably based on the Earl of Gowrie's attempt to murder James in 1600. Gowrie had been killed in the attempt, and [according to *Gowrie's Conspiracie* (1600)] on him had been found a bag 'full of magical characters, and words of enchantment, wherein, it seemed that he had put his confidence.' Whatever the reason for banning the play, the King's Men would have been unlikely to risk a second offensive play on the sensitive topics of the attack upon kings and the uses of the black arts.

But if James's ideas were not a source, they provide an analogue, sharing and partially determining the ideological terrain of *Macbeth*. Like James's works, *Macbeth* is constructed around the fear of a world without sovereignty. Similarly, Robert Bolton, preaching in 1621, attempted to legitimate sovereignty by constructing the imaginary horrors of a world without it:

Take Sovereignty from the face of the earth, and you turne it into a Cockpit. Men would become cut-throats and cannibals one unto another. Murder, adulteries, incests, rapes, robberies, perjuries, witchcrafts, blasphemies, all kinds of villainies, outrages, and savage cruelty, would overflow all Countries. We should have a very hell upon earth, and the face of it covered with blood, as it was once with water.

MACBETH AND HOLINSHED

If it was the ascension of James to the English throne which suggested a play about Scottish history, and about James's own ancestry in particular, it is worth noting how Shakespeare utilized Holinshed, his main source for the play. To begin with, he simplified the outlines of the story to create a structure of clear antitheses. Holinshed's Duncan is a weak king, 'negligent . . . in punishing offenders,' and unable to control the kingdom, whereas Shakespeare's Duncan is, as even *Macbeth* admits, 'clear in his great office' (I. vii. 18). Holinshed's *Macbeth* has a legal right to the throne, since 'by the old lawes of the realme, the ordnance was, that if he that should succeed were not of able age to take the charge upon himselfe, he that was next of blood unto him should be admitted', whereas Shakespeare makes little of *Macbeth's* claim. Moreover, Shakespeare omits any reference to the 'ten yeares in equall justice' during which Holinshed's *Macbeth* ruled after 'the feeble and slouthfull administration of Duncane.' Finally, Holinshed's Banquo is a party to *Macbeth's* plot to murder Duncan, whereas Shakespeare's Banquo is not.

What is striking about all these changes is that they transform dialectic into antithesis. Whereas Shakespeare's second historical tetralogy undoubtedly raises dialectical questions about sovereignty, *Macbeth* takes material eminently suitable for dialectical development (the weak ruler being overthrown by a ruler who establishes 'equall justice') and shapes it into a structural antithesis. One reason for the shaping of the sources in this way was, no doubt, royal patronage. This meant, for instance, that Banquo, James's ancestor, had to be shown in a favourable light, and it may be that James's views on godly rule and on 'the trew difference betwixt a lawfull, good King and an usurping Tyrant' were taken into account. Certainly, *Macbeth* differentiates as clearly as James's *Basiliikon Doron* between the good king whose 'greatest suretie' is his people's good will and the tyrant who builds 'his suretie upon his peoples miserie'.

Holinshed's account, though, suggested another factor by which the tyrant might be distinguished from the godly ruler: his relation to witchcraft. For Holinshed describes how *Macbeth* 'had learned of certaine wizzards' and had gained (false) confidence from a witch who told him 'that he should never be slaine with man born of anie woman'. But even over the issue of witchcraft, Holinshed is not entirely clear, because the crucial prophecies which embolden his *Macbeth* are made by 'three women in strange and wild apparell, resembling creatures of elder world', and these women are later described as 'either the weird sisters, that is (as ye would say) the goddesses of destinie, or else some nymphs or feiries, indued with knowledge of prophesie by their necromenticall science'. It was probably these three women whom Dr. Gwin transformed into the *Tres Sibyllae* who hailed James as King of Scotland and England in a performance presented to the king at Oxford on 27 August 1605.

But for the Witches in *Macbeth* to have been presented as godly sibylls would have weakened the antithetical structure of the play. Only by making his Sisters forces of darkness could Shakespeare suggest demonic opposition to godly rule. And here Shakespeare had to supplement Holinshed's account of *Macbeth*. For although the political effects of usurpation are suggested by Holinshed's account of how, after *Macbeth* murdered Banquo, 'everie man began to doubt his owne life', there is little sense of the natural holocaust which Bolton saw as the logical outcome of

the overthrow of sovereignty. For an image of a king's murder and the consequent turning of a country into 'a very hell upon earth', Shakespeare had to turn back to Holinshed's account of Donwald's murder of King Duff, a murder which is itself the consequence of the King's execution of Donwald's kinsmen for conspiring with witches against him. Many of the horrifying events which follow Duff's death (the darkening of the sun, lightning and tempests, cannibalism amongst animals) reappear, more or less transformed, in *Macbeth*, reaffirming through antithesis the order which has been overthrown—the order of monarchy, of patriarchy, of the head, of 'reason'.

THE WITCHES

'For Rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft' (I Samuel XV. 23). And the first two scenes of *Macbeth* present both witches and rebellion. But what kind of witches are they? In the first scene, we can note several aspects of them: they are connected with disorder in nature (not only thunder and lightning but also 'fog and filthy air'); they are associated with familiars (Graymalkin and Paddock), the common companions of English witches but rarely mentioned in Scottish or Continental prosecutions; they can 'hover'; they reverse moral values ('Fair is foul, and foul is fair' (I. i. 10); they presumably foresee the future, since the third witch knows that the battle will be over by sunset. The third scene, though, shows more clearly what seems to be an ambiguity in the presentation of the Witches. On the one hand, they have features typical of the English village 'witch', being old women, 'wither'd' and with 'choppy fingers' and 'skinny lips'. [In *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*] Reginald Scott described English 'witches' as 'commonly old, lame, bleare-eied, pale, fowle, and full of wrinkles'. Moreover, the second witch kills swine and the first witch pursues a petty vendetta, typical offences in English witch prosecutions. But, on the other hand, they are mysterious and 'look not like th' inhabitants o' th' earth' (I. iii. 41), and they prophesy the future.

What is the function of this ambiguity? At one level, no doubt, it enabled Shakespeare to draw upon the common belief in an 'evil' at work in the English countryside whilst never reducing the play's witches to village widows. But it was also structurally convenient because it established a double perspective on evil, allowing for the simultaneous sense of reduction in *Macbeth* as he becomes increasingly dependent on the 'midnight hags' (IV. i. 47) and of his aspiration as, after 'Disdaining Fortune' (I. ii. 17) in the battle, he attempts to grab hold of Providence itself. The double perspective operates throughout the play. On the one hand, *Macbeth* is reduced to the image of 'a dwarfish thief' (V. ii. 22) before being literally reduced to the head which Macduff carries onto the stage. At this level, evil is conceptualized as eating up itself until nothing is left. But the conceptualization leaves no role for militant 'good' (and therefore would not require the 'great revenge' (IV. iii. 2-14) of Malcolm and Macduff), and so the world of self-consuming evil is combined with a dualistic world in which both the Witches and *Macbeth* threaten to bring the world back to its first chaos or, as Bolton puts it, to create 'a very hell upon earth', the hell of a world without sovereignty.

LADY MACBETH, THE WITCHES, AND FAMILY STRUCTURE

The Witches open the play, but they appear in only the first and third scenes of the first Act. In the fifth and seventh scenes, the 'temptress' is Lady *Macbeth*. In other words, scenes in which female figures champion evil alternate with public scenes (Duncan and news of the battle in scene 2; the honouring of *Macbeth*, Banquo, and Malcolm in scene 4; Duncan's reception at *Macbeth's* castle in scene 6). And the public scenes, with the exception of the last, are exclusively male. If this foregrounds the female figures, Lady *Macbeth* is also equated with the Witches in more specific ways. As Mark Rose says [in *Shakespeare Design* (1972)] 'the third scene opens with the Witches alone, after which *Macbeth* enters and they hail him by his various titles. The fifth scene opens with Lady *Macbeth* alone, practicing witchcraft. . . . And when *Macbeth* enters she, too, hails him by his titles.' Moreover, Lady *Macbeth* and the Witches are equated by their equivocal relation to an implied norm of femininity. Of the Witches, Banquo says:

You should be women,

And yet your beards forbid me to interpret

That you are so.

(I. iii. 45-7)

And Lady *Macbeth* invokes the 'murd'ring ministers' (I. v. 45) to unsex her.

The enticement of *Macbeth* both by the Witches and by his wife is briefly suggested in Holinshed's account of *Macbeth*, and in Holinshed's earlier account of Donwald's wife Shakespeare found a much expanded role given to a murderer's wife. But in neither account is any connection made between witchcraft and the murderer's wife. Again, we see the antithetical mode being strengthened in *Macbeth* by the development of analogies between 'perverted femininity', witchcraft, and a world turned upside down. The analogy was not, of course, new, and it is notoriously

enshrined in *Malleus Maleficarum* where *Femina* is derived from *Fe* and *Minus* 'since [woman] is ever weaker to hold and preserve the faith.'

But it is important to note the shift of emphasis when Lady **Macbeth** 'replaces' the witches. By this movement from the already damned to the secular world, the implications of the rejection of 'womanhood' are made explicit. Whereas the witches are difficult to categorize at all within the implied norm, in I. v., Lady **Macbeth** is shown in the very attempt of overthrowing a norm inscribed in her own body. 'Remorse', 'compunctious visitings of Nature', and the 'milk' of 'woman's breasts' (I. v. 41-5) are established as the 'feminine' virtues even as Lady **Macbeth** negates them. Indeed, because of the inscription of those virtues in Lady **Macbeth**, her relation to witchcraft is not as clear at the psychological as it is at the structural level. Although Lady **Macbeth** might say, like Joan la Pucelle, 'I exceed my sex' (*I Henry VI*, I. ii. 90), her relation to witchcraft is never as explicit as Joan's. For Joan is not merely *accused* of being a 'witch' and 'damned sorceress' (III. ii. 38); her conjurings lead to the actual appearance of fiends upon the stage.

Nevertheless, Lady **Macbeth**'s invocation of the 'murd'ring ministers' (I. v. 45) as her children has particular resonance within the context of witchcraft, even if her ministers never appear. For her proclaimed role as mother/lover of the spirits implicitly subverts patriarchal authority in a manner typically connected with witchcraft. If the first Witch plans to come between a sailor and his wife in I. iii., Lady **Macbeth** herself breaks the bond with her husband by suggesting both his metaphysical and physical impotence (he is not 'a man' (I. vii. 49)) because he is unworthy of the respect due to a patriarch, because he is 'a coward' (I. vii. 43), and, possibly, because, as we learn later, his is 'a barren sceptre' (III. i. 61). It is particularly ironic, then, that **Macbeth** says 'Bring forth men-children only' (I. vii. 72). For the structural antitheses which the first act develops establish the relation between women, witchcraft, the undermining of patriarchal authority and sterility.

But how can the family be conceptualized if women are, literally, faithless? One way is to show that not all womanhood falls under the curse of witchcraft, and this is surely an important reason for the introduction of Lady Macduff in IV. ii., a scene which has no base in Holinshed. Indeed, it is the destruction of this 'ideal' family which leads to Macduff's revenge and the final denouement. But Lady Macduff is introduced late in the play, and we have already been presented with another way out of the dilemma: a family without women—Duncan and his sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, Banquo and his son Fleance (at the end of the play, Siward and his son Young Siward). On the one hand, there are the (virtuous) families of men; on the other hand, there are the antifamilies of women. And here, the notorious question, 'How many children had Lady **Macbeth**?' is not entirely irrelevant. For although Lady **Macbeth** says, 'I have given suck' (I. vii. 54), her children are never seen on the stage, unlike the children of Duncan, Banquo, Macduff, and Siward. Are we not asked to accept a logical contradiction for the sake of a symbolic unity: Lady **Macbeth** is *both* an unnatural mother *and* sterile? This links her to the unholy family of the Witches, with their familiars and their brew which includes 'Finger of birth-strangled babe' and the blood of a sow which has eaten its own litter (IV. i. 30 and 64-5). Like the Witches, Lady **Macbeth** and her husband constitute an 'unholy' family, a family whose only children are the 'murd'ring ministers'.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LADY **MACBETH** AND THE WITCHES

I have been writing mainly of the ways in which the Witches and Lady **Macbeth** function in the first Act. But their functions are not constant throughout the play. Lady **Macbeth** is beginning to be developed into her own antithesis even before the murder takes place. 'Nature' is reasserted through her in its most compelling guise—the Law of the Father which, in this society, founds and is founded by the Law of the King. Thus, Lady **Macbeth** says that she would have murdered Duncan herself 'Had he not resembled / My father as he slept' (II. ii. 12-13). And in the last act, she is transformed from the pitiless instigator to murder to the guilt-ridden sleep-walker whose thoughts return to 'the old man' who had 'so much blood in him' (V. i. 38). Curry interprets her sleep-walking as 'demoniacal somnambulism'. But surely this is to miss the dramatic point, which is the reassertion of 'the compunctious visitations of Nature' if only in sleep. Lady **Macbeth**'s last words, indeed, are not of her own guilt but of the solicitous wife's care for her husband: 'give me your hand . . . To bed, to bed, to bed' (V. i. 64-6). But the transformation of Lady **Macbeth** is used to affirm developmentally the antithetical structure. It operates as a specific closure of discourse within the binary opposition of virago (witch)/wife.

If Lady **Macbeth**'s changing function is marked by psychological change, the Witches' changing function is marked by the changing function of their prophecies. Much has been made of the fact that the Witches speak equivocally, that they are, as **Macbeth** says, 'imperfect speakers' (I. iii. 70). But the apparitions of the fourth act are progressively *less* equivocal, moving from the 'armed head' to the 'bloody child' to the 'child crowned' to the 'show of eight kings, the last with a glass in his hand' which shows Banquo's descendants stretched out 'to th' crack of doom' (IV. i. 117). The Witches here, far from being 'imperfect speakers', conjure up a vision whose truth is established by the presence of Banquo's descendant, James I. In this prophecy of the 'good', dramatic fate (as yet incomplete) joins hands with completed political fate.

As with Lady **Macbeth**, then, so with the Witches: they are constructed so as to manifest their own antithesis. Cursed witches prophesy the triumph of godly rule. At one level, no doubt, this implies that even evil works providentially. As James himself had declared in the preface to *Daemonologie*:

For where the devilles intention in them is ever to perish, either the soule or the body, or both of them, that he is so permitted to deale with: God by the contrarie, drawes ever out of that evill glorie to himselfe.

But at another level, the association of the Witches with the workings of Providence is part of the process by which attention is focused upon **Macbeth** alone. In I. i., the Witches are invoked by their familiars; in I. v., Lady **Macbeth** invokes the spirits. But, in the third act, it is **Macbeth**, who had to be 'invoked' to do the deed, who invokes the night to 'Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful Day' (III. ii. 47). But **Macbeth's** conjunctions made even

though the treasure

Of nature's germens tumble all together,

Even till destruction sicken

(IV. i. 58-60)

lead to a future in which he, with his 'fruitless crown' (III. i. 60), has no place. At the end, his only 'familiar' is 'Direness, familiar to my slaughteros thoughts' (V. v. 14).

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLAY

The first act of the play is framed by images of witchcraft, rebellion and murder. At the end of the second act, an old man describes a world turned upside down, in which owls kill falcons, horses revolt against men and cannibalize each other, and night strangles day. In I. i., I. iii., III. v., and IV. i., thunder sounds. And in III. v. and IV. i., Hecate, who, according to Jonson, 'was believed to govern in witchcraft', appears. Indeed, IV. i., the last scene with the Witches, can be seen as the emblematic centre of the play, containing as it does both the vision of kings and the fullest display of the workings of the 'secret, black, and midnight hags' (IV. i. 48). It is not my purpose to enter into the dispute about the authorship of the Hecate passages. Whether Shakespeare wrote them or not, they are perfectly in keeping with the structure of the play. Indeed, the dance of Hecate and the six Witches gives a concrete dramatization of the 'deed without a name' (IV. i. 49) which reverses the whole order of 'Nature'. We need to imagine something like the Witches' dance in Jonson's *The Masque of Queens* (1609), which was

full of preposterous change, and gesticulation, but most applying to their property, who at their meetings, do all things contrary to the custom of men, dancing back to back and hip to hip, their hands joined, and making their circles backward, to the left hand, with strange fantastic motions of their heads and bodies.

In the rituals of Shakespeare's Witches, as of Jonson's, a Jacobean audience could contemplate the systematic undoing of the hierarchical ceremonies of speech, of cooking, of dancing.

It is also in Act IV, though, that the 'prayers' for a 'swift blessing' (III. vi. 47) which will restore those ceremonies begin to be answered by the discovery of medicines for 'the sickly weal' (V. ii. 27). At the same time, the impotence of literal medicines is made explicit by two minor characters: the English doctor who admits the impotence of his art to cure scrofula, the Scottish doctor who admits the impotence of his art to cure 'infected minds' ('More needs she the divine than the physician' (V. i. 72)). The introduction of these characters should warn against any attempt to give too naturalistic an explanation of the play, since their function is largely to assert the dependence of physical health upon political and metaphysical order. Indeed, the only function of the English doctor is to dramatize the difference between his own weak art and the medicine of King Edward's 'sanctity' (IV. iii. 144). (The King's power to heal scrofula, a belief which originated with Edward I, was a useful piece of royal propaganda and, although James I was himself sceptical, he ultimately agreed to take part in the healing ceremony; its propaganda value may be suggested by the fact that Charles II touched 90,798 persons in nineteen years.) Of course, King Edward offers Malcolm the practical aid of troops as well as the metaphysical aid of the 'sundry blessings' which hang about his throne (IV. iii. 158). But the 'med'cines' of Malcolm's and Macduff's 'great revenge' (IV. iii. 2-14) are guaranteed and legitimated by a godly magic which surpasses 'the great essay of art' (IV. iii. 143).

Witchcraft, prophecy and magic function in **Macbeth** as ways of developing a particular conceptualization of social and political order. Witchcraft is associated with female rule and the overthrowing of patriarchal authority which in turn leads to the 'womanish' (both cowardly and instigated by women) killing of Duncan, the 'holy' father who establishes both family and state. This in turn leads to the reversals in the cosmic order which the Old Man and Ross describe, and to the reversals in the patriarchal order, culminating in the killing of Lady Macduff and her son. The conclusion of the play reestablishes both the offended (and offending?) father, a father, paradoxically, 'not born of women' (V. iii. 4) (does this imply that he is unnatural or untainted?) the offended son/king. And the Witches can simply disappear,

their evil supplanted by the prophetic vision of Banquo's line and by the 'heavenly gift of prophecy' and 'miraculous work' (IV. iii. 157 and 147) of a legitimate king.

CONCLUSION

This aspect of *Macbeth* as a work of cultural 'ordering' could, of course, only make claims to 'truth' within a cosmology which accommodated witchcraft beliefs. That cosmology was largely defined by the Bible. There are, indeed, interesting parallels between *Macbeth* and the story of Saul and the Witch of Endor in the Book of Samuel (I Samuel XXVIII), a text which was dealt with by nearly every Renaissance treatise on witchcraft. Jane Jack has explored this parallel in ["*Macbeth*, King James and the Bible," *ELH*, 22 (1955)] where she writes:

Like Saul, *Macbeth* hears from the witches the confirmation of what he most fears. The crisis of the story is the victory of the witches: the resolution of the story is the judgement passed on *Macbeth* at the end—the same judgement that is passed on Saul: 'So Saul dyed for his transgression, that he committed against the word of the Lord, which he kept not, and in that he sought and asked counsel of a familiar spirit' (glossed in Geneva version as a 'witche and sorceress').

Jack goes on to assert the essentially religious tenor of *Macbeth*, a view which most critics of the play seem to hold. Murray, for example, maintains

[*Macbeth*] is, if ever a poem were so, a *traditional Catholic Christian poem*, the vitality of which is rooted in an uncompromising medieval faith, and in a prescientific view of the nature of reality. Consequently it preserves in a tremendously powerful and well unified set of images one of the greatest forces in Western European culture, a force which, however alien it may seem to many of us today, we can afford neither to forget, nor to neglect, for it contains, and can still convey, much of the wisdom of human experience.

The 'Christian' interpretation is, I believe, right in so far as it recognizes that *Macbeth* can only be understood in relation to a particular cosmology. But Murray, like Jack, attempts to separate religion from politics in a way which was totally foreign to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century thinking. For instance, the Fifth Commandment ('Honour thy father and thy mother'. . .) received new emphasis during this period so as to give religious underpinnings to the patriarchal state. Indeed, analogical thinking could be used not only to draw close parallels between the law of Moses and the law of the State but also to collapse traditional distinctions. Thus, in *The Six Bookes of the Commonweale* (1586), Bodin rejected Aristotle's distinction between political and domestic hierarchy, claiming that the family 'is the true seminarie and beginning of every Commonweale.' Nor is it surprising that Bodin also wrote an influential attack upon witchcraft, *Daemonomanie des Sorciers* (1580). If state and family were founded together, witchcraft founded the antistate together with the antifamily. James I also made the connection between state and family ('By the Law of Nature the King becomes a naturall Father to all his Lieges at his Coronation') and he too saw witchcraft as the antithesis of both. If the family was theorized as the site of conflict between hierarchy and witchcraft, that was, no doubt, because of its symbolic importance in early modern Europe when, as Natalie Davis writes [in "Women on Top: Symbolic Sexual Inversion and Political Disorder in Early Modern Europe," in *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society* (1978)],

the nature of political rule and the newer problem of sovereignty were very much at issue. In the little world of the family, with its conspicuous tension between intimacy and power, the larger matters of political and social order could find ready symbolization.

Witchcraft, sovereignty, the family—those concepts map out the ideological terrain of *Macbeth*, a terrain which should be understood as a field of conflict, not a 'given'.

I would argue, then, that Murray is wrong in attempting to collapse the present moment of analysis back into the 'eternity' of a past 'wisdom'. What, after all, are those 'well unified set of images', which give us 'the wisdom of human experience', *about*? 'Unreasoning womanhood', 'eternal motherhood', mind as 'a male quality only', Murray tells us. He points, I believe, to important elements in the play, but he then requires that we *empathize* with its symbolic orderings without reference of those orderings as embodying particular manoeuvres of *power*.

Those manoeuvres as they relate to 'unreasoning woman' are spelled out clearly enough in Krämer and Sprenger's *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486), the most influential of all the Renaissance witchcraft treatises. In it, a section is dedicated to answering the question 'Why Superstition is chiefly found in Women.' The roots of witchcraft are there discovered to be in the very nature of women, a nature which includes her desire, following Eve, to betray mankind. 'She is more carnal than a man'; 'as she is a liar by nature, so in her speech she stings while she delights us'; 'her heart is a net, and her hands are bands. He that pleaseth God shall escape from her; but he that is a sinner shall be caught by her'; 'can he be called a free man whose wife governs him . . . ? I should call him not only a slave, but the vilest of slaves, even if he comes of the noblest family'; 'nearly all the kingdoms of the world have been overthrown by woman.' (All of these statements have analogues in *Macbeth*.) In the *Malleus*, misogyny leads to the conclusion that

'it is no matter for wonder that there are more women than men found infected with the heresy of witchcraft.' Krämer and Sprenger's advocacy of a programme of ruthless repression is a logical consequence of their fear of a supernatural power in the hands of the powerless. For who would the powerless direct their power against if not the powerful?

If Krämer's and Sprenger's beliefs were grounded in medieval Christian traditions, similar beliefs can be found in modern African societies which have been analysed by anthropologists attempting to understand the social functions of such beliefs. Esther Goody, for example, observes [in "Legitimate and Illegitimate Aggression in a West African State," in *Witchcraft Confessions and Accusations*] that amongst the Gonja in Ghana only women are punished for witchcraft, and she accounts for this by showing the relation between witchcraft and the prohibition against aggression amongst women, since they have been consigned to an exclusively nurturing role:

There are two regular characteristics of the female domestic role. First, in the role of mother, a woman is a focus of emotional ties. . . . Then, as wife, woman is defined as subordinate to her husband. Aggression, if permitted, would threaten both these characteristics. . . . And if a woman strikes her husband with a stirring stick . . . he will become impotent; aggression in a woman's role renders a man powerless—it cannot be permitted.

A woman's refusal to be subordinated, then, is often accounted for by witchcraft. Similarly, Max Gluckman notes that [in "Moral Crises: Magical and Secular Solutions," in *The Allocation of Responsibility* (1972)]

In Nupe the evil witches who kill are women. . . . Nadel seeks to answer why. He finds a striking conflict between the roles which, ideally, women ought to play and that many women in fact do. Ideally, a Nupe woman should be a good wife, subservient to her husband, bearing him many children, and staying at home to care for them and their father. In reality, a great deal of trade is in the hands of women.

Women seem to be particularly vulnerable to witchcraft accusations in patrilineal, patrilocal societies, where women are cut off from their own kin and expected to merge their interests with those of their husbands' kin.

Two versions of how women operate in this kind of situation are constructed in *Macbeth*. Lady Macduff submerges her interests in her husband's, and when he flees she is totally defenceless; Lady *Macbeth* actively pursues her husband's interests, but only those interests which separate him from his kin. In the latter case, this leads to *Macbeth*'s murder of his cousin, to the isolation of the husband with his 'dear wife' (III. ii. 36), cut off from 'honour, love, obedience, troops of friends' (V. iii. 25), and finally, to the total isolation of *Macbeth* in the field of battle. But the play, concentrating increasingly on *Macbeth* himself as it develops, does not analyse the position of women; rather, it mobilizes the patriarchal fear of unsubordinated woman, the unstable element to which Krämer and Sprenger attributed the overthrow of 'nearly all the kingdoms of the world', to which the Gonja and the Nupe attribute witchcraft.

I am not proposing to conflate the imaginary society of *Macbeth* with Gonja or Nupe society. But I am arguing for the *general* relevance of anthropological and sociological models of the relation between witchcraft beliefs and structures of political and social dominance. We need such models, I believe, if we are to analyse, rather than repeat, the terms of the play itself. What I have attempted to show here is the use of witchcraft as a form of ideological closure within *Macbeth*, a returning of the disputed ground of politics to the undisputed ground of 'Nature'.

But the play is not, of course, *about* witchcraft, nor does the threat of the Biblical 'Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live' (*Exodus*, XXII. 18) hang over *Macbeth* as it hangs over *The Witch of Edmonton* (1621), for instance. And it cannot be said that the witches in *Macbeth* provide the only explanatory element in the play. If their prophecies provide one motive for the killing of a king, the radical instability of the concept of 'manliness' is sufficient to precipitate the deed. But it would be misleading to interpret this overdetermination as a *conflict* between supernatural and natural modes of explanation, since, within the cultural context, there was no necessity to choose between those modes. (For example, Mother Sawyer in *The Witch of Edmonton* is at first abused as a witch merely because, as she complains, 'I am poor, deform'd and ignorant' (II. i. 3); but the fact that she is presented sympathetically as a scapegoat—the natural explanation—is not seen as contradicting the fact that she becomes a witch—the supernatural explanation—and therefore presumably 'deserves' her death.) Nevertheless the coexistence of those modes suggests that the structural closures which I have been examining do not preclude a problematic relation between 'highly' and 'holily' (I. v. 17-18).

Source Citation:

Stallybrass, Peter. "Macbeth and Witchcraft." *EXPLORING Shakespeare*. Online ed. Detroit: Gale, 2003. *Discovering Collection*. Gale. PRINCE GEORGE HIGH SCHOOL. 23 Sep. 2009
<<http://find.galegroup.com/srcx/infomark.do?&contentSet=GSRC&type=retrieve&tabID=T001&prodId=DC&docId=EJ2115509008&source=gale&srcprod=DISC&userGroupName=prin35678rpa&version=1.0>>.

