

Fair is Foul

From the very beginning, *Macbeth* announces itself as a play where meaning itself is subject to debate: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (I.1.12). This paradoxical assertion of the radical identity of two opposite terms is a perfect embodiment of the play’s focus on uncertainty. Fittingly, this single line is spoken by multiple characters simultaneously, with the layering of voices echoing the layering of alliteration and chiasmic repetition within the line. The similarity of the words—fair and foul, both four-letter monosyllabic f-words—ironically highlights their status as antonyms, and calls on us to question why such similar, easily interchangeable utterances can carry such wholly dissimilar meanings. We are thus reminded that language is arbitrary, that the words we choose to describe things and ideas originate within us, not the world we strive to describe. And if language is arbitrary, who is to say that the moral poles of good and evil, fair and foul, are not similarly open to subjective interpretation? Welcome to the world of *Macbeth*.

Shakespeare brought this world to life in late 1605 or, more likely, 1606, building on the groundwork of Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*. This is the same source Shakespeare uses for his history plays about English monarchs, and as with those plays he lifts some details verbatim while condensing the overall historical timeline into the tight narrative arc of a tragedy. The story was an especially compelling one to dramatize, for both artistic and political reasons. Artistically, Holinshed’s account of eleventh-century Scottish history includes all the elements of high drama: a brave warrior encounters mysterious witches, receives a prophecy that he will become king, follows his wife’s advice to assassinate the current king, assumes the throne, rules justly for a number of years, spirals downward toward tyranny through a series of increasingly violent outrages, and is finally killed in combat with

one of the noblemen he wronged. An inherently exciting narrative with a classic rise-and-fall tragic arc and a bit of the supernatural thrown in for good measure, *Macbeth*'s story practically begs to be told. That Shakespeare chose to tell it when he did, early in the reign of James I—aka James VI of Scotland—speaks to an additional set of facts that made the story particularly pertinent to the times.

As a member of the King's Men theater company, Shakespeare was technically a servant of the new king, and had a vested interest in pleasing the taste of his patron. As a sharer in the company's profits from the Globe Theatre, he also had a vested interest in pleasing the tastes of the paying public. *Macbeth* appears to have been an attempt to do both, as it focuses on topics of pressing interest to the sovereign and his subjects alike. For the people, still getting accustomed to life under a Scottish-born ruler, all things Scottish were fascinating. For the king, there were two obvious points of individual interest: first, there was the fact that his family traced its lineage back to a character in the play, Banquo; second, James was well known to have a keen interest in witchcraft and the occult, as in 1597 he published *Daemonologie*, a philosophical account of dark magic and a justification for witch hunting—as well as a source for Shakespeare's depiction of the Weird Sisters and their rituals. If Shakespeare had simply wanted to flatter the king and entertain the masses, though, he certainly could have written a rousing drama with a clear promonarch message of moral certitude. Instead, he produced a dense, atmospheric, intensely psychological play where good and evil become so intertwined as to be at times indistinguishable. Ambiguity is the play's defining feature, with Shakespeare sending conflicting messages about loyalty, morality, kingship, gender, nature, and reality itself.

Overview

For all of its richness and complexity, *Macbeth* is a strikingly short play: the shortest of Shakespeare's tragedies, less than 62 percent the length of *Hamlet*. Many scholars believe that Shakespeare originally wrote a longer, fuller version of the play, and that the text we have today reflects a version that had been edited and revised for

performance—perhaps a performance before James I at court. No version of *Macbeth* was published during Shakespeare's lifetime, so the text as we know it derives from that published in the First Folio. The First Folio was the collection of Shakespeare's plays published in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death, by Shakespeare's friends and colleagues from the King's Men, John Heminges and Henry Condell. Were it not for their work in memorializing their friend, *Macbeth* would likely have been lost.

No one knows for sure exactly how many years before it was eventually published the play was written, but, as stated above, 1606 is the most likely date of composition. Any time before 1603, when Elizabeth I died and was succeeded by James I, is difficult to imagine because the play seems so clearly suited to the accession of a Scottish king. 1607 is almost certainly the latest possible date, as in that year *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* by Francis Beaumont made an allusion to the banquet scene with Banquo's ghost. Most scholars agree that 1606 is the most likely date, as *Macbeth* includes a number of lines that are best explained as allusions to the Gunpowder Plot of November 5, 1605, and the subsequent trial of one of the alleged conspirators the following year. It is likely that the play was performed for James I himself in the fall of 1606, although there is no concrete evidence of a performance before 1611. Complicating matters further is the fact that the published text of the play includes cues for songs known elsewhere not from Shakespeare but from Thomas Middleton. Many scholars believe that the play we have today reflects Middleton's revision of Shakespeare's original play, with substantial material excised to shorten the running time as well as some new material added to meet the evolving tastes of theatergoers. Such revivals and revisions of old plays were commonplace in this era, and it is entirely possible that Shakespeare was never aware of the precise form his play took before it was immortalized in the First Folio. No matter how, precisely, *Macbeth* came to be what it is, undoubtedly its greatest mysteries are the ones within, the ones Shakespeare challenges us to confront.

What Is Real?

At its most literal, the witches' claim that "Fair is foul" refers to the weather, asking us to imagine a barren Scottish heath simultaneously wracked by storm and kissed by sunlight. For the original audience at the Globe Theatre, where the stage was exposed to the elements, this line would have served as a metatheatrical reminder that no matter the conditions in London, the weather on stage could be anything the players desired. This ability to manipulate the audience's belief, the very cornerstone of drama, is immediately compared to the black magic by which the Weird Sisters appear to be controlling the storm that accompanies and symbolizes the offstage battle at the beginning of the play. Rather than lull the audience into an unconscious suspension of disbelief, Shakespeare immediately foregrounds the almost magical artificiality of the performance, reminding us that we are being deceived. This questioning of the materiality of the play's world becomes a recurrent theme: Banquo asks the witches "Are ye fantastical" (I.3.53) and suggests that they may have been a hallucination caused by eating "the insane root / That takes the reason prisoner" (I.3.84-5); Macbeth questions his own senses repeatedly, both visual—"Is this a dagger which I see before me[?]" (II.1.34) and aural—"Methought I heard a voice" (II.2.38); Lady Macbeth famously hallucinates the "damned spot" (V.i.35) of guilt upon her hands. The inner workings of the mind seem to externalize themselves in the world sensed by the characters, and the insistence with which Shakespeare reminds us of the senses' unreliability makes us question whether what we see on the stage is to be understood as having literal existence within the play's world at all. Does Banquo's ghost actually come to dinner, or are we being shown the mad imaginings of Macbeth's guilt-racked conscience? Are there actual witches in the play's Scotland, or are they to be seen as symbolic representations of the characters' anxieties and desires? Of course, if a day can be both fair and foul then a witch can be both real and imaginary, a dagger can be both visible and symbolic, and a bloodstain can be both dirty and invisible.

Prophecy and Paradox

Whether the witches who deliver the inciting prophecy that Macbeth will “be king hereafter” (I.3.50) are themselves real or not, their prophecy takes on a life of its own. Evoking an ancient tragic tradition going back to Oedipus, a prophetic utterance prompts major interpretive challenges. The central question is whether the prophecies are glimpses into a future that is already set in stone, thereby eliminating the very concept of free will, or whether the subject of a prophecy possesses the agency to avoid what has been foretold. Secondly, as Macbeth himself wonders, does a prophecy eliminate the necessity of conscious action in order for it to come true, or does it compel someone to act in order to bring it about? When told that he will be king, Macbeth immediately recognizes that the swiftest way for him to make the prophecy come true would be to commit regicide, and yet he balks at this horrible thought: “If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me / without my stir” (I.3.143-4). Wishful thinking, perhaps. By minimizing the act of murder with the euphemism “my stir,” Macbeth has already begun the process of rationalization, a necessary step on his way to ensuring the prophecy comes true. Ironically, by refusing to see whether “chance may crown [him],” Macbeth arguably takes power away from the prophecy—if every prediction prompted the hearer to take steps to fulfill it, anyone could be a fortune-teller.

Macbeth’s response to prophecy in the play is wildly inconsistent, however, as his active attempts to fulfill the prophecy about his own kingship do not stop him from taking active steps to prevent the prophecy about Banquo’s descendants from coming true. Moreover, after having taken active roles in responding to the first two prophecies, Macbeth then acts upon his interpretation of the second set of prophecies in a way that suggests he has absolute faith in their veracity. Told that “none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth,” (IV.1.102-3) and that “Macbeth shall never vanquished be until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him,” (IV.1.114-16) the king believes he is invincible and neglects to provide adequate defenses accordingly. In every case the prophecies come true, and each time their accuracy depends

on Macbeth's actions, yet each time his actions reflect a different attitude toward prophecy. This combination of a dynamic character arc against the backdrop of consistent supernatural power makes for especially thought-provoking theater. Where does power really lie?

Unsex Me Here

Perhaps an even more fascinating depiction of power and agency in the play comes with its interest in gender. Shakespeare provides repeated images of gender fluidity: the witches are described as having feminine bodies as well as beards; Lady Macbeth repeatedly uses the language of emasculation to manipulate her husband into enacting their violent plot; conversely to these threats of emasculation, Lady Macbeth makes an explicit call for her own femininity to be erased—"unsex me"—and replaced with a pure distillation of masculine cruelty. Fair is foul, and the fairer sex is the fouler. This confusion over gender would have appeared all the more directly and metatheatrically on the original Shakespearean stage, as in this period all the actors were men, even those playing female parts. The witches may have had real, rather than costume, beards, and the actor playing Lady Macbeth could well have portrayed her in a more masculine light over the course of her unsexing soliloquy:

Come, you spirits
That tend of mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull
Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood;
Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between
Th' effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts
And take my milk for gall[.] (I.5.39-47)

Her feminine nature, with its capacity to create and nurture life, becomes the target of her desire for metamorphosis; she wants hate to replace compassion, gall to replace milk, hate to replace heart. Whether the invoked spirits help her or the capacity for violence was within her all along, Lady Macbeth's bloodthirsty persuasion causes

her husband to recognize her newfound masculinity: “Bring forth men-children only; / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / nothing but males” (I.7.72-4). Lest we see Lady Macbeth’s masculine metamorphosis as complete, though, note that Macbeth describes it within the still-feminine context of childbearing—the very thing that Lady Macbeth herself seemed to scorn by rejecting her milk. Unsexing, ultimately, seems impossible in this play where states of being become superimposed rather than erased. The implications of this layering and alternation of gender within the play’s characters are fascinating. As some of the men in Shakespeare’s company could take on feminine qualities on demand, the highly masculine world of Scottish political history appears constantly under threat of invasion from an enemy within itself. By waging war against biology, against the need for society to include feminine as well as masculine energies, the play’s primary characters attempt to set themselves above nature itself.

“Nature Seems Dead”

To be above nature, literally to be supernatural, is a dangerous ambition. It is one associated with the witches, of course, but also with both Macbeths’ desire for political power. Over and over they assert a desire for the natural world to cease its natural functions, for the natural order to bend itself to their will:

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.5.49-53)

So says Lady Macbeth, betraying the recognition that her desired enterprise requires the infernal “smoke of hell” to block the view of heaven. Similarly, Macbeth invokes a blinding of nature’s omniscient vision: “Stars, hide your fires. / Let not light see my black and deep desires.” In both these speeches nature takes on an ironically supernatural capacity for surveillance, symbolically representing the

moral authority of an unnamed but palpable religious providence. To blind nature is to escape judgment, to transcend justice.

Justice is no more limited to the confines of the natural order than murder, however, as witnessed by Macbeth's reaction to the appearance of Banquo's ghost:

The time has been,
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end. But now they rise again,
With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,
And push us from our stools. This is more strange
Than such a murder is. (III.4.79-84)

Indeed, to the world of medieval Scotland violence and death seem more natural than resurrection, and yet the human drive for vengeance overpowers all else: "It will have blood, they say: blood will have blood. / Stones have been known to move and trees to speak" (III.4.123-4). There is a certain hubris to this belief of Macbeth's, to assume that his own actions are so powerful as to cause a response from even inanimate objects. Kings, of course, are not known for their modesty.

The King's Two Bodies

Macbeth's kingship provides additional examples of the play's fixation on ambiguity, examples that were particularly pertinent to *Macbeth's* historical moment. As soon as he assumes the throne, Macbeth changes the way he refers to himself in public, with his frequent use of the introspective *I* turning into the so-called *royal we*. Why did monarchs in this era refer to themselves in the plural? The answer comes from an ancient custom of seeing the monarch merely as a human individual, but also as a vessel for a second person entirely—an immortal royal personage who inhabits each successive ruler without interruption. It is his complicated metaphysical explanation that gives rise to seemingly awkward locutions like "Ourself will mingle with society" (III.4.4) where the singular (*self*, not *selves*) and plural (*our*, not *my*) coexist, and it is this concept that helped justify the theory of the Divine Right of

Kings, the belief that God chooses the ruler and to question his or her authority would be to question God's.

James I was, not without a bit of self-interest, a major proponent of this view. In a 1598 treatise, *The True Lawe of Free Monarchies*, James attempted to justify the divine legitimacy of his rule, arguing that there was no role for the people or their representatives in parliament in choosing a monarch or, in the event of a bad one, deposing him or her. Macbeth's situation calls this entire political world-view into turmoil, as we witness the protagonist seizing power through deceit and murder and in turn have authority taken away through violent revolt. Macbeth wants to believe that his reign is divinely sanctioned, but his conscience creates massive cognitive dissonance. The very fact that he obtained the kingship proves that the kingship is not the pseudomagical state of divine power that made it worth seeking in the first place.

The play also explores another crucial political question of both Macbeth's period and Shakespeare's: is monarchical power inherited or passed on by election? Traditionally medieval Scotland employed the latter method of choosing a new king, largely out of practicality: kings almost never lived long enough to have adult children capable of assuming authority, and therefore the nobles saw fit to elect the most powerful from their number—often a brother or nephew of the deceased king—to take up the crown. Duncan I, the king the historical Macbeth deposed, threw this system into chaos by announcing that his son Malcolm would succeed him and creating him Prince of Cumberland. This English-style political move, based on the tradition of the Prince of Wales, marked a major sea change in the political world of the time, and was likely part of the historical Macbeth's motivation for killing the king. Very little of this motivation, arguably rooted in preserving a traditional way of life from foreign corruption, manifests itself in how Shakespeare depicts the act—and yet by including the lines by which Duncan announces his intention to make Malcolm his heir, the idea is present all the same. The debate between election and inheritance was a crucial one in the years leading up to Elizabeth's death, and remained vexed as James took power and claimed that Parliament

had nothing to do with it. As much as *Macbeth* could be read as an endorsement of hereditary monarchy through its celebration of Banquo's descendants and its moral privileging of Malcolm's invasion and reclaiming of his father's crown at the end of the play, significant questions remain.

Malcolm's accession is not quite as pure a happy ending as it may at first appear. Malcolm himself, even while claiming a birthright to the throne, goes out of his way to establish a limitation upon his legitimacy when he rather bizarrely tests Macduff's loyalty in IV.3. In so doing, Malcolm discovers that greed and lechery are entirely acceptable in a king—or at least preferable to the tyranny of Macbeth—while deceptiveness is a bridge too far. Why, exactly, a king's legitimacy should hinge on one moral failing but not another is not fully explored, but the very fact that both Malcolm and Macduff seem to agree that birthright alone is not enough to justify his rule is noteworthy. Kingship might be something one is born into, but it also appears to be something one can sin one's way out of—divine right or no.

National Identities

Malcolm's successful uprising against Macbeth, while led by the Scottish thane Macduff, is more than a domestic rebellion; it is also a foreign invasion. Malcolm would have had no chance of reclaiming his father's throne if he had not been given the command of an English army, and in the final speech of the play he makes it clear that the troops are more than mere mercenaries, they are representatives of a permanent cultural invasion as well:

My thanes and kinsmen,
Henceforth be earls, the first that ever Scotland
In such an honor named. (V.8.62-4)

While this change in semantics may seem benign enough, it represents an important coda for the play, serving as a final reminder both of the theme of linguistic layering—fair is foul and thanes are earls—and the very type of cultural imposition that many in England

feared upon the accession of a Scottish king. Malcolm is an inverted version of James, journeying from one British kingdom to another and bringing its dialects and values with him.

In *Macbeth*, of course, there is little doubt that this pseudo-English invasion is a good thing: Macbeth's Scotland has become a tyranny, a lawless land full of violence, darkness, and terror. England under its king, Edward the Confessor, is just the opposite – a realm of justice, peace, and wisdom. This historical self-portrait of Shakespeare's native land is not without its own complexity, however, as Shakespeare's audience would have been well aware that Edward the Confessor's reign ended in a very famous year: 1066, the year of the Norman invasion when William the Conqueror established an era of French domination over England that, in some dynastic respects, persisted to Shakespeare's day and, indeed, our own. Shakespeare's England was no longer a pure land of unadulterated British heritage, and perhaps by reminding his audience of this at the end of *Macbeth* the playwright was suggesting that the reign of James was less of a threatening anomaly than many had feared.

Religion, Terrorism, Equivocation

The single most powerful source of anxiety upon the accession of James was the question of what it would mean for England's religion. The Protestant Reformation, begun by Martin Luther and taken up in England by Elizabeth's father, Henry VIII, had thrown Europe into a period of chaos. In the sixty years before *Macbeth* was written England had gone from Catholic to Protestant under Henry VIII, then back to Catholic under Mary, then back to Protestant under Elizabeth. Each shift of official state religion was accompanied by widespread violence and unrest as many resisted being forced to alter their beliefs and practices, and those in power persecuted any caught disobeying their directives. James's mother, Mary Queen of Scots, had been executed by Elizabeth for attempting to lead a Catholic rebellion against Elizabeth's Protestant rule, and many feared that the new king James, while nominally a Protestant, would upon taking power institute yet another religious shift. In fact he did not, and his refusal to institute his mother's religion led a group

of Catholic extremists to attempt to kill him and other leaders of England's Protestant government by blowing up Parliament. This Gunpowder Plot and its highly publicized aftermath, including the trial of conspirators and a bloody crackdown on suspected Catholics, hovers threateningly in the background through much of *Macbeth*.

One of the alleged participants in the Gunpowder Plot was the Jesuit priest Henry Garnet. Garnet, who was executed in 1606, had previously published a *Treatise on Equivocation*, instructing Catholics on how to deceive Protestant would-be persecutors without technically committing the sin of lying. Equivocation, etymologically “to call something by the same name,” was the practice of using deliberately ambiguous language in order to lead someone to a false interpretation. The porter in II.3 speaks at length of an “equivocator...who committed treason enough for God’s sake” (II.3.8-10). This line directly calls the divine right theory of kingship into question, as a conflict between political and religious loyalty should not be possible in a world where monarchs are divinely ordained. Can any would-be traitor, whether a Macbeth or a Garnet, genuinely believe that murder is part of God’s plan? If their treason succeeds, as Macbeth’s indeed does, does that in turn suggest that they were right in believing in divine sanction for regicide? Macbeth’s success, taken alongside the evocation of equivocation, suggests that either God willed Duncan’s death—in which case the king lacked any kind of divine favor—or that there is no God at all—in which case no king can claim power from anything other than mortal sources. Whether God fails to protect kings or lacks any power whatsoever, *Macbeth* is an exceedingly disquieting play for those who believe in a world guided by Providence.

Conclusion

If *Macbeth* refuses to provide the reassurance of a world where traditional hierarchies and power structures stabilize civilization, all the better for Shakespeare and his art. Drama is at its most dramatic when hierarchies implode, when structures erode, when convention explodes. Literature strives to be the opposite of equivocation: while the latter strives to deceive while telling apparent truths, the former

seeks to illuminate the truth by presenting self-evident fictions. Fair *is* foul, and foul *is* fair. As Macbeth says,

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. (V.5.24-8)

Life is theater, theater is life, and that which signifies nothing means everything.

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