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**DECONSTRUCTING THE SUPERNATURAL IN
SHAKESPEARE'S *MACBETH***

by

Britney Marler

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of the requirements for the degree**

of

DEPARTMENTAL HONORS

in

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in the Department of English**

Approved:

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Deconstructing the Supernatural in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

Of all of Shakespeare's tragedies, *Macbeth* is by far the most supernaturally charged. The play opens with three witches who give Macbeth and Banquo a prediction that lays out the plot of the rest of the play. Macbeth sees a phantom dagger, hears voices, and is haunted by the ghost of his murdered comrade. The vast amount of supernatural events comes as no surprise considering that Shakespeare almost certainly wrote the play as a tribute to King James I, the British monarch whose belief in the power of witchcraft ran so deep that he led several witchhunts throughout Britain, in addition to writing *Daemonologie*, a text that argued for the reality of witches and the study of witchcraft's place in legitimate theological studies at the time. Led by King James, England treated supernatural phenomenon as a very real presence in the world at the time Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*. While witches are perhaps the most ostentatious and the primary focus of King James's attention, they were by no means the only form the supernatural was said to take. Ghosts, visions and dreams, postmortem bleeding corpses, possession of devils, each had a place in Jacobean culture.

On the surface, each supernatural element in *Macbeth* seems to fall perfectly within these conceptual parameters. However, I will argue that not only does the play complicate and question the supernatural, but eventually denies the authority and power of it altogether. The ontological status of the supernatural within the play has long been a source of argument for critics. Charles Lamb asserts that "from the moment that [the witches'] eyes first met Macbeth he is spellbound. That meeting sways his destiny" (qtd in Muir xxxv). George Kittredge was like-minded, arguing that "the Weird sisters were Norns, 'great powers of destiny, great ministers of fate. They had determined the past; they governed the present; they not only foresaw the future,

but decreed it” (qtd in Muir liv). Alternatively, critics have suggested that the supernatural’s malevolence in the play is filtered through Lady Macbeth. Robert Bridges argues that the darkness and power of the witches combines with the darkness and influence of Lady Macbeth, making both “hell and home leagued against [Macbeth]” (qtd in Muir xlvii). Curry expounds on that argument by stating that Lady Macbeth takes on evil powers of darkness, and “deliberately wills that they subtly invade her body and so control it that the natural inclinations of the spirit toward goodness and compassion may be completely extirpated” (qtd in Muir lix), thus shifting both the blame and supernatural powers from the witches *to* Lady Macbeth.

However, to understand the nature of the supernatural in *Macbeth*, the wide range of contemporary beliefs in Shakespeare’s England must each be taken into account. Some people in this period believed wholeheartedly that witches possessed sinister and formidable powers; others believed they existed but were also extremely limited in what mystical forces they could actually manipulate; a growing majority rejected any belief in the supernatural at all. This conflicting society formed the audience for whom Shakespeare wrote his play. Initially, *Macbeth* seems to align with the believers, but looking more closely at each supernatural event (specifically the witches, the dagger, Banquo’s ghost, the voices, and the pagentry) shows how the play questions the function, power, and reality of the supernatural throughout the play. It then becomes possible to interpret the supernatural and their supposed “powers of darkness” as purely atmospheric. Their function in the play is one of *theatrical* power as their presence sets a dark, surreal, and foreboding tone. Ultimately, the supernatural elements of the play symbolize Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s guilt and act as external representations of their psychology.

In the early 17th century King James I believed very strongly in the reality of the supernatural, particularly witches, but he and his followers were part of a diminishing minority. Indeed, King James wrote *Daemonologie* in direct response to a book that had been published several years before, a book that completely refuted and denied the existence of witches: Reginald Scot's *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*. In the Preface of King James's book, he distinctly singles out Scot, describing him as "an Englishman who 'is not ashamed in publike print to deny, that ther can be such a thing as Witch-craft: and so mainteines the old error of the Sadducees, in denying of spirits'" (Bevington 210). King James was thus compelled in his *Daemonologie* to assure and warn the world of "'The fearefull aboundinge at this time in this countrie, of these detestable slaves of the Devill, the Witches or enchaunters'" (Bevington 210) because of Scot's blatant denial of witchcraft's existence. In *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, Scot asserts that there is no such thing as witches and "that those executed for witchcraft were innocent" (Bevington 211). He refuted the idea "that there was a biblical sanction for the execution of witches," and ultimately made the claim that "witchcraft accusations in England thus arose in the context of disagreements over expectations and obligations relating to charitable giving" (Bevington 211). For example, if something bad happened after a beggar woman was turned away, then she was labeled as a witch. This interpretation of the origins of witchcraft accusations fundamentally connects them with the guilt of a society unwilling to care and provide for its poor. According to Scot's argument, the people of early modern England literally demonized their poor neighbors so that they need not feel guilty over not aiding those in need. Similarly, as in Scot's formulation, the witches in *Macbeth* can be seen, not as supernatural creatures, but as scapegoats for the guilt of Macbeth and his wife.

In the time during which Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, a more scientific way of seeing the world was developing, adding an even deeper challenge to the belief in witches, ghosts, and other supernatural phenomena. Previously in British society, unexplainable, supernatural events and objects had been treated not with suspicion or disbelief, but with the utmost gravity. The key to this unquestioning perspective lies in the fact that these events were often seen as divine in origin. Society attributed any phenomenon that seemed unexplainable to God's intervention in the lives of people on Earth, and as such did not need to have any rational explanation. However, as scientific advancements and philosophies were discovered and began to take root in Elizabethan society, acceptance of the existence of ghosts, divine visions, and witches began to fade. Nicolaus Copernicus published *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium*, which detailed his heliocentric theory which removed Earth from the center of the universe, in 1543. A little over fifty years after this, in 1609, Galileo Galilei invents the telescope, which allowed humanity to become more aware of the geographical nature of the universe. As a result, the space occupied by hell and heaven was called into question. Kristen Poole explains that before these developments "humanity existed in a geocentric universe; hell and purgatory were in the center of the earth, heaven was beyond the outmost celestial sphere; earthly space was not yet widely perceived" (Poole 4). In a hundred years this concept was radically different: "humanity was now spinning on a planet that orbited the sun; the location of hell, even its existence as a physical place, was in question, and purgatory had been largely abandoned...the conception of a distant clock-maker God, and a Satan who worked through witches and the physical world was becoming outmoded" (Poole 8). If it was no longer clear where God and the Devil existed in space, *how* they operated in the physical world became unclear as well. Supernatural beings were seen as the connecting link between the heavenly and infernal space, but by removing the

certainty of where God and the Devil lived, it gradually aided in the destruction of that link as well. Skepticism took the place of belief as society was forced to reexamine its conception of the very nature of God.

However, believers and skeptics alike recognized and appreciated the power of witchcraft as a symbol; although they each approached it from different perspectives, both still associated it with political as well as female transgression. Nonbelievers, while rejecting the supernatural reality of witches, could still respond to the symbols of both treason and the dangerous, powerful woman that witches embodied. Even those convinced of the existence and power of witches still invoked the supernatural with the same symbolic meaning. Witchcraft became a political crime after King James I gained an intense interest in witches and demonology. One particular event while James I was traveling in Scotland sparked his fascination with the subject. Scotland was, in general, much less suspicious of the existence of witches; the majority of scientific skepticism occurred in England. King James I was on his way to Denmark to claim his bride when a series of storms plagued their party. Later, a woman already under suspicion for being a witch confessed to creating the storms in order to assassinate the king. From then on, James's perspective of "witchcraft began to be understood as a species of treason...not only a crime of deviance, but *the* crime against the state and monarch" (Bevington 305). That one event expanded the conceptualized power of witches from a demonized threat to religious purity, to a direct threat to the king of England. Witchcraft was now conceived as a theological perversion *and* political treason.

But plotting against the nation's monarch was just one of the attributes assigned to witches during King James's reign; one obvious characteristic of witches is that they were typically female. Nine out of ten witches tried and accused were women. Many contemporary

critics argue that “the overwhelming predominance of women as the victims of such accusations is simply the product of the misogyny of a patriarchal society” (Bevington 304). In

Daemonologie, King James argues that the “moral weakness of women was recognized as one cause of their susceptibility” (qtd in Bevington 304). Whatever the reason, the women most commonly accused of witchcraft were “old, lame, blear-eyed, pale, foul, and full of wrinkles; poor sullen, superstitious, and papists; or such as know no religion: in whose drowsy minds the devil hath gotten a fine seat” (qtd in Bevington 308). In many ways the witchcraft discussion becomes a representation and a way of both explaining and exploring the dangers of giving women authority and power as well as the political transgression of treason. The fear of witchcraft resonated so strongly because it acted as a representation for other, more deeply-rooted fears. Witches, even to true believers of their supernatural power, still possessed a *symbolic* meaning within society.

But while their physical appearance seems to be well-defined and documented by both believers and nonbelievers, the question of what witches could actually do varied widely from scholar to scholar. Many claimed that they cursed their neighbors and made potions, but skeptics argued that, in reality, witches were essentially isolated women who became a scapegoat for every unfortunate event to occur in their community. Scot argued that “such faithless people are persuaded, that neither hail nor snow, thunder nor lightning, rain nor tempestuous winds come from the heavens at the commandment of God: but are raised by the cunning and power of witches” (qtd in Bevington 307). Scot’s criticism suggests that to many, witches had a more meteorological kind of power. Their influence rested in the ability to change the atmosphere and to manipulate the weather. Even King James’s witch claimed to use storms as her primary weapon against him. However, this ability allowed witches to also create a more figurative

atmosphere as well as a meteorological one. Not only would witches supposedly possess the ability to darken the clouds, bring lightening and rain, and raise foul winds, giving the play as a whole a sinister, eerie quality, but their very presence would automatically incite a fearful and foreboding mood in any situation. A portion of Stuart Clark's argument in his book *Thinking with Demons* is devoted to exploring the way in which society often views witches as symbols of chaos and destruction. Clark states that it is "the impression of Europeans who saw disorder and witchcraft as mutually entailed phenomena, permitting multiple transfers of meaning" and that it was "natural to set the scene for treatments of one by invoking the other--natural, that is, for Shakespeare...to let demonism introduce disorder" (559). In this way, witches themselves do not necessarily bring or create chaos and destruction, instead, their very presence represents coming disorder.

Macbeth's representation of the supernatural reflects the shifting and contradictory perspectives of British society at the time. Many in the audience, particularly King James I, would have seen the witches as powerful agents of darkness and ghosts as agents of divine intervention. However, many in that same audience would have aligned themselves with Scot and rejected the existence of magic, ghosts, or witches. Those playgoers might see ghostly visions as hallucinations from a diseased mind and witches as merely symbols or even scapegoats for disasters. To these people, the witches' power within the play could be nothing more than the ability to create a sinister ambiance. But to the king and those who sided with his beliefs, these witches had the ability to manipulate the weather, control future events, and drag Macbeth down a path of darkness and destruction. However, both groups, regardless of belief would see the symbolism that the witches evoke. The three witches of *Macbeth* are hellish women at the center of an assassination plot against a king. Their very presence establishes those

political and gender themes within the play. But while Shakespeare's play does give its audience seemingly real, stereotypical witches, he constantly questions their status, power, and role within the play.

Macbeth begins with witches who appear entirely real and tangible, and suggests that the play is not concerned with the complicated, conflicting views of the supernatural but merely seeks to please the views of the ruling monarch. In this opening scene, the witches determine where and when they will meet with Macbeth, by asking each other, "When shall we three meet again? / In thunder, lightning, or in rain?" (1.1.1-2). From the beginning, the witches set a dark and chaotic tone to the play. Their first question explicitly informs us that they are going to return at some point and will thus be a presence throughout the play; their second question fundamentally implies that at some point in the play there will be thunder, lightning, and rain. Within a Shakespeare play the weather always carries symbolic meaning, and the coming of atmospheric storms alludes to the coming of turmoil and darkness. The witches bear an inherent connection to that foreboding weather. The witches answer each other questions by chanting, "When the hurlyburly's done / When the battle's lost and won / ...where the place? Upon the heath" (1.1.3-4, 6-7). Their answers show the witches' knowledge of the political events at the time: they know a battle is going to end soon. Because they have dictated the time and place of this mysterious meeting, it seems that the witches will have the control and authority in this coming encounter, whereas Macbeth will be forced into a subordinate role. Even the simple fact that the play opens with the witches gives them an authoritative position and implies that they will initiate all the action that follows. However, their language has no real action in it at all but is entirely atmospheric: "When shall we three meet again? / In thunder,

lightning, or in rain?" (1.1.1-2). The first question asks for a time, but in the context of weather. Time for these witches is measured and determined meteorologically and therefore weather becomes a determining, fundamental characteristic of the witches themselves. Even their final famous lines of "fair is foul, and foul is fair: / Hover through the fog and filthy air" (1.1.10-11) suggest that the witches have a connection with the meteorological elements. As a result, the main function of the witches is not action-oriented, but to simply establish both the literal and thematic atmosphere of the play.

Shakespeare has carefully and deliberately constructed these witches so that they appear to represent the stereotypes of both ends of the demonology debate: the evil, vengeful witch of *Daemonologie* and the begging crone of Scot. One witch describes how she intends to torment a sailor whose wife would not share her chestnuts with her by sailing to his ship and "like a rat without a tail; / I'll do, I'll do; I'll do" (1.3.8-9). On the one hand, she seems to fulfill the traditional expectation of a vindictive, vengeful witch. But when closely examining her actions, she simultaneously fulfills Scot's expectation of a "witch" really being just a beggar-woman who was refused and then blamed for any following disaster. While the witch's revengeful plan sounds foreboding on the surface, when she describes how she intends to torture the sailor, it seems as though the only thing she and her sisters have control over is, once again, the weather. One sister offers to "give thee a wind...and I another," while she herself "have all the other, / And the very ports they blow, / All the quarters that they know / I' th' shipman's card" (1.3.11, 13-17). The only way she can torment him is by using wind to prevent his sleep: "sleep shall neither night nor day / Hang upon his penthouse lid" (1.3.19-20). This seemingly irrelevant and unrelated digression of the witches serves as an example of the kind of power the witches actually wield, a power deeply entrenched in and even limited to atmospheric properties. Yet it is

not even clear *how* she is going to torment him. All the line reveals is that she “has” these winds, not how she can use them. The witches claim to have mystical control over the winds and these men, but the language they use does not convey any sort of active control.

From the first lines of the play, the witches’ actions concentrate on Macbeth; every thing they do and everything they speak of is centered on him. After the first witches answer “When shall we three meet again?” (1.1.1) and “Where the place?” (1.1.6), they give the purpose of that meeting: “There to meet with Macbeth” (1.1.7). Their purpose within the confines of the play is entirely dependent and centered on Macbeth from the very first lines. In the witches’ following scene, all their vengeful and mystical musings are interrupted with “A drum! A drum! / Macbeth doth come” (1.3.30-31). Before Macbeth even enters the stage his proximity dictates their actions. When Macbeth and Banquo finally cross their path, they ignore Banquo’s questions of “live you? Or are you aught / That man may question?” (1.1.3.43-44) and instead speak only when Macbeth demands, “Speak, if you can: what are you?” (1.3.48). The witches immediately respond, “All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, thane of Glamis! / All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, thane of Cawdor! / All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!” (1.3.49-51). When they finally turn to Banquo, they don’t use his name but simply shout “Hail! / Hail! / Hail!” (1.3.63). They tell him his future only in relation to and in comparison of Macbeth: “Lesser than Macbeth and greater. / Not so happy, yet much happier. / Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none” (1.3.66-68). Even though the play presents the witches as being real, and even seems to give them a kind of power over the events of the play, their realm of influence starts and ends with the character of Macbeth.

Yet even the witches’ authority over Macbeth and their ability to influence him are undercut in this scene. Feeding off of the audience’s preconceived notions of witches as portents

of disaster and chaos, the witches in *Macbeth* seem to be just that and only that: portents. Clark's argument that in the early modern era demonism could serve to "introduce disorder" (Clark 559), suggests that the very presence of witches in the play act as a warning to the audience that death and destruction are soon to follow them. Their presence and behavior imply the deterioration of goodness and virtue, impending destruction, and hidden, unknown dangers. They evoke a foreboding atmosphere of imminent destruction and chaos, where "fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.11). When Macbeth and Banquo finally cross the witches' path, both characters see and speak with the witches, refuting any theory that claims the witches are hallucinations. But the amount of influence and control that the witches have over Macbeth can be questioned.

Macbeth's first line "so foul and fair a day I have not seen" (1.3.39) obviously recalls the first scene with the witches and suggests that Macbeth's mind is already being influenced by the witches. But using this line to prove that the witches have a *controlling* effect on Macbeth and compel him to commit the evil deeds to come takes the concept too far. As Kenneth Muir points out, "their prophesy of the crown does not dictate evil means of achieving it--it is morally neutral" (Muir liv). Macbeth's line reflects that neutrality. He does not repeat "fair is foul and foul is fair," which suggests an inversion of order and an impending chaos, but rather he says "so foul *and* fair" (Emphasis added); both characteristics are present at the same time instead of one replacing the other. The appearance of the witches in the play sends a clear message of dark events to come and even sets the witches up as predictors of these future events. Yet the fact that their prophesy foretelling he is to be Thane of Cawdor (1.3.49) is not actually a future event diminishes its mystical properties in the eyes of the audience. Viewers have already heard Duncan pronounce Macbeth Thane of Cawdor when he tells his men, "No more that Thane of Cawdor shall deceive / Our bosom interest.—Go pronounce his present death / And with his

former title greet Macbeth” (1.2.65-68). If even their ability to prophesy is limited, it seems that the ability to establish a foreboding atmosphere is all they can truly do. The only action established in their opening scene is a meeting with Macbeth, for without Macbeth, there would be no meeting. When they do meet with him they still do not actually do anything. They cannot make their prophecies come true, they depend on the action of Macbeth to bring their predictions into reality. This suggests that the control in the relationship between Macbeth and the witches as well as the true action of the play lie with him and not with them.

After the witches vanish, Macbeth himself gives an aside that affirms the neutrality of the witches’ visitation. He explicitly tells the audience that “this supernatural soliciting cannot be ill; cannot be good” (1.3.132), subsequently suggesting that the moral choice of his future actions and whether they are “ill” or “good” will lie entirely with him, not the witches. It is entirely up to him to choose what to do with the information the witches gave him, for nowhere in the witches’ dialogue with Macbeth do they persuade, suggest, or even mention the idea of murdering Duncan. Their words are not inherently leading Macbeth down an evil path. Rather, he will be the one to translate the witches’ words into a moral issue. He must decide what is foul, what is fair, and which side he will choose. His choice begins to solidify later in this same musing when Macbeth first voices the idea of murdering Duncan to gain the crown. The “present fears,” or the witches, seem so much less frightening and disturbing in comparison to his own “horrible imaginings” (1.3.37-39). At the end of his aside Macbeth tells himself that “if chance will have me King, why, chance may crown me, / Without my stir” (1.3.143-145). He tries to leave his future to fate and the witches, yet this very statement suggests that he has already begun considering to “stir” against the king. He therefore tries to quell those thoughts and put a halt to such actions before they occur. These misgivings and conflicting thoughts show how Macbeth is

going somewhere that the witches did not take him. And if the witches did not take him there, but rather he came to this realization on his own, then the true powers and authority that the witches seem to possess are greatly undermined.

Many critics have argued that Macbeth's murderous thoughts predate the witches and as a result completely undermine their authority and influence on Macbeth. Coleridge and Dover Wilson draw similar conclusions from a later scene, where Macbeth refuses to go forward with their plan, and Lady Macbeth demands "What beast was 't, / Then, that made you break this enterprise to me?" (1.7.47). Coleridge argues that this implies a reference to a previous discussion concerning the murder of Duncan in order to acquire the crown, a discussion in which Macbeth was the one to suggest such a plot. Muir mentions a brief comment made by Banquo during their scene with the witches that further supports the possibility of the critical discussion explored by Coleridge and Wilson. The witches proclaim "All hail, Macbeth! That shalt be King hereafter" and Banquo, looking at Macbeth asks, "Good Sir, why do you start, and seem to fear things that do sound so fair?" (1.3.52-53), a short statement that implies the thought of murdering his king had already entered Macbeth's mind even before the witches' prophesy. If this is the case, then the witches have no power over him whatsoever. They don't inspire him to commit any deed, let alone the murder of his king, because the sinister idea was already in his mind before he ever met them. Indeed, Macbeth's fearful face indicates that the witches' prophesy *reminded* him of his murderous thoughts, and suggests that they might in fact come to be. His fear lies in the idea that the witches possess the power to predict that he will be king, but that he possesses the nerve kill to become king.

The first scenes with the witches begins to question the nature of the supernatural and suggests that their function is primarily to add atmosphere to the play, but the scene with the

dagger blatantly challenges the reality of this new supernatural event. As Macbeth tries to work through the conflict between his ambitions and his moral code in order to summon up the nerve to kill his king, a dagger appears, floating before his eyes. At the very moment of the dagger's appearance before Macbeth he exclaims, "Is this a dagger, which I see before me" (2.1.33), which shows how he immediately questions the corporeality of the dagger. He attempts to grab it but is unable to grasp it, saying "and yet I see thee still" (2.1.34). The dagger is clearly not real, but what it actually is and why it has appeared has yet to be revealed. Macbeth questions the nature of its ontological status by asking

Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight?
Or art thou but a dagger of the mind,
A false creation, proceeding from
The heat-oppresséd brain?"

(2.1.36-39)

The idea that the dagger could be a hallucination is first suggested by the hallucinator himself, which is particularly interesting considering the fact that when staging this scene, many directors choose not to have a dagger there at all, and instead have it appear only in Macbeth's mind. The witches actually appear on stage, alone and in front of Banquo as a witness; they speak and respond to Macbeth which implies that in some sense they must be real. But the dagger scene begins to blur the line between what is real, what is supernatural, and what is psychological.

Macbeth's encounter with the dagger dramatizes the uncertainty of the supernatural. Macbeth cannot determine whether the dagger is real or imaginary. He exclaims, "Mine eyes are made the fools o' th' other senses, / Or else worth all the rest" (2.1.45-46). Macbeth himself

makes the argument that his senses are conflicting with one another. He sees the dagger, but cannot touch it. As such, either his eyes possess a clearer sight than his other senses, or his eyes are the fools for seeing something that is not really there. This scene makes it impossible for the supernatural to be entirely real because he cannot experience it with all of his senses. Even though that line suggests the dagger is not entirely real, it does serve a symbolic purpose closely connected to Macbeth's own intentions. When he determines that the dagger "marshall'st the way that I was going, / And such an instrument I was to use" (2.1.43-44), the dagger suddenly acquires "on thy blade, and dudgeon, gouts of blood, which was not so before" (2.1.46-47). Even if there really was a dagger in the performance, this particular development would have been impossible to create on stage. The image of the dagger and its ability to shift and change with Macbeth's thoughts and emotions fundamentally links it to the mind of Macbeth. Indeed, following the appearance of the apparition of the dagger, Macbeth's resolve to commit the murder is strengthened, and the next time he appears on stage he has already committed the violent deed against Duncan. Not only does the ghostly dagger debunk the way the supernatural was thought to operate, but its tie to Macbeth's mind further shows how the supernatural is not influencing Macbeth but the other way around. The dagger is not a ghostly vision dictating the actions of Macbeth but rather a symbolic projection of Macbeth's own murderous desires.

The play further blurs the line between the psychological and the supernatural when Macbeth hears voices calling to him immediately following Duncan's murder. When Macbeth emerges from the bedroom, his hands covered in blood, he is in a state of the utmost horror and shock. Macbeth exclaims to his wife that one of his victims cried "'God bless us!'" and that the other cried "'Amen'" but "List'ning their fear I could not say, 'Amen,' / When they did say, 'God bless us!' ...I had most need of blessing, and 'Amen' / Stuck in my throat" (2.2.26-32). Already

Macbeth feels as though his actions are beyond any sort of spiritual redemption. At this moment of intense guilt, Macbeth claims to hear ghostly voices shouting,

Macbeth does murder sleep,' the innocent sleep,
 Sleep that knits up the raveled sleeve of care,
 The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath,
 Balm of hurt minds.

(2.2.34-39)

The voices end by telling him that “Macbeth shall sleep no more” (2.2.45). The voices tell him that he no longer will be able to sleep the sleep of the innocent. Even more so than the dagger, these mysterious voices seem to be projections of Macbeth's psychological state and deeply connected to his guilt. The previous events of the play encouraged audiences to think that these voices mark the beginning of another supernatural event, but the ethereal voices never amount to anything more than that. Indeed, the text almost explicitly places these voices firmly inside Macbeth's head because they don't actually speak: unlike the witches that audiences do see, or the dagger which audiences could see, what these voices say is delivered entirely second-hand from Macbeth. The voices represent a clear progression away from the supernatural and towards a more psychological interpretation. The way in which Macbeth questions the reality of the supernatural in the dagger scene does instigate a more psychological shift. But the voices expound on that connection because they are more obviously the result of heightened emotional strain and psychological distress. In this instance, it is much clearer that Macbeth himself is the one conjuring this “supernatural” event by trying to express *internal* conflict as an *external* phenomenon.

After having Banquo killed, Macbeth receives the most dramatic haunting of the play, which reflects the deterioration of his psychological state. The majority of critics tend to disregard the psychological toll Banquo's murder has on Macbeth, treating the murder "simply as efforts to secure the usurped crown" (Reid 75). It is true that, according to Macbeth, "to be thus [the king] / Is nothing, but to be safely thus" (3.1.49-50), which suggests that, at least on some level, maintaining the secrecy of his first murder is a priority. However, Macbeth's murders don't devolve or become less important to his personal psychology, but rather show a progression in Macbeth's psychology as he kills "first a parental ruler, then a brotherly friend..., and finally a mother and her children" (Reid 77). As Reid suggests, Banquo's murder contains at least as much, and perhaps more emotional weight than that of Duncan because he is a devoted and honorable friend who is not a "co-conspirator in regicide," but one who "modestly resist[s] each temptation to which his colleague falls prey" (Reid 79). Banquo can be interpreted as a better version of Macbeth, a Macbeth without dark ambitions; by killing him, Macbeth is killing an image of himself, or at least an image of what he could have been if he had resisted the temptation of the crown as Banquo did. Immediately after he issues the order to have Banquo killed, Macbeth acknowledges the insupportable guilt that will accompany his death, stating that it would,

Better be with the dead,
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy.

(3.2.21-24)

With this statement, Macbeth openly reveals that his hopelessness is so deep and that his life has sunk so low that he now envies the peace of those whom he killed. That escalation of guilt is manifested directly by an escalation of the ghost. The apparition is now the very friend who was killed coming to condemn him in person. He sits in Macbeth's own chair, which makes it impossible for Macbeth to ignore him and further suggests the idea of a shared identity between the two characters. This new ghost is a more concrete and literal image of his guilt and torment, reflected directly back at him.

However, this particular ghost does more than symbolize the guilty, psychological state of Macbeth as Reid suggests; this scene clearly serves to question and challenge further the reality of the supernatural. Initially Macbeth seems to regard his ghostly visitation as all too real, and even mistakes it for an actual person when he first sees it sitting in his seat. Even when he realizes who and what Banquo is, he almost seems to have expected such an encounter when he recalls how:

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.

(3.4.76-83)

Macbeth's expectation of Banquo's ghost aligns perfectly with traditional perceptions on the purpose that ghosts served in the early modern era. In *Crime and Mentalities in Early Modern England*, Malcolm Gaskill explores and explains how ghosts and dreams or visions were used in the legal system as admissible evidence. These visitations were often

interpreted as a form of divine intervention in order to capture a criminal. Gaskill argues that there was a universal belief in the idea of “murder will out” and that supernatural events were a way in which “God exposed and punished the crime of murder” (Gaskill 45). Ghosts, much like Macbeth just stated, revealed murderers either through haunting perpetrators into confessing, or by informing another person of the murderer’s guilt. After Banquo’s ghost leaves Macbeth reiterates the belief in using the supernatural as a tool of justice when he states,

It will have blood, they say: blood will have blood:
 Stones have been known to move, and trees to speak;
 Augures and understood relations, have
 By magot pies, and choughs, and rooks, brought forth.

(3.4.123-127)

Macbeth appears to be telling audiences that the ghost of Banquo is real and serves that traditional purpose of bringing justice to the guilty by tormenting Macbeth into confessing his guilt.

Yet even as Macbeth seems to entirely endorse the power and purpose of the supernatural, he undermines such assumptions at the same time by simultaneously questioning the reality and the power of the ghost. Upon seeing the ghost for a second time he shouts, “Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold; / Thou hast no speculation in those eyes / Which thou dost glare with!” (3.4.95-97). Macbeth attempts to calm his fears by methodically listing off evidence that proves Banquo’s ghost has no physical form as a means of rejecting any power that the ghost could possess. A ghost does not possess the faculties and the physical capability to do anything or control anyone. It does not even

speak, a fact that separates this particular ghost from both traditional expectations of the era as well as ghosts within Shakespeare's other plays. In other plays the ghosts speak, compelling whoever they are haunting to do *something*. But Banquo's ghost does not seem to support the traditional role and purpose of a ghost. Right before the ghost vanishes for good, Macbeth calls it both a "horrible shadow" and an "unreal mockery" (3.4.107-108). Macbeth's particular word choice at this moment highlights the impossibility of the ghost, showing that, even at the height of his guilt-ridden terror, Macbeth still emphasizes the ethereality of the ghost before him. A shadow cannot actually do anything. Ghosts, even more than the witches, possess no supernatural abilities to manipulate or influence the world around them.

Furthermore, just like the vision of the ghost and the dagger, Banquo's ghost seems to be under Macbeth's control on some level. It is no coincidence that the ghost appears and at the same time that Macbeth wishes "the graced person of our Banquo present, / who may I rather challenge for unkindness / than pity for mischance" (3.4.41-43), or that when Banquo reappears it is when Macbeth raises his glass "to our dear friend Banquo, whom we miss. / Would he were here!" (3.4.89-90). At both moments the ghost only shows himself when Macbeth thinks of him and voices his name. At the same time, the ghost always seems to disappear as soon as Macbeth addresses it and treats it as a real thing. When it vanishes the first time, it is after Macbeth demands that "if thou canst not, speak too" (3.4.70). Such behavior on the part of the ghost suggests not only that the ghost is not real, but that Macbeth possesses some kind of control over it. What's more, the ghost vanishes a second time after Macbeth actually orders it to do so, shouting, "Avaunt, and quit my sight!" (3.4.94) and "Hence, horrible shadow, unreal mockery, hence!" (3.4.107-108). If

the ghost really was a true supernatural being, a tool sent by God to intervene and bring Macbeth to justice, Macbeth himself wouldn't be able to order it around. The ghost would haunt him until he confessed, a thing he never does. All Macbeth reveals or confesses is the guilt he feels for his actions. Macbeth's control over the ghost of Banquo rejects the traditional belief in the supernatural and strips it of any power it may have possessed. Instead this ghost implies that it, like the dagger and the voices, is a projection or personification of Macbeth's own psychology and guilt.

Macbeth's final supernatural encounter, his second meeting with the witches, initially suggests a return to a more traditional interpretation of the supernatural, one where supernatural beings are entirely real, powerful, and influential. The witches appear in the scene first, suggesting a disconnection from Macbeth, that they live independently from him. They are even in the middle of making a potion, chanting the ingredients as they go. The ingredients consist entirely of body parts and organs of different animals such as a newt's eye and fur from a bat. But then the ingredients themselves become more sinister, such as "Liver of blaspheming Jew," "nose of Turk and Tartar's lips," and finally, "finger of birth-strangled babe/Ditch-delivered by a drab" (4.1.14-31). When Macbeth finally enters the scene, the witches seem to be the ones with the authoritative role in the scene. In this scene, the witches constantly tell Macbeth what to do. When he pleads, "answer me / To what I ask you" (4.1.62-63), they respond with sharp commands of "Speak. Demand. We'll answer" (4.1.64). When they conjure the apparitions of the armed head, the witches interrupt Macbeth whenever he tries to speak to the apparition, and even tell him that it "will not be commanded" (4.1.77). Throughout the entire scene Macbeth seems to play a subservient role to the supernatural. And yet, he still maintains a semblance of control.

Although the witches appear to operate outside of his influence by appearing in the scene *before* him, in the previous scene he actually determines to summon the witches: “I will tomorrow— / And betimes I will—to the weird sisters” (3.4.138-139). This is the first supernatural occurrence that he consciously chooses. He further shows his authoritative role over the witches by asserting, “More shall they speak, for now I am bent to know, / By worst means, the worst” (3.4.140-141). Immediately after Macbeth makes this assertion, the witches appear. When he meets the witches for the second time tells them, “I conjure you” (4.1.50), further asserting his authority. Even the apparitions, that seem to be solely under the witches’ control, can only be conjured after the witches asked Macbeth to, “Say, if th’ hadst rather hear it from our mouths, / Or from our masters,” as if they needed his permission before anything could happen. The witches do not want Macbeth to speak to the apparitions, but that is because they know his thoughts and as such he does not need to speak aloud. The telepathic connection between Macbeth and the apparitions suggests a deeper relationship between these ghosts and Macbeth’s mind. By the time the final spirit appears, it is the witches who plead with Macbeth to “seek to know no more” (4.1.108) and he who orders them to continue, stating “I will be satisfied. Deny me this, / And an eternal curse fall on you! Let me know” (4.1.109-110). Macbeth not only orders the witches to do *his* bidding, but he even threatens them with an eternal curse. His threat undermines their supernatural abilities and reduces the mystical properties of the “charm of powerful trouble” (4.1.18) that they concocted before Macbeth entered the scene. Their roles have reversed from the beginning of the scene and Macbeth now possesses supernatural authority over the witches.

After this final encounter all aspects of the supernatural disappear entirely.

Furthermore, the apparitions gave Macbeth two prophesies: that “none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (4.1.82-83) and that “Macbeth shall never vanquished be until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him” (4.1.96-98). Both of these prophesies imply supernatural means to bring them about, and yet, when the prophesies do come true, they turn out to be entirely prosaic and not supernatural in any way. Macbeth tells Macduff that he bears “a charmèd life, which must not yield / To one of woman born” but Macduff tells him to,

Despair thy charm,
And let the angel whom thou still hast served
Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother's womb
Untimely ripped.

(5.8.12-16)

Macduff fulfills the prophesy and is able to kill Macbeth, not from any supernatural origin, but simply because he had a Caesarian birth. He tells Macbeth outright to forget the supernatural because in reality it is worthless. The prophecy of a moving forest seems utterly impossible to bring about without some mystical means, but it turns out that it also comes true through utterly conventional means. By having these supernatural prophesies turn out to be entirely prosaic in nature, the play rejects any power that the supernatural claims to have and places all of the power on the mortal characters within the play. This rejection of supernatural authority in the prophesies extends to the downfall of Macbeth's character throughout the play. Macbeth is not a victim of supernatural forces working against him, pulling him down, but rather he set his own destiny and brought about his own

downfall through entirely mortal means. Ultimately, the supernatural forces that surround Macbeth, are external projections of the internal turmoil of Macbeth's character.

While Macbeth takes internal conflict and projects it onto the supernatural, his wife is the exact opposite and instead takes external, supernatural forces and internalizes them. Lady Macbeth's relationship with the supernatural ultimately reflects the journey of the play as a whole: the transfer of the the supernatural from the external to the internal, followed by its rejection altogether. Macbeth sees the supernatural literally, in various forms. As a result, he can externalize the responsibility of his actions onto the supernatural beings he sees. Lady Macbeth blurs that line between an external and internal relationship with the supernatural. She actively calls on dark forces to consumer her, commanding them:

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!

(1.5.30-37)

This powerful passage shows how Lady Macbeth had no trepidation in accepting the dark power of the supernatural, but her perception of the supernatural is much more personal

and psychological than her husband's. Her spirits tend on mortal *thoughts*, not actions. She demands that they fill her body and thicken her blood, actions that occur totally within herself. As previously mentioned, Curry argues that Lady Macbeth takes on evil powers of darkness first introduced by the witches, so that any "natural inclinations of the spirit toward goodness and compassion may be completely extirpated" (Muir lix), thus shifting the supernatural powers of the witches *to* Lady Macbeth. However, when examining the remainder of the play, there is no evidence that Lady Macbeth possesses or channels the witches' dark power in any way. In fact, there is more evidence that she still possesses some of her "natural inclinations" of goodness and compassion. She tells the audience while she waits for Macbeth to kill the king that she would have done it herself had not Duncan "resembled / My father as he slept" (2.2.12-13). So, despite Lady Macbeth's call to evil forces to fill her "from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty," she still possesses a shred of goodness and as such her actions after this moment are entirely of her own doing, not supernatural forces acting through her. The very verb "tend" doesn't imply any sort of authority and power of the supernatural that she envisions. Rather, it implies assistance and attention to thoughts that were already there. She wants the supernatural to hold her on her purpose, a purpose she has already designed and the action she already intends to take, with or without the help of any dark spirits.

Lady Macbeth's journey with the supernatural begins with a closer proximity to psychology than Macbeth, yet she nevertheless parallels Macbeth's gradual journey away from the supernatural. Lady Macbeth accepts wholeheartedly the authority of the witches, but her personal relationship with the supernatural is much more internal, and after that scene she consistently rejects any supernatural power. After the murder of Duncan and his

servants, Lady Macbeth is more aware of the psychological repercussions of their actions and repeatedly tries to refute the supernatural forces working against Macbeth. She warns Macbeth that “These deeds must not be thought / After these ways. So, it will make us mad” (2.2.33-34). Before their dinner she tells Macbeth that “Things without all remedy / Should be without regard. What’s done is done” (3.2.13-14). But Macbeth, unable to forget the murder, is in constant battle with his guilt and it destroys his well-being. In contrast, Lady Macbeth’s battle is fought entirely within herself and almost subconsciously. As a result, she seems to maintain her composure much more effectively. At the banquet there is a clear disconnect between Macbeth and his wife; they are clearly not partners anymore as both wrestle with their own psychological turmoil. Macbeth externally represents his psychology through the manifestation of Banquo, but Lady Macbeth has no such relationship. When Macbeth is haunted by the ghost of Banquo it should be noted that Lady Macbeth never sees it. In fact, she never sees any supernatural being of any kind throughout the entire play. Despite her call to the dark forces of the world, she seems to be incredibly sceptical, even disbelieving in the supernatural. When Banquo appears to Macbeth she reproaches him, telling him that “This is the very painting of your fear. / This is the air-drawn dagger which you said / Led you to Duncan...When all’s done, / You look but on a stool” (3.4.64-71). In that one aside to Macbeth she refutes the reality of both the apparitions Macbeth has seen, even the one in front of him at that moment. Her determination to forget their murderous actions and bury them in the past reflects the fact that she never sees any of the supernatural events that fill the play. Her disbelief in the supernatural makes her much more effective in maintaining her “False face” that hides “what the false heart doth know” (1.7.82).

Even her initial perception of the power of the supernatural proves to be groundless in the end. Lady Macbeth's determination and demand that dark spirits "Make thick my blood" in order to "Stop up the access and passage to remorse" (1.5.33-34), clearly does not work and subsequently rejects the power of the supernatural. When Lady Macbeth loses her grip on reality, she loses her mind completely and suddenly. Just like Macbeth, her guilty mind projects supernatural apparitions that recall her past deeds and continues the connection that the play has made to individual psychology and the supernatural. When the doctor enquires how long Lady Macbeth has been sleepwalking, the nurse informs him, "Since his majesty went into the field" (5.1.4). This brief statement shows that, despite the fact that Lady Macbeth appeared not to suffer from any guilt from her actions, that guilt had manifested itself in her dreams, causing her so much distress that she actually relives the murder scene in her sleep. Her nurse and doctor overhear her muttering, "Fie, my lord, fie! A soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?" (5.1.34-36) which directly recalls her conversation with Macbeth when she demands "Art thou afeard / To be the same in thine own act and valor / As thou art in desire?" (1.7.39-42). She tells Macbeth to "Wash your hands. Put on your nightgown. Look not so pale" (5.1.43-44) in her sleepwalking state, just as she did on the night of the murder: "A little water clears us of this deed...Get on your nightgown" (2.2.67, 71). And finally, she dreams her victims' blood back onto her hands. According to the nurse, "It is an accustomed action with her to seem thus washing her hands. I have known her continue in this a quarter of an hour" (5.1.22), just as when she washed her hands after the murder. Whereas before she told Macbeth that "what's done is done," she now despairs that "What's done *cannot* be undone" (5.1.46-47; emphasis added). She is unable to undo the

past, but she is unable to truly forget it either, and as such her past, bloody actions seem to manifest themselves literally before her eyes. But unlike Macbeth's ghostly visitations, which cause the audience to only question their level of reality, with Lady Macbeth there is no doubt that her apparition is not real. In most productions of this play the audience actually sees the ghost of Banquo along with Macbeth. But in Lady Macbeth's final scene, she is sleepwalking and there is obviously no blood stain on her hand; the supernatural potential of this scene is entirely dissolved. The key distinction between the two scenes is that with Macbeth everything was seen from his perspective. With Lady Macbeth, the perspective of the audience matches with the doctor and the nurse who are observing Lady Macbeth. She is not being haunted, but *diagnosed*.

Macbeth is so packed with disturbing, supernatural encounters that it is easy to allow them to mask and distract from the deeper, more psychological themes. Such a supernatural takeover would not only reduce the complexity of the play, but if the witches, ghosts, and visions are given too much authority over Macbeth, his character is thus stripped of its tragic complexity and he is then simply a victim of external forces. If, as Lamb argued, "from the moment that [the witches'] eyes first met Macbeth he is spellbound. That meeting sways his destiny" (qtd in Muir xxxv) the tragic arc of his character is weakened. He would be an innocent man who becomes the prey of evil, supernatural beings. The play itself would truly be "a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (5.5.26-28). The more authority given to the supernatural to sway and influence Macbeth's actions, the less meaning those actions have on the overall themes of ambition and guilt that the play so obviously explores. What's more, if Macbeth

is no longer seen as the agent of his own fate then the guilt he feels for his actions is also diminished. If Macbeth's control over his own actions is taken away, so must his guilt.

Without that guilt the following lines would lose their poignancy:

that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.

(5.3.24-28)

By losing his guilt, he would lose the only remaining thing that makes him human. He has “in blood / Stepp'd in so far” (3.4.135-136) through his increasingly brutal murders that the only evidence of any remaining goodness within his character is his ability to feel remorse, regret, and guilt for those bloody actions. It's true that Shakespeare used the supernatural to compliment the king and enhance the theatrical power of the play, but by simultaneously challenging and refuting aspects of the supernatural beings and events within his play, he is able to give Macbeth agency over his own fate.

Aligning audiences with Macbeth's perspective so consistently throughout the play invites audiences, particularly those in the early modern period, to mirror his gradual rejection of the supernatural. When Macbeth asks “art thou but a dagger of the mind, / A false creation” (2.1.37-38), he is asking the audience just as much as the dagger, inviting them to question along with him. While many audience members at the time, not the least of these King James I, likely took the supernatural elements of the play at face value, those paying attention would quickly see the play steadily undermine the power and, ultimately,

the reality of the supernatural. In the end, the play reflects the context in which it was written: it begins by treating the supernatural from a traditional perspective, one that is becoming increasingly outmoded. But by the play's end, it rejects the superstitious view and instead embraces a perspective that looks to the future of history.

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