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Witches and Equivocation in Macbeth

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Abstract:

Shakespeare's Macbeth, a Jacobean play, was first performed in front of King James I, whose obsession regarding witchcraft was widely manifested in the early seventeenth century England. This essay is an attempt to explore the manifestation of the witches as projected in Macbeth with an emphasis on equivocation and their connections to Macbeth, the eponymous hero of the play.

Keywords: *Macbeth, witchcraft, equivocation, seventeenth century, England*

1. Introduction

On 9th May, 1603, Shakespeare and his company were patronized by King James I of England and VI of Scotland, and from being the Lord Chamberlain's Men, they were named as 'The King's Men'. Writing about their grateful allegiance towards their patron and monarch, Professor Greenblatt writes:

The players had every reason to be grateful towards royal master and attentive to his pleasure and interest. It has long been argued that one of the striking signs of this gratitude is Macbeth, based on a story from Scottish history particularly apt for a monarch who traced his line back to Banquo, the noble thane whose murder Macbeth orders after his killing King Duncan. (Greenblatt 783)

Shakespeare's endeavor of taking care of the king's 'pleasure and interest' caused him to introduce not only the themes of witchcraft and equivocation in Macbeth, but also the projection of England as a friend of Scotland to show that England is not a foe but a friend to Scotland and Scottish people. The reason is explained by J. Pauline Croft in her biography of the king in her book, King James, which records the new king's efforts and struggles to unite England and Scotland and the dissent it aroused in the two borders. Pauline writes,

In the proclamation of May 1603 ordering his subjects on the English and Scots Borders, renamed 'the middle shires', to cease raiding one another, James asserted that 'in the hearts of all the best-disposed subjects of both the Realms', there was 'a most earnest desire that they say happy Union should be perfected'. (J. Pauline Croft 2003 page: 54)

Few lines later she writes, "Numerous tracts were written and circulated, but there was little consensus. Those who wanted Union, apart from the king himself, were a small minority in both countries" (ibid). Shakespeare's attempt to pay homage to the king's endeavor is embedded in his engaging England, English army and an extremely righteous English king who possessed magical healing power come forward in Scotland's aid in Macbeth. The playwright attributes one whole scene in the court of England in Act 4, scene 3 to establish this new relationship of amity and union between two countries. In the play, England gives full support to the Scottish royal heir Malcom by giving him shelter and providing him English army to reestablish legitimate succession in Scotland.

2. Portrayal of the Issue

History tells us that King James the First was deeply disturbed by the notion of regicide as both his parents had unnatural deaths; his father was assassinated and his mother, Queen Mary of Scotland, was executed. He himself also had a very narrow escape from the assassination threatened by the Gunpowder plot. So, just after three years of ascending to the throne of England and barely a year after the Gunpowder plot, regicide and the demonic power over humans became highly sensitive and sensational socio-political issues. King James also profoundly believed in demons and witchcraft. In 1597 James wrote a book titled Daemonologie where he expressed his obsession with witchcraft, an obsession widely believed in Denmark, Scotland and England. In the words of J. Pauline Croft, it was "a disease of the body politic comparable to drunkenness or adultery" (Croft, 26). In her book King James, she further writes that between 1590 and 1597, in Scotland, "James himself played a central role and at least 70 and perhaps more than 100 witches were tortured, tried and executed." (Croft 26).

The fact that Shakespeare uses witches as stimulators of Macbeth's treason and regicide also has a theological significance. Braunnmuller writes:

In early modern England, witches and witchcraft were political matters as well as personal, familial, and communal ones. Biblical precedent identified witchcraft with treason: 'For rebellion is as the sign of witchcraft' (i Sam. 15.23). Following that precedent as well as their own self-interested desire for public order, Tudor and Stuart

governments sought to regulate and, if possible, extirpate various practices labelled 'witchcraft' by common folk, local magistrates, the legal apparatus, and learned authorities. (Braunmuller 29)

One of the major themes of the play is equivocation or duplicity in statement, which makes the witches and Macbeth paranormal clones. Most of the language of Hecate and her team are heavily tempered with equivocation that tortures Macbeth throughout the play. In the play the crucial moment of its occurrence is in Act IV, scene I, when Macbeth visits the witches for the second time to inquire further about his fate, his kingship and the lineage of Banquo. This scene is crucial in the play as it is here that Macbeth finally realizes that this attempt to refute the second part of the witches' prophecy – that Banquo's heirs will succeed Macbeth has miserably failed and his triumph of snatching kingship of Scotland is only temporary. King James the First's ancestry has been traced to Banquo, about whom Shakespeare expresses through the words of the witches on their first meeting with Macbeth:

First Witch: Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.

Second Witch: Not so happy, yet much happier.

Third Witch: Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none. (1.3. 63-65)

However, his queries about what he should fear and what he should not regarding the safety of his life and crown are met with the witches with double edged answers. On the issue of his succession, a procession of apparitions is shown to him up to the eighth descendant of Banquo. The last one carrying treble scepters obviously refers to the monarchy of England and more directly to King James under whose monarchy England, Scotland and Ireland were united.

Macbeth: Thou art too like the spirit of Banquo. Down!

Thy crown does sear mine eyeballs. And thy hair,

Thou other gold-bound brow, is like the first;

A third, is like the former. - Filthy hags,

Why do you show me this? - A fourth? Start, eyes!

What, will the line stretch out to th' crack of doom?

Another yet? A seventh? I'll see no more.

And yet the eighth appears, who bears a glass

Which shows me many more. And some I see,

That two-fold balls and treble sceptres carry.

Horrible sight! (4.1. 111-121)

Interestingly everything the witches tell Macbeth is equivocal but everything that they tell Banquo or about Banquo is very much true although a little bit paradoxical. In Shakespeare's brief presentation of Banquo in the play, the bard's deep loyalty towards his patron and his outstanding artistry is manifested. Professor Greenblatt points out:

In Shakespeare's principal historical source, Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1587), Banquo aids Macbeth in the murder of the king. Shakespeare suppresses this complicity. The witches (or "weird sisters") who tell Macbeth that he would be king tell Banquo that he will be the father of kings, but Banquo seems to be determined not to be drawn into any conspiratorial attempt to realize these prophecies. When, just before Duncan's assassination, Macbeth indirectly asks for his support, Banquo speaks of keeping his "allegiance clear" (2.1.27). (Greenblatt 783)

So, as Macbeth points out earlier in the play that the regicide has given him nothing but a hollow crown, must have rendered a satisfying feeling of being avenged to King James. Macbeth blames the weird sisters for his misfortune in his soliloquy of Act 3, scene 1:

Then prophet-like,

They hailed him father to a lineage of kings.

Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown,

And put a barren scepter in my grip,

Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand. (3. 1. 60-64)

Paradox or equivocation forms the main poetics in *Macbeth*, it marks almost all significant issues. Starting from the utterance of the witches, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" in the very first scene, all the prophecies made to Macbeth, all actions and most of the dialogues of the play are replete with double meaning, and dramatic irony. When on the king's command, Ross and Angus hail him as the Thane of Cawdor, the news of whose treachery and execution had not yet reached Macbeth, the paradoxical fulfilling of the prophecies starts. This address of himself as the Thane of Cawdor opens the gate of confusion for him as he exclaims, "The Thane of Cawdor lives. Why do you dress me / In borrowed robes?" (1.3. 106-107). At the end of the play, he too, like the former Thane of Cawdor, faces the same destiny, the murder of a traitor. In *Macbeth*, the issue of treason and treachery pervades both the trajectory of the play and that of the contemporary politics. In the play, even during the period when the Scottish army was fighting Norway, the treason of Malcom, the Thane of Cawdor, had to be addressed and capital punishment had to be rendered before the war was over.

In British history, the Gunpowder Plot was a failed assassination attempt against King James I along with the whole government as the king was about to open a new parliament session on 5th November, 1605, just the year before *Macbeth's* first production. It was a Jesuit Treason Plot by a group of provincial English Catholics. The plot was to blow up British parliament on the commencing day of the parliament session. The plot was discovered the day before and the rebels were caught. Till today the futility of that plot is commemorated in England on 5th November as Guy Fawkes Day. At this point, equivocation gets entwined with both the contextual and the textual ploy of the play. Among the conspirators of Gunpowder plot was Father Henry Garnet, head of the secret Jesuit mission in England. Stephen Greenblatt in his introductory essay on *Macbeth* in Norton Shakespeare writes:

Garnet, against whom, there was very little hard evidence, pleaded innocent, but the government prosecutors made much of the fact that he was the author of *A Treatise of Equivocation*, a book showing how to give misleading or ambiguous answers under oath. Garnet, Fawkes, and the others were all found guilty and executed, their severed heads displayed on pikes. (Greenblatt, 783)

The Jesuits conspired to blow up the parliament along with the king and all its members because they wrongly assumed that killing the protestant king would earn them the glory of God's scourges, hence would ensure their place in heaven. Macbeth performed the regicide efficaciously in the play that they failed to perform successfully in reality. To make the harrowed audience feel the intensity of Macbeth's sunnam able 'deed' more profoundly, the Porter scene is juxtaposed into the play right after the murder of Duncan. The scene is a continuation of the previous scene as the knocking starts when Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are still on stage sharing the immediate horrifying feelings of their crime. The scene ends with Macbeth's anguished lamentation, as if in answer to the knocking:

Macbeth: To know my deed 't were best not know myself.

Knock [within]

Wake Duncan with thy knocking. I would thou couldst. (2.2.71-72)

However, although the Porter Scene intensifies the nature of horror initiated by Macbeth, there is a strong tradition in Macbeth criticism to hold this scene as a technical ploy by Shakespeare release the immense pressure on the mind of the audience created by the murder scene. Thomas De Quincey's famous essay 'On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth' records how the porter's knock cuts into the most monstrous and evil moment of the play to let the human world get reestablished once more. In beautiful words he explains –

Hence it is, that when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away like a pageantry in the clouds: the knocking at the gate is heard; and it makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced: the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the reestablishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them.

As the porter of Macbeth's castle poses himself as the gate-keeper of hell-gate he reminds everyone that equivocators who try to win their way by fooling the judges of the world will fail to maneuver their way to heaven and will have to arrive at the doorstep of hell:

Knock, knock. Who's there, in th'other devil's name? Faith, here's an equivocator that could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven. O come in, equivocator. (2.3.7-11)

As stated earlier, King James's firm belief was that devils lend their hands 'in any plot against an anointed king', and that 'witches had at various points in his own life conspired to harm him' (Greenblatt 784). Banking on the king's faith in demonology, Shakespeare gives a wide space to the witches in the play and makes Macbeth share a telepathic mind with them. The famous utterance of the witches, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair," (1.1.10) reverberates in the first words uttered by Macbeth on stage: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (1.3.36). His mind seems to be under the control of the witches even before he has met them.

Again, as he enters the stage right after murdering King Duncan, he tells his wife, "I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?" (2.2.14). From the beginning of the play, whenever he thinks aloud in an aside or in a soliloquy about Duncan's assassination, he thinks or talks about it in an elusive manner, using nouns like 'deed', 'that suggestion', or pronouns like 'it', as he does in his first soliloquy. Hence in his second aside he says:

This supernatural soliciting

Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,

Why hath it given me earnest of success?

Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.

If good, why do I yield to that suggestion?

Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair

And make my seated hear knock at my ribs

Against the use of nature? (1.3.129-136)

Not only that Macbeth's mind has already started thinking about regicide in unnamable terms but also it works like that of the witches, equivocally and ambiguously. Confusion and chaotic disorder seem to take hold of his mind immediately after he is addressed as the Thane of Cawdor. Robin Grove in his essay 'Multiplying Villainies of Nature' points out:

For an instant he sways between 'ill?' and 'good?' unable to choose or reject, and then he is falling away, falling into the deed he is to commit. He asks not 'Will I yield?' (The question of a tempted man), but 'Why do I yield?' amazed that he is already overcome: ... as though far below the conscious mind were something in him struggling to get free. And it is not just horror that he feels at this: there is ecstasy in giving way to so dreadful a thing and heeling over into its power. (Grove 123-124)

But G. Wilson Knight sees this aside as the 'microcosm' of the whole play. In his famous book, *The Wheel of Fire*, we read,

This speech is a microcosm of the Macbeth vision: it contains the germ of the whole. Like a stone in a pond, this original immediate experience of Macbeth sends ripples of itself expanding over the whole play. This is the moment of the birth of evil in Macbeth—he may have had ambitious thoughts before, may even have intended the murder, but now for the first

time he feels its oncoming reality. This is the mental experience which he projects into action, thereby plunging his land, too, in fear, horror, darkness, and disorder. (Knight, collected in Bloom's Shakespeare through Ages: Macbeth, page 236) Macbeth's speech in the above quoted aside shows that this is the decisive moment for him to change the unreality ("nothing is / But what is not." I. iii. 140-41), which is his secret intention of killing Duncan, into reality, which is his nightmarish helpless realization that he has to do the killing, because this is his fate and this is also his fearful, vaulting ambition. The witches tell him about his future, about his fate, they do not tell him anything about regicide. His plan of murder is completely his own.

Among few other paranormal connections between Macbeth and the witches, lies Macbeth's mysterious behavior that he also equivocates himself. Just the way he negates their prophecies both as 'ill' and 'good' at the same time, the witches deceive him by saying that he should laugh at the 'power of men' as no 'woman born' can ever harm Macbeth and that he should not worry until Birnam Wood moves forward to 'high Dunsinane hill' (4.1. 78-80, 91-93).

To show Macbeth and the witches as psychological doubles Shakespeare makes them utter the same words and the same phrase in different situations of their own accord. Just as he fails to talk about the assassination of Duncan in any direct words and refers to his regicide as 'deed', so the witches choose not to refer to their boiling the broth of the cauldron with any direct words, rather, like Macbeth, they utter the word 'deed', connecting Duncan's killing and their demonic activities with the same cord, and placing Macbeth and the witches in the same scale:

Macbeth: How now, you secret, black, and midnight hags!

What isn't you do?

All the Witches: A deed without a name. (4.1.46-48)

A further telepathic interrelation between Macbeth's and the witches' minds is dramatized as the witches forbid Macbeth to ask any question:

Macbeth: Tell me, thou unknown power -

First Witch: He knows thy thought;

Hear his speech, but say thou nought. (4.1.67-69)

This telepathic and psychic correlation between Macbeth and the witches is established at the very outset of the play by the words 'fair' and 'foul'. Macbeth's first words in the play to describe the weather ('So foul and fair a day I have not seen'), exactly chime the same phrase the witches' speak in the opening scene. As 'fair' and 'foul', two oxymoronic qualities of life can express one thing at the same time only equivocally, the words also emphasize the reversal of positive and negative values, which is one of the major themes of the play. Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's stands regarding Duncan's murder change over the course of the play. Lady Macbeth was resolute and unyielding about the regicide from the moment she received her husband's letter in Act 1, scene 3 and continued to be unwavering till the deed was done. But Macbeth was irresolute although his getting startled the moment he hears the witches hail him as the next king of Scotland, denotes that the witches only uttered the words that were secretly nurtured all along in his mind. His criminal intentions are well-defined from the different responses Shakespeare makes Macbeth and Banquo give. Banquo seems to be unmoved by their fortune telling. As they vanish, he simply comments:

The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,

And these are of them. (1.3.77-78)

But Macbeth submerges in a deep brooding and a number of very deep and significant asides, which project his mind echoing the 'fair' and 'foul' binaries set by the witches in the opening scene. Macbeth's prior secret wish of ascending the throne by means of regicide, his fear of committing it, terror of foreseen consequences, irresolution of advancing further with the plan – all pour down from him as he mutters in his aside:

This supernatural soliciting

Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,

Why hath it given me earnest of success,

Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.

If good, why do I yield to that suggestion,

Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair

And make my seated heart knock at my ribs 135

Against the use of nature? (1.3.129-136)

The reversal of values in Macbeth works even in this aside; in Macbeth's failure to comprehend the message his heart is giving him loud and clear. He negates the prophecy both as 'ill' and 'good', or as 'foul' and 'fair', not realizing which one to take as good, and which one to take as ill. He is wrongly taking his new laurel of being thane of Cawdor as ill, whereas it is a good tiding, had he been satisfied with it. On the other hand, he is considering the prophecy about being the king as good. But his heart realizes it to be ill and evil and for this reason it is knocking against his ribs violently and making his hair stand on his head. But Macbeth ignores the warning of his heart.

His irresolution continues when he meets Lady Macbeth for the first time in their castle. In Act I, scene v, it is Lady Macbeth who strongly asserts that the 'tomorrow' Duncan plans to return will never come:

O never

Shall sun that morrow see. (1.5.58-59)

But Macbeth, still indecisive, says, 'We will speak further' (1.5.69)

By the next scene, Macbeth, with Lady Macbeth's tantalization, has already resolved about the regicide as he ends his first soliloquy with the words: "I have no spur / to prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself / and falls on th'other." (1.7.25 – 28), and the scene ends with his firm decision and invocation to his own

physical faculties to come to his aid: "I am settled, and bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat" (1.7.79-80). Victor Hugo compares Macbeths with Adam and Eve and says: "This Eve tempts this Adam. Once Macbeth has taken the first bite, he is lost. The first thing that Adam produces with Eve is Cain, the first thing that Macbeth accomplishes with Grouch is murder" (Bloom 132).

But by the time the play reaches its last Act, the Macbeths' stands get reversed. Macbeth who felt his heart beat violently against his ribcage at the thought of regicide, stands knee-deep in the pool of blood and has lost his ability to be moved by any loss. Even the death news of his wife fails to stir his remorse, and he comments with astonishing indifference, 'She should have died hereafter;' (5.2.17). Lady Macbeth, who was so resolute Duncan from their way of greatness that after the murder said a little water clears them of their deed, cannot stand the smell of blood in her hand.

L. C. Knights in his book, *Some Shakespearean Themes* gives his critical observation on reversal of values that changes Macbeth's character with the following extract:

The main theme of the reversal of values is given out simply and clearly in the first scene – "Fair is foul, and foul is fair"; and with it are associated premonitions of the conflict, disorder and moral darkness into which Macbeth will plunge himself. Well before the end of the first act we are in possession not only of the positive values against which the Macbeth evil will be defined but the related aspects of that evil, which is simultaneously felt as a strange and unnatural perversion of the will, an obfuscation of the clear light of reason, a principle of disorder (both in the "single state of man" and in his wider social relations), and a pursuit of illusions. (Bloom 306)

So, albeit imperious to the plot of the play, the witches do not instigate Macbeths for the murder, it is their own well planned and deeply contemplated decision. Had there been no meeting between the weird sisters and Macbeth, they would have accomplished it on their own. Yet, in his soliloquy after the murder, he words, "Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown" (3.1.62), in a manner as if it is the witches' fault that he committed the crime.

Although the witches are projected in the play as equivocators misguiding Macbeth to fulfill his fantasy with the enticement of Lady Macbeth, it is Macbeth himself who, with his body, mind and soul, performs the ultimate action of equivocation. From his aside uttered after Malcom is declared the official heir of Duncan, he starts instructing his body parts to cheat each other, which culminates in his second soliloquy when he hallucinates over the dagger directing his way towards Duncan's bed chamber. In his aside, he orders his 'eye' to 'wink', or not to look at the hand (1.4.53). Even if 'eye' is considered both by its surface meaning as body organ and its pun meaning of 'I' as the first-person pronoun, Macbeth is equivocating as he is trying to distract, to shift his eye's and his own knowledge from the deed of his hands. This disconnection and disintegration between eye and hand, eye and mind, throat and mind, footsteps and earth, light and hand holding knife pervades both in Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's speeches throughout the first half of the play. Lady Macbeth's first soliloquy ends with her invocation to the murdering ministers of hell. She urges them to 'unsex' her, and begs the darkness to 'pall' the night -in the dunnest smoke of hell,

That my keen knife sees not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry, 'Hold, hold'. (1.5.49-52)

In this soliloquy, she is trying to deceive firstly her gender identity, then the most vital inner organ, blood and blood vessels and then her eye sight and lastly the knife, the weapon she plans to use for the assassination. Here, her appeal to nature is an appeal of metamorphosis. It is thunderously chilling and blood congealing. Metaphorically, she is equivocating in this speech as her eyes are supposed to turn a blind eye to her 'deed' and hence, will not be able to give witness of her another organ's action. Similarly, the softness of her gender role will not be able to stand the mental pressure of such a heinous crime; as seen when all the thanes discover the murder and she swoons. So, her female sex will never know what her male sex has done, and hence will fail to truthfully testify her share of the guilt in regicide.

On the other hand, in his first hallucination Macbeth sees the dagger, dripping drops of blood, moving in the air towards Duncan's bed chamber, but as he tries to hold it, he fails (2.1.33-35). Like the nature of equivocation, the norms of human life and action are reversed. It is not the murderer who is taking the weapon to his victim, it is the weapon which is taking the murderer to his victim:

Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going,
And such an instrument I was to use.
Mine eyes are made the fools o'th'other senses,
Or else worth all the rest. (2.1.42-45)

The process of disconnection is further carried inside Duncan's chamber as he overhears the bodyguards' prayers and wishes to say 'Amen' but feels that the word got stuck in his throat and detaches his mind from his voice.

3. Conclusion

Macbeth's equivocality begins with the very first line he speaks, "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (1.3.36) and by doing so, coincides with the paradox uttered by the witches in the opening scene, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair, / Hover through the fog and filthy air" (1.1.12-13). The manifestation of his equivocal mind climaxes in his review of the murder as he reports to his wife that "To know my deed 'twere best not know myself" (2.1.71). With these words Macbeth simultaneously owns and disowns, acknowledges and denies his own action, which make him at par with the other equivocators of the play, the witches and make him enter his own personal hell summoned by the knocking of the porter of his own castle.

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