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John E. Curran Jr.

Marquette University, john.curran@marquette.edu

Article

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John E. Curran Jr.

English Department, Marquette University, 1217 W. Wisconsin Ave., Milwaukee, WI 53233, USA;
john.curran@Marquette.edu

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Abstract: In a keeping with the view that Shakespeare harbored a sympathetic attitude to Catholic ways of seeing, this essay argues that *Macbeth* is a study in the dangers of oversimplification and certainty. In contradistinction to how Spenser's Redcrosse Knight escapes the Cave of Despaire, *Macbeth* would benefit greatly from probing, questioning, nuancing, and sifting through ambiguity. He needs to examine the particular attenuation of his own moral thinking, and needs to engage equivocation, in the forms of both amphibology and mental reservation.

Keywords: *Macbeth*; conscience; casuistry; equivocation; Protestantism; Catholicism

One remarkably tenacious view of *Macbeth* is that of its titular character as overwhelmed by the power of his own imagination; A. C. Bradley once isolated as “the key to Shakespeare’s conception” *Macbeth*’s possessing “the imagination of a poet” (Bradley 1926, p. 352), and much more recently Harold Bloom mentions this idea as if it were a given, calling *Macbeth* “profoundly and engagingly imaginative,” his imagination being his greatest strength and his destructive weakness (Bloom 2010, pp. 1–2, 4). Thus for John Wilks, *Macbeth*’s descent into crime is attributable to “a disordering of the imagination capable potentially of seducing the will” (Wilks 1990, p. 21). In a similar vein, I think, despite a much different take on conscience, is Abraham Stoll’s account of *Macbeth* as confused and haunted by his sensitivities to the uncanny signs around him indicative of a bygone but still lingering “animistic” moral universe (Stoll 2017, pp. 79–106).¹ If we briefly recall the play’s signature set-pieces, like the “dagger” speech (2.1.32–63),² it is easy to imagine how the imaginative *Macbeth* got traction. And yet, it is also hard not to concede the point of Robert Hunter—who also stressed the importance of imagination in assessing *Macbeth*—regarding the curiousness of *Macbeth*’s lack of picturing himself enjoying any part of being crowned: “the oddity is rationally inexplicable.” In fact, Hunter went far in identifying the strangely unimaginative tenor of *Macbeth*’s initial reaction to the Witches’ accuracy in naming him Thane of Cawdor, and noted how, despite how *he* feels called and prompted to regicide, actually “there has been no soliciting and no suggestion” (Hunter 1976, pp. 165–66). In this essay I shall explore further this sense of *Macbeth*’s radical limitedness of thinking, and propose that it can explain much both about what happens to *Macbeth*, and about the play’s line of religious inquiry. In brief: *Macbeth* is a study in the dangers of moral, logical, and spiritual oversimplification, and this bent for oversimplifying is aligned by Shakespeare, here as elsewhere in his work, with the deterministic Protestantism hegemonic at this time in England. Using Spenser’s Despaire episode for contrast, I hope to show that the concentrated, bluntly logical, assured, and certain conscience that saves the Redcrosse Knight could

¹ Stoll (2017) is referring to Freud here on pp. 98–99.

² All references to *Macbeth* are from Muir’s edition (Shakespeare 1962); references to other plays are from Riverside (Shakespeare 1974).

never ameliorate Macbeth's predicament; far from offering a solution, certainty and simplicity reinforce the problem for him. By presenting him as constantly truncating his own incipient interrogative and interpretive processes, Shakespeare insinuates that Macbeth would benefit from a basically Catholic frame of mind—a mind addressing the inner and the outer worlds with a casuistical reasoning attentive to questions, subtleties, and open possibilities. Specifically, Macbeth would with a more Catholic sensibility be much better equipped to understand his own particular psychological situation, and to handle the equivocations thrown his way. Because of his oversimplifying, a non-suggestion is made over into *that* suggestion, a suggestion so irresistible there seems to him no possible alternative to it. For Macbeth, nothing is but that suggestion, and since it's a non-suggestion, nothing is but what is not: nothing exists for him but the self-conceived and non-necessary idea that he *must* and *will* murder his way to the throne. But the *play's* suggestion is that this thought-trap isn't the only way to think.

My discussion is grounded on arguments I've previously made concerning Shakespeare's affinity for Catholic ideas and systems—not that he was a recusant or a Catholic in any confessional sense, but that he shows signs of missing the philosophies and ways of seeing allowed for by the old religion. With *Hamlet* and *Othello*, especially, I find Shakespeare implying a sharp criticism of multiple aspects of Protestant theology, which come off collectively as far too narrow, rigid, and constricting.³ With *Hamlet*, I argue that Shakespeare courts our disapproval of Protestant determinism and over-simplicity by shoving the Catholic-minded Prince, who poses questions of being and not being and would posit things not dreamt of in our philosophy, into a starkly deterministic world, to which he finally accommodates himself in Act Five, with “to be or not to be” yielding to “let be” (5.2.224); with *Othello*, I argue that with marriage theology in particular, Shakespeare creates a world alive with open possibilities and contingencies,⁴ and a world, therefore, much more in line with Shakespearean typicality than the anomalously horrific, claustrophobic confines of *Hamlet*-world. In each case, conscience, and the processes of moral reasoning which conscience entails, is part of the picture. Hamlet feels that the how and why of his revenge need to be carefully “scann'd” (3.3.75) for their juridical, existential, and soteriological ramifications, until in Act Five when he achieves an assured “perfect conscience” (5.2.67) bizarrely incongruous with the conditions of his life; meanwhile Othello has a patient conscience recognizing hasty judgment, predicated solely on jealousy-enflamed doubt, as immorally irrational (3.3.176–92), until suddenly bereft of any working conscience whatever, so that when Iago advises him to “scan this thing no farther; leave it to time” (3.3.245), we are aware of a fast-hardening incapacity in him to scan or leave anything. In each case, scanning, the analysis of complication and ambiguity, appears much preferable to oversimplifying—in the latter case, to an extent both absurd and horrific. And if Hamlet goes from scanning to a troublingly perfect conscience, and Othello goes from an ability to scan to an inoperative, even absent conscience, Macbeth, condemned by his conscience nigh immediately in the play, is marked by never being able to do any scanning: when he says “Strange things I have in head, that will to hand,/Which must be acted, ere they may be scann'd” (3.4.138–39), he describes a more frantic translation of thought to action, but hardly a new mode of thought. His thought always “o'erleaps itself” (1.7.27). This pattern is one of many factors which make James Calderwood look at *Macbeth* as a kind of counter-*Hamlet*: Macbeth becomes habituated to saying “yes,” while Hamlet tries to respond with a “maybe” (Calderwood 2010, pp. 23–26). What I am doing here is laying out the religious significances at play with this kind of insight.

First, we need to address whether Shakespeare would have been apt or able to make this sort of distinction between Protestant and Catholic philosophies, especially with regard to concepts of conscience. As for Shakespeare's own religious orientation, I think securest the approach

³ On the general argument on *Hamlet* see (Curran 2006, pp. 1–17, on logic and conscience pp. 49–63, 201–18); on *Othello* and marriage theology see (Curran 2014, pp. 48–64, on conscience pp. 186–202).

⁴ For an interesting opposing view, that Shakespeare pejoratively aligns Catholic marriage theology with paganism, see Tiffany's (2018) article in this issue.

Peter Iver Kaufman crisply articulates: the controversy's scholarship "suggestively identifies what Shakespeare *explores*; much of it ... unconvincingly details what Shakespeare *endorses*" (Kaufman 2013, pp. 87–88). Kaufman does well to be cautious, for his interest in the impact of Protestantism on Shakespeare would seem outweighed by the tide of scholars pushing the playwright's Catholicity. Though such scholars lack conclusive proof, it is a short step to Catholicism from the Thomist-style Natural Law framework many readers have persuasively found in Shakespeare,⁵ and indeed Father Beauregard, for example, has taken that step.⁶ For my part, I suggest only that Shakespeare if not Catholic harbored sympathy for Catholic philosophical provisions, and disliked the Calvinistic Protestantism so prevalent in his day. However, there is one important corollary of this position that seems too often overlooked: this prevalence, of predestinarian theology, would have been easy to accept for many of Shakespeare's countrymen, making his apparent aversion to it all the more significant. It is a cliché we commonly fall into, attaching negative connotations to such a theology and envisioning it conducing mostly to terror and despair.⁷ Kaufman himself has done much to correct this prejudice, examining how Protestant preachers modeled the tribulations of attaining assurance (Kaufman 1996, pp. 32–36; Kaufman 2013, pp. 129–32), and Leif Dixon has refuted it authoritatively: far from instilling anxiety, especially in troubled times, "Predestination is, in many ways, a doctrine of comfort and contextualisation," and moreover it was preached as such, with the intent "to create a generation of self-confident and assertive everyday saints" (Dixon 2014, p. 7). If we detect Shakespeare's disliking of Protestant thinking, then, we are not detecting anything necessarily unlikable about it. On the contrary, I would say he seems to object, in *Macbeth* as in *Hamlet* and *Othello*, to strains in Protestantism unpalatable mostly from a Catholic or Catholic-sympathizing perspective.

One such strain is the Protestant emphasis on assurance and certainty of salvation, which was to be gained by means of a conscience made clean and firm interiorly, via repentance and faith, rather than externally, via validation from the Church and its quasi-legalistic mechanisms. By Shakespeare's time, a version of this strain had been refined into what scholars term "experimental predestinarianism," but such ideas had deep roots in Protestant tradition and were manifestations of Protestantism's fundamental simplifying tendencies. The interiorizing of conscience, and the setting up of an imperative for assurance next to a removal of exterior markers and signs thereof, has often been featured in discussions of early Protestantism and its anxiety- and alienation-ridden effects, recently by Stoll, who calls the Protestant conscience "destructured," exchanging the syllogistic application of clear moral standards for a nebulous introspection.⁸ But while certainly the Protestant conscience could be seen this way, it also had the entirely opposite potential: to inculcate a sense not of the nebulous but the rigidly structured and easily understood and purchased, the moral and spiritual truth expressed in the incontrovertibly logical proposition corresponding seamlessly to objective reality. In pointing to this side of the equation (Curran 2014, pp. 141–48), I have in mind the researches of Dennis Klinck, who does nod to the increasing subjectivism entailed in Protestant casuistry, but also explains its countervailing force; says Klinck:

Protestantism's celebrated individualism notwithstanding, the Reformers' account of conscience remained insistently objective While ascertaining what conscience requires is the responsibility of each person, it is not a matter of opinion, probability, or conjecture,

⁵ For discussions of *Macbeth* by major proponents of Shakespeare and Thomist Natural Law, see (Herndl 1970, pp. 48–50; Wilks 1990, pp. 17–23, 125–43; Beauregard 1995, pp. 130–38). For a targeted analysis, see (Hibbs and Hibbs 2001). For a discussion along similar lines see also (Cauchi 2015).

⁶ See (Beauregard 2008) for his full case for a Catholic Shakespeare.

⁷ For an emphatic example see (Stachniewski 1991, pp. 1–14, *passim*). For the application of this view to *Macbeth*, finding it anomalously deterministic and pessimistic for Shakespeare, see (Stachniewski 1988). For a more recent discussion of *Macbeth*'s terror at a Protestant universe, see (Gleckman 2013).

⁸ For Stoll, the Protestant concept of conscience, in contrast to the Thomist one, is logical; see (Stoll 2017, pp. 41–43, 121–24). For the Protestant emphasis on assurance, and its conceptual and pastoral problems, see for example (George and George 1961, pp. 61–62, 101; Shuger 1990, pp. 78–87; Stachniewski 1991, pp. 32–33). For this in relation to experimental predestinarianism, see also (Kendall 1979, pp. 42–66; Marshall 2003, pp. 126–35).

but ... something to be measured insofar as it is *right* Among the aspects of Protestant conscience that conduce to its objectivity are its ruledness, its being a function of knowledge or understanding, and its involving a set, syllogistic form of reasoning, leading to “inevitable” conclusions. (Klinck 2010, p. 114)

Thus we have good reason to see a figure like William Perkins, the pioneer of Protestant casuistry, in a much different light from the purveyor of solipsism he is sometimes made out to be,⁹ as both Kaufman (1996, pp. 51–62) and Dixon (2014, pp. 61–122, esp. 91–93) have shown.¹⁰ His doctrine urged the believer to perceive the condition of the conscience interiorly, but objectively, at the same time.

Perkins in one treatise after another¹¹ stresses the need for the individual believer to apply the gospel promises to the self particularly. But some aspects of this process, the inserting of the self as the minor premise of the “practical syllogism,” deserve a closer look. Perkins insisted that Catholic concepts of practical piety were fatally flawed in depriving the believer of a pacified conscience; for that, saving doctrine needed certainty, simplicity, and logic. In both *Assertion: A Papist Cannot Goe Beyond a Reprobate* and *Reformed Catholike*, Perkins attacks the Catholic allowance for uncertainty and doubt in spiritual life, in the former work using it to exemplify how Catholicism lacks cohesion and logical consistency, being “*contrarie to it selfe*” while cluttering up theology with human-made categories and levels of sin, and in the latter work defining faith as “both an vnfallible assurance and a particular assurance,” and casting it as logically made irreconcilable with doubt, since “doubting is made a fruite of vnbeleefe” (Perkins 1600, pp. 642–57, 918–25). *A Discourse of Conscience* elaborates on such points. “Papists” admit only “Coniecturall” certainty, which if not a blatant contradiction is overly nuanced, and unworthy of God; for, God’s promises of salvation are to be applied not generally but by particular persons each to her or himself, “much as if euery mans particular name had bene put in the promise,” and with such application “certaintie is by little and little conceiued in a forme of reasoning or practicall syllogism framed in the mind by the holy Ghost, on this manner: *Euery one that beleeuues is the childe of God:/But I doe beleeuue:/Therefore I am a child of God.*” A person who has undergone this procedure, moreover, is likewise given the gift of knowing she or he has undergone it, for though thorough particular self-knowledge were impossible—“no man can search his heart to the very bottome, to see all and euery want, infirmitie, and wicked inclination that is therein”—we know that we have sins, and therefore we know when we have God’s “principall” graces belonging to the elect (Perkins 1600, pp. 872–73, 879, 883–84). What this amounts to is a peculiar understanding of the particular: the individual person is a self-contained spiritual entity, but one shorn of the particularities of life experience and merits and demerits, lending significance to which would only result in despair: “in respect of our owne vnworthines, we are not to doubt of our saluation, but to be out of all doubt, yea to despaire before the iudgement seat of God” (ibid., p. 880). The particular person was to conclude, by using the practical syllogism, that she or he was a child of God, but the uniqueness of the person’s life, and its unique living up to and falling short of a bevy of standards set by the Church, could add only distraction and confusion. Far from affording an objectivity against which a person’s conduct might be measured, the particularities of Catholic systemization, much like the particularities of an individual’s own moral track-record, could only impede the desired syllogistic conclusion, and would probably even generate doubts enforcing the opposite one: damnation. Objectivity was to be conferred by the syllogistic certainty accessible solely through a total reliance on God’s absoluteness.

We ought at this point to recognize, however, that Perkins was not offering much of anything novel. Melanchthon, as serviceable a writer as any to represent boilerplate Protestantism, has this to say in the first version of the *Locī*:

⁹ See the discussions of how Perkins problematizes and subjectivizes assurance see (Rose 1975, p. 199; Kendall 1979, pp. 67–76; Keenan 2004; Stoll 2017, pp. 39–46).

¹⁰ For my own remarks on this, see (Curran 2014, pp. 145–46).

¹¹ Cited works by Perkins (1600) are included in and cited from the *Golden Chaine*, which treatise gives its name to the compendium.

detorserunt ad sua somnia sophistae, et ad carnalem illam opinatiunculam, quam fidem vocarunt ut plane nihil Apostolicae sententiae intelligeretur. Pro inde nos simplicissima verba simplicissima sententia referemus. Fidem esse certitudinem eorum quae non adparent. Obsecro quid est certitudo? at divinarum ac spiritualium rerum nihil certo tenet natura, nisi per spiritum sanctum illustrate . . . Non credunt igitur, qui non expectant promissam salutem. At dices, credo promissam salutem, sed aliis obventuram. Sic enim sentit caro. Sed audi, An non haec tibi quoque promissa sunt? An non in omnes gentes praedicatum est Evangelium? non credis igitur ni tibi quoque salutem promissam credas.

[the sophists twist what they term faith to their own fantasies, and to that fleshly little supposition, so that nothing of the Apostle-said concept can be understood. For thence we will restore most simple words with a most simple reading. Faith is certitude for things which are not apparent. I ask, what is certitude? Nature holds nothing certainly of divine and spiritual things, unless revealed by the Holy Spirit . . . They do not believe, therefore, who do not anticipate the promised salvation. But you will say, I believe the promised salvation, but that it is to come for others. Thus the flesh thinks. But hear: are not these promises also to you? Isn't the Gospel preached to all peoples? Therefore, not unless you believe it's for you do you believe in the promised salvation.]¹²

And in the second *Loci*, he adds that Catholic, Scholastic over-sophistication, binding up faith with human merits, virtually *commands* doubt: and the invariable result is either contempt of God or despair. But then, what was the nature of the certainty the believer was personally supposed to feel? Though personally felt, it needed to be impersonally understood: “Si quis ex universali particularem velit efficere, is reddet simpliciter incertam promissionem et tollet fidem” [if someone wants to make a particular out of a universal, he will simply find an uncertain promise and uproot faith]; in fact, the devil has no more powerful tool to agitate consciences (“perturbant conscientias”), than “imaginatio illa, quae efficit promissionem particularem” [that delusion which turns the promise particular] (Melancthon 1963, pp. 168–69, 424, 429, 451–52).

How such a despairing conscience would set in as a result of merit theology, and how grace-inspired logical certitude would be the only cure for it, is what Spenser represents in *The Faerie Queene's* Despaire episode.¹³ Despaire is first astonishing and then compelling to the Redcrosse Knight because he increasingly harps on Redcrosse's particular personal history, applying it, with formidable soundness, citing specifics, to the general proposition that the unfolding of life means the accumulation of sin (“The lenger life, I wote the greater sin” (1.9.43.1)). Life has only piled up reasons for God to hate Redcrosse—as Andrew Escobedo notes, while suicide might not seem rationally to follow from this realization, an inability to discern any alternative to self-loathing is understandable (Escobedo 2017, pp. 150–51). For, Redcrosse cannot deny the major premise that God punishes sin, and he cannot deny the minor that his resume is streaked with sin—Despaire's case against *him* in particular is acquiesced to by his own conscience, because corroborated, brutally, by his own memory (“And in his conscience made a secrete breach,/Well knowing trew all, that he did reherse,/And to his fresh remembraunce did reuerse/The vgly vew of his deformed crimes” (i.9.48.3–6)).

And yet, Despaire's general and special premises are conspicuously vulnerable if interrogated more, with further factoring in of complexity, particularity, and ambiguity. In the first place, Despaire is, rather unobtrusively if we consider it, equivocating on at least two levels, amphibology and mental reservation. One amphibological move, for example, is the play with what it means to “die”: “Let euery sinner die:/Die shall all flesh?” (1.9.47.5–6). Conflating the biological

¹² Translations mine.

¹³ References are to (Spenser 2007). For a breakdown of how the episode invokes the problems in the doctrine of assurance see (Skulsky 1981). For accounts of Redcrosse's lack of agency, see (Moss 2008; Escobedo 2017, pp. 143–57). For his escape from Despaire as representing not assurance but a step toward it, see (Kaufman 1996, pp. 71–79).

fact of death with the theological principle of death as the wages of sin, Despaire twists mortality into desert of punishment, making the latter seem as inevitable as the former. The mental reservation is more blatant: your sin disgusts God . . . and is forgiven, in Christ. It is a single proposition, but only half of it is expressed, the other, critical half—God’s mercy—withheld. In the second place, Redcrosse has been sinful—but not ONLY so. To retrace his steps is to see mitigating circumstances and *mostly* good intent and *some* good deeds, with each discreet adventure having its own dynamics, frustrating any easy judgment of the whole. But Redcrosse escapes suicide neither by picking the equivocations apart nor by taking inventory of his life and evaluating it more closely. However questionable Despaire’s attack is, Redcrosse never questions it. Instead, Una, the Truth, intervenes and asks, purely rhetorically, “Why shouldst thou then despeire, that chosen are?” (1.9.53.5). Redcrosse’s ordeal isn’t nearly over—experimental predestinarians like Perkins would always affirm as much, that assurance goes along with tribulation and disallows security. But Redcrosse’s new life is hinged on this moment, the descending on him of simple, syllogistic assurance: those chosen will be saved, and he is chosen. Indeed, it seems implied that deeper engagement with the content of Despaire’s speech were disastrous for him; “Arise, Sir knight arise, and leaue this cursed place,” enjoins Una (1.9.53.9), and Redcrosse obeys without comment.

By making clear that the practical syllogism alone can save Redcrosse, Spenser highlights the dichotomy between Protestant and Catholic theories of what causes and what cures despair; Shakespeare plays a similar game with *Macbeth*, but from the other direction and for the other side. Macbeth like Redcrosse misses opportunities to engage complexity and ambiguity, in that, like Redcrosse, despite being virtually cued to it he refrains from delving and probing into his own particularity and circumstances, and from reading into and unraveling equivocations. But the mental work, the delving and probing and the reading and unraveling, that would most likely further entangle Redcrosse in despair would most likely save Macbeth from it, if anything could. And here we can observe a resonance with Catholic critiques of the Protestant theology of conscience.

As Elliot Rose and after him many other scholars have noted, with proliferating innovations in casuistical thinking, such as probabilism—the theory making any probable moral decision acceptable, rather than only the more or most probable—Catholic moral theology became increasingly theoretically complex, and in the process increasingly attentive to human complication, especially as contrasted with concurrent Protestant formulations.¹⁴ At times, English Catholic polemic couches objection to Protestantism in just such terms, that it lacks responsiveness both to human diversity and to the many fine, subtle distinctions necessary to apply precept to human life. That assurance was not to be had in this life was standard Catholic dogma,¹⁵ and such a position went with an approach to reading self and world predicated on the more provisional and multi-layered. For Richard Bristow, Protestants like William Fulke failed to appreciate the multiplicity and idiosyncrasy of individuals’ goodness and badness, the fact that with sinners, “some go wider then some, with infinite varietie,” just as with the pious, “some go narrower then some, with infinite varietie likewise” (Bristow 1970, p. 158); for Thomas Hill, one of the consequences of the Protestants’ “Negatiue Doctrine,” their stripping-down and dismantling of the whole Church apparatus—“they doe nought but destroy, pull downe, and denie many pointes of Religion”—was a stripped-down, dismantled, and ineffectual casuistry: whereas Protestants do not “meddle with these matters of Conscience,” and in their incuriosity remain “vtterly ignorant” about the galaxy of sins, among Catholics “there are taught *Cases of Conscience*, in which is set downe, what is sinne, and what is not: the differences of sinnes, which great, which lesser, &c.,” and the whole of moral philosophy is “much studied” by Church authority and taught to the people (Hill 1972, pp. 69, 79). Such careful, granular study lies behind the

¹⁴ See (Rose 1975, pp. 71–102 for Catholic casuistry, esp. pp. 72–73, and pp. 185–212 for Protestant casuistry, esp. p. 186). On probabilism as an address to the variety and uncertainty of moral situations, see also (Jonsen and Toulmin 1988, pp. 164–75; Zagorin 1990, pp. 159–63; Gallagher 1991, pp. 1–13; Stone 2004, pp. 1–16).

¹⁵ For official statements see (Canisius 1971, pp. 468–69; Bellarmine 1858, pp. 542–44).

theory and practice of equivocation, as we see in Henry Garnet's *Treatise*, the furor over which, in its association with the Powder Plot, has long been tied to *Macbeth*.¹⁶ For Garnet, the permission granted to Catholics interrogated unlawfully by Protestant persecutors to equivocate was fully justifiable, but the justification called for the drawing of many fine lines, in accordance with the probabilism Garnet subscribed to, itself a product of nuance. To understand how equivocation, in particular mental reservation, was not a lie—for lies were everywhere unlawful—one needed to understand how logicians had included mixed proposition among the four proposition-types (mental, vocal, written, and mixed), how Aristotle had located the essence of a truthful proposition in the speaker's mind and intent, and how completely the question depended on "the circumstance of place, tyme, and person" (Garnet 1851, pp. 44–46, 8–10, 12, 18). Asked by government officials if he was a priest, a Jesuit missionary like Garnet could say, "I am not a priest," and withhold but keep in mind, "insofar as I am bound to tell *you*."

Garnet also puts some onus on the hearer of the equivocation—"And the judge, if he be wise, hath cause alwayes to vnderstand these particles" (ibid. p. 18)—and this point is driven home by the prolific Catholic controversialist, Robert Parsons: there is no lie when, intending only self-defense against an unlawful judge, "I speaking a truth in it selfe according to my meaning, though he taking it otherwise is deceaued therby, but without fault of mine"; after all, "God doth permit men to be deceaued, and to be deliuered ouer into a reprobate sense for their sinnes" (Parsons 1977, pp. 346, 401). *Macbeth* can be assessed in much this way, as a hearer who makes insufficient effort to understand particles and who, as a bad interpreter making unjust queries, is given over to a reprobate sense. For many readers, *Macbeth*'s confusion is of a piece with the atmosphere of his world, in which interpretive chaos, registered in the theme of equivocation but at work in many other ways, is endemic¹⁷; but some others have found that *Macbeth* fails at reasoning and interpreting when failure is by no means necessary. For William O. Scott, it's noteworthy how, at the Witches' first appearance, relatively uninquiring *Macbeth* is compared to Banquo—he's "much narrower in his scrutiny of the truth"—and how much his fixation on the prophecy involves suppressing his misgivings, both moral and intellectual, since it cries out for questioning: "the circumstances of the speaker are a sufficient clue to the presence of equivocation." *Macbeth* foregrounds the issue of interpreting a device like mental reservation with the resources available—but *Macbeth* has more resources than he avails himself of (Scott 1986, pp. 163–64, 169–72). With an eye toward conscience and casuistry, Camille Wells Slight (1981, pp. 109–21) and Wilks (1999, pp. 185–86) similarly trace how *Macbeth* becomes increasingly unresponsive to paradox and complexity, and perhaps even from the start resistant to them: he "draws all the unnecessary inferences," observes Wilks. Such readings anticipate my own, in their sense that the Witches' puzzles are not overwhelmingly difficult to penetrate—they are amenable to being dissected and probed by an adequately analytical and self-aware conscience. This is not to say that equivocation is approved of,¹⁸ or that the Weird Sisters are other than evil. But their power might be nullified with a more Catholic mode of thinking—a more deliberate, a more particularistic and interrogatory, mode of thinking, one more comfortable dealing with a lack of assurance or certainty.¹⁹

Let us examine *Macbeth*'s thought-process as he reacts to having been named Thane of Cawdor:

¹⁶ For equivocation theory and uproar over it, including Garnet, see (Zagorin 1990, pp. 186–220; Covington 2003, pp. 143–49; Marotti 2005, pp. 132–47). For the impact on *Macbeth* see (Huntley 1981, pp. 40–47; Scott 1986, pp. 161–63; Zagorin 1990, pp. 193–94; Wills 1995, pp. 93–105; Childs 2014, pp. 313–15). For a full and more recent account of equivocation theory and its ramifications, factoring in *Macbeth*, see (Butler 2012).

¹⁷ For a book-length study arguing this see (Kinney 2001, esp. pp. 239–42 for equivocation as the central conceit). For *Macbeth*'s world of ambiguity and chaos, as esp. conveyed with equivocation, see (Mullaney 1980; Coddon 1989; Jacobus 1992, pp. 113–23; Cavell 2010; Zukerman 2013).

¹⁸ The condemnation of equivocation might be qualified, however, as with the play's anti-Catholicism; see (McCoy 2004; Hunt 2005; Baynham 2006). Also interesting for our purposes here is the argument for a Catholic Shakespeare signaling, via the vilifying of equivocation, a dissociation with the Powder plotters, in (Wilson 2004, pp. 186–205).

¹⁹ For an interesting attribution of *Macbeth*'s early oversimplifying to a Ramist logical paradigm—Ramism being aligned with Protestantism—see (Jacobus 1992, pp. 115–16).

Two truths are told,
 As happy prologues to the swelling act
 Of the imperial theme
 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,
 Against the use of nature? Present fears
 Are less than horrible imaginings.
 My thought, whose murther yet is but fantastical,
 Shakes so my single state of man,
 That function is smother'd in surmise,
 And nothing is, but what is not. (1.3.127–42)

Occupying the position of Thane of Cawdor has led thought to o'erleap itself in a squeezing out of all the great body of fluid middle matter in between this new reality of the thaneship and the prospect of regicide. Othello while still lucid is mindful of the dangers of such leaps, springing from mere unknowns: given the flux of human relations, baseless doubt itself is to be guarded against, and so doubly to be avoided are "exsufflicate and blown surmises" extrapolated merely from such doubt (3.3.182). Insecurity must not slip into suspicion, for suspicion is apt to seek relief by twisting the categorically uncertain into the certain, into inflated surmises. For Macbeth, this has happened already—the surmise, blown up by his own thought working on nothing but air (i.e., constituted of and inflated by what is not), is so exsufflicate that it suffocates, smothers, all other thought-avenues (i.e., nothing is but what is not).

But in the meantime, Macbeth's thought has gestured toward what these other avenues might and should be. The illness of the suggestion, as brought out in its visceral symptoms, is duly perceived, and this in the interrogative mood; not only are the good and the ill parceled out and their mutual exclusivity understood, with greater weight given, accurately enough, to the ill, but the thought is also directed in an exploratory vein, as though, despite his agitation, he is perceiving his perceptions and questioning them. Whatever his current, real-world fears now, for example, the idea of usurpation, metastasizing (swelling) in his fantasy and imagination, appears much more horrid, and the fact of this metastasizing even more so—there is *some* self-reflecting here. And yet, embedded in the perception/question is that it has been preempted, the suggestion already yielded to, utterly. This striking juxtaposition, between the interrogatory and the certain, between a line of questioning opening up and a hard-fast conclusion becoming cemented, with the latter undoing the former, creates a sense of Macbeth being hopeless when he ought not to be. That is, as the question-asking sparked by the new information—the thaneship of Cawdor—continues even as it gives way to horror at the already-decided, we are enabled to notice the gaps in the thought-stream, feel the contours of what has been leapt over.

There are at least two strands of this effect. First, we must wonder about the nature Macbeth references, and wonder too why he doesn't wonder more about it. He separates ill and good in the proper use of nature; but what about *his* nature might make him susceptible or inclined toward ill thought deleterious to that proper use? He asks, "why do I yield"—why not therefore ask, "why do I yield"? Second, we must wonder about his manner of separating the good and ill: the swelling act of the imperial theme *never* seems good, for it is never not equated with murder, and the Witches never mentioned murder. Only the vague idea of a future "King Macbeth" has been presented to him: the assigning of "good" to it and the attaching to it of the "ill" of murder both come from his own interpretive embroidering. His inquiry about good and ill proves him capable so to inquire, but also

dreadfully superficial in it, and for more profound inquiry, it would help him mightily to be able to frame the Witches' discourse as possible equivocation. He could then turn over what they may have withheld, by amphibology or mental reservation, and what he has mentally inserted in its place. Are not their few words cryptic? Can those few be unambiguously good? And, especially given Banquo's perpendicular future as an ancestor of kings, what are they not telling about the particulars enfolded into their bare "shalt"? Each strand, looking into his own nature and looking into equivocation, is made possible within a basically Catholic purview. In taking the Witches' prophecy as *not* prophecy but "supernatural soliciting," Macbeth has placed himself in a case very close to that of someone confronting a spirit and having to gauge its good or ill provenance and intent, as Noel Taillepied sets down: it is paramount "to consider whether the apparition says or suggests . . . anything in fine contrary to faith and morals." Such investigation may well get tricky, explains Taillepied, for the devil could dissemble ill intent, and even a good spirit, truly that of a benign departed soul, might complicate the matter by enjoining something dangerous or only good ambiguously. Taillepied thus treats ghost encounters as highly situational affairs, dependent on the specific person, and on the specific apparition's appearance and behavior. If there's "no actual suggestion" contrary to faith and reason, but something problematic about the solicitation, the best course would be careful questioning, ideally with the consultation of authority (Taillepied 1933, pp. 163–64). Unlike Hamlet's case, in which an honest ghost makes just such a problematic suggestion,²⁰ in Macbeth's an extremely strange and mysterious apparition makes no suggestion at all. But what the "imperfect speakers" (1.3.70) do say can hardly be simply forgotten, and surely warrants that study which Taillepied advises, and which the Protestantism of Shakespeare's time had obviated. From a Catholic standpoint, in a particular case of conscience circumstances matter, and ambiguities are worth teasing out.

Regarding the first strand, for instance, for Macbeth to look into his own nature would amount to engaging his own particularity, precisely whither Despaire invites Redcrosse to turn his thought in order to compound his desperation. Why does he yield to that suggestion? The play gives us just enough clues to suppose that he has already been suggesting kingship to himself and that his conscience, while striving against that suggestion, has not been able to do so very robustly. The suspicion that he had been thinking of seizing the crown for some time before the Witches' appearance has a long history in the criticism, with many deriving his horror from his suddenly being exposed to his inner desires, as they have now been expressed, and the trajectory of events—I am Thane of Cawdor—seems to be manifesting them.²¹ But not often remarked on, in my reading, is that Macbeth might have and should have noticed this about himself. His single state of man, his proper psychophysiological function, is shaken because he recoils from the wrong of murder, but then, also because his conscience has not been able to obstruct the gluing of murder and kingship together. He fears his sinful thought but his thought far too swiftly flows in a sinful channel. And key to this too-swift flow is his tendency to dilute or even displace morality with practicality and practicability. Soon after this admission to himself that he has yielded to that suggestion, he makes an attempt to divert the stream of thought: "If Chance will have me King, why, Chance may crown me, / Without my stir" (1.3.144–45). In a way, this thought is a crucial opening up of possible alternatives for him, as he contemplates how regicide might not have to be, and such is indicative of some redemptive impulse to heed his reservations; and yet, the thought is still being smothered by the surmise, for it maintains the premise that he will and must be king, and further maintains the buckling of kingship to murder: accident might exempt him from having to act, but it is not in doubt what "stirring" would mean. It were a relief not to have to crown himself via murder—but that is assumed to be the track he is on,

²⁰ For commentary on Hamlet's Catholic-oriented and probing encounter with what appears to him as his father's purgatorial ghost, enjoining a uniquely just and memorializing revenge, see (Curran 2006, pp. 78–83).

²¹ Walker is an eloquent early example: "The experience was the shock of hearing spoken in his ear the very thoughts of kingship that were stirring within him" (Walker 1949, p. 44). For other prominent examples see (Ornstein 1960, p. 231; Huntley 1981, pp. 43–44; Wilks 1990, p. 130).

and on it he will stay unless Chance intervenes and sets him at the end of it. No notion of getting off the track, or that there might be other tracks, or that there's something besides tracks, ever takes hold.

This inability to shake off the practical—his idea of the one determined temporal sequence and the mechanism by which it will fall out—or rather this centripetal force that always steers thought back to the practical, at the expense of the moral, is repeatedly shown to control his mind's "function." One word crackling with this centripetal energy is "success," as it appears in the speech (1.3.132). "Success" here is automatically troubled by referring to a "good" outcome, an imperial theme, thoroughly and undeniably integrated with ill means.²² But further, "success" excludes a sense of judgment on that outcome, privileging the sheer sense of one-event-following-another, in succession. Being Thane of Cawdor is taken not merely as evidence for the Witches' credibility but as "earnest of success"—a sign that being king will *happen*,²³ a marker along a temporal progression. For, an "earnest," as per the OED, is, more than a sign of the future, an "instalment" of something "to be received in greater abundance."²⁴ Part of a line of events has been fulfilled, and thus we must look toward the line's remainder, as with someone awaiting the repayment of a loan after a partial payment has been tendered. And this is to contextualize everything he is responding to as purely a matter of what happens. "Success" connotes here nothing beyond the unfolding of time along a certain vector: his conscience alerts him to the ill entailed in that vector, absent the intervention of Chance, but it doesn't allow for any other contexts for thought-generation. The new thaneship is related to the possible kingship, then, solely on the level of events, on the same level as the "success" of winning a battle (1.3.90)—in his missive to his wife, Macbeth himself makes this connection, with the "earnest of success" seeming all the more resounding for arriving "in the day of success" (1.5.1). The riffing on "success" is consolidated in his "if it were done" speech, which is the closest his conscience comes to waylaying him, as thoughts of Duncan's mildness and generosity, and his own obligations, occur to him, only to be outflanked by how the murder will alienate the populace²⁵ (1.7.12–25). Here, Macbeth acknowledges himself as at a moral precipice, fully responsible for the action he takes in this extravagantly clear case of conscience ("in these cases,/We still have judgment here" (1.7.7–8)). But the case is never truly opened up, for his revulsion to regicide is at once subordinated to the scenario of his being able to be excused from committing it: how much better "if th' assassination/ Could trammel up the consequence, and catch/ With his surcease success" (2–4). Here again, he is yielding to the suggestion even as he feels the illness of it, and this largely because his mind centers on success, and thence, to compunction that only regards the succession after success, the consequence of the crime. The deed's illness yields to the deed's relation to the sequential, so much so that he personifies the deed capturing success and preventing contingencies attending it. Murder becomes an agent acting in time, setting off how little it's thought of as a question of timeless morality.

This same foregrounding of the practical and sequential, and marginalizing of the moral and non-sequential, recurs with other common but pointedly used terms, such as "way" and, as at the famous opening lines of this speech, "done"²⁶: Malcom's elevation a new obstacle, "For in my way it lies," Macbeth envisions already-accomplished usurpation somehow eluding his own perception, "yet let that be,/Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see" (1.4.49–53); in the dagger speech, then, the prospective collapses into the relentlessly directed, the thought-dagger turning into the real one and leading him "the way that I was going" (2.1.42), until the tolling bell clinches the inaccessibility to him of another way, and confirms that "I go and it is done" (2.1.62)—this even despite the known fact that nothing's actually happened yet and a whole array of other possibilities substantively exists

²² Somewhat related is the discussion of (Hibbs and Hibbs 2001, pp. 281–83 on success, pp. 283–87 on practicality).

²³ Somewhat related is the observation that Macbeth consigns himself to passivity here; see (Blits 1996, pp. 30–31).

²⁴ For this sense OED cites *Cymbeline* 1.5.65–66: "It is an earnest of a farther good/That I mean to thee."

²⁵ For an interesting argument that conscience in *Macbeth* is generally a matter of concern for others' opinion, see (Tilmouth 2009, pp. 510–14).

²⁶ See (Slights 1981, p. 116). Also, we should note how Macbeth eventually refers back to this thought-pattern with "The way to dusty death" (5.5.23).

(“he lives”). In each contemplation, terror at an idea of crime morphs into terror at the *way*, the path he’s on, along which he moves leap by leap with each action done and finished, the real-world deed and its consequences felt, before they occur, the coldness of Lady Macbeth’s comfort—“what’s done is done” (3.2.12)—felt before any doing. This is to deprive himself of agency, for it is effectively to preclude decision-making power in the interim, but more important for us here is that it reveals the flatness and thinness of his moral thought.

It’s important, this thought-pattern of practicality and sequentiality overbalancing morality, in that it is an intrinsic part of his inner-life history, one he’d do well making an effort to understand—for his wife understands and exploits it with the utmost perspicacity. That attack which targets his masculinity in 1.7 berates him not merely for cowardice but for cowardice in having no stay against regicide *except* cowardice, in “Letting ‘I dare not’ wait upon ‘I would,’ / Like the poor cat i’ th’ adage” (1.7.44–45).²⁷ In considering how he has no “spur” but “Vaulting ambition” (1.7.25–27), he has just been thinking how he has insufficient good to motivate him, and this goes along, we see, with an insufficiency of scruple to dissuade him from egregious ill. The disgust at the ambition is weak. And yet, it seems to be gaining momentum when Lady Macbeth’s entrance interrupts it. The ambition overleaps itself “And falls on th’ other—” . . . *what?* Where might this thought-thread about the emptiness of ambition take him as he begins to look within, to his own drives? Lady Macbeth pounces on him before any such thought can germinate. Since the regicide’s ill is mentally purchasable only in the realm of essential ideas, where his thought does not easily go, his wife shoves the discussion back into the realm of the practical and practicable and successive. She boxes his thought into a kind of infernal practical syllogism: since your desires are unfettered by principle, the only variable is opportunity; opportunity is here; ergo. And so she wins his feeble, practicality-mired, last-ditch question, “If we should fail?” (1.7.59), which she easily resolves. The difference between no conscience and an attenuated one is well recognized by Lady Macbeth, and she makes sure it is never recognized by her husband.

For, her receipt of his letter captures how his attenuated conscience has long been his mind’s mode of operating. Despaire would have Redcrosse face his personal sinfulness and imagine that it renders him peculiarly odious to God, but the self-destruction Lady Macbeth draws Macbeth into requires keeping him from awareness of his particular inadequacy. Her soliloquy characterizes a man a deal more complicated than the cat in the adage:

Yet I do fear thy nature:
It is too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness,
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great;
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it: what thou wouldst highly,
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win; thou’dst have, great Glamis,
That which cries, “Thus must thou do,” if thou have it;
And that which rather thou dost fear to do,
Than wishest should be undone. (1.5.16–25)

Her Macbeth is a study in a shallow conscience, but one still existing within normal human moral parameters (the “milk of human kindness”²⁸). It has not been nearly strong enough to quell sinfully ambitious thought of a categorically violent stamp. As borne out in his notion of Chance perhaps crowning him without his stir, she divines that his dislike of the “way” to kingship and of what can’t go “undone” to get there is much less intense than it ought to be, and that it comes with grievously

²⁷ See Muir’s note here (Shakespeare 1962), citing a work by Heywood: “The cate would eate fyshe, and would not wet her feete.”

²⁸ For this I follow (Wilks 1990, p. 21). Muir’s note (Shakespeare 1962) presents the case for this reading and does not discount it, but seemingly prefers others.

small antipathy to that outcome itself. She correctly sees his vision as functioning horizontally, toward practical success, and not vertically enough, toward the morally abstract. And yet, as she says, though his rejection of “illness” is inadequate, he has a baseline concept of good versus ill, which we have likewise heard from him. That the suggestion is wholly ill eludes him, but that what is ill cannot be good, ill and good being opposites, does not. And it’s just this inkling of moral reasoning that she must drown out in him, replacing what is lame compunction at a murderous “way” with what is nothing more than a predatory cat’s hydrophobia. Lady Macbeth’s speech proves the value of fine distinctions, both conceptual distinctions, and distinctions about kinds and degrees of culpability within oneself. Her insights into him, though tortuous and knotty—“art not without ambition”—are knots worth untying, for they hold power to aid him. She invokes infernal aid to help her keep them from him.

Regarding the second strand, the amphibology and mental reservation Macbeth falls prey to are insidious, but not insurmountably so. Such is the significance, I think, of the Porter interlude referencing equivocation as a topical issue (2.3). The Porter unequivocally aligns equivocation with evil, useful for the committing of treason, but incapable of fooling heaven’s judgment. And yet, while he locates hell within the murder-stained castle, he locates the equivocation outside, with the knocking that turns out to be that of Macduff: the relationship between equivocation and hell is jumbled here. The extra-topical symbolism of this could work in any number of ways, of course; equivocation is both the hellish inside, pertaining to Macbeth’s duplicity, and the unknown outside, pertaining to how the Witches’ “imperfect” statements have gained admittance into his mind, when his psychic defenses might have shut the door to them. Then again, such interpretive moves merely reinscribe our need to fill in the gaps ourselves, super-imposing logic and leaving out inconvenient snags like the presence of Macduff. This is indeed epistemologically scary. But it grows less so if we back off from strictly logical and literalist frameworks. That the Porter’s treasonous equivocator “could not equivocate to heaven” (2.3.11–12) makes him all the more menacing, for then the civil, human authority has been powerless against his obfuscations; and yet, at that heart of Catholic casuistry’s sanction of equivocation was this idea that God cannot be fooled by it. Since God judges intent, a well-intended thought, vocally expressed or not, clarified or not, could not be sinful.²⁹ Just while we’re reminded of equivocation’s conduciveness to ill, then, we are also reminded of the principle justifying it *in particular cases*. Into the Porter’s overall association of equivocation with the diabolic creeps a sense that its illness depends on the use of it, and perhaps that its dangers depend largely on its audience’s gullibility—for, the equivocator swearing in both scales against either scale doesn’t seem to have gotten away with it at all, and indeed, the topical valence, pointing to the apprehended Garnet, adds to the hint of equivocation’s toothlessness. Though the diabolism isn’t dissipated, it does increasingly come accommodated with other, less threatening ways to conceptualize equivocation, as with the Porter’s lecture on drink (2.3.25–37). Drink is an “equivocator with lechery,” working to humiliate the unwary via amphibology and mental reservation: it’s a signifier with a double-meaning for the libido, both enhancing and diminishing it; and its consumption issues a proposition with a missing premise, wherein it “persuades” the drinker of his potency but then cues him to suggest to himself that more drink will make him more potent, and, “giving him the lie, leaves him.” The pun on “lie” conveys how the withheld premise—while some alcohol has invigorated more will incapacitate you—has tricked the now passed-out, prostrate would-be amorous drinker into generating the lie himself as to alcohol’s effects. There is a sinister shade here, Lady Macbeth having given drink a demonic aspect (2.2.1),³⁰ but too, there is also a comic shade of quite avoidable stupidity.

Amphibology becomes more evident later in the play, the Witches deploying it, through the spirits they’ve conjured, with Macbeth’s conscience a non-issue, he knowing himself steeped in blood and

²⁹ See esp. (Navarrus 1584, pp. 3–4); but also (Garnet 1851, pp. 16–17, 75; Parsons 1977, pp. 344–47).

³⁰ That the diabolic aspect of drink cannot be ignored is also clear from *Othello* 2.3.281–83.

unable to turn back as he resolves to confer with them again (3.4.131–37). Still, 4.1 dramatizes the difference being a smarter, more inquiring interpreter might have made. His literalist, one-dimensional reading of “none of woman born” (4.1.80) and “until/Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane hill/Shall come” (4.1.92–94) echoes the plight of the Porter’s impotent drunkard in his being misled by a mixed signal, but one that might have been pegged as such. For the drunkard, drink portends nothing else but amorousness, and so for Macbeth here: each phrase is plain and can mean only one thing, impossibility of defeat (“That will never be” (4.1.94)). Drink facilitates this interpretive tunnel-vision, and so do the apparitions, each advising him to be proud, bold, and secure—the perceiver is nudged toward a single reading and simultaneously toward the existence of only a single reading. In neither case, however, does the mixed-ness of the signal seem imperceptible, and with each, in fact, willful ignorance seems at play. Alcohol’s double effects are well understood by the Porter, who’s indulged anyway and makes fun of himself for having fallen into a wrestling match with booze (2.3.38–42), and Macbeth in order to ratify his invincibility has to block out the implications of both the warning about Macduff and the line of kings issuing from Banquo. Such silly difficulty handling handle-able doubtful speech is exactly the charge Parsons lays at the door of Protestants like his sparring partner Thomas Morton: “HOMONYMIA” being an officially designated species of “ambiguity of speach”—a device repeatedly used by Jesus himself—for Morton to deem it hateful is ridiculously to prohibit “all Rhetorical tropes, and figures,” an exercise in “childish vanity”; Morton’s childish interpretive obtuseness—“very fond, simple, and vntrue”—resembles that of Christ’s befuddled hearers, frustrated in solely “vnderstanding the one sense” of his sayings (Parsons 1977, pp. 315–19). Macbeth cannot imagine how Birnam Wood would show up at Dunsinane, but with some small imagination he could guess there’s multivalency afoot; that it takes report of moving trees to make him “begin/To doubt th’ equivocation of the fiend” (5.5.42–43) is grimly absurd, for he has ample cause to doubt here in 4.1. Equivocation seems fiendish, but it also seems able to be short-circuited with doubt and questioning—its power comes from its hearer’s certainty in the affixing of a single meaning.

Amphibology is of some relevance to the original case of conscience, though, when he yet has the possibility to be saved. The Witches clarify their meaning in proclaiming Banquo “greater” and “much happier” than Macbeth—begetting kings versus reigning (1.3.65–67)—but each term remains packed with double-senses. Whereas in *Holinshed* the Witches spell out that King Macbeth is bound for “an vnluckie end,” and that Banquo’s royal line will stretch deeply and gloriously into history, “by long order of continuall descent,”³¹ *Macbeth*’s Weird Sisters offer only comparative greatness and happiness. The comparative hides though it does not erase the sense of Macbeth’s abject polar opposition to Banquo: Banquo will be greater than Macbeth, in that Macbeth will be loathed by all posterity, and much happier, in that Macbeth will be wretchedly miserable and soon die in that condition. To gain access to this hidden sense, we need to be able to play with meanings of “great” and “happy”—and implied here is that in his inability so to do, Macbeth is rather dull. For, how alternative meanings of the Witches’ “greater” and “happier” foreshadow his downfall is not obvious—but *that* they are speaking in paradoxes is all too obvious (lesser and greater, not so happy yet much happier). His reading of the prophecy is relegated to “vnderstanding the one sense,” in this case to ideas of relative elevatedness of position and preeminence of title³²; the speakers are “imperfect,” to him, mostly for not explaining clearly why they call him Cawdor when the current occupant of that thaneship, as far as Macbeth knows, still “lives/A prosperous gentlemen” (1.3.72–73). What more they might mean by quibbling on such already loaded terms as “great” and “happy” goes unentertained.

What surely ought to be entertained, moreover, is that the speakers have indeed been imperfect; just as with the topical storm over equivocation, here with the Witches’ initial prophecy mental reservation is the main form of equivocation providing the stumbling block for the interpreter.

³¹ See Muir’s Appendix A (Shakespeare 1962, p. 178).

³² Macbeth’s letter to Lady Macbeth shows this same limited understanding of “greatness” as pertaining only to station (1.5.12–13); a similarly limited understanding of “happy” resounds in his “happy prologues” (1.3.128).

The Witches hail Macbeth “that shalt be King hereafter” (1.3.50); they do not say he shall be king hereafter *because* of how he will take this very prediction as a supernatural soliciting, that suggestion which he feels is so certain it must be bloodily forced to materialize. They say “shalt,” but they do not say “you shall” as a result of being transfixed—“rapt” (1.3.57, 1.3.143)—with this their “shalt,” for that is what induces him to confuse the present with the future, and see only one possible future, to see nothing but what is not. This is not to assert that the play’s mystification of agency can be solved, for indeed it cannot.³³ I am asserting, however, that there’s one thing Macbeth *can* be blamed for here: he’s guilty of bad interpreting, of negligence *and* abuse in the apprehension of the equivocal, in insisting an incompletely expressed proposition is utterly complete. He reacts to the utterance as “imperfect” but then assumes its absolute perfection and its cancellation of all other possibilities. The news that he *is* Thane of Cawdor when it ought to illuminate the proposition’s imperfection—prove there’s much left out of it—merely locks the assumption immovably into place. Ironically, and damningly, the missing premise *is* this very insisting and assuming: what’s left out is that the “shalt” shall be a “shalt” as a product of Macbeth’s own absolutist and literalist and unimaginative, even anti-imaginative interpretation.

The Witches cannot be thought parallel to the persecuted Catholic justifiably practicing equivocation, but Macbeth, with this interpretive negligence and abuse, has much in common with the Protestant investigator deemed, by Catholics, blamably closed-minded about words and meanings. Morton, for example, argued *all* mental reservation to be plain lying, no matter how Catholics tried to defend it with circuitous “Sophistrie,” and to deny that it met the two qualifiers of lying, speech contradicting knowledge and an intent to deceive; for Morton, to concede any such utterance lawful were to doubt the consistency of God himself, and to deprive humanity of the capacity to repulse the suggestions of Satan (Morton 1606, pp. 53–63). But for Catholics, such an all-encompassing stance, in addition to violating the rule of charity, both defied philosophical precision and unreasonably posited responsibility to an unjust interrogator. On mental reservation both Garnet and Parsons were influenced by Martin of Azpilcueta,³⁴ whose carefully documented, scholarly treatise, drawing fine, subtle distinctions backed by authority, established that the hearer’s understanding was immaterial; if, with good cause, the speaker spoke, or was silent, according to her or his own intent, then the interrogator’s intent, and comprehension, did not need to be accounted for (Navarrus 1584, pp. 15, 23). Accordingly, Garnet holds that “it skylleth not, whether those which I speake to vnderstand it amisse or no, as long as vniustlye and rashely and wickedlye I am asked by them” (Garnet 1851, pp. 16–17). Parsons is incisive on both points. He schools Morton on the nature of equivocation according to Aristotle, and later logicians such as Occam, affirming that a grasp of mental reservation requires a more than elementary conversance with logic—“it serueth to discerne captious and sophisticall sillogismes, from demonstratiue and dialecticall”—and claims support from the long Church tradition of painstaking interpretation of the many obscure passages of scripture: as modeled by the Fathers, interpretation is arduous, demanding “labour by examination of the circumstances,” and “labour . . . to find out the secret meaning, and reserued sense.” Furthermore, as the truth of a proposition depends not on whether “the hearer vnderstand it or no,” if that hearer is with no proper jurisdiction pressing for answers, still less is the speaker bound to his comprehension: “if the Iudge be not lawful or competent,” the speaker “hath no necessary reference to him at all, nor to his demaundes, questions, or speach, but that he may frame to him selfe any proposition that is true in it selfe, and in his owne sense & meaning,” though the hearer “be therby deceaued” (Parsons 1977, pp. 324–26, 312–14, 376, 388–89, 329, 342). Such arguments need not have persuaded Shakespeare to embrace equivocation to impress him with a sense that the principles governing

³³ On the many sides of this mystification Hunter remains the authority; see (Hunter 1976, pp. 167–69).

³⁴ For the controversy over mental reservation, esp. as influenced by Navarrus, see (Huntley 1981, pp. 41–42; Zagorin 1990, pp. 163–81; Gallagher 1991, pp. 63–75).

truthful expression are intricate, that circumstances—who's demanding the truth and why—inflect them, and that outright disregard for them is imprudent and self-deluding as well as illogical.

Macbeth's being deceived by mental reservation is in this light of little exoneration for him; his bad interpreting is much his own fault, for he is both slack in his logic and hyper-logical, the moral reasoning of his conscience invalid for skipping steps and for brutal tautology. In order to read a mixed proposition, one withholding a premise, as a fully expressed one, he has translated it bluntly into a simple demonstrative syllogism admitting no qualification or inflection (if I am Thane of Cawdor, I shall be king hereafter; "I am Thane of Cawdor"; ergo). Just as Morton would turn the mixed proposition "I am not a priest" into a bare lie, eschewing all the refinements of Scholastic logic, for Macbeth, "commencing in a truth" leads straight to *the* truth and nothing but. At the same time, his thought glosses over how its ironclad conclusion is based on its own working; for, how can the Witches be absolutely correct about the future when it takes Macbeth's own "stir" to bring that future about? The circularity that ought to disprove merely reinforces the conclusion. However, that conclusion is indeed ironclad; a mere surmise, it nevertheless smothers everything else. Not only is there no labor on or examination of secret meaning; there is a kind of ideational tyranny, the mind elevating its own fallacious creation to the highest height of truth—all the more so in that the creation is predicated on murder. For Catholics, Protestants conducted their persecutory investigations in much this spirit, unthinkingly asking their unjust questions and convincing themselves of their simplistic, cruel conclusions, heedless that, as heretics, their self-made premises made the process unsound to begin with. As such, they were justly fooled, or, more precisely, justly allowed to fool themselves.

Again, this is not to say that Shakespeare admired equivocation or was a crypto-papist, and still less to imply that he wished the Powder Plot a success. It is to say that he preferred the complex, the particular, and the open to the oversimplified, the generalizing, and the closed, and he found the state religion of his time too bent toward the latter. In these cases of conscience, indeed, we still have judgment here; Shakespeare has his Macbeth grossly fail to harness the potential of that judgment. Coordinately, with Macbeth the playwright presents us with a case of the perils of too-easy certainty.

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