



Lying Like Truth: Equivocation, Witchcraft, and the Unstable Self in Shakespeare's Macbeth

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Abstract

Macbeth is Shakespeare's shortest tragedy and, by common consent, his most concentrated study of a mind in the act of undoing itself. This article argues that the play's famous linguistic doubleness its riddling prophecies, its paradoxes of fair and foul, its obsession with words that mean two things at once is not merely a stylistic feature but the play's central subject, and that Shakespeare uses the early modern controversy over equivocation to dramatise a crisis of selfhood in which the boundary between the inner and the outer man, between what is thought and what is done, collapses. Drawing on the historical scholarship that has connected the play to the Gunpowder Plot and the trial of Henry Garnet, on the cultural history of witchcraft under James I, and on the New Historicist, feminist, and psychoanalytic readings that have transformed the play's criticism over the past four decades, the article examines three interlocking sites of instability: the Weird Sisters and the language of prophecy, the *Macbeths'* marriage and the gendering of murderous resolve, and the protagonist's soliloquies as records of a consciousness that can no longer distinguish desire from deed. The paper contends that *Macbeth* is finally a tragedy of interpretation, in which a man is destroyed not by supernatural agency but by his own readiness to hear in ambiguous words the meaning he already wishes them to have. The article is intended both as a contribution to the study of the play's language and as a model of theoretically informed close reading for undergraduate and postgraduate readers.

Keywords:- Shakespeare, Macbeth, Equivocation, Witchcraft, Gunpowder Plot, Jacobean Drama, Interiority, Gender, Psychoanalytic Criticism, New Historicism, Prophecy, Tragedy

Introduction

"Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.10). The Weird Sisters' chant, delivered before the play's protagonist has appeared or its plot begun, announces a world in which the ordinary correspondence between words and things has been suspended. Nothing in *Macbeth* is only what it seems: a castle that has a pleasant seat is the site of a king's murder; a woman who prays to be unsexed is the play's most eloquent voice; a forest moves; a man not born of woman walks the earth. The play is built, as Frank Kermode observed, on a vocabulary of doubleness, on words such as "double," "equivocate," and "palter" that recur with an insistence found nowhere else in Shakespeare (Kermode 201–16). Criticism has long recognised this doubleness as the

play's most distinctive feature. What is less often recognised is that it is also the play's argument.

This article contends that *Macbeth* is a tragedy about the instability of meaning, and that Shakespeare found in a specific historical controversy, the debate over equivocation that followed the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, a vocabulary for dramatising a much larger crisis. The Jesuit doctrine of equivocation, which permitted a speaker under interrogation to utter words that were true in one sense while allowing the hearer to understand them in another, was denounced in the treason trials of 1606 as a technique for lying like truth. The Porter's reference to an equivocator who could swear in both scales against either scale has been read since the eighteenth century as an allusion to Henry Garnet, the Jesuit superior executed in May 1606, and the play's date is usually fixed by it. But Shakespeare's interest in equivocation goes far beyond topical allusion. The witches equivocate; *Macbeth* equivocates with his wife, his guests, and himself; and the play's language equivocates with the audience, offering at every turn a surface meaning that a second hearing overturns.

The argument proceeds in four stages. The first section situates the play in the culture of 1606, examining the equivocation controversy and the Jacobean discourse of witchcraft. The second reads the Weird Sisters as figures of interpretive instability whose prophecies destroy *Macbeth* not by deceiving him but by allowing him to deceive himself. The third turns to the *Macbeths'* marriage and to the feminist and psychoanalytic readings that have shown how the play genders the language of resolve. The fourth examines the soliloquies as records of a consciousness in which the distinction between thought and act, desire and deed, has broken down. A concluding discussion considers what the play offers to students approaching Shakespearean tragedy through the critical frameworks that now dominate the field.

Quotations from the play follow the Oxford Complete Works edited by Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, cited by act, scene, and line. Critical works are cited parenthetically in MLA style.

The Culture of 1606: Treason, Equivocation, and the King's Witches

The Gunpowder Plot and the Doctrine of Equivocation

On the night of 4 November 1605, a search of the cellars beneath the Palace of Westminster discovered Guy Fawkes guarding thirty-six barrels of gunpowder intended to destroy the King, the royal family, and both houses of Parliament at the state opening the following morning. The Plot's failure produced a wave of anti-Catholic feeling, a series of show trials, and a public controversy over the moral status of a doctrine that the prosecutors placed at the centre of their case. Henry Garnet, superior of the Jesuit mission in England, had known of the Plot under the seal of confession and had not revealed it; more damagingly, a manuscript treatise defending equivocation was found among the papers of one of the conspirators and was traced to Garnet's hand. At his trial in March 1606, Attorney General Coke made the doctrine the emblem of Catholic duplicity, and the word "equivocation," which had previously been a technical term in logic, entered common English as a synonym for treasonous lying.

Frank Huntley's classic study established that Shakespeare's Porter, who imagines admitting to hell 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" (2.3.8–11), is drawing directly on the language of the Garnet trial (Huntley 390–400). Garry Wills has gone further, arguing that the whole play is saturated with the Gunpowder year: its imagery of subterranean explosion, its Jesuit-like witches, its treatment of regicide as a violation of nature that the cosmos itself resists (Wills 1–32). Whether or not one accepts every detail of Wills's argument, the historical connection matters because it shows that the play's preoccupation with double meaning was not a private obsession of the dramatist's but a public anxiety of the

moment. A culture that had just discovered that the words of its enemies might mean the opposite of what they said was well prepared for a tragedy in which prophecies come true by meaning something other than what the hearer understood.

Steven Mullaney's essay on riddle and treason offers the most theoretically sophisticated account of this connection. Mullaney argues that the treason trials of the period were themselves theatres of interpretation, in which the state sought to fix the meaning of ambiguous utterances and to punish those who exploited ambiguity, and that *Macbeth* stages the same process in reverse, showing a man who is destroyed by his failure to read the ambiguity in the words that promise him the crown (Mullaney 32–47). Equivocation in this reading is not a Catholic vice but a property of language as such, and the play's horror lies in its demonstration that no utterance can be made secure.

James I and the Discourse of Witchcraft

The second historical context is the King himself. James VI of Scotland, who became James I of England in 1603, was the author of *Daemonologie* (1597), a dialogue defending the reality of witchcraft against sceptics and prescribing death for those who practised it. He had personally interrogated the accused in the North Berwick witch trials of 1590–91, in which a coven was alleged to have raised storms against his ship on its return from Denmark. *Macbeth*, a Scottish play written for the King's Men within three years of the accession, tracing the ancestry of the Stuart line to Banquo and staging a show of eight kings that flatters the reigning monarch, has always been read as a play written with James in view (Paul 1–15). The witches are part of that address.

Yet the play's witches are not straightforwardly the witches of *Daemonologie*. Peter Sallibrass has shown that the Weird Sisters occupy an uncertain position between the folk tradition of the village wise woman, the classical tradition of the Fates, and the demonological tradition of the covenanted servant of Satan, and that the play exploits this uncertainty rather than resolving it (Sallibrass 189–209). Diane Purkiss has argued that the witches on Shakespeare's stage are a theatrical construction that has little to do with the women actually prosecuted for witchcraft in early modern England, and that the play's interest is in what witchcraft could be made to mean rather than what it was (Purkiss 199–230). Stephen Greenblatt, in a characteristically New Historicist reading, suggests that the play draws on the energy of witchcraft belief while declining to commit itself to the belief's truth, leaving the audience in a condition of interpretive suspension that mirrors *Macbeth*'s own (Greenblatt 108–35). The witches, in other words, are equivocators in their very ontology. They may be agents of fate, or projections of *Macbeth*'s desire, or hallucinations, or servants of the devil, and the play's refusal to decide is the first of its equivocations with the audience.

The Weird Sisters and the Grammar of Prophecy

Truth That Deceives

The witches never lie. Every prophecy they utter is fulfilled to the letter: *Macbeth* becomes Thane of Cawdor and King; Banquo's descendants reign; no man of woman born harms *Macbeth*; Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane. Their power lies not in falsehood but in the gap between the letter and the sense, and *Macbeth*'s tragedy is that he supplies the sense himself. When the Sisters hail him as king hereafter, they say nothing about how he will come to the throne. It is *Macbeth* who, within forty lines, is contemplating murder: "why do I yield to that suggestion / Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair" (1.3.133–34). The word "suggestion" is precise. The witches have not suggested murder; the suggestion has arisen in *Macbeth* in response to their words, and he experiences it as coming from outside him because he cannot bear to acknowledge it as his own.

Banquo's response to the same prophecy establishes the alternative. He hears the Sisters' words with scepticism, warns that "oftentimes, to win us to our harm, / The instruments of darkness tell us truths, / Win us with honest trifles, to betray's / In deepest consequence" (1.3.122–25), and declines to act. His speech is the play's most explicit statement of the equivocator's method: truth used as bait. That Banquo later broods on the prophecy for his own descendants, and is murdered for it, shows that the method works on the sceptical as well as the credulous, but the contrast in the third scene remains. The prophecy is the same; the men are different; and the difference lies in what each is prepared to hear.

A. C. Bradley, whose character-based criticism the historicist and theoretical readings of recent decades have often reacted against, nonetheless saw this clearly. For Bradley, the witches are not the cause of Macbeth's crime but the occasion of it; the ambition was already present, and the prophecy merely gave it a form (Bradley 340–49). What Bradley could not say, and what later criticism has made available, is that the play's language dramatises this process of self-persuasion at the level of the sentence. Macbeth's soliloquy on the prophecy is itself an equivocation, in which he argues both that the supernatural soliciting cannot be ill and that it cannot be good, and arrives at no conclusion except to let chance crown him without his stir, a resolution that the next scene immediately undoes.

The Second Prophecy and the Literal Mind

The apparitions of the fourth act complete the pattern. The armed head, the bloody child, and the crowned child with a tree in its hand deliver three prophecies whose grammar is designed to be misread. "None of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" (4.1.96–97) is true of Macduff, who was from his mother's womb untimely ripped; "Macbeth shall never vanquished be until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him" (4.1.108–10) is true of the camouflaged army. In each case the prophecy exploits a distinction that Macbeth collapses: between natural birth and Caesarean delivery, between a wood and its branches. He hears the words as a guarantee of invulnerability because he wishes them to be one, and he recognises his error only at the end, when he curses "these juggling fiends ... That palter with us in a double sense, / That keep the word of promise to our ear / And break it to our hope" (5.10.19–22).

The speech is the play's own gloss on equivocation. The fiends have kept the word and broken the hope; the promise was literally true and materially false; and Macbeth has been destroyed by the difference between ear and hope, between what was said and what he wanted it to mean. Terry Eagleton's provocative claim that the witches are the play's true heroines, the only figures who see through the ideology of the Scottish state and speak a language of pure ambiguity that its rulers cannot master, is overstated, but it captures something real: the witches are the play's most accomplished users of language, and their mastery consists precisely in saying nothing that is not true (Eagleton 1–8). Macbeth's failure is a failure of reading, and the play, which was performed before a king who had written a treatise on how to read the signs of witchcraft, is among other things a warning that the surest reader may be the most easily deceived.

The Marriage and the Gendering of Resolve

Unsexing and the Language of Manhood

Feminist criticism has transformed the reading of the Macbeths' marriage. Where earlier critics saw Lady Macbeth as a fiend-like queen who corrupts a reluctant husband, the readings of Janet Adelman, Coppélia Kahn, and others have shown that the play constructs murderous resolve as a masculine attribute that must be acquired by both partners, and that Lady Macbeth's invocation of the spirits to unsex her is not an expression of a monstrous nature but a

recognition that the deed she contemplates is barred to her sex by the play's own logic (Adelman 130–47). "Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty" (1.5.39–42). The speech asks for the removal of everything the culture coded as feminine: the milk of remorse, the visitings of nature, the compunctious passage to the act. Lady Macbeth cannot commit the murder as a woman, and the play does not let her commit it at all; she prepares the daggers and drugs the grooms, but the killing is done by her husband, and her own explanation of why she could not do it, "Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't" (2.2.12–13), locates the barrier precisely in the feminine bond she had asked to have removed.

Her method of persuading Macbeth is to attack his manhood. "When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man" (1.7.49–51). Macbeth's reply, "I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none" (1.7.46–47), draws the distinction the play will spend the rest of its length destroying: between the manhood that consists in restraint and the manhood that consists in daring. Kahn's account of masculine identity in Shakespeare identifies this as the central instability of the play's gender system, in which the same word, "man," can mean the creature bound by nature and the creature who violates it (Kahn 172–92). The equivocation the witches practise on Macbeth, his wife practises on the word "man."

Cleanth Brooks's celebrated New Critical essay on the play's imagery reached a related conclusion by a different route. Brooks traced the pattern of the naked babe and the cloak of manliness, showing that the play repeatedly sets the image of the helpless infant, the emblem of the future and of pity, against the image of borrowed robes and ill-fitting garments, the emblem of a manhood assumed rather than possessed (Brooks 22–49). Lady Macbeth's most terrible speech, in which she declares that she would have dashed out the brains of the babe that milked her rather than break such a promise as Macbeth has broken, is the point at which the two patterns meet, and it is the point at which her assumption of masculine resolve is most complete and most self-destructive.

The Sleepwalking Scene and the Return of the Body

The play's answer to Lady Macbeth's request to be unsexed comes in the fifth act, in prose, in the dark, with a taper. The sleepwalking scene shows the return of everything she asked to have removed. The blood she told her husband a little water would clear returns as a spot that will not out; the compunctious visitings of nature return as the hand-washing that no perfumes of Arabia can sweeten; the mind that called the sleeping and the dead mere pictures is now itself a picture, observed by a doctor and a gentlewoman who cannot help it. The scene is written in prose because Lady Macbeth's verse, the medium of her command, has deserted her; and it is written as fragments because the self that spoke the great speeches of the first act has come apart.

Adelman reads the scene as the play's restoration of the maternal body that the Macbeths' fantasy of self-creation had tried to abolish, and as a demonstration that the attempt to escape the vulnerability of the flesh ends in madness (Adelman 144–47). The reading has the merit of connecting the scene to the play's larger argument about equivocation. Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking is a form of involuntary truth-telling: asleep, she says what awake she could never say, and the doctor's comment, "Foul whisp'rings are abroad. Unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles" (5.1.62–63), treats her speech as evidence in exactly the way the interrogators of 1606 treated the speech of the accused. The equivocator has become the confessor, and the confession, like the prophecies, is true in a sense its speaker does not control.

The Soliloquies and the Collapse of the Inner Man

Thought and Act

Macbeth's soliloquies are the play's most direct evidence for the crisis of selfhood that this article has been tracing. From the first, they show a mind that cannot maintain the distinction between imagining a deed and doing it. "My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical, / Shakes so my single state of man that function / Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is / But what is not" (1.3.138–41). The syntax enacts the confusion: the murder is fantastical, a mere thought, and yet it has already shaken the state of man, already smothered function, already made nothing real except what does not exist. The soliloquy before the murder continues the pattern. "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly" (1.7.1–2) plays three senses of "done" against one another, and the whole speech is an attempt to think the act into a form in which it could be finished, concluded, and left behind, an attempt the rest of the play shows to be futile.

The dagger speech is the clearest instance. Macbeth sees a dagger that is not there, reaches for it, cannot grasp it, and concludes that it is a dagger of the mind, a false creation proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain, yet he continues to address it, follows it toward Duncan's chamber, and sees blood appear on its blade. The hallucination is an equivocation in visible form, an object that is and is not, and Macbeth's response to it is the response he gives to every ambiguous sign in the play: he acts on it. Margreta de Grazia has argued that Shakespearean interiority is best understood not as a psychological given but as a dramatic effect produced by soliloquy, and the dagger speech is an example of what she means, since the inner life it displays is precisely an inner life that has lost the capacity to distinguish itself from the outer (de Grazia 1–22). Whatever Macbeth thinks becomes, for him, a thing in the world, and the world, in return, invades his thought.

Tomorrow and the Exhaustion of Meaning

The last great soliloquy, spoken on the news of his wife's death, is the point at which equivocation exhausts itself. "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day / To the last syllable of recorded time" (5.5.18–20). The speech that follows, with its tale told by an idiot signifying nothing, has often been read as Shakespeare's own nihilism, but it is better read as the terminus of the play's argument about language. Macbeth, who has spent the play hearing meanings in words that were not there, now hears no meaning in anything; the man who yielded to suggestion can no longer be suggested to. The equivocations of the witches, which promised everything and delivered nothing, have produced a subject for whom every word is a syllable and every life a walking shadow.

L. C. Knights's famous polemic against character criticism insisted that Macbeth should be read as a dramatic poem rather than as the biography of a man, and that its meaning lay in its patterns of imagery rather than in speculation about the motives of its figures (Knights 15–54). The reading proposed here suggests that the two approaches need not be opposed. The patterns of imagery, of doubleness and equivocation, of fair and foul, are the means by which the play constructs a character, and the character it constructs is one whose interiority is made of language and unmade by it. Alan Sinfield's cultural materialist reading, which argues that the play's apparent endorsement of legitimate monarchy is undermined by its demonstration that Malcolm's order rests on the same violence as Macbeth's, adds the political dimension: if the equivocation that destroys Macbeth is a property of the language of power itself, then no king is safe from it, and the restoration of the fifth act is a restoration in name only (Sinfield 63–77).

Discussion: Reading Macbeth Through Contemporary Criticism

The readings surveyed in this article have been drawn from four critical traditions that undergraduate students will encounter in any serious study of Shakespeare: the historicist scholarship that connects the play to the events of 1605–06 and to the King's own writings; the

New Historicist and cultural materialist criticism that reads the play as a site where the ideologies of witchcraft, treason, and monarchy circulate and contend; the feminist criticism that has exposed the play's construction of gender; and the psychoanalytic criticism that has read the Macbeths' fantasy of self-creation as a flight from the maternal body. Each of these traditions illuminates a different facet of the play, and each has sometimes been presented as superseding the others. The argument of this article is that they converge.

They converge on the problem of equivocation. The historicist reading shows that the play's doubleness was a public preoccupation of its moment; the New Historicist reading shows that the doubleness extends to the play's own attitude toward the beliefs it dramatises; the feminist reading shows that the play's key terms, "man" above all, are themselves equivocal; the psychoanalytic reading shows that the equivocation reaches into the structure of the self, which in Macbeth can no longer tell its thoughts from its deeds. A student who has grasped that the play's language is its subject has the means to move between these approaches without treating any one of them as the last word, and that capacity, the capacity to hold competing readings in suspension and to see what each reveals and each conceals, is exactly what the play itself demands of its audience.

It is also what the play's historical moment demanded of its first audience. The subjects of James I in 1606 were being asked to read the signs of treason in the speech of their neighbours, to distinguish the equivocator from the honest man, and to accept the state's authority to fix the meaning of ambiguous words. Macbeth offered them a tragedy in which a man was destroyed by his confidence that he had read ambiguous words correctly, and in which the only figures who understood language were the ones who used it to deceive. Whether the play was received as a warning against Jesuit duplicity or as a warning against the interpretive certainty of those who hunted Jesuits is a question the play, characteristically, leaves open. Its equivocation with its audience is its final and most consequential one, and it is why the play continues to reward the critical attention of readers whose own culture has its own reasons to be uneasy about the relationship between words and truth.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Macbeth is a tragedy of interpretation, and that its celebrated linguistic doubleness is the vehicle of an argument about the instability of meaning and the fragility of the self that depends upon it. The Weird Sisters destroy Macbeth by telling him the truth in a form he is bound to misread; his wife persuades him to murder by equivocating on the word that names his identity; and his own soliloquies record the collapse of the boundary between what is thought and what is done, until in the fifth act language itself signifies nothing. The play's roots in the Gunpowder year, in the trial of Henry Garnet and the King's demonology, gave Shakespeare a vocabulary for this argument, but the argument exceeds its occasion. It is an argument about what happens when words are trusted to mean what their hearers wish, and it has lost none of its force.

For students, the play offers a compact and exceptionally clear demonstration of how the major critical approaches to Shakespeare can be brought to bear on a single text, and of how those approaches, rather than cancelling one another, can be made to illuminate a common problem. It also offers something that criticism cannot supply and can only point toward: the experience of a language so charged with doubleness that every line rewards a second reading and every second reading unsettles the first. To read Macbeth carefully is to learn how easily one is persuaded, and that lesson, delivered by the most persuasive writer in the language, is the play's enduring gift to those who take it up.

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