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Theatrical Flattery: *Macbeth* and King James I of England

The world has come to regard William Shakespeare as a literary genius who used the stage as a tool for not only the performance of his masterfully constructed plays, but often as a platform for commentary on what occurred in his modern-day England. His portrayal of monarchical conflicts, romantic woes, and vulgar humor has become eternal in the world of literature which scholars study today; however, in certain cases, those artfully communicated themes have other inspiration aside from his theatrical goals. These playwrights did have to earn a living with their work, their plays earned them their living wages. Shakespeare had many of his plays performed in front of the royal court, including the monarchs themselves. This performance would consequently have a significant influence on the content of these plays considering monarchs functioned essentially as their employers. Considering that factor, one could reasonably assume that pleasing the monarch for which they performed became one aim of the playwrights' work. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* provides a great example of this type of placation. *Macbeth*, written in 1606, follows a tale of witchcraft, regicide, and the ultimate punishment of death with no legacy, quite similar the primary concerns facing King James I of England, the monarch who ascended the throne in 1603. Not only does Shakespeare mention similar topics of concern as the King, but he also echoes the King's views on these concerns as well as the favorable tone regarding the King at the time. From witchcraft to regicide, Shakespeare covers these topics with the same tone as the King, something easily attributed to

his desire to please, or at least to remain neutral towards, the seemingly extreme monarch. Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* at a time in England where King James I, as well as much of England, searched for and killed many supposed witches for their crimes against the crown and against God. The King had direct involvement in several witch trials and published his own views on how to seek out and punish witches who threatened the security of the monarchy in his book, *Daeomonologie*. This book demonstrates just how strongly King James I feels in regard to something like witchcraft. These intense views lead to massive witch hunts as well as many wrongful executions of citizens across the country. Shakespeare characterizes these witches just as demonically in *Macbeth*; the weird sisters are portrayed as having direct ties with demonic beings like the devil as well as using their powers for malicious acts, something in which they take pride. *Macbeth* portrays a King who fails to punish the witches with which he interacts and instead uses their predictions to carry out a plot of regicide, such a decision which results in Macbeth's murder by the rightful heirs to the throne as well as the loss of honor for eternity for himself and his wife. This mirrors the punishment James believed to suit engagement with witchcraft, but also for regicide. James had strong views against regicide, but not only because he was a King himself. James felt regicide to be a high crime against God because of his belief in the divine right of kings. This religious backing gave him more of a reason to come down harshly on those who attempted something like this, such as the sentencing of Guy Fawkes, conspirator of the Gunpowder Plot, to be sentenced to death by drawing and quartering only after intense torture on the rack. James took none of these topics lightly and Shakespeare would have known this. Because of the intensity of James beliefs, specifically those regarding witchcraft and regicide, coupled with the portrayal of these same beliefs in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, one can

come to the conclusion that Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* as a form of flattery to the monarch James I and VI of England and Scotland.

This paper will address all of these issues in more detail in an effort to provide further cultural context for a play such as *Macbeth*. To begin, the paper will maneuver through the various difficulties facing not only England, but the King himself, as well as his personal fascinations with witchcraft and the potential reasoning behind such harsh characterization and punishment of these people. After establishing the issues facing the monarch, this essay will move through the plot of *Macbeth* with the aforementioned problems in mind and demonstrate how and why Shakespeare chose to address the pieces of the plot in the way he did. All of this will come together to demonstrate how *Macbeth* serves as a pedestal for Jacobean absolutism and the maintenance of the established national narrative regarding James I after the attempt on his life and the life of many other Protestants in Parliament in 1605.

Several major issues faced early seventeenth-century England as well as James as an individual. England faced several economic problems that created strife in the country at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Growing populations in the countryside lead to inflation and rising food prices, as well as a decrease in the real wage for workers. The country was not suffering through a famine, but they certainly were not gaining economically. James faced backlash for his criticism of goods that could create economic boom for a struggling England, such as tobacco. James released a pamphlet criticizing tobacco in 1604 despite the fact that much of the population praised its virtuous properties and health benefits. Not only that, but he also managed to nearly bankrupt the fabrics market by plummeting exports with a poor patent decision which he then was forced to repeal. These economic issues were eventually reinforced by the Thirty Years War to come, but that follows the era of focus. Much of this stagnation in the

early seventeenth century led to increased poverty in rural communities, an issue the gentry decided to blame on the moral failings and idleness of the poor, as well as deciding to place the blame for inflation on the greed of merchants (J.P. Sommerville n.pag.). This newly established narrative of a morally weak poor would come to set up a new mode of thinking regarding witchcraft, the morally weak poor became the targets of witch hunts, but that did not mean that the elite became exempt from accusations of witchcraft either. This kind of economic stress could easily lead to a compromising situation for a person in need of money. Now, of course no one can concretely prove that Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* because he needed money to live, but one could easily assume that financials became a consideration when deciding on tone and presentation of these kinds of topics to a monarch who felt so strongly about them, a topic that this essay will address shortly. As F.P. Wilson, a professor of English Literature at Oxford, and W.W. Greg, a leading Shakespearean scholar of the twentieth century, point out, “the full context of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* includes the complex field of dramatic production and collaborative authorship in Early Modern England. The *Macbeth* we know today is a product of many different forces – aesthetic, economic, theatrical - at work in the period” (qtd. in Carroll 156). This work takes into consideration the fact that many factors contribute to the content and tone of these kinds of plays, especially in *Macbeth*. But the economic factors facing England only begin to scratch the surface of why Shakespeare addressed the major issues facing his country and his monarch in the way he chose to address them.

James proved an interesting monarch to say the least, his complicated upbringing led to an even more complex adulthood. Born into a royal family in Scotland, James was quickly accustomed to the life of a monarch after the usurpation of his mother, Mary Queen of Scots and the death of his father. At the young age of one, James had inherited the throne, to soon be used

as a puppet for many others trying to enforce their own agendas in Scotland. A main source of these disagreements from how to rule came from religious differences. The reigning Stuart's had long served as devout Roman Catholics, a religion many tried to force completely from the United Kingdom during the Reformation. Mary's rule came to an end because of this desire. As an adult, James devoutly served as a Protestant Christian and famously oversaw the translation of the King James Bible. However, the conflict of religion did not die with the Reformation in the late sixteenth century. The Protestants and Catholics feuded for many decades following this overthrow in England despite many efforts to suppress the Catholic faith. Prior to his rule as King in England, he promised more religious tolerance to the people of England following Elizabeth I, even though his prior writings did not prove very tolerant. He soon went back on that promise and continued the oppressive ways of the prior monarch. This led many to criticize the Protestant monarchy and created even more strife among the two theologies. This religious conflict in England came to have further consequences than many would think.

In order to better understand the implications of James's fascinations and decisions, one must fast-forward to November 5<sup>th</sup> 1605, and the Gunpowder Treason, one of several attempts on James's life. This plot has become infamous in modern culture and the day on which the plan failed has become a national holiday in England, "remember, remember, the fifth of November, the Gunpowder Treason and plot; I know of no reason, the Gunpowder Treason, should ever be forgot!" has become a widely known statement because of this day in the early years of James I's reign. The plot arose from the strife caused by the monarch (as well as Elizabeth I) between Roman Catholics and English Protestants. Many things led to the rise of extremists that would soon carry out this attack, but a main issue Catholics found with James himself was that he had promised religious tolerance of Catholicism before he took power in England, and he quickly

went back on that promise exacerbating the oppression of the English Catholics (Herman 117). Guy Fawkes and his associates sought to blow up Parliament on its opening day in 1605 while the King, a large majority of his family (besides his daughter, Elizabeth, the would-be puppet queen) as well as all members of Parliament who mostly served the Protestant faith, were in attendance. The explosion would kill all those present and they then planned to kidnap his surviving children and force them to bring Catholicism back to England, as the Venetian ambassador, Nicolo Molin, put it, “the King, Queen, Princes, Clergy, Nobility, and Judges... and thus to purge the kingdom of perfidious heresies” (qtd in Herman 118). Now, of course, that did not occur, and the plan failed in the nick of time. However, that does not mean that the attempt did not change England, and the King, forever; it did. Molin provided a further dispatch explaining the behavior of the King after the events that took place, “The King is in terror, he does not appear nor does he take his meals in public as usual. He lives in the innermost rooms, with only Scotch men about him” (Qtd in Herman 118). The King had lost trust in all Catholics, as well as Englishmen (though this was not the first time James had expressed his distastes for Catholicism). Even though this had not been the first attempt on the King’s life, it was the first attempt on the King’s way of life, an entirely new concept that shook London to its core. Now, in today’s world, our society has become unfortunately accustomed to attempts at mass murder due to ideological differences (Pearl Harbor, 9/11, and so on), but that was not the case for the people of London in the early seventeenth century. This came as a complete shock that anyone would attempt such a villainous deed on such a large scale, and on such revered targets. Even so, the King reacted much as leaders do today, he, and his fellow clergymen, crafted a single narrative that the nation and its people would stick to in an effort to help heal the wounds of the affected

(Wills 15). The story the clergy crafted had two main goals, to establish James as the King by the will of God, and to divide the catholic population in England.

Pulitzer Prize winning author and historian Gary Wills does a wonderful job explaining how the clergy accomplished those two goals. The first goal did not prove difficult for James at all, and it is the piece that proves most important to the influence on Shakespeare's writing of *Macbeth*. As Wills describes, "King James [did not] want a country full of private vengeance-seekers initiating a reign of terror against Catholics" he simply wanted them to see that James could lead them with confidence and success if they all accepted his divine right to be king (15). So, to communicate this message, James chose to disseminate a large amount of religious propaganda to his people including his official version of the Plot. He used this opportunity to convey his message of religious superiority in England. In James's eyes, England served as the strongest pillar of the Protestant Reformation, and because of that, their country became the target of such religious extremists. More specifically, "If England could be defeated, Rome would have its way, and the foretold reign of the Antichrist could be initiated. But God showed he would not let England fall – it would stand as the champion of the true faith when the final showdown *did* come, as believers in the scriptural Revelation held that it must" (Wills 16). This viewpoint that he communicated to the masses positioned England as the leaders of this religious movement while also putting God in the corner of the Brits. But James did not leave it at that. To rewind some, the discovery of the plot to detonate the government came through a letter sent to one of the Catholic members of Parliament; a letter that warned him of the eminent danger and advised he stay home. Many thought it a falsehood and ignored the letter all together, but James himself read the letter and sent a team to investigate the corridors underneath the building, and the rest remains history (Wills 14). The importance of this however, comes later when King

James uses his discovery of the plot in a religious setting. The clergy used this as proof of the King's divinity, i.e. "the proof that God delivered James was the inspiration – beyond his normal capacity – that allowed the King to divine the hidden meaning in the letter that betrayed the Plot" (Wills 19). This made not only England the pillar of the Protestant Reformation, but James himself. This cemented the idea that James had the blessing of God to remain on the throne despite all other attacks against not only his person, but against his will as well. This became the norm, an act against the King became an act against God, an issue to be addressed more in detail shortly.

The clergy could easily achieve their second goal of dividing the Catholic population with the punishments of the extremists. Their display of strength in so horrifically punishing the Plotters sent a strong message to public. The most important aspect of this message to the story of *Macbeth* is the fact that it demonstrated how James would handle attempts at regicide. The Plotters suffered through hours of torture on the rack only to receive death sentences of public hanging and drawing and quartering. Public hanging would strip you of your life and dignity while drawing and quartering would symbolically destroy any legacy you might have attained (Herman 118). This message becomes prevalent in *Macbeth* as well, as will be detailed at a later point. This intense tactic made for many "old believers" in Catholicism to disassociate themselves from the extremists and made it easier for James and his clergy to hunt down and prosecute religious extremists in England (Wills 16-17). His hunt of religious heretics did not stop at Catholic extremists however.

James had many fascinations, but one consumed his mind the most, the study of demonology, or in other words, witchcraft. Many in England at the time thought witchcraft as a far-fetched idea of the occult and quite implausible overall, James clearly thought differently.



James himself in his book on witchcraft states, “the damnable opinions of two ... the one called Scot, an Englishman, is not ashamed in public print to deny, that there can be such a thing as witch craft” (qtd. in Carroll 326). Even though he only served as King James VI of Scotland at the time, he still publicly damned those who denied the existence of witchcraft, an incredibly controversial thought process to bring him criticism for centuries to come. Clearly, the King had an intense obsession with this sort of treachery. In fact, he spent a decent amount of his time as King searching for and interviewing the accused, something with which a king did not often involve himself. Regardless of the truth in that, James found ways to slip away and perform his studies. Henry N. Paul, in his book *The Royal Play of Macbeth*, demonstrates various occasions in which James found himself hunting for witches or simply obsessing over them in general. Firstly, he recounts, “The king, as everyone knows, was inordinately fond of hunting, spending much of his time in the saddle as an escape from affairs of state. Not so well known is it that he spent much time during these trips interviewing witches” (113). With this in mind, one can assume that the King did these activities while erring on the side of caution. He did not simply state that he had gone to hunt witches instead of rabbits. He used his time as King to interview those accused, often falsely, of witchcraft to satiate his desire to know as much as possible about these types of people. He still did not keep his general interests completely secret, however. For one, he shared his obsession with his fellow hunters or advisors when he asked them questions much like the one he asked Sir John Harington in 1604. Sir John recalls, “His majestie did much presse for my opinion touching the power of Satane in matter of witchcraft ... I did not refraine from a scurvey jeste ... He ... saide he had sought out of certaine books a sure waie to attaine knowledge of future chances” (qtd. in Paul 114). Sir John’s remembrance of such an encounter with the King brings important light to how James felt about witches and to what extent he felt

them to affect his life. He had given them so much credence as to ask the advice of a friend whom he knew would make jokes about him. His time for interviews was not the only investment James made into his fascination. James also took it upon himself to inform the public of how they ought to think regarding witchcraft, as well as explaining the punishment for engagement with witchcraft and how everyone would be expected to conduct themselves with this topic in his younger years.

In 1597, a mere six years prior to his ascension to the English throne in addition to his place on the Scottish throne, James published his own thoughts on witchcraft in his book *Daemonology, In Form of a Dialogue*, the book in which he damned the denial of the practice's existence, as well as damning those who engaged with the practice. This book sought to address the many questions the general population held regarding witches and their craft, and with the dialogue format, James could frame himself as the source for answers to all of these difficult questions at a young age. James addresses several important issues to England in this address; although he spoke for Scotland at the time, similar fears spread throughout much of the United Kingdom. James made certain to frame the witches as "detestable slaves of the Devil" (325). This narrative became essential to King James and his staunchly protestant viewpoints in the future, and it fit perfectly with the narrative following the Gunpowder Plot of 1605.

The religious heresies of Catholics (as they became viewed by the Protestants of the time) served well in James's pursuit of knowledge about this dark deed, as well as his efforts to establish the presence of the Devil in England through this witchcraft. Immediately after the Plot, the clergy also framed the deeds in terms of the Devil, a clearly popular viewpoint at the time. As Lancelot Andrewes said in his sermon regarding the Plot, "[the Plot was] a religious, missal, sacramental treason, ... not man, but the devil, devised it" (qtd. in Wills 36-37). This idea of the

Devil working through the people of England did not stop with the Plot however. This was the age of battles between good and evil. Everything done to and done by the country became a struggle between the light of God and the darkness of the Devil. Clearly this applied to the Gunpowder Plot, but it also applied to the concept of witchcraft. In fact, “A ... common model used to explain the rise in witchcraft persecutions is a religious model concerned with elite and popular views of witchcraft” (MacLean 163). This statement proves multiple things about the concept of witchcraft in the early seventeenth century, especially in England. First, it demonstrates that a spike in hunts of witches occurred in this era, especially under James. Second, it shows that the beliefs disseminated by the elites of England regarding issues such as this, especially based on religious guidance, became the views of the populace of England as well, demonstrating the exceptional ideological influence the clergy maintained over their subjects. And third, it shows that a common justification for the hunting of witches under James I became a religious justification, only valid because of James’s ability to cement himself and his kingdom as the strongest religious center for the guidance of faith over the Pope, for it was the Pope’s subjects that sought to eliminate the King and his court with the Plot of 1605. This justification becomes obviously important because it allows the King to continue to persecute these “heretics” without much resistance from the larger population; the public revered James as the mouth of God, he knew what the Lord wanted and communicated that message, ever so graciously, to his people. Rachel MacLean goes on to describe the religious model by delineating what exactly the religious elites thought of witchcraft at the time, a thought process that closely resembled the thoughts regarding the Gunpowder Plot. She describes the evolution of thought regarding witchcraft from the middle ages to the Protestant Reformation. She writes,

Popular and elite views of witchcraft in the middle ages were largely concerned with *malificium*, the ability of a witch to do harm, and did not think magic was,

itself, worthy of punishment. Then, during the Protestant Reformation, elites began to accept continental views of witchcraft. This continental view argues that all witchcraft, not just *malificium*, was evil because all magic was the result of a contract with the devil. Thus, all witches were engaged in false religion, Satan worship, and the denial of Christ. Some historians argue that the spread of the demonic view over the malificium view among the upper class during the early modern period created a religious zeal to purge the land of witch rather than a quest for social order. (163)

This mindset is clear for James I. As mentioned previously, the early modern era served as a time where every interaction meant a battle between good and evil, a mindset clearly applied to the work of witches as well. This topic became so prevalent in this time in England that many began to believe that the power of Satan had become comparable to the power of God. This would have become problematic for James, except for how he handled himself regarding the Powder Plot as well as his previous writings regarding witches. James had always made it a point to demonstrate the way in which he felt the public should deal with witches, and the Devil in general; which, of course, meant with severe punishment, something this paper will touch on shortly. Acts against the King, of course, had become clearly regarded as acts against God, especially after the religious addresses made by James after the Plot, reinforcing the idea that only the Devil had the power to truly act against God, and because of that thought process, the acts by religious extremists as well as witches meant acts of the Devil through these civilians, something that could not go unpunished in an effort to expel him and his malicious acts from England.

Now, the question may have arisen, how does the religious conflict play into all of this nonsense about witches and the devil? Well, that question has a shockingly simple answer. MacLean points out a concept of religious legitimacy issues in the era of James I. What does that mean? It means that because of the increasing tensions among Catholics and Protestants, many had become critical of the King and his thoughts on religion, an issue that became abundantly clear in 1605 with the Gunpowder Plot. The Plotters, even though they held extremist values,

they shared many concerns of the entire population. They felt that the King had irreparably failed to make life tolerable in England for Catholics and therefore felt they had no other choice but to take the lives of their oppressors, which they identified as the members of Parliament. This attack peaked the religious conflict in England up to that point and forced the King's hand in undermining the Catholic faith in an effort to restore as much religious legitimacy to his throne as he could (Herman 118). He handled this issue on two major fronts, the first being his narrative regarding witches and his zeal in finding and executing them. This may not make much sense, but in fact, some argue that the King's desire to expel these witches (aside from his personal obsession with them) served as an effort to secure that religious legitimacy he desired so greatly from his people and the world. More specifically, as MacLean puts it,

the witch statues of the Tudor/Stuart period were an attempt to help religiously justify a monarchy that had been widely criticized for its "ungodly" Anglican policies; for how could a monarchy be "ungodly" if it was fighting god's mortal enemy, the devil, through his agents on earth, witches. (163)

This theory definitely has traction, especially when considered in conjunction with how the King's court chose to handle the narrative around the Gunpowder Plot. Both of those things combine to prove this idea legitimate, the King felt threatened by the growing power of Rome as well as the fear of the devil in witches and used these instances to his advantage to further legitimize the new Church of England. MacLean goes on to focus on one major issue with the theory as the lack of attention it gives to the clearly lopsided accusations against women instead of men. James, in his book on demonology published back in 1597, directly addressed this question as well as explicitly answers many other questions raised during the uncertain times of rising numbers of witch hunts; he also vilified witches with this accepted continental narrative of witches as servants of the Devil.

James found an opportunity with his book to express his concerns as an echo of the concerns of the people of the United Kingdom. In *Daemonology* James gives further credence to the concept of witches as servants of the Devil by giving an explicit answer as to how they even come to have the power of magic through the Devil when he writes, “the Devil may prophesy to them when he deceives their imaginations in that sort, as well as when he plainly speaks unto them at other times for their prophesying, is but by a kind of vision, as it were, wherein he commonly counterfeits God” (327). This gives further legitimacy to the act of witchcraft as a whole, but very artfully demonizes it as well. This demonization comes as no accident from the clergy of England, as this essay has explored above. The punishment of the accused during this monarchy did not stop with the many attempts to ostracize them within their own communities. James, and many others because of James, took a very extreme view on the necessary punishment for those engaged with the art of witchcraft. As he illustrates, “such assaults of Satan are most certainly practiced, and that the instruments thereof, merits most severely to be punished” (qtd. in Carroll 326). This section of his book has very careful word choice that, based on the research above, influences how many frame the way they speak about witchcraft in the coming decades. One, it expresses without doubt the existence of witchcraft. Two, it frames such as work of the Devil, and three, it makes those who practice the art, i.e. the accused people of England, as simple instruments of the Devil, but because they have succumbed to his powers, they must suffer an extreme death, often by fire, to ensure the Devil has left that body. James not only used his book on witchcraft to express his various views on the different aspects he felt most important to witchcraft to the United Kingdom at the time, but he also used it as an opportunity to further deteriorate the view of Catholics, a view that allowed him to demonize them further in the coming decades. On the Catholic efforts to expel the Devil from witches,

James writes, “It is known so many of them to be counterfeit, which while the [Catholic] clergy invents for confirming of their rotten religion” (qtd. in Carroll 327). This religious intolerance comes years before his ascension to the throne of England and proves his promises of tolerance false even before he broke them prior to the Plot of 1605. Regardless of the religion of his parents, James never seemed to tolerate the Catholic religion while he reigned. But, nevertheless, his views on witchcraft remained the same, the Devil worked through the people of England by allowing them to perform such sorcery, a thought that clearly permeated the minds of many a person in England at the time. And with his published work on witchcraft, James could prove that he, and the Protestant faith, had the only true capability to save England from their treachery if all of his subjects should follow his aforementioned guidelines.

James made it a point to continually project his views onto the people of England regarding many topics, especially witchcraft, as seen above. MacLean clearly argues in favor of the concept that the magistrate can heavily influence the public’s perceptions, and because of the beliefs of James and the dissemination of these beliefs, the people of England accepted witchcraft as the Devil’s work that only Protestants could remedy. However, she did find one issue with that theory in its failure to explain the inordinate number of women who suffered the death penalty because of these accusations. James himself addresses this in his book when he explains, “The reason is easy, for as that sex is frailer than man is, so is it easier to be entrapped in these gross snares of the Devil, as was over well proved to be true, by the serpents’ deceiving of Eve at the beginning” (qtd. in Carroll 326). This excerpt does not directly relate to the plot of *Macbeth* as it will be discussed shortly, but it does further show that James had the answers to any and all questions about witchcraft the people may have had. He managed to use his religious knowledge to demonstrate himself as divinely chosen to have a throne, in this case before he

even began his campaign of divinity in England. As early as the age of twenty-five, James made himself the center of religious knowledge and answers which allowed for him to set his reign in England the way in which he did. On a more directly relevant line of analysis, James also addresses concerns the people may have in terms of the monarch himself, and his ability to resist these strong and infectious charms of the Devil. Considering the strong language everyone chose to use regarding the power of the Devil, it would be easy to understand why people would worry about their very own King becoming a witch himself, but considering, one, James was male, the stronger sex according to him, and that he had the divine right of God on his side, monarchs had less of a chance of falling victim to these entrapments. As James himself explains,

PHILOMATHES: But what is their power against the magistrate?

EPISTEMON: Less or greater, according as he deals with them. For if he be slothful towards them, God is very able to make them instruments to waken and punish his sloth. But if he be the contrary, he according to the just law of God, and allowable law of all nations, will be diligent in examining and punish of them: God will not permit their master to trouble or hinder so good a work. (qtd. in Carroll 327)

This exchange proves vital to understanding James stance on witches. One, it further ensures the understanding of James as a servant of God, not the Devil. Two, it makes central the importance of punishing these witches, something that becomes integral to his reign as King and to the play of *Macbeth*. But before this essay can address all of this in terms of the play itself, one main contextual element must have an explanation to fully understand the implications of *Macbeth*; the punishment of witches.

As seen by the exchange regarding the magistrate, as well as many others provided from James's *Daemonology*, James, and therefore the rest of England, thought of the severe punishment of witches as centrally important to their cause of expelling the Devil from England. The King also expressed how severe a punishment those involved in witchcraft should receive,



as well as whether or not any should receive exemption from such a sentence. The dialogue proceeds,

EPISTEMON: [Witches] out to be put to death according to the law of god, the civil and imperial law, and municipal law of all Christian nations.

PHILOMATHES: But what kind of death, I pray you?

EPISTEMON: It is commonly used by fire, but that is an indifferent thing to be used in every country, according to the law or custom thereof.

PHILOMATHES: But ought no sex, age nor rank to be exempted?

EPISTEMON: None at all (being so used by the lawful magistrate), for it is the highest point of idolatry, wherein no exception is admitted by the law of God. (qtd. in Carroll 328)

The conversation continues to explain that the magistrate shall exempt children from such a punishment because they do not have the capacity to comprehend their decisions. Later in that same sentence, he further explains how horrific of a crime witchcraft is against everything an honest person should believe by writing, “in the end to spare the life [of an adult], and not to strike when God bids strike, and so severely punish in so odious a fault and treason against God, it is not only unlawful, but doubtless no less sin in that magistrate” (qtd. in Carroll 328). This passage proves vital to thoughts of James on witches and how those thoughts relate to the story of *Macbeth*. As mentioned previously, James’s views heavily influenced the views of everyone in England, of course, including Parliament. In 1604, the very early years of James’s reign, Parliament passed an Act known as “An Act against Conjuraton, Witchcraft, and Dealing with Evil and Wicked Spirits.” This explicitly detailed the actions of those who James continually referenced as witches and delineated what punishments which acts would receive. As it stands, one clarifying passage reads,

any person or persons, ... shall use, practice, or exercise any invocation or conjuration of any evil and wicked spirit, or shall consult, covenant with, entertain, employ, feed, or reward any evil and wicked spirit to or for any intent of purpose; or take up any dead man, woman, or child out of his, her, or their grave, or any other place where the dead body resteth, or the skin, bone, or any other part of any dead person, to be employed or used in any manner of witchcraft, sorcery, charm, or enchantment; or shall use, practise, or exercise any witchcraft,

enchantment, charm, or sorcery, whereby any person shall be killed, destroyed, wasted, consumed, pined, or lamed in his or her body, or any part thereof; that every such offender or offenders, their aiders, abettors, and counsellors, being of any [of] the said offences duly and lawfully convicted and attainted, shall suffer pains of death as a felon or felons, and shall lose the privilege and benefit of clergy and sanctuary. (qtd. in Carroll 329).

The act includes more specifics about more minor offenses with witchcraft, but those do not necessarily apply to the discussion at hand. This act maps out exactly what “counts” as treasonous witchcraft and how severe a punishment would fall on an offender of such a crime, an act clearly in line with the new King’s views on witches, which as mentioned many times before, became the adopted view of all of those who lived in the United Kingdom at the time. This may seem like an inordinate amount of context to discuss the play of *Macbeth*, but rest assured, that is not the case. Without the understanding of the concepts above, it would be incredibly difficult to try and communicate the depth to which *Macbeth* proves itself a piece of flattery to the King, in addition to why Shakespeare would make the effort to please this monarch when his history of writing demonstrates that flattery does not often become an issue with which Shakespeare worries himself.

As presented previously, King James sought to ensure that witches across the globe would become viewed as demonic servants of the Devil who only sought to create mischief in the lives of the honest. The aspect of James’s concerns which Shakespeare covers the most densely in *Macbeth* becomes the plot line of the Weïrd Sisters. The demonic representation of the witches’ physical forms serves as the base for building such a demonic and mischievous characterization. Firstly, in every scene in which the witches appear, Shakespeare added a stage direction of a storm breaking across the stage and then the sisters would appear. In a literary sense, Shakespeare made this choice very strategically. One must first consider the scarcity of

stage direction used by Shakespeare in any of his works. Shakespeare has gained a reputation for providing little or no stage direction whatsoever in many of his plays. One might ask what this has to do with anything; well, considering he made sure to include the stage direction of thunder in every scene that included witches even though he rarely provides a full setting, one must assume he made this choice strategically. Shakespeare did not want someone to have the chance to frame the witches in any way other than the way he wanted, in other words, he never wanted someone to contradict the views of the King on the sorcery of these witches. Not only does the inclusion of any stage direction have importance, but choosing storms as the identifier for the witches serves a very specific characterization purpose. Storms represent several concepts that align with the monarch's thoughts on this kind of sorcery. First, on a literal level, they bring darkness. When a storm comes in, the clouds cover the sun and spread darkness across the land. Many often relate darkness to evil, or at a minimum, misfortune. Often times darkness symbolically relates directly to the Devil. A devilish representation of these characters occurs before the audience even sees their faces on stage, setting a tone of evil that associates itself with the witches in all of their scenes. Chaos functions as another symbol of an arriving storm, considering the weather consistently remains beyond the control of those on Earth. Storms become unpredictable rapidly and often cause destruction to anything in their path, another aspect analogous to James's thoughts on witches. One must make a third consideration of storms and witches directly in relation to James himself. As claimed in his book on Demonology, and believed by many at the time, witches powers often related to their ability to raise storms that would wreak strategic havoc on their unknowing victims. James himself believed he fell victim to this in 1590 when a storm, which he believed witches to have caused, delayed the arrival of his bride to Denmark (Paul 248). Now, of course, playwrights have always used storms to signal

distress or conflict headed in the way of the characters of the scene, but the strategic use of storms prior to the arrival of the witches in every scene speaks to the fact that Shakespeare sought to validate the concerns of the King regarding witches and their power to control something like the weather, a power generally reserved for God. The witches appear in acts one, three and four, in a total of four scenes, and each time the scene begins with “*Thunder. Enter three Witches*” (*Macbeth*). Thunder is the minimum, whereas in the opening scene of the play the stage direction adds lightening to the thunder. The repetition of such a direction serves an important role in communicating the extent to which Shakespeare seeks to please James through the validation of his concerns regarding witchcraft in England.

The inclusion of the narrative created surrounding witches and the King following the Plot of 1605 served as another portion of the story line of the witches that sought to placate the concerns of the King. The inclusion of magical, or supernatural instances in Shakespearean plays happened often, either through apparitions, ghostly warnings, or supernatural calls to action, but the three witches in *Macbeth* function differently all together. Shakespeare’s decision to include a human-like character capable of sorcery at all must seem influenced by environmental factors of the time; clearly, James’s obsession with witches serves as that influence. James and his intense disapproval for dissidents could function as motivator enough for Shakespeare to include the witches as characters, but he also chooses to frame any and all issues addressed by the King and *Macbeth* in the same tone which the King would approve. Recall the several instances of framing witchcraft as an act of the Devil in James’s *Daemonology*. This narrative seeped throughout England, but that does not mean people accepted this all together; as with all ideologies, many may disagree with the proposed narrative. One cannot discern Shakespeare’s exact views on witchcraft, but one can certainly see how he frames such an idea to match the

national narrative established and disseminated by James himself. Shakespeare does this by framing the witches as not only the sources of mischief, but as evil, or instruments of the Devil's work to bring down Protestant England. In act one, scene three, the witches discuss their past whereabouts prior to their meeting. The first witch recounts her experience as well as her plans when she says,

A sailor's wife had chestnuts in her lap  
 And munched and munched. "Give me," quoth I.  
 "Aroint thee, witch," the rump-fed runnion cries.  
 Her husband's too Aleppo gon, master o' th' *Tiger*;  
 but in a sieve I'll thither sail,  
 And, like a rat without a tail,  
 I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.  
 ... I myself have all the other,  
 and the very ports they blow;  
 All the quarters they know  
 I' th' shipman's card.  
 I'll drain him dry as hay.  
 Sleep shall neither night nor day  
 Hang upon his penthouse lid.  
 He shall live a man forbid.  
 Weary sev'nnights, nine times nine,  
 Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine.  
 Though his bark cannot be lost,  
 Yet it shall be tempest – tossed ... (*Macbeth* 1.3.4-26).

This passage brings in the idea of the storm once again, but it also demonstrates how the witches use their magic. It portrays them as simply moving around the world only to torment people. The witch chose to torment a woman's husband, and perhaps even kill him, simply for their own amusement, as well as justified said actions because of someone's refusal to obey her wish. This punishment seems hardly proportionate to the "crime" of the sailor's wife. Their actions with Macbeth himself seem similar in nature. They simply appeared to him to disrupt his life and cause him nothing but unceasing harm, regardless of his honorable position as Thane and revered warrior prior to their entrance into his life. This frames them as evil beings that, even though not

explicitly stated, one can certainly assume to not serve God, therefore, plausibly serve the Devil, the very mode of thinking James sought to instill in everyone. Shakespeare does not always demonize magic in his works, but certainly in *Macbeth*, he has chosen to do so, arguably for the pleasure of the King.

The famous potion that the witches brew in act four, scene one, serves as another instance of Shakespeare directly representing the views of the King as well as the views of English law as described in the statutes on witches passed by the Parliament early in James's reign. In this scene the witches utter their eternal words, "Double, double toil and trouble;/Fire burn and cauldron bubble" (*Macbeth* 4.1.10-11). These words not only forever shaped the characterization of every cliché Halloween witch from that moment until this very day, but also signaled a very important moment in the characterization of these witches as an act of appeasing the thoughts of the monarch. The following lines mention many different animals, and many different parts of those animals, as well as parts of humans both dead and living that the witches combine in fire to form, "a charm of powerful trouble,/Like a hell-broth boil and bubble" (*Macbeth* 4.1.18-19). Clearly these actions do not settle well with any audience, but they become especially ominous when one considers to social context of the literal word choice here as well as their specific choice of ingredients. As seen above, the actions of the witches fall directly into the most punishable category of the practicing of their craft per the Act passed by Parliament in 1604, two years prior to the writing of *Macbeth*. Not only do they participate in the creation of a charm through the potion, but they do so with the pieces of both dead and living humans and animals, the highest form of sin as defined by the Jacobean Parliament. The perpetrators of these actions would of course suffer a punishment of death by fire in England, but that does not happen with these witches because of the choices of the monarch, Macbeth, the relationship of which this essay will

analyze shortly. Shakespeare did not simply choose to have these witches make a potion in the background, or have them just torment Macbeth, instead he had them explicitly state their supposed heinous crimes against the crown and therefore against God. Considering the mention of hell as well, signaling the idea that these witches served the ruler of hell, another factor that would align with James's perspectives. The witches explicitly fell into every category that James felt a true witch would fall into, a testament to the fact that Shakespeare's characterization decisions, especially regarding the witches, sustained heavy influence from the desire to please the somewhat outlandish monarch.

One more aspect of the plot progression of the witches comes in their complete establishment as servants of the Devil, and therefore evil itself, something with which the King would have found great pleasure. Hecate giving her angry lecture to the witches for tormenting Macbeth without letting her join, adds the final layer of evil witchcraft necessary to ensuring the permanent characterization of these women as servants of the dark magic of hell. She scolds the witches by saying, "how did you dare/To trade and traffic with Macbeth/In riddles and affairs of death,/And I, the mistress of your charms,/The close contriver of all harms,/Was never called to bear my part/Or show the glory of our art?" (*Macbeth* 3.5.3-9). A point of clarification from this quote should be made. Hecate claims herself the source of their power of course, but Hecate comes from a line of Greek Titans and serves as the goddess of witchcraft. The Titans became the enemies of Greek Gods and therefore function in a similar sense as the Devil in Christianity to God. Regardless, Hecate serves the evil deeds of the witches as well, and would therefore the public would regard her as a servant of the Devil herself. The important takeaway here is not the source of the magic, but the way the character discusses their craft. Hecate shows anger at the lack of her inclusion and takes pride in the evil deeds their craft has the ability to achieve. This

frames the act of these witches as an act with no remorse. These women act maliciously with pride, something that no one would see in the soul of someone who serves God. Only a true demon could serve such a will, and because of this crescendo of malicious actions that culminates in a speech of pride irrevocably demonizes these characters in the eyes of the audience; the witches serve as the ultimate evil, something that should never go unpunished. Yet, instead of acting to destroy these witches and expel the Devil, Macbeth blinds himself to their heinous acts and chooses to use their prophecy to his advantage to attempt to satiate his uncontrollable ambition.

Macbeth commits the fatal error of a magistrate, as defined by James himself, he does not choose to swiftly eliminate the threat to himself and his kingdom, and as James said in 1597, God began to use the powers of the witches to punish him for his “sloth”. Some could even argue the arrival of Hecate demonstrates this directly, the goddess of witchcraft arrives to ensure the downfall of a King who does not deserve his throne because he does not protect his people. In any case, the way in which Shakespeare chooses to have Macbeth address the issues with the witches, as well as his choices because of the witches, along with his ultimate demise, all point to the idea that this play came as an attempt to placate the ideas of King James I. Early on, Macbeth makes this slothful mistake. When the apparitions first appear to him and Banquo, he does not immediately find trouble with their prophecy, meaning that he does not immediately sense the work of the Devil, as James and the rest of England would have assumed he should. During an aside, Macbeth says to himself,

This supernatural soliciting  
 Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,  
 Why hath it given me earnest of success  
 Commencing in a truth? ...  
 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 fear  
 Are less than horrible imaginings. (*Macbeth* 1.3.143-151)

He does not want to believe that evil could have worked in this moment because of the favorable prophecy the witches give to him. Instead of assuming it false and having them destroyed, or at a minimum, ignoring their words all together, he chooses to act in an effort to put their prophecy into action. He and his wife, Lady Macbeth, conspire to kill the King, Duncan, to ensure the prophecy of the witches comes to fruition.

Regicide, as explored above with the Gunpowder Plot, serves as another very prominent topic of conversation in the early years of James's reign. Not only does Macbeth not choose to ignore the heresies of the witches, but he also chooses to use their prophecy to his advantage and to justify he and his wife's decision to overthrow the King of Denmark by murdering him in his sleep (*Macbeth* 1.7). They hatch this plan because they think it will give Macbeth what he has always deserved and what the witches prophesized he should have, the throne of Denmark. In that same scene Macbeth does in fact question his wishes to kill the King and take his throne, yet his wife convinces him otherwise; Macbeth's ambition has justification for the glory and that had he the true grit of a man he would have no issue murdering a King that does not serve their purposes, much like the thoughts of the Catholics who felt the new Anglican King, James, did nothing other than oppress them who then felt their only option was to remove him from his throne. Macbeth's ambition for honor and glory blinds him to the fact that one, the prophecy of his successes came from a being that, especially at the time, all knew to only serve the Devil, and two, that murdering a King would never achieve the goals of an honorable man considering the fact that a crime against the monarch serves as a crime against God, just as conspiring with witches does as well. Macbeth committed the highest treason, and to worsen the effects of his

actions, he did so on the basis of the words of a witch. This type of crime had recently come to the forefront of everyone's minds because of the events of 1605 and reinforced the intense hate for anyone who would even conspire against the King in such a manner. Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* in 1606, a mere one year after the Plot, and this type of narrative of flattery of a King which God delivered from death, would have become the only narrative worth mentioning within a country that so intensely believed in the divinity of their newly strengthened King. One could easily argue here that he included the plot of regicide to mirror the Plot of 1605, of course, Macbeth's plan does not involve terrorism on the large scale that the Catholic extremists had in store for Parliament at the time, but the line of thinking remains the same, Shakespeare wanted to demonstrate such a crime on stage, but the inclusion of the crime does not prove well enough Shakespeare's flattery of James; yet, the punishment Macbeth faces at the end of the play serves well enough to accomplish the ultimate flattery. The final piece of the witches' prophecy ended with Macbeth's death, which of course happens in the final scene of the play. But the importance of this scene comes not from Macbeth's literal loss of life, but the way in which Shakespeare chooses to phrase the line after his death by his murderer, Macduff. After slaying Macbeth, with Macbeth's head in hand, Macduff announces to Malcolm, son of Duncan and rightful heir to the throne, "Hail, king! for so thou art. Behold where stands/Th' usurper's cursed head" (*Macbeth* 5.8.65-66). The word choice here as well as the visual serves the overall purpose of the play, placating James I. Firstly, it ensures the audience understands Macduff has restored the rightful King of Scotland to the throne because of Macbeth's death. Two, it forever characterizes Macbeth as nothing more than a usurper, something that will forever tarnish his previously established, and honorable, legacy. And third, the use of the word cursed to reference the severed head of the former king symbolizes how his willingness to work with the Devil lead him to the

fate to which it did. This fate brings devastation not only to the body of Macbeth, but to his legacy as well. Shakespeare used this character to demonstrate the national narrative that the clergy of England had set regarding witchcraft and regicide after the Gunpowder Plot, one where King James remained the pillar of religious wisdom, only deserving of the highest praise, and any who tried to usurp him or take a stance against him would face similar fates to that of Macbeth. The clergy set the tone for the rest of the country to adopt, and with his work of *Macbeth*, Shakespeare followed suit as well.

Some may argue that Shakespeare did not have much of a choice, considering all of the factors above, but those previously mentioned factors only prove to a certain extent that he would have felt obligated to flatter the King. Two other main aspects of the culture of England at the time likely heavily influenced Shakespeare's decisions in the flattering of King James I. For one, anything other than flattery regarding James and his kingdom became less than acceptable following the Plot in 1605. As Herman demonstrates, "flattery [was] laid on with a trowel for James after the Plot was discovered" (122). The country had chosen to handle their woes in this way, James had proven himself the Divine King who had the capacity to protect his people and served as a central pillar for the Reformation that God had delivered from a heinous attempt on his life as well as the life of many others. God put him there, and England had to accept that with nothing other than positivity. This would have encouraged Shakespeare of course, but the more binding law known as the "Oath of Allegiance" passed by Parliament in the aftermath of the Plot required English Catholic recusants to swear their loyalty to James as King and to deny the Pope's power to depose monarchs (North 215). Of course, the debate of Shakespeare's religious affiliations remains hotly contested, however, this act demonstrates the severity to which James took the idea of those who thought and acted against him, James had become paranoid of

dissenters in the aftermath. This act could easily give worry to someone writing a play for which the King would sit as the audience, and therefore must influence the content of such a play. In the end, Shakespeare had to ensure he kept his favor with the court, and to do so he kept in line with the popular beliefs of the time which stemmed from the beliefs of the King. Or as Henry Paul writes,

The philosophy of the play is in truth a fusion of the thoughts of two minds. But there was here no contradiction. The ethics of King James, although Shakespeare may not have cared for his precise and theological form of expression, were the ethics of the people of England, and those of the dramatist, and were readily molded to fit the latter's pattern for his high tragedies. (141)

Considering all of the cultural factors at play, as discussed in detail above, during the writing of *Macbeth*, Shakespeare had a strong motivation to “vindicate the king’s public image” (Norbrook 80). The clergy had so efficiently disseminated their narrative of the King as the ultimate pillar of the ideology of England because of the events that took place prior to the first performance of this work, Shakespeare himself thought it wisest to follow this same flattering narrative, and that he did with *Macbeth*.

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