

RELIGIOUS IMAGERY IN MACBETH

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Many books and articles have been written concerning interpretations of Shakespeare's writings. One topic of fundamental importance has been debated by leading critics to no avail. Did Shakespeare employ Christianity in his plays to make a conscious statement about it? Did he only include Christian images and doctrines as a result of the influence of his times, or finally, can his plays be interpreted with any justification from a Christian standpoint? Perhaps these questions are mere points of scholarship which will remain unsolved. However, speculation has led to a deeper understanding of the plays themselves.

Macbeth is fundamentally a play about a man who loses his position and his life for the sake of ambition. It can be interpreted on two levels. Some critics see only its comment on life while others believe that its numerous Christian elements express a Christian view of life. Macbeth has even been termed a morality play in which a hero yields to temptation and finds retribution only in death.¹ If this disagreement exists, what can be gained from further consideration? From study of the positions held by the critics and of the work itself and its author, conclusions can hopefully

¹John McCutchan, Macbeth; a Complete Guide to the Play (New York, 1963), p. 83.

be drawn which will lead to an adequate interpretation of Shakespeare in relationship to his own times and to his significance today.

The leading proponent of the theologizing analysis is G. Wilson Knight. He and his followers have turned to the works themselves and have found numerous Christian references and theological doctrines employed. Knight's major tenet can be quoted as follows:

We believe that the education of William Shakespeare was grounded upon the Book (Bible) and that if this Book had been sealed to his childhood he might have been the poet of Nature and of passion; his humour might have been as rich as we find it and his wit as pointed, but he could not have been the poet of the most profound as well as the most tolerant philosophy; his insight into the nature of man, his meanness and his grandeur, his weakness and his strength, would not have been what it is.²

Proponents of this theory have dissected the plays for Christian references and have attempted to show the contribution of the elements to the message of the plays. Their fundamental assumption is that Shakespeare is a Christian, lived and wrote for a Christian era, and used Christianity to implement his writing and his basic themes.

Thus, Knight and his followers look at the plays and see humanity portrayed from a Christian point of view to lend deeper understanding to that humanity. Specifically in Macbeth Knight notes that Macbeth must be true to his own human nature which is defined by Christianity.³ He violates the concept of correct human behavior outlined by the Commandments when he falls to temptation and kills his king.

²Thomas Carter, Shakespeare--Puritan and Recusant (Edinburgh, 1906), p. 181.

³L.C. Knights, Some Shakespearian Themes (Stanford, 1959), p. 135.

From this point of view the play defines the evil of temptation showing the unnaturalness of this evil through the imagery, action, and wording of the play.⁴ Thus, Duncan's horses eat each other as a sign that the events connected with the murder are unnatural. Yet, purity also contrasts with these figures of moral darkness. The "temple-haunting martlet"⁵ and Duncan himself show the admirable beauty possible in life.⁵

Macbeth is tempted by the witches because he is ambitious and proud. He cannot wait for his fate but must implement it. G. R. Elliott compares this fault to the Christian Renaissance sin of pride.⁶ Pride was believed to originate with the devil and goodness from God; however, pride was thought a sin which could be forgiven if the sinner repented. Macbeth is possessed by a sense of pride in himself which drives him on to insure the truth of the witches' prophecy. He lets his pride win and kills Duncan. He tries to give reasons for not committing the crime in Act I and finally concludes that it will lead to damnation. Knight sees here a correspondence to the Christian idea of the Day of Judgment.⁷ The play reveals the nature of that judgment in the end when the man who has given himself over to evil reaps death. The theologizers see the witches as supernatural figures who foretell the future without having power to affect it.

⁴Knights, op. cit., p. 121.

⁵George Wilson Knight, The Wheel of Fire (London, 1956), p.148.

⁶G.R. Elliott, Dramatic Providence in Macbeth (Princeton, 1958), p. 26.

⁷Knights, op. cit., p. 137.

Curry considers the power of the witches in a Renaissance frame of reference. He concludes that they are fundamentally spirits who, though they may have fallen from grace, are endowed by God with the power to foretell the future. They cannot directly affect it but can give stimulus. Thus, the witches served to stimulate Macbeth's innate desire for power. Following the idea of predestination, Macbeth's future is ultimately decided, but he has the choice of method in implementing it.

Macbeth succumbs to his pride. "That the man who breaks the bonds that tie him to other men, who 'Pours the sweet milk of concord into Hell' is at the same time violating his own nature and thwarting his own deepest needs, is something that the play dwells on."⁸ Again Joseph Bryant compares the murder of Duncan with the crucifixion. Macbeth, by analogy, has crucified his Lord and put him to open shame.⁹ Bryant quotes the following lines from the play to enforce the image:

Confusion now hath made his masterpiece.
 Most sacriligious murder hath broke ope
 The Lord's annointed triumph, and stole thense
 The life of the building (II iii 70-74)

Although the murder of Duncan is a damning act, the theologizers see Macbeth's chief downfall in the murder of Macduff's wife and children.¹⁰ Until this time Macbeth has merely followed suggestions made by his wife and the three wierd sisters,

⁸ Ibid., p. 135.

⁹ Joseph Bryant, Hippolyta's View (Kentucky University, 1961), p. 165.

¹⁰ Elliott, op. cit., p. 26.

With the murder of the innocents, Macbeth consciously chooses evil for evil's sake. The murder of Macduff's family was unnecessary in the prophecy and shows the degradation of Macbeth's mind. At this point Elliott suggests the doctrine of grace as a point of major importance. From the Christian standpoint Heaven attempts to induce Macbeth to repent. As Leontes in Winter's Tale is an example of one who yields to grace, Macbeth is one who does not. Macbeth becomes evil, and Duncan assumes the image of goodness.¹¹ Duncan is a good king and man of grace contrasted with the usurper Macbeth. According to Elliott, "Macbeth himself is widely, typically, nominally Christian, he is mainly pagan in spirit and liable to become diabolic."¹² However, he maintains that God attempts to save all men through divine grace and thus Shakespeare makes the offer of this grace felt throughout the play. There are numerous references to grace and many chances for Macbeth to proceed no farther. Lady Macbeth sees Macbeth's reluctance to commit the crime when she says of him:

Art thou afeard
 To be the same in thine own act and valor
 As thou art in desire: Wouldst thou have that
 Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life
 And live a coward in thine own esteem.....
(I vii, 39-43)

Macbeth does not let his conscience rule. He proceeds with the murder of Duncan, the takeover of the kingdom, and finally the ruthless murder of Macduff's family and the banishment

¹¹Ibid., p. x.

¹²Ibid., p. xi.

of Duncan's son. In the end Malcolm will restore the lost grace to Scotland symbolized by the renewed beauty of nature.

Joseph Bryant, a follower of the Christian interpretation, regards Macbeth as a dramatic symbol of the sin of apostasy or the renunciation of God in full knowledge of the consequences.¹³ Macbeth gives numerous reasons for not committing the crime. He recognizes the seriousness of it but in the end renounces God and goodness. The play therefore becomes the working out of Macbeth's road to damnation. Can he ever be saved after renouncing God? Bernard makes a similar statement when he says that Macbeth created a hell for himself when he killed Duncan. He was fully aware of his predicament and its uselessness, but he could not repent or could not avail himself of the proffered grace. Macbeth alternates "between tedium and senseless, murderous fits."¹⁴ Along the same line, there was great dispute over the possibility of the sin of apostasy to be forgiven. Scholars and churchmen are divided according to the theological outcome of the play. Was Macbeth sufficiently repentant to deserve pardon, or did he die a condemned man after renouncing his God? At the end of the play Macbeth sees that his kingdom is at an end and recognizes his own evil. Though death brings him peace, does it bring him forgiveness and salvation?

Summarizing Bryant's and leading theologians' views:

¹³ Bryant, *op. cit.*, p. 161.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

The murder of Duncan is a multiple sin. It is a sin against God and against society on many counts: it is murder--a sin against justice; it is the murder of a kinsman--a sin against piety; it is regicide--a sin against fealty, a sin of sacrilege as the Middle Ages understood sacrilege, and of perjury since in medieval times it was the violation of an oath. Finally, it is the murder of a guest by his host--a sin against the rules of hospitality.¹⁵

Following these theories Macbeth is a statement about a Christian who falls prey to the sins of pride and apostasy, denies saving grace, and reaps death for his crime. This death brings peace but only questionable salvation. The Christian references are, therefore, significant and relevant to a full understanding of the fall of this man, whose fate may be generalized to man as a whole.

Bradley is the leading opponent of the theologizers. He and his followers regard Knight's theories as faulty based on shaky assumptions. Shakespeare's references to God and evil do not "materially influence his representation of life, nor are they used to throw light on the mystery of its tragedy."¹⁶ The major flaw in Knight's thesis, according to Bradley, is the lack of evidence.¹⁷ To prove his point Knight and his followers have twisted theology to fit their theories. Many critics, for instance, have tried to prove Shakespeare's use of religion by using the theology of today rather than that of the times of Elizabeth. Also,

¹⁵M. A. Bernard, "Five Tragedies in Macbeth," Shakespeare Quarterly, XIII (Winter, 1962), p. 58.

¹⁶Roland Frye, Shakespeare and Christian Doctrine (Princeton University, 1963), p. 5.

¹⁷Ibid., p. 20.

they make the tenets of theology flexible to prove their point and restrict Shakespeare's statements to Christian theology complete with Christ figures. An example from another play is Nevil Coghill's assumption that Shylock's baptism was an act of mercy. Only after baptism could a person enter the kingdom of heaven; thus, Coghill reasons that Shylock was given forced salvation. As Roland Frye points out, this theory is entirely contradictory to the leading theologians Calvin, Luther, and Hooker. They all agreed that an unbaptized person may be saved if he holds the right attitude; and enforced baptism does little good since it signifies no change of heart.¹⁸

A similar instance of misinterpretation of theology is Irving Ribner's attempt to condone Romeo and Juliet's suicide in a Christian context. Theology will not condone suicide, and Christian theology, thus, will not uphold the beauty of their deaths.¹⁹ Another example arises from the dispute over Hamlet's last words "The rest is silence." Some critics have interpreted these to mean that Shakespeare was an agnostic denying the existence of an afterlife. According to 16th century theology, they express "faith in an afterlife and sorrow at leaving earthly vocations."²⁰ The Scriptures often speak of death as silence, but modern critics use this silence as proof of nonexistence after death. Thus, Shakespeare's

¹⁸Ibid., p. 21.

¹⁹Ibid., p. 27.

²⁰Ibid., p. 52.

words are again misinterpreted to prove a theory. Bradley proposes that the works be interpreted for the direct statement about life and not dissected for every meaningless reference to religion. He agrees with Frye's comment:

Shakespeare's works are pervasively secular in that they make no encompassing appeal to theological categories and in that they are concerned with the dramatization of universally human situations within a temporal and this worldly arena. He at times introduced such theological materials as might contribute to his presentation of particular characters and situations.²¹

Frye points out that the Reformation period was a time when educational emphasis was on the classics.²² No Christian literature was taught since good literature was considered to be that of Ovid and Plotinus. Theologians went along with this system since Luther himself said that the Reformation owed its life to educated people.²³ Since literature was non-theological, Shakespeare's works would have been considered the same. Literature merely revealed natural truths. Elliott will concede the influence of Christianity on Shakespeare but states that he was not attracted to Christianity on Christian grounds but as a writer and a dramatist. "He did not deliberately employ Christian doctrine as a mode of expression. To him it was veritably orthodox, right, sound, and catholic in idea and image."²⁴ Shakespeare's drama is, from this point of view, a statement of natural

²¹Ibid., p. 44.

²²Ibid., p. 74.

²³Ibid., p. 76.

²⁴Elliott, op. cit., p. 7.

truths in a Christian era.

According to Bradley and his followers, Macbeth represents the violation of human order in the mutualities of loyalty, trust, and liking. Thus, his crime is a violation of his own humanity.²⁵ They interpret the play as the natural fate of a good man who chooses evil, and they accept the play at face value. "Macbeth was not written for students of metaphysics or theology, but for people at large."²⁶ Violations of this natural order are shown in the images and events of the play. In the very first scene the three witches appear who do not change events but bring Macbeth's evil desires to view. They act as an impetus to his downfall and signify the unnaturalness of the entire play. However, Bradley sees them not as supernatural beings but as old hags. They are only women, and their prophecies affect only Macbeth. There is no intimation that Macbeth's actions are thrust upon him by an external power. As Bradley interprets the play, Macbeth chooses to violate nature, and the witches are merely forces which are continually at loose in the world. Thus, Shakespeare was a Christian and naturally used the Christian materials in his life to implement his writing, but the truths he presented are purely human truths and do not depend on religion for meaning.

How can the two theories be proved, disproved, or reconciled? A consideration of the evidence from Shakespeare's

²⁵Knights, op. cit., p. 136.

²⁶Frye, op. cit., p. 34.

own life and from the play itself will aid such a reconciliation. Was religion an important part of Shakespeare's life? His family professed to be Catholic but followed Puritanism and, as a result, were not persecuted by the Puritans. Even his biblical references appear to come from the Genevan Bible.²⁷ However, John Shakespeare's name is recorded on the list of non-attenders in the church of the community. William Shakespeare himself was exposed to religious training as a child. The common school courses of the time were catechism, Greek literature, and the Bible. Shakespeare is recorded to have been an avid reader of the Bible and to have been familiar with its passages as, indeed, his plays illustrate.²⁸ From records it is presumed that Shakespeare himself was not seriously religious, but he definitely showed prejudices on views of right and wrong in his own writing, and these prejudices usually followed accepted theology. He was familiar with the Bible and with the teaching of the Church but was not bound by set theology.

A close consideration of the play itself will reveal many allusions both to religion and to nature. Throughout the play there are numerous references to God and grace and nature as well. All the major religious references appear to be directly connected with saving grace, Macbeth's damnation, and Duncan as a gracious king. In Act I, scene

²⁷ Carter, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

²⁸ Joseph Adams, *A Life of William Shakespeare* (Boston, 1925), p. 60.

vii, Macbeth speaks of a poisoned chalice signifying the evil in the deed which he is to commit. Extended further this chalice could parallel the one used by Christ at the Last Supper. This chalice was poisoned by the lips of the traitor Judas--Macbeth by analogy is a traitor to Duncan since he violates order. The remainder of the speech makes references to damnation entirely in Christian terms. In the same scene Macbeth says "I dare do all that may become a man. Who dares do more is none." By extension Macbeth is going against order as Satan did when he revolted against God. Satan attempted to be more than an angel and Macbeth more than a man. Satan lost his angelic qualities as Macbeth loses his human ones.

In Act II there are numerous references to Heaven or Hell. The bell summons Duncan to the hereafter. The sleeping guards asked for God's blessing while Macbeth performed the horrible deed, and he could not finalize it with an amen. The porter scene shows the castle as Hell and the porter as the porter of the gate. Indeed, the castle may have become an inferno since Macbeth has murdered grace in the person of Duncan. In the same scene Duncan is referred to as the "Lord's annointed temple." Still later Macbeth says "Renown and grace is dead." He seemingly realizes that he has lost his own saving grace in the murder of his king. Following this grace imagery, in Act IV scene iii, the king of England James I is shown to be a man of grace, prophecy, and healing power. He is the ruler of a healthy state in which grace exists and is in direct contrast with the murderer Macbeth. Aside from complimenting the ruling monarch, Shakespeare uses this image

for effective contrast. Finally, the last speech by Malcolm completes the grace references by showing that grace as well as the political exiles will be restored to Scotland. Malcolm will bring health to the diseased state.

In addition to the direct references to God and Christian concepts there are several near biblical quotations as marked by Richmond Noble. The mention of Golgotha is prophetic. The term occurs in the first scene, and although the sergeant speaks here of another Golgotha as the slaughter on the battlefield, Macbeth creates another Golgotha when he kills his lord Duncan. Further ideas of anointed temples, cleansing water, and fir trees show Shakespeare's use of and knowledge of the Bible. The majority of the references are from the New Testament accounts of the betrayal and death of Christ. Even Macbeth's "If it were done, where 'tis done, then 'twere well It were done quickly" echoes Christ's admonition to Judas "That thou doest, doe quickly" meaning a similar betrayal. Thus, the wording and images used in the entire play tend to parallel Macbeth with Judas and his crime with the betrayal of Christ, for both traitors were responsible for the death of men of grace.

A second group of images which greatly affect the play concern nature and natural order. Throughout the play nature is shown to be violated. The witches have beards, an uncommon event in women. The night of Macbeth's murderous deed has been filled with unnatural events in the heavens and among the animals of the earth. Duncan's horses have devoured each other. Macbeth discusses the nature of a murderer who is

not enough of a Christian to forgive ill use by another. He refers to the nature of the hired murderer, which ironically must be similar to his own. Several times nature is referred to as the giver of life and the bounties needed by man.

Lady Macbeth says that Macbeth lacks the refreshing sleep of nature. Indeed nature is upset and is not functioning according to order. Macbeth's own downfall is connected with two unnatural occurrences. A man who was not born of woman was able to kill him only after a woods moved to the castle. These last examples of violations of nature prophesied the downfall of the tyrant and the restoration of health in the kingdom.

The violations of nature stem from the idea of cosmic order prevalent at the time of Shakespeare. The stars and planets of the heavens were supposed to be set in a certain order by God with the earth as the center. Likewise, a determined hierarchy was supposed to exist among men. Thus, the king was set at the head of the realm of men. Under the king, who was divinely appointed by God and who followed the heavenly beings, all men would have a proper place according to their position in life. Each man should therefore find his proper place and not violate the total order. The earth was the center of the universe and man the center of the earth. All events and all people were supposed to follow in order. However, at the end of the sixteenth century this comfortable theory of order was upset by Copernicus who noted that the sun

not the earth was the center of the universe. Other writers considered man's position and questioned his superiority. Men questioned order, right, wrong, and human worth. Thus, Shakespeare's world of Macbeth was out of natural harmony much as Shakespeare's own world, and Macbeth deals with questions of position and ambition among men just as philosophers of the day.²⁹

Aside from the specific references in the play to religion and to nature, the entire theme and main action has several parallels in other literatures. Assuming that the play deals basically with ambition and with self-destruction arising from ambition, one can say that this theme was certainly not unique to Shakespeare or to Christianity. Men of all ages have known ambition and human weaknesses. From the pagan Greeks comes Sophocles' story of Oedipus Rex. As Auden has stated, Oedipus may be considered a poetic approach while Macbeth is an historic one.³⁰ However, Oedipus lived in a world in which fate supposedly determined man's life. Thus, he killed his father and married his mother while incapable of escaping his fate of destruction. Macbeth, on the other hand, could escape his fate. Ambition drove him to kill the king and

²⁹ Henri Fluchere, Shakespeare and the Elizabethans (New York, 1956), p. 189.

³⁰ Laurence Lerner, Shakespeare's Tragedies (Baltimore, 1963), p. 219.

thus consciously choose evil. If any form of fate had destined him to be king as the witches foretold, then he need only have waited for his destiny. These two works help to illustrate the point that although interpretations of man's fate and responsibility for his own destiny may change, the questions have long existed.

A closer parallel falls in a slightly later period. Brutus killed Caesar in pre-Christian times. This is another example of a man overthrowing natural order and for what purpose? Perhaps Brutus did kill Caesar to purge Rome or perhaps he, like Macbeth, was guilty of a driving ambition which led him to defy order. Both men violated the sacred bonds of kinship and fealty. Another example of the same theme is the biblical story of the temptation of Adam and Eve. Adam, like Macbeth, aspired to better his station in life. He defied the dictates of God representing order by tasting the apple of the tree of good and evil leading to his own destruction. Again like Macbeth, Adam had as his catalyst his wife Eve, who spurred him on to commit the deed. Both Eve and Lady Macbeth received punishment for their involvement.

Another parallel can be seen in the story of Satan.³¹ Satan was an angel second only to God himself when his own ambition led him to attempt to put himself first. Macbeth,

³¹E.E. Stoll, "Source and Motive in Macbeth and Othello," Review of English Studies (January, 1943), p. 27.

likewise, is second in rank but desires to be first. Satan warred against God and received damnation as punishment.

Macbeth kills his lord and likewise reaps destruction.

As has been previously stated, various images in the play may be used to parallel the Satanic story. References are also found to equate Duncan with Christ and Macbeth with Judas. Thus, Macbeth may be seen as a traitor who not only betrays but kills his lord. Summarizing these parallels then, one can see that, in all of the works or myths mentioned above, ambition led a man to defy a fixed order and that his act resulted in his own destruction. Thus, the protagonist has caused his own downfall. The theme of Macbeth that "Moral order exists in the microcosm, that there is no escape from conscience, that man is at once a criminal and his own executioner"³² is, therefore, not a unique one nor a purely Christian one.

After considering the critics and the evidence in the play, one, it appears, can only conclude that neither Bradley nor Knight is completely right. Religious references certainly exist in the play and they do contribute to the meaning of the work. The full impact of Macbeth's loss reaches the reader when he considers it from the Christian standpoint

³² Donald Stauffer, Shakespeare's World of Images (New York, 1949), p. 210.

of grace and denial of God. However, the tragedy can be felt merely from realizing that Macbeth dies as a result of his deed. References to Satan and Christ help the reader to extend his thinking beyond the framework of the play to his own religious world, but the story would be the same without the references to religion. That man tends to be ambitious and that this ambition may lead to his downfall is a truth recognized by men of all times. As one critic said, Shakespeare held a mirror up to nature to reveal man to himself. Shakespeare uses accurate references to theology but expresses universal truths.³³

Besides enlarging the reader's frame of reference, Shakespeare quite probably used religious references simply to make his ideas meaningful to his audience since the plays were written to be portrayed on stage. Since he himself was familiar with Christianity and his audience likewise would have a basic understanding of theology, religion would be an effective medium to make concrete more difficult ideas. Nevertheless, the play Macbeth retains its meaning and its vitality without Christianity. Thus, for Knight to say that without the Bible Shakespeare would not express human truths seems too narrow an assertion. What can be, as has been shown through examples, more human than the human fault ambition? Again for Bradley to conclude that the religious

³³ Frye, op. cit., p. 268.

references have no vital function is too narrow. The overall picture of the play can certainly be lost in looking for every minor religious reference, but the picture can be enhanced by looking at the major theological tenets of the day as used in the play. As one critic said, "Shakespeare's world is multitudinously varied. Christian eschatology entwines with pagan naturalism and both with themes of empire and world-glory."³⁴ Shakespeare revealed universal truths. He employed Christian references and images in his works. Was he therefore a Christian? Did he use Christianity to make a comment about it? Did he only employ Christianity to help make his ideas meaningful to a Christian community? The question remains unsolved, but the play assumes greater significance from the consideration.

³⁴George Wilson Knight, The Christian Renaissance (New York), p. 117

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