The Story of Macbeth

Introduction

After teaching twelfth-grade English in a New York public high school for ten years, I was assigned to teach the eleventh-grade. I already had tenure and seniority by that time, and I was allowed to choose all the works we were to read for the year... except for the Shakespeare. Shakespeare was to be taught, from the ninth to the twelfth grades, in this order: *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, *Macbeth*, and *Hamlet*. Although I had gladly, and I think successfully, taught *Hamlet* for the last ten years, I looked forward to the opportunity to explore a new work. I knew very little about Macbeth, in fact, I don't think I had ever read it.

During the summer before I taught eleventh-grade English for the first time, I re-read all of the books on my list, and I read Macbeth. Then, I read it again. And again. I loved the play, and couldn't believe I had missed it, but looking back on it now, I'm glad I had.

All too often, great works of literature are introduced too early in the course of one's education. In high schools across America, students are required to read works that were really meant for the edification, enjoyment and contemplation of far older and more mature minds — people who are seasoned by life, well read, and who understand and appreciate the complex nuances of the English language and the human spirit.

I think the fact that I came to Macbeth later in life enabled me to make a connection that I would not have seen had I read it in high school. It was only because I encountered it tabula rasa, with no prejudices, that I could have the insight which is the subject of this paper.

Discovery

After a summer of reading Macbeth, I realized the story seemed strangely familiar. Traditionally, Macbeth is taught as a play about a man who is consumed by ambition. But I didn't know that. I saw a man who is tempted to do what he knows he should not do and a woman who gets him to do it— familiar indeed. It was Adam and Eve. I was intrigued. I went to the library and read all the Macbeth criticism and commentary I could find, but there was no mention anywhere of the biblical reference. I was surprised. Had no one seen this clear similarity between the two stories? In 400 years? I felt compelled to investigate further.

I decided to find out more about the history of the play. I found out that *Macbeth* was most likely written sometime around 1604 and first performed, depending on where one looks, sometime between 1606 and 1610. The first written account of a performance of the play was penned by the astrologist and occultist, Simon Forman. He wrote that he saw the *Tragedy of Macbeth* at the Globe Theatre in London on April 20th, 1610. Thus, the play was most probably written and performed between 1604 and 1610. Fine.

I learned next that *Macbeth* was dedicated to King James I, the King of England at that time. King James? I thought. The King James of the King James Bible? I admit herewith to my lack of knowledge, at the time, of the history of British royalty. But it didn't take me long to learn that the King James of the King James Bible and the King James to whom *Macbeth* was dedicated, were indeed the same person. Hmmm... and when was it that the project to re-translate and rewrite the Holy Bible began?

I found a book about the history of the bible which established that, indeed, the translation effort and the writing of Macbeth coincided precisely. Though I do not have my original source, the following excerpt contains all of the relevant information regarding the fascinating story of the King James translation of the Bible which I had found.

> As the reign of Elizabeth (1558-1603) was coming to a close, we find a draft for an act of Parliament for a new version of the Bible: "An act for the reducing of diversities of bibles now extant in the English tongue to one settled vulgar translated from the original." The Bishop's Bible of 1568, although it may have eclipsed the Great Bible,

was still rivaled by the Geneva Bible. Nothing ever became of this draft during the reign of Elizabeth, who died in 1603, and was succeeded by James 1, as the throne passed from the Tudors to the Stuarts. James was at that time James VI of Scotland, and had been for thirty-seven years. He was born during the period between the Geneva and the Bishop's Bible.

One of the first things done by the new king was the calling of the Hampton Court Conference in January of 1604 "for the hearing, and for the determining, things pretended to be amiss in the church." Here were assembled bishops, clergymen, and professors, along with four Puritan divines, to consider the complaints of the Puritans. Although Bible revision was not on the agenda, the Puritan president of Corpus Christi College, John Reynolds, "moved his Majesty, that there might be a new translation of the Bible, because those which were allowed in the reigns of Henry the eighth, and Edward the sixth, were corrupt and not answerable to the truth of the Original."
The king rejoined that he:

> "Could never yet see a Bible well translated in English; but I think that, of all, that of Geneva is the worst. I wish some special pains were taken for an uniform translation, which should be done by he best learned men in both Universities, then reviewed by the Bishops, presented to the Privy Council, lastly ratified by the Royal authority, to be read in the whole Church, and none other."

Accordingly, a resolution came forth:

> "That a translation be made of the whole Bible, as consonant as can be to the original Hebrew and Greek; and this to be set out and printed, without any marginal notes, and only to be used in all churches of England in time of divine service."

The next step was the actual selection of the men who were to perform the work. In July of 1604, James wrote to Bishop Bancroft that he had "appointed certain learned men, to the number of four and fifty, for the translating of the Bible." These men were the best biblical scholars and linguists of their day. In the preface to their completed work it is further stated that "there were many chosen, that were greater in other men's eyes than in their own, and that sought the truth rather than their own praise. Again, they came or were thought to come to the work, learned, not to learn." Other men were sought out, according to James, "so that our said intended translation may have the help and furtherance of all our principal learned men within this our kingdom."

> Although fifty-four men were nominated, only forty-seven were known to have taken part in the work of translation. The translators were organized into six groups, and met respectively at Westminster, Cambridge, and Oxford. Ten at Westminster were assigned Genesis through 2 Kings; seven had Romans through Jude. At Cambridge, eight worked on 1 Chronicles through Ecclesiastes, while seven others handled the Apocrypha. Oxford employed seven to translate Isaiah through Malachi; eight occupied themselves with the Gospels, Acts, and Revelation.
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> From "A Brief History of the King James Bible" By Dr. Laurence M. Vance
> http://www.av1611.org/kjv/kjvhist.html

So all the most learned and erudite men in England were going to work on the new translation of the Bible at the same time that Macbeth was apparently written. It would only make sense that William Shakespeare, one of the most famous and prolific poets and playwrights in history would be called on to participate in such a project if he was available. Though I have never found any evidence that substantiates the assumption, it is hard to believe that Shakespeare would not have been involved. At the very least, he must have been aware that the king was undertaking the endeavor as it was public knowledge.

And if Shakespeare was trying to extol the royal line of the new king, he would not only dedicate a play to him, as he did Macbeth, but he would also choose a subject matter the King would appreciate. Because King James had previously been the king of Scotland, Shakespeare chose to retell the Scottish tale of Macbeth. And since he knew that the recently crowned king was deeply dedicated to the Bible, I believe he also decided to superimpose, on the Tragedy of Macbeth, a retelling of the first story of the Old Testament, in the King's honor.

The strange thing is that I'm not sure if the king, or anyone for that matter, ever knew.
It seems that Shakespeare, for some reason, decided to hide the Biblical references. It is as if he planted clues throughout the play but in such a way that only after the source is discovered do they emerge. Once Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are seen as a medieval Adam and Eve, the signs, clues and references to the Bible that Shakespeare hid become obvious. The more one looks, the more one finds.

It should also be noted here that King James I was fascinated by witches and demons, another reason Shakespeare would choose Macbeth as the story to retell in the King's honor. In 1597, when he was King James VI of Scotland, he published a work called *Daemonologie* in order to prove that Satan, demons, and witches are real and influence the world. *Daemonologie* was a very widely read work, and there can be little doubt that Shakespeare was familiar with it. It could well be that the work provided Shakespeare the creative spark for what was to become *The Tragedy of Macbeth.* Amazingly, King James himself refers to the Garden of Eden when discussing the evil knowledge that witches possess:

> Where, in the meane time (miserable wretches) they are become in verie deede, bond-slaves to their mortall enemie: and their knowledge, for all that they presume thereof, is nothing increased, except in knowing evil, and the horrors of Hell for punishment thereof, as Adams was by the eating of the forbidden tree.

The Witches

In the traditional interpretation of Macbeth (the one I was not privy to as a newcomer to the play), the witches, when they first meet Macbeth, greet him as the Thane of Glamis and then offer him two prophecies (Act 1, Scene 3):

> All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!
> All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter!

But calling Macbeth Thane of Cawdor is no prophecy, because King Duncan had already announced, in the previous scene, that Macbeth was to be given that title and we can assume the witches knew it. When he finds out, just after meeting the witches, that indeed the king has made him Thane of Cawdor, he has been tricked into believing that they can see into the future. And just as hailing Macbeth Thane of Cawdor is not a prophecy, nor is telling him that he will be king— it is a temptation. The witches wanted Macbeth to believe that they could see into the future so that the temptation to become king would be so strong as to seem inevitable.

So clearly the witches represent the very first tempter— the serpent, from the Garden of Eden. Sure enough, in the same scene, after Ross tells Macbeth that he has been named the thane of Cawdor, we find our first hidden clue in a direct Biblical reference. Banquo asks, in shock, "What, can the devil speak true?" which is as good as calling the witches the serpent since the Devil, or Satan, is traditionally recognized as the serpent from Adam and Eve (Revelations, 20:2).

Now convinced that the witches have "more in them than mortal knowledge," (Act 2, Scene 1) Macbeth is ensnared... (Act 1, Scene 3):

> Two truths are told,
> As happy prologues to the swelling act
> Of the imperial theme...Cannot be ill, cannot be good: if ill,
> Why hath it given me earnest of success,
> Commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor:
> If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
> Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
> And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
> Against the use of nature? Present fears
> Are less than horrible imaginings:
> My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,

> Shakes so my single state of man that function
> Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is
> But what is not.

Yes, Macbeth considers the unthinkable— killing his cousin, the beloved King Duncan. Yet he has still not been completely consumed by the witches' temptation as is clear when he says, "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me/Without my stir." Just like Eve got Adam to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, it will take Lady Macbeth to convince Macbeth to murder.

Eve

> And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

Clear enough: Don't eat from that tree or you will die. Adam heard this directly from God, and it was a command. Adam heeded God's word, and he did not eat from the tree.
After this, God saw that Adam was all alone, decided it was a not a good thing, that Adam needed "an help meet," a companion, and so God gave Adam... the animals. Adam named the animals but God saw that Adam was still without a companion. Then, finally, God made Eve (Genesis 2:21-25):

> And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This *is* now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, and were not ashamed. (Note Shakespeare's sly reference to the creation of Eve in Macbeth's first soliloquy, the one quoted above, when he speaks of the thought of murder making his seated heart knock at his *ribs*.)

The very next thing that takes place is the temptation of Eve by the serpent (Genesis 3:1-3):

> Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden? And the woman said unto the serpent, We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which *is* in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.

One of the big questions, which has been asked for centuries, is: How did Eve know about the commandment not to eat from the tree? Biblical scholars have offered at least three explanations. Some believe Eve knew about the commandment and the tree because the she was a part of

Adam's body when he received it, and the knowledge was transferred to her. Another view of how she got the word, is that God told her directly. Or it could be Adam told her.

If Adam told Eve about the tree and the commandment about it, why? Perhaps, as many scholars propose, Adam believed that the commandment applied to Eve, too. This seems unlikely. After all, God commanded Adam, spoke directly to him; that's how important the commandment was to God. Surely if God wanted Eve to adhere to the same prohibition, He would have told her directly too, and there is no indication that that happened.

Some scholars offer another possible reason that Adam told Eve about the tree. And this is the theory, it seems, that Shakespeare pursued: Adam told Eve because he wanted to see what would happen. Two points should be considered in support of this view. First, Adam must have been tempted himself when he was told by God that he could eat from all of the trees in the garden but that one. However, since he got the commandment directly from God, he was too frightened to disobey. Second, Adam figured he'd do his own tempting and see what Eve might make of it. After all, she didn't hear it from God, so who knows what would happen.

And then there's this: who changed the commandment? Again, here are God's original words to Adam:

> Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat: But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.

And here is Eve's reply to the serpent:

> We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden: But of the fruit of the tree which *is* in the midst of the garden, God hath said, Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it, lest ye die.

Where did Eve get the "neither shall ye touch it"? Did Adam tell her that? Why? To tempt her even more perhaps?

The Medieval Eve

Macbeth has had a victorious day of battle, and then he and Banquo meet with the witches. Regardless of how many men he has killed in battle, Macbeth knows it is wrong to kill a beloved and innocent king. During the encounter with the witches, they tempt him with greatness. Not quite sure what to make of his mixed feelings (should he kill the king or just let things unfold naturally?), he writes his wife, Lady Macbeth, a letter, telling her of what he has been promised. In it, he states that the witches hailed him "King that shalt be" (Act 1, Scene 5). But like Adam may have done when conveying God's commandment to Eve, Macbeth has altered the orignal words, "King hereafter," and the effect Macbeth has hoped for comes to pass— the temptation takes hold. She can't wait for her husband to return from the war so that Duncan's murder can be set into motion. Lady Macbeth believes the witches promises, just as Eve believed the serpent

(Genesis 3:4-6):

> And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil. And when the woman saw that the tree *was* good for food, and that it *was* pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make *one* wise, she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat.

Why Lady Macbeth wants so desperately to be queen is hard to tell. Then again, where does ambition come from in the first place? Is it just wanting more out of existence, or is it born out of a deep-seated dissatisfaction with some aspect or aspects of one's life. Later in the play, we will see that Lady Macbeth had a child once (Act 1, Scene 7):

> I have given suck, and know
> How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me...

Maybe a child is what she's missing, for there is no other mention of any heir to the throne for Macbeth. But for whatever the reason, Lady Macbeth is the one with the "vaulting ambition," as Macbeth himself calls his wife's need.

And as for Eve, the serpent tells her that she, too, is incomplete, for all she has to do is to eat from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil and her eyes will be opened and she'll be like a god. In both cases, we see the essence of temptation: the tempter convinces the other that all that is needed to be so much better, happier, more complete, is this one essential thing. A deep-rooted and all-too-human sense of not having it all, an existential emptiness and yearning, makes us easy prey to temptation. A lack of perfection gnaws at so many of a us... a sense of: If only I could have this or that, then everything would be perfect and I'd finally be completely happy.

Both Adam and Macbeth seem to be at least partly satisfied with the status quo. Adam heard the commandment and did not eat, and Macbeth says to his wife (again, Act 1, Scene 7):

> We will proceed no further in this business:
> He hath honor'd me of late, and I have bought
> Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
> Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
> Not cast aside so soon.

But both Adam and Macbeth seem to tempt their wives to push each of them further into acting on their own temptations. Once she is told, Lady Macbeth is ready to kill the king, so that the two of them will have everything they ever wanted. All she has to do is to get her husband to eat of the fruit, convince him to commit the crime. How does she accomplish this? How does Eve get Adam to eat the fruit? In the Bible, it sounds like no effort at all: "she took of the fruit thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her; and he did eat."

There is no way that it was that easy for either woman. Indeed, the rabbis of the Midrash had a number of theories as to how Eve got Adam to break God's commandment. The general consensus is that she carried on— bothered him and nagged at him until he gave in. And after all, nothing happened to Eve when she ate from the tree. God didn't make a sound as far as we can tell. And if the theory is correct, if Adam told Eve just to see what she would do and what would happen, he got his answer.

And Lady Macbeth had to do some carrying on, too, and she had prepared herself:

> Hie thee hither,
> That I may pour my spirits in thine ear;
> And chastise with the valour of my tongue

Yes, she gives her returning husband quite an earful: how if he really loved her he would do it, how he promised her, how if he were a real man he would follow through... In the end, he acquiesces half heartedly with "If we should fail?"

Before the killing, everything falls into place for the Macbeths — how easy is it to just eat a fruit. Not only does King Duncan invite himself to their castle for dinner, he plans to spend the night there. Lady Macbeth tells Macbeth how to act when he arrives (Act 1, Scene 4):

> To beguile the time,
> Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
> Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower,
> But be the serpent under't.

What's that she said about a serpent?

Just as Duncan arrives at Inverness, he stops to appreciate the view (Act 1, Scene 6):

> DUNCAN
> This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air
> Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
> Unto our gentle senses.
>
> BANQUO
> This guest of summer,
> The temple-haunting martlet, does approve,
> By his loved mansionry, that the heaven's breath
> Smells wooingly here: no jutty, frieze,
> Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird
> Hath made his pendent bed and procreant cradle:
> Where they most breed and haunt, I have observed,
> The air is delicate.

The contrast is obvious and stunning: this beautiful setting, so Eden-like, with smells of heaven's breath, is about to become a place of murder and horror. The description also highlights the folly

of ambition; like Adam and Eve, the Macbeths seem to live in Paradise. What more could they want?

No Mere Coincidence

Macbeth, a man with a strong body but a weak, excitable and malleable mind, is convinced to commit the murder. He finally tells his wife (Act 1, Scene 7):

> I am settled, and bend up
> Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.

Lady Macbeth has prepared everything for the deed. Everyone is drugged, asleep, or both, and all Macbeth has to do is kill the King while he's sleeping. With fear and dread, Macbeth is led into the King's chamber by a "dagger of the mind," and, while Lady Macbeth nervously waits in another room of the castle, he slays the king.

When Adam finally eats from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, two things happen: he and Eve realize that they are naked and they hear a voice (Genesis 3:7-10):

> And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they *were* naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons. And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden. And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where *art* thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I *was* naked; and I hid myself.

And what do you know? Right after the murder, Macbeth asks Lady Macbeth, "Didst thou not hear a noise?" He first heard the voices of the King's guards. (Act 2, Scene 2):

> One cried, “God bless us!” and “Amen” the other,
> As they had seen me with these hangman's hands.
> Listening their fear, I could not say “Amen,”
> When they did say “God bless us!”

and then he said he heard the whole house:

> Me thought I heard a voice cry “Sleep no more!
> Macbeth doth Murder sleep”—the innocent sleep,
> Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleave of care,
> The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath,
> Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
> Chief nourisher in life's feast—
>
> LADY MACBETH:
> What do you mean?

MACBETH:
Still it cried, “Sleep no more!” to all the house;
“Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor
Shall sleep no more. Macbeth shall sleep no more.”

Macbeth has, in his panic, brought the guards' daggers with him. He is far too horrified by what he has done to bring the daggers back and smear the guards with the Kings's blood, so Lady Macbeth goes to do that. Macbeth then hears more sounds; there is a knocking at the castle gate.

When Lady Macbeth returns, even she is shocked and full of shame for what they have done. She says,

My hands are of your color, but I shame
To wear a heart so white.

But there's no time now for remorse. The sound of the knocking continues and, like Adam and Eve, garments have to be put on:

LADY MACBETH:
Hark! more knocking:
Get on your nightgown, lest occasion call us
And show us to be watchers.

And was that the Lord God himself knocking on the castle gate in the cool of the day? Well, in large part, yes.

The famous Porter scene comes next (Act 2, Scene 3). Many see this brief scene as comic relief, a jocular contrast to the shocking murder, and that it is. We see a Porter fast asleep in his place near the entrance of the castle, and he's determined to stay asleep. His job is to answer whoever comes calling at the castle and to open the gate. Then he, no doubt, has to carry the visitors' things for them into the castle.

It is quite early in the morning, and this porter is completely unaware of the foul murder that has taken place elsewhere in the castle. He is innocent and is very much his casual, irreverent, funny self. He's a stark and riveting contrast to what we have just witnessed. In his attempt to stay asleep under his warm covers, he dreamily imagines all the people who may be knocking at the gate.

Some see the scene, in part, as a reference to the Gunpowder Plot of 1605, which was an unsuccessful attempt on the life of King James by a group of English Catholics. The Porter's whole speech is filled with contradictions and equivocations (as is the entire play), and it is thought that such manner of speaking refers to Henry Garnett’s *A Treatise of Equivocation* which was known to be popular among the conspirators. As *Macbeth* is dedicated to King James, this theory may, at least in part, be correct.

The Porter scene, however, has an even deeper, religious significance. The introduction of a "Porter" who answers the knocking at a gate and then his own references to "hell-gate," "Belzebub," and the devil, would be missed by few patrons of the Globe theater as obvious references to the miracle play, *The Harrowing of Hell*. The play was written during the reign of Edward II and was performed throughout England until at least the late 16th century.

Here are the Porter's relevant lines from *Macbeth:*

> Porter:
> Here's a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of
> hell-gate, he should have old turning the key
>
> Who's there, i' the name of
> Belzebub?
>
> What are you? But this
> place is too cold for hell. I'll devil-porter it no further.

There's little doubt that the Porter scene in *Macbeth* is presented to suggest *The Harrowing of Hell*. In that play, Christ comes to the Gates of Hell to free those whom Satan has taken there and to bring them to Paradise with Him:

> Prologue
>
> Let every one listen to me now!
> I will tell you a contest
> Between Jesus and Satan
> When Jesus went to hell
> To bring thence his own,
> And lead them to paradise.
> The devil was so powerful
> That every one went to hell :
> Nor was there a prophet so holy, —
> Since Adam and Eve eat the apple, —
> If his life were finished.
> That could escape from the pain of hell ;
> Nor would one have been released
> Had it not been for the Son of God.
> This was revealed to Adam and Eve,
> Who were beloved of God.

> Christ:
> I now come to the gated of hell,
> And I command them to be opened.
> Where then is now the porter?
> I think he is a coward.
>
> Porter:
> I have heard powerful words,
> Nor dare I remain here longer.
> Keep the gates — whoever can,
> I leave them and fly.
>
> Christ:
> Hell gates will I beat down,
> And take out all my people.
> Satan, I bond thee, — here shalt thou lay
> Until the coming of doomsday.

And there, at the top of the list of those to be freed, are Adam and Eve. The rest of those to be saved are Abraham, David, Moses, and John the Baptist.

In *Macbeth*, of course, it is Macduff whose knocking is heard by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in the cool of the day ("this place is too cold for hell" says the Porter). And it is Macduff who is the first person to discover the horrible crime. And, as we know, it is Macduff, along with Malcolm and Seward's army, who will come to save Scotland from the hell that Macbeth has made of it. Macduff is the Savior knocking at Hell-Gate.

As the Porter opens the gate to let Macduff in, he says, "I pray you, remember the Porter." This ambiguous line is delivered to Macduff and to the audience. As addressed to Macduff, it can be seen as a request for a tip, as, in most productions of the play, the Porter holds out his empty hand. As addressed to the audience, however, it is a reminder of the Miracle Play.

Beginnings of the Play

It is no great secret, nor taint upon his stature as a playwright and poet, that Shakespeare's plots, for the most part, were far from original:

> Shakespeare was an omnivorous reader. Often he used several versions of a story in his plots; it seems likely, for example, that before writing *Richard III* he had read Sir

> Thomas More's *Life of Richard III,* and Edward Halle's chronicle *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Famelies of Lancastre and York* (1548), as well as one of his most trusted sources, Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England Scotland, and Ireland* (1587). Shakespeare knew his history well, but often he changed the simple facts to suit the medium of the play: time is condensed, battles are combined, characters and actions are modified or created.
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> From the Internet Shakespeare Editions website
> http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/history/sources.html

Plot sources can be found for all of Shakespeare's historical plays and almost all of his other plays as well. Most critics agree that the only truly original plots of Shakespeare were : *Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *The Tempest*. Every other work had a literary precursor. Before *Romeo and Juliet* there was Arthur Brooke's *The Tragical History of Romeus and Juliet*; before *Hamlet*, there was Thomas Kyd's *Ur-Hamlet* (c. 1589 and since lost); before *The Merchant of Venice,* there was Christopher Marlowe 's *The Jew of Malta* and most probably Giovanni Fiorentino's *Il Pecorone*.

Thus, it is not for his originality in the formulation of plots or even plot twists that Shakespeare is famous. It is what he does with the compelling stories that he has chosen, dramatically, poetically and intellectually for which he is revered throughout, and well beyond the boundaries, of the English-speaking world.

Shakespeare's historical source for the Macbeth story was Holinshed's *Chronicles of England Scotland, and Ireland* (which itself was based on Hector Boece's 1526 work, Scotorum Historiae). As he often did, Shakespeare manipulated some aspects of historical accounts for his own ends. He was never a slave to the absolute facts if they did not comport with the story he wanted to tell or the ideas he wanted to consider and explore. And the story of the murder of King Duncan is no exception.

In many ways, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is but a masterful and poetic rewording and rethinking of Holinshed's work. Here, for example, on pages 268-7 of the *Chronicles*, we find the description of the fateful meeting between Macbeth, Banquo and the three witches:

> It fortuned as Makbeth and Banquho iournied towards Fores, where the king then laie, they went sporting by the waie togither without other companie, saue onelie themselues, passing thorough the woods and fields, when suddenlie in the middest of a laund, there met them thrée women in strange and wild apparell, resembling creatures of elder world, whome when they attentiuelie beheld, woondering much at the sight, the first of them spake and said; "All haile Makbeth, thane of Glammis" (for he had latelie entered into that dignitie and office by the death of his father Sinell.) The second of them said; "Haile Makbeth thane of Cawder." But the third said; "All haile Makbeth that héerafter shalt be king of Scotland."

Although Shakespeare's Macbeth is mostly a straight retelling of the original, in some ways he has refashioned the narrative significantly. In the original, Macbeth conspired with Banquo and others to kill the ineffectual Duncan, and he was able to get away with it because they were all on his side against the King. Why would Shakespeare change history to such a degree? What could have been his motive?

During the time of Shakespeare, legend had it that Banquo, and his young son Fleance, were in the ancestral line of the Stuarts. By the 1600s that line stretched all the way to the person to whom the play *Macbeth* was dedicated, King James I. Shakespeare, thus, chose to honor James and his lineage by making Banquo innocent rather than one who conspired with Macbeth to kill Duncan. But Shakespeare had another reason for changing the story.

If he was to re-tell the Adam and Eve story, Shakespeare needed a woman, a partner in crime. In Holinshed's story of Macbeth, the fact that Macbeth has a wife at all is mentioned only once, and in only one sentence. Amazingly, in that single mention, the template for Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth is established.

> The woords of the thrée weird sisters also (of whome before ye haue heard) greatlie incouraged him herevunto, but speciallie his wife lay sore vpon him to attempt the thing, as she that was verie ambitious, burning in vnquenchable desire to beare the name of a quéene. (p. 269)

Everything else we know about Lady Macbeth was invented by Shakespeare. And what an invention she was, an early version of the "Bride of Frankenstein." Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's purely original female characters and the only female character to be an accessory to murder. Of all of Shakespeare's women, Lady Macbeth is, by far, the most ambitious, vicious and cold blooded. An outraged and jealous Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* knocks around the poor messenger and threatens to kill him, and Goneril and Regan, the greedy daughters of King Lear, plot to inherit their father's wealth. But not one of Shakespeare's women can compare to Lady Macbeth in the rawness of her desires and her cold-blooded determination.

She is the perfect Eve for an Adam whom she knows will never, by himself, commit the first sin. After all, Adam has heard the commandment directly from God, and Eve must have known what a strong impression that has made on him. Lady Macbeth puts it perfectly:

> Thou wouldst be great;
> Art not without ambition, but without
> The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly,
> That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
> And yet wouldst wrongly win.

Without Eve to goad him, Adam, the holy, would never have gone against the word of God.

Beginning of the Play

As has already been noted, right after God created Adam and Eve in Genesis Chapter 2, their story begins in Genesis 3:

> Now the serpent was more subtil than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said unto the woman, Yea, hath God said, Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?

Likewise, The story of Macbeth begins with the three wily witches who plan to meet with Macbeth to tempt him (Act 1, Scene 1):

> FIRST WITCH:
> When shall we three meet again?
> In thunder, lightning, or in rain?
>
> SECOND WITCH:
> When the hurlyburly's done;
> When the battle's lost and won.
>
> THIRD WITCH:
> That will be ere the set of sun.
>
> FIRST WITCH:
> Where the place?
>
> SECOND WITCH:
> Upon the heath.
>
> THIRD WITCH:
> There to meet with Macbeth.

Then, in the very next scene while King Duncan is being filled in on the war and the valiant efforts and bravery of Banquo and Macbeth, there is this exchange:

> DUNCAN:
> Dismay'd not this
> Our captains, Macbeth and Banquo?
> SERGEANT:
> Yes,
> As sparrows eagles, or the hare the lion.
> If I say sooth, I must report they were

As cannons overcharged with double cracks,
So they
Doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe.
Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds,
Or memorize another Golgotha...

Right here, in the very first scene of the play, is a reference to Adam and Eve. Golgatha, the cite of Jesus' crucifixion, is the same hill, where, legend has it, Adam was buried. All those pictures where a skull is seen at the foot of the cross – that is Adam's skull.

Crucifixion on Golgatha with Skull by Fra Angelico, 1442

The Middle:

Taken as a whole, *Macbeth* is a study in opposites and for good reason. As a retelling of and improvisation on the story of Adam and Eve, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is a powerful a symbol; it stands for the perception of all of life's dichotomies: oneness with God, and alienation from God; the union of man and woman (the sense of "one flesh") and the separation of the genders; being unclothed and unashamed as opposed to the awareness of our differences in our nakedness and the need to cover ourselves; belief in everlasting life and the acknowledgment of death...

And Fair and Foul.
And Man and Woman.
And Truth and Falsehood.
And What Is and What Is Not.
And Losing and Winning.
Killing for a King and Murdering a King.
Heaven and Hell.
Old and New.
Friends and Foes.
Fathered and Fatherless.
Dead and Alive.
Angel and Devil.
Asleep and Awake.
Born and Not Born.

Once Adam listens to Eve, who has harkened unto the serpent, and eats from the tree from which he was forbidden to eat, he has separated himself, and all of mankind, from the Holy One. His eyes and the eyes of his wife are then opened, and they see the gulf between themselves and God, between each other, and between all things. On almost every page of the play one can find a reference to dichotomy and opposing facets of existence.

And in the End:

So Shakespeare has neatly rearranged Holinshed's history and deftly recreated and illuminated the first human story of the Bible, and he has slyly planted his references and clues, and made the knowledge of opposites a leading motif. But just in case we needed a reminder or we missed it (which we did, it seems, for 400 years), Shakespeare, as the play nears its end, provides us with one more hint of what we have been treated to.

In Act 5, Scene 3, Macbeth is holed up in his castle with a few soldiers and servants. Most of his retinue have long since deserted him. He struts around bragging about how he can't be defeated when a servant enters to inform him that a force of ten thousand soldiers has been seen amassing below the castle. He then angrily dismisses the servant and yells:

> ...Seyton—I am sick at heart,
> When I behold—Seyton, I say!—This push
> Will cheer me ever or disseat me now.
> I have lived long enough. My way of life
> Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf,
> And that which should accompany old age,
> As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
> I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
> Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath,
> Which the poor heart would fain deny and dare not.
> Seyton!

The name may be spelled "Seyton," but the line "Seyton, I say!" gives the correct pronunciation and interpretation: he is Satan come 'round again for the final curtain. In his time of ruin, Macbeth is left with the one who set it all in motion, Satan, the adversary of God and tempter of man.

Upon his entrance, Seyton asks Macbeth, "What's your gracious pleasure?"
And Seyton's last words, fittingly are:"The Queen, my lord, is dead."

Soon Macbeth, too, will be dead, slain by Macduff, who, in Act 2, like Jesus, knocked at the gates of hell.

"...for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die."

Good has finally triumphed over evil.

A Final Word:

From the earliest times of his familiarity with Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the English author and intellectual Thomas De Quincey was bothered by one thing in particular: as soon as the Macbeths succeed in murdering King Duncan, they hear a knocking at the castle gate. What perplexed De Quincey is why he had the peculiar feeling of sympathy or at least an interest in the reactions of Macbeth to the sound.

> ...the knocking at the gate, which succeeds to the murder of Duncan, produced to my feelings an effect for which I never could account. The effect was, that it reflected back upon the murderer a peculiar awfulness and a depth of solemnity...
>
> From Thomas De Quincey's essay "On the Knocking at the Gate."
> First published in *The London Magazine*, October 1823

De Quincey had felt for years that, although his thoughts should have been with the dead King, instead they were with Macbeth's horrified reaction. He comes to understand that this was Shakespeare's intent all along:

> Murder in ordinary cases, where the sympathy is wholly directed to the case of the murdered person, is an incident of coarse and vulgar horror; and for this reason, that it flings the interest exclusively upon the natural but ignoble instinct by which we cleave to life; an instinct, which, as being indispensable to the primal law of self-preservation, is the same in kind, (though different in degree,) amongst all living creatures; this instinct therefore, because it annihilates all distinctions, and degrades the greatest of men to the level of "the poor beetle that we tread on," exhibits human nature in its most abject and humiliating attitude. Such an attitude would little suit the purposes of the poet. What then must he do? He must throw the interest on the murderer. Our sympathy must be with him; (of course I mean a sympathy of comprehension, a sympathy by which we enter into his feelings, and are made to understand them,--not a sympathy of pity or approbation.) In the murdered person all strife of thought, all flux and reflux of passion and of purpose, are crushed by one overwhelming panic; the fear of instant death smites him "with its petrific mace." But in the murderer, such a murderer as a poet will condescend to, there must be raging some great storm of passion,--jealousy, ambition, vengeance, hatred,--which will create a hell within him; and into this hell we are to look.

While De Quincey uses the word "sympathy" in a dispassionate sense, more like attention than sympathy, I have always felt real sympathy for Macbeth and even Lady Macbeth.

Remember, just hours before the deed, Macbeth had given himself all sorts of reasons not to kill Duncan. Here he even seems to invoke an image of the Last Judgement with trumpets, angels, and heaven:

> Besides, this Duncan
> Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
> So clear in his great office, that his virtues
> Will plead like angels trumpet-tongued against
> The deep damnation of his taking-off,
> And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
> Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin horsed
> Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
> Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
> That tears shall drown the wind.
> (Act 1, Scene 7)

The knocking on the gate reminds us of Macbeth's sympathy for the king and of his own weakness. Even Lady Macbeth has shown her fraility: "Had he not resembled My father as he slept, I had done't" and also "My hands are of your color, but I shame To wear a heart so white."

Finally, Macbeth desperately cries to the unseen knocker at the gate:

> To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself.
> *Knock knock knock*
> Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!
> (Act 2, Scene 3)

How heartfelt and pathetic are those lines. And from this point on, Macbeth will be hounded by fear and guilt. And he means it deeply when he says:

> Had I but died an hour before this chance,
> I had lived a blessed time
> (Act 2, Scene 3)

By the end of the play, although Macbeth was a "butcher" and his wife was a "fiend-like Queen," yet in their last day we are surely meant to feel some sympathy for them. Lady Macbeth has gone mad with remorse and shame. Her desire to be unsexed and filled with direst cruelty has failed her. She is, in the end, horrified to have been so heartless, and it kills her. As her doctor says:

> More needs she the divine than the physician.
> God, God, forgive us all!

Yes, the divine.

As for Macbeth, he, too, is painfully aware of his weakness and what it has wrought.

These contradictory feelings of disgust and sympathy should, by now, be no surprise, for when Jesus came to free those held in Hell by Satan, Adam and Eve were the first to be released. We, the children of their children's children, are, according to Christian theology, sinners as well. We are in no position to stand in absolute judgement of the first couple.

In the end, we are left with the message the Bible intended from the start: Forgive them, for they know not what they do. We should feel sympathy and forgiveness for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as we feel sympathy and forgiveness for Adam and Eve.

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools the way to dusty death.
(Act 5, Scene 5)

For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.
(Genesis 3:19)

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