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Shakespeare and Equivocation

Language and the Doom in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*

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Abstract

Equivocation is a condition of language that runs riot in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*. Whether as ambiguity or dissimulation, equivocation propels the plots of these plays to their tragic finales. The Doom as depicted in pre-Reformation churches is invoked in the plays as a force that could end both equivocation and tragedy. However, Shakespeare withholds this divine intervention, allowing the tragedy to play out. Chapter One outlines the thesis, explains the methodological approach, and locates the thesis in relation to the major fields of Shakespeare studies. Chapter Two focuses on the equivocal position of father-and-not-father occupied by Claudius and the Ghost in *Hamlet*, and the memento mori imagery in the play that reminds the audience of the inevitability of death and Judgement. Chapter Three on *Othello* examines Iago's equivocal mode of address, a blend of equivocations and lies that aims to move Othello from a valued insider to a detested outsider in Venice. Chapter Four argues that linguistic and temporal equivocations are the condition of *Macbeth*, where the trace of the future invades the present and the trace of vice invades virtue. In both *Othello* and *Macbeth*, the protagonists, in their darkest moments, summon images of apocalyptic damnation. Chapter Five proposes that the language of King Lear deconstructs the opposition between Christianity and paganism, and interprets Cordelia as both Lear's poison and remedy. Furthermore, it analyses the moment when Lear enters the stage carrying Cordelia's dead body as an equivocal invocation of the Doom. The methodological approach to this thesis draws on Derrida's conception of language as differential and without access to any divine guarantees that could anchor meaning. The tragedies, then, can be understood in relation to language: they are denied the divine force that could fix, resolve, and stabilize them.

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Introduction

An Outline of the Thesis

This thesis proposes that equivocation, as ambiguity or dissimulation, is a condition of language that runs untamed in the tragedies of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*. A *deus ex machina* that could end both equivocation and tragedy is invoked in the language of the plays in the form of the apocalyptic Judgement depicted in pre-Reformation depictions of the Doom. However, Shakespeare ultimately keeps this divine intervention off-stage, allowing the tragedy to play out. As a result, equivocations, which are resolved in the comedies, propel the plots to their tragic conclusions.

Equivocation was topical in 1606 when Father Henry Garnet, implicated in the Gunpowder Plot of the previous year, was tried before the King's Council at Guildhall. He justified his opaque answers at the trial on the basis of his adherence to the Jesuitical doctrine of mental equivocation, which allowed him, he claimed, to fulfil his obligation to his inquisitors but still observe the covenant of the private confession that revealed the plot against King James I. One reason for dating *Macbeth* as late as 1606 is the widely held belief that Shakespeare's hell-porter alludes to Garnet's trial:

> Knock, knock. Who's there, i'th'other devil's name? – Faith, here's an equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale; who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven: O! come in, equivocator.[1]

The hell-porter's imaginary newcomer arrives there because he has been unable to equivocate to heaven. Equivocation, from the Christian perspective of the four tragedies in question, occurs in a fallen world. But rhetorical art cannot hoodwink God: the Last Judgement, the definitive, unequivocal separation of the saved from the damned, is the point when all equivocation comes to an end.

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[1] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by Kenneth Muir, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1962), 2.3.7-12. All references are to this edition, unless otherwise indicated.

Early-modern Bible illustrations imply just such a difference between mortal language and the language of God. Woodcuts from the first page of Genesis suggest, in some cases, the transparency of language before the fall, its singular meaning, and, in other cases, the opacity of a fallen language where meaning runs riot. One woodcut shows the Tetragrammaton, the Hebraic name of God always rendered without vowels to emphasize its ineffability, placed above creation (figure 1). Several other versions have instead Adam naming the animals overseen by the Tetragrammaton (figure 2). Before the Fall, Adam could not misname the animals because the unequivocal truth of his choice was guaranteed by God. However, these prelapsarian images are replaced in some editions with a depiction of the Fall. Adam and Eve stand by the Tree of Knowledge, their disgrace written in English on the scroll that links them to the tree. The unspeakable, ineffable Tetragrammaton sits above them in the sky (figure 3). Viewed up close, the animals that surround Adam and Eve wear looks of scorn or despair.

Consciously or not, this woodcut presents a division between man and God as, at the same time, a difference between mortal and immortal communication. The Fall marks the point at which the Creator lets go, but it also signals the moment when human beings start to emulate His creativity. As this thesis primarily contends, man's fallen language is unstable and polysemic, in the possession of multiple meanings, a condition exemplified by equivocation. Ironically, the full possibilities of this language are realized by equivocation; it is language at the apex of its creative powers. Shakespeare's plays would lose much of their complexity without equivocation, a linguistic condition only possible in a fallen world. Indeed, without the heterogeneity afforded language by its separation from an unequivocal source, literature, including Shakespeare's plays, might not be possible at all. Paradoxically, equivocation – the play of language – can be seen not only as a curse of the Fall, but as one of its recompenses.

Equivocation is an unstable and unfixed linguistic trope that threatens inaccuracy even as this Introduction seems to promise the opposite in providing a definition. Father Garnet's equivocations were effectively lies, exemplifying equivocation as a way of lying by withholding part of the truth. It may also be an adherence to the letter of the truth that invites another meaning. Alternatively, equivocation exploits the plurality of meaning, inviting misconstruction or uncertainty by an utterance that is susceptible of more than one reading. Examples of these definitions are evident in modern political controversies. In 1992 Bosnian Muslim Dzemal Partusic revealed the atrocities perpetrated in a Bosnian-Serb prison camp with an equivocation: "I don't want to tell any lies, but cannot tell the truth."[2] Partusic's words, practically a definition of equivocation, confirmed the suspected atrocities by explicitly withholding any confirmation, satisfying both an inquisitive reporter and the camp's gun-wielding guards. Defeated 2008 Democratic presidential candidate Hilary Clinton did lie about the circumstances of her visit to Bosnia in 1996. Video footage showed her arrival to be routine, with no hint of the hazardous, unseen sniper-fire she recalled. Clinton described the error as a "misspeak", an ambiguous term that suggested a dramatic exaggeration but fell deliberately short of admitting the lie.[3] Such public relations tactics have characterized the New Labour government and, in the summer of 2008, came back to haunt one of its two major architects. Without a clear declaration of intent, Foreign Secretary David Miliband nevertheless signalled the start of his leadership campaign against Prime Minister Gordon Brown with opaque, but calculated, comments: "I have always wanted to support Gordon's leadership." The equivocation was swiftly paraphrased in the national press: "I hoped he would be a good Prime Minster, but I

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[2] Ed Vulliamy, "The Edge of Madness", *The Guardian* (23 July 2008) <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/jul/23/radovankaradzic.warcrimes > [accessed 5 August 2008] (para. 6 of 23).

[3] "Does 'Misspeak' Mean Lying?", *BBC Online* (28 March 2008) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/7314726.stm> [accessed 5 August 2008] (para. 3 of 26).

have been forced to conclude that he cannot be."[4] Miliband's statement addresses the Labour Party in a manner similar to Macbeth's temptation of Banquo: help me to replace our current leader, and your loyalty to me will be repaid.

Shakespeare did not need to wait until the trial of Father Garnet to discover the possibilities of equivocation. The practice features in his plays much earlier. Villainous characters make seemingly innocent statements that mislead others, or they use ambiguous terms that invite misapprehensions but maintain their integrity. Equivocation is not, however, exclusively evil. Jokes exploit double meanings to display the wit of the speaker, and romantic couples suggest their love with words that shy away from declaring it. Furthermore, it is not only a way of speaking; it may also be structural. For example, many characters hold titles or occupy positions that are equivocal. The comic heroines equivocate when they tell the truth disguised as boys. Dramatic irony depends on meanings available to the audience but not to the characters.

Philosopher Jacques Derrida, whose work provides the foundation for the methodology of this thesis, has argued that Western metaphysics traditionally, and erroneously, assumes an external point of reference. This external point of reference, the transcendental signified, is where unequivocal truth resides. In the Christian worlds of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*, as well as in the profoundly Christian language that invades the pagan world of *King Lear*, such a transcendental signified can be understood as God, or, appropriately, the *Logos*. In this designation often used by Christian theology, Jesus Christ is linked to the original Greek "logos" that denotes both "reason" and "word". The divine reason connects truth, rationality, and language, as in the New Testament: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."[5] As Derrida himself puts it, "all the metaphysical determinations of truth [...] are more or

[4] Andrew Rawnsley, "There is No Doubt About It, This is a Full-Frontal Assault", *The Observer*, 3 August 2008, p.33.
[5] John, 1.1.

less immediately inseparable from the logos" and, by way of example, this can be understood "in the sense of God's infinite understanding".[6] The main implication of Derrida's work on language is that communication does not take place, and messages are not received in the forms they are sent. Separated by disobedience from the authority of the *Logos* (as God, or divine law, which cannot lie or be irrational), Adam and Eve and their descendents have lost their hold on the connection between truth, reason, and speech, and must understand or delude each other as best they can. As Catherine Belsey states, "equivocation [...] is the paradigm case of all signifying practice".[7] Equivocation, whether as ambiguity or dissimulation, is not just a historical issue; it is the human experience of language.

This thesis examines the role equivocation plays in four of Shakespeare's tragedies. It is also viewed in relation to the anticipation, inspired by the pre-Reformation religious imagery, of the Last Judgement that could put a stop to both equivocation and tragedy. What I identify is not, however, a general rule of tragedy, or even of Shakespearean tragedy. *Antony and Cleopatra*, considered by many to be one of Shakespeare's major tragedies, is omitted from this thesis on the grounds that it can be understood as a possible counter-example. Cleopatra, a mortal character, also has immortal, otherworldly qualities: her beauty positions her outside the play's world, as a Venus-like goddess beyond the language used to describe her seductive powers. Unlike in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, where a metaphysical presence is invoked but kept off-stage, Cleopatra is an on-stage presence defined in metaphysical terms. That fulsome praise in her honour is delivered in her absence suggests a tension between her supernatural erotic powers and her presence before the audience. In the light of this, comparisons can be made. Although Cleopatra's ineffable beauty escapes adequate

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[6] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp.10-11.
[7] Catherine Belsey, *Shakespeare and the Loss of Eden* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p.83.

description, the play relies on the power of the signifier to persuade Shakespeare's audience that the boy playing Cleopatra can be compared to a goddess of love. *Antony and Cleopatra*, in this sense, does explore the creative possibilities of human language and its relationship with divinity.

The intervention this thesis makes can be summed up as follows: drawing on Derrida's critique, it proposes that the transcendental signified, lacking from a fallen language, is withheld, analogously, in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*. Without the divine intervention that ties up loose ends and brings unity to some of the comedies, tragedy has no recourse to a utopian conclusion. Language works in a similar way: without divine intervention it is unfixed, unanchored, and unstable. The four plays in question unleash the anarchic heterogeneity of language with tragic consequences. Moreover, Shakespeare's tragic protagonists call on the transcendental signified, the *Logos* kept tantalisingly off-stage, in the form of the final, apocalyptic Judgement, the literal, promised Doom, which would end equivocation and tragedy. Earthly destruction and disaster is thus unredeemed by any supernatural disclosure or revelation, by apocalyptic punishment for the wicked and salvation for the just.

In comedies the consequent misunderstandings are finally resolved. Moreover, sometimes closure explicitly depends on divine intervention. Hymen, goddess of marriage, reveals Rosalind's true identity and, as a result, resolves the events of *As You Like It*. Rosalind is reunited with her father, the Duke, and married to Orlando, while all the other romantic loose ends are tied up. In *Pericles*, the immaculate Diana, chaste, lunar goddess of the hunt, directs Pericles to her temple where he finds the wife for whom he grieves still alive. The tablet left by thunder-throwing Jupiter in *Cymbeline* foretells the succession of disclosures and discoveries in the final scene of the play, where Imogen and Posthumus are reconciled and Cymbeline finds his long-lost sons. Apollo's Oracle at Delphos offers the truth against which the disgrace and rehabilitation of Leontes is

measured in *The Winter's Tale.* Leontes dismisses the Oracle's words as false, but they are confirmed by the death of his son, Mamillius. The Oracle is validated again at the end of the play with the arrival of Leontes's lost daughter, Perdita, which leads to Hermione's mystical revival. These plays have, by definition, endings that point in different directions to those of the tragedies: protagonists are redeemed, doubts are resolved, malevolent figures are punished or seen to repent, lost siblings are found, parents and children are reconciled, and lovers are married. The resolution that a comedy offers can also be understood as a counterpoint to the endings of the tragedies, often displaying the supernatural justice anticipated, feared but ultimately withheld by Shakespeare from *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear.*

To mortal eyes, however, divine messages can still equivocate. Hymen bars confusion, but the declarations of Apollo's Oracle and Jupiter's tablet still require interpretation. A difference seems to hold in these plays between encountering the *Logos* and its symbolization in a fallen language, a difference also seen in St. Paul's epistle to the Christians of Corinth: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face."[8] The tragic heroes, however, do not come face to face with the *Logos.* Instead, in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, the intervention of a transcendental signified, of the *Logos*, is withheld and equivocation runs riot, its structural effects and the misapprehensions and misconstructions it invites producing tragic finales.

On the other hand, in allusions within the tragedies the *Logos* is invoked in the form of the Last Judgement that would end all equivocation and tragedy. This thesis examines pre-Reformation imagery of the Doom not critically mined before now, tracing its progression through the four tragedies in a linear manner. In the First Quarto of *Hamlet* the hero explicitly names the fear of God as the decisive point on man's moral compass, while all three texts of the play remind the audience of the inevitability of death

[8] I Corinthians, 13.12.

and the Judgement that follows. The graveyard scene reworks a memento mori often depicted on the walls of medieval churches. Hamlet's iconic encounter with Yorick's skull summons up the imagery of the "Three Living and the Three Dead", which showed gruesome cadavers warning living kings that the wealth and power they hold cannot defy death.

The language of *Othello* and *Macbeth* draws heavily on depictions of the Doom. Othello calls for Judgement, inviting, and despairing of, the heavenly wrath that could punish Iago. After Desdemona's murder is exposed as foul and wrongful, Othello pictures Desdemona's gaze thrusting his soul away from heaven and towards hell to be snatched at by fiends. Devils, or fiends, were almost universal in depictions of the Doom, grabbing souls, whipping the damned in the direction of hell, or carting them off to a fiery hell-mouth. Harrowed by shame and guilt, Othello offers himself to these sadistic demons. Macbeth is haunted by apocalyptic vision. In a soliloquy replete with references to Judgement Day, and before Lady Macbeth spurs him on to regicide, Macbeth considers the murder of Duncan a damnable offence, visualizing trumpet-wielding angels that condemn the crime with their blasts. Angels with trumpets featured in most Dooms, their heavenly blasts waking the dead to be saved or damned by the same "everlasting judge" feared by the protagonist in the First Quarto of *Hamlet*.[9]

Finally, Shakespeare ends *King Lear* with a conflation of a Christian and pagan apocalypse. Kent and Edgar invoke the Doom imagery introduced in *Hamlet* and so prevalent in *Othello* and *Macbeth*, acknowledging the moment Lear enters with a dead Cordelia in his arms as an image of the Apocalypse. The poor man's Bible, the title by which pre-Reformation church imagery has come to be known, warned medieval parishioners of the consequences of their actions, and, it seems, Shakespeare invoked,

[9] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet: The Texts of 1603 and 1623*, ed. by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 7.119.

appropriated, and reinterpreted images of death and, especially, the Doom in these four tragedies. These visions haunt the language of the plays, but the apocalyptic Judgement they imagine never arrives on stage to save the innocent and damn the wicked, to stop the tragedy caused by equivocation. Depictions of the Doom were widespread, and many, as well as a small number of "Three Living and Three Dead" paintings, can still be seen today across Britain, survivors of Protestant iconoclasm.

Extant images are often faded and difficult to make out, but the vitality and visibility of these images to medieval parishioners cannot be overestimated. Vivid and unavoidable, church imagery, including wall paintings and stained glass, was used as an educational tool by parish priests, more than likely not scholars themselves, to inform their mostly illiterate congregations. Along with images of Christ and the Virgin Mary, Biblical tales, morality tales, and Christian saints could be found on the walls of the medieval church. With densely packed narratives, these images could be subtle, surreal, or even grotesque, and would surely have made a profound impression on all who saw them. Doom images in particular were often ornate, complex, and frightening. They were intended to instruct parishioners across Britain and save their souls, but they also looked over the congregation with a menace that must have been overwhelming. But did Shakespeare himself see them? The evidence would certainly seem to suggest so.

During the Reformation, imagery, including wall paintings and stained glass, was destroyed as a result of iconoclastic zeal following injunctions by both Edward VI and Elizabeth I. Although most Doom paintings were whitewashed over in the course of the sixteenth century, obliterated by these decrees by the emergent Protestantism of the English Reformation, Shakespeare could have been aware of their content and may well have seen one. Edward VI in 1547 ordered that all pictures, paintings and stained glass in churches be removed, so church walls with paintings were washed and then covered with a coat of white lime. As Eamon Duffy writes, "conformity was almost universal" to

these diktats.[10] However, Duffy's words also betray the possibility that some churches could have escaped the fervour sweeping through England's parishes. At some point in his life, Shakespeare may well have seen a Doom painting, or even a stained glass version. That Elizabeth I ordered more removals from places of worship in 1559, just five years before Shakespeare's birth, suggests, at the very least, that enough pictures, paintings, and stained glass had survived for further action to be deemed necessary.

The 1559 injunction, as Margaret Aston sets out, "did not prescribe an aniconic church". Whether because of Elizabeth I's own resistance to this destructive mania, public affection for such imagery, or the practical difficulty of annihilating idolatrous imagery with the totality envisaged, "the way was open for compromise, for the retention, even the restoration, of imagery".[11] It would appear that pre-Reformation imagery thus had a chance of surviving the Protestant revolutionary zeal for long enough to be available to Shakespeare. Indeed, in *Much Ado About Nothing*, he seems to reference this iconography, evidently counting on his audience to recognize the allusion. Claudio and Don Pedro have been duped by false evidence of Hero's infidelity. Borachio talks about the eccentricities of fashion, which

> turns about all the hot-bloods between fourteen and five-and-thirty, sometimes fashioning them like Pharaoh's soldiers in the reechy painting, sometime like god Bel's priests in the old church window.[12]

The picture of Pharaoh's soldiers discoloured by smoke would seem to be one of the many wall paintings that illustrated Biblical tales in medieval churches, and the subsequent invocation of priests in the stained glass of church windows, suggests the survival of pre-Reformation iconography in glass, either in reality or in the popular memory.

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[10] Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England c.1400 – c.1580* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), p.481.
[11] Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts: Volume I: Laws Against Images* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp.304, 337.
[12] William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, ed. by Claire McEachern, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 3.3.127-131.

Moreover, as late as 1643-4, long after Shakespeare's death, William Dowsing worked his way through Suffolk and Cambridgeshire doggedly implementing a Parliamentary Ordinance to destroy surviving superstitious and idolatrous monuments. Conformity to the injunctions of 1547 and 1599, then, may have been far from universal for quite some time before the intervention of Victorian renovation destroyed hundreds of images. But most importantly, the content of these pictures would have been fresh in the memory of local communities, and throughout early modern Britain, and must have been familiar at least by repute to Shakespeare. As Duffy notes:

> The churchwardens' accounts of the period witness a wholesale removal of the images, vestments, and vessels which had been the wonder of foreign visitors to the country, and in which the collective memory of the parishes were, quite literally, enshrined.[13]

In an era of mandatory church attendance, it seems highly improbable that any congregation could be unaware of what had so recently adorned the church walls that surrounded them, especially when the very absence of these objects of religious creativity resulted from one of the key ideological struggles of the period's sectarianism. And if the items removed were fascinating for visiting foreigners and, for so long, a mode of religious instruction for the mostly illiterate parishioners, the language of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear* can be understood as a cultural representation of, perhaps, the most dramatic example of the images that persisted in the collective memory even after they were effaced, pulled down, or carried away.

Methodology

My focus in this thesis is the language of four of Shakespeare's tragedies in the light of elements of deconstruction. To put it another way, Derrida's conception of language as differential rather than referential, and its consequent instability, is employed to analyse

[13] Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, p.480.

the role a polysemic language, exemplified by equivocation, plays in the plots of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*.

Ideas, for Derrida, do not exist independently of language. It was Ferdinand de Saussure who privileged the signified within the linguistic sign over the referent in the world. In other words, language itself, not the outside world, determined meaning.[14] For instance, we comprehend the term "boy" in its difference from the term "girl", not because either word is fixed to an entity or concept in the world. Indeed, biological sex is much less binary than this verbal opposition implies. Following Saussure, Derrida goes on to argue that meaning results from the trace of difference, since we understand a term by reference not to the world but to its differentiating other. Meaning depends on the trace of "boy" in "girl", a trace that marks "the relationship with the other".[15] An effect of this trace is to unfix, or deconstruct, binary oppositions such as "boy" and "girl". According to Derrida, the signifier, without access to free-standing concepts, is separated from any possible fullness of its own meaning, the fullness only a metaphysical presence outside language could ensure. In a world devoid of divine guarantees, signification cannot be closed, final, or held in place, and equivocation stands as its general condition. My analysis considers this linguistic state as relevant, not just because it compliments the unfixed spelling and grammar of early modern English, not to mention the variations between Shakespeare's texts, but as a condition that the texts deliberately exploit as an instrumental part of the plots, which themselves withhold divine resolution.

This thesis analyses equivocation in relation to the metaphysical universes of each play. Drawing at one point on Derrida's work in his extensive reappraisal of Shakespeare in the light of poststructuralism, Malcolm Evans locates a linguistic battleground in the

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[14] See Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. by Wade Baskin (London: Fontana, 1974), pp.65-70, 111-122.
[15] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.47.

early scenes of *Macbeth*. On the one hand there is an "attempt to construct an unequivocal idiom" that includes "the theory of the divine right of kings and its place in the Great Chain of Being". On the other hand is "an inescapable undertow of negation [...] the hurly-burly of language".[16] To put it another way, equivocation disturbs a metaphysical order that assumes a transcendental signified. This thesis builds on Evans's insight, finding this struggle to be a fundamental one throughout *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*.

In so doing it answers R. A. Foakes critique of poststructuralist accounts of Shakespeare. Although Foakes generously concedes the poststructuralist liberation of Shakespeare criticism, he also believes that it undermines the aesthetic pleasure found in "the design of the whole" by focusing "on the particular, the fragmentary, the anecdotal, the borders of literature".[17] This thesis does not wish to offer a totalizing account of the texts, but it does not marginalize the texts in the way Foakes suggests, instead studying the relation between Derrida's conception of language and the dramaturgy of the plays. To put it simply, it examines the role of an unstable language in the plots of the plays. When Hymen intervenes at the end of *As You like It*, she orders reconciliation to take place "If truth holds true contents".[18] Evans calls this a validation of the restored order that opposes the tyrannous interregnum of Duke Frederick "in which those in power manipulate language to sustain official versions of 'truth' that are patently false".[19] This thesis places a different emphasis on this dramatic event: the intervention of a transcendental signified not only exposes lies, but resolves equivocations and the tragedy they threaten to cause. In *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, equivocations are

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[16] Malcolm Evans, *Signifying Nothing: Truth's True Contents in Shakespeare's Texts* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p.114.
[17] R. A. Foakes, *Hamlet Versus Lear: Cultural Politics and Shakespeare's Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p.222.
[18] William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. by Juliet Dusinberre, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 5.4.128.
[19] Evans, *Signifying Nothing*, p.147.

unchecked and unresolved by a *deus ex machina.* The equivocal positions of Claudius and the Ghost, Iago's temptation of Othello and the general's dual position as insider and outsider, the temporal and linguistic condition of *Macbeth*, and Cordelia's double-edged role as both a disgrace to Lear and his saving grace, all of these perform an active part in bringing about the tragic conclusion of each play.

Close scrutiny of the four texts dominates this thesis, following the recent return to the importance of Shakespeare's language initiated by Frank Kermode and, in particular, Lukas Erne. Kermode, writing on this occasion for a non-academic readership, states that Shakespeare's literary skills have been marginalized, an unwanted side-effect of the modern proliferation of Shakespeare studies, so that "the fact that he was a poet has somehow dropped out of consideration".[20] Erne, in response to the claims of performance theorists that Shakespeare wrote solely for the stage, offers a more substantial argument that Shakespeare also wrote for publication. The peak of playbook publication, Erne proposes, came between 1594 and 1613 and so what is particular about Shakespeare's career in London "is that plays stopped having a public existence that was confined to the stage". Successful and a shareholder in his company, Shakespeare "could afford to write plays for the stage *and* the page".[21]

However, rigorous textual analysis that treats the plays as literary works must also acknowledge the demands of the early modern stage as we understand them. Adopting Erne's implication that extant texts are our most unmediated encounter with Shakespeare, this thesis also acknowledges that early modern experiences of Shakespeare occurred predominantly in the theatre. Poetry and dramatic function cannot be divorced in the plays. When, as *Hamlet* begins, the sentry on guard is challenged by his replacement, the reversal of protocol indicates an uncanny unease in the dark. But a contemporary

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[20] Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.vii.
[21] Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp.14, 20. Original emphasis.

audience would need to be convinced of the night-time setting of the scene: we know performances occurred in the middle of the afternoon, so words have to do the work that, these days, can be done with a dimming of the lights. Barnardo solves the problem: "'Tis now struck twelve. Get thee to bed, Francisco." Francisco responds by stressing the melancholy mood: "For this relief much thanks. 'Tis bitter cold, | And I am sick at heart."[22] This reinforces the importance of Shakespeare's language; it is the power of the signifier that convinces Shakespeare's audience that the wary, brooding sentries change shifts uneasily at midnight rather than in broad daylight. And, of course, the central argument of this thesis is that these tragic plots and their language depend on each other in the following way: Shakespeare employs equivocation as a catalyst in tragedy and withholds the entity that could end both. Language and the plays are both denied the force that could fix, resolve, and stabilize them.

Locating the Thesis

This thesis draws on elements of new historicism and cultural materialism, as well as psychoanalytic and presentist approaches to Shakespeare, to supplement its methodology. In so doing, new-historicist considerations of contemporary political discourse are fused with the textual analysis of cultural materialism. At the same time, psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan's theory of the Name-of-the-Father supports the predominantly Derridean methodology of this thesis, primarily to illuminate Hamlet's dilemma, but also to comment on Duncan's position in *Macbeth* and Lear's position after he voluntarily gives up power. I also employ a presentist tactic, using modern theatre productions, films, and novels, to emphasize the themes located in each of the four plays.

The major new-historicist influence on this thesis is the work of Stephen Greenblatt, the figurehead of a methodology designed to understand the Shakespearean

[22] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Harold Jenkins, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1982), 1.1.7-9. All references are to this edition, unless otherwise stated.

canon in relation to dominant early modern ideological institutions. Greenblatt sets out his stall in *Shakespearean Negotiations*, where he contends that "works of art, however intensely marked by the creative intelligence and private obsessions of individuals, are the products of collective negotiation and exchange".[23] This thesis explores the influence of pre-Reformation imagery on four Shakespearean tragedies, a new-historicist nod to Greenblatt's *Hamlet in Purgatory*, where religious images from the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries illustrate the role of purgatory in *Hamlet.* My focus is the far more prevalent Doom imagery and its influence on the plays. In *Hamlet in Purgatory*, Greenblatt seems to allow Shakespeare greater agency in a search for "the matter he was working with and what he did with that matter".[24] However, as with his earlier work, the literary object of study takes second place to the historical context. Addressing the variations between Shakespeare's texts, Greenblatt states that there has "probably never been a time since the early eighteenth century when there was less confidence in the 'text'".[25] This justification for giving political discourse and events priority over an unstable text comes at a heavy price: Shakespeare's plays are relegated in importance, footnotes to their own exegesis. My analysis draws on Greenblatt's concern for social, economic, and political circumstances, but foregrounds the language of Shakespeare, employing the rigorous textual analysis new historicism can tend to eschew.

In privileging the language of the text, this thesis shares something of its methodology with cultural materialism. The foreword by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield to the seminal *Political Shakespeare* explains that this field of criticism can be understood as "a combination of historical context, theoretical method, political commitment and textual analysis".[26] The political commitment of cultural materialism

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[23] Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p.vii.
[24] Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.4.
[25] Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p.3.
[26] Editors' Foreword, in *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), p.vii.

can, in part, be seen as a reaction to the inequalities of Margaret Thatcher's Britain, and my focus on the machinations of language is perhaps a response to the political spin of Tony Blair's New Labour project, which valued the public's perception of its governance at least as highly as governance itself. Spin is defined as "a bias or slant on information, intended to create a favourable impression when it is presented to the public" (*OED*, *n.*[2.]g); it is the modern incarnation of Father Garnet's controversial equivocations. Blair's government, it seems, understood what Dollimore says of representation: "it is never merely a reflection of the pregiven, but something which helps both to control and constitute what is given and what is thought."[27] We can, perhaps, consider Iago as a twisted prototype of the modern political spin doctor. Indeed, Hamlet's delay can be seen as the apathetic response to the ideological wasteland of political leadership, Macbeth, with his unchecked ambition, as an early progenitor of ruthless, careerist politicians, and the multiple betrayals in *King Lear* as a proleptic vision of a cut-throat world. Meanwhile, those who believed in the bright future promised for Britain by New Labour may now feel as duped as Othello. These playful speculations aside, this thesis does not draw direct comparisons between Shakespeare's plays and the modern political environment, but it does aim to celebrate the power of the signifier. Just as cultural materialism searched the margins of the text to remove the shackles of ideological appropriations of gender, race, class, and sex in Shakespeare, this thesis aims to explore Shakespeare's language in order to understand the possibilities equivocation offers as a manipulative political tool. The thesis is thus self-consciously positioned at the intersections of various scholarly and political discourses that make up the cultural conditions of its production.

Use of Lacan's theory of the Name-of-the-Father gives this thesis a different dimension to recent psychoanalytic criticism of Shakespeare. Sigmund Freud has been a

[27] Jonathan Dollimore, "Shakespeare, Cultural Materialism, Feminism and Marxist Humanism", *New Literary History*, 21 (1989/1990), 471-493 (p.479).

useful resource for several generations of critics, with *Hamlet* proving the most fruitful source of analysis for both Freud and the Shakespeare criticism he inspired. Philip Armstrong, in a study of the relationship between Shakespeare and psychoanalysis, calls the scribbles Hamlet frantically makes on his tables after the intervention of the Ghost as "a moment that in Freudian terms represents the inscription upon the psyche of the superegoic law of the father".[28] Alternatively, this thesis centralizes the moment Hamlet addresses the Ghost as "King, father, royal Dane" (*Hamlet*, 1.4.45). In Lacanian terms, the paternal trinity of names invokes the Father as a structural position in language, a privileged signifier that directs the development of the subject. Coppélia Kahn has focused on Shakespeare's protagonists as products of a particular family structure,[29] but, as Armstrong puts it, Kahn "tends to take the Shakespearean family as a replica of the twentieth-century Oedipalised nuclear family".[30] Armstrong himself, in the light of Lacan's theory of the mirror stage – where the young child is inducted into culture by an identification with its reflection – uses the repetition of Renaissance "models of cognition – the eye of the mind, mirror of the intellect, mind as inner arena" in *Hamlet* to examine the identification between theatrical spectacle and spectator.[31] My thesis, however, adopts Lacan's emphasis on the Father to read Hamlet's dilemma as a choice between the Ghost and Claudius, both of whom occupy equivocal positions that undermine their claim to the place of Father. For Janet Adelman, emphasizing the maternal as a reaction to the patriarchy and misogyny feminist critics have located in Freud and Lacan, the mother previously absent in Shakespeare "returns with a vengeance in *Hamlet*".[32] Contrary to this approach, this thesis sees in *Hamlet* the failure of either

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[28] Philip Armstrong, *Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 2001), p.52.
[29] See Coppélia Kahn, *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981).
[30] Armstrong, *Shakespeare in Psychoanalysis*, p.188.
[31] Philip Armstrong, "Watching Hamlet Watching: Lacan, Shakespeare and the Mirror/Stage", in *Alternative Shakespeares: Volume 2*, ed. by Terence Hawkes (London: Routledge, 1996), pp.216-237 (p.224).
[32] Janet Adelman, *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays, "Hamlet" to "The Tempest"* (London: Routledge, 1992), p.10.

Claudius or the Ghost to unequivocally occupy the space vacated by old Hamlet, and, by extension, the failure of the play's patriarchal system. My analysis takes the Father to be a structural position in language rather than a biological one, a Lacanian trope that compliments the importance assigned to kings and fathers in early modern society, which saw a conflation between the two. Therefore in *Macbeth*, Duncan's success as a king, as a Father-figure, makes his killing all the more horrific, and in *King Lear*, Lear gives up the duties of kingship but still tries to retain its benefits, an equivocation that leaves him vulnerable to Goneril's and Regan's thirst for power.

Modern theatre productions, films, and novels are used throughout the thesis to substantiate the analysis in each chapter. This technique draws on the presentism of Terence Hawkes that attempts to "talk to the living", to use current issues as access points to Shakespeare.[33] Inverting the flow of presentism, my analysis uses modern texts to investigate how the issues it locates are exemplified by, and manifested in, current interpretations that draw directly or indirectly on *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*. In other words, though I acknowledge the historical context of these plays, I also read as a self-consciously twenty-first century reader.

Chapter Two of this thesis interprets *Hamlet* in the light of Jacques Lacan's theory of the Name-of-the-Father. Lacan extends the cultural tradition of associating external law with paternal authority to posit his Law, which constitutes the internalized commands imposed by the Father that regulate desire and unconscious imperatives. This chapter argues that Hamlet faces an impossible choice between a Ghost whose provenance is equivocal and Claudius, who is both Hamlet's uncle and his father. Neither the Ghost nor Claudius can authoritatively, unequivocally request Hamlet's fidelity, as both disrupt the order of family. This order depends on a system of clear differences for its meaning, a hierarchy that ensures the Father's pre-eminence. The

[33] Terence Hawkes, *Shakespeare in the Present* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.4.

chapter ends with an examination of the graveyard scene, which introduces the theme of Judgement by invoking the "Three Living and the Three Dead" memento mori.

Othello's position is interpreted as an equivocal one in Chapter Three, the impressive general moving from an insider to an outsider in Venetian society, ensnared by Iago's mode of address. The chapter posits Iago as an anti-*Logos*, a fiendish figure who revels in the use of an unanchored language, switching between lies and equivocations in order to realize his schemes. Othello, disgraced, beckons damnation, and the chapter ends by suggesting that Othello's self-condemnation invokes Doom imagery. Patricia Parker proposes that, in the final scene, Othello claims the authority of "a husband as final judge and executioner of a too open and too 'liberal' wife".[34] The chapter argues that Othello also calls upon the Judge seen in Doom imagery to justly punish him in turn.

Chapter Four examines the trace of the other that invades the selfsame in *Macbeth*. It begins by proposing that "man" is an equivocal term in the play contested by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Thus the self-interest and feudal obligations Kiernan Ryan sees as "sharply opposed value-systems and versions of masculinity"[35] are reappraised as the effect of a differential language. The chapter sees equivocation as the temporal, as well as the linguistic, condition of the play, the prophetic trace of the future invading the play's present. Moreover, the trace of the vices Malcolm renounces still threatens to invade his professed virtue, remaining a threat to the future of Scotland. The chapter ends with a detailed analysis of Macbeth's soliloquy at 1.7 in relation to pre-Reformation Doom imagery.

The final chapter proposes that *King Lear* deconstructs the opposition between Christianity and paganism. While the play is ostensibly set in pre-Christian times, it

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[34] Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp.251-252.
[35] Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), p.92.

nevertheless articulates its issues in the deeply Christian language of Shakespeare's day. Moreover, the chapter argues that the painful end confounds the expectation of salvation set up in the play, with Cordelia as the soteriological figure who initially hurts Lear but also returns from exile to save him. Cordelia is thus posited as a pharmakonic figure because, like the *pharmakon* Derrida finds to be both poison and remedy in Plato's *Phaedrus*, she is a figure within which "these oppositions are able to sketch themselves out".[36] The chapter concludes by arguing that *King Lear* ends with a Shakespearean image of the Apocalypse. Lear dies with the murdered Cordelia in his arms; it is an unredeemed, mortal image of the end of the world that stands in place of the promised Doom.

Equivocation runs free in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*. Tragedy, like language, requires a transcendental signified to resolve its ambiguities. However, the Doom that could end both equivocation and tragedy in the plays is invoked but strategically withheld. As a result, equivocations direct the plots of the plays to tragic conclusions.

A Note on Typography

When using early modern texts I have modernized "i", which also served for "j". Also, I have replaced the long "s" with the familiar modern version throughout. Where I have maintained the capitalization of theological terms, such as Doom, Judgement, Judge, Last Judgement, and Apocalypse, it is to emphasize their specifically Christian resonance. Moreover, I have also maintained the capitalization of quotations from Shakespeare and the Bible.

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[36] Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy", in *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 61-171 (p.99).

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Hamlet and the Symbolic Order

Introduction

A fallen world entails a fallen language distanced from a transcendental signified, and this thesis proposes that equivocation exemplifies such a language, while the plots of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* also turn on the lack of resolution and stability that a transcendental signified could provide. Without the divine intervention that Shakespeare withholds, the conflict in each play ends in tragedy as the signifier's power to generate meaning runs untamed. This chapter draws on Jacques Lacan's theory of the Name-of-the-Father, a structural position in Lacanian psychoanalysis influenced by the cultural role of fathers who are "identified [...] with the figure of the law".[1] By this Lacan means that culture has tended to associate the external law and authority of the state with fathers, and he uses this tradition to justify his Law, the internalized commands imposed by the Name-of-the-Father on the subject that check both desire and the imperatives of the unconscious. Thus the Name-of-the-Father, which can simply be referred to as the Father, confers identity and prohibits incest. In *Hamlet*, this chapter will argue, both the Ghost and Claudius occupy equivocal positions that disrupt the proper system of differences, meanings, and order of the family usually reinforced by Lacan's Name-of-the-Father. The contradictory positions occupied by Claudius and the Ghost are only possible in a fallen world afforded the possibilities of an equivocating, polysemic language. This chapter will conclude by suggesting that the audience is reminded of the Judgement of God – the transcendental signified, the *Logos*, that could stop all equivocation and which Shakespeare keeps off-stage – in the graveyard scene's invocation of the memento mori imagery often seen in pre-Reformation churches.

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[1] Jacques Lacan, *Écrits*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Routledge, 1989), p.74.

The Name-of-the-Father stands at the pivotal point of the symbolic order, understood as both symbolisation in language and a discipline that brings behaviour into line with the commands of the *Logos*, the absolute meaning without equivocation. Recognised as a privileged signifier in Lacan's symbolic system, the Name-of-the-Father locates the identity of the subject by placing it within a lineage and emphasising the incest taboo. In *Hamlet*, the king's murder by Claudius precipitates an uncertainty. Regicide, and the marriage of Gertrude and Claudius, causes confusion: Claudius becomes father and uncle, Gertrude mother and aunt, Hamlet son and nephew. Shakespeare's play can be seen to anticipate the agonistic relationship between the unequivocal *Logos* and its representation in a language we experience as polysemic, a difference stressed by old Hamlet's replacement by a spectre that assumes his shape on the one hand and an impostor father on the other. Hamlet cannot obey both; the play also questions whether the external law associated with fathers permits him to obey either as both Claudius and the Ghost are defined in the play as father-and-not-father. Following inexorably on from this, Law as defined by Lacan forbids him from obeying either, as both are and at the same time are not in the position of the Name-of-the-Father.

Hamlet's problem is not psychosis or procrastination, but that, in old Hamlet's absence, no figure in the play has the authority to require him to act. Psychosis, in Lacanian psychoanalysis, is the result of the paternal Law's expulsion from the symbolic universe, "the foreclosure of the Name-of-the-Father in the place of the Other".[2] For Lacan, this Other denotes the unconscious as well as the symbolic order, which, in turn, is equivalent in meaning to both language and the entire cultural domain. In order to avoid the individual's psychosis, the Name-of-the-Father must speak from the place of the Other. However, in *Hamlet*, with the death of the father, old Hamlet, and the introduction of Claudius the impostor-father in his place, the Name-of-the-Father speaks

[2] Lacan, *Écrits*, p.238.

from an equivocal position. Hamlet's problem, rather than a proto-Lacanian psychosis triggered by "the Name-of-the-Father [...] never having attained the place of the Other",[3] is that he is asked to obey the commands of untrustworthy father-figures. The questionable Ghost speaks from an other, supernatural place, while, like Claudius the usurper king, it is both Hamlet's father and not Hamlet's father. Attempting to solicit filial piety from Hamlet, Claudius lays claim, albeit unsuccessfully, to the place vacated by old Hamlet's death: "That which dearest father bears his son | Do I impart toward you."[4] Similarly, the Ghost expects Hamlet to obey its command in the name of filial piety: "If thou didst ever thy dear father love [...] Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder" (1.5.23, 25). Both are qualified for the condition of father-and-not-father.

Hamlet's crisis is a profoundly personal one but it has a social dimension. A clear demarcation did not exist between public and private spaces in Elizabethan society and *Hamlet* presents this undifferentiated sphere that includes, as Francis Barker puts it, "the father who is as a king in the family and the king who is as a father in the state".[5] In *Hamlet* family equivocations are also state equivocations. Hamlet receives equivocal commands both as a son of the king and as a subject of the king, and responds with equivocations of his own that try to work through the confusions of the play. His alienation marks the territory of a struggle with a new, unstable symbolic order. Indeed, it can be argued that *Hamlet* not only anticipates Lacanian psychoanalysis but, in muddying the Name-of-the-Father, pre-empts Derrida's criticism of Lacan's symbolic order as the source of a phallogocentric truth psychoanalysis reveals.[6]

The opening three lines of the Arden edition of *Hamlet* offer a question, a demand and a statement that resonate throughout the play:

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[3] Lacan, *Écrits*, p.240.
[4] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Harold Jenkins, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1982), 1.2.111-112. All references are to this edition, unless otherwise stated.
[5] Francis Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body* (London: Methuen, 1984), p.31
[6] Jacques Derrida, "Le facteur de la vérité", in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 411-496.

BARNARDO Who's there?
FRANCISCO Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself.
BARNARDO Long live the King!

1.1.1-3

An omen of the early threats posed by the Ghost and Fortinbras, the opening question also situates Hamlet amidst the equivocations of the play. To reveal himself as a murderous revenger is what the Ghost demands of Hamlet: "If thou has nature in thee, bear it not" (1.5.81). Hamlet's response to the demand is not the swift and bloody justice the Ghost expects; it is the unfolding of the play's metaphysics of kings and fathers as Hamlet struggles with a command that proves difficult to obey. Barnardo's cry does not turn out to be just ironic: the statement also predicts Hamlet's inability to obey the impossible Law imposed by impostor Fathers.

The Ghost's Equivocal Provenance

Invoking the equivocal provenance of the Ghost, the opening line of *Hamlet* poses a question that dominates the beginning of the play and haunts the unfolding of the dramatic events. Barnardo's question immediately unbalances the military etiquette of the battlemented scene, as it is Francisco on guard who has the right to challenge the presence of anyone approaching. This disruption of protocol indicates the oncoming sentry's jumpy unease. Though the black of night Shakespeare intended would not have been immediately perceptible to an audience at The Globe, Barnardo's words to Francisco specify the late-night setting: "'Tis now struck twelve. Get thee to bed, Francisco" (1.1.7). An ominous darkness becomes apparent to an audience that has already heard the needy question. Beginning with the first line, which in our time sounds like the final words of a Hollywood horror film's sacrificial victim, the theatrical effect of the opening scene is to make the onlooker immediately aware of the time of day and convey the sense of discomfort, trepidation and slight, subtle imbalance that permeates

Elsinore. Francisco – no longer on sentry duty – reinforces this shortly afterwards when heralding the entry of Horatio and Marcellus, whose imminent arrival he is even aware of: "Stand, ho! Who is there?" (1.1.15). The fear is infectious. Back in late 2005 the Wales Theatre Company's production of *Hamlet* at Cardiff's New Theatre used the modern theatre setting to emphasise this horror. As the winter winds howled outside, the mist and darkness on the indoor stage was broken by director Michael Bogdanov with the sudden, blinding projection of the Ghost on a large screen. In Shakespeare's play, as well as setting the scene of embryonic disturbance, Barnardo's question is an instant, dramatic omen of the nightly stalking of old Hamlet's ghost, a supernatural march that drives the action of the play by its revelations to Hamlet, while, ironically and equivocally, being the cause of the protagonist's inaction. Moreover, the spectre's visitation eventually exposes the crimes of the incumbent king, himself threatened by Fortinbras's march towards Elsinore.

The question becomes more specific after Horatio and Marcellus enter: "Say, what, is Horatio there?" (1.1.21). Horatio, as a scholar, is summoned to the watch as a witness to sceptical reasoning:

HORATIO What, has this thing appear'd again tonight?
BARNARDO I have seen nothing.
MARCELLUS Horatio says 'tis but our fantasy,
And will not let belief take hold of him,
Touching this dreaded sight twice seen of us.
Therefore I have entreated him along
With us to watch the minutes of this night,
That if again this apparition come,
He may approve our eyes and speak to it.
1.1.24-32

Horatio's description of the ghost as a thing encapsulates the equivocal nature of the presence that will silently stalk both the stage itself and the language of the three watchmen. Marcellus's descriptions conflate something feared with something supernatural but visible. Setting up an analogy between Shakespeare's fictional Ghost

and Marx's philosophical and political haunting of the present, Jacques Derrida describes the initially silent spectre as "nothing that can be seen when one speaks of it".[7] However, the problem seems to be that, even once seen, this feared presence cannot be easily defined. Equivocal outlines and ambiguous labels surround a ghoul, a vision, yet to be named. Hamlet's famous words to his friend and ally are appropriately oblique, an effect of the vagueness of the Ghost: "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, | Than are dreamt of in your philosophy" (1.5.174-5). In the plot of the play, one of these things, a dreaded thing, a fantastical apparition, appears as it is spoken of, usurping the tale of its appearance with a repetition of the past:

BARNARDO Last night of all,
When yond same star that's westward from the pole,
Had made his course t'illume that part of heaven
Where now it burns, Marcellus and myself,
The bell then beating one –

Enter GHOST

MARCELLUS Peace, break thee off. Look where it comes again.
BARNARDO In the same figure like the King that's dead.
1.1.38-44

This brief appearance suggests the primacy of a signifier that signifies only fleetingly. Anticipating Banquo's response to the sight of the witches in *Macbeth*, Horatio asks: "What art thou that usurp'st this time of night?" (1.1.49). Indeed, this anachronistic supernatural interruption echoes the otherworldly intervention of the witches in *Macbeth*, who cause a schism in the temporal and linguistic stability of the play from the very start, so that the schism and its jagged opening up is the condition of the play. In *Hamlet*, the Ghost appears in a form that resembles the recently deceased king in the opening scene, but does not convince the wary watchmen that it is the King of Denmark so much as an apparition that seems to imitate him: "Looks a not like the King?" asks Barnardo (1.1.46). Doubt and confusion over the Ghost confound the scholar Horatio, who is overcome

[7] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), p.6.

with "fear and wonder" by what looks upon him, by what he sees but cannot define (1.1.47). The play's opening question, then, signals the start of a motif repeated in relation to the Ghost throughout the play.

A military threat to Elsinore is conflated with the supernatural threat the watchmen fearfully await at the start of *Hamlet.* Horatio's words reinforce the already paranoid mood created by the Ghost's march across the stage: "This bodes some strange eruption to our state" (1.1.72). Unable to warrant the need for their night-time watch, the presence of the Ghost substantiates the anticipation of another unwelcome and unclear disturbance felt by the King's Guard and the amazed Horatio. This is articulated by Marcellus, who is as yet unaware of the reason, if any, for his sentry duty:

> Good now, sit down, and tell me, he that knows,
> Why this same strict and most observant watch
> So nightly toils the subject of the land?
>
> 1.1.73-5

According to Horatio, Prince Fortinbras has "in the skirts of Norway here and there | Shark'd up a list of lawless resolutes" to recover by force lands lost by his father to old Hamlet in a duel (1.1.100-1). Or "At least the whisper goes so" (1.1.83). In these early stages of the action the threat to Elsinore is equivocal yet fluid, with both the ghostly likeness of old Hamlet and the nearing army of Fortinbras seeming to pose a double threat. Yet what kind of outbreak will afflict Elsinore remains shrouded in mystery at this moment of the play. The apparition in the form of old Hamlet also signifies, in the minds of the watchmen at least, the approach of Fortinbras's disparate rabble. Silent, the Ghost withholds what it signifies, while the possibility of war waged by the Norwegian prince remains unconfirmed by the court. A double threat becomes one threat and one omen, while the equivocation, the conflation, repeats and perpetuates the question: "Who's there?"

Elizabethan audiences may well have doubted that the Ghost was the returned soul of the departed king. Though there was a widespread popular belief in revenants, this idea was contrary to the Christian teachings of the period. What connected the Church and folk beliefs was the moral ambiguity of such appearances. It was likely that the Ghost was perceived initially as a presence that could be anywhere on the spectrum between benevolent and malevolent. A generation ago, Eleanor Prosser invited viewers and readers of *Hamlet* to consider that, contrary to most presentations of the play over the previous four centuries or so, the protagonist is not morally obligated to obey the Ghost and that this form of old Hamlet is not necessarily benevolent. Rather, Prosser stated that the common religious beliefs of the time would have led the audience to understand the Ghost in a variety of ways, and this would have included the possibility that it is something devilish.[8] Thus, to the Elizabethan audience well-versed in Catholic beliefs and bombarded with Protestant correction, the Ghost probably did not seem to have a fixed moral position. Indeed, the presence of a figure that would have meaning for an audience comprised of Protestants and Catholics may have been a deliberate ploy by the dramatist. Or, in fiction, perhaps the religious resonance of a revenant was unimportant. Certainly, the offence the Ghost takes to Horatio's demand, "By Heaven, I charge thee speak" (1.1.52), would be enough to make Shakespeare's audience at least wary, and possibly sceptical, of the spectre's intentions. Emanating from beneath the stage, the Ghost's demand that Horatio and Marcellus swear allegiance would have added to the sense of devilry, while the Christ-like stage direction of the Second Quarto when "*It spreads his arms*" contradicts demonic signifiers with a powerful introductory gesture that compensates for the Ghost's silence.[9] We are wrong-footed once more when the Ghost's exit is prompted by the cock crow (1.1.142), as nature's early-morning alarm call

[8] Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1971), pp.101-102.
[9] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), 1.1.126-7. All references for the Second Quarto of 1604-5 are to this edition.

was commonly believed to dispel ghouls, goblins and the general evils of the night. Shakespeare, it seems, resisted the temptation to make the Ghost's provenance explicit: perhaps even, as E. Pearlman speculates, Shakespeare "decided to engage his audience intellectually by casting doubt on the very nature of his specter".[10] The following possibilities would seem to hold for the Ghost: it is a spirit that may be good or bad; it is a Catholic soul in purgatory; it is, considering the almost unanimous Protestant belief that the age of miracles passed with the coming of Christ and the establishment of the church by his apostles, a hallucination or a demon in the seductive shape of a much loved, and recently passed, king. The religious equivocation is infinite. As a spirit, only its actions will reveal its motives and plans. As a soul in purgatory, it inhabits an equivocal position until its earthly wrongs are put right by the living, telling truths in order to bring justice. As a demon masquerading in the form of old Hamlet it could be an instrument of darkness that wants to win Hamlet to his harm. Hamlet's response to Horatio's report captures the various beliefs encompassed by the Ghost; it is both a Protestant spectre that takes on the shape of Hamlet's "noble father's person" (1.2.244) and a classical or Catholic spectre that is Hamlet's "father's spirit" (1.2.255). As well as these, Horatio considers the Ghost to be a common revenant disturbed by unresolved matters on earth:

> If there be any good thing to be done
> That may to thee do ease, and grace to me,
> Speak to me;
> If thou art privy to thy country's fate,
> Which, happily, foreknowing may avoid,
> O speak;
> Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life
> Extorted treasure in the womb of earth,
> For which they say your spirits oft walk in death,
> Speak of it, stay and speak.
>
> 1.1.133-142

[10] E. Pearlman, "Shakespeare at Work: The Invention of the Ghost", in *Hamlet: New Critical Essays*, ed. by Arthur F. Kinney (London: Routledge, 2002), pp.71-84 (p.81).

Above all, the spectre seems to be a popular folk ghost that cannot rest while some issues remain unsettled.

Hamlet's first response to the appearance of the Ghost acknowledges it as an equivocal presence. He accompanies Horatio and Marcellus to the watch the next night at the witching hour, a time that heightens the expectation of a supernatural, otherworldly intervention:

> HAMLET What hour now?
> HORATIO I think it lacks of twelve.
> MARCELLUS No, it is struck.
> 1.4.3-4

The sombre, misty mood of midnight, the hour when the apparition is "wont to walk" (1.4.6), has crept up on the watchmen, and Hamlet recognises the Ghost as an indefinable vision:

> HAMLET Angels and ministers of grace defend us!
> Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damn'd,
> Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
> Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
> Thou com'st in such a questionable shape
> That I will speak to thee.
> 1.4.39-44

Hamlet's prayer for protection to the agents of God's grace anticipates a threat, but the next three lines complicate the sense of imminent danger. In Hamlet's eyes, the vision could be benevolent or malevolent, may herald salvation or damnation, and have heavenly or demonic intentions. These words reinforce the initial impression of the Ghost's equivocal supernatural position.

Hamlet, like Macbeth, is seduced by a figure he cannot define. The witches in *Macbeth* look "not like th'inhabitants o'th'earth", and their androgyny and fantastical appearance fascinate Banquo and Macbeth.[11] Hamlet is also intrigued by a figure visible on the earth, but seemingly from another realm. Indeed, Hamlet's first haunting by the

[11] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by Kenneth Muir, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1962), 1.3.39-47 (1.3.41). All references are to this edition, unless otherwise indicated.

Ghost can be seen as a prototype of Banquo and Macbeth's encounter with the witches. On the Scottish heath, in an echo of the question that dominates the opening of *Hamlet*, Shakespeare has Macbeth demand that the witches reveal their identity: "Speak, if you can: – what are you?" (*Macbeth*, 1.3.47). In *Hamlet*, the mourning prince challenges the Ghost to speak: "O answer me. | Let me not burst in ignorance" (1.4.45-46). Hamlet, influenced by the Ghost's resemblance to old Hamlet, addresses the Ghost by the name of his father, and a trinity of other names that invoke the structural position of the Father: "I'll call thee Hamlet, | King, father, royal Dane" (1.4.44-45). However, these invocations follow hard upon Hamlet's wonder at the Ghost's spectral, indefinable presence.

Others have also exploited the Ghost's equivocal influence. Matt Haig's recent novel, *Dead Fathers Club*, reworks Shakespeare's play, setting it in the north-east of modern-day England. Eleven-year-old Philip's mother marries his Uncle Alan soon after the death of Philip's father. The ghost of Philip's father visits him wearing a "T shirt which said King of the Castle with the word CASTLE written in red capital letters".[12] As in *Hamlet*, a ghost that claims to be the protagonist's father appears in apparel that signifies his paternal authority. But, like the figure that haunts the battlements of Elsinore, the phantom comes from a place that cannot be defined:

> When Mum was in the bathroom getting ready I sat and looked at the five Guppies and then I saw a reflection in the fish tank. It wasnt like a normal reflection it was like a reflection of a reflection and I turned round and it was Dads Ghost and I said Dad? in a loud voice.[13]

The wispy reflection of this ghost emphasizes its otherworldly origin, and, like Hamlet, Philip addresses the spectre as his father at the same time that he questions its origin. Like the Ghost in Shakespeare's play, the apparition in *Dead Fathers Club* may assume the

[12] Matt Haig, *Dead Fathers Club* (London: Vintage, 2007), p.4.
[13] Haig, *Dead Fathers Club*, p.16.

shape of the protagonist's father, but it is an equivocal representation that emanates from a supernatural place.

The Ghost initially wins Hamlet's attention and trust, a trust the audience is encouraged to share. Measured but authoritative, the taciturn Ghost's first words command the stage: "Mark me" (1.5.2). In *Macbeth*, the equivocal modes of address employed by the witches seduce Macbeth. Similarly, in *Othello*, Iago employs equivocations and lies in order to invite Othello to volunteer the murderous intention the fiendish ensign withholds. Despite its initial silence, the Ghost in *Hamlet* is more explanatory:

> I am thy father's spirit,
> Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
> And for the day confin'd to fast in fires.
>
> 1.5.9-11

The *Logos*, the everlasting Judge of the play's Christian universe, makes its presence felt in the Judgement the Ghost claims has condemned it to a torturous routine that seems like Purgatorial cleansing of its "foul crimes" (1.5.12-13). In *Othello* and *Macbeth* the audience hears the scheming Iago and the riddling witches speak without the protagonist present, but in *Hamlet* the Ghost remains silent until it is alone with Hamlet. The audience knows neither more nor less than the protagonist about the Ghost, sharing Hamlet's experience of the dreaded apparition. This knowledge shared with Hamlet determines the disposition of the audience to the Ghost, and this identification between viewer and hero invited by the play's dramaturgy acts as a counterpoint to the bitter, revengeful urgings of the Ghost. Moreover, it encourages the audience to believe in the Ghost's benevolence, especially as Hamlet twice refers to the spectral thing as "poor ghost" (1.5.4, 1.5.96). As the Ghost pledges to unfold a foul tale of murder, Hamlet's ultimately ironic first words of revenge indicate the righteous, bloody conviction of a traditional revenger: "Haste me to know't, that I [...] May sweep to my revenge" (1.5.29-31). Though ironic when

considered at the end of the play, Hamlet's words set up the expectation of vengeance. Indeed, the Ghost substantiates this expectation by promising Hamlet a tale so horrid that he will be compelled to act: "Duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed [...] Wouldst thou not stir in this" (1.5.32-34). If Hamlet has misjudged the Ghost at this point, the audience is encouraged to make the same mistake.

Hamlet and the Ghost are placed in opposition to the villainous Claudius. The tale Hamlet yearns for and the Ghost divulges also provides the despicable enemy who must fall in the name of justice:

> Know, thou noble youth,
> The serpent that did sting thy father's life
> Now wears his crown.
>
> 1.5.38-40.

Claudius is revealed as the venomous snake that has stung, and poisoned, the Eden of Elsinore. The Biblical nature of the Ghost's words demonise the new king and sanctify the Ghost: it is not the spectre that cowers away from the morning light that should be feared, but the serpent-like Claudius who hisses in Gertrude's ear at night. Hamlet's response brings the audience further on side: "O my prophetic soul! My uncle!" (1.5.41). He was right about Claudius, and the audience was right to believe him. The revelation of murder, as well as the Ghost's and Hamlet's indignation, sharply contrast with the matter-of-fact pragmatism Claudius offers in response to Hamlet's continued mourning, where nature's "common theme | Is death of fathers" (1.2.103-104). In the light of the Ghost's claim, these words sound wicked, and the Ghost's story of horror pulls no punches in damning Claudius:

> Ay, that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
> With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts –
> O wicked wit, and gifts that have the power
> So to seduce! – won to his shameful lust
> The will of my most seeming-virtuous queen.
>
> 1.5.42-46

Like Hamlet, who compares Claudius to a satyr inferior to the majesty of old Hamlet as the sun god Hyperion (1.2.139-140), the Ghost portrays Claudius as beastly, as, in the Second Quarto and Folio, "a wretch whose natural gifts were poor | To those of mine" (1.5.51-52). Christian morality permeates the Ghost's language, portraying Claudius as the fiendish, treacherous villain.

The Ghost's human burst of moral outrage problematizes its supernatural origin. An otherworldly force with human emotions, the Ghost is presented by Shakespeare "as a fellow creature who just happens to be a spirit".[14] This spirit, this presence from another realm, speaks with very human spite: it refers to Gertrude's superficial virtue, mirroring Hamlet's shattered image of his crying, mournful mother who wept inconsolably for her dead husband:

> Within a month,
> Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
> Had left the flushing of her galled eyes,
> She married – O most wicked speed! To post
> With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
>
> 1.2.153-157

The royal wedding undermines Gertrude's mourning. Retrospectively, her conduct exposes her grief as a façade for Hamlet, since "a beast that wants discourse of reason | Would have mourn'd longer" (1.2.150-151). For Hamlet it is the speed that propelled Gertrude to her husband's brother's bed that rankles; for the Ghost it is the sinister charm that won her. As the Ghost is humanised, Claudius is demonised, described as something less than human. Shifted by the Ghost into the position of the devil, Claudius has witchcraft at his disposal. The devil is not here in the dark night of this scene, not the one condemned to suffer the flames of purgatory every day. Instead, the devil slithers through the court to take a place by Gertrude. Claudius is like a cockroach that remains bold under the kitchen light. He must be stamped on.

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[14] Pearlman, "Shakespeare at Work", p.80.

On the other hand, demonic imagery surrounds the Ghost. Doomed to fires of cleansing or punishment, the Ghost cowers when daylight approaches: "But soft, methinks I scent the morning air: | Brief let me be" (1.5.58-59). This poetic photophobia could be played on stage in a pejorative manner, like a cockroach that scuttles into the damp and the darkness when the kitchen light is switched on. Puck's words to Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* describe another nightly escape from the encroaching morning's brightness:

> And yonder shines Aurora's harbinger,
> At whose approach, ghosts wandering here and there
> Troop home to churchyards.[15]

Here souls return to consecrated ground before sunrise, but the damned souls also return to their burial sites before the morning star rises:

> Damned spirits all,
> That in cross-ways and floods have burial,
> Already to their wormy beds are gone,
> For fear lest day should look their shames upon:
> They wilfully themselves exil'd from light,
> And must for aye consort with black-brow'd night.
> *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 3.2.382-387

Elizabethans who committed suicide were commonly buried at crossroads, unless, like those who drowned, their bodies were not recoverable, but they are included by Puck in the nightly migration of ghosts returning to consecrated graves. Hamlet's response to the Ghost's exit as "The glow-worm shows the matin to be near" (1.5.89) sums up the equivocation between the damned and the saved souls that disappear as the morning light breaks: "O all you host of heaven! O earth! What else? | And shall I couple hell?" (1.5.92-93). The Globe theatre's trap-door was used by players to rise up on to the stage from the cellarage area beneath, known as "hell", and, in a discussion of Elizabethan stage and printing history, Tiffany Stern states that its use as a grave and as the door to

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[15] William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. by Harold F. Brooks, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1979), 3.2.380-2. All references are to this edition, unless otherwise stated.

hell suggests the possibility that "the ghost in *Hamlet* is evil".[16] Stage directions do not specify where the Ghost enters and exits from so we cannot know for sure that the Ghost came and went through the trap-door to the cellarage, but we do know that it moves around the cellarage urging Horatio and Marcellus to swear secrecy, and that certainly can be seen as its return either to the grave or to hell. That the Ghost comes from hell could, then, have been suggested to Shakespeare's audience, if in performances of the play the Ghost entered or exited via the trap-door. However, Hamlet's own words signify the possibility of the Ghost as evil: although he seems convinced by the Ghost's tale, Hamlet does not discount the possibility of its hellish malevolence.

Uncertain of its origins, Hamlet cannot without question obey the command of the Ghost to avenge old Hamlet's murder. To test its authority, the *Mousetrap* seeks evidence to prove Claudius's guilt: "I'll have grounds | More relative than this" (2.2.599-600). The words of the Second Quarto and Folio, as well as the First Quarto's "sounder proofs", evoke a sense of solidity in opposition to the immateriality of the Ghost and its tale.[17] The "perturbed spirit" (1.5.190) Hamlet was ready to swiftly serve "May be a devil" (2.2.595). As Lacan observed, the Ghost does not offer Hamlet the prohibitions of Law because it "is constantly being doubted".[18] In other words, as a spectre, as an illusory Father, the Ghost's provenance is too equivocal for it to occupy the structural position of the Name-of-the-Father. Instead, the Ghost's structural place is uncertain, and its command that Hamlet murder Claudius proves difficult for Hamlet to obey. Indeed, Hamlet also disobeys the Ghost's prohibitions. It orders Hamlet to concentrate only on Claudius: "Taint not thy mind nor let thy soul contrive | Against thy mother aught" (1.5.85-86). Hamlet's "antic disposition" (1.5.180) could thus be seen as

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[16] Tiffany Stern, *Making Shakespeare: From Stage to Page* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.26.
[17] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet: The Texts of 1603 and 1623*, ed. by Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Thomson Learning, 2006), Q1, 7.434. All references to the First Quarto of 1603 and the Folio of 1623 are to this edition.
[18] Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book 11: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Norton, 1981), pp.34-5.

resistance to the Ghost's order, rather than psychosis or a mode of protection that hides murderous intentions. The Ghost appears for a second time to reiterate its command and interrupt Hamlet's vitriolic attack on Gertrude, imploring Hamlet to heal the inner torment he has caused in Gertrude: "O step between her and her fighting soul" (3.4.113). Franco Zeffirelli's film version of Hamlet introduces the Ghost to Gertrude's chamber as she kisses Hamlet passionately, emphasising the Oedipal prohibition of the second spectral visitation.[19] But more than just a clumsy challenge to the incest taboo, Hamlet's attack has contravened the explicit demand that he does not turn against his mother. Moreover, in Gertrude's closet, Hamlet, once more, seeks the protection of the agents of God's grace before addressing the possibly demonic Ghost: "Save me and hover o'er with your wings, | You heavenly guards!" (3.4.104-105). This fear counterpoints the exposition of old Hamlet as an ideal Father:

> See what a grace was seated on this brow,
> Hyperion's curls, the front of Jove himself,
> An eye like Mars to threaten and command,
> A station like the herald Mercury
> New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill,
> A combination and a form indeed
> Where every god did seem to set his seal
> To give the world assurance of a man.
>
> 3.4.55-62

Hamlet portrays his father as endorsed by the gods themselves, blessed with their divine qualities. With Titanic hair, the greatest brow, and a war-like gaze, old Hamlet, like the messenger Mercury, mediates the orders of the heavens to mortal men. In Lacanian terms, Hamlet's eulogy places old Hamlet in the position of a Law that both commands and threatens. Typically reticent, the Ghost reminds Hamlet of its impossible order. When at its most taciturn, from its initial "Mark me", to the farewell of "Remember me" (1.5.91), and the final "Do not forget" (3.4.110) of its unexpected return, the Ghost imitates what the Name-of-the-Father should be. From another, supernatural realm, the

[19] *Hamlet.* Dir. Franco Zeffirelli. Warner; Carolco. 1990.

Ghost assumes the shape of old Hamlet but provides a command and a prohibition difficult for Hamlet to obey because they emanate from an equivocal source. Hamlet cannot obey both Claudius and the Ghost, and the Ghost's questionable provenance makes it untrustworthy, unable to hold the structural position of the Name-of-the-Father once occupied by old Hamlet.

Claudius the Father/Uncle

Claudius is both Hamlet's father and Hamlet's uncle, an equivocal position that undermines the authority of the Name-of-the-Father. Hamlet is perplexed in the extreme by Gertrude's choice of Claudius that swaps the father he deifies for "a mildew'd ear | Blasting his wholesome brother" (3.4.64-65). But it is more than an issue of quality, as the impact of ecclesiastical law on Elizabethan society rendered this instance of incest, as John Dover Wilson once stressed, "so important that it is scarcely possible to make too much of it".[20] The family equivocation that results from the replacement of old Hamlet by Claudius, as well as Gertrude's dual position as mother and aunt, complicates a structure that depends on an order, on a system of differences, for meaning. Michael Almereyda's film version of *Hamlet*, set in modern-day New York, keeps the stress on the family structure. As Hamlet contemplates the Ghost's revelation he watches a video of Thich Nhat Hanh, the Zen Buddhist monk, who explains his theory of Interbeing: "You need other people in order to be. You need father, mother, but also uncle".[21] "Who's there?", the question of the opening line, resurfaces in the Second Quarto and Folio when Claudius inadvertently introduces the audience to the ambivalences, the disruptions to the family structure, that affect Hamlet:

> Therefore our sometime sister, now our queen,
> Th'imperial jointress to this warlike state,
> Have we, as 'twere with a defeated joy,

[20] John Dover Wilson, *What Happens in "Hamlet"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), p.43.
[21] *Hamlet.* Dir. Michael Almeyda. Miramax. 2000.

With an auspicious and a dropping eye,
With mirth in funeral and with dirge in marriage
In equal scale weighing delight and dole,
Taken to wife.

1.2.8-14

The new uncertainties caused by regicide and the Queen's speedy remarriage are immediately apparent. Gertrude's sinful, incestuous remarriage advances Claudius to the throne and blocks Hamlet's inheritance claim. As Lisa Jardine proposes, Hamlet obsesses over his mother's remarriage because Gertrude "embodies the contradictory claims of kinship on women" in the early modern period.[22] This can be understood another way: Hamlet's obsessive focus on Gertrude's second marriage contravenes the Ghost's inadequate prohibition. Femininity in *Hamlet* violates this: it "functions *as* excess" according to Jacqueline Rose, an excess that disturbs patriarchal, psychoanalytic authority.[23] However, femininity in *Hamlet* can also be seen as immovable: Gertrude is not replaced by a different woman, but remains in place as old Hamlet is substituted in a reversal of the phallocentricity of Lacanian psychoanalysis. For Lacan, the phallus – another privileged signifier that symbolizes sexual difference, and relates to desire and signification itself – in *Hamlet* is "entirely out of place in terms of its position in the Oedipus complex".[24] By this, Lacan means that Hamlet finds Claudius, associated with the phallus, in the place where he wants his father to be, and so cannot kill the father who, in the Oedipal triangle, he really wants to kill. The play, as Lacan interprets it, thus confirms the unattainable nature of the phallus. We can articulate this dislocation differently: as a result of Gertrude's union with Claudius, the Name-of-the-Father is out of place in terms of its position in the symbolic order, and embarks on a voyage within a patriarchal order it should instead regulate by playing a central, stabilizing role.

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[22] Lisa Jardine, *Reading Shakespeare Historically* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.47.
[23] Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986), p.136. Original emphasis.
[24] Jacques Lacan, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*", *Yale French Studies*, 55/56 (1977), *Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise*, ed. by Shoshana Felman, 11-52 (p.50).

Hamlet's exchange with Gertrude in her chamber concerns the replacement of old Hamlet by Claudius:

HAMLET Now, mother, what's the matter?
QUEEN Hamlet, thou hast thy father much offended.
HAMLET Mother, you have my father much offended.
3.4.7-9

Hamlet throws Claudius's dual-identity as father and uncle back at Gertrude. In a line absent from the First Quarto, Hamlet refers to Gertrude as "the Queen, [her] husband's brother's wife" (3.4.14), stressing his over-fathered status. Polonius, hidden behind the arras, cries out and, as a result, dies on the point of Hamlet's suddenly-thrust rapier. With this action Hamlet answers Barnardo's demand: "Stand and unfold yourself." Hamlet, with Claudius absent, displays a murderous decisiveness that would please a classic revenger, such as Kyd's Lorenzo: "Where words prevail not, violence prevails".[25] The complications that make the regicide demanded of Hamlet so problematic momentarily disappear, but he wastes no time in returning to the matter of civilizing Gertrude:

QUEEN O what a rash and bloody deed is this!
HAMLET A bloody deed. Almost as bad, good mother,
As kill a king and marry with his brother.
3.4.27-9

Nothing the Ghost reveals implicates Gertrude in the killing of old Hamlet, yet Hamlet's statement returns us to the main equivocations at stake in the play.

For Hamlet, the composite crime he imagines not only "blurs the grace and blush of modesty" (3.4.41), but has a far broader impact. The double offence of the act unhinges the very truth of language, so that marriage vows become "As false as dicers' oaths" (3.4.45). In lines only in the later texts, Gertrude's damnable act abuses language itself, as well as the holy laws it symbolizes:

O, such a deed

[25] Thomas Kyd, *'The First Part of Hieronimo" and 'The Spanish Tragedy"*, ed. by Andrew S. Cairncross, Regents Renaissance Drama Series (London: Edward Arnold, 1967), 2.1.108.

As from the body of contraction plucks
The very soul, and sweet religion makes
A rhapsody of words.

3.4.45-8

Her crime has not only perverted marriage, but all solemn, contractual agreements. As a result of this offence, language has become discordant, extravagant, and confused; it is an offence that incurs a heavenly sorrow and wrath as great "as against the doom" (3.4.50). Here Hamlet invokes the unequivocal Judgement that could stop all equivocation, but which remains off-stage in the play, allowing the tragedy to play out; it is the transcendental signified, the *Logos*, that could bring resolution and stability to a language polluted, in Hamlet's mind, by the union of Claudius and Gertrude. This union invokes the proximity of the funeral and marriage that, in the plot of the play, entail the possibility of father/uncles and mother/aunts.

Gertrude's opposing titles anticipate the inverted emotions of old Hamlet's funeral and the royal wedding. Claudius articulates her position as Hamlet's mother and aunt, as a joint-ruler in joint possession of antithetical titles. The usurper king's descriptions of the union swap the emotions linked to funerals with those linked to weddings. As Hamlet bitterly remarks to Horatio, "The funeral bak'd meats | Did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables" (1.2.180-181). The proximity of the wedding to the funeral deconstructs the opposition between grief and ecstasy; it is with a compromised, beaten joy, an eye inclined to weeping and another looking up in happiness, with which Claudius and Gertrude wed. Marriage and funeral ceremonies are associated with inappropriate feelings, which, like the equivocations of the witches in *Macbeth*, are to be revealed as the truth of the matter.

The reduced mourning rites in *Hamlet* oppose Claudius's excesses. For Lacan, mourning is "performed to satisfy the disorder that is produced by the inadequacy of

signifying elements".[26] That is to say, mourning compensates for the inability of language to cope with an event that sits outside its realm of meaning. In *Hamlet*, the disorder caused by old Hamlet's murder at the hands of Claudius creates an impasse: the dead cannot be mourned properly, or given the appropriate ceremonies, without threatening the new, precarious *status quo*. Claudius's acquisition of his brother's throne and wife in one fell swoop leave old Hamlet, so the Ghost claims, "Unhousel'd, disappointed, unanel'd" (1.5.77), without the Christian ritual provisions for the after-life, setting the tone for what is to follow. Not only is Hamlet encouraged to forget about his father, but Laertes must come to terms with his father's "obscure funeral" (4.5.210). Laertes snarls that Polonius, slain by Hamlet when hidden in Gertrude's chamber, was buried with "No trophy, sword, nor hatchment o'er his bones, | No noble rite, nor formal ostentation" (4.5.211-212). A state funeral is denied in favour of political expediency, so that the accusations that may harm Claudius "hit the woundless air" instead (4.1.44). Another victim of the rotten court is laid to rest without the conventional parade. Ophelia, maddened by the twisted Oedipal killing of her father by the man she loves, has a similarly ascetic funeral because of her suspected suicide. "What ceremony else?" Laertes repeatedly asks (5.1.216, 218), but the Priest firmly denies Ophelia any further service, which would profane that offered to "peace-parted souls" (5.1.231). In *Hamlet*, death is unaccounted for because the appropriate or expected rituals that would ascribe it meaning in the universe of the play are absent, withheld in order to protect the king's position.

Hamlet's introduction by his uncle and now father, Claudius, underlines the equivocation dominating his mood: "But now, my cousin Hamlet, and my son" (1.2.64). Terence Hawkes states that in European cultures the uncle plays the lax, humorous role in opposition to the strict, disciplinarian authority of the father, so "when Claudius seems

[26] Lacan, "Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*", p.38.

able, even willing, to change his role from uncle to father, he's proposing a fundamental transgression".[27] Replacing Hamlet's dead father produces a contradiction in the family unit, and Hamlet's first words to Claudius in the Second Quarto and Folio are a response that attempts to disentangle the equivocation of their new relationship: "A little more than kin, and less than kind" (1.2.65). Hamlet describes their relationship as both more than kinsmen as father and son and less than kinsmen in their similarity to one another in emotion and deed. This can also be read as a conflation of the sense of "kin" as relation, kindred or, indeed, kind, with "kind" as "birth, origin, descent", "the family, ancestral race, or stock from which one springs", and also "naturally well-disposed" (*OED*, *sb.*1.a, *sb.*12, *a.*5). Hamlet's succinct, sarcastic response equivocates, withholding any explicit attack but implying his suspicion and resentment of Claudius: the new king is less than of the same nature and disposition as Hamlet, less than well-meaning, less than Hamlet's father. If the structural position of the Name-of-the-Father brings discipline into line with the commands of the unequivocal *Logos*, which we can understand as the Christian God of *Hamlet*'s universe, the union of Claudius and Gertrude contradicts the prohibition on incest as set out in the Holiness Code of the second part of Leviticus in the Old Testament.[28] Claudius's marriage to Gertrude does make him King of Denmark, one of the play's Father-figures. However, the very marriage that wins him that structural position also disturbs the order of the family, its differences and meanings, which paternal law should support. Similarly, Hamlet's pun in the Second Quarto and Folio that he is "too much in the sun" (1.2.67) plays on the equivocation of the family trinity that has given him an extra Father: the king, who was Hamlet's father, is dead, and the new king, who is also Hamlet's father, lives. Hamlet's acidic responses explore the ambiguities introduced by Gertrude's marriage to Claudius, and it is this disruptive trope

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[27] Terence Hawkes, *Shakespeare in the Present* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.136.
[28] "Thou shalt not uncover the nakedness of thy brother's wife: it *is* thy brother's nakedness" (Leviticus, 18.16). Original emphasis.

that, throughout the play's cultural history, has given it "the power to shake the most firmly-planted binary representations".[29] In *Hamlet* the meaning that generally depends upon the differences between fathers and uncles, mothers and aunts, and sons and nephews, is absent.

Claudius equivocates in order to compliment and belittle Hamlet at the same time. His portrayal of Hamlet damns the aloof protagonist with faint praise: "'Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet, | To give these mourning duties to your father" (1.2.87-8). These kind words are also tight-fisted, suggesting that Hamlet's grief is flippant, and little more than a reserved and hurried introduction to the inevitable rebuke that follows: "But you must know your father lost a father, | That father lost, lost his" (1.2.89-90). The scepticism toward Hamlet's "obsequious sorrow" (1.2.92) grows as the tone of Claudius's speech becomes increasingly didactic, painting Hamlet as immature. Indeed, Claudius goes on to question the manhood of his nephew/son, because

> to persever
> In obstinate condolement is a course
> Of impious stubbornness, 'tis unmanly grief.
>
> 1.2.92-94

Claudius portrays Hamlet's grief as prodigal; it is unnecessarily insistent, as well as disrespectful to the natural, new, and inevitable *status quo*. Moreover, Claudius's words anticipate Lady Macbeth's appeal to Macbeth's masculinity. Where Macbeth is "too full o'th'milk of human kindness" to seize the throne (*Macbeth*, 1.5.17), Claudius the regicide portrays Hamlet as "unfortified", "impatient", "simple and unschool'd" (1.2.96-97), and that his reluctance to accept the death of old Hamlet as swiftly as the rest of the court is "peevish" (1.2.100). Lady Macbeth rouses Macbeth's primordial aggression, but Claudius robs Hamlet of his manhood by describing him as a spoilt, crying child. The

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[29] Lawrence Danson, "Gazing at Hamlet, or the Danish Cabaret", *Shakespeare Survey*, 45 (1992), 37-51 (p.37).

metaphorical pat on the head that patronises Hamlet becomes an accusation of self-indulgence in Hamlet that is "a fault to heaven, | A fault against the dead, a fault to nature" (1.2.101-2). Claudius attempts to strengthen his grip on the throne with an analysis that, in the eyes of the court, as well as the audience, will make Hamlet seem unfit to rule. This subtle political manoeuvring turns on Claudius's equivocal use of "nature": the same sweet, loyal dedication to his father that Claudius applauds in Hamlet also offends the natural passage of life. Although Claudius's chastisement of Hamlet is more close-lipped in the First Quarto, it follows the same trajectory:

> This shows a loving care in you, son Hamlet,
> But you must think your father lost a father,
> That father dead lost his, and so shall be
> Until the general ending. Therefore
> Cease laments, it is a fault 'gainst heaven,
> Fault 'gainst the dead, a fault 'gainst nature,
> And in reason's common course most certain
> None lives on earth but he is born to die.
>
> Q1, 2.40-47

Though Claudius labels Hamlet "the most immediate to our throne", he ends by rearticulating the equivocation between "cousin, and [...] son", renaming his nephew/son as his "chiefest courtier" rather than Denmark's heir to the throne (1.2.109, 117). The rhetoric that subtly debases Hamlet's qualities also attempts to legitimise Claudius's possession of Hamlet's inheritance.

Hamlet's crisis is a profoundly personal one. The Queen asks why the common theme of death affects Hamlet more than others: "Why seems it so particular with thee?" (1.2.75). As Barker states, Elizabethan society conceived of the king's body as the contemporary instance of Christ's earthly symbolisation of God's heavenly will, the body that "encompasses all mundane bodies within its build".[30] A depiction of Christ at St. Teilo's Church in Cardiff, a recreation of a medieval church previously at Pontarddulais, West Glamorgan, illustrates the belief: bearded and red-haired, this Christ may well have

[30] Barker, *The Tremulous Private Body*, p.31.

intentionally resembled Henry VIII, the connection between the Messiah and the monarch emphasized by the Tudor roses that flank him (figure 4). William Tyndale's 1528 anti-Catholic text *The Obedience of a Christian Man* encouraged its readers to submit to a social hierarchy with the king at the top and fathers supreme in their homes.[31] Almost a century later, James I would draw on scripture to make this point in a speech to Parliament in 1609: "Kings are [...] compared to Fathers of families: for a King is trewly *Parens patriæ*, the politique father of his people."[32] The term James I used to denote his position as the father of the people now also refers to the power of the state to usurp the rights of the parent, guardian, or carer. Hamlet, located in a polity without the clear difference between public and private space recognizable to us, is subject to a king that both is and is not his father.

The absence of stable meaning extends to Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia. Hamlet's desire for Ophelia, particularly in the Second Quarto and Folio, equivocates. He rejects Ophelia, teases her with lascivious sexual connotations and, finally, admits his love for her only at her funeral. In the later texts Hamlet denies the existence of love-letters sent to Ophelia (3.1.93-96) then makes explicitly contradictory statements:

> HAMLET I did love you once.
> OPHELIA Indeed, my lord, you made me believe so.
> HAMLET You should not have believed me; for virtue cannot so inoculate our old stock but we shall relish of it. I loved you not.
> OPHELIA I was the more deceived.
>
> 3.1.115-120.

Hamlet, tormenting Ophelia, admits to the trace of man's original, sinful aspect, an invasion of vice into virtue that corrupted his declarations of love. He then sums up the equivocation with an order that plays on the Elizabethan slang use of "nunnery" as a brothel, suggesting both chastity and lustfulness: "Go thy ways to a nunnery" (3.1.130). Alexia Papalazarou's direction of Sam Bobrick's comedy, *Hamlet II (Better Than the*

[31] See William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, ed. by David Daniell (London: Penguin, 2000).
[32] *The Political Works of James I* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1918; repr. New York, NY: Russell & Russell, 1965), p.307.

Original), at the Anoikhto Theatre in Nicosia, Cyprus, in December 2007, linked Claudius's ambiguous position with grotesque, confused desires. After the hasty marriage of the queen and her new king, Laertes cannot decide if his lust should be satisfied by Claudius or Hamlet, as Hamlet repeatedly escapes from the overtly Oedipal attentions of his mother only to accidentally return to her embrace when faced with Ophelia's youthful desperation. Ophelia, disgruntled, takes on all-comers, including Claudius, who sometimes deliberately, sometimes innocently, confuses her with Gertrude. All the while Polonius holds a supernatural torch for the Ghost, itself flirting outrageously with the audience. And, as the protagonist surveys the orgiastic scene, the famous question of whether it is better to be or not to be in such a world becomes, in the Greek translation, an "aporia", an impasse that, like Shakespeare's use of "nunnery", points in opposing directions. Indeed, in Shakespeare's original, after Hamlet pushes Ophelia away, he pulls her back again in the preamble to *The Mousetrap*. Hamlet refuses Gertrude's company to sit beside Ophelia: "No, good mother, here's metal more attractive" (3.2.108). As the court settles down to watch the play-within-the-play, Hamlet turns on the outrageously improper bawdy charm as part of his performance of an antic disposition:

HAMLET	[*lying down at Ophelia's feet*] Lady, shall I lie in your lap?
OPHELIA	No, my lord.
HAMLET	I mean, my head upon your lap.
OPHELIA	Ay, my lord.
HAMLET	Do you think I meant country matters?
OPHELIA	I think nothing, my lord.
HAMLET	That's a fair thought to lie between maids' legs.
OPHELIA	What is, my lord?
HAMLET	Nothing.

3.2.110-19

Ophelia rebuffs Hamlet's implication and he clarifies his meaning only to return to the sexual theme with polite innuendo that, obliquely, contains a hard, dirty, and foul reference to the nothing, the O, the fair, undiscovered country between Ophelia's legs.

Hamlet responds to the unravelled signifiers of mother and father with a search for meaning beyond signification. Alone before the audience for the first time, Hamlet, in the play's initial soliloquy, spells out his turmoil:

> O that this too too sullied flesh would melt,
> Thaw and resolve itself into a dew,
> Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
> His canon 'gainst self-slaughter.
>
> 1.2.129-32

Hamlet comes close to the Christian sin of despair, wishing that his body would dissolve or that God did not prohibit suicide. Editorial debate surrounding the word "sullied" offers three possibilities – the "solid" of the Folio, the "sallied" of the Quartos, and the conjectural "sullied" in the Arden edition. The sense in the Folio is of solidity, a fatness, which operates in opposition to Hamlet's nihilistic drive towards a state of dissolution. This desire for diffusion compliments Hamlet's search for meaning beyond signification. Both Claudius and Gertrude question Hamlet's "nighted colour" in the face of death's ubiquity (1.2.68), but Hamlet's spiky response refutes their pragmatism:

> 'Tis not alone my inky cloak, good mother,
> Nor customary suits of solemn black,
> Nor windy suspiration of forc'd breath,
> No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
> Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
> Together with all forms, moods, shapes of grief,
> That can denote me truly. These indeed seem,
> For they are actions that a man might play.
>
> 1.2.77-84

Hamlet stresses that his grief is more than just the outward indicators of mourning. Moreover, the list of actions pre-empt the play-within-a-play and allude to the disingenuous nature of the Gertrude's and Claudius's own grief. The difference is made explicit: "I have that within which passes show, | These but the trappings and the suits of woe" (1.2.85-86). Thus Hamlet constructs an opposition between an unattainable signifier that can denote him accurately and theatrical signifiers that equivocate.

The inheritance, the royal throne of Denmark, of which Claudius robs Hamlet, is described by Rosencrantz in the Second Quarto and Folio in terms that anticipate Lacan's theory of the Name-of-the-Father. To protect his position as king, Claudius dispatches Hamlet to England in the care of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Rosencrantz's sycophantic reply to the commission unintentionally evokes the death of old Hamlet, as well as the threat posed by an out of control Hamlet:

> The cess of majesty
> Dies not alone, but like a gulf doth draw
> What's near it with it. Or it is a massy wheel
> Fix'd on the summit of the highest mount,
> To whose huge spokes ten thousand lesser things
> Are mortis'd and adjoin'd, which when it falls,
> Each small annexment, petty consequence,
> Attends the boist'rous ruin.
>
> 3.3.15-22

A royal death creates an eddied drag that draws in its surroundings, sucking them into its whirlpool. Rosencrantz here refers to the threat posed to Claudius by Hamlet's prickly eccentricity but, at the same time, these words also evoke the murder of old Hamlet, while the spiralling pull of majesty's end can be read as a portentous statement that Claudius, "like a man to double business bound" (3.3.41), must constantly resist, despite being its cause. The fall of a king, like the turn of Fortune's wheel, determines the mood of all subjected to it. Derrida identifies a chronological madness in *Hamlet*, where times and dates, which ordinarily situate and arrest meaning, are inconsistent.[33] The dislocation Derrida identifies as temporal can be transposed to the position of Fathers in the play, where equivocal Fathers disrupt, rather than stabilize, meaning. Fragile Claudius sits unsteadily atop the wheel Rosencrantz describes, which can be read as an allegory for Lacan's symbolic order where the Name-of-the-Father is a privileged signifier that should organize and control the excesses of signification.

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[33] Jacques Derrida, "The Time is Out of Joint", in *Deconstruction is/in America: A New Sense of the Political*, ed. by Anselm Haverkamp (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1995), pp.14-38.

Kingship, like the Lacanian Father, depends upon a paradox. When Hamlet teases Rosencrantz with the whereabouts of the slain body of Polonius he also equivocates on the political doctrine that ascribed to a king two bodies, one natural and one political: "The body is with the King, but the King is not with the body" (4.3.26-27). Hamlet's words carry an implied threat to Claudius, warning that kingship does not protect the king from death, and that, moreover, the office of king itself outlives the death of the individual who occupies that office. More than that, Hamlet's words point out that a body may hold the position of king, but that kingship does not reside in that body, an oblique attack on Claudius as unfit to be king. James L. Calderwood stresses that Claudius is only referred to by his title in the dialogue of the play because "the royal class name obscures whereas the proper name proclaims individuality".[34] To take this further, when Claudius becomes king he attains a symbolic title that supersedes his name. However, instead of a Father fixed in his dominant position at the high peak of Rosencrantz's metaphorical mountain, a usurper-king and impostor-father stands as the privileged signifier in *Hamlet.*

With characteristic complexity, Nicholas Royle states in his deconstructionist analysis that *Hamlet* is "the impossible dramatisation, deferral and enactment, presentation, analysis and abyssing of the signature".[35] What we can take from this is that proper names in *Hamlet* invoke expectations that the play confounds. Hamlet stands in the shadow of his father's name, as inadequate as Claudius in comparison to old Hamlet: "My father's brother – but no more like my father | Than I to Hercules" (1.2.152-153). Fortinbras's strong-arm tactics are out-manoeuvred by Claudius's diplomacy, while the crimes Claudius committed in order to become king invade the

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[34] James L. Calderwood, *To Be and Not To Be: Negation and Metadrama in 'Hamlet'* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1983), p.8.
[35] Nicholas Royle, *After Derrida* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p.106.

structural position he occupies when he "cashes in his own identity".[36] The Ghost's identity as Hamlet's father is constantly doubted, while in the prayer scene Claudius doubts himself and, therefore, Shakespeare presents Fathers who destabilise the structural position assigned to them. In the prayer scene in particular, the sins of Claudius constantly haunt the position of king. The fate of a nation is in the balance when danger seems so near to the king, but regicide, which Claudius continues to hide with more crimes, threatens the order, discipline, and stability his symbolic position should ensure. Put simply, Claudius endangers Denmark because he cannot offer the security Rosencrantz both ascribes to a king and resolves to defend.

Equivocation comes back to haunt Claudius in the prayer scene. Claudius's first admission comes as an aside that confirms his guilt and offers the audience a glimpse of the insincere genuflection to come:

> The harlot's cheek, beautied with plast'ring art,
> Is not more ugly to the thing that helps it
> Than is my deed to my most painted word.
>
> 3.1.51-53

His words, like the beauty of a painted face, are artificial: they may be fair, but his crime proves them false. This division between his words and the effects of his crimes is reproduced as he kneels in search of salvation. Alone and temporarily without the trappings of his crime, Claudius admits that his regicide "is rank, it smells to heaven", his desire to pray constantly obstructed, "Though inclination be as sharp as will" (3.3.36, 39). Claudius holds the reward of his foul crime, and so struggles to request forgiveness: "That cannot be, since I am still posses'd | Of those effects for which I did the murder" (3.3.53-54). Prosser identified "an active conscience that cannot be silenced" in Claudius,[37] but his attempted repentance before divine judgement comes up against the continued possession of his ill-gotten gains:

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[36] Calderwood, *To Be and Not To Be*, p.9.
[37] Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge*, p.185.

In the corrupted currents of this world
Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,
And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
Buys out the law. But 'tis not so above:
There is no shuffling, there the action lies
In his true nature, and we ourselves compell'd
Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults
To give in evidence.

3.3.57-64

Claudius's fear of Judgement anticipates the treasonous equivocator the Porter in *Macbeth* imagines, who "could not equivocate to heaven" (*Macbeth*, 2.3.11). By choosing the aspect of prayer's "twofold force" (3.3.48) that forgives a past, committed sin, Claudius invokes the unequivocal Judge, the play's Christian God, who will expose his crime. Unlike earthly judgement, which can be corrupted, the final Judgement of a transcendental signified cannot be bought or hoodwinked. Claudius can only offer an equivocal prayer: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. | Words without thoughts never to heaven go" (3.3.97-98). The First Quarto, where Claudius's final words are slightly different, sums up what is at stake: "My words fly up, my sins remain below. | No king on earth is safe if God's his foe" (Q1, 10.32-33). More explicit than the later texts, the First Quarto closes the prayer scene with an affirmation of the divine danger Claudius faces: though Claudius can equivocate to the ears of men, from whom rhetoric and political machinations can withhold the full truth, trickery reaps everlasting damnation before God.

Hamlet's deliberations, as Claudius kneels, deconstruct the opposition between salvation and damnation. Claudius admits defeat in his attempt to be absolved, but, ironically, Hamlet allows his father/uncle the repentance that, according to the Ghost, old Hamlet was denied:

Am I then reveng'd,
To take him in the purging of his soul,
When he is fit and season'd for his passage?
No.

3.3.84-87

The penitence Claudius cannot wholeheartedly perform does, in Hamlet's mind, offer the king an undeserved salvation, diluting the intended revenge. Indeed, in order for Claudius to be damned his soteriological prayer cannot be interrupted and revenge must be deferred until a more suitable time:

> Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent:
> When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
> Or in th'incestuous pleasure of his bed,
> At game a-swearing, or about some act
> That has no relish of salvation in't,
> Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven
> And that his soul may be as damn'd and black
> As hell, whereto it goes.
>
> 3.3.88-95

Murder must occur at an appropriately foul moment to send Claudius head-first into the mouth of hell. For Margreta de Grazia, Hamlet's determination to damn Claudius displays a desire that in Church tradition "belongs exclusively to devils". Hamlet, de Grazia argues, can thus be identified with the devils in Doom paintings that consign souls to hell's eternal fires.[38] However, Hamlet's inaction provides the time for Claudius's attempted repentance. Not only does Claudius survive because his death, for Hamlet, must not save his soul, but Hamlet allows Claudius to snatch at the salvation of which he wishes to rob him. Moreover, Claudius fears the very damnation Hamlet wishes upon him but withholds delivering. As Hamlet awaits the damnable opportunity without a trace of salvation, Claudius performs the very act that could save him. In short, Claudius glimpses salvation at the very moment Hamlet plots his damnation.

Not only does Hamlet's task point him in opposite directions, but the texts of the play also equivocate. For Lukas Erne, the emphasis in the First Quarto "is on the swiftly moving action, on plans formed and carried out", differentiating it from the longer, more cerebral later texts intended for the page.[39] Another distinction can be made between the

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[38] Margreta de Grazia, *"Hamlet" Without Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.188.
[39] Lukas Erne, *Shakespeare as Literary Dramatist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.235.

Second Quarto and the other texts. After Claudius walks out of *The Mousetrap*, Hamlet states his readiness to "drink hot blood, | And do such bitter business as the day | Would quake to look on" (3.2.381-3). But he recoils, and while the First Quarto and Folio texts move through the closet scene, Hamlet's banishment to England, and his return that culminates in the play's bloody end, the Second Quarto adds a soliloquy that diverts the audience back to Hamlet's vacillating introspection. As Fortinbras and his men march through Denmark to claim a meaningless patch of land in Poland, Hamlet contemplates his inaction in the face of a far greater imperative:

> How stand I then
> That have a father killed, a mother stained,
> Excitements of my reason and my blood,
> And let all sleep; while to my shame I see
> The imminent death of twenty thousand men
> That for a fantasy and trick of fame
> Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot
> Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,
> Which is not tomb enough and continent
> To hide the slain?
>
> Q2, 4.4.55-64

Here Hamlet swings back to "thinking too precisely on th'event" (Q2, 4.4.40). He berates himself for not having the determination of others, repeating the self-doubt provoked by the performance of the player: "What would he do | Had he the motive and that for passion | That I have?" (Q2, 2.2.495-497). As well as this repetition, the bloodthirsty language that punctuates *The Mousetrap* resurfaces: "O, from this time forth | My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth" (Q2, 4.4.64-65). This difference between the texts presents a protagonist in the First Quarto and Folio who progresses in a more linear fashion towards revenge, while in the Second Quarto Hamlet once more considers his delay.

Opinion has varied on Hamlet's deferral of revenge. Some have interpreted Hamlet's hesitations as weakness. For Bradley, Hamlet is held back by "a state of profound melancholy" triggered by Gertrude's shallow, lustful, and hasty marriage to

Claudius.[40] Wilson admired Hamlet's noble sensibilities, but still considered him to have a glaring weakness: when he is "called upon for deeds he fails, dismally and completely".[41] G. Wilson Knight excused Claudius, stating in 1930 that "one can hardly blame him" for conspiring with Laertes to kill Hamlet. In the process, Knight saw Hamlet as a cruel, inhuman "ambassador of death" who "deals destruction around him" as he tries to cope with the burden of the Ghost's injunction. Later, in 1947, Knight conceded that "Hamlet starts as an admirable young man" and "Claudius is a criminal opportunist".[42] Others have seen a stronger protagonist in *Hamlet.* G. K. Hunter defended Hamlet "because he keeps facing up to and (however desperate) maintaining some control over the flux of action".[43] All these critics, in different ways, were writing about whether Hamlet's hesitations are heroic or not, whether his reaction to his task is the correct, most admirable one.

Hamlet's response can be seen differently: caught between the equivocal provenance of the Ghost and Claudius the father/uncle, Hamlet lacks the ideal, Mars-like Father who could compel him to act. Recently, Catherine Belsey has asked whether Hamlet's hesitation could be "the proper response of any God-fearing hero" to a murderous command from another world.[44] To take this further, Hamlet cannot obey the Ghost, nor, for that matter, can he obey Claudius, and the play questions whether Law permits him to obey either of them. The opening night of the Royal Shakespeare Company's 2008 production of *Hamlet* at Stratford-upon-Avon's Courtyard Theatre, directed by Gregory Doran, offered an insight into this Law. With the house lights still on, and with red-shirted ushers still showing people to their seats, Francisco walks slowly

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[40] A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1957), p.86.
[41] Wilson, *What Happens in 'Hamlet'*, p.276.
[42] G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1949), pp.37, 45, 298.
[43] G. K. Hunter, "The Heroism of Hamlet", in *Stratford-Upon-Avon Studies 5: 'Hamlet'* (London: Edward Arnold: 1963), pp. 90-109 (p.104).
[44] Catherine Belsey, *Why Shakespeare?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.117.

across the stage three times on his watch. Officially, the play has yet to start, the lights have not been dimmed and many seats are still empty. Nevertheless, the audience falls silent, and Lacan would probably see this internalized self-regulation as an effect of Law. The audience seem comfortable in the knowledge that the figure on stage signifies the start of the play, or at least requires their silent attention, despite the fact that a line has yet to be spoken and, beneath the glare of the lights and the sound of people shuffling into their seats, the actor could easily be ignored. David Tennant's manic and amusing Hamlet then emphasizes the contrast between the Courtyard audience and the young prince's performed madness: during the play-within-the-play he neither keeps his mouth shut nor resists interfering, stepping into its stage-space to provoke, prod and push the players. Of course, Hamlet's behaviour is not aimed at the players but at provoking Claudius, and his comments demonstrate his distrust of the king. The lack of control Hamlet affects also betrays the lack of a Mars-like Father who could impose that control or offer proof reliable enough to justify revenge. Both the Ghost and Claudius are untrustworthy; both name themselves as Hamlet's father but are eligible for the condition of father-and-not-father, an equivocal position from which they cannot offer the god-like authority Hamlet associates with old Hamlet.

The prayer scene exemplifies Hamlet's problem: in the name of vengeance, Hamlet must do wrong in order to achieve right. This equivocal act, as Belsey suggests, "deconstructs the antithesis which fixes the meanings of good and evil, right and wrong".[45] Revenge perpetuates the effects of murder. Claudius possesses the crown, so Hamlet must murder the King of Denmark to avenge the murder of the King of Denmark, and so Hamlet's projected revenge repeats the crime of regicide; it is a second act of injustice, a murder, a crime, designed to rectify the first unjust act. Claudius's frustrated attempt to pray also explores his position as king, as heaven's anointed

[45] Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985), p.115.

representative, and the hellish means that won him the crown. Or, to understand it another way, Claudius is unhappily located between the structural position of Father that represents the symbolisation of absolute, unequivocal meaning, and the equivocal position of regicidal father/uncle who disrupts the order of the family and the differences on which it depends. As King, Father, and Royal Dane, he should reinforce these differences. According to Patricia Parker, Hamlet cannot know who his real father is because the poisoned, adulterous union of Claudius and Gertrude complicates the "Christological motif of the Son who is the perfect bearer of his Father's will".[46] However, rather than question the identity of Hamlet's father, the play presents two figures who fail to occupy the structural position of the Father as bearer of the Law. Moreover, *Hamlet*, with the figures of the Ghost and Claudius, emphasizes the contradiction between an unequivocal *Logos*, the play's Christian Father in heaven, and the equivocal symbolisation of its commands in a fallen, polysemic language.

Hamlet's Death and Judgement

In *Hamlet* equivocation is the condition of a language that symbolizes an unequivocal metaphysical framework. Hamlet works through the family disorder introduced by Gertrude's marriage to Claudius, as well as the contradictions of revenge that point him towards both salvation and damnation, appropriating and reproducing the equivocations he encounters until he conceives of himself as heaven's "scourge and minister" (3.4.177). In the final act of the play, Hamlet's language invokes the supernatural realm of the *Logos*, where truth resides. A ghost of equivocal provenance and a usurping father/uncle fail to occupy the structural position that symbolizes the transcendental world of unequivocal salvation and damnation delivered by the play's Christian God. Laertes warns Ophelia that Hamlet "is subject to his birth", to a higher order than his own will (1.3.18), and our

[46] Patricia Parker, *Shakespeare from the Margins: Language, Culture, Context* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p.178.

hero duly steps into the void created by equivocal, unsuitable, untrustworthy Fathers. Hamlet calls on the transcendental world that lies beyond the equivocal, mortal world, reminding us of the inevitability of death and Judgement, anticipating the play's tragic, but just, finale. In this sense, though he never wears the crown, Hamlet fulfils his destiny and becomes king: it is he, not Claudius, who is identified with the "divinity [that] doth hedge a king" (4.4.123), with the providential powers that endorse the Father of the state.

Shakespeare's most famous soliloquy foreshadows Hamlet's providential attitude in the last act as it outlines an apocalyptic fear. Hamlet first elegises his predicament as if it were mankind's condition:

> To be, or not to be, that is the question:
> Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
> The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
> Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
> And by opposing end them.
>
> 3.1.56-60

Whether existence outdoes non-existence turns on the choice between the stoical endurance of life's caprices and an endless, futile battle against waves of malice a thousand swords cannot stop. His problem in this soliloquy anticipates Macbeth's moral struggle with the consequences of regicide. Hamlet, like Macbeth prior to Lady Macbeth's encouragement, cannot carry out the murderous act he is urged to commit because the fear of Judgement haunts him:

> To die, to sleep;
> To sleep, perchance to dream – ay, there's the rub:
> For in that sleep of death what dreams may come,
> When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
> Must give us pause – there's the respect
> That makes calamity of so long life.
>
> 3.1.64-69

For Hamlet, dread of the after-life impedes action, and makes "cowards of us all" as earthly enterprises "lose the name of action" (3.1.83, 88). Consequences beyond the grave inspire this Christian conscience, and in the 1603 text, as Stern suggests, "God has

[...] a much less ambiguous presence".[47] Indeed, early on in this text Hamlet uses apocalyptic language:

> O that this too much grieved and sallied flesh
> Would melt to nothing, or that the universal
> Globe of heaven would turn all to a chaos!
>
> Q1, 2.55-7

And Hamlet's soliloquy in the First Quarto returns to this theme with an explicit consideration of God's Judgement:

> To be, or not to be – ay, there's the point.
> To die, to sleep – is that all? Ay, all.
> No, to sleep, to dream – ay, marry, there it goes,
> For in that dream of death, when we're awaked
> And borne before an everlasting judge
> From whence no passenger ever returned –
> The undiscovered country, at whose sight
> The happy smile and the accursed damned.
>
> Q1, 7.115-22

Hamlet's words invoke more specifically here than in the Second Quarto and Folio the pre-Reformation Doom paintings that become so evident in the language of *Macbeth* and *Othello* and are explicitly referred to in the final, apocalyptic scene of *King Lear*. The "joyful hope" of reaching heaven (Q1, 7.123), the existence of which is not doubted, restrains Hamlet, who considers the fate of the saved and the condemned. In the later texts the problem is nuanced: the undiscovered afterlife "puzzles the will" (3.1.80) so that fear and conjecture compromise action.

In the last act Hamlet equivocates on the heavenly and earthly justice between which he feels caught. In the Second Quarto and Folio, he suggests to Horatio that there can no longer be any debate: killing Claudius must be the correct thing to do. Regicide becomes a moral imperative, not a matter of obeying a questionable spectral presence:

> Does it not, think thee, stand me now upon –
> He that hath kill'd my king and whor'd my mother,
> Popp'd in between th'election and my hopes,
> Thrown out his angle for my proper life

[47] Stern, *Making Shakespeare*, p.56.

> And with such coz'nage – is't not perfect conscience
> To quit him with this arm?
>
> 5.2.63-68

The Folio goes further than the Second Quarto. To leave all Claudius's offences unpunished, the further crimes heaped upon the murder of old Hamlet and the speedy, incestuous marriage to Gertrude, to let him live and commit more evil, is "to be damned" (F, 5.2.68). In the prayer scene earthly justice, for Hamlet, would send Claudius to heaven, but here it would save Hamlet himself from damnation. The regicidal act that he resisted for fear of damnation is now a source of salvation; it is damnable to forego the murder of Claudius, just as it was damnable to do it. At the same time, the moral imperative to act sits alongside heavenly providence:

> There is special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, 'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all.
>
> 5.2.215-18

Hamlet, sensing something awry in the proposed fencing match with Laertes, appeals to the providential sparrow of the New Testament that "shall not fall on the ground without your Father".[48] In the First Quarto, the sovereignty of God over the affairs of man is "predestinate" (Q1, 17.45). According to Fredson Thayer Bowers, the Old Testament laws legitimating private revenge were "twisted so as to apply to state justice, or were ignored, or contrasted to the new world created by Christ", due to the progressive moral and legal condemnation of Shakespeare's time.[49] We can understand this another way: in *Hamlet*, the protagonist conflates his agency with the sovereignty of God over man's free will, a clash between mortal concerns and the unavoidable approach of death. This clash repeats the concerns of the graveyard scene, which rearticulates the legend of "The Three Living and the Three Dead" as depicted in medieval wall paintings.

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[48] Matthew, 10.29.
[49] Fredson Thayer Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy: 1587 – 1642* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940), pp.12-13.

As the Introduction of this thesis sets out, it cannot be demonstrated that Shakespeare definitely saw such images, but they did profoundly influence a largely illiterate population that was legally required to go to church, affecting their mode of worship and "the ways in which they thought and created".[50] Moreover, the sectarian struggles, the predominant ideological battleground of the early modern period, imprinted such images in the cultural memory of the society in which Shakespeare lived. He would no doubt have been aware of the Christian legend of "The Three Living and the Three Dead" and, at the very least, must have been aware of the legacy of imagery that depicted such Christian tales to parishioners.

The graveyard scene can be understood to retell this story. A popular memento mori in early modern society, "The Three Living and the Three Dead" was often painted on pre-Reformation church walls: three corpses warn three kings of the inevitability of death and Judgement. The dead urge the living to repent with an ominous reminder that nothing can prevent the inevitable: "As you are, so were we: as we are, so you will become".[51] An extant example of a wall painting that depicts the legend can be seen at Charlwood, Surrey (figure 5). As the gravedigger jokes that the houses he builds last "till doomsday" (5.1.59), his words make it clear that we are in the realm of the Apocalypse, surrounded by the bodies that will rise to face their Judgement. His actions compliment his words as the dead fly out of their graves when the gravedigger throws up skulls in the direction of Hamlet and Horatio.[52] Moreover, in perhaps the most iconic image in the Shakespearean canon, Hamlet confronts Yorick the court jester's skull and, with black humour, replicates the moral message of the legend:

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[50] Margaret Aston, *England's Iconoclasts: Volume I: Laws Against Images* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), p.2.
[51] See Roger Rosewell, *Medieval Wall Paintings in English and Welsh Churches* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2008), pp.81-83.
[52] As de Grazia proposes, the gravedigger equivocates to Hamlet (de Grazia, *"Hamlet" Without Hamlet*, pp.138-140). Moreover, at the moment the Apocalypse is invoked, Hamlet finds he must "speak by the card or equivocation will undo" him (5.1.133-134).

> Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment, that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chop-fallen? Now get you to my lady's chamber and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favour she must come.
>
> 5.1.183-188

Reversing the direction of the moral message so that the living prince addresses the dead jester, Hamlet's blackly comic order acts as a reminder of death's inevitability, and his subsequent meditation on the corporeal fate of great historical figures repeats the moral of the Christian legend that neither wealth nor power can resist what is to come. Alexander and Julius Caesar are both given as instances of great men reduced to the same crude matter as the rest of us: "Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust" while Caesar is "dead and turn'd to clay" (5.2.201-203, 206). Depictions of the Christian legend, such as the extant painting at Peakirk, Northamptonshire (figure 6), showed the living kings to be wealthy and powerful, finely dressed to indicate their wealth and status. By way of contrast, the three dead were painted as decayed corpses (figure 5 again) or as skeletons (figure 7). Moreover, behind the north-wall panelling of the Guild Chapel in Stratford-upon-Avon there is a degraded painting of The Dance of Death, a similar but less common legend that presents a grinning skeleton randomly selecting those to die from a diverse collection of people.

Another memento mori enters the stage in *Hamlet* as Ophelia's coffin is brought into the graveyard. Indeed, the Second Quarto's stage direction indicates that her corpse, rather than her coffin, appears here. These reminders anticipate the arrival of the "fell sergeant, Death" that takes Hamlet and the feast of "proud Death" Fortinbras enters in the next scene (5.2.341, 369). And, following quickly upon Hamlet's contemplation of death in the graveyard scene, the Priest uses the language of the Last Judgement to remind Laertes that Ophelia's funeral service offers more, not less, than her doubtful death deserves, because "She should in ground unsanctified been lodg'd | Till the last trumpet" (5.1.222-223). The Priest appeals to the divine, Christian Judgement as set

down by St. John of Patmos in the Book of Revelation. Seven angels sound seven trumpets to herald the apocalyptic intervention of God, the transcendental signified that will end all equivocation, and when the final trumpet-blasting angel sounds in John's hallucinatory vision "the mystery of God should be finished".[53] The graveyard scene invokes the familiar Christian images as a reminder of the unavoidable eventuality of death and the Judgement that follows it.

The deaths that punctuate *Hamlet* return the audience to the equivocation that dominates the play. Although the intervention of a *deus ex machina* often seen in the comedies is absent, all those guilty within the metaphysical framework of the play are punished with death in the denouement of *Hamlet*: the equivocal family trinity of father/uncle, mother/aunt, and son/nephew, which has transgressed the clear divisions that order the family unit, all fall. In this sense, the divine Judgement that remains off-stage makes its presence felt indirectly. Gertrude can be understood to pay for her incest, while Hamlet's dilemma is resolved as he loses his life, killed by the rapier Claudius and Laertes have poisoned, before committing the bloody, murderous act demanded of him. Although Hamlet seems a different figure in the final act, with an understanding, as Maynard Mack suggested over half a century ago in an influential essay, of "the boundaries in which human action, human judgment, are enclosed",[54] he acts spontaneously when his hand is forced. As with Othello, who, overcome with guilt and shame, takes his own life as payment for the wrongful murder of Desdemona, the cost for Hamlet of administering earthly justice is his earthly existence. Even here, however, there is an ambiguity: killing King Claudius conflates vengeance for Hamlet's own murder with the assassination of old Hamlet. This conflation fulfils, in a twisted manner, the regicides both exposed and foretold in *The Mousetrap*, which alludes to old Hamlet's death at the hands of Claudius and the killing of a king by his nephew. And whereas

[53] Revelation, 10.7.
[54] Maynard Mack, "The World of Hamlet", *Yale Review*, 41 (1951), 502-523 (p.521).

Othello believes his action has damned him to hell's everlasting fires, in Horatio's mind Judgement will send Hamlet in the opposite direction: he wishes Hamlet "flights of angels" to sing him to his rest as the prince slips away (5.2.365).

Stephen Greenblatt states that Horatio's angels "figure in many images of Purgatory",[55] but images of purgatory were rare compared with the Doom images so commonly found above the church chancel arch. These depictions of the Last Judgement often showed angels carrying saved souls to heaven, as in the stained glass version at St. Mary's Church, Fairford, Gloucestershire (figure 8). Claudius, the equivocal Father, pays for his regicide in kind. The poisoned rapier, the "treacherous instrument" (5.2.322) that should serve Claudius's interests, also betrays the king as Hamlet wounds him with it: "The point envenom'd too! Then, venom, to thy work" (5.2.327). Hamlet makes sure of the king's death by forcing him to drink from the poisoned cup that should have guaranteed Hamlet's death, and the prince's words as he stamps Claudius out of existence return the audience to the sinful marriage of Gertrude and Claudius:

> Here, thou incestuous, murd'rous, damned Dane,
> Drink off this potion. Is thy union here?
> Follow my mother.
>
> 5.2.330-2

Hamlet's words unite the pearl floating in the poisoned cup with the marriage that was murderously won, sending Claudius to hell close behind Gertrude. Wilson Knight urged us to consider Hamlet's "consciousness of death" as the real threat to Denmark,[56] while, according to Maynard Mack, Jr., *Hamlet* constantly reminds us that Denmark can be seen "as a possible type of the fallen garden".[57] We can make an alternative interpretation: in the fallen world of the play Hamlet's revenge takes us to the liminal point between life

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[55] Stephen Greenblatt, *Hamlet in Purgatory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), p.51.
[56] Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*, p.32.
[57] Maynard Mack, Jr., *Killing the King: Three Studies in Shakespeare's Tragic Structure* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1973), p.82.

and death, as he becomes death's ambassador, a breathing incarnation of one of the three dead from the morality paintings of "The Three Living and the Three Dead". In the graveyard scene Hamlet could be understood as one of three living encountering the morbid, degenerated reminders of death's universal inevitability. Here, close to death, still alive but fatally poisoned, he delivers justice that emanates from a place neither living nor dead, deconstructing the opposition between the earthly justice that compelled Hamlet and the divine providence that, in Hamlet's mind, controlled his destiny in the final act. To put it another way, Hamlet's revenge is equivocal; it is neither the swift, blood-revenge of a traditional revenger nor an act of heaven.

Conclusion

As this thesis proposes, in a fallen world there is a fallen, polysemic language exemplified by equivocation. Like language, Shakespeare's central tragedies are also denied divine intervention. The creative and generative powers of language are at their most potent in these plays, revelling in the absence of the unifying resolutions often seen in the comedies that prevent, or undo, tragedy. Hamlet's words in the final act remind the audience of the inevitability of death and its associate Judgement. The memento mori in *Hamlet* anticipates the apocalyptic visions that, as this thesis goes on to argue, are so prevalent in *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*. In *Hamlet*, the protagonist's eventual revenge is prompted by his death, placing him briefly in an equivocal position between the mortal and supernatural realms of the play. Shakespeare's play as a whole can be understood to articulate the agonistic relationship between these two realms, between an unequivocal *Logos* and its representation in a language we experience as polysemic, a difference emphasized by the substitution of old Hamlet with a spectre that takes on his shape on the one hand and an impostor father on the other. Both the Ghost and Claudius occupy equivocal positions as Fathers that disrupt the proper system of differences, meanings,

and order of the family, an order usually reinforced in the mortal world by the supernaturally inspired paternal law they cannot represent from their ambiguous structural places.

As Chapter Three argues, the key equivocation in *Othello* is the proud general's position as both an insider and an outsider to Venice. The villainous Iago employs a cunning blend of equivocations and lies, shifting the perception of Othello from valued Venetian citizen to a disgraced racial other. Consumed by guilt and shame, Othello pleads for damnation with words inspired by medieval depictions of the Doom, popular examples of the pre-Reformation imagery that *Hamlet* introduces.

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Othello's Language: The Supplement and the Anti-*Logos*

Introduction

Equivocation plays a key role in the plots of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, which, like language, are denied the soteriological intervention of a transcendental signified. Taking up Jacques Derrida's notion that speech has to be supplemented, or supplanted, by writing because of "the anterior default of a presence"[1] – the lack of an extra-linguistic origin from which language emerges complete, full of presence, truth, and a single true meaning – this chapter proposes that Othello's identity crisis can be understood as equivocal, as an issue of multiplicity where the protagonist is both an insider and an outsider. At the same time, Iago plays on Othello's vulnerabilities by exploiting the absence of a transcendental signified, a *Logos*, in language in order to make the untrue appear true. To conclude, this chapter discusses the connections between Iago as the play's devilish anti-*Logos*, Othello's damnation, and the pre-Reformation church imagery that illustrated Biblical narratives of the Doom.

Derrida's critique of the western philosophical tradition emphasizes the supremacy of speech over writing for philosophers, from Plato onwards, who have considered spoken language to be natural and writing little more than a supplement. Responding to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Essay on the Origin of Language*, which claims that writing is parasitic on speech, Derrida finds instances of the inadequacy of speech alone and contends that it needs to be supplemented. Clarifying gestures are one example of a supplement that indicates a structure where something, in this case speech, "can accomplish itself [...] only by allowing itself to be filled through sign and proxy".[2] Speech cannot be naturally complete if it needs to be supplemented, and this necessity

[1] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.145.
[2] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.145.

indicates an absence or gap that Derrida calls the originary lack. As a result, while writing may appear parasitic on speech to the degree that it is also supplementary, it simultaneously demonstrates that speech lacks plenitude. And speech without plenitude, lacking presence and truth, necessarily equivocates.

In *Othello* the protagonist is undone by speech that is perceptibly incomplete. Iago's equivocations exploit the contradiction between the opportunities Venetian society offers an outsider like Othello and the proto-racist prejudices that nevertheless remain against him, a Moor sent to defend the honour of Venice the same night he secretly marries its whitest, most innocent daughter. Othello's fall occurs in a Venetian state that Shakespeare's audience may well have known was, as Giovanni Botero noted, "preserued [...] as an vntouched virgin from the violence of any forreine inforcement"[3] and, as William Thomas observed, also a liberal place where "if thou be a Jewe, a Turke, or beleeuest in the diuell [...] thou arte free from all controllement".[4] As Ania Loomba points out, a key aspect of European encounters with other peoples is "the conversion of the outsider to the service of dominant culture".[5] European nations thus seem to require – in the form of colonialism and migrant labour, to name two instances – supplementation from outsiders, but they invariably posit those outsiders as a threat. Indeed, in the absence of a transcendental signified, a *Logos* that could resolve and stabilize language and tragedy, the words of Iago the anti-*Logos* deconstruct the fragile opposition between insider and outsider, exploiting the polysemy of a fallen language to bring chaos and disorder.

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[3] Giovanni Botero, *The Worlde, Or An historicall description of the most famous kingdomes and common-weales therein*, trans. by Robert Johnson (London: by Edm. Bollifant for John Jaggard, 1601), sig.N4[r].
[4] William Thomas, *The historie of Italie, a boke excedyng profitable to be redde: Because it intreateth of the astate of many and diuers common weales, how thei haue ben, & now be gouerned* (London: Thomas Berthelet, 1549), sig.Z1[r].
[5] Ania Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), p.50.

Othello's Equivocal Identity

Othello holds an equivocal position in Venice as both an insider and an outsider. The state's best general, he commands the stage at the start of the play with his composure, uses words that align him with the civilized Christian values of Shakespeare's Venice, and enjoys the full confidence of the senate. At the same time, he is a Moor, an exotic adventurer, and a warrior who eventually conforms to Iago's racist account of him. However, unlike the weak-willed duo of Brabantio and Roderigo, and, of course, the irredeemably devilish Iago, Othello recognizes his fault, confirms his damnation, and takes his own life. Othello delivers this punishment on behalf of the state and receives it as an enemy of the state, at once an insider and an outsider, an equivocation that responds in kind to the deconstruction of his previously stable position.

Othello begins by confounding the expectation of blackness it sets up. Shakespeare's previous depiction of a Moor, the dastardly Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*, confirmed the connotations of blackness to Elizabethan minds, what G. K. Hunter called "a powerful, widespread, and ancient tradition associating black-faced men with wickedness".[6] Indeed, Aaron has a "fleece of woolly hair"[7] that also covers the heads of Christ's black tormentors in religious images that date back to the Middle Ages, which Hunter used to illustrate his assertion. It has been stated that Othello could have been tawny or light-skinned and that the associations of an equivocal term such as "Moor" are, as Daniel J. Vitkus writes, "all constructed and positioned in opposition to Christian faith and virtue".[8] A decade earlier than Vitkus, Anthony Gerard Barthelemy stated that "the only certainty a reader has when he sees the word [Moor] is that the person referred to is

[6] G. K. Hunter, "Othello and Colour Prejudice", *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 53 (1967), 139-163 (p.142).
[7] William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. by Jonathan Bate, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Routledge, 1995), 2.2.34. All references are to this edition, unless otherwise indicated.
[8] Daniel J. Vitkus, "Turning Turk in *Othello*: The Conversion and Damnation of the Moor", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 48 (1997), 145-176 (p.160).

not a European Christian".[9] The text, however, seems to describe a figure more like the "coal-black Negro" Hunter saw Othello as.[10] Iago sarcastically refers to the man he so evidently despises as "his Moorship" and entices Roderigo to sheepishly echo the ensign's proto-racism by labelling Othello "thicklips".[11] Like Roderigo, Brabantio follows Iago's lead: the provocative imagery of a hot and lusty "black ram" that ravishes Brabantio's daughter, the "white ewe" Desdemona (1.1.87-88), produces an anxious response from the easily manipulated father.[12] This anxiety reflects the Elizabethan understanding, which Hunter also pointed out, of blackness as "the colour of sin and death".[13] However, rather than a barbaric figure in opposition to Christian virtue, Othello enters the stage imperiously and, when swords are drawn for the first time in the play, the violence is dissuaded as he tells all to "Keep up [their] bright swords, for the dew will rust them" (1.2.59), diffusing the aggression between his and Brabantio's attendants.

Opinion has varied on what these calming words signify about Othello. They were, for A. C. Bradley, an example of Othello as Shakespeare's most poetic creation. Bradley renounced the idea of *Othello* as "a study of a noble barbarian [...] who retains beneath the surface the savage passions of his Moorish blood", and instead saw the protagonist as a noble Moor "unusually open to deception, and [...] likely to act with little reflection, with no delay, and in the most decisive manner conceivable".[14] While renouncing the relevance of Othello's skin colour to his essential character, Bradley still ascribes to him traits associated in Shakespeare's time with the savagery of blackness: he forgets that Othello is not as easily seduced by Iago as Roderigo and Brabantio, that he

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[9] Anthony Gerard Barthelemy, *Black Face, Maligned Race: The Representation of Blacks in English Drama from Shakespeare to Southerne* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1987), p.7.
[10] G. K. Hunter, "Elizabethans and Foreigners", *Shakespeare Survey*, 17 (1964), 37-52 (p.51).
[11] Aaron calls the child that Tamora bears him a "thick-lipped slave" (*Titus Andronicus*, 4.2.177).
[12] William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. by E. A. J. Honigmann, The Arden Shakespeare (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 1.1.32, 65. All references are to this edition, unless otherwise indicated.
[13] Hunter, "Othello and Colour Prejudice", p.140.
[14] A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1957), p.151.

demands ocular proof, and has enough self-reflection to take his own life in shame while imploring those around him to remember his service as well as his crime. F. R. Leavis, on the other hand, cut Othello none of the slack Bradley did. Leavis came out fighting, calling Bradley's approach "completely wrong-headed", and the poetic language the words of a man with "a habit of self-approving self-dramatization [that] is an essential element in Othello's make-up". Rather than a noble Moor, for Leavis Othello is "at the best, the impressive manifestation of a noble egotism".[15] Othello's blackness is only parenthetically mentioned by Leavis to emphasise the disparity between the general and Desdemona, but this distinction makes Othello culpable and ignoble precisely because he stands in opposition to Desdemona's whiteness. In different ways, both Bradley and Leavis were writing about Othello's blackness while claiming to do otherwise, reaffirming the pejorative, Elizabethan associations of blackness Hunter had illustrated with religious iconography. Yet in practice Othello's introduction would surely have surprised Shakespeare's audience with a figure who contradicted the common perception of blackness as evil, best fit for slavery, or at best primitively innocent, behaving instead as an authoritative, controlled and gracious man of Christian virtue.

What the audience can be sure of is that Othello, despite his background of otherness, is a valuable asset to Shakespeare's Venice. Early on, the Turkish threat to Cyprus impels the Duke of Venice to send Othello to the island post-haste:

> The Turk with a most mighty preparation makes for Cyprus. Othello, the fortitude of the place is best known to you, and, though we have there a substitute of most allowed sufficiency, yet opinion, a sovereign mistress of effects, throws a more safer voice on you.
>
> 1.3.222-226

Common opinion in Venice, which governs decisions made by the state, considers Othello's command to be more assured than the Governor of Cyprus, Montano, to whom the Duke seems to refer. Othello, then, is not only a black man trying to make his

[15] F. R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit*, (London: Chatto & Windus, 1952), pp.136, 142.

way in the white man's world, but a Moor endowed with a significant amount of responsibility by a major European society.

Othello's war-time experience and ability augments Venice's military prowess. Historical accounts indicate that outsiders with useful abilities could attain prominent positions in Venetian society. Gasper Contareno, in Lewes Lewkenor's 1599 translation, wrote that "forrain men and strangers" were welcomed into the higher echelons of Venetian society "in regard of their great nobility, or that they had beene dutifull towardes the state, or els had done vnto them some notable seruice".[16] As Thomas stated, in the sixteenth century Venetians were considered "better merchauntes than men of warre",[17] a sentiment echoed later by Botero, and both describe a moment in Venetian history when the opportunities for outsiders to achieve military prominence may well have been greater than had previously been the case. More than this, the authority Shakespeare gives Othello complicates the usual practice of Venetian society as documented by Botero:

> By sea they choose generals out of their owne common-wealth: by land, strangers, both for generall, for captains, and for all other men of warre. For by land [...] their law permitteth not any Venetian borne to be captaine ouer the armie.[18]

Thomas had earlier explained this law in much the same ways as Botero:

> By sea the Venetians theim selfes gouerne the whole, and by lande they are served of straungers , both for generall, for capitaines, and for all other men of warre: because theyr lawe permitteth not any Ventian to be capitaine ouer an armie by lande.[19]

A clear division held between the land army, always governed by non-Venetians, and the navy, always governed by Venetians. Contemporary theatre-goers who could read, and had access to these texts, may not have been particularly astonished to hear that Othello was better qualified than any Venetian to defend Cyprus from the advance of the Turkish

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[16] Gasparo Contareno, *The Commonwealth and Government of Venice: London, 1599* (Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum; New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1969), p.18.
[17] Thomas, *The historie of Italie*, sig.W3^{v}.
[18] Botero, *The Worlde*, sig.O1^{r}.
[19] Thomas, *The historie of Italie*, sigs.Y1^{v}-Y2^{r}.

galleys, or that despite his foreignness, Othello seems to be handed the position of what Thomas called a "*Proueditore*, who (out of Venice) is of no lesse authoritee, than the *Dictatour* was wont to be in Rome: specially by sea".[20] This position was created at times of great danger to the state, when, as Botero notes, "they create over the whole nauie a captaine generall with heigh and soueraigne authority, not onely ouer the same, but also ouer all maritim prouinces".[21] If so, Othello can here be understood to represent what Homi K. Bhabha calls "the *double entendre* of the supplement" that compensates for a lack in the origin:[22] his war-like qualities are employed in the name of Venice, but they could also be seen as emphasizing the absence of war-like qualities in Venice itself. Many of them illiterate, perhaps the majority of theatre-goers in the sixteenth century would not have known all these details about Venetian life. However, the play itself does offer its audience the story of an outsider whose military skills have made him a man of honour in Venice: in *Othello*, not only does the protagonist supplant Montano's authority as Governor of Cyprus, but he holds the pre-eminent position in the forces that sail there to withstand, from the island's shores, a naval attack from more unacceptable, and unwelcome, strangers.

Iago acknowledges the skill of Othello, who has unparalleled ability to lead the Cyprus wars on behalf of the Venetian governors: "Another of his fathom they have none | To lead their business" (1.1.150-151). The commission Othello receives from Venice's governors confirms his significant reputation, and the audience is made well aware that Othello has accomplished more than enough on the battlefield to deserve the highest respect from the senate. In Shakespeare's source text, Giraldi Cinthio's *Hecatommithi*, the Venetians appoint the Moor as a commandant of their soldiers in Cyprus, a position "given only to noble and loyal men who have proved themselves most

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[20] Thomas, *The historie of Italie*, sig.Y2^{r}. Original emphasis.
[21] Botero, *The Worlde*, sig.O1^{r}.
[22] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.154. Original emphasis.

valiant".[23] Certainly, when Iago delivers with relish the news of an accusation that Othello has stolen Desdemona against her will, the proud general makes it clear that his achievements will outdo her father Brabantio's imminent complaint before the state's governing body:

> Let him do his spite;
> My services, which I have done the signiory,
> Shall out-tongue his complaints.
>
> 1.2.17-19

These past services that will speak more effectively than the grievance anticipate Othello's poetic narrations of his predicament, what G. Wilson Knight long ago highlighted in *The Wheel of Fire* as Othello's music.[24] Othello's words eventually overcome Brabantio's highly influential voice, which Iago points out has "potential | As double as the duke's" (1.2.13-14), indicating the regard for Othello by senators who are unmoved by the colour of his skin, or who, in the plot of the play, are not given the opportunity to face Iago's rhetoric and prove themselves as easily duped as Roderigo and Brabantio. To the senate, Othello appears to be an insider, a valuable asset to the state.

Not only does Othello have the confidence of the senate, but his confidence in his own abilities compliments his non-violent, calm demeanour. His appointment of Cassio as his lieutenant comes despite the "personal suit" (1.1.8) of three high-ranking Venetian governors on Iago's behalf. As the rejected Iago makes clear, Othello was not swayed by the intervention of the petitioners:

> But he, as loving his own pride and purposes,
> Evades them, with a bombast circumstance
> Horribly stuffed with epithets of war,
> And in conclusion
> Nonsuits my mediators. For "Certes," says he,
> "I have already chose my officer."
>
> 1.1.11-16

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[23] *Othello*, p.372.
[24] G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Interpretations of Shakespearian Tragedy* (London: Methuen, 1949), pp.97-119.

Iago's words create the expectation of the narratives Othello delivers before the audience to the senate and prior to his suicide. This antagonistic evaluation of Othello's mode of address contrasts with the quiet authority of the words Iago attributes to him, so that Iago's bitter tale also describes a general in control of his affairs, who refuses to be influenced and uses language that, although it is from Iago's hostile point of view bombastic, confirms his authority and experience on military matters. Subsequent events vindicate Othello's choice of lieutenant as sounder than that of the high-ranking petitioners, who are presumably part of the council that sends Othello to Cyprus. Also, Othello's mission to Cyprus signifies his proven value to the state; it is a value so great that even though he secretly marries the coveted, virginal daughter of a leading aristocrat – and a very popular aristocrat, if Iago's words are to be trusted – the black Othello's military worth to Venice outflanks any offensive manoeuvre at this early stage of the play. As the Moor himself states, he will not hide from Brabantio's challenge because his previous actions and his current blamelessness, along with his legal right to marry Desdemona, will be his advocates: "My parts, my title and my perfect soul | Shall manifest me rightly" (1.2.31-32). However, as the Duke points out, Othello must "slubber the gloss of [his] new fortunes" (1.3.227-228), must darken the lustre of his recent marriage to Desdemona, with a difficult and violent expedition that his very worth to Venice demands he accept.

The Duke's use of "slubber" can be seen to equivocate: it can be read as invoking Othello's dark skin, as well as anticipating both Desdemona's death and their disjointed wedding night. To slubber is "to stain, smear, daub, soil", "to sully" a renown or reputation, and "to obscure, darken" (*OED*, *v.*1.a, *v.*1.b, *v.*1.c). Shakespeare employs the word in only one other place, when the phrase Antonio uses to forbid Bassanio's hasty return from Belmont is repeated by Salerio in *The Merchant of Venice*: "Slubber not

business for my sake Bassanio, | But stay the very riping of the time."[25] In the light of this unusual usage, "slubber" in *Othello* can be understood to impel the protagonist to hurry the business of his wedding night with Desdemona, a consummation deferred by their journey to Cyprus in separate ships and interrupted by Cassio's drunken attack on Roderigo that Iago orchestrates. As Othello states, he has "but an hour | Of love, of worldly matter and direction" (1.3.299-300) to spend with Desdemona before he must deal with the hazardous situation in Cyprus.[26]

Alternatively, the Duke's use of "slubber" finds a twisted truth when Othello murders Desdemona. Convinced by Iago that Desdemona has cuckolded him, Othello's act of violence replaces the anticipated war with the Turks, a threat that does not arrive. Iago's seduction of Othello leads the general to suspect that Desdemona's honour has been besmirched: "Was this fair paper, this most goodly book | Made to write 'whore' upon?" (4.2.72-73). Othello's words portray her innocent whiteness as tarnished by the dark ink that inscribes the supposed voracity of her sexuality, replicating the common early modern belief that blackness signified the monstrous, devious, and devilish. Karen Newman argues that *Othello* is structured around the monstrousness common to the hideously excessive sexual appetites of both femininity and blackness that the union of Desdemona's desire and Othello's colour represent.[27] Although the impression the audience has of Othello and Desdemona cannot be considered monstrous, Newman's argument can be appropriated in order to read Othello's words in 4.2 as a confirmation of Desdemona's sexuality as stained, smeared, or slubbered by an accusation of infidelity. Othello explains this accusation as written in sinful black across her pure, white, and

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[25] William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. by John Russell Brown, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1955), 2.8.39-40.
[26] Oliver Parker's film version of the play, the first to cast an actor of African descent as the protagonist, includes a sex scene between Othello and Desdemona that also removes the doubt and intrigue that surrounds the consummation of the marriage in the play (*Othello*. Dir. Oliver Parker. Columbia. 1995).
[27] Karen Newman, "'And wash the Ethiop white': Femininity and the Monstrous in *Othello*", in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, ed. by Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor (London: Methuen, 1987), pp.143-162.

virginal honour. Iago exploits the same scheme of blackness as a negative cover or contamination of whiteness when he rouses Brabantio with the warning that Desdemona will be "covered with a Barbary horse" (1.1.110).[28] So by extension, "slubber" can be understood to foretell the murder of Desdemona, when Othello literally covers her, a warped conclusion to the "stubborn and boisterous expedition" (1.3.228-229) the Duke foresees in Cyprus: Othello does not provide Venice with a glorious victory against the Turks, but smothers Desdemona to punctuate Iago's endeavours with domestic tragedy and violence, turning the ensign's lewd provocation into a perverted prophesy of the play's end. It is possible, then, to see the disrupted wedding night, Othello's colour, and Desdemona's eventual murder as unified by the imagery the Duke's use of "slubber" summons.

Brabantio, his wrath incited by Iago, attempts to portray Othello as an outsider unfit to marry his daughter. Extolling Desdemona's virtues, Brabantio questions whether she could "fall in love with what she feared to look on" (1.3.99), enforcing the division he makes between "The wealthy, curled darlings" of Venice his daughter rejected and the "sooty bosom | Of such a thing" as Othello (1.2.68, 70-71). Brabantio's words stress the differences "of nature, | Of years, of country, credit, everything" (1.3.97-98) that divide Othello and Desdemona. As Loomba explains, the proto-racist imagery in the play tarnishes Othello "almost exclusively in the context of his contact with a white woman".[29] As well as this, Brabantio uses this imagery to situate Othello outside of Venice, as from another country, an interloper in the place where Desdemona should choose a fair and more suitable husband to be, while the services done by Othello on behalf of Venice are ignored. After Iago's intervention, Othello's blackness, his otherness, though inoffensive to the senate, becomes a failing in Brabantio's eyes, his

[28] Barbary horses are wagered by Claudius at the end of *Hamlet*, and in the light of this Iago's reference can be said to commodify Othello as an exotic luxury also renowned for his prowess.
[29] Loomba, *Gender, Race, Renaissance Drama*, p.49.

wrath incited by Iago and further incurred when the Moorish general fills the gap that the state's most eligible white bachelors, not to mention Brabantio himself, cannot fill.

Othello's narratives point out that his cultural difference from the Venetians was a source of wonderment to Brabantio before it enthralled Desdemona. Promising to deliver a "round unvarnished tale" (1.3.91) to defend himself against the claim that he bewitched Desdemona into marriage, Othello's response disabuses the prior apology he offers for his rough, unskilled speech, as he ties together three stories, starting with his relationship to his accuser:

> Her father loved me, oft invited me,
> Still questioned me the story of my life
> From year to year – the battles, sieges, fortunes
> That I have passed.
>
> 1.3.129-132

These lines situate Othello in Venice: the conflicts that he has endured, survived, and excelled in as a non-Venetian, an outsider, have led the Venetian court to promote him to a respectable position and, in the case of the Cyprus wars, to depend on his experience as their best soldier. Othello expands on the story with a catalogue of misfortunes and narrow escapes that led him to slavery and then redemption, a "travailous history" (1.3.140) followed by a list of wonders that enthralled Brabantio. Othello's past, a past alien to the "wealthy, curled darlings" of Venice who vied for Desdemona's hand, marks the difference his skin colour represents between the Moor and the other Venetians present. These tales captivated Brabantio then enticed Desdemona to return "with a greedy ear" (1.3.150), and mark their courtship.

At the same time that Othello's speeches to the senate draw attention to his cultural difference, they also imply his assimilation to Venetian life. Othello alludes to his service to the state as the confidence he has in his military duties is diplomatically delivered before the senators:

> For since these arms of mine had seven years' pith

Till now some seven moons wasted, they have used
Their dearest action in the tented field,
And little of this great world can I speak
More than pertains to feats of broil and battle.
1.3.84-88

Othello can be understood to indicate what he means by withholding it. His account of the long, worthwhile years as a soldier, from the age of seven onwards, substantiates for the audience the golden opinions that his military duties for Venice have won from the senate. Employed by Venice on the strength of his reputation as a warrior, he loves the soldier's life, which, as he tells Iago, all the treasures hidden by the sea could not make him "Put into circumscription and confine" (1.2.27). That Othello claims to know little of the world outside tumult and violent struggle further impresses on the audience his happy commitment to his savage art, but can also be read as a subtle suggestion to the senate that a significant proportion of his efforts have been dedicated to Venice. This equivocation fulfils the promise he makes that his professional record will be his most steadfast advocate, and says implicitly what it does not explicitly confirm: the senate should take into account that Othello has sacrificed all the other aspects of the world for the battlefield, and done so happily in the service of Venice too. Derrida notes that even in earlier linguistic theory every repetition is different because the practice of quotation shows that the sign, the word, symbol, or gesture traditionally thought to refer directly to the thing or referent that exists in the world, "can break with every given context, engendering an infinity of new contexts".[30] In Derridean terms, a word is actually a signifier that invokes a signified, a concept or idea, entirely within language, not a sign that arbitrarily yet fixedly denotes a referent outside language. As a result, language is meaningful but not referential, and meaning is not anchored in the real world, but depends on how, and in what context, a signifier is used. Thus, for Derrida, a word has different meanings when repeated in other contexts. Othello's words before the senate

[30] Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), p.12.

anticipate Derrida's insight by flipping it on its polysemic head: they are different from the words Othello uses to Iago but repeat the meaning – the worth of his military service and the advocacy it will provide in the face of Brabantio's attack – in the language appropriate to a different context.

Othello's defence alludes to his Christianity. Initially, Othello foregrounds his relationship to Brabantio: the frequent invitations Brabantio gave to the general were the catalyst for the courtship of Desdemona, and the tales of adventure and danger that won her were also desired by Brabantio. And his respectful courtship that foregrounds Desdemona's father moves on to another Father, as Othello invokes Christian themes. His "redemption" from slavery (1.3.139) describes his freedom from captivity, but the word Shakespeare employs also denotes "deliverance from sin and its consequences by the atonement of Jesus Christ" (*OED*, 1.a). Jonathan Burton proposes that the role of religious difference in Leo Africanus's *Geographical Historie of Africa*, which was published in English in 1600, is important to our understanding of *Othello*, concluding that the text's "establishment of women and dark-skinned Africans as a 'more other'" nullifies Africanus's lighter-skinned, Muslim otherness.[31] In *Othello*, the mythical images of cannibals and freaks, the "Anthropophagi, and men whose heads | Do grow beneath their shoulders" (1.3.145-146) that are generally considered to have been inspired by Pliny's *Natural History*, can also be seen to create an other more other than Othello. Moreover, these beings from a non-Christian environment stand in contrast to the overtly Christian language that relates the chance Othello seized to woo Desdemona:

> She'd come again, and with a greedy ear
> Devour up my discourse; which I, observing,
> Took once a pliant hour and found good means
> To draw from her a prayer of earnest heart
> That I would all my pilgrimage dilate.
>
> 1.3.150-154

[31] Jonathan Burton, "'A most wily bird': Leo Africanus, *Othello* and the Trafficking in Difference", in *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*, ed. by Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin (London: Routledge, 1998), pp.43-63 (p.61).

The interest Desdemona shows in Othello's tales elicits a "prayer" that encourages his romantic overtures. His hazardous, action-packed, and fantastical journeys are Othello's "pilgrimage", and this word conflates the notion of a journey with an act of religious devotion. So Othello's words before the senate diplomatically imply his Christianity as well as his service to the state, at the same time that they remind both the Venetians and the audience of his cultural difference.

Cultural difference disturbs Othello's Venetian identity. Stephen Greenblatt, arguing that Othello submits to the narrative self-fashioning of his own speeches and Iago's equivocal prompts, points out that Othello "at once represents the institution and the alien, the conqueror and the infidel".[32] This can be taken further: Brabantio's fear that, as Iago so deliberately puts it, "an old black ram | Is tupping [his] white ewe" (1.1.87-88), moves Othello from the position of insider to outsider. Urged on by Iago's proto-racist incitement, Brabantio's disbelief that Desdemona has married a Moor of her own free will, as well as a Moor's story of his "travailous history", indicates Othello's separation from other Venetians. This separation exists mainly in the eyes of Brabantio, Roderigo, and Iago, but, after Iago's delicate promptings in the temptation scene, where the ensign stresses Desdemona's rejection of a suitor of her own "clime, complexion and degree" (3.3.234), Othello himself calls into question his suitability for Desdemona's hand in marriage:

> Haply for I am black
> And have not those soft parts of conversation
> That chamberers have, or for I am declined
> Into the vale of years – and yet that's not much –
> She's gone, I am abused, and my relief
> Must be to loathe her.
>
> 3.3.267-272

So self-assured at the start, so much a citizen of Venice, an insider highly respected by all save one fiend, Othello here submits to Iago's vision of him. Although he consistently

[32] Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p.234.

contravenes the self-imposed notion of ineloquence, and dismisses his age as an issue in the same breath that he ponders it, Othello's blackness remains. Despite his revered role as a general, Othello's strangeness, foreignness, and otherness are now emphasized by his own words. Even the Duke's placatory description of Brabantio's new son-in-law as "far more fair than black" (1.3.291) is the result of Iago's interventions, prompting Brabantio with imagery that connects Othello's skin colour to immorality and irreconcilable difference to Desdemona. When Brabantio delivers his complaint at the same moment that he finds a "special mandate for the state affairs" (1.3.73) conferred on Othello, Othello is moved into an equivocal position before the audience: the gathering onstage conflates the state institutions that include Othello with the private grievance of Iago, and his tools, Brabantio and Roderigo, who exclude him, and attempt to alienate him, from Venetian life.

At the end of the play Othello's two suicide speeches re-assert his Venetian identity. Contemplating the sword strapped to his thigh as the Venetians surround him, Othello once more recalls his military prowess:

> I have seen the day
> That with this little arm and this good sword
> I have made my way through more impediments
> Than twenty times your stop: but, O vain boast,
> Who can control his fate?
>
> 5.2.259-263

This rampaging force becomes a service of the Venetian state in the general's final speech: "I have done the state some service, and they know't: | No more of that" (5.2.337-338). The difference in tone between the braggadocio of the violent battle itself and the prosaic "service" that turmoil constitutes echoes the difference between Othello's diplomacy before the Venetian senate that subtly reminds them of his worth and his boasts to Iago that this military quality carries more weight than Brabantio's accusation. Once more, Othello uses different words appropriate to the context in order

to call up the same meaning. At his "journey's end" (5.2.265), Othello interrupts his fighting talk as he recognizes the irrelevance of his battle-hardened combat skills. More, that his service to Venice will stop anticipates his suicide, as, literally, his death will put an end to it. Military service defined Othello as a member of Venetian society, and Othello chooses to end his life with this identification.

The general kills himself as if he was the other that he defines himself against. Though he says there will be no more mention of his service to the state, he goes on, one last time, to recount a telling instance of it to register his suicide:

> In Aleppo once,
> When a malignant and a turbanned Turk
> Beat a Venetian and traduced the state,
> I took by th' throat the circumcised dog
> And smote him – thus!
>
> 5.2.350-354

The Turkish other that so concerned Venetians and Western Europeans in Shakespeare's time is both identified with Othello as he stabs himself and the victim of the patriotic action he recounts. In an essay that examines the marriage bed in *Othello* as a nexus of early modern racial and sexual politics, Michael Neill states that Othello must speak his own funeral oration "in the absence of any witness sympathetic enough to tell the hero's story".[33] But this oration also performs a function only possible with Othello as its source: as he takes his own life his words serve to conflate his Venetian identity with his otherness, so that he dies a Venetian and an outsider in the same breath.

Both Venetian and other at the moment of his death, Othello's final suicide speech deconstructs the antithesis between insider and outsider. For Derrida language is differential, not referential, so terms such as "insider" and "outsider" are meaningful to us because they are signifiers that differ from each other, not because they are the sign of something in the actual world. Meaning in a differential language is produced by the

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[33] Michael Neill, "Unproper Beds: Race, Adultery, and the Hideous in *Othello*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 40 (1989), 383-412 (p.383).

trace of difference, of the other within the selfsame, that marks "the relationship with the other".[34] As a result of the trace of difference, binary oppositions such as "inside" and "outside" can always be unfixed. Burton calls Othello's final, schizophrenic speech a "simultaneous affirmation of his Otherness and desperate attempt to reclaim his standing".[35] This can be further extended. As Othello stabs himself, recognizing his murderous act as a confirmation of the proto-racist imagery Iago used to incite others against him, he asks the onlookers to remember the honourable figure who contradicted the pejorative associations of blackness set up by the play with his regal, assured entrance:

> Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,
> Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak
> Of one that that loved not wisely, but too well;
> Of one not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
> Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand,
> Like the base Indian, threw a pearl away
> Richer than all his tribe.
>
> 5.2.340-346

Agitated by Iago, worked into a fatal distraction, Othello goes on to punish, on behalf of the state, the "base" outsider who has repudiated its rewards. If "Venice haunts Shakespeare's play long after the action has shifted to Cyprus",[36] the Cyprus wars also haunt Venice as represented in the play: at a time when Venice was host to a diversity of foreigners and its dominions were threatened by a more powerful empire, this deconstruction of the opposition between outsider and insider allegorizes the contemporary struggle between Venice and the Ottoman Empire for control of the eastern Mediterranean, a historical event that provides the backdrop for *Othello.* As Emrys Jones pointed out, the play seems to be set around the first Turkish attack on Cyprus in 1570, with the island eventually lost to the Turks in 1571 when it "underwent a

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[34] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.47.
[35] Burton, "'A most wily bird'", p.58.
[36] Peter G. Platt, "'The Meruailouse Site': Shakespeare, Venice, and Paradoxical Stages", *Renaissance Quarterly*, 54 (2001), 121-154 (p.140).

violent conversion from Christian to Turkish rule".[37] In the text, Othello's violent self-sacrifice of shame can be seen to problematize the clear division between the Turk as outsider and Venetian as insider when, in one final, bloody stroke, he represents the internal institution and the external alien that threatens it, a representation that both provokes and allays Venetian anxieties about the Turk, and captures Othello's equivocal position at the end of the play.

Iago the Anti-*Logos*

Iago's words take advantage of Othello's equivocal position in Venice by exploiting the polysemy of language. As he outlines his Machiavellian interests to his dupe, Roderigo, Iago offers a riddle that both states the obvious and describes himself, obliquely, as an equivocator: "Were I the Moor, I would not be Iago. | In following him I follow but myself" (1.1.56-57). These words introduce a division between Othello and Iago, between the selfsame and the other, at the same time that they describe a link between the two predicated on the dependency of Iago's success on Othello's station. These schemes of falsified connections are made possible by Iago's equivocations and lies. When Iago explicitly calls his allegiance to Othello nothing more than show by playing on the meaning of "sign" as a token or military banner and, alternatively, as an act of pretence, he lies: "I must show out a flag and sign of love, | Which is indeed but sign" (1.1.154-155). Despite Iago's words to the contrary here, the power of these signs of love led Laurence Olivier, after a meeting with Freudian psychoanalyst Ernest Jones, to play Iago as secretly besotted with Othello. Indeed, the plotting ensign's initial riddle describes the absolute divorce of his secret motivations from his outward presentation, a separation that he promises to one day unify:

> Heaven is my judge, not I for love and duty

[37] Emrys Jones, "'Othello', 'Lepanto' and the Cyprus Wars", *Shakespeare Survey*, 21 (1968), 47-52 (p.52).

But seeming so, for my peculiar end,
For when my outward action doth demonstrate
The native act and figure of my heart
In complement extern, 'tis not long after
But I will wear my heart upon my sleeve
For daws to peck at: I am not what I am.

1.1.58-64

Iago pledges that, when his ends have been achieved, he will reveal his secret motivations. However, the disclosure that Iago promises never arrives. When Othello demands an explanation for the ensign's devilish machinations, Iago refuses to provide closure: "Demand me nothing. What you know, you know. | From this time forth I never will speak word" (5.2.300-301).

As Iago twists Roderigo around his words, he invokes the Judgement of heaven, the divine guarantee that will end all equivocation. But, like Iago, this invocation is not what it seems. Just as Iago delivers silence in the place of his promised disclosure, this transcendental signified to which Iago appeals, this *Logos*, is kept off-stage by Shakespeare, withholding from the play the resolution and stability it could provide. To put it another way, language lacks resolution and stability without the *Logos*. By way of compensation, it gains heterogeneity, the creative force that makes literature possible. This process encapsulates the dramaturgy of Shakespearean tragedy: without a transcendental signified – a *Logos* – to fix both language and tragedy, equivocations result in tragedy.

Instead, in *Othello*, Iago the anti-*Logos* remains. In the absence of the *deus ex machina* that could anchor language and thwart Iago, the ensign revels in the anarchic possibilities of a heterogeneous language in order to prompt tragedy. So when Iago says that Cassio did "Lie", he equivocates, allowing Othello to imagine all the possibilities suggested by the word in this context: "With her, on her, what you will" (4.1.34). The myriad meanings send Othello into a fit: "Lie with her? lie on her? We say lie on her when they belie her! Lie with her, zounds, that's fulsome!" (4.1.35-37). Although Othello

can explain away one expression as, ironically, the telling of lies about Desdemona, he cannot so easily explain away Iago's other implication. For Bernard Spivack, Iago is inspired by the psychomachia of pre-Renaissance morality plays, an allegory of evil who views man as "uninhibited and uninspired by any participation in divinity".[38] To extend Spivack's proposal, Iago thrives in *Othello* where the transcendental signified, the *Logos* that remains off-stage, is the Christian God. Its absence leaves the demonic ensign with the polysemic language he uses so well and allows his plots, and the plot of the play, to achieve tragic fruition.

Desdemona and Iago's salacious repartee warns the audience that neither are what Othello takes them to be. Iago states from the play's onset that he is not the honest ensign the other *dramatis personae* will go on to repeatedly describe him as, while Desdemona forewarns us that the playful and wanton young bride she briefly appears to be disguises her anxiety over Othello's uncertain fate on the rough seas that have carried them all to Cyprus: "I am not merry, but I do beguile | The thing I am by seeming otherwise" (2.1.122-123). This fateful echo of the counterfeit signs of love Iago earlier admits foreshadows Othello's mistake: he accepts the satanic Iago's lies as honesty and Desdemona's truths as dissimulation and dishonesty. His misrecognition leads him to brand Emilia with "the office opposite to Saint Peter" at the gates of hell in her role as Desdemona's mistress, an ironic substitution of place for Iago's wife (4.2.93). While Desdemona explicitly states that she is not the woman she plays in this exchange, Iago showcases the quick-witted linguistic dexterity that will turn this fiction of Desdemona's lustfulness into an apparent fact for Othello. Iago claims that his "muse labours" (2.1.127) but, like Othello before the senate, his subsequent performance contradicts the claims of speech that struggles to be delivered. The ensign begins with simple, aphoristic praise of Desdemona: "If she be fair and wise, fairness and wit, | The one's for use, the

[38] Bernard Spivack, *Shakespeare and the Allegory of Evil: The History of a Metaphor in Relation to his Major Villains* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1958), p.424.

other useth it" (2.1.129-130). However, lewder language replaces this restrained tribute of courtesy when Desdemona encourages Iago to praise a "black and witty" lady (2.1.131): "If she black, and thereto have a wit, | She'll find a white that shall her blackness fit" (2.1.132-133). Both the "fit" of the Folio that E. A. J. Honigmann opts for and the "hit" of the Quarto emphasize the possible connotation of "blackness" as vulva and hint ominously at the mixed marriage of Desdemona and Othello. Desdemona calls Iago's absurdities "old fond paradoxes to make fools laugh i'th' alehouse" (2.1.138-139) but they also indirectly refer to her. Iago reinforces an irreverent attitude to virtue, which he has described as a "fig" (1.3.320), by implying that the innocent are hypocritical because the sinful only perform the same "foul pranks which fair and wise ones do" (2.1.142). Moreover, when Iago goes on to list the merits of an upstanding, morally strong, and chaste woman – a description that bears a strong resemblance to Desdemona, who Cassio says surpasses "description and wild fame" in her virtue (2.1.62) – he dismisses such an ideal woman as fit only "To suckle fools, and chronicle small beer" (2.1.160). Here Iago equivocates in the following sense: his apparently flippant and nonsensical rhymes are proved true by his actions.

Iago's dismissal of the feminine ideal he presents anticipates the casual manner in which he manufactures Desdemona's death. Indeed, Cassio's remark that Iago "speaks home" (2.1.165) can be understood as more than just the apology for the ensign's bold and direct attitude in courteous society that it seems to be. Honigmann argued that Iago consistently reminds the audience of motives that are "connected [...] by his class feeling",[39] but for the audience Cassio's haughty intervention, as well as Desdemona's reference to bawdy bars, can also suggest that Iago amuses and scandalizes those around him with the very licentious immorality that eventually engineers their downfall. Iago disguises a dangerous honesty as burlesque comedic quips, a tactic that acts as a

[39] E. A. J. Honigmann, *Shakespeare: Seven Tragedies: The Dramatist's Manipulation of Response* (London: Macmillan, 1976), p.84.

counterpoint to Desdemona's explicit disavowal of her role in the lewd banter. Part of the tragedy of *Othello* is that the protagonist accepts the lascivious lie Iago constructs as truth and rejects Desdemona's abhorrence of it. To put it succinctly, Othello takes Iago's disguise, rather than Desdemona's disavowal, at face value.

Iago oils the wheels of this turn from fiction to fact as he convinces Othello that what he withholds is virtuous. The ensign gives the impression of reluctantly reporting the events of Cassio's assault on Montano, an event that Iago orchestrates with his dupe, Roderigo. Montano warns Iago that his account should not "deliver more or less than truth" (2.3.215), and the response of the dissembling ensign once more signifies doubly to the audience: "Touch me not so near" (2.3.216). This plea feigns grave disappointment with a charge that might "do offence to Michael Cassio" (2.3.218) and admits to the accusation of both embellishment and calculated restraint, an admission only the audience can hear. His glee obvious to the viewer, Iago delivers a sober account that fakes neutrality and persuades Othello to believe that his "honesty and love doth mince this matter, | Making it light to Cassio" (2.3.243-244). As a result, Othello is seduced in the temptation scene by the assumption that Iago extenuates Desdemona's fault by withholding what would indict her: "This honest creature doubtless | Sees and knows more – much more – than he unfolds" (3.3.246-247). Not only does Cassio's fall pave the way for Iago's rise, it creates the conditions that make Iago's defamatory attack on Desdemona believable to Othello.

Such dissimulations are not unique to Iago, or confined to the tragedies. Iachimo fails to seduce Imogen with a similar technique in *Cymbeline*, presenting himself as virtuous at the same time that he implies that Posthumus has been unfaithful:

> What! are men mad? Hath nature given them eyes
> To see this vaulted arch, and the rich crop
> Of sea and land, which can distinguish 'twixt
> The fiery orbs above, and the twinn'd stones
> Upon the number'd beach, and can we not

Partition make with spectacles so precious
'Twixt fair, and foul?[40]

Theses images allegorize the difference between Imogen's splendour and Posthumus's fictional Italian strumpet. The audience, who have witnessed the wager on Imogen's honour, are complicit in the equivocation, well aware that Iachimo's meditation is aimed directly at Posthumus. However, Iachimo is too verbose and Imogen remains undeceived. She insists that the visiting Italian speak unequivocally and explicitly state what he implies but withholds: "Discover to me | What both you spur and stop" (*Cymbeline*, 1.7.98-99). Iachimo's baroque outbursts not only suggest a fault that Imogen is invited to interpret as Posthumus's inconstancy but, at the same time, they conceal Iachimo's deceit with a façade of good intentions. Iachimo's lascivious intentions betray him, but the neutrality to which Iago successfully lays claim in the aftermath of the brawl between Cassio and Montano provides the foundations upon which the seduction of Othello is built.

In the temptation scene, Iago repeats Othello's words in order to give them a different meaning. Derrida stresses the "essential iterability" of language in general, in which he includes the alterity that comes with every repetition because, by definition, a repetition occurs in a different context.[41] Equivocations propel the opening of *Othello* as Iago teases Brabantio with the suggestion of his daughter's transgression. Honigmann writes that "it is Iago's gusto that transfixes us" because he withholds an explicit statement from Brabantio and the audience for as long as possible.[42] Whereas Othello diplomatically implies the same meaning before the senate that he confidently boasts to Iago, here Iago pounces on the opportunity offered by the shamed Cassio's guilty disappearance from Desdemona's side to repeat, to cite, Othello's own words with an

[40] William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, ed. by J. M. Nosworthy, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1995), 1.7.32-38. All references are to this edition, unless otherwise indicated.
[41] Derrida, *Limited Inc*, p.9.
[42] Honigmann, *Shakespeare: Seven Tragedies*, p.80.

alternative emphasis. Not an unequivocal statement of the worst, this change of emphasis nevertheless invites Othello to assume it. Iago starts with a question that tempts Othello:

IAGO Did Michael Cassio, when you wooed my lady,
Know of your love?
OTHELLO He did, from first to last.
Why dost thou ask?
IAGO But for a satisfaction of my thought,
No further harm.
3.3.94-98

Iago withholds the supposed thought for which he seeks clarification and then entices Othello with the possibility that there remains a doubt as to Cassio's role in the wooing of Desdemona:

OTHELLO Why of thy thought, Iago?
IAGO I did not think he had been acquainted with her.
OTHELLO O yes, and went between us very oft.
IAGO Indeed?
OTHELLO Indeed? Ay, indeed.
3.3.98-102

Without any further information offered by Iago as to his thoughts on the matter, Othello delves deeper into the surprise his ensign displays at Cassio's frequent role as a go-between. Othello repeats Iago's words twice, initially with a reciprocal surprise and then as a restatement that attempts to remove suspicion. The very repetition he makes, however, raises an irresistible doubt and Iago reverses the flow of interlocution:

OTHELLO Discern'st thou aught in that?
Is he not honest?
IAGO Honest, my lord?
OTHELLO Honest? Ay, honest.
IAGO My lord, for aught I know.
OTHELLO What dost thou think?
IAGO Think, my lord?
OTHELLO Think, my lord! By heaven, thou echo'st me
As if there were some monster in thy thought
Too hideous to be shown.
3.3.102-111

Iago insinuates something different using the same words, a scheme of anaphora that exploits the instability of a fallen language.

An echo, or the figure of Echo, that changes the meanings of words was a technique widely exploited by Shakespeare's contemporaries. In John Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* a voice that echoes from the Duchess's grave supports Delio's concerns but contradicts Antonio by repeating his words:

DELIO	Wisdom doth not more moderate wasting sorrow
	Than time: take time for't; be mindful of thy safety
ECHO	*Be mindful of thy safety.*
ANTONIO	Necessity compels me:
	Make scrutiny throughout the passes
	Of your own life, you'll find it impossible
	To fly your fate.
ECHO	*O, fly your fate!*
DELIO	Hark: the dead stones seem to have pity on you
	And give you good counsel.[43]

Through repetition, Delio's and Antonio's words become explicit warnings against reconciliation with the Cardinal, anticipating the case of mistaken identity that leads the avenging Bosola to murder Antonio instead of the Cardinal. Similarly, echoes play a role in *Venus and Adonis* as night interrupts the frustrated goddess's lustful pursuit and leaves her alone with the sound of her own voice reverberating sympathetically from nearby caves:

> And now she beats her heart, whereat it groans,
> That all the neighbour caves, as seeming troubled,
> Make verbal repetition of her moans;
> Passion on passion deeply is redoubled:
> 'Ay me!' she cries, and twenty times, 'Woe, woe!'
> And twenty echoes twenty times cry so.[44]

Here the poem moves from one of wooing to one of woe, as her night of lamentation is cruelly followed by Adonis's death on the morning hunt. If *Othello* is an "echo

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[43] John Webster, *The Duchess of Malfi*, ed. by John Russell Brown, The Revels Plays (London: Methuen, 1964), 5.3.30-37.

[44] *Shakespeare's Poems: "Venus and Adonis", "The Rape of Lucrece" and the Shorter Poems*, ed. by Katherine Duncan-Jones and H. R. Woudhuysen, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Thomson Learning, 2007), 829-834.

chamber",[45] Iago's repetitions, his echoing of Othello, restate the issue of Cassio's honesty with the possibility of a difference too horrid to be revealed. These repetitions, these slippery manoeuvres that escape any definitive answer, imply that Cassio may not be honest in every sense of the word at a moment in the play when the issue of wooing becomes one of woe.

Iago equivocates on honesty in the temptation scene. His deliberate hesitancy suggests that Cassio, who as a lieutenant certainly appears honest, may in fact be the opposite. To a Jacobean audience an honest person could be reputable regardless of his or her moral standing. Someone honest could therefore be "held in honour" (*OED*, *a.*1.a), that is, have an honourable or respectable position, but it did not necessarily follow that their social standing would make them "worthy of honour", "free from disgrace", or "chaste" (*OED*, *a.*2.a, *a.*2.b, *a.*3.b). Iago's focus on what Cassio seems to be implies that the outward show of Cassio's honesty could be deceptive:

IAGO For Michael Cassio,
I dare be sworn, I think, that he is honest.
OTHELLO I think so too.
IAGO Men should be what they seem,
Or those that be not, would they might seem none.
OTHELLO Certain, men should be what they seem.
IAGO Why then I think Cassio's an honest man.
3.3.127-132

As George Puttenham wrote in 1589, the rhetorician who uses repetition as a tactic "doth much alter and affect the eare and also the mynde of the hearer".[46] In this exchange Othello's use of "honest" is turned against him. The appreciation and praise Othello bestows on "Honest Iago" (1.3.295) is thrown back the way it came, repeated in order to suggest its opposite, dishonesty. Iago's invocation of the division between

[45] Thomas Moisan, "Repetition and Interrogation in *Othello*: 'What needs this Iterance?' or, 'Can anything be made of this?'", in *Othello: New Perspectives*, ed. by Virginia Mason Vaughan and Kent Cartwright (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1991), pp.48-73 (p.50).
[46] George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. by Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), p.198.

honest appearances and dishonest intentions intensifies the dramatic irony by recalling his own pretences of love for Othello. By virtue of a simple restatement, Iago ensures that the general implores him to give his "worst of thoughts | The worst of words" (3.3.135-136). The ruminations he withholds sow a seed of doubt that ultimately germinates into the murder of Desdemona.

Facial expressions that supplement speech are used by Iago to emphasize his sinister point to an increasingly agitated Othello:

> And when I told thee [Cassio] was of my counsel
> In my whole course of wooing, thou criedst "Indeed?"
> And didst contract and purse thy brow together
> As if thou then hadst shut up in thy brain
> Some horrible conceit.
>
> 3.3.114-118

Iago torments Othello. His equivocal mode of address entices Othello to interpret an unstable text, a linguistic trap that has no exit. Knowingly tight-lipped, the ensign's controlled statements invite Othello to consider the likelihood of Desdemona's infidelity, subtle insinuations and grimaces of concern exploiting Othello's vulnerabilities so that the ensign's abridged linguistic menace manages to accuse Desdemona by proxy. Tactically taciturn, Iago tempts Othello to question Desdemona's chastity on his behalf: to put it simply, Iago speaks through Othello. Tim Blake Nelson's *O*, a film adaptation of *Othello* set in a contemporary American high school, takes the link between self and other evident in the temptation scene as the key to Othello's and Iago's relationship. The jealous Hugo tells O, star of the basketball team and the school's only African-American pupil, that the two must depend on each to fulfil their dreams: "I'm you, O. I'm part of you."[47] However, this connection between self and other turns on Iago's studied use of speech and body language: the clarifying gestures he uses signal a particular, negative meaning to his ambiguous statements, tempting Othello to construct

[47] *O*. Dir. Tim Blake Nelson. Lions Gate. 2001.

what Iago withholds. To paraphrase Derrida, speech is not complete, full, or stable, and clarifying gestures are examples of supplementation that indicate the originary lack in speech. Such gestures are an example of Iago as the anti-*Logos* in *Othello*: the lack of self-sufficiency in speech in particular is exploited by the scheming ensign, who echoes Othello with additional grimaces that emphasize the alterity of repeated words.

Iago's taciturnity quickly becomes loquacity as he senses Othello's vulnerability. In response to Othello's demand that he speak his mind, Iago deliberately procrastinates and stresses at length that his thoughts may be unpalatable "As where's that palace whereinto foul things | Sometimes intrude not?" (3.3.140-141). Here the devilish ensign employs the tact of "dilatory time" (2.3.368), which requires patience. Patricia Parker identifies three meanings of "dilation" at work in *Othello*: delay, amplification and accusation.[48] Iago brings all three meanings together and, as Othello begs him not to conceal thoughts from a deceived friend, he increases the pressure:

IAGO It were not for your quiet nor your good
Nor for my manhood, honesty and wisdom
To let you know my thoughts.
OTHELLO Zounds! What dost thou mean?
3.3.155-157

The blasphemous exclamation absent from the Folio but present in the Quarto emphasizes Othello's exasperation, as does the "By heavens" (3.3.164) a few lines later that prefixes the general's determination to know Iago's thoughts. Although, as Tiffany Stern points out, Othello's seduction by Iago is slower in the Folio because his "furious exclamation becomes [...] a question, a demand for more information",[49] in both texts Iago's equivocations intrigue Othello more with each line. By withholding any explicit statement, Iago becomes "the dramatist within the play itself".[50] Brabantio and Roderigo both fall under his spell, and Othello too allows himself to be orientated by Iago's use of

[48] Patricia Parker, "Shakespeare and Rhetoric: 'dilation and 'delation' in *Othello*", in *Shakespeare and the Question of Theory*, ed. by Patricia Parker and Geoffrey Hartman (London: Methuen, 1985), pp.54-74.
[49] Tiffany Stern, *Making Shakespeare: From Stage to Page* (London: Routledge, 2004), p.55.
[50] Parker, "Shakespeare and Rhetoric", p.65.

language as the ensign increases his word count the more Othello becomes convinced of being wronged. Iago states that the "cuckold lives in bliss | Who, certain of his fate, loves not his wronger" (3.3.169-170), an indirect reference to Othello, and the general's simple response of "O misery" (3.3.173) signifies the completion of a movement from a question of wooing to a question of woe.

Iago turns Othello's cultural difference from Desdemona against him. Seizing on Othello's restatement of Brabantio's horror, Iago paraphrases the senator's words of disbelief. "For nature so preposterously to err" (1.3.63) by matching Othello and Desdemona must, for Brabantio, be the result of Othello's witchcraft; in Iago's rhetoric the union becomes the symptom of a carnal desire and lust in Desdemona that must, inevitably, remedy itself:

> OTHELLO And yet how nature, erring from itself –
> IAGO Ay, there's the point: as, to be bold with you,
> Not to affect many proposed matches
> Of her own clime, complexion and degree,
> Whereto we see, in all things, nature tends –
> Foh! one may smell in such a will most rank,
> Foul disproportion, thoughts unnatural.
> 3.3.231-237

Murray J. Levith argues that, like Cyprus, Othello has a veneer of civilization "but waiting to erupt at any moment are dark forces". Desdemona's murder would thus confirm Levith's view of Othello as a representative of "primitive and elemental chaos".[51] Should we opt to reject this essentialist, colonialist reading, the dark force that begins to stir in Othello's interrupted sentence is the spectre of Iago's, Roderigo's, and Brabantio's proto-racist ideology. As a result, this part of the temptation scene can be read as the point when Iago positions Othello as exterior to Venice. Loomba points out that "ideologies, the play tells us, only work because they are not entirely external to us".[52] Or, to put it another way, ideologies speak through us. In the light of this, Iago does not awaken or

[51] Murray J. Levith, *Shakespeare's Italian Settings and Plays* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989) p.32.
[52] Ania Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p.91.

provoke Othello's essential nature or character in the temptation scene, but catches the ghost of Brabantio's proto-racist ideology that speaks through Othello. Iago pounces on the opportunity Othello's words offer to place the general outside of Venice and its values. He explains Desdemona's rejection of suitors more appropriate to her country, character, and rank as a mark of her waywardness and, by extension, the possibility that she may return "to her better judgement" (3.3.240). The implication cannot be ignored: Desdemona cannot be virtuous because Othello would be no choice for a virtuous Venetian woman.

Iago physically positions Othello outside of Venetian discourse in 4.1. Encouraged by Iago to hide and watch his conversation with Cassio, Othello secretly, silently looks out for "the fleers, the gibes and notable scorns | That dwell in every region of [Cassio's] face" (4.1.83-84). Although the bawdy backslapping concerns Bianca's attachment to Cassio, Iago advises Othello to "mark [Cassio's] gesture" (4.1.88), signs that Iago promises will demonstrate the lieutenant's contemptuous use of Desdemona. Standing close to his ensign in the temptation scene, Iago's gestures reinforced his equivocations to Othello. Now, struggling to hear the whispered words, Cassio's actions, manipulated by Iago, reinforce the words Iago ensures Othello hears, verifying the accusation of infidelity to Othello's discreet, tormented gaze. For Loomba, *Othello* offers the prime early-modern example of how racial attributes such as skin colour, religion, and location "were animated by notions of sexual and gender difference".[53] In 4.1 the sexual betrayal of Othello and his otherness are both stressed as the one reinforces the other, a movement symbolized by the precious handkerchief that undoes Desdemona. Possession of a lady's handkerchief was considered proof of adultery in fifteenth-century Venice,[54] and Shakespeare certainly uses it as a twisted symbol of Desdemona's adultery as Bianca produces it before Othello's stolen glances: "By heaven,

[53] Loomba, *Shakespeare, Race and Colonialism*, p.93.
[54] Newman, "'And wash the Ethiop white'", p.155.

that should be my handkerchief!"(4.1.156). But, as a vexed Othello explains to Desdemona, the handkerchief given to him by his mother also has a very un-Venetian significance:

> 'Twould make her amiable and subdue my father
> Entirely to her love; but if she lost it
> Or made a gift of it, my father's eye
> Should hold her loathed and his spirits should hunt
> After new fancies.
>
> 3.4.61-65

Following Iago's intervention, the handkerchief becomes more than a symbol of sexual betrayal; it also recalls the magical otherness of which Othello stood accused earlier in the play. Before the senate Othello distances himself from such witchcraft in defence of his marriage to Desdemona, but here that witchcraft, and the associated otherness, returns to anticipate the death of Desdemona and the damnation of Othello: "To lose't or give't away were such perdition | As nothing else could match" (3.4.69-70). The unvoiced gestures along with the chance entrance of the handkerchief make Iago's statement that Venetian women "do let God see the pranks | They dare not show their husbands" (3.3.205-206) appear true to Othello, and this apparent truth of sexual mores emphasizes Othello's exclusion from the centre of Venetian cultural knowledge. Iago gives the impression that he opens a door for Othello to Venice's secret codes of behaviour at the same time that in practice he shuts him out.

As he excludes Othello from Venice, Iago welcomes Othello into a tortuous realm, encouraging Othello's doubt while seeming to discourage it. As he prepares to put Othello in a hidden place from where the general can watch Cassio's innocent words and gestures validate his accusation, the ensign twists the knife with a blackly comic show of reassurance that warns against hell's malice:

> O, 'tis the spite of hell, the fiend's arch-mock,
> To lip a wanton in a secure couch
> And to suppose her chaste.
>
> 4.1.70-72

Iago, of course, is the fiend who professes, amongst other motives that negate each other, an envy that leads him to mock Othello.

Any audience may interpret Iago as a devil, but this in turn implies a God who does not intervene in the play. Rather, Iago is more than that: a fiend whose fiendishness remains unproven in a play where divinity is invoked but does not intervene to assert its existence or the existence of its opposite. In other words, Iago is an equivocation. Ben Saunders looks at Iago and the associations of anality in the early modern period, and considers falsehood to be "the only essential truth of [Iago's] character", a psychopathology that sees the soliloquies as "insights into Iago's character that remain unknown to Iago himself".[55] Similarly, Michael Neill notes, in an essay on the importance of place in *Othello*, that the inconsistent, contradictory motives of Iago's sexual jealousy and professional envy offer "symptomatic expressions of his core of resentment, the cancer of comparison at the heart of his being".[56] We can understand these falsehoods that are disguised as truth another way. As humans we experience language as heterogeneous, unstable, and in a continual state of flux; it is the transcendental signified, the *Logos*, the Christian God of *Othello*'s universe, that can bring stability and resolution to language. But, in a fallen world, a fallen, polysemic language lies at the mercy of Iago the anti-*Logos*, who deconstructs the opposition between truth and falsehood that the *Logos* would reinforce. Set on a hellish wheel of fire by Iago, Othello rejects the satanic torture of Iago's mode of address:

> Avaunt, be gone, thou hast set me on the rack!
> I swear 'tis better to be much abused
> Than but to know't a little.
>
> 3.3.338-340

[55] Ben Saunders, "Iago's Clyster: Purgation, Anality, and the Civilizing Process", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 55 (2004), 148-176 (p.156).
[56] Michael Neill, "Changing Places in *Othello*", *Shakespeare Survey*, 37 (1984), 115-131 (p.121).

Othello swiftly demands to be "satisfied" (3.3.393), to be released from the purgatorial space in-between truth and falsehood that Iago drags him into. For Neill, language "begins to break upon the rack of equivocation" in the play.[57] We can extend Shakespeare's metaphor of the infernal torture that Neill recycles: Iago's rack, the purgatory of falsehood disguised as truth his words create, stretches meaning to the point where the *dramatis personae* border on, seem to glimpse, the play's universe of immortal and divine existence that lies beyond the human language that invokes it.

Othello's Judgement and Damnation

Iago the anti-*Logos* uses equivocation as the counterpoint to the metaphysical framework of *Othello* where a *Logos* is implied but its truths withheld. In the universe of the play, Iago teases those around him, and the audience, with the possibility that he stands as hellish divinity dramatized, a representation of evil, a devil let loose on stage. The existence of such a "demi-devil" (5.2.298) implies the corresponding existence of a *Logos* by seeming to refer to another, supernatural realm where truth resides. In other words, the possibility of Iago's otherworldliness, as well as Othello's invocations of heavenly divinity in the final scene of the play, takes us to the threshold of the play's mortal world, a liminal point where the play's language of salvation and damnation comes close to convergence with the transcendental world that lies beyond language, where salvation and damnation are unequivocally delivered by the Christian God of the play's universe. Here, transcendental Judgement remains off-stage, but manifests itself on-stage in the words of the *dramatis personae.*

In the final scene of the play, Othello's language unites human and divine justice. As Othello approaches Desdemona's sleeping body with murderous intent, his words allude to earthly justice: "It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul!" (5.2.1). One way a

[57] Neill, "Changing Places in *Othello*", p.125.

Jacobean audience may have understood "cause" would have been as "a matter before a court for decision" (*OED*, *sb.*8) and, by extension, also as a "trial" (*OED*, *sb.*8.b). Later, Othello warns Desdemona to "Take heed of perjury" (5.2.51) as she denies giving the strawberry-spotted handkerchief to Cassio. Moreover, the word "cause" would also have suggested a charge, accusation, or blame (*OED*, *sb.*9). Shakespeare later used the word in this sense as a mock judgement when the maddened Lear refers to the affair that produced Gloucester's bastard son, Edmund: "What was thy cause? | Adultery? | Thou shalt not die – die for adultery? No!"[58] Othello, like Lear, plays the judge, but whereas Lear rallies against divinity, Othello describes himself as a minister of heavenly Justice: "This sorrow's heavenly, | It strikes where it doth love" (5.2.21-22). Although Othello has just claimed that Desdemona's "balmy breath [...] dost almost persuade | Justice to break her sword" (5.2.16-17), his bittersweet words of love and sorrow paraphrase the traditional Christian proverb that God punishes those He loves. Indeed, Othello ominously advises Desdemona to pray "to heaven and grace" for pardon (5.2.27). Here, Othello judges on behalf of God; he is the *Logos* manifested in the play, but, of course, the audience knows that he has misjudged Desdemona, that his sword of justice should rightly break. Desdemona's insistent denial of adultery exposes the unhappy conflation of transcendental Judgement and mortal judgement made by Othello:

> O perjured woman, thou dost stone my heart
> And makest me call what I intend to do
> A murder, which I thought a sacrifice!
>
> 5.2.63-65

Othello cannot reconcile a falsely sworn Desdemona with the innocence she protests, and this conflict results in an equivocation between murder and sacrifice that anticipates the damnation of Othello for an ultimately wrongful murder. In a moment of prescience, Othello reflects on the cruel act he has just committed with words that foreshadow the

[58] William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. by R. A. Foakes, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1997), 4.6.108-110.

spiritual ruin he feels when later faced with the horrific knowledge of Desdemona's innocence and his terrible crime:

> Methinks it should be now a huge eclipse
> Of sun and moon, and that th'affrighted globe
> Should yawn at alteration.
>
> 5.2.98-100

This vision proves an anti-climax: the cataclysmic events that should greet Desdemona's death do not arrive here. Instead, the words echo the divine, Christian Judgement of the Book of Revelation where St John of Patmos describes the apocalypse heralded by the trumpets of the angels: "And the fourth angel sounded, and the third part of the sun was smitten, and the third part of the moon."[59] Othello, who delivers brutal, human justice laced with the language of Christian divinity, invokes a Judgement that he ultimately delivers upon himself when he commits suicide. Othello kills Desdemona and himself in the light of a mortal sense of justice inspired by a Christian Judgement that is invoked, but remains off-stage.

Christian imagery in the final scene of *Othello* shares much with the images and wall paintings of the Last Judgement found in Catholic, pre-Reformation churches and cathedrals. As Othello reveals Desdemona's hellish fate to Emilia, her horrified response paints him, rather than her mistress, as hell-bound:

> OTHELLO She's like a liar gone to burning hell:
> 'Twas I that killed her.
> EMILIA O, the more angel she,
> And you the blacker devil!
>
> 5.2.127-129

Desdemona is imagined as condemned to a fiery perdition, while Othello's action compounds his skin colour, a blackness that stands in stark opposition to the fair whiteness of the sanctified Desdemona. Emilia's condemnation also stresses the connection between Othello's blackness and the devil, which Morris Palmer Tilley lists in

[59] Revelation, 8.12.

his collection of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English proverbs, a link that, in one proverb, brings the devil together with the coal-blackness of a collier or coalman: "Like will to like, quoth the devil to the collier".[60] Here the descriptions of Desdemona and Othello suggest damnation as depicted in Doom images, where fair, white souls were commonly seen to be carted off to a red, fiery hell by vividly coloured, or dark, often black, devils.

An extant example of a stained glass depiction of the Last Judgement can be seen in St. Mary's Church, Fairford. The church retains a complete set of late medieval glass made largely in Westminster by Barnard Flower, the King's Glazier, between 1500 and 1517 with the help of glaziers and glass painters from the Netherlands. Located in Gloucestershire, on the southern edge of the Cotswolds, Fairford lies just east of Cirencester, a town that was accessible from Stratford-upon-Avon along the Roman road, the Fosse Way, in Shakespeare's day. Driving there from Cardiff, South Wales, in early 2008, requires an alternative route: rivers have burst their banks due to the hard, persistent rain of the previous days and many roads are flooded. It is hard to resist the temptation to playfully link the passage of flooded roads with the cataclysmic Biblical occurrences that inspired some of the illustrative stained glass to be seen on arrival. The Great West Window of St. Mary's Church depicts the Last Judgement (figure 9) and is split in two: the upper half shows Christ in Judgement, with Mary and St. John the Baptist kneeling down on either side, and a sword of justice rests on one of Christ's shoulders; below the transom angels raise the dead with their trumpets, a golden-armoured St. Michael holds scales of justice, St. Peter guards the entrance to heaven, and, to the right, blue devils carry the damned souls to hell where a black, monstrous Satan sits (figure 10).

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[60] Morris Palmer Tilley, *A Dictionary of the Proverbs in England in the Sixteenth and Seventeen Centuries: A Collection of the Proverbs Found in English Literature and the Dictionaries of the Period* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1950), p.382.

In the iconoclastic fervour of the Reformation most images were removed from places of worship, but an exception seems to have been made for stained glass in the Elizabethan era. The 1559 injunction by Elizabeth I to remove images from places of worship included a clause for the preservation and restoration of stained glass windows, an indication of her "concern that church buildings should be decently maintained". Moreover, there was also a pragmatic reason why stained glass windows were more likely to survive than other images: they "were permitted to remain intact because of the expense of replacement".[61] Many stained glass windows thus had a chance to survive the sectarian battles of the early modern period and Shakespeare may well have seen these colourful depictions of the Last Judgement. Although we cannot be certain that Shakespeare saw such images, we know that they were widespread and that the Reformation took a while to penetrate areas remote from London. Perhaps, even, it was difficult to avoid them. Not only would the ideological struggle itself have kept such images fresh in the cultural memory of early modern society, but in an era of mandatory church attendance parishioners would have seen these images that were intended to relate Biblical narratives to largely illiterate parishes and spoken about them. Shakespeare, at the very least, must have paid attention.

In *Othello* the protagonist calls for the Judgement depicted by images of the Doom, but this soteriological intervention remains off-stage. As Iago's schemes are revealed, Othello calls for the divine to step in: "Are there no stones in heaven | But what serves for the thunder?" (5.2.232-233). At once, Othello seems to expectantly wait for, and despair of, thunderbolts of punishment rather than just ordinary thunder. This sentence captures the dramaturgy of Shakespearean tragedy that withholds the divine, Christian Judgement it invokes, so that *Othello* – like a fallen, polysemic language

[61] Richard Marks, *Stained Glass in England during the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 1993), pp.231, 232.

distanced from a transcendental signified – ends without resolution and stability.

Othello's final, futile demand finds only Iago's silence:

> OTHELLO Will you, I pray, demand that demi-devil
> Why he hath thus ensnared my soul and body?
> IAGO Demand me nothing. What you know, you know.
> From this time forth I never will speak word.
> 5.2.298-301.

In contrast to Desdemona, who Othello asks to reconcile herself to heaven and avoid the damnation of her soul, Othello explicitly states his damnation, soul and body irreconcilable to God. In non-response Iago reiterates his position as the anti-*Logos*: despite the invocations of the Day of Judgement, the time when equivocation and tragedy both end, Iago falls silent and no transcendental body shows its hand. Only the *Logos* can end equivocation, while Iago the anti-*Logos* is defined by enigmatic irresolution that withholds disclosure. The one, unequivocal good implies the other, equivocal evil. The famous twelfth-century Last Judgement mosaic in the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, Torcello, at the northern end of the Venetian Lagoon, suggests this idea of an anti-*Logos* as the alternating, supplemental current of a *Logos* with a line of fire that flows from Christ's mandorla straight to hell, signifying that God fires the flames of the inferno that opposes him (figure 11).

Othello's image of the Day of Judgement is much like the stained glass depiction at St. Mary's Church. He imagines the fearful moment of account when he will face Desdemona:

> When we shall meet at compt
> This look of thine will hurl my soul from heaven
> And fiends will snatch at it.
> 5.2.271-273

In the stained glass, devils cart souls off to hell where Satan awaits (figure 12). One literally snatches at a soul protected by an angel with a golden staff (figure 13). More, the

vexed journey into the everlasting torture of hell that Othello desires articulates the common depiction of perdition:

> Whip me, ye devils,
> From the possession of this heavenly sight!
> Blow me about in winds, roast me in sulphur,
> Wash me in steep-down gulfs of liquid fire!
> 5.2.275-278

In St. Mary's stained glass depiction of the Day of Judgement, a red devil with a flail whips a rising soul away from heaven and towards the fires of hell (figure 14). Elsewhere in Gloucestershire, at St. Nicholas's Church in Oddington, the Doom painting that adorns the north wall of the nave shows a devil forcing recently roused souls in the direction of a fiery hell (figure 15). Despite the fact that no intervention of divinity is apparent to the audience, in the mind of the protagonist at least Judgement has been delivered that condemns Othello to the infernal underworld. Othello's attack on Iago tests the materiality and truth of his belief: "I look down towards his feet, but that's a fable. | If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee" (5.2.283-284). A thrust blade wounds Iago, who doesn't die: "I bleed, sir, but not killed" (5.2.285). True to form, Iago the anti-*Logos* does not confirm that he is a devil, but teases the audience and the *dramatis personae* around him with the possibility that he could be a member of the undying devilish assembly that many Jacobean churchgoers would have seen on the walls and windows of their churches or known of by repute.

A Jacobean audience would have been expected to understand the on-stage allusions to divine Judgement and hellish damnation in *Othello.* The play's imagery repeats what Christopher Marlowe made explicit in *Doctor Faustus.* As Faustus anxiously awaits damnation he fears the grasp from below of fiends that will snatch him to hell: "The divel wil come, and *Faustus* must be damnd. | O Ile leape up to my God: who

pulles me downe?".[62] Faustus, like Othello, pictures fiends that pull him down to hell. As Neill points out, Iago's service to Othello "is that of a Mephistophilis".[63] Marlowe, it seems, was influenced by the same images as Shakespeare, and devils enter the stage to literally drag Faustus off to hell. Moreover, according to an inventory in Philip Henslowe's diary, the Rose Theatre had a "Hell mought" among its props for the Lord Admiral's Men, who consistently played Marlowe's works.[64] Above the chancel arch in Coventry's Holy Trinity Church, a recently uncovered example of Doom paintings shows a vivid hell-mouth ready to swallow the souls of the wicked (figure 16), and back in St. Nicholas's Church in Oddington a devil thrusts souls into a mouth-like chasm that leads to hell, which even seems to have an eye and a twisted, fiery nose (figure 17). The mouth of hell, then, was a common image. In St. Mary's stained glass window, however, a jackal-like Satan sits where the hell-mouth would be, with eyes and teeth in his stomach, an indication, perhaps, of a swallowed soul (figure 18). On a final, playful, but not entirely improbable, note, this depiction of Satan, like the red devil that hovers with menace as the angel fights off a snatching fiend (figure 13 again), recalls the anthropophagi with heads beneath their shoulders mentioned by the protagonist in *Othello*. We might choose to understand Othello's narration of such images as a trope that embellishes his Christian identity with a dangerously close non-Christian past, and also as a deconstruction of pagan and Christian myths thought of as opposites. Had Shakespeare seen, or heard of, this particular, stained glass, depiction of Judgement Day, he may well have noted the connection between the Plinian creatures we now suppose he had read about and the devouring devil that still watches over St. Mary's pews with menace.

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[62] *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe*, ed. by Roma Gill and others, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987-98), II: *Dr Faustus* (1990), 13.72-73. Original emphasis.
[63] Neill, "Changing Places in *Othello*", p.129.
[64] *Henslowe's Diary*, ed. by R. A. Foakes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p.319.

Conclusion

This thesis proposes that in a fallen world there is a fallen language. Equivocation exemplifies this fallen language. Creative, generative and anarchic, the power of language runs unchecked in Shakespearean tragedy, which, distanced from the *Logos*, lacks the divine intervention that often provides unification and resolution in the comedies. *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear* can also be understood as distanced from the *Logos* because they are without the soteriological intervention instanced by Jupiter in *Cymbeline.* This chapter used Derrida's notion that speech needs to be supplemented – because language is without an extra-linguistic origin from which it emerges complete – to propose that, like a language without plenitude, Othello's position in Venice equivocates; he is both an insider and an outsider. A fallen language without an extra-linguistic origin, a transcendental signified, from which it emerges complete is exploited by Iago the anti-*Logos*, whose main method is equivocation; Shakespeare's fiendish creation makes the untrue appear true in order to ensnare Othello and uses proto-racist imagery to dupe Brabantio and Roderigo. Othello calls on the *Logos* that would punish Iago, the Christian Judgement of the play's universe, but to no avail; the *Logos* remains off-stage, but does manifest itself in the words Othello uses to paint a picture of his damnation, words inspired, it seems, by the poor man's Bible of pre-Reformation iconography.

As Chapter Four suggests, Doom imagery also haunts Macbeth as he considers the consequences of murdering Duncan. Moreover, equivocation is both the linguistic and temporal condition of the play, as the trace of the future invades the present and the trace of vice invades virtue.

— 4 —

Macbeth and the Trace of the Other

Introduction

The sequential chronology of *Macbeth*'s world equivocates as the witches' amphibologies unfix the opposition between the present and the future. As in *Hamlet* and *Othello*, equivocations are not only structural: Macbeth tempts Banquo, the witches seduce Macbeth, and Malcolm tests Macduff. Furthermore, the fulsome praise of Macbeth's honour also suggests his dishonour, while Malcolm disavows vices that threaten the virtues he professes, a trace of the other invading the selfsame in both cases.

For Jacques Derrida no ideas exist independently of language. Instead, we understand the term "man", for example, not because it refers to any entity in the world or is fixed to a particular concept, but in its difference from the term "woman", or "animal, or "god", or "demon". Meaning in a differential language, then, is produced by the trace of difference, of the other within the selfsame, by the trace, say, of "woman" in "man", and this trace marks "the relationship with the other".[1] This chapter starts by proposing that in *Macbeth* the protagonist and his wife contest the meaning of "man". It then goes on to argue that in the play the trace of the future, in the form of prophecy, invades the present, while the trace of the vices Malcolm disavows remain a threat to Scotland. Similarly, the Captain's speech portrays Macbeth as brave and honourable, but also hints that he may be brutal and dishonourable. To conclude, this chapter discusses the connections between Macbeth's soliloquy at 1.7 and the pre-Reformation Doom images of final Judgement that represent the divine intervention missing from a fallen language and withheld from the plot of *Macbeth.*

[1] Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p.47.

Derrida's point is that in language there are only differences, not references, so concepts do not exist beyond language or independent of other concepts. Without access to free-standing concepts, the signifier is divorced from any possible fullness of its own meaning, a fullness that could only be guaranteed by a metaphysical presence outside language. In the absence of divine guarantees, meaning is no more than the effect of difference, and thus of the trace of the other in the selfsame. Thus, in a fallen world signification is never closed, final, or held in place, and equivocation is therefore the condition of language in general; it is also the temporal and linguistic condition of *Macbeth* in particular. In 1589 George Puttenham defined amphibology as to "speak or write doubtfully and that the sense may be taken two wayes". An example of equivocation, amphibology is a menacing linguistic tactic used by "false Prophets as appeareth by the Oracles of *Delphos*".[2] To use amphibology is to influence and exploit the ambitious and dwell upon the things that frighten them. Hope and fear may read in amphibology what it most desires, or, more accurately, what amphibology can be taken to mean without ever explicitly confirming it. In consequence, amphibology can turn its victims into the instigators of insurrection and rebellion, their malleable minds fuelled by "vaine hope or vaine feare".[3] The cryptic cackles of the witches in *Macbeth* exemplify Puttenham's paradigm of amphibology.

Shakespeare's witches exploit an unstable language in order to deliver their prophecies. In turn, these prophecies deconstruct the opposition between the present and the future in *Macbeth.* Supernatural others whose language Macbeth is enticed into deciphering, the witches immediately set the scene of unreality with their rhyming riddles: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair."[4] This riddle anticipates Macbeth's pensive response to

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[2] George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, ed. by Gladys Doidge Willcock and Alice Walker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1936), p.260. Original emphasis.
[3] Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie*, p.260.
[4] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by Kenneth Muir, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1962), 1.1.11. All references are to this edition, unless otherwise indicated.

victory at the battle of Fife: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (1.3.38). Such a foul day of thunder and lightning, saturated by death and the play's repeating motif of blood, is made fair by victory at Fife, a conundrum that demonstrates the heterogeneity of meanings in the play. This foul and fair day foreshadows the unfolding of dramatic events that confirm the amphibologies of the witches to be true: the foul and fair future their riddles foretell occurs. After Macbeth is made Thane of Cawdor, Lady Macbeth feels "The future in the instant" (1.5.58), demonstrating how prophecies in the play impel a trace of the future to invade the present.

Macbeth invokes apocalyptic Judgement that is ultimately withheld, at least within the frame of the play. As this thesis proposes, Shakespeare's dramaturgy can be understood to anticipate divine intervention that will not arrive, just as final, stable meaning is always deferred in a fallen language that lacks a transcendental signified. To put it another way, the non-arrival allows the tragedy to play out, just as the absence of a transcendental signified affords language heterogeneity and creativity. In *Macbeth*, the profoundly Christian language that articulates the protagonist's fears of Judgement anticipates a "deep damnation" (1.7.20) that never materializes in the play itself. In the light of this, Macbeth's death does not guarantee a better future for Scotland. Rather, when Malcolm disavows the vices with which he has tainted himself as nothing more than a fiction, the trace of that fiction remains. Malcolm presents the dissimulation of the virtues he professes because the very articulation of virtuousness follows soon after his "first false speaking" (4.3.130). As Derrida writes, the other always "presents itself in the dissimulation of itself" due to the trace of its opposite in the selfsame.[5] In *Macbeth* the trace marks relationships between virtue and vice, as well as between the present and the future.

[5] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.47.

Imperfect Manhood

"Man" is an equivocal term in *Macbeth.* Macduff's introspection when he hears the horrid news that his wife and children have been slaughtered on the order of Macbeth elicits this response from Malcom: "Let's make us med'cines of our great revenge, | To cure this deadly grief" (4.3.214-215). Though Malcolm urges him to turn sorrow into a vengeful remedy, Macduff continues to exclaim at the tyrant's hellish action: "What, all my pretty chickens, and their dam, | At one fell swoop?" (4.3.218-219). Malcolm then implores Macduff to struggle against the news another way: "Dispute it like a man" (4.3.219). Macduff's response indicates that, though a man must be brave, he must also be subject to human weakness: "I shall do so; | But I must also feel it as a man" (4.3.220-221). This exchange demonstrates that the term "man" is an unstable one in the play.

A different equivocation on "man" can be read in Banquo's remarks about the witches. Before the witches have even spoken to him and Macbeth, it is evident that they occupy a space beyond the human world, as well as the finite, corporeal realm in which the two generals exist:

> BANQUO What are these,
> So wither'd and so wild in their attire,
> That look not like th'inhabitants o'th'earth,
> And yet are on't? Live you? or are you aught
> That man my question? You seem to understand me,
> By each at once her choppy finger laying
> Upon her skinny lips: you should be women,
> And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
> That you are so.
> 1.3.39-47

Displaying a quick and fluid insight here that later becomes a moral intuition, Banquo's description of the witches' androgyny and questionable humanity anticipates the equivocations of their amphibologies. Their shrivelled, decayed appearance, as well as their uncultivated clothing, gives the impression of unnatural, fantastic creatures, yet their

presence in front of Banquo and Macbeth implies that they should, even must, be of this world. Banquo wants to know exactly what blocks his path: "I'th'name of truth, | Are ye fantastical, or that indeed | Which outwardly ye show?" (1.3.52-54). It seems as though the witches have stepped through a portal from another, supernatural world. Indeed, Macbeth demands that the witches confirm their essence: "Speak, if you can: – what are you?" (1.3.47). Here, the trace of another, supernatural realm invades the mortal realm that Banquo and Macbeth exist within. Moreover, the witches "should be women" but the trace of masculinity prohibits a confident assertion of this, and so the questionable gender of the witches substantiates the equivocation between the human and the non-human, man and demon, as well as man and woman. Something otherworldly, confusing and indefinable, neither natural nor supernatural, neither male nor female, seems to stand before Banquo and Macbeth.

Demonic, witch-like qualities are linked to manhood for Lady Macbeth. She asks ill spirits to make her, like the witches, as much male as female:

> Come, you Spirits
> That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
> And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
> Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood,
> Stop up th'access and passage to remorse;
> That no compunctious visitings of Nature
> Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
> Th'effect and it!
>
> 1.5.40-47

For Lady Macbeth, to be unsexed, to be unwomanly, consists of a dreadful mercilessness that will fill her body completely. The audience has already witnessed her fears that Macbeth is "without | The illness" (1.5.19-20), without the wickedness, needed to take the crown. Here Lady Macbeth wishes to resist the compassion that might obstruct her horrible intentions, and which also taint Macbeth's ambition. Joanna Levin has argued that, according to the Witchcraft Statute of 1604, Lady Macbeth would have been

considered a witch for invoking evil spirits, a capital offence under the regulation.[6] As Macbeth approaches, Lady Macbeth invites the "murth'ring ministers" with a nurturing and sexual statement: "Come to my woman's breasts | And take my milk for gall" (1.5.47-48). This may well recall the trials for treason by sorcery that took place in Scotland between 1590 and 1591. As Christina Larner points out, more than 300 witches, it was alleged, had "indulged in hitherto unheard of obscene rituals [...] in the physical presence of their master, the Devil".[7] Watching the play, James I may well have made a connection between Lady Macbeth's invitation, the events that supposedly occurred during the trials, and the lewd "forme of adoration" he himself had described as a common ritual performed by witches.[8] And an everyday Jacobean at the Globe would probably have thought of Lady Macbeth as witch-like, if not quite the same as Shakespeare's witches. But Lady Macbeth's commitment to the murderous cause can be understood another way: firstly, it introduces the audience to her idea of manhood; and, secondly, due to the "future in the instant" that she feels more keenly than her husband, Lady Macbeth welcomes a union with forces that have to entice Macbeth.

The future Lady Macbeth feels in the instant encourages her to plot Duncan's murder. Her entrance in 1.7 as Macbeth searches his soul emphasizes her role as a catalyst in the eventual regicide:

> I have no spur
> To prick the sides of my intent, but only
> Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
> And falls on th'other –
>
> *Enter* LADY MACBETH.
>
> 1.7.25-28

[6] Joanna Levin, "Lady Macbeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria", *ELH*, 69 (2002), 21-55 (p.39).
[7] Christina Larner, *Witchcraft and Religion: The Politics of Popular Belief*, ed. by Alan Macfarlane (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), p.9.
[8] James VI & I, *"Daemonologie", 1597; "Newes from Scotland", 1591*, ed. by G. B. Harrison (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966), p.37.

Lady Macbeth arrives as the imperative that will drive on Macbeth's intent. Unlike Macbeth, the audience knows that Lady Macbeth privately believes her husband to be "too full o'th'milk of human kindness, | To catch the nearest way" (1.5.17-18), and their subsequent warring words can be understood as a dispute over the meaning of manhood.

Macbeth's reluctance to pursue the dastardly plan confirms Lady Macbeth's fears:

> We will proceed no further in this business:
> He hath honour'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.
>
> 1.7.31-35.

Caroline Spurgeon proposed that the image of ill-fitting garments constantly recurs in *Macbeth*,[9] and here Macbeth wears the effusive appreciation and praise he has recently earned, while to act in a dishonourable manner would be to lose these garments. To commit the act Lady Macbeth presses upon him would be to throw away the honour these metaphorical garments signify. The honour at stake cannot, for Macbeth, be separated from a conception of manhood defined by an adherence to feudal conventions. When, later, Macbeth suggests that all "briefly put on manly readiness" (2.3.131) in the aftermath of Duncan's murder, he puts this manliness on – hypocritically, as the audience is well aware – in the light of his regicidal act. In his study of metaphor in the play, Cleanth Brooks argues that, at this moment, Macbeth "can only pretend to be the loyal, grief-stricken liege".[10] He can only pretend because killing the king contradicts the obligations of fidelity that define a man as loyal and honourable in a feudal society.

Lady Macbeth turns the metaphor against Macbeth, however, with a swift and cutting reproach that attacks his masculinity:

> Was the hope drunk,
> Wherein you dress'd yourself? Hath it slept since?
> And wakes it now, to look so green and pale

[9] Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What it Tells us* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1935), pp.324-335.
[10] Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London: Dobson, 1968), p.29.

At what it did so freely?

1.7.35-38

Lady Macbeth equates her husband's doubts with a cowardice that loses courage in sobriety, reflecting fearfully on what it had contemplated without restraint. The courage that only comes with intoxication, in which Lady Macbeth credits Macbeth, separates the apprehensions of the morning after from the bravado of drunkenness that belonged to the heady night before. The contrast Lady Macbeth makes between the faint-heartedness of sobriety and the boldness of insobriety prepares the audience for the battle between what Macbeth wants to do and what he feels he ought to do.

Lady Macbeth's attempt to argue Macbeth into murder brings desire and action into conflict:

> Art thou afeard
> To be the same in thine own act and valour,
> As thou art in desire? Would'st thou have that
> Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,
> And live a coward in thine own esteem,
> Letting "I dare not" wait upon "I would,"
> Like the poor cat i'th'adage?
>
> 1.7.39-45

The proverbial cat likes to eat fish but not to get her paws wet, and the pejorative analogy sums up Macbeth's moral acrobatics, where his apprehensions stand in the way of his goal. She aligns Macbeth's ambivalence with fear of acting in accordance with what he wants. For her, a man's action must realize his desires. But, for Macbeth, manhood must be more temperate than the desires that tempt it to its own betrayal: "I dare do all that may become a man; | Who dares do more, is none" (1.7.46-47). In the social structure of *Macbeth*, kingship is highly desirable, but at the same time it is forbidden to all but one person, which makes it precarious. Inevitably then, the principles that govern social exchange and regulate behaviour in the play – the laws of *Macbeth* – come into conflict with the understandable desire to be king, a desire that may

lead a man to step beyond the boundaries set out by feudal relations and commit a regicidal act that strips him of the very qualities that are revered in a king.

Lady Macbeth's provocation exploits a contradiction: namely, that despite the laws of the play, competing interests are always a threat to security in Scotland. Harry Berger Jr.'s analysis of the early scenes of the play suggested "that there is something rotten in Scotland", a structural malaise that claims both Macdonwald and Macbeth as its victims.[11] We can take this further: Macbeth is caught between the desire for the benefits of kingship and the rules of kinship that prohibit the violent betrayal that would lead him to the throne. In the play, feudal relations are defined by the factionalism and warfare they are designed to exclude, and which hold Macbeth back. Indeed, these relations are, as Kathleen McLuskie points out, "precarious and potentially bloody" until Malcolm redistributes power at the end of the play.[12] So "I dare not" always competes with "I would" in the structure of *Macbeth*'s society.

"Man" repeatedly equivocates in the play: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth struggle for its meaning. To return to Macbeth's response to his wife's emasculating attack, we can read it as a warning against the unmanliness of tyranny: "I dare do all that may become a man; | Who dares do more, is none". Macbeth's words pre-empt Macduff's response to Malcolm's supposed vices: "Boundless intemperance | In nature is a tyranny" (4.3.66-67). Actions that exceed the temperance appropriate to manhood must be balanced against the kinship obligations of fealty, for who disregards these constraints cannot be considered a man of worth. At this point for Macbeth to step beyond the parameters that designate masculine restraint and control is to disavow feudal relations, to disregard the codes that ensure the health of such a polity, thus becoming less than a

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[11] Harry Berger, Jr., "The Early Scenes of *Macbeth*: Preface to a New Interpretation", *ELH*, 47 (1980), 1-31 (p.5).
[12] Kathleen McLuskie, "Human Statute and the Gentle Weal: Historical Reading and Historical Allegory", *Shakespeare Survey*, 57 (2004), 1-10 (p.8).

man. Yet for Lady Macbeth the courage that acts on such ambition is the marker of manhood:

> What beast was't then,
> That made you break this enterprise to me?
> When you durst do it, then you were a man;
> And, to be more than what you were, you would
> Be so much more the man.
>
> 1.7.47-51

Lady Macbeth uses "beast" to mock Macbeth's notion of temperate manhood. The action, not the regulated desire, makes Macbeth a greater man. She defines Macbeth's quality in line with how far he will discount the very principles that define his quality in a feudal society, opposing Macbeth's conception of manhood and honour.

Lady Macbeth reminds her husband of how he can lose what becomes a man domestically by doing what becomes a man politically. Like Lady Macduff, Lady Macbeth places her husband's loyalty to her above the codes of fealty: "From this time | Such I account thy love" (1.7.38-39). The demand that she makes as a wife adds to Macbeth's confusion. At this moment in *Macbeth*, the demands of fealty are opposed by the demands made by Lady Macbeth as two commitments come into conflict. She warns that the solemnity of the contract between her and Macbeth will be threatened by adherence to other, competing codes of behaviour. Macbeth must weigh the unmanliness of tyranny against the unmanliness of abandoning undertakings he himself reveals to his wife.

Lady Macbeth utilizes the difference between parenthood and marriage to bully Macbeth. She affirms the family structure with a disavowal of its fruit:

> I have given suck, and know
> How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
> I would, while it was smiling in my face,
> Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
> And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn
> As you have done to this.
>
> 1.7.54-59

The merciless brutality described in Lady Macbeth's words reaffirms her contempt for the altruism and self-sacrifice in Macbeth. Simultaneously, however, her words uphold the gravity of a spouse's promise. That she would kill with such sickening violence a baby that suckles at her breast emphasizes the importance of an oath, even at the expense of the life most valuable to a mother. Moreover, these lines recall the invitation to the ill spirits to take her milk for bile, as the babe is fatally separated from the breast that is offered instead to evil spirits. "Pity, like a naked new-born babe" (1.7.21), which Macbeth fears will herald divine Judgement, becomes a twisted, pitiless version of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac.[13] The image Lady Macbeth conjures replaces the divine image in Macbeth's soliloquy with one of murder. Indeed, we can read the murdered babe as an evil spirit. Lady Macbeth first welcomes the "Spirits | That tend on mortal thoughts" (1.5.40-41) to her breasts then recycles the image with a child in order to win Macbeth's commitment. "Murth'ring ministers" in Lady Macbeth's words masquerade as an innocent babe she would kill out of loyalty to her husband. After this, Macbeth no longer objects. He asks just one question, "If we should fail?" (1.7.59), before asserting that he is "settled [...] to this terrible feat" (1.7.80-81). If the witches seduce Macbeth with their amphibologies, Lady Macbeth does it with words that literally describe the killing of pity in the name of manhood.

Later in the play, Macbeth's manliness will become the subject of a theatrical equivocation. As Macbeth rants wildly at Banquo's ghost, Lady Macbeth asks him, "Are you a man?" (3.4.57). Though Macbeth claims to be a "bold one" (3.4.58), Lady Macbeth insists that he is "quite unmann'd in folly" (3.4.72). The editor of the Arden edition, Kenneth Muir, adds a stage direction in this scene, which the Folio *Macbeth* does not have, in order to make sense of these words: "Why, so; – being gone, | I am a man again" (3.4.106-107). Macbeth's words do seem to indicate the departure of the ghost,

[13] Genesis, 22.

but as David Worster proposes, we could choose to believe that the ghost is still on stage in order to cast doubt on Macbeth's claim to be, once more, a man.[14] In response to this, we can also say that Muir's stage direction fixes a correlation suggested by the text between Macbeth's "unmann'd folly" and the ghost's presence on the stage. On the other hand, because it does not confirm Macbeth's words, the Folio retains the possibility that the ghost haunts Macbeth until the end of the scene. Worster's argument is far-fetched, but we can nevertheless understand Banquo's ghost as a reminder of Macbeth's dishonour, where the consequences of actions that lie outside what becomes a man in feudal society perpetually haunt the tyrant's honourable conception of manhood.

Imperfect Time

The supernatural allegiance the witches' bodies hint at, their words confirm. When Rosse brings the news that Duncan has made Macbeth Thane of Cawdor, the fulfilment of the witches' first prophecy provokes a startled response from Banquo: "What! can the Devil speak true?" (1.3.107). Jacobeans at the Globe may or may not have believed that witches and magic could have real effects but, as Stephen Orgel writes in a rich and wide-ranging article, even for the sceptical, witchcraft and the supernatural were "as much part of reality as religious truth".[15] As the authorities executed people for witch-like activities, the public debate extended to the publication of many books on witchcraft. Reginald Scot's sceptical *The discouerie of witchcraft* was published in 1584, and George Gifford produced two equally unconvinced texts, *A Discourse of the subtill Practices of Deuilles by Witches and Sorcerers* in 1587 and A *Dialogve concerning Witches and Witchcraftes* in 1593. Opposing Scot's scepticism, James I wrote his *Daemonologie* in 1597. So Shakespeare's audience would certainly have been aware of the popular debate surrounding witchcraft

[14] David Worster, "Performance Options and Pedagogy: *Macbeth*", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 53 (2002), 362-378.
[15] Stephen Orgel, "Macbeth and the Antic Round", *Shakespeare Survey*, 52 (1999), 143-153 (p.145).

and, consequently, that witches were, as James I had written, commonly seen as "of that kinde that consultes with the Deuill".[16]

An antithesis exists between the witches and the play's benevolent powers that are supported by England's pseudo-messianic king, blessed with "a heavenly gift of prophecy" (4.3.157). Enigmatic in his theatrical absence, the English king is the reference point for the good forces "That Christendom gives out" in the battle against Macbeth (4.3.192). And so it is fitting that the neutral riddlings of the dark and scheming witches are aligned with the devil by Banquo, despite their validity: "And oftentimes, to win us to our harm, | The instruments of Darkness tell us truths" (1.3.123-124). Banquo's words suggest that these strange sisters have access to an other, metaphysical realm; it is the realm of a transcendental signified. In the Christian universe of *Macbeth*, this transcendental signified, this *Logos*, is the Christian God, and to suggest the existence of the devil is also to imply God's existence, for "who denyeth the power of the Deuill, would likewise denie the power of God".[17] Using the example of Robert Kett, who, with an inspirational speech at what is now called Kett's Oak, led a rebellion in 1549 in response to the enclosure of common land by the aristocracy, Steven Mullaney points out that the traitor in Renaissance England is "seduced by a language without origin".[18] In *Macbeth*, prophecy, assumed to be the work of the Devil and his demonic allies, draws inspiration from a supernatural place outside language in order to wreak havoc in the play.

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[16] James VI & I, *Daemonologie*, p.29.
[17] James VI & I, *Daemonologie*, pp.54-55. Geoffrey Wright makes this connection between witches and the devil explicit in his recent film adaptation of *Macbeth*, set in the criminal underworld of modern-day Australia, as the witches deface the monuments of a cemetery in the opening scene (*Macbeth*. Dir. Geoffrey Wright. Revolver. 2007).
[18] Steven Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage: License, Play, and Power in Renaissance England* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1988), p.121.

Rhyming riddles delivered by the witches ultimately prove to be the truth of the matter. With the promise of great honours the witches begin their amphibological seduction of Macbeth:

1 WITCH All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!
2 WITCH All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!
3 WITCH All hail, Macbeth! that shalt be King hereafter.
1.3.48-50

Unlike Banquo, who responds with purpose and alacrity, Macbeth falls silent, seeming, as Banquo observes, "to fear | Things that do sound so fair" (1.3.51-52). For the audience, the suggestion that Macbeth will be Thane of Cawdor affirms that, as Banquo suspects, the witches "can look into the seeds of time" (1.3.58). Reappraising Shakespeare in the light of poststructuralist, political and feminist theories, Malcolm Evans states that in the early scenes of *Macbeth* "the theory of the divine right of kings and its place in the Great Chain of Being is made one with nature", and that the hurly burly of language invades this metaphysical hierarchy to interrupt its "'natural' quality".[19] In the light of this, we can also say that the "natural" quality of time is also interrupted by the prophetic utterances of the witches. The audience is immediately aware that the words that throw Macbeth into a state of confusion are a statement of fact, and the news Rosse soon breaks to Macbeth confirms the witches' prophecy as the trace of the future that invades the present. Already aware of the Thane of Cawdor's fate, the audience are complicit with this particular amphibology. On the other hand, they are as yet unaware of whether, and how, Macbeth will be king. At the same time, they know that he has inherited the title of a traitor. And before the possible routes to accession can be considered, the witches greet Banquo with predictions that divide him from Macbeth:

1 WITCH Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.
2 WITCH Not so happy, yet much happier.
3 WITCH Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.
1.3.65-67

[19] Malcolm Evans, *Signifying Nothing: Truth's True Contents in Shakespeare's Texts* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p.114.

The predictions of the future are contradictory, describing Banquo as both inferior and superior to Macbeth, and a father of kings without his own crown. The pattern of "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" returns in these predictions, and their apparent contradictions ultimately prove to be accurate. Rosse's news of Macbeth's advancement to Thane of Cawdor instantly proves the witches' words to be true, and the amphibologies that confront Banquo are another instance of the trace of the future invading the present. But this time the amphibologies of the witches are proved to be accurate over the course of the play as the dramatic action unfolds to confirm the "strange intelligence" of their equivocations (1.3.76).

For Derrida "the future *is not present*, but *there is* an opening onto it".[20] Lady Macbeth becomes a devoted disciple of the future's trace. She welcomes home her victorious husband with a re-articulation of the witches' prophecy: "Great Glamis! worthy Cawdor! | Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter!" (1.5.54-55). In the language of *Macbeth* prophecy opens a door from the present to the future that Lady Macbeth hails. Though the future is not present, its trace teases Lady Macbeth with the possibility of its arrival in the here and now:

> Thy letters have transported me beyond
> This ignorant present, and I feel now
> The future in the instant.
>
> 1.5.56-58

Macbeth's news has taken Lady Macbeth beyond the opacity of the moment or, in other words, beyond a present that does not know the future. Now, what she presently feels is the future's imminence, since the letters that have transported her are a mark left by the trace of the future. Lady Macbeth's words emphasize how close she senses the clamour of future acclamations to be.

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[20] Jacques Derrida and Maurizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, trans. by Giacomo Donis, ed. by Giacomo Donis and David Webb (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), p.20. Original emphasis.

As I have proposed, time in *Macbeth*, like the play's language, is unstable. Or, to put it in the language of the play, time is never done. Macbeth's soliloquy at the start of 1.7 begins by using "done" to mean both "finished" and "executed": "If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well | It were done quickly" (1.7.1-2). To paraphrase, if Duncan's assassination could be finished – without later repercussions – when carried out, then it should be carried out quickly. These words articulate Macbeth's anxiety that the deadly deed he contemplates, like time and language, will never reach the fullness, completion, or stability guaranteed by a transcendental signified. Divine, Christian intervention only comes on Judgement Day, when, as the Book of Revelation describes, the seventh and final angel heralds "a great voice out of the temple of heaven, from the throne, saying, It is done".[21] A generation ago, M. M. Mahood focused on the use of "done" in *Macbeth* and suggested that, because Fleance escapes the murderers sent to kill him and Banquo, Lady Macbeth's assertion that "what's done is done" cannot be considered accurate (3.2.12). On the contrary, with Fleance alive the future as prophesied by the witches, a future where Macbeth's horrid deed rewards Banquo's progeny with the crown, still lurks on the horizon: completion is beyond reach, it slips through Macbeth's fingers, and all that can be done is not done if Banquo's descendants live to be kings.[22] Mahood argues that this results from the play's primary dramatic conflict between a religious notion of time "in which the change of hour and season [...] symbolises both the impermanence of things within time and their extra-temporal permanence" and an irreligious notion of time as "the momentous event alone" or "duration alone".[23] We can take this further: the "surcease" and the corresponding "success" (1.7.4), which Macbeth desires and that would supply completion and resolution, are always deferred, demonstrating the human experience of time. From the

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[21] Revelation, 16.17.
[22] M. M. Mahood, *Shakespeare's Wordplay* (London: Methuen, 1957), pp.136-141.
[23] Mahood, *Shakespeare's Wordplay*, p.132.

moment he engages with the witches, Macbeth's words are haunted by the possibility that time is never finished, complete, or done:

> Present fears
> Are less than horrible imaginings.
> My thought, whose murther yet is but fantastical,
> Shakes so my single state of man,
> That function is smother'd in surmise,
> And nothing is, but what is not.
>
> 1.3.137-142

Frank Kermode suggests that in this aside "the present is no longer present, the unacted future has occupied its place".[24] I have argued that the future does not occupy the place of the present, but that the trace of the future invades the present. In the light of this, the present is not displaced entirely, but differs from itself. Macbeth's actions, then, are both motivated and hampered by ideas rooted in the future. One possible meaning of "surmise" is the "slight trace (*of* something)" (*OED*, *sb.*3.b). So we can understand this as the trace of a future, imaginary killing that can still shake Macbeth to his foundations.

Macbeth's conception of himself as unified seems to equivocate as his words bring together the meanings of "single" as "unaccompanied or unsupported by others" and "slight, poor, trivial" (*OED*, *a.*1, *a.*12.b). Shakespeare invokes the later meaning in *The Second Part of King Henry the Fourth* when the Lord Chief Justice ridicules Falstaff's claim to youth: "Is not your voice broken, your wind short, your chin double, your wit single, and every part about you blasted with antiquity?"[25] Emphasizing the opposite of such slightness, Iago describes Brabantio in *Othello* as so popular that he "hath in his effect a voice potential | As double as the duke's".[26] The conflation at this point in *Macbeth* of "single" as meaning both withered and "individual" (*OED*, *a.*2.a) – and therefore "not double, compound, or complex" (*OED*, *a.*11.a) – articulates the threat to

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[24] Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (London: Penguin, 2000), p.205.
[25] William Shakespeare, *The Second Part of King Henry IV*, ed. by A. R. Humphreys, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 1.2.181-183.
[26] William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. by E. A. J. Honigmann, The Arden Shakespeare (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 1.2.13-14.

the protagonist's unity from fearful imaginings. In an essay that examined the questions of sovereignty in *Macbeth*, Richard Horwich described "wholeness, completeness, or coherence" as the "unattainable condition" sought by the play's *dramatis personae*.[27] More than that, in a fallen world incoherence is the condition of mankind, and the condition of time and language in *Macbeth* in particular.

As Derrida explains, the imminence of our death in the future drives us to act now, and this relationship between present and future makes us human: "Only a mortal can speak of the future in this sense, a god could never do so."[28] That is to say that mortality entails a structure of experience where the trace of the future always invades the present. As mortals, we experience time and language as defined by difference. Only the divine intervention of a transcendental signified could take us to the "last syllable of recorded time" and erase that difference (5.5.21). Macbeth's words after Lady Macbeth's death invoke the Book of Revelation where an angel heralds the Last Judgement with the cry "that there should be time no longer".[29] Until then, man can never be "perfect; | Whole as the marble, founded as the rock" (3.4.20-21). Shakespeare echoes a commonplace idea exemplified in *Sophonisba*, his fellow playwright John Marston's witchcraft play. The ill-fated protagonist, Sophonisba, says that "*Gods naught foresee, but see, for to their eyes | Naught is to come, or past*".[30] Mortal Macbeth looks to the future once more when Fleance escapes. Despite the murder of Duncan, the deed is not complete. Beyond the present, Fleance "the grown serpent lies" and "in time will venom breed" (3.4.28-29). In a fallen world without divine guarantees, time is never done.

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[27] Richard Horwich, "Integrity in *Macbeth*: The Search for the 'Single State of Man'", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 29 (1978), 365-373 (p.366) <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2869146?seq=1> [accessed 25 September 2008].
[28] Derrida and Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, p.23.
[29] Revelation, 10.5-6.
[30] John Marston, *The Wonder of Women Or The Tragedie of Sophonisba* (London: John Windet, 1606), sig.C2^{v}. Original emphasis.

Imperfect speakers

Language, like time, is also incomplete. As I have proposed in this chapter, temporal equivocation is the condition of *Macbeth.* Simultaneously, linguistic equivocations lead to the consideration and realization of Duncan's murder, as well as the tyrannical aftermath, events that prove the amphibologies of the witches to be correct as prophecies. This invasion of the future into the present co-exists with the language of the play where dishonour can be honour, and vices present themselves as virtues. Jonathan Goldberg explores *Macbeth*'s relationship to its sources, principally Holinshed, in order to consider history – in this case the history Shakespeare draws on for the play – as a "heterogeneous dispersal" rather than linear, homogeneous, and fully recoverable.[31] But the relationship can be examined the other way round too: we can look at the different aspects of Holinshed that Shakespeare brings together so as to understand the many, dispersed meanings of honour and dishonour, virtue and vice, in the play.

The television performance of Trevor Nunn's minimalist interpretation of the play dressed Duncan in white robes with a large crucifix around his neck, an image of Christian purity emphasized by a demeanour of beneficence.[32] Orgel points out that, contrary to this common saintly image, in practice "Duncan's rule is utterly chaotic, and maintaining it depends on constant warfare."[33] Holinshed's *Chronicles* bear this out, describing the historical Duncane's administration as "feeble and slouthfull",[34] and the "hurlyburly" the witches speak of could refer to both the current disorder in Scotland and troubles to come (1.1.3).

Moreover, Duncan's proclamation of Malcolm as next in line to the throne could perhaps be read as a cunning attempt to trump a legitimate claim, with the title of Thane

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[31] Jonathan Goldberg, "Speculations: *Macbeth* and Source", *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, ed. by Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor (London: Methuen, 1987), pp.242-264 (p.247).
[32] *Macbeth.* Dir. Philip Casson. 1978. DVD. Fremantle. 2004.
[33] Orgel, "Macbeth and the Antic Round", p.146.
[34] Raphael Holinshed, *The First and second volumes of Chronicles, comprising 1 The description and historie of England, 2 The description and historie of Ireland, 3 The description and historie of Scotland* (London: [n. pub.], 1587), p.171.

of Cawdor a consolation prize for Macbeth. Holinshed wrote that when Duncane made Malcolme Prince of Cumberland – a position always given to the future king – Makbeth "began to take counsell how he might usurpe the kingdome by force, having a just quarell so to do".[35] A contemporary audience may have known the histories referred to by the play, but the text itself does not confirm Holinshed. On the contrary, Macbeth never states any legitimate claim to the throne, and ascribes to fortune the role of kingmaker: "If Chance will have me King, why, Chance may crown me, | Without my stir" (1.3.144-145). The usurpation that Holinshed presents as politically understandable and to a certain extent honourable considering the weakness ascribed to Duncane's regime, Shakespeare presents as utterly dishonourable.

The bleeding Captain's words carry a trace of dishonour in the honour with which they credit Macbeth, as he recounts Macbeth's bravery with awe and respect:

> For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),
> Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
> Which smok'd with bloody execution,
> Like Valour's minion, carv'd out his passage,
> Till he fac'd the slave;
> Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
> Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th'chops,
> And fix'd his head upon our battlements.
>
> 1.2.16-23

As soon as the Captain honours Macbeth's valour, he reaffirms the praise. Macbeth is portrayed as scorning the slings and arrows of chance, and the audience encounters an honourable and fearless warrior in the Captain's words. Yet the portrayal equivocates as the Captain's tale also describes a ruthless warrior who punished Macdonwald's treachery without words or ceremony, cutting open the rebel's torso. Recently, the Captain's speech has been recited in the film *V for Vendetta*, stressing the moral ambiguity of its principal character, V, a vigilante in a futuristic, dystopian London who wears a Guy Fawkes mask and blows up the Houses of Parliament. V, interrupting a potential rape,

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[35] Holinshed, *Chronicles*, p.171.

repeats the Captain's words so that both the victim and the perpetrators are unsure who he will target.[36] The images the Captain creates make Macbeth, like V, both appealing and unappealing, and provide a clue to his destiny. Indeed, the Captain initially describes Macdonwald and Macbeth "As two spent swimmers, that do cling together | And choke their art" (1.2.8-9), and as Berger insisted this simile hints at the problems in Scottish society that make both figures in the play "equally victims of a common social weather".[37] Macbeth eventually takes Macdonwald's place as a decapitated traitor when Macduff presents Macbeth's severed head to Malcolm. But, in addition, the image of the similarities between the two tired swimmers struggling together immediately taints Macbeth's honour with Macdonwald's dishonour, anticipating the regicide to come.

Shakespeare's additions to his source thus emphasize Macbeth's dishonour. In Holinshed, Makbeth finds "Makdowald lieng dead there amongst the residue of the slaine bodies", which include Makdowald's wife and children that he killed rather than allow to be executed as an example to others.[38] In the play, however, Macbeth brutally kills (unseams) Macdonwald. The mutilation of a traitor introduces Macbeth as a figure who hovers between honour and dishonour, and the description looks forward to Malcolm's last words on Macbeth as the "dead butcher" (5.9.35). In this sense, violence is equivocal: Duncan endorses the actions of his "valiant cousin" (1.2.24) because they coincide with allegiance, but "bloody execution" is an ominous phrase here. The Royal Shakespeare Company's 2007 production of the play, directed by Conall Morrison, began with a dramatization of the battle at Fife that showed Patrick O'Kane's Macbeth slaughter his way to the front of the stage where, after a brief moment of consideration, he broke the neck of a crying baby. Not only did Morrison's introduction to the play anticipate the images of babes that recur in the text, but it also made clear what the text

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[36] *V for Vendetta*. Dir. James McTeigue. Warner. 2006.
[37] Berger, "The Early Scenes of *Macbeth*", p.8.
[38] Holinshed, *Chronicles*, p.169.

hints at as Macbeth's brutality was exposed to the audience before the Captain's ill-boding speech of praise.

When the Captain tells the story of the second phase of the battle, the text again offers Duncan and the audience an omen of danger to come: "So from that spring, whence comfort seem'd to come, | Discomfort swells. Mark, King of Scotland, mark" (1.2.27-28). In other words, from the place where Macbeth's honour seemed to originate, the trace of dishonour also makes itself felt. And in time the sword of honour that tore open Macdonwald's body becomes the diminished dagger of dishonour that haunts Macbeth:

> Is this a dagger, which I see before me,
> The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee: –
> I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
> 2.1.33-5

Macbeth accepts the "dagger of the mind, a false creation" that beckons him, a metaphor for the shame of needless regicide (2.1.38). This "fatal vision" precedes a fatal act, as Macbeth then carries out the very real and dishonourable task (2.1.36).

Macbeth marries amphibology and treason, their generative, anarchic powers intrinsically linked, both uncontrollable and ungovernable. As a result of this, the successful completion of the regicidal act depends on equivocations that saturate the exchange between Banquo and Macbeth in the castle at Inverness:

> BANQUO I dreamt last night of the three Weïrd Sisters:
> To you they have show'd some truth.
> MACBETH I think not of them:
> Yet, when we can entreat an hour to serve,
> We would spend it in some words upon that business,
> If you would grant the time.
> 2.1.20-4

Banquo begins with a deft equivocation that is both a subtle invitation and an innocent statement of fact. That the witches appeared in his dreams is beyond his conscious control and suggests no underhand motive, but he punctuates this with a statement of

fact that also reminds Macbeth of the full extent of the prophecy: the riddles of the witches have in part come true. Should the predictions of the witches come to pass, should the whole truth be shown, Macbeth's lineage will be usurped by Banquo: Macbeth may become king, but Banquo "shalt get kings". Banquo's allusion to the prophesied royal progeny indicates his quiet willingness to negotiate, and invites Macbeth to unveil any plans he may have for gaining the throne. Macbeth's initial response is a lie obvious to the audience: he claims that the witches are not on his mind, but those watching the play know the contrary to be true. This politicizes the situation for the spectator, as Macbeth deceives Banquo for the first time. Indeed, the political rhetoric commences immediately after the lie, as Macbeth invites Banquo to discuss the issue. Set on Duncan's murder after Lady Macbeth's intervention, Macbeth uses the royal "we", with the hint that it may innocently refer to the two interlocutors, a clue that Banquo may have to find the time to discuss Macbeth's claim to the throne sooner than he might anticipate. If Banquo hears these words as Macbeth's claim to the throne, he may well expect that Duncan's death will not be natural and could well happen soon. When Banquo agrees to the discussion at least, Macbeth lays out the basis for negotiation:

> If you shall cleave to my consent, when 'tis,
> It shall make honour for you.
>
> 2.1.25-26

Mimicking the amphibologies of the witches, Macbeth equivocates fully for the first time, his duplicitous ambiguity trying to tease the general on side. Macbeth implies that he would want Banquo to yield to his authority and support him in the event of Duncan's death: should anything untoward happen, such allegiance to Macbeth will bring rewards for Banquo in return. This delicate admission amid the canvassing arouses Banquo's suspicion and he senses something treasonable in the space Macbeth exploits between the material honours on offer and the honour of integrity. Banquo displays the sharp

moral intuition, which, from this instant, threatens Macbeth, and counters with an equivocation that flips Macbeth's use of "honour" on its two-faced head:

> So I lose none
> In seeking to augment it, but still keep
> My bosom franchis'd, and allegiance clear,
> I shall be counsell'd.
>
> 2.1.26-29

Banquo's response addresses the case of Duncan's natural and unnatural death without an accusation of foul play or a commitment to treason. Moreover, his words do not explicitly state any suspicion of foul play, and so he avoids any judgement of Macbeth that could result in immediate peril or leave him vulnerable should the prophecies made by the witches prove to be wholly true. In the event of Duncan's natural death Banquo would lose no honour in "seeking to augment" his status innocently and without guilt. To receive Macbeth's counsel is only respectable if Banquo follows the correct protocol of fealty and does not serve more than one lord at the same time, avoiding any ambiguous, possibly underhand, political manoeuvres, a steadfastness that resists the treasonable act bubbling under the surface of this exchange that would make him guilty by implication. Banquo's statement implies that personal, human honour is lost if the honours of titles and distinctions are gained by improper, dishonourable means.

Treason and amphibology place Banquo in a position that can be read as either complicit with Macbeth or the instance at which the two diverge. Macbeth's devious motives, which are implied but withheld by his equivocation, impel Banquo to adopt the same equivocal mode of address. If, as Mullaney states, "amphibology marks an aspect of language that neither treason nor authority can control",[39] then we can say that both the treasonous Macbeth and the steadfast Banquo are here at the mercy of a linguistic force unleashed in the play. Unable to occupy a political position on future events hinted at but yet to happen, on events that remain clouded, Banquo must respond to treason by

[39] Mullaney, *The Place of the Stage*, p.125.

reproducing its non-committal language. His engagement with this mode of address puts him at the mercy of the naïve hopes and fears on which, for Puttenham, amphibology preys. Later, Macbeth's accession to the throne proves the amphibologies of the witches to be prophecies, and encourages Banquo: "May they not be my oracles as well, | And set me up in hope?" (3.1.9-10). Amphibology traps him, and, despite his suspicions that Macbeth "play'dst most foully" for the crown (3.1.3), Banquo's equivocal riposte simultaneously complies with treason and nails his colours to the mast of feudal allegiances.

Macduff's honour is also presented as dishonour in *Macbeth*. Abandoned by her husband, Lady Macduff dislodges Macduff's morality from any stable position:

> LADY MACDUFF
> What had he done, to make him fly the land?
> ROSSE You must have patience, Madam.
> LADY MACDUFF He had none:
> His flight was madness: when our actions do not,
> Our fears do make us traitors.
> ROSSE You know not,
> Whether it was his wisdom, or his fear.
> 4.2.1-5

Macduff's choice to flee to England is seen from two contradictory positions. For Lady Macduff the act indicates guilt, but Rosse sees the unfolding of events in Scotland differently, encouraging endurance. Rupert Goold's 2007 production of *Macbeth* at the Chichester Festival Theatre and London's Gielgud Theatre presented Rosse as a well-meaning bureaucrat weakly compliant with the Stalinist oppression implied by the production's Soviet setting. Goold's Rosse infuriates Lady Macduff, and in the text her words show little patience with Rosse's diplomatic defence of Macduff. Contrary to Goold's interpretation, Rosse's appearance at Macduff's castle in Fife can be read as a moment of bravery that puts him in great danger: "I am so much a fool, should I stay longer, | It would be my disgrace, and your discomfort" (4.2.28-29). If Macduff's

absence signifies that "He wants the natural touch" (4.2.9), then Rosse's presence is an honourable act carried out by a man in the employment of a tyrant.

Just like Lady Macbeth, Lady Macduff's relationship with her husband obeys a different law than the obligations of fealty. Her assertion that fear, like certain actions, can be traitorous implies that Macduff's exile shows a deficient love for, and responsibility to, his wife and children. When Rosse responds with the suggestion that Macduff's disappearance may have been an act of wisdom, he captures the paranoid mood in *Macbeth* that breeds thoughts and deeds that are honourable to some and dishonourable to others. From a position of vulnerability and imminent threat, Lady Macduff sees only the dishonour in Macduff's decision:

> The most diminitive of birds, will fight,
> Her young ones in her nest, against the owl.
> All is the fear, and nothing is the love;
> As little is the wisdom, where the flight
> So runs against all reason.
>
> 4.2.10-14

Lady Macduff questions her husband's commitment to his family when she asserts the loveless intention of such a flight, the strength of his emotion for them undermined by a fear that true love should dispel. The wisdom Rosse refers to contradicts all reason that Lady Macduff can imagine. We can understand this reason in *Macbeth* as the law of family, which opposes the national and political logic that propagates the relations of king and thane.

Rosse's response articulates the confusion and ambiguity caused by the clash between family relations and feudal relations. He addresses Lady Macduff as "dearest coz" (4.2.14), bringing together the more common understanding of "cousin" with its less familiar meaning of "a term of intimacy, friendship, or familiarity" that can denote "a nobleman of the same country" (*OED*, *sb.*5, *sb.*5.a). The words that follow articulate the effects of this conflation:

I dare not speak much further:
But cruel are the times, when we are traitors,
And do not know ourselves; when we hold rumour
From what we fear, yet know not what we fear,
But float upon a wild and violent sea.

4.2.17-21

With tempestuous imagery that recalls the thunder and lightning at the play's start, Rosse's words chart the ebb and flow of commitments in the play. That Rosse fears he may already have said too much signifies not only the delicate nature of his political position but a reluctance to communicate in a polysemic language beyond the control of the play's hierarchical institutions. The present age is at the mercy of the wild, uncontrolled flow of meanings. These stormy, unpredictable movements on which the *dramatis personae* float scramble any linear time scale or univocal meaning that the metaphysics of *Macbeth*'s Christianity and fealty desire, so that treachery cannot be recognized as such. More specifically, the treasonable hopes and fears on which Puttenham suggests amphibology feeds find a twisted realization in the rumours inspired by vague fears.

In the midst of this hurly-burly, the trace of vice penetrates the virtue of both Macduff and Malcolm. At the heart of the introspective exchange between Macduff and Scottish king-in-waiting, Malcolm, lies the bloody imagery of a dagger that maims Scotland. "Each new day a gash | Is added to her wounds," Malcolm says of his beleaguered country (4.3.40-41). But though he admits that "There would be hands uplifted" to herald his claim (4.3.42), Malcolm, testing Macduff's integrity, pretends to be an unworthy successor:

My poor country
Shall have more vices than it had before,
More suffer, and more sundry ways than ever,
By him that shall succeed.

4.3.46-49

A spectral identification occurs between Malcolm and Macbeth, where the restoration of the moral purity absent from Macbeth's reign will not be guaranteed by Malcolm's succession, as Malcolm's pretence aligns him with the vices associated with a tyrant. The trace of the future in the present that impelled Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to contemplate the murder of Duncan, and led him from the valiant soldier honoured by the king to a regicidal "tyrant, whose sole name blisters our tongues" (4.3.12), now appears to constitute Malcolm, who seemingly falls into the unforgivable sin of despair as he contemplates the debauchery his kingship would inflict on poor Scotland. Convinced by Macduff's honest despair, Malcolm disclaims the image of a horrid future-king he has presented to Macduff:

> I put myself to thy direction, and
> Unspeak mine own detraction; here abjure
> The taints and blames I laid upon myself,
> For strangers to my nature.
>
> 4.3.122-5

The reconstitution of his morality disavows the vices he confessed as merely a fiction, where the negative qualities that threatened to blight his reign as king of Scotland are now unknown to him, providing hope for Scotland. Horwich claimed that Malcolm's simple dismissal of vices shows no understanding of the human struggle against vice, and this inability to understand "complex truths does not augur well for the prospects of renewed harmony and order in Scotland".[40] However, the disavowal of the vices Malcolm lays on himself can be interpreted another way: in the form of the trace, Malcolm's play on his own character returns to haunt our image of him in a Derridean manner.

In his critique of logocentrism, differance – with an "a" – is a crucial term. Deriving from the French verb *différer*, meaning both "to differ" and "to defer", Derrida's neologism highlights a graphocentricity in language: to distinguish his *différance* from the

[40] Horwich, "Integrity in *Macbeth*", p.370.

standard *différence*, the term has to be seen in writing. No distinction is possible on a phonetic level, providing an instance of writing's primacy and subverting the phonocentric tradition of the West from Plato to Saussure that sees writing as the parasitic supplement to speech. Derrida argues that if speech needs to be supplemented this shows a lack of natural self-sufficiency. The originary lack in speech is the gap that remains due to the absence of an extra-linguistic point of origin, a transcendental signified; this is the *Logos* that the tradition of phonocentric logocentrism, the Western tradition that associates speech with rationality, presumes in the form of the spoken "Word" that begins the Gospel of St John. In the Christian universe of *Macbeth* this transcendental signified, this *Logos*, is God. Differance is the process of supplementation that makes speech appear superior to writing but, at the same time, uncovers the lack that characterizes it and contradicts the appearance. Without an extra-linguistic point of origin there is no concept outside of language, no complete correspondence between signifier and signified, coincidental or not, and, therefore, no stability, fullness, or finality of meaning. The main implication of this philosophy for language is that meaning is the result of difference and stable, full, and final meaning is always deferred. This process deconstructs binary antitheses, just as differance allows speech to appear superior to writing while simultaneously exposing its failings; it implies a possible duality or identification between terms thought of as opposites, so that the trace of the other is always already concealed within the selfsame.

Derrida proposes that "when the other announces itself as such, it presents itself in the dissimulation of itself".[41] Thus, when Malcolm denounces all the sins and imperfections he laid upon himself, he presents the dissimulation of himself, and the vices he then disavows are still coiled asp-like, ready to invade their opposite and corrupt the values that befit a king. In other words, though Malcolm calls his own defamation of

[41] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.47.

his character just a fiction, the trace of that fiction remains as a threat to Scotland's future. Because of the naïve comprehension of virtue and vice that his words betray, Malcolm, for Horwich, "may be seen as, potentially, a Macbeth in embryo".[42] This can be viewed from a different angle: at the moment of recoiling, professing the opposite to absolve himself and give Scotland hope, Malcolm fits into the riddling scheme of "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" that disguises dishonour as honour and, like the trace that cannot "be summed up in the simplicity of a present",[43] he cannot be considered as simply virtuous or wholly good. Berger argues that "the prowess by which [Macbeth] preserves Duncan's kingdom is at the same time a claim to praise and admiration worthy of a king",[44] and this can be adapted to speak of Malcolm: we can view the process by which Malcolm claims to be worthy of a king as a warning of his possible unworthiness.

With the throne in sight, Malcolm's "first false speaking" (4.3.130) both presents and undermines his case. Macduff, silenced by Malcolm's turnaround, eventually offers a pensive and confused response to the disavowal: "Such welcome and unwelcome things at once, | 'Tis hard to reconcile" (4.3.138-139). While, as McLuskie argues, Malcolm ensures the future of Scotland,[45] the text can also be read to suggest an unwelcome threat situated at the margins of Malcolm's welcome accession. Roman Polanski's film version of the play offers such an ominous vision of Scotland's future in the film's final scene when Donalbain enters the witches' hovel, a sign that the horrid events portrayed threaten to recur as another steps into the role vacated by the deceased Macbeth.[46] The end of the film thus extends Berger's analysis that Macbeth and Macdonwald are victims of a diseased structure that requires their presence as traitors, and in Malcolm's own words we can also conceive of a bleak future for Scotland. Power's corrupting tendency

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[42] Horwich, "Integrity in *Macbeth*", p.371.
[43] Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p.66.
[44] Berger, "The Early Scenes of *Macbeth*", p.19.
[45] McLuskie, "Human Statute and the Gentle Weal", p.8.
[46] *Macbeth*. Dir. Roman Polanski. Columbia. 1971.

makes itself evident as the lust and greed he disclaims simultaneously make their claim for him in the form of the trace of vice that invades his virtue.

Vice also invades Macduff's virtue. In a cultural materialist article that reads *Macbeth* in the context of Europe's sixteenth-century move from feudalism to absolutist states, Alan Sinfield urges us to consider the play as a dramatization of the clash between ideologies that see the king as untouchable, a position advocated by King James I, and dissident analyses that, inspired by George Buchanan's writings, see the people as the source of political power. By extension, Sinfield sees the exchange at 4.3 as an indication of how a tyrant and a good king can overlap in qualities.[47] The barbarous murder of Macduff's family by Macbeth's men indicates that whatever is pure in the play is killed, to be replaced by chaos and confusion, but, like Malcolm, Macduff is tainted by the play's scheme of dishonour disguised as honour, first by the disgust of a bewildered and abandoned Lady Macduff and then by the vices he is willing to allow Malcolm.

Malcolm's examination tests Macduff by questioning his integrity:

MACDUFF I am not treacherous.
MALCOLM But Macbeth is.
A good and virtuous nature may recoil,
In an imperial charge.
4.3.18-20

Malcolm's words prepare the audience for the actions Macduff will permit. As Sinfield states, "Macduff is prepared to accept considerable threats to the welfare of Scotland",[48] and the response that follows the dissimulation proves that Macduff's upstanding morality may be compromised in order to preserve Malcolm's claim to the throne. Indeed, he insists that the future king can indulge his lust and get away with it:

You may
Convey your pleasures in a spacious plenty,
And yet seem cold – the time you may so hoodwink:
We have willing dames enough.
4.3.70-73

[47] Alan Sinfield, "*Macbeth*: History, Ideology and Intellectuals", *Critical Quarterly*, 28: 1 & 2 (1986), 63-77.
[48] Sinfield, "*Macbeth*: History, Ideology and Intellectuals", p.70.

These words encourage Malcolm to deceive all observers by appearing virtuous, and they recall Lady Macbeth's advice to Macbeth as the pair first contemplated regicide: "To beguile the time, | Look like the time" (1.5.63-64). When Macbeth eventually acquiesces, he heeds his wife's counsel and resolves to "mock the time with fairest show" (1.7.82). Macduff at this moment occupies the same position in relation to Malcolm as Lady Macbeth does to Macbeth. And though he concedes that "avarice | Sticks deeper", the nobleman assures Malcolm that his greed will also be catered for: "Scotland hath foisons to fill up your will" (4.3.84-85, 88). It takes Malcolm's extravagant prediction of a catastrophic reign that will "Uproar the universal peace, confound | All unity on earth" (4.3.99-100) to dishearten Macduff, and we can understand this belated abhorrence as Macduff's own dissimulation: in the same scene in which he unreservedly mourns a more virtuous past and declaims against Macbeth's tyranny, he also excuses the threat Malcolm's vices might pose to the future of Scotland. If, as Evans proposes, "the intractability of language" announces, in the early scenes of the play, a more ingrained disorder than the one just defeated,[49] we can extend this to understand the exchange between Malcolm and Macduff as the intimation, threat, or possibility of the future's disorder.

As I have proposed, in a fallen world time and language are never finished, and it is Macbeth's mistaken assumption that language can be finalized that brings on his prophesied downfall. Macbeth fails to understand the words of the apparitions, which equivocate because they seem absurd but prove to be true, abandoning the analytic quality that led him to contemplate Duncan's murder when prompted by the riddles of the witches. To put it simply, he takes the words of the apparitions at face value and suspects no implied meaning or withheld truth. Orgel points out that Macbeth's failure

[49] Evans, *Signifying Nothing*, p.114.

to understand what the apparitions imply may be because he "is not a close enough reader".[50] We can also say that Macbeth hears what suits him, or rather, what suits the unfolding of the dramatic action. The first apparition warns Macbeth to beware of Macduff: "Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! beware Macduff; | Beware the Thane of Fife" (4.1.71-72). Though this confirms his fears, the words of the second apparition immediately assure Macbeth:

> Be bloody, bold, and resolute: laugh to scorn
> The power of man, for none of woman born
> Shall harm Macbeth.
>
> 4.1.79-81

Despite the confirmation just a few moments earlier of the fears he holds, Macbeth now disregards the warning about Macduff: "Then live, Macduff: what need I fear of thee?" (4.1.82). He ignores the clue offered by the form the second apparition takes, making no connection between the bloody child it appears as and a bloody child that may have been, like Macduff, "from his mother's womb | Untimely ripp'd" (5.8.15-16). The decision to kill Macduff regardless is only made in order to make "assurance double sure" and challenge fate to resurrect a dead man as well as produce one not born (4.1.83). Unlike the riddles that were full of meaning for him, Macbeth reads the statements the apparitions make as unequivocal. The third apparition offers the most obvious clue to Macbeth's fate:

> Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be, until
> Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill
> Shall come against him.
>
> 4.1.92-94

Again, he pays no attention to the clue offered by the apparition's form – a crowned child with a tree in its hand – and disregards the possibility of Birnam wood's arrival at Dunsinane hill as absurd. However, the dismissal returns to haunt him as the apparent absurdity of the utterance proves, like the riddles of the witches, to be the truth of the

[50] Orgel, "Macbeth and the Antic Round", p.150.

matter. When the apparent impossibility of Birnam wood's arrival at Dunsinane becomes a reality in the form of the boughs from the wood's trees held by the advancing soldiers to hide their numbers, Macbeth belatedly understands "th'equivocation of the fiend, | That lies like truth" (5.5.43-4). Reading from an unfounded framework of assumptions, Macbeth dismisses the imperfect statements of the apparitions as impossible absurdities; on the other hand, the apparitions conjured by the witches know exactly what they mean.

The Soliloquy of Doom

Equivocation is the alternating, supplemental current of a metaphysical framework where a *Logos* is implied but its truths withheld. In *Macbeth,* the witches' prophecies imply the existence of a *Logos* by seeming to access another, supernatural realm where truth resides. In other words, the intervention of the otherworldly witches takes us to the border between the play's mortal world, with its language of salvation and damnation, and the transcendental world that lies beyond language where salvation and damnation are unequivocally delivered by the Christian God of the play's universe. Thus, the trace of the future in the present that the prophecies offer also suggests to Macbeth a trace of the transcendental Judgement in the material world.

In perhaps the play's most famous soliloquy, the trace of divine Judgement haunts Macbeth as the mortal and the transcendental world are united in an apocalyptic vision that shares much with the Doom images common to Catholic, pre-Reformation churches. As I have suggested earlier, Macbeth begins the soliloquy by articulating the human experience of time: "If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well | It were done quickly" (1.7.1-2). So if Duncan's assassination could be carried out, and be over – without later repercussions – when it is carried out, then it should be carried out quickly. Macbeth implies that the murder of Duncan will never be wholly done, finished, or

complete, but have ongoing and unpredictable consequences, an anxiety that links the deadly deed to time and language: indeed, it is the human condition to experience time and language as heterogeneous. Macbeth then considers the possibility of bypassing the Judgement of the after-life:

> If th'assassination
> Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
> With his surcease success; that but this blow
> Might be the be-all and the end-all – here,
> But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
> We'd jump the life to come.
>
> 1.7.2-7

Macbeth's commitment to regicide is weak here but, as he contemplates the ramifications of murdering Duncan, he clings to the hope that the completed act might also bind up the earthly consequences of killing the king. Though Macbeth indicates a willingness to risk damnation in the after-life if success could be assured in the here and now, the consequences of the present life still scare him. The karmic return of "Bloody instructions" describes impartial justice in the here and now (1.7.9), and Macbeth's words foretell his own death at the hands of Macduff:

> But in these cases,
> We still have judgment here; that we but teach
> Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
> To plague th'inventor: this even-handed Justice
> Commends th'ingredience of our poison'd chalice
> To our own lips.
>
> 1.7.7-12

Macbeth sets a blood-drenched example that, in the form of the vengeful Macduff, will indeed return with violent intent in the current life. Even before this, Banquo's Ghost can be understood as a karmic return that haunts Macbeth, a trace of the after-life that invades the present, a revenant that deconstructs the opposition between the hereafter and the here and now by reminding the protagonist of the unavoidable Judgement to come.

The trace of the future that invades the present – due to the amphibological intervention of the witches in Shakespeare's play – is merged with the Last Judgement in one of John Donne's Holy Sonnets. Donne's sonnet calls on the souls of the dead, and those yet to die, to rise:

> At the round earths imagin'd corners, blow
> Your trumpets, Angells, and arise, arise
> From death, you numberlesse infinities
> Of soules, and to your scattred bodies goe,
> All whom the flood did, and fire shall o'erthrow.[51]

The speaker begins with a reference to the "four angels standing on the four corners of the earth" in the Book of Revelation,[52] fusing them with the trumpet-wielding angels that wake the dead. Both the already dead and those that die in the future will be held to account for their sins, implying a Christian God that exists in eternity, beyond the human experience of time. This echoes the future's invasion into the present in *Macbeth*, and emphasizes the commonplace notion also seen in Marston's *Sophonisba*: the human temporal experience differs from the unified, divine experience of a timeless eternity.

The damnation in the after-life that Macbeth so cavalierly dismissed quickly returns to haunt him.[53] Retributive, human justice makes way for a vision that invokes the Last Judgement and the Doom images of churches in the middle ages, instances of the intervention of a transcendental signified, which Macbeth's words here anticipate, that does not materialize in the plot of the play, denying it the resolution and stability also denied language:

> 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-tongu'd, against
> The deep damnation of his taking-off;
> And Pity, like a naked new-born babe,

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[51] John Donne, *The Divine Poems*, ed. by Helen Gardner (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p.8.
[52] Revelation, 7.1.
[53] Orson Welles's film adaptation of the play emphasises the religious concerns of Macbeth's words by presenting the soliloquy as an inner monologue during a Christian service (*Macbeth*. Dir. Orson Welles. Republic. 1948).

Striding the blast, or heaven's Cherubins, hors'd
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.

1.7.16-25

The holy consequences that restrict Macbeth are greater due to Duncan's qualities. Whereas Hamlet must obey the untrustworthy Ghost to kill the untrustworthy king, Macbeth's target carries out his divinely anointed role with the humility and, particularly, the clarity required of a Lacanian Father. Jenny Wormald explains that in Scotland the Gunpowder Plot was considered to be parricide as well as treason, the political horror of the Scots reinforced with a "personal chill particularly associated with the Scottish concept of their king as father not of their country but of themselves".[54] Lady Macbeth's hesitancy when faced with Duncan's sleeping body indicates that, unlike Claudius, Duncan authoritatively occupies the structural position of the Name-of-the-Father: "Had he not resembled | My father as he slept, I had done't" (2.2.12-13). Hamlet defers the murder of King Claudius, too little like his biological father, only to damn him further, but Lady Macbeth spares King Duncan because he is too much like her biological father. Macbeth's concern in this soliloquy is also with two distinct types of consequence – here and in the life to come – that poeticize the fear of the Second Murderer in *Richard III*. In the earlier play the two murderers dispatched by Richard to kill the Duke of Clarence discuss how best to carry out the deed:

2 M. What, shall I stab him as he sleeps?
1 M. No: he'll say 'twas done cowardly, when he wakes.
2 M. Why, he shall never wake until the great Judgement Day.
1 M. Why, then he'll say we stabbed him sleeping.[55]

The First Murderer worries that they will be accused of cowardice in the after-life, an image that recurs in *Macbeth* with the frenzied stabbing of Duncan in his bed-chamber.

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[54] Jenny Wormald, "Gunpowder, Treason, and Scots", *Journal of British Studies*, 24 (1985), 141-168 (p.164).
[55] William Shakespeare, *King Richard III*, ed. by Antony Hammond, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1981), 1.4.99-103. All references are to this edition, unless otherwise indicated.

Moreover, the Second Murderer frightens himself with words that impel him to disentangle the earthly and transcendental consequences of his actions:

> 2 M. The urging of that word, "Judgement", hath bred a kind of remorse in me.
> 1 M. What, art thou afraid?
> 2 M. Not to kill him – having a warrant – but to be damned for killing him, from the which no warrant can defend me.
>
> *King Richard III*, 1.4.104-109

According to the Second Murderer, a "passionate humour" that "makes a man a coward" (*King Richard III*, 1.4.113-114, 128) has momentarily taken hold of him and caused his attack of conscience. Foreshadowing Lady Macbeth's view on the subject, the Second Murderer distinguishes manhood from the compassion and pity that hold man back from fulfilling his desires: "A man cannot steal but it accuseth him; a man cannot swear but it checks him; a man cannot lie with his neighbour's wife but it detects him" (*King Richard III*, 1.4.129-131). Indeed, after the First Murderer fleetingly loses the will to perform the bloody deed, his renewed commitment is greeted by the Second Murderer with words that compliment his manliness: "Spoke like a tall man that respects thy reputation!" (*King Richard III*, 1.4.144). The fear prompted by the word "Judgement" anticipates Macbeth's anxiety over the damnation that lies beyond the present life as the consequence of actions on earth. Carrying the warrant may excuse the Second Murderer's actions in the present life, but nothing can defend him from the great day of reckoning – when the *Logos* intervenes and all equivocation stops – because all equivocations, all warrants for our actions, are worthless in the face of an unequivocal, omniscient Judge.

Rousing the Porter from his drunken stupor, the knocking at the door intimates the coming of a *Logos* that, in *Macbeth*, arrives only obliquely. The bleakly comic fear of that arrival in *King Richard III* is revisited by the sinister humour of the Porter, which echoes the sentiment of the Second Murderer's words:

> Faith, here's an equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale; who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven.
>
> 2.3.8-11

Like the murderer whose warrant cannot save him from damnation, the Porter describes an arch-equivocator whose rhetorical art inevitably fails before heaven. To Shakespeare's audience these words would have brought to mind the figure of Father Garnet, tried and executed in 1606 for complicity in the Gunpowder Plot, who justified equivocation in the name of the covenant of confession. At the same time the words also apply to Macbeth. Even if the earthly consequences could be trammelled up, when the *Logos* announces its arrival and ends all equivocation Macbeth will be damned for the murder of Duncan. Although the *Logos* remains off-stage, it knocks at the door in *Macbeth.* The Porter identifies himself with the "Porter of Hell Gate" (2.3.1-2), words that align the entrance to Inverness with the jaws of hell, and eventually opens the door to hell. Macduff enters, as if from a supernatural place, to find Duncan murdered in his bed and wakes those sleeping to "see | The great doom's image" (2.3.76-77). Not only is the play's imagery common in depictions of the Doom, but Macduff's words seem to explicitly refer to this iconography. Like a trumpet-tongued angel raising up the souls, Macduff's blasts rouse the sleeping bodies at Inverness to behold the bloody crime as if they too stand before the dreadful scene of Judgement: "As from your graves rise up, and walk like sprites, | To countenance this horror!" (2.3.78-79). At Broughton, Cambridgeshire, the doom painting clearly shows the dead rising up from their graves (figure 19). As well as this, Macduff's eventual murder of Macbeth continues the play's riddling scheme of "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" by confirming what the witches' apparitions hint at. In other words, the play delivers earthly judgement in the here and now, but one that takes its inspiration from the realm of Christian metaphysics that transgresses into the here and now in the form of doomsday imagery and the devilish

witches, their amphibological prophecies another trace of an after-life that knocks on the door of the present.

In Macbeth's soliloquy, his impending sin is opposed by the heavenly sound of trumpet-blasting angels, and this angelic image that Donne will call up in his sonnet originates in the Book of Revelation where, in his vision of the Day of Judgement, John of Patmos describes how "a door was opened in heaven: and the first voice which [he] heard was as it were of a trumpet talking".[56] Seven angels opened one each of seven seals in John's wild, almost psychedelic, ecstasy, "and to them were given seven trumpets".[57]

One extant and typical example of Doom images adorns the north wall of the nave of St. Nicholas's Church in Oddington. Shakespeare's hometown, Stratford-upon-Avon, is not far from here, linked to Cirencester by a stretch of the old Roman road, the Fosse Way, which is now the A429 that cuts across Gloucestershire and runs directly through Stow-on-the-Wold. Just east of Stow-on-the-Wold, on the A44, is Oddington, where St. Nicholas's Church lies. The drive there from Pershore, southern Worcestershire, in late 2007 follows a circuitous route around – rather than through – the Vale of Evesham, as many of the smaller roads into Gloucestershire are closed off. This diversion is a result of the cataclysmic floods that drowned this area earlier in the year, an apt reminder of the ominous and fearful natural forces that herald the Day of Judgement in the Book of Revelation. This Doom, like most Last Judgement paintings usually found above the chancel arch, conflates Armageddon with the parable of the sheep and the goats[58] with Christ enthroned in heaven above the moon, surrounded by apostles and saints (figure 20). To his right the righteous ascend into heaven, and to his left the wicked are sent down to a hell-mouth that gobbles them up the way the Rose

[56] Revelation, 4.1.
[57] Revelation, 8.2.
[58] Matthew, 25.31-46.

Theatre's hell-mouth prop may have done in performances of Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus.* Below the moon can be seen the influence of John's vision, as two trumpet-wielding angels at Christ's feet sound their instruments to resurrect the dead who rise at the bottom of the tableau (figure 21). Angels with trumpets were often seen in apocalyptic iconography, also appearing in the stained glass window in St. Mary's Church, Fairford (figure 22), and above the chancel arch at South Leigh (figure 23), where, in the absence of Christ in Judgement, the angels are the image's key figures.

Macbeth's soliloquy conflates the naked souls resurrected by the trumpeting angels with the sky child in the Book of Revelation. John describes "a great wonder in heaven; a woman [...] with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered.[59] In *Macbeth,* the image of the babe takes a twisted route from the naked, new-born child of pity who rides the blasts of the angels' trumpets, to the unfortunate, imagined child that Lady Macbeth would have brutally beaten to death, a gruesome, deformed, and literally battered, version of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac that is then resurrected as one of the "men-children" her "undaunted mettle should compose" (1.7.73-75). These words place Lady Macbeth in opposition to the heavenly woman in John's vision who gives birth to a child that will "rule all nations with a rod of iron".[60] In St. Nicholas's Doom painting every soul stands naked as they meet Judgement, and, alongside another angel that trumpets the resurrection of the dead, a small, cherubic angel pulls a naked soul up to heaven from the top of a turret (figure 24). This comic touch of pity brings deliverance to a righteous soul, but in the soliloquy horrifies Macbeth, as it will make the pitiless nature of his deed visible to every eye and condemn him to the fires of hell into which devils force the wicked in the Doom painting (figure 25). On a more playful note, just above the gates of hell a demon, recognizable by his striped attire, uses a bellows to keep the fire beneath a cauldron going as a kneeling figure begs for mercy nearby.

[59] Revelation, 12. 1-2.
[60] Revelation, 12.5.

Seduced by the witches' amphibologies and the apparitions they concoct at their cauldron, Macbeth could well be that genuflecting figure whose own tears shall drown the howling winds when faced with the final evaluation of his own horrid deeds.

Conclusion

Macbeth's soliloquy at 1.7 describes a Christian instance of soteriological intervention. In *Macbeth* the description of divine Judgement follows hard upon the protagonist's anxiety over earthly, human justice, and Macbeth stands at the threshold between the mortal and supernatural worlds in the play once he hears the amphibological seduction of the witches. These equivocations exploit the polysemy of a differential language that shows virtue to be the dissimulation of vice when the trace of the latter invades the former, tainting Macbeth, Macduff and Malcolm. Moreover, these equivocations turn out to be the truth of the matter, prove to be prophecies, instances of the invasion of the future into the present that characterizes the human experience of time. The human experience of language is also one of heterogeneity: without a transcendental signified, it is – as Macbeth says of Duncan's murder – never done, stable, or complete upon this bank and shoal of time.

Edgar and Kent in *King Lear* describe Cordelia's death as an image of the Doom, echoing Macduff's description of Duncan's death. However, *Macbeth* makes a comparison between the roused sleepers at Inverness and the souls raised from death on Judgement Day, whereas *King Lear*, on the other hand, invokes Doom imagery in order to describe the image of Lear holding Cordelia's killed body in a pagan world infused with Christian language. The following chapter argues that *King Lear* dislocates the antithesis between the Christian and the pagan, and that an unfinished, equivocal language presents Cordelia as both Lear's poison and his remedy. Moreover, the figure

of Cordelia is interpreted as representing a soteriological promise that is confounded by the tragic finale.

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King Lear and Deconstruction: Christianity and Paganism

Introduction

Drawing on Jacques Derrida's notion of deconstruction as "both more than a language and no more of *a* language",[1] this chapter will argue that the plurality of meanings intelligible in the language of *King Lear* can be understood to deconstruct the binary opposition between Christianity and paganism, while the deaths of Lear and Cordelia confound the expectation of salvation that the play sets up. *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth* draw on pre-Reformation imagery, in particular of the Doom, as inspiration for the divine intervention invoked in each play that could end both tragedy and equivocation. Alternatively, *King Lear* offers the audience a tragic, unredeemed conclusion described as an image of the Apocalypse, substituting the invocations of whip-wielding devils, trumpet-tongued angels, and fire-breathing hell-mouths painted above many of the chancel arches across medieval Britain with a murdered Cordelia in a dying Lear's arms.

King Lear transcends any specific time period: while it is set in pre-Christian times, many of the play's central issues are nevertheless articulated in the profoundly Christian language of early modern Britain. Pagan gods are invoked by the *dramatis personae* but the language of the play also alludes to Biblical images and events. By way of example, the only specific reference to a Christian God in the entire play can also be heard as a reference to pagan gods. When Lear and Cordelia are reconciled, the old man pleads with his daughter to retreat into isolation with him so that they can be "God's spies".[2] Consistent with early modern usage, neither the Quarto nor the Folio edition of the play have an apostrophe before or after the "s", so both texts equivocate as they invoke a

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[1] Jacques Derrida, *Memoires: for Paul de Man*, trans. by Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava and Peggy Kamuf (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1989), p.15. Original emphasis.
[2] William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. by R. A. Foakes, The Arden Shakespeare (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson, 1997), 5.3.17. All references are to this edition, unless otherwise indicated.

number of gods and a specific, Christian God simultaneously. An audience, not able to distinguish an upper case "G", can hear this statement two ways too, as a reference both to the many pagan gods directly appealed to in the play's pre-Christian setting and to a Christian God specifically.

Other equivocations in *King Lear* can be read simultaneously as both pre-Christian and Christian. For example, as Lear calls on the pagan gods to witness him banish and disown Cordelia, Kent urges him to retract his "doom". I propose later in this chapter that Shakespeare's audience could have understood this as an earthly judgement or sentence, and also as an apocalyptic, Christian judgement. Later on, the play's tragic end stems from the expectation of soteriology invested in the form of a Christ-like Cordelia that her death, as well as Lear's, contradicts. As this thesis proposes, the dramaturgy of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear* can be understood, in one sense, to work in the same way as language: they anticipate the divine intervention of the *Logos*, the god of their Christian universes, a transcendental signified that is withheld, just as final, stable meaning is always deferred in a fallen language distanced from that God.

Cordelia represents the hope of a saviour in the play, but also hurts Lear because she cannot speak what she feels. This reticence sparks the play's tragic events but, although Cordelia's words offend Lear, her actions prove that she loves him. Thus Cordelia can be seen as a pharmakonic figure because, like the *pharmakon* that Derrida explains as both a poison and a remedy in Plato's *Phaedrus*, she "partakes of both good and ill" in the play.[3] What provides the conditions for this pharmakonic presence is the power of the signifier, which in *King Lear* deconstructs the binary opposition between Christian and pagan and presents remedies as poisons. This is a power that flourishes in the absence of a transcendental signified that would fix meaning and truth, and one that revels in the creativity afforded a fallen language.

[3] Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy", in *Dissemination*, trans. by Barbara Johnson (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 61-171 (p.99).

Christian Words in a Pagan Universe

When Edgar convinces his father, Gloucester, that he stands on the edge of Dover Cliff, the illusion he creates depends on a language that, for Jonathan Goldberg, "slides into an abyss, an uncreating, annihilative nothingness". Goldberg calls this "the failure of the sign", where an ineffective signifier does not reach the signified to provide intelligibility in language.[4] However, Goldberg mistakes the meaning for the referent; in his account, language is not referential and, therefore, meaningless. But the events supposedly taking place at the cliff's summit show exactly the opposite: language as a creative, generative power. The efficacy of the signifier can convince Gloucester that he teeters on the edge of the "chalky bourn" that Edgar describes (4.6.57), even though they are not at Dover. Others seem to have been equally convinced. Part of this massive stretch of chalk now bears the name Shakespeare Cliff, while a nearby housing estate has roads named King Lear and Gloucester Way, as well as a King Lear pub. Joe Wright's recent film *Atonement*, based on the Ian McEwan novel of the same name, also returns the famous white cliffs to their association with fiction. The false accusation of Young Briony Tallis destroys the love affair between Robbie and Cecelia Tallis. An elderly Briony Tallis then writes a book on the events as an act of atonement, but admits that the happy ending to the love affair between Robbie and Cecelia in her story is fictional: they were never reunited and both died tragically. In the film's final scene we see Robbie and Cecelia walking happily along Dover beach and into a cottage overlooked by the cliffs, an event that Briony Tallis has made up. The cottage at Dover symbolizes this fiction, and the film seems to reference the famous cliffs as a well-known instance of literary illusion.[5]

Believing himself to be perched on the very edge of those cliffs, Gloucester offers a Stoic defence of suicide before he throws himself to his supposed death:

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[4] Jonathan Goldberg, "Perspectives: Dover Cliff and the Conditions of Representation", *Shakespeare and Deconstruction*, ed. by C. Douglas Atkins and David M. Bergeron (New York, NY: Lang, 1988), pp.245-265 (pp.254, 247).

[5] *Atonement*. Dir. Joe Wright. Universal. 2007.

O you mighty gods,
This world I do renounce and in your sights
Shake patiently my great affliction off.
4.6.34-36

As he bemoans the failure of his attempt, Edgar, dropping his Poor Tom persona, describes the "thing" that stood by Gloucester as he leapt (4.6.67):

As I stood here below methought his eyes
Were two full moons. He had a thousand noses,
Horns whelked and waved like the enraged sea.
It was some fiend.
4.6.69-72

In the previous act of this ostensibly pagan play Edgar, disguised as Poor Tom, paraphrases the Ten Commandments when he tells Lear and the Fool to "obey thy parents, keep thy word justly, swear not, commit not with man's sworn spouse, set not thy sweet-heart on proud array" (3.4.78-80). This Christian theme continues in Gloucester's language: the fictional fiend could be the devil, who was popularly understood to tempt people to suicide. "He led me to that place" the blinded old man says of this devilish figure (4.6.79). Gloucester's failed suicide also resembles the desperation in John of Patmos's vision of the world's end where "men seek death, and shall not find it; and shall desire to die, and death shall flee from them".[6] The Earl's subsequent repentance can be read as a conversion to Christian forbearance:

Henceforth I'll bear
Affliction till it do cry out itself
"Enough, enough" and die.
4.6.75-77

Echoing Goldberg, Malcolm Evans views the Dover Cliff scene as the "absent centre of the play". For Evans, however, the destructive nothingness in the play is the other side of a "utopian plenitude".[7] To put it another way, language does not collapse into an "abyss" because it is not referential, but instead makes heterogeneity possible. At

[6] Revelation, 9.6.
[7] Malcolm Evans, *Signifying Nothing: Truth's True Contents in Shakespeare's Texts* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), pp.226, 228.

Dover Cliff it allows Edgar to play the role of both devil and Samaritan, and Gloucester to affirm and then deny suicide, turning the scene into a Christian warning against self-sacrifice that comes in the profoundly Christian language of early modern Britain but occurs in a pre-Christian setting. Joseph Wittreich has stated that Shakespeare's play offers a "topsy-turvy version" that paganizes the essentially Christian story of the earlier *King Leir*,[8] but the equivocations in the Dover Cliff scene show us something more: Christianity invading a pagan universe in an instance of the way *King Lear* deconstructs the opposition between Christian and pagan.

This deconstruction is made possible by the multiple temporal commitments of *King Lear*, epitomized by the Fool's line in the Folio text: "This prophecy Merlin shall make, for I live before his time."[9] A contemporary audience may well have been familiar with Leir, the legendary eighth-century King of Britain, whose story was recounted in Geoffrey of Monmouth's pseudo-historical *Historia Regum Britanniae* and later retold in Shakespeare's most probable source, Holinshed's *Chronicles*. Hence, the title of the play alone would have produced the expectation of a pre-Christian setting, and the title page of the Quarto text foregrounds this historical aspect: *King Lear* is a "Chronicle Historie".[10] At the same time, Shakespeare's audience would probably have been aware of the earlier, and explicitly Christian, *King Leir*. Despite the pre-Christian setting, the *dramatis personae* of this anonymous play live in a universe instantly recognisable as Christian. Leir alludes to a Christian God when he expresses his love for his daughters: "How dear my daughters are unto my soul | None knows but He that knows my

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[8] Joseph Wittreich, "'Image of that horror': The Apocalypse in *King Lear*", in *The Apocalypse in English Renaissance Thought and Literature: Patterns, Antecedents and Repercussions*, ed. by C. A. Patrides and Joseph Wittreich (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), pp.175-206 (p.178).

[9] William Shakespeare, *King Lear: The 1608 Quarto and 1623 Folio Texts*, ed. by Stephen Orgel, The Pelican Shakespeare (London: Penguin, 2000), F, 3.2.96-7. All references to the Quarto of 1608 and the Folio of 1623 are to this edition, unless otherwise stated.

[10] William Shakespeare, *His True Chronicle Historie of the life and death of King Lear and his three Daughters* (London: [Nicholas Okes] for Nathaniel Butler, 1608).

thoughts and secret deeds."[11] When Leir banishes Cordella, she puts her faith in "Him which doth protect the just" (*King Leir*, 1.3.131). Elsewhere in the play the supernatural allusions are more precise, as when Perrilus appeals for divine and wrathful justice against Gonorill and Ragan for sending a messenger to take Leir's life:

> O just Jehovah, whose almighty power
> Doth govern all things in this spacious world,
> How canst Thou suffer such outrageous acts
> To be committed without just revenge?
>
> *King Leir*, 4.7.206-209

The failure of the murderous messenger leads Ragan to bemoan the "heartless men in Christendom" (*King Leir*, 5.5.22) that are so easily swayed by entreating words of the kind Perillus uses. Before stepping into the Globe, then, a contemporary audience's expectations may well have been poised between the pagan history of the Leir tale and the Christianity of *King Leir*.

Lear's supernatural allusions in *King Lear*, by contrast, make the pagan setting explicit. As he disowns Cordelia for refusing to profess love, Lear appeals to Hecate and the astrological influence of heavenly spheres:

> For by the sacred radiance of the sun,
> The mysteries of Hecate and the night,
> By all the operation of the orbs
> From whom we do exist and cease to be,
> Here I disclaim all my paternal care.
>
> 1.1.110-114

The appeal to the mystical, consecrated power of the sun invokes the solar deities that predate and anticipate monotheism. Hecate, chthonic deity and, in early modern culture, goddess of witchcraft, also inhabits a time long before Christianity. Lear later insists "by Apollo" and "by Jupiter" that he will stand by his banishment of Cordelia, and further on mentions "high-judging Jove" (1.1.161, 179; 2.2.417). An audience would reasonably expect the *dramatis personae* of a play set in Christian times to call upon the omniscience of

[11] *King Leir*, ed. by Tiffany Stern, Globe Quartos (London: Nick Hern, 2002), 1.3.6-7. All references are to this edition.

God at this moment. However, Lear assigns the responsibility for the beginning and end of man to pagan gods, and the movements and purposes of celestial bodies. Persuaded by Edmund that Edgar seeks his life, Gloucester, too, assigns divine providence to the skies, rather than one all-powerful being beyond the skies: "These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good to us" (1.2.103-4). Like Lear, Gloucester refers to the power of planets and stars, rather than God, to control human destiny.

Maynard Mack argued that Jacobean audiences may have recognized many of the figures, communities and hierarchies as contemporary aspects of an out-of-time setting, something with which Victorian audiences might not so easily have engaged.[12] Within its pre-Christian setting *King Lear* also presents a royal hierarchy a Jacobean audience would have recognized as contemporary. The ceremonial stage-direction that introduces the royal family in the Quarto version of *King Lear* deploys the *dramatis personae* in descending importance:

> *Sound a sennet. Enter one bearing a coronet, then Lear, then the Dukes of Albany and Cornwall; next Goneril, Regan, Cordelia, with Followers.*
>
> Q, 1.1.32-33

First enters the coronet, the symbol of authority. Lear, the wearer of the coronet, follows. After him, in a patriarchal order, come Albany and Cornwall, followed by Lear's three daughters, with the eldest first. It is the complication of this hierarchy that poses a threat to the universe of *King Lear.* Claudius lays claim to the structural position of Father in *Hamlet* but fails to unequivocally occupy it because, by marrying his brother's wife, he disrupts the order of the family he should, as its patriarchal figurehead, guarantee. Lear, on the other hand, delegates the responsibilities of a king, a deed that undermines his structural position: he gives away the functions of the king; "the sway, | Revenue, execution of the rest" (1.1.137-138) are split between Cornwall and Albany. Furthermore, this gesture is equivocal since what he chooses to retain are the royal

[12] Maynard Mack, *King Lear in Our Time* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1972), p.23.

benefits attached to kingship: "The name, and all th'addition" (1.1.137). Lear gives the equivocation a two fold force as he gives away the object that symbolizes power and authority: "This coronet part between you" (1.1.139). Not only does Lear place himself in an equivocal position, but he also divides the role designed for a single figurehead. The single coronet that cannot be worn by two, Albany and Cornwall must share, and so both the role and the title of king are split. In *Macbeth* kingship is precarious because it is desirable to all but available to only one person, but in *King Lear* the vulnerability of kingship stems from its division. *King Lear* portrays a kingdom disrupted by the monarch's equivocal symbolic presence: the splitting of the crown destabilizes the nation, and the monarch abdicates the throne but claims to retain the advantages of kingship.

King Lear's multiple time frames make references to the seventeenth century, but also to a Britain that doesn't exist at the time and can, despite the pre-Christian setting, include Christian elements. The Royal Shakespeare Company's 2007 production of the play emphasized this. At the very start of the performance, Director Trevor Nunn had Ian Mckellen's Lear perform a pagan-style ritual dressed in golden robes that resembled the vestments still worn today by Orthodox priests and bishops. Nunn married Christian and pre-Christian elements in a visual image inspired by the play's language. As the Dover Cliff scene demonstrates, the play might have been recognizably contemporary because of the Christian vocabulary that haunts the pagan setting, as well as the "chatter on the life of farm communities" or "urban knavery" that Mack points to.[13] Lear's words to Kent are an early example of this. "Come not between the dragon and his wrath" (1.1.123), he warns. "Dragon" signifies both a serpent identified with kingship in pre-Christian cultures and the symbolic dragon of Christianity. Stephen Batman's translation, and empirical gloss, of Bartholomaeus's *De Proprietatibus Rerum* identified the dragon as

[13] Mack, *King Lear in Our Time*, p.23.

the "most greatest of all Serpents".[14] Thomas North's translation of Plutarch associates this distinguished creature with kingship when it describes the death of King Cleomenes of Sparta. His dead body hung on a cross, Cleomenes was seen with "a great Serpent wreathed around his head", a mysterious event interpreted as a sign that Cleomenes was "belouved of the gods". North's translation concludes that "the auncients in old tyme, of all other beastes [...] did consecrate the Dragon to Kinges and Princes, as proper vnto man".[15] Of course, the dragon also has a religious meaning that Shakespeare's audience would have been aware of in the legend of St George. Moreover, Satan takes the form of the creature in the final battle with God: "And the great dragon was cast out, that old serpent, called the Devil."[16] The association also seems to have influenced Doom paintings, as the hell-mouth that devoured souls was often reptilian, similar to the clasping jaws of the fearsome lizard-like creatures depicted at Broughton, Buckinghamshire and Beckley, Oxfordshire (figures 26 and 27). The image of the dragon, then, may well have suggested both satanic tyranny and the greatness of majesty to a contemporary audience. In the light of this, Lear's initial use of "dragon" anticipates a Biblical connection with Satan that resurfaces in perhaps the play's most quoted line, "How sharper than a serpent's tooth it is | To have a thankless child" (1.4.280-281), and the providential "dragon's tail" (1.2.129) of the moon's orbit, beneath which Edmund jokes he was conceived.

The Christian vocabulary at work in *King Lear* soon reappears in the Quarto text. When Lear disclaims his "paternal care" of Cordelia (Q, 1.1.102), Kent asks Lear to reconsider his sentence:

Reverse thy doom,

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[14] Stephen Batman, *Batman vppon Bartholome, his Booke De Proprietatibus Rerum* (London: Thomas East, 1582), fol.360[r]. Thanks to Peter Roberts for this reference.
[15] Plutarch, *The Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romanes, Compared together by that graue learned Philosopher and Historiographer, Plutarke of Chæronea*, trans. by Thomas North (London: Thomas Vautroullier and John Wight, 1579), p.874.
[16] Revelation, 12.9.

And in thy best consideration check
This hideous rashness.

Q, 1.1.137-139

"Doom" might or might not be understood here as a Christian reference. To doom is "to pronounce judgment" (*OED*, *v.*1). The word also signifies a "sentence of punishment", and by extension "the last or great Judgement at the end of the world" (*OED*, *sb.*2, *sb.*6). Shakespeare employs the word as both a general judgement and an apocalyptic, Christian day of reckoning, when God will judge the living and the dead.

The Harvard Concordance to Shakespeare notes fifty-four instances of "doom" in his works.[17] In general, Shakespeare uses "doom" primarily in the sense of judgement, and these occasions are predominantly negative, as when Aaron plots the destruction of Titus's family in *Titus Andronicus*: "This is the day of doom for Bassianus, | His Philomel must lose her tongue today."[18] In all, "doom" occurs six times in *Titus Andronicus*, each of which concern violence and banishment, ending with Lucius's judgement that the villain Aaron be buried in the earth and starved: "This is our doom; | Some stay to see him fastened in the earth" (*Titus Andronicus*, 5.3.181-182). In addition, more than once in the sonnets the term is used with reference to doomsday:

Nor Mars his sword, nor war's quick fire, shall burn
The living record of your memory:
'Gainst death, and all oblivious enmity,
Shall you pace forth; your praise shall still find room
Even in the eyes of all posterity
That wear this world out to the ending doom.[19]

Here the speaker claims that the sonnet, its "powerful rhyme" (Sonnet 55), will be the living document of the youth's excellence, preserving it beyond all war, death and bad blood until the world's end. The speaker forestalls the equivocation of the word by

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[17] *The Harvard Concordance to Shakespeare*, ed. by Marvin Spevack (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1973).
[18] William Shakespeare, *Titus Andronicus*, ed. by Jonathan Bate, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Routledge, 1995), 2.2.42-43. All references are to this edition.
[19] *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. by Katherine Duncan-Jones, The Arden Shakespeare (Walton-on-Thames: Thomas Nelson, 1997), Sonnet 55. All references are to this edition.

calling it the "ending" doom, and this differentiates this instance of the word from the more general use. Another sonnet defines true love as unchanging and unchangeable until doom arrives:

> Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks
> Within his bending sickle's compass come;
> Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
> But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
>
> Sonnet 116

Love, this sonnet claims, lasts until the end of the world, outliving physical beauty that falls to the ravages of time, and endures until time stops on the brink of the apocalypse. In *Macbeth* the term refers to the Last Judgement as the witches conjure a vision of Banquo's royal progeny that foretells the failure of Macbeth's tyranny: "What! will the line stretch out to th'crack of doom?"[20] For Caesar in *Antony and Cleopatra*, doom's roar should be greater when Antony dies:

> The breaking of so great a thing should make
> A greater crack. The round world
> Should have shook lions into civil streets
> And citizens to their dens. The death of Antony
> Is not a single doom; in the name lay
> A moiety of the world.[21]

Doom has the sense of both death and fate in Caesar's words, but on this occasion lacks the cataclysmic impact worthy of such a passing. As well as a rift or fissure, this crack evokes the thunderous sound Macbeth associates with the day of doom: Antony's suicide, the individual death of one man, should have caused the upheaval, the semi-apocalypse, befitting a triumvir whose name was synonymous with a share of the Roman Empire. The equivocation of "doom" here joins death with major political turmoil. As well as "judgement", then, the sense of doom in the play has the following meanings: death;

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[20] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. by Kenneth Muir, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1962), 4.1.117. All references are to this edition.
[21] William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, ed. by John Wilders, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1995), 5.1.14-19. All references are to this edition.

doomsday; cataclysmic change; fate. Indeed, Cleopatra's words to the messenger, Thidias, signify more than just her acquiescence to Caesar's judgement:

> Most kind messenger,
> Say to great Caesar this in deputation:
> I kiss his conqu'ring hand. Tell him I am prompt
> To lay my crown at's feet, and there to kneel
> Till from his all-obeying breath I hear
> The doom of Egypt.
>
> *Antony and Cleopatra*, 3.13.77-82

Egypt's doom refers to Caesar's judgement on the Queen of Egypt, but also foretells both her death and the significant historical change that it brings about: the demise of the Hellenistic dynasty and the rise of Roman control in the eastern Mediterranean.

In the light of these uses, Lear's "doom" can be understood as equivocal, referring to a judgement that Kent insist he "Revoke" (Q, 1.1.153) but with apocalyptic, Christian connotations, foretelling the violent disorder Lear's decision will cause in *King Lear*: the personal tragedies of Lear, Cordelia and Gloucester, the invasion by France and the simmering civil war.

"Doom" in the Quarto anticipates the eschatology of Lear's madness. The cataclysmic "cataracts and hurricanoes" and the "sulphurous and thought-executing fires" (3.2.2, 4) are images that resemble the Armageddon that John of Patmos describes.[22] This recalls the "trumpet-tongu'd" angels in *Macbeth* that herald judgement (*Macbeth*, 1.7.16-20), which in the Book of Revelation bring tempests and plagues. When Lear beckons the judgement of the gods, the crimes on which he focuses are recognizable as the sins that incur God's final wrath. Damned are those that "Neither repented [...] of their murders, nor of their sorceries, nor of their fornication, nor of their thefts".[23] Lear's attack displays a biblical argument of condemnation:

> Hide thee, thou bloody hand,
> Thou perjured, and thou simular of virtue
> That art incestuous. Caitiff, to pieces shake,

[22] Revelation, 6.12-17.
[23] Revelation, 9.21.

That under covert and convenient seeming
Has practised on man's life.

3.2.53-57

The murderer stained by his crime, the falsely sworn who deceive, and the unchaste that give the appearance of modest virtue are all to be held to account by the "dreadful summoners grace" (3.2.59). Indeed, when the ravaged old man goes on to speak one of the play's most famous lines, "I am a man | More sinned against than sinning" (3.2.59-60), it sounds like a statement of defence offered to spare him from the fate awaiting the doomed, quivering wretch that plotted against his fellow man.

Lear's prayer to the "Poor naked wretches" (3.4.28) presents Christian reason in a pagan universe. Judy Kronenfeld has argued that, contrary to Marxist and cultural materialist readings that explain *King Lear* as proto-communist, the language of the play is "well accounted for by traditional Protestant rank-respecting exhortations to and concepts of charity".[24] In the light of this, we can read Lear's prayer as paraphrasing the Song of Mary – also known as the Magnificat – that is in both the Gospel of Luke and the *Book of Common Prayer.* The "houseless heads and unfed sides" (3.4.30) can be those of "low degree" exalted in the Song of Mary,[25] while the humility of "Take physic, pomp" (3.5.33) would have reminded an early modern audience probably well-acquainted with the canticle that God "hath scattered the proud".[26] The promise that he who overcomes will have "power over the nations"[27] accounts for the hierarchy of Protestantism Kronenfeld identifies, but also Lear's resolution "to feel what wretches feel" and then "shake the superflux to them | And show the heavens more just" (3.4.34, 35-36). To put it another way, his words bring to mind the alms-giving and government-controlled charity of Shakespeare's day that Kronenfeld points out, but they also

[24] Judy Kronenfeld, "'So distribution should undo excess, and each man have enough': Shakespeare's *King Lear* – Anabaptist Egalitarianism, Anglican Charity, Both, Neither?", *ELH*, 59 (1992), 755-784 (p.764).
[25] Luke, 1.52.
[26] Luke, 1.51.
[27] Revelation, 2.26.

rearticulate the promise to "give unto every one of you according to your works".[28] Ultimately, Lear's language not only confirms Protestant dogma, but can also be read as an invocation to the justice of pagan gods that, at the same time, paraphrases the wrath of a God who "hath filled the hungry with good things" and sent the rich "empty away", an instance of the biblical eschatology in Lear's moments of madness.[29]

Christian connotations also surface in both Quarto and Folio when Lear invokes "sweet heaven" (1.5.43). Like "doom", heaven could be neutral: it was understood as "the expanse in which the sun, moon, and stars, are seen" or "the 'realm' or region of space beyond the clouds or the visible sky" (*OED*, *sb.*1.a, *sb.*3.a). On the other hand, the term is also more specific. It is

> the celestial abode of immortal beings; the habitation of God and his angels, and of beatified spirits, usually placed in the realms beyond the sky; the state of the blessed hereafter. Opposed to *hell.* (*OED*, *sb.*5.a)

Lear's call on heaven would have implied the home of God and the sky, as well as the canopy over the Globe Theatre's stage.

The play combines Christian moral values with its pagan setting. No clear notions of heaven, hell, or salvation compliment the Christian issues that are so central to the play. As a result, the simultaneous presence of Christian ideas and the absence of a metaphysical structure that might provide relief from the play's tragic events can be read as placing Christianity in *King Lear* beyond the antithesis of presence and absence. Equivocations such as Lear's "sweet heaven" call upon Christian imagery from a pre-Christian context, at once invoking and deferring an ordered religious framework that "does not succeed in arriving, precisely *by* arriving".[30] *King Lear* articulates Christian

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[28] Revelation, 2.23.
[29] Luke, 1.53.
[30] Jacques Derrida, "For the Love of Lacan", in *Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp.39-69 (p.42).Original emphasis. Derrida is situating a response to the late Lacan that encompasses the drift of the letter's destination, "*destinerrance*", and the "assymetrical structure of the utterance" that requires the non-arrival of the other (pp.42, 43).

images and values that are radically other to the pagan setting, their articulation in the language of the play the mark of a soteriology absent from the universe the *dramatis personae* inhabit. Temptation by the devil and the prohibition against suicide in the Dover Cliff scene, as well as allusions to doomsday and appeals to the heavens, operate as "the trace that arrives only to efface itself / only by effacing itself, beyond the alternative of presence and absence."[31] Or rather, because Christian language invades a pagan setting, it presents itself in the pre-Christian universe of *King Lear* as a trace that marks the play's paganism with its inevitable other.

Christ-like Cordelia

With Christian values at its core, *King Lear* also presents a Christ-like figure in Cordelia. A. C. Bradley saw the play as a renunciation of the world in favour of the soul, with Cordelia as a sanctified figure who redeems Lear before his death.[32] Barbara Everett made the case for a more pessimistic account of the play with a critique of the redemptive interpretations inspired by Bradley.[33] However, both Bradley and Everett saw Cordelia as the play's Christ-figure. Placed in the stocks by Cornwall and Regan, Kent reads the letter Cordelia has sent him as if it were an epistle from a saintly saviour. Cordelia's letter represents the nation's hope of redemption, and a remedy for Lear's unhappy and deteriorating situation:

> Nothing almost sees miracles
> But misery. I know 'tis from Cordelia,
> Who hath most fortunately been informed
> Of my obscured course.
>
> 2.2.163-166

While Kent envisages miracles as the preserve of those most in need of them, or as changed circumstances that appear miraculous to the eyes of the distressed, he places

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[31] Derrida, "For the Love of Lacan", p.44.
[32] A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1957), pp.198-276.
[33] Barbara Everett, "The New King Lear", *Critical Quarterly*, 2 (1960), 325-339.

Cordelia in the position of the play's redeemer, who, as her letter states, will seek "'to give | Losses their remedies'" (2.2.167-168). Kent's selfless service to Lear and Cordelia's faithfulness to her father is contrasted in this scene with the weak, obsequious Oswald. As Kent vigorously points out, servants like Oswald offer no honesty because they are compliant "With every gale and vary of their masters, | Knowing naught, like dogs, but following" (2.2.77-78). Cordelia's sanctification and Kent's steadfastness distinguish them from the fawning, pliant support Oswald provides that indulges tyranny without contradiction.

The correspondence between Kent and Cordelia differs from others in the play. Lisa Jardine proposes that the exchange of letters between Kent and Cordelia in *King Lear* makes "absence present" and transmits "passionate feeling", an exception to the dangerous rhetoric unleashed in the play's other letters. Kent and Cordelia's exchange of letters is set apart from the letters exchanged elsewhere in the play: Kent and Cordelia are honest, but letters sent by others manipulate emotions in order to deceive.[34] Edmund's forged, patricidal letter that he claims was sent to him from his brother Edgar provides the most obvious example of how correspondence operates in *King Lear*, where letters are used with evil intent. The deceitful letter Edmund sends completely severs the link between the writer and the voice of a letter. Goneril also does this: her letter of warning to Regan that describes the riotous behaviour of Lear's knights and her plans to reduce their number is penned by Oswald. Moreover, she gives the steward licence to embellish the letter with his rhetoric:

> Inform her full of my particular fear,
> And thereto add such reasons of your own
> As may compact it more.
>
> 1.4.333-335

[34] Lisa Jardine, *Reading Shakespeare Historically* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.91.

But when the Gentleman describes Cordelia's response to Kent's letter – a scene only in the Quarto – he does not disturb the relationship that Edmund and Goneril destroy:

KENT Made she no verbal question?
GENTLEMAN Faith, once or twice she heaved the name of father
Pantingly forth, as if it pressed her heart,
Cried "Sisters, sisters, shame of ladies, sisters,
Kent, father, sisters, what, i' th' storm, i' th' night?
Let pity not be believed!"

Q, 4.3a.25-30

Unlike Oswald, who is instructed to intervene, the Gentleman only observes and recounts what he saw. At this juncture the Quarto goes on to make a link between the integrity of Kent and Cordelia's correspondence, and Cordelia's sanctity:

There she shook
The holy water from her heavenly eyes
And clamor moistened; then away she started
To deal with grief alone.

Q, 4.3a.30-33

Christ-like Cordelia cries with holy grace as a result of the strong emotions honestly presented by the letter. And whereas Oswald receives instructions to enhance Goneril's letter with his own words, the Quarto indicates no interaction between Cordelia and the Gentleman – other, presumably, than when she accepts the letter from him – before she retreats to deal privately with her grief. Kathleen McLuskie proposes that Cordelia's "dutiful pity" engages an audience's sympathy for Lear when they might otherwise see him as tyrannically patriarchal, while the gentleman's speech implies that Cordelia "resolves contradiction". Cordelia's resolving force is represented by the "poetic paradoxes" the gentleman employs:[35]

Patience and sorrow strove
Who should express her goodliest. You have seen
Sunshine and rain at once; her smiles and tears
Were like, a better way. Those happy smilets
That played on her ripe lip seem not to know
What guests were in her eyes, which parted thence

[35] Kathleen McLuskie, "The Patriarchal Bard: Feminist Criticism and Shakespeare: *King Lear* and *Measure for Measure*", in *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism*, ed. by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1985), pp.88-108 (p.101).

As pearls from diamonds dropped. In brief,
Sorrow would be a rarity most beloved
If all could so become it.

Q, 4.3a, 16-24

Patience and sorrow struggle for pre-eminence, but harmoniously and without conflict. Like simultaneous sunshine and rain, her endurance and distress produce smiles and tears that turn sorrow into a quality that would be desirable if it were always so beautiful. Not only does this description idealize Cordelia as a figure of divine compassion whose tears are like pearls dropping from her diamond-like eyes, but it unites sunshine and rain, and patience and sorrow, so that Cordelia overcomes the differences between these terms in order to find a superior idiom of grief.

The vision of Cordelia as a figure whose love and endurance will save the king and his kingdom, a Christ-like figure ready "'to give | Losses their remedies'", promises in the play what the transcendental signified would provide for language – resolution and stability. Terry Eagleton has suggested that the "creative tendency to exceed oneself is also the source of destructiveness" in *King Lear*.[36] As Eagleton explains, humans are structured by language to demand more than their biology requires, a paradox explored by the play. So when Lear calls on his daughters to "reason not the need" for his demands, he makes a distinction between simple biological needs and the needs of humans who, even at their most deprived, "Are in the poorest thing superfluous" (2.2.453-454). Eagleton's point can be extended to describe the dramaturgy of Shakespearean tragedy: without a transcendental signified – a *Logos* – language is polysemic, but the divine intervention that might prevent tragedy is withheld from the play. To put it simply, without the *Logos* language lacks resolution and stability. On the other hand, it gains heterogeneity, the creative force that makes literature possible. In *King Lear* the absence of soteriology – Cordelia's ultimate failure to redress the grievous

[36] Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), p.81.

atrocities seen in the play and bring about that resolution and stability – allows the tragedy to play out.

Though Kent and Cordelia's correspondence contrasts with the more demonic letters sent in *King Lear*, it also constitutes an impossible ideal of representation. Jardine points out that for a letter to convey an honest emotion it requires a fictional aspect to its composition: it must provide the fictional presence of an absent individual.[37] Honesty and dishonesty exist alongside each other in personal letters, and the malicious, deceitful ones in *King Lear* exploit this equivocation. Ironically, however, Goneril's letter to Edmund transmits no less sincerity than the correspondence between Kent and Cordelia. Her intentions are malicious in urging Edmund to murder and replace her husband Albany, but her passion cannot be doubted: Edmund is her "most dear Gloucester" (4.2.25). Edgar's horrified response to the letter he intercepts in 4.6 indicates that the text compensates well enough for the absence of Goneril herself: "O indistinguished space of woman's will!" (4.6.266). Crossing the divide between Kent and Cordelia's correspondence and the play's morally corrupt exchanges, Goneril's letter highlights how all personal letters in *King Lear*, regardless of moral value, need rhetoric in order to convince the reader. Indeed, the Gentleman's description of Cordelia's reaction uses Christian rhetoric to portray her as saintly, while Edgar demonizes Goneril when he describes her letter as "ungracious" (4.6.271), a description that distinguishes Goneril's political manoeuvres from the grace of Cordelia.

King Lear begins with an equivocation at the heart of the kingdom's splitting. Cordelia offers "Nothing" (1.1.87) in refusing to outdo her sisters, which anticipates the subsequent loss of her dowry, but inequality and equality sit side-by-side in the division of Lear's realm. Goneril, Regan and Cordelia's dowries prove to be unequal. Lear sets up this imbalance: "Which of you shall we say doth love us most, | That we our largest

[37] Jardine, *Reading Shakespeare Historically*, p.80.

bounty may extend" (1.1.51-52). The most generous expression will inherit the best share of a kingdom "divided | In three" (1.1.36-37). More than that, the one who proves to love Lear the most wins the rhetorical game.

Goneril's and Regan's hypocrisy anticipates the division between the words of love they offer Lear and the subsequent deeds that disprove their love. In order to emphasize the rhetorical nature of their speeches, Nunn's direction of the play has each sister approach a lectern and address the audience as if they were politicians attempting to win over potential voters. Goneril professes to love Lear "more than word can wield the matter" (1.1.55), but then proceeds, in the wordiest manner, to declare the depth of her feelings:

> Dearer than eyesight, space and liberty,
> Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare,
> No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour.
> As much as child e'er loved, or father found,
> A love that makes breath poor and speech unable,
> Beyond all manner of so much I love you.
>
> 1.1.56-61

Goneril's speech not only pre-empts the actions that expose her insincerity, but also shows the cruel irony of her protestations. That her love is more valuable than eyesight finds a dark inversion in the blinding of Gloucester, the most violent and bloody deed in *King Lear.* Regan and Cornwall pluck out Gloucester's eyes for his "confederacy [...] with the traitors" (3.7.44), calling him a "villain" (3.7.86 & 95). Freedom and domain, in the form of the land she will inherit, are at stake when she speaks – that which can be priced takes precedence for Goneril and Regan from the instant the ceremony of flattery ends and they begin to plot against their father. Lear "hath ever but slenderly known himself" (1.1.294-295) according to Regan, and Goneril insists that they "hit together [...] and i' the heat" (1.1.304-309). The two sisters prove their words false by wielding the power those same words won against their father.

Meanings run out of control in the godless world of the sisters. Regan aligns herself with Goneril in the ceremony of flattery when she claims to be "made of that self mettle as my sister, | And prize me at her worth" (1.1.69-70), making the divide between words and deeds that Goneril hints at plain: "In my true heart | I find she names my very deed of love" (1.1.70-71). Regan's use of "deed" equivocates: it can be read as a substitution of words for deeds, where words take the place of deeds or, to put it another way, do not need deeds to substantiate them. On the other hand it can also be read as a contract of filial obligation that Goneril has described, one that "comes too short" when up against Regan's love (1.1.72).[38] Kent plays on this equivocation when he warns the sisters that their actions must compliment their words: "And your large speeches may your deeds approve" (1.1.185). Kent's words could also be read as meaning that, even if the sisters' words are hollow, they are nevertheless contracted to behave as if their words were true by filial duty. Alternatively, Kent's words can be interpreted as implying that their actions must reciprocate Lear's own deed of giving them power and lands, as well as referring to the literal contract for lands and power seen in Peter Brook's film. Won by the things they have said, this contract binds Goneril and Regan to offer "good effects [...] from words of love" (1.1.186). But later on in the play actions break the promise of a love beyond words, and this love to which breath and speech cannot do justice finds a twisted manifestation in the throttling "mother" Lear feels (2.2.246), the condition Edward Jorden described as a "choaking in the throat".[39] Regan and Cornwall place Kent in the stocks after the disguised Earl's confrontation with Oswald. When Lear arrives at the place of his "Beloved Regan" (2.2.322), his early tenderness quickly

[38] Peter Brook's desolate film version of the play emphasises the contractual nature of this filial duty, the camera switching to notaries that scrawl deeds for the new lands and powers that are handed out to Goneril and Regan. (*King Lear.* Dir. Peter Brook. 1971. DVD. Columbia. 2004).
[39] Edward Jorden, *A Briefe Discovrse of a Disease Called the Suffocation of the Mother* (London: John Windet, 1603), sig.C1^{r}.

dissipates as she aligns herself with her sister in malevolent action, rather than the rhetoric of love.

Cordelia also finds her words wanting. She will "Love, and be silent", setting up the dramatic expectation of a confrontation with her father (1.1.62). At the same time, her aside foreshadows the division between her words that will hurt Lear and the actions that will eventually prove her love for him.

Though Cordelia frets as her sisters perform seemingly rehearsed speeches, Lear has already decided who will win: Regan's third matches only Goneril's third, preparing the way for Cordelia to take a more special third:

> To thee and thine hereditary ever
> Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom,
> No less in space, validity and pleasure
> Than that conferred on Goneril.
>
> 1.1.79-82

Regan and Goneril each receive a bountiful third, as lavish as that awarded to the other. Cordelia will inherit a "more opulent" share (1.1.86). Goneril and Regan's loquacity earns an equivocal reward that can be understood as a pre-emptive strike against them, an explanation and apology for the higher favour about to be shown Cordelia. As Goneril and Regan profess undying love for their father, Cordelia's aside expresses a divide between signification and what it signifies:

> Then poor Cordelia,
> And yet not so, since I am sure my love's
> More ponderous than my tongue.
>
> 1.1.76-78

Cordelia's love is weightier, more profound, than expression. Feeling a love beyond articulation, Cordelia believes that the "nothing" she offers her father displays a love at least equal to Goneril and Regan's pronouncements.

Cordelia is idealized in this first scene of *King Lear*, but this very idealization plays a part in the tragedy. Rhetoric sanctifies her in the exchange between Kent and the

Gentleman, but her refusal to define her love antagonizes Lear and induces the tragic events that unfold. Cordelia's "nothing" produces something in *King Lear*:

> LEAR What can you say to draw
> A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.
> CORDELIA Nothing, my lord.
> 1.1.85-87[40]

Nunn's Cordelia is distinctly uncomfortable when at the lectern, approaching it and backing away swiftly after she speaks. Ewan Fernie, writing from a Christian perspective, suggests that Cordelia "possesses the virtuous sense of guilt and shame which her father and sisters lack". Fernie puts Cordelia on a moral pedestal for an innate, essential quality she has within, but the elevation of Cordelia to a Christ-like figure can be seen here as an intertextual moment rather than an example of a character who "remains perfectly shamefast and modest".[41] Cordelia's response in this scene resembles the silence of Jesus before the court of King Herod:

> And when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceeding glad: for he was desirous to see him of a long season, because he had heard many things of him; and he hoped to have seen some miracle done by him. Then he questioned with him in many words; but he answered him nothing.[42]

Herod could find nothing with which to accuse a silent Jesus, and so returned him to be tried before Pilate; Lear renounces Cordelia for the "nothing" she offers. Coppélia Kahn's psychoanalytic reading suggests that Lear's aggressive denial of "Propinquity and property of blood" (1.1.115) with Cordelia stems from a "frustrated incestuous desire", a desire that leads Lear to demand confirmation of Cordelia's complete love before he

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[40] Lear's dotage demonstrates the relative parsimony shown to Goneril and Regan. It can be assumed that Cordelias's proposed share is "more opulent" because Lear wishes to bequeath her the remainder of England. Goneril will have Scotland, and Regan Wales and Cornwall.
[41] Ewan Fernie, *Shame in Shakespeare* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.179.
[42] Luke, 23.8-9.

gives her away.[43] But the rash and vitriolic response can be attributed to a misinterpretation of Cordelia's "nothing" that acts as the catalyst for the play's tragedy. Lear expects her to answer the question rhetorically, just like Goneril and Regan: then, when she does not, he mistakenly assumes that "nothing will come of nothing" (1.1.90) in Cordelia's speech. However, in a fallen world, language, distanced from the *Logos*, is also fallen. Thus, Cordelia cannot say what she truly feels: like Hamlet, she lacks the signifier that can denote her truly.[44]

Cordelia's "nothing" is an equivocation. She answers Lear's question directly: she could *say* nothing to outdo the loquacity of Goneril and Regan. For Goldberg, the illusion of Dover Cliff that Edgar creates, and in which Gloucester believes, depends on an ineffective and meaningless language. As I have suggested, the scene in fact demonstrates the prolific, generative power of the signifier, rather than a failed referential system. Lear interprets Cordelia's "nothing" as if that too were referential. Kent advises that, contrary to Lear's interpretation, Cordelia's words "Reverb no hollowness" (1.1.155). Kent, of course, is correct, but rather than prove to Lear that Cordelia "does not love thee least" (1.1.53), the taciturn response becomes an insult "so untender" (1.1.107) for Lear that, along with the initial division of the kingdom, it sets in motion the dramatic action of the play.

By their deeds, Goneril and Regan eventually show their words to be false. They are like the false prophets Jesus describes as wolves in sheep's clothing: "Ye shall know them by their fruits."[45] In other words, their actions, not their words, will betray them. Goneril's actions, like Regan's, contradict her rhetoric. Made to wait for a dinner that

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[43] Coppélia Kahn, "The Absent Mother in *King Lear*", in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. by Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 1986), pp.33-49 (p.39). Kahn goes on to propose that Lear's renunciation of Cordelia and his incestuous desire for her awakens the deeper emotional need for Cordelia as a mother-figure instead of a wife-figure.

[44] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. by Harold Jenkins, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1982), 1.2.76-84. All references are to this edition.

[45] Matthew, 7:16.

never arrives and brusquely dealt with by Oswald, an excited Lear gets pushed close to the edge by the boldness of his eldest daughter: "Does any here know me? Why, this is not Lear" (1.4.217). Requesting her father to reduce the numbers of his train, Goneril threatens to "take the thing she begs" (1.4.239). Incensed, Lear weeps:

> Life and death, I am ashamed
> That thou hast power to shake my manhood thus,
> That these hot tears, which break from me perforce,
> Should make thee worth them.
>
> 1.4.288-291

Without his previous supremacy Lear can do nothing when faced with Goneril's warning, and the tears he sheds are explained in terms of a blow to his masculinity. Kahn argues that Lear's tears mark his "progress toward acceptance of the woman in himself",[46] but Lear's shaken manhood can also be explained in relation to the concept of the Name-of-the-Father, which Lacan posits as privileged signifier in language. In *Hamlet* the system of differences that structure the hierarchy of a patriarchal symbolic order is disturbed by the replacement of old Hamlet and the persistence of Gertrude in an economy predicated on the exchange and movement of women. This patriarchal economy is also disturbed in *King Lear* when the role of king is split between the powers of kingship Lear gives up and the benefits he wants to retain. Vulnerable to the malevolence of his daughters as a result of the divisions he makes, Lear confirms a symbolic emasculation with "hot tears": these water-drops, Lear says, are "women's weapons" (2.2.466). Goneril's opportunity to hurt Lear comes after he has divided the kingdom and abandoned what Derrida called the "the proper place" of this privileged signifier in Lacan's system.[47]

Regan's broken promise of a love irreducible to her breath and speech finds a twisted truth in the choking "mother" Lear feels twice in 2.2, and this suffocating

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[46] Kahn, "The Absent Mother in King Lear", p.46.
[47] Jacques Derrida, "Le facteur de la vérité", in *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. by Alan Bass (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987) pp. 411-496 (p.480).

condition also illustrates Lear's equivocal movement away from the proper place of a symbolic, masculine figure of king. Kara L. Peterson has recently proposed that Lear's affliction with the "mother" is a deliberate ploy by Shakespeare to show Lear as either mad or feminized, a possibility rarely considered by editors of the play.[48] Should we focus on the text, rather than what Shakespeare might have intended, this moment can be re-read in the light of Lacanian psychoanalysis. Lear, without the sway of kingship, suffers an affliction that Shakespeare's contemporary Jorden pointed out is more appropriate to "the passiue condition of womankind"[49] than a figure of paternal law: Goneril's and Regan's actions do feminize him, but only when he has no recourse to his position as Name-of-the-Father.

Cordelia the *Pharmakon*

Though Cordelia – who does not "speak and purpose not" (1.1.227) – could say nothing to outdo her sisters, her deeds prove her love for her father. Derrida writes that the *pharmakon* in Plato's *Phaedrus* "acts as both remedy and poison"[50] and Cordelia's role in *King Lear* can be understood as pharmakonic: her words precipitate Lear's madness, but her love in practice honours the bond between parent and child. The equivocation of Cordelia's "nothing", like the *pharmakon*, announces itself as opposite to itself. Though her words are disagreeable to Lear, her actions redeem him, and so, like the *pharmakon*, she is "linked as much to the malady as to its treatment".[51] In the light of this, the letter from Cordelia that Kent reads in the stocks can be understood as a soteriological promise that manifests itself in the form of an antidote that will heal the wounds that have been inflicted in the play, and "'give | Losses their remedies'". Cordelia, when

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[48] Kara L. Peterson, "*Historica Passio*: Early Modern Medicine, *King Lear*, and Editorial Practice", *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 57 (2006), 1-22.
[49] Jorden, *The Suffocation of the Mother*, sig.B1^{r}.
[50] Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy", p.70.
[51] Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy", p.99.

reunited with Lear, wishes to be his cure: "O my dear father, restoration hang | Thy medicine on my lips" (4.7.26-27). Here, the language of the play affirms the sense of Cordelia as a holy remedy to Lear's hellish pain. Indeed, Lear describes Cordelia as "a soul in bliss" while he is "bound | Upon a wheel of fire" (4.7.46-47), invoking heaven and hell. But Lear welcomes the remedy Cordelia offers as if it were a venomous drink: "If you have poison for me, I will drink it" (4.7.72). Richard C. McCoy argues that, at this moment, Lear does not "acknowledge his needs and desires" (contrary to Kahn, for example, who sees Lear as eventually accepting his female side), but makes a "desperate effort to regain some control".[52] What Lear's words also acknowledge, however, is Cordelia's dramatic function in the play, her pharmakonic effect on the course of the play's dramatic action. Cordelia has the antidote to Lear's pain and, in recognition of both Cordelia's potential and cause to hurt him, Lear calls the antidote a "poison". A similar equivocation on "poison" also occurs in *The Second Part of King Henry the Fourth*, when Northumberland tries to find strength in adversity when told that his son has died in battle: "In poison there is physic."[53] Cleopatra describes her thoughts on an absent Antony as a "most delicious poison" (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 1.5.28) in much the same way we today describe our pleasurable vices as poisons. Unable to represent her truly in a fallen language, Cordelia's words equivocate, proving hurtful for Lear. Despite Lear's treatment of her, Cordelia says she has "no cause" against him (4.7.75), and so her deeds ultimately provide "physic" for his pain and demonstrate her love: she invades Britain with French forces in order to restore her father to the throne. At the tumultuous moment of reconciliation and reunification between Lear and Cordelia in 4.7, Cordelia is both a "medicine" and a "poison" as the language of the play confirms a reading of her as pharmakonic.

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[52] Richard C. McCoy, "'Look upon me, Sir': Relationships in *King Lear*", *Representations*, 81 (2003), 46-60 (p.51).
[53] William Shakespeare, *The Second Part of King Henry IV*, ed. by A. R. Humphreys, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), 1.1.137.

Cordelia's reference to the bond between parent and child in the first act is equivocal. She holds the dearest place in Lear's heart, and his initial distress is a result of her defiance:

> Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
> My heart into my mouth. I love your majesty
> According to my bond, no more nor less.
>
> 1.1.91-93

Cordelia's use of "bond" suggests filial duty, but can also be read in a pejorative sense as the shackle of bondage. Lear urges Cordelia to change her choice of words: "How, how, Cordelia? Mend your speech a little, | Lest you may mar your fortunes" (1.1.94-95). A bond, in the legal sense, is a "deed" (*OED*, *sb.*[1]9.a) by which an obligor agrees to pay a set amount of money to an obligee. It also signifies "confinement, imprisonment, custody", and "obligation" or "duty" (*OED*, *sb.*[1]1.b, *sb.*[1]6.b). Primarily in *King Lear* the term denotes the relationship between parent and child. Edmund uses it when he deceives his father, Gloucester, into thinking that Edgar has patricidal intentions:

> I told him the revenging gods
> 'Gainst parricides did all their thunders bend,
> Spoke with how manifold and strong a bond
> The child was bound to the father.
>
> 2.1.45-48

Elsewhere, Shakespeare predominantly uses "bond" as a legal term. In *The Merchant of Venice* the term refers to the legally binding agreement between Shylock and Antonio. Shylock loans money to Bassanio and then arranges to meet the guarantor, Antonio, and officially record the transaction: "Go with me to a notary, seal me there | Your single bond."[54] "Bond" occurs more times in *The Merchant of Venice* than the sum of all the other instances in Shakespeare's works.[55] Indeed, the legal sense of the term returns as metaphor in *Macbeth* as the tyrant hopes for the deaths of Banquo and Fleance:

> Come, seeling Night,

[54] William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, ed. by John Russell Brown, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1955), 1.3.140-141.
[55] Spevack, *The Harvard Concordance to Shakespeare.*

Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful Day,
And, with thy bloody and invisible hand,
Cancel, and tear to pieces, that great bond
Which keeps me pale!

Macbeth, 3.2.46-49

That bond of life Macbeth's hired murderers threaten is compared to a contract that will be torn to pieces by death. The stamp of a close, encompassing night that blinds also invokes the seal of Shylock and Antonio's bond. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also uses the language of legal formalities, this time to describe the bond of marriage. Theseus warns Hermia that she will die if she does not give up her love for Lysander and marry Demetrius on the day Theseus marries Hippolyta, "The sealing-day betwixt my love and me | For everlasting bond of fellowship."[56] So romantic and filial love, life, and legal procedures are all signified by Shakespeare's use of "bond". Thus Cordelia's use refers not only to her affection for her father but also has the legal connotations that dominate *The Merchant of Venice*, as well as suggesting bondage or imprisonment.

Although Lear expects Cordelia to play his rhetorical game, she does not. Breaking this bond costs Cordelia her dowry; to receive the dowry Cordelia must fulfil the terms of an agreement that requires the "glib and oily art" she abhors (1.1.226). Forced out by Goneril, Lear reminds Regan of the contractual demands to which she agreed:

Thou better knowst
The offices of nature, bond of childhood,
Effects of courtesy, dues of gratitude.
Thy half o'the kingdom hast thou not forgot,
Wherein I thee endowed.

2.2.366-370

Should Regan not provide the food, shelter and clothing Lear asks for, a bond will be broken, as Lear expects something in return for what he has bequeathed his daughters. For Derrida a gift must not be acknowledged or reciprocated in any way, because the

[56] William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, ed. by Harold F. Brooks, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1979), 1.1.84-85.

expectation of something in return destroys the notion of a gift: "For there to be a gift, there must be no [...] debt".[57] Hence, Lear's use of "bond" can here be seen in the legal sense: the half of the realm that Regan was given requires her to honour a daughter's obligations to her father, and the trade suggests both an economic exchange and filial obligation. To break this particular bond violates Regan's duty to her father and an agreement that requires her to provide certain things in exchange for her inheritance.

Cordelia's equivocal use of "bond" also reminds Lear that she obeys the bond of nature rather than a bond that stakes her economic future on a hypocritical speech. "My bond", Cordelia says, emphasizing that her commitment to her father differs from the pledges made by Goneril and Regan:

> Good my lord,
> You have begot me, bred me, loved me. I
> Return those duties back as are right fit,
> Obey you, love you and most honour you.
> Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
> They love you all?
>
> 1.1.95-100

Here Cordelia states the conditions of the bond between parent and child as a reciprocal exchange that involves obedience, love and honour. Her obedience to Lear is questioned in this scene, so she includes the caveat that the duties she owes to her father are appropriately returned. Moreover, the scorn she pours on Goneril and Regan's total devotion to their father when they have husbands invokes Jesus's Sermon on the Mount: "No man can serve two masters."[58] Cordelia's refusal to indulge her father enrages him. Lear disowns his preferred daughter and compares her to the savage "Scythian" and the cannibal that "makes his generation messes | To gorge his appetite" (1.1.117-119).

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[57] Jacques Derrida, *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 12.
[58] Matthew, 6.24.

Cordelia marks her banishment from the kingdom with words that madden Lear, but also prepare the audience for a return that will be a remedy to his ills and poisonous to her sisters:

> I know you what you are,
> And like a sister am most loath to call
> Your faults as they are named.
> 1.1.271-273

Cordelia says what she claims to hide: she discredits Goneril and Regan's integrity without naming specific faults, implicitly warning her elder sisters. When Cordelia says that she "would prefer him to a better place" (1.1.276), she means that Lear would be better off with her. However, these words also hint at something else: they anticipate the invasion and attempted restoration of Lear later in the play.

Cordelia returns to England with French forces as the remedy to Lear's distress. She dispatches an officer with soldiers to find Lear, who has become "As mad as the vexed sea" (4.4.2). Cordelia's Christ-like qualities are perhaps never more apparent in *King Lear* than when she justifies the French invasion on Lear's behalf: "O dear father, | It is thy business that I go about" (4.4.23-24). These words paraphrase the gospel of Saint Luke. When Mary and Joseph leave Jerusalem after a Passover feast they are separated from the twelve-year-old Jesus. Returning to Jerusalem, they find Jesus deep in conversation with the learned of the temple:

> And when they saw him, they were amazed: and his mother said unto him, Son, why hast thou thus dealt with us? behold, thy father and I have sought thee sorrowing. And he said unto them, How is it that ye sought me? wist ye not that I must be about my Father's business?[59]

Though both want to carry out the work of a father, Jesus separates himself from his parents in order to serve God the Father, while Cordelia aims to restore her biological father to his symbolic position on earth.

Biblical hierarchies equivocate when Cordelia meets Lear again:

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[59] Luke, 2.48-49

CORDELIA [*Kneels.*] O look upon me, sir,
And hold your hands in benediction o'er me!
[*She restrains him as he tries to kneel.*]
No, sir, you must not kneel.
4.7.57-59

Neither the Quarto nor the Folio have stage directions here, but Foakes's editorial additions are justified by the text, which indicates that Lear attempts to kneel before Cordelia. Alternatively, in requesting his hands in blessing over her, Cordelia could be interpreted as kneeling first before him. Lear returns to the image of kneeling as if in prayer when Edmund takes him and Cordelia prisoners: "When thou dost ask me blessing I'll kneel down | And ask of thee forgiveness" (5.3.10-11). Lear's heartfelt language here and in their last exchange contrasts with the bathos of his words to Regan: "On my knees I beg | That you'll vouchsafe me raiment, bed and food" (2.2.344-345). Lear mocks Regan, and his own reduction, as she tries to persuade him to ask Goneril's forgiveness for the unchecked revelry that his knights brought to her house.

King Lear's tragic ending confounds the dramaturgical and religious expectations it sets up. When Edmund confesses that he and Goneril have already ordered Cordelia's death, and that her death be made to look like suicide, Albany responds: "The gods defend her" (5.3.254). Immediately, Lear enters with a dead Cordelia in his arms. Bradley reads the ending of the play as a renunciation of the world in favour of the soul because, as he sees it, Lear eventually dies believing Cordelia alive.[60] Critiques of such redemptionist readings, such as J. Stampfer's, emphasize the turmoil in the play and point to Lear's insistence that Cordelia has "no life" (5.3.304).[61] Catherine Belsey describes *King Lear* as "bleak to the point of nihilism" because it confounds the expectation set up by its similarity to popular folk tales that have happy endings.[62] Alternatively, it can also be argued that *King Lear* sets up the expectation of salvation in Cordelia, whose death

[60] Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, pp.272-273.
[61] J. Stampfer, "The Catharsis of *King Lear*", *Shakespeare Survey*, 13 (1960), 1-10.
[62] Catherine Belsey, *Why Shakespeare?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2007), p.50.

signifies the failure of that salvation. Goneril, Regan, Cornwall and Edmund receive fatal justice, but Lear does not live to reclaim the kingship promised by his restoration.

As Lear lays down Cordelia's dead body, Kent asks "Is this the promised end?" (5.3.261), and Edgar responds "Or image of that horror?" (5.3.262). Both Kent and Edgar articulate a disappointment that merges both the end of the world and an expectation that the play organizes, bringing together the religious and non-religious. Derrida makes a distinction between the experience of the messianic and divine messianism "so as to designate a structure of experience rather than a religion".[63] Kent's and Edgar's words undo Derrida's distinction; it is both a dramatic and a religious experience, as the play sets up a theatrical expectation in a pagan setting that nevertheless invokes Christian salvation. More specifically, Edgar's words conflate the image of Lear and Cordelia with depictions of the Doom, replacing the swooping angels, snatching fiends, and devouring, reptilian hell-mouths with a warped, tragic Pietà: rather than the Virgin Mary cradling the dead body of Christ, an image commonly found in medieval churches, Shakespeare presents Lear holding Cordelia's inert, lifeless body in his arms. Both the Christian and Shakespearian images equivocate: the Pietà at once depicts the tragedy of a mother with her dead son's body and the redemptive moment of Atonement, while Shakespeare's version withholds the redemption it alludes to. On the one hand, the image of Lear holding Cordelia, as described by Kent and Edgar, fuses the tragedy of the Pietà with the damnation of the Doom. On the other, the expiation and salvation associated with these Christian events is kept off-stage. *King Lear*'s equivocal ending thus withholds the definitive resolution promised by the Doom, as well as the divine reconciliation the Pietà expects, in order to guarantee the austere, desolate outcome of the play.

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[63] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (London: Routledge, 1994), pp.167-168.

Conclusion

Equivocation runs unchecked through *King Lear*, as it does in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*. Lear's ambiguous structural position, as well as Cordelia's double-edged role as both Lear's poison and remedy, comes into conflict with the political manoeuvrings of Goneril, Regan, and Edmund, while Edgar's imaginative words in the Dover Cliff scene exemplify the creative, generative, and anarchic power afforded a fallen language. Cordelia also represents the promise of soteriological intervention that, by its failure to appear, gives the play a tragic end. Moreover, the polysemic language that makes Cordelia a pharmakonic figure in *King Lear* also deconstructs the oppositions between Christianity and paganism, as the Christian vocabulary of early modern Britain invades a pre-Christian setting.

At the end of the play, Kent's and Edgar's words can be seen to punctuate the progression of Doom imagery invoked in the four tragedies. *Hamlet*'s graveyard scene alludes to the gruesome cadavers of "The Three Living and Three Dead" paintings that warned of the inevitable death and Judgement to come. In their darkest moments Othello and Macbeth explicitly invoke the Apocalypse as portrayed on the walls and windows of pre-Reformation churches, their words infused with the images of hell-fire, marauding fiends, and swooping, trumpet-blasting angels that gazed down on so many medieval congregations. Finally, the image of Lear grieving over the dead body of Cordelia becomes Shakespeare's dramatic appropriation of the Doom, fused with the Pietà, an entirely tragic vision shorn of redemption.

Such redemption is called on but remains tantalisingly off-stage in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*. Without the *Logos* to tame its anarchic effects, equivocation, whether as ambiguity or dissimulation, runs riot as Shakespeare holds back the Judgement that could, in one blazing, sulphurous, and apocalyptic moment, end equivocation and the tragedy it helps to bring about. As a result, the earthly destruction

and disaster caused by equivocation is unredeemed by any supernatural disclosure that could deliver punishment for the wicked and salvation for the just.

— 6 —

Conclusion

Summing Up

At St. Mary's Church in Fairford, the restored stained glass depiction of the Last Judgement has Jesus Christ at its centre with the world as his footstall and flanked by Mary and St. John the Baptist, while on his shoulders rests the sword of justice (figure 28). The image signifies final, unequivocal Judgement, with souls below damned to hell on one side and saved, raised up to heaven, on the other. Although this part of the image itself is Victorian, it perfectly captures the moment that is withheld from the tragedies. Shakespeare invokes Christian salvation for the good and punishment for the wicked in the form of depictions of the Doom, but withholds its effects from the action of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*. Like a fallen language distanced from God, from a transcendental signified that would provide resolution and stability, these four plays arrive at their tragic conclusions because the sword-wielding *Logos* they call upon is kept off-stage, allowing equivocation to wreak havoc in a world distanced from any supernatural, apocalyptic redemption of earthly destruction and catastrophe.

As Othello contemplates the sleeping body of Desdemona he unwittingly sets out the difference between earthly justice and heavenly justice. His murderous intentions wavering for a moment, Othello claims that Desdemona's sweet breath would cause the sword of justice, the sword that rests on Christ's shoulder, to break before it could punish her. However, the dramatic irony is that the earthly justice an abused, misguided Othello prepares to administer should, as the audience knows, be stopped before it takes an innocent life. The Judgement of Christ's sword of justice, the sword of the *Logos*, is unequivocal; at the edge of Doom it does not damn the just, save the wicked, or condemn any souls to the equivocal place of purgatory. Face to face with the *Logos* there is no equivocation, no dark glass through which understanding is obscured, no anti-*Logos*

who encourages misapprehensions, misconstructions, and false accusations. Instead, the separation effected by the Fall, the distance between humans and the ineffable Tetragrammaton, is reconciled: the definitive Judgement of the Doom breaches the wall between the mortal and immortal worlds to provide unequivocal closure to the disorders of a fallen world and its fallen, polysemic language.

The fiendish Iago provides the opposite of the transparent disclosures the *Logos* would give, refusing to explain himself at the end of *Othello*. Chapter Three of this thesis urges the reader to consider Iago as the anti-*Logos* of the play, a figure who revels in the possibilities offered by a heterogeneous language, achieving his wicked ways with a combination of equivocations and lies. Iago's seemingly innocuous remarks, aided by calculated shrugs and grimaces, imply what they feign to withhold. Eventually, this mode of address exploits Othello's vulnerabilities with a proto-racist attack on a man held in high esteem by Venetian society. Convinced that Desdemona has been unfaithful, and haunted by the possibility that he is an outsider rather than an insider, Othello delivers fatal, tragically mistaken, and injudicious earthly judgement. Shamed by his mistake, Othello beckons the damnation seen in pre-Reformation depictions of the Doom, and then, as he takes his own life, identifies himself equivocally: he dies as both a servant and enemy of Venice.

Hamlet presents the audience with an ending that emphasizes the equivocal aspects of earthly justice. Before old Hamlet's death can be avenged, Claudius snatches Hamlet's life with the aid of Laertes. A dying, assassinated Hamlet thrusts a poisoned sword into Claudius's flesh and roughly forces poison down Claudius's throat. The murderous tools intended for Hamlet draw revenge for both Hamlet's and old Hamlet's deaths as they are turned back in the direction of Claudius, the catalyst for the play's structural equivocations. Hamlet, who kills in retaliation, is spared the condemnation reserved for the provocateur, Claudius, but he also loses forever the prize of kingship

deferred by Claudius's usurpation of the crown. Furthermore, earlier in the play Hamlet refuses to avenge the death of his father and kill Claudius as he prays, suggesting that human, earthly justice can in one instance save a sinner, at another condemn the same sinner to hell. Hamlet sets the effects of earthly justice against divine justice and, as Chapter Two of this thesis proposes, the graveyard scene invokes the memento mori of "The Three Living and the Three Dead" as a reminder that death and the Judgement that follows it are inevitable, unavoidable, and unequivocal. Chapter Two also argues that both the Ghost and Claudius fail to occupy the Lacanian structural position of the Father, leaving Hamlet caught between loyalty to a spectre of equivocal provenance or to an uncle who is also his father.

Macbeth receives his comeuppance, but it is not the trumpet-tongued Apocalypse that arch-equivocators cannot hope to deceive. Nor does his death guarantee a healthy future for Scotland. Chapter Four suggests that equivocation is the linguistic and temporal condition of *Macbeth* and one of the effects of this is that, despite Macbeth's decapitation by Macduff, the vice that threatens the country still lurks at the margins of the virtuous Malcolm's accession to the throne. *Macbeth*'s polity seems structured to fail, destabilized, perhaps unalterably, by the murder of Duncan. Seduced by promising amphibologies, Macbeth in turn offers Banquo promise-crammed equivocations on his way to the bloody gain, and ruthless retention, of kingship. His dishonourable intentions are presented as honourable, an instance of *Macbeth*'s scheme of dissimulation, a trope of foulness disguised as fairness that engulfs innocent lives with frightening, indiscriminate frequency. Macduff's killing of the savage, regicidal Macbeth replays Macbeth's own heroic violence: the disembowelling of the traitor Macdonwald, which won Macbeth so much honour. By extension, the end of the play, like the beginning, can be understood to present earthly justice tainted by injustice. An example, like the witches' prophecies, of the trace of the future that invades the present identified

in Chapter Four, violence in the name of justice also anticipates the possibility of treacherous bloodlust to come.

King Lear conflates earthly tragedy with heavenly justice. Kent and Edgar, at the sight of a murdered Cordelia in Lear's arms, summon the Doom, and the pre-Reformation imagery that depicts it, in order to make sense of the twisted Pietà they see. This vision of profound injustice, as Chapter Five proposes, invokes the cataclysmic destruction of the Doom, but without the redemptive disclosure of a new world order heralded by this earth-shattering event. Chapter Five also argues that *King Lear* deconstructs the opposition between Christianity and paganism, with Cordelia as a Christ-like figure who both hurts and heals Lear. For Lear, Cordelia, like the *pharmakon* Derrida examines in Plato's *Phaedrus*, is both a poison and a remedy. The divine intervention that would separate the poisons from the remedies, cure the equivocal condition of language, and call a halt to tragedy is withheld in *King Lear*, as it is in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*. As a result, the ambiguities and dissimulations that are resolved in the comedies run unchecked, untamed, and propel the plots of these four plays to tragedy.

This thesis thus makes a connection between language and the plots of the four plays it analyses. Drawing on Derrida's critique of Western metaphysics, it proposes that the transcendental signified, the *Logos* distanced from language, is, analogously, withheld by Shakespeare from the plots of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*. Without the intervention of an unequivocal *Logos*, the creative possibilities of a fallen, unfixed, unanchored, and unstable language are successfully exploited for tragic ends. Shakespeare's protagonists in these plays call on the *Logos* that would end equivocation and tragedy in the form of pre-Reformation depictions of the Doom. Tantalizingly kept off-stage, the final, apocalyptic Judge who would redeem earthly tragedy never shows His

hand, ensuring that the equivocations of the plays result in death, heartbreak, and misfortune.

Implications

Although comedies ultimately disentangle the misunderstandings that threaten their utopian endings, they could still be tackled with my hypothesis in mind. Happy endings are seldom absolute, even when they are explicitly the result of divine intervention. Shakespeare's comedies often have negative remainders in the form of dissenting figures and divine messages that still require interpretation. Not only do comedies such as *As You Like It*, *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Winter's Tale* counterpoint the plays analysed in this thesis, they offer the opportunity for further analysis of the relationship between equivocation and a transcendental signified. In these particular comedies, divine intervention does not always deliver the unequivocal closure it promises.

From a mortal point of view, missives from immortal sources can still equivocate. In *Cymbeline* Jupiter's tablet foretells the reconciliations and reunifications that follow. The Soothsayer, however, must interpret the oblique inscription before it is understood to describe the relentless disclosures and discoveries of the play's conclusion. Apollo's Oracle declares that Leontes "shall live without an heir, if that which is lost be not found".[1] The prophetical truth of these words is only confirmed when the arrival of Leontes' long-lost daughter, Perdita, leads to Hermione's mystical revival. When comic heroes do not come face to face with their god they receive opaque communications, products of a fallen language that cannot directly or unequivocally convey immortal meanings.

Even when gods are embodied on stage, some comedies still contain a negative undertow that disrupts their utopian endings. Comedies offer the audience fictional

[1] William Shakespeare, *The Winter's Tale*, ed. by J. H. P. Pafford, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1963), 3.2.132-136.

visions of alternative, egalitarian ways of life. However, with their unlikely scenarios, stunning coincidences, straightforward oppositions between bad and good, and overtly fantastical, contrived conclusions, they still remind us that these alternative possibilities are both tenuously constructed and removed from the less serendipitous realities of our own existence. As Kiernan Ryan reminds us, both the world of the play and the world of the audience are scrutinized by the comedies. The puns, riddles, and deliberate misunderstandings and misrecognitions made by many of the characters expose language as fluctuating and changeable, highlighting the instability of structures the viewer too easily takes to be fixed and unalterable. At the same time "estrangement-effects" undermine the concord on stage.[2] In the light of this, we can also say that the instability and confusion Hymen bars in *As You Like It* returns in the form of the malcontent Jacques's dour denial of the general gaiety the goddess of marriage brings to the stage. Jupiter's intervention in *Cymbeline* constructs a happy end founded on death and decapitation, while the international relations that led to war in the play are reasserted rather than altered. In the midst of celebration, *Cymbeline*, like *Macbeth*, may suggest that its problematic governing structures have not been reassembled, regardless of the play's outcome. Moreover, the narration by Time in *The Winter's Tale* and the poet John Gower in *Pericles* emphasizes unreality and artificiality as the condition of the unfolding events. When a transcendental signified shows its hand in the comedies there is still slippage: a difference seems to hold between, on the one hand, an unequivocal source and, on the other, the equivocal effects of its incarnation in a fallen world or its equivocal symbolization in a fallen language.

One aspect of the methodology of this thesis was to use modern cultural texts to situate my analysis of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear*, and this could be developed into a study of how these plays are retold, or the issues they raise interpreted, by popular

[2] Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), pp.115-121 (p.118).

culture. Shakespeare's apotheosis in modern culture has assigned the dramatist himself a status akin to a transcendental signified. His works have such cultural influence in the English-speaking world, and beyond, that they are invoked as the source of truths that helps us to make sense of the world in which we live. Indeed, it could be argued that, in an increasingly secular society, the complete works of Shakespeare have a cultural cachet comparable to the Bible. Children's names are drawn from Shakespeare's plays and, like Hymen, Shakespeare is often present at weddings and engagements as his sonnets are read out. As well as this, his characters are frequently used as paradigms to explain human actions. For instance, Prime Minister Gordon Brown's eventual decision against holding a general election in 2008 came after many weeks of conjecture, a period in which Brown was accused of Hamlet-style indecision by the press.

Films, novels, and television dramas often use elements of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, and *Macbeth* in order to anchor their meaning. Drawing on relevant aspects of these plays has helped to make these cultural texts intelligible to an audience familiar with Shakespeare's plays, setting up expectations that can be confirmed or confounded. For example, the role of the Ghost in *Hamlet* is reproduced elsewhere. In the American drama *Six Feet Under*, the ghost of a deceased father provides moral guidance to his children at the same time that they doubt his provenance.[3] And, like Shakespeare's Ghost, the spectre that takes the form of a father lays claim to a structural position that, as a spectre, it cannot unequivocally occupy.

Another popular American drama, *The Wire*, presents the city of Baltimore as a dystopia that, like the polity of *Macbeth*, is structured to produce traitors.[4] Social relations come into conflict with individual success in *The Wire*, reproducing the tension in *Macbeth* between ambition and the feudal bonds of kinship. Indeed, the exchange between Macbeth and Banquo at 2.1 can be understood as the prototype for the dissimulations

[3] *Six Feet Under*. By Alan Ball. HBO. June 3 2001 – August 21 2005.
[4] *The Wire*. By David Simon. HBO. June 2 2002 – March 9 2008.

that characterize the communications between drug lords, trade unionists, police, and local politicians. Alternatively, Billy Morrissette's film, *Scotland, PA*, draws on *Macbeth* in order to comment on small-town America in the 1970s with a dark comedy set in a burger bar called Duncan's Café.[5] Rebecca Reisert's novel *The Third Witch* retells *Macbeth* from the perspective of one of the witches, Gilly, who is determined to avenge the death of her father.[6]

King Lear has been similarly mined. Jane Smiley's novel *A Thousand Acres*, which tells the story of a farmer who hands over his land to his three daughters, Ginny, Rose, and Caroline, uses the play to structure a tale of sexual abuse in modern day Iowa.[7] In Kristian Levring's film *The King is Alive* a group of stranded tourists stage *King Lear* in an attempt to maintain their sanity, but their desperation is increased by the issues they find in the play,[8] while Don Boyd's *My Kingdom* tells the tale of a widowed crime lord in modern-day Liverpool inspired by Shakespeare's play.[9] Elsewhere, the Hindi film *Omkara* takes *Othello* and transposes its proto-racism to the caste system and local politics of India.[10]

Finally, the influence of pre-Reformation imagery on Shakespeare's work can be further explored. Hearing of Tybalt's death at Romeo's hand, Juliet invokes the Biblical trumpets of Doom paintings in *Romeo and Juliet*: "Then dreadful trumpet sound the general doom". Juliet's concern is not only the death of her cousin and banishment of her husband, but also the oppositions that constitute Romeo: he is a "Beautiful tyrant, fiend angelical" as well as "A damned saint, an honourable villain".[11] Here, as in the four tragedies that are the subject of this thesis, the Last Judgement is summoned as the force

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[5] *Scotland, PA*. Dir. Billy Morrissette. Lot 47. 2001.
[6] Rebecca Reisert, *The Third Witch* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2001).
[7] Jane Smiley, *A Thousand Acres* (London: Harper Perennial, 2004).
[8] *The King is Alive*. Dir. Kristian Levring. 2000. DVD. Pathé. 2002.
[9] *My Kingdom*. Dir. Don Boyd. 2001. DVD. Prism. 2001.
[10] *Omkara*. Dir. Vishal Bhardwaj. Big Screen. 2006.
[11] William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, ed. by Brian Gibbons, The Arden Shakespeare (London: Methuen, 1980), 3.2.67, 75, 79.

that could disentangle the equivocations of dissemblers, as well as a response to the woe that, for Juliet, is irreducible to language. Dooms were common in medieval churches but, of course, they were not the only images that were popular. Narrative scenes from both the Old and New Testament covered the walls of a church, while depictions of various saints were prevalent examples of religious iconography, as were devotional images of Mary's life, death, and miracles. Chapter Two of this thesis analysed the influence of "The Three Living and the Three Dead" in *Hamlet*, but other moralities were also widespread. The Warning Against Idle Gossip showed the devil embracing two gossiping women, while the Seven Works of Mercy instructed parishioners to clothe the naked, feed the hungry and provide drink to the thirsty. Other examples, which could often be found in the same church, included depictions of the Seven Deadly Sins and the Warning to Sabbath-breakers.

This thesis thus opens the door for further study on equivocation and its relationship to a transcendental signified in the comedies, Shakespeare's adaptation by, and influence on, modern cultural texts, and Shakespeare's possible use of pre-Reformation imagery not looked at in my analysis. These three strands lead on from a thesis that focuses on four of Shakespeare's tragedies.

To sum up, equivocation, in the form of ambiguity or dissimulation, has been considered by this thesis as the archetypal condition of a fallen, differential language without access to a transcendental signified. The *dramatis personae* of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *Macbeth*, and *King Lear* are, my interpretation contends, also distanced from a transcendental signified. Plagued by equivocations, Shakespeare's tragic heroes call on the Last Judgement of the *Logos*, which can be understood as the transcendental signified of the profoundly Christian language they use. Furthermore, this divine intervention is invoked in the form of pre-Reformation images of the Doom. Shakespeare, however,

ultimately withholds any heavenly involvement, which in the comedies provides resolution and stability, allowing equivocations to propel the plays to tragedy.

Figures

Figure 1

The Tetragrammaton oversees creation, *The holie Bible* (London: Richard Jugge, 1568).

Figure 2

Adam names the animals, *Holy Byble* (London: Richarde Iugge, 1576).

Figure 3

The Fall, *The Holy Bible* (London: Christopher Barker, 1584).

Figure 4

Wall painting of a Tudor Christ, at St. Teilo's Church, St. Fagans National History Museum, Cardiff, South Glamorgan.

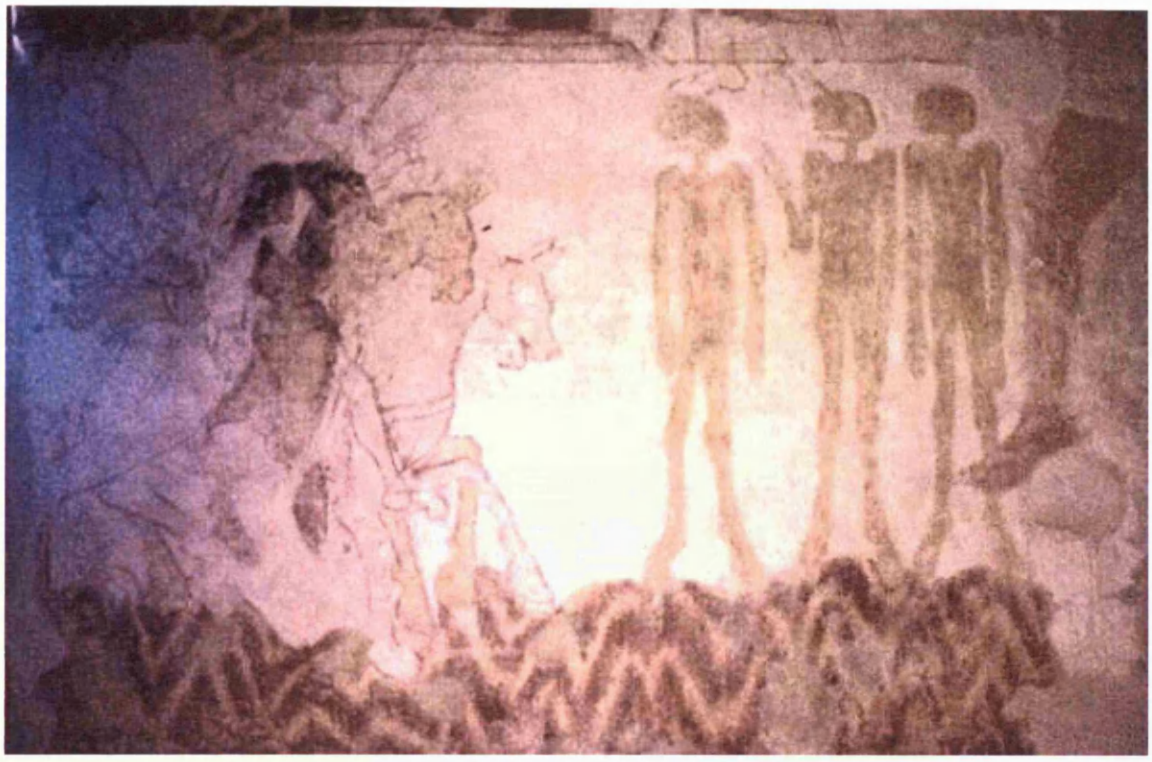

Figure 5

Painting of the Three Living and the Three Dead at Charlwood, Surrey

(<http://www.paintedchurch.org/charlld.htm> [accessed 24 September 2008]).

Figure 6

Painting of the Three Living and the Three Dead at Peakirk, Northamptonshire, with the elaborate attire of the three living an indication of their nobility (<http://www.paintedchurch.org/peak3l3d.htm> [accessed 24 September 2008]).

Figure 7

Painting of the Three Living and the Three Dead at Peakirk, Northamptonshire, showing the three dead as skeletons

(<http://www.paintedchurch.org/peak3l3d.htm> [accessed 24 September 2008]).

Figure 8

Detail of the stained glass depiction of the Last Judgement at St. Mary's Church, Fairford, Gloucestershire, showing an angel lifting a soul towards heaven.

Figure 9

The west wing of St. Mary's Church, Fairford, Gloucestershire, with a stained glass depiction of the Last Judgement.

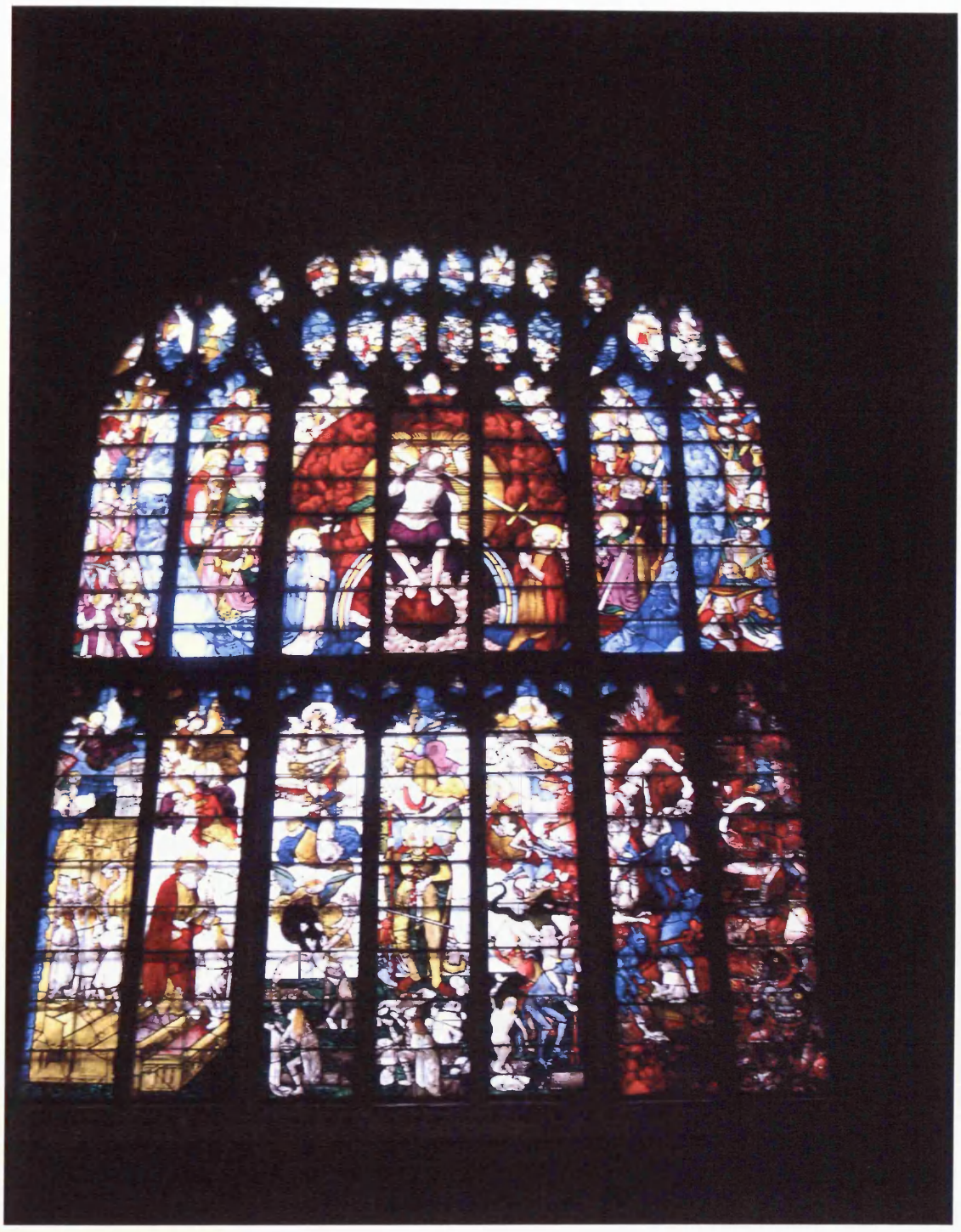

Figure 10

Stained glass depiction of the Last Judgement at St. Mary's Church, Fairford, Gloucestershire.

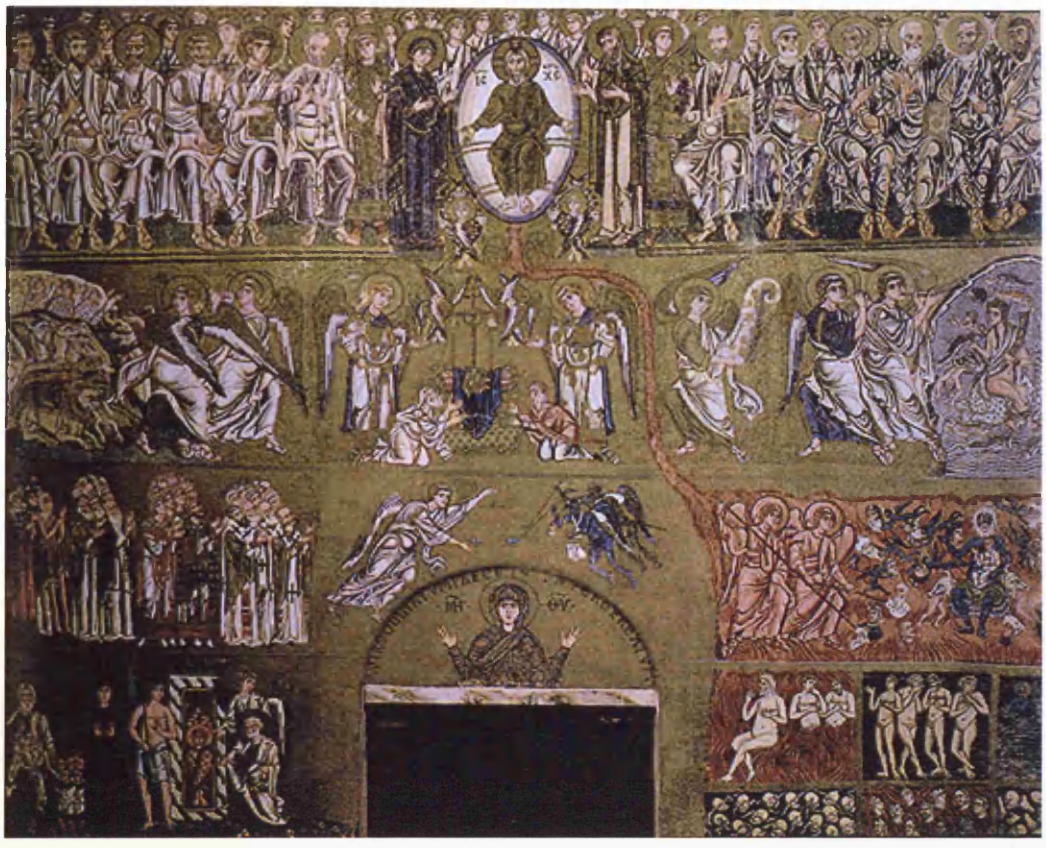

Figure 11

Last Judgement mosaic at the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, Torcello, Venice.

Figure 12

Detail of the stained glass depiction of the Last Judgement at St. Mary's Church, Fairford, Gloucestershire, showing a devil carting a soul off to hell.

Figure 13

Detail of the stained glass depiction of the Last Judgement at St. Mary's Church, Fairford, Gloucestershire, showing a devil snatching at a soul protected by an angel with a golden staff.

Figure 14

Detail of the stained glass depiction of the Last Judgement at St. Mary's Church, Fairford, Gloucestershire, showing a devil whipping a soul to hell.

Figure 15

Detail of the doom painting at St. Nicholas's Church, Oddington, Gloucestershire, showing a devil driving souls to hell.

Figure 16

Doom painting at Holy Trinity Church, Coventry, West Midlands.

Figure 17

Detail of the doom painting at St. Nicholas's Church, Oddington, Gloucestershire, showing a devil thrusting souls into the hell-mouth.

Figure 18

Detail of the stained glass depiction of the Last Judgement at St. Mary's Church, Fairford, Gloucestershire, showing the devil with a head beneath his shoulders.

Figure 19

Detail of the doom painting at Broughton, Cambridgeshire, showing the souls rising to face their Judgement.

Figure 20

Doom painting at St. Nicholas's Church, Oddington, Gloucestershire.

Figure 21

Detail of the doom painting at St. Nicholas's Church, Oddington, Gloucestershire, showing two "trumpet-tongu'd" angels resurrecting the dead.

Figure 22

Detail of the stained glass depiction of the Last Judgement at St. Mary's Church, Fairford, Gloucestershire, with two "trumpet-tongu'd" angels.

Figure 23

Doom painting at South Leigh, Oxfordshire, showing two "trumpet-tongu'd" angels resurrecting the dead. The Latin inscriptions above the swooping angles stress the unequivocal nature of God's Judgement, beckoning the blessed and sending away the cursed (<http://www.paintedchurch.org/sthleigh.htm> [accessed 24 September 2008]).

Figure 24

Detail of the doom painting at St. Nicholas's Church, Oddington, Gloucestershire, showing a small, cherubic angel lifting a soul up to heaven as another angel wakes the dead with a trumpet.

Figure 25

Detail of the doom painting at St. Nicholas's Church, Oddington, Gloucestershire, showing a devil driving the wicked into the "deep damnation" of hell, as a striped demon keeps the cauldron fire burning with his bellows.

Figure 26

Detail of the doom painting at Broughton, Buckinghamshire, showing a reptilian hell-mouth devouring souls (<http://www.paintedchurch.org/broughtb.htm> [accessed 24 September 2008]).

Figure 27

Detail of the doom painting at Beckley, Oxfordshire, showing a reptilian hell-mouth overseeing the fiery scene of damnation (<http://www.paintedchurch.org/beckdoom.htm> [accessed 24 September 2008]).

Figure 28

Stained glass depiction of the Last Judgement at St. Mary's Church, Fairford, Gloucestershire, showing Jesus Christ with the sword of justice on one shoulder.

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