

Article

Shakespeare's Ambivalence: Epistemological Hesitation about the Origin of Evil

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Abstract: Recent studies of the conceptualization of the Devil in the early modern period have pointed to the shifting theological and philosophical coordinates, which made possible a diverse spectrum of representation of diabolical evil—from Francis Bacon's naturalistic scepticism to King James's supernatural demonology. Shakespeare has always been central to this discussion but has not yet been placed in a contextual frame that incorporates the rise of scholarly interest in the diabolical. This article interprets Shakespeare's representation of diabolical evil in *Hamlet* (1601), *Othello* (1603), *Measure for Measure* (1604) and *Macbeth* (1606) as constituted by a complex tension between natural and supernatural ideas about the origin of evil. Drawing on a raft of recent scholarship on representations of witchcraft and devils in the period, I show that diabolical figures in the universe of Shakespeare during the period of great tragedies between 1601 to 1606 exist in two modes of representation: as a persistent magical ambience and as a localized agent. Ambivalence is expressed in the hesitation between these opposing theological modes and is evident in the way that the Devil's material agency is obscured and left unresolved. Viewing this through the lens of the fantastic as an ontological uncertainty that results in epistemological hesitation helps us to frame Shakespeare's ambivalence, which at least in part originates in the ambivalent theology of Calvin. The analysis thereby positions hesitation and diabolic temptation in line with Calvin's theology and shows how Calvin's framework of secular evil presents an intellectual context through which Shakespeare's ambiguity can be understood in theological terms.



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1. Introduction

The analysis presented in this article resonates to a certain degree with several other claims made in various circles of scholarship about the supernatural in Shakespeare. These include Stephen Greenblatt's ironical readings of Shakespearean exorcism that dramatically symbolize the world of the theatre itself, and Bradley's discussion of hesitation surrounding Macbeth's desire to both anticipate and control time in order to circumvent God's judgment, for instance (Greenblatt 1988; Bradley 2019). A.P. Rossiter established that Shakespeare was ambivalent in a series of lectures many years ago, though his reading is framed around emotional ambivalence and largely concerned with how love and hate—particularly for the father—permeates throughout his theatre (Rossiter 1961). Similarly, Normal Rabkin identified strands of rhetorical ambivalence in Shakespeare by showing how Henry V is held both in virtue and in contempt, in equal measure, to generate hesitation (Rabkin 1977, pp. 279–96). My analysis adds to these local debates by integrating a reading of Shakespeare's theological ambivalence, which is not like the ambivalence hypothesized by Rossiter and Rabkin. It is my view that the blurred distinction we encounter in Shakespeare between supernatural modes of inspiration for natural behaviour, and supernatural manifestation in the natural world, originates in Calvin. This is because while Calvin seeks to provide a secular explanation for diabolical temptation, he simultaneously hedges his bets about precisely how this is the Devil's work. This sets up an intellectual framework which provides the context for understanding Shakespeare's ambiguity as an

expression of Calvin's own ambivalence as to whether the origin of evil is fallen human nature or supernatural diabolical prompting. In transposing his conception of evil onto the stage, Shakespeare presents two conflicting yet equally plausible accounts of the diabolical and withholds his particular allegiance. This is perhaps the first time that such a reading has been extended to Shakespeare's concurrence of evil as it is characterized through various natural and supernatural intermediaries. Though it is not within the scope of this article to justify a consistent or global theological position that extends across all of Shakespeare plays, it is my view that Shakespeare is operating within this typology between the authorship of *Hamlet* (1601) through to the authorship of *Macbeth* (1606).

I thereby propose a new praxis that interprets Shakespeare's representations of evil through the uncanny, and the resulting effects of ontological uncertainty and epistemological hesitation. This places hesitation upon the origin of evil within the precise theoretical coordinates of the literary fantastic, and amidst a background of theological disputes that have recently emerged with further clarity about early modern witchcraft and diabolism. When this hesitation is represented in a literary sense, what materializes is the fantastic, which can be defined very precisely by Jackson (following Todorov) as a representation of events that prompts the audience to hesitate between two kinds of explanations that are antithetical—specifically, natural and supernatural causality (Jackson 2013, p. 25). While we may not encounter unambiguous supernatural agents in Shakespeare as such, nor angels and demons (as we do, for instance, in Marlowe's *Faustus*, in which Mephistopheles is clearly a supernatural devil intermediary), there does yet appear to be demonic prompting for Shakespeare's representations; and I would argue that this is in fact closer to the Calvin view than anything else.

One of the only scholars in the past century to have dealt with the phenomenon of witchcraft and exorcism systematically (across both medieval and early modern stage representation) is John D. Cox. With the exception of Marlowe, whom Cox views as unequivocally secular, Cox maintains that no operating process of secularization can be detected in the catalogue of 43 plays that he suggests comprised the entire field of Devil representations on the English stage. It is on this basis that Cox describes the early modern stage Devil as "more continuous with the formative tradition (i.e., the Morality plays) than is usually recognized" (Cox 2000, p. 2). Cox even goes as far as to literalize the witches in *Macbeth*, placing them in a tradition of unequivocal belief in the reality of supernatural agencies. This is a point of contention for this analysis. In making the broad assumption that the early modern playwrights "made no distinction between (Devil and Vice)" and were thus contingent upon binaries (good and evil, truth and illusion, belief and heresy) (Ibid., p. 6), Cox neglects to consider the idea that some representations were intended to cause the audience to hesitate between the natural and the supernatural, generating the effect of the uncanny.

The Devil in medieval Morality plays (*Fall of Angels*, *Fall of Man*, *Harrowing of Hell* and others) was typically a localized personified entity invested with metaphysical powers who stood diametrically opposed to God. Stylized representations that took on increasingly bestial forms would manifest in medieval theatre; the *Corpus Christi* cycle plays, performed in England from circa 1378 until the latter half of the sixteenth century, were particularly popular for their imaginative dramatization of Biblical stories, and the Devil himself. Many of these plays owe a debt to the first moments of the creation, the disobedience of Lucifer and rebellious angels and their descent into hell. For the medieval playwright, it was inevitable for God to be returned to dominion by the play's end. This is not necessarily the case in early modern drama, in which ethical values based in tradition are maintained in tension with new naturalistic understandings of morality, leading to representations of the Devil that are theologically ambivalent.

The nature of the process of secularization is central to understanding why Shakespeare's diabolically inspired figures were so equivocal. The key to this argument is the idea that modern disenchantment begins with Protestantism's scepticism about the supernatural claims of the Catholic Church. This is examined in detail by Keith Thomas, whose seminal

work *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) re-established the effects of the Reformation and its resulting decline in magical beliefs. According to Thomas, the Protestant critique of the ecclesiastical and doctrinal politics of the Catholic Church quickly led to a sceptical assault on the previously held metaphysical beliefs of the medieval world (Thomas 1971, p. 496). Inadvertently, these religiously informed sceptical critiques of witchcraft and exorcism, and of the metaphysics of the Holy Mass and belief in demons, fostered cognitive attitudes that sought to explain apparently supernatural events with reference to natural phenomena. A similar process can be observed in the normative sphere, in the works of leading reformer, John Calvin—particularly *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Calvin 1536). In seeking to undermine Catholic claims about the capacity of good works to influence a believer's prospects of salvation, Calvin articulated a view of human nature as intrinsically debased. Inadvertently, however, Calvin's theologically motivated philosophical anthropology provided an explanation for evil that potentially dispensed with reference to the Devil, because it could account for suffering in naturalistic terms.

Positioning ambivalence and epistemological hesitation in Shakespeare in this context should not be particularly surprising, given that Calvin's theology and demonology already consists in hesitation. Shakespeare's drama becomes embroiled in the predicament that the Anglican church faced at the time, which was to consistently follow the theological ideas outlined by Calvin in relation to witchcraft, whilst discrediting all forms of demonic exorcism performed by outsiders (whilst refraining from rejecting the practice entirely, as doing so would contravene the existence of God). Calvinism represented a rejection of traditional theological ideas about sin—following *Institutes*, "All men are not created on equal footing; for some eternal life is pre-ordained, for others eternal damnation" (Ibid., vol. III, p. xxi). Our nature is intrinsically depraved; man will always choose sin, cannot escape nor overcome sin, and cannot freely choose the path towards God. Following Sluhovsky in *Calvinist Miracles*, "Calvinists regarded nature as a divine plan, which cannot and should not be changed through human interventions" (Sluhovsky 1995, p. 7). In essence, all teachings of Calvin follow from the fall of original sin; our inability to choose goodness, our inability to respond to God's will, and the unconditional election by which God predetermines certain individuals to be granted salvation. God has determined that it is by "(His) grace alone, not from anything at all foreseen in man, who is altogether pass therein" (Ibid., vol. X. p. ii). Providence is therefore necessary to salvage us from our corrupt nature, but humans have no agency over our condemnable existence in the world. It is through Calvin's vision of human depravity, alongside the sovereign nature of God, that we can trace theological hesitation in Shakespeare. From Calvin, we can advance that Shakespeare's ambivalence may reflect a prism of competing ideas about the Devil that exist outside of the theatre across a spectrum of belief and non-belief, to which the playwright refrains from making clear his position.

In his renowned article "Shakespeare Bewitched" (1994), Greenblatt closely follows Reginald Scot's *Discoverie of Witchcraft* (Scot 1584) and makes the case that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* reflects upon a distinction between legitimized demonic agency and human fictions. In responding to Scot, Greenblatt frames Shakespeare's diabolical as an allegorizing of sceptical materialism and ambiguity which are intended for dramatic ends only. Most of the specifications and complexities in Greenblatt's article set out to show that this is in fact a logically consistent reading of Shakespeare. The core tenet of Scot's text, he suggests, is in locating witchcraft beliefs "not in, but as the imagination" (Greenblatt 1994, p. 23). For Scot, supernatural events are the result of discursive misrepresentations, which can be adapted in a theatrical context to conjure something that may be an illusion. Per Greenblatt:

Scot must not only demystify vision, but also expose the extent to which the experience of wonder—the thrilled recognition of the presence of supernatural power in the material world—depends upon language. "Naturall magic", Scot remarks, "consisteth as well in the deceit of words, as in the sleight of hand". (Ibid., p. 24)

According to Greenblatt and others—Phillip Almond in *England's First Demonologist* (Almond 2011, p. 3), Douglas King in *Shakespeare's World* (King 2018, p. 171), Ani Kojoyan in “Inter-Textual Relations Between Scot and Shakespeare” (Kojoyan 2013, p. 166)—it is highly likely that Shakespeare had been aware of Scot's *Discoverie*, and therefore entirely possible that he was influenced by the effect Scot had on Elizabethan consciousness about the supernatural. The Three Witches in *Macbeth* are especially indicative of this connection. Though they are imbued with an array of magical properties with divine allusions to thunderstorms and tempests, it remains unclear as to what extent their prophesy conditions Macbeth's fate or reinforces his ever-increasing sense of ambition. Subsequently, we cannot know whether their intervention is to be regarded as supernatural agency, or a mere projection of his mind.

Scot's view contests that of Burton-Russell, who in *Mephistopheles* argues that there are only a few moments in Shakespeare in which the evil is excessive to the occasion that prompts it (i.e., we have natural radical human evil when the action is proportionate to the occasion that prompts it, and we have diabolical supernatural evil when the action is excessive to the occasion that prompts it) (Burton-Russell 1990, p. 17). If indeed Shakespeare's plays exist in the climate of ambiguity set up by Calvin, then Burton-Russell's cut-and-dry criteria can actually be reread from either perspective. This means that an action proportionate to the occasion that prompts it does not rule out the agency of the Devil, because all wicked actions are supernatural promptings; similarly, when supernatural evil appears excessive to the occasion that prompts it, it does not rule out the possibility of a bestial and depraved instance of purely human action.

To support this claim, I present a matrix for Shakespeare's atmosphere of ambivalence in which the Devil is represented both as a pervasive magical or supernatural ambience, and as an existential threat within the human that provokes our base inclinations. This creates epistemological hesitation between natural and supernatural accounts of specific entities, alongside hesitation between metaphysical and human evil as the origin of malice. By bringing theological modes and naturalistic modes into conflict, Shakespeare strands us in a double bind in which the Devil's real-world influence is obscured.

The analysis to follow demonstrates how Shakespeare's diabolical allusions are recognizably evocative of the early modern Devil, despite the Devil's seeming absence. This inquiry proceeds as follows, beginning with *Hamlet*, a play in which there is unequivocally a supernatural agent. I then present a series of representations that are only equivocally supernatural in line with Todorov's notion of the fantastic, which occurs whenever Shakespeare generates a structurally determined epistemological hesitation between natural and supernatural causation. The first of these is a reading of *Othello's* interplay between love as it exists before the Fall (*constantiae*), and sin after the Fall, represented by Iago's tempting of Othello (*passione*). My contention is that Shakespeare creates two competing (and yet entirely consistent) interpretations for Iago's “motiveless malignity” (Coleridge 1987, p. 315): one that is naturalistic, and one that is theological. I demonstrate that the implicit hesitation on part of Shakespeare in denying both Othello and the audience a resolution to the true motivating forces behind Iago's devilry resonates as ambivalence towards the play's atmosphere of evil. Following this, my interpretation of *Measure for Measure* illustrates Shakespeare's reversal of what takes place in the garden of superstition, evident through Angelo's self-identification as a “devil” who is tempted by a saint. Evil is explored almost exclusively within the context of Angelo's appetites, for which he consciously preordains his “fall”. On this reading, Angelo's denial of the inclinations and unresolved rhetoric are consistent with a strikingly ambivalent treatment of evil. Finally, I show that Shakespeare's aesthetic juxtaposition of the Three Witches against Macbeth's own imagined projection obscures the origin of diabolical action in the absence of a literal Devil. This augments the play's horizon of uncertainty over the origin of malice, registering as ambivalence; two valences, and two meanings, creating tension over the source of Macbeth's rise and fall.

2. Hamlet

As I have noted, the ghost in *Hamlet* is unequivocally supernatural, though there is a question about whether it in fact straightforwardly diabolical (i.e., a Devil emissary on the same kind of plane that Marlowe's Mephistopheles is). We know that Hamlet rhetorically speculates about the diabolical nature of ghost in Act II—"The spirit that I have seen/May be a devil" (II.ii.627–628). This possibility, however, is dispelled by the play itself when Claudius confesses in prayer to the "primal eldest curse" upon "a brother's murder" (III.iii.87–88), which renders the ghost's word true. Hamlet's tragedy therefore does not appear to be the result of regarding the ghost as truthful, but rather the result of his hesitation. As Greenblatt convincingly attests, this hesitation has to do with the nature of Hamlet's warrant for revenge, not with the origin of the warrant in the ghost:

Hamlet will famously complain that conscience . . . "does make cowards of us all", that the native hue of resolution/Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought", and that "enterprises of great pith and moment . . . lose the name of action" (III.i.85–90). This corrosive inwardness—the hallmark of the entire play and the principal cause of its astonishing, worldwide renown—is glimpsed even in his first frantic response to the Ghost, and it is reinforced by the Ghost's command, "Remember me". From this perspective, what is at stake in the shift of emphasis from vengeance to remembrance is nothing less than the whole play. (Greenblatt 2001, p. 188)

On this line, the ghost that psychologically torments Hamlet is also unlike the other equivocal figures in this analysis that take their inspiration from Calvin's ambivalent framework. Though the ghost looks like the clearest manifestation of a Calvinist version of evil, Shakespeare makes it very apparent that the ghost is truthful, and this is not the case with the other plays. Consider the atmosphere that Calvin creates in hedging his bets, which shows us that his view is inherently contradictory: the distinction between a fallen nature that requires no prompting other than its own animality, versus the real agency of the Devil as a supernatural prompter behind every instance of human suffering. On the one hand, the Devil exists—particularly in the lie, which for Calvin is the only original work of the Devil—which therefore means that temptation, instigation and deception are effects generated by a supernatural agent (the Devil, who prompts). On the other side, human nature was created fallen and because of its degenerate and bestial characteristics needs no further prompting than its own self to commit evil. These views of Calvin are in contradiction; one of them says that the origin of harm is a directly supernatural prompter who whispers lies, while the other says that no such agent is necessary to explain harm.

Shakespeare's relation to Calvin is a point of speculation, as he may or may not have been a Calvinist. The Church of England at the time *was* Calvinist (or at least upheld a moderate form of Calvinism) whilst simultaneously a reform is underway in the Catholic Church which comes to conclusions that are not so different from Calvin's. This strongly suggests that the intellectual context and ambience for Shakespeare's work cannot escape the framework that Calvin articulates, given that everyone else is articulating the same kind of framework. Shakespeare's own allegiance, whether he was a closet Catholic sympathizer or a moderate Anglican who detested Puritans, is not something that we can know for certain. The doctrinal differences between those positions, however, are not substantive differences on the nature of the Devil's agency, and that is the key point here.

3. Othello

This brings me to *Othello*, a play in which Iago has figured as a point of controversy due to the difficulty in assigning him a consistent set of humanly plausible motivations. This has created space for critical speculation about what his impulse might be. The enigmatic nature of his character has prompted some critics to propose motivation by evil (McCloskey 1941; Seigel 1953; Dachslager 1976). Janet Adelman theorizes that the fractured sense of being that Iago perceives within his Euro-Christian self (in contradistinction to Othello's Arabic wholeness) brings about his end (Adelman 1997, pp. 127–28). In a reading that

suggests a kind of psychological and narcissistic trauma, Harold Bloom asserts the origins of Iago's "genius of evil" to be "engendered from a great Fall"—a consequence of the "ontological shock" of being overlooked by Othello as his lieutenant, in favour of Cassio (Bloom 1998, pp. 435–36). While the precise source of Iago's provocation has been commonly debated across a great deal of the scholarship that surrounds the play (with the intention of illuminating a specific rationale), I wish to make the more complex argument that both a naturalistic and supernatural causation are simultaneously woven into his design. My view of Iago is not that he is a supernatural Devil agent, but rather that Shakespeare represents his actions in ways that are equivocal and ambivalent (on a Calvin line), and that is because Iago is supernaturally prompted. This allows Shakespeare to remain theologically ambivalent by creating doubt as to which reading should be predominant.

The naturalistic reading is the Greenblatt argument. Greenblatt considers Iago to be a representation of the new philosophy: that all values are just rationalizations for natural appetites, that the rational will is in fact a rationalization of these appetites, and that these rationalizations are satisfactory. This positions Iago as a sceptic and materialistic egoist. Moreover, Greenblatt describes *Othello* as a work of "narrative self-fashioning", which is to say that Othello—and other major figures in the play—create stories about themselves and each other's lives, and thus "submit [their identities] to narrativity" (Greenblatt 1980, p. 238). Though this may to a certain degree capture the performative aspect of the play, Greenblatt's conclusion leaves little room for how the early modern audience may have engaged with the material surrounding race, religion and the natural inclinations of the human appetite. As such, I wish to foreground an interpretation of Othello's downfall that takes into consideration the cultural concerns of Shakespeare's day.

This brings me to the second supernatural reading, which is as follows: it has long been known that Shakespeare offers a series of very vague gestures towards the possibility that Iago can also be read as having a supernatural motivation, e.g., "I am not what I am" (which is an inversion of "I am that I am") (I.i.64), and the idea that Othello points towards his cloven hooves, albeit ambivalently, for instance (V.ii.294). We know that the inflection is ambivalent because the nature of Iago's evil carries both natural and supernatural causation, that Othello "cannot kill" (V.ii.295)—or perhaps, more concisely, cannot resolve. What is less well known is that Iago has a completely consistent set of motivations within a supernatural frame derived from original sin (on an Augustinian reading). In this case, we see more than a whiff of sulphur by Shakespeare. Othello appears to possess the qualities of a Stoic at the start of the play, so his descent into turmoil can be thought of as a kind of Stoic downfall. Therefore, that sexual jealousy should be the impetus for his madness is particularly significant, and resonant with the garden of superstition. In fantasizing over Desdemona's sexual affair with Cassio, the play's sequence of events evokes original sin, to which Iago is supernaturally inspired by the Devil-serpent.

I refer back to Calvin's self-contradiction (ambivalence), which flows both ways. The two statements are in contradiction, yet there is another implication; it is always possible to read from one side of the contradiction into the other side. What I mean by that is, if we hold that the Devil is supernatural prompter who lies behind every instance of human suffering, then it is always possible to detect in apparently natural evil a supernatural force at work—albeit at a distance and under disguise. This brings to light the very real possibility when Othello says "I look down towards his feet; but that's a fable/If that thou be'st a devil, I cannot kill thee" (V.ii.286–287) that Iago, who appears to be a perfectly secular agent and a representation of the passion of envy at work, is also from one position in Calvin's antithesis exactly what the text hints at him being: supernaturally inspired.

Equally though, the reverse is true—that every apparently supernatural figure (e.g., a witch) is actually just a manifestation of our fallen, degenerate and corrupt nature. The witches in *Macbeth*, for instance, may be nothing more than a representation of Macbeth's psychological disturbance, or alternatively (given that Banquo appears to see them as well) purely human agents who have duped themselves in justifying their evil through illusory

conjurings of the supernatural variety. This is the view of Scot in *Discoverie*; that witches are wicked women who do bad things in the name of an agent that does not exist.

What this means for Iago is that just as there is a logical reading on the naturalistic side, there is also a consistent theologically derived reading of his motivations. This, I suggest, is entirely coherent with the spectrum of belief positions that Shakespeare engaged with. Evil is present under both readings; it is never clear that evil is either naturalistic or supernatural in its complexion, and the reason for this is because it is both/and. The ambivalence in *Othello* (and indeed throughout all of the plays that follow *Hamlet* in this analysis) is pervasive, and it renders impossible any common-sense distinction between the classes' inspiration for the action.

To unpack this further; on the one hand, Iago can be thought to operate within an atmosphere of darkness, via invocation of evil spiritual entities, diabolical cunning and devilish luck. At the same time, he is spurred on by a medley of mysterious psychological forces that he himself is not cognizant of—perhaps jealousy, tyranny or repressed sexual desire for Othello. Nevertheless, while Shakespeare is inclined to propose a psychological explanation, he simultaneously weaves in a theological explanation that belongs to magic, located in Othello's renouncing of the religion of his fathers, to which Iago emerges as an agent of retribution. Iago's actions can be interpreted as motivated by love, hate, racism, jealousy or sovereignty; and so, when Greenblatt says in *Will in the World* that Shakespeare "refused to provide the villain with a clear and convincing explanation for his behaviour" (Ibid., p. 36), what he actually means is that there are a multitude of explanations for why Iago does the things that he does. All of these explanations are worth exploring on their merits—but that they remain unresolved within the context of the play signifies ambivalence towards both the naturalistic *and* the supernatural as the source of Iago's provocation. We should therefore not discount the possibility that the atmosphere in *Othello* veers towards the wild in a way that appears to evoke the garden of Genesis. The political landscape is largely governed by self-interest and survival, as not only do Iago's designs upon the Moor appear opportunistic, but they frequently register as animalistic. He expresses a sincere admiration for those who keep their "hearts attending on themselves" in deceitful "shows of service on their lords" to line their pockets and ascend the ranks (I.i.53–56). It is this nebulous space that exists between Iago's malignity, and the impulse for his malignity, that renders him a prototypical example of Shakespeare's theological hesitation. We know that this is the intended effect because we can present a theological reading of the play without assigning Shakespeare a theological position. Here, Kai Wiegandt presents a useful historical overview that outlines the sweeping horizon of Shakespeare's ambivalence:

When Coleridge referred to Shakespeare as 'myriad-minded', he was suggesting that the playwright could not be pinned down to any one reading of reality. Keats praised Shakespeare's embrace of "uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason", calling this "negative capability". Every attitude or ideology, Keats argued, finds its resemblance in Shakespeare's works yet also finds itself subject to criticism, qualification and interrogation. (Wiegandt 2016, p. 4)

Following Wiegandt, rather than reveal clear moral biases through the actions of his characters, Shakespeare instead opts to probe the origin of the action. This becomes particularly evident when we understand Iago, who is oddly charming in his malevolency, as implicitly ambivalent. He pontificates upon this very paradoxical nature of his persona, in a way that appears to align him with a supernatural explanation:

Iago: How am I then a villain
To counsel Cassio to this parallel course,
Directly to his good? Divinity of hell!
When devils will the blackest sins put on,
They do suggest at first with heavenly shows,

As I do now. (II.iii)

This stanza neatly encapsulates the antithetical nature of Iago's ego as a kind of secular vessel for diabolical evil. Diabolical as he may profess to be, Iago remains bashful on which Devil he seems to think is paying any attention to him. Instead, a great deal of Iago's egocentric language is rhetorical ("I am not what I am", "In following him, I follow but myself") and fixated on his lack of a singular identity or purpose. Iago puts on "heavenly shows" to conceal his "blackest sins", and though he resents being glossed over in favour of Cassio, he applauds himself for giving "counsel" (knowing full well that he plans to double-cross him). It is the combination of these fragmented and contradictory effects that signals Shakespeare's ambivalent display.

This effect also happens to be true of Othello himself. On the theological side, Othello's psychological and sexual temptation is evocative of the Fall in the Garden of Eden, through which base inclinations remain in check. On the naturalistic side, Othello's love for Desdemona is maligned by Iago's insinuation that together they make "the beast with two backs" (I.i.18). Othello's "fall" can be thought of in relation to Augustine's demarcation of *constantiae* ("good" love, as willed by the hand of God) and *passione* ("sinful" love, as willed by man's base desires), loosely derived from Stoic teachings. Iago intercedes as a force of temptation; his psychological tormenting of the Moor is executed with a visceral and strikingly artful precision, intimating an instinct seemingly woven into the fabric of his very nature. By the same token, the poisoning of Othello's mind also closely recalls the tempting of Eve to eat the fruit of the tree, through the divine premonition that doing so will open her eyes to "knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3:5). "How am I then a villain", Iago muses in a feigned expression of virtue, as he poisons and renders his victim irreparably cursed just like the serpent of the garden. Shakespeare plays both sides of Iago and Othello with an array of secular and religiously inspired motifs, and this is by design.

We should also consider it significant that Iago occupies the physical space of the stage on his own far more often than Othello does. This has important implications; Iago is allocated one side of Othello's moral compass (evil), whilst Desdemona is allocated the other (good), allegorizing original sin. Consider also that it is Iago who shares the stage with Othello on his wedding night—not Desdemona. In fact, Othello is not afforded the stage to himself until the latter moments of Act III, immediately following Iago's first sowing of the seeds of temptation in his ear. Othello and "honest" Iago therefore a present plausible (albeit highly dramatized) set of theological ideas for Shakespeare's amalgamation of opposites, through which ambivalence is expressed. This is reprised in the play's final scene, again creating hesitation. Othello gestures ironically to Iago's feet, looking for the cloven hoof that would prove him a "demi-devil", demanding he answer for "why he hath thus ensnar'd (his) soul and body". Iago, however, is unmoved—"demand me nothing" (V.ii.301–303). In denying Othello a resolution, Shakespeare obscures the significance of a metaphysical operative, and thus, the play draws to a close with both naturalistic and supernatural readings intact.

A final word on ambivalence in *Othello*: to conclude that evil exists only as a dramatic device in the play renders Shakespeare's dynamic swirl of opposites superfluous. On this reading, the difficulties encountered in the play, particularly the equivocal nature of Iago's motivation, are merely the result of an attempt to translate the amoral seducer of the Morality stage into realistic Elizabethan–Jacobean drama. Iago, though, is dynamic as a materialist and egoist; he reacts instinctively to matters as they develop around him and often premeditates the cause and effect of his actions. On the other hand, Shakespeare also sprinkles the possibility of supernatural provocation throughout the course of the play by presenting Iago in a way that resonates with the Marlovian figure of Mephistopheles. If the characteristics which are thought to be typical of the Vice—often relied upon in scholarship to detect Iago's literary progeny—were discovered throughout the period of the Morality play in the figure of the Devil, then it is entirely reasonable to suggest that it is to the Devil, not the Vice, that Iago is indebted. Following Habermas, transcendent social norms implicit in a rational and reasonable society are in fact representative of secularized interpretations

of religious motifs, and these motifs represent a post-secular acknowledgment of our lifeworld. Whilst the purpose of the Vice is primarily to represent a single moral idea, the purposes of the Devil are those of a complex and dynamic moral being; the former acts to show what he is, the latter to achieve what he desires. The Devil is implicitly, and explicitly, motivated; and Iago constantly reverts back and forth between the unmotivated seducer and the motivated antagonist. The diabolic imagery of Iago “winking” at the audience incites the myth of the Devil in and outside of the play—not merely as allegorical projection, or dramatic mechanism, but rather as a collateral presence that Shakespeare makes us sense through the inclusiveness of the fable.

4. Measure for Measure

I now turn attention to *Measure for Measure* for this section of the analysis, one of Shakespeare’s dark comedies that achieves a more secular treatment of evil action than *Othello*. In my view, the play is primarily concerned with immoderate demands of the super-ego, while offering a theological inflection to the idea of poetic justice. This is expressed through the lead figure of Angelo, who initially stands on the precipice between puritanism and devilish temptation. Though Angelo is himself a natural secular agent, his inevitable fall into temptation reflects a distinct air of scepticism on mastering one’s inclinations that can be justified on a Calvin line. Calvin provides the theoretical grounds that frame the Devil as a psychological tempter (that preys upon our bestial nature) within the human condition, so as to lead them astray from God (Calvin 1541, p. 457). Therefore, my aim with this analysis is to foreground Shakespeare’s thesis on the natural inclinations versus the moral conscience.

A brief overview: Claudio is arrested by Angelo for having sexual relations with Juliet—who falls pregnant—outside of wedlock. Capital punishment is the penalty for the deed, and it is dangled over the head of Claudio for the entirety of the play. Upon learning of her brother’s arrest, Isabella promptly leaves the nunnery and implores Angelo to forgive the matter. Angelo uses this as an opportunity to negotiate Isabella into a sexual liaison of their own; instead, Isabella conspires with the Duke to trick Angelo by substituting a former lover, Mariana, in her place. The plan goes ahead, but rather than pardon Claudio, Angelo orders his execution—to which the Duke shrewdly sends him the head of a dead pirate as “proof” of Claudio’s demise. At the play’s end, Claudio is pardoned after the Duke reveals that he has deceived Angelo, who is thereby left with no other choice but to confess.

First, here is Greenblatt’s summary of the play in *Shakespeare’s Freedom*:

Measure for Measure allows us to glimpse the seeds of what would in a later period be termed aesthetic autonomy, but the play is famously a “problem comedy,” haunted by moral ambiguity, claustrophobia, and an overwhelming sense of something intractable in human nature. (Greenblatt 2010, p. 11)

That the tenor of *Measure for Measure* registers as comic and even chaotic in the play’s closing courtroom scene is self-evident. Greenblatt, however, views the play as entirely theatrical and in no way evocative of the real world. I thereby propose a providential mechanism that illustrates the intrinsic link between fall and nature, and devilish temptation. This reading expands upon the ambience of amorality described by Greenblatt in his appraisal of the central figures of the play by substantiating Shakespeare’s ambivalent—and highly secularized—display towards religious redemption. Here again is Greenblatt:

... Shakespeare does not unequivocally endorse what Claudio in *Measure for Measure* calls “the demigod Authority” (I.ii.100). If to the guilty, publicly disgraced Angelo, the ruler, in his ability to perceive what is hidden, appears to be “like power divine” (V.i.361), to the irrepressible libertine Lucio he is “the old fantastic Duke of dark corners” (IV.iii.146–147). The play does not allow one to choose one or the other image or even to settle somewhere in between. (Ibid., p. 12)

This view can be extended to Shakespeare's inflection of supernaturalism and devilish temptation that encircle the work. Supernaturalism in *Measure for Measure* actually refers to the Protestant conception that no longer belongs to the age of miracles (as wholly Christian interpretations of the play have suggested). Instead, we should view the work as a continuation of the trend of theological ambivalence towards visions of divine providence.

Like many of Shakespeare's protagonists, Angelo is an oddly complex figure and should be considered in line with Shakespeare's artful representation of temptation and human psychology. Angelo is at the very heart of what makes *Measure for Measure* the comical play that it is: a self-righteous puritan who denies his own natural inclinations, who is ultimately undone by his sexual desires. He takes a particular pleasure in manipulating the law and the institution of public office and does so purely to suit his appetites. Brian Gibbons refers to Angelo as a "devil in the guise of a saint" and offers a useful entry point into his characterization:

In presenting Angelo's Machiavellian plots Shakespeare exhibits the working of the internal power-system of the state as graphically as Jonson in *Sejanus*. Angelo's desire is infected and it is cruel, its object "sweet uncleanness", blackmail and rape, not wooing and love. Even the infamous bargain over Claudio's life is broken—a gratuitous kind of theft and therefore especially sweet to his perverse taste. (Gibbons 2006, pp. 41–42)

Angelo is a vain and lascivious figure, who is so deeply in denial about his nature that he introduces a law to ban fornication, believing he is going to conquer his sexual lusts. When he meets Isabella, however, all of this changes, and suddenly, his appetites are what he had on his mind all along. At one critical point in the play, Angelo describes himself as a Devil, specifically in the context of sexual desire:

Angelo: Heaven in my mouth,
As if I did but only chew his name;
And in my heart the strong and swelling evil
Of my conception. The state, whereon I studied
Is like a good thing, being often read,
Grown seared and tedious; yea, my gravity,
Wherein—let no man hear me—I take pride,
Would I with boot change for an idle plume,
Which the air beats for vain. O place, O form,
How often dost thou with thy case, thy habit,
Wrench awe from fools and tie the wiser souls
To thy false seeming! Blood, thou art blood:
Let's write good angel on the devil's horn:
'Tis not the devil's crest. (II.iv.4–17)

In this aside, Shakespeare positions Angelo's ideas of stoic Christian purity against his natural bestial desires. Not only does Angelo begin to doubt his ability to resist temptation, but he even debates whether pursuing an illicit affair with Isabella is ultimately worth renouncing Christianity altogether. Angelo "prays and thinks . . . to several subjects", suggesting that his mind is both on Isabella, and how an uninvited tryst with her would be looked upon in the eyes of God. He expresses dissatisfaction with the "seared and tedious" affairs of government and freely admits that his esteemed position in public office is purely a means to satisfy his own sense of vanity. The meaning of "Blood, thou art blood" is double, both the common rejoinder of all humans and the inexorable passions that reside in all of us, hidden from view. Angelo concedes that even "wiser souls" of Christian faith cannot withstand their passions; therefore, the "good angel" that appears externally on the "devil's horn" cannot mask our true devilish natures.

It is possible that Angelo is prompted by Calvin's moral ideas about passion and restraint. Calvin understood all humans to be innately animalistic, and thus, the passions required a profound mastery of the spirit to restrain. He speaks to this specific internalized conflict at length in *Institutes*:

Because the organs of the body are directed by the faculties of the soul, they pretend the soul to be so united to the body as to be incapable of subsisting without it; and by their eulogies of nature do all they can to suppress the name of God. But the powers of the soul are far from being limited to functions subservient to the body . . . the manifold agility of the soul, which enables it to take a survey of heaven and earth; to join the past and the present; to retain the memory of things heard long ago; to conceive of whatever it choose by the help of imagination; its ingenuity also in the invention of such admirable arts, are certain proofs of the divinity in man. (Ibid., I.V.)

We also note that Angelo discloses being tempted by the Devil, in reference to Isabella: "Tis one thing to be tempted, Escalus,/ Another thing to fall" (II.i.117–118). A prefatory reading will recognize that for Angelo to "fall" in love with Isabella would be a violation of his duties as a lawmaker. However, the implied double entendre of the word "fall" is not always discussed in critical responses to the play. It seems unlikely that Angelo is actually concerned with "falling" in love with Isabella. Rather, "fall" denotes the act of sexual intercourse, and the repercussions of the act—namely, to fall into sin. Immediately prior to this stanza, Escalus warns Angelo about the wildness of the passions:

Escalus: Alas, this gentleman
Whom I would save had a most noble father.
Let but your honour know—
Whom I believe to be most strait in virtue—
That, in the working of your own affections,
Had time cohered with place or place with wishing,
Or that the resolute acting of your blood
Could have attained th'effect of your own purpose
Whether you had not sometime in your life
Erred in this point which now you censure him,
And pulled the law upon you. (II.i.7–17)

Here, Escalus urges Angelo to consider whether the "acting of (the) blood" would have caused him to fall into the same temptations that he is now punishing Claudio for. Escalus then steps aside and privately ponders Angelo's decision to execute Claudio and pursue Isabella, within the context of God's forgiveness. His assessment is markedly non-committal:

Escalus: Well, heaven forgive him; and forgive us all.
Some rise by sin, and some by virtue fall.
Some run from breaks of ice and answer none.
And some condemned for a fault alone. (II.i.37–40)

Escalus finds himself unable to articulate what lies ahead for Angelo and what this may mean for the fate of his soul in the eyes of God; a sentiment that affirms Shakespeare's ambivalent response to Christian moralizing about the passions. Moreover, the idea that Angelo may emerge from the "breaks of ice" (transgressions upon his abstinence) unscathed is a particularly agnostic position to hold. In another aside, Angelo ponders the interplay between the "tempter" and the "tempted" with similarly ambivalent rhetoric:

Angelo: From thee, even from thy virtue.
What's this? What's this? Is this her fault or mine?

The tempter or the tempted, who sins most? (II.ii.192–194)

This passage is uniquely reminiscent of the fall of temptation as described in the book of Genesis, beginning from a place of virtue and ending at a point of sin. It is important, though, that the question be asked privately in an aside to the audience, so as to remain open-ended and unresolved. By doing so, Shakespeare toes the red line between agency versus non-agency in Angelo's fall. If we understand Isabella as the temptress (or indeed the personification of the very idea of temptation), then what we see is an ambivalent and secular expression of diabolical prompting via the inclinations. The precise language Escalus uses after learning of Angelo's plot—"forgive him; and forgive us all"—is relevant here, as it preserves the unifying naturalistic explanation for Angelo's sexual dalliance. This humanizes the play's meditations upon sin and the fall and places them within implicitly secular margins.

Isabella plays a unique role in all of this. As Angelo continues his aside, there is an abrupt shift in language, as though it suddenly dawns upon him that this temptress of the fall is in fact a nun, and a human being. Note that descriptors of Isabella quickly change from sinner to saint:

Angelo: What is't I dream on?
O cunning enemy, that, to catch a saint,
With saints dost bait thy hook! Most dangerous
Is that temptation that doth goad us on
To sin in loving virtue: never could the strumpet,
With all her double vigour, art and nature,
Once stir my temper, but this virtuous maid
Subdues me quite. (II.iii.209–216)

That Angelo should describe his temptress as a "virtuous maid" is an unusual inversion of the fall. A woman of unwavering chastity, Isabella's "double vigour" is the tension she creates between sin and virtue; where Angelo epitomizes excess, Isabella epitomizes restraint. In the play's opening Act, Lucio asks Claudio "whence comes this restraint?" as he is escorted to his prison cell, to which Claudio replies "from too much liberty" (I.ii.112–113). A similar dynamic is sustained by Angelo and Isabella. By the play's close, Isabella manages to extend Angelo clemency and does so before she is able to confirm Claudio's wellbeing:

Isabella: Most bounteous sir,
Look, if it please you, on this man condemned,
As if my brother lived. I partly think
A due sincerity governed his deeds,
Till he did look on me. (V.i.447–450)

A charitable account of this reprieve would argue that Isabella's forgiveness towards Angelo is intended to convey God's mercy. However, I think such an interpretation hinges on drawing straightforward Christian connotations, which do not entirely resonate with the play's secular idiosyncrasies.

The providential mechanism on display at the close of the play affirms Shakespeare's sense of poetic justice. Here, the Duke is more a device than he is a character; note how he operates from a great distance, not directly intervening but rather setting up the conflict of the action and allowing it to unfurl while gazing down upon it in judgment. The very design and purpose of his role seems fitting for one acting as cypher for both Shakespeare and God:

Duke: I love the people
But do not like to stage me to their eyes
Though it do well; I do not relish well (I.i.67–69)

The Duke is also remarkably ambivalent. On the one hand, he can be viewed as a naturalistic figure who wishes to test his lieutenants, drawing upon some lessons about human nature in the process (via the moral conscience). He can also be read, though, as part of Shakespeare's kaleidoscope of figures that the playwright faintly surrounds with an ambivalent supernatural halo—and of course, the truth of it is that the Duke is both. This is the likely reason as to why the play comes to such an unusual close; Angelo is forced to marry Marianna, whilst the Duke's proposal to Isabella goes unanswered. It would appear that a Christian reading underestimates Angelo's vileness and overestimates Isabella's agency, particularly given that both the Duke and Marianna cajole her into granting him pardon. In both instances, choice is illusory—much as it is in *Macbeth*. The choice to marry the Duke is undermined by her silence, and the choice to rebuke Angelo is undermined by her compliance, and thus, what we are left with is hesitation.

5. Macbeth

The final section of the analysis discusses the diabolical hesitation that I suggest is central to the tragedy of *Macbeth*. A significant body of scholarship has by now made it clear that *Macbeth* primarily deals with uncertainty as to whether the witches are supernatural or not (Greenblatt 1994; Kranz 2003; McGuinness 2015). My reading of the play is therefore not intended to reinvent what has already been covered at length. Rather, I aim to examine commonly accepted views about the play alongside a discussion of how Shakespeare's ambivalence intersects with theological concerns. If we make definitive claims about the nature of evil in the play, we are implicitly suggesting that Shakespeare holds either a naturalistic moral-psychological or a supernatural theological position. In my view, Shakespeare does not put forth a decisive argument about the supernatural in his drama and instead oscillates between secular and theological modes. The resulting hesitation caused by the uncanny is epistemological, concerning reconstructing the causal chain that generates the narrated events—primarily in the mind of the reader, and only secondarily in the mind of the protagonist. This can be described as ontological ambivalence, as it is not really clear in the imaginary world of *Macbeth* whether the supernatural actually exists. For all intents and purposes, the witches appear to be supernatural agents (and in relation to Macbeth, they seem to be supernaturally prompting him), but they are *also* readable as either figments of his disordered imagination, or simply as natural bad people. Therefore, while it is entirely possible to speculate that Shakespeare may have held a sceptical position, what the plays present is ambivalence.

To begin, I discuss Greenblatt's reading of the play, which can be applied to varying degrees across all of the plays discussed in this analysis. There are two main points of interest put forth by Greenblatt. The first is that Shakespeare inherits from Scot a sceptical exposition of witchcraft and possession, which occurs within a Calvinist frame. Scot is embroiled within a movement attacking Papistry and magic, but this attack has the unintended consequence of fostering naturalistic views. This aspect should be described as sceptical or inclined towards naturalism.

In *Will in the World*, Greenblatt notes Shakespeare's familiarity with Scot and the influence this has on the sceptical tenor of his plays—*Macbeth* in particular; “though many of the demonic powers listed by Scot as the inventions of poets are alluded to in *Macbeth*, it is oddly difficult to determine what, if anything, the witches actually do” (Greenblatt 2004, p. 39). Greenblatt's second reading suggests that Shakespeare is engaged in a kind of meta-drama, in which the theatre only retains meaning as metaphor, and therefore, human beliefs about the supernatural (and the discourse that this sparks) are grounded in the imagination, not in reality. We can describe this aspect as “self-reflexive”, which is to say that Greenblatt views Shakespeare's theatre as primarily self-reflexive.

Greenblatt also acknowledges that Shakespeare traces opposing and conflicting ideas about the natural and the supernatural throughout the work, creating ambivalence—or, as he often puts it, ambiguity. There are several key scenes that are pivotal to this hypothesis and form the cornerstone of my analysis here: the vignettes that reveal Macbeth's internal

deliberations prior to committing the murder act, Macbeth's first meeting with the witches (and the various prognostications that the witches speak of thereafter) and the well-known disruption of the banquet scene by the vision of Banquo's ghost. Taking all of this into account, Greenblatt is steadfast in his view that evil in *Macbeth* is a metaphor:

... Though it gestures towards history, *Macbeth* is a self-conscious work of theatrical fiction, an entertainment in which nothing need be taken as real, in which everything can be understood, as Shakespeare suggested elsewhere, to be "shadow" or "dream". (Greenblatt 1994, p. 20)

In this framing, all of the representations of the world to which Shakespeare is so equivocal about can be resolved at the meta-level, because Greenblatt understands Shakespeare as ultimately only believing in the realm of the theatre. Therefore, both the theatre and theatricality of representation constitute the world; and so. if the world is full of opposites, it is because "all the world's a stage", and the stage is full of opposites.

My reading deviates from this perspective to a certain degree. Yes, Shakespeare puts forward thesis and antithesis, and natural and supernatural without resolving them, to create ambivalence. My assertion, however, is that the witches are not only representative of an ambience of evil, or harbingers of Macbeth's undoing, or even symbolic of Macbeth's faltering psyche, but that they are all of these—whilst being implicitly and structurally prompted by the Devil. This strain of ambivalence is evident from the very outset, via the tension created by the witches' opening pronouncement upon Macbeth's arrival, "All hail Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!" (I.iii.51), despite his lack of any serious aspirations to be king. Therefore, rather than take the view that Shakespeare's concurrence of opposites exists entirely within the margins of the stage, it is more likely that he is representing an array of ideas out there in the real world that are in flux about the Devil, to which Macbeth appears as the living embodiment of ambivalence. We need not evince Shakespeare's personal view on the matter to demonstrate this. To say that Shakespeare thinks that "all the world's a stage" is to inhibit the breadth of his diabolical allusions; in my view, it does the playwright greater service to suggest that Shakespeare thinks of the stage as the abstract chronicle of our time.

Greenblatt does, however, present a useful guide to the aesthetic surface of evil's theatrical representation. The significance of the Three Witches' prophetic powers and their alleged role in manipulating Macbeth as agents of fate are central to this inquiry. Whether the witches and the ghost of Banquo have supernatural agency or are simply a projection of Macbeth's disordered mind and conscience, anticipates the very same set of events unfolding—even if Macbeth were to reject their prognostications. Greenblatt's reading tends towards the naturalistic explanation. What I wish to draw attention to, then, is how the play stages ambivalence towards magicism and witchcraft as placemarkers for supernatural evil, within the context of such discourse as it relates to common legal and theological positions during the Renaissance. It is here that Greenblatt's understanding of Shakespeare as representing meta-theatre undermines the inclination towards naturalism, derived from Scot. My analysis thereby signals a shift from a critique of the dramatic function of Shakespeare's art to a figurative description of the technique of that art. Greenblatt shows this within the theatrical nature of Shakespeare's supernaturalism, yet we can take this a step further—Shakespeare grants himself the freedom to present a decidedly Calvinistic universe, which he thereby ambivalently portrays as monstrous, without committing to a particular declaration that would likely offend the audience's sensibilities (or the ruling king, for that matter). By proposing metaphysical anxieties in this work, Shakespeare stages traditional understandings of what is sinful and unnatural against representations of human beings having animal instincts, creating hesitation.

Hesitation in *Macbeth* begins thematically through Lady Macbeth in the play's opening act, in which she reads aloud a letter penned to her husband: "My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical/Shakes so my single state of man,/That function is smothered in surmise,/And nothing is but what is not. (I.iii.141–144)". Todorov is a valuable point of reference here as his framework shows the relation between structural features of a

text and the literary fantastic, and the precise mechanism through which fantasy creates feelings of existential anxiety. Following Rosemary Jackson, this registers as follows: the marvellous means the supernatural exists, the mimetic means only the natural exists and the fantastic (which generates the effect of the uncanny) means that both exist in uncertainty (Ibid., p. 25). Note that in light of Lady Macbeth's elation over the prospects of her husband's promotion, Macbeth is filled with apprehension—a horror that only heightens upon his inexplicable encounter with the witches. This dissonance looms over him for the entire remainder of the play. According to Todorov's structural poetics of the genre of the fantastic, literary representation of events and figures that cannot be naturally explained by rational laws and physics must satisfy three benchmarks: hesitation between natural and supernatural explanations for events, hesitation experienced by a character and encompassed thematically throughout the work and the implication of the outside world into the dramatic effect. This places the fantastic somewhere between the uncanny (an unusual experience that toes the line between reality and unreality) and the marvellous (a fantastical event that does not necessarily implicate a character). Therefore, it is uncertainty that defines the fantastic: "once we choose one answer or the other," Todorov states, "we leave the fantastic for a neighboring genre, the uncanny or the marvelous" (Todorov 1975, p. 25). This leaves fantastical events in a subjective limbo that does not strictly adhere to any set facts.

The witches in *Macbeth* exemplify Todorov's position; the question as to whether they are a naturally explicable psychological projection by Macbeth, or supernatural messengers with a satanic story to tell, or simply wicked women prompted by a diabolical entity, is structurally embedded in the play. Macbeth himself represents natural law arriving at the foothills of supernatural intrigue and hesitates about whether the witches are supernatural or not—just as the audience must. He *also* represents the intersection of temptation and fear. When Macbeth demands the stars to "hide (their) fires! Let not light see my black and deep desires" (I.v.50), he is essentially pitting his bestial inclinations against his existential anxieties. This very act epitomizes the dichotomy of Shakespeare's dramatic conceit; Macbeth presents entirely plausible readings of both ontological ambivalence and epistemological hesitation, prompting hesitation in response from the readership.

This dynamic is not exclusive to *Macbeth*, either. When we are first introduced to the witches in Act I, Banquo expresses an inkling of doubt about their "outwardness"; that is to say, their very existence outside of the imagination:

Banquo: I'th' name of truth,
Are ye fantastical or that indeed
Which outwardly ye show? (I.iii.50–52)

The question Banquo poses taps specifically into the epistemological and ontological dilemmas over witchcraft rituals that had cast a shadow over Shakespeare's society. It is particularly interesting that in staging this juxtaposition between the real and the imagined, the play itself parallels the anomaly of the fantastical world of the theatre stage and the real world outside of it. Shakespeare's meditation upon disenchantment against re-enchantment, and the very essence of our nature as human beings, becomes apparent here. Evil is portrayed in two aspects simultaneously: both as a brooding atmosphere of disintegration that sparks Macbeth's downfall and as a localized agent through literal witch figures, assassins and even Macbeth himself. Shakespeare frequently gestures towards evil's omnipresence; on the one hand, Banquo floats the idea that witches are real inhabitants of the natural world—"The earth hath bubbles, as the water has/ And these are of them" (I.iii.79–80)—yet at that precise moment, they vanish into thin air. In light of the bizarre experience, Macbeth recounts how these "horrible imaginings" have made the "seated heart knock at my ribs/against the use of nature" (I.iii.136–137). This implies that what Macbeth sees as supernatural alteration of the physical state can be generated by psychological disturbance, which is the naturalistic explanation for seemingly supernatural phenomena. "The witches' charm amounts to a fan dance of its victim's desires that obscures needed data

... and the play as a whole replicates the effect, enticing our credulity with certain hoped-for outcomes and uncertain processes", as Mallin (2016, p. 68) writes. That Shakespeare should obscure any true semblance of agency on the part of the witches, whilst simultaneously absolving them from revealing their conjurations a mere hoax, creates an intriguing paradox through which the lines between the demonic, the ontological and the epistemological are blurred.

The context of the banquet scene is pivotal in making this case. It is the play's central meeting point of traditional doctrine against the advent of new knowledge that creates epistemological tension. Such an occasion is standard fare courtly tradition and would ordinarily ratify the king's seat at the royal table. Macbeth's violation of order and state, however, repays him in kind as order turns against him. Though Macbeth initially anticipates the event as a steppingstone towards coronation, what ultimately transpires sends him on course to purgatory. This tonal shift marks a turning point that unravels him thereafter. By the banquet's end, Macbeth realizes that he is lost to the wilderness, resigned to a perpetual cycle of "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" (V.ii.17) within which he has relinquished control.

When Banquo's apparition appears seated at Macbeth's dining chair, it prompts Macbeth to ironically utter the phrase "the table's full" (III.iv.47). This is indicative of two things: one, Macbeth does not doubt, in that precise moment, the existence of the Ghost; and two, by usurping Macbeth's royal chair, the Ghost has recreated the conditions by which Macbeth himself usurped the royal throne. The irony of the situation is heightened by the fact that only Macbeth can see the apparition, through which Lady Macbeth and her husband become pillars demonstrative of the fantastical hesitation of the scene. Lady Macbeth again scorns the very essence of his masculinity: "Are you man? ... What quite unmanned in folly?", "O, these flaws and starts" (III.iv.62–69). Macbeth, however, responds by insisting that his vision is real—"If I stand here, I saw him ... This is more strange than such a murder is" (III.iv.75–84)—and then once more ironically gestures towards the apparition with a toast to "our dear friend Banquo, whom we miss, would he were here!" (III.iv.91). Thus, in oscillating between the real and the marvellous, the scene evades explanation, and the uncanny creates hesitation.

If we accept that this is the intended effect of the play, then we must also accept that the impetus for Shakespeare's dramatization of evil must likewise be to generate hesitation. The presence of both supernatural evil and religious damnation in *Macbeth* seeks to provoke the uncanny and the marvellous into co-existence, and we can trace this throughline from religious order to decentralized chaos in Macbeth's downfall. As Macbeth spirals, his agency as king simultaneously unwinds, and so the laws of the world around him appear increasingly ambiguous. Metaphysical and naturalistic actions are always in flux and never fully understood, and reflected in the discord of Macbeth's own mind. Consider that when Lady Macbeth instigates the murder plot, she does so because believes her husband to be "too full of the milk of human kindness" (I.v.4) to see it through. Just as Macbeth vows to "proceed no further in this business" (I.vi.31), she entices him by preying upon his sense of masculinity: "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" (I.vi.49–51). With his ego sufficiently piqued, Macbeth is finally coerced into the act.

Shakespeare does not make it entirely clear as to why Lady Macbeth is quite so enthused about what lies ahead, nor does she speak of the importance of being Queen at any great length. The initial sense of purpose she exhibits in coercing her husband to see the deed through quickly evaporates, in tandem with the fading sense of manliness that once inspired Macbeth's regicide. At one point, Macbeth insists that she give birth to "men-children only" (I.vii.72), as though she has the specific means to cultivate men. Macbeth's ambivalence becomes all the more apparent as he drifts further and further away from the "single state of man" (I.iii.155) that he spoke of being at the beginning of the play, and it is the women of the play (Lady Macbeth and the witches) that "shake" up the man that he once was. Later, he envisions being "perfect", "whole as the marble"

and “founded as the rock” (III.iv.23–25), implying some semblance of control over his destiny, yet at the same time, he becomes increasingly obsessed with fantastical ideas and the witches’ prophecies.

Driving home Macbeth’s psychological discord are existential contemplations over evil inferring the possibility that everything that happens in the future has already been preordained by something in the past. Again, Shakespeare leaves this dichotomy unresolved. The witches accelerate Macbeth towards a cataclysmic end by tempting his instincts and persuading him to believe their prophetic distortions and misrepresentations, while simultaneously appearing as harbingers of a supernaturally ordained fate. Both traditional understandings of what is sinful and unnatural coincide with Calvinistic placemarkers of sin within the essence of our animality; Macbeth’s murder of Duncan severs of the natural order of the royal bloodline, and from the moment Macbeth announces “by Finel’s death, I know I am Thane of Glamis” (I.iii.69), his place in the monarchy grows ever uncertain, both by the hand of his own hubris and by the predetermined course of supernatural forces that operate beyond his control. Hesitation is mirrored in Macbeth’s own descent, from the honourable and battle-tested—“valour’s minion” (I.ii.20), “Bellona’s bridegroom” (I.ii.35), “Brave Macbeth” (I.ii.17)—to the personification of Shakespeare’s ambivalence who “sits in the midst” (III.iv.11). Agency is fallacy and choice is illusory and permeates the atmosphere surrounding Macbeth in both theological and naturalistic modes, alongside the witches’ inextricable prophecy.

The analysis I have offered has put forward the case that Shakespeare’s diabolically inspired figures and his general intonation of evil are paradoxically torn between naturalistic and supernatural explanations for the origin of the action, in concert with the moral philosophy of Calvin that swept through the consciousness of the age. This takes us beyond the theatrical lens presented by Greenblatt into rapidly evolving processes of secularization endemic to Shakespeare’s time. Shakespeare’s primary impulse is to create hesitation resulting in ambivalence by obscuring the diabolical action, which is why both the Devil as ambience and the Devil as a locally prompted threat can coexist within the same play. The artistic effect that we are looking at, then, is no longer a purely theatricized reprisal of evil, but rather an inspired account of a wider array of ideas about the supernatural.

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