

“Not like th’ inhabitants o’ th’ earth”: The Queer “Other” in *Macbeth*

By Thomas P. Catalano

Author Bio

Thomas Catalano is a senior at Loyola High School of Los Angeles. He is very passionate about the field of economics and plans to study it in college; however, he is also very interested in the study of literature. He is very involved in extracurricular activities at his high school, including Co-Editor-In-Chief of the newspaper, Co-Editor-In-Chief of the yearbook, Co-Captain of the Public Forum Debate Team, Chapter President of Junior State of America, and a member of the Varsity Tennis Team. He is currently engaged in an independent research capstone project on cultural narratives of Latino people found in literature.

Abstract

This literature review offers a queer theory analysis of William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. The following questions drove my research: “How do the heteronormative Christian values in *Macbeth* endorse the traditionalist principles of the English monarchy? How does Christianity place limitations on gender expression in the context of the Renaissance?”

An antithetical reflection of the traditional male-female binary, queerness in *Macbeth* manifests in the weird sisters’ androgynous attributes and *Macbeth*’s invocation of Hecate before murdering King Duncan; furthermore, queerness is otherized and demonized through its association with states of evil and disorder. The witches’ queerness produces their opposition to divine order. Through their esoteric evil practices, they possess *Macbeth* into invoking the mythological queen of witches, Hecate, and assassinating King Duncan, the epitome of patriarchal, heteronormative order. In doing so, *Macbeth* creates a satanic anti-kingdom of which the witches themselves rule through their occult queer evil. Thus, the witches represent the ultimate opposition to the divine monarchy in their state of indeterminate gender expression, which contradicts the Christian cultural norms of the gender dichotomy.

Keywords: *Macbeth*, Shakespeare, queer theory, witches, Renaissance, King James I, disorder, unholiness, tragedy

“Not like th’inhabitants o’ th’ earth”

The Queer “Other” in *Macbeth*

William Shakespeare commissioned by King James I to write *Macbeth*, the equivocal language used by the Weird Sisters associates queerness with unholy disorder, and the Christian *logos* used by King Duncan and other ordering figures associates heteronormativity with holy order; furthermore, this juxtaposition is informed by the historical context of King James’s mission to legitimize his rule after his succession of Queen Elizabeth I. Stephanie Spoto explains the political tensions regarding the archetypal witch’s queerness as an opposition to the divine right of kings during the Renaissance: “The fear of the witch’s power links directly to a fear of the witch’s sexuality, a fear which James I of Scotland outlines as growing from the anxieties surrounding the possibility of an inversion of the gender hierarchy” (Spoto, 2010, p. 58). At the North Berwick Witch Trials in 1590, King James I was a witness against a group of witches that plotted to murder him. At the will of King James I, Shakespeare used witches to represent gynocentric, queer power because the witch archetype connotes occult, evil layers, as opposed to James’s predecessor Queen Elizabeth, whose virgin Mary archetype would connote layers of order and divinity. The occult unholiness of the witches is primarily revealed through recurring storm imagery and equivocal language. Through their esoteric evil practices, they possess *Macbeth* into invoking the mythological queen of witches, Hecate, and assassinating King Duncan, who is the epitome of patriarchal, heteronormative order. In doing so, *Macbeth* creates a satanic anti-kingdom of which the witches themselves rule through their occult queer evil. Thus, the witches represent the ultimate opposition to the divine monarchy in their state of indeterminate gender expression, which contradicts the Christian cultural norms of the gender dichotomy. The juxtaposition of queer equivocation and heteronormative *logos* affirms King James I’s patriarchal rule and implies that unholy otherness associated with the queerness of the matriarchal witches and the matriarchal rule of Queen Elizabeth is disordering. By hiring Shakespeare to write *Macbeth*, King James I posed himself as a holy restorer of order to a nation ridden by queer, gynocentric disorder. Represented as figures of indeterminate, queer gender expression, the occult, demonic witch

archetype embodies an oppositional force to divine heteronormative order and Christian norms of the Renaissance; furthermore, the linguistic juxtapositions of queer characters—the witches and *Macbeth*—and heteronormative characters—King Duncan and Banquo—underscore Shakespeare’s attempt to otherize queerness through the descent of the heroic defender of androcentric order into a psychological space of gynocentric evil.

Epitomizing divine androcentric power, King Duncan and Banquo embody heteronormativity as an embrace of Christian cultural norms; moreover, their adherence to the gender dichotomy and use of Christian *logos* maintain their characters as symbols of holy order. King Duncan and Banquo provide the standard of archetypal manhood and heroism from which *Macbeth* will begin and ultimately regress: “One of the organizing themes of *Macbeth* is the theme of manliness: the word (with its cognates) echoes and re-echoes through the scenes, and the play is unique for the persistence and subtlety with which Shakespeare dramatizes the paradoxes of self-conscious ‘manhood’” (Ramsey, 1973, p. 286). A historical reflection of King James I, King Duncan embodies the archetypal divine monarch whose divine right to rule places him at the top of the Great Chain of Being, the ordering construct of Romantic society which emphasizes the king as a holy extension of God’s will. King Duncan exemplifies divine transcendence through Christian *logos*: “I have begun to plant thee, and will labour / To make thee full of growing” (Shakespeare 1.4.28-29). His claim of “planting” Banquo parallels God’s biblical creation of Earth; furthermore, the vegetation imagery reifies the natural order and hierarchy of the Great Chain of Being. After *Macbeth* and Banquo first encounter the witches, who prophesize that *Macbeth* will be King and that Banquo’s descendants will be king, Banquo’s reliance on reason juxtaposes *Macbeth*’s descent into insanity: “[H]ave we eaten on this insane root, / That takes reason prisoner” (Shakespeare 1.3.86). Like King Duncan, Banquo uses Christian *logos* through the vegetation imagery of the root, emphasizing Banquo as a defender of the natural order. Banquo’s role as the archetypal expression of heroic manhood allows him to resist the witches’ occult spellcasting. Banquo is aware that “the instruments of darkness tell us truths, / Win us with honest trifles, to betray’s / In deepest consequence” (Shakespeare 1.3.125-128), so he relinquishes possession of his sword to his son,

Fleance, in the case that he becomes overtaken by the esoteric, evil witchcraft: “Here, take my sword. . . . Merciful powers, / Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature / Gives way to in repose” (Shakespeare 2.1.4-9). Following his encounter with the witches, Banquo remains the voice of righteous masculinity and reason, and surrenders his sword because he notices that heaven’s “candles are all out” (Shakespeare 2.1.5); thus, during a time of psychological darkness under the influence of the witches’ prophecy, Banquo maintains his moral certainty and ultimately rejects the witches’ equivocal language with clarity: “May they not be my oracles as well / And set me up in hope? But hush, no more” (Shakespeare 3.1.9-10). While divine order is represented by androcentric heteronormativity, the witch archetype alters the consciousness of ordering figures with esoteric evil practices and “spellcasting” in the form of equivocal language.

Representing an inversion of the traditional gender binary, the witches also invert the Great Chain of Being and alter the male consciousness of *Macbeth* to produce a wicked Scottish anti-kingdom that they themselves control through their psychological possession of *Macbeth*. The witch archetype inherently embodies an unholy opposition to the natural, Christian order: “Whether one considers them as human witches in league with the powers of darkness, or as actual demons in the form of witches, or as merely inanimate symbols, the power which they wield or represent or symbolize is ultimately demonic” (Curry, 1933, p. 400). The witches exist “upon the heath” (Shakespeare 1.1.7), which is the untamed country beyond the space of human civilization and constructs; this wild setting reflects the symbolic nature of the witches as antithetical forces of holy order. One witch says, “That will be ere the set of sun” (Shakespeare 1.1.5), which introduces the concept of liminal space, as the sunset represents the transitional state of day to night. Not only are the witches associated with a transitional nature, but they are also associated with darkness, a symbolic representation of the witches as demonic, evil figures. The witches’ state of fluidity illustrates the deconstruction of Christian binaries, which is epitomized by their indeterminate gender expression: “[T]heir gender becomes more difficult to distinguish as they cast aside traditional roles and acquire new masculine, or anti-maternal, positions, and appearances” (Spoto, 2010, p. 66). Upon his interaction with the witches, Banquo is unable to determine their gender identities, for they exist

beyond the absolutes of the Christian world: “You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so” (Shakespeare 1.3.45-47). Because Banquo is the archetypal embodiment of heteronormativity, he is incapable of comprehending the witches’ androgyny. The witches’ queerness and opposition to heteronormative order allow them to invert social and political constructs: “The fear of the witch’s power links directly to a fear of the witch’s sexuality, a fear which James I of Scotland outlines as growing from the anxieties surrounding the possibility of an inversion of the gender hierarchy” (Spoto, 210, p. 58). Such anxieties about hierarchical inversions were present in the witch hysteria of King James I’s rule, as he expressed in *Daemonologie*, a compendium about witchcraft: “He believed this chaotic rebellion to be satanic forces intent on disrupting his benign, god-sanctioned reign, and to be connected in a biblical precedent as treason: ‘For rebellion is as the sinne of witchcraft,’ a passage that explicitly illustrates the connections between power-inversion and witchcraft” (as cited in Spoto, 2010, p. 55). King James I’s historical view of witchcraft as an existential threat to political order manifests in *Macbeth* because the witches are capable of altering the human psyche through their equivocal language that transforms heteronormative characters into queer characters: “Witches can cast diseases and make men ‘unable for women’ by ‘weakening the nature’ of them. The fear that women could reduce men to impotence demonstrates that many anxieties surrounding gender hierarchy were related to sexual power and sexual surrender” (Spoto, 2010, p. 58). The witches psychologically emasculate *Macbeth* and possess his consciousness to assassinate King Duncan and create a Scottish anti-kingdom. As *Macbeth* embodies a state of queerness in embracing the matriarchy of witchcraft, the holy order of the kingdom is inverted, as “castles topple on their warders’ heads” (Shakespeare 4.1.55). The metaphorical inversion of the castle represents the inversion of Scotland’s political structure under *Macbeth*’s disordering reign controlled by the witches.

While the witch archetype inherently poses an antithetical threat to divine order, Shakespeare supplements the queer associations of witchcraft with storm imagery. Rulers of a dark, satanic anti-kingdom, the witches are solidified as agents of cataclysmic disorder by fog and storm semiotics, which appear each time the witches are present; furthermore, the storm and fog imagery presents an inversion of orderly

nature and contribute to an anti-Christian narrative of witchcraft. The witches' affiliation with such chaotic imagery represents Shakespeare's attempt to otherize and demonize queerness as an antithetical reflection of the traditional male-female binary through its association with states of evil and disorder. When the witches first enter at the beginning of the play, "thunder and lightning" (Shakespeare 1.1.0) appear, immediately establishing their connection to calamitous nature, which is symbolic of political and metaphysical disorder. The witches' association with storm imagery furthers their role as antithetical embodiments of orderly human constructs, for they exist outside the constraints of Christian binaries: "Upon occasion, indeed, they themselves brew storms on land and tempests at sea, thus destroying the products of men's hands at home and distressing or sinking ships abroad" (Curry, 1933, p. 395). The witches are inherently agents of satanic evil in their queer gender expressions; moreover, their ability to shape the weather into chaos symbolizes their unholy, disordering role. Additionally, the sky is traditionally symbolic of the Christian God; therefore, the witches' presence "in thunder, lightning, or in rain" (Shakespeare 1.1.2) further demonizes them as unholy oppositions of divine order, as God's domain, the sky, enters a tumultuous state. This metaphorical relationship represents Shakespeare's conservative, Christian gaze on queer identities. The witches' equivocal language, which is paradoxical and evil by nature, is not only evident in the wicked control of the human subconscious but also in the disordering control of nature: "The entire situation, both the human context and the natural setting, can be totally transformed by the Weird Sisters, and . . . their influence is always of a malignant and perverse kind" (Tomarken, 1984, p. 82). In addition to storms, the witches are also associated with fog imagery, as the witches "hover through the fog and filthy air" (Shakespeare 1.1.10). The fog represents a state of confusion that is reflective of the contradictory language employed by the witches; the filthy air represents the failed vision of the witches, which reinforces the Christian gaze of the Renaissance as superior. Ultimately, the disordering semiotics connected to the witch archetype reflect the societal gaze on queerness as demonic and innately evil; therefore, "Shakespeare's Weird Sisters are intended to symbolize or represent the metaphysical world of evil spirit" (Curry, 1933, p. 400). The semiotics implicit in the storm imagery that surrounds the witches are

indicative of the witches' archetypal representation as agents of Satan.

Like the chaotic nature imagery associated with the witches, their antithetical language indicates the conservative societal gaze on queerness. Reflections of occult queerness, the witches practice esoteric spellcasting through complex, contradictory linguistics known as equivocal language; furthermore, the paradoxical nature of equivocal language juxtaposes the divine truth of Christian *logos*, which further develops the queer witches as oppositional to Christianity. Perpetuating a state of queerness, equivocal language is the method by which the witches are able to alter the male consciousness into one of queerness: "Equivocation leads to treason in that it holds back mentally one-half of a proposition in order to delude the hearer by that half which is spoken" (Huntley, 1964, p. 398). The witches' self-negating speech represents disorder because the language is a sequence of antithetical words, which, when spoken together, are essentially void of meaning. The paradoxical linguistics tied to queerness underscore that the witches are outside the constraints of the ordering male-female binary and embody a disordering, indeterminate state. The witches equivocate their speech countless times throughout the play, such as saying, "When the battle's lost, and won" (Shakespeare 1.1.4). The witches' equivocal language underscores the disordering uncertainty of *Macbeth's* fate, juxtaposing the divine truth of King Duncan and Banquo's Christian *logos*. Seeking to demonize figures of indeterminate gender identities to reify the monarchical rule of King James I, Shakespeare characterizes the witches as equivocators, a sign of satanic evil according to the Renaissance truth candidacies: "Shakespeare begins simply enough with the assumption that equivocation springs from the devil and that, in the Christian view of order, the devil is the archtraitor" (Huntley, 1964, p. 397). The epitome of anti-Christianity, the witches' equivocation, such as "Double, double, toil and trouble" (Shakespeare 4.1.10), is associated with the potion they make prior to prophesizing *Macbeth's* fate for the second time: "Cool it with a baboon's blood, / Then charm is firm and good" (Shakespeare 4.1.37-38). The blood of this potion is a perverse allusion to the sacramental blood; therefore, the witches' potion represents the anti-Sacrament, furthering Shakespeare's conservative narrative of the queer witches as unholy equivocators conspiring with the devil. Equivocation ultimately

becomes a form of occult, unholy spellcasting, as the witches subvert *Macbeth*'s male consciousness and make it queer: "Meeting the witches, who . . . are in league with the devil, he [*Macbeth*] is seduced by their technical equivocation, and, through . . . his own moral weakness, ends by becoming its victim" (Huntley, 1964, p. 397). Because the equivocal language of the witches is a form of queer spellcasting, the witches enchant *Macbeth* with their satanic linguistics, and under their metaphysical possession, he embodies queerness by embracing the matriarchy of witchcraft.

Through *Macbeth*'s possessed invocation of Hecate, the mythological queen of witches, before murdering King Duncan, *Macbeth* becomes part of the matriarchy that is witchcraft, and the rigid male-female binary dissolves as he embodies the feminine characteristics of witchcraft; additionally, *Macbeth*'s queerness in this moment is associated with evil because it precedes his violent killing of the Christian, heteronormative King Duncan and chaotic plot to take over Scotland. The witches' satanic linguistic spell having taken effect, *Macbeth* begins to repeat their equivocation, which signals his descent from a psychological space of androcentric order to gynocentric disorder. The witches say, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (Shakespeare 1.1.9); *Macbeth* repeats, "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (Shakespeare 1.3.38). *Macbeth*'s coerced adoption of linguistic disorder represents the unraveling of his heteronormative reason into queer insanity as he encounters androgynous otherness. Furthermore, *Macbeth*'s equivocation indicates the witches' domination of his psyche: "The psychological procedure whereby evil makes use of *Macbeth*'s conscience is . . . directly related to the enchantment of *Macbeth*" (Tomarken, 1984, p. 85). The witches' psychological control of *Macbeth* leads him to assassinate King Duncan, which represents the symbolic assassination of heteronormative order and the birth of a queer anti-kingdom ruled by the weird sisters. *Macbeth* embodies queerness preceding his murder of King Duncan: "Witchcraft celebrates pale Hecate's offerings" (Shakespeare 2.1.51-52). *Macbeth* offers King Duncan's body as a sacrifice to Hecate, making him a male witch, or warlock; consequently, *Macbeth* embraces the matriarchy of witchcraft as his male consciousness is queered. The male-female binary of the Christian orderly world is dismantled by *Macbeth*'s new state of queerness: "At the first of the play, *Macbeth*'s 'manly' actions in war are

not contradictory to a general code of humaneness or 'kindness' irrespective of gender: but as the play develops, his moral degeneration is dramatized as a perversion of a code of manly virtue, so that by the end he seems to have forfeited nearly all of his claims on the race itself" (Ramsey, 1973, p. 285). Upon *Macbeth*'s assassination of King Duncan, *Macbeth* ascends to the throne of Scotland; however, he inverts the Great Chain of Being of the Scottish hegemony, which would have placed the heteronormative, divine figure at the top of the political hierarchy rather than a queer, demonic figure. Contrary to the natural order commanded by the Christian norms of the Renaissance, *Macbeth*, possessed by the witches, creates a satanic anti-kingdom: "By this time, treasonous equivocation which is not the whole truth has turned the world of value upside down. *Macbeth* is a traitor to the king; but when *Macbeth* becomes king, then all those forces of righteousness against him become 'traitors'" (Huntley, 1964, p. 398). *Macbeth*'s queered consciousness leads to a violent, perverted Scottish kingdom, which epitomizes the conservative societal gaze on queerness as a destructive force of unholy evil.

A classic Shakespearian tragedy, *Macbeth* centers on the descent of the Scottish kingdom from a state of divine, heteronormative order to evil, queer disorder under *Macbeth*'s chaotic reign as king. *Macbeth*'s consciousness is psychologically altered by the witches through their equivocal spellcasting, as he embodies the archetypal queer warlock. *Macbeth*'s state of queerness is inherently oppositional to the ordering constructs of Christian society because by "embracing . . . equivocation he communes not with God but with the devil" (Huntley, 1964, p. 399). This unholy anti-Christian narrative of *Macbeth*'s queer transformation and the consequential demise of the Scottish kingdom epitomizes Shakespeare's tragedy, which encodes significant queer oppression narratives. Interestingly, the tragedy finds resolution when *Macbeth* faces his death as a reconstituted man, having eradicated his queerness. As he realizes his existential fate—death, *Macbeth*, having been under the witches' wicked spell, finally shatters their satanic, linguistic influence, as Macduff dismantles their flawed prophecy of *Macbeth*'s immortal reign: "Despair thy charm, / And let the angel whom thou hast served / Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripped" (Shakespeare 5.8.13-16). An antithetical representation of equivocal language, Macduff's

Christian *logos* restores *Macbeth*'s heteronormative righteousness, as *Macbeth* realizes the truthlessness of the witches' equivocation: "And be these juggling fiends no more believed, / That palter with us in a double sense, / That keep the word of promise to our ear, / And break it to our hope" (Shakespeare 5.8.19-22). As *Macbeth* overcomes the psychological control of the witches, he returns to a state of valiant manhood, mirroring his condition before first encountering the Weird Sisters. Aware that he is fated to die, *Macbeth* does not surrender to Macduff but rather embodies the archetypal expression of male heroism: "I will try the last. Before my body / I throw my warlike shield" (Shakespeare 5.8.32-33). *Macbeth*'s ultimate rejection of the witches' queer matriarchy of occult witchcraft and return to the heteronormative patriarchy represents the death of the tragedy, for in *Macbeth*, queerness is the tragedy. The conservative gaze of the Renaissance otherizes queerness as an anti-Christian opposition to societal order so that the tragedy of Shakespeare's play becomes intertwined with queerness; therefore, the restoration of patriarchal heteronormativity to Scotland marks the resolution of the Shakespearean tragedy.

References

1. Curry, W. C. (1933). The Demonic Metaphysics of "Macbeth." *Studies in Philology*, 30(3), 395-426. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4172210>
2. Huntley, F. L. (1964). Macbeth and the Background of Jesuitical Equivocation. *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, 79(4-Part1), 390-400. <https://doi.org/10.2307/460744>
3. Ramsey, J. (1973). The Perversion of Manliness in Macbeth. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 13(2), 285-300. <https://doi.org/10.2307/449740>
4. Shakespeare, W. (2015). *Macbeth* (3rd ed.). The Arden Shakespeare Spoto, S. I. (2010). Jacobean Witchcraft and Feminine Power. *Pacific Coast Philology*, 45, 53-70. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41413521>
5. Tomarken, E. (1984). THE WITCHES IN "Macbeth": SAMUEL JOHNSON'S NOTION OF SELECTIVE EMPATHY. *CEA Critic*, 47(1/2), 78-89. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44378163>