

Macbeth

A Language-Obsessed, Heretical Play

by Sky Gilbert

Traditional interpretations of *Macbeth* affirm that the play's theme is a Christian, moral one; characterizing Macbeth as a man enduring the epic eternal struggle between good and evil. Beginning with Samuel Jonson and continuing until the present day, common critical practice has assured gullible readers and rapt audiences that – although the subject matter of the play may involve superstition – Shakespeare was not irreligious. I propose that *Macbeth* is a language-obsessed play (like many other Shakespeare plays, including *Love's Labour's Lost* and *Twelfth Night*) based on a medieval cosmology in which Christianity and pagan mysticism exist side by side. It was fundamentally influenced by Navarrus, a 16th century philosopher whose views on equivocation prefigured modern language theory. In *Macbeth's* climactic scenes the witches' pronouncements are polysemous; the meaning of words becomes equivocal, and language offers threatening truths that at first appear to be false.

Focusing on the play's obsession with language as well as its heretical worldview has implications for the authorship debate. Those who see *Macbeth* as a Christian morality drama have linked the play with King James' obsession with witches and the Gunpowder Plot (1606). This places the play's authorship outside the Earl of Oxford's lifetime. In *The Royal Play of Macbeth* (1950), Henry N. Paul offers extensive but dubious proof for a claim that is now accepted by many – that the play was written during the reign of James I. Paul's attempts to date the play in 1606 are significant not only because they have influenced modern critical interpretations of *Macbeth*. His approach to Shakespeare's work arrives with the same erroneous assumptions propagated by critics who believe Shakespeare was the man from Stratford.

Several different attitudes to *Macbeth* are available to us. Twentieth-century cultural critic Alan Sinfield differentiates between two critical positions on the moral message in *Macbeth*: one conservative, one liberal. He says – citing critics such as Kenneth Muir – that “the conservative position insists that the play is about evil” (106). Sinfield finds this opinion deeply hypocritical as Macbeth's malevolent violence is regarded as necessary when he is serving the state, but evil when he is killing the king. In contrast Sinfield summarizes A.C. Bradley's articulation of the play's theme to be: “we must

still not lose our sympathy for the criminal” (107). Sinfield labels this a liberal position. Macbeth is evil, but we all share in this evil through sympathy, which enlightens us all.

You will pardon me for thinking that these critics have been reading a play that is quite fundamentally different from the one the rest of us have been reading. Or perhaps they have slipped into a time warp and stumbled on an 18th century performance by bardolater David Garrick, (provided here by George Winchester Stone, Jr.) who wrote a speech of glorious Christian penitence for Macbeth:

’Tis done! The scene of life will quickly close. Ambition’s vain delusive
dreams are fled. And now I wake to darkness, guilt and horror; I cannot bear
it! Let me shake it off – it will not be; my soul is clog’d with blood – I cannot
rise! I dare not ask for mercy – It is too late, hell drags me down; I sink, I
sink, – my soul is lost forever! Oh! – Oh! (3-4)

Although this melodramatic speech in no way resembles Shakespeare’s rhetorical style, it clearly expresses what many consider to be his sentiments. So why didn’t Shakespeare compose something like it for *Macbeth* – but perhaps more mellifluous and inventive? Because Shakespeare wasn’t a Sunday school teacher; Christian moral instruction was the furthest thing from his mind. Nevertheless, critics choose to ignore or dismiss significant chunks of *Macbeth* in order to justify their contention that the play is primarily concerned with issues of Christian morality.

Despite its sloppy scholarship, Paul’s *The Royal Play of Macbeth* has had a substantial influence on modern interpretations of the play. The book shows a passionate disregard for Shakespeare’s text. It insists that the play is focused on moral issues and is anti-superstitious. Paul bends and crunches the poetry to pinpoint the exact date and time (and the exact shade of every mood that touched Shakespeare) when he wrote the work.

Though the idea that *Macbeth* may have been written in 1606 was suggested as far back as the 18th century by Malone, Paul attempts to settle the matter once and for all. From the moment of the release of Paul’s book, establishment Shakespearean critics like J. Dover Wilson believed that although Paul was not an academic, his

Sky Gilbert is a writer, director, teacher, and drag queen extraordinaire. He is the co-founder and was artistic director of Toronto’s Buddies in Bad Times Theatre for seventeen years. He has had more than forty plays produced, and has written seven critically acclaimed novels and three award winning poetry collections. He has received three Dora Mavor Moore Awards (Toronto’s ‘Tonys’). There is a street in Toronto named after him: ‘Sky Gilbert Lane.’ Dr. Gilbert is a Professor at The School of English and Theatre Studies at the University of Guelph. His collection of anti-essays *Small Things* will be published in 2018 by Guernica Press.

book had merit: “It is the work of an amateur, though an amateur in the better sense of the word” (286) and the book, despite “building conjecture upon conjecture . . . contains much information and many suggestions of real value” (287). Jane H. Jack referred to Paul in 1955 in order to back up her Christian, moral interpretation: “Paul has pointed out in *Macbeth*’s bitterness as he watches Banquo’s descendants, there is an oblique implied compliment to James I . . . a powerful reminder to the audience of Biblical descriptions of [the] evil of listening to false prophets and the unfulfilled horror of the wrath of God” (193). Modern critics such as Gary Wills accept Paul’s dating of the play while choosing to quibble over the exact day of composition. Wills takes issue with Paul’s thesis that *Macbeth* was written for King James’ visit with the Danish King because – “few of these [i.e. Paul’s] ingenious references have convinced later scholars” (153). Many leading 20th century scholars seem to accept Paul’s dating, if not his methods: Richard Whalen tells us that Frank Kermode “concludes that the evidence is strong for 1606” (211) and Stephen Greenblatt says “the play is usual dated 1606” (211). However, Kevin Gilvary states “all attempts to assign the plays of Shakespeare to a precise date are conjectural.”

But Paul is important even if we cannot hold him fully responsible for the conviction held by some critics – that *Macbeth* was written during the reign of King James I. His approach shares three important characteristics with usual academic approaches to the bard. First, there is the general assumption that Shakespeare’s values were traditional Christian moral ones, and that to read Shakespeare’s work as heretical or nihilistic – that is, to suggest that the worldview in his plays does not revolve around one Christian God, and that the endings of the tragedies do not allow for redemption – is simply wrong. Second, there is a tendency to try to burrow into Shakespeare’s brain and muse about his intentions i.e.: what was he thinking when he wrote that? And finally, and most significantly, traditional Shakespeare scholarship seeks to find out the ultimate, true meaning of Shakespeare’s poetry. I will tease these three, rarely-discussed, hidden agendas out of Paul’s theories, hoping to shed light on the misinterpretations of Shakespeare’s work that pervade contemporary scholarship.

As early as 1765 Samuel Johnson wrote uncomfortably about the witches in *Macbeth*: “A poet who should now make the whole action of his tragedy spend upon enchantment and produce the chief events by the assistance of supernatural agents, would be censured as transgressing the bounds of probability, be banished from the theatre to the nursery, and condemned to write fairy tales instead of tragedies.” Johnson attempts to quell his own uneasiness with the great poet’s use of enchantment by suggesting that Shakespeare incorporated magic spells “his audience thought awful and affecting.” Henry Paul confirms this idea, setting up a contrast between a knowing, intelligent, and aristocratic early modern audience who would have been privy to Shakespeare’s skepticism concerning witches, and the less-informed poor, who would not. He says “to the groundlings what the sisters do or say seems real.

To thoughtful men, including the king, the play presses home Banquo's question, whether it is imaginary" (64).

Paul's intention is to erase forever any inclination we might have to think that Shakespeare believed in magic, or in any way sympathized with the witches. He emphasizes again and again that the weird sisters – who he says are not weird at all, as they have no connection with fate, and should be called "wayward sisters" – are "simply and solely hatefully malicious hugely old hags used by their devils to do evil deeds" (183). He suggests that the presence of the witches is detrimental to the play: "to permit a large number of boys dressed as women witches to dance around the stage was poor business in a play with such high purpose" (412).

And what is that high purpose that so supersedes the superstition that Paul regards as negligible? The theme of the play, according to Paul, is highly moral; Shakespeare is warning us against the dangers of letting our imagination run wild. Macbeth "well knows that he has put his actions under the control of his imagination. He well knows that he ought not to do this" (67). The witches do not bewitch Macbeth – this would be to give them too much power. Instead Macbeth, "always prone to substitute the imaginary for the real, transmutes the mumblings of the third witch into hopes which are in his own mind" (63). So Macbeth's tragic flaw is his ambition – and he is spurred on by the witches, who are not actual living supernatural beings as much as the poetic incarnation of a personal evil.

King James' *Daemonology* was published in 1597, before he became king of England. It explores the practices that devils employed on mankind, as well as explaining the canonical reasons for executing witches and is considered to be a Christian, anti-sorcery document. Paul assures us that although James' book is clearly superstitious – claiming a belief in witches of course would be necessary in a book that explains why they should be burned. According to Paul, James abandoned his belief in witches soon after he wrote it – conveniently, just in time for his terribly modern views to influence Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*! Paul does not offer any incontrovertible proof of this change of attitude. And it's important to note that – as Paul himself admits – the laws against witches were not removed until 1736 because it took "over a hundred years to uproot the deeply held superstitions of a nation" (102). Kimberly Bercovice tells us that King James' *Daemonology* was written in opposition to Reginald Scot's skeptical treatise on witches – *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584). She asserts that James never abandoned his persecution of witches, but rather changed somewhat his notions of who should be prosecuted. "Although James had initiated the change in statute at the very onset of his reign in England, he had demonstrated restraint when it came to the witchcraft persecutions, and only witchcraft-based treason seemed to illicit a strong reaction from him" (135). At any rate, Paul makes the erroneous assumption that skepticism about witches – which King James may have come to share with Reginald Scot, after writing *Daemonology* to challenge him

– meant, during the 16th century, rejecting superstition altogether. But to be skeptical of witches was not the same as rejecting superstition. Even Scot, who was a revolutionary witch skeptic “did not deny the existence of Satan or devils/demons” (Bercovice 132).

Even in the unlikely event that a king who was skeptical of witches inhabited Shakespeare’s mind’s-eye, what proof do we have that Macbeth himself doesn’t believe in magic? Paul cites the moment when Macbeth speaks of the witches as proof of the character’s skepticism: “infected be the air whereon they ride / And dam’d all those that trust them” (4.1). But the fact that Macbeth thinks himself damned for trusting witches does not mean that he doesn’t believe in them. In fact the quotation only confirms that evidence of Macbeth’s superstition: he believes that witches ride on air.

Paul’s obsession with James’ *Daemonology* may serve his need to date the play during James’ reign, since otherwise there would be no reason to see the King’s book as a primary source for the attitude to witches in *Macbeth*. It’s important to remember that Europe’s journey from paganism to Christianity occurred just before the Early Modern period and the journey was not the clear trajectory we often assume. Europe wasn’t pagan one day and Christian the next. Magic and superstition existed without contradiction, side by side with Christianity, for hundreds of years.

A case in point is Joan of Arc’s infamous voices. Though traditionally identified as Christian saints, those voices are now recognized by feminist historians to have been pagan spirits. In her book *The Interrogation of Joan of Arc*, Karen Sullivan writes about the belief in the “Woman’s Tree” or “Fairy Tree” which dominated the life Joan of Arc’s small town of Domremy in France in 1426.

The villagers too identified the tree near where they live with the fairy ladies. Most of them stated simply, as Joan did, that “the tree is called the Fairies’ Tree” or “the tree is called the Ladies Tree” Like Joan, the villagers treated the fairy ladies as a third category of supernatural beings, neither angelic or demonic, neither inside nor outside Christianity, neither to be venerated, as one venerated God and his saints nor to be abhorred as one abhorred the devil, but to be accepted as one accepted the tree and the spring themselves, as part of the landscape. (15)

It is significant that the fairy tree was also a ladies tree, implying a matriarchal paganism. Part of the transition from pagan to Christian involved what was for some a difficult abandonment of matriarchal paganism for patriarchal Christianity. Joan of Arc was tried for heresy, witchcraft, and dressing like a man. Richard Whalen says “attributes of the witches indicate the author of *Macbeth* was also knowledgeable about witchcraft on the continent and in Scotland” (28). I suggest that Shakespeare’s witches – who weave spells and have beards like men, and, as Richard Whalen notices,

significantly employ “bawdy comedy” (28) inhabit a world which – although perhaps not as purely pagan as Joan of Arc’s home town – is certainly similar to Domremy.

The witches in *Macbeth* are undeniably associated with the devil and yet Macbeth listens to them and believes their prophecies. Is this purely a result of his evil nature – his overweening ambition? A glance at Thomas Nashe’s *Terrors of the Night* might help to clarify this question. Nashe moved in the literary circles associated with Edward de Vere and John Lily. Nash is known as pamphleteer (but was also a playwright) whose work was deeply enmeshed in the Martin Marprelate controversy. His pamphlet *Terrors of the Night* was published in 1594. It bears the subtitle “A Discourse of Apparitions,” and it discusses the origins of the dreams we have when we sleep, suggesting that nightmares are related to devils and their manipulations of our thoughts and desires. It also offers a metaphysical worldview in which spirits, witches, and devils are taken for granted much the same way as they are in *Macbeth*. These magical creatures are certainly real, but paradoxically, very much related to guilt caused by human action. Paul suggests that Shakespeare was skeptical of witches – that they are not to be taken seriously as actual beings, but only as metaphors for Macbeth’s own evil. In Nashe, spirits and demons can be simultaneously both real and manifestations of guilt. The witches of course, are dramatically effective, whether Shakespeare believes in them or not; the concern here is that we put Early Modern witches in historical context. If we do, we can see the play was not necessarily written in response to James’ *Daemonology*, but in response to the general ideas about magic that pervaded the age.

Nashe mentions the “Robin Goodfellows of our latter age...[who] pinched maids in their sleep that did not do the sweeping” (4). Puck is also Robin Goodfellow, one of Shakespeare’s several magical sprites; the fairies in the climax of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* pinch the guilty Falstaff as punishment for his crimes. Nashe also speaks of spirits of the air that have a decidedly matriarchal allegiance: “as for the spirits of the air, which have no other visible bodies and form...women and children they most converse with...[and they] make it fair or foul when they list” (11). This calls to the metaphors in *Macbeth*. Many of Nashe’s other assertions sound equally Shakespearean, with his proclamation of bottomless lakes and people turned into statues: “admirable, above the rest, are the incomprehensible wonders of the bottomless Lake Vether, over which no crow flies but is frozen to death, nor any man passeth but he is senselessly benumbed like a statue of marble” (20). He tells us with equal assurance that “in India the women often conceive by devils in their sleep” (19).

That Nashe states what now appear to be fantastical notions blithely as facts speaks volumes about the mixture of Christian morality and superstition that dominated the Early Modern period. For Nashe – and for Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* – the devil is, paradoxically, a very real being who appears in our dreams as a result of the bad feelings that plague us due to evil acts: “even as, when a condemned man is put into

a dark dungeon, secluded from all comfort of light or company, he doth nothing but despairfully call to mind his graceless former life....the devil keepeth his audit in our sin-guilty consciences” (1).

Henry Paul’s insistence that King James – and therefore Macbeth and Shakespeare – were not superstitious, simply does not make sense, in terms of the ambiguous attitude to superstition that pervaded the time. If one examines the witches in the light of Nashe’s *Terrors of the Night*, or Joan of Arc’s experiences at Domremy, it is clear that they could be both real and not simultaneously. Nashe’s *Terrors of the Night* shares much more with the cosmology of *Macbeth* than King James’ *Daemonology*. And the dramaturgical power of *Macbeth*, I would posit, is seriously diminished if one imagines King James and Shakespeare watching the play and reminding themselves that witches are just imaginary moralistic symbols, while observing the groundlings wallowing in their foolish fancies.

Paul is certainly not the only literary critic who has misread *Macbeth* and invented historical detail in order to place Shakespeare’s work in a Christian tradition, but in doing so, he is certainly part of a long scholarly tradition. His insistence that Shakespeare worked skepticism about witches into the play to please King James is merely one example of a very unscholarly tendency. In addition, he quite regularly insists on burrowing into Shakespeare’s consciousness to imagine what he might have been thinking.

In *The Royal Play of Macbeth* Paul says, apparently indisputably, that “no other play of Shakespeare’s, except *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, affords such exact indications as to the date of composition” (402). He claims that “the first three acts . . . were written before the end of March 1606, and as the dramatist sat at his desk and wrote, he was conscious of the face of the king looking straight at him, so that his words formed themselves to fit this expected audience” (401).

Paul justifies the comparative shortness of *Macbeth* through the king’s short attention span: “the king . . . would not sit through a long play, a fact which explains the comparative brevity of *Macbeth*” (3). There is no proof offered for the assumption that King James could not sit through a long play, and of course even if this was true, why must we assume that Shakespeare specifically wrote this play to suit the King’s tastes? Such unfounded assumptions dot his book. For instance, Paul prefers some scenes in *Macbeth* to others, and presumes Shakespeare did too: “the scene of the murder of Lady MacDuff, a disagreeable scene at best, was evidently written without fervour” (37).

But by peering imaginatively into Shakespeare’s brain, Paul shares much with modern Shakespeare hagiographers Stephen Greenblatt and Stanley Wells. William Leahy comments on modern writers who manufacture fantasy about Shakespeare’s inner and outer life: “In this process we see the ‘nothing’ of Shakespeare’s recorded writing

life filled with the ‘everything’ of the respective biographer’s narcissistic urges” (33).

Paul thus shares two unfortunate tendencies with modern scholars: the habit of assuming a traditional Christian cosmology is the foundation for Shakespeare’s work, and the urge to wax poetic about Shakespeare’s inner life. But Paul also shares a much more profound and significant mistake with his peers – he demands that poetical exegesis uncover a fixed meaning in Shakespeare’s text. In Paul’s case the expectation is that the meaning of *Macbeth* can provide a commentary on seventeenth century historical events.

Paul’s arguments for placing the play during James’ reign rely on the notion that *Macbeth* contains references to the Gunpowder Plot, which was conceived as early as 1604, and was uncovered – before achieving fruition – in 1605. The *Dictionary of National Biography* is clear that as the Gunpowder Plot has been variously interpreted to fit the political expediencies of any given period, it is often mis-characterized as having been Jesuit-inspired. The plan – actually hatched by five Catholic English gentleman (Robert Gatesby, Thomas Winter, Guy Fawkes, Thomas Percy and John Wright) – was to blow up Parliament and the king and subsequently assassinate the king’s heirs. The plot was foiled when a Catholic friend of one of the plotters betrayed their secret to gain favour with King James. The assassination attempt grew out of frustration with James for renegeing on his early promise to end persecution of Catholics. But Catholic opposition to James (who allowed Catholics to worship in private) was anything but unilateral, and actual Jesuit participation was merely tangential: “Henry Garnet and Oswald Tesimond, were to some extent informed of what was planned. However, many of these secondary conspirators remained ignorant of all the inner ring’s secrets. Consequently, when at length they fell into the government’s hands, they had a limited amount to tell.”

Is the alleged Jesuit involvement with the Gunpowder plot – that has obsessed so many, including Henry Paul – the cause of the many mentions of equivocation in *Macbeth*? The practice of equivocation was associated particularly with Jesuit Catholicism and hotly contested by Protestants; it consisted of evading punishment by lying to one’s accusers while simultaneously confessing the truth to God. Equivocation was famously used by St. Francis of Assisi who – when a murderer came looking for someone who he had just seen – lied to the murderer while crossing his fingers inside his sleeve. In this way, he saved an innocent life. For though St. Francis lied to another human being by crossing his fingers in his robe, he told the truth to God. And under the rubric of equivocation, God – it goes without saying – is a much more important witness than any mere person.

The link between equivocation and the Gunpowder plot lies in the “treatise of equivocation” which was found on one of the alleged Jesuit plotters Henry Garnet. What exactly is this treatise? Frank L. Huntley tells us:

The treatise of Equivocation . . . exists among the Laudian manuscripts in the Bodleian Library . . . Robert Southwell, executed in 1595, quoted parts of it at his trial, [and] the Bodleian copy is dedicated to his martyred spirit. It was probably put together during the last ten years of Elizabeth's reign from such continental sources as Navarrus, Suarez, and Sanchez, and at the time of its discovery was being prepared for the secret press by Father Garnet, whose hand is seen in the corrections throughout.

Equivocation is mentioned six times in *Macbeth* – five times in the Porter's comic monologue in Act 2 Scene 3, and once by Macbeth in relation to the pronouncements of the witches near the end of the play. The porter's use of the word seems highly significant, in fact portentous. The porter is drunk and slow to answer the door; his speech as he approaches the door serves no dramatic purpose, and is relatively long. Also, since the porter spends so much of the speech talking of equivocation for no obvious reason, one can't help inferring that Shakespeare was trying to send a special message with an incongruous emphasis on this particular concept.

Equivocation is mentioned three times at the beginning of the scene:

“Knock, knock! Who's there, in the other devil's name? Faith, here's an equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale; who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven: O, come in, equivocator.” (2.3.7-12)

The porter then mentions equivocation as part of an explication of the effects of alcohol at the end of the scene:

It provokes the desire, but it takes away the performance: therefore, much drink may be said to be an equivocator with lechery: it makes him, and it mars him; it sets him on, and it takes him off; it persuades him, and disheartens him; makes him stand to, and not stand to; in conclusion, equivocates him in a sleep, and, giving him the lie, leaves him. (2.3.28-35)

Paul goes to great lengths to make it clear that Shakespeare's emphasis on the concept of equivocation is a reference to Henry Garnet and the Gunpowder Plot. He says that the oath “without equivocation or reservation” was introduced after Garnet's trial, and that during the reign of Queen Elizabeth the word *equivocation* had “no sinister implications whatsoever” (23) having been used by Shakespeare himself previously in *Hamlet* with “nothing sinister involved” (23). Paul admits that there was another Jesuit priest who also famously used equivocation, and was tried and executed in 1595: Robert Southwell. However Paul does not believe Southwell was Shakespeare's inspiration for the use of the term *equivocator* in *Macbeth*. Paul claims that Southwell – unlike Garnet – had not done anything “treasonous” (244). But

Southwell, like Garnet, was a Catholic Jesuit priest. As Frank Huntley points out: “to almost every Englishman in the age of Elizabeth and James, a Jesuit was an agent not of God but of the devil. Equivocation was his means to treason and the end was the murdering of Protestant princes” (393).

Richard Whalen states: “Since the Jesuit doctrine of equivocation had been well known before the 1600s, it is not valid evidence for a 1606 date of composition” (209). Paul’s dismissal of Southwell as an earlier inspiration for Shakespeare’s use of the word equivocation is obviously a manipulation of the facts in service to his argument. For scholars have noted that far from ignoring Southwell, Shakespeare makes reference to Southwell’s most famous poem “The Burning Babe” in *Macbeth*. Interestingly, Southwell was the kind of poet Shakespeare was not; a sentimental popular writer who wrote Christian message poetry. “The Burning Babe” concerns a vision of a burning baby on Christmas day, who burns so that men’s evil souls can be saved. In *Witches and Jesuits* Gary Wills mentions the similarities between Southwell’s poem and *Macbeth*, and Sylvia Morris on her *Shakespeare Blog* quotes from Southwell’s poem:

A pretty babe all burning bright did in the air appear;
Who, though scorched with excessive heat, such floods of tears did shed,
As though his floods should quench his flames, which with his tears were fed.

She notes that a passage from *Macbeth* seems to make direct reference to this passage from Southwell. In the play, Macbeth is tortured about the possibility that he might murder Duncan, and thus pleads to his own good nature that such a murder would make a baby cry:

And Pity, like a naked new-born babe
Striding the blast, or heaven’s Cherubins, hors’d
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.

(1.7.21-25)

But this is not the only reference to Southwell’s poem in *Macbeth*. When Macbeth’s henchmen kill Macduff’s son, they say “What you egg? You fry of treachery?” (4.2.94-95). The word *fry* is also in Southwell’s poem, which is literally (and horrifyingly) a poem about a baby who is being fried alive: “Alas!” quoth he, “but newly born, in fiery heats I fry, /Yet none approach to warm their hearts or feel my fire but I!” *Macbeth* is replete with dead children, and children who speak from beyond the grave, like Southwell’s baby.

It might seem odd that Shakespeare would almost lightly – in a punning manner in fact – refer to the death of a child featured so prominently in Southwell’s poem. But this reference makes perfect sense if one considers that both Southwell and Shakespeare use such a melodramatic and heart-wrenching event in radically different ways. The death of Macduff’s son is significant and shocking in *Macbeth*, and it is a feature of the play that has horrified critics and audiences alike (including Henry Paul, who – as previously mentioned – calls it “disagreeable”). Southwell, in contrast to Shakespeare, uses the death of a child to press a moralistic point. His poem is considered a special favourite Christmas poem by many Catholics even to this day because of its direct appeal to the heart. This is sharply different from Shakespeare, who presents the brutal murder of children with a chilling coldness and lack of moral judgement, in a universe that seems – at the moment of the child’s murder at least – to be particularly godless and amoral. Though we can’t help but recoil in horror, Shakespeare does not manipulate us with that horror; he simply presents the brutal violence as a repugnant fact of life. Could Shakespeare – by his references to Southwell – have been making fun of Southwell’s verse; emphasizing the difference between Southwell’s brand of moralistic religious poetry and his own?

This may seem like conjecture. But perhaps not, in the context of Shakespeare’s strong ties to overdecorated, ambiguous, paradoxical style. Paul’s attempt to relate the notion of equivocation to the Gunpowder plot is not only historically erroneous; it reveals a deep misunderstanding of Shakespeare’s attitude to language that is typical of mainstream Shakespeare scholarship. Specifically, Paul asserts that Shakespeare is writing – in a sort of poetic code – about specific historical issues and incidents. Opposition to this idea is not to suggest that Shakespeare didn’t have opinions about issues during his lifetime, or even that those opinions are not evident in his plays. It also does not mean that Shakespeare didn’t allude to certain topical controversies or persons in his work. But I would suggest – not that Shakespeare’s plays have no meaning, nor that the meaning of Shakespeare’s poetry shouldn’t be debated – but that the words we find in Shakespeare do not have singularly indisputable meanings that are primarily related to contemporary events.

Paul’s attempt to discover explicit references to specific historical incidents and issues in the play erroneously demands a certain literalness from Shakespeare’s style. Of course, Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* has been suggested to be a caricature Christopher Hatton. Does acknowledging this mean that the character was written only to satirize Hatton, and to deny that the character of Malvolio is making reference to any other contemporary of Queen Elizabeth, or to insist that the primary purpose of that character is satire of a specific person? Certainly not. A reference to Hatton is simply part and parcel of the allusiveness, resonance, and ambiguity of Shakespearean poetry. It is quite different from Paul’s punctilious attitude to Shakespeare and meaning. He states, quite early and quite unequivocally: “because Shakespeare’s words still mean what they meant when he wrote them with his pen the first questions

that arise in trying to determine the meaning of the play of *Macbeth* are: When, why and how was it written?” (2). On the contrary, not only have the meanings of many words changed over time, but Shakespeare used language ambiguously. It is a primary feature of his style.

The publication in 1579 of Lyly’s novel *Euphues or the Anatomy of Wit* resulted in an obsession at Elizabeth’s court for a specific manner of style-centric prose. Lyly’s style was borrowed from the writings of the ‘patristic’ fathers (i.e. medieval Catholic philosophical sermons and tracts). As I have written in the journal *Brief Chronicles*, euphuism was the base camp for one side in the early modern English style wars:

Lyly and Shakespeare are of course not the only early modern English poets who employ vocal ornament, antithesis, similes, or the judicious weighing of ideas to create their effects. But I would suggest that Spenser and Sidney (for instance) share a different focus. This is supported by the fact that Sidney and de Vere almost fought a duel over the issue of style versus content. Sidney along with the anti-Ramists, Protestants, and dialecticians alike were all intent on clearing the verbal and syntactical jungle that constituted the dense and complex style that was so much in vogue. They wanted to lay bare the moral message beneath the words, so that the ideas might be heard understood as clearly and simply as possible. (179)

Paul’s attempt to translate Lady Macbeth’s advice to Macbeth as a reference to the Gunpowder plot is an example of misinterpreting Shakespeare’s work by expecting it to deliver a clear meaning, rather than accepting that often what he writes is subsumed in the euphuist style. Paul suggests that Lady Macbeth’s advice – “look like the innocent flower but be the serpent under it” (1.5.76-78.) – is an obvious reference to the Gunpowder Plot. Apparently, during James’ reign, a medal was struck to honour the King’s unmasking of the Gunpowder Plot which featured the image of a snake amongst flowers. However the image of a snake among the flowers can be found throughout Shakespeare, and is typical of Shakespeare’s style; the salient characteristic of the euphuistic style is paradox. Nashe, who would have known John Lyly, utilizes a euphuistic trope (just as Shakespeare does) when he speaks of things simultaneously ‘foul and fair.’ Similarly, the paradoxical notion of evil lurking in the shadow of beauty – specifically personified by the image of a snake and flowers – appears in *Pericles*: “and both like serpents are / who though they feed on sweetest flowers yet they on poison breed” (19), and in *Romeo and Juliet* “O serpent heart, hid with a flowering face!” (172), as well as *2 Henry VI* – “Or as the snake, rolled in a flowering bank / With shining checkered slough, doth sting a child” (92). Thus there is no reason to associate this image particularly with the Gunpowder Plot medallion that was struck for King James.

Paul goes so far as to attribute the lush, complex, exorbitant extremity of Macbeth’s

speaking style to the Gunpowder Plot. He quotes Macbeth at the climax of the play when he wishes “the estate of the world were now undone” (5.5) commenting “This language now seems extravagant, but in the winter of 1605-1606 such phrases were in people’s mouths and in the play only served to put Macbeth in the class with the powder plotters” (229). Paul also explains that the lines “Cruel are the times, . . . when we hold rumour / From what we fear, yet know not what we fear” (4.2.22-24) are also related to the fearful atmosphere that surrounded the Gunpowder Plot: “he was merely using phrases which had been in his and everyone else’s mouth only a short time before” (Paul 232). In both cases situations in the narrative justify the lines, and reference to the Gunpowder Plot is not necessary to explain their use. In both these cases Shakespeare’s language is extravagant simply because it almost always is.

It’s important to remember that Shakespeare’s style cannot be ‘translated’ in order to discover one, single, clear and penultimate meaning. Most of Shakespeare’s plays are actually either about the difficulties of language, or make reference to that difficulty. As texts, they notoriously resist straightforward exegesis. Touchstone says it all, in his lecture about poetry to the gullible Audrey in *As You Like It*:

AUDREY. I do not know what “poetical” is. Is it honest in deed
and word? Is it a true thing?

TOUCHSTONE. No, truly, for the truest poetry is the most feigning, and
lovers are given to poetry, and what they swear
in poetry may be said as lovers they do feign.
(3.3. 13-18)

To say that the truest poetry is the most feigning is to say: the truest poetry is the poetry that lies.

In his doctoral thesis *The Classical Trivium*, Marshal McLuhan speaks of the medieval subject of ‘grammar’ – which is very different from the sentence parsing that is thought to be grammar today. Early Modern grammar analyzed poetry in order to understand the world’s deepest secrets. Poetry was a way to understand life before the Enlightenment, before scientific analysis became the routine epistemological tool. As David Blank says “the role of etymology by Varro’s account to Plato, that of a privileged part of knowledge to reality, was predicated on the weakness of the senses and their inability to access the truth” (52). And McLuhan tells us that the medieval patristic writer Salutati said: “Since we have no concept of God we can have no words in which to speak to him or of him. We must, therefore fashion a language based on his works. Only the most excellent mode will do, and this is poetry. Thus poetry may be outwardly false but essentially true. Holy Writ is of this kind” (158).

Note the qualification ‘outwardly false but essentially true.’ It is no accident that this phrase, like Touchstone’s reference to true poetry feigning, calls to mind the medieval notion of equivocation. Salutati believed in a kind of holy truth, one that

only God knows, a truth that – when human begins attempt to communicate it – is shrouded, even hidden, in falsehood. This seems to imply that poetry is a secret one shares with God. Paul’s reading of *Macbeth* as a literal translation of contemporary incidents portrays an ignorance of the medieval concept of poetry that constituted an early modern education, a concept that not only defines Shakespeare’s style, but is intimately connected to the themes of *Macbeth*. For an important theme of the play is that language is simultaneously both a lie and the truth.

Macbeth is about the dangerous power of words to mystify us, to create new realities, and to perform magic. In *Macbeth* imagination is also under critical scrutiny – not necessarily because it is at the service of Macbeth’s ambition but because language and her partner, imagination, are by their very nature dangerous. The play is filled with utterances that are thoughtful, critical, and ultimately analytical about the act of speaking, the meaning of words, and nature of the imagination and art. The climax of the play is specifically about words and their meaning.

From the moment that Macbeth begins to consider the possibility of murdering Duncan, his hold on reality is also loosened. His imagining becomes reality, and he says “That function is smothered in surmise / And nothing is but what is not” (1.3). In the famous ‘dagger’ monologue, he imagines that he sees a dagger before him – a dagger that only exists in his imagination. When he first visits the witches he cannot believe his eyes because the witches disappear in what appears to be a magic bubble so that “what seems corporal melted” (1.3.84). Significantly, the witches speak in a kind of demented, somewhat incomprehensible, and yet strangely mundane poetry. What are they saying, and are they speaking the truth? Macbeth calls the witches “imperfect speakers” (1.3.73) and in the same scene Banquo asks “can the devil speak true?” (1.3.113). He observes: “The instruments of darkness tell us truths / Win us with honest trifles, to betray’s / In deepest consequence” (1.3.136-138). This becomes a major issue as Macbeth becomes more and more dependent on the witches’ prophecies.

Lady Macbeth, like the witches, is an imperfect speaker and her fantastical speaking is overheard by those who spy on her when she is sleepwalking. Shakespeare here echoes Nashe, who equates dreaming and art in *Terrors of the Night*. When Nashe realizes that his pamphlet has gone on rather too long, he apologizes, but not too much: “I care not much if I dream yet a little more, and to say the troth, all this whole tractate is but a dream, for my wits are not half awaked in it” (21).

The dreams of the sleepwalking Lady Macbeth, are more than real to her, and yet are watched by the doctor and gentlewoman as a kind of warped fantasy performance. The doctor describes her “walking and other actual performances” (5.1.3). Her speech is suspect, for the Gentlewoman says that she has “spoke what she should not” because she, as the doctor says, “receives at once the benefit of sleep and do[es] the effects of watching” (5.1.10-12).

Before Macbeth hears the witches' predictions he asks them what they are doing at the cauldron, and they reply "A deed without a name" (4.1.50). This is significant. For Neoplatonists and patristic writers most things were thought to have inevitable names inscribed by their essence. Indeed the names of things were divine and immediately understood by Adam and Eve in paradise. Language was once perfect, but after the fall it became imperfect and capable of deceiving us. It's as if language was still magical, but the magic, as it was no longer divine, was now capable of both good and evil. Malcolm refers to the perverse nature of the world after the fall where things are not what they seem: "Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell. Though all things foul would wear the brows of grace, Yet grace must still look so" (4.3.27-30).

This is one of many references in *Macbeth* (and one of many in Shakespeare) that speaks to the danger of an evil soul misplaced in a serene and/or beautiful countenance. The fear was always the paradox of a pleasing outside hiding evil inside – i.e. the serpent hiding in the flowers. That this dissembling could be related to language is clear. Lennox raises the issue of the relationship between language and appearance when Ross appears odd when reporting on the atrocities of war early on in the play: "So should he look that speaks things / strange" (1.2.52-53). People's demeanour should match their speech – just as their demeanour should match their souls – but Shakespeare's use of the word 'should' suggests that this is unfortunately not always true. Similarly, Duncan comments on whether or not the Thane of Cawdor's demeanour upon his execution had any meaning "There's no art / to find the mind's construction in the face." (1.4.13-14). And finally Macbeth is very aware of how a face can dissemble and betray the heart when he speaks of the death of Malcolm: "False face must hide what the false heart doth / know" (1.7.95-96). The double meaning constitutes an equivocation. There is an outer face and an inner truth and the two don't always match, and this is the danger. If people do not tell the truth, like Macbeth when he deliberately lies to hide his crimes, there is danger to both the soul of the speaker and the understanding of the listener.

For Shakespeare this is not always a matter of intention, of deliberately hiding something. Language is fundamentally equivocal, which makes it difficult to understand the world if one depends on words to clarify it. Paul dismisses Hamlet's use of the word *equivocation*, claiming there's nothing 'sinister' in it. But Hamlet's use of the word is significantly sinister. When speaking with the Gravedigger – a character who is simply called 'clown' in some versions of *Hamlet* – he gets trapped by the Gravedigger's sense of humour. Hamlet wishes to find out whether or not Ophelia is dead, and the Gravedigger refuses to give a straightforward answer. He insists that he is not burying a woman because – as the person he is burying is already dead – she is no longer a woman. Hamlet then comments "How absolute the knave is! We must / speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us" (5.1.129-130). Though the scene is a comic one, the stakes are high, as the death of Ophelia is a crushing blow to

Hamlet. So in this important moment language is not to be trusted and equivocation is dangerous.

The ultimate equivocators in *Macbeth* are the witches. They are ‘imperfect speakers’ in the sense that what they say is both true and false at the same time. When Macbeth – hypnotized and confused by their prophecies – realizes that what they say cannot be trusted, he refers to them as equivocators:

I pull in resolution and begin
To doubt th’ equivocation of the fiend
That lies like truth. ‘Fear not, till Birnam wood
Do come to Dunsinane’; and now a wood
Comes toward Dunsinane.

(5.5.48-52)

Macbeth is trapped by language, and that trap threatens to make life meaningless, for not only do words equivocate, but the stories that words tell have lost their meaning and life has become “a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing” (5.5.30-31). In this nightmare, language has no meaning, and neither do stories. Shakespeare’s attitude to equivocation is unequivocal in this instance of Macbeth’s existential despair. There is no hope, because words don’t represent anything – language has fallen as far as it can from a divine essence – and in the hands of witches and poets, it cannot be trusted.

Does this mean – as various interpretations of *Macbeth* would have us believe – that the moral of the play is that Macbeth’s evil ambition has made words equivocal? The problem is that Macbeth is not the only Shakespearean character – good or evil – to struggle with language, meaning, dissembling, or equivocation. And the problem is that if we look deep in our own souls, we may find there is always the possibility that an essential skepticism may surface – a skepticism that is fundamental and metaphysical – that in a moment of uncertainty, confusion or crisis, we might find ourselves like Lear, Hamlet, and Macbeth, questioning our most cherished concepts, beliefs, stories, realities, and moralities.

If we accept that *Macbeth* is a play obsessed with the very nature of language, then the play’s problem scene (Act 4, Scene 3) finally makes sense. This scene has confounded critics, causing them to suggest the play is unplayable or at the very least, deeply flawed. Both Henry Paul and Gary Wills struggle to understand it. In this scene, Malcolm speaks with Macduff about his unsuitability for kingship by melodramatically revealing his vices. He then promptly reveals he has just lied, and he has few if any vices at all. Why does Shakespeare waste our time with this waffling? Paul’s answer to what seem to be dramaturgical inadequacies, is this:

After the flight of Macduff it only remained to bring the play of *Macbeth*

to an end by exhibiting the reduction of the great Dunsinane and the overthrow of the tyrant. This scarcely afforded enough material to fill the last two acts of the play. Therefore, to maintain suspense, the dramatist, following his source in Holinshed, interposed an unexpected obstacle to the revolt of the thanes...Malcolm tells Macduff that he is unfit for kingship because of imaginary vices and therefore unwilling to lead a revolt. The recitation by him of these supposed vices ends in lines the true significance of which has been entirely lost. (359)

Similarly, the focus of Gary Wills' book *Witches and Jesuits* is to discover what it is that has made *Macbeth* such a difficult play to love and produce. Early on, he singles out Act 4, Scene 3 as fundamentally problematic because the scene "substitutes the pallid moral struggle of Malcolm and Macduff for the crackling interplay of Macbeth and his lady" (5).

In both Holinshed and Shakespeare, Malcolm seems to be testing MacDuff by pretending to be a traitor like Macbeth. The problem is that the interaction seems inconsequential, yet it takes up enormous space in the play (not unlike the Porter's digressions on equivocation). Paul and Wills come up with wildly different solutions to the question – why Act 4 Scene 3? In his usual manner, Paul enlightens us to the true meaning of Malcolm's vices. Malcolm says that if he were king, he would: "Pour the sweet Milk of Concord into hell, / uproar the universal peace, confound / All unity on earth." (4.3.97-99). Paul suggests this was inserted in order to perversely echo King James motto, which was 'concord, peace and unity.' The fact that 'concord, peace and unity' was a phrase used by many English monarchs, including Queen Elizabeth, clearly escapes him. Wills offers another explanation: "the scene of Malcolm's mental fencing with Macduff should be staged with a view to some of those [i.e. the play's] other discussions of trust and deceit" (112). I would go even further and suggest that Malcolm's false confession, and indeed most of Act 4 Scene 3, emphasizes the sinister and magical power of words, and are a kind of equivocation – because words have an intrinsic ambiguity.

Donald Lyons' review of *Witches and Jesuits* rips apart Wills' theory:

Malcolm's testing of Macduff is in Shakespeare's source, the chronicler Holinshed, where Malcolm, the good-king-to-be, falsely accuses himself of lust, avarice, and dissimulation/equivocation. But – alas for Wills – Shakespeare changes the last self-accusation to general wickedness – that is, he de-jesuitizes, de-topicalizes the gravamen! Why should Shakespeare, supposedly writing a "Gunpowder" play, thus unpowder himself?

Lyons makes an interesting point. In the original Holinshed source Malcolm frames deceitfulness as his third and final egregious fault, whereas in *Macbeth* the final fault is

changed from deceitfulness to a kind of general treason (when Malcolm mentions – so marked by Paul – that he will ‘Pour the sweet Milk of Concord into hell’). However Macbeth does mention deceitfulness – buried in his general lists of faults: “But I have none. /The king-becoming graces, /As justice, verity, temp’rance, stableness,” (4.3.107-108). Much more importantly, this entire test climaxes with Malcolm apologizing for having lied; which confirms what the scene is actually about. Malcolm admits that he “would not betray/ The devil to his fellow, and delight /No less in truth than life/ My first false speaking/ Was this upon myself” (4.3.147-150). The scene is terribly important thematically. It foreshadows Macbeth’s often quoted monologue in Act 5 – ‘a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.’ Malcolm’s false admission seems to be just such a tale, because it transforms itself from melodramatic truth to crushing lie in a manner of minutes.

Most of the rest of Act 4 Scene 3 is taken up with a similar false admission. Ross arrives with the knowledge that Macduff’s wife and child have been murdered. As in the previous encounter between Malcolm and Macduff, the revelation involves a lie. When Macduff first inquires about his wife and children, Ross replies that they are well. But almost as soon as he has lied, Ross reveals: Your castle is surprised, your wife and babes / Savagely slaughtered” (4.3.240-241). For MacDuff, language has created a certain sense of what is true, and then – tragically and mysteriously – smashed that reality into a million pieces. The words spoken to Macduff at the end of the scene are so adept at manipulating Macduff’s reality that they elicit Macduff’s agonizing cry “All my pretty ones / Did you say all? Oh hell-kite! All? / What, all my pretty chickens and their dam / At one fell swoop?”(4.3.255-258). The end of the scene is profoundly moving and dramatic. Act 4 Scene 3 emphasizes that we needn’t be as evil as Macbeth to experience the manipulations of verbal equivocation, and to develop a frightening skepticism towards words and stories. We need be only as innocent as Macduff, who is fooled first by a King’s false vow and then by a messenger’s inability to reveal horrifying news.

Henry Paul and those who insist there is a poetic code in *Macbeth* that can be analyzed for its exact meaning in relationship to historical events are not only misinterpreting the play, but are wasting their time with a methodological approach that is alien to Shakespeare’s aesthetic. The porter’s extensive improvisation on the subject of equivocation may have less to do with Jesuit traitors, than it does with an early modern philosopher who has been ignored by Shakespeare scholars, but whose work was fundamental in the creation of the treatise on equivocation: Navarrus.

Navarrus (Martin de Azpilcueta,1491-1586) – was a 16th century religious theorist. Frank Huntley tells us that Navarrus was read in Shakespeare’s lifetime by educated Europeans. He quotes from Etienne Pasquier’s 1602 book *Jesuit Catechism*. “the great Canonist Navarre, the chiefest of all the Doctors in matters of the Canon-Law, speaking of this simple vow [i.e. equivocation] gives it the name of Great and

Maruailous” (396). We have no proof that Shakespeare read Navarrus. However, if we understand the focus of *Macbeth* to be an expression of the fundamental mutability of language then it is no accident that Shakespeare mentions equivocation in *Macbeth*. For Navarrus stretched his theory of equivocation beyond the spiritual and ethical issue of speaking one truth to God while communicating another truth to a living person. Navarrus hinted, in his writing on equivocation, at modern language theory. Stefania Tutino, in a new book about the philosopher, says Navarrus suggested: “human language is not a tightly regulated venue where meaning is communicated between people, but a complex set of different types of communication, not a measure of moral uncertainty but a measure of hermeneutical uncertainty” (24). In other words, Navarrus went beyond the moral implications of equivocation to propose that language is itself fundamentally equivocal, meaning perpetually uncertain, and communication difficult and ambiguous. This skepticism about the relationship between signifier (word) and signified (object) is what characterizes modern day post-structuralist linguistic theory.

That Shakespeare was obsessed with the ambiguous nature of human language, that he found language both fair and foul, good and evil, attractive and unattractive – but always obsessively addictive – is proved by the many musings on language in his work. I will not list them here, but instead mention a play that particularly displays Shakespeare’s fondness for a florid style, a play that is concerned with questions of language and epistemology, and often referred to as being influenced by euphuism: *Love’s Labour’s Lost*.

Martin de Azpilcueta was nicknamed ‘Navarrus’ because Navarre was his place of birth (in northern Spain, bordering what is now Basque). Is it simply a coincidence that *Love’s Labour’s Lost* takes place in Navarre? And that Ferdinand, the King of Navarre is also a philosopher sometimes referred to as simply ‘Navarre,’ just as Martin de Azpilcueta is, in the Pasquier quotation above? But the array of coincidental associations between Navarrus and *Love’s Labour’s Lost* (and indeed other Shakespeare works) does not end there. King Ferdinand or, Navarre, in *Love’s Labours Lost* sets up a school of philosophy for young gentleman, in which they will be asked to give up love. Navarrus also had a school of philosophy in Navarre, called the Salamanca School. What this school is best remembered for today, are the musings Navarrus and his colleagues entertained on economics. Goncalo Fonseca, writing on the website of The Institute of New Economic Thinking, tells us that the Salamanca School invented capitalist economic theory:

Their analysis led them to trace a scarcity theory of value and employed supply-and-demand with dexterity. They rejected Duns Scotus’s ‘cost of production’ conception of the just price, arguing that there was no objective way of determining price. Before Bodin, but after Copernicus, the Salamanca School independently uncovered the essential properties of the Quantity Theory of

Money, using it to explain the inflation of the 1500s arising from the influx of precious metals from Spanish America. They also provided a resounding defense of usury. The accomplishments of the Salamanca theorists have led scholars such as Friedrich von Hayek to note that, contrary to Max Weber's thesis, it is the religion of the Jesuits and not the Calvinists, that set the grounds for capitalism.

Shakespeare frequently uses financial matters as a metaphor for love; this metaphor is overwhelmingly present in *Love's Labour's Lost*, as well as *The Sonnets*. And of course not only is usury the subject matter of Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, but some critics have suggested that *The Merchant of Venice* was written in response to early modern theories of mercantile capitalism.

If all this seems like conjecture, let us turn to the theme of *Love's Labour's Lost*. The play is centered on the epistemological question; how best can one come to know the world? Navarre has decreed that all the men in his kingdom must abjure the company of women. Resembling those who 'equivocate' in Act 4 Scene 3 of *Macbeth*, the three lords who come to visit have barely arrived before they take the vow (referred to as an oath in the play), and then immediately break it, spending the rest of the play referring to themselves as *perjurers*. And like the traitors in *Macbeth*, and all Jesuits in England, the three lords in *Love's Labour's Lost* are also committing treason – only in this case it is by virtue of falling in love. They spend the rest of the play wooing their favourites, and waxing poetic about the ladies who have caught their fancy.

The most sensitive, witty and poetic of the lords, Berowne, struggles with a fundamental question – what is the best way to learn in this academy? He ultimately decides that love is actually a form of perception more efficacious than his own senses: "Love's feeling is more soft and sensible / than are the tender horns of cockled snails" (4.3.336-337). Having adopted love and poetry as a mode of perception, it is in Act 5 that his love poetry is criticized by his love object, Rosaline. So he vows (yet again another vow which is broken as it is made) to modify his ornate manner of speaking. He says "O never will I trust to speeches penned, / Nor to the motion of a school-boy's tongue" (5.2.403-404) seeming to reject the whole of Elizabethan grammar and rhetoric. Unfortunately he ends his speech – a speech against ornate speech – with an ornate flourish:

BEROWNE. My love to thee is sound, sans crack or flaw.

ROSALINE. Sans 'sans,' I pray you

BEROWNE. Yet I have a trick

Of the old rage. Bear with me;

I am sick; I leave it by degrees. (5.2.416-419)

Shakespeare, not unlike Berowne, cannot leave *lying* behind, because to do so would be to abandon the beauty of words. No matter what Berowne says, he – like Shakespeare – is riddled with a disease that makes embellishment, metaphor, paradox, and ornate language irresistible, even though both Berowne and Shakespeare are fearful of poetry’s ability to dissemble – to the point of labeling it perjury.

Michael Delahoyde suggests that the school of Navarre in the play – “may be . . . ridiculing a group headed by Raleigh and including Marlowe, Chapman, and others who, with John Florio, thought ‘it were labour lost to speak of Love’; they were interested in the new science, especially astronomy and Copernicus.” That Shakespeare might ridicule this group (sometimes referred to as *The School of Night*) would certainly make sense since he was a dedicated euphuist and grammarian devoted to understanding the world through poetry. Such a school would be very much opposed to a school of ‘dialectics’ (as the discipline we now call science was then called).

Delahoyde also tells us “J. Thomas Looney and Oxfordians since have identified Boyet as a send-up of Philip Sidney,” which makes sense as Sidney was Edward de Vere’s sworn enemy in the early modern style wars. Berowne, addicted to euphuism, says of Boyet:

This fellow pecks up wit as pigeons pease
And utters it again when God doth please
He is wit’s pedler, and retails his wares
At wakes and wassails, meetings, markets, fairs
And we that sell by gross, the Lord doth know
Have not the grace to grace it with such show.

(LLL 5.2.315-320)

Shakespeare was no doubt cynical about the more moralistic, Christian poets Sidney and Southwell, whose work was more accessible and who relied on message more than medium.

What is perhaps most telling about *Love’s Labour’s Lost* – in the context of its incessant, at times numbing wordplay – is that Shakespeare was both enraptured of and disturbed by the ambiguities of language. When Berowne hears Dumaine’s sonnet to his beloved – “I would forget her; but a fever she / Reigns in my blood and will remember’d be” (4.3.99-100) he responds: “A fever in your blood! why, then incision / Would let her out in saucers: sweet misprision” (4.3.101-102). *Misprision* is derived from the old French word meaning ‘to misunderstand’ but was used in English law to describe an act which involved hiding one’s awareness of an unlawful act. *Misprision* was, significantly and paradoxically, thought (like equivocation) to have both positive and negative implications. Berowne’s use of the phrase “sweet misprision” to describe a sonnet thus encapsulates Shakespeare’s ambivalent opinion on the ambivalence of language.

Shakespeare, in *Macbeth*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, and indeed, in all his plays explicitly and implicitly worked through his love/hate relationship with language. The discussion of language by Viola and The Clown in *Twelfth Night* is often considered obscure or beside the point. It may very well, instead, actually be the point:

CLOWN. You have said, sir. To see this age! A sentence is
but a cheveril glove to a good wit: how quickly the
wrong side may be turned outward!

VIOLA. Nay, that's certain; they that dally nicely with
words may quickly make them wanton.

CLOWN. I would, therefore, my sister had had no name, sir.

VIOLA. Why, man?

CLOWN. Why, sir, her name's a word; and to dally with that
word might make my sister wanton. But indeed words
are very rascals since bonds disgraced them.

VIOLA. Thy reason, man?

CLOWN. Troth, sir, I can yield you none without words; and
words are grown so false, I am loath to prove
reason with them.

(3.1.11-26.)

Language is not rational. It can betray us with its ambiguity. But Shakespeare's lingual skepticism is never hopeless, because he is ever the poet and cannot abandon words. Present day scholars – dedicated to interpreting plays like *Macbeth* – must take a warning from *Love's Labour's Lost*. It's important to be skeptical of literal analysis of Shakespeare's poetry. Delahoyde quotes Goddard: “What a warning to scholars and commentators *Love's Labour's Lost* is! If the truth that it teaches is applicable to its author's own works (including this one), their secret will never be revealed to mere erudition or learning on the one hand nor mere romantic glorification on the other.”

An analysis of *Macbeth* that ignores Shakespeare's obsession with language is ignoring Shakespeare's perhaps greatest and most revolutionary theory of all: that language is an ambiguous and dangerous – yet mysteriously revealing – lie.

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