

# The antagonism of Equivocal Conscience in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

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## Abstract:

This study is an undertaking to depict in Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* that how conscience interface. For instance, how conscience sounds, how it looks like, and how it feels for a human being to find oneself with the workings of conscience. Along with the representation of conscience, *Macbeth* is a play with many references pointing to the theme of equivocation as well. *Macbeth* presents before us an atmosphere where the theme of equivocation, the feeling of uncertainty and ambiguity became the condition of the play. This kind of atmosphere in the play receives its most well-defined and striking expression in the Weird Sisters', i.e. the three witches' equivocation and their fair/foul paradoxes, but it is not only limited to their forecasting riddles. Infact it is through the play's equivocal atmosphere which is responsible for creating problems of intelligence throughout and later on prefiguring the problems of differentiation and discernment in the personality of Macbeth. Thus, the primary objective of this paper is to bring forth the equivocal ethics and compunctions of Macbeth as a crisis of signification. As Shakespeare's period put considerable energy into explaining the ideas related to conscience, this paper also aims to reveal how the cacophony of sounds and the chaos of sights which greet and haunt Macbeth all the time after committing the murders, fails to convey to him the judgements of conscience with clarity.

Key Words: conscience, equivocation, uncertainty, ambiguity

## Introduction:

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* raises one of the most significant questions that how one should make choices in life, or what actually forms the basis of our actions. *Macbeth* sustains a view of morality which is twofold in nature which measures human actions and objectives by their worth that is relative to polar opposites of 'good' or 'bad'. So this dichotomy between 'good' and 'bad' forms a powerful argument that dramatises the operation of conscience in the sinful mind. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth wilfully ignore their conscience as they kill their sworn king, and in the aftermath of that action, they experience conscience reverberating upon them. Lady Macbeth's conscience unfolds slowly, finally communicating to her in Act 5. But in case of Macbeth, his conscience works immediately and expansively after the murder.

As this paper is an undertaking to explore the antagonism of equivocal conscience in *Macbeth*, therefore it is important to trace the relevance of equivocation and conscience together that has been seen as a dominant theme in this play. In this regard, it is important to understand that *Macbeth* is written soon after the two important theorisations of conscience, one is that of Alexander Hume's *Ane Treatise of Conscience* (1594) and William Perkins's *A Discourse of Conscience* (1596). These two works marks the beginning of England's extensive entanglement with conscience in the seventeenth century. With conscience emerging as a central object of inquiry, theorists such as Hume and Perkins take up the challenge of explaining how this inward faculty functions. The array of metaphors which emerges in the discourse of conscience shows how hard it is to describe. Conscience has always been figured as fiery darts, a worm that is constantly found to be pricking, gnawing, biting, stinging and accusing. But one of the most commonly discussed conceptions regarding conscience is the idea that it functions through a sharing of knowledge with an 'other'. Then *Macbeth: New Critical Essays* (2008) by Nick Moschovakis is significant in providing a greater substantial criticism that identifies the main critical issues and problems that the play has raised.

## Aims and Objectives:

The primary objective of this paper is to bring forth the equivocal conscience of Macbeth as a crisis of signification. As Shakespeare's period put considerable energy into anatomising and understanding the conscience, this paper also aims to reveal how the cacophony of sounds and the chaos of sights which greet and haunt Macbeth all the time after committing the murders, fails to convey to him the judgements of conscience with clarity.

## Research Methodology:

In this paper, both analytical and descriptive method has been adopted to project *Macbeth* as a play that develops a vision of conscience as a tragically equivocal moral guide. The text chosen for to study serves as the primary source while secondary sources are comprised of some critical books in terms of the discourse on equivocal conscience which has been selected to appropriate in the play.

## Analysis:

Male violence materializes in all its gory terror in the first scene with a blunt question, "What bloody man is that?" (1.2.1), followed by a realistic report of the battle, full of upbeat military rhetoric of manly courage of the victors and the villainy of the traitors. It is in this context of unmitigated violence that the "brave Macbeth" is mentioned for the first time, highly regarded by fellow soldiers for his undaunted courage, fighting skills, and spectacular efficacy in battle, and now publicly glorified in Homeric terms as an eagle, a lion, "Valour's minion," and "Bellona's bridegroom" (1.2.16-19).

Macbeth's promotion from the thane of Glamis to the thane of Cawdor marks a transition of his character from honest, honourable statism to potentially disloyal, opportunistic, and traitorous endostatism. But the ultimate step in Macbeth's social advancement is announced in the witches' triple all-hails, which imply a natural progression from Glamis to Cawdor to king, while in dynamic terms they supply the final, endodynamic phase in the evolution of Macbeth's character, first represented by Lady Macbeth and later by Macbeth himself. When Macbeth says "I am Thane of Cawdor," (1.3.133), this defines his character as endostatic. This is so because Macbeth's mental distance from the static and straightforward Banquo is marked by the former's absentmindedness and the appearance of asides to hide his dark thoughts as he says "Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor:/The greatest is behind," (1.3.115–16). While Banquo prudently dismisses the prophesy as a temptation to "win us to our harm" (1.3.123), Macbeth is unable to control the ever-swelling flow of ambitious thoughts, experiencing, for a time at least, an acute dilemma.

Macbeth's first reaction to his heightened ambition is to write a letter to his wife to inform her about the witches' prophesy, but it is not immediately clear why Macbeth should write to his wife at all, because the object of the letter is clearly not to inform her about the coming of Duncan to their castle. However, it would appear that Macbeth's real, unconscious reason is to send a letter is to give his wife more time to strengthen her resolve on the right course of action and to decide the matter for him. The frankness of the letter betrays a character who fails to withstand his endostatic manliness but revealed as psychologically dependent on his wife, a fact that indicates a configuration of consecutive characters with its mixture of adoration and submission in the less mature partner and protection and domination in the more mature partner, who in this case happens to be Lady Macbeth, the endodynamic, masculinised woman.

The dilemma of being caught between static loyalty and endodynamic thirst for power is borne out by Macbeth's introspective asides and by his indecision, until Lady Macbeth tips the scales in favour of manly action. Moreover, the progression of social success and power promised by the witches' prophesy appeals to Macbeth's already existing endodynamic appetites. Moreover, the presence and vulnerability of Duncan's lodging in Macbeth's castle provides the now-or-never opportunity, which the endodynamic Lady Macbeth cannot fail to seize, and which the endostatic Macbeth finds difficult to let slip, not so much as a means to achieve the aim as a challenge to prove his worth in action. As an endostatic, he is tantalized not so much by the ultimate material prize, but by the very possibility of doing that which is mostly forbidden by all sacred and human laws. The absolute outrageousness and sacrilege of the deed committed in open violation of the most sacred feudal and familial bonds and of traditional hospitality excite Macbeth's boldness, his "vaulting ambition," as the only motive for his action. Because his ambition is as ineradicable as his endostatic character from which it derives, Macbeth de facto cannot choose but to act, not so much to become king as to become the man who dared to kill the king. Macbeth is so unforeseeing and so preoccupied with the immediate challenge that just a few minutes before Duncan's murder, in a conversation with Banquo about the weird sisters, he does not for an instant consider the fact that his own posterity would benefit nothing from his crime. The tragedy of Macbeth relies therefore not only on his ultimate disappointment with what he has gained, also not on his isolation and his disgraceful death, but on the trap that the givens of the circumstances and of his character have arranged for him: he cannot abstain from action because he will loath himself for not daring to kill the king, but when he kills the king he loathes himself for having done it.

Immediately after the murder, Macbeth experiences conscience as a chamber of sights and sounds, with each signifier potentially, but incompletely, representing that witness who will communicate his guilt. Macbeth kills his liege in the second act, between the first and second scenes, and his entrance in Scene 2 shows us Macbeth in the first throes of conscience. In his first words he is startled, and worries that someone is out there: "Who's there? What ho?" (2.2.8) and then, "I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?" (2.2.14). Macbeth goes from the deed right to the sense that there is a person or a noise within a communicable distance. In the immediate aftermath of the murder, and throughout the course of Scene 2, we can see the implications where Macbeth expects to experience his conscience and conceives of it as an exchange of information with some other being. Not knowing how to interpret the noise, Macbeth first guesses that it issues from a person, and then more generically identifies it as a noise. In the following lines Macbeth and Lady Macbeth desperately try to understand the noise:

Macbeth. I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear a noise?

Lady Macbeth. I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry. Did not you speak?

Macbeth. When?

Lady Macbeth. Now.

Macbeth. As I descended?

Lady Macbeth. Ay.

Macbeth. Hark! who lies i' th' second chamber?

Lady Macbeth. Donalbain.

Macbeth. This is a sorry sight.

Lady Macbeth. A foolish thought to say a sorry sight. (2.2.14–19)

To answer Macbeth's confusion, Lady Macbeth provides an interpretation of the sound which views it as a natural phenomenon. The possibility that it is an owl or crickets would quiet the fear that it is a supernatural noise connected to the conscience. But Lady Macbeth immediately undermines her rational explanation by betraying that she too thinks the sound is a person. The line "Did not you speak?" suggests that in her own mind she thinks of a possibility that a voice made the noise. They continue inquiring into the sound, but the exchange takes on a dizzying sense of anxiety and doubt: "When?/Now./As I descended?/Ay./Hark!". Here the switching of the stichomythia creates a sense of searching in audience and reader alike, as we ask suddenly, Who is speaking? Where on stage or in the line of pentameter is that sound? The question of where he was when the previous sound echoed remains unresolved, however, as Macbeth jumps to another line of inquiry. "Hark," implies that a new sound is at that very moment audible. And then he makes another jump to a different topic, the tenant of the second chamber. This seems to be motivated by the fear of a witness to his deed, and now the sense of some other being has developed from the uninterpretable sound to the possibility of his sin becoming known by that other. Lady Macbeth's answer, that it was the king's son Donalbain, sinks Macbeth into the despair of "This is a sorry sight," which may refer to himself or to the tableau he imagines in which he murders the king in the chamber next to the king's son, or to the possibility that Donalbain has seen the deed and is a witness.

Macbeth is now haunted by a conscience which is experienced in even more equivocal terms. Earlier he was confronting conscience with multiple and distanced voices and sounds, but this time it appears as a vision—the "dagger of the mind" which

confronts Macbeth in his solitude. Macbeth's preoccupation is whether the dagger he sees is really there, or if it is a product of his mind:

Is this a dagger which I see before me,  
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee:  
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.  
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible  
To feeling as to sight? or art thou but  
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,  
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain? (2.1.33–39)

When he cannot touch what he sees, Macbeth assumes that the dagger is “of the mind,” and this leads immediately to it being false and a product of a diseased brain. But the most common metaphor for conscience's action, that it pricks, is implicit in the image of the dagger. Macbeth's conscience flickers with the impossibility of deciding whether the dagger is real or not, and hints at its knowledge through the trails of literary allusion. In fact, Macbeth's preoccupation with what is real and what is not covers over the alternative possibility that the dagger is ghostly, precisely because it is legitimately a thing of the conscience. With this in mind, Macbeth's conclusion concerning the dagger appears as perfectly contradictory: “There's no such thing:/It is the bloody business which informs/Thus to mine eyes” (2.1.47–49). Here Macbeth decides that the dagger is unreal, and at the same time names it as a piece of information issuing from the bloody business—as a signifier of conscience.

The murder of Banquo marks another step in Macbeth's development away from the early statism toward the endodynamic extreme of the dynamic spectrum, the movement repeatedly emphasized in the play by Macbeth's threefold progression from Glamis through Cawdor to king, corresponding respectively with the static, endostatic, and endodynamic stages in the evolution of his character. As a static Glamis, Macbeth was able to win his noble reputation by courageously risking his own life in a face-to-face battle; as an endostatic traitor he still took a risk by murdering Duncan with his own hands; but now as an endodynamic king he no longer risks his own safety but hires assassins or gives orders to have his future threats killed. By hiring assassins to murder Banquo, he kills a friend whom he envies; and when he decides to destroy the house of Macduff he is motivated less by revenge but more by a desire to forestall the menace of future loss of power, and in doing so he causes the deaths of people he has probably never even seen.

As an endodynamic person, that too with possession of power, Macbeth lives in constant fear of losing it. Macbeth has been seen giving all his way entirely to endodynamic cruelty and unscrupulousness as he says “full of scorpions is my mind,” (3.2.36), which has been seen grow bigger and bigger “Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill” (3.2.55). Even the Ghost of Banquo is not a projection of Macbeth's guilt, as is sometimes supposed, but of his paranoid fear and insecurity. During the banquet scene, the Ghost sits in Macbeth's seat, replacing him as king, as the weird sisters prophesied, a visible proof of the futility of Macbeth's efforts to dispose of his political rival, who now returns to push the usurper from his stool (3.4.81). But while there was still a concrete, “rational” reason to assassinate Banquo, there is none in Macbeth's plan to pursue Macduff except the pretext of the latter's avoidance of Macbeth. State terror, as in Stalinist Russia, now gets out of control, becoming all-pervading, random, indiscriminate, and inescapable, motivated solely by the tyrant's insecurity and paranoid fear rather than by any pragmatic reasons. Macbeth has entered an insane, irrational phase of extreme endodynamism, in which he has severed all positive social ties and completely alienated himself from all humanity, trapped in the ever-intensifying compulsion to commit more and more violence:

I am in blood  
Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more,  
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.  
Strange things I have in head, that will to hand,  
Which must be acted, ere they may be scann'd (3.4.135–39).

In case of Lady Macbeth, the play provides enough cross-gender imagery to “unsex” her that emphasizes the “un-feminine character,” in her. Lady Macbeth is seen to suppress all exodynamic traces of her femininity and motherhood as she says “take my milk for gall” (1.5.51–52), acquiring traits more characteristic of endodynamic sexual violence, as she summons the night and the smoke of hell to hide her keen knife making the wound while she transforms herself into a masculinized creature of “direst cruelty.” But when we deal with the idea of conscience in Lady Macbeth, her sleepwalking scene tells us all the workings of her conscience influenced by her actions.

In *Macbeth*, the sleepwalking scene of Lady Macbeth remains dramatically powerful and poignant. Lady Macbeth's somnambulism offers a version of complete alienation from life and human relations to which her complicity in Macbeth's crimes has led her. The Doctor describes her state as “a great perturbation in nature,” the oxymoronic “slumbry agitation,” a sort of living death in which she receives “at once the benefit of sleep, and . . . the effects of watching” (5.1.9–11). The paradox of being awake, active, able to speak, and at the same time unconscious and absent minded provides a moving tableau of isolation and alienation. The letter she writes in her somnambulist state has been variously interpreted as a confession, a warning for Lady Macduff, or a message to Macbeth indicating that she still wishes to control him, but it could indeed be anything. For example, Lady Macbeth may be writing a reply to her husband's early letter informing her about the witches' prophesy (1.5.1–14), in which case she may be either dissuading him from taking any steps (the static variant) or, to the contrary, telling him to go ahead, the way she did (the endodynamic variant). Again, the famous gesture of washing the hands, linked with Lady Macbeth's direct implication in Duncan's murder (2.2.66), can be interpreted as a sign of belated remorse but also as a desire to escape detection: “Out, damned spot! Out, I say!” (5.1.33). The line “What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to accompt?” (5.1.35–37) repeats the same cynical confidence in their invulnerability, with which Lady Macbeth answered her husband's earlier fear of being found out (1.7.75–80). The only moment that can be interpreted as betraying Lady Macbeth's pity and regret is a “feminine” reference to the perfumes of Arabia unable to “sweeten this little hand” (5.1.48), which is linked back to Macbeth's regretful realization that “all great Neptune's ocean” will not wash the blood from his hand (2.2.59–60) and is indeed interpreted by the Doctor as an indication of a heart “sorely charg'd” (5.1.50).

#### Conclusion:

Human behaviour is defined through the use of actions that human beings take into account in a fundamental course of life and accordingly these actions are influenced by their own consciousness. But in case of *Macbeth*, it is the bad conscience of

Macbeths (Macbeth and Lady Macbeth) which lead to their melancholia. If Macbeth's killing of Duncan creates a world in the image of that act, it creates Macbeth in its image as well. To substantiate it, we can refer to the murderous deed he commits which brings home his own form of being, in a form so repellent that he says "To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself" (2.2). Thus, it can be said that the deed is a violation of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's "conscience," that too in the double sense of "consciousness" as well as in identifying the "knowledge of right and wrong." It, therefore, can be concluded that the murderous deed initiates and finally registers the experience of Macbeth's equivocal conscience followed by Lady Macbeth till the end of the play. And again it is the equivocal conscience of Macbeth that finally flickers their impossibility of deciding what is real and what is not, and finally plaguing the characters to death.

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