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Macbeth's Demonic Right Monarchy

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Introduction

Joel Coen's film *Macbeth* (2022) opens on three disembodied voices reciting the haunting first lines of the Scottish Play. Although the scene conceals the identity of the voices behind a shroud of darkness, the characters reappear in the third scene, this time on screen. But this scene reveals that the voices heard before evidently belong not to three but one writhing, crooked person.[1] This psychotic contortionist, apparently one being with three personalities, splits visually into three persons when Macbeth and Banquo approach. Initially the lone figure casts a mind-bending reflection of two side-by-side images in a pool, nearly forming the Celtic triquetra. Then under a half-second's cover of fog the reflections materialize into two actual persons standing beside the first. Coen's three-in-one presentation of the Weird Sisters emphasizes something often overlooked: a strange parity exists between the Weird Sisters' role in establishing Macbeth's kingship with the God of the Holy Trinity's role in establishing kingship under the divine right of kings.

Bringing this parity to light requires a close look at *Macbeth* and its context. Shakespeare's most important contemporary who

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wrote on the divine right of kings was King James VI and I. He wrote a work on the subject before his ascension to the English throne and used those arguments in obtaining it.[2] His writings provide a baseline for Shakespeare's understanding of the subject, both because they reflect the thought of the era and because of Shakespeare's company's official presence in King James's court. Furthermore, *Macbeth* tells the story of James's bloodline and was likely written, in large part, as a gift to the king. Exploring this connection provides the setting for an analysis of the nature of Macbeth's monarchy and the supernatural support the Weird Sisters provide him. Given the context provided by the discussion of James and his writings, a link between the two emerges. Putting them in conversation brings out Shakespeare's evident critique of the divine right of kings directed to James's theory.

Presenting these problems as Shakespeare does via *Macbeth*'s grotesque parody provides him a salutary veil of murky poetic fog. *Macbeth* offers an opportunity even the history plays, which sometimes more directly address divine right, lack. In the play's setting and context, Shakespeare found himself sufficiently liberated to express his thought on the role of the supernatural in earthly sovereignty with a logical completeness he did not find safely available to him in other, less paranormal historical plays. Although buried in poetic language and plot, *Macbeth*'s political teachings expose the logical conclusion of divine right and thus may be read as Shakespeare's most complete statement on the subject.

King James

Before his ascension to the English throne, King James had already gained the throne of Scotland as James VI. Upon obtaining England's crown, he became James VI of Scotland and I of England. At the coronation, Shakespeare's acting company became The King's Men.[3] By no coincidence, soon thereafter the company first staged *Macbeth*.[4] That play reimagines the story of James's line gaining the throne of Scotland, as recounted in Holinshed's *Chronicles*. James's lineage traced to Malcolm,[5] whose father, Duncan, Macbeth murdered. Shakespeare's dramatization centers

on neither Malcolm nor his descendants but follows Macbeth's bloody, cruel rise and reign, with Malcolm eventually returning to reclaim Scotland. The subject of the play being James's family accounts for the source material and timing of its creation. However, even this first glance makes the play seem not exactly a straightforward compliment to the king.

Henry N. Paul argues in *The Royal Play of "Macbeth"* that *Macbeth* was written to please King James. Paul makes many helpful observations about the timing of the play's initial staging, the historical sources and intent of the work, and the themes and content of the play.[6] In a short chapter, "When and Why the Play Was Written," he claims that Shakespeare honored the king by incorporating ideas from James's *Basilikon Doron* and *Dæmonologie*.[7]

Shakespeare was familiar with James's writings,[8] and to Paul's credit, in the play he catered to James in important respects. One example is Shakespeare's depictions of England and Scotland. Macbeth characterizes England as the source of contemporary Scotland's woes: Christianity and civilization. The spread of Christianity Macbeth derisively terms "gospelling" (3.1.98).[9] He mocks the civilized refinement of England, referring to English soldiers under Malcolm's command as "English epicures" (5.3.9). Malcolm, in contrast, embraces moderate Anglicization of Scotland. He evinces this by his long asylum in England, by his acceptance of English military support in retaking Scotland, and by his first act as king: changing Scotland's thanes—thane being a primitive Scottish title for independent lords—to earls, giving them a sophisticated, centralized English title (5.8.74–77). Macbeth, the tyrant and usurper, represents old Scotland, with its warrior virtue; Edward, the saintly king who can heal disease with the touch of his hands and "hath the heavenly gift of prophecy" (4.3.160–81) represents England, with its Christianized civilization. Malcolm, attempting a synthesis of the two, welcomes an early rhetorical unity of England and Scotland. The bloodline Macbeth sought to wipe out, which Malcolm restored, is King James's. Malcolm defeated Macbeth and sought the unity of Scotland and England in his own small way so that James might one day effect a complete unification of the two

countries under one crown. Since Malcolm is both James's ancestor and the moral hero of the play, this honors James's filial pride.[10]

This observation, among others,[11] supports the idea that Shakespeare wrote aspects of the play to please King James. However, Marvin Rosenberg disputed Paul's claim; comparing *Macbeth* with James's *Trew Law of Free Monarchies* and demonstrating the tension between the two, Rosenberg showed that the king might not wholly approve of *Macbeth*.[12]

Rosenberg's conflict with Paul in some sense animates this paper. However, apparently responding to James's writings, Shakespeare does not rule James out as his audience but rather evinces his even more focused intent for the play. Paul saw *Macbeth* as primarily a sycophantic "royal play." Shakespeare's inclusion of critiques of James's writings on sovereignty—alongside apparent flattery—suggests a serious didactic aim for the play.[13] Both Paul and Rosenberg were partially right, but neither fully exposed the connection between James and *Macbeth*. To help evaluate this view, a summary of *Trew Law*'s teaching on the divine right of kings follows.

"Trew Law" and the Divine Right of Kings

Jean-Christophe Mayer summarized John Neville Figgis's definitive treatment of the concept of the divine right of kings as follows:

1. Monarchy is a divinely ordained institution.
2. Hereditary right is indefeasible.
3. Kings are accountable to God alone.
4. Non-resistance and passive obedience are enjoined by God.[14]

In his book, Figgis explains how the circumstances surrounding James's rise to the throne of England show why he "should hold the Divine Right of Kings in its strictest form."[15] In James's work *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, Figgis finds "the doctrine of divine right in every detail."[16] Selections from James demonstrating Figgis's view follow.

The Trew Law's first argument's conclusion demonstrates James's support for Figgis's first, third, and fourth principles. Of

principle one (monarchy as divinely ordained), James states that the subjects'

> obedience . . . ought to be to [the king], as to Gods Lieutenant in earth, obeying his commands in all things, except directly against God, as commands of Gods Minister, acknowledging him a Iudge set by GOD over them.

Of principle three (royal accountability), James says the people must remember the king as

> hauing power to iudge them, but to be iudged onely by GOD, whom to onely hee must giue count of his iudgement; fearing him as their Iudge, louing him as their father; praying for him as their protectour; for his continuance, if he be good; for his amendement, if he be wicked.

Of principle four (passive obedience), James avers the people must ascent to

> following and obeying his lawfull commands, eschewing and flying his fury in his vnlawfull, without resistance but by sobbes and teares to God.[17]

Although it is not in the same section as the three foregoing examples, James demonstrates support of principle two (hereditary right) as well: "[T]he duty and allegiance, which the people sweareth to their prince, is not only bound to themselues, but likewise to their lawfull heires and posterity."[18] These examples suffice to show James's support in writing for divine right as defined by Figgis.

James's rhetorical approach and methodology emphasize divine right's centrality in his thought. He often conflates kings with gods. At the beginning of *Trew Law*, James says monarchy "which forme of gouernment as resembling the Diunitie, approcheth nearest to perfection, as all the learned and wise men from the beginning

haue agreed vpon; Vnitie being the perfection of all things."[19] Then, when introducing the argument, he says, "Monarchie is the trew paterne of Diuinite."[20] Soon thereafter he states, "Kings are called Gods by the propheticall King Dauid, because they sit vpon God his Throne in the earth, and haue the count of their administration to giue vnto him."[21] Similarly, James introduces *Basilicon Doron*, another of his works on kingship, with two sonnets. The second sonnet begins thus:

> God giues not Kings the stile of Gods in vaine,
> For on his Throne his Scepter doe they swey:
> And as their subiects ought them to obey,
> So Kings should feare and serue their God againe[22]

James's writings depend principally on arguments from scripture. This follows, considering James's introduction to the argument from scripture in *Trew Law*: "First then, I will set downe the trew grounds, whereupon I am to build, out of the Scriptures, since Monarchie is the trew paterne of Diuinitie, as I haue already said."[23] The foundation of his argument is established in scripture because only the pattern established by God's word can adequately express the truth of James's view of monarchy, the king being like God to his people.

Once his company became The King's Men, Shakespeare ingratiated himself by writing and staging a play dramatizing the King's ancestral struggle for the throne. However, he did not stop at this. In *Macbeth*, along with themes meant to engage King James's attention, Shakespeare included a powerful warning on the potential danger of theories of the divine right of kings, like that espoused by James in *Trew Law*. Before examining *Macbeth's* unique take on the question, a word on Shakespeare's approach to divine right.

Shakespeare and the Divine Right of Kings

Richard II contains Shakespeare's most straightforward treatment of divine right monarchy.[24] It depicts King Richard's fall from the

throne and Henry Bolingbroke's rise. Richard loses the throne through reckless disregard for political expediency, favoring instead an immovable faith in God's support; Henry rises by his ambition, controlled by an overriding prudence.

Richard's worst political decision in the play comes after John of Gaunt, the father of Bolingbroke (exiled at the beginning of the play), dies (2.1.154–58). When Richard hears of Gaunt's illness, he says, "Now put it, God, in the physician's mind / To help him to his grave immediately! / The lining of his coffers shall make coats / To deck our soldiers for these Irish wars" (2.1.161–70). York cannot stand to see another wrong done to Bolingbroke and his family. He openly disputes the king's decision, listing every wrong Bolingbroke suffered at the king's hands,[25] telling the king, "You pluck a thousand dangers on your head, / You lose a thousand well-disposèd hearts, / And prick my tender patience to those thoughts / Which honor and allegiance cannot think." Even he, a loyal courtier and counselor, sits on the verge of treasonous thought. King Richard replies, "Think what you will, we seize into our hands / His plate, his goods, his money, and his lands." York leaves in a fit of rage (2.1.171–219). Immediately after, Richard departs for Ireland to oversee the war and leaves "York Lord Governor of England, / For he is just and always loved us well" (2.1.229–30). Richard disrespects York, leading him to thoughts of treason, and he then puts him in charge of England. At this news, Bolingbroke returns to England, gathers supporters, and marches for redress of his wrongs, bringing York into his cause with little effort (2.3.90–175).

Richard apparently did not see this coming. His poor decisions receive their apologia when he returns from Ireland. He lands amid the political turmoil his departure caused. However, he is surrounded by sycophants reassuring him of God's continued support regardless of circumstances. Carlisle tells him, "Fear not, my lord. That power that made you king / Hath power to keep you king in spite of all" (3.2.27–28).[26] Richard replies, comparing himself to the sun: the sun had set on his departure from England, and night is when criminals conduct their wicked business; but once the sun rises, everything changes. He believes his return to

England will set everything right. "So when this thief, this traitor Bolingbroke, . . . / Shall see us rising in our throne, the east, / His treasons will sit blushing in his face, / Not able to endure the sight of day, / But self-affrighted, tremble at his sin" (3.2.36–54). His presence, as "God's substitute,"[27] will leave the usurpers in awe. They will find themselves unable to continue, as "[n]ot all the water in the rough rude sea / Can wash the balm off from an anointed king," and angels fight in his cause (3.2.65–63).

King Richard's hope evaporates as this scene progresses. He begins with confidence and ends with his despairing speech, "For God's sake, let us sit upon the ground / And tell sad stories of the death of kings" (3.2.149–82). Richard's claim to sovereignty upheld by God proves insufficient in the face of a more aggressive claim.

In Shakespeare's presentation, Bolingbroke succeeded in large part because he personally possessed several things Richard lacked: popular support (1.4.21–37), prudence, and ambition. He had the talent and desire to mount the throne, and that he did. In *Henry IV, Part 1*, Bolingbroke, now King Henry IV, warns Prince Hal, his errant heir, that he is in danger of losing the crown to Harry Percy, the leader of a rebellion. He compares Hal with Richard and Percy with himself, giving Hal the legal claim to the throne, but Percy has a natural claim. Bolingbroke's theory of monarchy differs from the one that caused Richard's fall. His view of sovereignty rewards talent over lineage.[28] He tells Hal that Percy's ambition and energy give him "more worthy interest to the state / Than thou, the shadow of succession" (3.2.96–102). Although less lofty, Bolingbroke's theory more circumspectly grasps the nature of politics than does Richard's.[29]

Richard's woes find their source in his misapprehension of politics and his too-thorough application of the divine right of kings. He felt himself impervious to the immutable vicissitudes of life. His confidence made him imprudent, foolish, and ineffectual. Other kings had been arraigned and usurped, but as he believed, *he* had God's mandate and support. None, he supposed, could violate the sovereignty of "God [and] His Richard" (3.2.61) without the former's say so.[30]

Shakespeare again took up the question of divine right with *Macbeth*. That play differs from the history plays' treatments, however, in its approach and audience. As noted, *Macbeth* was written with King James in mind. Shakespeare provides cunningly veiled critiques and counsel to James and to all would-be proponents of divine right. Subterraneous though this grave advice may be, its poignancy and completeness recommend it for careful examination.

The Weird Sisters and God

King Macbeth mounted the throne on the back of a true prophecy revealed by immortal beings. The prophecy, however, came not from God or one of his prophets but from a trio of wild, ominous beings called the Weird Sisters. Their words accelerated Macbeth's ascent, brought him psychological assurance in his reign, and led to his demise. These episodes of direct revelation and their results offer a glimpse at the perils of claims to sovereignty based on "more . . . than mortal knowledge" (1.5.3). The attributes of the Weird Sisters and their relationship to Macbeth reveal several similarities between these dreadful beings and God.

The Sisters are not quite earthly. Banquo says they "look not like th' inhabitants o' the Earth / And yet are on 't." This phrase brings Jesus Christ to mind, who declares, "Ye are from beneath; I am from above: ye are of this world; I am not of this world."[31] As Son of a mortal mother and immortal Father, Jesus, like the Sisters, is not exactly an inhabitant of the earth, yet he is upon it.

The Sisters appear suddenly, and then vanish like "bubbles." This occurs in both meetings with them. First, they disappear into thin air, then the stage direction before act 4, scene 1, line 149, says, "*The Witches dance and vanish*." This ability makes them again comparable to Jesus. After his resurrection,[32] he repeatedly displayed the ability to appear and disappear at will, exemplified in his disappearance from the house with the disciples on the road to Emmaus,[33] as well as in his appearance to the Apostles as they met behind closed doors.[34]

The Sisters' genders are ambiguous. Said Banquo, "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you

are so." Jesus Christ was a man, but God's gender is more complicated. In Genesis 1:27, when it is said that both men and women are created "in the image of God," some traditions interpret this to mean that God contains in himself both genders.

The Weird Sisters are goddesses of destiny. The use of the word *weird* in the name Weird Sisters would today suggest that something about them is unusual. However, according to Holinshed, "the weird sisters" are "(as ye would say) the goddesses of destinie."[35] *Weird* is a cognate of *weyard* or *wayward*,[36] both words in that era meaning something like "equivocal" or "relating to fortune or fate." The phrase evokes, not strangeness exactly, but rather some kind of supernatural status.[37] The Sisters possess true and irrefutable knowledge of the future. Macbeth says, "I have learned by the perfect'st report that they have in them more than mortal knowledge." That report, of course, is the "earnest of success" Macbeth gains when he is named Thane of Cawdor after they promised it. Jesus's prophesying is well documented.[38] The members of the Holy Trinity possess perfect knowledge of all things, the future not excepted.

The Sisters do not obey the whims of man. In his letter to Lady Macbeth, Macbeth notes, "When I burned in desire to question them more, they made themselves air, into which they vanished" (1.5.4–5). Seeking to keep them longer and interrogate them further, Macbeth commanded them, "Stay, you imperfect speakers. . . . Speak, I charge you" (1.3.73–81), but they willed to reveal only so much and no more. Macbeth seeks them out later in the play. Here they tell him, after he has again commanded them to answer him, "Speak. / Demand. / We'll answer" (4.1.65–67). Macbeth hears from their "masters" directly, rather than from the Sisters. The Weird Sisters all evidently serve at the pleasure of familiars and Hecate,[39] and they reveal what follows in the scene. When the first apparition appears, Macbeth seeks to question it; the first Sister tells him, "He knows thy thought. / Hear his speech, but say thou naught" (4.1.79–80). When the prophecy is spoken, Macbeth again tries to question the apparition. The first Sister says, "He will not be commanded" (4.1.86). Finally, when the third vision

concludes, Macbeth again greedily desires more. All three warn him, "Seek to know no more" (4.1.118). In this instance, Macbeth curses the Sisters and demands greater knowledge.[40] The final apparition, however, gives him no comfort or strategy, as it reveals only the length of Banquo's line from Fleance all the way down to King James (4.1.119–42). The Lord God, in the Old Testament, is similarly selective in how he responds to prayer. For example, in the depths of despair, Job receives an extended revelation from God. Before his revelation, Job despairingly wondered about the nature of God's judgments, whether God is physical, if he feels emotions toward humans, if only the unjust receive trials, and so on. God revealed his power to Job: God pointed to his creations and his majesty, but he did not answer Job's questions. Job learns much, but he does not learn what he seeks to. God concealed full knowledge from Job, much as Job would like to have learned more. Such is the nature of the Divine Being. When he does reveal his will, he does so on his own terms, not on those of the supplicant.[41]

The Sisters are an unholy trinity. To return briefly to this paper's introductory reference to Joel Coen's film adaptation of the play, consider: the Weird Sisters are three in person, one in purpose, and as presented in Coen's production, conceivably one in substance as well.[42] The God of the Christian world contains three beings in perfect unity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.[43] Shakespeare seems thus not only to permit but also to welcome a comparison between the Weird Sisters and God.[44]

The Prophecies

All the Weird Sisters' prophecies, so called,[45] appearing in Shakespeare also appear in some form in Holinshed; however, the sources of the actual prophecies differ. In both Holinshed and Shakespeare, the Sisters give the first prophecy.[46] In Holinshed, however, "certeine wizzards, in whose words he put great confidence," told Macbeth to beware of Macduff. Then, "a certeine witch whom hee had in great trust" tells him that he is impervious to mortal harm inflicted by anyone born of woman and that his reign will stand until Burnam Wood comes to Dunsinane.[47]

In Holinshed's version of the story, Macbeth meets the Sisters only once; Shakespeare, in contrast, attributes all three revelations to the Weird Sisters.

Shakespeare's choice to eliminate the other soothsayers unifies the prophecies rhetorically.[48] Macbeth gets the "earnest of success" in receiving the title of Cawdor shortly after the Sisters foretold as much. This early confirmation of their authoritative knowledge primed Macbeth to trust all their sayings and spurred his bloody climb to the throne. Changing the source for each prophecy, even if the historical Macbeth purportedly trusted the other sources, undermines the power of the overall meaning of prophecy in the play. Instead, by unifying the prophecies, Macbeth's reckless self-assurance is amplified.

Moreover, despite his own evident heresy, Macbeth had learned from the influence of Christianity, indeed probably from his own practice of the faith, that there is only one God. After he received their words, he treats the Weird Sisters as God. The movement from Christianity to a polytheistic religion, administered by various witches, wizards, and gods, would be a more difficult adjustment for Shakespeare's Macbeth than a move from one three-personed Godhead to another.

Responses to the Weird Sisters

These blasphemous gods provoke different responses from different characters. Most of the attributes of the Weird Sisters identified in the preceding section come from Banquo's description upon his first meeting them. His language reveals disgust, confusion, or at best ambivalence. He describes them as "[s]o withered, and so wild in their attire" that they look unearthly. He calls their fingers "choppy," their lips "skinny," and their faces bearded (1.3.40–49). If he does not despise the Sisters, he seems uncomfortable with them. When Ross greets Macbeth as Cawdor, confirming the Sisters' saying, Banquo asserts the first moral judgment of the Sisters, asking, "What, can the devil speak true?" (1.3.113). Quickly thereafter Macbeth asked Banquo, given the confirmation they just received of the Sisters' foreknowledge, "Do you not hope your

children shall be kings?" Banquo does not share Macbeth's optimism: "[O]ftentimes, to win us to our harm, / The instruments of darkness tell us truths, / Win us with honest trifles, to betray's / In deepest consequence" (1.3.129–39). Banquo unequivocally classifies the Sisters as the devil and instruments of darkness. The truth they revealed, though they evidently know the future, does not demonstrate their honesty but rather points to a nefarious purpose. Privately Banquo considers that perhaps the Sisters' promise to his posterity might be fulfilled (3.1.1–10), but this is never explored beyond a mere thought. Banquo sticks with his initial unsettled impression. Banquo possesses a well-ordered soul, not burning with an unquenchable fire of ambition. He ever doubts the goodness (if not the equivocal truthfulness) of the Sisters and holds firm in the right as he sees it.[49]

Macbeth's first reaction to the Sisters is stunned silence, as Banquo wonders, "Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?" (1.3.54–55). Other explanations of Macbeth's reaction have been forwarded,[50] but on its face, it seems he blanches in the presence of such eerie, unearthly creatures, who reach into his future to prophesy. Macbeth calls the Sisters "imperfect speakers" (1.3.73), but in conversing with others he does not judge the Sisters' appearance or nature. His first comment on the exchange comes in a soliloquy. Here, he questions the nature of the prophecy first, noting that it all seems so equivocal, given that it had proved true thus far, but that the prophecy suggests to his mind a murderous course "whose horrid image doth unfix my hair / And make my seated heart knock at my ribs / Against the use of nature" (1.3.148–50). Here he acknowledges his wicked thoughts inspired by the Sisters' words, but he does not place the Sisters in a clear moral frame, outside of his pregnant use of the word *nature*. Furthermore, Banquo, knowing the prophecy Macbeth had received just before the meeting, repeatedly prompts a response from his friend in their conversation with Ross and Angus, when Macbeth finds himself unable to speak as he is mentally rapt in the planning of a "fantastical" murder. The significance he ascribes the Sisters Macbeth later downplays

in conversation with Banquo, who knows well the effect their encounter has had on him. In passing, Banquo tells Macbeth, "I dreamt last night of the three Weïrd Sisters. / To you they have showed some truth." Macbeth, with preposterous nonchalance, shrugs off Banquo's reminder with "I think not of them" (2.1.25–28). Unlike Banquo, he possesses ambition in spades. Even before he met the Sisters, the idea of taking the throne had already occurred to him, as well as to those around him, as evidenced by the king's preempting Macbeth's bid by naming Malcolm as successor (1.4.41–48) and by Ross's statement, made after Duncan dies and Malcolm runs away, that "'tis most like / The sovereignty will fall upon Macbeth" (2.4.41–42).

In the letter to his wife recounting his meeting with the Sisters, Macbeth never indicates that they are evil. He says, "They met me in the day of success, and I have learned by the perfect'st report they have more in them than mortal knowledge. When I burned in desire to question them further, they made themselves air, into which they vanished" (1.5.1–5). He calls them Weird Sisters, which tempts the modern reader to interpret Macbeth as revealing their strangeness if not their wickedness; but as noted earlier, *weird* evokes a mysterious godliness, not necessarily eccentricity. Instead, he notes they have in them more than mortal knowledge and refers to them by a title Holinshed tells us means they are "goddesses of destinie," before testifying to their miraculous ability to disappear into thin air. Whereas Banquo characterizes the Weird Sisters as Christian demons, Macbeth depicts them as pagan gods. He seeks to present them as neutral supernatural messengers in possession of the truth. Rhetorically, Macbeth wished not to baptize the Sisters, only to defang them.

Lady Macbeth's first acquaintance with the Sisters was made in Macbeth's equivocal letter. Upon reading it, she makes no comment on the Sisters. Instead, she briefly celebrates the message and then imputes Macbeth's gentle nature. Her one comment on the Sisters speaks to Macbeth's need of her cruelty to claim the crown, "[w]hich fate and metaphysical aid doth seem / To have thee crowned withal" (1.5.32–33). Like Macbeth, she does not speak about the

moral or eternal identity of the Sisters but instead gives their communications the neutral descriptor "metaphysical." What this adjective does imply, however, is the role that divine right plays in the reign of a monarch animated thereby. Divine right, like the Sisters' promises, supplies "metaphysical aid" to the monarch in support of his claim. Most dare not even question it, the source being so indubitable.

Curiously, while Lady Macbeth does not question the nature of the Weird Sisters, she does speak of evil. By her account, Macbeth is ambitious, but ambition is insufficient without the "illness [that] should attend it." He contradicts himself in that he lacks the willingness to harm those who stand in his way, but he would willingly accept a victory gotten wrongly—yet he would prefer not to act wrongly himself. Fortunately for him, his lady plans to "pour [her] spirits in [his] ear," resolving by her venomous cruelty the conflict betwixt Macbeth and greatness. Perceiving the need for assistance in her wicked effort, like a good Christian Lady Macbeth says a prayer[51]—though, the prayer is not to the God of Christianity but to "spirits . . . murd'ring ministers" whom she supplicates to fundamentally alter nature, to change her from a woman to something much more brutal, to remove conscience, and to hide her demonic doings from judgment (1.5.47–61). Between the metaphysical aid of these wild gods and Lady Macbeth's new adherence to their religion, Macbeth's ambition will be actualized.

Although in presenting them Macbeth made the Sisters seem less repulsive, Lady Macbeth actively sought the assistance of demons in gaining the Sisters' promises.[52] Her response to Macbeth's neutral presentation of his encounter with the Sisters demonstrates the zealotry—manifested both physically in her planned murder of Duncan and metaphysically in her fanatical supplications to the supposed source of the prophecies—to which a theory like divine right can lead, regardless of rhetorical moderation (like that of King James) employed in presenting it.

After meeting the Weird Sisters again and receiving the second set of prophecies, Macbeth starts to believe his own account of them. He begins act 5 by piously citing them as "[t]he spirits that know / All mortal consequences" (5.3.4–5). He quotes their

prophecies like a zealous Christian might Holy Scripture (5.3.1–11). Siward informs Malcom of Macbeth's astonishing acquiescence in their march toward Dunsinane (5.4.11–13). Macbeth's choice of passivity, though Malcolm attributes it to military tactics, comes largely from his overconfidence in the revelations of his gods. He followed Moses's injunction to the children of Israel to "stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord,"[53] though the salvation he expected was not from the Lord, and it never came.

By act 5, scene 5, reality begins to set in: like Richard II's, Macbeth's faith (and therewith his sovereignty) wanes. Upon hearing of Lady Macbeth's death and the apparent march of Burnam Wood to Dunsinane, Macbeth sheds his reverence for the Weird Sisters, instead scorning them as he begins "to doubt th' equivocation of the fiend / That lies like the truth." Then, contemptuously rather than reverently, he quotes the prophecy that foretold the event (5.5.49–52). In the final scene of the play, after Macduff reveals himself as "being of no woman born," Macbeth declaims all confidence in the sisters: "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" (5.8.23–26). Macbeth begins act 5 as a zealous follower of the Weird Sisters and ends it as an embittered former believer.

Tensions between Christianity and Paganism

Macbeth's peculiar religious behavior evinces a mind influenced by the ubiquitous Christianity of his era, despite his pagan (or otherwise unchristian) pretentions. Generally, this manifests indirectly,[54] as Macbeth, consciously or not, casts his relationship to the supernatural through a Christian lens.[55] In "*Macbeth* and the Gospelling of Scotland," Paul Cantor points to this and other tensions between Christianity and paganism on display in *Macbeth*. He notes the many contradictions the Weird Sisters embody, particularly that they are both "a link to the older pagan forces in Scotland" and apparent "enemies of orthodox religion."[56] He suggests that the Sisters may represent the difficulty of synthesizing Christianity and paganism.[57] Macbeth's worship of them mirrors that uneasy combination.

Cantor finds in this strangely mixed influence of the Weird Sisters a "demonic parody," of Christianity.[58] He wrote,

> although as "instruments of darkness" (I.iii.124) the witches must be viewed as enemies of orthodox religion, the principles in which they in effect instruct Macbeth are at least in one respect indistinguishable from Christian beliefs. What the witches teach Macbeth is after all a lesson in providence. The providential order they represent may be demonic and lead Macbeth to his damnation, but the fact remains that their prophecies embody for Macbeth a form of religious teaching, that earthly events are governed by higher powers.[59]

To Cantor's point, Christianity's influence on Macbeth likely accounts for his credulity toward the Sisters. Paganism of most any stripe by the imperfect, petulant, and often cruel nature of its deities commends its adherents to approach the gods carefully, not to say mistrustfully.[60] Macbeth, however, learns pleasing things that appear true on the surface from horrid, unearthly creatures and accepts their word quite uncritically. Such trust embodies the nature of the simple faith the consistent God of Christianity invites.

Paganism in part stands for the brutality of earthly politics in this play, as noted symbolically in the warrior-thanes' rebellion against and death of Duncan, the "most sainted king." Duncan fails to adequately account for this brutal reality and pays for it. Macbeth takes a different path, seeking to reject Christianity outright, but he finds himself caught in the Christian conditions of his era. He seems incapable of worshipping his gods without slipping in and out of a Christian paradigm. His own mind is "gospelled" despite his best efforts. Macbeth therefore falls into a default amalgamation of Christianized paganism that the Sisters represent. And, just as Duncan finds his end at the hands of a representative of the pagan impulse in Scotland, Macbeth has his head unseated by the pious Macduff.

Lady Macduff's reflection on the insufficiency of dependence on divine support in this fallen world mirrors a fundamental

challenge Macbeth encounters. Macbeth designs to kill Macduff's family. When a servant warns Lady Macduff to flee the coming danger, she replies,

> Whither should I fly?
> I have done no harm. But I remember now
> I am in this earthly world, where to do harm
> Is often laudable, to do good sometime
> Accounted dangerous folly. Why then, alas,
> Do I put up that womanly defense
> To say I have done no harm? (4.2.81–87)

She begins by asserting her righteousness as a justification for not running away. This statement argues for a belief that God protects the truly innocent from harm in this life. Lady Macduff quickly realizes her folly and reminds herself that her "womanly defense"[61] does not account for the fallen nature of this world. In this world, harmlessness and goodness are seen as womanly weakness, "sometime / Accounted dangerous folly." Harmfulness, however, "is often laudable." Were the world heavenly rather than "earthly," things would be different. But since the fall of Adam, innocence no longer holds as an argument for perfect safety in this life.

Macbeth, in contrast, consistently seeks perfection in his sovereignty via an "Absolute Act,"[62] a "be-all and . . . end-all." Macbeth first seeks this in the murder of Duncan, wherein he hopes to "trammel up the consequence and catch / With his surcease success" (1.7.1–7). Then he realizes that the act failed because his sovereignty, though secured, is imperfect. "To be thus is nothing, / But to be safely thus," and Macbeth's safety on the throne fails with his death, for he has no heir (3.1.62–69).[63] For one like Macbeth who wishes to "jump the life to come" (1.7.7), the only immortal glory he can hope for comes through his earthly legacy. If his dynasty dies with him, Macbeth's death and damnation will be complete. He can expect no immortal reward in heaven and has failed to get one on earth. Therefore, Banquo's seed, those

promised the throne after Macbeth, still stand in the way—if the prophecy is to be trusted—of Macbeth's perfection in establishing a royal succession, if only by naming an heir. When Banquo is killed but his son Fleance escapes, Macbeth mourns, "I had else been perfect" (3.4.23). Macbeth's approach to sovereignty, his belief in perfection in this life, demonstrates the influence of Christianity on his thinking, even if he has rejected Christian doctrine. Only in Christianity is a promise of complete perfection attainable, but not in this life. Macbeth inverts the Christian teaching and strives to bring heaven to earth, to become a mortal god, although he has lost any chance of living in God's presence because he has surrendered his "eternal jewel / . . . to the common enemy of man" (3.1.73–74).[64]

Perfection in earthly sovereignty through the absolute act eludes Macbeth just as protection from physical harm through individual righteousness eludes Lady Macduff. For Christians, the next life permits perfection, this life does not, regardless of an individual's innocence or ability. Macbeth deals with the same problem as Lady Macduff: both fail to sufficiently appreciate the impossibility of their proposal until too late and die because of their mistake. The deleterious influence of a misapplied Christianity leads to their individual downfalls.[65]

Macbeth casts off all strategy and politics in favor of faith in the promises of a kind of providence. Seated on his throne, he awaits his doom. Macbeth's overconfidence in his fate has led him to disregard even the necessity of loyal followers, such that by the final battle, "none serve with him but constrainèd things / Whose hearts are absent too" (5.4.17–18). Macbeth demonstrates by his heedless, ambitious descent into hell,[66] as clearly shown, that even "fate and metaphysical aid" (1.5.32) are insufficient to secure sovereignty absent prudence and popular support. In Shakespeare's sardonic presentation, Macbeth's demonic right monarchy fails disastrously.

Macbeth's Demonic Parody of Divine Right

The political catastrophes that animate *Macbeth* demonstrate to the attentive partisan of divine right—and particularly to King

James—the practical dangers the theory might introduce. Shakespeare here attempts to find the logical conclusion of supernaturally upheld sovereignty by asking, "what if God spoke to the king directly? What if the king's claim relied on a direct revelation rather than a questionable claim of divine sovereignty that passed to him inherently?" The play answers: a king would *nevertheless* lack the sure sovereignty claimed by zealous proponents of divine right; that theory, though sometimes a necessary, powerful support of a king's claim (as in the case of King James) proves finally insufficient on its own. Furthermore, Macbeth's experience with the Weird Sisters shows not only this deficiency but also the limits of mortal reason. The king's understanding of a revelation—colored as it is by his experience, the inherent weakness of the intellect, and the blinding light of ambition and other passions—might overlap only imperfectly, if at all, with God's will.

Compare this high-stakes uncertainty of a divine right monarch with the ever-present denominational disputes over biblical interpretation.[67] Macbeth derives his authority not from ancient texts but from prophecies spoken to him personally by his gods. And yet, Macbeth still failed in his interpretation. Not only that, but his credulous legitimation of rule by an essentially unquestionable source inevitably led him to "a sense of absolutist power inherent in tyranny."[68]

Someone wishing to forward these teachings in the political context of a divine right monarchy might encounter resistance, if not mortal danger. In fact, another play more explicitly critical of divine right, *Richard II*, was the subject of controversy in Shakespeare's day. Richard's deposition scene was censored, never performed publicly until after Queen Elizabeth's death.[69] Had Shakespeare written another play on the subject but included direct revelations from God to the king culminating in regicide, he would likely have encountered worse persecution than in the first instance.

Given the historical circumstances surrounding its release, Queen Elizabeth worried *Richard II* was written with her in mind. But *Macbeth*, as demonstrated here, was certainly written with

King James in mind. Since his encounter with the censors under Queen Elizabeth, it seems Shakespeare learned greater caution when composing plays that bore on contemporary politics.

Shakespeare holds up a funhouse mirror to divine right,[70] displaying through *Macbeth*'s fanciful reflection the dangers that may await a king should he uncritically espouse that theory. The distorted lens through which Shakespeare projects the images allowed him more intellectual freedom than he would otherwise have enjoyed. Given these apparent intentions for the play, his approach to the critiques he forwarded required great care. James's theory of the divine right of kings was known to Shakespeare. Seeing the extremes to which these beliefs might tend, Shakespeare includes in the play he wrote for King James not only flattery but corrective instruction as well. Two examples of such instruction follow.

The Problem of Tyrannicide

Much like Richard II, King James rejects the idea of any person righteously rising up against the king, even if the king is providentially destined for removal. All who lead uprisings, whether the king ought to be removed or not, are in sin. In the contract

> betwixt the king and his people, God is doubtles the only ludge, both because to him onely the king must make count of his adminstration (as is oft said before) as likewise by the oath in the coronation, God is made iudge and reuenger of the breakers: For in his presence, as only iudge of oaths, all oaths ought to be made. Then since God Contract is the onely Judge betwixt the two parties contractors, the cognition and reuenge must onely appertaine to him.[71]

James does, however, confess that the people are often required to bear with the king's imperfections, and perhaps injustices and tyrannies. Although the people have no right to revolt, the king *might* still rightfully be removed, as God wills.[72] James suggests that those who remove him will still be in sin, even if they do so

under the guiding hand of providence;[73] he excludes the possibility that God could instruct anyone directly to rebel.

Macbeth features two uprisings: first, Macbeth taking the throne from Duncan; and second, Malcolm taking the throne back from Macbeth. The former is wholly wicked, the latter ostensibly good. Yet, by James's account, neither uprising could be justified. This on its face shows the excesses toward which divine right tends. No room for prudent action in such situations is found with this understanding of sovereignty. None can discriminate between the Gunpowder Plot, the bloody sacrifice of Julius Caesar, or later the American Revolution. Even when a clear tyrant has wrongfully taken the throne, the subjects must bear it patiently. No permissible action by the just parties exists. Perhaps the teaching is good in principle and points toward durable sovereignty, but politics necessitates flexibility. James and others like him might count such practicalities as unworthy of Christian subjects and rulers, but without a holistic sense of material realities to inform theory, theory always proves deficient if not dangerous in practice.

Notably, Macbeth draws on supernatural backing as he mounts the throne, Malcolm makes no such claims either in soliloquy or public rhetoric, but he does partner with the Christian soldiers of England and the pious Macduff.[74] Shakespeare's attribution of supernatural motives to Macbeth and not directly to Malcolm brings divine right into question. The natural foil to Macbeth's disastrous demonic right monarchy would be a traditional divine right monarchy, if such represented a commendable theory of sovereignty.[75] Indeed, Malcolm's success came by strategy and statecraft, but it did rely on the faith and zealotry of a particular Christian: Macduff. Malcolm's test of Macduff's motives for supporting him is born of his concern that Macduff has abandoned his family to save himself, not for the good of Scotland. For all Malcolm knows, Macduff might wish primarily to ride his coattails back into favor at court, given his recent falling out with Macbeth; or worse, he is a spy for Macbeth, as those who came before him proved to be (4.3.136–39). He therefore claims many false, vicious things about himself to see how Macduff will react. Macduff is

repulsed and downtrodden, and so Malcolm deems him a worthy partner in his bid for the throne. He has proved he desires the good of Scotland (4.3.1–158). Malcolm therefore takes the next opportunity to mold Macduff to his purposes. Malcolm advises Macduff to convert into anger his grief at the slaughter of his family. Macduff's sorrow becomes "the whetstone" to sharpen his passion; "blunt not the heart," counsels Malcom, but "enrage it" (4.3.268–69). Macduff demonstrates his prowess as a soldier in taking this advice and dethroning Macbeth, but Malcolm proves himself a statesman of the highest order by winning Macduff's affection, harnessing his tragedy, and winning himself the throne.[76] The triumphant, righteous king in the play, the king presumably set up as an ancestral mirror in which James should seek to see himself reflected, regained the throne by his virtue and arms, claiming sovereignty on that basis primarily, leaving arguments for supernatural claims in his favor to others.

The two uprisings cut sharply against James's teaching on the subject. Duncan, by the play's account, was a righteous and good king. As Macbeth says, "[T]his Duncan / Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been / So clear in his great office, that his virtues / Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against / The deep damnation of his taking-off" (1.7.16–20).[77] Duncan's righteousness, like that of Lady Macduff noted earlier, did nothing to save him from death and usurpation. In contrast, Macbeth shows by his foolhardy trust in the Sisters that supernatural foundations for monarchy prove weak when the rains descend and the floods come and the winds blow and beat upon the kingdom, because Macbeth fell too. Neither Duncan nor Macbeth was protected as both perhaps expected to be by their divine behavior or metaphysical aid.[78]

Macbeth's Teaching on Providence

That *Macbeth* contains a teaching, as Cantor notes, on providence is a second example of Shakespeare's corrective instruction. Macbeth killed Duncan and rose to the throne on the back of a convoluted but accurate demonic promise, but he was soon usurped, making way for the line of kings branching from Malcolm,

and then Banquo by way of Fleance, all noted in the same prophecy. King James argues that his ascent and sovereignty are rooted in the divine right of kings. Knowing that *Macbeth* tells the ancient story of his bloodline's obtaining the throne of Scotland, one could argue that the Weird Sisters themselves acted as agents of divine providence. For, their apparent wickedness notwithstanding, the motivation they gave Macbeth to pursue and achieve the objects of his deepest ambitions led to the rise of a line of kings that would eventually lead to King James's ascent to the thrones of both Scotland and England. Hamlet's comment on providence and human agency appropriately articulates this view:

> Our indiscretion sometime serves us well
> When our deep plots do pall; and that should learn us
> There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
> Rough-hew them how we will. (*Hamlet*, 5.2.8–12)

One could interpret *Macbeth*'s convoluted web of equivocal prophecy and appalling murder as a moment in the series of events by which divine providence fated the rise of James VI and I, as James himself would probably like to have done.[79] However, Shakespeare's critique of divine right might extend to this point as well. James's claim of divine right rests on the demonic remonstrance of the Weird Sisters. Shakespeare suggests that equivocal fate like that revealed by the Sisters more accurately characterizes the tumultuous movements of history and politics presented in the play than does divine providence guiding events toward James's rule. He articulated this in Macbeth's famous speech after his wife's death. Given the larger critique and context, Shakespeare avers that the disappointments attendant to the political life of the partisan of divine right leads eventually to the conclusion that all life and politics is "but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more. It is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (5.5.27–31). The totalizing effect of divine right tends toward an all-or-nothing view of things, as Richard II no less than Macbeth

demonstrates. If this be-all sovereignty fails to measure up to its lofty promise, the king's foundation crumbles and in its collapse is revealed the end-all of politics, and perhaps of life. Happily, this is far from Shakespeare's last word on the question of political legitimacy;[80] it might, however, be his last word on divine right: that theory, though often useful and perhaps based in some truth, never sufficiently upholds sovereignty to recommend its untempered application. One who, like Malcolm,[81] can competently synthesize his nation's dominant metaphysical paradigm with a clear view of the brutal (not to say pagan) nature of politics secures for himself the safest seat of power.

Conclusion

Shakespeare prudently dressed his exploration of the logical conclusion of divine right in new clothes. God is replaced by goddesses of fate in the guise of evil hags. Pious royals are replaced by the brutal, ambitious Macbeths. These chosen devotees are guided to their ultimate destruction by demonic deceit. Furthermore, the main characters of the play are evil, those seeking to conquer them are good.

The divine right of kings, by Shakespeare's account, suffers from an insufficient appreciation of the realities of politics. That he included in this most thorough and difficult exploration of this topic practical teachings intended for the princely advocate of divine right in his immediate audience drives home the teaching twice over. Shakespeare did not merely pontificate on the concept but boldly ventured to instruct. This he did in the most prudent, thoughtful way he could. The story portrays King James's family and includes many elements to draw the king's attention so that once he has it, Shakespeare can gently guide him. Much like Lucretius, Shakespeare presents his hardest teachings by following the practice of doctors who, when administering bitter medicine, "first touch the rim all around the cup with the sweet golden moisture of honey."[82]

It is anyone's guess whether King James downed the draught. However, serious students of politics should take up the cup

Shakespeare prepared for the king and drink deeply. Although few today fancy themselves worthy to rule by divine mandate, it is a universal human tendency to color one's actions with a patina of transcendence. *Macbeth*'s dark echo of divine right—a most extreme presentation of this natural inclination—proves invaluable in understanding the dangers such beliefs can introduce.

Notes

1. Kathryn Hunter portrayed all three sisters in the production.
2. George Walter Williams, "*Macbeth*: King James's Play," *South Atlantic Review* 47, no. 2 (May 1982): 12–21, see esp. 21–22.
3. They marched in King James's procession, according to Williams, "*Macbeth*: King James's Play," 12.
4. This production likely took place before a very intimate audience in the palace, including King James and his brother King Christian of Denmark. See Henry N. Paul, *The Royal Play of "Macbeth": When, Why, and How It Was Written*, 1st ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1950), 317–31.
5. W. G. Boswell-Stone, *Shakespere's Holinshed: The Chronicles and The Historical Plays Compared* (New York: Longman's Green and Co., 1898), 35n1. He asserts, this "descent is a fiction." On p. 35 he also examines the descent and its connection to the play's "Show of eight kings." Cf. Williams, "*Macbeth*: King James's Play," 20–22.
6. For a summary of these claims, see the opening chapter, "The Royal Play of Macbeth," 1–14.
7. Ibid., 399–401. Jane Rickard gives a detailed account of similarities and (more importantly) differences in Shakespeare's treatment of witchcraft and devils to James's in *Writing the Monarch in Jacobean England: Jonson, Donne, Shakespeare and the Works of King James* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 232–35.
8. Kenneth Muir opined that while Henry Paul "doubtless exaggerated . . . [,] there is no doubt that Shakespeare had taken the trouble to read several of James's works." *Shakespeare Studies* 13 (1980): 312. Williams uses this quote and reference, as well as the dispute between Henry Paul and Marvin Rosenberg in his essay "*Macbeth*: King James's Play," see 12 and endnotes 1 and 2. Jane Rickard provides a detailed account of Shakespeare's understanding of James's writings, as well as of Shakespeare's intentions for *Macbeth* with James as the intended audience, even suggesting an early staging of the play's use of a mirror to bring James's actual image onto the stage, in *Writing the Monarch*, 230–43.

9. This he does despite Christianity's apparent influence on him. All references to Shakespeare are parenthetical, as demonstrated here. Footnotes are employed only in case further clarification is needed. I use Folger Shakespeare Library editions of the plays for all citations.
10. My final claim about James as the unifier of the two nations is wholly unique; however, the construction of this section, the arrangement and use of the details as they appear here, relies heavily on Paul Cantor, "*Macbeth* and the Gospelling of Scotland," in *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, ed. John Alvis and Thomas West (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2000), 315–52. Note esp. pp. 317–22, on the "symbolic geography" of the play.
11. Several examples from Henry Paul's argument appear above. Greater detail for *Macbeth* as a "royal play" can be found in Paul's thorough work on that subject.
12. Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Macbeth* (Newark, DE: University of Delaware Press, 1993). See esp. 557–58, but also 386 and 521.
13. This claim supplements the helpful treatment in Rickard, in which she concludes the play employs a "purposeful elusiveness. Through its subject matter the play courts topical reading and sets up a series of connections with various works by the King, making many different associations and interpretations available to its audiences. But none of these connections is specific and detailed enough to allow audiences and readers to be sure Shakespeare was consciously engaging with James's works or to determine his view of those works." Rickard, *Writing the Monarch*, 242. The account offered in this paper supplies additional support for Rickard's reading and offers evidence of Shakespeare's judgment of James's writings.
14. Jean-Christophe Mayer, "Providence and Divine Right in the English Histories," in *Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Religion*, ed. Hannibal Hamlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 158. Summarizing John Neville Figgis, *The Divine Right of Kings*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922). Charles Woods, *Joan of Arc and Richard III: Sex, Saints, and Government in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), argues also for the importance of Parliament in divine right.
15. Figgis lists the following reasons: "His claim to the throne of England rested upon descent alone; barred by two Acts of Parliament, it could only be successfully maintained by means of the legitimist principle. Further, it was disputed by the Roman controversialists, who had not sufficient hope of converting James to make them love his title. Doleman's attack on the hereditary principle is written from the Papalist

standpoint. But it was not only from the Roman side that the position of James was threatened. Presbyterianism in Scotland, as expounded by Knox or Buchanan, and inwoven with politics by Murray and Morton, was a system of clericalism as much more irritating and meddlesome as it was stronger and more popular in its basis than that of the Papal sovereignty." *The Divine Right of Kings*, 137.

16. Ibid., 138.
17. *King James VI and I Political Writings*, ed. Johann P. Sommerville (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 72. Quotes from James are rendered verbatim. Henceforth *King James*.
18. *King James*, 82.
19. Ibid., 63.
20. Ibid., 64.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid., 1.
23. Ibid., 64.
24. Explications of this in greater detail can be found in the two chapters on the subject in *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, ed. John E. Alvis and Thomas G. West (Wilmington, DE: ISI, 2000). Treatments of divine right appear in other of Shakespeare's history plays, though less directly. Even a cursory glance at Shakespeare's two tetralogies demonstrates his complicated, often skeptical view of the subject.
25. He even includes in the list that Richard prevented "poor Bolingbroke / About his marriage" (2.1.175–76), a wrong against the exiled duke not made known elsewhere in the play.
26. Carlisle seems to contribute considerably to Richard's theory of divine right. Later in the play when Bolingbroke is soon to be crowned, Carlisle gives a speech that expounds on his comment to the king quoted above (4.1.123–41).
27. Note similarity to James's own understanding of the king in *Trew Law* outlined above.
28. As one might expect his thought to do, even as a matter of vulgar self-justification.
29. The success of Macduff's thumotic hunt for and slaughter of Macbeth (treated in detail later in this essay), thereby reobtaining the crown for Malcolm, argues with it a legitimate claim to sovereignty. His claim resembles that of Coriolanus, tempered with the question of expediency forwarded by Bolingbroke here.
30. Within his own theory, perhaps he had not considered that God had, indeed, given his say so to Bolingbroke, even if only as a punishment to Richard and not a reward for Henry.

31. John 8:23. I use the King James Version.
32. An argument could be made that Jesus could mysteriously vanish before his resurrection as in Luke 4:30. Jesus is being threatened with death and is inexplicably described as "passing through the midst of them." Also, John 5:13, where Jesus is said to have "conveyed himself away" through a large crowd. The meanings of these and similar instances are less clearly of the same sort as the examples after his resurrection.
33. Luke 24:13–35. Verse 30, Jesus "vanished out of their sight." Verse 36, as the disciples discuss the event, "Jesus himself stood in the midst of them," though he was not there before.
34. John 20:26–30. Verse 26, Jesus appears with "the doors being shut."
35. Boswell-Stone, *Shakespere's Holinshed,* 24.
36. In the Folger Shakespeare Library edition, the word is rendered throughout as *weïrd*, to emphasize the difference in pronunciation and meaning.
37. On this point, Shakespeare and Holinshed rhetorically differ. In the *Chronicles*, Holinshed says that Macbeth and Banquo's experience with the Weird Sisters "was reputed at first but some vaine fantasticall illusion . . . but afterwards the common opinion was, that these women were either the weird sisters that is (as ye would say) the goddeses of destinie, or else some nymphs or feiries" (Boswell-Stone, *Shakespere's Holinshed*, 24). In Holinshed's initial account, goddess was only one among several possible mythic identities. However, he later leaves off his uncertainty on the question, referring to the first prophecy as "the woords of the three weird sisters" (ibid., 25). Shakespeare picks up on this change and leaves out all doubt. The women are never presented as other than the Weird Sisters, including referring to themselves by the title before Macbeth arrives (1.3.33), solidifying their place in a pagan pantheon.
38. See Matthew 24.
39. David Lowenthal addresses Hecate's relationship to the Sisters in *Shakespeare's Thought: Unobserved Details and Unsuspected Depth in Eleven Plays* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 146–54. The question of Hecate's role is important, interesting, and disputed in the literature. For the purposes of this paper, it proves too great a distraction to explore in very great depth, but I acknowledge this lacuna in discussing the Sisters.
40. Joel Coen excludes Macbeth's demand and the final apparition, further emphasizing the point I make here.
41. David Nichols first pointed out this understanding of Job in a personal conversation at Baylor University in 2020.
42. Since they are apparently not fully corporeal, they can presumably take different forms, perhaps a unified form containing all three as Coen suggests.

43. See John 10:30, John 17, and 1 John 5:7.
44. Many of the attributes mentioned above point to the supernatural status of the Sisters, but not necessarily specifically to a comparison to the Trinity, as I am arguing. These opening points of basic comparison certainly bring the Weird Sisters into a pagan pantheon, where one finds the presence of other gods with comparable attributes. Most potent, of course, are the Greek Fates (and other similar pagan deities in other traditions), who are three in person and know all human events. This is what Holinshed suggests when he calls the Sisters "goddesses of destinie." I do not deny the pagan resonances throughout the play. Indeed, Paul Cantor, David Lowenthal, Carson Holloway, and Jan Blits, who all emphasize these elements, have informed my analysis. That the Sisters are pagan does not negate their standing in for the Christian Godhead, given the complicated relationship of pagan Scotland to "Gospelled" Scotland. That tension is not resolved in this essay, but it is here acknowledged as an essential feature of the play, demonstrated especially in Paul Cantor's essay referenced several times below. On the question "Are the Sisters meant to be seen as satanic or pagan?" I answer yes. Without this tension their role as Macbeth's trinity would lose much of its color and depth.
45. David Lowenthal notes in his chapter on *Macbeth* in *Shakespeare's Thought*, 148, that "two-thirds of what the witches tell him are not prophecies at all," since he had Glamis before the play began and Cawdor had already been given him by the king (unbeknownst to Macbeth), though Lowenthal acknowledges "the power of the witches to know even these seems beyond any human power." To account for the Sisters knowing something mentioned quite far away, but knowable by anyone with ears and proximity, Joel Coen gives the Sisters the ability to transform themselves into ravens (this also explains how they "hover through the fog and filthy air"). In this form they fly to Duncan's camp to hear rumor of Macbeth's honor before greeting him in their semi-prophecy. Regardless of these statements as prophetic or simply impossible to know, the supernatural status of the Weird Sisters stands. The impossibility of their utterances is sufficient to convince the credulous, ambitious Macbeth.
46. Boswell-Stone, *Shakespere's Holinshed*, 23–24.
47. Ibid., 36.
48. As a matter of expediency, it should be noted that while it is true that the historical Macbeth was familiar with, indeed often consulted with, the wizards and witch from whom the latter prophecies came, for the sake of simplicity in the play, unifying the characters makes practical sense.

49. Interesting is that as a matter of history, Banquo's family gained their promises with greater success than did Macbeth. Apparently "the instruments of darkness," the devil, did in Banquo's case "speak true." This fact imputes some level of pagan neutrality, or perhaps even elevation to the status of agents of providence (as noted later in this essay) to the Sisters not afforded them in Banquo's own assessment. Rickard includes an admirable discussion of how the sisters also prophesy truths to James. Rickard, *Writing the Monarch*, 235–43.
50. Tim Burns suggests Macbeth reacted so because he and Lady Macbeth had already planned Duncan's murder and feared he had been found out. Timothy W. Burns, *Shakespeare's Political Wisdom* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 65, 70–71.
51. See Burns's comments on Lady Macbeth's religion in *Shakespeare's Political Wisdom*, 70–73.
52. Perhaps Lady Macbeth, sensing that the murder of Duncan was what the Weird Sisters' prophecy called for, considered the possibility that the Sisters were neither ministers of light nor neutral conveyors of fate.
53. Exodus 14:13.
54. For exceptions, see 2.2.30–46, Macbeth's near despair in recounting his inability to seek a blessing from God to Lady Macbeth immediately following Duncan's murder; and 3.1.69–77, Macbeth speaks of giving his "eternal jewel" to the "common enemy of man."
55. Consider Macbeth's reaction to the ghost of Banquo, who apparently demonstrates the power of Christ's resurrection, for "i' th' olden time, / Ere humane statute purg'd the gentle weal; / Ay, and since too, murthers have been perform'd / Too terrible for the ear. The time has been, / That when the brains were out, the man would die, / And there an end; but now they rise again" (3.4.91–96). See Cantor, "*Macbeth* and the Gospelling of Scotland," 322–24.
56. Ibid., 337–38.
57. Ibid., 338–39. Malcolm, as shown in two other places in this essay, offers a positive example of a statesmanship that accounts for both the Christian context of his era and the pagan reality of politics, without falling insensibly into either extreme.
58. Ibid., 333 and 338 for two examples: "a demonic parody of religious faith," and "a demonic parody of the crusading Christian warrior," assured of the success and justice of his cause. On p. 327 Macbeth himself is called a "demonic counterpart" to the "happy synthesis of pagan and Christian," contemplated by Holinshed in Shakespeare's historical source for the play.

59. Ibid., 333.
60. E.g., in *The Iliad*, when Agamemnon decided to raid Troy as a result of a dream sent by Zeus. Homer comments, "The fool. How could he know / what work the Father had in mind?" Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (London: Penguin Classics, 1998), 100. While Agamemnon uncritically (and wrongly) accepted the promise of Zeus in his dream much as Macbeth did the prophecies of the Weird Sisters, Homer in recounting the story conspicuously notes Agamemnon's mistake. The more commendable relationship to the divine in Homer is that of Odysseus, who frequently mistrusts, subverts, tricks, or otherwise disobeys the gods with whom he interacts, demonstrating in himself a sort of pagan imago dei.
61. Given Lady Macbeth's characterization of things, this could be renamed a "Christian defense," as Cantor notes in "*Macbeth* and the Gospelling of Scotland," 320. And although Lady Macduff rejects this defense after a moment's thought, one cannot help but think that Macduff could not, unless he were a monstrous fool, have left his family in Scotland unprotected unless he believed something like what Lady Macduff asserts here. Perhaps in her rejection of her husband earlier in the scene she also rejects in this portion of the scene his teaching on innocence and divine protection.
62. Cantor, "*Macbeth* and the Gospelling of Scotland," 329.
63. Historically (and *Macbeth* suggests) before Duncan's attempt to name Malcom his successor, Scotland was an elective monarchy. Duncan, however, had changed the rules, favoring the more English system of hereditary kingship. Macbeth, after being slighted by this breach in tradition, has no intention of returning the system to its old ways and wishes to secure his own rule as firmly as possible, then presumably name his own successor, subverting the promise made to Banquo's family. For the foolishness of Macbeth's attempt to maintain one part of the prophecy while defeating another, see Ted J. Richards, "Lincoln and Shakespeare at Peoria," *Perspectives on Political Science* 51, no. 1 (2022): 7–14, esp. section entitled "Fate, Prophecy, and Natural Rights."
64. Cantor forwards the argument for the influence of Christianity on Macbeth outlined here, "*Macbeth* and the Gospelling of Scotland," esp. 329–33.
65. In Lady Macduff's case, perhaps the Christianity of her husband.
66. Lady Macbeth summons hell's smoke to cover their murder, at 1.5.57–60; the porter pretends Macbeth's castle is hell in the same moments

the murder is being carried out, at 2.3.1–20; Lady Macbeth says mid-sleepwalk, looking around her own castle, "Hell is murky," at 5.1.36–37.

67. King James VI and I is the famous Protestant king who produced the first standard translation of the Bible in English for wide distribution. This Protestant intent on making the word of God available to all men interprets the scriptures far differently than does the Catholic pope, whose approach to scripture is far more aristocratic. Yet, both claimed divine authority thereby, each condemning the other from the same scriptures (see Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address).
68. Arthur F. Kinney, "Scottish History, the Union of the Crowns and the Issue of Right Rule: The Case of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*," in *Rennaissance Culture in Context: Theory and Practice*, ed. Jean R. Brink and William F. Gentrup (London: Routledge, 1993), 26. See also 25–28.
69. Elizabeth and her two predecessors all failed to produce heirs to the throne, hence James's rise. Mayer claims, "According to Figgis and, well before him, to medieval and Tudor theorists, hereditary right was supposed to be an emanation of divine right, all laws being of divine origin." Mayer, "Providence and Divine Right," 159–60. See also Janet Clare, "The Censorship of the Deposition Scene in *Richard II*," *Review of English Studies* 41, no. 161 (1990): 89–94.
70. And a literal mirror to King James, as Rickard notes in *Writing the Monarch*, 236–42.
71. *King James*, 83.
72. Ibid., 85.
73. See Isaiah 10:5–7.
74. However, Macduff said upon Duncan's death, "Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope / The Lord's anointed temple and stole thence / The life o' th' building" (2.3.77–79), and Macduff supports Malcolm. The Macduffs' Christianity (noted above), however, led to his family's demise. Any scholars tempted to claim an influence of Macduff's divine right beliefs (not directly supported by the text) in spurring Malcolm to Macbeth's removal must confess that his imprudent Christianity does not commend itself for emulation.
75. In *Shakespeare's Political Wisdom* (67–70 and 93–96), Burns suggests that Malcolm is not a Christian. If his account holds, the notion of Malcolm's choice to forgo the language of divine right follows. One could perhaps say that King Edward of England, unquestionably a divine right monarch in the play, serves as the traditional divine right foil to Macbeth in the play. Be that as it may in theory, Edward has no lines in the play and makes an appearance in only a few short comments; but Malcolm,

the genuine alternative to Macbeth, interestingly, seems to synthesize Edward (or perhaps more appropriately Duncan) and Macbeth.

76. Malcolm may not have been a religious zealot, but he certainly demonstrated his facility in making use of such zealotry as that evidently held by Macduff.
77. Holinshed's account differs. The people did not see Duncan as a good king; instead, they felt he "was so soft and gentle of nature" that they wished he was moderated by some of Macbeth's cruelty. Duncan proved "negligent in punishing offendors, manie misruled persons tooke occasion thereof to trouble the peace and quiet state of the commonwealth, by seditious commotions." In Holinshed, Duncan might have been gentle and Christian, but he was a poor king. *Shakespere's Holinshed*, 18–19.
78. This lesson also speaks directly to James's reign, as there was an attempt on his life in the famous Gunpowder Plot not long before this play was first staged.
79. A similar interpretation has been forwarded of the chaos throughout English history culminating in Richard III's death at the hands of Richmond. Richard too could be an agent of providence, as suggested in Mayer, "Providence and Divine Right," 157–58.
80. Consider the models forwarded by Malcolm, Bolingbroke, and King Henry V.
81. See also *Henry V*.
82. Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. Cyril Bailey (Carmel, IN: Liberty Fund, 1910), 33. Available at the Liberty Fund Online Library, http://oll-resources.s3.amazonaws.com/titles/2242/Lucretius1496_EBk_v6.0.pdf