Bloody Piety: Morality and Revenge in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*

By

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Abstract

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* are, respectively, the shortest and longest plays in his catalogue of tragedies. Perhaps by coincidence, these two plays highlight a very interesting facet of Shakespeare's catalogue: Can a Christian ethos accommodate the pagan context of revenge? The purpose of this thesis is to explore the (contrasting) elements of revenge and Christianity in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* to illuminate this complex idea of murder and piety at work in two of Shakespeare's most well-known works.

In *Macbeth* we see a world, for the most part, devoid of religion. The play starts with witchcraft and hinges upon a hellish and diabolical prophecy aided by the pagan goddess Hecate, who in this play, mainly represents witchcraft and impure magics. By the end of the play, few characters come across as wholly pure, and there are only a few indications that Scotland will return to a Christian and holy place. These indications rest with primarily minor characters, and most certainly do not rest with the supposed *hero* Macduff. Instead, the audience gets a cursory glance at Young Siward, a soldier who is nevertheless heralded by his father, Siward, as "God's soldier" (5.8, line 46) and Malcolm insisting that Young Siward is "worth more sorrow" (5.8, line 50). In many cases, whereas *Macbeth* is a play that revels in the immorality of both Macbeth and Macduff, *Hamlet* is a play of misaimed and misguided revenge.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, we see a world torn asunder by the conventions of Christianity and the afterlife. The Ghost cannot move on until "the foul crimes done in my days of nature/ Are burnt and purged away" (1.5, lines 3-14). Hamlet senior urges Hamlet on to his task, maintaining that Claudius must die and demanding that Hamlet seek revenge for his father's ghost. *Hamlet* is a play where the plot hinges on an apparently clear-cut motive for revenge. Hamlet embraces the Ghost's desire for revenge, swearing on the sword, and from that point on, leaves behind any sense of morality.

This thesis will take a deconstructionist lens and analyze in detail *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* in order to parse out important details and events relevant to the theme of Christian revenge and how the main characters in each play operate according to their Christian belief (or lack thereof) and position in the setting of both plays. The introduction to this thesis will set up the basic argument of Christian violence, revenge, and murder. I will be using sources from a wide variety of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* scholars, as well as cursory looks into the genre of revenge tragedy as a whole. Research includes Russ McDonald's *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents*, David Bevington's annotated collection *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, and Stephen Greenblatt's *Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare*. The following chapters will analyze each play's settings and characters to examine how they fit into this dichotomy of bloody piety. The conclusion will summarize the preceding arguments and codify them accordingly.

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my mother, Melissa Owens and my father, Jeffery Owens. Without their support, I would not have made it this far. My eternal gratitude to my parents.

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Introduction

Macbeth's Scotland and *Hamlet's* Denmark are putatively Christian societies, although both plays are driven by the decidedly non-Christian concept of revenge. In "Bloody Piety" I will examine the paradox/binary of "bloody piety" and demonstrate that these two Shakespearean dramas present a contrasting image of Christianity and revenge. Tension develops between the realm of mortal urges for revenge, and Christian acceptance surrounding the role of the supernatural and the lack of influence of Christianity in the play. In both *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, the title characters interact with their world in bloody and violent ways. Their various sins pile up rather quickly. In many ways, the plays echo each other. *Macbeth* begins with the witches conjuring some devilish plot, while *Hamlet* orients the viewer in a perpetual haunting by the enigmatic Ghost of Hamlet Senior. Likewise, both the witches and the Ghost play an integral part in leading the main character down a self-destructive path of unredeemable violence. Both plays feature a prominent act of regicide which drives the plot headlong into its inevitable end.

This thesis will examine these binary attributes of revenge and Christian piety that are in opposition in the plays and suggest that, Macbeth, Macduff, and Hamlet are corrupted by their desires, ambitions, and bloody acts. Revenge and paranoia drive the majority of their actions, and these actions all have disastrous consequences for the characters. In the case of Macbeth, his overly ambitious nature serves to undermine the aristocracy of Scotland and send it into political upheaval. However, such actions are only possible because Scotland itself is corrupted by a lack of religious fortitude. The presence of the witches and the malevolent powers they wield, given to them by Hecate, all serve to create a Scotland with a very weak spiritual center. Macbeth's actions further

distance Scotland from its Christian core, bathing the land in a bloody and paranoid attempt to hold onto a stolen throne. Similarly, in *Hamlet*, we see how Hamlet's depression and anger become the driving forces of the plot. His desire to unseat his uncle from the stolen throne of Hamlet Senior results in a bloody ritual where he disposes of all those in his way, which has disastrous consequences for Denmark. The Ghost compels Hamlet to adopt the sword as emblem of revenge, which Hamlet readily agrees to. Over the course of the play, Hamlet quickly racks up a hefty body count, and his descent into the mindset of a revenger makes him utterly reprehensible in action. Though he may have motives that the audience agrees with (taking his father's throne back), Hamlet is not concerned at all with restoring the proper rule of Denmark, but instead far more concerned with correcting his mother's perceived infidelities and murdering his uncle.

In Chapter 1, I will analyze Macbeth and Macduff's bloodthirsty mental states leading up to their final, bloody confrontation with each other. Likewise, considerable time will be spent making note of the fact that these two characters are not so dissimilar. In fact, as explicated in chapter one, Macbeth and Macduff are both shown to exhibit the same undeniable lust for battle. Their combat goes beyond the traditional roles of honorable combat between opposing sides. By engaging in such a bloody battle, the two men will work to destroy their own sense of selves. They will see the loss of their own morality; Macbeth and Macduff both share this shortcoming, as explicated in the chapter. Macduff descends into his basest instincts in his desire to get even with Macbeth.

Though he has cause to lash out at Macbeth, his words and actions all serve to dethrone him from his standard status as the hero of the play. At best, Macduff could be considered an anti-hero, but the aim of this chapter is to portray Macduff as simply a

revenger. In his heart, Macduff is not fighting for a higher power, Duncan's memory or Malcolm's cause; instead, Macduff is ruled entirely by his unstoppable rage and relentless pursuit of revenge after the death of his wife and son. Though a seemingly noble cause, Macduff's rampage clouds his better judgement and his bloody act of revenge on Macbeth goes beyond the bounds of simply returning order to Scotland. Macduff takes the role of the hero in *Macbeth*, slaying the terrible tyrant Macbeth and paving the way for Malcolm to reclaim his father's throne; Macduff does this at the express cost of his humanity. Though Malcolm assumes the throne, it happens as a result, instead, Macduff's primary goal is to revenge the sleights against him by Macbeth.

Macbeth ends with the sacrificial death of Young Siward, with the damned soul of Macbeth being the final man killed, and Macduff returning into the final scene, carrying his nemesis's head aloft. The play is one which "is assailed by contrasting exigencies which at times intersect with violence" (Ferrucci 335). Rather than finding the play "at times" engaging in violent discourses, we should instead notice that *Macbeth* is a play where violence permeates the entire plot and action of the play. Much like *Titus Andronicus*, *Macbeth* is a play that revels in the performance of violence. This performance gives the audience a window through which to view "hypothetical suppositions" (Picciuto 487). By allowing ourselves to see, picture, and engage in a monstrously revengeful and unchristian play, the audience is invited to entertain the idea of a world where spirituality is destroyed. As religion crumbles, we witness not only how men crumble and self-destruct, but how those actions have lasting consequences. Without a higher power to keep things in check, dark forces amass, ambition and revenge rule men's minds, and revenge ruins kingdoms and lives.

Of the two plays (*Macbeth* and *Hamlet*), only *Macbeth* offers a chance of salvation at the end. *Hamlet* is replete with death, while *Macbeth* offers a chance of redemption via martyring a godly young soldier. Only in Macbeth do we see a slight return to the Christian in Young Siward, and even then, "God's soldier" is quickly dealt with and disposed of by the violent Macbeth. *Hamlet* offers no chance of redemption, only an unseen burial for Hamlet as he is carried aloft, off stage as Fortinbras assumes control of Denmark.

In Chapter 1, when Macduff returns with Macbeth's bloody head fixed on a pike, Young Siward is inextricably connected to the image of the divine and Godly soldier. Macduff has fully embraced his bloodthirsty nature; he is a warrior first, a man second. In his case, "[w]ar horribly wounds individual bodies, families, societies, and the land itself" (Stimson 131). Macduff has embraced war, as it is the only way he can function and make sense of a Scotland so marred by pagan rituals and diabolic reigns of false kings. I propose that Young Siward presents a brief, if poignant, nod that Scotland will see better days. Young Siward is the final person to fall to Macbeth's sword. Likewise, he is a martyr to the religious renewal that must happen in Scotland. Though his part is small, Young Siward is mourned by Malcolm and Ross at the end of the play, and his father reaffirms that Young Siward lived an honorable and glorious life.

Macbeth may have been written with the visit of King Christian of Denmark in mind, as "Shakespeare was commissioned by King James to write a tragedy in honor of the occasion" (Ferrucci 334). The play itself was commissioned in order to entertain the royal guests, rather than for a more dramatic performance. Ferrucci sees the abruptness of the play as a fault in its construction, noting, "the play is short: the royal guests must not

be wearied" (334). However, perhaps Ferrucci has not considered the rationale behind such a short and succinct play. *Macbeth* perfectly executes the idea of a perverse society. No time is allotted to question the perverseness because none of the characters have a definite answer as to why Scotland is so wretched. The witches are ever present, ghastly in design and description. Macbeth is bloody and weary by the end of the play. Macduff has succumbed to his baser impulses, eager to revenge his slain son and wife. And all around, the combined forces of England and Scotland mourn for the slain Young Siward, the sacrificial figure who must die for Scotland to finally see the light.

While *Macbeth* slightly rectifies the moral degradation of Scotland, *Hamlet* sees the utter desolation of entire families in Denmark. Chapter 2 will focus on the Ghost and Hamlet. In *Hamlet*, the supernatural elements are decidedly more personal than Macbeth's interaction with the witches. Hamlet's desire to help his father Ghost is directly linked to the pathos of their father/son relationship. Chapter 2 of this thesis will focus on the relationship between the Ghost and Hamlet. In doing so, this will be a critique Hamlet's interactions with the other characters in the play after his initial encounter with the Ghost. The chapter will begin with a lengthy analysis of how the Ghost's background, dress, and attitude all further reveal the rotten state of Denmark.

The Ghost is the first point of inquiry for this play. Much of this section is informed by Marjorie Garber's book, *Shakespeare After All*. She clearly states, "it is with the Ghost, I think, that one should start in approaching and comprehending the world of the play and problems of Hamlet" (479). The Ghost is angry about his death, angry about his wife marrying his murderer, angry that Denmark is doing well without him, angry that he is not remembered by anyone, save his son. Likewise, Hamlet shares the Ghost's

anger about all of these things. Ironically, as mentioned (or rather unmentioned in the play) Denmark seems to be doing perfectly fine without its *rightful* king. Denmark is peaceful, jovial, and full of entertainment, at least as viewed in the scene where we are first introduced to Claudius and Gertrude, celebrating their recent betrothal. The court enjoys their festivities, save for Hamlet, who is still in mourning. The only two characters who seem unhappy are the Ghost and Hamlet. However, the soldiers in Act 1.1 show us that Claudius and Gertrude's reign is not as peaceful as it appears. The guards are obviously tense, ready to strike, repeatedly encountering the enigmatic, vengeful, and angry Ghost of Hamlet Senior. Due to this shared unhappiness and anger between them, the Ghost and Hamlet complement each other perfectly. The Ghost needs Hamlet's help to revenge his memory, and Hamlet needs his father's approval. Their match works perfectly together, save for the fact that this partnership ruins Denmark's political ruling class and puts it into the hands of a foreign government, namely, Norway.

The image of Hamlet's sword, and how it becomes a recurring image for Hamlet's utterly depraved notions of revenge against his uncle, Claudius, is a crucial piece of this reading. Once Hamlet swears an oath to his father's Ghost on the sword, Hamlet's lust for revenge overtakes his judgment. From this moment on, there is a noticeable shift in Hamlet's tone and actions. He becomes far more cruel and bloodthirsty. His mood shifts fluidly from hysteria to pensive rage. In moments when he has clear opportunities to murder Claudius, he hesitates for one reason or another. In other instances, Hamlet acts hastily and manically, thrusting his sword into the arras that Polonius hides behind. In this moment, Hamlet is all impulse and action. He freely thrusts his sword into the hidden Polonius with little cause for concern about who it might be.

From the moment Hamlet accepts the Ghost's desire, he has damned not only his own soul, but also the entire kingdom of Denmark.

When Hamlet swears by his sword to avenge the Ghost, he makes an oath to a supernatural entity that he will murder his uncle. However, by following the request of the Ghost, Hamlet slowly devolves to a man ruled by his baser instincts. He becomes an ignoble revenger, and the only thing he can think about or focus on is killing his uncle, no matter who gets in his way. His thoughts are forever bloody, up until the end of his life.

Hamlet's desire for revenge has destroyed not only his own family, but also Ophelia's entire family as well. Laertes is outwardly hostile to Hamlet, due only to Polonius' death. Even then, Laertes has a right to expect a certain amount of recompense for Hamlet's callous killing of Polonius and Hamlet's role in the suicide of Ophelia. Laertes is certainly not excused for his actions, but Hamlet's machinations, spurred on by the Ghost, are what have destroyed all semblance of normalcy in Denmark. By the end of the play, all the major players, save Horatio, are either unmentioned or dead. Hamlet's lust for revenge has damned everyone, guilty or innocent, to an early grave.

Though *Macbeth* is not usually envisioned as a revenge play, for the purposes of this thesis, it is being analyzed as containing many of the same qualities as more traditional revenge plays such as *Hamlet*: "most revenge tragedies share some basic elements:... a play within a play, mad scenes, a vengeful ghost, one or several gory scenes, and, most importantly, a central character who has a serious grievance against a formidable opponent" (Mabillard). Macbeth most certainly features several characters going mad, Lady Macbeth and, to a lesser extent, Macbeth himself. Battle scenes are imagined to be gory, especially as Macduff returns with Macbeth's head fixed on a pike.

The ghost of Banquo returns from the grave, and Banquo also appears as a vengeful ghost in Macbeth's eyes. And finally, Macduff himself most certainly desires to settle things with Macbeth after the latter's murder of his wife and son. While *Macbeth* is not strictly a revenge tragedy, it shares many elements of revenge tragedies such as *Hamlet*.

Certainly, in civilized societies, people acting as brazenly as Macbeth or as bizarre as Hamlet would certainly strike the casual onlooker as strange. For the unrepentant Macbeth and the flighty Hamlet, violence coincides to present an image of macabre rituals and shady dealings with the supernatural. Revenge plays themselves are interesting pieces of literature. Indeed, as psychologists attest, it is perfectly normal and acceptable to engage in "hypothetical suppositions" (Picciuto 487). In this case, the supposition becomes entertaining the idea of stepping into these characters' worlds for a brief few hours, and seeing how deviant their behaviors are from what the accepted norm is.

The behavior of characters like Macbeth, Macduff and Hamlet so strongly deviates from normal civilized interactions that it holds some sort of enjoyment for the viewer. Again, these feelings are to be expected: "[j]ust as in positive suppositions, the content of the suppositions is the source of pleasure we take in tragedies" (Picciuto 498). By engaging ourselves in the revenge tragedies, the audience is taken into a world where the unacceptable becomes the norm. We allow ourselves to be entertained by this world of deviancy much in the same way we allow ourselves to be entertained by any sort of medium, simply because it reflects the positive or negative views of the world at large. The revenge plays and violent stories like *Macbeth* allow the reader/viewer to imagine what life would be like giving in to those baser and more animalistic instincts.

Clearly, the Early Modern playgoer enjoyed these types of stories; revenge plays were extremely popular in the Renaissance, and as a result, the public flocked to them: "where most plays enjoyed but a single theatrical run, ten revenge plays had three or more runs" (Woodbridge 4). The theatre audience loved revenge plays because it allowed them a chance to see and experience the excitement of a world gone horribly wrong without actually living the life attested to in the play. The same is certainly true for Shakespeare's revenge plays as well.

Of course, though these plays were and still are popular, we cannot underestimate the juxtaposition between the spectacle of violence and Christian values. These two thoughts have always been in conflict; basic human instinct tells us to avenge an '"[e]ye for eye'" (lex talionis), but Jesus himself says, "do not resist an evil person. If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also" (Matt. 35:8-9). Evil must be met with compassion and piety, rather than bloody violence. Therefore, the revenge play holds a sort of mystique for the Christian Renaissance viewer and the modern viewer due to its unrepentant spectacle of violence and revenge. The revenge plays reveal much about the Elizabethan stage and what audiences then enjoyed seeing performed, and still do. Audiences clamored for them, and eagerly attended in order to witness worlds torn asunder by malevolence, ambition, and most of all, revenge. In the revenger's world, right is wrong and wrong is right, and perhaps that very fact allowed the audience an escape from their mundane lives and dared them to entertain thoughts about their own society. Much as in our modern world, "[u]nfairness was like the weather: everyone talked about it. But revenge plays did something about it" (6). Revenge plays allow for a certain amount of freedom from one's social limitations. They allow the viewer to escape

into a world where humanity's basest instincts, revenge and honor, reign supreme. The revengers are presented as powerful, and able to effect change for themselves: "[m]any revengers are disempowered people, unjustly treated, who step up and take control" (Woodbridge 6). In these ways, "[d]ramatic revenge mimics Tudor law, where 'condign' penalties suited crimes – thieves' hands were cut off, scolds' tongues bridled" (Woodbridge 6). Quite simply, revenge tragedies allows the audience a chance to call into question these laws. It allows viewers to question a character like Claudius, and relate the social scheming and power hungry fictional king to historical and perhaps, contemporary examples of corrupt politicians.

Likewise, it also allowed them to evaluate the economic as well as the political. It should come as little surprise that the "Elizabethans applied monetary terms to both reward and punishment" (Woodbridge 10), for the practice is still with us today. Revenge plays allowed for the questions of legal and social conventions, as "stage revengers often encounter a corrupt legal system" (Woodbridge 11). Legality never interferes at all in *Macbeth*; the plot never bothers with it. The previous Thane of Cawdor is sentenced to death without a trial, and Macbeth takes his place. In *Hamlet*, legal issues should certainly arise, given the fact that Hamlet is old enough to rule. But Hamlet never makes a case for his legitimate claim to the throne. This further throws the divinely ruled political balance in Denmark off kilter and presents far more questions than it does answers. The audience is invited to ask questions concerning why Hamlet doesn't have control of his father's throne. Yet, no answer is ever given. Revenge plays invite us to consider how "[s]uch legal scenes, at a fantastic remove [sic] from real trials, are a metaphor for unfairness in general" (Woodbridge 12). Perhaps most perplexingly, just

like in real life, the text is unfair. It provides no answers, only questions. In this way, the text invites reader to ask questions about their own society that they may not think of or want to consider.

This paper aims to analyze the motivations of several main characters in relation to the spiritual (or lack thereof) relation to the world they inhabit. This thesis will use a broad definition of Christianity, looking at the main tenets of the religion as a whole, rather than a particular sect or denomination of Christianity. To accomplish its goals, this thesis will take a markedly deconstructionist approach. In doing so, it is the aim of this author to show how the Christian setting which provides a spiritual framework for the play, illuminates and highlights the degradation already present in *Macbeth's* Scotland and *Hamlet's* Denmark. This degradation is further enhanced by the lack of morality and ethics espoused via the revengers in the play. Only Young Siward in *Macbeth* brings any semblance of Christianity to Scotland, and it is only through his death that this revelation takes place. Likewise, there is no spiritual revival at the ending of *Hamlet*. It is a play utterly lacking of any Godly framework for the characters to find strength in. Without this framework of deific perfection, the sullen and rotten state of Shakespeare's Scotland and Denmark becomes readily apparent.

Chapter 1: Hellhounds and Godly soldiers: Politics of Revenge in Macbeth

In act 1.1 of *Macbeth*, as the witches join their voices, they explicate a very important theme in *Macbeth* as they remark, "[f]air is foul, and foul is fair./ Hover through the fog and filthy air" (1.1.line 11-2). This line is easy to overlook because it occurs in the incredibly short opening scene. In essence, the world of the play is a world where everything is turned upside down. Good means bad, right and wrong are confused, chaos and order are switched around. Macbeth is not the sole transgressor in this play; rather, it is the world of the play that is to blame. This theme of misunderstood violence, unsettled murder, and revenge is an example of the witches' prophecy come true. While the events of the play emphasize the chaos of revenge and the terrible nature of murder, the witches have provided the audience with all of the context they need for why things in the play are so utterly and confusingly bloody. As with all of their prophecies in the play, the witches' assertion that Scotland is facing a foggy uncertainty comes true.

Digging deeper into the world of *Macbeth's* Scotland reveals wounds that go deep into the spiritual core of the world the characters inhabit. The spiritual resolution is implied, but not fully realized upon completion of the play, "the snares of watchful tyranny,/Producing forth the cruel ministers/ Of this dead butcher and his fiendlike queen" are ruined, and as Malcolm exits with his entourage to be "crowned at Scone" (5.8.lines 68-76), the audience can at least rest easy knowing Scotland is on its way to spiritual healing. This chapter will outline the ills of Scotland, describe the sorts of moral failings that plague Duncan's rule, critique the tyranny of Macbeth in relation to Christian values, examine the violent tendencies of Macduff, and finally, conclude with the

reemergence of the Christian values present in the British soldiers, specifically, the Siwards.

From the outset of the play, few of the goings on in Scotland are apparently accessible to the audience. Each and every action of the characters is shrouded in the haze of confusion and the fog of war. The witches speak in riddles in Act 1.1. When discussing the war efforts against Ireland, Ross and Duncan fluidly talk politics and war in 1.2, while the audience is thrown headlong into a war that is already in motion. The very structure of *Macbeth* situates the audience in a morally ambiguous state of affairs, unsure of the motivations of any character.

Likewise, when Macbeth murders Duncan, he does so not because he is inherently evil, but because the moral fiber of Scotland itself makes so little sense: "Shakespeare carefully avoids portraying a Macbeth helplessly caught in the grip of irresistible demonic forces" (Biggins 226). Were Macbeth utterly possessed, the emotion of this scene changes dramatically. As Macbeth is merely a character in such a chaotic world, such murder gains a sense of ambivalence and while Macbeth retains the full blame for killing Duncan, it has as much to do with Scotland's topsy-turvy world as it does with any feelings of bloodlust or ambition.

When Macbeth and Lady Macbeth make their decision to murder the King, the confusion surrounding Scotland drives them both to ignoble ends. Dennis Biggins argues that in the play, there is an overwhelming sense of "disordered sexuality," which "is a function of deeper moral disorder" (15), but the aspect of a world turned upside down is missing from his article. While sexuality is not my focus, I do agree with Biggins that immoral violence that drags Scotland into a cacophony of war and murder. For Biggins,

the problems present in *Macbeth* is not immoral sexuality, but Shakespeare's use of witchraft that brings out this immoral sexuality. Biggins states, "there are important structural and thematic links between sexuality and the various manifestations of violence in *Macbeth*" (225). Once Macbeth and Macduff's hands have been stained bloody, the lack of Christian values inherent in the play's structure and world allows for a tale of despotic murder to nearly drown the entire nation in impious murder and a cycle of revenge that ends with Macbeth's bloody head impaled upon a pike. The violence in the play is relentless, and is performed entirely without any mind paid to Christian values concerning killing and murder. In a play where Christian chivalry has been replaced with a near pagan bloodlust, such complexities must be examined fully. This chapter will set out to examine such ideas of immoral bloodlust present in Macbeth and Macduff while juxtaposing their savagery with Young Siward's passionate, yet tempered Christian valor.

Macbeth's first line in the play has him mentioning what "foul and fair a day" it is (Shakespeare 1.3, line 38). This line is almost a direct paraphrase of what the witches say during the first scene in the play. This effectively proves that the world of Macbeth is one of moral confusions. The entire world seems to be shrouded in a dense fog, and while the witches are first to comment on it, "noble Macbeth" (1.2, line 70) is the first main character in the play to draw attention to the disconcerting fact that Scotland is rife with both moral and spiritual uncertainty. The main event that sparks the plot of the play, Macbeth's regicide at the behest of his wife, is a perpetuation of this cycle of revenge. While he will eventually obtain the throne, Macbeth is not capable of ruling, and as such, he "becomes a tyrant and not a politician" (Tarantelli 1494). However, Scotland is already at war with itself, and already faces significant problems of civil unrest before

Macbeth's rise to villainous tyranny. This is perhaps our second clue that Scotland is imploding upon itself. The most immediate concern plaguing Scotland's monarchy is one of inside political squabbles and looming war. Put simply, the problem does not begin with Macbeth.

From the onset of act 1.2, war permeates the subtext of *Macbeth*. In this act, a precedent for Scotland's ongoing hostilities with the Irish forces is established. In line 9, specifically, Ross and Duncan speak of the named but otherwise unseen Irish commander by the name of Macdonwald. This scene of wartime conversation takes place in a camp near Foress, where Duncan is receiving status updates about the rebellion of the Irish. Scotland, under Duncan's rule, is a place rife with troubles and strife. It houses foul spirits conjured by hedonistic and demonic witches all the while threatened on all sides by war and the rumors of war. Duncan must deal with the looming threat of Macdonwald, whom Macbeth has slain and "unseemed him from the nave to th' chops,/ And fixed his head upon our battlements" (Shakespeare 1.2, lines 22-3). This is both a gory description of the bloody result of war, and a brief, yet poignantly ironic foreshadowing concerning Macbeth's own eventual fate, as his head, too, will be served up on a pike. Likewise, though he is unnamed and unseen in the play, the treachery of the original Thane of Cawdor haunts King Duncan's legacy as well. Duncan orders the traitorous Thane of Cawdor to be stripped of his title, telling Ross to "pronounce his present death,/ And with his former title greet Macbeth" (1.2, line 66-7). Under Duncan's watch, the previous Cawdor has already allied himself with Norway, "assisted by that most disloyal traitor,/ The Thane of Cawdor, [and] began a dismal conflict" (1.2, line 54-55). When briefing King Duncan, Ross states that Norway marches "himself, with terrible numbers" (1.2,

line 53). Under Duncan's rule, the Irish and the Norwegians have snuck up on him, and his own retainers have allied themselves against Duncan. This presents an ongoing problem within the play, that of unfit leadership. Though Macbeth is most certainly a terrible king, Duncan is most certainly ineffective as well. As stated by Garber, "[w]e know from plays like *Richard II* and the *Henry IV* plays, that when the king is weak, so too is the kingdom. When there is corruption at the top, the land and its people are likewise corrupted and infected" (469). This is an ongoing problem in both *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, that of a king without the proper strength to hold his own kingdom together.

All of this being said, it is not the aim of this author to deny Macbeth his rightful place among Shakespeare's villains. Macbeth's greatest failing comes from his ambition, and while he shows "Heroism in war, [it soon transforms and] becomes ambition in peace" (Garber 699). When Macduff arrives at the end of the play and challenges his foe to a duel, Macbeth receives the moniker of "Hellhound" (5.8.line 3). Macbeth has earned this title because he is most certainly aligned with Hell. Macbeth's villainy goes beyond the constructs of typical villainy and his murder of King Duncan cements his place into Shakespeare's cadre of deceivers and regicidal assassins. During this final meeting, he admits to Macduff that his "soul is too much charged/ with blood of [Macduff] already" (5.8, line 5). By the end of the play, Macbeth has realized that he is already too far fallen from God to deserve pity or remorse. His sins weigh heavy upon him. Perhaps most problematic, the erstwhile hero figure of the play, Macduff, is not so dissimilar to his foil, Macbeth. In actuality, the two characters share a penchant for bloody combat and destruction. Ultimately, Macduff is not so different from his counterpart.

However, unlike many of Shakespeare's other villains who only recognize their

villainy too late, Macbeth struggles with his conscience from his first inkling of temptation. After the murder of Duncan, he tells Lady Macbeth "I have done the deed" (2.2, line 15). From this moment on, Macbeth is a character marred by the constraints of his degradation. Essentially, his lack of piety and loyalty to his Christian king has made him into a villain. Macbeth feels that by murdering Duncan, he has forever stained his hands red. Not even "great Neptune's ocean [can] wash this blood" from Macbeth's hands (2.2 lines 64-5). The sin Macbeth has committed, regicide, is a sin that will damn him for all of eternity, and yet, that is not his greatest sin. Macbeth is a character marred by the inability to reject evil. Without a spiritual and Christian presence in Scotland, Macbeth is free to enhance his already growing fortunes by usurping the throne of Scotland. From this point on, it is this unclear sense of morality that leads Macbeth to trust in the prophecy of the Weird Sisters. Once his trust has been established in them, Macbeth fully accepts that "[f]oul is fair" (1.1, line 11). His trust in the prophecy reaffirms the degradation of Scotland.

After hearing the prophecy that he "shalt be king hereafter" (1.3, line 50), Macbeth demands answers from the witches, even though by his own admission they are "imperfect speakers" (1.3, line 70). This line highlights that on some level, deep in his subconscious, Macbeth knows that he is dealing with forces of ill will, yet in the same line, he begs them to "tell [him] more" (1.7, line 70). The lack of spiritual clarity in Macbeth's soul drives him to believe in the prophecy of the witches and accept their proclamations as fate. Though *they* do not plant the seeds of murder in Macbeth's mind, Lady Macbeth does, and once he accepts the witches' council that he will be king, Macbeth has succeeded in irreparably damaging his soul.

After the murder of Duncan, Macbeth realizes his moral and spiritual failings, telling Lady Macbeth that in murdering Duncan, they have made their "faces vizards to [their] hearts,/ Disguising what they are" (3.2.37-8). Bevington's introduction to *Macbeth* centers mainly on the portrayals of Macbeth as both a hero and villain, but mostly sides with the view that Macbeth is a "tragic protagonist" (1255). However, the tragic elements at work in the play are wholly by Macbeth's own making. Macbeth's failings, both in terms of morality and in his role as purported *hero*, are his own sins to bear. Macbeth is not a tragic character any more than Richard III is. In this case, both characters are in full control of their actions, yet they eagerly murder their way to power.

There has been much discussion of eroticism and sexuality as it pertains to *Macbeth.* Biggins asserts that if Macbeth believes in the witches' prophecy then their "spiritual seduction of Macbeth will deprive him of true manhood" (263). This true manhood is achieved, for Biggins, by "[t]he slaying of Duncan" (264). This evokes a sense of "violent eroticism" (266) for Biggins. However, the true problem is not Macbeth's sexuality, but rather, his lack of Christian conviction, which allows him to murder Duncan. As Biggins asserts, regicide is not an attempt to assert one's manhood, but rather an act of religious dissention. Macbeth is a manly sort, and has just been given another thanedom by Duncan. His problem is not masculinity, he is hyper masculine. Instead, his weaknesses stem from his low moral compunction, which causes him to fall headlong into tyrannous barbarism. From this moment onward, Macbeth becomes obsessed with power, doing whatever he can to hold onto it. Bevington asks "to what extent the powers of darkness are a determining factor in what Macbeth does" (1256), and I would argue that while they possess little overt power over him, covertly, the

powers of darkness provide Macbeth with an excuse to allow for his spiritual weakness. Macbeth is armed simply with knowledge that he will become king of Scotland, and then at the urging of his wife, willingly commits regicide with his own hands.

From this point onward, Macbeth's character spirals out of control, orchestrating the deaths of young boys and families. It is important to realize that Macbeth is not forced into action or murder; he does so of his own volition. In his paranoia, Macbeth can only think of destruction and murder. He orchestrates the death of Banquo and his young son Fleance to hide his crime of regicide by hiring murderers to kill Fleance and Banquo. Banquo says of this feat, just before he is killed, that it is "treachery!" (Shakespeare 3.3 line 22). In this instance, treachery is the only act Macbeth can perform until the play's panicked finale. Biblically, while murder is obviously a serious sin, so too is the act of hiring a murderer to kill another, for "[c]ursed is anyone who accepts a bribe to kill an innocent person" (Bible Gateway Due. 27:25). Banquo, as he is killed by the murderers, begs Fleance to run, but not before giving Fleance one final command, "Thou mayst revenge!" (3.3, line 24). Banquo, in his dying breath, urges his son to seek revenge against his murderers. In its construction, this scene is quite reflective of a similar scene in Hamlet, where Hamlet Senior urges the indecisive and capricious Hamlet to revenge him by killing Claudius. In both plays, we see revenge not only as an expected course of action for males to take against each other, but the use of "mayst" by Banquo to Fleance could be taken to mean something to the effect of: As your father, I give you permission to seek revenge against my murderers. However, Banquo's permission is not enough, for as Exodus reveals "[t]hou shalt not kill" (Bible Gateway Ex. 20:13). In both instances, Hamlet and Fleance do not immediately seek revenge (Fleance is never seen again in

Macbeth, while Hamlet does not avenge his father until the climax of *Hamlet*). Revenge, in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, is cyclical and always expected "[t]he theme of killing the father, whether parricide or regicide, is everywhere in *Macbeth*…. The play presents as an emblem of the socially unnatural, a pair of fictive parricides" (Garber 715). Macbeth's parricide is the killing of Duncan and Macbeth also orchestrates the death of Banquo, Fleance's father. To honor his father, Fleance should seek revenge, but spiritually, this is of course a slippery slope. Where does revenge end and murder begin? In the case of Macduff, the foil to Macbeth, his desire for revenge becomes his defining trait.

Macduff's actions as he steps into the role of the needed hero are not sacrificial; instead, his heroism is a barbarism focused through an ideology of revenge. Stephen Greenblatt feels that "[t]here are many forms of heroism in Shakespeare, but ideological heroism- the fierce, self-immolating embrace of an idea or an institution- is not one of them" (110-1). Greenblatt is quite correct when looking at Macduff's heroism. His heroism is not "self-immolating" (101) or self-destructive. Instead, his hatred for Macbeth defines him and this hatred for his foe mars the purity of Macduff's soul. Macduff's spirit most certainly suffers once he hears news of his family's assassination and this breaks his heroic façade. Thus, while Macduff may be a fitting soldier and warrior, his spirituality (or lack thereof) is what mars his heroics. When Ross informs him of the death of his wife and son, Macduff's failings become apparent. His violent tendencies overtake him. From this moment on, he slowly devolves into a character whose eventual turn to revenge is highlighted by "hav[ing] no words;/ [His] voice is in [his] sword" (5.8.6-7).

Even before the news of his family's death, when Malcolm bids them to take a

break from their march on Macbeth's castle, Macduff would "rather/ Hold fast the mortal sword" (4.3.2-3) implying that Macduff is already eager to engage in bloody combat. He finds it an outrage that "[e]ach new morn/ New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows/ Strike Heaven on the face" (4.3.4-6) but Macduff's outrage is not rooted in Christianity. Rather he firmly plants these thoughts on the edge of a bloody blade. Even if Macduff recognizes the threat to Heaven and Christianity that the "hell-kite" (4.3.217) and the "Hellhound" (5.8.3) Macbeth embodies, it is not his primary concern. Macduff worries more about exacting revenge for his slain "pretty ones" (4.3.16). Ironically, while Macduff notices that women are being made widows, he himself becomes a widower and experiences "new sorrows" (4.3.5) when Ross arrives shortly thereafter to talk of his family's murder. Macduff feels sorrow and recounts that Heaven should take mercy upon his family, and cements this idea with his final request that the "gentle heavens,/ Cut short all intermission. Front to front/ Bring though this fiend of Scotland and myself;/ Within my sword's length set him. If he scape,/ Heaven forgive him too!" (4.3.235-37). If Macduff held any piety in his heart before, he has now given it up for revenge. His piety has turned bloody, and his mind clouded with thoughts of revenge. In the culmination of the play, Macduff's sword becomes his soul, and he quenches that sword in Macbeth's tyrannous blood.

Although Macbeth and Macduff appear dissimilar at first glance, they are really quite similar. Macduff is not a selfless hero, but rather a self-serving man consumed with fantasies of revenge. Macduff is clearly disturbed by the death of his wife and children, and as Malcolm urges him to "dispute it like a man" (4.3, line 220) Macduff responds that he "must also feel it like a man" (4.3.222). Ramsey argues that Macbeth suffers from

"diseased manliness" (296), but it is clear that this disease has spread to Macduff. Much as is the case is with Banquo urging his own son to seek revenge for his death, Macduff feels compelled to seek revenge for the death of his wife and children.

However, for each quality that Macduff mirrors in Macbeth, it is his fall to violence that is perhaps the most troubling, and it is the greatest similarity between the two. This change occurs so suddenly that the character of Macduff is irrevocably altered once he hears the news of his family's murder. To be certain, upon news of his family being slaughtered, Macduff reacts with shock and anger, but nevertheless buries his pain and ends his feelings saying, "Heaven rest them now" (4.3.229). Clearly, a Christian sentiment is intended to be expressed by this line. Macduff is aware of Christianity at work in Scotland, but the only recompense he truly desires in the play is the death of Macbeth. The Bible is clear on the act of revenge, for those who have done ill, "[t]he Lord will repay [them] for what [they have] done" (Bible Gateway, 2 Tim 4:14). Whereas Macbeth, in 2.2, considers the ramifications of his actions, Macduff considers his faith, but he too falters in the execution of Christianity, for the only way Macduff knows how to speak is with violence. Malcolm urges him to use the news of his family's death as a catalyst for his anger and let it be "the whetstone of [Macduff's] sword" (4.3, line 331) and Macduff answers with a chilling line concerning how he will affect his revenge: "[b]ring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself;/ Within my sword's length set [Macbeth]. If he scape,/ Heaven forgive him too" (4.3.235-6). In this exchange, Macduff has confused his righteous fury with that of rage. While he will kill Macbeth and bring order back to Scotland, he will not do so with God in his heart. This is precisely the problem, for "[v]iolence is the heart and soul of *Macbeth*. It permeates the action and the

narrative; it clings to the characters; it infects and controls the imagination of each of the personae" (Cohen 55). The driving force behind Macduff is to seek revenge for all of his slaughtered "pretty ones" (4.3.217). Carole Tarantelli says that in Macbeth's character, we only see the "infinitely proliferating internal destructivity" (1486) that he embodies, yet this idea can clearly be expanded to cover Macduff as well. Macduff becomes obsessed not with restoring order to Scotland, but with killing Macbeth. As he returns with Macbeth's head in 5.8, Macduff has restored kingly order to Scotland, but a spiritual cleansing of the land has never arrived. Instead of sins being washed away by Christianity, they are instead stained crimson by the blood of revenge. In Romans, it states, "[d]o not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone" (Bible Gateway Romans, 12:17). Within the play, Macduff is a hero of necessity, not one chosen because of exceptional valor or of stalwart character. He is a hero that is forced to step into the fray because no other able-bodied man exists.

As Macduff steps into the role of slayer, he does so with no hesitation. As Macduff returns with the head of Macbeth, we are struck by the barbarity of the act. As Macbeth puts his faith in the witches' prophecy, he previously declares, "[t]hen live, Macduff; what need I fear of thee" (Shakespeare 4.1, line 82)? Certainly, at this stage in the play, the notion is rendered that Macbeth has no need to fear Macduff. Yet once Macbeth learns that Macduff must not be "of woman borne" (4.1.12) he truly begins to fear for his life. This illustrates the greatest fear Macduff embodies for Macbeth; the fear of death, a fear that is explored in act 5.7 as Macbeth explains "[o]f all men else I have avoided thee" (line 5). Indeed, in this instance, we see how Macbeth accepts that "[m]anhood is violence and its existence is inseparable from the bloody endeavours of

men" (Cohen 56). Macduff reclaims his manhood, as his family was murdered by Macbeth. It is worth noting that Macduff's very birth was a bloody and bleak endeavor. Being born via Cesarean section in the Early Modern Period would be extremely bloody. Macduff's mother would likely not survive the child being removed from her stomach as doctors or midwives cut her open to extricate the baby Macduff. His mother most certainly died from this wound, and Macduff was born covered in blood.

In *Macbeth*, Christianity is, at best, a façade through which the characters think and act, and at worst, completely ineffectual and unable to effect any real change in the world. Regardless of the various critical discourses concerning the placement of the witches, they are most certainly a force of malevolence and cultural anxiety about the power of evil. (Garber 696-7). The only character that fits in accordance to Christianity is Young Siward. In accordance with Young Siward's status as the Christian knight, his "power of Christianity" (Baker 229) is reintroduced into the play at the climax of *Macbeth* to give a sense of closure and triumphant Christian allegory to a bloody ending.

To be certain, the biggest problem facing Scotland as a whole is its weak moral/religious fiber. As the play opens, we are treated to the meeting of the witches, showcasing the relative lack of Christian morality present in Scotland. Their meetings with Macbeth turn into a potent prophecy (it is left undecided how much of the witches' prophecy is destiny), and their cavorting with Hecate reinforces their malicious dealings with devils and false gods. The witches and their supernatural ilk are "an emblematic state of mind" that represents the immorality of Scotland and reflects the actions of Macbeth (Garber 698). The witches are described as inhabiting a "wasteland" which is the very area the play opens in (698). The most problematic factor concerning the

witches' involvement in the plot is that Macbeth essentially fulfills their prophecies, and Macbeth plays right into the hand they have dealt to him. The question of whether or not the witches possess any supernatural power is never answered by the play. One would assume that since Hecate does appear in the play, the witches do indeed possess some sort of supernatural connection to the spirits they summon and the prophecies they speak to Macbeth. So, when Young Siward, his father, and the Christian army march into Scotland, they are literally reasserting a dominant Christian force into the play, albeit at sword point. In many ways, the witchcraft and secrecy of the witches is juxtaposed with the overt, open, and powerful soldiers of Christian England, led by Siward of Northumberland and his son.

While Scotland spirals downwards into the grasp of blood and paganism, it is perhaps not surprising that Britain is the one to uphold the tenets of Christianity into its neighboring kingdom: "[a]s the play progresses, England begins to appear as a redemptive land different from both the barren heath of the witches and unnatural, blood-drenched Scotland of the usurping Macbeth" (Garber 718). The soldier characters of Young Siward and Siward seem to emulate two separate ideals of the Christian hero: bravery and wisdom. The elder Siward is a hero whose worth in battle and tactical prowess has been proven. He is a veteran soldier whose arrival in England heralds great tidings for the battle to come. While it may appear Young Siward's connection to Christian ideals is strained due to his haughtiness and eagerness to face Macbeth in battle, yet, even before he and his father appear on stage, Malcolm informs all the men present of the Siwards' holiness, piety, valor, and courage. While Macduff will kill Macbeth and Duncan will reclaim the throne of Scotland, Britain will assist with the endeavor, and

with this assistance, a fleeting spark of Christianity will flare up, paving the way for a better Scotland.

To combat this tyrannical rule of the usurper to Scotland's throne, Ross tells Malcolm that he should return to Scotland to raise an army and "create soldiers, make our women fight,/ To doff their dire distresses" (4.3, lines 188-9). This further exemplifies the need for a reunification of Scotland, as Macbeth's rule is so unpopular that all able bodied people (not just men) would be willing to rise up against him. Malcolm, however, notices this need to depose Macbeth goes beyond the realm of simply war and titles of state. Because Scotland is marred spiritually by war, witchcraft, and regicide, Malcolm realizes the need for an intermediary between violence and war. He responds to Ross' advice by presenting knowledge that "Gracious England hath/ Lent us good Siward and ten thousand men;/ An older and a better soldier none,/ That Christendom gives out" (4.3, lines 190-192). Therefore, all of the men who travel with Siward exemplify the traits of Christianity. According to Garber, this revelation is indicative of "England's king, Edward the Confessor, [as] a patently holy personage who cures evil. In historical fact, he was the first to cure a disease described as the 'king's evil'" by the process of laying on hands" (Garber 718). She asserts that "[b]y framing his play about medieval Scotland with a mention of the healing touch of the English king, the playwright is able to underscore a crucial opposition. Macbeth's bloody hand brings death; Edward [and England's] holy hand brings life" (Garber 718). While Ross is certain that Malcolm could raise an army big enough to defeat Macbeth, Malcolm recognizes that victory would be a pyrrhic one without the teachings of Christ to reunify the broken and unholy kingdom that Scotland has deteriorated into. Ten thousand English soldiers march toward Scotland

to join Malcolm's army not only to end Macbeth's tyrannical rule, but to also bring the light of Christianity back into a world so stained with affairs of darkness. This darkness is not only exemplified by the murder of Duncan, but further increased by Macbeth's dealing with the witches and Hecate. Hecate calls herself "the mistress of your charms,/ The close contriver of all harms" (3.5.6-9). Macbeth does not only put Scotland's spiritual fate in danger merely by murdering Duncan, but his continued adherence to these powers of evil further exacerbates the need for a resurgence and reemergence of the Christian ideal. Whereas the play begins in a world where "[f]oul is fair, and fair is foul" (1.1.11) and occupies a "moral tradition nevertheless [that] provides as its legacy a perspective on the operation of evil in human affairs" (Bevington 1255), the advent of the Christian English soldiers and their leader in Siward provides a certain sense that Scotland will succeed in weathering its spiritual bankruptcy.

Even before the Siwards and their holy warriors arrive, Malcolm feels it necessary to explicitly mention the need not for mere soldiers, but an embodiment of something more. Young Siward, as his father's son, is now entering into this cusp of manhood. Indeed, though as Banquo urges his son Fleance to raise a sword and avenge his murder, these two acts are not equal to each other. Where Fleance is urged to commit murderous revenge, the British soldiers and Young Siward fight for Scotland's spiritual freedom from the tyranny of Macbeth. The implication of the Christian English Army is that they are the soldiers of Christendom, and therefore, have the moral and spiritual right to engage in warfare. While Banquo and Macduff see only bloody revenge, Siward and Young Siward present a second option. They show a turn from bloody piety to sacrificial honor.

However, that is not to underplay Young Siward's death. Young Siward is brash, hotheaded, and perhaps from the audience's perspective, foolhardy for engaging Macbeth in a duel, which we, the readers, know he will lose because he is "of woman born" (Shakespeare 4.1.80) yet, "Young Siward's kind of manliness… is nonetheless offered to us dramatically as the only moral alternative in the play" (Ramsey 297). In many ways, it appears that Young Siward is bloodthirsty as well, choosing to strike at Macbeth alone, but unlike Macbeth's cockiness, their "encounter is a type of the Christian struggle against evil, and he expects the victory which Paul promises in Ephesians. For Macbeth, by contrast, "it serves only to confirm his sense of power" (Zender 417). While we see Macbeth as only a monster by the end of the play, we see "Siward, by contrast…engaged in a virtuous action" (418), action which is far more virtuous than we see Macduff engaged in. However, as he has arrived as a warrior in "Christendom" (4.3, line 192) Young Siward is duty bound to test his skills against the one whom he calls "abhorrèd tyrant" (5.7, line 10).

Before their duel, Young Siward resolutely asks, "What is thy name?" (5.7, line 4) to which Macbeth responds "Thou'lt be afraid to hear it" (5.7, line 5). Even though Macbeth is assured that Young Siward will fear him, Young Siward responds with "No, though thou call'st thyself a hotter name/ Than any is in hell" (5.7, line 6). The implication here is that Young Siward is a typical Christian hero, while Macbeth represents the forces of darkness, specifically pagan, non-English, and finally, Satanic. This equation with Satan is perfectly summarized by Young Siward, who, after hearing Macbeth state his name, says, "[t]he devil himself could not pronounce a title/More hateful to mine ear" (5.7, line 8). Young Siward is not fighting a man who has wronged

him personally; instead, Young Siward sees himself fighting an agent of hell. Young Siward is "a courageous soldier of heaven" (Downey 151), attributes which enhance his brief, yet poignant role of a martyr.

Macbeth's villainy is perhaps most well proven by his need to eliminate potential male rivals who could kill him and usurp power from him much in the same way Macbeth has done to Duncan. Likewise, the other male children he orders murdered are too young to be actual warriors. It is also interesting to note that Young Siward is the only young male child that Macbeth kills himself, rather than ordering him executed. Garber states that the ultimate defeat of Macbeth comes at the hands of people seeking revenge for the children Macbeth has ordered slain, led by "the crowned child, Malcolm" (720). Ultimately, Young Siward's death shows us the final slain child/son in the play, but rather than reacting with anger, the elder Siward accepts his son's death with Christian pride, feeling honor in his son's bravery in battle (Garber 720). Clearly, this overt battle between a soldier of God and a pagan villain should be obvious, especially considering that the entire scene where they exchange words is a commentary on the idea of good vs. evil. Before their duel, Macbeth claims his name is "fearful" (Shakespeare 5.7, line 9) but Young Siward retorts "[t]hou liest, abhorred tyrant! With my sword/ I'll prove the lie thou speakest!" (5.7, lines 10-11). Young Siward, like Macduff, feels battle is inevitable. Yet his claim is to prove that Macbeth is a dishonest person, a person who has used treachery, lies, slander, murder, and cowardice to ascend to the throne. Young Siward's sword aims to disprove Macbeth's claims of power. This is in sharp contrast to Macduff and Macbeth's relationship as it relates to their battle, fought for worldly concerns. Macduff's duel with Macbeth is entirely violent in nature. It is fair enough to

say that we expect a spectacle of violence within the play, but *Macbeth* features elements of regicide which transcend "the limits of soldierly valor and [instead] embraces the extreme of retaliatory violence" (Asp 155). While most certainly a trained warrior, Young Siward is fulfilling his role as a soldier while Macduff's motives in the play are to destroy the man who robbed him of his family. Young Siward does battle with Macbeth in order to restore peace in Scotland. He is not driven by ambition or revenge as Macbeth and Macduff are. Young Siward, like Macduff, seeks to effect change through his sword; however, Macduff cares only for revenge, exemplified, in stage direction, by his return with Macbeth's severed head (5.8).

Nevertheless, whether out of bravado or brashness, Young Siward fights and is slain; he is the final victim of Macbeth's tyranny. Young Siward is not a hero whose glory is gained by spilling blood. Instead, his glory is gained by being slain. Young Siward's presence does not end at Macbeth's blade, but instead, finds resurgent meaning and glory after the battle between Macduff and Macbeth is over. Macduff's motivation for the fight is that he "must seek atonement by assuming the patriarchal responsibility" for his family, and it is the responsibility of manhood that drives him to his breaking point. (Downey 155). Macduff's overt antagonism toward Macbeth is subpar to that of Young Siward's martyrdom. Young Siward dies a warrior's death, and serves a Christian role in martyring himself for the perceived betterment of others. Young Siward is essentially the most holy, the goodliest, and the most Christlike figure in the play.

In his quest of murder and madness, Macbeth has truly renounced the power of Christ, and instead, looks for power in the mouths of witches and their pagan goddess. C.O. Gardner says, "Macbeth is presented to us both as the heroic possessor of virile

courage and as a person who, for all his sound intuition and moral sensitivity, is in danger of succumbing to the ambition which often accompanies high-spiritedness" (15). It is rather interesting that Gardner would feel Macbeth is heroic by any standard of the word. He is ultimately cowardly in nearly every scene he appears in. He murders Duncan at night when the king sleeps, the murders of Banquo (and the attempted murder of Fleance) and Macduff's family are both committed by hired murderers/assassins, making sure that Macbeth's hands remain physically unstained with blood. Even more so, Macbeth only feels assured of victory over Young Siward and Macduff because he misunderstands the witches' prophecies and mistakenly feels he has nothing to fear. Though it would be easy to casually dismiss the importance of Young Siward's allegorical meanings, this is perhaps the entire point of *Macbeth*. In a world so consumed by the lack of Christian values and replete with murder and revenge, the ultimate focus of the play is the depravity which unfolds across the entire scope of the play. No character in the play truly grasps what is at stake, which is Christianity itself as a power in Scotland.

Young Siward's true glory is found not by his prowess in battle, but his status as a martyr. I wish to point out how, in fact, the significance of Young Siward is that the audience expressly knows he stands no chance against Macbeth, both in terms of battle "experience" (Asp 167) and in terms of the prophecy in the play. His martyrdom is instead the reason Young Siward is a fitting foe. He reminds readers of the inadequacies of Macbeth's reign of evil, and therefore, the return of the righteousness of God's rule to the world. After Young Siward is killed by Macbeth and the news is relayed to the aged Siward, who is told that his son died heroically, even if it was in vain. According to his father, Young Siward had every quality necessary to be a hero, and as such, he enters the

realm of "God's Soldier" (5.8.46). In fact, the implications of a heroic deed by the Siwards are rendered by Malcolm, who says "Gracious England hath/ Lent us good Siward, and ten thousand men,/ An older, and a better Soldier, none/ That Christendom gives out" (4.3.190-92). According to Malcolm's views of the events that bring the Siwards to Scotland, the side of God is upon Siward's back, who has no equal in the realm of soldiering and warfare.

Young Siward meets his death not only without fear, but with valor. Casey says that "one of the defining characteristics of manhood in the play is the acceptance of one's own death and the willingness to meet it without fear" (81). The elder Siward does not react with anger or sadness, but acceptance towards the death of his son. The torch of knightly honor and Christian valor (in the face of evil) has been passed to his son, Young Siward, who fulfills his role by martyring himself to Macbeth's villainy. Casey qualifies his thoughts concerning Young Siward's death by saying of his father, "Old Siward apprehends his child's death as an acceptable outcome of war" (89). To die in battle, fighting for the side of God, is a death worthy of only the greatest of heroes. Scotland cannot begin to heal until Macbeth is removed from power. His violent removal at the hands of Macduff completes Macduff's quest for vengeance, but does nothing for Scotland's spirituality.

Shakespeare's Scotland is a nation on the brink of religious death, and through the allegorical death of a Christian soldier, we see how it can begin to heal. While the play ends on a resurgent note as Malcolm reclaims the throne, Scotland has a long way to go to regaining its spirituality. Macduff still remains on stage holding Macbeth's bloody head, which presents a problem for the resolution of the play. Cohen accurately says

"[e]ach character demands to be read in his or her relation to violence" (60) Cohen tells us, "Macbeth inhabits every moment of the play…. He is invoked, remembered, and feared" (60) and yet at the end, Macbeth is remembered only as a head upon a pike, which was placed there by his killer, Macduff. To be certain, that does not lessen Macbeth's evil, or the fact that he is murdered brutally, but it also does not excuse Macduff from his violent acts. It is important to remember that the Christian army of Siward of Northumberland also remains present, with Siward himself present at Malcolm's ascension to the throne. In essence, Scotland finds a balance between blood and piety, and from there, perhaps it can reaffirm its Christian spiritual center.

Chapter 2: Swearing by the Sword: Hamlet's Misguided Quest

As explicated by Marjorie Garber, "[w]hen we are told '[s]omething is rotten in the state of Denmark' we do not think first of pollution problems in Scandinavia, but rather of a generally corrupt society or situation, a perverse decay" (467). *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* are plays that share the theme of regicide, revenge, and the degeneration of society as a result of the characters' compulsion to act according to that desire of revenge. Much as Shakespeare serves as a "frequent use as a tool or medium to address non-literary issues: racism, matters of gender, the evils of colonialism, power and politics" (Alexander 19), so too can his works be adapted to explicate the evils of ambitious revenge/murder. The revenge story of *Hamlet* happens in media res; the act of regicide has already occurred, and like the witches in the opening scene of *Macbeth*, *Hamlet* orients the audience in a place of bizarre supernatural occurrences and phenomenon.

Some scholars have stated that "Shakespeare displays a fully Catholic constellation of concerns about Purgatory, maimed funeral rites, deprivation of sacraments, and remembrance of the dead" (Beauregard 50). For the purposes of this paper, however, it is of little interest to peg down the particular sect of Christianity Shakespeare had in mind, but rather, to focus on the main tenets of Christianity outlawing murder. *Hamlet* is a play where the plot is initiated by murder, and driven by Hamlet's insatiable needs to revenge his father's Ghost. But this desire for revenge goes against some of the most basic tenets of Christianity, specifically, "[r]ecompense to no man evil for evil…. If it be possible, as much as in you is, have peace with all men. Dearly beloved, avenge not ourselves, but give place unto wrath, for it is written, 'Vengeance is mine, I will repay,' saith the Lord" (Romans 12:17-21). Regardless of whatever particular branch of Christianity Shakespeare had in mind, examples such as the above and the

example of Cain's murder of Abel show how murder and revenge in the Bible are viewed in the grand scheme of Christian thinking. Never once is revenge stated to be the realm of man; instead, it is God's role to deal out divine judgment. Regarding revenge "[i]n *Hamlet* especially, but throughout Shakespeare, no unproblematic argument is made by anyone regarding the justification of violence against one's self or another" (DiMatteo 126). It is precisely this factor that makes the characters in Hamlet so morally ambiguous. When the characters in *Hamlet* threaten violence on each other, they overstep their bounds as mortals: "[i]n Shakespeare, "the distinction between unholy revenge or greed and righteous retaliation often proves hazy, muddying the waters" (DiMatteo 125). Hamlet's desire for revenge puts a bloody stain upon Denmark.

To explicate the unnaturalness of revenge in *Hamlet*, our first point of inquiry should be the aspect of the Ghost's undeath. As Marjorie Garber states, "it is with the Ghost, I think, that one should start in approaching and comprehending the world of the play and [the] problems of *Hamlet*" (479). The Ghost's restlessness is already previously hinted at to have been a fairly recent occurrence, for "this dreaded sight [has been] twice seen" (1.1.29). Horatio attempts to control the Ghost with a command, "[b]y heaven, I charge thee, speak!" (1.1.53) and yet the Ghost does not respond. This is a clear indication that the powers of the divine hold little sway in Denmark. For all the characters involved, Heaven proves to be an empty force that possesses little power in the kingdom. In this instance, Horatio's command goes unheeded.

The Ghost's appearance in the opening act of the play is described as "fair and warlike" (1.1.51) showing that the previous King Hamlet was both king and a soldier. As Alexander notes, "England was at war for over half Shakespeare's lifetime" (7), which

may have manifested itself in Shakespeare's portrayal of the strong male king entrenched in battle. Hamlet Senior's manliness is best proved in battle, and we see the evolution of skill and valor on the battlefield to be a reoccurring trait in many Shakespearean kings. For Alexander, "Shakespeare… has become the shared language of warfare" (14). Hamlet Senior has duties to fulfill, and as such, those duties see him engaged in battle with other neighboring nations. As Horatio explains, the Ghost is clad in "the very armor he had on/ When he the ambitious Norway combated" (1.1.63-5). It is increasingly interesting that King Hamlet's proclivities for war determine how he is dressed in all his appearances as a ghost. Rather than appearing as an innocent man who was murdered, King Hamlet appears in the garb of a warrior and a conqueror, fully dressed for battle. It is clear that King Hamlet engaged in battle himself, yet he is unnerved by the thought of his own unavenged death.

The Ghost's undeath is connected with Claudius' murderous and possibly incestuous intentions, and Claudius' ambition to claim the throne. The answer is left undecided whether Gertrude is a confidant to Claudius, or simply a victim of his initial regicide. However, the Ghost explicitly tells Hamlet that Gertrude is his "most seeming virtuous queen" (1.5.47). The Ghost is unconvinced of her innocence (and not quite convinced of her guilt), and yet he bids Hamlet to leave her be: "[l]eave her to heaven/ and to those thorns that in her bosom lodge,/ To prick and sting her" (1.5.88-90). The Ghost is as concerned that Denmark is a "seat to damned incest" (1.5.84) than he is at getting revenge on his brother. King Hamlet was a man with moral failings, and the Ghost shares those moral failings, explained by his existence as a vengeful spirit in Purgatory. The Ghost's very presence keys us into this fact of unrepentant sins, as does

the Ghost's word choice. The Ghost states he is, "doomed for a certain term to walk the night,/ And for the day confined to fast in fires,/ Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature/ Are burnt and purged away" (1.5.11-14). The Ghost is explicitly not a holy creature. His sins have condemned him to a purgatory-like existence, where he is neither "a spirit of health [n]or goblin damned" (1.4.40). He has not moved on from his previous mortal concerns, and these concerns with revenge and his wife's sexuality spurn Hamlet Senior to damn the entire kingdom. King Hamlet was not the most gracious of rulers, and is a man with many faults, as evident by his wartime scuffles with Norway, which set into motion the downfall of Denmark's royalty. Elder Fortinbras' brush with King Hamlet happens when the elder Hamlet "in an angry parle,/ …smoted the sledded Polacks on the ice" (1.1 66-7) and killed old Fortinbras.

Greenblatt feels "the horror is not only the fact of [Hamlet Senior's] murder, at the hands of his treacherous brother, but also the precise circumstances of that murder, in his sleep, comfortable and secure." (300). As Greenblatt frames this argument, it would be less a horror to the Ghost if he died in battle. Perhaps as a social construct of masculinity, this is a truism for early modern kings. However, as the play is structured, the audience cannot help but picture King Hamlet as a warmongering conqueror rather than a noble ruler.

Beyond the warlike nature of its previous king, Denmark faces "glaring ethical problems [that] often remain when it comes to the motive for making war" (DiMatteo 125). Now, Denmark is in a state of seemingly peaceful political times, with the elder Fortinbras dead and his son appeased by seeking military conquest in Poland. However, beneath this veneer of political stability, there exists an intense backstory of murder and

regicide. Claudius has ended the sinful ways of his brother's warmongering, but by doing so, these actions plunge Denmark into a tailspin that ends with all the major players dead. By listening to the Ghost, Hamlet has made a grave mistake, one which will bring about many deaths and the end of Hamlet's lineage.

King Hamlet's proclivities for violence are then thrust onto his son, who adamantly demands that his confidants on stage, Horatio and Marcellus, "swear by" the sword (1.5.163). By listening to the urgings of his (possibly real) dead father, and swearing an oath of revenge to it, Hamlet has taken revenge into his heart and accepted "a call for vengeance" (Greenblatt 306). Hamlet's drive for revenge is embodied by the sword he uses to make this pact, a pact he reemphasizes: "[c]ome hither, gentlemen,/ And lay your hands again upon my sword./ Swear by my sword/ Never to speak of this that you have heard" (1.5.166-70). By allowing himself to be swayed so easily to bloody revenge, Hamlet puts himself in a precarious situation, both legally and ethically.

By taking recommendations from the Ghost, Hamlet has accepted the ethical quandaries that come with taking council from false gods and demonic entities. The Ghost repeats his plea from beneath the stage, urging Horatio and Marcellus to "[s]wear" (1.5.164). Hamlet's actions bring about the deaths of nearly every major character in the play, "where ultimately everyone is a ghost" (Garber 477). Nevertheless, The Ghost again reinforces this pact, urging Marcellus and Horatio to "[s]wear by [Hamlet's] sword" (1.5.162) which they all agree to again. At this point, Hamlet has accepted the Ghost's desire for revenge, and the sword has become the catalyst of this pact. By the act of swearing on the sword, Hamlet, Horatio, and Marcellus have chosen to take an oath

upon a weapon meant only to kill others: "[t]here is, then, a strong and deliberate parallelism between the mind of Hamlet and the world of Denmark" (Garber 470). Hamlet's sword becomes an emblem of the usurped power of King Hamlet, but also of the Prince of Denmark. In a sense, "[the] sword…[serves] as peripatetic sites of memory reinforcing the monarch's claims to authority" (Ruiz 14). In Act 1.5, however, we see how the sword presents itself as a perverse symbol. After Hamlet has taken this oath of revenge, he uses the sword to stab Polonius in 3.2 "[He thrusts his rapier through the arras]" and again in 5.2 where Osric informs Hamlet that the duel between him and Laertes will be "[r]apier and dagger" (5.2.133). Hamlet's sword functions as an image of the monarchy gone astray, and its use as a prop in the play demonstrates this. Hamlet's sword has been baptized by the revenge of the Ghost, and the uncertainty of the Ghost's identity, his proclivities for violence, and his questionable motives are all hints that Hamlet's quest for violence is a perverse supernatural encounter whereby the sword becomes a resurgent image of the supernatural dealings. From this moment on, Hamlet becomes a revenger, and his thoughts are always about enacting revenge.

The sword itself becomes a powerful symbol of Hamlet's quest for revenge. Hamlet's hesitancy to claim his station as the rightful king manifests itself as madness: "the madness that Hamlet assumes is a madness already preset in the state, for the king is the state" (Garber 469). Yet, the rightful king, Hamlet Senior was murdered and replaced by his usurper brother. Hamlet himself makes no claim to the throne, and suddenly, Denmark's ruling class mirrors the uneasiness the soldiers feel on the battlements in Act 1.1. Hamlet's mental immaturity stems from his desire to see his father revenged, and not from any actual fits of madness.

Hamlet's murder of Polonius shows a markedly different shift in Hamlet's mental state. The callous way he disposes of Polonius' body, then goes about his life as if nothing has changed, speaks volumes of Hamlet's character. Hamlet "cannot be said to have pursued his ends by very warrantable means" (Steeves 243). Rather than the most sympathetic character in Shakespearean drama, Hamlet instead deserves the fate he ultimately receives. At the end of the day, his murder of Polonius is no less sinful than Claudius' murder of King Hamlet.

It is with the sword that Hamlet will attempt to kill Claudius, only to find out the man he murdered was Polonius. Hamlet admits this act is beyond bloody, as he states, "a bloody deed- almost as bad, good mother,/ As kill a king, and marry with his brother" (3.4.30). In this instance, we get a clear view into how Hamlet "can be actively cruel and brutal, as with Ophelia and Gertrude (not to mention Polonius and Rosencrantz and Guildenstern), and on the other hand, how he can be inactive and remiss in punishment, as he is with Claudius" (Beauregard 56). In this instance, Hamlet's desire for revenge has trumped his better judgment, and in many ways, Hamlet has become the very sort of man he despises. By killing Polonius, Hamlet has invoked an act similar to that of his uncle's murder of his brother. Unlike the plotting and methodical murder that Claudius enacted, Hamlet's is one of hastiness and brashness. Hamlet leaps at the figure behind his mother's arras and plunges his rapier into the man behind the curtains, only for that man to be revealed to him as Polonius. Instead of being taken aback by his murder of an innocent, Hamlet launches into a tirade against his mother, mentioning her perceived sexual impurities and poor judgment for marrying Claudius (3.4.54-89) while making absolutely no mention of the man he had just slain with his own hands. By choosing to

perform his self-inflicted role of avenger, Hamlet's action will damn Denmark and ruin his family's lineage.

As he drags Polonius' lifeless body away at the close of act 3.4, Hamlet blames the dead chancellor for his own death, stating, '"tis the sport to have the engineer/ Hoist with his own petard" (3.4.216-7). After the murder, Hamlet verbally derides Polonius' lifeless body, and reduces the former human being to being simply a pile of "guts" (3.4.219). In his verbal and physical desecration of the body, Hamlet releases himself from morality and centers his mind explicitly on revenge. Quite literally, Polonius' murder results in absolutely zero hesitation from Hamlet. Likewise, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are treated as necessary causalities in Hamlet's crusade for revenge. Once he has dispatched of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet is convinced his right to revenge is a just one, claiming "[o]h, from this time forth/ My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth" (66-7). As Steeves explains,

> Though he assassinated Polonius by accident, yet he deliberately procures the execution of his schoolfellows, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, who appear to have been unacquainted with the treacherous purposes of the mandate which they were employed to carry. Their death (as he declares in a subsequent conversation with Horatio) gives him no concern for they obtruded themselves… and he thought he had a right to destroy them (Steeves 242).

When looking into the sort of man Hamlet truly is, it is odd to hear acclaimed thespians such as John Gielgud state Hamlet is "much more of a civilized man than all the other people in the play" (1). To be certain, on the outside, Hamlet's introspective nature and melancholic nature make him appear to be quite the sympathetic protagonist, and yet

scenes such as his brutal and misinformed slaying of Polonius help to explicate just how far Hamlet's moral fiber has fallen since the death of his father. Hamlet's motive has fallen from understandable (and perhaps justifiable) rage to base murderous impulse.

Hamlet's character progression is shown to be one of needless bloodshed. More so than any other reason, Hamlet's murder of Polonius and his implications in Ophelia's mental degeneration and her eventual suicide mark his person as unnaturally bloodthirsty. After Hamlet's murder of Polonius, Ophelia is struck with a psychotic break, as Claudius comments that "[f]or good Polonius' death-/… Ophelia divided herself and her fair judgment, without which we are pictures of mere beasts" (4.5.85-7). Polonius' death strikes Ophelia with a fit of suicidal madness. While Hamlet's madness is feigned and put on for show, Ophelia's madness is shown to be debilitating and eventually, fatal. Both characters suffer a crisis of identity and self after the murder of their father(s), yet Hamlet's hostile reaction to Ophelia during Act 3.1 shows how little he truly cares for her as "[h]e is not less accountable for the distraction and death of Ophelia. He comes to interrupt the funeral designed in honor of this lady" (Steeves 242). Likewise, both characters do not see immediate justice served for the murders. Claudius' homicide is never punished until the climax of the play, and the entire plot hinges upon Hamlet's desire/trepidation to murder his uncle. On the other hand, Ophelia never sees the murderer of her father brought to trial. Hamlet succeeds/dies fulfilling his impious goal, while Ophelia drowns herself. Hamlet tells Ophelia the love of a woman is fleeting (3.2.152), yet it is Hamlet who spurns her in the nunnery scene. The difference in these two acts is that Hamlet is merely acting mad, and more importantly, acting. In his speech to the First Player in 3.2, Hamlet states, "I have though some of nature's journeymen had

made men and not made them well, they imitated humanity so abominably" (33-35). Hamlet is aware that he is putting on a performance of madness in order to make himself seem less threatening, while Ophelia is driven mad by Hamlet's ruthless murder of her father.

Ophelia's death and funeral hold no grand revelation for Hamlet. He states that he loves her (5.1.272), and yet Hamlet has no realization after noting his love for the dead Ophelia. Hamlet states, "[w]hat is he whose grief/ Bears such an emphasis…?/ This is I,/ Hamlet the Dane" (5.1.254-9).Though we do see he is indirectly responsible for her death, he makes no effort to realize how destructive his misguided quest is. Though the funeral scene gives a brief view of the repentant Hamlet, the sentiment is quickly disposed of by the end of the scene when Hamlet states, "[l]et Hercules himself do what he may,/ The cat will mew, and dog will have his day" (5.1.294-5). Ophelia's funeral slows him but for a moment. Hamlet most certainly feels bad for Ophelia, yet he quickly comes to the conclusion that he "too, will have [his] turn, despite any blustering attempts at interference, every person will sooner or later do what he or she must do" (Bevington 1143). Hamlet's thoughts return to revenge, and turn away from Ophelia and his failed self-realization. It has been noted by critics that "Hamlet seems to have been hitherto regarded as a hero not undeserving the part of the audience, and because no writer on Shakespeare has taken the pains to point out the immoral tendency of his character" (Steeves 243). In these scenes, we see clearly how base Hamlet's morality is. Hamlet's resolve to get his revenge against Claudius does not waver; not even after seeing Ophelia in her grave can sway him from his destructive path of revenge. Hamlet's quest, however damnable it may be, will not be complete until he kills his uncle. He shifts wildly from

mourning over Ophelia's corpse to steadfastly stating that he must have his revenge come whatever may.

We see these shifts of morality and mood no more clearly than during Claudius' prayer scene. Hamlet is intimately aware that he has the perfect chance to murder Claudius. But Hamlet pauses before delivering the fatal blow to the unaware Claudius in order to weigh his options: "[n]ow might I do it pat, now, 'a is a-praying;/ And now I'll do i't [He draws his sword.] And so 'a goes/ to Heaven and so am I revenged… A villain kills my father, and for that, I, his sole son, do this same villain send / to Heaven" (3.3.73-79). Hamlet's hesitation in killing Claudius first appears to be an act of mercy, as he cannot bring himself to kill a man who is kneeling before God in prayer. However, upon closer examination, Hamlet's hesitation in stabbing Claudius is not so easily answered. Hamlet does indeed hesitate, but only because he desires to kill Claudius when Claudius is sinning; Hamlet desires even better revenge upon the "villain [that] kill[ed] [his] father" (3.3.79). Hamlet vows that he will kill Claudius "when he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,/ Or in th'incestuous pleasure of his bed,/ at game, a-swearing, or about some act/ That has no relish of salvation in't-" (3.4.89-92). Hamlet does not merely desire to kill Claudius, he wants revenge on top of revenge; Hamlet's sword becomes no more emblematic of this impulse for revenge than during the prayer scene. As he recants his desire to stab his uncle, Hamlet has carefully lain out several ways he can imagine Claudius' sins piling on top of one another, so that Claudius' "heels may kick at heaven,/ And that his soul may be as damned and black/ as hell, whereto it goes"(3.4.93-95). Hamlet's resolve to murder his uncle and revenge his father is rekindled. Indeed, echoing the oath he made with Marcellus and Horatio upon his sword, Hamlet states to his blade

"[u]p, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent" (3.3.88). Hamlet's desire for revenge has fully supplanted his religious morality. Revenge is his creed now. Hamlet wants Claudius to suffer, wanting to kill his uncle when the latter is mad with drink or full of sexual lust. Hamlet has steeled himself for the political reckoning that will arise from his killing of his uncle; despite the consequences and ramifications, which are many. Hamlet will hesitate no longer. Like his uncle before him, Hamlet knows he will commit regicide.

Politically, Hamlet is nearly equal to Claudius, and yet he makes no use of the political channels to oust Claudius from power. Instead, Hamlet resorts to barbarity, vice, anger, and madness to get what he wants. Hamlet is already guilty of killing Polonius in a paranoid and hasty act, and has thrown Denmark into political upheaval. Likewise, the spiritual reckoning will come later, but is left unsolved in the play. By the end of the play, the body count attributed to Claudius' ambition and Hamlet's quest for revenge is quite high. Ophelia, Polonius, Gertrude, Claudius, Laertes, and Hamlet himself will all die as a result of Hamlet's ambitions to revenge.

It has often been said that Hamlet's greatest fault is his melancholia or his propensity to hesitate:

> Shakespeare's tragic hero Hamlet's fatal flaw is his failure to act immediately to kill Claudius, his uncle and murderer of his father. His tragic flaw is 'procrastination'. Unlike Greek classical tragic heroes, Hamlet is well aware of his fatal flaw. His continuous awareness and doubt delay him in performing the needed act. Hamlet finally kills Claudius but only after realizing that he is

poisoned. His procrastination, his tragic flaw, leads him to his doom along with that of the other characters" (Devi 2).

However, unlike Devi, it is the opinion of this author that Hamlet's greatest shortcoming is his intractable urge to carry out the revenge fantasy of his deceased father. Many critics like Devi focus on the lack of speed with which Hamlet makes his decisions, and yet, if we fully examine the situation Hamlet is both placed in and places himself in, it becomes far more obvious that Hamlet's greatest character flaw is not his inability to make choices, but his overt pursuit of vengeance which causes him to make the wrong choice over and over again. In his search for vengeance, Hamlet gives up more than he could ever hope to gain. Beyond the lives of his friends and mother, Hamlet's actions effectively hand control of his father's lands over to an outside force. Fortinbras has no need to wage war because Hamlet's machinations leave a power vacuum that Fortinbras is very capable of filling.

In his final act of treachery, Claudius has laid his faith in Laertes' poisoned rapier, much as the Ghost and Hamlet implore their followers to swear by the sword. This echo of the invocation of the sword thematically brings Hamlet's and Laertes' own personal quests for revenge to a close. Hamlet and Laertes both possess an unflinching desire to avenge their slain loved ones. While Laertes has no moral claim to revenge either, he certainly has motivation to kill Hamlet. Though Hamlet's quarrel lies primarily with Claudius, there is no more fitting use for Laertes than Claudius' enforcer. Rather than a hired blade, Claudius appeals to Laertes' sensibilities for revenge which ultimately creates murderous revengers that are all trying to outsmart each other. Laertes effectively mirrors Hamlet; as Hamlet seeks revenge for the unjust murder of his father, Laertes

seeks revenge for his slain father and lost sister. Laertes is brought down to Hamlet's level, much the same way that Macduff is brought down to Macbeth's level. At the end of the play, Hamlet's quarrel is no longer just with Claudius. The duel between Hamlet and Laertes is as much about Hamlet answering for his crimes as it is about Laertes' revenge. Laertes does not question the spiritual implications of murdering Hamlet; his rage and desire for vengeance for his father and sister blind him to the spiritual ramifications of murdering Hamlet. All those complicit in the revenge plot suffer ignoble deaths, and where poison began Hamlet's crusade, so too does poison become the end of him. Beauregard feels, "Shakespeare assumes that vengeance is justified in Hamlet's case but concerns himself with delineating the portrait of a reckless and incompetent avenger" (57). Ultimately, Beauregard's analysis of Shakespeare's ethical quandaries is a semantic argument without an answer. The important factor concerning the play is not Shakespeare's ethics, or the rhetorical and ethical strategies Shakespeare employs, but rather the ethics of *Hamlet* and the characters that inhabit it. Concerning the major revengers and murderers, (King Hamlet (Ghost), Hamlet, Laertes, and Claudius) not a single one of them come off as mentally stable after they become revengers/murderers.

Denmark's rottenness and the state of its society can easily be attributed to the overwhelming desire of its political class to complete their endless cycle of murder and revenge. King Hamlet's war has created unrest in Norway, which sparks Fortinbras' reaction. Meanwhile, Claudius kills his brother, which causes Hamlet to kill Laertes' father out of paranoia. The entire play, when deconstructed, shows the insanity inherent in seeking revenge. Despite knowing revenge/murder is God's territory, Hamlet decides

to take matters into his own hands, eventually, despite the consequences for himself, others, or Denmark.

Hamlet finally has his revenge, killing Claudius with Laertes' rapier (and thereby completing his oath to the Ghost). Just before he dies, Fortinbras' army encroaches upon the castle, and Hamlet aptly notes, "What warlike noise is this?" (5.2.343). The noises Hamlet hears are that of Fortinbras' approach, and with it, the arrival of Fortinbras after the bloody murders. Unlike Hamlet, Fortinbras does not state whether he has a personal quarrel with anyone, and seems to respect Hamlet, as he orders his men to "[b]ear Hamlet, like a soldier…/ To have proved most royal; and for his passage,/ The soldiers' music and the rite of war" (5.2.398-401). Likewise, Hamlet's dying breath connects himself and Fortinbras as men with similar convictions, as Hamlet tells Horatio "[b]ut I do prophecy th'election lights/ on Fortinbras. He has my dying voice" (5.2.556-8). On one hand, this line could be read with disgust towards Fortinbras, but it is this author's interpretation that Hamlet willingly connects his own ambitions and faults with Fortinbras. Fortinbras accepts leadership of Denmark because he is the only person of noble birth to be present. Ironically, even though Fortinbras isn't interested in revenge (instead, he sets his sights on conquering Poland) he essentially gets retribution by assuming the throne of Hamlet Senior, the man who killed his own father years ago. In *Hamlet*, revenge is cyclical.

Conclusion

For plays that engage so fully in the spectacle of violence, this critical view of religion and violence allows for a far different reading of many of Shakespeare's plays. Though this thesis focuses on two of Shakespeare's most notable and bloody plays, other unrepentant revengers besides those in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* also have their places in several of Shakespeare's other works, such as *Titus Andronicus*, *Merchant of Venice*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *Much Ado About Nothing*. In closing, I would like to touch on how this sort of critique would respond to each of those plays as well. Likewise, for this reading to work, violence does not need to be a theme or even an occurrence in the play. Instead, in the next few paragraphs, I would like to demonstrate how these readings can reinforce our understanding of ritual and revenge, whether violence is present or not, in several of Shakespeare's other tragedies and comedies.

In *Titus Andronicus*, blood flows as freely as wine, and swearing violence and revenge upon one's foes is a common occurrence. Titus and Lucius kill Alarbus cruelly, jesting how they "have performed/ [their] Roman rites. Alarbus' limbs are lopped,/ and entrails feed the sacrificing fire" (*Titus* 1.1.142-4). Predictably, Tamora and her sons, Demetrius and Chiron swear revenge on Titus. Tamora presents her revenge as a chance to "massacre them all,/ And raze their faction and their family,/ the cruel father and his traitorous sons" (*Titus* 1.1.451-3). Here, Tamora's revenge is presented as a chance to completely erase Titus' entire family lineage from existence. However, her desire to get even comes only after Titus murders and desecrates her son's body (*Titus* 1.1.142-47). Already, the audience can see how violence and the desire for revenge become a cyclical expression of sin rather than one of closure, as the characters seem to think. Conversely,

the play engages in dark humor concerning Titus' bloodthirsty methods when Lavinia says Titus will live in "peace and honor" (*Titus* 1.1.157), and yet honor or peace are the farthest things removed from this play. One act of violence begets another, and the cycle continues until Rome lies drenched in blood; death in *Titus* is quick. Murder and mutilation all occur without much buildup. Aaron, the immoral lover to Tamora urges Chiron and Demetrius to "serve…lust…/ And revel in Lavinia's treasury" (*Titus* 2.2.131). It is perhaps ironic that Lavinia's naiveté sees her receive the worst punishment of all in the play; she is raped, her tongue cut out and her hands cut off. Lavinia's injuries receive a lengthy blazon from her uncle Marcus, who states, "[a]las, a crimson river of warm blood,/ Like to a bubbling fountain stirred with wind,/ Doth rise and gall between thy rosèd lips,/ Coming and going with honey breath" (*Titus* 2.4.22-5). The spectacle of violence has become embodied in Lavinia's twisted inhuman form. Lavinia, as a young woman, should be beautiful and pure, and yet her body is ravaged and cut into pieces. Regardless, her uncle is struck by the hideous beauty of her wounds, turning it into over 40 lines of beautifully twisted poetry. More so than any of Shakespeare's plays, *Titus* proves to be the least concerned with moral arguments concerning violence, and presents violence as a spectacle to watch unfold; in this sense, it is quite similar to a snuff film, with the text constructed primarily as an exercise in presenting over the top violence for the audience's amusement. Demetrius states Titus has a "threat'ning look" (*Titus* 1.1.134), yet every character is threatening and looks are not the most dangerous thing abounding in Shakespeare's Rome. Similar to *Hamlet*, most of the key players lie dead, save Lucius. The characters are utterly immoral, and while in *Hamlet* we see Hamlet pause before the fatal strike to Claudius, there is no morality in *Titus*' Rome.

Likewise, *Merchant of Venice* presents an anti-Semitic society where the violence that takes place is religious persecution. Shylock cares not for money, but rather he seeks revenge for Antonio's default on his loan. Shylock is insistent that he receives his "bond" or pound of flesh (*Merchant* 4.1.87). In this case, due process of law is being denied to Shylock. Though vengeful, Shylock's bargain with Antonio is technically legal and binding. Shylock clearly states that Antonio and he had a binding contract: "The pound of flesh which I demand of him/ Is dearly bought, is mine, and I will have it./ If you deny me, fie upon your law" (*Merchant* 4.1.99-101). In this case, the concept of bloody piety can be used to examine Shylock's contract and the Christian response to it. It is worth noting that anti-Semitism runs rampant in *Merchant of Venice*. Shylock is a "harsh Jew" (*Merchant* 4.1.123) and while his demands are certainly monstrously callous, one cannot deny that the Venetian justice system is remiss in not abiding by its own customs. Shylock is denied justice because he is not Christian. Moreover, after being denied the justice of man, Antonio perverts the image of piety by requesting that Shylock convert to Christianity or else (*Merchant* 4.1.385). In this case, the violent acts are rendered thusly on an othered person, Shylock. Piety is construed to work solely for the gain of Christians, and by the twisting of legal rhetoric, Portia makes it so that Shylock cannot gain his pound of flesh. She argues Shylock's bond gives him no right to take Antonio's "blood" (*Merchant* 4.1.306). The idea of bloody piety is construed to rob Shylock of his bond and instead bend the rigid laws of society for the immoral Christian, Antonio.

Likewise, this idea of revenge, violence and societal degradation is in Shakespearean comedies. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Don John's schemes to get revenge concerning his brother's perceived slights bring the love plot of the play to a

grinding halt. By his own admission, Don John is a man who eagerly sows discord, and he admits that he is "a plain-/dealing villain" (*Much* 1.3.29-30). Seeking to ruin the marriage of Claudio and Hero would bring Don John a great deal of pleasure, as "any impediment will be/ medicinal" to him (*Much* 2.2.4-5). The stakes in *Much Ado* are not quite as grandiose as anything seen in *Macbeth* or *Hamlet*, yet revenge drives Don John and Claudio to commit terrible injustices against the innocent Hero. Although *Much Ado About Nothing* is classified as a comedy, its potential to end with tragic elements is most certainly present. Don John's machinations cause Hero's innocence to be sullied and questions of her chastity raised. Claudio is incensed in the first wedding scene, and declares Hero has "cunning sin..../ She knows the heat of a luxurious bed" and therefore, he cannot marry her (*Much* 4.1.35-40). Don Juan's machinations are ultimately undone, and the comedic elements return with a dual marriage of Beatrice/Benedick and Hero/Claudio. Yet, the plot of the play hinges upon revenge and the sullying of a maiden's duty to uphold her virginity. By threatening that purity of self, Don Juan's schemes serve to undermine the construction of how society utilizes marriage as a function of Early Modern Christian life. Though, to be certain, even plays without any elements of overt Christianity can contain these unresolved and troublesome revenge plots.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare explores a classical world where Christianity is replaced by pagan faeries, but the theme of revenge against personal slights still has an important thematic presence in this comedy. It is with Titania and Oberon that the revenge elements in the story begin to fully develop. Puck notes that Oberon "is passing fell and wrath,/ Because [Titania] hath/ A lovely boy, stolen from an

Indian king…./ And jealous Oberon would have the child" (*Midsummer* 2.1.20-4). Oberon's foolhardy display of anger has thrown the world out of balance, and disrupts the entire mortal world as well. All of Lysander, Hermia, Helena, and Demetrius' hardships can be traced back to this ongoing feud between the two godlike faeries. Titania openly admits that her husband's desire for "revenge" in their marital spat has caused "[c]ontagious fogs which, falling in the land,/ Hath every pelting river made so proud/ That they have overborn their continents" (*Midsummer* 2.1.89-92). Oberon's drive to see his wife punished for her mistakes had caused the "seasons [to] alter" and to fall out of alignment, causing great ruin to the mortal world (*Midsummer* 2.1.107-14). Oberon's foolhardy desire to enact revenge ends up creating far more problems than it ever solves. It is perhaps unsurprising that once the two faerie gods stop their infighting, all of the problems in the play disappear. Once Titania and Oberon have resolved their marital problems, the mortals can work at resolving their own problems as well. Titania states, "we sing, and bless this place" (*Midsummer* 5.1.395). While *A Midsummer Night's Dream* takes place outside the context of Christianity, it is easy to note how Oberon and Titania fulfill the roles of deities, and when presented in this way, the play presents the audience with an image of corrupted gods whose arguments have lasting consequences for the mortal realm.

Finally, when viewed with this lens, the most striking point about *Romeo and Juliet* is that it actually shows real world consequences for brazen acts of violence. The Nurse tells Juliet that "Tybalt is gone, and Romeo banished" (*Romeo* 3.2.69). Tybalt plainly states, "Romeo… thou art a villain" (*Romeo* 2.5.60). Romeo most certainly is not a villain, and yet we must keep in mind that Romeo, Tybalt, and Mercutio are all kids

playing at being adults. To them, the family feud is all that matters. Much like Hamlet when he stabs Polonius, the young firebrands in *Romeo and Juliet* are all impulse and no thought. Likewise, Tybalt's fiery attitude leads to Mercutio's death. Mercutio's dying words are to invoke "a plague" on the houses of Montague and Capulet. It is important to remember that Mercutio is not some innocent martyr, but that he draws his sword first in act 3.1. Mercutio's dying words allow us to see how the impulse for revenge, in this case threats and idle jests, can have lasting implications and even result in the deaths of others. Romeo feels perfectly justified in urging Tybalt to heaven (*Romeo* 3.1.121-7) as he is fighting "for Mercutio's soul" (*Romeo* 3.1.125). Romeo's fervor and righteousness die down soon after he realizes the error of his judgment, as "[t]he Prince will doom [him to] death" (*Romeo* 3.1.133). After Tybalt's death, there are real world consequences to Romeo's actions. He cannot return to Verona, because he has let his desire to get revenge on Tybalt for Mercutio's death overshadow his judgment.

In closing, I think this type of reading could be applied to many of Shakespeare's works beyond simply his most bloody plays. In fact, many of his plays feature a scene where characters scheme, manipulate, and kill one another for some perceived slight or political gain. *Henry V* sees waged war based on shaky legal framework backed by corrupt doctrine, while *Richard III* embraces a violent and scheming Richard. All in all, this line of inquiry is not limited to Shakespeare's tragedies, but instead can be adapted to use in a variety of his works or other works where religion and violence intersect and comingle.

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