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Edward Djordjevic

CONJURING LEGITIMACY: SHAKESPEARE'S *MACBETH* AS CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH POLITICS

ABSTRACT
The text provides a political reading of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, claiming that the play is responding to the curious connection between witchcraft and state power in the preceding century, as well as contemporary political events. Namely, practices variously labeled as witchcraft, magic, conjuring were an integral aspect of English politics and struggles over royal succession in the sixteenth century; even more so were the witch hunts and attempts by British monarchs to control witchcraft. These issues reached a head with the accession of James VI of Scotland to the English throne in 1603, and the Gunpowder Plot in 1605. On the surface, Shakespeare's play, written in the immediate aftermath of the failed attempt at regicide, brings these historical and political issues together in an effort to legitimize James' rule. However, the article shows that a closer look reveals a more complicated, indeed subversive undercurrent at play. Paradoxically, while *Macbeth* does provide James with legitimacy, at the same time it calls into question the grounds of that legitimacy.

KEYWORDS
Macbeth, legitimacy, witches, conjuring, Gunpowder Plot

Of course, there never were any witches. Therein lies the crux of the problem for any attempt at their scholarly study: the subject about which the researcher is supposed to 'reveal' something, being an empty term, must first be filled with content, at which point the game, as it were, is up. It is itself, in a sense, an act of academic conjuring, by which the scientist must textually invoke unnatural beings only to attempt to present their nature. The broader problem of witches as scholarly subject is also true on the narrower level of the witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. More often than not, the reach and limits of an interpretation of the play are revealed in the understanding of the witches. For example, one could be rather literal about them, considering them merely fashionable entertainment among Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences (Herrington 1919); this is no less right than any other way of thinking of them, although it closes off a wealth of other interpretations.

A common take, both scholarly and in performance (Willis 1995), is what can be called the psychological reading. It centers on Macbeth's (and Lady Macbeth's) psyche, often locating the problem of the play in the tensions that arise between ambition, conscience, madness, delusion of grandeur, folie à deux, etc.

Edward Djordjevic: MA, Belgrade; edward.djordjevic@gmail.com.

(Bradley 2005). A great advantage of this reading is that there is little mystery about the witches themselves: they are either regular women who Macbeth's addled brain turns into supernatural beings (which is consistent with his other hallucinations), or they are even less, that is, nothing but manifestations of his madness, that is, illusion. Either way, this resolves the problem of their reality as a device in the play. But the applicability of this interpretation is also its weakness, since displacing the plot onto almost any tyrant ruling over a troubled county also abstracts the play from its historical and political context.

To read the play as mere entertainment or as a study in psyche is to ignore any reference to the intense witch hunts taking place in Europe at the time, and particularly Scotland; it also ignores the politics surrounding James VI of Scotland's ascent to the English throne and the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. It further ignores the very important political and historical role the play itself would have had for contemporary audiences. The present paper, therefore, seeks to provide an explicitly political reading of *Macbeth* that relates both to the history of witchcraft and the politics at the time of James' reign. Specifically, the political question around which the play is structured is that of *legitimacy*.

If to our ears the question of political legitimacy and the issue of witchcraft and witch hunts have little to do with one another, not so in the sixteenth century. It is important to note that as far as sixteenth-century England was concerned, witches and witchcraft were simply fact. This was true across all regions and social strata. Just about every village would have had its local witch or sorcerer, a person who knew their way around herbs and potions, could turn animal parts or products into medicine or poison, could cast or resolve spells, held 'knowledge' to effect change in the human or natural world, which was either passed down or held in a book (Clark 1999; MacFarlane 1999). And a few of them were also, unsurprisingly, involved in matters of state. Consider the perhaps most famous case of Elizabeth Barton. Born in 1506, in her youth she developed an illness, during which it was revealed that she had the gift of divine visions. Her powers included curing her own illness, which was confirmed by an ecclesiastical commission, but she retained her prophetic utterances thereafter. And it was her visions that lead her to the court of Henry VIII around 1527 (Watt 1997). However, once there, she opposed Henry's plans to divorce Catherine of Aragon and marry Anne Boleyn, going so far as to prophesize the king's demise should he go through with his plans. In 1532, Watt tells us, she had "an openly seditious eucharistic vision" (Watt 1997: 69) regarding Henry's alliance with France. Shortly thereafter, she was arrested, condemned by a bill of attainder (a legal act by the parliament allowing for punishment without trial) for treason, and executed.

What is important here is how integral Barton's role was in the political turmoil of Henry's court. Prophetic visions allowed a poor servant girl to reach a high level of influence, they could be "openly seditious," and considered threatening enough that it required the harshest charge and punishment. According to Diane Watt, Barton herself was aware of the political role of her visions, that is, she was emulating other Christian mystics who stood up to authority, such

as Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Sienna. Prophesizing, Watt insists, was one avenue available to Renaissance women to enter public life and advance political goals (Watt 1997). In other words, all parties involved took witchcraft, visions, and prophecy seriously. Moreover, lest we think of sixteenth-century English rulers as doubly naïve – first for believing in witches, and then for also believing that killing witches could somehow disrupt the prophecy – let us ask what exactly did Henry hope to achieve in executing Elizabeth Barton? Consider to that end Barton's words that "in case hys Highnes proceded to the accomplishment of the seid devorce and married another, that then hys Majestie shulde not be kynge of this Realme by the space of one moneth after, And in the reputacion of God shuld not be kynge one day nor one houre" (quoted in Watt 1997: 51). Now, whether he would remain king a month after he divorced Catherine and married Anne, Henry knew no one could know (including himself and Barton); but he could certainly control the "reputacion of God," that is to say, the *legitimacy* of his decision.

Throughout the sixteenth and into the seventeenth centuries, as Watt shows, witchcraft remained a means for those less powerful to influence the political theater in England (1997). (Even if most witchcraft, as MacFarlane points out in *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* had little to do with kings and governments, but was a local community affair [1999].) Still, an even greater means of establishing and maintaining power was the rooting out of witchcraft. English sovereigns established their power in part by passing laws to protect their persons and the state *against* witchcraft: Henry VIII in 1541; Elizabeth I passed several anti-witchcraft laws, each harsher than the previous, although the one from 1563 is perhaps most famous (Young 2018); and then in 1604, Parliament passed the strictest anti-witchcraft law to date, under James I. In a sense, they all had good reason: in *Magic as a Political Crime*, Francis Young calls Elizabeth "perhaps the most magically attacked monarch – at least while on the throne of England – in English history" (Young 2018: 87). Her only competition in this regard – hence the disclaimer "while on the throne of England" – was her successor James I, who prior to assuming the English throne in 1603 had endured a turbulent career as James VI of Scotland. "In Scotland, popular magic of any kind was seen as a menace to the state and was associated with treason" (Young 2018: 155). The most famous case were the North Berwick trials that took place in 1590, when a circle of witches and sorcerers admitted (under torture, of course) to having raised storms on the seas that hampered James' journey back from Denmark. The "visit to Denmark was of crucial importance, because his purpose was to marry Princess Anne, daughter of Frederick II of Denmark, and thus *secure the future* of the House of Stewart" (Young 2018: 155-156, emphasis added). Clearly, not only did British monarchs (and other men and women of state) believe that witchcraft could impact politics, they believed that controlling witchcraft was paramount for establishing and maintaining order.

In addition to having marked "James VI for the rest of his life" (Young 2018: 155), the North Berwick trials became well-known across Britain due to the

pamphlet printed in London in 1591, *Newes from Scotland*. One detail from the affair that would not seem conspicuous to us, but Shakespeare uses it to great effect in *Macbeth*, is that witchcraft and magic in England until that point was almost always an activity of a single man or woman. The three witches in *Macbeth* were "unprecedented" in that this was "...the first time in an English drama when witches had been represented as congregating in a group" (Wilson 2002: 126). The famous case of the Lancashire witches, the first example in England of witches tried as a group, did not occur until 1612, six years *after* the likely first performance of *Macbeth* (Poole 2002). Now, the decision to have three witches as opposed to one raises many more questions than an article such as this could give answers: what can three witches do that one cannot? Why three, rather than, say, seven or thirteen, etc.? Not to mention that later in the play we encounter three more witches very briefly and their chief witch, Hecate. Among the many valid possible answers, one is that it is a matter of representation: this is the Scottish play, it only makes sense that the magical element be the way it is conducted in Scotland, that is, in congregation, as a witches' sabbath. This detail gestures towards a reading of *Macbeth* through a historical lens, referring not only to the historical Macbeth and Duncan in the eleventh century, but to a more recent history of witchcraft, its manifestations, and role in power struggles of the sixteenth century. Paradoxically, the witches in *Macbeth*, when considered this way – as opposed to either mere entertainment or manifestations of madness – provide a link with real, concrete English and Scottish history.

This is true in at least one more sense. Both Robert Wilson in "The pilot's thumb: *Macbeth* and the Jesuits" and Garry Willis in *Witches & Jesuits* argue convincingly that the witches are to a great extent a link to the events surrounding the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 (Willis 1995, Wilson 2002). Although it is the words spoken by the Porter in Act II, scene 3 that are usually considered the most explicit reference to the Gunpowder Plot and the execution of the would-be assassins, Wilson and Willis both show how London audiences would have understood Shakespeare to be presenting the plotters and conspirators *as* witches (which is also another potential answer as to why Shakespeare had several of them). The identification of the Gunpowder Plot conspirators with witches was less of a metaphor than it might seem. Attempting to blow up Parliament with the king in attendance was no ordinary assassination – had it been successful, it would have been a crime of the highest order – treason. This was the very essence of witchcraft, or at least the authorities' charge against it. Recall that Elizabeth Barton was tried and executed for treason, as were the witches of the North Berwick trial: the casting of spells (witchcraft) and killing of kings were equal in that they were both the work of the Devil.

Yet, there was a further connection of the conspirators to witchcraft: any justification of action or claim to innocence was considered dissemblance and equivocation, that is, a cunning trick against the king and justice. Henry Garnet, the Jesuit priest whose connection to the plot was tenuous, but was presented at the trial as plot ringleader, had previously written *A Treatise of*

Equivocation, instructing Catholics how to lie to the authorities if captured (Willis 1995). (It is the word equivocation that connects the Porter's speech in Act II to the trial.) The prosecutor at the Gunpowder Plot trial was the famous jurist Edward Coke, who, Willis notes, directed most of his anger at the conspirators' "perversion of the nature of language. Equivocation, as an attack on meaning itself, is a more fiendish instrument than gunfire for overthrowing kings" (Willis 1995: 22).

There is a hint here of something Michael Walzer wrote about in "Regicide and Revolution." His point, briefly, is that while throughout history kings were often murdered and always under threat of being killed, monarchy, or what he calls kingship, was not called into question until the English Revolution in the seventeenth century and the French in the eighteenth (Walzer 1973). These two revolutions ushered in the possibility of the destruction of monarchy as a system of rule. And while there is no suggestion that the Gunpowder Plot conspirators had in mind anything like the later English and French revolutionaries, it is not hard to see that the sheer scale of their (failed) endeavor brought up anxieties about the very nature of order and disorder. Quieting these anxieties required not just punishment of death, but condemnation through "official ideology-theology" (Willis 1995: 22) and erasure of any justification of the plotters' effort. Since the plot to blow up Parliament and the king failed, the trial was less about (attempted) murder and much more about ideology, justification, and legitimacy. It was indeed, as Willis describes the prosecutor Edward Coke's target, about controlling and fixing language. Thus, the Gunpowder Plot itself, and the trials of the plotters and conspirators ultimately had to do with justification and legitimacy. As did the execution by Henry VIII of Elizabeth Barton for her prophetic visions, and the North Berwick witch trials.

Macbeth was likely written in the same year as the Gunpowder Plot trial. It is possible that its very first performance was for King James I of England, during a visit of his brother-in-law, King Christian of Denmark, but this is not certain (Clark and Mason 2015). Undoubtedly, however, by making the play about Scotland and Scottish history, introducing witchcraft as a prominent element (James fancied himself an expert on witches, having written *Daemonologie*, a treatise on uncovering, trying, and executing witches), Shakespeare is currying favor with the new king. Furthermore, although a subplot in the play, the prophecy and fate of Banquo and his son Fleance would have been immediately recognized by both royal or lay audiences as crucial. Namely, it is Banquo to whom in Act I the witches foretell initiating a line of kings ("Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none," 1.3.67), and in Act IV when that prophecy is confirmed, it is presented as the famous show of kings that leads directly to James.

In addition to drawing a clear line of kings, the vision from Act IV would have also appealed to James because it confirmed his ideology of the *source* of legitimacy: lineage. The line of kings could not be in greater contrast from Macbeth himself, who is curiously cut off from any kind of genealogy. We know next to nothing of his parents, he has no children, and even the additional title he acquires during the play, Thane of Cawdor, he earns, that is, it is not

hereditary. And of course, he ascends to the throne not through inheritance, but by murdering the king. He himself is aware of the problem,

> Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown
> And put a barren scepter in my gripe,
> Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand,
> No son of mine succeeding. If't be so,
> For Banquo's issue have filed my mind (3.1.60-64).[1]

If lineage confirms legitimacy, as was widely believed, it is important to say that *Macbeth* is not a story of a king losing his legitimate rule through unjust or horrible deeds. All the tyranny after Duncan's murder, and indeed even regicide do not render Macbeth a less legitimate king, because Macbeth never was, nor could be the legitimate king. Being a murderer and tyrant as king (in contrast with Duncan who, as even Macbeth acknowledges "hath been/So clear in his great office" 1.7.17-18) make Macbeth a *bad* king, but not an illegitimate one. His tyranny only adds to an already established illegitimacy. This was precisely the position James himself took, as Shakespeare likely knew. According to James, a king was legitimate based on lineal descent, regardless of how he treated his subjects. For James, tyranny, while bad, was not grounds for illegitimacy (James VI, internet). In this sense, the purpose of Macbeth the character is to provide as strong a contrast with the new king. The less of any lineage and legitimacy Macbeth holds in the play, the more it is implied for James.

Yet, Macbeth's illegitimacy is not as straightforward as it might appear. How does he become king? After all, murdering the king is only half the job. The play here (as throughout) moves quickly: after the discovery of Duncan's assassination, in the last scene of Act II, the Scottish noblemen tell us that Duncan's two sons have fled (drawing suspicion on themselves for the murder), but also that Macbeth has been "already named, and gone to Scone/To be invested" (2.4.31-32). Act III opens with Banquo remarking – to himself, but referring to Macbeth – "Thou hast it now, King, Cawdor, Glamis, all" (3.1.1), meaning that Macbeth is now king. When Banquo finishes speaking, stage direction says 'Enter Macbeth as King'. Yet, the audience does not get to see *how* Macbeth was chosen king, or by whom. Now, historically speaking, the story of Macbeth Shakespeare is retelling takes place at a moment in Scottish history when one system of rule supplanted another. Up until the time of the historical King Duncan and Macbeth, new kings were selected from the extended family of the old king, a system known as tanistry (Herman 2007; Clark and Mason 2015). The historical Macbeth was actually on the side of preserving the old order, which was disrupted by Duncan who sought to ensure the throne for his son Malcolm – thus replacing tanistry with primogeniture. Even if he knew this, Shakespeare could not present any of this in the play, given that James held

1 All quotes from *Macbeth* are from Clark, Sandra and Mason, Pamela (eds.) (2015), *Macbeth*. London: Bloomsbury.

such clear and strong beliefs about the God-given nature of monarchy. Presenting the actual process of choosing Macbeth to be king would legitimize him at least somewhat, and reduce the blatant contrast with James. If Shakespeare was to call legitimacy into question, he would have to go about it in a subtler way.

The critique of this concept of legitimacy comes almost as an unintended consequence of the omission because, as it were, it goes too far. Consider that, whoever 'named' Macbeth king, presumably gave reasons and justification, drawing on some, however meager, claim to the Scottish throne (even if coming from Macbeth himself). In the play, the audience are deprived of even hearing any claim to the throne. Which is to say, in an effort to erase all legitimacy from Macbeth, Shakespeare had to erase not only lineage, but also any other potential source of legitimacy and any potential *claim* to the throne, which is to say also any *claim* to legitimacy. But Shakespeare has thus 'overplayed' his hand, revealing that legitimacy goes beyond the fact of lineage. It would seem that an integral part of legitimacy is also a claim to that legitimacy. Even if legitimacy is lineal, it is still necessary for someone to claim that lineage, to produce it discursively, to connect the dots as it were. Shakespeare even does precisely this for James VI with the show of kings in Act IV. And by hiding the moment of legitimacy-claiming for the illegitimate Macbeth, Shakespeare only confirms the significance of the discursive element (connecting the dots) within legitimacy.

There is a paradox at play here: *Macbeth* does indeed (in the show of kings) claim the lineage that puts James rightfully on the Scottish throne; but in so doing, it modifies the philosophical grounds for legitimacy from James' own understanding and ideology. For James, legitimacy was strictly lineal: being descended from rightful kings makes one a rightful king. By omitting the process by which Macbeth becomes king in the play, and by writing in a scene with a show of kings, Shakespeare inserts a discursive element – the claim to legitimacy – into its grounds.

Another way of describing this paradox is to think of the role of theater in the issue of political legitimacy. If *Macbeth* the play is about legitimacy, but legitimacy is only about lineage, what good would such a play be? Performed for the king, it would only state the 'truth' of lineage, of which the king is already convinced and upon which he already grounds his rule; yet, performing it for the masses would be even more pointless, since the rightful king is rightful by virtue of descent and there is nothing the masses (or anyone else) can do about it. If, on the other hand, legitimacy, in addition to rightful descent, includes a discursive element, it is vital for the play to be performed to both the king and the masses, because it becomes the very discursive element necessary for the fulfilment of condition of legitimacy. *Macbeth* the play, in other words, was the mouthpiece that claims legitimacy for James; at the same time, however, it undermined the purely lineal grounds of that legitimacy.

The theater, it seems, conjures legitimacy. Indeed, one of the meanings of the verb to conjure is to call forth, and in addition to being about an il/legitimate king, the entire play is riddled with acts of conjuring (beyond the characters of the witches). In Act I, for example, Duncan, speaking to Macbeth, says,

"There's no art/To find the mind's construction in the face:/He was a gentleman on whom I built/An absolute trust" (1.4.12-15). While describing betrayal by the former Thane of Cawdor, Duncan is unwittingly foretelling Macbeth's treason against him. Banquo, speaking to Macbeth who tells him to make sure to come to his banquet: "My lord, I will not [fail to come]" (3.1.28), and a few lines later, "our time does call upon's" (3.1.36) – thereby prophesizing first his appearance at the royal banquet as a ghost, and also his own demise, since 'our time is upon us' can be read to mean that he has to leave, but also that it is his time to die. In speaking to Malcolm, Macduff describes the situation in Scotland from where he has just fled with the words "Each new morn/New widows howl, new orphans cry" (4.3.4-5), yet he does not know that his own wife and children have been slaughtered in the interim. Even minor characters, such as Siward, conjure unconsciously: when he says "certain issue, strokes must arbitrate" (5.4.20) he is referring to the idea that sometimes war is necessary to resolve political conflict. But the word 'issue' also means children, and a few scenes later Young Siward's life is 'arbitrated' by a stroke of Macbeth's sword. To which we can add Lady Macbeth, whose words from Act II, scene 2 about Macbeth washing his hands of Duncan's blood, as well as her advice to her husband upon his hallucination of Banquo that he lacks "the season of all natures, sleep" (3.4.139), only portend her own madness and sad demise. All these characters have an uncanny ability to utter statements that are truer than they realize. Shakespeare consistently puts words in their mouths through which they unwittingly conjure their own horrible fates.

Of course, words and language are most powerful and under least control in Macbeth's mouth. From the moment we meet him, the words he utters are enigmatic to the point of meaninglessness: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (1.3.48) – not only is he already echoing the spellbinding incantation of the witches from the very first scene, but we are already disoriented regarding what he means to say. Shortly after, when he's told that he would become the Thane of Cawdor and King, his words again escape his control: "and to be king/Stands not within the prospect of belief,/No more than to be Cawdor" (1.3.73-75). The first of these two lines seems to say that he does not believe he could become king, only to be reversed in the second line by comparing it to becoming Cawdor, which title he has already been given. When he finds out that he is also indeed the new Thane of Cawdor, and that the witches' prophesies might come true, he says that "This supernatural soliciting/Cannot be ill; cannot be good" (1.3.132-133), that is, it is somehow both good *and* bad. Let us give one further example of Shakespeare making language betray his main character. In the banquet scene, upon seeing the ghost, he is trying to explain to himself and Lady Macbeth what is going on: "Blood hath been shed ere now, i'th' olden time,/Ere humane statute purged the gentle weal" (3.4.73-74). The word purged in the second line is meant to convey that the law has stopped the bloodshed of old and created a gentle weal, i.e. the common good; but it could equally be read to mean its exact opposite, that is, that 'humane statute' destroyed the common good.

The banquet scene, furthermore, best reveals another curious aspect of Macbeth's language. When the ghost of Banquo first appears, Macbeth is understandably stunned, but gathers himself shortly to address and challenge the ghost, "Why, what care I? If thou canst nod, speak too" (3.4.67), whereupon the ghost leaves. It returns a second time, again frightening Macbeth, but again, he girds himself up against the ghost with the words, "Hence, horrible shadow,/ Unreal mockery, hence" (3.4.103-104), and the ghost does indeed disappear. It would seem that the ghost can be commanded through language (one meaning of the word conjure is to command an oath); the problem is that Macbeth himself is not in command of his own language – just the opposite. Perhaps it is out of his control because it is so powerful, for it is worth noting that the witches' prophecies always also emerge from the mouths of those characters to which they are given: Macbeth repeats the initial prophecy first by questioning it, but also by writing it down to send to his wife. The three prophecies given to him in Act IV he repeats one by one: Birnam Wood moving in the opening of scene 3, Act V; then, he repeats verbatim the witches' instruction to 'laugh to scorn one not of woman born' in scene 7 with Young Siward; and finally, upon meeting Macduff, his initial reaction is to utter "Of all men else I have avoided thee" (5.8.4.), a rephrasing of the apparition's "Beware Macduff" (4.1.70) from Act IV. Even Banquo, the only other character to see the witches, repeats what has been said to him: "Yet it was said/It should not stand in thy posterity,/But that myself should be the root and father/Of many kings" (3.1.3-6).

These descriptions destabilize the locus of power of the utterance. Even if witches are real, and their spells and conjuring have an effect on the world, it would seem that by introducing this repetition of utterance but displacement of speaker, Shakespeare is blurring the source of that power: does the prophecy of Macbeth being king lie in what the witches say or in the message he sends to Lady Macbeth? Is the spell by which none of woman born shall harm Macbeth powerful due to its being uttered by the second apparition or by Macbeth pronouncing it himself in 5.3.3-7:

> ...What's the boy Malcolm?
> Was he not born of woman? The spirits that know
> All mortal consequences have pronounced me thus:
> 'Fear not, Macbeth, no man that's born of woman
> Shall e'er have power upon thee.'...

It could be that for a spell to work, it must be conjured once again by the subject of the prophecy.

Macbeth repeats one of his prophecies – the one according to which he cannot be harmed by one of woman born – three times in Act V. Two of those utterances are around sword fights with candidates for this label 'not of woman born': Young Siward (in 5.7) and Macduff (in 5.8). But the responses he receives in speaking to them are very different. The young Englishman threatens, "with my sword/I'll prove the lie thou speak'st" (5.7.10-11). Although uttered as

a prophecy (in the future tense), it gives advantage to the sword over language; but the sword is clearly no match for Macbeth's charm, and Young Siward is killed. The situation changes when Macbeth comes across Macduff. Although he too initially equates his voice and his sword (in 5.8.7), upon being told that Macbeth bears a charmed life, Macduff deploys his own spell against the tyrant: "let the angel whom thou still hast served/Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother's womb/Untimely ripped" (5.8.14-16). Referring to himself like this, in the third person (after the comma) gives the words a performative aspect, as if uttered (to Macbeth) by a supposed angel, that is, the witches. This utterance acquires a spellbinding or spell releasing quality. Resolving the charm, or casting a counter-charm, Macduff is able to slay Macbeth.

All of which may be spells, invocation, conjuring, and yet might not require witches. Or rather, it might only require them as a legal fiction of sorts. Prior to about the time *Macbeth* was written, witches resolved the problem of the claim to legitimacy. To return once again to Michael Walzer and his point on killing kings and killing monarchies, before the English and French Revolutions, "kings for centuries were killed in corners, the murders hushed up, the murderers unthanked, neglected, condemned" (Walzer 1973: 620). This is largely how the murder of Duncan plays out. However, by shifting the power of the utterance and spell, first into the mouths of his characters (who are not witches), and then into the overall public realm of the theater, Shakespeare is shifting the very grounds of legitimacy. Perhaps we can now understand at least some of the reason for such a close connection between witches and power in sixteenth-century England. Namely, through their divine visions, witches were the way kings and queens claimed their legitimacy without having to turn to the public. A private vision (by a witch) in direct communication with God or the angels establishes the divine nature of monarchy, but also circumvents the need to justify oneself – thus relinquishing at least some of the power of legitimation – to the public. Because, as Walzer says regarding the English and French Revolutions, "to try [the king] and then to execute him in public was to challenge monarchy itself" (ibid. 621). This is not to say that Shakespeare was a monarchy-challenging revolutionary; but it does seem that there is an inkling about the shaky foundations of divine rule, or a sense that sweeping change to the English political landscape was not too far off. (At the risk of sounding too Whiggish about this history, the very next king after James, Charles I was beheaded in that English Revolution that, according to Walzer, destroyed the divinity of monarchy.)

In addition to the omission of Macbeth's claim to the throne (in Act II), there is another, even subtler, curious omission in Macbeth that gestures towards a shift in English politics. The witches of Macbeth are very nearly entirely Macbeth's private matter. Although they do appear at the beginning to Banquo as well, in Act IV, when Macbeth *goes* to their lair (as opposed to being intercepted), he is alone. If he knows where to find them, as he tells Lady Macbeth ("I will tomorrow,/And betimes I will, to the weird sisters" 3.4.130-131), presumably he could take her or someone else to them as well, but this is

never an option. Furthermore, after Macbeth's visit, the witches make no other appearance in the play. After his death, the victorious Malcolm and Macduff, along with the English, make no effort to find them, nor is there any implication that they will now be visited by the sisters. The witches, as it were, disappear with Macbeth. (In Roman Polanski's 1971 film version of the play, at the end, Donalbain, Malcolm's brother, goes looking for them, implying a new cycle of power struggle. This, however, has no basis in the text.) The final removal of the witches makes sense in light of their strong association with treason: with the fall of the tyrant Macbeth, rightful rule is once again established, and there is no more need for tortured language, twisted words, ambiguous spells. *Macbeth* could therefore be read as political commentary on the (beginning of the) end of the legal fiction of witchcraft. Wilson notes that the association of the witches with the Gunpowder conspirators would have allowed London audiences to hear Macduff's line that "the time is free" (5.9.21) as being free of treason (Wilson 2002:139). With magical conjuring shifted from hidden lairs to the public London theaters, the connection between witchcraft and royal power was also loosened, if the spell was not yet fully broken.

James was indeed right in his megalomania that the principal aim of the Gunpowder plotters was killing the king; but it is worth remembering that the actual plan was to blow up the entire building of Parliament. Like the language in *Macbeth*, the performers unwittingly targeted more than they likely intended: by setting the explosives in the basement of the Houses of Parliament, the perceived target was the entire legal and political order of England. And even without the detonation, the plot trial placed that political order center stage, for all to see. Unlike the execution of Elizabeth Barton, who was condemned by attainder, and the North Berwick witch trials, where the accused were brought before King James VI personally, the trials for the Gunpowder plotters and conspirators were public. In his efforts at the trial, the head prosecutor, Coke, might as well have made use of an above quoted line from *Macbeth* (and Macbeth, ironically): "Blood hath been shed ere now, i'th' olden time,/ Ere humane statute purged the gentle weal" (3.4.73-74). Namely, although he vehemently prosecuted the accused in James' name, the grounds had shifted almost imperceptibly from divine right of kings (and their 'blood i'th' olden time') to 'humane statute'. Coke and James would clash over this very issue of grounds – whether the king stood above the law or *vice versa* – only two years later, in 1608, and remain enemies for the rest of their days (Glendon 2011). James perhaps did not notice that in providing him with legitimacy, the Gunpowder trials nevertheless displaced the claim to and source of that legitimacy – thereafter, it would have less to do with lineage and God, and more with law and public forum.

Macbeth was thus embedded in English politics, both historical and of the moment – indeed, the play *was* contemporary English politics. It is important to remember that when the play was written, James was a new and *foreign* king, and the history and culture of Scotland were not familiar to London audiences in the way they became in subsequent centuries. And on the other hand,

the Gunpowder Plot was, even unsuccessful, an extraordinary event. Both of these would have required a means through which to be given meaning, in an age when even printing was fairly rare (for example, none of Shakespeare's plays were printed in his lifetime), not to mention electronic communication, on which we have come to rely to shape our view of the world. Theater was a major way English society reflected itself to itself. In presenting a story about an il/legitimate king, *Macbeth* displaced the discussion about legitimacy from courts and witches' lairs into the public forum – theater, quite literally, conjured legitimacy.

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Edvard Đorđević

Prizivanje legitimnosti magijom: Šekspirov *Makbet* kao savremeni engleski politički činilac

Apstrakt

Članak polazi od političkog čitanja Šekspirovog *Makbeta*, tvrdeći da je to delo odgovor na možda neobičnu vezu između magije i državne moći u 16. veku, kao i na politička dešavanja u vreme njegovog pisanja. Naime, delatnosti koje su raznorodno obeležene rečima vradžbina, magija, prizivanje, itd. bile su sastavni deo engleske političke sfere u 16. veku, naročito u borbama za presto. Međutim, još važniju ulogu u političkom smislu je imao lov na veštice i pokušaji britanskih kraljeva da kontrolišu magiju. Ova pitanja su dostigla svoj istorijski vrhunac 1603. godine, dolaskom na engleski presto Džejmsa I (koji je do tada bio Škotski kralj Džejms VI), kao i Barutnom zaverom 1605. Šekspirova drama, napisana odmah posle suđenja zaverenicima za neuspeli pokušaj ubistva engleskog kralja, naizgled služi tome da legitimiše vladavinu kralja Džejmsa. Međutim, pažljivijim čitanjem i stavljanjem u istorijski i politički kontekst, uviđa se da *Makbet* sadrži izvestan subverzivni element. Paradoksalno, iako *Makbet* uistinu legitimiše Džejmsa za kralja, istovremeno dovodi u pitanje osnov po kome on ima kraljevski legitimitet.

Ključne reči: *Makbet*, legitimitet, veštice, magično prizivanje, Barutna zavera