



“Turn His Sleep to Wake:” Sleeplessness in Macbeth

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“Turn His Sleep to Wake:” Sleeplessness in *Macbeth*

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Abstract

This thesis will consider how sleeplessness functions in *Macbeth*. Many consider Macbeth's sleeplessness to be the product of his guilty conscience after he murders Duncan for the throne. While a case can be made for that argument, readings of the play that focus exclusively on Macbeth's personal sleeplessness overlook the fact that virtually every character in the play experiences sleeplessness as well. Additionally, many of the unnatural events that mark Macbeth's reign connect back to sleeplessness, suggesting the theme is more significant than merely denoting the emotional state of one character.

Historical accounts of English life in Shakespeare's time illustrate that sleep was a precarious state closely tied to safety and security; without the latter, the former became impossible. Elizabethans and Jacobeans also believed that physical and psychological ailments could be caused by one's sleeping practices. In other words, good health was rooted in good sleep. These beliefs are evident in *Macbeth*, where universal sleeplessness becomes a symbol of Scotland's vulnerable and treacherous state that Macbeth creates during his reign.

Many readings of *Macbeth* suggest that not only is Macbeth guilt-stricken at the murders he commits, but that his actions are influenced if not overtly dictated by the play's witches. By following the spread of sleeplessness and its remedy symbolized by Malcolm, it becomes clear that sleeplessness is not a supernatural or self-inflicted punishment inflicted upon Macbeth. Reading the play in this way strongly suggests that

Macbeth is responsible for his own acts and that the influence of the witches is ultimately minimal.

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Chapter I

Introduction

The themes of sleep and sleeplessness echo across William Shakespeare's works. Within the 37 full-length plays and 154 sonnets, Ronald Hall notes that there are "about a thousand references to sleep" (24). The word "sleep" appears at least once in each of Shakespeare's plays¹. Yet the topic was not equally represented in the works of other dramatists of the time; beyond "a few exceptions in Marlowe and Webster there is really very little to say on the subject [of sleep] in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama outside Shakespeare" (Hall 25). Hall fails to make the important distinction that in some cases, these references to sleep are actually references to insomnia, or *lack of sleep*². Macbeth uses the word "sleep" four times in the opening lines of this famous speech:

Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more,
Macbeth does murder sleep'—the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast—" (*Mac.* 2.2.33-8)

Despite the repetition of the word, this speech is actually about sleeplessness. There is no critical work that analyzes sleep and sleeplessness across all the plays. The academic writing that does exist on sleep throughout the whole of Shakespeare is simply a catalog of occurrences without any accompanying analysis or distinctions between sleeplessness

1. The plays with the most uses of the word "sleep" including stage directions are *Macbeth* (23), *Richard III* (19), and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (18).

2. Of the 19 uses of "sleep" in *Richard III*, five refer to sleeplessness, four denote nightmares and disturbed sleep, and one serves as a metaphor for death. Only seven refer to peaceful, restful sleep and all of these concern Richmond, who defeats Richard III. The remaining two uses merely refer to the time of day, the period before sleep.

and sleep. If it was so comparatively rare for playwrights to write about and stage sleep, it seems curious that no one has attempted to tease out why Shakespeare's works contain so many of these references and what their significance might be.

Macbeth is Shakespeare's most renowned insomniac, perhaps because his sleeplessness is of the character's own making. Macbeth does not merely lose sleep, he murders it along with Duncan. It seems logical that the genesis of Macbeth's sleeplessness is the gruesome crime committed against Duncan and that link is commonly noted in literary criticism written about the character. But closer inspection shows that Macbeth is far from the only character experiencing sleeplessness in the play. Banquo, Malcolm, Ross, and Lennox³ all describe their own threatened or disrupted sleep—in some instances expressing the general sleeplessness of the Scottish citizenry under Macbeth's reign. The play shows Lady Macbeth's doctor and gentlewoman awake in the night, witnessing their lady's disturbed sleep in the sleepwalking scene. The three murderers, of course, are awake through the night perpetrating their crimes at Macbeth's behest. The drunken sleep of Duncan's grooms is interrupted in the night. In fact throughout *Macbeth*, only Duncan is described as sleeping soundly—a sleep so sound that it allows for his murder.

Rather than being evidence of a guilty conscience linked only to Macbeth as some suggest, perpetual insomnia within the play becomes one symbol of many that shows the inversion of natural and political order that happens under Macbeth's ill-gotten rule. When the rightful king is murdered and replaced by Macbeth, the unnatural comes to the fore. Waking overtakes sleep, nighttime overrules day, and the supernatural in the form

3. While some modern editions of *Macbeth* spell this name as Lenox as it appears in the First Folio, the *Norton* edition of the play has modernized the spelling to Lennox. I use the spelling of my primary source text throughout.

of the witches seems to overwhelm the natural. The questions I will consider in the course of this thesis are: What did sleep represent to Shakespeare's original audiences and how are those beliefs reflected in *Macbeth*? How does sleeplessness function within the play? Does the insomnia depicted reflect the state of the king or the state of his kingdom? How does insomnia interplay with the supernatural and the political in *Macbeth*? Does the return of sleep connote a restoration of political and natural order?

In a preliminary answer to these questions, I suggest that it is significant that Macbeth, the character within the play with the most cause to experience disturbed sleep, is not the only character afflicted with sleeplessness. The assumption that Macbeth's insomnia is the result of his guilt over killing Duncan fails to account for the insomnia described so vividly and persistently by the play's other characters. I hypothesize that a close reading of *Macbeth* supported by an examination of Elizabethan and Jacobean cultural assumptions and practices concerning sleep and consideration of literary criticism on sleeplessness in Shakespeare illustrates that sleeplessness symbolizes more than just Macbeth's own guilt and madness. Rather, it symbolizes Macbeth's unnatural and devastating rule. Natural order is connected to sleep and tied inextricably to political order in the play. In *Macbeth*, strange animal behavior, earthquakes, storms, and unremitting darkness show that Scotland literally cannot endure Macbeth as king; the play's pervasive sleeplessness suggests that neither can her people. Insomnia in the play is used to imply and then ultimately refute the witches' power in the play. Malcolm's ascension to the throne is foreshadowed throughout the play as a return of Scotland's safe sleep.

This view of sleep revises the tendency of literary criticism written about *Macbeth* to make the character of Macbeth synonymous with guilt. Marjorie Garber describes

Macbeth's insomnia as "the mark of a troubled condition of soul, the outward sign of an inward sin" or the embodiment of a guilty conscience (*Dream* 19). In contrast, Garber describes the ability of other characters to sleep as "a mark of spiritual innocence" (*Dream* 198). This connection between sleeplessness and guilt is not peculiar to Macbeth according to Garber. She likens *Julius Caesar's* Brutus to Macbeth because he too "suffers from the Shakespearean malady of sleeplessness, an index of moral turmoil and guilt" (*Shakespeare* 411). Benjamin Parris notes that "[t]he guilt of Duncan's murder takes on the substantial character of a bodily humour that fuses to Macbeth" (123). To Parris, Macbeth's guilt is not only presumed, it is described as its own corporeal entity. The existence of Macbeth's guilty conscience is such a foregone conclusion that it gets mentioned in criticism that is not even about the play or the character. In analyzing the sleeplessness of a wakeful lover in *Sonnet 28*, Dympna Callaghan compares it to Macbeth's, but qualifies that "it is desire rather than guilt that induces sleeplessness" in the poem's speaker (113). In literary criticism, Macbeth has become so synonymous with guilt that this connection between the pair is often invoked but far less often explicated or analyzed.

Assigning the emotion of guilt to Macbeth is not solely an instinct of modern readers and audiences well-versed in popular psychology and the mind/body connection. In 1744, David Garrick acted in and directed a version of *Macbeth*. In his staging, he restored a previously altered script almost back to Shakespeare's original form, with one exception: the actor "composed for himself a dying speech in which the hero reflects on the vanity of human wishes and is overwhelmed by guilt and despair" (Wilders 13-4). In discussing the history of performances of Macbeth's character, John Wilders notes that "actors can be roughly classified into those who emphasise his ruthlessness and those

who accentuate his sense of guilt and horror” (14). Even within the play, certain characters link Macbeth’s actions with emotions of guilt and self-recrimination. Menteith attributes Macbeth’s erratic behavior—his “senses [that] recoil and start”—to a body that “condemn[s] / Itself for being there” (*Mac.* 5.2.22, 4-5).

I do not suggest that Macbeth displays no remorse or emotions of guilt within the play. As the porter opens the gate to admit Macduff and Lennox, Macbeth wishes they were able to “wake Duncan with [their] knocking” (*Mac.* 2.2.72). This scene takes place before Macbeth plans for any of the play’s subsequent murders and it seems at this moment that Macbeth genuinely wishes he could undo the crime he has committed. But this single reference to remorse is scant evidence upon which to establish Macbeth as an emblem of a sleepless king wracked by his guilty conscience. In the following scene, Macbeth kills Duncan’s chamberlains to cover up first his crime and in the scene after that, he begins planning Banquo’s murder to eliminate a perceived threat to his throne. It is not that Macbeth exhibits no feelings of guilt or remorse throughout the play; he does, but he rejects them and pursues instead his continued ambition for political and supernatural power. When considering the forces that shape Macbeth’s character throughout the play, readers and audiences should reject Macbeth’s guilt as readily as the character himself does.

The regret that Macbeth comes to display for Duncan’s murder is not that he committed it, but rather that it fails to afford him the security of reign and peace of mind that he anticipates. After Macbeth orders the murderers to kill Banquo and Fleance, he gives this speech to Lady Macbeth:

Ere we will eat our meal in fear, and sleep
In the affliction of these terrible dreams
That shake us nightly. Better be with the dead,

Whom we to gain our peace have sent to peace,
 Than on the torture of the mind to lie
 In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave.
 After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.
 Treason has done his worst. Nor steel nor poison,
 Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing
 Can touch him further. (*Mac.* 3.2.19-28)

The “torture of the mind” to which Macbeth refers is not guilt over killing Duncan. It is not agony over the acts committed in the past, but instead torment over the uncertainty of the future. To Macbeth it is “better [to] be with the dead” than to face the eventuality of no longer being king. Treason in the form of Macbeth has done his worst, which is to part the king from his crown. This speech is not couched in terms of murder, regicide, or assassination, but instead in terms of sleep and peace. As it was when Duncan was king, his state is enviable to Macbeth. Macbeth has managed to steal Duncan's crown and throne, but in doing so he illustrates to himself how tenuous reign is. He can snatch it from Duncan and someone can just as easily snatch it from him. It is Macbeth's insecurity of reign that is his biggest regret in the play.

The collective language of the play also fails to support the suggestion that Macbeth's guilt and shame are the drama's central themes. The word “conscience” is never used throughout the play; the word “shame” is used four times, three by Lady Macbeth as she chastises her husband. The final usage is by Ross in a metaphor describing the unnatural darkness under Macbeth's reign⁴. The word “guilt” appears only twice within *Macbeth*, both times spoken by Lady Macbeth concerning the plot to frame the chamberlains with Duncan's murder (*Mac.* 1.7.71, 2.2.54). An additional reference

4. “My hands are of your colour, but I shame / To wear a heart so white” (*Mac.* 2.2.62-3); Ross: “By th' clock 'tis day, / And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp. / Is't night's predominance or the day's shame / That darkness does the face of earth entomb / When living light should kiss it?” (*Mac.* 2.4.6-10); “Shame itself, / Why do you make such faces?” (*Mac.* 3.4.65-6); “Fie, for shame!” (*Mac.* 3.4.73). The latter two quotations are Lady Macbeth's response to Macbeth's behavior at the banquet and his explanation that he was reacting to the sight of Banquo's ghost.

employs a pun on the words gilt and guilt. In the early seventeenth century, to gild had an ancillary meaning: “to smear (with blood)” (*OED* v.1.d.). The pun between gilt and guilt is obliquely stated by Lady Macbeth’s plan to “gild the faces of the grooms” with Duncan’s blood “for it must seem their guilt” (*Mac.* 2.2.54-5). This theme of gold and gilding is purportedly a metaphor for Macbeth’s sense of guilt, making his reference to Duncan’s “silver skin laced with his golden blood” a revelatory conflation of the words gilt and guilt, which Lady Macbeth purposefully interrupts with her faint (Greenblatt 2579 fn 4; *Mac.* 2.3.109). However, a nearly identical line appears in Shakespeare’s *King John*. In that play, an English herald describes soldiers returning home from battle with “[t]heir armours that marched hence so silver-bright / Hither return all gilt with Frenchmen’s blood” (*Jn.* 2.1.315-6). In that play, the imagery of silver and gold has no purported connection to emotional guilt. In fact, despite the violence and blood the scene depicts, the metaphor is a positive image of soldiers returning alive from a conflict that has ended. It is telling that nearly all uses of the word “guilt” are spoken by Lady Macbeth because it is she and not Macbeth who is the play’s symbol of guilt.

Examples of Lady Macbeth’s guilty conscience appear throughout the play. In an effort to goad Macbeth into committing Duncan’s murder, Lady Macbeth asks him, “Was the hope drunk / Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since? / And wakes it now to look so green and pale / At what it did so freely?” (*Mac.* 1.7.35-8). In her metaphor, a Macbeth emboldened by intoxication has committed to murdering Duncan only to awaken queasy and horrified by his planned act. This is the exact state in which Lady Macbeth hopes the “drenchèd,” gilded chamberlains will find themselves after Duncan’s murder (*Mac.* 1.7.68). But this metaphor also unexpectedly anticipates Lady Macbeth’s own emotions by the end of the play. She herself is undone by the guilt of what she did

so freely throughout. Not only is her conscience plagued by Duncan's murder, but also by the murders in which she had no foreknowledge or hand, such as Lady Macduff's and Banquo's. In her rambling confessions during the sleepwalking scene, Lady Macbeth says, "The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now?" (*Mac.* 5.1.36-7). She goes on to assert that "Banquo's buried. He cannot come out on's grave" (*Mac.* 5.1.53-4). The sleepwalking scene is the first time that readers and audiences learn that Lady Macbeth is even aware of these murders, because Macbeth has pointedly kept her from their planning and execution. This is Lady Macbeth's last scene in the play; just as she occupies the space between sleep and wake in her sleepwalking, she also occupies the liminal space between life and death in this scene. None of Macbeth's actions or speeches throughout comes close to exhibiting the pathos and culpability that Lady Macbeth does in her final scene onstage and her almost exclusive use of the word "guilt" in the play underscores this dramatic arc.

Another of Shakespeare's kings more closely resembles Lady Macbeth's unraveling than Macbeth's. The titular king in *Richard III* also commits a series of murders in order to attain the crown. Richard is another monarch afflicted with sleeplessness and linked with a guilty conscience. Of this king, Marjorie Garber notes that he also "suffers from the Shakespearean symptom of a diseased conscience, sleeplessness" (*Shakespeare* 836). But in contrast to *Macbeth*, the very language of the play seems to bear this connection out. In *Richard III*, the word "conscience" is used eight times, including a curse of sleeplessness pronounced by Queen Margaret in the first act and Richard's response to it in the final act (*R3* 1.3.219, 5.5.133). Further, the words "guilt," "guilty," "guiltily," and "guiltiness" appear a total of 11 times throughout the play, with Richard using them both to deny and ultimately acknowledge his feelings of

guilt over the murders he commits. The themes of guilt, conscience, and remorse are clearly a central focus of *Richard III* based on this repetition of language. Reducing the plays to a mere inventory of the words that form them is simplistic, but Shakespeare clearly paid such close attention to the language he chose in his writing. A. C. Bradley notes that Shakespeare routinely wrote speeches for characters in prose rather than blank verse to illustrate when their “state of mind is abnormal” (Bradley 352). Bradley cites this lapse into prose that Shakespeare used to signal the emotional and psychological breaks in Lady Macbeth, Hamlet, Ophelia, Lear, and Othello; Macbeth himself is notably absent from Bradley’s list (*ibid*).

Yet another of Shakespeare’s guilty kings is Claudius in *Hamlet*, who becomes aligned with Macbeth through their mutual inability to repent through prayer. Macbeth reports that as he stands over Duncan’s murdered body, one of the chamberlains “crie[s] ‘God bless us’ and ‘Amen’ the other” (*Mac.* 2.2.24). It deeply troubles Macbeth that he is unable to “say ‘Amen’ / When they did say ‘God bless us,’” despite “ha[ving] most need of blessing” (*Mac.* 2.2.26-7, 2.2.30). Claudius’ soliloquy on guilt seems to apply as much to the Macbeths as to his own emotions. His guilt, like Lady Macbeth’s, manifests itself in the image of bloodstained hands and absolution in the image of water finally washing them clean. Claudius weighs guilt and repentance in the following soliloquy:

..... but O, what form of prayer
 Can serve my turn? ‘Forgive me most foul murder’?
 That cannot be, since I am still possessed
 Of those effects for which I did the murder—
 My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen.
 May one be pardoned and retain th’offence?
 In the corrupted currents of this world
 Offence’s gilded hand⁵ may shove by justice,
 And oft ’tis seen the wicked prize itself

5. An additional use of gilded meaning bloodstained.

Buys out the law. But 'tis not so above. (*Ham.* 3.3.51-60)

Claudius is unable to pray and repent for his acts despite his desire to do so, in part because truly repenting means giving up his throne and his wife, the things he murdered Old Hamlet to gain. Claudius notes that his position as king allows him to skirt justice as there is no one powerful enough to hold him accountable for his actions. Lady Macbeth echoes this sentiment when she asks during her sleepwalking scene, “What need we fear who knows it when none can call our power to account?” (*Mac.* 5.1.32-3). However, Claudius also notes that divine justice is inescapable—he will be punished for his actions in the next life. Claudius gives voice to the great inconsistency of aligning Macbeth and especially his sleeplessness with guilt—how can Macbeth be repentant for murdering Duncan when he retains the throne and even continues to murder to secure his claim to it? Claudius resigns himself to the idea of divine justice, while Macbeth never seems to consider consequences or punishment beyond losing his crown.

The sleeplessness that recurs throughout *Macbeth* is not solely or even primarily a symbol of Macbeth’s guilt. Rather, it comes to symbolize Macbeth’s misrule. As there becomes “[s]omething...rotten in the state of Denmark” under Claudius’ reign, Macbeth’s rule results in the upset of natural order and the safety of Scotland (*Ham.* 1.4.67). It is a king’s duty to foster the security of his subjects, which Macbeth instead undermines at every turn. The sleeplessness that plagues Scotland becomes a spur for Macbeth’s ambition; in an effort to secure his reign and restore his own sleep, Macbeth carries out even more murders. The witches are suspected of being the cause of the play’s strange events when Macbeth is the actual cause, for the weird sisters represent a

power more alluring to Macbeth than even the crown. Macbeth's attempts at restoring his own sleep make the sleep of his subjects recede even further.

Chapter II

Sleep, Watch, the Supernatural, and Clocks and Bells in Shakespeare's Era

Two problems that complicate readings of Shakespeare's centuries-old plays are the things that present-day readers and audiences think they know and the things that they never knew. If you look up the idiom "to watch like a hawk," virtually every current source will define the phrase to mean "to watch closely." Additionally, the term is often conflated with the word "hawkeye," adding the association of a close watch by a spectator with especially keen eyesight. However, the saying actually has its roots in the sport of falconry. To begin the process of training birds to hunt on command, hawks were deprived of sleep until they became so exhausted, they would fall asleep on their trainer's arm (Keleney; "watch" *OED* v.16.). "To watch like a hawk" originally meant to be kept awake, not closely watched⁶. The expression has outlasted its referent and English speakers created a logical explanation for it, one which radically altered its original meaning.

Similarly, many elements of Shakespeare's plays refer to customs and ways of life that have drastically changed in the 400 years since the plays were penned and staged. Present-day readers and audiences often unconsciously fill in the blanks with their own experiences and understandings, which allows them to create a contemporary reading of the play. Jacqueline Latham notes that the problems of present-day readers contemplating *The Tempest* "are the more insidious because action, language and

6. Desdemona refers to this form of watching when she says of Othello that she will "watch him tame" (*Oth.* 3.3.23).

characters seem transparently clear,” but to an extent, this is a problem in reading all of Shakespeare’s plays (117). Modern editions of the plays contain line and footnotes defining archaic terms that have fallen out of use and the historical or political context that has long since been forgotten, but they do not explain readily identifiable terms like “sleep” or “watch.” Asking how Shakespeare’s audiences experienced and understood sleep, night, time, watch, and the supernatural—all prominent themes within *Macbeth*—allows present-day readers and audiences to develop an understanding of associations and patterns that may have become altered or obscured over time. In turn, these patterns present a clearer understanding of Macbeth’s relationship with sleep and sleeplessness.

Sleep

Those in Shakespeare’s time had anxieties and fears surrounding sleep that we do not experience today. Without electricity, night was darker, longer, and more dangerous than it seems now. Although sleep was as much a requirement of life in Shakespeare’s time as it is now, our understanding and experiences of sleep differ vastly from those of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Scholars have examined works of art and literature, diaries, personal accounts, and medical texts in an effort to discover what was commonly known about sleep in Shakespeare’s time. A. Roger Ekirch notes one of the major problems in studying sleep in this period and generally: “[e]arly modern scholars have neglected such topics as bedtime rituals, sleep deprivation, and variations in slumber between different social ranks” (344). Part of the reason for these omissions may simply be that there are comparatively few records documenting sleep practices versus other aspects of life from that period for scholars to study. Eluned Summers-Bremner writes that in eighteenth century Europe, there was a “change from understanding sleep as an active state with its own requirements to understanding it as a passive state that simply

occurs” (9). The dearth of accounts that Ekirch cites may be evidence that this shift began occurring even earlier, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. If sleep were considered an absence of activity, it might reasonably be deemed unworthy of documentation by those recording accounts. Additionally, because sleep is a universal necessity, perhaps people did not see a reason to detail an act that they assumed everyone experienced exactly as they did, especially if that state seemed automatic and involuntary.

The historical accounts and depictions of sleep that were written, however, show that sleep especially in the Elizabethan era was not the same for all people. The different classes represented in Shakespeare’s plays and audiences experienced sleep differently even from one another. The historical accounts that survive come largely from “diaries...heavily weighted toward Britain’s upper classes” (Ekirch 350). These were the people who had the ability, leisure time, and resources to keep personal accounts. Through these sources, Ekirch reports that “adults typically slept for periods from six to eight hours but that the standard time for retiring to bed fell between nine and ten o’clock,” making the time of awakening between three and six o’clock in the morning (ibid). This is confirmed by the descriptions in Nicholas Breton’s 1626 fictional work *Fantastickes*, which provides a poetic account of each hour of the day. In “One of the Clock,” the only waking people are the bellman, the hungry baby calling to his nurse, and the thief; the vignette makes it clear that most of the population is asleep at this hour (McMurtry 13). By “Three of the Clock,” servants, milkmaids, housewives, shepherds, ploughman, threshers, laborers, and scholars—all representatives of the lower classes—are depicted already at their work, suggesting that the working class likely had earlier bedtimes than the upper classes (ibid).

The working poor lived in one- or two-room houses. Their kitchens, living

rooms, and bedrooms were all the same single space. Because of their small quarters, working-class citizens in London and other cities did not have bedsteads or other furniture devoted solely to sleeping. Rather, they slept on pallets stuffed with straw or wool placed on the floor and traditionally slept in day clothes for warmth (Ekirch 352; Mortimer 187). Poor families in rural areas may have had more money and space, which allowed for more elaborate furnishings. During Shakespeare's lifetime, it appears that the differences between the classes at least as far as bedding were beginning to equalize. Karl H. Dannenfeldt suggests that the security and comfort previously afforded only the wealthy was becoming more commonplace, citing an account noting that as of "1598...English beds were 'covered with tapestry, even those of farmers'" (426 fn 31).

These curtains⁷ helped address a problem that all classes faced during sleep: a lack of privacy (Ekirch 352). Lower-class householders slept in the same room as their children, servants or tenants, and even livestock (Ekirch 361). Members of the upper class with larger homes still shared space with servants, children, and other members of their household because many of the town and manor houses of Shakespeare's time lacked corridors (McMurtry 207-8). With this design, "one room opened into the next in a way that gave the occupants no way to shut the door and achieve some privacy" in their bedchambers (ibid). Regardless of class, sleep was conducted somewhat openly and with potential onlookers.

Shakespeare routinely dramatizes sleep as a time of vulnerability and exposure. His plays contain myriad examples of the lack of privacy found in sleep—many proving threatening or detrimental. In *Much Ado About Nothing*, Hero's position as Beatrice's bedfellow is exploited in an effort to ignite a romance between Beatrice and Benedick.

7. See Macbeth's reference to "curtained sleep" in 2.1.51 (Vaughan and Vaughan 175 fn 1).

Leonato shares a false report from Beatrice's bedfellow for the benefit of an eavesdropping Benedick. Beatrice is purportedly "up twenty times a night, and there will she sit in her smock till she have writ a sheet of paper" containing both their names (*Ado* 2.3.120-1, 125-6). In a darker moment in the play after Hero has been slandered, Beatrice is asked whether she was her cousin's bedfellow on the night Hero is accused of sleeping with Borrachio. Beatrice must confess that, while she had "this twelvemonth been her bedfellow," she was not on the evening in question and cannot vindicate Hero from Claudio's claims (*Ado* 4.1.148). The crux of both the play's romance and near-tragedy stem from false reports of someone's behavior while in their bedchambers.

The accusation against Hero is echoed in *Othello*, when Iago perpetrates slander against his own bedfellow by telling Othello that Cassio has been having sexual dreams about Desdemona. Iago details how Cassio, mistaking Iago's body next to him in bed for Desdemona's, kisses him and lasciviously puts his leg over Iago's (*Oth.* 3.3.426-8). Perhaps even more incriminating is Iago's report that Cassio then bemoans the "cursèd fate, / That gave [Desdemona] to the Moor" (*Oth.* 3.3.429-30). Iago's tale makes it plain that Cassio is not merely dreaming of Desdemona, but remembering their encounters in his sleep, suggesting the vulnerability of the sleeper on two counts. Cassio has no control over what he dreams or what he says in sleep (a theme that is repeated with Lady Macbeth's admissions in the sleepwalking scene), but he also has no control over what Iago reports to others about his behavior. Iago's false account spurs Othello's jealousy, resulting in a series of deaths and Iago's ruin. These scenes illustrate not only the extent to which private sleep was often a public spectacle, but also the harm that such publicity could bring.

In addition to different sleep practices, Elizabethan and Jacobean understanding

of the physical processes of sleep differs vastly from our understanding today. Even in the present day, it is likely difficult for the average person to define what precisely sleep is and which factors bring it about. In Shakespeare's time, the causes of sleep were not merely difficult to articulate, they were largely unknown by laypeople and doctors alike. In Shakespeare's day, "the gap in knowledge between trained physicians and many members of the gentry (or, for that matter, the church) was less extreme" (Hoeninger 34)⁸. Neither the physical cause nor the effects of sleep were well understood, and that lack of understanding contributed to the sense of fear and anxiety that surrounded sleep in Elizabethan and Jacobean England.

Sleep was considered a spiritual state as much as a physical one. For the most part, "Elizabethan writers on the psychology of sleep usually define sleep as a kind of separation of the soul from the body, or a rest of the five outward senses, together with the sixth or common sense" (Camden 107). Levin Lemnius, a Dutch physician and the era's expert on sleep, wrote that "sleepe is nothing els but a restinge of the Animal faculty, and a pawsing from the actions and busines of the day" (Camden 108; Dannenfeldt 422). Sleep was widely regarded as the receding of one's consciousness for a period of time in a way that mimicked death. In *The Haven of Health*, Thomas Cogan theorized that sleep was in fact a form of death performed daily, "for as in sleep the body rests while the soul remains awake, so in death the body rests while the soul and spirit live" (Camden 110, Ekirch 348). This anxiety over sleep's proximity to death is dramatized throughout Shakespeare. In *Henry IV Part II*, Prince Hal mistakenly believes his sleeping father is dead. Romeo misidentifies Juliet's sleep as death, and Juliet

8. The extent of Shakespeare's education and medical training has become its own subgenre of Shakespearian studies. For discussion on this, see Hoeninger, Edgar, Chandler, and Stearns. One argument is that Shakespeare writes so often on sleeplessness because he himself was an insomniac (see Chandler, Head, and "Shakespeare and Sleep").

mistakes Romeo's death as sleep initially.

There were several theories regarding the physical process of sleep or why the consciousness withdrew into sleep. According to Petrus Velentinus' theory published in 1612, sleep was caused by a vapor produced during digestion that rises from the stomach to the brain (Camden 110). The warm vapor becomes congealed by the brain's coolness, physically blocking one's consciousness and producing sleep (ibid). Other hypotheses of the causes of sleep were that the brain was critically dry and sleep allowed it to be remoistened or that the liver and the stomach needed to be more active. This greater activity drew energy and heat away from the brain to other areas of the body and caused consciousness to recede into sleep (ibid). Sleep was long linked with meals and digestion, because it came so readily after consuming the evening meal.

Given the abundance of theories on what caused sleep, it is little surprise that there were also myriad theories on the best sleep practices to preserve health and avoid negative consequences such as bad dreams or sudden death. The connection between sleep and digestion is reinforced by the advice given about the best and safest sleeping position. Sleeping on your right side was ideal, for that position allowed food to drop down into the stomach (thought to be on the right side) and in turn be cradled by the liver (Dannenfeldt 428). The heat created by digestion in this position theoretically allowed for a deeper sleep (Dannenfeldt 428; Camden 113). Sleeping "groveling on your stomach" was advisable only if one suffered from slow digestion (Dannenfeldt 429; Camden 114). All the scholars of the day agreed that sleeping flat on one's back could be fatal. If sleeping supine did not kill you outright, it could lead to a litany of ills including nightmares, kidney stones, bad memory, convulsions, and cramps (Dannenfeldt 429). These detailed instructions for the safe and correct ways to sleep expose an anxiety

surrounding sleep in Shakespeare's time: sleepers have a complete lack of control and awareness over their actions while in sleep and therefore had no way to maintain a safe sleeping position. The fear surrounding sleep and accidental death must have been immense.

With so much concerning sleep beyond a sleeper's understanding and control, the aspects of sleep that people could regulate became associated with morality. Medical writing and popular wisdom dictated when and how much sleep was appropriate for maintaining good physical and moral health. Day sleeping "brought on illnesses associated with humidity, healthy coloring was lessened, the spleen became heavy, the sinews lost their tone, vim and appetite were lost, and fevers often appeared" in those who indulged in daytime naps⁹ (Dannefeldt 419). When considering how much sleep a body needed, "common aphorisms expressed similar attitudes toward the proper duration of sleep, including 'Nature requires five, *Custom takes seven*, Laziness nine, And wickedness eleven" (Ekirch 349, emphasis in original). Summers-Bremner notes that "wasting time first became sinful in the West in the fourteenth century" with the rise of "the newly mercantile economy" (10). Sleeping too much and sleeping during the day were symptoms of a lax moral character because the acts were synonymous with waste and extravagance. However, not sleeping at all was also suspicious according to Summers-Bremner. Sleep was a way of establishing social order; sleep disorders were in turn evidence of a disorderly character. Summers-Bremner writes that the Devil was believed to be an insomniac, "an example of a sleepless being bent on evil" (52, 10).

9. Thomas Dekker was in the minority with his conflicting advice that napping during the day was beneficial to women in particular, making "the body fat, the skin faire, the flesh plump, delicate, and tender" (Camden 113). In addition to making women more physically attractive, sleeping during the day helped them be frugal, "both in sparing victuals...and in preserving apparel; for while wee warm us in our beds, our clothes are not worn" (ibid).

Notably, Iago was reportedly witness to Cassio's nocturnal performance because he "could not sleep;" his insomnia as much as his actions mark him as a suspicious character (*Oth.* 3.3.420).

Despite the anxiety and suspicion surrounding insomnia or nighttime waking, there is evidence that these were a routine part of Elizabethan and Jacobean life. Sleepers of the present day generally experience "consolidated sleep," meaning that a night's sleep is a continual span of six to eight hours with no or minimal intervening periods of waking (Ekirch 344). In contrast, for Elizabethans and Jacobean sleep was "segmented," usually consisting of a period of several hours' sleep between bedtime and midnight, a period of waking for an hour or two, and a return to sleep until dawn or uprising (Ekirch 344, 364). The "initial interval of slumber was usually referred to as 'first sleep'" (Ekirch 364). There was no specific term given to the subsequent period of waking after first sleep; it was simply called "watch" as was any mid-night waking (*ibid.*). Despite the lack of terminology, Ekirch lists a series of activities that people engaged in during these nightly periods of waking and traces references to them from various literary and artistic sources. These activities included grooming, lovemaking, discussing the night's dreams, and prayer (Ekirch 344). Because the stomach was no longer thought to be actively digesting the evening meal by the time of second sleep, it was safe to sleep on one's left side for the remainder of the night (Dannenfeldt 428).

Inextricably linked to the concept of sleep and vulnerability in the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras was the ritual of prayer before bed¹⁰. Ekirch describes that households

10. In addition to praying before bed as one final means of establishing the sense of security required to sleep, Ekirch notes that there were also specific prayers meant to be recited when one awakened in the middle of the night to reinforce one's protection (371). Father Ignazio Balsamo provides a list of meditations upon which the faithful should pray, instructing Catholics "before you fall a sleepe, . . . you shall meditat four of the foresaid meditations. An if it happen also that you awake in the night time, you shall

settling in for sleep “prepared...as if girding for an impending siege;” locks were thrown, shutters and doors barred, and weapons laid close at hand to ensure a household’s physical safety against intruders (353). In addition to these physical preparations, people also invoked spiritual and moral protection through prayer. Because sleep and death were such close states, it was important to atone for one’s sin before both. If the temporary state of sleep were to become the permanent state of death, failing to atone prior could lead one’s soul to purgatory or to eternal damnation. To prevent this eventuality, “the family patriarch bore a responsibility for...conducting household prayers, the fabled ‘lock’ of every night” (Ekirch 356). The anxiety surrounding the importance of prayer before sleep is a theme that appears throughout Shakespeare, most notably with Old Hamlet’s death during his afternoon nap in the orchard. When his ghost returns, he tells his son that he was “[c]ut off even in the blossoms of [his] sin,” or carrying a full weight of sins because he died without having atoned for any of them through prayer (*Ham.* 1.5.76).

Despite all these instructions for securing safe and sound sleep (or perhaps because of them), sleeplessness was a problem for some in Elizabethan and Jacobean England. To combat insomnia, Ambroise Paré, a sixteenth-century French surgeon, suggested that “the lungs of a freshly killed sheep could be applied to the head as long as the lungs remained warm” (Dannenfeldt 436). André du Laurens, another French physician of the same era, recommended the slightly less drastic measure of placing

meditate one or two more. If you awaken not all the night, in the morning you shall accomplish althose hours which you have omitted” (Balsamo 306). In *The Whole Duty of Prayer*, Richard Allestree provides a chapter entitled “Ejaculations on certain occasions.” Among the occasions listed, Allestree includes “When the clock Strikes,” “When you awake in the Night,” and “When You Hear the Bell Toll for one Departed” (13, 16). Many of these prayers only amount to a few lines, such as the following from James Perrott: “My God, I am awaked againe: awake mee out of sinne, as thou hast done me out of sleepe” (75). The interrupted sleep and resulting prayers of Duncan’s chamberlains are a key example of this phenomenon in Shakespeare.

“blood-sucking leeches behind the ears” and subsequently “putting a grain of opium in the holes made” (ibid). Camden additionally cites “one remedy which uses the fat of a dormouse applied to the soles of the feet” to induce sleep (117). Even the more innocuous herbal-based remedies for combating sleeplessness and nightmares still contained ingredients such as “hart’s bones, pearls, and burnt silk” (Camden 120). Poet William Vaughan suggested “that to procure sleep one should take a little camphor, mix it with woman’s milk and anoint the temples with the mixture” (Dannenfeldt 435, Mortimer 286). It appears that perhaps Lady Macbeth may have exacerbated Macbeth’s sleeplessness when she exchanges her “milk for gall” (*Mac.* 1.5.46).

Because of all the risks associated with sleep, preparing oneself for bed was often a precarious and fraught activity in Shakespeare’s time. People felt the need to secure the safety of their bodies from internal, external, and supernatural threats. Sleep was regarded with fear and the rituals surrounding sleep were regarded with a superstitious fervor, because many believed that any bed had the potential to become one’s deathbed through the slightest error or lapse in vigilance.

Watch

For Shakespeare’s first audiences, nighttime—which comes to be the permanent state of Scotland under Macbeth’s reign—was inextricably linked to the idea of watchmen and guard. Men who sat on the watch were in essence professional insomniacs who forwent their own sleep to help secure the sleep of others. Rebecca Totaro notes that Shakespeare was particularly adept at exploiting “fantasies of the perfect watch and sweet sleep, anxieties over security heightened by the failed watch, and combinations of the two” (409). The fodder for this conflict between sleep and security came from the lived experiences of Shakespeare and his initial audiences. *Hamlet* opens

at midnight on a guard platform where a group of watchmen gathers to discuss a strange and unsettling specter that they have encountered on the previous two nights' watch.

Watch and watchmen also appear in *Othello*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Coriolanus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *Henry VI Part 1*, *Henry VI Part 2*, *Measure for Measure*, the sonnets, and very briefly in *Macbeth*. In most of these plays, the theme of watch interacts with the themes of sleep or sleeplessness.

It seems unlikely that Shakespeare would expect his audiences to know the intricacies of law enforcement in the periods in which plays like *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are set. Rather, the watches and watchmen depicted in Shakespeare's plays follow Elizabethan and Jacobean customs and represent familiar images to Shakespeare's London audiences. The laws creating England's formal system of watch and ward were initially introduced in 1285 when King Edward I announced the Statute of Winchester. The King cited an increase in "Robberies, Murthers, [burnings, and Thefts]," as well as the fact that criminals who break the laws in committing their crimes could not be expected to in turn obey the laws that summoned them to trial (Edward I 1:96). Under the Statute of Winchester, the onus for law-keeping essentially fell to law-abiding citizens. The public at large was not only responsible for catching criminals and turning them over to the magistrate, but if they failed to do so, they became responsible for damages for the crimes (ibid).

In addition to defining an individual's responsibility for law-keeping, the Statute of Winchester also gave details on setting watches in towns and cities. The King called for a watch "in every city by six men at every gate, in every borough, by twelve men; in every town, by six or four, according to the number of inhabitants of the town, and they shall keep the watch continually all night from the sun-setting unto the sun-rising"

(Edward I 1:96). The duties of the watch were simply to hold any stranger who passed until morning, when his identity and intent could be determined (ibid). If someone refused to submit to being held or committed any other offense, the Statute of Winchester “lev[ied] Hue and Cry upon them” (ibid). Hue and cry was the pursuit of a criminal “with all the Town, and the Towne near” joining in “until that they be taken and delivered to the Sheriff” (ibid). The practice of the hue and cry was essentially the formation of an ad hoc police force—or angry mob—in physical pursuit of a specified criminal. The guiding principle behind the hue and cry was to make the crowd looking for the criminal so large and news of the crime so widespread that the criminal simply could not escape capture and punishment (Critchley 3, 6; Forgeng 36).

Other provisions made by the Statute of Winchester were that highways between market towns must be cleared by landowners “so that there be neither Dyke [tree] nor Bush, whereby a Man may lurk to do hurt” (Edward I 1:96). Failure to do so made the landowner liable for any robbery or murder committed on his land (ibid). Lastly, the statute “commanded...Every Man between fifteen years of age and sixty years, shall be assessed and sworn to Armor according to the quantity of their Lands and Goods” (ibid). Essentially, this section of the statute dictated that the larger your fortune, the larger the arsenal you were legally mandated to keep so that you could protect it yourself. The Statute of Winchester clearly made it the public’s job to prevent crimes and their additional responsibility to apprehend criminals or pay damages if their efforts failed.

The Statute of Winchester was still in place some 300 years later in Shakespeare’s day, but the application of the laws it enacted had undergone some shifts in the intervening years. At the constable’s direction, every man except those with great wealth, property, or status was assigned duty as a watchman to prevent harms at night

(Critchley 2). In addition to the guards who manned city walls and gates, there were also bellmen who patrolled the streets, each “carrying a lantern, a bell to raise alarms, and a staff weapon for self-defense, keeping an eye open for possible fires or suspicious activity” (Forgeng 75). As important as ringing the bell in case of alarm, the bellman also rang out or proclaimed the hour as he patrolled (Critchley 26 fn 1; Greenblatt 1416 fn 1; Kinney 81). The watch was established not only to keep the public secure, but also to convey the status of that security to citizens.

The drawbacks of performing these watches were numerous. They were unpaid posts (Forgeng 35). Watchmen were required to be awake from sunset to sunrise, which in turn interfered with their paid duties the following day (Critchley 6, 25). Most watch schedules have not survived, but constables had full discretion in setting the schedules for the watch. It seems likely that preferential treatment was extended to a constable’s friends and family and that perhaps authority was abused in overscheduling those whom a constable disliked. But worst, the personal danger of the job was very high. In 1582, William Lambarde drafted a letter of instruction to constables, watchmen, and other officials charged with keeping the peace. In it, Lambarde notes that if evil men escape or evade the capture of the watch, those on duty may be punished in their stead, themselves being treated as felons (Lambarde 5, 6). Failure to show up for watch or to participate in the hue and cry could land a watchman in the stocks (Critchley 6).

Because of the inconvenience and risk involved in performing the required duties of the watch, those with ready means paid a substitute to serve in their stead rather than standing watch themselves. Constables oversaw the watch, led the hue and cry in pursuit of felons, and checked that households maintained the weapons the Statute of Winchester decreed they must have (Critchley 11, 12,). The constable’s duties were even more

burdensome than those of the watch and these positions, like the watch, were often filled by men who received pay to substitute for another who did not want the complications that came with the unpaid office¹¹ (Critchley 10, Frasure 385). The position of constable “came to be filled by those who could find no other form of employment....Hence the office sank lower and lower in public esteem as the old principle of personal service died out” (Critchley 10). *Measure for Measure* depicts a perennial constable of exactly this sort. Elbow has served in that post for seven-and-a-half years; when asked if his ward has any other men who might take over the office, Elbow responds that “[a]s they are chosen, they are glad to choose me for them. I do it for some piece of money, and go through with all” (*MM* 2.1.238-40).

Shakespeare’s plays contain several examples of sleeping watch, comical constables, and crimes that occur despite the systems in place to prevent them. As Critchley notes, *Much Ado About Nothing*’s constable Dogberry is another preeminent example of how the position—one of no small power and responsibility—became diminished because those who could afford otherwise did not wish to be saddled with the time-consuming and arduous duties (Critchley 10). Dogberry warns his watchmen *against* interfering with drunks, thieves, and even matters as trivial as crying children (*Ado* 3.3.42, 53-5, 62-3). A watchman asks Dogberry what to do if the man he bids to stand will not. Under the Statute of Winchester, the watch must restrain him or levy hue and cry, but Dogberry tells him to simply “let him go...and thank God you are rid of a knave” (*Ado* 3.3.25-7). Despite doing the opposite of every function the watch was supposed to perform, Dogberry and his men actually do manage to foil criminals during

11. Shakespeare’s father, John, was sworn in as a constable in Stratford-upon-Avon in 1558 (Greenblatt 42). This was presumably before the time when the quality of constables had become degraded.

the course of the night. Although the scene is played for comedy in *Much Ado About Nothing*, inadequate security was a real problem in Shakespeare's time, so much so that the system was reformed in the mid-1600s, formally making the watch a paid position to improve the quality of the men serving and to assure greater security (Beattie 175-6).

Shakespeare's audiences would associate depictions of the night's watch with conflicting feelings of safety and vulnerability. Many in the audience would know firsthand the tedium experienced on a night standing watch. But a scene of watch would also connote a state of profound darkness. According to Jeffrey Forgeng, some towns required householders to place lit lanterns outside their doors at sunset to provide a meager source of light to aid the watch and allow travelers to make their way in relative comfort and safety (Forgeng 75-6). However, the cost of providing artificial light was far greater than the perceived benefit, since "it was assumed that nobody who was outside at night had any honest business" (Forgeng 76). Banquo alludes to the darkness that resulted from this thrift as he approaches Inverness, noting that "[t]here's husbandry in heaven, / Their candles are all out" (*Mac.* 2.1.4-5). In his metaphor, the darkness of a starless night is likened to the extinguished candles and lanterns that greeted the watch. The watch was charged with observing and keeping the peace, and yet they were operating in utter darkness.

Peter Schwenger describes night as "first of all an absence, absence of light, and light is what gives shape to the things of the world, structure, the clarity of their distances from each other and their relationships in space" (52). Darkness's effect on human perception would have been much more pronounced in Shakespeare's time, before electric light could grant perspective at the flip of a switch. In discussing a production of *Macbeth* staged in 1999, Harriet Walter described how she as Lady Macbeth set about

evoking the sense of fear in her audience that the play requires. It can no longer be presumed that all or even much of the audience harbors a genuine fear of witches, the devil, the supernatural, political upheaval, or even an attack in the night. But whatever a person feels intellectually is often no match for how we feel instinctually; Walter remarked that “one of the most primitive fears we all share is fear of darkness,” and it was that fear that she channeled in her staging¹² (5). The prevalence of prayer, sleep rituals, and watch in Shakespeare’s time illustrates how perilous night and sleep seemed, and yet each of these represents an imperfect system of security that offers little real safety or reassurance.

The Supernatural

In Shakespeare’s time, supernatural beings such as witches, ghosts, and evil spirits were believed to be real and were thought to be most active at night. In Elizabethan and Jacobean England, the official purpose of the watch was to provide protection from human and natural threats, such as criminals and fires. In *Hamlet*, “[t]he source of this our watch” is the threat of Fortinbras and Norway’s forces; the country was at war and the watch was protecting against foreign enemies (*Ham.* 1.1.105). As we see, however, the ghost of Old Hamlet ultimately becomes the true subject of the watch. Summers-Bremner discusses how the threat of the supernatural was perceived in Elizabethan England: “arson, political conspiracy and robbery were feared, as were personal attacks....Perhaps the most feared of all at night, though, were the devil and his minions,” which included witches (38). One reason for this was that supernatural harms

12. Darkness is linked to another more contemporary fear surrounding the play. Harriet Walter cites a theory that links the superstition regarding productions of “The Scottish Play” with this darkness. Walter says, “Theories abound as to the origins of the superstition, but Greg [Doran] favoured the most practical one in circulation, namely that because so much of the play takes place at night in semi-darkness, an above average number of falls and breakages can occur” (3).

were thought to be incredibly widespread and yet were nearly impossible to witness and therefore guard against. Bruising on infants was attributed to “fairies pinching [them] in the cradle” as they slept¹³ (Mortimer 266). In *King Lear*, Edgar (disguised as Tom o’ Bedlam) describes the nocturnal activities of one such supernatural threat: “He gives the web and the pin [cataract], squinies the eye, and makes the hare-lip; mildews the white wheat, and hurts the poor creature of the earth¹⁴” (*Lr.* 3.4.107-9). *The Tempest’s* Prospero refers to the supernatural beings “whose pastime / Is to make midnight mushrooms, that rejoice / To hear the solemn curfew” bell ringing (*Tmp.* 5.1.38-40). After the curfew bell has rung, these beings have freedom to create mischief, in this case stymying agricultural pursuits by making patches of mushrooms in grazing pastures “[w]hereof the ewe not bites” (*Tmp.* 5.1.37). These disruptions may seem petty, but any tribulation or ailment ranging from mere inconvenience to fatality was attributed to the supernatural, and the watch, the system of security, was powerless to prevent such occurrences. As Keith Thomas writes, “the belief in witchcraft can be defined as the attribution of misfortune to occult human agency” (436). In an era where science and technology were in their infancy, there were many such misfortunes to blame upon the supernatural.

Witchcraft was so feared that several acts of Parliament were passed to curtail its practice. In 1542, the first act was passed under King Henry VIII. This act was repealed five years later by Edward VI in 1547. Elizabeth was crowned in 1558 and for the first

13. Prospero threatens to use his magic to torment Caliban’s sleep, promising “For this be sure tonight thou shalt have cramps, Side-stitches that shall pen thy breath up....Thou shalt be pinched as thick as honeycomb, each pinch more stinging than bees that made ‘em” (*Tp.* 1.2.328-33).

14. Tom’s speech about the supernatural ends with the phrase, “and, aroint thee, witch, aroint thee!,” a near verbatim quote of the sailor’s wife dismissal of the weird sister recounted in the first act of *Macbeth* (*Lr.* 3.4.114; *Mac.* 1.3.5). *King Lear* was likely written in the same timeframe as *Macbeth*, between 1603 and 1605 (Greenblatt 2308).

five years of her reign, there were no official laws concerning the use of witchcraft or magic. Parliament then passed the Act of 1563, which echoed the act passed under her father in its prohibitions: it was illegal to use witchcraft to kill or harm people, to damage property, to find treasure or lost items, or to provoke unlawful love (Thomas 442; Newton 233-4). However, under Elizabeth, witchcraft was only a capital offense if a human being died as a result of its practice (ibid). Those convicted for the first time of a lesser charge of witchcraft would spend a year in prison (Thomas 442).

In 1597, six years before being crowned King of England, King James wrote *Daemonologie*, a treatise arguing that witchcraft was real and that it should be punishable by law. James takes great care to differentiate between magicians (or necromancers) and witches within *Daemonologie*. The former, as seen in figures like Prospero and some would argue James himself, were attracted to the study of magic through curiosity and a desire for knowledge (Vaughan and Vaughan 39; James 21). James took a much harsher position against witches, calling them “slaues of the Deuill” (preface). They had less pure motivations for pursuing dark magic, including “thrist [sic] of revenge” and “greedie appetite...caused through great poverty;” a witch’s desire for power outstripped the desire for knowledge (James 8).

Against this background, it is unsurprising that the Witchcraft Act of 1604 that Parliament passed under James provided a richer list of infractions as well as harsher punishments than either of the preceding acts. The act forbid the use of familiar spirits, which were believed to be gifts from the Devil used to perform magic on a witch’s behalf (Newton 13, James 21). In addition, the laws sentenced to death anyone convicted of using witchcraft themselves, as well as their “Ayders, Abettors, and Counsellors” (Newton 248). The act also formally made it illegal to “take up any dead man, woman,

child, out of his, her, or their grave, or any other place where the dead body resteth; or the skin, bone, or any other part of any dead person, to be employed, or used in any manner of Witchcraft, Sorcery, Charme, or Inchantment¹⁵” (Newton 238).

Despite James’ personal interest in witchcraft and the introduction of this more comprehensive statute, witchcraft-related accusations, trials, and convictions actually peaked during Elizabeth’s reign. Thomas writes that “on the Home Circuit the trials were at their zenith during the reign of Elizabeth I, when 455 out of the 790 known indictments were made, the majority during the 1580s and 1590s” (451). Jacqueline Latham notes that witchcraft laws and trials in England “were chiefly concerned with *maleficium*, harm to others, either their person or possessions;...On the other hand, continental witchcraft was frequently concerned with the diabolical nature of the witches’ compact and the sexual orgy of the witches’ Sabbath” (118). The harm feared from witchcraft by Shakespeare’s first audiences was not moral, but physical. Records from the era are incomplete at best, so the total number of witchcraft-related deaths—both by accused witches and as punishment for witches—can only be inferred based on existing records. In the introduction of the Witchcraft Act of 1604, James wrote that the act was intended “for the better restraining of said offences, and more severe punishing the same” (Newton 238). It is also unknown whether it was these new laws or increased skepticism in James’ era that resulted in fewer accusations of witchcraft being levied during James’ reign.

15. The Witchcraft Act of 1604 had to use careful language noting these items were outlawed in use for supernatural acts because human body parts were used with fair frequency in medicine in Shakespeare’s time. For more on this, see Sugg, Noble, and discussion in Chapter 4.

Clocks and Bells

Another prominent element of *Macbeth* that is largely unfamiliar to present-day audiences and readers is the use of bells for timekeeping. Throughout the play, there are several distinct terms that we have come to understand as the same thing, largely because the need to distinguish between the meanings has passed. A knell is “the sound made by a bell when struck or rung, esp. the sound of a bell rung slowly and solemnly, as immediately after a death or at a funeral” (*OED* n.a.). While a knell was sounded after someone’s death, a bell called the passing bell was rung when a person was on his or her deathbed as “a signal for all hearers to pray for the dying person. After the death, there would be one peal; from its sound, the hearers could tell whether the deceased was male or female” (Forgeng 69, Cressy 421). Christopher P. Wilson describes that “peals of bells most commonly comprised six in a sequence 1 2 3; 4 5 6 and in various combinations of the two sets of threes” in a sort of aural code (50). It seems likely that different peals conveyed this information about the deceased’s gender to the listener, similar to how people use cell phone ring tones to differentiate between callers today. Wilson also differentiates between the sound of a bell being rung versus one being tolled. The tolling of a bell “is effected by a single pull on the rope...or by a single stroke to one side of the bell, as for example when a clock chimes” (128). To the listener, “the difference between ringing and tolling is heard in the volume and the speed of the chime. Tolling is quieter and slower. The most obvious example of this difference is in the transition from the ‘passing-bell’ (tolled) to the death knell (rung)” (*ibid*).

In Shakespeare’s era, clocks and watches were too expensive for many to afford (Forgeng 73). To keep time, people relied on hearing the “hourly ringing of church and civic bells” (*ibid*). In addition to marking time, these bells were used to convey

information to citizens, such as the commencement of curfew and the night watch. They were also used to inform the citizenry of important life and church events, such as weddings and deaths (Kinney 83). According to Cressy, “restoration churchmen encouraged the ringing of tolls for the dying, knells for the dead, and subdued peals on the occasion of burials” (Cressy 425). However, customs varied from region to region. Some boroughs “‘condemned that heathenish practice of ringing bells so soon as ever funeral solemnities are performed’, and thought the joyous sound of the peal improper at such times of sadness. Others allowed that joyful ringing was appropriate, to celebrate the passing of the soul to a better world” (ibid). Outside of cities, “large ‘tower’ bells were hung in secular buildings such as castles, town-halls, and great houses” (Wilson 46).

The ringing of the death knell began a series of acts meant to prepare a person’s body for burial and, presumably, their soul for the afterlife. According to David Cressy, such preparation included “included washing, winding, and watching before taking the body to church” (425). This form of watch was conducted by family, securing the body and performing “a ‘wake’ over a dead person” (*OED* n.2.c.). The process of preparing a body for death in many ways echoed the process of childbirth. The act of winding the body in cloth would sometimes be performed by midwives because it was so similar to swaddling a newborn (Cressy 428-9). As the body was wound, flowers and herbs were added (Cressy 428). Cressy explains that “rosemary was favoured as an evergreen herb with an agreeably pungent smell” to cover the smells of decomposition in the era before embalming (ibid). Once a body was washed and wound in its shroud, the watch was set. Family members sat up with the corpse around the clock until it could be interred. As with performing the duties of the night’s watch, sitting watch over the dead was a time of potential terror and supernatural activity. Given the realities of Elizabethan medicine, it

was not unheard of that the body might be “unexpectedly revived” (Cressy 427). But infinitely more alarming was the idea that the deceased’s spirit rather than body might become active through the night. Some “believed that the soul or spirit was not fully detached and might in some way hover or linger during that liminal interval between death and interment” (Cressy 427-8). It was not uncommon for those sitting watch with a corpse to report seeing visions; these visions could be construed as either evidence of the supernatural or the psychological effects of the fear of the supernatural (Cressy 428).

An example of this sort of burial ritual and watch can be seen in the acts performed by the Macbeths upon Duncan’s murder. After painting the grooms with Duncan’s blood, Macbeth asks whether “all great Neptune’s ocean [can] wash this blood / Clean from my hand?” (*Mac.* 2.2.58-9). Lady Macbeth soothes him by saying that only “[a] little water clears us of this deed” (*Mac.* 2.2.65). The Macbeths wash and then perform an act of winding, changing into their nightgowns¹⁶ in order to not be perceived as “watchers” (*Mac.* 2.2.68). In the following scene, Macduff comes to collect Duncan for the rest of his journey and so it seems likely that the Macbeths have stayed up through the night with Duncan’s body in their house. That Macbeth is the object of this ritual rather than Duncan can be explained by the idea of the body politic—the notion that the being of the king, which is infinite and intangible, is invested in the body of Macbeth, the new monarch. Before Duncan’s death, Macbeth experiences the vision of the dagger and after, he hears the phantom voice. The play leaves it open to interpretation whether these are supernatural visions or mere hallucinations. It was not uncommon for those sitting

16. There was an important distinction between nightshirts—the garment men wore while sleeping—and nightgowns, which were worn for warmth by both genders after getting out of bed, but before dressing for the day (Mortimer 87). While wearing the clothing they would in bed seems as if it would present the strongest evidence the Macbeths were sleeping when Duncan was murdered, by choosing nightgowns instead, it becomes clear these are outfits staged as part of a performance of innocence. The suggestion is still that the Macbeths were not abed, sleeping.

watch with a dead body to be so terror filled that they experienced visions and hallucinations akin to Macbeth's (Cressy 428).

People in Shakespeare's time had myriad anxieties surrounding nighttime and especially sleep. Bodily, spiritual, and physical security all had to be addressed before Elizabethans and Jacobean felt safe in submitting to the vulnerability of sleep. Throughout *Macbeth*, Shakespeare uses the anxieties and fears of his audiences to demonstrate the dangerous and threatening state that Macbeth creates in Scotland.

Chapter III

Sleep and Sleeplessness in *Macbeth*

In Elizabethan and Jacobean England as we have seen, sleep was dependent upon security, even though oftentimes that security was illusory. Sleepers secured their own bodies against harm through prayer and by sleeping in carefully chosen positions. Householders secured their homes with locks against criminals who might harm them or their property. In support of these efforts, the watch was charged with securing the public safety against criminals and natural disasters such as fires. The monarch, as evidenced by the Statute of Winchester and even the Witchcraft Acts, was responsible for fostering the overarching sense of safety and security. In *Macbeth*, however, the king is shown acting against each of these duties of security. He is unable to secure himself through prayer. He murders Duncan in violation of a patriarch's duty to cultivate the security of his house. As king, Macbeth spreads that insecurity and in turn sleeplessness to all of Scotland. Ultimately, no space over which Macbeth has dominion is safe to pursue sleep. *Macbeth* takes Shakespeare's initial audiences' fears surrounding sleep and amplifies them to illustrate that the insomnia of the king represents not his emotional state, but the corrupt state of his kingdom. The bumbling, ineffective watch feared by Shakespeare's audiences is preferable to a corrupt one. The fear that sleep may give way to death is more benign than the threat that sleep may result in your murder. And perhaps most vividly shown, the supernatural is not always the most powerful or most frightening force of evil at play. Notably, each of these examples of Macbeth's misrule is connected back to the play's sleeplessness.

Macbeth begins with a confirmation of one of the foremost dangers of sleep: the vulnerability in sleep that comes with the loss of consciousness. The play's first reference to the vulnerability and lack of agency found in sleep naturally includes Duncan, whose murder makes all Scottish citizens eschew the danger of sleep for the relative safety of sleeplessness. Lady Macbeth obliquely states the loss of control that comes with the loss of consciousness when she asks Macbeth, "What cannot you and I perform upon / Th'unguarded Duncan" with his protectors in their own drugged sleep (*Mac.* 1.7.69-70). After Duncan's murder, Lady Macbeth chides her husband for his inability to return to the scene of his crime and plant the daggers next to the drunken chamberlains, telling him that "[t]he sleeping and the dead / Are but as pictures" (*Mac.* 2.2.51-2). As the audience would have feared in their own lives, the Macbeths exploit Duncan's vulnerability to cause him harm for their own gain. Those who submit to sleep become mere objects upon which any fate can be visited.

The Elizabethan and Jacobean conflation of sleep and death is another anxiety that is reiterated throughout the play. The popular theory of sleep in Shakespeare's time as voiced by Thomas Cogan was that "in sleep the body rests while the soul remains awake, so in death the body rests while the soul and spirit live" (Camden 110). Before Macbeth murders Duncan in his sleep, Lady Macbeth describes how the "drenchèd natures" of Duncan's chamberlains "lie as in a death" (*Mac.* 1.7.68). The separation between the states of drunken sleep and death is so slight that Lady Macbeth conflates the two with her language. Macbeth himself reiterates this belief that sleep is "[t]he death of each day's life" (*Mac.* 2.2.36). Macduff calls "downy sleep, death's counterfeit" as he alerts Banquo, Malcolm, and Donalbain to Duncan's murder (*Mac.* 2.3.73). However, as evidence of the unnatural state that Macbeth creates for his subjects, sleep in the play

comes to be associated not with mere death, but instead with murder. The fear is not just that if you sleep you might die, but instead if you sleep you will be murdered. Macbeth describes “Duncan...in his grave” and notes that “[a]fter life’s fitful fever he sleeps well” (*Mac.* 3.2.24-5). But as readers and audiences know, Duncan is not merely dead; he has been murdered. His state is neither peaceful as sleep might suggest nor was his murder an inevitability as death is.

The tension between the unnatural pairing of sleep and murder becomes clear as other characters within the play struggle to restore the original and now seemingly benign pairing of sleep and death. When Ross tells Macduff that his “[w]ife, children, servants, all” have been “[s]avagely slaughtered,” it is a gut-wrenching scene (*Mac.* 4.3.212, 4.3.206). Macduff’s losses need to be reiterated several times before he can understand the enormity of the news. When it seems he does, Macduff asks that “Heaven rest them now” (*Mac.* 4.3.229). As Lady Macbeth transforms sleep into death with her words and Macbeth conflates sleep and murder with his, Macduff’s words in turn transform death back to sleep. The struggle for rule of Scotland is also an ominous struggle over who controls death and who controls sleep in the play.

The fear of supernatural beings wreaking havoc at night was another anxiety that stymied sleep for Shakespeare’s initial audiences. A similar fear is hinted at early in the play, but there soon comes a tipping point where Macbeth represents a more dangerous force than the witches and their magic. The first report of insomnia in *Macbeth* is given not by the sleepless king or one of the play’s central characters, but rather by the weird sisters. One of the witches reports being rebuffed by a sailor’s wife. In retaliation, this sister punishes the woman’s husband by casting this spell upon him:

Sleep shall neither night nor day

Hang upon his penthouse lid.
 He shall live a man forbid.
 Weary sennights nine times nine¹⁷
 Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine” (*Mac.* 1.3.18-22)

This scene hints at both the witches’ power and, through their choice of victim, their capriciousness. It also implies that within *Macbeth*, insomnia is a supernatural punishment, meted out by the witches for ill behavior or violated social codes. Elizabethans and Jacobeans often attributed a supernatural cause to maladies and misfortunes that afflicted them (Thomas 436). Significantly, the recipient of this punishment is not the person who committed the affront in the first place, so the implication is that even those who have done no wrong might have evil befall them. In short order, it appears that any person who has contact with the witches in the play—the sailor, Banquo, Macbeth—experiences sleeplessness or disturbed sleep. The placement of this vignette at the beginning of the play suggests that all the sleeplessness that occurs throughout may have its root in the supernatural and may be afflicting innocent people.

The play’s most famous speech (likely the reason that Macbeth is so singularly aligned with insomnia) strengthens this perceived connection between the supernatural and sleeplessness. Immediately after Macbeth murders Duncan, he returns to Lady Macbeth and reports:

Methought I heard a voice cry ‘Sleep no more,
 Macbeth does murder sleep’—the innocent sleep,
 Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care,
 The death of each day’s life, sore labour’s bath,
 Balm of hurt minds, great nature’s second course,
 Chief nourisher in life’s feast—” (*Mac.* 2.2.33-8)

17. The sailor is described as the “master” or captain of a ship called “Tiger” (*Mac.* 1.3.6). A footnote in the *Arden* edition cites an account that “there had been a recent voyage by a ship named Tiger, lasting from 5 December 1604 to 27 June 1606, i.e. 567 days, or 81 weeks, thus ‘sennights nine times nine’. It is, however, impossible to know if Shakespeare was aware of this fact” (Vaughan and Vaughan 137 fn 7).

The play has already shown the witches casting a spell of sleeplessness on the hapless sailor. Readers and audiences have seen the weird sisters make other pronouncements about Macbeth: they correctly foretell Macbeth's future as the Thane of Cawdor (*Mac.* 1.3.47). This phantom voice gives what amounts to another spell or prophesy within the play when it intones that "Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor / Shall sleep no more, Macbeth shall sleep no more" (*Mac.* 2.2.40-1). This particular prophecy is not voiced in the rhyming, spell-like language we come to associate with the weird sisters. However, it suggestively repeats all three of the titles that the witches portend Macbeth will hold.

That only iterations of Macbeth's name and titles are spoken implies that the loss of sleep and its boons are restricted solely to Macbeth. Surely as the play progresses, we see Macbeth unravel mentally and emotionally without the balm of sleep. After Macbeth's breakdown at the sight of Banquo's ghost at the banquet, Lady Macbeth suggests that Macbeth is acting so strangely precisely because he "lack[s] the season of all natures, sleep" (*Mac.* 3.4.140). Macbeth's speech on murdered sleep makes it clear that he understands what sleep is, what it does, but the only time in *Macbeth* that we see sleep function in this way—as a healer or restorative—is during this oration. This is the sleep that Macbeth murders. But it soon becomes apparent that Macbeth murders these boons not just for himself, but for all his subjects as well. From the moment of Duncan's death, the sleep that exists in the play promises to be life-ending rather than life-sustaining. One of the central themes of the play is that the realm under Macbeth's control—initially Inverness in the play's first acts and then Scotland in the latter—is unsafe for sleep.

Evidence that Macbeth's murder of Duncan leads to disrupted sleep beyond his

own comes immediately—even before Macbeth gives his famous speech on the murder of sleep. Macbeth reports to Lady Macbeth that after he murders the king, one of Duncan’s chamberlains “did laugh in’s sleep, and one cried ‘Murder!’ / That they did wake each other.... / But they did say their prayers and addressed them / Again to sleep” (*Mac.* 2.2.20-4). Duncan’s murder has an instantaneous, albeit brief, effect upon the sleep of these two subjects. Audiences and readers hear this account immediately before Macbeth’s speech on murdered sleep; by the time we do hear Macbeth’s report, it has already been proven true. It is instantly plain that these losses of sleep are not Macbeth’s alone. The health and safety represented by Duncan’s sleep was destroyed, and immediately thereafter, the sleep of Duncan’s chamberlains was disrupted as well.

We soon see evidence that illustrates that Macbeth’s murder of sleep is not contained either to himself or to his own household; rather sleeplessness has already begun to spread across Scotland. Further confirmation of sleep’s murder comes from Lennox, who gives the following account to Macbeth and Macduff of his own experience on the night of Duncan’s murder:

The night has been unruly. Where we lay
Our chimneys were blown down, and, as they say,
Lamentings heard i’th’ air, strange screams of death,
And prophesying with accents terrible
Of dire combustion and confused events
New-hatched to th’ woeful time. The obscure bird
Clamoured the livelong night. Some say the earth
Was feverous and did shake. (*Mac.* 2.3.50-7)

What this speech suggests but does not explicitly state is that Lennox and his party were also awake in the night to bear witness to all the bizarre occurrences he relates. Lennox reports these events before Macduff discovers Duncan’s assassination, so readers and audiences are assured that Lennox is not merely inventing these bad omens with the

knowledge that a terrible crime has been committed. Instead, Lennox's story reinforces the notion that—as with Duncan's chamberlains—Duncan's murder causes an immediate disruption in his subjects' sleep. The moment Macbeth subverts political order by murdering Duncan, he disrupts the cycle of sleep and wake and, based on Lennox's account, also disturbs natural order. Sleeplessness is already too widespread in the play to represent solely Macbeth's state.

The first of the characters central to *Macbeth* to report disrupted sleep is Banquo, and his sleeplessness is also attributed to the supernatural in the form of the weird sisters. As he and Fleance make their way to Inverness, Banquo confesses to his son, “A heavy summons lies like lead upon me, / And yet I would not sleep. Merciful powers, / Restrain in me the cursèd thoughts that nature / Gives way to in repose” (*Mac.* 2.1.6-9). Counter to the summons of sleep that Banquo feels, he remains awake. For all the ways that sleep is shown to be a danger in *Macbeth*, Banquo's wariness is due to an internal cause: he fears nightmares. We learn a few lines later that Banquo “dreamt” the previous night of the weird sisters (*Mac.* 2.1.19). That he now fears sleeping tells us that instead of having merely dreamt of the weird sisters, Banquo had nightmares about them. A.C. Bradley calls these nightmares “the cursed thoughts from which Banquo is free by day, but which tempt him in his sleep,” suggesting that like Macbeth, Banquo is contemplating a way to fulfill the weird sisters' prophecy that announces him sire to a line of kings (Bradley 296; *Mac.* 1.3.65). However, Banquo calls these nightmares “thoughts that *nature* / Gives way to in repose” (*Mac.* 2.1.8-9, emphasis mine). In contrast, Macbeth acknowledges that his physical reaction to the idea of murdering Duncan for the crown is “against the use of nature” (*Mac.* 1.3.134, 136). The witches' power seems to repel rather than allure Banquo.

It is in this scene even before Duncan's murder and Macbeth's murder of sleep that the play shifts from showing the threat of the supernatural toward showing the threat of Macbeth. Banquo literally and figuratively disarms himself as he approaches Inverness, handing Fleance his sword as he confesses his disturbed sleep (*Mac.* 2.1.4-5). As Macbeth and his servant approach the pair, Banquo hastily seeks his sword back from his son until he can determine whether the party approaching is friend or foe. Although it is not explicitly stated or staged as such, Banquo and Fleance are performing the role of watchmen tasked with determining the identities of those moving about in the night. When charged by Banquo, Macbeth identifies himself as "a friend" (*Mac.* 2.1.10). Audiences and readers know this is not quite true, and even Banquo voices suspicion by asking why Macbeth is "not yet at rest" when even "the King's a-bed" at that late hour (*Mac.* 2.1.11). It was presumed that kings owed their subjects constant vigilance and care; if even Duncan could muster sleep, there is no cause for his subjects to remain awake as Macbeth does¹⁸. Banquo views Duncan's sleep as a model—an act of the king's that his subjects should emulate. This is one of the first glimpses that readers and audiences get of Banquo's suspicion of Macbeth and the basis for that suspicion is suggestively rooted in Macbeth's sleeplessness. Those who do not sleep at night are

18. Several of Shakespeare's kings ruminate on the notion that in diligently performing one's duties, a king must sacrifice his own sleep to ensure his subjects'. Henry IV speaks at length about the insomnia he suffers as king. Garrett Sullivan's analysis of Shakespeare's *Henry IV* shows Prince Hal in *Henry IV* Parts 1 and 2 caught between the insomniac worries of his father the king and the somnolent influence of Falstaff, "the greatest of all Shakespeare's sleepers" (79). It is only when Prince Hal accepts the responsibility of the crown, which "is constituted in terms of both sleeplessness and wakeful vigilance," that he is able to throw off the excessive sleep that has been his hallmark to that point (Sullivan 90-1). In Sullivan's analysis, Prince Hal must reject the physical demands of his body in order to meet the demands of his reign and his subjects. Rebecca Totaro notes that kings who do sleep—Duncan and Hamlet among them—imperil their states and subjects through their own vulnerability in sleep. Benjamin Parris theorizes that sovereign sleep makes the king too human and mortal, as "sleep creates an image of human imperfection in the sovereign body natural: bodily life in sleep resembles death, and so the king's mortality resurfaces" (Parris 102). Macbeth's sleeplessness negates the idea that a sleepless king is necessarily a beneficent or dutiful one. See Parris, Totaro, and Sullivan for more on sovereign sleep in Shakespeare.

considered suspicious and threatening, even though Banquo is similarly sleepless when he encounters Macbeth. Banquo as a figure of watch recognizes Macbeth as a burgeoning danger. It is with Banquo's approach to Inverness that the idea of sleeplessness as a product of the supernatural recedes and Macbeth's culpability begins to come to the fore. As of this moment, the supernatural in the play is just a perceived threat, but one that as I will discuss is never actualized.

Macbeth exacerbates the effects of his murder of sleep by attacking the supporting elements that allow for sleep—symbols of safety and security. As a beneficent king, it is Macbeth's duty to promote safety for his subjects. Instead, Macbeth takes the security promised by the night's watch and transforms it into an emblem of danger. While Banquo's arrival at Inverness is associated with watch, the manner in which Macbeth arranges for Banquo's murder is an inversion of the duties and safety symbolized by the night watch. The three murderers who are hired to assassinate Banquo and Fleance await the pair on the road to Inverness. They gather as the sun is setting, the time when watchmen take up their posts. One of the murderers comments that it will be easy to spot their prey because the late hour "spurs the lated traveler apace / To gain the timely inn" (*Mac.* 3.3.6-7). As travelers race the darkness to find safe shelter, the only people on the road should be "the subject of [their] watch," Banquo and Fleance (*Mac.* 3.3.8). Watchmen in Shakespeare's time acted to keep the monarch's peace and to prevent harms at night. The watch that Macbeth sets waits to ensure harm against honest citizens at the monarch's command.

The chime of the clock becomes another usurped symbol of safety, which perpetuates the sleeplessness of the play. The clock chime was traditionally a way to announce safety and security to citizens throughout the night, allowing them to pursue

sleep (Critchley 26). A ringing of a bell announced curfew, closed gates, and deserted streets in Elizabethan England (Beattie 169). In *Macbeth*, this symbol becomes so distorted that what it actually announces is the dangerousness of Macbeth's rule and the instability of Scotland under his control. Lady Macbeth is the first to corrupt this symbol into one of danger and terror; the agreed upon signal to murder Duncan is Lady Macbeth "striking upon the bell" (*Mac.* 2.1.32). Instead of this nighttime bell announcing that the household is secure and sleep is safe to pursue, it becomes a signal that it is safe to turn sleep into murder undiscovered and unimpeded. The chiming of the clock moves from the announcement of order and safety to, as Macbeth puts it, an invitation to commit Duncan's murder (*Mac.* 2.1.62).

Lady Macbeth's signal also serves as the first knell of the play, marking the beginning of a long and bloody series (*Mac.* 2.1.63). Ross informs the audience that the state of Scotland under Macbeth's reign is such that "[t]he dead man's knell / Is there scarce asked for who" (*Mac.* 4.3.171-2). Macbeth's viciousness makes the knell seem as unremarkable as the bell tolling the hour. The chiming of the bell meant to represent safety is replaced with constant death knells and pronouncements of danger. In addition to the literal knells that sound throughout the play, the hoot of the owl also becomes a form of knell. Lady Macbeth attributes the strange noise she hears while Macbeth is committing regicide to the sound to an owl, calling it "the fatal bellman / Which gives the stern'st good-night" (*Mac.* 2.2.3-4). Lady Macbeth's metaphor conflates the owl's call with the "bell...rung outside the cells of condemned prisoners the night before they were to be executed" (Greenblatt 2578 fn 1). The owl comes to symbolize Lady Macbeth as it is she who gives the signal to Macbeth that it is safe to proceed with Duncan's murder;

Lady Macbeth is the play's fatal bellman¹⁹. When Lennox reports to Macbeth that on the night of Duncan's murder, the owl or "the obscure bird / Clamoured the livelong night," he essentially reiterates the idea that the death knell for Duncan that sounds within Macbeth's castle also resonates across Scotland (Greenblatt 2581 fn 3; *Mac.* 2.3.55-6). This is the second instance where the effects of Macbeth's actions are witnessed simultaneously within Inverness and Scotland at large, suggesting the widespread effect that Macbeth's seemingly private actions have. In addition to being rung by a bell, a knell can also be "a sound resembling a knell; a doleful cry, dirge, etc." (*OED* n.2.c.). Immediately preceding the news of Lady Macbeth's death, the stage directions read "a cry within of women" (*Mac.* 5.5.7 s.d.). It appears that the "fatal bellman" who signals Duncan's death receives a knell of her own at the end of the play.

Macbeth is not just filled with usurped symbols of safety that become associated with harm. The unnatural state of Scotland under Macbeth's reign is such that warnings of danger go unheeded. In counter to ringing the bell at night to convey the message that all was well, the night watch was also charged with sounding an alarm in emergencies. The bell was reassurance; the alarm was a warning of danger that signaled both an interruption of sleep and of social order. Marjorie Garber discusses "that most terrifying of all human disruptions of order: a voice crying out in the night" (*Shakespeare* 591). Garber cites the opening scene of *Othello*, when Iago and Roderigo use a call of "thieves, thieves, thieves" to awaken Brabantio and "poison his delight" by announcing his daughter's elopement with Othello (*Oth.* 1.1.79, 1.1.68; Garber *Shakespeare* 591). Few things are as unsettling as a sense of safety being rent by impending threat. *Macbeth* is very much a play about what is unsafe, so it is fitting that there are disembodied voices

19. The masculine gender of the title seems fitting since Lady Macbeth unsexes herself in 1.5.39.

crying out alarms throughout the play. The most famous of these voices, of course, cries out ““Sleep no more, / Macbeth does murder sleep”” (*Mac.* 2.2.33-4). Many critics speculate that this voice, much like the apparition of the dagger that Macbeth describes in the previous scene, is an hallucination that demonstrates Macbeth’s diminished mental state²⁰. However, in the same way that Macbeth is not the only character to experience disturbed sleep, he is also not the only character to hear these alarms being called out. At the same time Macbeth is hearing his phantom voice, Lennox hears “as they say, / Lamentings heard i’th’ air, strange screams of death, / And prophesying with accents terrible” (*Mac.* 2.3.50-2). Counter to Macbeth’s unreliable perspective throughout the play, Lennox is a credible source used to report events and provide a counter to Macbeth’s perspective for readers and audiences.

Based on Lennox’s report, it suddenly seems possible that Macbeth may have indeed heard a voice in the night proclaiming his loss of sleep. One possible explanation for these voices may well be found in the play’s first scene, when the unnamed captain falters in his recitation of Macbeth’s brave deeds on the battlefield and says, “My gashes cry for help” (*Mac.* 1.2.42). In that initial scene, it seems unlikely that those cries were meant to be taken literally, and yet at Duncan’s murder, a voice asserting that Macbeth has murdered sleep is heard during another scene of profound, bloody violence. This idea of wounds communicating is evident in *Holinshed’s Chronicles*, which is considered to be Shakespeare’s primary source text for *Macbeth*. Rather than calling out, however, Holinshed describes the superstition “that the dead corps of anie man being slaine, will bleed abundantlie if the murtherer be present” (28). Lady Macbeth references this

20. Lady Macbeth ambiguously calls the vision “the air-drawn dagger,” which might mean floating on air or created by air and thus non-existent (*Mac.* 3.4.61). See Kinney 78; Adams 129; Bradley 469.

superstition when she says “if [Duncan’s corpse] do bleed / I’ll gild the faces of the grooms withal” (*Mac.* 2.2.53-4). Lady Macbeth proposes a further possibility for the disembodied voices that punctuate key scenes in *Macbeth*. When she invokes darkness prior to Duncan’s murder, she does so to prevent heaven from seeing the crime and crying, ““Hold, hold!”” to stop her acts (*Mac.* 1.5.52). Macduff endorses the possibility of heaven voicing objections to certain actions within the play. In his conference with Malcolm near the play’s end, Macduff notes that “[e]ach new morn / New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows / Strike heaven on the face that it resounds / As if it felt with Scotland and yelled out / Like syllable of dolour” (*Mac.* 4.3.4-8). To Macduff, the source of the voices throughout the play are Scotland’s citizens and heaven itself, crying out in agony. Macbeth suggests several possibilities of his own for these recurring phantom voices. The first is that Duncan’s “virtues / ...plead like angels, trumpet-tongued against / The deep damnation of his taking off” (*Mac.* 1.7.18-20). After Lady Macbeth dismisses the guests of the banquet, Macbeth alludes to two more phantom voices. He tells her, “It will have blood, they say. Blood will have blood. / Stones have been known to move, and trees to speak” (*Mac.* 3.4.121-2). These voices may be the omnipresent “they” to whom Lennox also makes references or the trees themselves. Whether these calls of alarm emanate from Duncan’s wounds, his virtue as king, heaven protesting Macbeth’s murders, or even Scotland herself crying out at the death of her rightful sovereign and citizens, it is clear that the messages are filled with horror and despair. These voices, whatever their origin, act as a preternatural watchmen calling out an alarm at the danger threatening Scotland. The hue and cry announcing Macbeth’s crimes spreads from Duncan’s chambers to all of Scotland. Voices interrupt sleep with their foreboding messages of danger and death. Many characters report hearing these

voices—Macbeth among them—and each notes with unease the unsettled, sleepless state of Scotland under Macbeth’s reign.

As the play’s other characters acknowledge these alarms, Macbeth becomes inured to the warnings that Scotland is unsafe and sleepless. Readers and audiences can track Macbeth’s state of mind throughout the play by the increasingly peculiar reaction he displays to these calls of alarm. Just after Duncan’s murder and after hearing the disembodied voice pronouncing his murder of sleep, a knock comes at the castle gate and Macbeth responds that “every noise appals me” (*Mac.* 2.2.56). Macbeth is terrified by noises in the night and overreacts to a familiar sound. Despite having planned and committed a murder, Macbeth is as susceptible to the terrors of a cry in the night as anyone at this point in the play. However, Macbeth soon becomes hardened to these fears and terrors after murdering the balm that is sleep. Upon hearing a cry offstage, Macbeth says, “I have almost forgot the taste of fears. / The time has been my sense would have cooled / To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair / Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir / As life were in’t” (*Mac.* 5.5.9-13). A.C. Bradley avers that “this ‘time’ must have been in [Macbeth’s] youth, or at least before we see him” (310). However, readers and audiences do in fact witness the time when Macbeth was still capable of such a reaction: these lines not only recall Macbeth hearing the phantom voice for the first time, but also his reaction to the idea that he could achieve the throne by killing Duncan. In that early scene, Macbeth describes how the thought of committing regicide “doth unfix [his] hair” and makes his “heart knock at [his] ribs” (*Mac.* 1.3.134-5). From replaying Duncan’s murder to the confrontation of Banquo’s ghost, Macbeth asserts, “I have supped full with horrors. / Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts, / Cannot once start me” (*Mac.* 5.5.13-5). Slaughterous thoughts pale when compared to

slaughterous acts. Macbeth acknowledges that the threat that inspires terror no longer affects him because he has himself become that threat realized. He is the danger in the night and the reason it is unsafe for sleep. Not only has he created a violent, sleepless realm, he alone is comfortable there and inured to the danger.

We see Macbeth through his actions create this disordered, sleepless realm for himself and his subjects. Macbeth's misguided attempts at restoring his own sleep ultimately push sleep and safety even further away. One of the few places where imagery of sleep exists in the play is in Macbeth's descriptions of acts of murder. From his final contemplation of Duncan's assassination through his decision to murder Macduff, the murders that Macbeth commits are planned and described using imagery and metaphors of sleep. As Macbeth contemplates going through with Duncan's murder to achieve the crown the witches seem to have promised him, he gives the following soliloquy:

..... Now o'er the one half-world
 Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
 The curtained sleep. Witchcraft celebrates
 Pale Hecate's offerings, and withered murder,
 Alarumed by his sentinel the wolf,
 Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
 With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
 Moves like a ghost. (*Mac.* 2.1.49-56)

In the final speech before Macbeth murders Duncan, sleep is both equated with death and plagued with nightmares. Supernatural beings and predators are loose. The safety of the night's watch has been replaced by the predation of the wolf. Rape, symbolized by Tarquin, and murder are the acts that Macbeth associates with nighttime, a time that should most strongly be associated with sleep. In this speech, sleepers are pitied as the potential prey of witches, ghosts, murderers, and rapists. Macbeth delineates the dichotomies of night and day, wake and sleep, predator and prey. By murdering Duncan

in the next moments of the play, Macbeth makes it very clear which of the binaries he chooses to embrace.

Macbeth again uses language of sleep and the supernatural to obliquely describe Banquo's impending murder to Lady Macbeth. The sleepless king tells his wife that "[e]re the bat hath flown / His cloistered flight, ere to black Hecate's summons / The shard-borne beetle with his drowsy hums / Hath rung night's yawning peal, there shall be done / A deed of dreadful note" (*Mac.* 3.2.41-45). In this description, there are bats, the goddess of witchcraft, and shit-borne insects creating a coded message about the murder of a close friend. For readers and audiences, it is foreboding and discomfiting language. Yet for Macbeth, these words manage to evoke "drowsy," "yawning" images of sleep. The yawning peal is another reference to the curfew bell, for most citizens an aural symbol of bedtime, while the dreadful note recalls the passing bell referenced by Lady Macbeth at Duncan's murder. With these references to bells, the connection that Macbeth creates between the restoration of his sleep and murder is once again reinforced. Macbeth explicitly states here the association that he has created between the curfew bell—a sound of safety and impending sleep—and passing bells—symbols of imminent death.

By Banquo's murder, a pattern has emerged linking murder and sleep. The story Macbeth tells himself before Duncan's murder is set at night, while half the world is in a troubled, deathlike sleep. Macbeth begins to drift off during the bedtime story of Banquo's murder, feeling "drowsy" and "yawning." Macbeth acknowledges that the future ascension of Banquo's line "is the fear that will not let him sleep; and [so] it will die with Banquo" (Bradley 316). But the full restoration of Macbeth's missing sleep comes as he plans Macduff's murder. The witches' second apparition tells Macbeth he

may “[l]augh to scorn / The power of man, for none of woman born / shall harm Macbeth” (*Mac.* 4.1.95-7). Macbeth interprets this prophecy to mean that he cannot be killed, despite having been warned to beware of Macduff by the first apparition moments before (*Mac.* 4.1.87). Upon learning of his supposed invincibility, Macbeth gives Macduff a brief reprieve before ultimately deciding to “make assurance double sure, / And take a bond of fate [Macduff] shalt not live, / That [Macbeth] may tell pale-hearted fear it lies, / And sleep in spite of thunder” (*Mac.* 4.1.99-102). Macbeth sees yet another murder as the only way to restore his murdered sleep. In Macbeth’s mind, once Macduff is dead nothing will be able to interrupt his sleep again. Bradley notes that Macbeth’s murders are intended to allow the return of his sleep by eliminating challengers to the throne (Bradley 316). However, Macbeth’s pursuit of sleep illustrates not just his pursuit of political power, but also his pursuit of supernatural power. By restoring his own sleep through Macduff’s murder, Macbeth will contradict the voice announcing his murder of sleep. By restoring his own sleep, Macbeth would not only be able to tell fear that it lies, but also the voice declaring that he will “sleep no more.” Macbeth would be able to defy if not control the supernatural forces at work in the play, a far greater power than mere kingship. Macbeth drastically misunderstands the effect his murder of Duncan will have on Scotland’s safety and sleep—and he drastically misunderstands how to go about restoring that sleep for himself.

Throughout the play, we have seen several examples of sleep being equated with vulnerability. However, Macbeth also makes waking its own danger. The watch of the doctor and gentlewoman in Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking scene demonstrates the precarious nature of Scottish citizens under Macbeth’s rule. Sleep has clearly become an unsafe and impossible state, but sleeplessness is hardly more secure. At the beginning of

the scene, the doctor asks the gentlewoman what Lady Macbeth says as she walks and talks in her sleep. The gentlewoman replies that she will repeat Lady Macbeth's confessions "neither to [him] nor anyone, having no witness to confirm [her] speech" (*Mac.* 5.1.14-5). Once the doctor hears Lady Macbeth's confessions for himself, he realizes the volatility of the information he too now possesses: to accuse the king and queen of murder could get him executed for treason. The doctor echoes the gentlewoman's words at the start of the scene when he says "I think, but dare not speak" (*Mac.* 5.1.69). The knowledge they gained being awake at night instead of safely asleep has put them at risk. Murder and physical safety are not the only problems that nighttime and sleeplessness present in *Macbeth*.

Perhaps Macbeth's singular link with sleeplessness stems from the fact that as king, he never acknowledges or addresses the lost sleep of his subjects. The witches' prophecy seems to suggest that sleeplessness is Macbeth's own. Throughout the play as Macbeth fears losing his power, he attempts to murder what makes him feel unsafe—his rivals for the throne. In so doing, however, he creates a perilous and sleepless state for his subjects, who in turn demand that Macbeth be removed from the throne so safety can be restored to the realm. Rather than evidence of a guilty conscience, Scotland's ubiquitous sleeplessness is the product of Macbeth's crimes and evidence of his misrule. The threat to Macbeth's throne creates an instability in the king, which leads to an instability in the realm.

Chapter IV

The Unnatural and the Supernatural in *Macbeth*

The theme of sleeplessness exhibited in *Macbeth* is not restricted to characters explicitly discussing or exhibiting their lost sleep. In Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene, the doctor describes the queen's state as "[a] great perturbation in nature, to receive at once the benefit of sleep and do the effects of watching" (*Mac.* 5.1.8-9). However, we come to see throughout the play that the effects of watching on their own also cause a great upheaval in natural order. Macbeth's murder of Duncan does not just cause the sleeplessness that permeates the realm under his rule, but also other unnatural and supernatural phenomena. Initially, it seems as if these unnatural events, like sleeplessness, are the product of the witches' influence. However, many of these events from darkness to unnatural animal behavior find links back to the sleeplessness created by Macbeth's acts. Where these ominous and eerie occurrences might typically be attributed to supernatural forces by Shakespeare's initial audiences, in *Macbeth* it becomes clear that the king is the darkest, most malignant force in the play and more fearsome than the witches. The themes of the unnatural and supernatural reinforce the notion that sleeplessness symbolizes Macbeth's misrule and the state of his state rather than his own emotional state.

The Unnatural

The unnatural elements of the play exist to show the full extent to which Scotland becomes unsettled under Macbeth's reign. In order to appreciate the unnatural events that transpire under Macbeth's rule, audiences are first shown natural order as it existed

under King Duncan. Although the play only shows a small span of time under Duncan's rule, those brief scenes establish that the natural order such as the behavior of animals is present despite the political upset and war raging. In discussing the symbolism that surrounds the play's first king, Marjorie Garber writes that "Duncan is for this play the opposite of the witches and of Lady Macbeth—he is a benevolent figure of order and trust, evoked regularly and insistently in images of light and of fertility associated with the land" (*Shakespeare* 702). Indeed, Duncan's reference to the future of his reign—seemingly secure after the threats represented by Norway and Cawdor have been eliminated in the play's early scenes—includes symbols of both light and agriculture. Duncan tells Banquo and Macbeth that he has "begun to plant the[m], and will labour / To make the[m] full of growing," tying the success of his subjects to his own and evincing an awareness of his subjects' wellbeing that Macbeth decidedly lacks (*Mac.* 1.4.28-9). While Garber marks Duncan as the antithesis of the witches and Lady Macbeth, it is arguably Macbeth who stands as the oppositional figure of darkness and blight. In contrast to the verdant metaphor of Duncan's reign, Macbeth's first glimpse of his future as king comes upon a "blasted heath"—or barren space (*Mac.* 1.3.75).

When he goes on to name Malcolm the Prince of Cumberland or heir apparent²¹, Duncan stresses that the "honour must / Not unaccompanied invest [Malcolm] only, / But signs of nobleness, like stars, shall shine / On all deservers" (*Mac.* 1.4.39-42). In contrast to the light that represents Duncan's reign, a pervasive darkness marks Macbeth's kingship. Darkness, along with the play's disembodied voices, is one of the only bizarre phenomena reported by the play's other characters that readers and audience see Macbeth

21. Hereditary succession reflected an anxiety of Shakespeare's time more than a reality of Macbeth's; Queen Elizabeth's health was failing and she had no heir to inherit the throne.

explicitly acknowledge. Evidence within the play suggests that the reason darkness envelops Scotland and the reason Macbeth notices this darkness so acutely is because the Macbeths explicitly conjure it themselves. Through Duncan's murder, Macbeth wrests the crown away from Malcolm. Macbeth negates Malcolm's reign, presented in terms of starlight, by commanding, "Stars, hide your fires" (*Mac.* 1.4.50). He goes on to order, "Let not light see my black and deep desires; / The eye wink at the hand" (*Mac.* 1.4.51-2). Rather than starlight spreading to "all deservers," Macbeth cultivates an environment of pure darkness so that no one—not even himself—is witness to Duncan's murder at his hand. Macbeth's desire for the throne is black, and he wishes that all of Scotland be the same to hide what he is doing to attain the crown. The more murders Macbeth contemplates and attempts to keep his throne—his darkest desire—the darker Scotland physically becomes.

From the outset, Macbeth prioritizes night and darkness above the light represented by Duncan. When Macbeth contemplates his future as king, he ponders the effect that Duncan's murder will have on "all our nights and days to come" (*Mac.* 1.5.67). This reversal of the expected rhetorical order of day and night suggests the reversal of natural order that comes under Macbeth's reign. In the following scene, Lady Macbeth intones, "Come, thick night, / And pall thee in the dunkest smoke of hell, / That my keen knife see not the wound it makes, / Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark / To cry, 'Hold, hold!'" (*Mac.* 1.5.48-52). Lady Macbeth's words and her intent in speaking them are a perfect echo of her husband's. Rather than light that benefits all—the symbol of Duncan's reign and of Malcolm's future reign—the Macbeths invoke darkness that serves only to help them to the throne by hiding their crimes. This bent toward darkness becomes an inversion of the natural order of day and night; as it is

sought by the king, it symbolizes Macbeth's unnatural and harmful reign. A king is supposed to promote safety for his subjects. Turning the kingdom to perpetual night—a time already fraught with danger and fear—threatens the safety and well-being of his subjects.

As with sleeplessness, the darkness that the Macbeths invoke is shown to spread from Inverness across Scotland, affecting both the king and his subjects. Early in the play, Ross and an unnamed citizen list all the unnatural occurrences and inversions of nature that have taken place since Duncan's murder and Macbeth's ascension to the throne. Among these, Ross points to the unnatural darkness that overtakes Scotland:

..... By the clock, 'tis day,
 And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp.
 Is't night's predominance or the day's shame
 That darkness does the face of earth entomb
 When living light should kiss it? (*Mac.* 2.4.6-10)

Darkness in Ross' report is equated with guilt and death, and it becomes a murderous entity akin to Macbeth as it "strangles" natural order and the balance of daytime and night. While the states of darkness and death are fully natural, their constant presence during Macbeth's reign is deemed "unnatural" by Ross's companion (*Mac.* 2.4.10). The old man vouches that these events outstrip any he has witnessed in his seventy years of life, emphasizing once again just how bizarre the natural world has become during Macbeth's reign and reiterating the safety and normalcy of Duncan's (*Mac.* 2.4.1-4). This scene's list of abnormalities allows readers and audiences to link the disorder in the natural world with Macbeth's murder of the natural king, an imbalance eventually acknowledged by the Macbeths. When Macbeth asks his wife, "What is the night?," she responds by saying, "Almost at odds with morning, which is which" (*Mac.* 3.4.125, 3.4.126). Even they can no longer discern night from day, or the normal from the bizarre.

What compounds this unnatural darkness is the fact that, despite the nighttime setting, no one is able to sleep. The Macbeths create a nighttime realm—the setting for sleep—but stymie all access to sleep for themselves and for their subjects.

This theme of darkness is underscored by the metaphors of blindness that repeat throughout the play. Macbeth refers to the obscuring darkness as the “seeling night,” which he once again invokes, inviting darkness to “[c]ome” (*Mac.* 3.2.47). “Seeling” is a falconry term denoting the fact that “falcons’ eyelids were sewn shut...as part of their training²²” (Greenblatt 2589 fn 9). Daylight is once again transformed—in this case rather gruesomely—into darkness. Macbeth makes this reference to seeling regarding the plot to murder Banquo, wanting to “[s]carf up the tender eye of pitiful day” while he plans his next murder (*Mac.* 3.2.48). This metaphor functions as a reiteration of the invocation of darkness that Macbeth gives prior to Duncan's murder in hopes of keeping his crimes hidden. When Macbeth sees his own bloodstained hands after he murders Duncan, he says that “they pluck out mine eyes” (*Mac.* 2.2.57). Macbeth does not seek blindness out as punishment for his guilty conscience; he still wants the murder to be done, he just does not want the knowledge and responsibility of it. The mention of blindness in relation to Banquo’s murder symbolizes Macbeth’s plan to have the murderers commit the crime so he himself does not have to witness it. Macbeth’s attempt at separating the sight of his crimes from his culpability fails as we see with Macbeth’s haunting by Banquo’s ghost, but more explicitly with Lady Macbeth’s confessions during the sleepwalking scene. She, too, is described as blind for while “her eyes are open,” “their sense are shut” (*Mac.* 5.1.21, 5.1.22). However, what she sees are the murders of

22. Further information on the sport of falconry explains that hunting birds had to be captured wild and trained to return to their keepers after hunting because that trait could be learned, while a hunting instinct could not be instilled in birds raised in captivity. Most hunting birds were female, because they were larger and more docile than males (McMurtry 212-3).

Duncan, Banquo, and all the play's other dead regardless of whether she had a hand in their deaths. Macbeth is blind to nearly all of the problems of his reign and instead seems to be in a dream-like state where he keeps only the witches' prophecies in sight. These representations of blindness are all unnatural, sometimes violently so. Much like seeling a falcon's eyes, it is a violent act, but one that leads to a desired end. As the general darkness creates the setting for sleep, blindness represents the dulling of the senses one experiences in sleep. But as sleep disappears in Scotland, this symbolic sleep fails to become an adequate replacement. Despite the metaphors of blindness, Banquo haunts Macbeth and Lady Macbeth comes to see nothing but the play's murders. Scotland is in perpetual darkness and yet sleepless. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth mirror the diminished consciousness and senses of sleep, and what they experience is tortured and gruesome rather than healing and safe.

Unnatural animal behavior described throughout the play also finds several curious links back to sleeplessness, illustrating that it is not merely the king and his subjects who are plagued within the play; Macbeth has murdered sleep for *all* inhabitants of his kingdom. When Duncan asks if the violence of the battle and number of foes "dismayed" Macbeth and Banquo, the captain facetiously responds, "Yes, as sparrows [dismay] eagles, or the hare the lion!" (*Mac.* 1.2.34, 5). The scene is meant to express Macbeth's bravery in battle, but it again illustrates a sense of nature's normalcy during Duncan's reign. In his recitation of all in the natural world that has gone awry since Macbeth's ascension to the throne, Lennox notes that "[a] falcon, tow'ring in her pride of place"—representing both the extreme height at which falcons fly and their metaphorical

place atop the food chain—“was by a mousing owl hawked²³ at and killed” (*Mac.* 2.4.12-3). During Macbeth’s reign, prey becomes predator. This suggests an inversion of nature by describing a death that would not or should not naturally happen. But perhaps most evocative of the disruption of natural order is the fact that the owl and the falcon are fighting at all. Owls are nocturnal and falcons are diurnal. For them to fatally clash, one of the creatures must be awake at a time when it should naturally be sleeping. This scene describes a battle between night and day, with night being the victor.

The voices that cry out in alarm and disturb human sleep extend to the animal world as well. When Macbeth returns from murdering Duncan, he asks Lady Macbeth whether she heard a noise (*Mac.* 2.2.14). She responds that she has “heard the owl scream and the crickets cry” (*Mac.* 2.2.15). The sounds of owls and crickets are quite natural at night, but that normalcy is undercut by the fact that these creatures are screaming and crying rather than merely calling and chirping. In addition to these normal night sounds being cast as yet more voices crying out in the dark, owls and crickets have connections to the supernatural. In the cauldron scene, one of the opening lines is “Harpier cries, ‘Tis time, ’tis time” (*Mac.* 4.1.3). Francis Ferguson is quoted as saying that ““according to folklore...Harpier [the familiar of the Third Witch] [is] an owl” (Coursen 380 fn 12). Crickets and other insects were also considered likely consorts for witches in Shakespeare’s era (Vaughan and Vaughan 179 fn 17; Thomas 446). Even something so minor as background noise commented upon by one of the play’s characters becomes another voice calling out in the night, illustrating that Macbeth’s Scotland is an inherently dangerous and unsettled state in which night and day are

23. Per the *Oxford English Dictionary*, hawking means to attack on the wing, as hawks typically did (*OED* v.1.3.a.).

interchangeable.

One of the most innate natural instincts and the essential symbol of safety is a mother's protection of her young. As Macbeth abuses the paternalistic nature of his role as king by endangering rather than protecting his subjects, the function of motherhood likewise becomes corrupted in Scotland illustrating how unsafe the realm is with Macbeth upon the throne. Lady Macbeth's inverse in the play is Lady Macduff, the emblem of the instinct of maternal protection. As Macbeth subverts the duties to his kingdom by making it less safe and secure, we see several examples of motherhood that defy natural, maternal instinct and instead present a monstrous version of the role. This clash between idealized and corrupted motherhood is represented through the play's bird imagery. Owls, already symbols of the supernatural and death knells, become increasingly connected to both Lady Macbeth and depraved motherhood. When Lady Macduff bemoans the fact that her husband has fled and left his family unprotected, she uses bird imagery to emphasize her plight. She likens herself to "the poor wren, / The most diminutive of birds, [which] will fight, / Her young ones in the nest, against the owl" (*Mac.* 4.2.9-11). In her metaphor, we see another example of prey becoming predatory, in this case in protection of her chicks marking the inversion of nature as maternal instinct. Of course, with this metaphor, Lady Macduff prefigures her own murder, because the diminutive wren is unlikely to fend off a large predator²⁴. Lady Macbeth's association with the owl creates a juxtaposition between Lady Macduff, "the poor wren" and emblem of motherhood, and the childless queen. This battle between Lady Macduff the wren and Lady Macbeth the owl may explain why in the sleepwalking

24. There is a similar moment of irony when Macduff also prefigures the news of his wife's murder, telling Malcolm that "[e]ach new morn / New widows howl" (*Mac.* 4.3.4-5). Later in the same scene, Macduff learns that he is, in fact, a new widower (*Mac.* 4.3.205-6).

scene, the “Thane of Fife [who] had a wife” weighs so heavily on Lady Macbeth’s conscience (*Mac.* 5.1.36).

Lady Macduff’s fierce protection of her children stands in stark contrast to Lady Macbeth’s chilling statement regarding her own baby. While Lady Macduff would face a predator (or murderer) to protect her children, Lady Macbeth would instead become the murderer. Lady Macbeth says of her own child that she “would, while it was smiling in my face, / have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out” had she promised to do so (*Mac.* 1.7.56-8). The witches’ second apparition takes the form of “a bloody child,” which evokes the unnatural act of infanticide as well as the murder of the Macduff children and the eerie specter of the Macbeths’ missing child (*Mac.* 4.1.92 s.d.). The finger of the birth-strangled babe represents yet another dead child harmed (albeit inadvertently) by his mother. This death calls to mind Lady Macbeth, both because of the violent imagery of her dashing out the brains of an infant, but more obscurely through her connection to owls. The witches’ brew also includes an owl’s wing. Lady Macbeth is strongly associated with the nocturnal and the portentous through the owl; an owl is, of course, a baby of that species and its wing akin to its arms. Harmed young of all species gesture back toward Lady Macbeth.

The play’s many references to infanticide and wounded children symbolize the basest, most horrifying inversion of nature in the play and illustrate just how unsafe Scotland has become. Citizens are not safe in their beds, they are not safe in their homes, and they are not even safe in their mother’s arms. For Shakespeare’s original audiences, the reference to Lady Macbeth breastfeeding would likely evoke a connection between the queen and the weird sisters. Witches were said to have a physical mark upon their bodies that proved them to be supernatural beings, “recognizable because it would not

bleed when pricked and was insensible to pain” (Thomas 445). In *Daemonologie*, King James explains that the devil gave witches this mark once they agreed to come into his service by renouncing God and their baptism (James 33). The witch’s mark was “sometimes thought of as a teat from which the familiar could suck the witch’s blood as a form of nourishment” (Thomas 446, Mortimer 128). The description of Lady Macbeth breastfeeding becomes one of the play’s most unsettling images, with blood replacing mother’s milk and murder replacing maternal care. It finds an echo in the cauldron scene, where one of the ghastly ingredients is “sow’s blood that hath eaten / Her nine farrow” (*Mac.* 4.1.80-1). The protection of motherhood is the ultimate symbol of safety that is shown to deteriorate throughout the play. Safety in a mother’s arms is the ultimate symbol of security that becomes dangerous in *Macbeth*. In a world where an infant is unsafe in his mother’s arms, it is little wonder that sleep is hard to come by.

The Supernatural

The witches appear in only four scenes in the play, but their supernatural influence is suggested throughout. It seems a foregone conclusion that if a realm contains witches and that horses are devouring themselves, the former must be the cause of the latter. Because of this implication, much debate about *Macbeth* centers on the extent to which the witches influence Macbeth’s actions and fate within the play. Do they goad Macbeth into committing his series of murders, or does he act on his own? The intent and power of the weird sisters in *Macbeth* is unclear; however, readers and audiences see very clearly the intent and evil in Macbeth. Considering how sleeplessness functions in the play suggests that the witches indirectly goad Macbeth into action; they do not cast a spell on him, forcing him to commit murders and pursue power. Instead, his pursuit of power, especially the witches’ supernatural power, spurs him to commit the

crimes he does. The pursuit of the witches' power is linked to Macbeth's ambition and also to the restoration of his sleep.

Throughout the play, there are myriad suggestions that Macbeth's actions are controlled or prompted by the witches. Although the Witchcraft Acts detailed various acts that were illegal in Shakespeare's time and their punishments, they did not detail how witchcraft was thought to be practiced. Keith Thomas describes the various ways that witches were thought to work their magic against others. Victims could be "fascinated" or "overlooked," meaning that an evil spell was cast upon them by touch or look (Thomas 473). There are no stage directions in *Macbeth* indicating that the weird sisters physically touch Macbeth, but the word "fascinated" is particularly evocative of Banquo's description of Macbeth's reaction to their proclamation that he will be named Thane of Cawdor and "shalt be king hereafter" (*Mac.* 1.3.48). Macbeth is silent, and Banquo notes that he "start[s]" and appears "rapt withal" (*Mac.* 1.3.49, 55). Banquo reiterates Macbeth's "rapt" appearance to Ross and Angus when he learns he has in fact been conferred the title of Cawdor (*Mac.* 1.3.142). In its final appearance in the play, Macbeth uses the word himself in a letter to Lady Macbeth recounting these details, describing himself as "rapt in the wonder" of both the proclamations and their partial fulfillment (*Mac.* 1.5.6).

Alternatively, witches could speak "a curse or malediction which in due course took effect" (Thomas 473). The term to describe this phenomenon was "forespoken" (ibid). The witches' recurring pronouncements of Macbeth's kingship and the prophecies that he interprets as assurance of his reign seem to fit this particular version of witchcraft. They declare the titles that Macbeth shall hold and each declaration comes to pass. Thomas describes a final method "which involved technical aids—making a wax image

of the victim and sticking pins in it” (ibid). This form of spell casting is absent from *Macbeth*, but does appear in Shakespeare’s source material for the play, *Holinshed’s Chronicles*. That work contains an account in which another Scottish king is plagued with sleeplessness and its cause is diagnosed to be witchcraft (Holinshed 22). Soldiers are dispatched to a house in “the midst of the night”—the primary time for supernatural beings and their works (Holinshed 23). There the soldiers discover witches holding “an image of wax at the fier, resembling in each feature the kings person” (ibid). Reportedly, the curse upon the figure “serued to keepe him still waking from sleepe, so that as the wax euer melted, so did the kings flesh: by the which meanes it should haue come to passe, that when the wax was once cleane consumed the death of the king should immediatlie follow” (ibid). *Holinshed’s Chronicles* includes magic that directly results in the sleeplessness of a king, and yet the overt practice of black magic does not appear within *Macbeth*. The unequivocal witchcraft that appeared in Shakespeare’s source material was avoided in favor of the ambiguous suggestion of witchcraft that appears in *Macbeth*. This alteration from the source material suggests that the possibility or suggestion of witchcraft is a more important theme in the play than the actual influence of magic upon Macbeth.

The most overt act of witchcraft within the play comes in the weird sisters’ cauldron scene. *Macbeth* was likely written in 1606²⁵ only a few years after James changed the 1563 witchcraft statute put in place by Parliament under Queen Elizabeth. James’ changes to the statute explicitly forbid the use of human bodies and body parts in the casting of spells used for witchcraft or black magic (Newton 238). The weird sisters

25. The introduction to the play in the *Norton* edition cites the Porter’s veiled reference to the execution of Henry Garnet in May of that year for his involvement in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 (Greenblatt 2556).

seem to violate the Witchcraft Act of 1604 by making use of “a pilot’s thumb,” the “[f]inger of birth-strangled babe,” “Witches’ mummy,” “[l]iver of blaspheming Jew,” and “[n]ose of Turk, and Tartar’s lips” in working their magic (*Mac.* 1.3.26, 4.1.30, 23, 26, 29). The use of these body parts may represent a particular anxiety of audiences in Shakespeare’s time, but they also highlight an interesting contradiction: human body parts were used with some frequency in medicines and folk remedies in Shakespeare’s times. Culturally, the use of human body parts was far less problematic than the motive for their use—whether the body parts were used for black magic or medicine. An excerpt from Nicolas Culpepper’s 1649 *Pharmacopeia Londinensis* contains an inventory of items commonly found in London’s apothecaries in the seventeenth century. Listed among them are “the fat, grease, or suet of . . . man,” “stone taken out of a man’s bladder,” “the skull of a man killed by a violent death,” “the milk of . . . a woman,” “fasting spittle,” “the piss . . . of a man or woman that is a maid, and [of she] that is not a maid,” and “the moss on a man’s skull” (Sugg 209-10). The list also includes countless animal body parts, many similar to those used by the witches in the cauldron scene (*ibid.*). What is never explicitly shown is the witches’ spell or whether the witches’ activities result in *maleficium* or harm due to witchcraft (Thomas 436). Whatever magic the witches perform or spells they cast is left for readers and audiences to guess at and interpret for themselves. For present-day readers and audiences, the content of the witches’ cauldron seems alarming and dangerous. But it also seems similar to some of the treatments for insomnia which used animal body parts and breast milk. The use of human and animal body parts was far more common place in Shakespeare’s time²⁶. The fear and suspicion

26. Animals are still widely used in the production of pharmaceuticals today, from the gelatin coating on pills and capsules to medicines made with hormones from mares’ urine to anticoagulants derived from cows and pigs.

of the supernatural was such that even innocuous actions were cast in a malicious light if witchcraft was invoked. This fear is exposed in both Shakespeare's initial audiences and even those today when one considers that the witches' malevolence is only suggested within the play and yet the play's evil acts are attributed to them. Conversely, Macbeth is shown explicitly committing and planning murders throughout, and yet his culpability and intent is still debated.

In contrast to the notion that the weird sisters have tremendous influence in the play, it is explicitly noted that there are limits to the weird sisters' powers. The pilot's thumb the witches have belongs to a sailor "[w]recked as homeward he did come" (*Mac.* 1.3.27). This reference connects back to the very first mention of sleeplessness that occurs in the play, the first spell cast by the witches. The first witch has the ability to inflict insomnia and make the ship "be tempest-tossed," but she lacks the power to wreck the ship outright and kill its crew; she says, "his barque *cannot* be lost" (*Mac.* 1.3.24, 23, emphasis mine). While there is no explanation for how this particular captain died or came to be divided from his thumb, the idea of being wrecked as he made his way homeward is suggestive of the witches' interception of Macbeth as he makes his way home from battle. Macbeth is ultimately separated from his head, and again the witches' culpability in that matter is suggested, but not explicitly stated.

While the witches' effect on Macbeth's reign is uncertain, it does seem clear that Macbeth's reign creates an environment fitting and beneficial for the weird sisters. One of the disparities of Macbeth's reign as we have seen is that, despite the darkness that turns the play into perpetual night, most of the play's characters remark upon the state of sleeplessness that exists in Scotland. The land is in turmoil with storms, earthquakes, and unnatural animal behavior suggesting nature's displeasure with the king's reign.

However, while the king's subjects are suffering, the witches appear to be benefiting from Macbeth's kingship. Darkness is now prevalent. Several of the ingredients in the witches' brew are nighttime creatures referenced elsewhere in the play: bat, owlet, wolf (*Mac.* 4.1.15, 17, 22). Additionally, of the few plants listed among the ingredients, each has a description that suggests it needs to be harvested specifically at night²⁷. The "[r]oot of hemlock digged i'th' dark" means this ingredient is made even more accessible by Macbeth's unnatural reign (*Mac.* 4.1.25). The "slips of yew / [s]livered in the moon's eclipse" must be gathered when the realm is at its darkest, a state readers have seen both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth themselves invoke (*Mac.* 4.1.27-8). The unnatural and bizarre events of the play are squarely tied to Macbeth's unnatural rule; however, the presence of the witches suggests they are responsible and perhaps more culpable than Macbeth.

But the greatest symbol of the dangerousness of Macbeth's hunger for power and continued reign is in the way that he aligns himself more closely with the witches than with Duncan, Banquo, or Malcolm—the play's kingly figures. Readers and audiences realize that Macbeth is power hungry when he murders Duncan to achieve the throne. However, we also see Macbeth attempt to wrest supernatural power from the witches by using their art against them. Repeatedly, Macbeth echoes the language and speaking style of the weird sisters. Many critics have noted that Macbeth's first line in the play—"So foul and fair a day I have not seen"—is a repetition of the witches' earlier ambiguous incantation, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (*Mac.* 1.3.36, 1.1.10)²⁸. At several points,

27. Similarly, in Hamlet's play "The Mousetrap," the Player King is murdered with a poison made "of midnight weeds collected" (*Ham.* 3.2.235). In *The Tempest*, Ariel is charged "at midnight to fetch dew / From the still-vexed Bermudas" for use in Prospero's magic (*Tmp.* 1.2.229-30).

28. See Brindley 137; Garber *Shakespeare* 700; Churchill 166; Bradley 296-7; Booth in Newton 59.

Macbeth takes up the rhyming language of the weird sisters, mimicking their cadence as they cast their spells. In one such example, Macbeth intones that the “[g]ood things of day begin to droop and drowse, / While night’s black agents to their preys do rouse” (*Mac.* 3.2.53-5). This passage—spoken in anticipation of Banquo’s assassination—is significant not only because it aligns Macbeth’s language with the rhyming speech of the witches, but also because it recalls the moment that Banquo appears at the castle. He is battling the call of sleep, while Macbeth rouses his nerve to kill Duncan. Duncan, always painted in terms of light, and Banquo are good things of day; Macbeth is the black agent of night rousing to murder his prey.

These subtle repetitions of style and language culminate in Macbeth’s attempt at appropriating the witches’ power by casting a spell of his own. When Macbeth seeks out²⁹ the witches for further information, he literally conjures them, saying:

I conjure you by that which you profess,
 Howe’er you come to know it, answer me.
 Though you untie the winds and let them fight
 Against the churches, though the yeasty waves
 Confound and swallow navigation up,
 Though bladed corn be lodged and trees blown down,
 Though castles topple on their warders’ heads,
 Though palaces and pyramids do slope
 Their heads to their foundations, though the treasure
 Of nature’s germens tumble all together
 Even till destruction sicken, answer me
 To what I ask you (*Mac.* 4.1.66-77)

Macbeth invokes their power, listing all the events he will endure to know their answer. However, audiences and readers recognize that this list recapitulates the state of Scotland under Macbeth’s reign, as well as again providing a counter to the language of fertility

29. Wendy R. Harper’s essay "Polanski Vs. Welles on Macbeth: Character or Fate?" notes that Polanski’s version of the film stresses Macbeth’s pursuit of the witches, which brought the theme to my attention.

and agriculture that Marjorie Garber noted was a mark of Duncan's rule (*Shakespeare* 702). It is Macbeth who upsets agricultural abundance and unleashes the wild weather on the night he murders Duncan. Perhaps this is Macbeth's attempt at laying responsibility for all those ills at the witches' feet and denying his own culpability. However, the use of the word "conjure" suggests that Macbeth views the witches as the tools of the king and rather than vice versa³⁰. The consequence for denying Macbeth's power is revealed a few lines later, when Macbeth informs the witches, "I will be satisfied. Deny me this, / And an eternal curse fall on you!" (*Mac.* 4.1.120-1). Throughout the play, we have seen Macbeth pursuing the power of the supernatural; this scene marks his attempts at wielding that power.

What the supernatural elements of the play highlight is not a legitimate threat or the supernatural influence that motivates Macbeth's actions. Instead, Macbeth's response to the weird sisters and their magic exhibits his own poor judgment as both man and king. Throughout the play, Macbeth utterly misconstrues the meaning behind the unnatural occurrences that afflict Scotland, as well as the means of restoring his own sleep. The play's unnatural phenomena depicted in the form of storms, abnormal animal behavior, and darkness are undercut by Macbeth's misinterpretation of the unnatural elements that are merely suggested by the witches' apparitions. While Macbeth's subjects remark throughout the play about the unnatural darkness, animal behavior, and violent weather, Macbeth remains largely silent on these matters. Instead his focus is almost exclusively on the seemingly unnatural symbols of the play, voiced by the weird sisters and their

30. James I argues in *Daemonologie* that "witches ar servantes onelie and slaues to the Devil; but the Necromancers are his maisters and commanders" (9). One of Macbeth's final scenes shows him conversing with a servant named Seyton, a homonym of Satan (Coursen 385-6; *Arden* 280 fn 19; Burelback 134). In 2.3, the Porter makes several allusions to Inverness being hell and his master being a devil. The allusion is that Macbeth is not only the master of the witches but of the devil as well and is therefore in control of all the play's supernatural beings and occurrences.

apparitions. The first of these apparitions appears as “an armed head” that says “Macbeth, Macbeth, Macbeth, beware Macduff, / Beware the Thane of Fife” (*Mac.* 4.1.84 s.d., 4.1.87-8). Macbeth never considers the idea that Macduff is a threat to him because Macbeth has made himself an enemy of Scotland despite being king. The second apparition takes the form of “a bloody child” who advises Macbeth to “[b]e bloody, bold, and resolute. Laugh to scorn / The power of man, for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (*Mac.* 4.1.92 s.d., 4.1.95-97). Macbeth interprets this prophecy to mean that no living man—for surely all have been born of women—will be able to unseat him from the throne. The final apparition takes the form of “a child crowned, with a tree in his hand,” who tells Macbeth he “shall never vanquished be until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him” (*Mac.* 4.1.102 s.d., 4.1.108-10). Twelve miles separated the two from one another, so Macbeth feels confident this eventuality “will never be” (Vaughan and Vaughan 242 fn 92; *Mac.* 4.1.110). But the witches from the outset have prophesied that it is Banquo’s line and not Macbeth’s that will rule Scotland (and other countries besides) far into the future. As Marjorie Garber notes, “the apparition scene with the witches ends, famously, with two great images of the paradoxical and unnatural: a man not born of woman, and a moving grove” (*Shakespeare* 704). The apparitions, which only hold the appearance of the unnatural, are highly regarded by Macbeth while the actual unnatural events of the play are overlooked almost entirely. Instead of considering ways in which these prophecies might come to pass, Macbeth instead ponders all that he can get away with using his unchecked power.

As Macbeth’s interactions with the prophecies show, it is important to distinguish between a symbol’s actual meaning and its perceived meaning. In *Macbeth*, it is equally important to determine whether supernatural events or magic are actually depicted or

whether they are merely suggested. That no spells or magic are explicitly shown suggests that Macbeth's actions in the play are ones he chooses to perform and not those he is compelled to perform. The king's selfish and fatal choices result in an upset of natural order that endangers his kingdom and subjects, which in turn threatens his own reign—the very eventuality he is fighting to prevent.

Chapter V

The Restoration of Sleep in *Macbeth*

As the deleterious effects of Macbeth's kingship consume Scotland over the course of the play, it becomes clear that it is insufficient to merely end his reign; rather, the effects of Macbeth's rule need to be remedied to restore sleep and natural order to the realm. Sleeplessness, darkness, and barrenness are the hallmarks of Macbeth's kingship that overcome Scotland during the course of his reign. In counter, Malcolm is symbolized by sleep, light, and fertility, prefiguring his ascension to the throne and his status as the antidote to the poisonous effects of Macbeth's reign. Sleeplessness illustrates the harm of Macbeth's kingship and his motives for pursuing the witches' supernatural power. The return of sleep underscores Malcolm's rightful place upon the throne and the need for a king to promote the safety and security of his people.

As insistently as Macbeth is linked with sleeplessness in the play, Malcolm comes to symbolize the restoration of Scotland's sleep. When Macduff meets Malcolm in England, he tells the young prince that "[e]ach new morn / New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows / Strike heaven on the face" (*Mac.* 4.3.4-6). This is an implicit reiteration of the sleepless state of Scotland under Macbeth's rule; murders are being carried out through the night and few Scottish citizens are sleeping securely. From the moment of Duncan's murder, Macbeth makes Scotland a violent state that is unsafe for sleep. This realization of Scotland's perilous state has, like a hue and cry, reached all of Macbeth's subjects by the time of Macduff's speech. In contrast to the sleeplessness spread by Macbeth, Malcolm is repeatedly shown as a symbol of restored sleep and

security. An unnamed Lord expresses the hope that Malcolm may finally unseat Macbeth and “again / Give...sleep to our nights, / Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives, /...all which we pine for now” (*Mac.* 3.6.33-7). The anonymous character voices the wishes of all of Scotland’s citizens. As Malcolm gathers with the English forces to march on Inverness he says, “I hope the days are near at hand / That chambers³¹ will be safe” (*Mac.* 5.4.1-2). His actions in unseating Macbeth are clearly linked here with the return of safe sleep for the realm. Sleep goes hand in hand with security, and both are absent from Scotland under Macbeth’s reign. Malcolm’s ascension to the throne would effectively return to Scotland the innocent, nourishing, and nurturing sleep that Macbeth murders at the start of the play.

This connection between Malcolm’s reign and the restoration of sleep is underscored by the fact that almost all references to sleep and sleeplessness abruptly end when Macbeth is finally defeated. Malcolm gives the final speech of the play, closing both Macbeth’s reign and the drama. In it, the only reference Malcolm makes to either sleep or sleeplessness is to refer to Macbeth’s reign as “the snares of watchful tyranny” (*Mac.* 5.11.33). After the abundance of references to and metaphors of sleep throughout the play, this dearth at first seems peculiar. However, Malcolm avoids further reference to sleeplessness because the symbol has become so thoroughly Macbeth’s throughout the play that it has no place in a speech about Malcolm’s future reign; the new king does not concern himself with the language and symbols of the old king. Instead, Malcolm becomes an opposing symbol of Macbeth not through references to sleep, but through the renewed symbolism of his father—fertility and light.

31. “A room or suite of rooms in a house, typically one allotted to the use of a particular person, a private room; (in later use) *esp.* a bedroom, typically on an upper floor” (*OED* n.1.1.a); Malcolm is obliquely stating that with the deposition of Macbeth, he hopes sleep will once again be safe.

In his closing speech dismissing the watchful tyrant, Malcolm returns to the agricultural metaphors that marked Duncan's reign. Malcolm describes his future acts as "planted newly with the time," a repetition of Duncan's similar speech at the start of the play (*Mac.* 5.11.31)³². Malcolm is not solely tasked with restoring Scotland's security and ability to sleep, but also with reversing the blight associated with Macbeth's reign. Throughout the play, Macbeth paints himself as the inversion of Duncan's natural rule by carrying on this metaphor, showing himself to be a blighted crop that falters without Duncan's tending. As with the return of sleep, agrarian language throughout the play prefigures Malcolm's ascension to the throne. Lennox perpetuates this agricultural theme, describing the plan to overtake Macbeth as a way to "dew the sovereign flower" of Malcolm "and drown the weeds" of Macbeth's reign (*Mac.* 5.2.30). While Macbeth's first glimpse of the throne takes place on the blasted heath, his reign ends trapped in his castle, where he describes how his "way of life / Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf" (*Mac.* 5.3.23-4). Tellingly, Macbeth uses agricultural metaphors in his request for the doctor to restore Lady Macbeth's sleep and health. He asks if it is possible to "[p]luck from the memory a rooted sorrow, / Raze out the written troubles of the brain" (*Mac.* 5.3.43-4). Macbeth unwittingly ties the return of Lady Macbeth's healthy sleep with the symbolism of Malcolm's kingship. In the same way that darkness and sleeplessness expand outward from Macbeth to encompass his entire realm, the desolation and barrenness of the heath expands to encompass all of Scotland under Macbeth's rule. Only Malcolm's newly planted rule can restore what was destroyed under Macbeth.

One of the prophecies upon which Macbeth relies so heavily is that of the third

32. "I have begun to plant thee, and will labour / To make thee full of growing" (*Mac.* 1.4.28-9; Vaughan and Vaughan 299 fn 1).

apparition, the image of a “crowned child holding a tree” who assures him that “Macbeth shall never vanquished be until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him” (*Mac.* 4.1.102 s.d., 4.1.108-10). This image is neither as impossible nor as unnatural as Macbeth allows himself to believe. Thematically, these trees simply represent Malcolm’s rule—symbolized by agriculture—overtaking Macbeth’s. Macbeth foreshadows the very moment of his defeat with his own prophecy of the unnatural, telling Lady Macbeth that “[s]tones have been known to move, and trees to speak” (*Mac.* 3.4.121-2). The trees of Birnam Wood may both appear to move and speak, for they are being carried forward by Malcolm and his soldiers. In enacting this plan, Malcolm directs that “every soldier hew him down a bough / And bear’t before him” so they may “shadow / The numbers” of their forces as they march upon Macbeth’s castle (*Mac.* 5.4.4-5, 5-6). Malcolm uses another of Macbeth’s symbols—darkness in the form of shadow—against him in taking the crown. Because symbols of sleep, light, and agriculture all belong to Malcolm (in the same way that sleeplessness, darkness, and blight belong to Macbeth), they are intensified by this repetition and doubling.

The perversion of watch that Macbeth embraces to achieve Banquo’s murder is ultimately the harbinger of Macbeth’s own demise. A messenger announces to Macbeth, “As I did stand my watch upon the hill / I looked toward Birnam, and anon methought / The wood began to move” (*Mac.* 5.5.31-3). The helplessness of the watch against supernatural foes as staged in *Hamlet* represented an anxiety for Shakespeare’s audiences. In *Macbeth* that fear is turned on its head, because the watch’s inability to combat the seemingly supernatural ultimately leads to the defeat of a tyrant, the greater threat in the play. It is also fitting that Macbeth, who subverts the safety of the watch in murdering Banquo should himself be undone by his perceived failings of the watch.

The restoration of sleep to Scotland shows Malcolm overcoming Macbeth's symbol of sleeplessness. The return to the language of agriculture shows the restoration of Duncan's line and the rightful king to the throne. The transformation of Malcolm's symbol from starlight to daylight illuminates Malcolm's legitimate and proper rule. Malcolm's kingship is initially symbolized by starlight, something that coexists in nature with the darkness of night conjured and controlled by Macbeth. By the play's end, Malcolm's future reign is linked strongly with full daylight, an oppositional state to the nighttime that Macbeth has fostered. Malcolm stands in opposition to Macbeth's symbols and is an amplification of Duncan's. Malcolm notes of Macbeth's dark reign that "[t]he night is long that never finds the day" (*Mac.* 4.3.242). As the play ends, we see that Macbeth's "night" of rule is leading into the "day" that is Malcolm's reign. Despite Macbeth's attempts, it is ultimately impossible to halt the natural or political cycle of night and day. As the battle approaches, Siward tells Malcolm that "[t]he day almost itself professes yours" (*Mac.* 5.9.4). Winning the day means securing a victory in battle, but in the greater context of the play it also means restoring actual daylight to Scotland. Siward goes on to express how high the stakes of this battle between night and day actually are. After Macbeth's defeat and the return of daylight, Siward declares that "[s]o great a day as this is cheaply bought," despite the fact the loss of his own son is included in the cost (*Mac.* 5.11.3). The end of Macbeth's darkness and the return of day are worth even that high a price to ensure that other sons—Fleance, Donalbain, and Malcolm among them—are not endlessly slaughtered.

In the sleepwalking scene, readers and audiences see Lady Macbeth reverse her invocation of darkness. Instead of a "pall" that obscures heaven, Lady Macbeth "has light by her continually" (*Mac.* 1.5.49, 5.1.19-20). Even Macbeth himself links Malcolm

with a return to daylight. When he learns that the grove of trees is approaching his castle, Macbeth says, “I ‘gin to be aweary of the sun, / And wish th’estate o’th’ world were now undone. / Ring the alarum bell” (*Mac.* 5.5.47-9). “Th’estate o’th’ world” is “ordered structure” or natural order, which has been subverted by Macbeth throughout the play; the inversion of natural order under his rule is no longer sustainable (Greenblatt 2614 In 48). Throughout the play, Macbeth has believed in the prophecies and apparitions of the witches that seemed to promise him success through symbols in which natural order is undone: moving trees, abnormal births, grievously wounded children. With the sun’s return, Macbeth’s defeat is already imminent; Malcolm rises to the throne just as the sun rises once again over Scotland. The alarum bell that rings is ultimately Macbeth’s own passing bell, signaling his approaching demise. The word toll, in addition to meaning the “single stroke made in tolling or ringing a bell, or the sound made by such a stroke,” also means a “clump of trees” (*OED* n.2.4, n.4.). Tolling bells have become a symbol of Macbeth’s misrule and a toll of trees—Malcolm and his army—will soon set the kingdom to rights.

For all the ills that Malcolm is called upon to remedy, there is one element of Macbeth’s reign that Malcolm tellingly has no call to address: the presence of the witches in Scotland. The cauldron scene marks their last appearance in the play, at the end of which “the witches dance, and vanish” (*Mac.* 4.1.148 s.d.). It can be inferred that the witches have had no ill or lasting effect on Scotland because Malcolm is not needed to counter them or drive them off. Instead, the play hints the weird sisters may in fact be part of the remedy that restores Scotland. Readers and audiences last see the witches creating a concoction with ingredients that are both unsettling and, at least in Jacobean England, seemingly medicinal. In his final moments, Macbeth’s asks the doctor to

“purge [Scotland] to a sound and pristine health” (*Mac.* 5.3.54). This notion of the healing power of the witches is underscored by Macbeth asking “[w]hat rhubarb, cyme, or what purgative drug / Would scour these English hence?” (*Mac.* 5.3.57-8). Tellingly, Macbeth still does not see that it is neither Malcolm nor the English forces that have made Scotland so sickly and that Macbeth cannot both cure Scotland and eradicate the approaching army. Audiences are never shown what the witches do with the brew they concoct, but there is the suggestion that the cauldron contains the purgative drug that helps Malcolm return Scotland to pristine health. The wild ingredients in their brew may be required to remedy the caustic disease that is Macbeth.

The close of the play shows Macbeth desiring conflicting states of being. He wants to remain king, while the threat of Malcolm disappears, Lady Macbeth’s sleep is restored, and Scotland’s health and prosperity returns. It is clear to both the play’s characters and its audiences that the former precludes any of the latter from coming to pass. Macbeth is the cause of the insecurity that creates the play’s sleeplessness. As king, Macbeth makes many ill-fated attempts at restoring his own lost sleep by assassinating his rivals for the throne. These actions serve only to spread the sleeplessness of Scotland and make her citizens even more wary of their king until there is no choice but to unseat Macbeth from his coveted throne. Encoded in the language of the play is the promise that Malcolm’s reign will restore security to Scotland, thereby restoring sleep and natural order.

Reducing Shakespeare’s character types to very basic symbols has likely happened since there were first Shakespearean characters to consider and discuss. This tendency of condensing a character down to his or her essential trait permits people to use Shakespeare’s works as literary and cultural touchstones, allowing quick references that

have near universal understanding. These references can be fairly broad and general, such as symbolizing tragic or unlucky figures by evoking characters like Ophelia or Cordelia. Inexplicably cruel and monstrous characters might be likened to Iago, Regan or Goneril—and some might say Lady Macbeth. Certain characters evoke even more specific connotations. A person crippled with indecisiveness might be deemed a Hamlet. A jealous lover is accused of being a “green-eyed monster” like Othello (*Oth.* 3.3.170). This shorthand allows people to wield the richness of Shakespeare’s character development without ever having had to see one of his plays. However, as we see with Macbeth, it is also easy to leave out important details in these simplifications or worse, get them wrong entirely. Another glaring example is Romeo, who has come to symbolically represent the idealized lover and dream man. There are infant and maternity outfits that identify baby boys as a “Future Romeo.” Taylor Swift’s song “Love Story” is about a teenage romance in which the young lovers are called Romeo and Juliet; their love story ends with a wedding, illustrating the way in which Shakespeare’s lovers have come to be an idealized couple that others aspire to emulate. What this particular shorthand overlooks, of course, is the fact that the love story of Romeo and Juliet ends with their deaths just as their relationship is starting. It is not the way one would hope that their relationship would end and certainly not the future one would wish for their infant son. In making certain of Shakespeare’s characters archetypes, it is clearly important to get the essences of their characters right.

Macbeth is ultimately too complicated a figure to reduce to a simple symbol. Over the 400 years since *Macbeth* was penned, the central questions of debate regarding the play have focused on the emotional state of the king and the extent to which the weird sisters determine Macbeth’s fate. For many, Macbeth’s sleeplessness is thought to be a

result of his guilt over murdering Duncan, an act Macbeth ostensibly commits under the weird sisters' influence. Macbeth is viewed as a character like Lear who has a lapse in judgment and whose sanity and kingdom unravel as a result. However, *Macbeth* is very clear in showing Macbeth's actions and their corruptive consequences in the form of sleeplessness and the inversion of natural order. Conversely, the effects of the supernatural are only hinted at within the play. Macbeth exhibits little sorrow or remorse for those he kills; those emotions are reserved for Lady Macbeth's death. His concern over the murders he commits is only how they will help or hinder him. *Macbeth* shows sleeplessness to be an effect that the king creates and perpetuates through his actions.

Present-day readers and audiences experience sleeplessness from a distinct cultural perspective: for many of us, sleepless nights are caused by anxiety about work, personal relationships, financial stress, or health concerns. We understand sleeplessness primarily as a physical symptom of some form of emotional unrest. Insomnia is an intensely personal and private experience, one that is caused by our own minds and that we suffer alone. But applying our cultural understanding of sleeplessness to *Macbeth* and interpreting Macbeth's sleeplessness as an external representation of the king's internal state is a reductive reading of Shakespeare's text and a misunderstanding of the way the play would have been received by his initial audiences. In Shakespeare's time, sleeplessness was often linked to external factors, such as a lack of physical or even spiritual security. When present-day readers and audiences understand how Shakespeare and his initial audiences perceived sleep, security, nighttime, and watch, it allows for a reading of the play that shows Macbeth as the root of the play's sleeplessness rather than its sole victim and it heightens the tension and unease that the drama evokes. Fully understanding the tenuous nature of sleep and safety as they are represented in *Macbeth* allows readers and

audiences to see past the play's blood, witches, and ghosts to find an even more terrifying specter: the danger and unrest that corrupted power can bring.

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