

# Gunpowder, Witches, Jesuits, and Shakespeare's "Macbeth", Comments on a Book



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Jointly published by Oxford University Press and the New York Public Library the book entitled *Witches and Jesuits: Shakespeare's Macbeth* (New York, 1995) deserves extended comment. Because the author, Garry Wills, has written popular biographies of political figures (*Nixon Agonistes*; *Reagan's America*; *Lincoln at Gettysburg* — this last awarded the Pulitzer Prize), the impression might be given that his venture in Shakespeare criticism is that of an amateur. But in fact he has solid credentials for it: he has (as the book's Preface tells us) taught Shakespeare at Johns Hopkins University and has delivered lectures on the subject as Regents Professor at the University of California in Santa Barbara. One of those lectures (incorporated in the present book) was later repeated at various institutions, including Yale and Notre Dame. The present book therefore should be taken seriously and deserves detailed comment.

The book's thesis (if we might oversimplify it) may be divided into two parts. The first part is that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* should be read (and performed) as one of the "Gunpowder Plays" produced at a time of great public excitement over the discovery of the Gunpowder Plot.

The play was "almost certainly" first performed in the Christmas season of December 1606-January 1607, a year after the discovery of the Plot, and a few months after the trial and execution of Father Henry Garnet, the Jesuit superior accused of complicity in it. The Jacobean government went to great lengths to create an "official version" of the plot (Wills outlines the steps taken in that effort) with the result that

there was great and prolonged public indignation against Catholics and the Pope and in particular against the alleged masterminds, the Jesuits. As Wills puts it, "The King disseminated his official version in a flood of religious propaganda. The agreement of all these sermons, publications and inspired pronouncements shows that they were the equivalent of a Warren Report, a government 'finding' meant to quiet competing views..." (pp. 15-16).

It is beside the point that this official version was in large part untrue. (The government knew far more about the Plot from its inception than the Jesuits ever did or could.) The pertinent fact here is that public excitement existed, and the audience of 1606 would be alive to the slightest allusion to the Plot or to the dangerous Jesuits.

Taking advantage of this public feeling, a number of plays were produced in 1606 that Wills calls "Gunpowder Plays." One of them (produced by Shakespeare's own company of actors) was by Barnes entitled *The Devil's Charter*. Pope Alexander VI (Rodrigo Borgia) is portrayed as having incestuous relations with his daughter Lucretia, who invokes the powers of evil to steel herself to kill her husband. The Pope himself makes a contract with the devil "to destroy all powers opposed to his hellish reign in Rome." Another play was by Dekker (and Wills considers "significant" the fact that Dekker was Shakespeare's collaborator in another play). Dekker's "Gunpowder Play" was entitled *The Whore of Babylon* in which the Pope plots to have Queen Elizabeth killed. Dekker had also published an anti-Jesuit poem entitled "The Double P."

Whether or not intended as religious propaganda, these plays would be received by the audience as allusions to what the Catholics were believed to be plotting: namely, blow up King and Parliament.

It was in that historical context (probably in the same year) that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* was first produced, and it was only to be expected that it would have many allusions to the events of the day, in particular the Gunpowder Plot. Even words that ordinarily would have no subversive connotation would have been understood by the audience of 1606 as alluding to the Plot. For example, "trains" (meaning devices): "Devilish Macbeth / By means of these trains ..." (4.3.117. Or the word "blow": "Shall blow the horrid deed ..." (1.7.14). The word "confusion" could also be understood as evoking the "hellish" plottings supposedly done by the Catholics:

Confusion now hath made his masterpiece!  
Most sacrilegious Murther hath broke ope  
The Lord's anointed temple and stole thence  
The life of the building. (2.3.66)

"Confusion," (Wills points out) "is the principle of the devil's reign, as order is of God's." He cites a similar passage in Dekker's *The Whore of Babylon*.



### *Jesuits and Others*

Wills has some original and quite convincing suggestions towards clarifying certain puzzling passages in Macbeth's soliloquy, "If it were done when 'tis done" (His suggestions are summarized in Appendix A at the end of this article.) Particularly brilliant is his identification of a possible source of Shakespeare's startling image of "a naked newborn babe striding the blast" and of tears that "drown the wind." There is a striking similarity between these images and those in a Christmas poem by the Jesuit priest, Father Robert Southwell, who was hanged at Tyburn in 1595 and whose poem, "The Burning Babe," was widely circulated after his death. There are even suggestions (which Wills dismisses) that Southwell and Shakespeare may have known each other. (The opening stanzas of the poem are quoted in Appendix A below.)

There is a much more insistent allusion to another Jesuit, Father Henry Garnet, in the Drunken Porter scene (Act II, Scene 3). The Drunken Porter's satirical humor gets the audience laughing at the idea of three notorious characters being admitted to the eternal bonfire. One is an "equivocator," another a "Farmer," the third an "English tailor." It has long been known that the "equivocator" alluded to was Father Henry Garnet. Wills shows that the "Farmer" was also Garnet, as that was one of his pseudonyms. And he cites the work of H. L. Rogers to show that the "English tailor" is also an allusion to Garnet. Because of this prominent and insistent allusion, Wills devotes one chapter to the Jesuits and in particular to the issue of equivocation. (See our Appendix B.)



## *Witches*

The second part of Wills' thesis (again if we may oversimplify) is that in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, witches and witchcraft play an all-important role, to the extent that, besides the Three Witches explicitly so-called, the two principal characters are in effect also witches. Lady Macbeth (whom some critics consider the Fourth Witch) acts in a way to suggest witchcraft. More important, *Macbeth* himself is portrayed by Wills as a Male Witch.

Belief in witches (and in ghosts) was widespread in Shakespeare's time, not only among the vulgar multitude but even among the educated classes. The King himself wrote a treatise on demonology. The ghost of Banquo, like the ghost in *Hamlet*, would be readily believed as really appearing. The same could be said the Three Witches of indeterminate sex who "hover through the fog and filthy air."

Wills is on solid ground when he shows how Shakespeare's details regarding the appearance and behavior of witches are completely in accord with what the wisdom of the age believed about witchcraft. He is also persuasive when he shows that the presence of Hecate (often omitted in productions) is a logical necessity in the necromancy scene in Act IV.

What is not persuasive is the conception of Lady Macbeth as a "fourth witch" or of *Macbeth* as a "male witch." We shall return to these points presently.



## *Trees and Forest*

And therein lies the strength and the weakness of this book. Its main contribution is the clarification and explanation of many details in the play. Its weakness is the failure to see the play as a whole. The trees are clearly seen; the forest is blurred.

Although Wills is careful to say that he does not intend to present Shakespeare's play as just another of the plays dealing with the Gunpowder Plot and witchcraft, the fact is that *that* is the net result of this presentation. In this book's reading, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is reduced to the status of just another "Gunpowder" and witchcraft play, no bet-

ter and no worse than, for instance, Barnes's *The Devil's Charter* and Dekker's *The Whore of Babylon*.

And yet it should be obvious that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is *toto coelo* different from these cheap anti-religious propaganda plays. There are indeed similarities between them; there were bound to be, since they were produced at the same time and by the same group of playwrights and actors; but Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is superior to those others as Everest towers above a molehill.

Despite allusions to the Gunpowder Plot, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is *not* a "Gunpowder Play." Although there are references to Jesuit "traitors" or "equivocators," it is *not* an anti-Jesuit or anti-Catholic propaganda play. Witches and witchcraft have indeed a very important role in the drama, but it is *not* a play *about* witches or witchcraft. It is a dramatic presentation of a tragic human situation; it is the tragedy of two human beings with the potential of greatness, who have human desires and ambitions and fears, who make deliberate choices that bring about tragic consequences for themselves and others.

That Wills' concept of the play diminishes its stature may be seen by what it has done to the roles of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.



### *Lady Macbeth*

Two "towering reputations" (Wills reminds us) have been built upon the role of Lady Macbeth, that of Mrs. Siddons in the 18th century and that of Ellen Terry in the 19th. He notes their different interpretations of the role: "Siddons was the lofty terrorizer of her husband, and Terry the pre-Raphaelite spectre who dooms him with her beauty." He rejects both interpretations as inadequate and tries to show that the role should be played with witchcraft in mind.

He reminds us that in the first performances, the role of Lady Macbeth was played by a boy, probably John Rice. The same boy "probably" also played Lucretia Borgia in Barnes's *The Devil's Charter* as well as Shakespeare's Cleopatra. "This clustering of Rice's roles with a witch-like aspect (Lucretia Borgia, Cleopatra, Lady Macbeth) would seem to support those who consider Lady Macbeth 'the fourth witch' of the play. . . . In fact Lady Macbeth's grand invocation at 1.5.40-54 is full of 'witch talk'" (79-80)

“Lady Macbeth’s relation to her husband” (Wills continues) “resembles that of Barnes’s Lucretia Borgia to her incestuous father.” Carrying the similarity farther, he says, “We see Pope Alexander strike his bargain with the devil and pay for it; but Lucretia’s invocation of evil spirits is mainly a way of steeling herself to kill her husband. In that sense, it works. Like Lady Macbeth, she is a murderess.” (p. 83)

But just because the same actor plays the two roles, does it necessarily follow that the roles are identical? Is it realistic to expect an audience to say to itself, “This boy who is playing Lady Macbeth was the same who played Lucretia Borgia in another play; therefore the two women must be similar to each other”? Is it really logical to say: the fact that the two roles are played by the same boy “indicates the way the role should be played”?

Surely Shakespeare had greater talent than to base the quality of a character upon the purely extrinsic fact that the same actor would be playing it as had played another role in someone else’s play!

Despite similarities and analogous situations, Lady Macbeth is a totally different character from Barnes’s caricature of Lucretia Borgia. She is even vastly different from an equally great Shakespearean woman, Cleopatra.

Wills mentions another conjecture regarding the first performances of Macbeth. “But there is another role Rice could have doubled, Macduff’s wife. The power of this doubling was suggested in Trevor Nunn’s staging of the play in the close arena of Stratford’s Other Place. . . . There was great power in the presence of Lady Macbeth at the murder of Lady MacDuff’s son.” (p. 85) Wills continues, “A similar increase in dramatic power comes from our seeing Lady Macbeth only after Rice has played the womanly anguish of Lady Macduff. . . . The fact that lady Macduff was innocent and Lady Macbeth guilty just increases the pathos of the queen’s repentance — for that in effect is what the (sleep-walking) scene amounts to.” (p. 86)

But was Lady Macbeth really “present” at the murder of Macduff’s son? Granted that the same actor *did* play both roles, at the murder of the child, that actor was acting as Lady Macduff, not as Lady Macbeth. To build the dramatic power of a scene upon the purely extrinsic and fortuitous accident of one actor doubling in two roles is to diminish the intrinsic power of that scene. Would Shakespeare’s play lose all dramatic power if there were no doubling?



### “Damned Spot”

The weakness of this conception of Lady Macbeth as a witch may be further seen in what happens, in this interpretation, to the great Sleep-walking Scene. It becomes merely “the queen’s repentance — for that is what the scene amounts to.” It is the equivalent (says Wills) of an *auto-da-fe*.

Wills bases this interpretation on two extrinsic details (extrinsic not to the play but to the psychology of the character): namely, the queen’s costume (she is dressed in a long white nightgown) and on the fact that she carries a lighted candle. “The punishment of a penitent witch involved her parading her crime by holding a taper (the symbol of witches’ rites, which used candles as Catholic masses did liturgically).” Wills cites the penance of the Duchess of Gloucester in another play (2 Henry VI, 2.4.17ff.), where the stage direction says, “Enter Duchess in a white sheet, and a taper burning in the hand.”

As for the imaginary spot of blood in the Sleep-walker’s hand, Wills says, “She acts like a witch when she tries to rub out or efface her ‘damn’d spot’. The bloody spot most feared by those suspected of witchcraft was the devil’s mark on them when they sealed their compact.” (p. 87)

This is to miss completely the psychological meaning as well as the dramatic irony of this scene. The Sleep-walking Scene should be understood with the following points in mind to serve as background.

After Duncan’s murder, Lady Macbeth ridicules her husband’s weakness, who has gone to pieces at the sight of blood. She herself is not afraid of blood. “My hands are of your colour / But I shame to wear a heart so white.” Macbeth fears that not all the waters of Neptune’s ocean can wash away the blood from his hands, but she has no such fears. The blood (she thinks) can be easily washed away. “A little water will clear us of this deed.”

And that is the dramatic irony of the Sleep-walking Scene. She had thought that the blood could be so easily washed away; but the blood remains. The “damn’d spot” cannot be rubbed out nor can all the perfumes of Arabia remove the smell of blood.

Macbeth had killed Duncan with much previous hesitation. He knew that it was horribly wrong and he shrank from it. In the end, prod-

ded by his wife's nagging and by his own ambitions, he had made the deliberate choice. Lady Macbeth had no hesitations. To her the matter was simple: the Witches had predicted that her husband would be king; there was one obstacle, Duncan was still alive; here was Duncan in her own house; eliminate him and the obstacle is gone. As simple as that.

And yet, was it? Shakespeare knew nothing of Freud's theories of the subconscious, but he knew the fact. The guilt that the conscious mind easily dismisses remains in the subconscious, and when the great strength of this strong woman collapses, the subconscious asserts itself.

This play is not the story of a penitent witch. It is the tragic fall of a strong woman who had thought that she had everything under control. She had done what she thought would "for all our nights and days to come / Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom." She had tried to obtain it by "the nearest way." She seemed to have titanic strength when she was plotting the deed; when her strength collapses, she is just another woman burdened in her subconscious mind with an enormous load of guilt. The "damn'd spot" is not the "devil's mark" of witchcraft but the blood of murdered victims haunting the conscience of the killer.



### *Male Witch or Tragic Hero*

The same problem arises with regard to the role of Macbeth. That many of his actions are like those of a witch, may be true. But to conceive of him as a male witch is to miss his tragic grandeur.

King Saul in the Bible conjures up (or asks a witch to conjure up) the ghost of Samuel without himself becoming a witch. His is the sin of necromancy, the same sin that Macbeth commits in conjuring up the ghosts in the Fourth Act. In both cases the message of the ghost is fatal to the king who seeks to know "by the worst means the worst."

"Seek not to know" is the unheeded advice of Tiresias to Oedipus. It is the same advice unheeded by Macbeth and by Saul.

In an attempt to demonstrate that Macbeth is a male witch, Wills cites the putting on and taking off and putting on again of a garment in the closing scenes. He interprets it to be a witch's cloak — like that of Prospero in the *Tempest*. But it is not a cloak that Macbeth frenziedly puts on prematurely and takes off again: it is his armor. Besieged in his fortress by the combined forces of England and the Scottish nobles,



Macbeth decides to fight it out, but he is nervous. He tries to be brave, but his fears assert themselves. We are told that the great 19th century Shakespearean actor, Macready, would come in, brandishing his sword and shouting in defiance, "Hang out our banners on the outward walls!" Then he sags, the sword drops to the floor and he whispers, "The cry is still, They come. They come."

That is the real Macbeth: an evil man, but a brave one who knows he is defeated but would fight to the end. He is not a male witch dealing with the powers of evil. He is an ambitious man who has placed himself under those powers, trusting the "juggling fiends" "who keep the word of promise to our ear and break it to our hope."

One consequence of conceiving Macbeth as a male witch is the failure to perceive the dramatic importance of the Banquet Scene, which is the turning point of the play. But this we have discussed at length in another article. ("The Five Tragedies in 'Macbeth'" by M. A. Bernad, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, XIII, No. 1 (Winter 1962) 49-71.)



## APPENDIX A

### a. "Bank and School"

In the soliloquy, "If it were done when 'tis done" (Act One, Scene 7), one of the puzzling passages is the phrase "bank and school of time":

But here, upon this bank and school of time,  
We'd jump the life to come.

Theobald's emendation of "shoal" for "school" is widely accepted; but Wills shows that it does not make sense. Shoal is shallow water: "How does one jump from bank and water?" Others retain "school" in the sense of a school-building or institution; which does not make much sense either. Wills' suggestion is that the real trouble is with another word misprinted in the First Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays:

No one I know of has suspected that the corruption may be in *bank* not in *school*. F's "Banke," with capital could well be a setter's misunderstanding of "Ranke!"

The word “rank” has been used by Shakespeare in the sense of category, as in “rank of praise” (*Lear* 2.4.398). As for the word “school,” it would fit the sense if taken not as a building or institution but as a body of opinion or interpretation, as in “school of night” (*Love’s Labour Lost* 4.3.251). Macbeth’s line should therefore read: “But here, upon this *rank* and school of time. . . .”

### b. “Vaulting Ambition”

Another puzzling passage in the Macbeth soliloquy is the “vaulting ambition that o’erleaps itself and falls on the other.” How does vaulting ambition “o’erleap itself” and what is the “other” on which it falls? Wills suggests that the key to the interpretation is in the word “falls.” He notes that the phrase “fall on” can mean to attack, as in the lines from *Two Noble Kinsmen* (2.2.249): “The bold young men that, when he bids ‘em charge, / *Fall on* like fire.” What Macbeth is saying is that he has “no spur to guide a rational intent. All he has . . . is a berserk ambition that spontaneously goes too far (o’erleaps itself) and attacks anything in the way (any other).” This reading (Wills admits) may not be too convincing, but none of the other explanations are tenable.

### c. “Naked New-born Babe”

The third passage from the Macbeth soliloquy is the image of the “naked new-born babe”:

- And pity, like a naked new-born babe
- Striding the blast . . .
- Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye
- That tears shall drown the wind.

Wills calls attention to the striking similarity between that image and Father Robert Southwell’s poem “The Burning Babe”:

As I in hoary winter’s night  
 Stood shivering in the snow,  
 Surpris’d I was with sudden heat  
 Which made my heart to glow.  
 And lifting up a fearful eye  
 To view what fire was near,  
 A pretty Babe all burning bright

Did in the air appear;  
Who, scorched with excessive heat,  
Such floods of tears did shed. . . .

That is a brilliant suggestions of Wills. He has identified the true source of Shakespeare's striking image of "a naked new-born babe striding the blast": it comes straight from Southwell.

Robert Southwell incidentally has been canonized, together with Edmund Campion and thirty-eight other martyrs of the Catholic Faith in England and Wales. They have been given the title of "Saint."



## APPENDIX B

### *Garnet And The Issue Of Equivocation*

With admirable impartiality Wills gives the background of the charge of "equivocator" against Father Henry Garnet and the Jesuits. The issue started with the torture and trial of Edmund Campion in 1581. He refused to answer what he called "bloody questions" the answer to which would incriminate himself or others. (It was considered a capital crime for a priest to say Mass or give absolution to lapsed Catholics, or for lay persons to harbor priests. So when asked about these things he refused to answer.) The issue came up again with the capture of Robert Southwell in 1595. The lady of the house where he was hiding had denied that there was any priest there. When the priest was discovered, she was accused of lying.

As Wills puts it, "This does not seem a moral problem to us — who would hesitate to lie to Nazis searching for hidden Jews?"

But that is just the point. In the antiquated moral theology of that time (which considered language a natural thing and not the artificial conventional set of signs that we now know it to be) it was absolutely forbidden to tell a lie. And yet there are secrets that cannot be revealed. For instance, the presence of a priest hiding in the house, who, if captured, would be put to death simply for being a priest.

Or another instance: if a penitent came to a priest and told him in

confession that he had committed a crime, and later the priest was asked if he knew anything about it, he could not possibly reveal what he had known only through sacramental confession. He would have to say he did not know. To the government, this was a lie. To the moralist it was equivocation, a mental reservation, very much like a person sending word to visitors he is "not in" when actually he is upstairs.

To guide the consciences of Catholics faced with this dilemma (who could not tell a lie but yet could not give incriminating answers to unjust questions) Garnet wrote a treatise in which he explained the common moral teaching: one could not tell a lie, but one could give an equivocal answer, using a mental reservation.

The English government had been trying to denigrate the Jesuits in the hopes that Rome would stop sending them to England. (Ever since the coming of Edmund Campion in 1580, the Catholic resistance to the government's attempts to make them give up the Catholic Faith had stiffened.) The Gunpowder Plot and the equivocation issue was a god-send to the government, as it gave them a handle to accuse the Jesuits of being equivocators and therefore liars and traitors. Wills points out the irony of this: "The Jesuits were condemned for mental tickery; but as they said themselves, if all they wanted to recommend was lying, they could have done that without all the mental exercise. They were scrupulously trying to make sure that all they said was *true* (at some level, in some consciously intended sense). But this very regard for truth in a difficult situation branded them as liars."

Wills also points out that the government was hypocritical in condemning lying and equivocation, when all the time they were using lies and equivocal statements themselves. But (he adds) the difference was that the Catholics had to respond to the questions of lawful authorities.

We might answer: But lawful authorities could ask unlawful questions.

It is curious that the Elizabethan and Jacobean governments, who were quoting Scripture all the time and who were so strong in condemning equivocation, did not condemn as a liar the harlot of Jericho who protected the lives of the Israelite spies who were hiding in her house by telling the pursuers that they had already "left!" (Joshua 2.3-4)