The Gunpowder Plot was widely advertised as an attempt to blow up the British Parliament building at a time when the King would be addressing a joint session of both Houses. The motive was said to be to destroy at one blow the King and the entire governing body and install a Catholic monarch. This was supposed to occur on November 5, 1605. The “discovery” of the Plot on the eve of the parliamentary session was hailed as the deliverance of the King and of Parliament from “hellish Popish plots” and led to more severe measures against Catholics in general and Jesuits in particular. It also led to strong popular indignation against the Pope, the Catholics and the Jesuits.

The perpetrators of the Plot were executed in January 1606. The Jesuit superior, Father Henry Garnet, accused of complicity in the Plot was tried in March 1606 and hanged at Tyburn. It was in that setting that Shakespeare’s Macbeth was first performed. And it was only to be expected that there would be topical allusions in the play to those recent events.

It is possible that Shakespeare had already begun writing the play before the Gunpowder episode, as a flattering tribute to the new king who ascended the English throne in 1604 as James I of England. He was already King of Scotland (as James VI), and Shakespeare’s play gives much prominence to his Scottish lineage from Banquo. In that supposition, the topical allusions to the Gunpowder Plot were added after the events of November 1605 and of January and March 1606.

It is these allusions and the setting of the play that are mainly the subject of a book recently published jointly by both the
Oxford University Press and the New York Public Library. It is entitled **Witches and Jesuits: Shakespeare’s Macbeth** (New York 1995). 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 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 second part of the thesis is that the role of the witches is crucial to the play, and that both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are themselves witches.

It is to that first part of the thesis that we shall direct our main attention.

**“GUNPOWDER PLAYS”**

That Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* was first performed shortly after the Gunpowder episode seems certain. Sir E. K. Chambers suggests that the first performance occurred in July 1606 (only four months after Father Garnet’s trial). Wills however chooses a slightly later date. He says that it is “almost certain” that the premier performance occurred in the Christmas season of December 1606-January 1607. In any case, the public excitement over the Gunpowder Plot would not yet have abated.

That public excitement over the Plot cannot be exaggerated. As Wills points out, the government made every effort to fuel its flames. “The King disseminated his official version in a flood of religious propaganda.” There were celebrations in thanksgiving for his deliverance. There were sermons, pamphlets, other forms of propaganda. “The agreement of all these sermons, publications
and inspired pronouncements show that they were the equivalent of a Warren Report, a government ‘finding’ meant to quiet competing views. . . .”

It is beside the point that this official version was in large part untrue. (The Jacobean government knew far more about the Plot from its inception than the Jesuits ever did or could.) The pertinent fact here is that the theatre 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 power 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 Jacobean audience as analogous to what the Catholics were believed to be plotting: namely, blow up King and Parliament.

In that atmosphere, 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

Wills has some original and quite convincing suggestions towards clarifying certain puzzling passages in Macbeth's soliloquy "If it were done when 'tis done" (Act I, Scene 7). 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 (now a canonized saint) 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. Southwell's opening lines were as follows:

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

But the most numerous and the most damning allusions are to Father Henry Garnet, whose trial and execution would still be fresh in the audience's memory. And these allusions are found in the Drunken Porter's speech.
The Drunken Porter scene (Act II, Scene 3) is one of the brilliant dramatic touches in the play, a comic interlude after the terrible intensity of the murder scene. Banquo and others who have slept outside the castle are knocking at the main door, and the Drunken Porter comes to open it. But before he does so, he imagines that he is the porter at the gate of hell, and he admits to the burning furnace various kinds of malefactors, among them an "equivocator," a "farmer," and an "English tailor." It has long been recognized that the "equivocator" is an allusion to Garnet. Wills maintains that the "farmer" and the "English tailor" are likewise allusions to Garnet.

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. No conscientious person would reveal the presence of a priest hiding in the house, who, if captured, would be put to death simply for being a priest. Or if a penitent told a priest in confession that he had committed a crime, and later the priest was asked if he knew anything about it, 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.

English Catholics were faced with this dilemma: they could not tell a lie, but yet they could not give incriminating answers to unjust questions. To guide their consciences, 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 Robert Parsons and Edmund Campion in 1580, the Catholic resistance to the government’s attempts to make them give up the Catholic Faith had greatly stiffened. The Gunpowder Plot and the equivocation issue were a godsend 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 exercises. 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” (p. 96).

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 hiding in her house by telling the pursuers that they had already “left!” (Jos 2:3-4).
WITCHES

The second part of Wills’s 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 as a Male Witch. That is Garry Wills’s contention.

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 of 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.” (This we can enlarge upon at another time and place.)

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 his presentation. In this book’s reading, Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* is reduced to the status of just another “Gunpowder” and witchcraft play, no better 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.