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Introduction

After I was admitted to graduate school, I knew that I wanted to write my thesis on William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, because from the first time I read the play I fell in love with Shakespeare’s use of language. I particularly enjoy his skillful use of imagery. When Macbeth says after he has killed King Duncan, “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?” I can feel Macbeth’s deep feelings of guilt and remorse for killing King Duncan (2.2 59-60). While I was drawn to *Macbeth* because of Shakespeare’s use of imagery, I was unsure as to what type of literary theory to employ as my critical framework for my thesis because while I was in undergraduate school, I was interested in feminist theory, Marxist criticism, and deconstruction.

In my first semester of graduate school, while taking my Research and Critical Mythology class, I also became interested in Lacanian psychoanalysis. I was mostly drawn to Lacan’s theories of how language creates desire and how desire creates lack. In the same course, the class was assigned to write a conference paper, so I decided to employ a Lacanian psychoanalytic approach to *Macbeth* to discover if I wanted to apply this same idea to my fully developed thesis.

While performing my initial research for the conference paper, although much had been written on *Macbeth*, I realized that there was a dearth of scholarly writings that employed a Lacanian approach to *Macbeth*. With that in mind, I asked my professor if the shortage of scholarly sources would hamper me if I decided to write my thesis on *Macbeth*, employing a Lacanian perspective. I was expecting him to say
“yes,” but his response was just the opposite. He encouraged me to explore the topic because he informed me that a thesis should contribute something new or unique to the existing literature. My professor’s comment to me is one of the contributing factors as to why I decided to pursue my topic further because I believe that employing a Lacanian interpretation to Shakespeare’s Macbeth can help us gain a better insight of how Macbeth’s desire to become king, and once he is crowned king drives his actions. A Lacanian interpretation can also provide an alternative to the traditional readings that argue that Macbeth already had a latent desire to kill King Duncan before his initial encounter with the three witches.

My decision to expand my topic to a fully developed thesis became official while I was in the process of writing and analyzing the play through a Lacanian psychoanalytical lens. I became infatuated with the idea of how language and desire were controlling the actions of Macbeth’s character. However, since my conference paper was limited to ten pages, I could not impart all of my ideas at that time in the paper that were circulating in my mind. Hence, the following study employs a Lacanian psychoanalytic interpretation to explore Shakespeare’s rendering of Macbeth’s transformation from a loyal subject to a malicious tyrant.

The central aim of this study examines how the discourses of the other characters, namely the witches and Lady Macbeth, influence and guide Macbeth’s actions. In the first chapter, I establish that before Macbeth’s initial encounter with the three witches, he has no latent desire to become king. In fact, I demonstrate that Shakespeare orchestrates events in such a way that the first impression we receive of
Macbeth is as a loyal subject and a good warrior, not a man who is inherently evil by nature. The witches are important characters to the play’s action because through their use of suggestive and ambiguous language, they initiate Macbeth’s desire to become king, and his excessive desire for the crown leads him to contemplate killing King Duncan.

In chapter two, I argue that the witches’ prophecies still guide the play’s action. I show that once Lady Macbeth reads Macbeth’s letter imparting their prophecy that he will become king, the witches’ language also catalyzes her desire to become the queen. I demonstrate that Lady Macbeth’s character has no qualms with repressing her “social I” as she instantly begins to plot the murder of King Duncan in order to usurp the royal crown, while Macbeth represses his desire to murder the king because he is worried about tainting his “social I.” Moreover, I contend that Lady Macbeth takes on the role of an active catalyst who steps in to verbally persuade Macbeth to act on his desire to become king. Furthermore, I argue that Lady Macbeth’s discursive force convinces Macbeth to murder the king.

In chapter three, I argue that language creates the circulation of desire. Once Macbeth is crowned king, his desire continually circulates, as he desperately tries to secure the royal crown from all possible threats. I also argue that Macbeth relies on language to try to learn about his future as king. Macbeth seeks out the language of the witches, thinking if he knows his fate, he can protect the royal crown. After hearing the second set of prophecies, Macbeth’s quick conclusion of the prophecies as good omens illustrates how he does not fully grasp how language works because
he incorrectly believes that he is invincible, and the royal crown is safe. By the end of
the play, I argue that Macbeth’s character realizes that his desire to secure the crown
will always remain unsatisfied, and he has no hope left because Macduff is destined
to defeat him in the last battle. Instead of being held prisoner and having his “social I”
taunted for the rest of his life, Macbeth chooses to fight to the death.
Chapter One:
Macbeth’s Desire for Kingship

Macbeth is one of Shakespeare’s most compelling characters, so I would like to begin this study by examining how he is depicted. In the play’s beginning, Shakespeare’s Macbeth has almost single-handedly saved Scotland from attacks, both foreign and domestic. In the eyes of many, he is a good man and a great warrior. When King Duncan and his fellow warriors speak of Macbeth’s character, he is vehemently lauded for his battlefield actions and praised for his loyalty to the crown. King Duncan even gives him the title of “noble Macbeth,” in order to show his gratitude for Macbeth’s loyalty and for fighting valiantly to preserve the crown for him (1.2 68). Although in the early stages of the play, Macbeth is viewed as a good man who will risk his own life to save the king’s body, after he encounters the three witches on the “blasted heath,” through his asides, we begin to get a glimpse of Macbeth’s loyalty to King Duncan gradually slipping away. Macbeth then begins to ponder the idea of regicide as a means to usurp the crown to obtain greater power for himself.

Macbeth’s transformation from a loyal subject to a vicious murderer leads me to the following main question in this study: what prompts Macbeth’s desire to become king? This question has generated various responses from critics. While studying the play from a psychoanalytic perspective, some critics focus their interpretations on Freud’s premise of the Oedipus complex as the driving force
behind King Duncan’s murder. In “Addressing the Oedipal Dilemma in Macbeth,” Janis Krohn provides such an interpretation. Krohn’s analysis of Macbeth focuses on the oedipal crime of patricide, and she argues that Lady Macbeth’s character is solely responsible for the play’s violence. Krohn depicts Lady Macbeth’s role in the play as the seductive oedipal mother and characterizes Macbeth as the Oedipus figure, surrendering to his oedipal fantasies of killing his symbolic father figure, King Duncan, in order to prove his masculinity to Lady Macbeth (334). Krohn’s central argument focuses on Lady Macbeth playing the part of the oedipal mother: “[Lady Macbeth] plays not only the role of Macbeth’s wife, but also the fantasy of an oedipal mother who urges her son home to the castle where he is to kill the king housed within and thereby prove he is worthy to lay claim to her” (335). In other words, Krohn’s argument illustrates that Lady Macbeth must assume a “fantasy” role as Macbeth’s mother in order to incite her figurative son, Macbeth, to commit the act of patricide to prove to her that he is a man and to garner her exclusive love.

Krohn also stresses that without Lady Macbeth’s constant encouragement and threats to Macbeth’s masculinity, he would have continued to be a loyal servant and a warrior in full support of King Duncan. Krohn’s observation is couched in the idea that “When the oedipal mother is removed, there is no temptation to kill the father, and fathers and sons may remain allied against common enemies, unafraid of each

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other and close” (334). In other words, Krohn’s observation squarely places all the blame on Lady Macbeth. Krohn’s observation claims that without Lady Macbeth’s presence in the play, Macbeth’s “temptation to kill the father,” represented by King Duncan, is completely removed. Employing this interpretation by Krohn, the only motivation for Macbeth to kill King Duncan derives from Lady Macbeth’s threats to Macbeth’s masculinity. For Krohn, Lady Macbeth’s constant goading is the only viable reason behind why Macbeth decides to kill King Duncan, and Krohn does not consider any other influences that could persuade Macbeth’s decision to murder King Duncan.

While I support Krohn’s observation that Lady Macbeth’s repeated challenging of Macbeth’s masculinity is one motivating factor as to why Macbeth decides to kill the king, as she serves to keep Macbeth focused when he vacillates toward that decision, I find fault with Krohn’s overall interpretation of why Macbeth goes through with killing the king because to place the entire blame on Lady Macbeth is an overly generalized and incomplete reading of what initially prompts Macbeth’s desire to become king. What Krohn’s analysis overlooks is that the witches also have a substantial influence on the play’s actions. The witches instigate the entire action of the play by introducing the temptation that greater power may await Macbeth in the future. Although Lady Macbeth does serve as a catalyst to keep Macbeth focused on taking action, without Macbeth’s retelling of his and Banquo’s encounter with the witches, Lady Macbeth would not have readily come to accept the inevitability of Macbeth becoming king. In this light, the language of the witches directly influences
Macbeth’s actions, and indirectly influences Lady Macbeth’s actions through the retelling of his encounter. I also find fault with Krohn’s observation that if we were to remove Lady Macbeth from the play, her elimination would prevent the murder of King Duncan from taking place.

I argue that Krohn’s observation is misleading because it resolves the issue of why Macbeth decides to murder King Duncan too easily. Macbeth’s asides during the first acts of the play clearly reveal that his fantasy of murdering the king has taken hold of his imagination long before he speaks to Lady Macbeth, so she cannot be the one who initially imparts the idea to usurp the crown. Macbeth’s asides clearly reveal that he is contemplating murdering the king, and his desire for greater power is escalating, without any influence from Lady Macbeth. If we consider the textual evidence located in the play, we cannot readily assume, as Krohn has, that Macbeth would not carry out the murder of King Duncan without any help and input from Lady Macbeth.

In that regard, I contend that an interpretation of why Macbeth ultimately decides to kill King Duncan deserves a wider view than that of a Freudian oedipal interpretation that places Lady Macbeth at the center of the play’s violence. I argue that a Lacanian psychoanalytic interpretation provides us with better insight as of why Macbeth ultimately decides to murder the king. Although Lady Macbeth’s encouragement does affect Macbeth’s decision, the witches also have an undeniable influence on the actions of the play, because their language instigates Macbeth’s desire to be king by verbally prophesizing that greater power may await him in the
future. This study examines *Macbeth* through a Lacanian psychoanalytic lens in order to argue how language catalyzes Macbeth’s ambition to become king. In particular, this first chapter draws upon Lacan’s theory of language and its relation to desire to demonstrate how the witches are integral characters to the play’s action because their discourse initiates his desire to become king. I argue that the witches embody Lacan’s Symbolic order, because they represent linguistic power over Macbeth’s thoughts and actions, as evidenced by his asides following their encounter.

Before I begin my argument, I feel that Lacan’s theories of language and desire need some attention. Lacan’s theory of the Symbolic order is based on the idea that language is a structured system already in place before the subject enters into the world. In *Ecrits*, Lacan claims that once people acquire language, they are forced to enter the Symbolic order (65). Lacan argues that once the subject enters the realm of language within the Symbolic order, “the subject, while he may appear to be the slave of language, is still more the slave of a discourse in the universal movement of which his place is already inscribed at his birth, if only in the form of his proper name” (140). For Lacan, a person’s “proper name” identifies the person as a subject, and places him or her within the Symbolic order. Lacan statement asserts that the prior existence of language makes us a “slave” to language, and its corresponding discourse, because we have no other choice but to conform to the already established system of language when we come into the world. For Lacan, we are also a “slave of a discourse in the universal movement” because others around us construct our desires and beliefs through their discourse.
According to Lacan, language creates our desires, and he argues that desire is meditated through language: “the moment at which desire becomes humanized is also that at which the child is born into language” (100). In other words, language and desire are coextensive, and once the child acquires language, he or she becomes a desiring subject. In this light, language always shapes our desires. For Lacan, once we enter into the confines of language, it produces lack, and lack forms our desires (184). In other words, desire unavoidably relies on lack, and this constant lack fuels desire.

How and when Macbeth obtains his desire to become king remains a debatable issue. Some critics argue that Macbeth aspired to be king long before his encounter with the witches. These critics assert that after Macbeth hears the witches’ prophecies, his reactions and thoughts reveal that he already had a hidden desire to be the king. For example, in “Bargains with Fate: The Case of Macbeth,” Bernard Paris contends that after Macbeth hears the third witch’s prophecy about his kingship: “He starts and is ‘rapt’ because the witches have brought to the surface a fantasy which he has been trying to repress” (8). In other words, Paris’s observation suggests that Macbeth had a latent desire to be king long before his encounter with the witches, and the third witch’s prophecy merely provides Macbeth with an excuse to act out his fantasy of killing the current king to achieve greater power. I disagree with Paris’s claim that Macbeth had any previous fantasies of killing the king before his encounter

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with the witches. What Paris’s observation fails to acknowledge is that in the opening scenes Shakespeare depicts Macbeth as a loyal servant, willing to die for King Duncan. If we examine Macbeth’s initial actions through a Lacanian psychoanalytic lens, we discover that he is represented as outside the Symbolic order because he uses his sword as his primary form of communication. Macbeth recognizes his role in the feudal society as a noble and loyal servant to King Duncan. Shakespeare’s initial description of Macbeth presents him as a noble and honored man, depended upon by King Duncan to protect his country, his fellow warriors, and most importantly, his king’s body.

When we first hear of Macbeth, an unnamed sergeant establishes his identity as a heroic and loyal warrior by providing a vivid description of his exploits during the opening battle. After the sergeant brings King Duncan up to date on the battlefield actions, the sergeant relates that the reinforcements in support of Macdonwald were all for naught once Macbeth fiercely joined the fray (1.2 12-14). The sergeant then provides a vivid and graphic account of Macbeth’s battlefield exploits to illustrate Macbeth’s courage and heroism.

The sergeant’s initial description of how Macbeth fought through the enemy lines and conquered his main enemy, Macdonwald, demonstrate that Macbeth starts the play as a valiant warrior, loyal, and in full support of his king. Macbeth’s battlefield exploits in defense of his king are manifested when the sergeant relates the following to King Duncan:

For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish’d steel,
Which smok’d with bloody execution,
Like Valour’s minion, carv’d out his passage
Till he fac’d the slave;
Which ne’er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseamed him from the nave to th’ chops,
And fix’d his head upon our battlements. (1.2 16-23)

After praising Macbeth for his valour on the battlefield, the sergeant describes how “brave Macbeth” plunges into the fray, not concerned with his own possible demise while he ignores the “Fortune” of reinforcements arriving in support of Macdonwald (1.2 16-17). The sergeant continues to detail Macbeth’s exploits on the battlefield as he illustrates how Macbeth does not allow this turn of events to deter him from his pursuit of vanquishing the rebel leader, Macdonwald. The sergeant’s description of how Macbeth’s sword “smok’d with bloody execution” enhances the illustration that Macbeth is a loyal warrior who will stop at nothing to protect the throne for King Duncan and preserve his power (1.2 18). The sergeant paints a vivid picture of Macbeth hacking and slashing his way through the bloody fray with reckless abandonment as he vanquishes the rebellious soldiers one by one in King Duncan’s defense. The sergeant’s characterization of Macbeth as a loyal and brave warrior is further advanced when the sergeant likens Macbeth’s fighting prowess to that of “Valour’s minion” (1.2 19). The metaphor used here illustrates that Macbeth is bravery’s servant, which emphasizes his fealty to King Duncan to protect him from
the rebellious army attack. The sergeant’s depiction of how Macbeth “carv’d out his passage” with single-minded purpose through the enemy foot soldiers intensifies his conviction in pursuing his main target, Macdonwald (1.2 19).

After the sergeant’s descriptive account of Macbeth slashing his way through the enemy lines, he provides a lasting image of Macbeth’s loyalty to King Duncan with his graphic description of Macbeth decapitating Macdonwald. The sergeant reports that Macbeth “unseamed” the traitor Macdonwald “from the nave to th’ chops, / And fixed his head upon our battlements” (1.2 22). The battle between Macdonwald and Macbeth ends with Macbeth victorious as he rends Macdonwald end to end. The mutilation of the traitor’s body epitomizes that Macbeth is savage in defense of his king. He will not stay his violence until the head of his king’s enemy is impaled upon the colors of King Duncan’s army as a warning to all future rebel forces that King Duncan’s loyal generals will vanquish them. This crass action by Macbeth represents his utter conviction to defend the crown. In all deeds and actions on the battlefield, Macbeth is single-minded in his defense of King Duncan and his throne, even if Macbeth’s actions place him at great personal peril to himself. The sergeant’s overall depiction of Macbeth’s heroic battlefield exploits represents Macbeth’s utter and undying conviction to defend the crown and establishes his unresolved loyalty to King Duncan. From a Lacanian perspective, we see that Macbeth’s character is unaware that he in the Symbolic order. He perceives that his position in the world is to rely on his strength and sword, not language, to protect King Duncan.
In fact, Macbeth’s transformation from a loyal subject to a malicious tyrant begins only after the witches discursively prophesize that he will become “thane of Cawdor” and king in the future. When Macbeth makes his initial appearance in the play, his first line is, “So foul and fair a day I have not seen,” echoing the witches’ incantation, “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (1.3.38, 1.1.11). In “The Sounds of Supernatural Soliciting in Macbeth,” David Kranz argues that since Macbeth’s first statement in the play similarly mirrors the line chanted by the witches, Shakespeare creates an eerie connection between Macbeth and the witches even before they meet: “Whether readers and audiences infer that Macbeth and the witches speak the same language by mere chance or that the latter’s words have infiltrated the hero’s mind simply by proximity, a close and mysterious connection between the hero and the supernatural hags is established well before the actual staged temptation of the former” (346).3 Kranz argues that when Macbeth similarly echoes the witches’ language on the heath, Shakespeare calls our attention to the poetic connection that exists between the supernatural and human characters. I agree with Kranz’s interpretation that Macbeth and the witches share a connection before they meet. The connection that links Macbeth to the witches is linguistic because we are all connected by language. Building further upon Kranz’s observation about language, I contend that after Macbeth’s encounter with the witches, his character is represented

as thrust into the Symbolic order because their prophecies construct his desire to become king.

Lacan’s theory of how our desires are constructed by the language of others can be applied to Macbeth’s character, once he encounters the witches, they create his desire to become king. When Macbeth and Banquo encounter the three witches, they give Macbeth three greetings. The first witch hails Macbeth as “thane of Glamis,” which Macbeth recognizes as his current title (1.3 48). The second witch hails Macbeth as “thane of Cawdor,” which Macbeth perceives as a new title because he is unaware that King Duncan has already given him this title (1.3 49). The third witch then prophesizes that Macbeth “shalt be king hereafter” (1.3 50). Once Macbeth hears the witches’ vatic interpellations of the greater power that may await him, his character is introduced to Lacan’s theories of lack and desire. What Macbeth lacks is being king, thus creating his desire. His thoughts now are influenced by their prophecies. Macbeth cannot stop thinking of himself as king to the point that all of his subsequent thoughts gravitate toward the witches’ suggestion of possible kingship. Who would not be tempted by the prospect of becoming king? To be king, Macbeth would hold the most powerful position in Scotland—it is good to be king. Macbeth cannot help but think about wearing the king’s colors. The problem for Macbeth is that his thoughts become obsessed with the witches’ prophecy of possible kingship because their discourse has inserted itself, like language, into Macbeth’s own mind, and his identity.
Macbeth’s fixation on the witches’ claim of possible kingship becomes clear directly after he hears the witches’ salutations when Banquo asks Macbeth, “Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?” (I.3 51-52). Why, indeed, does Macbeth look so startled and frightened after hearing the salutations? If Macbeth already wants to be king, as Paris claims, the witches’ prophecy that he will become king should please him, not startle him. Instead, Banquo informs us that Macbeth appears “rapt withal,” suggesting that he is entranced by the prospect of his imperial destiny (1.3 57). Macbeth’s rapt state of mind, to me, indicates that he has never considered the idea of kingship, and now he is mentally questioning the validity of the witches’ suggestion that he would be a king one day. Employing a Lacanian view, Macbeth’s “rapt” state illustrates how the language of the witches has influenced his thoughts, and provides us with further evidence how the witches have linguistic power over Macbeth.

The three witches then turn their attention to Banquo and predict his future as well. The third witch prophesizes that Banquo will never be king, but that his sons will be future kings (1.3.64–65). While Macbeth’s prophecy about kingship is ambiguous because the witches did not tell him how he is to become king, Banquo’s prophecy about kingship is clear. He is never going to become king. In this regard, Banquo is not invited into the witches’ linguistic den because he can merely wait until his sons grow up and become kings.

On the other hand, because of the witches’ equivocal language about Macbeth’s prophecies, he wants to hear more from the witches to gain better insight
into how he is supposed to become king. Macbeth’s desire to hear more about his future becomes clear when he tells the witches, “Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more” (1.3 70). When Macbeth says “imperfect speakers,” he is indicating that he believes that the witches’ speech is faulty or incomplete because the witches have not revealed how or when the prophecies are going to happen. Deborah Willis observes in Malevolent Nurture: Witch-hunting and Maternal Power in Early Modern England, the witches “function as artful manipulators of unconscious process, speaking just enough to make Macbeth ‘burn in desire’ and leaving the rest to his own transferential projections” (216). In other words, Willis contends that the witches do not tell Macbeth how he is to become king. They only insert the desire for greater power, and let Macbeth to conclude on his own how he is to become king. I agree with Willis’s observation because Macbeth wants to know how he is to become king. I argue that Macbeth is now relying on language, not action, to learn about his future identity. When Macbeth utters “tell me more,” he demonstrates that he wants to know when and how he is supposed to become king, but the witches vanish without providing Macbeth with these important details, which leaves Macbeth with no other option but to dwell on the witches’ claim. Hypothetically, if the witches would have provided Macbeth with the details about how he would become king (such as that he would be promoted to the throne once King Duncan dies in the near future), he, like Banquo, could have patiently waited until such time arose. However, this is not the case, so Macbeth is now, in the Lacanian sense, a “slave” to witches’ discourse.
because the ambiguous nature of the prophecies encourages him to continue pondering potential outcomes.

The king’s speech further advances Macbeth’s desire to become king when he gives Macbeth the title of “thane of Cawdor.” Moments after the witches’ prophecies, Rosse arrives, announcing news that Macbeth has been given the title of “thane of Cawdor,” thus validating the second witch’s salutation (1.3 105). The witches now have Macbeth completely under their linguistic spell, as he believes that since he has been accurately awarded with the title of “thane of Cawdor” as the second witch predicted, the third witch’s suggestion that he will become king could become a real possibility. After Macbeth is awarded with his new, his desire for kingship escalates as the fulfillment of the witches’ second prophecy transforms his identity to “thane of Cawdor.” While Angus delivers his news about the traitor Cawdor, Macbeth is already contemplating his succession to the crown, as he says: “Glamis, and thane of Cawdor: / The greatest is behind” (1.3 116-117). “Behind” signifies that the greatest is already behind Macbeth. In this sense, the “greatest” is still waiting for him, which is becoming king. From a Lacanian perspective, Macbeth’s speech reveals that he now desires the phallus. According to Lacan, the universal signifier for desire is the phallus, and it is also the signifier of lack (the phallus in Lacanian theory should not be confused with the male genital organ) (Ecrits 277). Lacan contends that the idea of both sexes is based on the male “having” and the female “being” the phallus (Ecrits 279). These unique differences determine the relations between the sexes that govern the male/female roles (Ecrits 279). In this regard, the phallus comes to
represent male power and women lack not just the phallus but also the power it represents (Ecrits 279). Applying Lacan’s theory that the universal signifier for desire is the phallus to Macbeth’s character, he demonstrates he now desires to possess the phallus and the power it represents. Thus, Macbeth is made a subject of lack because he lacks having the phallus.

Directly after Macbeth is awarded his new title, Banquo tries to warn him that the witches’ predictions might lead to evil:

That trusted home
Might yet enkindle you unto the crown,
Besides the Thane of Cawdor
But ’tis strange:
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths;
Win us with honest trifles, to betray ’s
In deepest consequence (1.3 120-126).

These lines signify that Banquo understands that sometimes evil works by trickery, and evil may tell truths and grant “trifles” to lure the innocent into the “deepest consequence” of evil acts. Unlike Macbeth’s quick response of “Glamis, and thane of Cawdor: / The greatest is behind, ” Banquo’s response to the witches’ prophecies seem more rational, and exhibits a controlled and carefully thought out deduction of the witches’ claims because his character realizes that language has no fixed meaning, and each individual needs to pause and question in a thoughtful manner the impart of
what is being said before taking action. The difference between the two men is that Banquo’s character comprehends how the Symbolic order and language function because he does not take immediate action to the witches’ prophecies. Macbeth, on the other hand, is so immersed in thought about the prospect of becoming king that he fails to hear Banquo’s warning, and Macbeth says, “Two truths are told, / As happy prologues to the swelling act / Of the imperial theme (1.3 127-129). These lines reveal that Macbeth believes that two of the three prophecies are true, and he eagerly looks forward to the “swelling act” of becoming king. Macbeth’s reaction demonstrates that he does not fully understand how language functions because instantly he trusts the witches’ discourse. At this point, he only evaluates the witches’ prophecies as “truths,” and nothing more.

Although Macbeth’s desire to become king is fully cemented in his thoughts, his character demonstrates that he still has some agency with language because the witches’ claims guide him to ponder whether their prophecy that he will become king is bad or good for him:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill, cannot be good: if ill,
why hath it given me earnest of success,
commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor:
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings:
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smother’d in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not. (1.3 130-142)

Macbeth’s aside begins with his claim that, “This supernatural soliciting / cannot be ill, cannot be good” (1.3 131-132). Macbeth’s paradoxical phrase “Cannot be ill, cannot be good” demonstrates that Macbeth cannot decide whether the prophecy that he will become king is a bad or good omen for him. Macbeth then begins his internal debate by asking himself the following question: if the witches’ predictions are “ill” in nature and will bring evil consequences in the future if he becomes king, why has the prophecy of him becoming “thane of Cawdor” come true without any “ill” results (1.3 131-133)? Macbeth uses the “truth” of “success” to convince himself that “supernatural soliciting” he has received is good in nature because he has been given the title of the “thane of Cawdor,” as the witches have predicted (1.3 130). In this context, Macbeth wants to believe that the witches’ prophecy of him becoming king would produce the same results. However, his thoughts instantly turn to the “ill” consequences of him becoming king. Given that Macbeth cannot become king while the current king is still alive, the “horrid image” signifies King Duncan’s death (1.3 135). The thought of the king dying produces such a disturbing image in Macbeth’s mind that it “unfix [es]” his hair and makes his heart “knock at [his] ribs” (1.3 135-
As Macbeth’s aside continues, his thoughts turn to usurping the crown in order to achieve his desire. Although the idea of murder is still just “but fantastical,” Macbeth is so distressed by his thoughts of murder that the “single state” of his body, mind, and soul become paralyzed with fear again (1.3 140). Macbeth is so unnerved by the thought of committing such a vile and evil deed that his thoughts are taken over by his active imagination. What Macbeth “is not” is king but becoming king “is” all he can think about and “nothing” else matters (1.3 141-142). At this point in the play, Macbeth’s aside illustrates how the witches’ language are completely influencing and guiding Macbeth’s actions.

Macbeth resolves his internal conflict in a sense with his statement in his next aside: “If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me without my stir” (1.3 143). By relying on “chance” instead of violent action to crown him, Macbeth finds the ideal solution for him because “chance” permits him to realize his desire for the royal crown without having to commit the vile act of murder, and more importantly, Macbeth will not have to forfeit his loyalty to King Duncan. Of course, Lady Macbeth, and ultimately Macbeth, are unwilling to wait for “chance,” to crown Macbeth, but rather decide to take fate into their own hands with the murder of King Duncan in order to achieve their desire.

Macbeth reliance on chance to crown him comes to an abrupt halt because King Duncan bestows on his son, Malcolm, the title of “Prince of Cumberland” (1.4 38). The nomination of Malcolm means that he will be the next successor to his
father’s throne. After Macbeth hears Duncan’s proclamation that his son, Malcolm, will be heir to the throne, Macbeth’s thoughts of murder reemerge:

The Prince of Cumberland! —That is a step
On which I must fall down, or else o’erleap
For in my way it lies. Stars hide your fires!
Let not light see my black and deep desires;
The eye wink at the hand, yet let that be
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. (1.4 48-53)

What emerges from this passage is that Macbeth returns to the idea of murder to seize the crown. Since King Duncan has named Malcolm as heir apparent, the next lines reveal that Macbeth has decided to act on his desire to attain the kingship by foul means: “Stars, hide your fires! / Let not light see my black and deep desires” (1.4 50-51). He wants the stars to go out, so that no one can see “black and deep desires” of murdering the king, not even himself. Macbeth’s pronouncement clearly shows that he knows that murdering his king is morally wrong, but under the grasp of Lacanian desire that he would become king, murdering the king becomes his only option. As Macbeth’s aside continues, his thoughts of murdering the king in order to seize the crown are manifested in the last two lines. When Macbeth utters “which the eye fears, when it is done, to see,” he is imagining committing the murderous deed, and he wants his own eye to blind itself to what his own murdering hand needs to do to become the new king. Macbeth wants the evil deed of murdering the king done, even if afterwards, “when it is done,” his own eye would be horrified to look at what his
hand had done. If Macbeth wants to be king, he must make himself king, even if that means murdering his current king.

This chapter has answered my initial question in the beginning of this study by showing that the witches’ tempting words catalyze Macbeth’s character to desire to become king, and his desire prompts Macbeth’s thoughts of murdering the king. In the second chapter, I argue how Lady Macbeth helps Macbeth realize his desire to become king.
Chapter Two:

Double Desire to Do the Deed

In chapter one, I argued that the witches successfully initiated the idea of kingship, and Macbeth’s desire produced the thought of murdering King Duncan. While Macbeth’s ambition to become the king is formed by the witches’ temptation, Lady Macbeth helps him translate that temptation into action. Recent scholarship on Lady Macbeth’s character mainly focuses on the issue of gender, and some critics argue that Lady Macbeth manipulates her husband by questioning his masculinity in order to influence him to kill the king.⁴

If we examine Lady Macbeth’s acts of persuasion to help Macbeth seize the crown through a Lacanian psychoanalytic lens, we also learn that she has the desire to become queen. In this second chapter, I draw upon Lacan’s theory of desire to demonstrate that the witches’ prophecy that Macbeth will become king also has a tremendous influence on Lady Macbeth’s actions because I argue that the witches’ language catalyzes her desire to become the queen. After Lady Macbeth’s desire is manifested, I employ Lacan’s theory of the “social I” to demonstrate how Lady Macbeth has no concern about her public self-image as she contemplates murder to obtain the crown. Moreover, I argue that Lady Macbeth uses discursive force as a

way to persuade her husband to kill King Duncan, so that they can achieve greater power.

According to Lacan, the “I” or the “self” begins to form in what he calls “the mirror stage.” Lacan claims that during this stage, a child experiences the world through images rather than through words and identifies himself or herself as autonomous and therefore distinguishable from others. Lacan contends that between the ages of six and eighteen months, children begin to recognize themselves in a mirror. This image does not necessarily have to come from an actual mirror, but rather any reflective surface (Ecrits 2). At first, the child thinks of this image in the mirror as the image of an “Other.” For Lacan, once the child recognizes that the image in the mirror is actually him or herself, this recognition establishes the transition from an image of an “Other” to the formation of the “I” (Ecrits 2). Lacan states that the image the child sees in the mirror now represents that child’s “specular image” or “specular I” and this image is a fantasized, fictional “self” that is unified and whole (Ecrits 5). Lacan argues that the formation of the “specular I” initiates the construction of our identities, and the mirror stage sets the groundwork for the social formation of identity (Ecrits 5).

Lacan argues that the mirror stage ends when the child begins to acquire language. For Lacan, this is the point where the “the specular I turns into the social I” (Ecrits 7). In Lacan’s view, the “social I” signifies that the child’s identity is now shaped by social norms, conventions, and expectations (Ecrits 7). Lacan contends that after we begin to assimilate to the social conventions, our aims and desires are shaped
by the discourse of others (*Ecrits* 7). For Lacan, language creates our desires, and our desires are bound up with the desires of the “Other.” In this view, Lacan contends that we can only express our desire through the language we have learned, and we must learn this language through others (*Ecrits* 51). Lacan states that this leads us to begin to ask questions about what other people think or want of us (*Ecrits* 7).

Lacan’s theories of the “social I” and desire can be applied to Lady Macbeth’s character. After Lady Macbeth learns of the witches’ prophesy, their language catalyzes her desire for power as it did with Macbeth. The witches’ claim of greater power for Macbeth influences Lady Macbeth to contemplate murder to seize the crown, as when she says the following:

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be

What thou art promised.—Yet do I fear thy nature.

It is too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness,

To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great;

Art not without ambition, but without

The illness should attend it. (1.5. 15–20)

These lines reveal that, unlike Macbeth’s constant vacillation of what action must be taken to become king, Lady Macbeth is decisive about what needs to be done to obtain the crown. She instantly turns to the idea of regicide to usurp the crown. However, Lady Macbeth believes that Macbeth might hesitate in taking the same decisive step to obtain the crown. She says that is he “not without ambition” to become king, but she suspects that his nature is too good “to catch the nearest way”
The “nearest way” (or the quickest way) for Macbeth to become king would be to perform the vile act of murdering his king. When Lady Macbeth expresses her fear of Macbeth’s kind nature, this fear is intimately connected to Macbeth’s loyalty to the crown, and more importantly, to King Duncan, and this loyalty is a moral trait that she worries may supersede his ambition for greater power. Lady Macbeth fears that Macbeth’s moral obligation as a loyal servant to King Duncan has the potential to dissuade him from the plan of murder to achieve the crown.

If we examine Lady Macbeth’s lines from a Lacanian psychoanalytic viewpoint, we observe that her character is now under the witches’ linguistic spell as well, because their language catalyzes her desire to obtain the royal crown. The witches’ linguistic power is so strong that Lady Macbeth suppresses her “social I” as a means to gain more power. In particular, because Lady Macbeth instantly resorts to murder to seize the crown, she illustrates that she has no inner torment about suppressing her “social I” nor upholding the social expectations of showing loyalty to the crown if her actions will lead to obtaining royal status, and she does not care about what other people will think of her actions.

Because Lady Macbeth suspects that Macbeth’s nature is too good to seize the crown through ill means, she decides to employ the power of discourse to influence him to assassinate the king by destroying his “social I” when she says the following:

Hie thee hither,

That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,
And chastise with the valour of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round,
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crown’d withal. (1.5 25–29)

These lines reveal that Lady Macbeth will “chastise” Macbeth by using discursive force to counter any arguments he may have that would prevent him from achieving the crown—the same crown that the witches want Macbeth to take. In ‘Be Bloody, Bold and Resolute’: Tragic Action and Sexual Stereotyping in *Macbeth,* Carolyn Asp argues, “[Lady Macbeth’s] role, as she perceives it, is to evoke her husband’s ‘noble strength’ so that he can act in accord with his desires” (159-160). In other words, Asp suggests that Lady Macbeth thinks she needs to conjure up Macbeth’s “noble strength” to ensure his desire of kingship becomes a reality. I agree with Asp because I argue that Lady Macbeth assumes the role of an active catalyst who steps in to encourage Macbeth to act on his desire to become king by using the power of language. If we examine Lady Macbeth’s speech through a Lacanian psychoanalytic lens, we see that because she and Macbeth are both in the Symbolic order, she will use discursive force to try to persuade Macbeth to destroy his “social I,” so he will be able to seize the crown through ill means.

Lady Macbeth’s desire for the royal crown escalates as she gives Macbeth instructions for their plan to murder the king. She understands Macbeth’s honest nature and the obstacle that Macbeth’s moral character could pose, as she tells Macbeth to “Look like th’ innocent flower, / But be the serpent under’t” (1.5. 65–66).
Lady Macbeth instructs Macbeth to appear natural and “innocent” as a “flower,” while she wants him to mask his true intentions by being “the serpent under’t” as he prepares for the evil deed. From a Lacanian viewpoint, we see that Lady Macbeth’s character understands that a person’s self-image and what other people may think are important. She tells Macbeth to appear “innocent” when King Duncan arrives, so he will not suspect any wrongdoing.

Lady Macbeth continues to rely on the power of language as she instructs Macbeth with the following lines:

He that is coming
Must be provided for; and you shall put
This night’s great business into my dispatch,
Which shall to all our nights and days to come
Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom” (1.5. 66–70).

These lines reveal that Lady Macbeth’s character is still repressing her “social I” because she wants to gain power, as she intends to take charge of planning the murder of King Duncan. These lines also provide further evidence that the witches’ language is influencing her desire to become the queen. She sees her entry to “sovereign sway and masterdom” goes through Macbeth’s promotion to kingship, and with his elevation to royal status and power, her own social status will rise as well. When Lady Macbeth says that the king’s murder will lead to “sovereign sway and masterdom,” she demonstrates that she desires absolute power and authority over others. From this point forward, Lady Macbeth desires to become the Queen of
Scotland, and this desire to attain greater political stature directs her to ensure that the witches’ prophecy of the throne for her husband is fulfilled.

While Lady Macbeth does not care about what other people think of her, at this point in the play, Macbeth is still influenced by his “social I,” because his dialogue to Lady Macbeth exhibits that he has no intention to repress his “social I” to gain power by the way of murder. Macbeth’s decision to call off the plan becomes clear when he tells Lady Macbeth the following:

We will proceed no further in this business:

He hath honour’d me of late; and I have bought

Golden opinions from all sorts of people,

Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,

Not cast aside so soon. (1.7. 30–34)

Macbeth’s society, as we witnessed in Act I, values loyalty and heroic deeds and despises traitors, such as Macdonwald and Cawdor. Since King Duncan “hath honour’d [him] of late,” Macbeth feels obligated to uphold his outstanding public self-image as a loyal servant to the crown (1.7. 30–34). From a Lacanian viewpoint, we observe that these lines illustrate that Macbeth is worried about his reputation because he is in the Symbolic order and therefore attached to the “social I.” Macbeth recognizes that he is defined by the discourse of others. He fears that if their murderous plot is revealed, his social I’ would become tainted, and he wants to keep his current “social I’ intact as loyal servant. Macbeth cherishes the “golden opinions” that he has “bought” from his fellow warriors and his king, and he is concerned that
his golden reputation might lose its “gloss” if he and his wife “proceed further in this business.” Unlike Lady Macbeth, Macbeth is concerned with what others think of him, and the possibility of forfeiting his “golden opinions” is the determining reason for Macbeth to wanting to “proceed no further in this business” (1.7 30). This elevation of Macbeth’s “social I” is firm in his mind. He wants to enjoy his new honors along with his reward as a “thane of Cawdor,” and “Not cast [them] aside so soon” (1.7 34). Macbeth is loathe to destroy his “social I,” and this is the basis of his decision to end the murderous plot.

Upon hearing that Macbeth has called off their plan, Lady Macbeth adds discursive force to her appeals to rekindle Macbeth’s desire to become the king by questioning his love for her and his warrior status:

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? From this time
Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire? (1.7 35–41)

In this passage, Lady Macbeth uses four rhetorical questions to try to persuade Macbeth to stop repressing his desire and destroy his “social I” as a way to gain more power. Lady Macbeth begins by asking if Macbeth’s “hope” of killing the king was only a brief intoxicated fantasy. Lady Macbeth’s next retort is that she wants to know
if that “hope” has been asleep, only to now wake “green and pale” in fear of what they had resolved to do earlier (1.7 36–38). Lady Macbeth also equates his love for her with his willingness to do the murderous act. She makes clear that if Macbeth is unwilling to murder King Duncan to seize more power and elevate their social status, then he does not really love her (1.7 39).

Lady Macbeth’s fourth rhetorical question employs a different tactic. She questions his status as a brave and courageous warrior in an effort to gain more power. She calls him a coward, a man without any resolve (1.7. 40). She says that he can only contemplate his desire, and yet he does not have the courage to act on his desire (1.7. 41). In a sense, when Lady Macbeth considers him “afeard” to go after what he desires, she is casting doubt on his “act and valour,” which denote his position as a brave warrior. Gregory Keller also discusses Lady Macbeth’s influence in “The Moral Thinking of Macbeth.” Keller observes, “The counterargument offered by Lady Macbeth functions on two levels. It appeals to the virtue of courage, which seems to be of high value to Macbeth. And it works through analogy and the appeal to courage to add tinder to the flames of desire” (53). In other words, Keller argues that Lady Macbeth is appealing to Macbeth’s courage as a warrior to stoke his desire. I agree with Keller. I argue that Lady Macbeth believes that by questioning Macbeth’s bravery, she can shame him into agreeing to carry out their original plot of regicide.5 In this view, Lady Macbeth is posing that her husband’s reputation as a brave warrior

5 For additional critics who share this interpretation see the following: Harvey Birenbaum, “Consciousness and Responsibility in Macbeth,” and Bernard Paris, “Bargains with Fate: The Case of Macbeth,” and Jarold Ramsey, “The Perversion of Manliness in Macbeth.”
is now on the line, and “brave Macbeth” will lose this title, in her view, if he does not murder the king. With this approach, Lady Macbeth takes Macbeth’s desire and redirects it toward taking action. In this passage, Lady Macbeth’s rhetoric is designed to persuade Macbeth to confirm his courage and bravery by executing the original plot of killing the king and assuming the throne.

Lady Macbeth’s discursive force starts to have the desired effect as we observe Macbeth returning to the possibility of fulfilling their murderous plot. Macbeth poses the question to Lady Macbeth by asking her, “If we should fail?” which indicates that he is still considering the murderous plot as viable (1.7 59). However, this question also shows that Macbeth is worried about the consequences of an unsuccessful attempt, and he is still concerned with others’ “golden opinions.” If he were fully resolved to “proceed no further in this business,” he would not have posed this question to Lady Macbeth (1.7 31). The pronoun “we” further shows that Macbeth desires to have the same resolve as Lady Macbeth to murder King Duncan as a means to achieve greater power.

Lady Macbeth counters Macbeth’s fear of failure by quickly retorting, “We fail? / But screw your courage to the sticking-place, / And we’ll not fail” (1.7. 60-61). According to the OED (Oxford English Dictionary), “sticking-place” refers to “the place in which a thing stops and holds fast, and only in echoes of the Shakespeare example, in which the allusion seems to be to the screwing-up of the peg of a musical instrument until it becomes tightly fixed in the hole.” In this light, I interpret these lines as Lady Macbeth telling her husband to tighten up his courage until it is secure
enough for him to murder King Duncan. Lady Macbeth then quickly assures him of
the practical certainty of success with “we’ll not fail”—if he conjures up enough
courage to perform the deed.

Macbeth finally succumbs to Lady Macbeth’s discursive force, and guided by
her influence, he decides to murder King Duncan. He states, “I am settled, and bend
up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat” (1.7. 80–81). When Macbeth utters, “I
am settled,” we now recognize that Macbeth’s constant vacillation at the beginning of
the play has ended and now he is committed to murder King Duncan. The suggestion
that “Each corporal agent” must be “ben [t] up” demonstrates Macbeth’s resolve to
brace every nerve and do all in his power to accomplish the “terrible feat” of
assassinating King Duncan. If we applied Lacanian terminology to Macbeth’s
decision, we could observe that the discourse of the “Other,” namely Lady Macbeth,
has influenced him to suppress his “social I” and kill King Duncan. In chapter three, I
argue how Macbeth tries to stop his desire from circulating as a means to secure his
royal crown.
Chapter Three:

Unattainable Desire

After murdering King Duncan, Macbeth is crowned king, thus fulfilling his initial desire. However, Macbeth’s coronation creates a new desire. In this chapter, I draw on Lacan’s theory of insatiable desire. I argue that once Macbeth achieves the royal crown, he attempts to prevent desire from circulating, as a means to secure the royal crown. I also contend that Macbeth relies on the language of the witches in a desperate attempt to learn about his destiny as king. After the witches provide Macbeth with a new set of prophecies, his quick judgment that the prophecies will protect him shows how he does not fully comprehend how language operates. By the end of the play, I argue that Macbeth’s character grasps that his desire to remain king and pass his royal crown to his possible future sons will never be achieved. Instead of being held captive and having his “social I” ridiculed for the rest of his life, Macbeth chooses to fight to the death.

According to Lacan, once we enter the Symbolic order, we are separated from the close union we experienced with our mother (Ecrits 108). He claims that this separation constitutes our most important experience of loss, and we will continually seek substitutes for that lost union with our mother through whatever means to try to close that gap (Ecrits 108). Lacan contends that this gap creates a lack, and this lack fuels our desires (Ecrits 108). Lacan also makes the fundamental distinction between having what we desire and having what we need. Dissimilar to need, which can be satisfied, and then ceases to motivate us, Lacan contends that desire is a persistent
force and what drives us (Ecrits 331). In this way, the Symbolic order introduces us
to lack and desire. Desire always seeks gratification, but Lacan contends that a
person’s desire can never be fully satisfied because desire always circulates to another
desire, creating another lack (Ecrits 331).

Desire is generated out of absence, and Lacan claims that desire is always
unfulfilled because it is the “desire for something else—of metonymy,” which is the
substitution of one word for another based on partial signification (Ecrits 153).
According to Lacan, desire is understood as metonymy because it corresponds to the
displacement of desire, thus creating a persistent cycle of lack (Ecrits 153). In other
words, desire is always circulating from one object to another, and desire is always
the manifestation of something that is lacking in the subject. For Lacan, a person’s
desire can be created by any object or person, depending on the course of the
unraveling of the metonymic sequence that desire follows (Ecrits 153). From a
Lacanian standpoint, metonymy is analogous to the process of displacement because
the process continually circulates from one object to another, through transference
(Ecrits 331).

Applying Lacan’s theory of how desire operates, we learn that Macbeth’s
character demonstrates how he is still a desiring subject because his desire circulates
to protecting the royal crown. Macbeth perceives that Banquo’s prophecy could pose
a threat to his crown, thus taking away what Macbeth has gained. His fear of losing
the royal crown to Banquo’s decedents is revealed when he says the following:

Then, prophet-like,
They hailed him father to a line of kings.
Upon my head, they placed a fruitless crown
And put a barren scepter in my grip,
Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand,
No son of mine succeeding. If ’t be so,
For Banquo’s issue have I fil’d my mind;
For them the gracious Duncan have I murther’d;
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace
Only for them; and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common enemy of man,
To make them kings, the seeds of Banquo kings!
Rather than so, come fate into the list,
And champion me to the utterance! (3.1 58–71)

Some critics contend that what emerges from this passage is that Macbeth considers the witches’ prophecy to Banquo as a threat to his own position, and his own royal line. In “Upon One Bank and Shoal of Time: Literature, Nihilism, and Moral Philosophy” Tzachi Zamir argues, “Gone is his earlier admittance that he operates solely from ‘vaulting ambition.’ He talks as if he murdered Duncan just for the sake of his own future children” (533). In other words, Zamir contends that Macbeth has

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committed regicide in the hope that his future sons will be kings. I agree with Zamir because I contend that Macbeth hopes to pass on his royal crown. The above passage reveals that when Macbeth says his “crown” is “fruitless,” he suggests that he has no offspring as future successors, and Macbeth thinks that the security of his kingship may be in jeopardy. In this context, Macbeth believes that he has killed King Duncan for the benefit of Banquo’s sons, and his actions have put “rancours” into the “vessel of [his] peace” only to have Banquo’s heirs claim his position. As the witches’ prophecy continues to control Macbeth’s language, his fear of being replaced as king compels him to ask “fate” to champion (fight) for him in order for him to remain king. The language of the witches creates desire because Macbeth’s belief in the witches’ prophecy to Banquo establishes his desire to secure the throne, and even after Macbeth is crowned the new king, the witches’ prophetic statements still control his actions. He now possesses the royal crown, which was his original desire. However, according to Lacan’s theory of desire, Macbeth’s “lack” does not dissipate because his desire circulates to remaining king until he dies and passing on his royal crown to his possible future sons.

Macbeth relies on action to protect his throne because he believes that if he were able to cut off the rival line, he could stop his desire from circulating, and thus his throne would be safe. Macbeth’s plan of murder becomes clear when he says the following:

Fleance, his son, that keeps him company,

Whose absence is no less material to me
Than is his father’s, must embrace the fate
Of that dark hour. (3.1 135–137)

When Macbeth claims that Fleance’s “absence is no less material” than “his father’s,” he is suggesting that Fleance’s murder is just as important or significant as Banquo’s death because if both were eliminated, their deaths would head off the witches’ prophecy about Banquo’s descendants claiming his position, and Macbeth would be able to fulfill his lack of security. From a Lacanian viewpoint, we see that Macbeth’s character appears to be trying to replace the power of language with the power of action, because he reverts to relying on action to resolve matters as he did in the beginning of the play. In this context, Macbeth’s lack of security prompts him to plan the murders Banquo and Fleance, and with their “absences” (deaths), he believes that his desire would be achieved.

Macbeth’s desire to secure the crown is still not satisfied after Banquo’s murder because he learns that Fleance escaped; hence his lack remains. Macbeth’s character is now thrust back into the Symbolic order because he depends on language as a means to try to achieve his desire. He seeks out the witches, because he thinks that their language can continue to foretell his future.7 When Macbeth meets the witches, they provide him with three more prophecies, which appear in the forms of apparitions. The first apparition materializes and announces that he should fear Macduff (4.1 71). Macbeth says that he already was worried about Macduff, and thanks the apparition for the warning (4.1 72-73). The second apparition is a blood-

7 See also: H. W. Love, “Seeing the Difference: Good and Evil in the World of Macbeth.”
covered child, who informs Macbeth with the news that he cannot be harmed by any man “of woman born” (4.1 80-81). Macbeth responds to the second prophecy by stating that he does not need to kill Macduff because he has no reason to fear him. However, he states that to guarantee his own safety he will kill Macduff (4.1 82-85). Then, a “child crowned, with a tree in his hand” declares to Macbeth that he will never be defeated until Birnam wood moves to Dunsinane hill (4.1 95). After Macbeth hears the last prophecy, he says, “That will never be: Who can impress the forest; bid the tree / Unfix his earth-bound root? Sweet bodements! good!” (4.1 96–97). When Macbeth proclaims, “Sweet bodements!,” he is suggesting that he perceives that the witches have provided him with good prophecies because he believes that he is invincible, and his royal crown is safe. In “Horrid Image, Sorry Sight, Fatal Vision: The Visual Rhetoric Of Macbeth,” Huston Diehl contends, “Macbeth sees these apparitions in terms of what he needs to see and what he wants, rather than acknowledging their ambiguity” (200). In other words, Diehl argues that Macbeth does not want to think of other possibilities because he only hears what he wants to hear.

Expanding on Diehl’s observation, I argue that Macbeth’s interpretation of the prophecies is almost child-like because he arrives at only one conclusion: the witches have promised him personal safety and, by extension, the security of his royal crown. From a Lacanian perspective, we see that Macbeth’s character does not completely comprehend how language functions because he only considers one meaning for each prophecy, and he is unable to conceptualize how language does more than simply
impart circumstances (unlike Banquo, who understands how language functions). Shakespeare’s depiction of Macbeth’s child-like interpretation of the witches’ prophecies exhibits how he has only partially entered the Symbolic order because he fails to grasp that language can produce multiple meanings, and when we seek answers from language all we receive is more signifiers, not absolute truths. According to Lacan, what a signifier refers to is not to a signified, but rather to another signifier (Ecrits 144). A signifier refers to another signifier, which refers to another signifier in an almost endless chain of signification, and meaning is never fixed because there is “an incessant sliding of the signified under the signifier” (Ecrits 145). On the other hand, Macbeth shows his child-like vulnerability to the witches’ language because he is inexperienced with how the Symbolic order and language operates. In this view, he simply accepts the witches’ prophecies as “truths.” He does not have the capacity to allow the slide of signification because he does not consider that the prophecies could also be interpreted as warnings. Macbeth leaves their house incorrectly thinking that he is invincible and his royal crown is safe.

Macbeth’s desire for security of the crown remains unsatisfied, and circulates to a new desire once he leaves the witches’ house. Lennox informs him that Macduff has fled to England. Upon hearing this troubling news, Macbeth vows to let nothing stand in the way of him protecting the crown from possible threats:

From this moment,

The very firstlings of my heart shall be

The firstlings of my hand. And even now,
To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done. (4.2 146–149)

The news of Macduff’s flight to England compels Macbeth to turn the first thoughts of his “heart” into immediate action. When Macbeth says that he is going to “To crown [his] thoughts with acts, be it thought and done,” he is pledging that he is not going to think about the consequences of his actions, as he did with contemplating King Duncan’s murder. From this point forward, his hands will act as soon as he conceives any plan, no matter how heinous, to secure his throne (4.2 149). From a Lacanian perspective, we see that these lines reveal that Macbeth’s character has rejected the Symbolic order and language. Macbeth vows to not allow the functions of language to interfere with his desire to retain the royal crown because all his thoughts will translate into immediate action. Macbeth’s desire circulates to wanting to eliminate any possibility, however slight, of someone discovering his actions and laying claim to his throne. Driven to act on his desire to secure the crown, Macbeth instantly says that he is going to murder Lady Macduff and her children (4.2 150–153). Macbeth believes that he needs to eliminate Macduff’s male offspring because they could lay claim to his crown. As for killing Lady Macduff, she is a possible threat because she could produce more male children. At this point of the play, Macbeth’s desire to secure the throne has completely taken over his actions, and has turned him into a murdering tyrant.

While Macbeth seeks counsel from the witches concerning the future of his kingship rather than from Lady Macbeth, she is left with only her guilty conscience
regarding their murderous actions. In the sleepwalking scene, the feelings and fears that she had repressed earlier, her “social I,” are revealed in her unconscious speech. As the doctor and gentlewoman observe Lady Macbeth, she shouts madly about the blood she imagines on her own hands, “Out, damned spot! Out I say!” (5.1 35). Lady Macbeth’s repetition of “out” reveals that she has become obsessed with a spot of blood on her hand, which symbolizes the guilt she feels; Lady Macbeth wants to rid herself of the guilt of murdering King Duncan.

Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking scene also exhibits that her speech has become fragmented and her memories of events are muddled. For example, “Out, damned spot! Out I say!” is followed by Lady Macbeth saying, “The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now?” (5.1 42). This line refers to Lady Macduff’s death. The next image Lady Macbeth refers to is her vivid memory of King Duncan’s murder when she utters, “What, will these hands ne’er be clean?” (5.1 43). Lady Macbeth’s dialogue demonstrates that she is recalling the murders of Lady Macduff and King Duncan in their incorrect order. Then, her next response is, “No more o’ that, my lord, no more o’ that. / You mar all with this starting” (5.1 44-45). These lines recall how Lady Macbeth tried to calm down Macbeth after seeing Banquo’s ghost. Moments later, she scolds Macbeth again when she says, “Wash your hands. Put on your nightgown; / look not so pale.—I tell you yet again, / Banquo’s buried; he cannot come out on ’s grave” (5.1 62-64). These lines illustrate how Lady Macbeth confuses the aftermath of the murder of King Duncan with the aftermath of the murder of Banquo. Overall, Lady Macbeth’s dialogue reveals how she is caught up in
a vicious guilt-shame cycle. While in her sleepwalking state, Lady Macbeth has no control over her “social I,” therefore, she cannot repress her guilty conscience because she divulges all of their heinous crimes aloud. Moreover, Lady Macbeth’s reoccurring hallucinations reflect the sense of dread that devours her, which leads to her death.

During the final battle scene, Macbeth’s character is pulled back into the Symbolic order because he begins to rely on the language of the prophecies for protection. Throughout the battle, Macbeth keeps referring to the witches’ new prophecies to reassure himself that his crown is safe. Directly after Macbeth slays young Swiard, Macbeth says, “Thou wast born of woman: — / But swords I smile at, weapons laugh to scorn, / Brandished by man that’s of a woman born” (5.7 12–13). Macbeth still incorrectly thinks that he is invincible, and his royal crown is safe, because he is not afraid of swords that are used by a “man that’s of a woman born.” As such, Macbeth is under the witches grasp because he is relying on the language of the witches as a protective shield.

Moments later, Macbeth comes face to face with Macduff. Macbeth’s reliance on the witches’ prophecies as a form of protection is further enforced when he warns Macduff that he is invincible by telling him, “I bear a charmed life, which must not yield / To one of woman born” (5.8 12-13). Here, Macbeth believes that the witches’ last claim is a protective charm and can guard him from physical harm. However, Macduff tells him that he was “untimely ripp’d” from his mother’s womb; in other words, he is technically “not born of a woman,” and Macbeth’s demise is sealed (5.8
Upon hearing this unsettling news, Macbeth realizes that he misunderstood the meanings of the second set of prophecies, and his reaction is to condemn the witches:

And be these juggling fiends no more believ’d,
That palter with us in a double sense;
That keep the word of promise to our ear,
And break it to our hope. I’ll not fight with thee. (5.8 19–22)

Macbeth curses the witches, and he finally breaks their linguistic influence over him when he says, “be these juggling fiends no more believ’d.” Macbeth’s character now comprehends how language and the Symbolic order work because he has figured out that the witches’ claims had a “double sense” in their meanings, which denotes that the prophecies were equivocal. Macbeth also realizes that the witches’ prophecies raised his “promise” of safety, only to have them destroy his “hope” afterward. After Macduff hears that Macbeth will not fight him, Macduff says, “Then yield thee, coward, / And live to be the show and gaze o’ th’ time” (5.8 23-24). These lines reveal that Macduff offers Macbeth the chance to live, but as a public spectacle, an object of ridicule and scrutiny for all to witness. At this point in the play, Macbeth’s options are reduced to either fighting Macduff in battle or living the rest of his life in a sideshow, as a public attraction to be persistently mocked. We see Macbeth’s decision when he says the following:

I will not yield,

To kiss the ground before young Malcolm’s feet,
And to be baited with the rabble’s curse.

Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane,

And thou oppos’d, being of no woman born,

Yet I will try the last: before my body

I throw my warlike shield: lay on, Macduff;

And damn’d be him that first cries, ‘Hold, enough!’ (5.8 28-34).

These lines demonstrate that although Macbeth knows he will lose the fight because the witches have guaranteed that Macduff will win, Macbeth chooses to die bravely, fighting to the last. From a Lacanian perspective, Macbeth decides to fight Macduff because he cannot accept the fact that his “social I” would be publicly humiliated for the rest of his natural life, and he also realizes that his desire to retain the royal crown will never be satisfied because his attempts to control all potential threats to the crown have failed. Since Macbeth is no longer a desiring subject, he is left with only one option, which is to die as a warrior.
Conclusion

This study argues that Shakespeare creates a world in which language fuels desire. Employing a Lacanian interpretation, I argue that in the beginning of the play, Macbeth’s character illustrates that he is outside the Symbolic order, and he uses his actions as his primary form of communication. I argue that the witches are integral characters to play’s action because their tempting words propel Macbeth’s character into the Symbolic order, and he is introduced to Lacan’s theories of lack and desire. Once Macbeth’s desire to become king is catalyzed by the witches, Lady Macbeth uses the power of language to influence Macbeth to act on his desire. Once Macbeth is crowned king, his character illustrates how he vacillates between action and language as a way to secure his crown.

While discussing Macbeth’s transformation from loyal servant to would be assassin, some critics dismiss the importance of the witches’ role in why Macbeth decides to kill King Duncan. For example, Paris argues that Macbeth already had a hidden desire to be king before his encounter with the witches, and their prophecies only give him permission to act out his latent fantasy (8). What Paris’s argument fails to consider is that Shakespeare depicts Macbeth’s character as a loyal subject before he meets the witches. On the other hand, some scholars employ a Freudian interpretation of Macbeth, and they focus on the Oedipus complex as the source behind why Macbeth kills King Duncan. Krohn’s article argues that Lady Macbeth’s character represents the oedipal mother, who forcefully persuades her figurative son, Macbeth, to perform the act of patricide (335). This type of interpretation is also
problematic because it argues that Macbeth’s only temptation to kill the king comes from Lady Macbeth. I believe that a more accurate interpretation, which allows for the dual influence of both the witches and Lady Macbeth, is to offer a Lacanian psychoanalytic interpretation of *Macbeth*. In particular, a Lacanian interpretation allows for a duel influence for the reasons why Macbeth commits murder, and emphasizes how the discourses of both the witches and Lady Macbeth influence and guide Macbeth’s actions throughout the play. A Lacanian interpretation of the play also draws attention to how our desires are created, and how desire can never be fully satisfied. Most importantly, a Lacanian interpretation helps us gain better insight into what leads to Macbeth’s downfall.

If in the future I plan on expanding my topic, it would be interesting to further explore how Banquo reacts differently to the witches’ prophecies, and how does Banquo’s reactions varies from Macbeth’s reaction. I would also like to examine the relationship between gender and power, focusing on Lady Macbeth. On the other hand, I hope that this study influences other scholars to employ a Lacanian psychoanalytical lens to examine *Macbeth.*
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