Macbeth: Sympathy for the Devil?

by Mark Alan Anderson

"Fair is foul and foul is fair" (1.1.11) chant the three witches of *Macbeth* in a phrase that aptly describes the pervasive darkness, treachery and self-damnation for which Shakespeare's play is noted. The chant might equally be used to describe the literary personification of Lucifer, Heaven's most notorious castaway. *Macbeth* is a fascinating and fantastic tale that, upon closer examination, demonstrates some intriguing parallels to the conception held by contemporary seventeenth century society of the myth surrounding Lucifer's fall from grace.

"Fair is foul and foul is fair" (1.1.11) chant the three witches of Macbeth in a phrase that aptly describes the pervasive darkness, treachery and self-damnation for which Shakespeare's play is noted. The chant might equally be used to describe the literary personification of Lucifer, Heaven's most notorious castaway. Macbeth is a fascinating and fantastic tale that, upon closer examination, demonstrates some intriguing parallels to the conception held by contemporary seventeenth century society of the myth surrounding Lucifer's fall from grace.

It is first necessary to review the background on which this premise is based. Fourteen years prior to his taking the English throne in 1603, Scotland's James VI married Anne of Denmark. Anne's voyage to Scotland was marred by storms and was, ultimately, unsuccessful. Blame for the furious squall was placed squarely on the shoulders of Danish "witches". James joined his bride in Denmark only to be confronted by another tempest upon their return voyage to Scotland, a hindrance denounced as interference from Scottish witches. (Thompson, 3 pars.) Convinced of a supernatural conspiracy to kill him, James personally led an inquisition and subsequently authored *Daemonologie* in 1597 "to persuade skeptics of the importance of witchcraft, and to put himself in the forefront of modern thinking, showing that his learning and scholarship was thoroughly up to date." (Thompson, 4 pars.)

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Upon the death of Elizabeth I in 1603, James VI of Scotland was crowned James I of England. Following his ascension to the throne, James authorized a scholarly translation of the bible into English – apparently having acquired an interest in the spiritual in addition to his apparent fascination with witchcraft and demons. Arguably, the creation of the King James Version of the Bible has been of monumental importance, providing unconstrained access to biblical texts which had heretofore been attainable only in Latin translations and the original Hebrew. (Robinson, 4 pars.) Most intriguingly, it appears that the story of Lucifer's fall from grace had not been included in versions of the Bible prior to James' translation into English. (It may be interesting to note that in modern times, the story of Lucifer's fall is recorded only in King James Versions of the Bible.) The inclusion of "Lucifer" came about when scholars used a fourth century mistranslation of "the Hebraic metaphor, 'Day star, son of the Dawn,' as 'Lucifer,' and over the centuries a metamorphosis took place. Lucifer the morning star became a disobedient angel, cast out of heaven to rule eternally in hell." (Robinson, 6 pars.) In an ironic – but probably coincidental – quirk of translation, the original Hebrew text refers instead to a fallen king and not a fallen angel – unintentionally foreshadowing the Macbeth story line. (Robinson, 4 pars.)

While it is not clear whether scholars were aware of the mistranslation at the time, it is not difficult to conceive that the creation of Lucifer was "allowed" by the Church Fathers – and possibly even encouraged – to develop an explanation for the existence of evil. Indeed, there appears to have been a literary need for such clarification: Bevington for instance, in reference to the 1463 Corpus Christi cycle drama of York, states that "The Fall of Lucifer (or Satan) as depicted in the York play is not found in the Bible." (qtd. in Iowa) And over a century earlier still, Dante wrote of seven sins, each on a level, with higher levels – "lesser" sins – closer to Paradise and the lower levels – and thus, "greater" sins – closer to Hell. (Alighieri, 48-49) Despite the plentitude of literary allusion to Lucifer and a continual flow of invective from the pulpit, the Bible was bereft of any promise of a Hell-bound eternity as a consequence for the wages of sin. Church Fathers may have felt it important for the KJV to close such an obvious "oversight" between scripture and doctrine.

Therefore, it's not surprising that the Lucifer story was incorporated into the new translation. Brother Anthony Sonjae describes the generally accepted story of Lucifer's fall from grace:

> God, the story goes, created Satan thirsting to know God in a most special way, for a very particular exchange of love. In the eternal moment of Satan's creation, when his God-given name was Lucifer, God said, "Here we are, come, know me and let me love you." Lucifer looked into the mirror of his eternal desire for God, where his essential being lay, took the form of the thirst he found there for an aspect of his own being, and chose himself above the Other, saying: "No. I do not need you. I will know myself as my own end, I am enough in myself. Go away, you do not exist." (49 pars.)

Prior to the *KJV*, Lucifer was a literary device used to portray the repercussions of sin,

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as well as a means for the clergy to frighten uneducated masses into blindly following Church doctrine. In a sense, James I was responsible for the creation – or at least the augmentation – of the modern interpretation of Lucifer, much as Shakespeare was responsible for the creation of the character Macbeth. This then was the state of the spiritual environment when Shakespeare completed *Macbeth* around 1606 or 1607: Lucifer, a literary *idea* of sin, was undergoing a transformation into the literal manifestation of evil.

As *Macbeth* opens, an injured and bloody Captain praises the valiance of "brave Macbeth" (1.2.16), much to the admiration of Duncan, who elevates Macbeth's stature by bequeathing upon him the former title of the traitorous Thane of Cawdor. (1.2.68) Clearly, the king views Macbeth as a very worthy subject and noble kinsman, a man of high rank who has proven himself to be a noble of great trust: A man of admirable qualities.

Of a similar nature is the angel Lucifer who, in Ezekiel 28:12-19, is described as having been created good and is, in fact, supposed to fulfill the role of protector over Adam and Eve. Lucifer is the chief of God's created angels: An angel of admirable qualities.

Similarly, Macbeth and Lucifer both set goals that are lofty beyond their appointed station. Both lust to be greater than they are: Without giving any real consideration to the requirements of office, they covet the throne – one hungers for the throne of Duncan while the other desires the throne of God.

It should be here noted that the image of Lucifer has gone through a remarkable transformation since the first known image of him was created in the San Apollinare Nuovo mosaic portraying him as a blue-violet angel. (San Apollinare Nuovo) A panel from the *Hortus Deliciarum* depicts a gentle and benevolent Lucifer in flowing robes, angelic wings spread wide, his head encircled in a halo. (de Bastard) This image contrasts sharply with Gustave Dore's monstrous line engravings of Lucifer after the fall, reproduced in his 1861 edition of Dante's *Inferno*. (Alighieri, 152) It is indisputable that Lucifer, through self-corruption, has metamorphosed into another literary creation – that of Satan.

Like Lucifer, Macbeth succumbs to desire and in the process displaces his sense of judgement, discretion and wisdom. Even before Duncan's pronouncement of title has been conferred upon Macbeth, three "Weird Sisters" waylay him with glorious predictions. Based upon this supernatural solicitation, one must speculate whether or not Macbeth is destined to be a villain, or if he has any say in his decisions, future actions or outcomes. Is this, in fact, a test? If so, then he fails: In his lust for the crown, Macbeth's ambition is so primal as to parallel that of Lucifer's having placed himself above God. Instead, both take events into their own hands rather than allowing things to play out as they may. Both characters are portrayed as having been created good, but through ambition and desire, both fall: Lucifer and Macbeth choose evil and descend into Hell.

Regardless of preordination or not, Macbeth does acknowledge to himself that his

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baser instincts are wrong. "…his virtues will plead like angels trumpet-tongued…" (1.7.18-19) is an unambiguous comparison of Duncan's goodness to things angelic. Macbeth is questioning himself and concedes his own "…vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself…" (1.7.27). While Lucifer may not be portrayed as having conflicting emotions about his intended treachery, he, like Macbeth, recognizes that the means of realizing his ambition can be attained only by supplanting his Lord. Lucifer, of course, does not succeed in his attempt to usurp God's throne, while Macbeth accomplishes Duncan's murder, expropriating the crown. Nevertheless, it can be argued that Macbeth has not actually succeeded because he has not killed off Duncan's lineage. Malcolm and Donalbain live and may yet mount the throne; Macbeth is childless and his own line will abruptly end with his beheading by Macduff. Ultimately, Macbeth's leap toward greatness falls as flat as Lucifer's.

In his fall from grace, Lucifer is cast out from Heaven. In Dante's story, he dwells in a Hell that is built from layer upon varying layer of sins – the most excessive of which are associated with the love of earthly goods: avarice, greed, lust and covetousness. (Alighieri, 48-49) Ironically, the punishment for these particular sins is to be placed into a boiling cauldron. (Rushman, 9 pars.) In *Macbeth*, the protaganist seeks out the Weird Sisters – the very act of which can be construed as complicit and damnable – and has an unpleasant encounter with a cauldron of his own, replete with visions, hallucinations and apparitions which horrify him. (4.1.48-132)

Hecate is associated with an idea or perception of "Hell", so it might be said that in visiting Hecate – or at least, the place in which Hecate has immediately left – Macbeth is visiting another layer of Hell. Hecate, having recently vacated the company of the witches, leaves behind the Weird Sisters and their cauldron. Macbeth, arriving in the wake of Hecate is, metaphorically at least, allowed to "boil" and suffer in the contents of the pot.

"Hell" for Macbeth and Lucifer, is a world of their own making. "This castle hath a pleasant seat. The air nimbly and sweetly recommends itself unto our gentle senses," Duncan sighs upon arriving at Inverness. (1.6.1-3) But with Duncan's imminent murder, the place quickly transforms from a pleasant castle into "Hell", the gates of which are guarded by a drunken "devil-porter."

"Who's there, in the name of Beelzebub?" cries the porter to himself, implying that Inverness is Satan's abode. (2.3.3-4) And shortly thereafter: "But this place is too cold for hell. I'll devil-porter it no further." (2.3.16-17) The transformation is complete: Macbeth is now in Hell.

The play makes a direct allusion when Malcolm compares Macbeth to a fallen angel – "Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell." (4.3.23) – insinuating that Macbeth is Lucifer. Immediately following Duncan's murder, Macbeth is unable to bless himself: "But wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'? I had most need of a blessing, and 'Amen' stuck in my throat." (2.2.35-37) Is it possible that the

man who "murdered sleep" (2.2.46), has been shunned by Heaven? Has Inverness fallen from the sight of God? Certainly from this point forward, the castle is populated with spirits, hallucinations, visions, madness, and the guilty sleepwalking of Lady Macbeth. One can hardly blame the porter for likening the castle to the residence of the devil. Shortly thereafter, Macbeth becomes a tyrannical ruler, summoning witches, and invoking madness. The brutal murder of his companion Banquo and the subsequent disturbingly graphic slaughter of Macduff's wife and children paint a vivid picture of Hell. For Macbeth and his wife, delusions and paranoia reign.

It might be questioned how Lady Macbeth fits into the premise of a Macbeth/Lucifer duality. After all, Lucifer didn't have a wife or partner to act as co-conspirator or to goad him into action.

Macbeth clearly knows that his actions are wrong. Maybe he would act differently if Lady Macbeth were to present a troubled mind about the proposed murder of Duncan. We are never allowed to know if this is the case: Instead, Lady Macbeth urges her husband on to the deed and lends a bloody hand in the aftermath herself. In this way, Lady Macbeth represents a form of temptation for her husband. While Macbeth's fall into disgrace may be analogous to Lucifer's decline, it is equally arguable that *temptation* has been the instrument of the failures for both man and angel.

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare has created a character whose perplexity over temptation is something with which we can all identify. Similarly, the sixteenth century literary rendering of Lucifer is not as the leader of Hell. Rather, it is a story of morality, in which Lucifer represents sins such as gluttony, avarice, pride and lust. At this time, his would have been a story with a moral: If you sin, you will suffer in Hell.

There's no clear evidence that Shakespeare was unduly influenced by James' interpretation of Lucifer. But if, as the online "Macbeth Survival Kit" postulates, the play was written for a command performance for James' court, it is not unreasonable to theorize that the playwright may have been influenced by James' well known predilection for witches and scholars' revisionist Bible translation. (Macbeth Survival Kit, 57 pars.) There is a greater likelihood that Shakespeare would have been familiar with the treatment of the Lucifer character in Dante's *Inferno* and similar literary works.

Whatever Shakespeare's influences may have been, he creates a world for Macbeth where temptation is legion: The Weird Sisters dangle tantalizing – but frustratingly incomplete – prophesies of greatness; Lady Macbeth spurs him forward when it seems that he might not act. Duncan even, can assume some blame: He places himself in Macbeth's care with implicit guardianship, after having recently been deceived by a previous Thane of Cawdor … on whom Duncan had similarly "built an absolute trust." (1.4.13-14)

Like Lucifer, Macbeth has constructed his own Hell; accordingly they have both successfully damned themselves through temptation. Macbeth finally begins to acknowledge this

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eventuality when he remarks to Lennox in regard to his encounter with the witches, "Infected be the air whereon they ride, and damned be all those that trust them!" (4.1.138-139) Macbeth trusts them and is himself damned in the process.

Is Macbeth Satan? Even at his very worst one would have to postulate that he probably is not and that his fall is a personal failure. But there is strength in the debate that Macbeth is Lucifer – the Lucifer who seems to be an admirable, shining depiction of the Heavenly aristocrat; a nobleman of Paradise who recognizes in himself a desire to be greater than his Lord; who succumbs to temptation and falsely tries to assume that seat for himself; and who at last must fail, falling from grace. Neither Lucifer nor Macbeth can ultimately be successful in their quest for the throne of their Lord because there is more at stake than the simple acquisition of power: In both instances, the throne symbolizes truth. Any attempt to usurp the respective crowns through pride, arrogance, deception or desire must necessarily corrupt their reign. Too late, Lucifer and Macbeth learn that they have indeed succeeded in creating a sovereignty – not over Paradise or Scotland of course, but over a Hell of their own forming, kingdoms built upon foundations of falsehood and a Gordian knot of treachery. Their choices have determined who they are.

Macbeth, whose initial inclination is "too full o' the milk of human kindness" (1.5.17) has, like Lucifer, bargained his soul for greatness, and ultimately ends up with neither. The vaulting temptation of ambition – for both angel and man – leads to their irrevocable fall from grace.

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