



What the Birds Tell:

Reading Shakespeare's Macbeth through the Bird Imagery

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Abstract: One of the significant things that the "invasion" of theory in literary studies has brought about is a revisiting of canonical texts. These revisiting that have generated new readings, some fascinatingly controversial, have sensitized students of literature to the unstable nature of literary and other cultural texts. This brief paper is an attempt to read one of William Shakespeare's classic plays applying some Ecocritical reading practices – a reading practice of recent vintage which is gaining ground rapidly all over the world. While the paper points out that Shakespeare makes use of several birds in the play, it focuses on three birds used prominently: the owl, crow and the 'temple-haunting' martlet. The paper will attempt to illustrate that Shakespeare's use of the birds is a conscious and artistic strategy to suggest that Macbeth's actions move beyond the simple scope of the political sphere. It is clear that the implications of Duncan's murder not only affect the subjects, but move to a wider scope that violates nature entirely. In other words the king's dominion is not only over the human subjects but extends over to the world of Nature, just as God's is in the Christian scheme of things since the king is God's representative.

Key words/Phrases: bird imagery, Macbeth, divine rights theory, monarchy

Narration

Macbeth is undoubtedly one of Shakespeare's most well-known and performed plays, and has time and again invited the attention of directors, actors and scholars alike due to the multiple meanings that it can support. – one of the qualities of truly great works of art. However, few readings attempt to engage with the obvious imbalance *Macbeth* causes by killing the king. This paper is an attempt to show how the titled balance brought about by *Macbeth*'s actions is more than purely political as has been made out and that it extends to include that of nature itself. By drawing upon well-known ideas surrounding owls, crows, and various other birds, the paper argues that Shakespeare uses this bird imagery in *Macbeth* to illustrate the gross violation of nature *Macbeth* engenders in his efforts to usurp the rightful king.

First, it is important to understand why Shakespeare would have written a play that focused so closely on the idea of the right to rule and the consequences that follow when this right is disrupted. Some scholars have argued vehemently that Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* specifically to please the monarch King James I, and there are certainly elements that point to this being true. For example, Michael Best points that King James wrote an entire book focusing on witchcraft, and it is clear that witches play a huge role in *Macbeth* (Best par. 2). King James also gave talks about the power of belief and there are a number of scenes where *Macbeth* questions the reality of a person or object in front of him (e.g: the floating dagger.)



There are a number of other factors that support this theory, worth an entire full-length book by itself, but suffice it to say that the evidence supporting the King James theory is strong. It is very clear from several scholarly documented sources that when King James came to power, there were many who questioned his right to the throne. However, it also well documented that King James was a staunch believer in 'God's will'. More specifically, that God put the king on the throne, giving him the divine right to rule. Therefore, to act against the king would be to violate God's will and nature itself (*James VI & I on Divine Right*). It would be no stretch of the imagination to see that there was a conscious effort on Shakespeare's part to include James' beliefs of how a person (in this case Macbeth) overthrowing a monarch who held the divine right to the throne (King Duncan) would result in a violation of nature in yet another effort to please him.

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare relies heavily on the use of the owl in order to underpin the disturbance in nature that Macbeth's actions have engendered. In the classical western tradition, owls have often been associated with Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom, and therefore hold her same association to knowledge (Mitchell-Boyask). Upon the death of Duncan, Lady Macbeth remarks that she has heard the owl both "shriek" (Shakespeare 2.2.3) and "scream" (Shakespeare, 2.2.5). Shrieking and screaming are associated with sounds of pain, as well as terror and alarm respectively (OED). Formulated in these terms, the owl, a creature of both nature and knowledge, seems to be communicating the almost physical pain

that is being dealt to the natural order of the universe.

Macbeth's actions go against not only what was constructed as morally correct, but a universal truth that should be known to all: to kill a king is to upset the delicate balance of nature. One could argue that the words 'shriek' and 'scream' also denote a feeling of rage in the owl's cries. This rage can be seen when examining the subsequent references of the owl after Macbeth kills Duncan. All further mention of owls depicts violent actions against other birds. One could read this as the owl, again a symbol of both reason and nature, two interwoven concepts, acting out its rage at Macbeth's actions and consequent unsettling of nature. However, the violent owls also serve another purpose.

One of the most remarkable references describes an owl that usually hunts mice killing a falcon flying in the sky (Shakespeare 2.4.13). Although this is clearly meant to parallel Macbeth's killing of Duncan, it also indicates the calamity Macbeth's actions have brought to Scotland. An owl is no longer following the established food chain, but is instead attacking a predator. This may be read to suggest how Macbeth, refusing to accept the divine right of monarchy conferred upon Duncan, has negatively influenced the natural arrangement of the universe. Taking this idea further, Lady Macduff speaks of her husband fleeing from Scotland, lamenting that even a weak wren would have stayed to protect the home "against the owl" (Shakespeare, 4.2.9-14). Again, Shakespeare uses an owl to signify violence against another of its own kind,



but it is possible to see the implications as running deeper.

Lady Macduff observes that her husband “wants the natural touch”, meaning he has lost his natural instinct to protect his family from the ‘owl.’ Again, the usual order of nature, this being Macduff’s instinct to protect his own, has been deeply compromised. Lady Macduff questions where his wisdom has gone (Shakespeare, 4.2.13-14), bringing the imagery of the owl full-circle. Macduff cannot use wisdom, because the owl, which as stated before is the representation of wisdom, no longer functions in the boundaries of the natural world. By killing Duncan, Macbeth has upset the fragile stability of nature, and consequently compromised the wisdom that the wise and noble had been ruled by before.

The crow plays a brief, but vital role in highlighting the violations in nature Macbeth will end up creating. When the witches meet Macbeth for the first time as he returns triumphantly from the battlefield with Banquo, they greet and address him as “Thane of Cawdor” and king of Scotland (Shakespeare, 1.3.47). A crow is the sound rooks and crows make, creating a strong phonetic association with these birds and the title of Thane of Cawdor. A group of crows is referred to as a murder, even in the period Shakespeare lived, which Macbeth commits time and time again later on in the play (OED). In the western tradition, crows are also associated with the Greek god Apollo. In one popular version of events, Apollo punishes the crow for failing to report his lover’s affair to him and turns the crow’s feathers black (Evslin, 40), effectively labelling it a traitor forever. By taking

these three elements into account, plus that the previous Thane of Cawdor was condemned to die for betraying Scotland (Shakespeare, 1.4.8), a clear portrait is being painted for the audience.

When Macbeth is named the next Thane of Cawdor by Ross, Macbeth believes that the witches’ other prophecies will come true as well. Due to his unwavering new trust in the witches created through acquiring the title of Cawdor, he is destined to become a traitor, just like the crow and the previous Thane. Since all this occurs before Macbeth kills Duncan, a connection between the crow and the consequences his actions in the future will have on nature may seem unclear.

However, it acts as a strong foreshadowing to the destruction of the balance in nature that Macbeth will wreak. A thane is a noble position, but it is highly unnatural for a person to be a noble traitor, which is what the title Thane of Cawdor implies. By taking on this title, Macbeth himself becomes a part of this imbalanced concept that defies what should be in the world. This early association between the crow (Cawdor), its seemingly contradictory nature, and Macbeth sets up a clear message warning the audience that the violations to order, reason and, on a larger scale, nature that Macbeth is implied in have only just begun.

Other birds illustrate the major violation of nature that Macbeth has incurred on the universe of the play. One of the most recognizable references to birds in this play involves the “temple-haunting martlet”, which Banquo describes in a very romantic manner,



claiming that Macbeth's home must have particularly sweet air if this bird has taken up residence (Shakespeare, 1.6.3-10). The martlet is not a real bird, although many have attempted to find the closest cousin to represent it. It is a bird very often used on a coat of arms, appearing footless and sometimes beakless (Velde par. 1-2). When Banquo speaks of the martlet, Macbeth and his wife have already begun discussing the murder of Duncan. Arguably, a bird without legs (especially one of an imaginary variety) is in no way a natural guest to have residing in one's courtyard. Nature is already disrupted, albeit in a more non-offensive manner than illustrated later. If nature responds simply to a hypothesized action, then the severity of Macbeth's crimes have been emphasized all the more: the balance of natural order has been upset by only a thought. Therefore an action could only prove to be disastrous. The imagery of the martlet serves to underline the impact that even a man's thoughts can have on the natural order and foreshadow the enormous violations of nature that Macbeth later causes.

Further bird references are seen in Macduff's manor. His son responds to Lady Macduff's inquiry of what he will do without a father with, "As birds do, mother... With what I get, I mean, and so do they" (Shakespeare, 4.2.31-34). There are two important facets to explore in this passage. First, the son is saying that birds live off what they can get. Macbeth, who is Thane of Cawdor and has previously been compared to a bird, does not live off what he can 'get' or what life has given him. Instead, he has taken forcefully what was not his right to have (the throne of Scotland). This further emphasizes the disruption

Macbeth has created in nature. He, as a part of nature, has acted out unnaturally, thereby affecting the balance around him.

This idea lends itself to the second point: the son's speech makes a reference to Luke 12:6, which claims that God will take care of all sparrows, even if the world at large seems to have forsaken them. Both Lady Macduff and her son compare themselves to birds, and yet God does not care for them. Both are killed on Macbeth's orders. The suggestion is that since Macbeth's actions have violated nature, Heaven and God can no longer protect those he has previously promised too. God's will has been compromised and as such, the natural order is violated. Perhaps God has no power to protect those who need it due to this imbalance or is simply choosing inaction in an effort to punish those who allowed this infraction to occur, but either way the son's trust in God to care for him and the 'other birds' has little effect when nature is overturned as a consequence of Macbeth's actions.

Macbeth actually resolves the violation of nature that its protagonist has wrought. Towards the close of the play, Macbeth laments that he is tied to a stake and "cannot fly" (Shakespeare, 5.7.1). Using the same imagery that has been plaguing the play in order to emphasize the violations that Macbeth has caused to the natural order, balance is restored in the same manner. Macbeth, the crow, has had his wings 'clipped' and can no longer escape from the damage he has wrought both in a political and natural sphere. A bird that flies is as natural as humans who walk, so to underscore that Macbeth can no



longer 'fly' is to suggest that he has been removed from the natural order of the universe. He has personally taken on the violations of the natural world that he inflicted, but in a manner that is deciding being thrust upon him by an outside force. He has not just lost the ability to fly, but has been 'tied down' by some force greater than himself. In order to achieve peace and re-establish a balance in nature, the traitor who caused it must die. It is possible to posit the idea that Shakespeare choice to include Macbeth's lament at finally being grounded in order to give a final comment on how those who decide to meddle in the divine right of the throne should be punished: with death.

Shakespeare has intelligently woven images and references to birds throughout the play, including numerous references to the owl, the crow, and various others, in an attempt to illustrate that Macbeth's actions move beyond the simple scope of the political sphere. It is clear that the implications of Duncan's murder not only affect the human subjects, but move to a wider scope that violates nature entirely. In other words the kings dominion is not only over the human subjects but extends over to the world of Nature, just as God's is in the

Christian paradigm since the king is God's representative.

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