Supernatural and Natural Manipulation: Magic in *Macbeth* and *The Tempest*

In William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, Banquo and Macbeth happen upon the Weird Sisters, who make mystic predictions of the pair’s future. On a small island elsewhere, a raging tempest shipwrecks a traveling party from Milan, leaving the marooned companions at the behest of the island’s ruler, Prospero. In both plays, Shakespeare departs from the conventional depictions of magic, instead examining the moral bounds of his characters through the use of magic as an integral part of the relationship between the supernatural and mortal world. Walter Clyde Curry, writing on *Macbeth*, states that the Weird Sisters transcend the archetypal representation of witches found within the Elizabethan era, and there is a, “curious majesty and even sublimity,” about the Weird Sisters (396). Mildred Tonge diverges, stating that Macbeth “makes a voluntary link with the witches who control Black Magic,” which contrasts his enemies, who represent, “miracles…and the wonders of good powers” (234). Regarding *The Tempest*, critical opinion of Prospero’s “rough magic” has bifurcated. Frank Kermode suggests that Prospero’s magic is described as “rough” because it is, “unsubtle by comparison with the next degree of the mage’s enlightenment” (396); whereas, Cosmo Corfield believes Prospero’s control of magic to be, “not goetic; but…not very holy either” (33). As defined by the Oxford English Dictionary, the term *magic* is best applied to Shakespeare’s plays as an influence to, “the course of events, or [the manipulation] of the natural world” (magic, n). I submit that the source of magic in *Macbeth* is symbolized by the cauldron of the Three Weird Sisters, and is indicative of the manipulation that destroys Macbeth’s morality; contrastingly, magic in *The Tempest* originates from Prospero’s mind, and is channeled through his cloak and staff, which are used for manipulation toward eventual righteous enlightenment.
The opening scene of *Macbeth* introduces the Three Weird Sisters. Their presence hearkens to mind the uncertain, humanistic skepticism of the supernatural world in relation to the natural world. The witches’ mystic existence creates a tense dichotomy suggestive of a bridge that occurs between the super and natural worlds—one composed with elements of each. Despite this, the influence that spills through the veil of the supernatural into the mortal world is not proof of the witches’ cerebral control of Macbeth and his actions, nor Banquo and his. Hermann Ulrici believes that the witches are, “partly rulers of nature, and... partly human spirits” (195). This being truth, the witches simultaneously reside on each side of the divide in a melded stratum that allows them to manipulate Macbeth’s will, although they have no control over his hand during any of his subsequent actions. Lady Macbeth is characteristically akin to a fourth witch, most noticeably in Act I when she exclaims, “Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts / unsex me here / And fill me … / Of direst cruelty” (I, v, 41-4). Her invitation for darkness to penetrate her heart is representative of her figurative association with the three Weird Sisters. While Lady Macbeth is incapable of the witches’ ability to make prophecies, she warps Macbeth’s mind through subversive methods not dissimilar to the magic of the witches. Lady Macbeth repeatedly insults her husband’s honor, asking him if he, “Wouldst... have that / Which thou esteem’st the ornament of life, / And live a coward in thine own esteem, / Letting “I dare not” wait upon “I would,”” (I, vii, 41-4). She perforates Macbeth’s loyalty Duncan by treating her husband as a prisoner chained to its better nature.

Of particular consideration as to the symbolic power of the Weird Sisters is the use of the *cauldron* in Act IV. The cauldron’s true symbolism extends further than the contemporary depiction of a large bowl for boiling grotesque potions. J.E. Cirlot states the cauldron to be, “a symbol of the receptacle [for] the forces of transmutation” (39). The cauldron, in symbolical
terms, is the antithesis of the skull, which is, “a receptacle for life and thought” (299); that is, the cauldron, as an inverted skull represents Fate scorned, often by malicious and immoral means; whereas the skull symbolizes rational thought and the natural world. Macbeth, then, can initially be characterized by his skull. It is the representation of his ability to think rationally, uninfluenced by the prophecies of the Weird Sisters or the wiles of his wife. In fact, in his narrative infancy Macbeth displays the classic qualities of a benevolent hero through his loyalty to Duncan; however, in allowing his will to be overtaken by the temptation of Fate as an absolute reassurance of virtuous ends, Macbeth instead destroys his Fate, and embraces his dark ambition. This is his transmutation: the pollution of his skull by the dreadful cauldron of the witches and the vicious desires of Lady Macbeth.

The Weird Sisters’ conversation with Hectate establishes the gravity of Macbeth’s immoral pursuit of Fate rather than maintaining his virtue. Hectate’s final words to the Weird Sisters, “He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear / His Hopes ’bove wisdom, grace, and fear: / And you all know security / Is mortals’ chiefest enemy” evoke a chilling foreshadow of Macbeth’s abandonment of his reason, or his skull in favor of the cauldron, which is composed of powers that he cannot understand, nor control (III, v, 30-3). Hectate’s prophecy hints at the dichotomy of life as equal parts Fate and rational thought—that is, equilibrium betwixt predestination and the capacity to choose based on rational thought and personal introspection. Macbeth is disillusioned into abandoning his skull, thus forfeiting his ability to resist the influence of the cauldron, which leads to the destruction of his Fate and his death.

In The Tempest, the island is “ruled” by Prospero, although it is revealed that he usurped the land from Caliban upon the former Duke’s arrival. Prospero temporally rules the island, but
also commands its mystical functions. His magic, though initially utilized to exact revenge against Antonio, emanates from a more benevolent source: his mind.

Prospero, like Macbeth, is affected by a transmutation via the use of mysticism, although the former respects his magic for virtuous purposes due to his prior mastery of knowledge. Additionally, much like the witches’ cauldron in Macbeth, The Tempest contains two physical tools that channel Prospero’s magic: his cloak and staff. J.E. Cirlot provides applicable insight into the symbolism of the cloak and staff in the play. A cloak symbolizes two things: “[a] sign of superior dignity, and… a veil cutting off a person from the world” (49). As to the staff, Cirlot notes that it historically and currently represents support or guidance (308). These devices, when added with Prospero’s knowledge signify his magic as originating from a superior source to that of the witches’ cauldron. Anna Brownell Jameson concurs, stating that Prospero’s power derives from his, “superior intellect,” rather than a “compact with an evil spirit” (301). In fact, the essence of Prospero’s magic originates from his skull if the analogy from Macbeth is extended to The Tempest. In his previous life as Duke, he certainly neglected his political duties, but only in pursuit of a rich and cultured mind. His current occupation of the island cuts him off from his former studies and forces him to apply his gathered knowledge into practical application, although he is aided by magic of a more virtuous source than the cauldron from Macbeth. Prospero’s use of a staff further indicates the support he is given through cerebral processes. The staff, like the cloak is an essential implement of his power; although, without his mental faculties, the staff and cloak would be ordinary objects, lacking any sort of mystical function.

Interestingly, Prospero’s rational mind, which was cultivated and intellectually engaged in his former years, manifests itself for magical use only while he is on the island. This brings the symbolism of the cloak to its supplemental meaning. Prospero’s ability to interact with the
elements of the island solidifies the idea that only in his banishment to the island can Prospero channel the elements of the fantastical to his will. In being cut off from and uninfluenced by the natural world, Prospero is given time to master his craft, and learn to respect its fragile virtue.

For all his acquired knowledge, Prospero was unable to use magic to prevent his exile from Milan—he was likely not aware of his power until he arrived on the island. Yet even on the island, Prospero is not omnipotent. He admits that his foreknowledge of the shipwreck is based upon, “A most auspicious star, whose influence / If now I court not but omit, my fortunes / Will ever after droop” (I, ii, 183-5). Thus, Prospero’s magic only comes, and only will come through his exile from the rest of the natural world, although he cannot ascend beyond these powers until they have been completely rectified with his vulnerable conscience. The play begins as a revenge drama; yet Prospero remains earnest in pursuit of a cleansed countenance: for consideration, even when he uses magic against Antonio’s ship; he ensures that no harm comes to the passengers, despite his wrath with Antonio being reason enough to seek vengeance.

Antonio’s invitation for Prospero to return to Milan is a turning point in the play’s previous theme of vengeance. Although Prospero accepts the offer, he realizes the cost of his return is his ability to perform magic. Not dissuaded by this, Prospero declares, “This rough magic / I here abjure…/ I’ll break my staff,” and proceeds to forgive those that wronged him (V, I, 50-4). This act of humility is not an admission to the use of unholy magic, as critics like Cosmo Corfield suggest; rather, it is recognition that Prospero’s abstention from magic is the requisite sacrifice in attaining a higher sense of spiritual transcendence. Walter Clyde Curry’s view of this occurrence is quite similar, for he states that Prospero abstains from his magic, “to achieve the utmost reach of which the human soul is capable” (359). In rejecting his power, and absolving it back to the natural faculties of the island, Prospero attains the highest level of
personal enlightenment: the ability to forgive, which is itself a magic that eradicates the bondage of personal vendetta.

In closing, the nature of magic in *Macbeth* and *The Tempest* does not serve to captivate or impress as a spectacle of visual and auditory stimulation; rather, it resides in a deeper level of the subconscious—the place where humankind’s doubting nature and its will to strive for moral conduct coalesce into a strange amalgam of supernatural and natural influence. In both plays, magic is used as manipulation, although *Macbeth’s* depiction of magic as the cauldron temporarily dissolves a kingdom and permanently condemns Macbeth’s soul. *The Tempest* foils *Macbeth*, for it finds absolution in the transmutation of Prospero through the virtuous use of his cloak, staff, and most importantly, his rational mind. William Shakespeare’s purpose in writing both plays is quite clear: the influence of magic, whether it come through mystic or rational means has the power to destroy and create; and the equilibrium betwixt the two must remain balanced. Magic, then, eclipses the bounds by which it has come to be known for in contemporary literature—it resolves itself to the hidden ambition present in humankind. How this magic is implemented is reliant upon the inherent nature of the caster.
Works Cited


