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Gothic literary works are characterized as such by their ability to represent and evoke terror. The form this representation takes is varied; often terror originates in the atmospheric effects of settings, in the appearance of mysterious, supposedly supernatural phenomena, and, perhaps most significantly, in the behavior of villainous characters. Shakespearean tragedy participates in just such an exploration of the origins and effects of terror. This thesis will examine three aspects of the Shakespearean Gothic in three of his most frightening and disturbing tragedies: Macbeth, King Lear and Titus Andronicus. All three of these texts represent terror in ways that are significant not only for genre studies but for historicist cultural studies as well. Shakespeare's particular vision of the terrible tends to represent unruly women and ethnic minorities as demonized others who threaten normalized social and moral order, and also evokes a religious dread—a fear of the cruelty or, more radically, the nonexistence of God—that would have proved particularly disturbing for Early Modern Christian culture. This reading of Shakespeare demonstrates both the influence of his vision on later writers and the trans-historic applicability of the Gothic aesthetic.

"Present Fears" and "Horrible Imaginings": Gothic Elements in Shakespearean Tragedy

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Introduction: The Gothic as Context

Shakespearean tragedy frequently explores what is dark and terrible about human experience. Indeed, darkness and terror permeate the dramatic landscapes of several of the most well-known Shakespearean tragedies. In <u>Macbeth,</u> mysterious hags prophesy grisly regicide. Hamlet is plagued by supernatural visitations and throughout the play evinces an obsession with death. Lusty youths rape and mutilate a hapless virgin and are later served to their mother as meat pies in <u>Titus Andronicus</u>. In <u>King Lear,</u> an ancient British king confronts the sublime horror of a malevolent natural world and a potentially indifferent cosmos. These and other of Shakespeare's plays reveal a significant fascination with the terrible, the uncanny and the grotesque, and suggest a willingness to explore these elements as continually present in the conflicted heart of human existence. This discovery of a restless and inescapable terror—one that is perhaps, at least in the Shakespearean imagination, inherent to the human condition—is not just tragic; it is also, as I am venturing to define it, quintessentially Gothic.

What does it mean to classify a text as "Gothic?" The term is used liberally and for diffuse purposes, taken to signify, depending on the aesthetic and social context, a period in art history, a literary sub-genre, a philosophical sensibility, and, perhaps most recently, a twentieth-century subculture and fashion trend. Originally, though, "Gothic" was merely taken to signify anything of or related to the Goths, an ancient Germanic tribe. The Goths in the popular

perception were often associated with savagery and barbarism; thus, in the words

of renowned Gothicist Montague Summers, "the word 'Gothic . . . originally

conveyed the idea of barbarous, tramontane and antique, and was merely a term

of reproach and contempt" (37). This usage of the term was similarly applied to

late Medieval architecture; in "On the Nature of Gothic," John Ruskin notes that

"whatever the date of its original usage, [Gothic] was intended to imply reproach,

and express the barbaric character of those nations among whom that architecture

arose" (172). Even more generally, Summers asserts, "[Gothic] came to connote

almost anything medieval, and could be referred to almost any period until the

middle, or even the end, of the seventeenth century" (37). This particular

qualification was likely ascribed to the term by eighteenth-century thinkers and

writers as a way of distancing their Age of Reason from the Medieval past.

Ruskin's essay, though, argues for a re-appraisal of the beauty and significance of

Gothic art and architecture and approaches the term without such an attitude of

cultural superiority. Gothic emerged, then, as a term that more generally referred

to the period in the late middle ages in which Gothic architecture was in fashion,

and the word, assisted by the works of aesthetic theorists such as Ruskin,

gradually became less value-laden. We can see, then, that even the first series of

definitions for the word "gothic" were diverse in meaning and connotation.

In the context of literature the term has undergone a similarly interesting

array of permutations; indeed, what literary scholars define as Gothic seems

continually to be evolving. Ann Williams makes note of this lexical malleability,

and attempts a long, all-inclusive articulation of the various contexts in which the term is used. "According to literary handbooks" she begins, referring primarily to M.H. Abrams' Glossary of Literary Terms, "Gothic is a matter of décor and mood—of haunted castle, and brooding, mysterious hero/villain, of beleaguered heroines, of ghosts, . . . of an ambiguously pleasurable terror, of the nostalgic melancholy of ruins and of remote times and places" (14). These generic traits are most often associated with a subversive mode of narrative fiction that developed around the turn of the nineteenth century, labeled even by some contemporary writers as "Gothic" fiction. Notable participants in this tradition include Horace Waldpole, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew "Monk" Lewis and Mary Shelley, all of whom crafted fantastical tales of mystery and suspense that often gleefully indulged in melodramatic emotion, supernatural plot devices and dark thematic atmospheres. These novels were often set in a remote and demonized— often medieval—past populated with gloomy, imposing castles and cruel-minded, lecherous patriarchs; indeed, Williams notes that, in simplistic terms, the literary Gothic "more or less corresponds with eighteenth-century fantasies of 'the dark ages'"(15). The original definition of the Gothic as a term that refers to the seemingly barbarous sensibility of the Middle Ages gets appropriated, then, by this school of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century novelists, and comes to signify the literary sub-genre with which they experimented.

What renders this formulaic, historically-localized concept of the literary Gothic problematic is its failure, according to Williams, to accommodate other

works that "while violating almost all the handbooks' criteria" nonetheless "may have a strong Gothic 'flavor'"(14). She cites as examples works as diverse as the recent tetralogy of <u>Alien</u> films and William Faulkner's <u>Absalom, Absalom</u>! M.H. Abrams allows for this diversity of applications in his definition of Gothic, noting that:

> The term "Gothic" has. . .been extended to a type of fiction which lacks the medieval setting but develops a brooding atmosphere of gloom and terror, represents events which are uncanny and macabre or melodramatically violent, and often deals with aberrant psychological states (78).

In Abrams' definition, the Gothic is concerned with a general establishment of a foreboding atmosphere and a distracted focus on terrifying circumstances and warped psyches. Both of these broad definitions clearly suggest that the Gothic can and does reach beyond the boundaries of its supposed formulaic origins and is perhaps usefully applicable to texts outside of the nineteenth century pop phenomenon to which the term is usually taken to refer. Williams, however, is not satisfied even with Abrams more wide-ranging definition; she ultimately seems to be implying that there are ideas essential to Gothicism as well as settings, plot devices and character types. Given these formulations, the Gothic (at least as I'm using the term in this project) can more easily be understood as a wide-ranging philosophical and aesthetic sensibility rather than as a formulaic and historically localized pop genre dependent upon certain predetermined generic trappings.

Even in these terms, though, a precise sense of what the Gothic entails is somewhat elusive. According to Williams, Gothic texts illustrate the interplay between rational, realistic, normal forces and their respective opposites, or "others" (18). She articulates this by citing Aristotle's Pythagorean paradigm, which expresses reality in terms of ten conceptual dichotomies, among them male and female, right and left, straight and curved, light and dark, good and evil (18). In a simplistic sense, this series of opposites defines reason and order in terms of masculinity, irrationality and disorder in terms of femininity. Gothicism as a philosophical sensibility, then, includes an endeavor to explore the phenomenon of the feminized "other" as it relates to—or perhaps threatens—established masculine norms.

G.R. Thompson makes a similar move in his essay "Romanticism and the Gothic Tradition." He considers the literary Gothic as analogous to dark, or negative, Romanticism, a term which "evoke[s] an image of the lonely, isolated self . . . either indulging in or struggling with an internal evil, the very conflict a source of energy" (1). Like Thompson, throughout this thesis I am using Dark Romantic and Gothic to describe the same kind of literature. For Thompson, Dark Romantic narratives—or Gothic romances—often depict these heroic protagonists at odds with dreadful "others," sources of evil that are both outward and internalized. "The chief element of the Gothic romance," he continues, "is not so much terror as, more broadly, dread—whether physical, psychological, or metaphysical" (3). This dread, he contends, is a combination of terror, horror, and

mystery. Terror, as he defines it, "suggests . . . physical and mental fear of pain, dismemberment, and death," and horror "suggests the perception of something incredibly evil or morally repellent" (3). Both of these are perhaps heightened by mystery, which according to Thompson "suggests . . . a world that stretches away beyond the range of human intelligence—often morally incomprehensible—and thereby productive of a nameless apprehension . . . in the face of the wholly other" (3). Like Williams, then, Thompson defines the Gothic in terms of a struggle against the ambiguous and problematic other, which, because incomprehensible, is considered a source of terror, horror, and perhaps evil.

In a broad sense, evil, whatever its particular manifestation in the text might be, is perhaps the most important thematic focus of Gothic narratives. Moreover, a Gothic text is perhaps distinguished by a characteristic indulgence in, or at least a thorough exploration of, evil. This focus becomes apparent in much of Shakespeare's work. Molly Smith asserts that "intense fascination with evil clearly demarcates early seventeenth-century literature from that of the Elizabethan and Restoration eras," and goes on to note that "Jacobean and Caroline dramatists show a particular preoccupation with the darker side of the human psyche, with the themes of madness, violence, revenge, adultery, incest, and with the psychological state of melancholia" (11). Shakespeare is of course one of the preeminent Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, and indeed a number of his tragedies—including such sixteenth-century works as <u>Richard III</u> and <u>Titus Andronicus</u>—demonstrate this willingness to explore the various roots and

ramifications of evil. The consequence of this fascination, I would argue, is the production of texts that we would now define as "Gothic."

Indeed, the Gothic novelists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries owed much to Shakespeare's aesthetics. Williams notes that Horace Walpole, author of the seminal Gothic romance <u>The Castle of Otranto</u>, made reference to Shakespeare's influence on his writing; and Ann Radcliffe, one of the most popular of the late eighteenth-century Gothic writers, opened many chapters in her novels with Shakespearean epigraphs. "Radcliffe appears to take it for granted," Williams observes, "that Shakespeare's sublime tragedies plumb the depths of human terror" (31). Clearly, then, Shakespeare's consistent portrayal of human experience as fraught with fear and sorrow, as well as his observable interest in human evil, was significantly influential for later Gothic writers.

Many of Shakespeare's tragedies, in addition to evincing this general fascination with evil and terror, satisfy all of the aforementioned generic prerequisites for categorization as "Gothic" works. My discussion of the Shakespearean Gothic will begin, then, with an examination of more the familiar, formulaic Gothic elements that are evident in the three plays I plan to discuss. These include, among other things, settings in the darker, distant, often Medieval past; plot devices, such as the Faustian pact, that can be found in abundance in a great deal of nineteenth century Gothic fiction; and a fascination with the supernatural and the occult. This inventory of the generic traits apparent in these

plays will, I anticipate, make the initial case for a Gothic vision as present in Shakespearean tragedy.

From this more general establishment of the over-arching Gothic sensibility of these tragedies I will move to a discussion of how the Shakespearean Gothic engages the dynamic of norms and others that Williams refers to in the plays' various dramatic representations of evil. It is the particular representations of the terrible in his tragedies—many of which, despite supernatural or phantasmagoric underpinnings, suggest a plausible world with credible, even historical, true-to-life characters and settings—that make Shakespeare's Gothic vision particularly fascinating. For in determining what is terrible about human life, Shakespeare's tragedies often yield very revealing cultural and philosophical insights.

This assertion that applying a Gothic mode of interpretation to Shakespeare can be the source of cultural revelation is not meant to suggest the universality either of Shakespearean drama or nineteenth-century Gothicism. Claims for universality often ignore the specific historicity of literary texts and fail to account for frequent shifts in cultural ideologies. This project seeks rather to extend the trend of Gothic interpretation back in time, as it were, to Shakespeare's historicized culture. In other words, I seek, through my anachronistic investigation of the Gothic sensibility as evident in Shakespearean tragedy, to interrogate the way in which Shakespeare as cultural ambassador

defines for us his culture's particular sources of terror. The goal here is what

Stephen Greenblatt refers to as resonance, which he defines as

> the power of the object displayed to reach out beyond its formal
> boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic
> cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which as metaphor or
> more simply as metonymy it may be taken by a viewer to stand" (170).

The objects on display here are the texts of <u>Macbeth</u>, <u>King Lear</u> and <u>Titus</u>

<u>Andronicus</u>; all three are in many ways bounded in history, and all three, through

the power of interpretation, reach out to our world as representatives of their

particular time and place, at times resonating and at times at odds with our own.

What resonates perhaps most profoundly in these plays is, among other things,

horror.

My endeavor to suggest that this sense of horror, indeed the entire Gothic

sensibility I've defined, carries with it some cross-cultural, trans-historic

resonance may seem incongruent with my assertion that Shakespeare's

exploration of evil and terror is in fact historically unique. It is reasonable to

assert, though, that terror is a natural human reaction to the unknown, and that we

can expect this reaction from any culture, however remote, when it is faced with

things it cannot fully understand. Twenty-first century readers may or may not

identify with the particular representations of the Terrible in Shakespearean

drama, but they will most certainly relate to the emotional reactions expressed by

Shakespeare's characters. One may historicize Shakespeare, distinguishing his

culture from ours, without completely isolating the emotional and psychological

landscapes of his world from those of our own. We can then read <u>Macbeth</u>, <u>King</u>

Lear, and Titus Andronicus, and still respond to the horror expressed in those texts.

The source of this horror in Shakespeare's plays is varied and complicated. What this project will attempt to do is analyze some significant ways in which Shakespearean tragedy represents the terrible; or, more particularly, the terrible as it seems to have been viewed and interpreted by sixteenth and seventeenth century English society. I'm particularly interested in how, as part of its articulation of the terrible, the Shakespearean Gothic vision tends to scapegoat women (Lady Macbeth, the Weird Sisters, Tamora) and minorities (Aaron the Moor, Othello, Shylock) as sources of terror and villainy in a strange process of cultural "othering." Some of Shakespeare's most compelling female characters are significantly demonized, even portrayed as villains; what's more, their villainy often stems from their cultural aberrance, their failure to fulfill their socially-scripted gender roles. Similarly, black characters are held to us as possible sources of terror in their ability, sometimes merely by their existence, to destabilize the white culture with which they interact. What these characterizations might reflect, I'm suggesting, is a latent societal fear in Shakespeare's England of unknown and marginalized others and their supposed threat to social order. This fear of the mysterious other is, as Williams notes, intrinsic to a Gothic sensibility.

In addition to these socio-cultural terrors—sources, as it were, of social dread—Shakespeare's Gothic vision also frequently expresses its ideological

anxieties in the form of profound religious dread. Perhaps the greatest mysterious

unknown for any culture is famously expressed by Hamlet as "the dread of

something after death / The undiscovered country." This hesitant fear considers

not only the fate of consciousness after the death of the body, but indeed the very

nature of the universe. Does the repentant soul proceed to a justly-governed

heavenly afterlife, or is the rest merely, to invoke Hamlet again, silence? The first

implies a divinely-ordained universe with a benevolent deity; the second suggests

the absence of a god and the annihilation of human consciousness after death. In

a Gothic, tragic vision, the existence of both possibilities is perhaps equally

terrible. If God is indeed omnipotent, as Christian doctrine suggests, then his

allowance of the kind of seemingly arbitrary suffering that is the bane of Lear and

other of Shakespeare's tragic heroes portrays him as cruel, spiteful and unjust. If

God is nonexistent, though, then the Christian sense of worldly order and purpose

utterly deconstructs.

Several of Shakespeare's tragedies flirt seriously with these respectively

fatalistic and nihilistic world-views, sometimes, as seems to be the case with

Macbeth and King Lear, offering little in the way of catharsis or redemption in

their resolutions. The protagonists in these plays, despite their personal flaws, can

be seen largely as victims of the machinations of either a malevolent or empty

cosmos, in the face of which they meet their grim fates. What these plot formulae

ultimately suggest is the ultimate ineffectuality of human agency in an arbitrarily

scripted universe, or the collapse of authority and purpose in an utterly

meaningless universe; this expression of existential dread is a trait common to Gothic fiction, and speaks to a fear deep-rooted in many cultures, including our own. In keeping with my historicist move, though, I'd suggest that these questions carried a special significance for Shakespeare's audience. Specifically, for seventeenth century Christians, the tragic fates of these characters—many of whom were, again, culled from historical records and fictionalized, which implies the potential actuality of their plights—suggested that God was either absent or cruel, both of which assumptions infused faith with dread, religion with terror.

What I hope to achieve through all of this is, again, a reading of Shakespeare that grapples with the manifold terrors that he so commonly engaged in his plays, to whatever end. Shakespeare took horror seriously, and used elements of the tradition that we have come to call "Gothic" liberally and for diverse purposes. This project seeks to identify some of those purposes as the products of an historicized cultural discourse on the sources and consequences of evil. If, as many people suggest, Shakespeare had a particularly keen insight into the human condition, then what do the twisted aesthetic, social and philosophical landscapes of Titus Andronicus, Macbeth and King Lear offer to Shakespeare's developing sense of what it means to be human? This thesis cannot, and will not attempt, to answer these universal questions, but will rather devise an analysis of how terror and horror seem inherently to figure in to Shakespeare's own portrayal of human existence and how his exploration of evil contributes to and complicates an evolving definition of the literary Gothic.

I: Formulaic Elements of the Gothic Tradition in Shakespearean Tragedy

Shakespeare's tragic vision, though it most often embodies Gothicism in a broad philosophical sense as opposed to a merely formulaic one, nonetheless employs several generic characteristics common to late eighteenth and early nineteenth century Gothic romances. It is useful, then, before exploring the applicability of Gothic theory to Shakespearean tragedy, to identify these more explicitly Gothic elements that appear on the very surface of the plays' dramatic landscapes. These generic elements include, as I've noted, settings in a troubling, demonized distant past; frequent appearance of Gothic character types; and the dramatization of supernatural phenomena.

The settings of these plays are perhaps their most identifiably Gothic traits. Fred Botting observes that "Gothic landscapes are desolate, alienating and full of menace" (2). This generalization is a useful starting point in discussing the Gothic quality of the physical landscapes suggested in Shakespeare's texts. Certainly there are many menacing and unsettling aspects of the dark terrains inhabited by Macbeth, Lear and Titus; specifically, though, all three plays correspond to literary definitions that ascribe Medieval or barbarous settings to Gothic narratives. According to Botting,

> The major locus of Gothic plots, the castle, was gloomily predominant in early Gothic fiction. Decaying, bleak and full of hidden passageways, the castle was linked to other medieval edifices—abbeys, churches and graveyards especially—that, in their generally ruinous states, harked back to a feudal past associated with barbarity, superstition and fear (3).

Two of the plays discussed in this study, <u>Macbeth</u> and <u>King Lear</u>, are set amongst

the ancient castles of Medieval Britain, while <u>Titus Andronicus</u> takes place in a

more remote Roman past. Whatever their specific temporal settings, though, all

three plays certainly grapple with the burden of the past and characterize it as

barbarous, superstitious and terrifying. The past itself, these narratives suggest, is

something to be afraid of by virtue of the fact that it is a remote realm that in

traces re-emerges in the present. The ominous, alien nature of the past finds its

most tangible representation in the settings of these plays.

This catalogue of characteristics perhaps applies most readily to the setting

of <u>Macbeth</u>, a play that is primarily set in various medieval Scottish castles.

Furthermore, the menace of these Medieval landscapes is qualified and enhanced

by their direct association with Macbeth and his wife. Indeed, the first textual

reference to the Inverness castle's ominous quality comes from Lady Macbeth

herself as she prepares for the King's visit: "The raven himself is hoarse / That

croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan / Under my battlements," she intones (I.v.,37-

39). The raven as a dreadful portent of doom is a traditional symbol, and it carries

with it a sense of gloomy Gothic terror. Lady Macbeth seems significantly to take

ownership of this macabre atmosphere, characterizing the looming "battlements,"

the passage under which seals Duncan's fate, as her own. This possessive

language characterizes the castle at Inverness as *her* castle, and as such its

ambience is marked by the Lady's own foreboding persona.

Later in the same speech, Lady Macbeth invokes the night to shroud the

castle in its gloom and hide her deed:

> Come, thick night,
> And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
> That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
> Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
> To cry "Hold, hold." (I.v.,49).

Just as Lady Macbeth claims ownership of the menacing "battlements" above,

here she similarly imagines for herself some degree of influence on the natural

atmosphere. What's more, the atmospheric elements she calls upon make

significant reference to other Gothic settings in the play. The "smoke of hell" she

invokes to enshroud the night echoes the "fog and filthy air" inhabited by the

witches (I.i,13) and foreshadows the Porter's later characterization of the entrance

to the castle as "hell gate" (II.iii.,2), and the "blanket of . . . dark" from which she

predicts the sun will never emerge corresponds with the prolonged night that

descends on Scotland after Macbeth's murder of the king. The castle and its

environs, then, becomes immersed in dread and darkness through its association

with the murderous intentions and prophetic invocations of Lady Macbeth, its

bleak atmosphere heightened by the threat of bloody deeds to come and by the

Lady's indirect association with the Weird Sisters.

This atmosphere contrasts significantly with Duncan's description of the

same castle when he arrives there in the next scene: "This castle hath a pleasant

seat" (I.vi.,1). Banquo concurs with this benevolent characterization, and even

makes note of a swallow whose nests in the battlements "does approve / By his

loved mansionry that heaven's breath / Smells wooingly here" (4-6). The child-like innocence of King Duncan briefly qualifies the Gothic menace conjured by Lady Macbeth's speech, which suggests again that the Gothic quality of these Medieval landscapes is determined to a large extent by the characters with whom they are associated.

These atmospheric speeches both allude to another crucial setting in Macbeth, and that is the bleak and ambiguous natural world. Natural landscapes, Botting notes, can be just as Gothic as the ruinous castles, abbeys and churches in which many Gothic narratives are set, in that "their immense scale offer[s]. . .a glimpse of infinity and awful power, intimations of a metaphysical force beyond rational knowledge and human comprehension" (4). The natural landscapes in Macbeth seem to perform this function, especially as they begin to serve as macabre indicators of Macbeth's murderous tyranny. Upon Macbeth's wary dismissal of the apparitional dagger and his subsequent resolution to murder Duncan in II.i, nature itself assumes an ominous aspect:

> Now o'er the one-half world
> Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
> The curtained sleep. Witchcraft celebrates
> Pale Hecate's offerings; and withered murder,
> Alarumed by his sentinel, the wolf,
> Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
> With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
> Moves like a ghost. (II.i.,50-57).

Macbeth envisions a malevolent nocturnal world in which murder assumes the shape of a rapacious, ghostly wolf, and Hecate's witches hold their dreadful ceremonies. It is a world that apparently lives only in the Thane's grim

imagination—nature only "*seems* dead," after all—and only during the night, though the foreboding atmosphere created by Macbeth's fantastical utterances here infuses the play itself with the title character's guilty dread. Moreover, this passage suggests some kind of causal connection between Macbeth's regicidal plot and the condition of the natural surroundings. Nature seems to assume this haunting appearance "*now*;" there is a sense of immediacy to Macbeth's abrupt transition from pondering the "fatal vision" of the dagger to noticing the eerie change in his surroundings. And, after all, "withered murder" is indeed about to move "with stealthy pace . . . toward his designs," in the wolfish guise of Macbeth himself. Again, though, this sensibility appears so far to exist largely in Macbeth's "heat oppressed brain" as metaphoric reflections of his inner dread.

Elsewhere, however, we learn that Macbeth's murderous deeds do have what appears to be a direct effect on nature. Consider this speech by Ross in the scene immediately following the murder sequences:

> Thou seest the heavens, as troubled with man's act,
> Threatens his bloody stage. By th'clock 'tis day,
> And yet dark night strangles the traveling lamp.
> Is't night's predominance, or the day's shame,
> That darkness does the face of earth entomb
> When living light should kiss it? (II.iv.,5-10).

The old man's reply to this speech is "'Tis unnatural, / Even like the deed that's done" (10,11). This language suggests that metaphysical forces are rebuking Macbeth's act, answering the darkness of his deed with a literal, perpetual darkness that "entombs" the earth. Later in the scene we also learn of horses eating each other and a falcon killed by "a mousing owl," both of which

occurrences are significant aberrances from natural order, to the same degree, perhaps, that Macbeth's murdering Duncan violates social and moral order (12-17).

These aberrant, inexplicable natural phenomena enhance the natural landscape that from the first scene of the play is populated with mysterious witches and characterized as ambiguous and tainted, full of "fog and filthy air" (I.i.,12). Ambiguity indeed is the very subject of what can be interpreted as the play's equivocal mantra: "fair is foul and foul is fair" (11). As the play opens, the world of Macbeth is in disarray, a state of being which, even before Macbeth's corrupt actions exacerbate it, defines the condition of the play's peculiar universe. This condition is one of dreadful uncertainty and fear, and it is directly linked to the play's Gothic settings.

In King Lear, we can observe the same close relationship between characters' actions and the condition of their natural surroundings. In II.iv., the manic tirade Lear delivers to Goneril and Regan seems punctuated by the first rumblings of the storm; indeed, the exact verbal cue for the storm to begin is the insistent "No, I'll not weep" (II.iv, 283). The storm that ensues could then be read as a symbolic expression of Lear's own shattered and sorrowful psyche. Furthermore, in some characters' minds, including Lear's, the "storm and tempest" that is unleashed on the king in the wilderness comes from an ambiguous source of malevolent preternatural power, "great gods" whose aims are to "find out their enemies" (III.ii.,49,50). This reading of the storm similarly

considers human actions as catalysts to natural—or supernatural—phenomena.

Kent's characterization of the storm in III.ii. acknowledges the force behind it as

angry, terrifying and beyond the scope of human understanding:

> The wrathful skies
> Gallow the very wanderers of the dark
> And make them keep their caves. Since I was man,
> Such sheets of fire, such bursts of horrid thunder,
> Such groans of roaring wind and rain, I never
> Remember to have heard. Man's nature cannot carry
> Th'affliction nor the fear. (III.ii.,43-49).

This is not a typical storm, Kent observes; its tremendous power is so

unprecedented that "since [he] was man" he has never seen its like. The storm is

alive, an untamed creature that roars and groans, and has the capacity to be

"wrathful." This stormy wrath is too terrible, Kent asserts, "th'affliction [and] the

fear" too great, for man's frail nature to endure. All of these characterizations

locate in this tempestuous natural force a malevolent power beyond that of

ordinary storms, and seem to suggest that this malevolence is directed towards the

"wanderers of the dark" as a form of punishment. The storm itself, then, is an

inexplicable, perhaps even metaphysical, power and a source of deep dread, and

as such imbrues the natural settings in King Lear with an atmosphere of Gothic

terror. This terror is intensified, however, by the ambiguity of the phenomenon,

an aspect of the play's natural landscape that I will devote more attention to later

in the discussion.

Nature provides a similarly ominous Gothic landscape in Titus

Andronicus. Jonathan Bate aptly asserts that "the second act of the play moves

swiftly from a cheerful aubade, complete with hunter's peal, to a dark forest,

evoked through a verbal iconography of shadowiness and banefulness" (7). This

forest is the site of Lavinia's rape and mutilation and of Bassianus' murder,

terrors which serve to instigate the brutal tragic actions that dominate the

remainder of the play. The move into the forest is one from order to disorder,

cultivation to wildness. In Act One, a new government takes control of Rome,

and hard-won reconciliations seemingly resolve social conflicts as Saturninus and

Bassianus marry; during the hunting-party in Act Two, this resolution proves

itself false and social order deconstructs as Tamora, Aaron, Demetrius and Chiron

begin their vengeful assault on Titus' family.

The forest, then, becomes the site of Gothic villainies, and, just as in

Macbeth and Lear, the natural environs begin to reflect the characters' actions and

intentions. Consider Tamora's own characterization of her natural surroundings:

> A barren, detested vale you see it is;
> The trees, though summer, yet forlorn and lean,
> O'ercome with moss and baleful mistletoe;
> Here never shines the sun, here nothing breeds
> Unless the nightly owl or fatal raven. (2.2, 93-97).

As Tamora lays her trap for the hapless Lavinia, the forest itself, at least in her

mind, assumes an eerie darkness. This forest, we realize, is mossy and desolate,

dark and imposing, and populated with the same harbinger of gloomy dread that

inhabits Macbeth's castle, a "fatal raven." In its foreshadowing of violence and

its representation of shadowy unease, this forest realm is then yet another

undeniably Gothic setting.

In a more general sense, the temporal setting of <u>Titus Andronicus</u> is, like <u>Macbeth</u> and <u>King Lear</u>, also Gothic. In this case, though, the setting is not squarely within the Dark Ages, but represents the threat of the supposed barbarism of that age as it encroaches upon Roman civilization. The play is set in ancient Rome on the brink of its downfall at the hands of Germanic tribes, among them Goths. The Goths, of course, figure into the plot of <u>Titus</u> significantly, and we know, despite the ostensible perseverance of Titus' legacy through Lucius at the end of the play, that the erstwhile grandeur of Rome is doomed to fall at the hands of pillaging tribes. Again, then, in <u>Titus</u> we have a historical setting in a remote and demonized past, one in which social order was poised to deconstruct and give way to the barbarism of the Dark Ages.

Shakespeare's characters are similarly essential to an understanding of his Gothic vision. The atmospheres I've been discussing only set the stage for these Gothic tragedies; the characters populate it. We've seen already how the frightening landscapes of these three plays become more menacing through their association with the psychic states of chief characters. In addition, many of these characterizations correspond to a variety of Gothic archetypes.

Clifford Davidson notes the archetypal nature of Macbeth's story, characterizing the tragic hero-villain as a "good man who. . . is corrupted by demonic tempters, falls into gross crimes, and plunges his life into an inferno of fear and despair. Like Dr. Faustus, [Macbeth] finds in the end that he has scoured all good from his soul" (1). This comparison of Macbeth to Dr. Faustus

reinforces a Gothic reading of Shakespeare's play, because, as Robert D. Hume

makes explicit in his "Three Varieties of Negative Romanticism," "the pattern of

the traditional Faust story is strikingly recurrent in Dark Romantic writing" (112).

The Faustian story draws dread from the notion that forces of evil can emerge in

the inner lives of human beings. In Macbeth, this internal evil takes the form of

corrupting and consuming ambition.

Macbeth treats his own ambitious desires as antagonists; indeed, the

Gothic terror that is attached to ambition is articulated most famously by Macbeth

himself. Upon first hearing the witches' prophesy, Macbeth is terrified by this

burgeoning ambition:

> 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 smothered in surmise, and nothing is
> But what is not (I.iii.,130-42).

In this initial stage of his character development, the Thane considers his

imagined murder of Duncan "horrible" to the extent that it paralyzes him from

taking further action. Macbeth's discovery of evil at work in his own

consciousness drastically revises his understanding of the world and himself, to

the point that "nothing is / But what is not." The fruits of his ambitions would

have dire consequences, he realizes here, and his terrified paralysis leads him to

the sage conclusion, "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me /

Without my stir" (143-44). Suppressing momentarily his regicidal thoughts, Macbeth resolves to leave his fate in the hands of Providence rather than actively pursue the throne of Scotland through unjust means.

Despite this resolution, Macbeth continues to contemplate his "black and deep desires" in a series of asides and soliloquies (I.iv.50,51). In I.vii., this deliberation reaches a feverish climax as Macbeth considers the numerous consequences of his intended actions in the same breath as he confesses to himself "I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself and falls on th'other" (I.vii.,25-28). Macbeth is profoundly terrified of his own intentions, because he knows that, even despite his hesitancy, his ambition is out of control. In this context, the Gothic horror that antagonizes Macbeth is his own inner demon. Thus, just as Faust does with Mephistopheles, Macbeth makes an implicit pact with this inner demon, bargaining his innocence away for power.

This is not to say, though, that we can find no outwardly located source of evil in Macbeth, or that the only analog to Mephistopheles in the play is Macbeth himself. Lady Macbeth, in her many seductive exhortations to her husband, is also a "demonic tempter;" she frequently demands that Macbeth maintain his resolve, even using his love for her as a bargaining point. In addition, the Weird Sisters, though they never explicitly demand recompense for assisting Macbeth, are portrayed as mysterious and evil forces in the play and are arguably responsible for igniting the flame of Macbeth's ambition. Macbeth's willingness

to associate with these demonized figures and solicit their assistance also attributes Faustian characteristics to the tragically ambitious protagonist of Shakespeare's play.

These Faustian characteristics, though, are not the only elements of Macbeth's personality that invite a Gothic reading of his character. In a more general sense, Macbeth can be considered as a prototype of the Romantic-Gothic quester. This character type is the protagonist in what Thompson calls "high Gothic" narratives, or "demon-quest romance[s], in which a lonely, self-divided hero embarks on insane pursuit of the Absolute;" Thompson goes on to note that "this self-destructive quest is metaphysical, mythic, and religious, defining the hero's dark or equivocal relationship to the universe" (2). Botting contributes to this definition, asserting that "the darker, agonized aspect of Romantic writing has heroes in the Gothic mould: gloomy, isolated and sovereign, they are wanderers, outcasts and rebels, condemned to roam the borders of social worlds" (98). The Gothic-Romantic hero, then, is a lonely and conflicted outcast doomed to wander the borderlands of society in an aimless quest for meaning.

Macbeth suits many of these qualifications. He is certainly self-divided; the passages cited above testify to the intense internal conflict that Macbeth experiences between his essential nature—which Lady Macbeth importantly characterizes as "too full o' th' milk of human kindness—and his intentions (I.v.,16). Furthermore, though he and his wife are initially partners, over the course of the play Macbeth becomes increasingly isolated and outcast, alone in

his hard-won sovereignty. He has his friend and confidant Banquo murdered, his subjects wage rebellion against him and his wife retreats into madness and suicide. Macbeth is also a rebel; he murders the king, orders the deaths of other Scottish nobles and willfully disrupts the course of nature.

Finally, he certainly seems to be on some manic quest for the Absolute, which he seems to define in terms of power, not only over Scotland but, as my explication of Macbeth's psychic corruption of the natural world has established, nature. He also seems obsessed with controlling time. Throughout the play, Macbeth frequently expresses a desire to use time to his advantage; as he contemplates the intended murder of Duncan, he famously wishes "that this blow / Might be the be-all and the end-all—here, / But here upon this bank and shoal of time" (I.vii. 4-6). Macbeth wants to skip the immediate negative consequences of the murder and quickly achieve success; to that end, he surmises that "'twere well / It were done quickly" (1-2). Indeed, this urgency colors Macbeth's actions for much of the play as he attempts to out-run time and the estimated consequences of delay: "Strange things I have in head, that will to hand / Which must be acted ere they may be scanned," he tells his wife before visiting the Sisters for a second time (III.iv.140,41). The Weird Sisters, of course, represent Macbeth's ultimate weapon against time in their apparent ability to see into the future and foretell his fortunes. Macbeth's stranglehold on time is in fact so tight that Macduff is led to declare that "the time is free" after he bests Macbeth in battle (V.viii.55). Macbeth, then, by virtue of these traits can be characterized both as a Faustian

over-reacher and a Romantic-Gothic quester, and as such anticipates later Gothic characterizations such as Shelley's Dr. Frankenstein and Melville's Captain Ahab.

King Lear can also be characterized as a Romantic-Gothic hero. Bereft of his crown, the king is certainly self-divided, perhaps even selfless; the Fool frequently associates the king's crown with his very identity, and the crown has been split between his two daughters, leaving "nothing in the middle" (I.iv., 183). "Now thou art an O without a figure," the Fool taunts; "I am a fool, thou art nothing" (187-89). His self-hood defiled and divided, Lear finds himself alone and outcast; when both Goneril and Regan shut him out, he literally must "roam the borders of social worlds." He shows himself as a rebel, expressing frequent defiance toward his daughters and the cosmos. In these respects, Lear seems to fit Thompson's and Botting's definitions of the Romantic-Gothic hero as a lonely, self-divided outcast.

He also can be suitably defined as a quester. Indeed, however aimlessly the king seems to roam the stormy heath, he often seems to be seeking some unattainable sense of meaning and justice. After witnessing Lear's behavior amidst the storm in Act II, Kent affords this description of the king as:

> Contending with the fretful elements;
> Bids the wind blow the earth into the sea,
> Or swell the curled waters 'bove the main,
> That things might change or cease;
>   . . .
> Strives in this little world of man to outscorn
> The to-and-fro conflicting wind and rain (III.i.,4-11).

Lear is motivated by a desire for divine justice, and he directs his importunities to

the elements "that things might change or cease." At the same time, though, he

"contends" with the very forces he would otherwise invoke to do his bidding,

exemplifying the self-destructive rebellion to which Thompson and Botting refer.

Furthermore, Lear's attempt "in this little world of man to outscorn" the

punishing storm reveals him as at odds with his own insignificance, attempting to

transcend his helplessness through defiance. This tormented struggle for agency

and meaning is often the bane of the Romantic-Gothic hero.

Though these rebellious and tortured Gothic heroes most often assume

center-stage in Shakespeare's tragedies, there is no shortage of Gothic heroines in

these works. Gothic heroines are characteristically virtuous, chaste and naïve, and

often find themselves abducted, and perhaps raped, by seductive and lecherous

rakes. Ann Radcliffe popularized and perfected the Gothic heroine; Botting

describes her female protagonists as "suffer[ing] repeated pursuit and

incarceration at the hands of malevolent and ambitious aristocrats and monks.

Orphans separated from protective domestic structures," he continues, "these

heroines journey through a mysteriously threatening world composed of . . . social

corruption, natural decay and imagined supernatural power" (64). This catalogue

of characteristics quite suitably describes Lavinia, the virtuous daughter of Titus

Andronicus. Like a Radcliffian heroine, Lavinia finds herself in the midst of an

ambiguous forest settling which, as I've established, is an ominous Gothic

landscape. Cut off from her father, who hunts elsewhere in the forest, and the

protective presence of Bassianus, who is murdered before her eyes, Lavinia must contend with the lusty aristocrats Chiron and Demetrius alone. Their rape and mutilation of her by the allowance of their mother is, to echo Botting's description again, the ultimate social corruption.

Ann Williams might disagree with my location of Radcliffian characteristics in Lavinia, though, because the text from which the heroine emerges was produced by a male writer. Williams suggests that the representation of Gothic heroines varies relative to the gender of their authors. "The Male Gothic heroine," she asserts, "is . . . caught in the ideology of a culture that reifies her 'female nature' as curious, inconstant, disobedient, weak, and that places her in a situation where those qualities will lead her into danger" (105). Shakespeare, though, does not portray Lavinia as particularly curious, and she is certainly not inconstant or disobedient. Nor does she seem inordinately weak; she fights as best she can, appealing to her attackers' mercy and firmly defending her own virtue, to the point that she requests death in lieu of the ensuing rape; "O, keep me from their worse-than-killing lust" she importunes Tamora (II.ii., 175). Lavinia, then, is not merely the object of patriarchal disapproval by Shakespeare's text.

She is, however, the object of a certain degree of voyeurism. Williams notes that "Male Gothic plot and narrative conventions . . . focus on female suffering, positioning the audience as voyeurs who, though sympathetic, may take pleasure in female victimization" (104). While it is difficult to gauge the degree

of pleasure Shakespeare might wish us to take in seeing Lavinia victimized, she is

nonetheless put on gratuitous display. We never see the rape enacted on stage,

but Shakespeare does dramatize the initial physical struggle that precedes the act.

In addition, Marcus' speech upon encountering the ravaged Lavinia presents her

as an object of aesthetic fascination:

> Alas, a crimson river of warm blood,
> Like to a bubbling fountain stirred with wind,
> Doth rise and fall between thy rosed lips,
> Coming and going with thy honey breath.
> . . .
> Ah, now thou turn'st away thy face for shame,
> And notwithstanding all this loss of blood,
> As from a conduit with three issuing spouts,
> Yet do thy cheeks look red as Titan's face,
> Blushing to be encountered with a cloud (II.iii., 22-32).

Images of pouring blood are juxtaposed with an aesthetic admiration of Lavinia's

"rosed lips," her "honey breath," and her modest blush. Marcus seems

preoccupied, here, with Lavinia's beauty, and describes it as heroically coexisting

along-side the mark of her ravishment. Her blush is the residual marker of her

tarnished virtue, and as such it meets the approval of Marcus, and perhaps more

broadly, Shakespeare's patriarchal Christian culture, as an emblem of her chaste

nature. Lavinia, then, is rendered an object of voyeuristic fixation and admiration

in what seems to be a very male imagination. She functions both as a strong and

intrepid Radcliffian heroine and as an object of victimization and sensual

fascination. Both of these characterizations emerge later in Gothic fiction.

All of these Gothic protagonists must contend with dreadful circumstances

that serve as collective antagonists to their quests. Quite frequently, these terrible

occurrences emerge in the form of genuine or imagined supernatural phenomena. Shakespeare is often unclear as to the origin of the various supernatural occurrences in his plays, so they invariably evoke the sensibility that Thompson considers the ultimate source of Gothic dread: mystery. In other words, the supernatural in Shakespeare is frightening not just because the events themselves elicit terror, but because they are often ambiguously supernatural and possibly attributable to madness, hallucination or imagination. The latter suggestion is frightening because it calls into question the reliability of human perception and would seem to bespeak a decline from reason into madness. This ambiguity colors much of the supernatural activity in Macbeth and King Lear.

The most common type of supernatural phenomenon portrayed in Shakespearean drama is the ghostly visitation. Hamlet is visited by the ghost of his father; Richard is haunted in his sleep by the spirits of men and women who lost their lives to speed his ascent to the throne; Brutus encounters the ghost of Julius Caesar in his tent before battle; and Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo during a royal banquet. Banquo's visitation of Macbeth is an ambiguous scenario in that the ghost may be merely a vision. None of Macbeth's guests can see the spirit, who occupies the seat at the table reserved for the king. Lady Macbeth chastises her husband for claiming to see the ghost, and makes a revealing connection to another visionary moment in the play. "This is the very painting of your fear," she insists, "This is the air-drawn dagger which you said / Led you to Duncan" (III.iv.,62-64). Macbeth admitted to himself that his vision of the dagger

was mere hallucination; his wife suggests that the same is true of Banquo's ghost.

Shakespeare leaves this issue open to interpretation, and indeed many directors,

perhaps most notably Trevor Nunn in his 1976 production of the play for the

Royal Shakespeare Company, choose not to show the ghost on stage. The

ambiguity of this supernatural circumstance is part of what makes the sequence

frightening.

Indeed, supernatural phenomena abound in <u>Macbeth</u>. The witches and

their seemingly preternatural, prophetic power are the other major example.

Again, Shakespeare isn't clear about the origin or the nature of the phenomenon.

As with the visionary dagger and the appearance of the ghost, Shakespeare allows

for the possibility that the witches' power exists only in Macbeth and Banquo's

minds. Banquo, upon witnessing the mysterious disappearance of the witches

"into the air," suggest the following to his companion: "Were such things here as

we do speak about, / Or have we eaten on the insane root / That takes the reason

prisoner?" (I.iii., 81-85). Later in the scene, Banquo cautions Macbeth that

"oftentimes, to win us to our harm, / The instruments of darkness tell us truths / .

. to betray's / In deepest consequence" (23-26). Here, Banquo warrants that the

witches are perhaps "instruments of darkness," and also implies that their "truths"

are equivocal, and are meant to lead Macbeth to harm. In light of their

precognitive remarks to Macbeth, the witches might not even be prophets; their

predictions come true because Macbeth takes action. Though elsewhere the

Weird Sisters certainly seem to possess some degree of other-worldly agency,

their prophecies about Macbeth aren't portrayed as unequivocally supernatural.

The supernatural phenomena in <u>King Lear</u> are similarly ambiguous. As

I've mentioned, Lear and Kent both seem to ascribe unprecedented supernatural

powers to the storm on the heath, but Shakespeare gives us no reason to believe

them. Greenblatt similarly notes that "the storm in the play seems to several

characters to be of more than natural intensity, and Lear above all tries

desperately to make it *mean* something . . . , but the thunder refuses to speak"

(111). Indeed, for reasons that I'll explicate in greater detail later, the prevailing

sense at the end of this play is that supernatural and metaphysical forces take no

hand at all in determining the course of human existence.

The play similarly resists an unequivocally supernatural reading of

Edgar's madness. In the guise of Tom o' Bedlam, Edgar claims to be possessed

by demons; he introduces himself to Lear as "poor Tom, whom the foul fiend hath

led through fire and through flame" (III.iv., 52-53). Later he claims that "five

fiends have been in poor Tom at once," and throughout Acts III and IV makes

continual reference to demonic voices telling him what to do (IV.i.,60-61). These

claims of supernatural influences on Edgar's behavior can be quickly reasoned

away, though, because Shakespeare is very clear about the fact that Edgar is

acting. "For all the invocation of the gods in <u>King Lear</u>," Greenblatt asserts," it is

clear that there are no devils. Edgar is no more possessed than the sanest of us"

(108). The play, then, like <u>Macbeth</u>, introduces supernatural elements only to

question their validity, and offers the frightening suggestion that demonic forces might be the imaginary constructs of distraught human psyches.

All of these formulaic elements collectively establish that human characters are often the source of Gothic dread in these three plays. Characters' intentions and emotions Gothicize settings and atmospheres; character types exemplify human suffering, fear and desire; and even supernatural phenomena often can be read as the products of characters' imaginations. The Gothic, then, is subjective; the nature of its manifestation varies relative to individual perception. In the next two chapters I will explore ways in which this subjective sensibility carries over into social and religious realms of thought and how Shakespeare's portrayal of human consciousness articulates and problematizes his culture's fear of the unknown.

II: Anomalous Others as Objects of Terror: Gender, Ethnicity, and Shakespeare's

Social Gothic

In 1558, Scottish Calvinist reformer John Knox wrote the following as a

thesis statement of sorts for his "First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous

Regiment of Women":

> To promote a Woman to beare rule, superioritie, dominion, or empire
> above any Realme, Nation, or Citie, is repugnant to Nature; contumelie to
> God, a thing most contrarious to his reveled will and approved ordinance;
> and finallie, it is the subversion of good Order, of all equitie and justice
> (373).

Knox here sets up feminine rule as un-natural, ungodly, and overall harmful to

society and the state. He attempts to justify Biblical patriarchy through a

characterization of women as "blind . . . weak, . . . sick, . . . foolish, madde, and

phrenetike," and therefore unfit to rule a country (373). These stereotypes, and

their supposed foundation in scripture, seem generally representative of

widespread views about women in Early Modern culture. Biblical assertions—

and their interpretations by figures like Knox—coupled with associations of

femininity with frailty and subservience seem to have held general currency

amongst Early Moderns, even those who were less radical in their anti-feminist

notions than Knox.

It is of course significant that this polemic was written in the same year

that Elizabeth I gained the throne of England; its rhetoric applies directly to

Elizabeth, and also to her cousin, Mary Queen of Scots, whose reign in Knox's

homeland was also contemporaneous to the writing of his treatise. This historical

context and the cultural associations upon which Knox draws seem useful in framing the way that Shakespeare's plays represent the relationship between patriarchy and feminine power. In <u>Macbeth</u>, <u>King Lear</u> and <u>Titus Andronicus</u>, women are sources both for significant power and tangible evil. One might even go so far as to characterize women in these plays as Gothic antagonists whose literal and figurative sorcery corrupts the tragically ambitious Macbeth; whose filial ingratitude and tyranny terrorize and drive to madness King Lear; and whose barbarous "otherness" solicits and condones the rape and murder of Titus Andronicus' offspring. This reading of these plays insists that women can wield power, and that their potential is not, as Knox would assert, limited merely to their domesticity and subservience; but it also suggests that feminine power, however tangible it can be, is nonetheless monstrous and corrupt, and as such a source of Gothic dread.

This anxiety about feminine power springs from an apparent cultural assumption amongst Early Modern male writers that insists upon the "otherness" of women; this social othering seeks to limit feminine agency to the domestic sphere, and locates subordinate positions for them under a patriarchal system. Thus, women who violate their socially-sanctioned gender roles become the objects of censure and fear. Shakespeare seems to transfer this anxiety about the social and religious aberrance of feminine power into his plays. What I seek to demonstrate is that the feminine is problematized, demonized and strengthened in all three plays as part of an ongoing cultural discourse on the danger of feminine

power; and that this manifold demonization of powerful women in the texts might also serve to enhance the fear of feminine rule articulated by figures such as John Knox and reinforced, perhaps, by the behavior of James Stuart, the first male monarch in England after Queen Elizabeth and the king for whose court <u>Macbeth</u> and <u>King Lear</u> were first performed.

In the first section of this chapter, I will evaluate this problematic representation of the feminine in <u>Macbeth</u> in light of the Elizabethan and Jacobean fascination with a culturally-acknowledged and reviled source of feminine power: witchcraft. In the late sixteenth century, a young King James VI participated in a large-scale persecution of witches that was spurred by a series of alleged events in 1590 in which large gatherings of witches—one on Lammath's Eve, another larger one on All Hallow's Eve—invoked the devil's aid to kill the king (Willis 126). During the latter of these two events, the devil himself was reported to have appeared, demanding allegiance and exhorting his followers to act with him against the king (126). Large numbers of alleged witches were tried for treason in Scotland over the course of the following decade, many likely at the behest of King James (128).

James, then, clearly felt threatened by the supposed power of witchcraft, and acted out his fears and suspicions through this series of Scottish witch trials. Some have speculated, though, that James might have felt equally threatened by the same trend of feminine rule that John Knox condemned in his Calvinist anti-feminist polemic. Deborah Willis notes that "though James was a king, his power

was in significant ways limited by and dependent on queens who out-ranked him"
(124). She refers specifically to his mother Mary Queen of Scots and his cousin
Elizabeth I, and suggests that "beholden to both of these women in important
ways, James also experienced them as threats to his secure possession of the
crown and as instigators of aristocratic conspiracies against him" (125). In
multiple ways, then, we can see potential reasons for James to fear—and desire to
undermine—feminine power.

This implied desire on James' part to contain and understand feminine
power—particularly the tangible power that female witches were alleged to
wield—seems interestingly concurrent with the development of a new definition
of the source of witches' agency: the notion of the demonic pact (Willis 122).
Initially, witchcraft was defined as a *malificium*, or source of harm, perpetrated by
"fantastical and devilish persons" who "devised and practiced invocations and
conjurations of evil and wicked spirits, and have used and practiced witchcrafts . .
. to the destruction of the persons and goods of their neighbors" (Sharpe 90). This
definition of the social ills caused by witchcraft suggests that practitioners of such
a craft had a maleficent power all their own with which they could conjure and
invoke spiritual agents, and that they were not viewed, as James Sharpe suggests,
to be in direct alliance with the devil (90). Later in the century, though, Willis
explains, "the witch as an autonomous agent, a sorceress exerting powers over the
supernatural . . . became in the new formulation the denigrated servant of the
devil, a mere vessel of a distinctly male power" (122).

Indeed, in <u>Daemonology</u>, James' 1597 treatise on the occult, witches are defined as being in league with Satan. What's more, women are considered as particularly susceptible to the devil's charms. When posed the question "What can be the cause that there are twentie women given to that craft, where ther is one man," Philomathes (one of two speakers in the dialogue) responds, "the reason is easy, for as that sex is frailer than man is, so is it easier to be intrapped in these grosse snares of the Devill, as was over well proved to be true, by the Serpents deceiving of Eva at the beginning, which makes him the homelier with that sexe"(28). James' document uses the age-old scriptural insistence upon feminine frailty as the basis for his claim that women are more likely, by virtue of their susceptibility to evil, to become witches. This misogynistic gesture divests female witches of the power once ascribed to them by the notion of the *maleficium*, and might, as Willis suggests, "serve a defensive function for men . . . by writing out the possibility of a special female power over the supernatural" (123).

However valid we may consider this speculation, it is certainly at least safe to say that James I was troubled by the supposed existence of witches and their threat to his throne. A turbulent legacy of attempted regicide lay in James' wake at the time of his succession to the English throne, and witchcraft was a frequent topic in the dominant cultural discourse of early Jacobean England. In addition, the king had also suffered another attempt on his life in the form of Guy Fawkes' infamous 1606 Gunpowder Plot, the failed execution of which was

contemporaneous to the completion, and perhaps initial performance, of <u>Macbeth</u>

(Honan 330-31). Shakespeare was certainly drawing on this cultural milieu at the

time he wrote <u>Macbeth</u>; indeed, since this tragedy was set to perform at James'

court, Shakespeare may very well have been consciously appealing to the king's

obsession with the occult and the very recent threat of regicide. That witchcraft

becomes represented by female characters in Shakespeare's drama should come

as no surprise given the dominant cultural stereotypes. What is most questionable

and pertinent to this discussion is the nature of this feminine representation. Are

the ambassadors of femininity in this text witches with significant personal

agency, decidedly in control of the supernatural forces with which they associate,

or are they rather mere puppets to a greater, patriarchal evil? In either case, in

what manner does the text resolve the problem they represent? I would suggest

that the force of feminine power in <u>Macbeth</u>, however problematic and demonic,

still lingers unvanquished even at the play's conclusion. What results from this is

a prevailing sense of Gothic dread that is explicitly linked to the problem of

feminine insubordination and the susceptibility of women to evil.

This insubordination is both social and physical. Concurrent with their

transgression of social roles, women in this play seem physically masculinized.

Though the witches, for example, are still gendered female, their grotesque

androgyny violates patriarchal (and stereotypical) definitions of femininity.

Women in <u>Macbeth</u>, then, disrupt patriarchal expectations in their possession of

unnatural agency and in their apparent androgyny; both violations, because they

confound patriarchal stereotypes, are sources of suspicion and terror.

The representation of Lady Macbeth in the play seems perhaps the greatest

illustration of Gothicized female authority and androgyny. Consider Lady

Macbeth's famous speech in which she invokes the aid of supernatural forces:

> Come, you spirits
> That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
> And fill me from the crown to the toe topful
> Of direst cruelty. Make thick my blood;
> Stop up th'access and passage to remorse
> That no compunctious visitings of nature
> Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between
> Th'effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts
> And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,
> Whatever in your sightless substances
> You wait on nature's mischief (I.v.39-49).

Lady Macbeth must shirk her femininity in order to execute her "fell purpose;"

she must be "unsexed," and her mother's milk must transform to gall.

Furthermore, she must repudiate nature utterly and be possessed not only of

physical transformation but a psychologically unnatural—perhaps even

masculine—cruelty. Femininity, this speech suggests, should be passive and

kind, in accordance with "compunctious" nature. Lady Macbeth, it would appear,

must undergo a masculine transformation at the hands of outside forces if she is to

execute her designs.

It should be noted, though, that Lady Macbeth's sorcery here is not

explicitly indebted to a source of patriarchal power. The forces she invokes are

androgynous "sightless substances;" there is no suggestion here that she calls

upon a male source of evil. Also, she seems to possess a certain power to invoke these forces. Lady Macbeth, then, if we are to view her even metaphorically as a witch, is more appropriately defined in terms of the *maleficium* as opposed to the notion of the demonic pact. Peter Stallybrass notes that Lady Macbeth "subverts patriarchal authority" here (197). Her relationship to her husband heightens this sensibility. In the letter she reads aloud at the beginning of this same scene, Macbeth refers to her as "my dearest *partner* of greatness," which suggests that their marriage does not function on exclusively patriarchal terms (I.v.10-11, emphasis mine). If anything, the balance of power seems to favor the Lady. She sets into motion the initial plan to murder Duncan, requesting of Macbeth, "leave all the rest to me" (1.v.72). She manipulates Macbeth as his determination wanes, using love as bargaining power—"From this time / Such I account thy love" (I.vii.,38-9)—and attacking his manhood—"When you durst do it, then you were a man" (I.vii. 49). In these early sequences, Lady Macbeth is perhaps the most active agent in terms of actually achieving influence over the events of the play. One could argue that, were it not for the Lady's urgent and seductive exhortations, Macbeth likely would have remained "infirm of purpose" (II.ii., 56).

It seems fitting to say, however, that Lady Macbeth's agency rapidly diminishes over the course of the play. She is not party to the murders of Banquo and the Macduff household—the newly transformed and hardened Macbeth asks that she "be innocent of the knowledge," a request that he follows with an invocation of "black agents" that explicitly echoes Lady Macbeth's own (III.ii,

46, 54). And though she scolds her husband for his lack of social graces during the banquet scene, she never regains the degree of influence established for her in the beginning of the play. Her reappearance as a somnambulistic wraith in Act V demonstrates her final susceptibility to remorse, and her suicide, mentioned in passing in Malcolm's final speech, quite conclusively resolves the problem of her unnatural agency by removing it altogether. Lady Macbeth, then, for all the power she exerts over the dramatic action early in the play, does seem finally to be the object of patriarchal censure by the text, her death allowing the perseverance of male dominance.

This is not the case, however, with the witches. An unsettling trio of Gothicized others, the Weird Sisters represent the other great threat to patriarchal order in the play, and they operate symbolically as similarly masculinized figures. Upon their first appearance, Banquo famously notes "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (I.iii.45-7). Though Banquo's tone here is likely one of confusion, the word "should" could be read as a patriarchal imperative, and suggests an implicit disdain for the witches' divergence from their socially-ascribed gender distinctions. The witches also seem able to exert a maleficent power similar to Lady Macbeth's. Significantly, their malice seems largely to be directed at men. In I.iii, the First Witch divulges her plan to thwart a sailor whose wife insulted her, and shows "a pilot's thumb, / Wreck'd as homeward he did come" to her sisters as a trophy from a former exploit (I.iii. 28-9). Both of these examples point to a desire, at least on the First

Witch's part, to gleefully destroy domestic unions: both of the men whose

seaward missions she thwarts have wives at home waiting for them. The witches'

sorcery, then, poses at least an indirect threat to the rule of patriarchy. Of course,

as I've mentioned, the witches don't seem directly to cast a spell on Macbeth;

they merely have the gift of prophesy. It can be argued, though, that the mere

suggestion of his future fortunes is enough to set the Faustian Macbeth on the

course toward regicide.

Though the witches in this example fit into the *maleficium* model set forth

in the 1563 statute, elsewhere the text suggests that the sisters serve a higher

power to which they turn for guidance. Their supposed master, however, is

Hecate, the Greek goddess of magic. The witches, if they are subordinate to a

higher power, are subject to a feminine pagan deity, not the patriarchal Christian

devil suggested by James' <u>Demonology</u> and other contemporary tracts on the

occult. This is a further representation of the threat of feminine rule in the play,

and it comes from a characteristically non-Christian system of iconography.

Feminine power—at least as represented by the witches—may be seen, then, to

exist in a context outside the boundaries of Christian hegemony. As such, the

witches are quintessentially Gothic "others" in whom Shakespeare locates an

ambiguous and unsettling terror.

Stallybrass' argument undermines the agency of the witches, though, in its

final assertion that, by the end of the play and the defeat of Macbeth at the hands

of Macduff, "the Witches can simply disappear, their evil supplanted by the

prophetic vision of Banquo's line and by the 'heavenly gift of prophecy' and 'miraculous work' (IV.iii. 157 and 147) of a legitimate king" (201-2). This reading, however tempting in its suggestion of thematic closure in this persistently—perhaps self-consciously—equivocal play, isn't entirely convincing. It seems dismissive to say that the witches can simply "disappear." Literally they do, though their mere failure to physically re-emerge does not effectively write their influence out of the play. Without being explicitly defeated, the witches, with all their outwardly located supernatural power, remain a threat at the end of the play. What's more, Malcolm's virtuous nature never completely survives his own vehement self-censure in IV.iii.; though he later denies the list of vices confessed in this scene, we never get an explicit articulation of his motives for lying. He could have been attempting to test Macduff's loyalty to Scotland, and renounced his own false confession upon seeing the thane's plaintive response; or he could have genuinely been confessing his manifold faults and denied them later out of self-interest. Shakespeare's failure to resolve this equivocal dilemma leaves the end of <u>Macbeth</u> open to further catastrophe. There is a faint suggestion at the end of the play that tyranny might continue in the figure of the new monarch. This allows the play's pervasive atmosphere of Gothic dread to remain prevalent even as the curtain closes.

Indeed, James himself might have perceived the threat of the unvanquished witches as particularly grave if we consider the king's direct relationship to the events documented in the play. James Stuart was a distant

descendant of the historical Banquo; he was then one of the many prosperous kings mentioned in the witches' prophecy. James was recently reminded of his legendary heritage during a 1605 sojourn to Oxford, when three boys in a welcoming pageant hailed the king as the descendant of Banquo, to whose offspring "eternal rule was promised by immortals" (Honan 330). James could easily have considered this fact as proof of the witches' existence and of their prophetic power. The three witches, after all, are explicitly mentioned in Hector Beothius' Scotorum Historiae, the main source of Holinshed's "The Chronicle of Scotland," which itself is one of Shakespeare's primary source texts for Macbeth (Bullough 436-37). Undefeated, still potentially roaming the foggy moors of Scotland, the Weird Sisters could be perceived to pose a lingering threat to James' patriarchal dynasty.

Patriarchy, then, might not completely recover in this fictionalized re-telling of history, either due to the lingering threat of feminine agency or the corruptibility of the new ruler. This is perhaps part of Shakespeare's tragic vision, and certainly part of what makes this play Gothic. In Macbeth, we can see Shakespeare answering specifically to relevant cultural fears in his attempt to define and shape the force of evil. Though patriarchal figures are also often the source of terror and villainy in Shakespeare (Macbeth himself and the similarly Faustian Richard III are the most immediate examples), in Macbeth evil is represented most tangibly by the unnatural shirking of gender boundaries, particularly in unruly and grotesque female characters. This depiction very likely

answers to the particular concerns about the consequences of witchcraft and feminine rule expressed by James I and his contemporaries.

King Lear also projects this Gothic terror of monstrous women in the execution of its tragic vision. In the case of Lear, though, the anxiety about feminine rule that is embedded in Macbeth becomes a central thematic concern. Lear himself is obsessively misogynistic after his banishment to the heath; his bitter censure of Goneril and Regan and his developing conception of Cordelia as a virtuous foil to their filial ingratitude establish two polar models for feminine behavior. Cordelia, in her refusal of insincere devotional rhetoric and her heroic passivity, seems to represent an ideal, whereas Goneril and Regan, in their aberrance from both, represent the opposite. Thus, as in Macbeth, female Gothic antagonists are rendered such through their repudiation of socially-ascribed gender roles and their perceived threat to patriarchal norms; moreover, their villainy is expressed through language that associates them with, to use Lear's own interjection, "darkness and devils" (I.iv.246).

This evolving portrait of Goneril and Regan as devilish monstrosities begins with the Fool's foreboding comments to Lear. The Fool throughout the play serves as the harbinger of dark wisdom and seems gifted with significant foresight. He mocks Lear for dividing his kingdom between Goneril and Regan and predicts that nothing but calamity will result from such an act. "E'er since thou mad'st thy daughters thy mothers," he taunts; "thou gav'st them the rod, and put'st down thy own breeches" (I.iv.167-69). Lear is now in a subordinate

position, the Fool notes, and as such is subject to punishment at the hands of his daughters. At this point of the play, the audience has been made aware of Goneril's intentions to punish Lear for his "gross crimes," and for the supposed misconduct of his knights; in a speech to Oswald, she declares that her purpose is "not to be overruled," even by her father, and she anticipates the Fool's comparison of Lear to an unruly child: "Now, by my life, / Old fools are babes again, and must be used / With checks as flatteries, when they are seen abused" (I.iii. 4,16, 18-20). This filial insubordination reverses Goneril's and Lear's social roles, to the extent that Lear is rendered a "babe" to be "used" as his daughters see fit.

The Fool, then, is right to assume that Lear has laid himself bare to his daughters' punitive intentions, and, after Goneril enters to deliver her punishment, he sings an ominous song to Lear prophesying the grim result of his daughters' tyranny: "The hedge-sparrow fed the cuckoo so long / That it's had it head bit off by it young. / So out went the candle, and we were left darkling" (I.iv.210-12). The unnaturally ravenous cuckoos, of course, are Goneril and Regan, and their ungrateful act of metaphorically biting the head off their caregiver seems to have apocalyptic consequences. The state of Britain, now headless, will fall to disarray, the Fool predicts, leaving its citizens in darkness.

The Fool's analogy is only one in a series of comparisons that associate Goneril and Regan with animals; these associations all collectively condemn the two sisters as unnatural and monstrous. Significantly, many of the animals to

which the women are compared are predators. When Regan asks Gloucester why he sent the king to Dover, he replies indignantly "Because I would not see thy cruel nails / Pluck out his poor old eyes; nor thy fierce sister / In his anointed flesh stick boarish fangs" (III.vii.57-59). The boar is the same animal that establishes Richard III's predatory nature, and it serves a similar purpose here. Later in the play, Albany declares to Goneril that she and her sister are "Tigers not daughters" (IV.ii.41). Perhaps most significantly, though, Lear earlier bemoans the fact that his daughters' treatment of him inflicts a pain that is "sharper than a serpent's tooth" (I.iv.284). This associates Goneril and Regan with the traditional Biblical representation of Satan: the serpent. Here we see Shakespeare using Judeo-Christian iconography to establish Goneril's and Regan's monstrous natures. These associations imply a system of moral reasoning akin to that of Knox, who similarly views feminine power as a "monstrous" aberrance.

Albany employs the same system of moral reasoning when he tries to convince his wife of her unnatural behavioral transformation, and again compares Goneril to Satan. "See thyself devil: / Proper deformity seems not in the fiend / So horrid as in woman" (IV.ii.61-62). Two lines later he continues his diatribe: "Thou changed and self-covered thing, for shame / Bemonster not thy feature" (63-64). Goneril is portrayed here as a monstrous, devilish "thing" whose monstrosity is more appalling because she is a woman. Again, the text seems to embrace patriarchal Christian expectations for femininity, here; Goneril is the object of censure because she rebels against the natural rule of her father and her

husband, whom she describes in this scene as a "milk-livered man" (51).

Furthermore, the language that alludes to her transformation—"changed,"

"deformity," "bemonster"—suggests a gradual descent into evil and, perhaps,

Satanic temptation. This echoes the assertion in James' Daemonologie that

women are more susceptible to the charms of the devil. Though he is not

exclusively portrayed as such, one could at moments in the play argue for

Edmund as an analog to Satan; in this same scene, Goneril promises her

"woman's services" to Edmund, and later in the play poisons her sister in order to

have him to herself. Thus, Goneril's function as a Gothic antagonist is predicated

on both her unnatural, tyrannical power and her susceptibility to the seductions of

the devilish Edmund.

This misogynistic demonization of the feminine in King Lear is

manifested most pervasively, though, in the play's sustained rhetorical attack on

female sexuality. Kathleen McKluskie notes that "the misogyny of King Lear . . .

is constructed out of an ascetic tradition which presents women as the source of

the primal sin of lust" (146). During Act Four, while in the throes of madness,

Lear makes just such a condemnatory gesture in relation to women's bodies:

> Down from the waist they are centaurs,
> Though women all above.
> But to the girdle do the gods inherit.
> Beneath is all the fiend's.
> There's hell, there's darkness, there is the sulphurous
> pit; burning, scalding, stench, consumption (IV.vi.124-29).

Lear Gothicizes his daughters' genitalia here with a strange mixture of fantastical

imagery, some pagan, some Christian. This commingling of iconography serves a

common purpose, though, and that is to associate the female body "down from the

waist" with obscenity and devilry. Natural body odors become the stench of a

"sulphurous pit," and the entire physical domain from the waist down is

characterized as hellish and dark. Edgar anticipates this imagery in III.iv., where

he describes sexual intercourse as "the act of darkness" (87). Even before his

descent into madness, Lear curses Goneril's "organs of increase," bidding Nature

to dry them up and "into her womb convey sterility," both as a blow to her

posterity and, supposedly, as a means of curtailing the reproduction of her

monstrosity (I.iv.275,74). These diatribes combine to render female sexuality

itself as a Gothic antagonist in the play in its capacity to threaten marital unions

and spawn, through adulterous liaisons, monstrous anomalies such as Edmund.

Shakespeare Gothicizes the feminine on a larger scale in this play, though,

in his traditional gendering of cosmic forces as female. Fortune and nature are

two of the imagined metaphysical villains in the play, generally portrayed as cruel

and corrupt. The Fool refers to fortune as "that arrant whore" (II.iv.51), and much

later in the play Lear characterizes himself as "the natural fool of fortune"

(IV.vi.190-91). In II.ii., Kent solicits Fortune's aid, bidding her to "smile once

more; turn thy wheel," ultimately to no avail (173). Nature is also commonly

gendered female, and indeed Edmund declares her as his "goddess," to whose law

his "services are bound" (I.ii). Nature is arguably represented in the punishing

storm, which I've already established as an ambiguous and unsettling Gothic

antagonist in the play. Of course, not all cosmic forces in the play are gendered

female—there is frequent reference to male gods who are equally cruel and

indifferent—but the allusions to corrupt fortune and wrathful nature complete a

general portrait of Gothicized femininity in Shakespeare's tragedy.

Femininity is similarly Gothicized in <u>Titus Andronicus</u>, perhaps the most

macabre of Shakespeare's plays. Here, though, the anxiety about female authority

that begets the demonization of powerful women is focused on one character:

Tamora, the Goth queen whose vendetta against Titus helps set the events of the

play's gruesome tragic plot in motion. Tamora, like Goneril, Regan and Lady

Macbeth, is portrayed as a monstrosity in the play because, in violation of

patriarchal expectations, she craves and attains power over male characters. In

I.i, in an aside which establishes her plot to ruin Titus, she demands of Saturninus

"My lord, be ruled by me, be won at last," to which the newly appointed emperor

replies, "my empress hath prevailed" (446, 466). Lines later, she is similarly

insistent, though this time under the guise of friendship to Titus and his sons,

punctuating her request "we must all be friends" with a terse "I will not be

denied" (486). Tamora makes a successful bid for dominance here that is closely

analogous to Lady Macbeth's "leave all the rest to me," and Goneril's declared

intention "not to be overruled," both of which speech-acts suggest that the women

envision themselves as being outside the rule of husbands and fathers. This is

perhaps all secondary to Tamora's status as queen of her own people; as ruler of

the Goths, she is perhaps the ultimate example of a woman in a seat of power that is normally reserved for patriarchs.

Of course, by subduing Saturninus' authority as she does, Tamora also establishes herself as empress of Rome. This seizure of political dominance is indicative of what Marion Wynne-Davies describes as "a misogynistic stereotype of the scheming woman perversely taking political power and sexual freedom" (226). For Wynne-Davies, Tamora is demonized, like Goneril and Regan, not only because of her bid for power and sway over men, but for what is perhaps her means to that end, sexuality. Through Tamora, then, the text lodges a patriarchal critique of a sexualized and dominant woman, to the extent that female sexuality itself becomes an object of disdain and, again, a source of terror.

Wynne-Davies cites as evidence a crucial passage in II.ii., when Martius slips and falls into a "subtle hole" to which he and his brother, in a sustained rhetorical display, ascribe vaginal characteristics. The language has graphic sexual connotations; Quintus describes the hole's "mouth" as "covered with rude-growing briers," and warns his brother that it is "a very fatal place" (II.ii.199,202). Marcus counters with a description of the trap as an "unhallowed and bloodstained hole," then later as a "detested, dark, blood-drinking pit" (210, 224). Shakespeare echoes this language explicitly in the passage cited above from <u>King Lear</u> in which Lear describes the female genitals as "the sulphurous pit" of hell and darkness. Wynne-Davies makes the same comparison, and notes of the <u>Titus</u> passage that "[this] imagery is blatant, the cave being the vagina, the

all-consuming sexual mouth of the feminine earth, which remains outside the patriarchal order of Rome" (218). She makes an important connection, here, to the "otherness" of the feminized forest setting as compared to urban, rational, masculine Rome. The forest is Tamora's domain, a "detested vale" that is the site of sexually-charged atrocity. Indeed, Wynne-Davies asserts that Lavinia's rape, itself a Gothic horror, "is the enactment of a more pervasive assault in the play on that which is feminine" (218). Lavinia's violation, in other words, is the result of and the punishment for Tamora's monstrous feminine agency and sexuality. Thus, just as in Macbeth and Lear, the feminine in Titus Andronicus is portrayed as an irrational, perhaps incomprehensible, unknown; the mystery of femininity, and its assumed hyper-sexuality, is a source of social dread. Tamora is the ultimate representation of this cultural anxiety, a fictitious scapegoat upon whom fear of feminine authority and sexuality is acted out in grotesque exaggeration.

Tamora's otherness, however, is not solely defined by her status as a politically and sexually dominant woman. An ambassador of the presumably barbarous Germanic northern lands, Tamora's ethnicity marks her as an "other" to the Romans just as surely as does her repudiation of female subordination. This demarcation between Romans and Goths was familiar to Elizabethans. Francesca T. Royster notes that "in Shakespeare's time the more compelling image of the Goth was that of an embarrassing distant cousin," and that in Titus Andronicus the Goths are therefore "the voices of the play's basest motives" (437). The reason Royster locates for this is the Elizabethan urge to emulate Roman culture;

"humanism," she asserts "had taught England to worship the works and ways of ancient Rome and to regard with shame the barbarity of their own ancestors" (437).

Richmond Barbour finds an explicit record of this Elizabethan disdain for ancient Germanic tribes in William Camden's "Britannia." Camden's text makes a firm distinction between the Britons, who painted their pale skin with tribal markings, and "those fair white folke, the martiall Germans" (quoted in Barbour, 146). Barbour notes of this that "Camden . . . associates white skin not with native virtue but with teutonic invaders . . . and . . . insists 'I would have no man . . . raise a slander on the Britons, or thinke them to be issuede from the savage cruell Hunnes'" (146). This consideration of Germanic tribes as more barbaric than the ancient Britons produces an attitude of cultural superiority that is clearly articulated in Titus Andronicus. Recalling Williams' Gothic binaries, we can then read Titus Andronicus as a text that documents with a certain level of cultural anxiety the fall of Roman reason and civilization to Gothic barbarism and social disarray. In this dichotomous schematic, Tamora's is the voice of the barbarous, pale-skinned "other" whose savagery threatens the patriarchal civil order of Titus' Rome.

The text portrays this distinction through a significant amount of language devoted to Tamora's whiteness. When Saturninus first begins to articulate his infatuation with the Goth queen, he describes her pallor as "the hue / that I would choose were I to choose anew," and later asserts that Tamora's beauty

"overshine[s] the gallant'st dames of Rome" (I.i.265-6, 321-2). This devotional

language establishes Tamora's whiteness as distinct from that of the Romans;

Saturninus admits that she is whiter than he is, and the verb he chooses to

commend her exotic beauty, "outshines," seems to ascribe a stark luminescence to

Tamora that differs from the complexion of Roman women. This language,

Royster asserts, characterizes Tamora as "hyperwhite" (1). Reference to this

whiteness, however, is far from exclusively commendatory. As Chiron and

Demetrius prepare to abduct and rape Lavinia under the supervision of their

mother, Lavinia implores of her violators "O do not learn her wrath : she taught it

thee. / The milk thou suckst from her did turn to marble" (II.ii.343-44). This

trope is meant foremost to signify Tamora's repudiation of her maternal instinct—

much like Lady Macbeth's aforementioned invocation of dark forces to turn her

milk to gall—and to suggest that Chiron and Demetrius' cruelty has been passed

to them from their mother. Marble, though, has very distinct connotations, here;

the matter to which Tamora's breast milk is metaphorically transformed can be

characterized as cold, hard and, most significant to this discussion, white. Lavinia

uses this image of nurturing breast-milk hardened into white marble as a

metonymy for Tamora's own Gothic whiteness, and all that it connotes.

Tamora's ethnic distinction, then, is here made into a symbol for her barbarous

cruelty.

This ethnic otherness makes Tamora analogous to Aaron the Moor, her

scheming partner in blood-vengeance. Aaron is of course another Gothic

antagonist whose ethnicity in part renders him an object of uncertainty and fear. The text produces through Aaron some conventionally ethnocentric symbolic associations of black skin with base motives. Bassianus attributes Tamora's corruptibility to her relationship with Aaron, asserting to her that "your swart Cimmerian / Doth make your honor of his body's hue, / Spotted, detested and abominable" (II.ii.72-74). Aaron, like Iago a self-consciously cruel character, confesses a desire to "have his soul black like his face," and thus himself seems to ratify Bassianus' suggestions. Aaron's otherness, then, is also considered somehow productive of villainy, his black skin a feature that signifies a black soul.

Aaron, however, also participates in the text's rhetorical attack on whiteness. When admiring the bastard child Tamora bears him in IV.ii., Aaron reproaches Chiron and Demetrius' pallor, asserting that "coal-black is better than another hue / In that it scorns to bear another hue;" he echoes this rhetoric lines later, describing whiteness as a "treacherous hue, that will betray with blushing / The close enacts and counsels of [the] heart" (101-02; 119-20). For Royster, these are crucial passages to the text's inversion of traditional black/white binaries. Aaron's speeches, she asserts, contort traditional racial associations in order "to embrace blackness as a sign of permanence and constancy" (443). From Aaron's point of view, whiteness is an anomaly, and, according to Royster, it is hence "denaturalized" by the text, and "racialized in reference to this community's most precarious subgroups: the Goths, who are on the margins of

belonging" (443). Aaron himself, though, is also on the margins of belonging,

and his declaration that blackness can betray nothing with blushing is easily

equated, as Royster notes, with the notion that "to be black is to have a natural

aptitude for dissembling" (443). The text here produces an ethnocentric distrust of

Aaron's deceptive nature, othering him even in the midst of adopting his

perspective. That Tamora chooses as her lover and co-conspirator this similarly

marginalized and vitriolic figure seems to bespeak a sense of alliance amongst

"othered" characters against the rational norms of the Romans. Thus, in Titus

Andronicus we have a pair of Gothic antagonists, both of whom are marginalilzed

for their ethnicity, considered terrible in the world of the play, it would seem, not

only for their cruel intentions, but also for their unsettling otherness and the threat

it supposedly poses to social and moral stability.

This perceived threat—or deliberate challenge—to stability, reason, and

order and the anxiety it produces are at the very root of Gothicism. Shakespeare's

texts reflect uneasy distrust of marginal figures and their capacity to upset an

already delicate social balance; in tragic plot formulae, these threats become

reality. In all three plays I've discussed, social order is overturned, and in all

three plays, powerful women have a hand in the upheaval. The collapse that

results, however, has implications on a scale that is wider than the material and

political. Shakespeare's characters, in keeping with the trend of metaphysical

contemplation in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, continually trace the

source of their political unrest, material ruin and personal despair to the presumed

creator of the world they live in. The inscrutable mystery of the divine is thus another tangible source of dread in these three brutal tragedies, one central to an understanding of Shakespeare's Gothic vision. I'll now turn to a discussion of Shakespeare's powerful expression of this religious dread and existential angst and its importance to the Gothic aesthetic.

III: "The Undiscovered Country": Religious Dread in Shakespearean

Tragedy

The Gothic at its most basic level expresses and explores dread of the

unknown. Consider, then, this excerpt from Shakespeare's most famous speech:

> Who would fardels bear
> To grunt and sweat under a weary life
> But that the dread of something after death,
> The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
> No traveler returns, puzzles the will,
> And makes us rather bear those ills we have
> Than fly to others that we know not of? (Ham. III.i.76-82).

Hamlet has had a glimpse of the afterlife through the "perturbed spirit" of his

father; here he asserts that bearing the pain and strife of everyday life is a more

desirable alternative than death, which for Hamlet, perhaps because of the

inexplicable ghostly visitation, carries a significant amount of dread. Hamlet

characterizes death as the ultimate unknown, "the undiscovered country;" for

Shakespeare's Christian audience, this is the expression of profound religious

doubt in that it professes no unequivocal faith in the existence of a heavenly

afterlife. The fate of the soul after the death of the body remains for Hamlet a

mystery, and as such, to invoke G.R. Thompson's definition of the Romantic-

Gothic once again, it is "productive of a nameless apprehension that may be

called religious dread in the face of the wholly *other*" (3). This kind of

metaphysical uncertainty easily transforms into a dread of death and, in extreme

cases, dread of God, the presumed creator of the universe and the arbiter of

human affairs.

Religious dread is a prominent characteristic in a great deal of eighteenth and nineteenth century Gothic fiction. Abbeys and monasteries—and their inhabitants—are the source of terror and villainy in many Gothic novels, perhaps most notably in Matthew Lewis' The Monk, in which one of the ghostly antagonists is a frightening apparition called the Bleeding Nun and the title character is an amoral rapist and murderer. Given these settings and characterizations, an important plot device in Gothic fiction is then punishment for sins; Joel Porte notes that "what is represented with great force and conviction [in these novels] is a religious drama, the dark rites of sin, guilt and damnation" (45). Thus, in The Monk the antagonist pays for his sins with a literal trip to hell at the novel's climax. Conclusions like these stir up a fear of divine retribution in their readers, threatening would-be sinners with a portrait of a punishing, wrathful God.

This sensibility can be found in Shakespearean drama, though Shakespeare's tragedies are too pluralistic to avow even the existence of the Judeo-Christian God with any degree of certainty, much less indulge in a singular portrait either of his mercy or his cruelty. The image of God that emerges in Shakespearean tragedy is highly ambiguous. There are numerous avowals of God's existence from characters, as well as a number of references to his mercy and justice, but there is a greater abundance, particularly in the tragedies, of language that questions God's justice and even disavows his existence. Given the pre-Christian settings of some Shakespearean tragedies, there is even a great deal

of language that references polytheistic religious theories; pagan gods are then

likewise invoked, worshiped, scorned and denied. Sometimes, pagan and

Christian theologies emerge simultaneously in the same play, as is especially the

case with King Lear. Early modern Christian audiences likely learned to interpret

these frequent references to Classical pagan religions not as endorsements of such

world views but rather as slightly refracted images of their own. In Titus, for

instance, references to unjust gods might easily have been construed as a veiled

indictment of the Christian God's injustice (though Shakespeare's purpose is

hardly so didactic). This all makes for a very confusing and inconsistent

metaphysical vision in Shakespearean tragedy.

Audiences are then left to decipher plays that seem to suggest the

existence of metaphysical truths but that overall embrace no single religious

ideology. My focus here, though, will be on the articulation of two specific

metaphysical visions that appear to emerge in the three tragedies I've been

discussing. The first is of an intemperately cruel divinity that allows intense and

unjust suffering as part of a system of divine retribution. In this vision, God is

portrayed as more cruel and punishing than kind and merciful, and is occasionally

even depicted as a divine trickster taking pleasure in the suffering of humankind.

The second vision is of a merely material and secular universe in which human

agency is decidedly unmediated by divine intervention and the very notion of God

is an elaborate lie. Both are bleak world-views, particularly for Early Modern

Christians, and both are certainly productive of a profound terror—"the dread of

something after death"—and are therefore the most abstract and incomprehensible of Gothic antagonists. These visions of the cosmos are certainly not the only two ideological constructs that Shakespeare and his contemporaries would have fashioned and endorsed, and, again, Shakespeare never singularly argues for either. The Gothic, though, deals in extremes; the two visions I am identifying in these plays I have singled out for their particular function as sources of religious dread at its most excessive.

Both metaphysical visions appear in <u>Macbeth.</u> The most overt religious terror expressed in this play is fear of divine judgment. The Porter, for example, uses Christian iconography in his imagined characterization of himself as gatekeeper of Hell. Three imaginary new denizens of Hell knock at the gate—a farmer, an equivocator, and a tailor. This scenario is meant exemplify the Porter's claim that "I had thought to have let in some of all professions that go the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire" (II.iii.16-18). Hell has a diverse population, apparently, and its residents have committed a variety of sins, from suicide to theft. About the equivocator the Porter is particularly sardonic; he characterizes him as a man "who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven" (9-10). In the Porter's grim imagination, there is no bargaining with God, and even petty theft earns damnation. This is certainly a portrait of an imperturbable God who enforces harsh judgments and evinces little patience for pleas.

Macbeth himself fears divine retribution for his deeds, acknowledging in his first soliloquy an "evenhanded justice" that "commends th'ingredients of our poisoned chalice / To our own lips" (I.vii.10-12). Macbeth seems anxious about the machinations not just of earthly law, but also of divine retribution. He fears the inevitable discovery of Duncan's murder and seems to realize innately that Duncan is virtuous and his own intentions evil, to the point that "[the king's] virtues / Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against / The deep damnation of his taking-off" (18-20). Macbeth's anticipation of his own damnation and the severity of the consequences of his actions appear to endorse a Christian rhetoric regarding punishment for sins and a knowing fear that God will exact vengeance. Indeed, in a simplistic reading of the play this is exactly what happens; the Faustian villain pays with his life—and presumably his soul—for his brief possession of political power. Macbeth, then, expresses terror of God's judgment, and his fears are arguably realized at the play's conclusion.

The metaphysics of this play, though, as I've established, are not exclusively Christian. The witches certainly possess a degree of supernatural agency, and the text does not stereotypically portray them as servants of the devil. They solicit assistance from Hecate, a Greek goddess who is actually a character in the play. The witches' power, then, is pagan, and there is no explicit metaphysical theory as stated in the play that attempts to reconcile the Weird Sisters with Christian theology. Moreover, the text finally does not repudiate the fact of the Sisters' existence—which, as I've said, is bolstered by Holinshed's

Chronicle—nor does it succeed in undermining their power and influence. The Christian God may have a place in this text, but he must coexist alongside a pagan goddess and her powerful servants.

Of course, by the end of the play Macbeth famously disavows any kind of metaphysical significance to the day-to-day cycle of human suffering. His soliloquy after Seyton divulges the news of Lady Macbeth's death brings an enduring note of nihilism to the play's final moments:

> Out, out, brief candle,
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more. It is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing (V.v.23-28).

Shakespeare employs one of his most common metaphors, here: life as play and the world as a stage, an ephemeral arena upon which is enacted an eventful but purposeless human drama. Macbeth's vision here is of complete cosmic emptiness. The only analog to God in this conceit is the idiot who tells our tale with meaningless repetition. There is ultimately no logical significance to human life, and certainly no divine plan guiding and shaping the course of human events. This suggestion is obviously damaging to a Christian world-view, its very articulation a source of terror to the devout and the doubtful alike.

King Lear offers a still bleaker vision of the cosmos. In Macbeth, divine retribution (if it exists) seems at least to side with characters that the text casts in a relatively virtuous light. Macbeth's nihilistic speech can even be reasoned away as the hopeless tirade of a desperate man, and we cannot help but concede, despite

our often fruitful efforts to empathize with him, that Macbeth deserves his brutal end. In <u>King Lear</u>, though, we are offered a vision of an indiscriminately cruel and punishing metaphysical power, allowed the hope of a redemptive comic ending, then are finally confronted with an existential catastrophe that would seem to belie the existence of any divinity, let alone a just or benevolent one. Lear himself echoes Macbeth's theatrical metaphor; he announces an intention to "preach" to the newly-blinded Gloucester in IV.vi, and the wisdom he provides is the mournful assertion that "When we are born, we cry that we are come / To this great stage of fools" (IV.vi.182-3). From the day we are born, Lear suggests, we suffer; and indeed, a world of virtually endless, meaningless suffering at the hands of other human beings is the dominant vision of human experience in this play.

Despite mounting evidence to the contrary, many characters in <u>King Lear</u> demonstrate unshakable faith in divine justice; as in <u>Macbeth</u>, though, the power to which characters pray varies. Often, a plurality of gods is acknowledged. Gloucester makes reference to "ever-gentle gods," and interprets omens from astronomical phenomena (IV.vi.219). Kent similarly finds divine agency present in signs from the sky; "It is the stars, / The stars above us govern our conditions" he asserts to the Gentleman in IV.iii. (33-34). Numerous characters appeal to fortune, and Nature is personified as a goddess by both Edmund and Lear. Indeed, in keeping with the pre-Christian setting of the play, the Christian God is seldom explicitly mentioned, though Edgar seems to have an anachronistic knowledge of Christian theology, as evidenced by the names he gives to the

demons that possess poor Tom (it is widely assumed that these names were culled
from Samuel Harsnett's A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures, which
Shakespeare had likely read) (Greenblatt, "Shakespeare and the Exorcists," 88).
Whether they originate in Christian doctrine or not, the gods invoked by the
various characters are often interpreted as willing and able to avenge earthly
atrocities with divine punishment. When Albany receives word that Cornwall
paid with his life for the blinding of Gloucester, he expresses relief: "This shows
you are above / You justicers, that these our nether crimes / So speedily can
venge" (IV.iii.79-81). The Gods exist, Albany avows, and their punishment is
just.

This rationale also applies, however, to the suffering of Lear and
Gloucester. Edgar (albeit simplistically) interprets his father's blindness as the
result of divine retribution: "The gods are just," he tells Edmund, "and of our
pleasant vices / Make instruments to plague us" (V.iii.172-73). This echoes
Macbeth's reference to "evenhanded justice;" but how even-handed is the
suffering that is unleashed on Lear and Gloucester? Lear acts rashly and with
great cruelty in Act I, but he pays for his banishment of Cordelia with egregious
suffering, descent into madness, and the deaths of all three of his daughters.
Gloucester, Edgar grimly surmises, pays for the adulterous liaison that produced
Edmund with blindness and death. If the gods do exist in this play, then the title
of "justicers" is dubious at best. Gloucester's own characterization of divine

activity in the play is perhaps more accurate: "As flies to wanton boys are we to th'gods; / They kill us for their sport" (IV.i.37-38).

Among the effects of this, Robert G. Hunter notes, "is to make us wonder if it might not be less disturbing ultimately to abandon the notion of divine judgment altogether" (188). Ultimately, that is what happens in King Lear, but it is arguably no less disturbing. The play offers us the hope of a redemptive ending in the return of Cordelia from France and the defeat of Edmund's tyranny. Edmund even repents of his sins and sends an officer to repeal the order for Lear's and Cordelia's execution—"Some good I mean to do," he decides, "Despite of mine own nature" (V.iii.248-49). Lear survives, but re-enters with Cordelia dead in his arms, his first utterance an incomprehensible trio of howls. The witnesses' collective reaction to the scene is a chorus of disbelief:

> KENT: Is this the promised end?
> EDGAR: Or image of that horror?
> ALBANY: Fall and cease. (V.iii.269-70).

The "promised end" carries two meanings: on one hand it signifies the foreshadowed redemptive end to Lear's quest that has now been defiled; on the other, it is the "image" of an apocalypse, at which point all things "fall and cease." Lear himself articulates the inability to read this outcome as the just machinations of divine retribution and redemptive catharsis; he imagines that Cordelia stirs, then hopefully asserts that, if she still lives, "It is a chance which does redeem all sorrows / That ever I have felt" (272-3). But Lear does not receive redemption for his sorrows; if God exists, He has broken His promise.

Hunter reflects on this moment, asserting that "If the body in Lear's arms is an image of the divine justice of the latter day, then we cannot understand it. If it is not, then there is nothing to understand. By the light of nature <u>King Lear</u> is either incomprehensible or meaningless, or both" (190). Both religious interpretations of this play, then, offer dark portraits either of a cruelly punishing or a nonexistent God, both of which possibilities imbrue the play, particularly in its final moments, with grim terror that human suffering is ultimately meaningless.

The same is true of <u>Titus Andronicus</u>. The pagan gods to which the characters in this play pray and make offerings are similarly characterized as intemperately cruel. Characters make many references to the gods' divine injustice. In IV.i., Lavinia reveals the story of her ravishment to Titus and Marcus by referencing the tale of Philomela in Ovid's <u>Metamorphoses</u>. The men are quick to realize that the Roman forest where Lavinia was raped is a setting similar to "the ruthless, vast and gloomy woods" in Philomela's story (53). In their exchange they blame the gods for the existence of such a place:

> TITUS: Ay, such a place there is where we did hunt—
> O, had we never, never hunted there!—
> Patterned by that the poet here describes,
> By nature made for murders and for rapes.
> MARCUS: O, why should nature build so foul a den,
> Unless the gods delight in tragedies? (IV.i.55-60).

There is an imagined chain of command, here; it is as if the gods read Ovid, "delighted" in the tragedy of Philomela, and bade nature to construct a place

"patterned by that poet" and "made for murders and rapes." The gods in Titus, it seems, kill for their sport as well.

They are also numb to the importunities of their subjects. At the end of the same scene, Marcus, frustrated with the mounting injustice of Titus' plight, vainly implores "O heavens, can you hear a good man groan / And not relent or not compassion him?" (123-24). Even Aaron broods over the gods' lack of involvement in human affairs, and he suggests to Demetrius that he "pray to the devils; the gods have given us over" (IV.ii.48). Perhaps the most powerful image, though, of the gods' indifference to human suffering is that of Titus, Marcus and their kin shooting solicitations for divine aid into the empty skies in order to "send down justice for to wreak our wrongs" (IV.iii.52). The only semblance of a divine messenger to emerge on-stage, though, is the Clown. Expecting "news from heaven," the men are merely greeted with a secular messenger bearing legal documents. It is an absurdly comic moment, but productive nonetheless of the same kind of religious doubt that is rampant in King Lear.

Titus does manage somewhat to "wreak his wrongs," but he does so by exercising his own diabolically creative intellect. The world of Titus Andronicus is managed by the savage desires of human beings, not by the just decisions of gods on high. "Rome," Titus asserts, "is but a wilderness of tigers," and "tigers must prey" (III.i.54-55). Human nature is inclined to prey upon itself in this world, and indeed in Titus' plot for blood-vengeance, this metaphor becomes grotesquely relevant, as Tamora, herself described as a "ravenous tiger," literally

eats her young (V.iii.194). Forsaken by the gods, the characters in <u>Titus</u> must compensate for an empty universe by taking matters into their own hands, and the result is savage violence.

Thus, the absence of the divine produces a terror just as tangible as that produced by the notion of a corrupt, indifferent and arbitrarily cruel god, because human beings are also often corrupt, arbitrarily cruel and indifferent to the suffering of others. In Shakespeare's tragic vision, whether God is present or not, human beings are indiscriminately subjected to suffering and terror. Edmund, perhaps, provides the most reasonable interpretation of how the world seems to operate in the Shakespearean imagination; it is the doctrine of personal responsibility, by which Edmund asserts that "I should have been that I am, had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing" (Lear, I.ii.131-33). We choose who we are to become, Edmund asserts. By this line of reasoning, human nature can either be the ultimate Gothic antagonist, or the only true bastion of hope against it.

Conclusion

Shakespeare was a student of the human psyche. His comedies and tragedies capture humanity in all its joy, exuberance, cruelty, pain, terror, complexity. The reason his tragedies in particular invite Gothic readings is that suffering, fear and uncertainty are integral to Shakespeare's pluralistic, dialectical portrait of human consciousness. Macbeth, King Lear, and Titus Andronicus are compelling pieces of literature in part because they so unflinchingly explore realms of thought and experience that many people would rather not think about.

This paradoxically may help to explain why the Gothic aesthetic sensibility is so popular, and so important. On a superficial level, it safely satisfies a curiosity for whatever a given culture perceives as monstrous, unusual, and threatening. On a deeper level, literature and art of such nature imaginatively explore the very limits of possibility, transgressing social and aesthetic taboos and making disturbing works of beauty out of things perceived as hideous and terrifying. Shakespeare, if we venture to call him Gothic, anachronistically joins the ranks of Shelley, Melville and Faulkner in his ability to apply Gothic aesthetics to a credible portrayal of human consciousness.

Shakespeare, though, pre-dates what literary historians have labeled the Gothic movement. By directing our Gothic interpretations backward to his work, we are really extending the applicability and significance of Gothic theory and further complicating the already problematic process of literary classification. What this project has demonstrated, however, is that this anachronistic endeavor

is in fact fruitful. The tragedies I've discussed can be aptly characterized as Gothic works, even considering the narrowest definitions of the term. This may be a testament to the enduring influence of Shakespeare on Gothic writers; but it also may imply something larger about the appeal of the Gothic sensibility: that the horror story is perhaps just as old and archetypal a narrative construct as the love story.

This is not to say that the way in which the Gothic manifests itself in texts is consistent or by any means universal. Shakespeare's participation in this tradition should be considered in its historical context. Focusing on the specific historicity of Shakespeare's Gothic vision yields some interesting suggestions about what Elizabethan and Jacobean culture considered as terrifying, mysterious, other. One among these sources of cultural anxiety is the burden of the brutal past. The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the estimation of many of their own historians mark a rebirth from the dark uncertainty and religious gloom of the Middle Ages. Shakespeare's plays often seem to struggle with the legacy of this medieval past, and it is significant to observe that only a century before Shakespeare was composing his early work England had been ravaged by the dynastic battle that was the War of the Roses. This proximity of Elizabethan England to the civil bloodshed of the late Middle Ages produced widespread fear that this recent brutality might emerge again, a fear exacerbated by Elizabeth's failure to name a successor. Plays like Titus Andronicus, Macbeth, and King Lear, though their settings recall a past far more distant than the fifteenth century,

are likely expressions of this anxiety about the lingering threat of Medieval barbarism.

Other urgently contemporary fears no doubt also weighed on the collective consciousness of these Early Moderns. The threat to traditional patriarchal order by destabilizing cultural forces such as the widespread trend in feminine rule and early colonial encounters were also a source of trepidation. John Knox's diatribe against a perceived "monstrous regiment of women" characterized politically powerful female figures as objects of fear and censure. Certainly not all Elizabethans would have taken Knox seriously (especially considering that Elizabeth herself seems to have been an exceedingly popular monarch), but he clearly was not alone in his discontent with the trend of female rulers in England and Scotland that included Elizabeth, her sister Mary Tudor, and her cousin Mary Queen of Scots. Titus Andronicus, with its depiction of the monstrously white and diabolically cruel Queen of Goths, is the only Elizabethan play discussed here, but even the Jacobean Macbeth and King Lear seem (in ways already discussed) to reflect this uneasiness about placing women in positions of power.

These powerful women, though, did not represent the only cultural forces that threatened to destabilize white, Christian male hegemony in this period. In an age of fitful colonial expansion and increasing trade, Elizabethans and Jacobeans faced strained relationships with foreigners, some of whom were dark-skinned Moors from Africa and the Middle East. This convergence of cultures might easily have been perceived by some as an encroachment on Britain by dark,

mysterious "others." Certainly there was a general fear and distrust of the Ottoman Empire amongst Western Europeans. Shakespeare's Moors, Aaron and his heroic successor Othello, both represent and embody some stereotypical associations of blackness with violence, cruelty and hypersexuality, and as such might have been perceived as frightening. (The latter characteristic was perhaps also indicative of a fear of miscegenation, because both Aaron and Othello have highly sexualized relationships with white women). These representations amount to a demonization of their subjects as sources of social dread in their capacity, again, to disrupt normalized cultural forms and threaten social order.

Finally, the religious dread discussed above can also be considered in light of its historical context. It is quite possible, even likely, that much of the metaphysical angst expressed in Shakespearean tragedy is symptomatic of Reformation-era religious doubt. The Protestant Reformation in Europe marked a century long break from centuries old religious dogma. Its revolutionary force suddenly allowed the emergence of increasingly specialized and widely diverse sects of Christianity. What this broad-based paradigm shift demonstrated profoundly, though, was the susceptibility of religion to skepticism and change. Though originally this skepticism was directed at the dogmatic practices of the Catholic Church, its triumph over these forms generated more radical religious questions. It is this restlessly skeptical spirit that possesses Hamlet, for instance, and it similarly pervades the metaphysical dimensions Macbeth, Lear and Titus.

The presence of this skepticism and the susceptibility of religious ideologies to its force might also have been frightening for Early Modern Christians.

However historically specific its representations, though, the terror that these Early Modern texts elicit and produce still manages to resonate powerfully in the twenty-first century postmodern imagination. This resonance is certainly one thing we gain from reading Shakespeare through a Gothic lens. In addition, though, we can observe through these Gothic readings the enactment of historically specific cultural fears that may seem very remote to us. It is this emphasis on fear that truly sets Gothic readings apart from other critical methodologies. If we consider that one goal of tragedy is to terrify its audiences into redemptive catharsis, then assessing the way in which each tragedy represents the terrible is crucial to an understanding of its purpose. This practice can yield, as we have seen, interesting cultural, historical and philosophical observations about what counts as horror for a given writer in a given historical moment.

Shakespeare then becomes one of the most notable participants in this very old and constantly evolving tradition of human expression that in its particular nineteenth-century permutation would be labeled by writers and critics as "Gothic." His tragedies allow us a window on human experience as fraught with terror and uncertainty, one that likely speaks volumes about the culture from which his texts emerged. Widely considered the world's greatest playwright and the most important writer in the English language, Shakespeare is then also the

craftsman of some of the greatest works of terror that our literary tradition has

seen.

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