

Historical Readings of Ambition and Kingship in *Beowulf* and *Macbeth*

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Shakespeare's Macbeth is a tyrant, traitor and murderer, but in Shakespeare's source material, he was a worthy and honorable king. Raphael Holinshed's 1587 *Chronicles* depicts Macbeth as a just and beneficent king, who rid Scotland of many "disordered persons" and restored young people to "vertuous maners" after the "féeble and slouthfull administration of Duncane" (Holinshed). According to Holinshed,

Such were the woorthie dooings and princelie acts of this Mackbeth in the administration of the realme, that if he had attained therevnto by rightfull means, and continued in vprightnesse of iustice as he began, till the end of his reigne, he might well haue béene numbred amongst the most noble princes that anie where had reigned. He made manie holesome laws and statutes for the publike weale of his subiects. (Holinshed)

Holinshed does not ignore the fact that Macbeth committed regicide for his crown, but he is careful to point out that Macbeth was in line to inherit the throne until Duncan named his own son heir. Holinshed's Macbeth therefore justifies the murder with his own lawful claim to the throne.¹ This Macbeth does not act alone; he has a whole bevy of thanes backing his takeover. Holinshed not only refuses to condemn Macbeth, but he rationally justifies his misdoings so that the overall picture is one of a man who did one moderately bad thing, but as a result created a brief golden age for his country.

This does not appear to be Shakespeare's Macbeth, yet Holinshed was Shakespeare's primary – and possibly only – source for the historical basis of *Macbeth*. Several lines in the play quote directly or obviously paraphrase the *Chronicles*,² which was published approximately

¹ In medieval Scottish politics contemporary to the historical Macbeth, Scotland's monarch came from one of several branches of the royal family, and the heir was not presumed to be the eldest son of the current king (Barrell 13).

² The witches' lines, "All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!" "All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!" and "All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!" are almost direct quotations from Holinshed's *Chronicles* (I.iii.51-53).

sixteen years before the writing of *Macbeth*.³ The play clearly makes the moral judgment that Macbeth is an anti-hero.⁴ For Shakespeare,⁵ the ambition that leads Macbeth to the throne is the tragic vice that sends him down the path to his inevitable doom. Assuming Shakespeare could have taken any story and jazzed it up for dramatic interest, why would he take this story only to contort the character of Macbeth in such a way? Why is it ambition that turns Macbeth from a 'noble prince' to a 'tyrant' and 'hellhound'?⁶

It is evident from *Beowulf* that ambition was once considered a heroic virtue in English culture. Macbeth cannot be an anti-hero simply because the Christian moral framework in which he was written considered ambition a vice, because *Beowulf* is without question the epic hero of

³ *Macbeth* was probably written around 1606, although there is no surviving record of a performance earlier than 1611, and it does not appear in print until the First Folio of Shakespeare's works in 1623 (Moschovakis 5-6). However, some scholars have suggested that *Macbeth* was written as early as 1603 (Mowat xiii).

⁴ For the purposes of this project, I am considering Macbeth an anti-hero, rather than a villain. Shakespeare's non-heroic protagonists most often appear as tragic heroes, such as Othello, who "loved not wisely, but too well" and therefore killed his wife because he incorrectly believed her to be adulterous (*Othello* V.ii.45). Macbeth has no such noble cause. Nor is Macbeth like Hamlet, who is certainly a hero, albeit one defined by inaction. Rather, Macbeth is more like Richard III, who is charismatic and the audience sympathizes with him somewhat, even though he commits deeds the audience cannot morally support. As an appealing, yet unforgivable, protagonist, I have termed Macbeth an anti-hero, rather than a villain with very little sympathetic character in the text, such as Aaron of *Titus Andronicus*, Claudius of *Hamlet* or Iago of *Othello*.

⁵ The question of authorship in what we now consider the works of Shakespeare is far too complex for a simple footnote to cover. For the purposes of this paper, when I refer to 'Shakespeare' I am not committing to the poet being a single man, any particular man, or even necessarily a man at all. Due to the complex cooperative project that was printing in early modern England, I consider the works of Shakespeare to be a body of work contributed to by multiple members of a fluid team, but centered around the productions of a specific troupe with the title of 'Shakespeare' as their unifying theme.

⁶ The Oxford English Dictionary defines ambition as "the ardent (in early usage, inordinate) desire to rise to high position, or to attain rank, influence, distinction or other preferment" ("Ambition").

the poem bearing his name, but that poem was almost certainly written by a member of the Orthodox Christian clergy.⁷ If a member of the church's clergy is able to consider ambition a virtue, then we cannot assume that later writers under Christian influence necessarily considered ambition a vice because of the church. Beowulf is incessantly boastful and described as '*lof-geornost*,'⁸ two unambiguous indicators that he can also be defined by his ambition for heroic greatness. If the literary moral judgment on ambition is not so simple as the judgment of Christianity, for all that Christianity in various forms was the primary moral arbiter of England in the Middle Ages and early modern period, then why is it that ambition is a virtue in one text and a vice in another?

Between these two texts, there is no moral gray area. It is absolutely clear that ambition is a heroic virtue in Beowulf, while it becomes a tragic vice in Macbeth, and in neither is there any hint that ambition is a minor characteristic. Ambition makes Beowulf a hero, just as it is the vice that leads Macbeth into deeds an audience cannot forgive. As both characters become king of their people through the narrative of the stories bearing their names, then both works should show a correlation between the texts' moral stance on ambition and how the texts relate ambition to whether or not each character is a good king. At first glance it is apparent that Beowulf is a hero, so he is a good king; likewise Macbeth is a murderer, so he is a bad king. But ambition leads one man to become a hero, and another to become an anti-hero, so why does ambition make Beowulf a good king and Macbeth a tyrant?

One might answer that Beowulf is a hero because he kills monsters and Macbeth is anti-

⁷ During the period in which Beowulf was written, literacy was almost exclusive to the clergy in England. In any case, the text has so many explicit Christian overtones that even if it were not written by a clergyman, this poet does not appear likely to ignore basic Christian morality without good cause.

⁸ Old English – Seamus Heaney translates this word as “keenest to win fame.”

heroic because he kills his king and countrymen. But the monstrosity of the victim is largely a consequence of the heroism of the killer. As John Gardner's 1971 novel suggests, Grendel is only a monster because we know Beowulf is the hero.⁹ Because Beowulf is so grand, Grendel, Grendel's mother and the dragon seem monstrous as opposition, and there is no room to dwell on the possibility that these opponents are actually in the right. The poet does not emphasize Grendel's mother's grief nor the provocation of the dragon as excuses; they are only accessories to the horrors that motivate Beowulf's attack.¹⁰ The opposite effect is evident in *Macbeth*. Macbeth seems the monster, so it is hardly thought that Duncan was a terrible king who perhaps deserved to be overthrown.¹¹ Because Shakespeare's Macbeth is deplorable, his victims seem saintly. Holinshed points out that Macbeth merely "caused to be slaine sundrie thanes, as of Cathnes, Sutherland, Stranauerne, and Ros, because through them and their seditious attempts, much trouble dailie rose in the realme" (Holinshed). Whatever murders Macbeth carried out were – for Holinshed – well-justified for the greater good of Scotland. This is a far cry from Shakespeare's Scotland under Macbeth, which "cannot / Be called our mother, but our grave" (IV.iii.190-191). Therefore the exact nature of Beowulf and Macbeth's deeds – the question of whom they killed – is not the determiner of their heroic value, so much as is the nature of Beowulf and Macbeth themselves – the question of why they killed.

The historical political context for the writing of each text in fact explains the differing evaluation of ambition either as a virtue or a vice in a king. Social mores determine whether a

⁹ Gardner, John. *Grendel*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1971. Gardner frames the story from Grendel's perspective, effectively making Grendel a hero.

¹⁰ Grendel's mother has fair motive in revenging the death of her son. The dragon is motivated to wreak havoc on the Geats because a thief steals a golden cup from his hoard.

¹¹ Shakespeare presents Duncan as an old man who can no longer lead his own army, which makes a weak king in the wartime Scotland that opens the play, yet he still seems innocent and righteous as Macbeth's victim.

characteristic – such as ambition – is a vice or a virtue in a fictional character, and these mores are informed by the cultural, historical and political context of the society in which a text is written. *Beowulf* and *Macbeth* are superb examples of this phenomenon because both title characters exhibit ambition in unexpected, but historically explainable ways. Beowulf's ambition is heroic, despite the poem's Christian affinities, because the warrior culture of Anglo-Saxon England needed its kings to be heroes and ambitious to be praised, for great deeds could drive otherwise ordinary men to become great kings. Conversely, *Macbeth* condemns ambition as a vice because the early modern England in which the play was written had come to see ambition as the cause of a violent, turbulent and transient monarchy during the Tudor period. These statements are intentionally broad. We cannot, unfortunately, prove the holistic moral structure of either or any period, but we can analyze literary moral responses to historical trends. We can explore how the texts that survive react to their respective historical and political worlds through their moral judgments on how ambition relates to the concept of kingship. Historical cross-referencing and analysis provide a cross-pollination of insight through which the literature sheds light on the history, but also the history influences our understanding of the literature, encouraging revised readings of *Beowulf* and *Macbeth*, readings that reconcile and explore the relationship between ambition, literary kingship and kingship in real-world contemporaneous politics.

I. Virtue and Vice: The Role of Christianity

An unknown poet¹² wrote *Beowulf* in the heart of the Anglo-Saxon period, sometime

¹² The identities of both the *Beowulf*-poet and the scribe who penned the surviving copy remain unknown, although it is fairly certain that they were two separate individuals, both members of

between the mid-seventh and late tenth centuries (Heaney ix). By this time, Christianity had been present in England since the Roman Empire spread to include Britain; Constantine sanctioned Christianity in the Empire in 313 and it was the official religion by the end of the fourth century (Lehmberg 27). Throughout the fourth and fifth centuries, Anglo-Saxon settlers took root in what is now England, and remained pagan, so that Christianity survived the fall of Rome primarily through Celtic societies in Wales and Ireland that had converted under Roman rule (Lehmberg 27). In 597, Pope Gregory the Great sent Augustine¹³ (later the first archbishop of Canterbury) as missionary to the Anglo-Saxons and in 634, just before the earliest time *Beowulf* could have been written, King Oswald of Northumbria asked monks from the monastery at Iona to send missionaries to his kingdom (Lehmberg 30-31). It is clear, then, that by the time *Beowulf* was written, Christianity was at the very least finally beginning to take hold in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and by the tenth century, *Beowulf*'s latest possible date, the roots of English Christianity had grown quite deep.

It may be troubling to note that there is such a variance in the degree to which Christianity influenced the Anglo-Saxons over the time *Beowulf* could have been written, but uncertainty regarding the world for which the poem was written may be reduced by pointing out that it was undoubtedly still a period of conversion. Christianity was not yet an assumption; Anglo-Saxons still practiced pagan beliefs and rituals, and not always with a veneer of Christianity. More profoundly, during this period, manuscripts such as the source of *Beowulf* were almost exclusively produced in monasteries by men of the church. Manuscripts were written in Latin,

the clergy. The poem survives in a single manuscript currently at the British Library as part of the Cotton Collection.

¹³ Augustine of Canterbury, not to be confused with Augustine of Hippo who wrote *The Confessions* and was a prominent early church theologian centuries before Augustine of Canterbury arrived in England.

the language of the church – except the ones, like *Beowulf*, that were written in the Anglo-Saxon vernacular now known as Old English, and which were evidently meant for secular use. There is therefore a high degree of certainty that no matter the overall degree to which England was Christian, *Beowulf* was written by a member of the clergy and intended to be read by a population not necessarily limited to the clergy.

Curiously enough, *Beowulf* is not a particularly Christian story and Beowulf himself is by no means a devout Christian. There is no hint of engagement with the church for any individual or society depicted in the poem, and although the poet sometimes puts Christian phrases in the mouths of his characters, there is an overall tone of worldliness and submission to the control of fate. In his dying breath, Beowulf says “To the everlasting Lord of All / to the King of Glory, I give thanks” (ll. 2794-2795). Perhaps this is the poet’s attempt to make Beowulf more admirable by giving him a seeming salvation on his deathbed, despite no mention of Beowulf ever being baptized, let alone having set foot in a church. But Beowulf has not hitherto made mention of God, despite a sense of some external force determining the path of his life and deciding whether he will meet with victory or defeat in his many battles. Beowulf’s own words usually name ‘fate’ or ‘doom’ – or in Old English, *wyrd*¹⁴ – as the cause of any misfortune. In conclusion to a statement of predetermination regarding the outcome of his fight with Grendel, Beowulf states, “Fate goes ever as fate must” (l. 455). There is a lack of perceived sentience in that statement, a perception that there is no personage deciding his fate, so much as a set sequence of events that will not deviate from its course, except when – as Beowulf states later – “for undaunted courage,

¹⁴ Though it is translated as either ‘doom’ or ‘fate,’ the Old English *wyrd* does not distinguish between the connotations those words have in Modern English. Doom is not necessarily meant to be negative, but some translators use it despite the common misinterpretation. *Wyrd* gives more of a sense that one’s fate will come, good or ill, and it cannot be known which it will be until it happens.

/ fate spares the man it has not already marked” (ll. 572-573). Beowulf is always more than happy to take credit for his good deeds, and proud of his escape from the jaws of death, but at the end of the day, his survival is simply because his “time had not yet come” (l. 2141). Although the poet-narrator frequently comments on the work of God in the events of *Beowulf*, the characters within the story subscribe to a pseudo-deterministic view in which there is no need for prayer, but rather a need for human action to affect events to the extent that one can. As such, Beowulf is actually encouraged to yearn after fame and glory, and seek them through his ambitions deeds.

Beowulf’s ambition is primarily evident in his desire for fame. The final word of the poem describes Beowulf as *lof-geornost*, meaning literally ‘most yearning for fame,’ and this is paired with “kindest to his people,” clearly indicating that these two qualities are desirable both for kings and heroes (l. 3182). The entire poem makes clear that in this society (the one being written about, not necessarily the one in which it was written) fame is the much-loved objective at stake. Beowulf’s great and heroic deeds appear to be motivated by little more than self-promotion to increase his earthly fame, even though the end result is just as much that both the Geats and the Danes benefit from his heroic deeds. Certainly, Beowulf comes to the Danes to save them from Grendel, but he speaks not of the plight of the Danes which he seeks to resolve, but of the glorious deeds he will enact to save them.¹⁵ Beowulf’s motivation is clear in his own words:

For every one of us, living in this world
means waiting for our end. Let whoever can
win glory before death. When a warrior is gone,
that will be his best and only bulwark. (ll. 1186-1189)

In the warrior culture that frames Beowulf, glory in life means remembrance in death, and he

¹⁵ For an example of this, see lines 399-454, in which Beowulf boastfully introduces himself to the Danes.

certainly succeeds at becoming known beyond his lifespan, not only in famous deeds, but also through the proud barrow that serves as his grave. Hrothgar says to Beowulf, “You have made yourself immortal / by your glorious action” (ll. 953-954). This immortality can hardly mean that Beowulf has won his way into heaven. In strict Christian terms, the soul is immortal whether it goes to heaven or hell, so surely the poet would have specified the destination of Beowulf’s immortal soul if he meant that Beowulf would have a Christian afterlife. Instead, Beowulf’s name has won earthly immortality through the fame of his deeds.

Beowulf is clearly infatuated with worldly renown. Ambition to achieve heroic celebrity status motivates the actions that in turn define him as a hero. Ambition is sinful in the most basic of New Testament Christian mores, but despite the necessary role ambition plays in *Beowulf*, the poet overlays his story with Christian values. In narration, the poet writes,

Past and present, God’s will prevails.
Hence, understanding is always best
and a prudent mind. Whoever remains
for long here in this earthly life
will enjoy and endure more than enough. (ll. 1057-1061)

But if one of the functions of this text is to espouse Christian values to a society still deeply entrenched in pagan beliefs, why does the poet use a hero who is not an example of a good Christian? Why does the poet create a hero who in fact defies Christian morality, and then overlay Christian principles in the narrator, without fully incorporating Christian mores in the characters? The use of ambition, despite its sinful status in Christianity, only makes sense if the poet is pointedly defying Christian morality to explain virtues of non-Christian kingship and heroism.

These questions may be answered by the cultural and religious climate of the time in which

the poem was written.¹⁶ In the Anglo-Saxon period, the missionary church was under orders to compromise with paganism in order to affect a gradual conversion. Writing his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in the eighth century, the Venerable Bede recounts a letter from Pope Gregory to his missionary team led by Augustine:

Tell [Augustine] what I have decided after long deliberation about the English people, namely that the idol temples of that race should by no means be destroyed, but only the idols in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it in these shrines, build altars and place relics in them. For if the shrines are well built, it is essential that they should be changed from the worship of devils to the service of the true God. When people see that their shrines are not destroyed they will be able to banish error from their hearts and be more ready to come to the places they are familiar with, but now recognizing and worshipping the true God. (Bede 107)

Gregory's recommended approach to pagan shrines may easily have been applied to literature by the *Beowulf*-poet. Beowulf embodies heroic values of a warrior culture that do not align easily with Christianity, but that warrior culture was exactly the pre-existing society Christianity sought to save by adapting it to a holier way of life. In that culture, pride in one's personal valor and ambition for worldly glory were valued because they encouraged military prowess, and in a time when England was split into as many as seven separate kingdoms always shifting power and constantly beleaguered by Viking raids – society had great need for heroes inspired by literary figures like Beowulf, not the Christian humility inspired by doctrine. The pagan hero, then, is like a well-built shrine. The people got to keep their familiar heroic figure, but the poet overlaid him with 'the service of the true God.' So it seems there is a strategic compromise at work in *Beowulf*. The poet created Beowulf in the context of a pagan world, so that he might be

¹⁶ The single manuscript of *Beowulf* that survives from the Anglo-Saxon period is almost certainly not the original written version of the story. The dates I am using for the writing of the poem refer to the composition of this version, which may have been earlier than the manuscript we have today.

recognizable to a culture still deeply attached in the idea that fame was all that remained of a person who died. But he also interwove core Christian beliefs, creating a mesh of pagan and Christian cultures, proving to his audience that the latter is not completely foreign to the former.

Additionally, there is an apparent connection between the conversion efforts of the church and ambition. Bede also relates a letter written in the sixth century, from Pope Gregory to the Anglo-Saxon King Æthelberht, in which Gregory encourages the newly Christian king to be like Constantine, who “transcended in renown the reputation of former princes and surpassed his predecessors as much in fame as he did in good works” (Bede 113). The clear suggestion here is that Æthelberht should be ambitious in his efforts to Christianize his people. So although Christianity even in this period ought to be condemning ambition as a sin, prominent church figures seem to have encouraged ambition for political purposes. The influence of Christianity cannot fully explain the appreciation of ambition as a kingly virtue in *Beowulf*, because Christianity seems to unexpectedly support ambition in kings as beneficial both to the Anglo-Saxon people and to the development of the church. Clearly the influence of Christianity does not offer obvious distinctions between virtue and vice regarding the role of ambition in *Beowulf*.

Christian theology exerts no overt presence in *Macbeth*. The characters understand the existence of God and the dichotomy between good and evil, and it is accordingly inherent in the play that going either to heaven or hell is a very real outcome of death. Even so, the Christian basis of the world of the play is set apart from the surface reality of each character’s spoken words. There is no questioning Christian morality; there is an assumption of the Christian moral framework under which both poet and protagonist operate. H.B. Charlton comments:

Men say their prayers, and, in their need, cry out ‘God bless us’;
and ‘Amen’ is the antiphonal accompaniment. But all active

consciousness of the Christian after-life is kept in even dimmer remoteness. A chance phrase here or there intimates the accepted existence of a heaven and a hell: but neither heaven nor hell is permitted to lay hard hold of men's convictions and thus participate visibly as the motive in their actions. (Charlton 145)

Shakespeare naturally presumed that the audience for which he wrote would be Christian. That religious moral framework was such a pervading force in society, that its anachronistic presence in a play would not be questioned. Although it is a presumption of the world of the play that these characters subscribe to Christian morality – and that that morality is correct – Macbeth is able to motivate rational actions that break the Christian moral code. Ambition was a sin in the Christian worlds that both Shakespeare and Macbeth lived in, so it is no surprise that the play bearing his name condemns Macbeth for actions inspired by ambition, but Shakespeare does not write that condemnation in Christian terms. Macbeth's doom is brought about by a secular wrongness in his actions, undefined by the morality of Christianity.

Macbeth's motivational soliloquy in Act I, scene vii opens with the pronouncement:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly. If th' assassination
Could trammel up the consequence and catch
With this surcease success, that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. (I.vii.1-7)

The clear tension here is that Macbeth is unsure whether he should murder Duncan. If he decides to kill him, the murder must happen soon, adding timeliness to the high stakes at play, but even now, Macbeth seems to know that this act will not be the end of it. He cannot put his finger on it, but the uncertainty inherent in the 'if' of the second line shows that he does not believe that this assassination will be the 'be-all and the end-all here.' *If* he could be certain of that, then he would have no fear of losing the 'life to come' – the afterlife in heaven – but he cannot be certain and so that fear is very real. Macbeth's imminent actions will almost certainly cost him eternity, but

he does not dwell on that thought. Perhaps he cannot dwell on it.

Instead, Macbeth sets that fear aside and proceeds to list rational and completely secular reasons why he should not kill Duncan. He points out that “we but teach / Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return / To plague th’ inventor” (I.vii.8-10). This is a gory version of the schoolyard adage: “what goes around comes around” or perhaps an anti-Golden Rule: “do not do unto others what you would not have done to you in return.” Macbeth goes on to cite social norms against the murder of Duncan:

He’s here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself.

What Macbeth does here is significant. He says that the murder of Duncan is wrong because the mores of his society dictate that men do not kill their kin, that subjects do not kill their kings and hosts do not kill their guests. Macbeth does *not* say that murder is wrong. Killing itself does not bother him.

Macbeth draws his soliloquy to a close by taking his very Christian view of heaven to speak *in favor* of murdering Duncan:

Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And pity, like a naked newborn babe
Striding the blast, or heaven’s cherubin horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid heed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind. (I.vii.16-25)

It is moments such as this that reveal Macbeth to be a man with “the imagination of a poet,” as A. C. Bradley writes, and who is therefore much more appealing to the sympathies of the

audience (Bradley 268). And yet, something terrible has happened to Christian morality in this moment. Macbeth concludes that because Duncan will assuredly go the heaven, it is not so bad to send him on his way; he uses the Christian promise of heaven to rationalize murder. More than that, Macbeth thinks that Duncan's goodness "will plead like angels ... / against the deep damnation of his taking off" (I.vii.17-18). Macbeth thinks that God's 'pity' and therefore God's forgiveness will be moved by the piety of his innocent victim to forgive the terrible sin of murder.

In this soliloquy, Shakespeare has inverted our moral expectations. We may expect to condemn Macbeth because his ambition makes him sinful in the Christian moral framework, but if that were the case, we would find some indication in motivating the murder of Duncan that Macbeth's ambition is a sin, rather than just a crime. Yet Macbeth's Christianity seems to encourage him toward the deed, while social mores hold him back. Because secular reasoning argues against the murder, it makes sense that there is a secular reason that ambition is a condemnable quality in a king.

When Macbeth goes about the murder, he is flouting secular prohibitions against killing one's kinsman, king or guest. His monarchal ambitions are not, apparently, a sin, for he embarks with all the righteousness he can muster in such cloak-and-dagger work. Macbeth clearly exhibits some anxiety over the sanctity of his deeds when he frets, "Wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'? / I had most need of blessing, and 'Amen' / Stuck in my throat" (II.ii.42-44). It seems here clear that murder is sinful, for whether it be Macbeth's hypochondria or the hand of God stopping his words, there is a tangible Christian response that opposes the deed. But although Macbeth does not find killing itself to be problematic, there has never really been a question of whether or not murder was sinful in the eyes of the church, as much as a question of

whether Macbeth's ambitious motive to murder is sinful, for it is his ambitions to achieve the crown that leads the audience to condemn him rather than forgive him. On that account, Christianity seems silent.

Shakespeare is much less heavy-handed in his use of Christian morality than the *Beowulf*-poet, but it is evident here that both relate to the matrix of Christian mores in surprising ways. Despite being a member of the clergy in a world of conversion, the *Beowulf*-poet has adopted pagan heroic virtues that valorize pride and ambition in his epic hero. Shakespeare, on the other hand, lived in an established Christian society, but makes ambition a secular vice to doom Macbeth. This juxtaposition shows that the portrayal of ambition as either virtue or vice is not solely dependent on whether Christianity deems it so. Further exploration shows that Anglo-Saxon culture valued ambition as a warrior virtue, an important characteristic for kings of that time. By the time of Shakespeare, ambition was no longer valued in monarchs due to the ambitious misdoings of the Tudor kings and queens that had severely disadvantaged the English people and created impermanence – a transience – in the concept of monarchy itself. The difference in English political context changed cultural mores, such that the same ambition that made Beowulf a heroic king in Anglo-Saxon England made Macbeth a tyrant in Jacobean England, and understanding that changes in turn how we read these texts.

II. *Beowulf* and the Anglo-Saxon Warrior Kings

It is evident in Beowulf's actions that he embodies the quality of ambition, and that his ambition makes him a good warrior. From Geatland, Beowulf hears of a threat, a menace that preys upon the Danes, and the combination of loyalty to a people who befriended his family and

eagerness to win fame in saving them drives Beowulf to their rescue. He makes a formal boast that proclaims his intentions:

I have suffered extremes
and avenged the Geats (their enemies brought it
upon themselves, I devastated them).
Now I mean to be a match for Grendel,
settle the outcome in single combat.
And so, my request, O king of Bright-Danes,
dear prince of the Shieldings, friend of the people
and their ring of defence, my one request
is that you won't refuse me, who have come this far,
the privilege of purifying Heorot,
with my own men to help me, and nobody else. (ll. 422-432).

Formal boasts such as this¹⁷ appear multiple times in *Beowulf*: before he accomplishes a great deed, Beowulf must alert everyone in his path to his intentions. There can be no mistaking that he will kill Grendel as an act of heroism, not as some accident or coincidence for which he may later take inordinate heroic credit. Moreover, Beowulf looks on the task as a 'privilege' – he is not doing a favor to Hrothgar by rescuing the Danes; he is asking for the opportunity to earn fame and glory for himself. In response to a challenge from a jealous Dane, Beowulf not only extols the truth of his heroic past, but reveals a further piece of his motivation: "I shall fulfill that purpose, / prove myself with a proud deed / or meet my death here in the mead-hall" (ll. 636-8).¹⁸ Beowulf's eagerness to 'prove himself' supports the argument that his service toward the

¹⁷ The 'formal boast' serves as both a social convention within the poem and a literary device of Anglo-Saxon epic poetry. In order to claim intent and full credit for his heroic deeds, Beowulf must first proclaim that he will kill Grendel, slay the dragon, etc. It serves both as self-promotion and as a moment of courage-building, in the sense that it forces Beowulf to follow through with the act; in the event that he had any hesitation, which he does while fighting Grendel's mother, he can fall back on knowledge that his 'name and fame' will be ruined if he backs out from the feat he boasted of in advance.

¹⁸ He is seeking to 'prove himself' – this is a rare glimpse into Beowulf's psyche, for unlike Macbeth, we only hear Beowulf speaking to others and never in soliloquy to himself.

Danes is also not entirely altruistic. Beowulf's heroism promotes his own fame – thus the Anglo-Saxon equivalent for 'ambition' is *lof-geornost*, which means most eager for praise or fame. But the term has a positive spin when applied to Beowulf, because his fame-seeking serves those around him. He wins fame by defeating Grendel and then Grendel's mother – it is a privilege because Beowulf gets the benefits of increased fame, but it is still heroic and admirable because the Danes are saved from the Grendel-kin.

It is important to notice here a modern response to Beowulf's action that bears an inclination to see him as self-serving, but this indicates precisely the change I seek to prove. Because modern readers do not approach *Beowulf* the way an Anglo-Saxon audience would have, we are bound to judge Beowulf's actions and character in a different light. In order to remedy that bias, we must understand the historical world in which the original audience lived, so that we can understand what exactly this text indicated at the time it was written regarding a connection between ambition and kingship. *Beowulf* could not have been meant to speak to 21st-century kingship, but whether the poet meant to or not, it certainly speaks to Anglo-Saxon kingship; to understand what the poem says about kingship, we must understand it from the perspective of the Anglo-Saxons.

Beowulf's ambition to distinguish himself is his motivation to become "the mightiest man on earth," "the man whose name was known for courage" and "the man who of all men / was foremost and strongest in the days of his life" (ll. 197, 340, 789-790). In fact, in the midst of his fight with Grendel's mother, Beowulf's thoughts dwell not on defending his own life, but on his ambition to be well-renowned: "Hygelac's kinsman kept thinking about / his name and fame: he never lost heart" (ll. 1529-30). This line comes just after Beowulf's sword has broken and the tide of battle is turning against him; but he manages to keep a cool head by thinking of the fame

that will come with victory. It seems almost a wonderful challenge – again, a ‘privilege’ – that if and when he succeeds in killing Grendel’s mother, he will have so much fame that it seems a joy to be fighting her. Conversely, the threat of damage to his reputation is doubly potent because his death in this fight will both shame him and preempt any attempts to retrieve his reputation.

Beowulf’s desire to promote his good name continues to drive him to become the greatest hero among the Geats when he returns:

Thus Beowulf bore himself with valour;
 he was formidable in battle yet behaved with honour
 and took no advantage; never cut down
 a comrade who was drunk, kept his temper
 and, warrior that he was, watched and controlled
 his God-sent strength and his outstanding
 natural powers. He had been poorly regarded
 for a long time, was taken by the Geats
 for less than he was worth: and their lord too
 had never esteemed him much in the mead-hall.
 They firmly believed that he lacked force,
 that the prince was a weakling; but presently
 every affront to his deserving was reversed. (ll. 2176-2189)

Here we have another insight. Apparently Beowulf was not well thought of in his youth, which perhaps explains his strong desire to improve his reputation and acquire more fame. This passage also evidences a certain level of accomplishment. Beowulf rose from being thought of as a ‘weakling’ to being thought of as a strong and valiant hero. Perhaps this is hyperbole on the part of the poet, to promote Beowulf all the more by contrast with how he began, and if so it serves the purpose well, and makes it more clear that his ambition is at play here. Weaklings who ‘lack force’ do not become heroes by accident, and we know quite well by now that Beowulf is keenly aware of what his deeds do for his reputation, so we can conclude that he has intentionally built up his reputation through the great acts of courage that counter any naysayers’ initial accusations of weakness.

But the poet contradicts himself here. For if Beowulf’s powers are ‘natural,’ ‘God-sent’ and

must be controlled, how could Beowulf ever have been thought weak? One would think that if his powers had been God-sent, he would be a somewhat Herculean youth, lifting horses over his head as a teenager, rescuing children from wolves while a child himself and so on. There are two possible solutions here, both of which support the case for Beowulf's ambition. It is first possible that Beowulf controlled his gifts and powers *too much* in his youth, and thus appeared weak. If that is the case, then it shows a certain level of indignant response to such allegations that he should later loosen his control enough not only to employ but also show off his prodigious strength, which implies ambition to be seen as more than just a 'weakling.' More likely, in my opinion, it was not until Beowulf's gift of strength was applied to heroic deeds that it could be seen as strength, and therefore it is a change of application, not of control that begins to get Beowulf noticed as a hero. Once Beowulf begins to fight well in battle, kill sea-monsters and win swimming contests, he gets called heroic.

The tactic works; the Geats eventually make Beowulf their king due to his heroic successes. There is a clear link in the warrior cultures both within *Beowulf* and in the real world of Anglo-Saxon England between heroism and kingship. It was necessary for a king to be able to protect his people, and in fact that very ability – not political savvy or skill in domestic governance – is the reason Beowulf is made king of the Geats. Upon the former king Hygelac's death, his wife Hygd:

... offered him [Beowulf] throne and authority
as lord of the ring-hoard: with Hygelac dead,
she had no belief in her son's ability
to defend against foreign invaders. (ll. 2369-2372)

Her son, Heardred, was still young, but Beowulf declined the throne and instead mentored Heardred as the boy grew into his own as king. Heardred's death embodies the failures of his short reign as king: "the shelter of Heardred's shield proved useless" (l. 2202). For the Geats, the

king's purpose is to serve as "warden of the land," protector of the people (l. 2210). Heardred was a bad king because he was unable to shelter the Geats; in fact, Heardred himself is meant to be the shield, but his sheltering 'proved useless.' A good king must be the "warrior's protector," for which one must also be a warrior (l. 2347). In the battle that killed Heardred, Beowulf ended up preventing the incursion of foreigners, and ultimately coordinated the revenge that brought justice to Heardred's death. The two passages that describe Beowulf's ascension demonstrate that Beowulf is a good king because he is a good warrior, able to protect the Geats:

Afterwards the wide kingdom
reverted to Beowulf. He ruled it well
for fifty winters, grew old and wise
as warden of the land. (ll. 2207-10)¹⁹

Heardred lay slaughtered and Onela returned
to the land of Sweden, leaving Beowulf
to ascend the throne, to sit in majesty
and rule over the Geats. He was a good king. (ll. 2387-2390)

The progression shows that because of his ambition, Beowulf is a good warrior, a brave and valiant hero and because of his heroic deeds as a warrior, he becomes a good king. Logically, Beowulf's ambition makes him a good king, and the poem proves it. The closing lines eulogize Beowulf: "They said that of all the kings upon the earth / he was the man most gracious and fair-minded, / kindest to his people and keenest to win fame" (ll. 3180-3182). The Geats clearly admire and respect Beowulf's eagerness to promote his good name, for neither poet nor people would lay praise upon praise only to conclude with a negative trait or something about which

¹⁹ From this passage, we know Beowulf's advanced age when he fights the dragon. Between his adventures among the Danes and the threat of the dragon, there has passed enough time for Hygelac to finish out his reign, Heardred to grow to majority and then die, plus the fifty years that Beowulf rules in peace. Even if the first two events happened in quick succession, under the assumption that Beowulf is a fully grown man when he defeats Grendel, a conservative estimate makes Beowulf at least 70 years old when he fights the dragon – not exactly young and spry.

they felt merely neutral. The word order holds true in the original; the last line in Old English is: “*lēodom līðost ond lof-geornost*,” *lof-geornost* being the compound word translated as ‘keenest to win fame.’ Beowulf’s eagerness for praise and distinction is such an important and defining characteristic, that it is the last thing the poet says about him. It is placed in such a context that this ambition defines what it is to be a good king. Graciousness and a fair mind contribute, as does kindness, but it seems that those are contingent upon Beowulf’s ambition securing the Geats’ safety first, for if the Geats had been decimated by the Swedes they would hardly have spared their criticism because Beowulf had been kind. The closing lines of *Beowulf* suggest that in a personality such as Beowulf’s – one who is constantly striving to ‘prove himself with a proud deed’ – ambition is the key motivational factor that drives him to earn his kingship many times over by protecting his people from outside threats. That heroic protective drive, motivated by a need to prove himself, makes him a successful king.

Beowulf was written in the warrior culture of Anglo-Saxon England, so an understanding of how kingship and ambition relate within *Beowulf* requires a brief inquiry into the nature of kingship for the Anglo-Saxon society that prevailed between the Anglo-Saxon migration of the fifth century and the Norman Conquest in 1066. The often chaotic political world of the Anglo-Saxons presented a great need for its kings to be warriors, due to the many threats that they faced. This political structure developed largely due to the influx of Angles, Saxons and Jutes who arrived after the fall of Rome and settled in more or less organized fashion into different areas. Although historians commonly portray this cultural shift as an invasion, recent archaeological evidence has shown that it was much more an immigration, so the political systems that developed were more a unity of Germanic, Roman and native British traditions than

the product of Anglo-Saxons alone.²⁰ Although a warrior culture emerged as the Anglo-Saxons took root in England, it is important to note that it was not begun violently – they were settlers, not invaders. Out of three distinct peoples with similar customs, seven kingdoms arose, known as the Heptarchy: Essex, Sussex and Wessex had all been settled by Saxons, Northumbria, Mercia and East Anglia grew out of lands settled by Angles and Kent was populated with former Jutes (Lehmberg 26). Within the Heptarchy, one king generally held power over the other six, although which king this was shifted roughly every century, depending on which kingdom had the most military and economic power. In the ninth century, Wessex gained control and began the process of unifying England under one monarchy, although the regions that formerly considered themselves kingdoms still played a large role in late Anglo-Saxon politics (Lehmberg 26). Anglo-Saxon kings within this political system, whether kings of the individual kingdoms or of the combined kingdoms, were responsible for protecting their subjects from the violent world in which they lived.

Anglo-Saxon sources such as the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* show that primogeniture was not the sole method of royal succession; in fact, the idea of a royal line only existed insofar as any relative of the previous king who made the strongest bid for the throne would become the next king, and the prerequisite of being a relative was hardly well-enforced. The *Chronicle* records much of the history of this period, although it was written toward the end of the Anglo-Saxon period and relates much of its contents from a perspective far past the years in which they occurred. Nonetheless, it provides a feel for the violent conflict that permeated the politics of the era:

²⁰ Robin Fleming makes an interesting archeological argument for the peaceful assimilation of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes into existing British settlements in *Britain After Rome*, Penguin Group, Inc. 2010.

757. In this year Cynewulf and the councilors of the West Saxons deprived Sigeberht of his kingdom because of his unjust acts, except for Hampshire; and he retained that until he killed the ealdorman who stood by him the longest; and then Cynewulf went from him into the Weald, and he lived there until a swineheard stabbed him to death by the stream at Privett, and he was avenging Ealdorman Cumbra. And Cynewulf often fought great battles against the Britons. (trans Whitelock, et al 30).

786. In this year Cyneheard killed King Cynewulf, and was himself slain there and 84 men with him. And then Brihtric succeeded to the kingdom of the West Saxons. (trans Whitelock, et al 34).

These passages describe events early in the span of time during which *Beowulf* could have been written, and they evidence quite clearly the kind of violence that affected kingship in Anglo-Saxon England. The internal violence that defined Anglo-Saxon England was compounded by attacks from outsiders:

789. In this year King Brihtric married Offa's daughter Eadburh. And in his days there came for the first time three ships of Northmen and then the reeve rode to them and wished to force them to the king's residence, for he did not know what they were; and they slew him. Those were the first ships of the Danish men which came to the land of the English. (trans Whitelock, et al 35)

892. In this year the great Danish army...rowed their ships up the river as far as the Weald, four miles from the mouth of the estuary, and there they stormed a fortress. Inside that fortification there were a few peasants, and it was only half made. (trans Whitelock, et al 54)

These passages relate the oncoming threat that affected Anglo-Saxon safety much more than any internal squabbles: the Vikings. This Viking threat defined the reigns of two notable kings, Alfred the Great and Æthelred the Unready, as bold, strong and able, or weak and ill-advised, respectively.

Alfred is called 'the Great' because he ruled close to England's unification under one king, met the Great Army brought by the Viking Northmen and limited them to live within the

Danelaw, an area in eastern England where Vikings were permitted to settle under their own rule, and which was reincorporated into England proper by Alfred's descendants (Lehmberg 34). In stark contrast, Æthelred's epithet is a play on his name, which with a slight distortion means 'noble or princely counsel' in Old English. The *unrede* of Old English, meaning ill-counseled, became 'unready' in Modern English, adapted to apply to Æthelred's lack of readiness to defend his people against a fresh wave of Viking attacks (Lehmberg 35). Although modern historians have been somewhat kinder to Æthelred and more critical of Alfred, roughly contemporaneous historians lavished praise upon Alfred and condemned Æthelred. It is important to note that the chroniclers who documented each king's reign were working from hindsight, and so crafted the characters of Alfred and Æthelred to fit what the Anglo-Saxons perceived to make a good or bad king (Keynes 201). As a result, "The impression we have" is of "a contrast between Alfred's resolute defiance, leading inexorably to victory, and Æthelred's feeble resistance, leading inevitably to defeat" (Keynes 196). Alfred's military success makes him a good king, while Æthelred's failures make him a bad king.

Death in battle was a common fate for Anglo-Saxon men (Campbell 45). It was a fact of the world they lived in that violent conflict occurred, men died and kingships changed hands in unpredictable ways. It is historically evident that the Anglo-Saxons expected their men to serve in a militia so that they could protect their women, children and elderly from outside attack, and the king's responsibility was to command this militia such that the warriors would be preserved and able to continue protecting their own families. Alfred was a good warrior, so he was a good king. Conversely, Æthelred was a bad warrior, so he was a bad king. *Beowulf* was composed between the mid-seventh and late-tenth centuries, right in the heart of the era to which that model of kingship applied (Heaney ix). *Beowulf* is much more like Alfred as a king than Æthelred; time

and again Beowulf saves his people, and is never caught ‘unready.’ It is impossible to draw a direct comparison between the kingship of Beowulf and the reign of any individual Anglo-Saxon king because we do not know for certain when the poem was written, and even with events that certainly happened before the poem was written, we cannot definitively state that the poet was aware of said events. We can, however, draw a connection between the warrior culture of Anglo-Saxon England and that presented in *Beowulf*, for the importance of warrior virtues in the kingship of Beowulf has its roots in the battle-readiness that was necessary for any of the Anglo-Saxon kings, at any point in the span during which Beowulf could have been written. The ties between ambition and kingship in *Beowulf* therefore seem to sprout from a connection between ambition and heroic national defense.

A modern reading could easily conclude that Beowulf’s ambition for fame and glory leads him to a very personal gratification, because he seems to benefit from his ambitious heroics more than the people he protects. In encouraging more manly behavior in Hrothgar after unexpected further attacks by Grendel’s mother, Beowulf proclaims the benefits of living a heroic warrior lifestyle:

For every one of us, living in this world
means waiting for our end. Let whoever can
win glory before his death. When a warrior is gone,
that will be his best and only bulwark. (ll. 1386-9)

This passage recalls the earlier sense of fatality in the line, “Fate goes ever as fate must” (l. 455). Beowulf takes for granted that death will come and there is little one can do to prevent it. There is a prevailing idea throughout the poem that a man’s doom will come when it must, and Beowulf only hints that it may be altered when, “for undaunted courage, / fate spares an unmarked man” (ll. 572-3). But even that loophole holds the certainty that once a man is marked

he will perish at his allotted time, no matter his bravery. The idea that ‘living in this world means waiting for our end’ suggests that the wait is all there is. Life is just a waiting game, wondering when it will be your turn to go. But go where? Despite the Christian overtones of the text, Beowulf never suggests that life on earth is just biding our time virtuously until we get to go to heaven. Rather, he gives every indication that he believes that his death will be the end. ‘Let whoever can win glory before his death’ suggests the sense of ‘every man for himself.’ That is his primary purpose: to win glory for himself before his death.

The modern inclination here is to start criticizing Beowulf as selfish. Before beginning to read Beowulf as self-serving, it is important to note that within the Anglo-Saxon model of kingship Beowulf’s heroics do not need to be altruistic to benefit the people. Beowulf’s ambition for fame and glory, although perhaps seeking a very personal gratification, has the positive effect of saving the Danes and then his own people, the Geats, from significant dangers. Ambition may be selfishly motivated, but it still creates a strong defensive king in Beowulf, just as it would have in any king of the Anglo-Saxon period. Therefore despite the modern tendency to consider selfish motivation a negative trait, Beowulf’s ambition would not have been viewed negatively by the Anglo-Saxons, so in the context of the poem we must approach ambition neutrally. Ambition to be a hero clearly drives Beowulf’s heroic deeds, and heroic deeds create the strongest king possible, whether in the fiction of *Beowulf* or the reality of Anglo-Saxon England. The poem itself – despite any selfish motivation – sees Beowulf’s ambition positively.

The poem suggests that in the fifty years of his reign Beowulf grows wise, and it is tempting to think that the years of experience temper his desire to risk his own life for glory at the expense of his people losing their king. That is not the case. For all the years he has spent being “kindest to his people,” Beowulf still thinks like a heroic warrior, not like a king (l. 3182). When the

Geats are attacked by the dragon, Beowulf concludes that he must face the dragon himself:

Yet the prince of rings was too proud
to line up with a large army
against the sky-plague. He had scant regard
for the dragon as a threat, no dread at all
of its courage or strength, for he had kept going
often in the past, through perils and ordeals
of every sort. (ll. 2345-51)

Despite his supposed wisdom, Beowulf sounds downright reckless. He is putting his people at risk, but one should note that his people are already at risk. The only way to save them is to fight the dragon, and so by going to fight the dragon (albeit alone) he is taking their only chance at security. The fact that he fails until Wiglaf joins him does not lessen his need to prove himself as a strong king by fighting the dragon alone. He brings eleven companions with him to fight the dragon, and then informs them that he alone will face the dragon in combat:

Beowulf spoke, made a formal boast
for the last time: "I risked my life
often when I was young. Now I am old,
but as king of the people I shall pursue this fight
for the glory of winning ...
Men at arms, remain here on the barrow,
... This fight is not yours,
nor is it up to any man except me
to measure his strength against the monster
or to prove his worth. I shall win the gold
by my courage, or else mortal combat,
doom of battle, will bear your lord away."
(ll. 2510-4, 2530, 2531-7)

Beowulf must prove that he is a strong king, not only to fight the dragon, but also to prove himself to his own people and to their hostile neighbors. Beowulf acknowledges that he is old, but that does not seem to stop him from making the same ambitious boasts he made when he was young. At this point in the poem, Beowulf is at least seventy years old. He pulls rank on the younger warriors, saying that as king he gets to have first crack at defeating the dragon, aware

that this will bring him more fame and glory than any of his previous deeds. He certainly thinks like the same ambitious hero he was in his youth, and not like a king who has his people to consider. Beowulf has no children, no wife that we know of in the poem, and yet he will risk his life with no consideration for who will lead his people after his inevitable death.

The only chance the Geats have at survival is if Beowulf succeeds in fighting the dragon. If Beowulf does not fight the dragon, but sends his other men in, it is not only apparent that they would not have had the courage to defeat the dragon, but it also would have shown Beowulf to have weakened as a king and opened the Geats up to attack. If Beowulf fights the dragon alone, he at least has the chance of defeating the dragon and securing himself as a strong enough king to ward off attack by neighboring kingdoms. The fact that Beowulf has no apparent heir is certainly an oversight, but it does not diminish the fact that given what he had, it was the most responsible and heroic choice for Beowulf to attempt to fight the dragon on his own, no matter the consequences for himself. But because the poet does not present this logic in political terms and instead uses Beowulf's ambition to motivate rather than rationalize the attempt, the poet is clearly tying ambitious motivation to the correct and noble actions of a good king.

The impression of the text is that Beowulf is mortally wounded, but is able to kill the dragon before dying in faithful Wiglaf's arms. Wiglaf, Beowulf's kinsman, has a stirring change of heart and determines to help Beowulf in his fight against the dragon, whether the other ten warriors will muster the courage to help him or not. The narrative is somewhat uncertain about who actually killed the dragon:

[Wiglaf] lunged at the enemy lower down
 so that his decorated sword sank into its belly
 and the flames grew weaker. Once again the king
 gathered his strength and drew a stabbing knife
 he carried on his belt, sharpened for battle.
 He stuck it deep into the dragon's flank.

Beowulf dealt it a deadly wound.
 They had killed the enemy, courage quelled his life
 that pair of kinsman, partners in nobility,
 had destroyed the foe. (ll.2699-2708)

The narrative seems to state quite bluntly that Beowulf killed the dragon, but a sword wound to the belly seems much more lethal than any but the very best-aimed knife wound to the flank. The poet reconciles this ambiguity with the conclusion that both men killed the dragon as a team. The poet seems to have intentionally confused the matter, and although his intentions cannot be known specifically, curiosity settles if one supposes that it is not important for Beowulf to have decisively killed the dragon on his own. It is important that the Geats credit Beowulf with the deed, but the poet also evidently thought it important that Wiglaf be given due credit for his part in the task. We know Wiglaf follows the same the heroic code by which Beowulf had lived; he had gone to Beowulf in battle saying,

Go on, dear Beowulf, do everything
 you said you would when you were still young
 and vowed you would never let your name or fame
 be dimmed while you lived. Your deeds are famous,
 so stay resolute, my lord, and defend your life now
 with the whole of your strength. I shall stand by you.
 (ll. 2663-2668)

It is important that Wiglaf did stand by Beowulf, for it was only through their work together that the dragon was defeated and the Geat people saved from further destruction, at least within the flames of the dragon. Without Wiglaf's help Beowulf's ambitions to defeat the dragon alone would have met with utter failure, and perhaps his fame would then indeed have faded away into a mist of indistinction. As it was, with the dragon defeated, the Geats still extolled his virtues, despite the impending doom on the horizon.

In truth confirmed by the narrative voice of the poet, an unnamed messenger predicts to the Geat people:

Now war is looming
over our nation, soon it will be known
to the Franks and Frisians, far and wide,
that the king is gone. (ll. 2910-13)

Instability is certain, because there is no obvious successor to the throne. As he dies, Beowulf acknowledges that Wiglaf is the last of his clan, and says “it is up to you / to look after [my people’s] needs,” but there is some uncertainty to whom he speaks (ll. 2800-2801). Although immediately after that line, Beowulf obviously addresses Wiglaf with instructions for his burial, he has just been addressing a quick prayer of thanks to God, so it is possible he is commending his people into the hands of divine providence. This is another moment where the poet may have intended ambiguity – it is evidently not important for us to be certain whether Beowulf is speaking to God or to Wiglaf. If he is speaking to God, it seems Beowulf knows that Wiglaf cannot lead the Geats. Wiglaf’s father has an outstanding blood-feud with the Swedes, who are already a great threat to the Geats. If Wiglaf were to become their king, there would be certain war. And yet, it seems Wiglaf is the only person competent to be king, assuming Beowulf took his eleven best warriors with him to fight the dragon. Wiglaf is not incorrect in dismissing their candidacy:

Every one of you
with freeholds of land, our whole nation,
will be dispossessed, once princes from beyond
get tidings of how you turned and fled
and disgraced yourselves. (ll. 2886-90)

If any one of these men becomes the next Geatish king, their enemies would find it laughable and quickly enact the Geats’ doom. The poignant Geatish woman wails at his funeral pyre,

with hair bound up, she unburdened herself
of her worst fears, a wild litany
of nightmare and lament: her nation invaded,
enemies on the rampage, bodies in piles,
slavery and abasement. (ll. 3153-3155)

It is evident from her lamentation that the people know and understand that the doom coming their way is due to the loss of Beowulf. For all that he turns out to have lost his prowess in battle, his presence as a figurehead kept their enemies at bay, and with him gone, so is the Geats' best and only bulwark.

With no strong replacement for Beowulf, the Geats have little to look forward to, but Beowulf's fault in the matter goes unspoken. The Geats seem unwilling to admit, or perhaps completely unaware of the fact that Beowulf's ambitious urge to slay the dragon himself has gotten him killed and doomed them all. His ambition to kill the dragon alone is what got him killed and doomed the Geats to suffer this annihilation sooner and more definitively than if they were safe until Beowulf's gentler death of illness or old age to find or prepare a new leader.

But nobody blames Beowulf; in fact, they persist in honoring him:

They extolled his heroic nature and exploits
and gave thanks for his greatness; which was the proper thing,
for a man should praise a prince whom he holds dear
and cherish his memory when that moment comes²¹
when he has to be convoyed from his bodily home.
So the Geat people, his hearth companions,
sorrowed for the lord who had been laid low.
They said that of all the kings upon the earth
he was the man most gracious and fair-minded,
kindest to his people and keenest to win fame. (ll. 3173-3182)

This passage epitomizes the degree to which the Geats value heroism in their kings. The fact that they 'gave thanks for his greatness' suggests that they appreciate the benefits they receive from the great deeds of a heroic warrior, particularly one in the position of a king. Beowulf has received exactly what he wanted. His death has come and his life ended, but memory of him has not. The Geats have continued to remember his name, and will for as long as that barrow stands

²¹ This moment recalls Beowulf's logic, discussed earlier, regarding the inevitability of death. He predicted that one day his doom would be unpreventable, and that moment has indeed come.

and Geats survive to remember him by it.²² Beowulf's ambition was specifically to gain sufficient heroic status to be remembered after his death, and he achieves that at the end of the poem. It is possible that Beowulf is here romanticized by his people, remembering him fondly as the last marker of a time when life was good, as they sit on the brink of destruction. But the fact remains that although Beowulf's ambition to achieve personal glory got him killed and doomed the Geats, they still praise him specifically for that trait, because his ambition was the only thing that might have saved them.

The Geats praise Beowulf's ambition because they were better off with a king who was ambitious to fight a dragon alone in the first place, even if that ambition caused him to overreach and lose his life. As with the Anglo-Saxon warrior kings, the Geats need a king who protects them, and a large part of that is the ambition to take on impossible battles to effect the kingdom's defense. Beowulf is certainly largely motivated by his ambition for fame, but he still provides his kingdom with defense. For the Geats, the blame does not lie with Beowulf for getting himself killed, so much as with the remaining Geatish warriors who are not ambitious enough to deserve kingship. Wiglaf cannot be king due to politically disadvantageous familial ties, but he is still correct in blaming the remaining warriors for their cowardice:

Anyone ready to admit the truth
will surely realize that the lord of men
who showered you with gifts and gave you the armor
you are standing in – when he would distribute
helmets and mail-shirts to men on the mead-benches,
a prince treating his thanes in hall

²² This comment allows discussion of the meta-textual implications of *Beowulf*'s fame. If the fictional character could know that his name is the title of the most recognizable Anglo-Saxon literary work, and that his deeds were multiplied into dozens of translations, literary adaptations and films, would that satisfy his eagerness to win fame? Perhaps it would be enough to know that the tale of his deeds that so miraculously survives is solidly part of the English canon, due to its compelling story, moving poetry and inspirational heroics.

to the best he could find, far or near –
 was throwing weapons uselessly away.
 It would be a sad waste when the war broke out.
 Beowulf had little cause to brag
 about his armed guard ...
 So it is goodbye now to all you know and love
 on your home ground, the open-handedness,
 the giving of war-swords. Every one of you
 with freeholds of land, our whole nation,
 will be dispossessed, once princes from beyond
 get tidings of how you turned and fled
 and disgraced yourselves. A warrior will sooner
 die than live in shame. (ll. 2864-2874, 2884-2891)

Wiglaf criticizes these warriors because they have not only brought shame on the Geats, but also effectively invited their doom. Nearby kings will perceive their weakness and decimate them – this is the fate approaching the Geats after Beowulf's death. None of these warriors will be a fit king, because they are not really fit warriors, and as Beowulf's apparent best, they prove that no warrior aside from Wiglaf would be ambitious enough to protect the Geats. The warriors had no ambition to fight the dragon, even after Wiglaf's stirring speech pulling on their sense of loyalty and pride, therefore they could not possibly have the ambition as king necessary to protect the people. Good kingship evidently requires warrior ambition, which these men sadly lack.

Considering the need for warrior kings in Anglo-Saxon England, it seems entirely likely that the poet considered Beowulf to be an exemplary king, and that is why the poet goes to such efforts to Christianize him as an example. Beowulf's heroism and the great deeds that protected both his people and the Danes make him almost a martyr when he dies fighting the dragon, not a fool who ambitiously overreached. Although ambition functions as a motivation for Beowulf, it is not at all a vice. In spite of the obvious downside that warrior kings with great ambition are more likely to get themselves killed by a dragon – or a Viking, as the case may be – ambition is clearly valued due to the benefits brought both as a side effects of heroic deeds and by the strength of a bold king with the ambition to fight off all threats. In the context of the warrior

society of Anglo-Saxon England, *Beowulf* becomes not merely the epic poem of a distant pagan hero, but an encouragement for Anglo-Saxon kings on the home front to seek such renown as Beowulf found and thereby not only construct their own bulwarks against the certain death that awaited them, but also protect their subjects from a multitude of threats and dangers.

III. Macbeth and Other Traitors: Ambition in Tudor Politics

Macbeth is introduced to the play bearing his name as a hero. Before he sets foot on stage, a wounded Captain describes Macbeth's exploits in battle to King Duncan:

For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel,
Which smoke with bloody execution,
Like valor's minion, carved out his passage
Till he faced the slave [the traitorous thane of Cawdor];
Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseamed him from the nave to th' chops,
And fixed his head upon our battlements. (I.ii.18-25)

Here Macbeth seems to be as much a butcher as anywhere later in the play, but Duncan's response is, "O valiant cousin, worthy gentleman!" immediately affirming that Macbeth's bloody trade of war is commendable and somehow courtly (I.ii.26). Duncan soon sends messengers to bestow upon Macbeth the title thane of Cawdor, and Macbeth's response (in light of the witches' recent prophecy)²³ is to begin to see some truth in his future as king. From this introduction, the audience is made to believe that Macbeth is the picture of heroic military prowess. Despite unfavorable odds, Macbeth has saved Scotland from the former Cawdor's treasonous alliance with Norway. Macbeth is without a doubt a good soldier, a good thane and a worthy candidate for hero status.

But the ambition that seems to rot Macbeth's soul prevents him from achieving that title.

²³ Recall the line "All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!" (I.iii.53).

Macbeth cannot be called a hero, but a tyrant. It is ambition that drives him, by his own account, to murder Duncan for his throne. In conclusion to the soliloquy analyzed above, Macbeth states,

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)

It might be easy here to say that Macbeth is reluctant to commit the deed, which lays much of the blame on Lady Macbeth for encouraging him, corrupting him, perhaps even forcing him to kill the king. A. C. Bradley argues – and I agree – that “there is no sign whatever in the play the Shakespeare meant the actions of Macbeth to be forced by him on an external power” (Bradley 261). Bradley points out that Macbeth’s starting response to the witches’ prophecies indicates he was far from innocent of thoughts of the crown, for no guiltless man would “start and seem to fear” (Bradley 261, *Macbeth* I.iii.54). In fact, Macbeth’s hasty conclusion after Malcolm is named heir to the throne suggests he is not unfamiliar with treacherous urges:

The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step
On which I must fall down or else o'erleap,
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires;
Let not light see my black and deep desires.
The eye wink at the hand, yet let that be
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. (I.iv.55-60)

That Macbeth’s ambitious language of falling and o’erleaping begins here – before he has even written to his wife – confirms that he has monarchical ambition independent of Lady Macbeth. When we compare the language of falling in these two moments, it seems that Malcolm is an obstacle to the throne, and also the ‘other’ Macbeth speaks of when he says ambition ‘o’erleaps itself and falls on the other.’ Initially, Macbeth o’erleaps both Duncan and Malcolm, killing the former and sending the latter into exile as the assumed murderer; but it is Malcolm on whom Macbeth falls, when Malcolm brings the English army to end Macbeth’s reign.

In the first act of *Macbeth*, we develop the impression of a valiant warrior thane, leading the

army on behalf of his impotent and excessively pious cousin the king. But Macbeth is not unfamiliar with ambitions for kingship; in fact, it should be specified here that Macbeth's ambition is for kingship and only kingship. His ambition does not manifest as a broader desire for power, and although seeking power may be the base of it, Macbeth only acts on his ambition in seeking a secure kingship for himself. I have thus termed Macbeth's ambition to be monarchal in nature – and monarchal ambition relates to kingships independently of ambition at large.

Lady Macbeth concretely establishes Macbeth's ambition when she says to her absent husband, "Thou... / art not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it" (I.v.18-20). One might suggest that she is projecting her own ambitions on him, but even if Macbeth's guilty shock at the prophecy can be explained by some previous influence of his wife, Macbeth himself embodies the quality of ambition to a tee. As he prepares to undertake the murder, and either hallucinates or imagines the bloody dagger leading him to Duncan, Macbeth knows that what he is about to do is wrong (for the cultural moral reasons discussed above). He has protested to his wife, and been overcome with the rationale that they cannot fail – but concludes the scene with an acknowledgment of the moral wrongness: "I am settled and bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat. / Away, and mock the time with fairest show. / False face must hide what the false heart doth know" (I.vii.92-95). He seems to feel a preemptive guilt, but when he says "I go, and it is done" – he goes (II.i.75). It is anticipation of what will come from such a murder – the fulfillment of a prophecy blocked by steps to be o'erleapt – that entices Macbeth to the deed. H. B. Charlton says it simply: "Macbeth's ambition overcomes all his moral scruples" (Charlton 154).

Although it is not evident in Shakespeare's play, history tells us that Macbeth had no small claim upon the throne. His mother and Duncan's were sisters, daughters of the same King

Kenneth III, and while Duncan had married an English noblewoman (allowing Malcolm his familial ties to the Earl of Northumberland), Macbeth's wife Gruoch was yet another grandchild of Kenneth III (Barrell 13). The structure of political inheritance in Scotland was not yet pure primogeniture and, in fact, control of Scotland bounced between branches of the royal family rather than descending a line of succession (Barrell 13). Macbeth perhaps would not be faulted for thinking he had more right to the throne than the half-English son of a king who could not even lead his own army, but he is condemned in Shakespeare's version because his ambition leads him to an unforgivable action, with results that hit unforgivably close to home for a Jacobean audience. Macbeth's monarchical ambition is unforgivable because it is all too familiar to those who had lived through the latter part of the Tudor period of the English monarchy.

Shakespeare's account of Macbeth's reign makes it appear both shorter and infinitely more destructive than history would have it – but we are more concerned here with how Shakespeare chose to portray the outcome of monarchical ambitions than with what actually happened.²⁴ Complaints against Macbeth's reign quickly follow the banquet at which Banquo's ghost appears, after which an unnamed Lord reports that Macduff has gone to Malcolm in England, encouraging him to war, so that

we may again
Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights,
Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives,
Do faithful homage, and receive free honors,
All which we pine for now. And this report

²⁴ For the sake of historical edification: “MacBeth was a successful ruler. By contemporary standards the length of his reign was highly respectable, and Scotland was sufficiently peaceable for him to be confident enough to leave in 1050 to make a pilgrimage to Rome. A Latin poem describes his reign as a fertile period, which suggests favorable weather, but also points to an absence of civil strife which always brings hardship in a rural society. There is no hint in contemporary sources that he was a tyrant, and it is inconceivable that he would have reigned for so long if he had been” (Barrell 12-13).

Hath so exasperate the King that he
Prepares for some attempt of war. (III.vi.36-43)

Macbeth, it seems, is still a soldier. When he could not bear the thought that Banquo's sons would inherit from his sins, Macbeth turned to violence to take them out of the equation (III.i-iii). When the lords of Scotland desire food, sleep and peace – Macbeth prepares for war. And later, when told by the witches' apparition that he should "Beware Macduff!" – Macbeth goads Macduff into their one-on-one combat through the brutal murder of his wife and children (IV.i.81; IV.ii).

But the brilliant martial skills that were praised in Macbeth in the opening act do not a good king make. Consider this description:

Macduff. Stands Scotland where it did?
Ross. Alas, poor country,
Almost afraid to know itself. It cannot
Be called out mother, but our grave, where nothing
But who knows nothing is once seen to smile;
Where sighs, groans and shrieks that rent the air
Are made, not marked; where violent sorrow seems
A modern ecstasy. The dead man's knell
Is there scarce asked for who, and good men's lives
Expire before the flowers in their caps,
Dying or ere they sicken. (IV.iii.188-198)

In short, Scotland is not doing well. Only the oblivious fools dare smile, pain and suffering are considered ordinary, and no one has a care for misery or death because it has become so commonplace. Men are dead without having been ill – the implication here is that they die unnaturally, violently and at the hands of the tyrant. Macbeth's soldiering has become a plague upon his country, for his violent means of resolving problems has turned Scotland into a hotbed of suffering, where the Scots are afraid to call themselves Scots because it makes clear all that they have lost.

In fact, the view of Macbeth as a soldier whose ambition led him to overthrow his lord calls

to light a thematic connection between Macbeth and another insubordinate warrior. In concluding that Macduff is loyal, Malcolm offhandedly likens Macbeth to Satan:

Macduff. I am not treacherous.
Malcolm. But Macbeth is.
 A good and virtuous nature may recoil
 In an imperial charge. But I shall crave your pardon.
 That which you are, my thoughts cannot transpose.
 Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell. (IV.iii.21-27)

In addition to pointing out the fall of Macbeth's 'good and virtuous nature,' Malcolm's words call to mind Milton's Satan, whose 'vaulting ambition,' one might say, led him to defy God and thus create a need for Hell – and eventually a cause for all human sin.²⁵ This brightest angel – no doubt Lucifer – is concretely linked to Macbeth in the climactic confrontation of the play when Macduff says:

Despair thy charm,
 And let the angel whom thou still hast served
 Tell thee Macduff was from his mother's womb
 Untimely ripped." (V.viii.17-20)

Though the term 'angel' is not necessarily a negative connotation the context implies that it must be – and what other angel could Macbeth have served? The comparison here implies that Macbeth is to Duncan as Satan is to God; the violent warrior murdered the pious king in an act of ambitious defiance on the same scale as Satan's divine rebellion. The conclusion is certainly allowed for that Macbeth's successful attainment of the throne, spawned by ambition, is comparable to the terrible hypothetical of Satan having overthrown God. However, that does not fully explain the relationship between ambition and kingship – for that we must turn to the political context of Macbeth's reign.

Macbeth is not a good king, but it is important to remember – because Shakespeare is not

²⁵ Despite the anachronism, it is pertinent to note the comparison with Milton because it offers an accessible rendition of the ambitious Satan.

ambiguous on the subject – that Macbeth was a good thane. Except for the actions which made him king, Macbeth was everything Duncan wanted and needed him to be; he was a “peerless kinsman” (I.iv.65). Macbeth is able to be ambitious because he has the possibility of becoming king by killing Duncan. Although Duncan has named Malcolm his heir, Scotland did not follow strict primogeniture, so without that naming Macbeth could have just as easily been the next king following a natural death for Duncan. The succession is undetermined at the start of the play; Macbeth is able to develop ambitions for kingship, because it is within his reach. When Duncan attempts to solidify the succession in a way that derails those ambitions, Macbeth’s ambition turns violent.

Literary critics have concretely linked *Macbeth* to several facets of contemporaneous Elizabethan politics. The fact that it followed close on the heels of King James I’s (formerly King James VI of Scotland) accession to the English throne immediately links it to a contemporary anxiety felt over the new union of England and Scotland (Moschovakis 42). The witches’ prophecy that Banquo’s sons would be kings is a nod to the chroniclers’ testimony that the historical Banquo was forebear to the Stuart line, through whom James had inherited the Scottish throne (Moschovakis 42). The alliance presented between Malcolm Canmore of Scotland and England’s pious King Edward I (called the Confessor) in Act IV and V of *Macbeth* supports the idea of Anglo-Scottish union, and Malcolm’s English blood calls to mind James’s own lineage: despite being king of Scotland, he was a descendant of King Henry VII (the original Tudor king in England) through both his father and his mother (Lehmberg 233). *Macbeth* has well-documented links to then-recent plots to assassinate both Queen Elizabeth I and King James VI/I, including the Ridolfi Plot of 1571 and Babington Plot of 1586, both of

which aimed to assassinate Elizabeth and replace her with her half-sister Mary, Queen of Scots (who was also James VI/I's mother).

The play also keys into recent memory of the Gowrie Conspiracy of 1600, in which James's personal servants defended him from assassins; where Duncan's drunken grooms slept through the murder of their lord, James's servants saved his life. (Baldo 91). It is well-established, therefore, that *Macbeth* was a topical play at the time of Shakespeare's writing, but a full understanding of relationship between the politics of real-world early modern England and the politics of fictional medieval Scotland calls for a brief historical account of the Tudor period – with an eye toward ambition.

The Tudor line came to power in 1485 when Henry VII won his crown and ended the War of the Roses on Bosworth Field (Lehmberg 171). Henry VII's claim was weakened by linking through female descendents and a birth prior to the legitimate marriage of his grandmother to King Edward III, but he settled the dispute between Yorkist and Lancastrian factions with his own claim to the throne (Lehmberg 172). Unlike any other Tudor monarch, Henry VII had no crisis of succession. In fact, when his eldest son, Prince Arthur died, Henry VII was able to pass the young widow (Catherine of Aragon) along to the second son, later King Henry VIII, and still have two daughters left over to be used as political bargaining chips (Lehmberg 175). Henry VIII's sister Margaret provides the necessary link between the English and Scottish royal lines, for her marriage to King James IV of Scotland made her great-grandmother to King James VI/I.

Henry VIII's succession was undisputed and passed peacefully – Shakespeare's sequence of history plays notably skips from Henry VII's ascension at the end of *Richard III* to the marital drama presented in *Henry VIII*. Henry VIII's famous marital habits – going through six wives over the course of his lifetime – began as a matter directly relating to an anxiety over the royal

succession. Henry VIII was inspired to divorce his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, because she had been unable to provide him with more than a single daughter as his heir, and Henry had little confidence that his first surviving child, named Mary, would be accepted as a queen (Lehmberg 182). At this point there had been no Queen of England who ruled solely through her birthright, not through marriage – not since before the unification of England into a single kingdom. Henry VIII's aspirations for a son to continue his line led him ultimately to break with the Orthodox Catholic Church to gain a divorce and marry Anne Boleyn, who was herself ambitious for a crown (Lehmberg 182-184). But Anne Boleyn merely gave him another daughter – this one named Elizabeth; Henry VIII had Anne executed for witchcraft and married Jane Seymour, who provided him with his only son and last child, Edward (Lehmberg 186, 192).

Henry VIII's death allowed the ascension of his only son as King Edward VI, who ruled with the help of regents from the ages of nine to sixteen, at which time he fell ill. Fearing the succession of his devoutly Catholic half-sister Mary, Edward VI signed the crown down to an obscure member of the royal family – also aged sixteen – Lady Jane Grey (Lehmberg 202). She ruled for nine days before Parliament changed sides, brought Queen Mary I to power and had Lady Jane executed (Lehmberg 202). Mary made a valiant effort to return England to Catholicism, exiling roughly 800 reformation-minded English folk and burning another 300 at the stake (Lehmberg 204). After Mary's death, the final Tudor inherited the throne: Queen Elizabeth I. Although Elizabeth's reign was long and quite successful, it was tempered by threats against her life and a constant anxiety over who would inherit the throne from the unmarried Virgin Queen.

The period between Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth was filled with brief and tumultuous reigns – it took three stabs at succession before Henry's religious confounding of England could

be resolved. Edward VI ruled for six years, Lady Jane Grey for nine days, and Mary I for five years, culminating in Elizabeth's 45-year reign (Lehmberg 201-202). Henry VIII's international politics began allied with Spain against France, but after a concrete show of military force against France, Henry developed an alliance with France against the Spanish, only to later turn on a personal friendship with the French king to side once more with Spain to gain support in the strongly Catholic country for his petition to the pope for a divorce from his first wife (Lehmberg 183). This shift in alliance was in turn motivated by Henry's desire for a male heir, not for the security of his kingdom, for other branches of the royal family had borne sons, but so that his personal line could continue on the throne. Henry VIII's ambition was tied directly to his succession, and it started him on a path that proved queenship by marriage to be fleeting, uncertain and unstable.

The monarchs that followed Henry VIII allowed personal ambition to reign at the expense of their people. Edward VI saw himself as new "Josiah," bringing new and better means of worship to his people, so of course he could not let that be tarnished by the inheritance of his Catholic half-sister (Lehmberg 199). But his ambitions for maintaining his own legacy nearly put England into the hands of a sixteen-year-old girl who had no education or training in the rule of a country. Mary I's short reign was even harsher. The Marian persecution of Protestants and reformers was carried out as part of the queen's ambitious plan to return England to Catholicism with no taint of compromise – and the deaths that resulted earned her the apt nickname 'Bloody Mary.' Mary was certainly called ambitious by supporters of Elizabeth; in 1602, poet-historian William Warner included these lines in his history of England: "For when these mightie Potentates, through Ones Ambition, fell, / Queene Mary seem'd to shut up Heaven, and set wide open Hell" (Warner 197/O3r). Warner blames Mary's ambition for the political murders and executions that

preceded her reign as well as the religious murders and executions that occurred during it. Although Elizabeth I's reign was generally much less violent toward her own people, her personal ambition again put subjects at risk. Elizabeth's refusal to marry was most likely a direct result of her unwillingness to share her power with a man and her ambition to be as much of a king as she could, which meant refusal to be a wife (Lehmberg 211). As a result of her ambition to have power equivalent to any male king, England spent much of her long reign with a looming anxiety over who would succeed her on the throne.

Unlike the Anglo-Saxon period of *Beowulf*'s writing, or even the intervening years of the Norman and Plantagenet kings, the ambitions of the Tudors created a terrible sense of transiency in the monarchy coming out of the War of the Roses. Whereas in the Anglo-Saxon period, kings had to be ambitious warriors to ably defend their subjects, by the Tudor period, the personal ambitions of monarchs served merely to – at best – inconvenience their subjects and – at worst – kill them. Additionally, the monarchical ambitions of persons not in line to receive a crown threatened the resolution of kingship (and queenship) itself.

The most notable challenger to Elizabeth's power was Mary, Elizabeth's second cousin, deposed Queen of Scots, one-time queen of France by marriage, and mother to a son who was English royalty through his father as well. The devoutly Catholic Mary Stuart had fled an increasingly Protestant Scotland – leaving the rule of Scotland to her one-year-old son, James VI – seeking Elizabeth's mercy, which she received in the form of house arrest (Lehmberg 214). It cannot be satisfactorily proven how much Mary was involved in plots to place herself on Elizabeth's throne, but Mary herself was the threat, and though Elizabeth resisted pressure from advisers, she ultimately signed her cousin's death warrant in 1587 (Lehmberg 215). The relationship here between monarch and relative with monarchical ambitions lines up interestingly

with *Macbeth*. Macbeth was successful in achieving Duncan's throne through assassination, but he had no son to inherit; Mary failed to acquire Elizabeth's throne through assassination, but because Elizabeth was childless, Mary's son still stood to inherit. In fact – to carry the analogy further – if Macbeth had fathered a child and Duncan had not, then that child's claim to the Scottish throne would be comparable to James's claim to that of England.

In *Macbeth*, as in the Tudor period of England, ambition only becomes a problem in the monarchy when the royal line is not ascertained, because a definitive heir precludes the possibility of any other monarch ascending the throne. Macbeth is able to be ambitious because Scotland did not follow strict primogeniture, so he has the possibility – indeed, the likelihood – of becoming king when he kills Duncan. Whereas in the Anglo-Saxon period, kings had to be ambitious warriors to ably defend their subjects, by the Tudor period, the personal ambitions of monarchs served merely to make the state less stable and created a terrible sense of transiency in the monarchy. Ambition was made possible by the succession crises of the Tudors, and became inextricably linked to uncertainty in the stability of an hereditary monarchy. The uncertainty of succession specifically allows for Macbeth's monarchical ambition, which is therefore the only kind of ambition that is able affect the concept of kingship in this way. Historically, the English people had good reason to believe that ambition to be king overwhelmed the monarchy with instability, and that the only way to combat that insecurity was to ensure a clear succession.

The language *Macbeth* employs to describe kingship exhibits an anxiety regarding the transiency of a monarchy influenced by royal ambition. While waiting for the Murderers (already sent for to dispatch Banquo), Macbeth exhibits discontentedness with kingship due to his lack of an heir:

They hailed him father to a line of kings.
 Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown.
 And put a barren scepter in my grip,
 Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand,
 No son of mine succeeding. If 't be so,
 For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind;
 For them the gracious Duncan have I murdered...
 To make them kings, the seeds of Banquo kings. (III.i.62-71, 75)

This complaint only makes sense if Macbeth has an heir, which he assuredly does not. If Macbeth had a son whom he expected to follow him as king, then his distress over the inheritance of Banquo's line would make sense. But with no son to inherit, and evidently no hope of creating an heir, one must question why Macbeth begrudges Banquo the throne. Why is Macbeth unwilling to have 'filed his mind' for Banquo's seed, if his initial motive was ambition for Lady Macbeth and himself with no consideration for succession? As is, this anxiety seems to represent not Macbeth's fears, but those of the Tudor monarchs. Edward VI, Mary I and Elizabeth I all had good reason to fear the relative that was next in line for the throne inheriting. That fear of the throne passing to a different line – a different ideology and in the case of the Tudors, a different religion – seems to threaten Macbeth much more than his lack of an heir. That threat makes manifest a Tudor anxiety over the succession of the throne.

The image of a 'barren scepter' is enlightening; it is as though the kingship itself is barren. The abstract concept of 'monarch' is barren and cannot conceive a healthy continuation. Just as the sterile doom of Macbeth's line freezes his kingship in inadequacy, his fruitless reign forced Scotland into a period of literal fruitlessness, as discussed above. It seems that all his ambitions have come to nothing, because he is not 'safely thus,' therefore Macbeth is nervous about where the balance of power will land once he is gone – whether he dies by foul play or manages a long, healthy kingship. One wonders whether this is similar to the anxiety felt by Queen Elizabeth I, knowing that the throne would be wrenched from her 'unlineal hand.' Would knowledge as

certain as Macbeth's – as certain as a witches' prophecy – that the son of her treasonous cousin would become king have spurred Queen Elizabeth to have both Mary and James killed? It may be coincidence that King James VI/I is a descendant of the line Fleance escapes to begin, and fills that same role in real-world English politics. But it tickles the imagination to note that though Elizabeth had his mother killed, James still took his – perhaps destined – place on the English throne, just as Fleance was apparently destined to continue Banquo's line to become kings.

The uncertainty that Macbeth feels regarding his own future as king (and the non-existent future of his dynastic line) reflects awareness that everything his ambition led him to desire is 'nothing' if he is not 'safely thus.' The transiency of his own rule is innately linked to the idea that his 'bloody instructions' will 'return to plague the inventor.' His ambition has cracked the stability of the Scottish monarchy, and as his monarchical situation may be linked to the Elizabethan/Jacobean changeover, Macbeth's soliloquy following the demise of Lady Macbeth is a pertinent comment on both Macbeth's situation of kingship and that of the Tudor-Stuart kings and queens of England.

Seyton. The Queen, my lord, is dead.
Macbeth. She should have died hereafter.
 There would have been a time for such a word.
 Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
 To the last syllable of recorded time,
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. 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.19-31)

These lines are easily taken at face value as Macbeth's existential crisis following the death of his "dearest partner in greatness," but that alone suggests a connection to the state of kingship,

for their ultimate greatness is monarchical (I.v.11). Though Macbeth's own ambition certainly motivated him to act on the witches' prophecy and kill Duncan, Lady Macbeth was not exactly silent on the topic. At this point in the play, following sudden word of her death (although we do not find until Act V, scene viii that she had committed suicide), it seems fitting that Macbeth should dwell – and soliloquize, as ever – on the pointlessness not only of life, but also a transient monarchy doomed from the start by ambition.

Temporally, this soliloquy ingeniously forces itself to be ever-present – in Shakespeare's early 1600's, Macbeth's fictionalized eleventh century and even in the present day. As if 'tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow' were not enough to provide an infinitely continuous cycle, 'from day to day' gives it a clear sense of including the here and now and 'all our yesterdays' – particularly with the permanence of *all* – suggests that it has always been this way and it always will. Additionally, this soliloquy is linked to King James VI/I through Shakespeare's own language. Compare "to the last syllable of recorded time" with "to th' crack of doom" (V.v.24, IV.i.132). The meaning is the same – to the end of time, until Judgment Day, or in short, forever – but if the latter seems less eloquent, it is because Macbeth is worked into a panic when he uses that phrase. It is from the scene in which Macbeth seeks out the witches to ask them for further prophecies and the witches ultimately show him a line of kings – Banquo's descendants – leading on, Macbeth fears, 'to th' crack of doom.'²⁷ In fact, there are only eight kings, but this is more than enough to allude to the Stuart line that began ruling England with the ascension of King James VI/I to the English throne as the inheritor of both Banquo's line in Scotland through his mother's paternal ancestors and of the Tudor line (Lehmberg 338). The

²⁷ It is interesting that Shakespeare uses the word 'doom' here – that is a common modern English translation for the Old English *wyrd*, which pervades "Beowulf" with a neutral implication of 'fate,' and is also the precursor for weird, as in the Weird Sisters.

soliloquy on ‘tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow’ is therefore poetically linked not only to the kingship of Scotland in *Macbeth*, but also to the monarchical rule of England by the Tudors and the Stuarts.

Immediately following the establishment that this soliloquy applies to a non-fictional sense of monarchy, Shakespeare introduces a sense of fatalism. The line, “All our yesterdays have lighted fools / The way to dusty death” implies a doomed cyclicity (V.v.25-26). Our past has led many before us simply to die for their efforts. Macbeth is feeling a futility in his actions as king and in becoming king. For all his ambitions, all his conviction that he was destined for it due to the witches’ prophecy, Macbeth is simply making his way toward death, and the implication of this line is that the next fool who takes the job will have the same realization and then die the same useless death. The line that follows – “Out, out, brief candle!” – is dangerously close to a desire to put out the candle of life (V.v.26). But the ‘light’ of which he has just been speaking can just as easily be a knowledge or understanding of history or our own personal pasts, and Macbeth elsewhere denies any suicidal intention. Calling it a ‘brief candle’ implies not only that it is dim and flickering, but also that it will not last. The wick will burn through all the wax and we are left with nothing for our knowledge, so perhaps the candle should not ever be lit – and since it evidently now is for Macbeth, he wishes it to be put out. He does not wish to put out his own life – how then would we explain his later line: “Why should I play the Roman fool and die / on mine own sword?” (V.vii.1-2) – but rather wishes to put out the knowledge of his own transiency as both man and king. His yesterdays include the day he killed Duncan, ambitious for a throne, the day he had Banquo killed, ambitious to be “safely thus” and the day he had Macduff’s family killed, ambitious to “make assurance double sure” (III.i.53, IV.i.94). It is Macbeth’s ambition that is leading him to ‘dusty death,’ and the knowledge of this doom is too

much to bear.

The lines that follow only emphasize the point that Macbeth's kingship is futile:

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.27-31)

With his wife dead and the imminent threat of invasion (for he does not yet know that Birnam Wood has already come to Dunsinane), all Macbeth really has left in life is his kingship. That does not necessarily mean we can read intent on the part of this character to comment directly on kingship itself, but the alluring possibility is certainly allowed for in the text. If this 'poor player' is strutting and fretting on the stage of monarchy, then he sounds an awful lot like Macbeth himself, who has done nothing but boast and worry in his time as king. Shakespeare has shortened Macbeth's reign from the historical decade to an ambiguous matter of months or maybe a couple years – that fits with a mere hour on the stage (*Macbeth* is, after all, much shorter than Shakespeare's other tragedies). The brevity of his reign may allude to the short and questionable reigns of King Edward VI, Lady Jane Grey and Queen Mary I, the transitions between whom seem to have caused about as much trauma for England as Macbeth's short reign has for Scotland.

What a bitter joke it is then, to say that these kings and queens who briefly strutted and fretted but are now 'heard no more' present merely 'a tale told by an idiot.' The 'sound and fury' certainly fit – merely recall the reason Mary I is called Bloody and all the international fuss started by Henry VIII's marriage habits. The English people had at the point of Shakespeare's writing gone through a lot of turmoil as they endured this transient monarchy, full of subversive threats to power, countless deaths and political or religious transitions without warning, and which was entirely due to the ambitions of their betters. Perhaps it all would have been worth it –

perhaps Macbeth's condemnation for his deeds would be worth it – if it meant *something*. A signifier must have a signified, but in the case of a transient monarchy brought into instability by royal ambitions, the tragedy of it all – the reason *Macbeth* is a tragedy – is that it signifies nothing.

V. Kingship and Ambition in Literature and History

Having established that Beowulf's ambition is praised because of its value in the warrior-king society of Anglo-Saxon England, and that Macbeth's ambition is condemned because of its relationship to the transiency of the Tudor monarchs, it is less curious that Beowulf should be treated as a hero and Macbeth should not. Beowulf's ambition makes him a good warrior, and a good warrior is valuable to the Anglo-Saxons so his ambition makes him a good heroic king. Macbeth's ambition, on the other hand, ties him inextricably to the ambitions of the Tudor dynasty that signified an anxiety of the transience of the English monarchy and an inability for kingship inspired by ambition to achieve a safe equilibrium.

It is important to note the linguistic distinctions between *Beowulf* and *Macbeth* with regard to ambition, because it pertains to the comparison of how the language of ambition functions similarly in these texts, despite their origination in two distinct languages. The word 'ambition' comes from the Latin *ambitio* through French, but it does not appear in English until the Middle English period of the late Middle Ages. In the Old English in which Beowulf is written, there is no word that can be directly translated as the Modern English 'ambition.' The only suitable equivalent is the word I have cited in *Beowulf*: *lof-geornost*, which directly translates to "most yearning for praise," but also has the connotations of "lavish" and "ostentatious." I have refused to tie ambition down to the connotations of a single word, but rather I have considered the

broader concept that includes the qualities of being either ambitious or *lof-geornost*. The definitions of *lof-geornost* and ambition are sufficiently similar to be considered the same concept. *Lof-geornost* does not connote the broad spectrum of goals that ambition encompasses – praise and fame, but also status, power, influence, the latter of which more solidly fit Macbeth’s profile. Macbeth’s ambition for kingship is not necessarily more negative than Beowulf’s ambition for fame and glory, because exploration of how ambition is understood within each text requires a study of the texts’ contemporaneous context. It is still possible that Macbeth’s anti-hero status is due to the embodiment of the more negative facet of the concept, but I contest that the more interesting distinction is due to a moral shift in evaluating the concept due to the political factors discussed at length above.

The Anglo-Saxons only had need for a term that describes the eagerness for fame and praise, both of which were generally to be praised. As such, *lof-geornost* is a very specific compound of “praise-yearning-est.” The less favorable aspect of the word suggests that even if Beowulf is lavish or ostentatious, that is still a desirable – or at least not undesirable – quality of an Anglo-Saxon warrior king, whose eagerness for fame and praise will help him keep his subjects safe from a violent and terrible invasion. But in relative peacetime, when England (and by the time of *Macbeth* – if not the historical Macbeth – also Scotland) was united under a single monarch, the ambitions of kings and queens were intricately bound to the question of succession, and so it is that we see *Macbeth* not only condemning a man whose ambitions make him king, but also dwelling at length on the transiency of a monarchy built upon ambition. So the question of why Beowulf’s ambition is a virtue and Macbeth’s is a vice is answered thusly: because Beowulf comes from a world where fame-seekers saved lives and peoples, he is a hero; while Macbeth – dramatized in a world all too familiar with royal wannabes – embodies a darker form of ambition

tied inextricably into the political history of Tudor-Stuart England.

The literatures of these very different periods understand the concept of ambition in direct reflection of the political contexts under which they were written. A broad claim about the relationship between politics, ambition and the whole of Anglo-Saxon and early modern literature would be impossible without a thorough and comprehensive study of the body of literature. However, we can draw some conclusions at least about the relationship between *Beowulf* and *Macbeth* and their respective politico-moral influences, and thereby make claims about how *some* literature interacts with its political climate. *Beowulf* functions as it does because of the Germanic influence on the political structure of Anglo-Saxon society, and what that form of kingship demanded in a society living under constant threat of attack. *Macbeth* condemns ambition as it does because of what monarchical ambition had done to damage English society and threaten the security of the monarchy itself in the Tudor period.

The comparison of *Beowulf* and *Macbeth* is significant because they address the issue of kingship – what it means to be king, what it feels like to be king and what it takes to be a king. But for all the controversy surrounding the authorship of either text, it is certain that neither text was written by a king. Therefore both of the poets are expressing what they perceived to be the answers to those questions, and thereby articulating what at least two uncommonly poetic men – or perhaps groups of men – considered the moral framework of kingship in their respective times. There is a symbiotic relationship here between history and literature, where – as we have seen – history informs our reading of literature, but the literature also informs our reading of history. This allows us important insight into contemporary views of very historical issues, such as the nature of kingship in two very different political climates.

The fictions these poets told serve as vibrant evidence for the kinds of world in which they

lived. Historical tracts and annals record who was king, and often also who killed whom to become king, but it takes an epic poem or a tragic drama to explicate what one man – and probably others – thought of the idea of kingship and how it related to ambition. From the study of historical influence on literary works, we gain insight into the politico-moral forces at play that determine the moralization of even so basic a human quality as ambition. It is clear now that *Beowulf* is not just an epic hero seeking fame, but an exemplar of Anglo-Saxon kingship. Likewise, *Macbeth* is not just an anti-hero doomed by his own ambition, but a tragic manifestation of an anxiety over the transiency of the English monarchy coming out of the Tudor period. That *Beowulf* so clearly reflects how ambition related to kingship in Anglo-Saxon England further supports a revised reading of *Macbeth* wherein the Scottish king's ambition struts while his monarchal anxiety frets, ultimately betraying an utterly non-fictional fear that this king – perhaps that any king with an uncertain line - will soon be heard no more. Historical readings of ambition in *Beowulf* and *Macbeth* signify the impact any socio-political climate can have on literature, how we can use an exploration of that context to better understand the literature in light of when it was written, and – most importantly – what changes in our understanding of well-studied works such as these when we consider them with interdisciplinary – historical and literary – study. And that is a far cry from signifying nothing.

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