

Reading *Macbeth* as Pandemic Literature: An Expedition to a Plague-Ridden World

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Abstract

This paper argues that William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* can be read as pandemic literature. Though the tragedy is not about a plague, critics have already viewed it as a depiction of a claustrophobic ailing world with Macbeth and his accomplices running amok as agents of death and corruption. However, how the play actually speaks of real plagues and how it can be considered as pandemic literature have not been discussed adequately. Pandemic literature illustrates the ravages of plague as experienced, reminisced, and dreaded by the sufferers. The fictional world of *Macbeth* appears to be a plague-ridden world. The existence of deformed entities like the weird sisters, Malcolm's familiarity with scrofula epidemic, Macbeth's obsession towards the end with medicine, frequent appearances of doctors, and so on are some signs that the world of Macbeth was already going through a plague-like situation. The inhabitants of such a world often act frantically trying to escape death. They articulate stories of invisible horror and difficult survival, as if a plague had gripped them. The portrayal of Macbeth himself as an inhuman despot can serve as an indication that the tragedy is signaling to something beyond the rise and fall of a man – something terrible whose rampage is comparable to the devastation of a plague. This research asserts that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* can be categorized under the pandemic literature genre.

Keywords: Pandemic literature, paranoia, early-modern European plague, medicine

William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is the tragedy of Macbeth, the illegitimate king of Scotland. It is a classic tale of the rise and fall of a flawed hero as he "goes from an honorable subordination to a royal power he cannot wield righteously" (Snyder, 2001, p. 88). Moral deviation, the play suggests this way, is the reason why the megalomaniac meets his downfall. It reminds that "[a]ctual lives, no matter how rich in power and achievement, always end in the final defeat of death . . ." (Snyder, 2001, p. 85). *Macbeth*, thus, is a story of moral transgression and retribution. And as such, it associates goodness with wellbeing and evil with suffering. In Knight's (1931/1968) words, "the opposition of life and death forces is strong in *Macbeth*" (p. 139). *Macbeth* contrasts these warring elements to show how happiness is often violated by the agents of perversion. Thereby, the tragedy sees evil as an endemic disease corrupting health and sanity. To be specific, *Macbeth* warns against plagues – both real and metaphoric.

Macbeth, from this perspective, can be considered as pandemic literature. Simplifying, *Macbeth*'s portrayal of moral rottenness is impregnated with references to actual plagues. The COVID-19 stricken twenty-first century world hardly needs to be told what tremendous impact a pandemic can have on human life. It was not different in

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Shakespeare's time. Plagues were "a constitutive force within British culture [from 1500 to 1666], affecting all aspects of lived experience . . . It halted trade, sent the wealthy in [flight] to the country, closed theaters, and killed thousands" (Totaro, 2008, p. 491). Shakespeare's England, thus, underwent a life-altering tribulation during the early-modern plagues. *Macbeth*, in particular, can be shown to be recapturing this very experience of being trapped in a pandemic. Though *Macbeth* does not depict this directly, it represents a pandemic-like situation. This paper argues that *Macbeth* can be read as pandemic literature. Through an exploration of its sickly world struck by both a real and an allegorical plague, through an analysis of the lived experience of its characters as they succumb to moral as well as physical degeneration, and through an exposition of the play's keen awareness of early-modern medical discourse, the paper asserts that *Macbeth* can be categorized under the pandemic literature genre.

***Macbeth* and pandemic literature**

A pandemic is a catastrophe on world scale: it is "simply an epidemic on a very wide geographical scale, perhaps worldwide, or at least affecting a large area of the world" (Hays, 2005, p. xi). A pandemic, therefore, is an outbreak of any mortal disease over a vast quarter of the globe. Though a fearful phenomenon, these calamities have inspired works of art and literature throughout the ages. In Europe, for instance, "[t]he recurrence of [bubonic plague] . . . in the early modern period . . . continued to stimulate the production of art and literature" (Marshall, 2008, p. 522). Such works which centre on plagues have come to be categorized under 'pandemic literature'. Pandemic literature has been defined as:

. . . works that are specifically tied to the experience or anticipation of plague by their content and purpose; that is, they contain direct reference to the disease, visually or verbally, and are created for plague-related aims, whether commemorative, *ex voto*, prophetic, didactic, or prophylactic." (Marshall, 2008, p. 522-523)

Plague literature, then, is essentially about plagues. It depicts, remembers, and dreads plagues. Literary works of such nature generally aim to capture the devastation that plagues and pandemics enact.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, apparently, does not revolve around a pandemic. Neither is it about diseases nor about mass death. Still, the play seems keenly alive to ideas concomitant to plagues. *Macbeth* ruminates on what ails the human body: it "invites speculation about the ultimate causes of pain and suffering" (Moschovakis, 2008, p. 1). It has a tendency to contemplate the reasons why human beings suffer. An endemic suffering overwhelms everyone in *Macbeth*. Its characters succumb to pain and misery indiscriminately: Lady Macbeth to mental illness, Macbeth to depression and paranoia, and almost everyone to fear and cowardliness. These sufferings depicted in the play are seen as infection resulting from evil. The more Macbeth and others are overcome with this evil, the more they become vulnerable to different kinds of diseases and abnormalities. Theirs is a fear of getting infected. Perhaps this is a reason why it has been said: "[f]ear is the heart of this play" (Knight, 1931/1968, p. 139). *Macbeth*, in this sense, represents the horror that accompany plagues and deaths.

The above statement can be substantiated in context to the sixteenth and seventeenth-century world Shakespeare saw. It was a world already devastated by the Second Pandemic. The Second Pandemic “began with the [Black Death] (1347–1352) and is widely believed to have initiated a cycle of recurring [epidemic] disease in Europe that lasted for the next 400 years” (Birkelbach, 2008, p. 484). This pandemic wreaked havoc on the world in the following manner:

. . . [T]he second pandemic was particularly widespread in the following years: 1360–1363; 1374; 1400; 1438–1439; 1456–1457; 1464–1466; 1481–1485; 1500–1503; 1518–1531; 1544–1548; 1563–1566; 1573–1588; 1596–1599; 1602–1611; 1623–1640; 1644–1654; and 1664–1667.

This prolonged pandemic ended at different times in different places, and subsequent historical accounts have given different end dates depending on their regional or national focus. In the years after 1670, plague visited Europe only sporadically; for many historians the second pandemic ended in 1722, the date of plague’s last appearance in western Europe. . . . (Hays, 2005, p. 46)

The description is proof that pandemics were nothing new in Shakespeare’s time. From the late fourteenth century to the seventeenth, it visited Europe recurrently. Particularly in Shakespeare’s England, plagues were a persistent and unforgettable reality: “[e]pidemics in 1563, 1603, and perhaps 1625 all killed a greater proportion of Londoners than did that of 1665, although the total death toll in 1665 was higher” (Hays, 2005, p. 122). Death from plague was a familiar phenomenon there. No doubt plague was “an ever-present reality for [Shakespeare] and his contemporaries” (Dickson, 2020, March 22). This macabre reality is the reality of *Macbeth* too because it “represents a realm that is worse than death” (Zimmerman, 2016, p. 339). *Macbeth*’s, in reality, is a plague-ridden world.

Moreover, *Macbeth*, which was “probably written and first published . . . in 1606” (“*Macbeth*,” 2000, p. 621), had direct contact with the plague of its time. The following can provide a justification for the statement:

There were particularly severe outbreaks of plague in 1582, 1592-93, 1603-04, 1606, and 1608-09. The theatre historian J. Leeds Barroll III, who carefully sifted through the surviving records, concluded that in the years between 1606 and 1610—the period in which Shakespeare wrote and produced some of his greatest plays, from [*Macbeth*] and [*Antony and Cleopatra*] to [*The Winter’s Tale*] and [*The Tempest*—the London playhouses were not likely to have been open for more than a total of nine months. (Greenblatt, 2020, para. 5)

Macbeth came out while plague was rife in England. The ensuing closure of the theatres was a nightmare to the playwrights. *Macbeth* could not have overlooked such constant spectral presence of pandemic. The following is a detailed exposition on how *Macbeth* can also be read as pandemic literature.

The plague-ridden world of *Macbeth*

The world of *Macbeth* is a world devastated by diseases. That *Macbeth* is set in such a world is evident from the very beginning of the play. The weird sisters of the “blasted heath” (1.3.75) are the first to comment on the contaminated atmosphere of the play’s world: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair, / Hover through the fog and filthy air (1.1.12-13).

The lines are expressive of the sisters' malevolent tendency to blur the boundary between good and evil at will. Therefore, this is a pure expression of their wickedness (Empson, 1986, p. 142). At the same time, the speech can also be regarded as a direct indication to an already existing "filthy" atmosphere which is not conducive to life. Lady Macbeth seems to be aware of such an atmosphere when she villainously summons the anti-life forces lurking in that murky world: ". . . unsex me here / And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull / Of direst cruelty; make thick my blood" (1.5.39-41). Here Lady Macbeth is risking moral bankruptcy as she wants to be turned into a heartless monstrosity. In doing so, she almost wants her body to be mutilated and violated. She further perverts her natural bodily functions when she calls on the agents of death and adds: ". . . take my milk for gall" (1.5.46). Lady Macbeth wants her entire being to be corrupted with unnatural health conditions. This might also be the reason why she is critical of Macbeth's initial righteousness which, she complains, is "full o'th'milk of human kindness" (1.5.15). She thinks her husband's ambition lacks "[t]he illness [that] should attend it" (1.5.18). Here "human kindness" has been likened to sound health and moral weakness to "illness." In all these instances, the play parallels instances of moral transgression with the ones of physical degeneration. It is as if health conflicts with sickness. Macbeth later clarifies: "Good things of day begin to droop and drowse, / Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse" (3.2. 52-53). He eventually wants the good things in nature to wear away and make place for the harmful agents to operate. In Knight's words, "life forces are vividly and very clearly contrasted with evil, with forces of death and ill-omen, darkness and disorder" (Knight, 1931/1968, p. 139) in the play. Therefore, *Macbeth* seems to represent both moral and physical pestilences simultaneously.

This connection between evil and diseases can strengthen the claim that *Macbeth* is pandemic literature: its depiction of evil leads to its depiction of plague. The most direct reference to such a plague appears in the conversation between Malcolm and Macduff as they converse about a disease afflicting the Englishers. When an English doctor informs Macduff of a "malady" a group of "wretched souls" are suffering from and how they are allegedly being cured by Edward the Confessor (4.3.140-145), the following discussion between Macduff and Malcolm followed:

MACDUFF: What's the disease he means?

MALCOLM: 'Tis call'd the evil:

A most miraculous work in this good King,
Which often, since my here-remain in England,
I have seen him do. How he solicits heaven,
Himself best knows; but strangely-visited people,
All swol'n and ulcerous, pitiful to the eye,
The mere despair of surgery, he cures,
Hanging a golden stamp about their necks
Put on with holy prayers; and 'tis spoken,
To the succeeding royalty he leaves
The healing benediction. (4.3.147-161)

The passage tells of a superstition namely “royal touch” which was prevalent in Shakespeare’s time. The disease Malcolm is describing was once falsely “believed to be cured by a monarch’s touch . . . rather than by medical treatment, and [hence] the disease was known as the ‘King’s Evil’” (Reeves, 2008, p. 709). This “touching” ceremony was basically a hoax to trick the English people into believing that their human kings have supernatural powers. “King’s Evil” is in reality the disease called scrofula or cervical tuberculous lymphadenitis which is “a tuberculosis infection of the lymph glands” (Hays, 2005, p. 469). Scrofula, as Malcolm reports, was tormenting the wretched Englishmen. However, the disease is not afflicting England only: it appears to have struck Scotland as well. To understand how, the speech above can be interpreted from Lemon’s perspective: in her words: “. . . terms such as ‘evil,’ ‘strangely-visited’ and ‘wretched souls’ recall the witches and the Macbeths, characters who appear to be, as Edward’s visitors are, ‘the despair of surgery’ . . .” (2008, p. 79). This suggests that the Macbeth family and the witches in Scotland and the diseased crew in England are carrying the same illness – proving the disease to be already widespread in Europe. Such an outbreak is comparable to a pandemic which is “[a]n epidemic occurring worldwide, or over a very wide area, crossing international boundaries, and usually affecting a large number of people” (“Pandemic,” 2001, p. 131). A pandemic, to simplify, is a massive outbreak of a disease which afflicts people around the world. The way scrofula is portrayed in *Macbeth*, it clearly appears to be more than just a regional malady: it has spread across countries there. Thereby, it has transformed into a pandemic.

Moreover, Malcolm’s speech above resembles the content of a plague tract. The plague tract is the “dominant form of plague literature in [early modern] period” (Marshall, 2008, p. 523). Plague tracts were “[physician]-composed” manuals with “an explanation of causes and signs to preventative and curative measures” of plagues (Marshall, 2008, p. 523). These were basically reference books to educate the common people about the plagues. Malcolm did not have the knowledge of a doctor to talk about diseases. Still, like the physician of a plague tract, he is detailing what he thinks to be the reasons, symptoms, and cure of a disease. Malcolm believes “evil” to be the cause of the epidemic. His understanding might have been inspired by contemporaneous beliefs: “[i]n the Middle Ages and well into the modern era, plague was seen as divine punishment for sinfulness” (Moss, 2008, p.75). He prescribes a solution for this: only by removing the source of evil can the malady be fought. In all these respects, *Macbeth* shows a world already beleaguered by evil. Plague is a natural outcome of such contaminated atmosphere. In this fashion, *Macbeth* depicts pandemic.

Living in the time of pandemic: Fear and disintegration in *Macbeth*

Macbeth can be interpreted as pandemic literature not simply because of its portrayal of evil in connection with a plague, it reads like pandemic literature because of its rendering of the lived experience of its panic-stricken characters during the time of plagues also. There are many episodes in the play where the characters feel the presence of a pandemic though they do not talk about it directly. One such incident is when Malcolm feigns hypocrisy and corruption trying to test Macduff’s patriotism (4.3.50-100). During the conversation, Malcolm compares himself with Macbeth and pretends to be an epitome of

unrestrained “vice” (4.3.51), “voluptuousness” (4.3.61), and “stanchless avarice” (4.3.78). He embroiders: “. . . black Macbeth / Will seem as pure as snow, and the poor state / Esteem him as a lamb, being compared / With my confineless harms” (4.3.52-55). In these lines, Malcolm purposefully mentions those very circumstances which blight a healthy life. Hearing him, Macduff declared that such a sinner can never govern a country: “Fit to govern? / No, not to live. O nation miserable!” (4.3.102-103). His verdict was followed by a lament for Scotland: “When shalt thou see thy wholesome days again” (4.3.105). He regarded the plagued life proposed by Malcolm as unwholesome and unlivable. The episode is proof that moral disintegration is tantamount to bodily infection in *Macbeth*.

Apart from that, it is also very interesting to see how the talk between the sojourners recaptures actual historical plague incidents. Upon the Black Death pandemic, which vandalized Europe from 1346 to 1353 (Hays, 2005, p. 41-43), Europe strangely indulged in moral degradation hitherto unseen: “In place of virtue, which had been driven from the earth, wickedness everywhere reared its rebellious standard, and succeeding generations were consigned to her baleful tyranny” (Hecker, 1844, as cited in Gowen, 1907, p. 12). Most Europeans, being unable to learn a lesson from the calamity, abjured moral values thus. Malcolm’s pretentious malice above recalls this proliferation of immorality consequent upon the Black Death. Shakespeare might have purposefully integrated this exchange between the two in the play to represent the milieu of historical pandemics in Europe.

A historical pandemic scenario is also evident in the episode when Lady Macduff complains about the sudden disappearance of her husband:

LADY MACDUFF: What had he done, to make him fly the land?

ROSS: You must have patience, madam.

LADY MACDUFF: He had none;

His flight was madness. When our actions do not,
Our fears do make us traitors.

ROSS: You know not

Whether it was his wisdom or his fear.

LADY MACDUFF: Wisdom? To leave his wife, to leave his babes,

His mansion . . . (4.2.1-7)

Here, Lady Macduff criticizes Macduff for deserting his wife and children. G. Wilson Knight (1931/1968) commented on how Macduff, being “mysteriously conquered by evil” (p. 156), leaves his family “to their death” (p. 157). An overpowering evil forced Macduff to act such selfishly. Lady Macduff’s complaint above along with Ross’ report afterwards on how Macduff’s family was “savagely slaughtered” (4.3.207) can bring to mind the strange aftereffects of Black Death pandemic. Speculating on the impact of that pandemic, Tytler (1799, as cited in Gowen, 1907) talks about “moral degeneration, desertion of children by parents, and desertion of parents by children, of stealing and murder, and the cruel mode of preventing or punishing these . . . and also of the sick and

suspects being killed, - all of which indicate the tremendous effects of the plague” (p. 12). People in the post-Black Death era acted thus unfeelingly towards the weak and the vulnerable. How uncannily those “desertion of children by parents,” and the killing of the “sick and suspects” in a Black Death-ravaged Europe are echoed by the trauma and persecution Macduff and his family underwent.

Apart from these references to pandemic related trauma experienced on a more personal level, there are portrayals of sufferings in the public sphere due to plagues. One of those examples is when Ross details the overall condition of Scotland:

ROSS:

. . . I dare not speak much further,
 But cruel are the times when we are traitors
 And do not know ourselves, when we hold rumour
 From what we fear, yet know not what we fear,
 But float upon a wild and violent sea,
 Each way and none. . . . (4.2.17-22)

Here, Ross is talking about the culture of fear and distrust in Macbeth’s regime. The post-pandemic profligacy discussed earlier is also unmistakable here. Reminiscing the bleak aftermath of Black Death pandemic, Hecker (as cited in Gowen, 1907) wrote: “Compassion, courage and the nobler feelings were found in but few, while cowardice, selfishness and ill-will, with the baser passions in their train, asserted their supremacy” (p. 12). Such erosion of ethical standards was an unexpected outcome of the plague. Ross’ comparison of themselves with “traitors” who are afraid and unable to assert their inner goodness can evoke that historical post-Black-Death reality characterized by “cowardice, selfishness and ill-will.” Later in the play, Ross came up with a more realistic picture of a plague-ridden world:

ROSS: Alas, poor country,
 Almost afraid to know itself! It cannot
 Be call'd our mother, but our grave. Where nothing,
 But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile;
 Where sighs and groans and shrieks that rend the air,
 Are made, not mark'd; where violent sorrow seems
 A modern ecstasy. The dead man's knell
 Is there scarce ask'd for who, and good men's lives
 Expire before the flowers in their caps,
 Dying or ere they sicken. (4.3.166-175)

Here, Ross is describing their ailing motherland. The country is comparable to a wasteland: life is suffocating and unsafe there. According to Greenblatt (2020, May 7), this passage “vividly conveys what it must have felt like when the whole population of a city or a country fell into the iron grip of plague” (para. 14). This implies that the people

are trapped in what has become a mass grave – just like the situation in a plague-stricken country. They have so long been acquainted with grief that they are no longer shocked with the news of death; the country is overwhelmed with tragedy. Particularly lines 172 to 175 accurately capture the horror of inescapable death: “[t]hough but four lines long, there’s probably not a better description of the terror and malaise plague carried with it” (Shapiro, 2015, “Plague,” para. 9). These lines make plague imagery even more conspicuous in *Macbeth*. Greenblatt (2020, May 7) further explains Ross’s speech in the following manner:

The words, then, perfectly capture the experience of living in the inescapable presence of an epidemic disease . . . But the strange thing about these lines from [*Macbeth*] is that they are not intended as a description of a country in the grip of a vicious plague. Instead, they describe a country in the grip of a vicious ruler. . . (para. 16)

Based on this analysis, plague is unmistakably present in *Macbeth*. Ross’s account of Scotland under the rule of Macbeth, even without being “a description of a country in the grip of a vicious plague,” clearly delineates a plague-ravaged area. From this perspective, *Macbeth* can be said to consciously capture the experience of a pandemic.

Disease, cure and Macbeth: An early-modern paranoia

Macbeth’s proximity to pandemic literature can further be affirmed through its repeated references to ailment and cure in general. Andrew Dickson (2020, March 22) marks: “. . . in the plays written after [the] appalling outbreak of 1603 . . . disease metaphors seem to infect Shakespeare’s work.” These “disease metaphors” are found in abundance in *Macbeth*. Its characters frequently use medical terminology to talk about pestilences both metaphorical and literal. When Macbeth was reconsidering his decision to kill Duncan, he said: “. . . we but teach / Bloody instructions, which being taught, return / To plague th’inventor. . . .” (1.7.8-10). Macbeth knew evildoings, like a plague, blast a healthy life. This health which Macbeth forfeited Malcolm plans to restore: “Let’s make us med’cines of our great revenge / To cure this deadly grief” (4.3.216-217). Malcolm aptly spots Macbeth as a disease. Furthermore, when the Scottish force was awaiting the English army led by Malcolm, Caithness, a thane antagonistic to Macbeth, said: “Meet we the med’cine of the sickly weal, / And with him pour we in our country’s purge, / Each drop of us” (5.2.27-29). He believes their country needs to be purged of the plague of Macbeth. The focus here is on a cure which needs to be sprinkled on the ailing motherland. In all these instances, *Macbeth* makes observable references to plagues, medicines, and doctors.

Such frequent mentions of diseases and cures are not for no reason. As Lisa A. Tomaszewski (2008) affirms, “[i]n a way, medicine dominates the later part of *Macbeth*. The [English] doctor is not introduced until 4.3, and this is immediately followed by the Scottish Doctor’s examination of Lady Macbeth” (p. 189). Such noticeable presence of doctors can indicate how integral the theme of disease and cure is to the play. Macbeth himself, who is apparently wholly concerned about the security of his kingship, seems habitually paranoid about diseases and medicines. When Macbeth was inquiring into his wife’s disease (5.3.40-46), sounding almost sure that a cure exists he ordered the doctor: “Cure her of that” (5.3.40). When the doctor failed him, Macbeth scolded: “Throw physic

to the dogs, I'll none of it" (5.3.48). Macbeth wanted quick relief, but "[r]enaissance doctors, despite their scholarship and professional title, were ill-equipped to combat the mysteries of illness" (Tomaazewski, 2008, p. 184). That is why he is genuinely irritated here. He appears to be preoccupied with the idea of some tonic for healing all his injuries. Had he not already been obsessed thus, disappointment with just one physician could not have annoyed him: he could have easily looked for another doctor, but he did not. Such amount of frustration on Macbeth's part can serve as recognition of the presence of a pandemic in *Macbeth*. Greenblatt (2020, May 7) writes, "[i]n Shakespeare, epidemic disease is present for the most part as a steady, low-level undertone, surfacing in his characters' speeches most vividly in metaphorical expressions of rage and disgust" (para. 7). Macbeth speaks with this same "rage and disgust" when he says: "Throw physic to the dogs, I'll none of it." This expresses his disillusionment at the entire medical endeavor. He sounds as if he had long been perturbed with the thoughts of some cureless plague. Nonetheless, he persists:

MACBETH

. . . If you couldst, doctor, cast

The water of my land, find her disease,

And purge it to a sound and pristine health,

I would applaud thee to the very echo

That should applaud again. . . .

What rhubarb, cynne, or what purgative drug

Would scour these English hence? Hear'st thou of them? (5.3.51-57)

Here, though Macbeth is primarily concerned about the detection and treatment of his wife's disease, it seems his mind was actually seeking a cure to every disease for every Whiteman: "What rhubarb, cynne, or what purgative drug / Would scour these English hence?" He was, in a way, looking for "help in healing Scotland as well as his wife" (Auden, 2000, "Macbeth," para. 26). He sounds very concerned about the general lot of the Englishmen (or the Europeans) and their vulnerability to diseases - any diseases. This fanaticism of his for a remedy can be compared to the following historical reality of the bubonic epidemic in the sixteenth-century England:

Innumerable preventive measures were proposed . . . The smoke of dried rosemary, frankincense, or bay leaves burning in a chafing dish was thought to help clear the air of infection, and, if those ingredients were not readily available, physicians recommended burning old shoes. In the streets, people walked about sniffing oranges stuffed with cloves. Pressed firmly enough against the nose, perhaps these functioned as a kind of mask. (Greenblatt, 2020, para. 3)

Englanders sought cures in diverse plant-based prophylactics. Macbeth also was curious about the possibility of a cure in plants. Macbeth's yearning for such cures reflects his "early-modern European" desire for herbal medicinal solutions to plagues.

In all these instances where Macbeth eagerly engages in medical discourse, he betrays his tremendous fear of death and his desire to escape it. Bradley (1968) states, "The 'will to live' is mighty in [Macbeth]" (p. 113). He desperately wants to live, and he

is even ready to consult the evil sisters for that purpose. In life-and-death situations, Macbeth frenetically cries: “I will not be afraid of death and bane, /Till Birnam Forest come to Dunsinane” (5.3. 60-61) and boasts: “I bear a charmed life which must not yield” (5.8.12). He actually wishes to cure his mortality. This despairing attempt is comparable to the attempts made by the Englishmen during the 1665 bubonic epidemic in London as illustrated by Hays (2005):

Popular responses to the threat of plague varied very widely. A great number of omens were consulted and charms were employed; people sought hope, or solace, in churches and from informal preachers in the streets. A broad range of healers, on a continuum from orthodox physicians through surgeons and apothecaries to folk practitioners and enterprising quacks, offered their remedies. Among the most common were some version of *theriac* (also called *treacle*) or *mithridatium* (varying mixtures of opium and viper’s flesh believed to be poison antidotes), and herbs such as rue. (p. 128)

The Londoners explored diverse methods – from religious to forbidden – to fight plague. Just like them, not only did Macbeth consult doctors to find a cure to diseases, he adopted nonmedical and dangerous means also to escape death.

Towards the end of the play, Macbeth is overwhelmed more by his fear of death than by his fear of being dethroned and prosecuted. As Knight (1968) points out, “[t]his kingship [that] he attains, [he] never really possesses . . .” (p. 143). Macbeth is never really worried about his regality, and he knows that he is not a legitimate king. Rather, he is constantly worried about death which to him is a cureless malady:

MACBETH

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. (5.5.18-27)

Macbeth finally acknowledges death as inescapable destiny. He painfully realizes how feeble humans are in the face of inevitability. Consequently, Macbeth had to yield to his human weaknesses. Through him, the fear and hopelessness that the people experienced in Shakespeare’s time during the pandemics seems to find an expression, as illustrated in the following quotation:

Shakespeare seems to have shared Nashe’s [another Elizabethan playwright] skepticism that there would ever be a medical solution to the plague—“Physic himself must fade”—and, from what we know of the science of his time, this pessimism was justified. He focused his attention instead on a different plague,

the plague of being governed by a mendacious, morally bankrupt, incompetent, blood-soaked, and ultimately self-destructive leader. (Greenblatt, 2020, last para.)

Macbeth's angst is historically vindicated. His is indeed a plague story. Throughout the play he terrorizes and persecutes his panic-stricken subjects just as a plague terrifies a people. In this manner, "unholy Macbeth who infects his land and his subjects" (Garber, 1980, p. 107) makes *Macbeth* pandemic literature.

Conclusion

Thus, *Macbeth* can be considered as pandemic literature. It gives its audience a glance to a plague-ravaged world by portraying an ailing Scotland whose morally plagued ruler oppresses and torments his subjects. As the paper has discussed, an actual plague was already rampant in *Macbeth*. The play's frequent references to historical plagues and early-modern medical discourse can indicate how conspicuously the play remembers the ravages of the plagues of its time. Macbeth himself seems to be noticeably obsessed with the search for a cure for human illnesses. Figuratively too, the play has associated goodness with health and evil with diseases. By juxtaposing plagues and plights with Macbeth's atrocities, the play has only intensified its tragic mood. Thus, through references to pandemic related phenomena – both fictional and historical – the play speculates on a tragedy greater than the tragedy of an individual namely Macbeth. This tragedy arises because moral and bodily degeneration is so pervasive in *Macbeth* that death becomes arbitrary similar to the times of pandemic. From this very perspective, *Macbeth* can be read as pandemic literature.

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