UNDERGRADUATE PAPER

The Devil's in the Details: Reading Seyton as Satan in *Macbeth*

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As far as characters in *Macbeth* go, Seyton is remarkably unremarkable. Not only does he have incredibly few lines, but he can't even be called noteworthy for having the fewest, as Fleance beats Seyton's thirty-two words with an even more meager fifteen.[1] Yet unlike Fleance who is noteworthy for, at the very least, being Banquo's son, Seyton appears to be of such inconsequence that we may even question why he has a name at all. He does play a slightly more relevant role in the play than an average servant, but even the unnamed Doctor who appears in scene 5.3 with him has more to say, speaking fifty-one words in that scene, plus 226 in 5.1 earlier. And the information the Doctor gives is much more unique to his position, as he discusses in specific terms Lady Macbeth's madness, and how she may be cared for. Seyton's one purpose in the whole play seems to be to deliver to Macbeth the news of his wife's death, yet given his inconsequentiality, it almost seems it would have made more sense to give the Doctor a name and have him deliver that bombshell—cutting Seyton entirely. But that's not what Shakespeare chose to do.

Seyton is but a retainer in Macbeth's household, and nothing obvious within the circumstance of the play leads us to believe he

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is of any greater significance. So why then does such a character have a name? The answer, I posit, can be found by first examining the name itself; Seyton, true to his eponym, should be read not as just being some random servant, but rather another devilish force, like the weïrd sisters, who has in the final act come to play his part in the unraveling of Macbeth, yet whose presence can be subtly felt across the entire play. Seyton, I will show, is not just some servant named at random, but an incarnation of the Devil himself, come to pull at the last threads of Macbeth's sanity.

Even after some 400 years, very little has been written about Seyton, and what has been said mostly equates to a debate over the pronunciation of his name. While it certainly looks like it would be pronounced /setɪn/ (or /seʔɪn/) in our present-day English, it is in all probability a derivation of the Scottish name "Seton," pronounced /sitɪn/. The Seton family of Scotland, from the middle-ages through Shakespeare's time, dwelled in social proximity to the monarchy without ever being fully royal,[2] and in the 1898 edition of *Macbeth,* H. H. Furness notes that "the Setons of Touch were [. . .] armour-bearers to the kings of Scotland."[3] Regardless of this connection, however, in the Arden edition Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason's footnotes conclude that the name is likely a pun off of the devil's own moniker.[4] Regardless of the definite pronunciation of the name, the similarities it bears to the name "Satan" are enough to invite a comparison, and while an identical pronunciation would certainly help my case, I do not believe that it is necessary to demonstrate the possibility of an intentional connection between the retainer and the great fiend.

From the moment in which Seyton first appears, there is something off about him. The fact that in the final act, a moment of madness and despair, Macbeth calls out this new name which we have never heard before is, perhaps, startling. If Seyton had already been a close intimate of Macbeth's (the kind one might call for at such times) it then seems strange that he is not present in earlier scenes. It could be that Seyton is a more recent acquaintance, but, given the seemingly brief and rapid duration of the play,[5] as well as Macbeth's growing dependence on the supernatural forces to feel secure in his power, it seems unlikely that he would now be taking the time to form strong bonds with otherwise inconsequential members of his retinue.

We can, however, amend this incongruence if we marry Seyton to those supernatural concerns that pervade *Macbeth*. Perhaps Seyton is not a mere retainer, but rather another ally in Macbeth's cortege of satanic defenders. Indeed, there is in Seyton's introduction already a possible hint toward his fiendishness—albeit a light one. In 5.3, Macbeth, left alone, calls "Seyton, I am sick at heart, / When I behold–Seyton, I say–this push / Will cheer me ever, or disseat me now. / [. . .] / Seyton?" (3.19–29) Clark and Mason suggest that the fact "that Macbeth names him three times before he appears may indicate Macbeth's lack of authority and increasing isolation."[6] This interpretation sounds reasonable, but I would like to consider that the passage may not represent a loss of control over the humans who serve him, but rather an assertion of a more magical control over a demonic entity he entertains. The idea of one calling the devil's name three times to summon him certainly sounds more like a fixture of modern pop-culture than classical literature; we can establish a plausible precedent for such practice within the world of Macbeth.[7] The number three is, within the context established by the play, an exceedingly magical number, and whenever a three is presented we ought to look for some possible witchcraft.[8] Furthermore, the idea that calling the devil by name could summon him must have existed in Shakespeare's time, as the common phrase "speak of the devil, and he will appear" is attested in written use as early as 1591.[9] If we mix that magical number with this folk-belief that calling "Satan" would summon the devil, this scene, in which a man, who has already harkened the words of witches, calls "Seyton [. . .] Seyton [. . .] Seyton [. . .]" and then Seyton enters, takes on an undeniably magical tone.

Now this scene alone is not conclusive. While he may enter like a fiend, we can only call Seyton Satan if we see such comparison in what he does. But in conjunction with his other devilish aspects, and particularly his actions, we may attribute to Seyton a connection with the devil. Throughout his three-and-a-half lines, the '"retainer" Seyton's primary purpose on stage seems to be to confirm Macbeth's unfortunate suspicions. We see this briefly when he first enters and reports that the opposing army is indeed advancing in great numbers (5.3.31). While this is grim news for Macbeth, it is no shock that a retainer entering from offstage would have this information. What is shocking is the other piece of news Seyton delivers, when he tells Macbeth, "The Queen, my lord, is dead" (5.5.16).

The lady's dying scream is heard from offstage only after Seyton has already entered, and the text gives no indication that Seyton steps off to investigate the scream. Clark and Mason note that "some editors, e.g., Muir, Booke, give Seyton an exit at 8 and a re-entry at 16, assuming that he has to go offstage to discover the significance of the woman's cry,"[10] and Furness even provides us with a brief discussion on how best to let Seyton learn of Lady Macbeth's demise.[11] What Furness's dialogue shows is that the text cannot be left alone. Seyton, if he is a normal man, cannot simply know what has happened. I would follow Clark and Mason in leaving Seyton on stage, but go further and explain his otherworldly knowledge by stating that he is indeed not of this world. Seyton is an unholy creature who sees the queen's suicide by some act of omnipotence, and tarries in telling Macbeth to toy with him.

If we read these powers into Seyton in 5.5, we may also return to 5.3, and perhaps view a similar action. While he would there have had time to learn the bad news he carries, we could just as easily imagine a similarly uncanny moment where Seyton enters after Macbeth's three-fold call and relates his message with a disposition that implies he knows without having seen aught. Macbeth certainly seems to, by this point in the play, be antic enough so as not to consider the oddities this character may exhibit. Furthermore, Macbeth and Seyton's conversation in 5.5 seems to be private, giving a possible devil ample space to act strangely and be unremarked (5.3.31).

This appearance of unworldly knowledge is suggestive, but one may still dissent from this reading, finding it strange that, unlike the witches (whose kind is generally considered lower than demons and devils in that vague, cosmic hierarchy of fiendish ones), Seyton presents himself not as a high-status master of unholy arts, but in a servile role beneath a human king. But this is another quality which could actually point toward confirmation of Seyton's satanic affilation, if we consider other sources of information on the great villain contemporaneous to *Macbeth*. In King James I's book *Daemonologie*, it is said that when the Devil forms a contract with a person, although it is mutual, in the beginning "the Deuill oblishes himselfe to them [. . .] he bindes himselfe to be subject vnto them."[12] The degree to which King James I's treatise is reflected in the actions, appearance, and thematic use of the weïrd sisters has been well documented,[13] so it is plausible that *Daemonologie* may impact the character of Seyton and his less overt devilish qualities.

While we may not see horns growing out of Seyton's head, we do have a character whose name sounds like Satan's, who appears suddenly when called thrice, who displays otherworldly knowledge, and whose relationship with Macbeth is not unlike the relationship King James I himself described between the "Deuill" and the people he beguiles.

Of note to this interpretation is that reading Seyton as Satan does not require awareness on Macbeth's part. While there may be some fun found in viewing the tragic hero as being an evil character who has made a Faustian pact, it is equally—if not more—plausible that Macbeth is unaware of his retainer's true nature. Being a Scotsman, Macbeth would doubtless be familiar with the name "Seyton," and not likely to suspect any new acquaintance of devilry because of this name; when he does call the name three times, it does not feel deliberate on his part. Rather it seems as though during his soliloquy he happened to address his armor-bearer three times, at which point he finally arrives. Even if Seyton displays some level of omnipotence, Macbeth is in such a state that he is less likely to notice any oddities in Seyton's breadth of knowledge, and his level of distinction between the natural and supernatural may also be so eroded that he doesn't flinch at Seyton's observation. Finally, it would be strange for any king to question why his servant is serving him. One could even argue that Seyton is a fiendish character who has concealed himself in order to massage Macbeth's mind to diffidence and indifference in the waning days of his life.

But even if Seyton only directly enters Macbeth's mind at the end of his short reign, it is apparent that his position as the king's retainer was merely the culmination of a long-standing plot to corrupt Macbeth, as Satan's presence can be felt from the first act of the play. In 1.2 when the king and his retinue find the wounded Captain who speaks of Macbeth's valor, it is easy to read this as a realistic scene, wherein ordinary people are talking about ordinary things. Yet here again we may find something in *Daemonologie* to suggest a fantastical element. Speaking again of the "Deuill," King

James I says he is known “to enter in a dead bodie, and there out of to giue such answers, of the euent of battels, of matters concerning the estate of commonwelths, and such like other great questions” (King James I, 18). Considering this, it is possible that the Captain has not survived his wounds, but is rather being used as a puppet of Satan, endearing Macbeth to Duncan so as to push forward the fiend’s macabre agenda. That productions and adaptations of *Macbeth,* such as Rupert Gold’s 2010 film *Macbeth,* have had the weïrd sisters interact in some manner with the captain in the transition from 1.1 to 1.2 gives further credence to this theory.

Indeed, the weïrd sisters can be seen as agents of Satan throughout most of the play. While they are explicitly depicted as disciples of Hecate, there is a hint that they have been acting on another’s orders when they begin their plot. In 3.5, Hecate, while chastising the witches for doing all they have yet done, says:

> And, which is worse, all you have done
> Has been but for a wayward son,
> Spiteful and wrathful, who, as others do,
> Loves for his own ends, not for you.[14]

Clark and Mason note that the phrase “wayward son” does not really appear to be referencing Macbeth, but they offer no definitive person who could be here implicated.[15] Consider, then, that Satan might be the “wayward son” Hecate refers to here. The character of the fallen angel is certainly more “wayward” than Macbeth, and this may explain what the weïrd sisters have been up to all this time, as 3.5 certainly suggests that they have not been acting on Hecate’s orders. They used the dead Captain and delivered their prophecy by order through the powers of Satan, and now Hecate comes to scold their impertinence.

While there is too much ambiguity in the plot surrounding *Macbeth* to say definitively what the purpose of Seyton’s role is, it is worth considering that Satan was behind it all: that for some foul purpose he sought to use Macbeth to sow discord within the royal family of Scotland, that he used the weïrd sisters at first, and that Seyton was merely his last trick as he sowed discord throughout the political state of Scotland.

Even if Macbeth remains unaware of this, it may become obvious to some by the end of the play. In the final confrontation between Macbeth and Macduff, the latter shatters the king’s prophesied immortality, exclaiming: "Despair thy charm, / And let the *angel* whom thou still has served / Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother's womb untimely ripped."[16] Clark and Mason seem to be at a loss for what to do with the word "angel," saying it refers plainly to an "evil spirit."[17] While the OED lists no definition of the word "angel" so broad to encompass all evil spirits, there is one definition, used as early as 950 and still present today, by which "angel" can refer to "one of the fallen or rebellious spirits, said to have been formerly angels of God."[18] While one ought often to be careful of making definitive statements when analyzing literature as obtuse as Shakespeare, I am comfortable stating that, assuming Macduff is using the word according to one of the definitions recorded in the OED, it must be in this sense, referring to the "fallen or rebellious" angel Macbeth "has served." And if everything I have put forth regarding Satan is accepted, it is clear just which fallen angel Macduff refers to here.

With Macbeth thoroughly tied to the characters of hell, we are given two options for what to do with Macduff. He could be an ordinary man who demonstrates that anyone is capable of rebuking the "Deuill," or we could see him as one who has been affected by the forces of heaven. I am more inclined to follow the latter statement, as it is difficult not to see in Macduff—the man who kills Satan's instrument and the ally of the witches—some hint of King James I, who, judging by the introduction to *Daemonologie*, must have thought of himself as one whose purpose it was to expunge the land of "these detestable slaues of the Deuill, the Witches or enchaunters."[19]

Finally, this interpretation may also make the play easier to interpret. Millicent Bell says of *Macbeth,* "the play is taught in schools as a moral tragedy illustrating the evil consequences of ambition, but Macbeth is not ambitious in the ordinary sense. [. . .] his supposed ambition is an emotion peculiarly unexpressed."[20] But seen as a theological torment of Macbeth and as Macduff's holy battle against him, we may remap the morality of *Macbeth* from the human to the cosmic. *Macbeth* is not the story of how one man can become corrupted by ambition, but rather of how Satan can corrupt any one man. This tells the same story that King James I's text perversely delights in: that there are creatures out there, hiding in the woods, who can turn even a valiant hero like

Macbeth into a parricidal, regicidal lunatic. It warns us not what to fear *within* ourselves, but rather what to fear *without*. It says, "be careful," because Satan could be right in front of you, and it will still take you 400 years to see him.

Notes

1. This paper uses the third series Arden edition. Other editions may vary slightly in line/word counts.

2. *Encyclopedia Britannica* (New York: Encyclopædia Britannica Company, 1911), "Seton."

3. H. Furness, *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare* (London: J. M. Dent & Co.), 5.3.30n.

4. Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason, eds., *Macbeth*, (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2018), 5.3.19n.

5. For an exhaustive exploration of time in *Macbeth*, see Clark and Mason's section on it in their introduction to the Arden edition (62–82). The chronology of the play is intensely obtuse and no all-pleasing calendar can be drawn; nevertheless, most tend to agree that the play must take place over a relatively short period of time, so given that the only time Macbeth could have had to befriend Seyton is during his break from the stage between 4.1 and 5.3, most sensible chronological accounts do not leave Macbeth much time to become so close to a new character.

6. Clark and Mason, 5.3.19n.

7. Consider, for example, the film Beatle Juice in which the titular ghost is summoned when he name is thrice spoken.

8. Clark and Mason, 1.1.01n.

9. *OED Online,* "devil, n.," accessed March 16, 2020. https://www-oed-com.cscc.ohionet.org/view/Entry/51468?rskey=jlgzma&result=1&isAdvanced=false.

10. Clark and Mason, 5.5.8–16n.

11. H. Furness, *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare* (J. M. Dent & Co.), 5.5.8n.

12. King James I, *Daemonologie* (Project Gutenberg), 17.

13. See Daniel Albright, "The Witches and the Witch: Verdi's Macbeth," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 17.3 (2005): 225–252, Jane H. Jack, "*MacBeth,* King James, and the Bible," *ELH* 22.3 (1955): 173–193, and Joanna Levin, "Lady MacBeth and the Daemonologie of Hysteria," *ELH* 69.1 (2002): 21–55 for examples.

14. Shakespeare, 3.5.10–3; emphasis added.

15. Clark and Mason, 3.5.11n.

16. Shakespeare, 5.8.13–6; emphasis added.

17. Clark and Mason, 5.8.14n

18. OED, "angel."

19. King James I, *Daemonologie,* 1.

20. Millicent Bell. "Macbeth and Dismemberment," *Raritan* 25.3 (2006): 14.