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FROM CRUCIBLES OF CHOICE TO MOMENTS OF ANAGNORISIS: SARTEAN CONFIGURATIONS OF RADICAL FREEDOM, BAD FAITH, AND ETHICAL ACCOUNTABILITY IN *MACBETH* AND *OTHELLO*

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Abstract
This paper propounds a Sartean-inflected re-reading of Macbeth and Othello, advancing a critical framework rooted in the ontological triad of radical freedom, bad faith, and moral accountability. Departing from deterministic interpretations of Shakespearean tragedy, this paper foregrounds Sartre's assertion that "there is no reality except in action… man is nothing else than the ensemble of his acts, nothing else than his life" (35), positioning the protagonists' tragic descent as paradigmatic expressions of volitional agency rather than external compulsion. The analysis reconfigures prophecy and manipulation—not as immutable dictates—but as existential provocations that disclose the protagonists' interpretive freedom and the anguish it entails.
This paper contends that Macbeth's resignation to "chance" and Othello's fixation on "ocular proof" constitute paradigmatic acts of Sartrean bad faith, wherein the characters elude authentic subjectivity through staged misrecognition and an evasion of existential responsibility. In situating these responses within Sartre's phenomenology of choice, the paper elucidates the mechanisms by which both characters navigate—and ultimately collapse under—the burden of freedom. The paper thus reframes Shakespeare's tragic architecture as a profound philosophical inquiry into the ethics of self-authorship, exposing the psychological disintegration that ensues from the refusal to claim authentic agency. By orchestrating an intertextual convergence between Shakespearean tragedy and Sartrean existentialism, this paper elucidates the moral topographies of radical freedom, the phenomenological intricacies of volitional action, and the inexorable imperative of ethical accountability inscribed at the core of the human condition.

Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Othello* emerge as profound dramaturgical meditations on existential autonomy, foregrounding the intricate dialectic between external instigations and internal volition. These tragedies do not merely dramatize the fall of their titular characters; rather, they constitute ontological inquiries into the burdens and responsibilities that accompany human freedom. The witches' arcane prophecy in *Macbeth* and Iago's insidious rhetoric in *Othello* operate not as deterministic mechanisms, but as existential provocations—enigmatic stimuli that compel the protagonists to engage in acts of interpretation and decision-making. In this context, Jean-Paul Sartre's existential ontology—especially his conviction that "man is not the sum of what he has, but the totality of what he does not yet have, of what he could have" (566)—provides the philosophical scaffolding for rereading these tragedies as investigations into the weight of freedom and the inexorability of moral consequence.

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At the epicenter of Sartre's thought lies the doctrine of radical freedom, which asserts that despite circumstantial conditioning, the individual remains wholly and irreducibly accountable for the choices they enact. Sartre's dictum that "to choose to be this or that is to affirm at the same time the value of what we choose" (76) underscores the existential inseparability of agency and ethical commitment. Macbeth's reflective musing—"If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me / Without my stir" (*Macbeth* 1.3.143–144)—betrays an awareness of potential passivity, yet his eventual capitulation to vaulting ambition embodies Sartre's insistence that it is only through action that freedom is realized. Likewise, Othello's invocation of "ocular proof" (*Othello* 3.3.363) underscores not epistemological necessity alone but the existential gravitas of interpretive autonomy, whereby external cues are transfigured into choices that define one's being.

For Sartre, accountability is the corollary and cost of freedom, an inescapable ethical dimension that demands the subject confront the totality of his deeds without recourse to evasion. His pronouncement that "man must create his own essence through his deeds" (40) accentuates this imperative. Macbeth's hallucinatory encounter with Banquo's ghost—voiced in his anguished outcry, "Thou canst not say I did it. Never shake / Thy gory locks at me!" (*Macbeth* 3.4.50–51)—epitomizes his futile repudiation of guilt, while Othello's tormented invocation, "Whip me, ye devils" (*Othello* 5.2.276), signals his belated reckoning with moral culpability. These moments function as existential epiphanies in which each character is confronted with the unrelenting demand of accountability—a demand that Sartre situates at the core of authentic existence.

The Sartrean concept of *mauvaise foi* (bad faith), delineated as "choosing to flee from one's freedom by taking refuge in determinism" (86), saturates the patterns of self-deception evident in both tragedies. Macbeth's chilling rationalization of regicide—"If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly" (*Macbeth* 2.1.1–2)—attests to his disingenuous effort to attribute causality to circumstance, thereby obscuring his own agency. Othello's projection of his insecurities onto Desdemona reflects an analogous evasion of self-knowledge, a psychological retreat that Sartre regards as antithetical to authenticity. These disavowals of freedom function as existential failures, converting the protagonists' narratives into wrenching studies in self-betrayal and ethical abdication.

Prevailing critical paradigms, often dominated by determinist or psychoanalytic frameworks, tend to marginalize the complex interrelation between autonomy, ethical consequence, and psychological fragmentation. This paper seeks to reconceptualize prophecy and manipulation not as deterministic instruments but as existential provocations that demand moral deliberation and subjective authorship. Through an integrative approach that synthesizes literary exegesis with philosophical inquiry, this paper repositions *Macbeth* and *Othello* as paradigmatic existential tragedies—texts that lay bare the ontological gravity of freedom and the ethical exigencies it imposes. It affirms Sartre's enduring insight: "it is in our choices that we express our being" (562), thereby illuminating Shakespeare's dramatization of freedom not as liberation, but as burden, responsibility, and the very crucible of human essence.

Literature Review

David Bevington, in his seminal critical compendium *Shakespeare's Tragedies: An Anthology of Modern Criticism*, contends that "the supernatural in Shakespeare's plays does not impose a narrative trajectory but serves as a mirror to the characters' inner landscapes, reflecting their latent aspirations and fears" (80). This interpretive lens illuminates Macbeth's response to the witches' enigmatic salutation—"If you can look into the seeds of time, / And say which grain will grow and which will not, / Speak then to me" (*Macbeth* 1.3.58–60)—as an invocation not of preordained fate but of existential self-reflection. Bevington's reading thus reconfigures the prophetic as a psychological stimulus, aligning cogently with Jean-Paul Sartre's existential

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CJSSR
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Vol.03 No.02 (2025)

postulate that "man first exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world – and defines himself afterwards" (15). This confluence of critical and philosophical perspectives foregrounds the tension between external incitement and internal authorship, situating the supernatural as a catalytic rather than a deterministic presence.

G.S. Kirk, in *The Concept of Fate in Early Greek Philosophy*, posits that "fate's narrative power resides in its ability to confront individuals with choices that reveal their intrinsic values and vulnerabilities" (120). This conceptualization proves particularly resonant when mapped onto Othello's unraveling under Iago's pernicious influence. Othello's credulous assertion—"This fellow's of exceeding honesty, / And knows all qualities, with a learned spirit, / Of human dealings" (*Othello* 3.3.259–261)—exemplifies how external manipulations operate as revelatory devices, exposing the fissures within the self. Kirk's classical framework, when synthesized with Sartre's claim that "freedom is the consciousness of possibilities" (87), elucidates how Othello's tragedy is precipitated not by inevitability but by the existential navigation of choice within a field of moral and epistemic ambiguity. The entwinement of external provocation and interior response manifests Shakespeare's nuanced dramatization of agency as a complex interplay of circumstance and volition.

Jean-Paul Sartre's existential edifice, articulated with incisive clarity in *Existentialism Is a Humanism*, maintains that "man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself" (22), a formulation that underscores the indivisibility of freedom and moral responsibility. This philosophical axiom finds dramatic embodiment in Macbeth's introspective invocation—"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" (*Macbeth* 1.4.50–52). Here, Macbeth confronts, albeit obliquely, the ethical dimension of his volition, marking the genesis of a self-authored descent into tyranny. Othello, conversely, arrives at a belated recognition of his moral agency in his anguished cry—"I am not valiant neither, / But every puny whipster gets my sword" (*Othello* 5.2.245–246)—a moment of existential despair in which self-awareness is rendered tragically retrospective. These textual instances exemplify Sartre's conviction that freedom, while inexorable, exacts a price in the form of unrelenting accountability, rendering the protagonists' downfalls as consequences of their own choices rather than external determinism.

Zohaib Hasan, in his incisive essay "Fate, Agency and Issues of Moral Authority in *Macbeth*," observes that "the witches' cryptic language in *Macbeth* transforms their prophecy into a reflection of Macbeth's internal aspirations, leaving its interpretation entirely to his discretion" (78). This reading illuminates Macbeth's ambivalent reflection—"Come what come may, / Time and the hour runs through the roughest day" (*Macbeth* 1.3.145–146)—as emblematic of an initial existential deferral, a moment suspended between passivity and resolve. Hasan's interpretation resonates powerfully with Sartre's assertion that "to choose is to commit oneself and to affirm the value of what one chooses" (65), situating Macbeth's trajectory within the Sartrean schema of radical freedom and moral affirmation. The tragic arc thus becomes not a product of metaphysical determinism but a case study in the ethical weight of human agency, where prophecy merely provokes rather than predetermines, and where meaning is forged through the crucible of choice.

Dr. Aidan Elliott, in his illuminating essay *"Fate, Free Will, and the Tragedy of Macbeth,"* contends that "Macbeth's tragedy is defined by his active engagement with the witches' provocations, transforming prophecy into a vehicle for his ambition" (116). This interpretive stance is exemplified in Macbeth's justification for orchestrating Banquo's murder: "For Banquo's issue have I fil'd my mind; / For them the gracious Duncan have I murder'd" (*Macbeth* 3.1.65–66). Here, Macbeth reveals his conscious manipulation of prophecy, disclosing a psyche increasingly governed by ambition and haunted by foreknowledge. Elliott's reading aligns with Jean-Paul Sartre's foundational existentialist premise that "man's existence

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CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
Vol.03 No.02 (2025)

precedes his essence" (29), as Macbeth's ontological identity emerges not from metaphysical predestination but from the cumulative weight of his freely enacted decisions.

Unhae Langis, in her incisive study *"Character and Daemon, Fate and Free Will in Macbeth,"* posits that "the witches' predictions in *Macbeth* act as a double-edged sword, serving both as catalysts for ambition and as mirrors of latent moral conflict" (3). This dual function is powerfully echoed in Macbeth's lamentation: "I have almost forgot the taste of fears; / The time has been, my senses would have cool'd / To hear a night-shriek" (*Macbeth* 5.5.9–11). This utterance does not merely reflect emotional desensitization but underscores Macbeth's full assimilation into the moral void shaped by his own volition. Langis's analysis reinforces the existential argument that Macbeth's tragic metamorphosis is not externally compelled but rather internally forged through a succession of deliberate, ethically fraught choices—an abandonment of the moral self in favor of an illusory sovereignty.

Jennifer Vasallo, in her comparative critique *"The Nature of Tragedy in Macbeth and Othello,"* asserts that "the protagonists' agency is central to their downfalls, with their choices reflecting both the psychological burdens of freedom and the existential weight of moral accountability" (92). This dialectic is poignantly rendered in Othello's anguished observation: "But, O, what damned minutes tells he o'er / Who dotes, yet doubts; suspects, yet strongly loves!" (*Othello* 3.3.168–169). Caught in the maelstrom of Iago's insinuations and his own self-doubt, Othello becomes the architect of his ruin, enacting Sartre's existential drama in which human freedom is both a privilege and a torment. Vasallo's reading positions both Macbeth and Othello as existential figures whose tragic arcs are shaped by their conscious engagement with moral choice, thereby embedding Shakespearean tragedy within a broader philosophical discourse on autonomy, vulnerability, and ethical consequence.

Peter Goldman, in *"Fate and Election in Shakespearean Drama: The Example of Coriolanus,"* observes that "Shakespeare's tragedies interrogate the porous boundary between fate and free will, revealing the human capacity for self-determined action even in the face of external provocations" (567). This conceptual nuance is dramatized in Macbeth's moment of introspective dread: "I am afraid to think what I have done; / Look on 't again I dare not" (*Macbeth* 2.2.50–51), a confession that exposes the psychological fissures wrought by his own agency. A parallel resonance is found in Othello's final plea: "Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught in malice" (*Othello* 5.2.340–341), a moment of tragic clarity in which he confronts the irreducible fact of self-authored guilt. Goldman's assertion compellingly echoes Sartre's dictum that "man is fully responsible for his world and himself as a way of being" (79), thus framing Shakespeare's tragic protagonists as embodiments of existential responsibility whose narratives dramatize the burden of freedom amidst the ambiguity of human experience.

Analysis/Discussion

The delicate edifice of human agency—perched precariously between existential freedom and moral responsibility—collapses with tragic grandeur in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Othello*. These dramas, steeped in prophetic utterance and insidious manipulation, enact the philosophical terrain delineated by Jean-Paul Sartre, who maintains that "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (22). Within these tragic architectures, Shakespeare constructs an ontological crucible wherein ethical deliberation is not merely dramatized but transfigured into an agonizing interrogation of self-authorship. Macbeth's fateful encounter with the witches and Othello's entanglement in Iago's duplicitous machinations are not deterministic mechanisms but existential provocations, revealing the psychological weight of radical freedom and the self-destructive potentialities of *mauvaise foi* (bad faith). Sartre's assertion that "man bears the entirety of his responsibility, without escape or excuse" (79) reverberates

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CJSSR
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Vol.03 No.02 (2025)

through these tragedies, which foreground not the external manipulation of fate, but the interior orchestration of self-determined collapse.

In *Macbeth*, the witches' salutation—"All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis! / All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor! / All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!" (1.3.50–52)—functions not as an irrevocable decree but as an ontological prompt that invites Macbeth to grapple with the potentialities of his ambition. His initial response—"If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me / Without my stir" (1.3.143–144)—signifies a moment of existential awareness wherein agency remains intact. Yet, as Sartre elucidates, "freedom is what we make of the conditions in which we find ourselves" (501), and Macbeth's subsequent descent marks his willful abandonment of that freedom in favor of a self-authored destiny forged in violence. Similarly, Iago's insinuation—"Look to your wife; observe her well with Cassio. / Wear your eyes thus, not jealous nor secure" (*Othello* 3.3.198–199)—functions not as revelation but as existential temptation. Othello's desperate plea for epistemological certainty—"Give me the ocular proof" (3.3.363)—exposes his complicity in interpreting ambiguity as betrayal, thereby transforming Iago's equivocations into a self-inflicted tragedy.

The protagonists' internal disintegration is mediated through potent metaphors that externalize psychological rupture. Macbeth's vision of the spectral dagger—"Is this a dagger which I see before me, / The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee" (*Macbeth* 2.1.33–35)—illustrates Sartre's confrontation with the ontological void, where existential choice becomes the only vector for defining being. In an analogous gesture, Othello's fixation on the handkerchief as a symbol of infidelity transmutes an inert object into an emblem of absolute truth. Sartre's assertion that "objects acquire meaning through human interpretation" (487) underscores these moments as existential thresholds, where subjective attribution eclipses empirical reality, propelling both protagonists toward irrevocable moral consequence.

The dialectics of freedom manifest divergently in each tragedy. Macbeth's admission—"I am in blood / Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er" (*Macbeth* 3.4.135–137)—betrays a conscious capitulation to transgression, emblematic of Sartre's notion of bad faith as the deliberate denial of one's ontological freedom (89). Conversely, Othello's anguished cry—"O fool, fool, fool! / Whip me, ye devils, / From the possession of this heavenly sight!" (*Othello* 5.2.308–310)—constitutes a belated reckoning with personal responsibility, aligning with Sartre's dictum that "man is fully accountable for his interpretation of the world and the acts derived from it" (473). Where Macbeth surrenders to freedom's burden through a self-perpetuating logic of bloodshed, Othello reclaims his agency through the tragic lucidity of self-condemnation.

Psychological disintegration—rendered through linguistic and symbolic intensity—becomes the theatre for existential awakening. Macbeth's nihilistic rumination—"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" (*Macbeth* 5.5.23–26)—is emblematic of Sartre's ontological pessimism, where meaning is not inherent but must be constructed within an indifferent universe (21). Othello's plea—"Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate, / Nor set down aught in malice" (*Othello* 5.2.340–341)—represents an existential reclamation of self-definition, one that resonates with Sartre's foundational claim that "man is nothing else but the sum of his acts" (34). In both cases, the protagonists are stripped bare before the mirror of their own choices, compelled to confront the inescapable implications of their freedom.

Metaphorical language of entrapment—"cabined, cribbed, confined" (*Macbeth* 3.4.23) and "But O, what damned minutes tells he o'er / Who dotes, yet doubts; suspects, yet strongly loves!" (*Othello* 3.3.168–169)—converges to dramatize the claustrophobic intensities of volitional crisis. These linguistic constructs map the terrain of Sartrean anguish, wherein "freedom is both the condition of possibility and the source of human anguish" (79). The

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protagonists' emotional incarcerations are not imposed by external constraints, but generated through the existential paradox of choosing amidst ambiguity.

Shakespeare's dramaturgy subverts deterministic hermeneutics by positioning the witches and Iago as agents of provocation rather than destiny. Macbeth's lament—"Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow, / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day" (*Macbeth* 5.5.19–20)—and Iago's ontological obfuscation—"I am not what I am" (*Othello* 1.1.65)—emphasize the constructedness of identity and the interpretive freedom that undergirds human action. These tragedies, far from capitulating to fatalism, enact the Sartrean imperative that meaning is not inherited, bestowed, or divinely ordained; rather, it is laboriously wrought through deliberate acts within the crucible of freedom and the moral weight it entails. Ultimately, *Macbeth* and *Othello* stand as harrowing meditations on the existential condition, dramatizing with unrivaled intensity the burden of autonomy and the inescapable gravity of human choice.

Conclusion

Macbeth and *Othello* stand not merely as literary artefacts of tragic downfall, but as existential testaments to the burdens and privileges of human autonomy. Through the crucible of Shakespeare's dramaturgy and Sartre's philosophical framework, these protagonists emerge not as victims of fate, prophecy, or manipulation, but as agents whose volition, however anguished, sculpts their destinies. Sartre's pronouncement—"Man is responsible for everything he does; it is impossible for him to disclaim responsibility" (554)—resonates as the moral fulcrum upon which both tragedies turn. The psychological torment voiced in Macbeth's restless lament—"Better be with the dead… Than on the torture of the mind to lie" (*Macbeth* 3.2.22–25)—and Othello's despairing farewell to inner peace—"Farewell the tranquil mind!" (*Othello* 3.3.349–350)—signals a deeply internalized reckoning with choices made, not imposed.

This research asserts that Shakespeare's tragedies must be re-read not as fatalistic scripts of downfall, but as philosophical investigations into self-authorship under existential strain. Macbeth's despairing cry—"signifying nothing" (5.5.28)—and Othello's remorseful admission—"loved not wisely but too well" (5.2.345)—are not merely the laments of broken men; they are existential epitaphs, forged in the awareness of freedom misused. In reconfiguring prophecy and manipulation as existential provocations rather than deterministic forces, these narratives confront us with the profound and often unbearable truth: that meaning, identity, and destiny are not inherited—they are chosen, shaped, and borne.

In their final moments—Macbeth's nihilistic vision of life as "a tale / Told by an idiot… Signifying nothing" (*Macbeth* 5.5.26–28), and Othello's self-indicting elegy, "Speak / Of one that loved not wisely but too well" (*Othello* 5.2.344–345)—we encounter not the collapse of meaning, but its ultimate assertion: that human existence is shaped by the relentless and inescapable imperative to choose. Shakespeare, in relentless fidelity to the human condition, reveals a searing existential truth: that freedom, though riddled with anguish, is the condition of all value, and that to be human is to continually bear the weight of becoming. Through Macbeth and Othello, we are reminded that tragedy does not lie in the loss of control, but in the terrifying majesty of having always had it.

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CJSSR
CONTEMPORARY JOURNAL OF SOCIAL SCIENCE REVIEW
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