

EQUIVOCATION

by
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————— *background information* —————

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DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Equivocation is one of my two favorite plays written in the past thirty years (the other being David Edgar's *Pentecost*, which I directed at UCSB in 2005). The play is filled with intelligence, ambition, humor, theatricality and ideas; exactly the kind of play I feel we should be doing at the university. *Equivocation* follows our recent Naked Shakes production of *Macbeth*; the two plays work together to "bookend" our mainstage season. We hope that many of you also saw *Macbeth*, and that that experience helps to inform and provide even greater enjoyment as you watch *Equivocation*. The play also reminds me of the film "Shakespeare in Love;" they are both imaginative fictional explorations of how one of Shakespeare's works could possibly have come to be written. In the case of *Equivocation*, at the center of the play is Sir Robert Cecil, King James' leading minister who demands from William Shakespeare (or, in the play, "Shagspeare") a play about the famous Gunpowder Plot to blow up King James and Parliament. However, what interests me most about *Equivocation* is not that it is simply a historical drama, but that it encompasses so many universal and contemporary themes and ideas. Some of those themes speak directly to current events, especially the issues of torture and surveillance. Bill Cain has said that he wrote *Equivocation* while noting the close proximity between the Tower of London and Shakespeare's Globe Theatre. It was said that one could hear the screams of torture in the Tower from as far away as the Globe. At the same time, Mr. Cain was musing on the fall of our own "Twin Towers" on September 11, 2001. He was powerfully affected by this coming together of history and our contemporary world. However, what maybe resonates even greater in *Equivocation* are the more universal themes of fathers and daughters, and the "cooperative venture" and brotherhood and sisterhood of the theater community. Shag takes great pride in proclaiming to Cecil: "you'll never understand. Theater's a small world, but it's built on affection and trust." *Equivocation* is about the power of theater itself to affect a society, and the essential humanity of us all. We are the "thing itself."

DRAMATURG'S NOTE

I was first introduced to *Equivocation* over four years ago, when I saw a fantastic production of it in Los Angeles, at the Geffen Theater. Since then, I've been tirelessly telling people about this amazing play about Shakespeare. The truth of the matter is, though, that this play is about so much more than Shakespeare.

This is a play, of course, about “how to tell the truth in difficult times.” It is a play about the camaraderie, the deep family connections, created by the theater community. It is a play about fathers and their children. It is a play about nation, and the way nations are built more on the stories we tell about them than on anything else. Ultimately, then, I would say that, at least to me, *Equivocation* is a play about the ways we choose to narrate ourselves.

Below, I’ve included several pieces of contextual information, as well as excerpts from plays and texts mentioned in the play, to give a fuller understanding of the play.

MACBETH

In many ways, the plot of *Equivocation* can be summarized as “a play about the writing of *Macbeth*.” *Macbeth*, one of Shakespeare’s most famous tragedies, details the career of Macbeth, who begins the play a loyal subject to the Scottish king, and then, relying on the prophecies of three very strange witches, proceeds to kill everyone around him in his pursuit of, and then attempt to maintain, the throne. Among Macbeth’s victims is Banquo, supposedly a direct ancestor of King James I of England, the king we see in *Equivocation*. In the following monologues, we see Macbeth struggling with his plan to murder his king; the play’s only comedic interlude, offered by a very drunk Porter, performed in part by Armin in our play; Lady Macbeth, her husband’s partner (and sometimes instigator) in crime, confronted and consumed by her own guilt at the end of the play; and Macbeth himself, after learning of his wife’s death, contemplating what he has come to see as the futility of existence:

MACBETH

If it were done when ‘tis done, then ‘twere well
It were done quickly: if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his 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’ld jump the life to come. But in these cases
We still have judgment here; that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague the inventor: this even-handed justice
Commends the ingredients of our poison’d chalice
To our own lips. 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. 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 new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on the other. *Macbeth*, I.7

PORTER

Here's a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of hell-gate, he should have old turning the key. [Knocking within] Knock, knock, knock! Who's there, i' the name of Beelzebub? Here's a farmer, that hanged himself on the expectation of plenty: come in time; have napkins enow about you; here you'll sweat for't. [Knocking within] Knock, knock! Who's there, in the other devil's name? Faith, here's an equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale; who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven: O, come in, equivocator. [Knocking within] Knock, knock, knock! Who's there? Faith, here's an English tailor come hither, for stealing out of a French hose: come in, tailor; here you may roast your goose. [Knocking within] Knock, knock; never at quiet! What are you? But this place is too cold for hell. I'll devil-porter it no further: I had thought to have let in some of all professions that go the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire. [Knocking within] Anon, anon! I pray you, remember the porter. *Macbeth*, II.3

LADY MACBETH

Yet here's a spot.... Out, damned spot! out, I say! One: two: why, then, 'tis time to do't.--Hell is murky! Fie, my lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account? Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him.... The thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now? What, will these hands ne'er be clean? No more o' that, my lord, no more o' that: you mar all with this starting....Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. Oh, oh, oh!... Wash your hands, put on your nightgown; look not so pale.--I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he cannot come out on's grave. To bed, to bed! there's knocking at the gate: come, come, come, come, give me your hand. What's done cannot be

undone.--To bed, to bed, to bed! *Macbeth*, V.1

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. *Macbeth*, V.5

RICHARD III

Shakespeare's *Richard III* tells the story of England's infamous king of the late 15th century. Shakespeare's Richard, a ruthless man on par with Macbeth in his quest for the throne, brutally slaughters all in his way, including his two young nephews. At the end of the play, on the eve of the battle in which Richard will be slain by his opponent, who will become King Henry VII, the evil king suddenly has a fit of conscience, after being visited in a dream by the ghosts of all whom he has killed. Shakespeare's version of Richard was, as Cecil points out in *Equivocation*, almost entirely propaganda: as Henry VII, Richard's successful opponent, was the father of the Tudor line – the line to which King Henry VIII and Queen Elizabeth I also belonged – it was important to color Richard as evil as possible, against which the Tudors could look like the saviors of England:

KING RICHARD III

Give me another horse: bind up my wounds.
Have mercy, Jesu!--Soft! I did but dream.
O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!
The lights burn blue. It is now dead midnight.
Cold fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.
What do I fear? myself? there's none else by:
Richard loves Richard; that is, I am I.
Is there a murderer here? No. Yes, I am:
Then fly. What, from myself? Great reason why:
Lest I revenge. What, myself upon myself?
Alack. I love myself. Wherefore? for any good

That I myself have done unto myself?
O, no! alas, I rather hate myself
For hateful deeds committed by myself!
I am a villain: yet I lie. I am not.
Fool, of thyself speak well: fool, do not flatter.
My conscience hath a thousand several tongues,
And every tongue brings in a several tale,
And every tale condemns me for a villain.
Perjury, perjury, in the high'st degree
Murder, stem murder, in the direst degree;
All several sins, all used in each degree,
Throng to the bar, crying all, Guilty! guilty!
I shall despair. There is no creature loves me;
And if I die, no soul shall pity me:
Nay, wherefore should they, since that I myself
Find in myself no pity to myself?
Methought the souls of all that I had murder'd
Came to my tent; and every one did threat
Tomorrow's vengeance on the head of Richard.

KING LEAR

Much like *Equivocation*, *King Lear*, the play we see Shag's troupe rehearsing at the beginning of the play, is a play about communication, particularly between fathers and daughters. In *King Lear*, Lear, an aged king, begins by dividing his kingdom among his three daughters, based on a test of love. While his two eldest daughters flatter him, his youngest, only sincere daughter, Cordelia, simply says that she can say "Nothing" in response to his request. Angrily, he excludes her from his will, setting off a chain of tragedy, as he attempts to rely on his two eldest, ungrateful daughters. Below is an excerpt from this division scene, commonly known as the "Love Test" scene:

KING LEAR

Meantime we shall express our darker purpose.
Give me the map there. Know that we have divided
In three our kingdom: and 'tis our fast intent
To shake all cares and business from our age;
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we
Unburden'd crawl toward death....
Tell me, my daughters,...
Which of you shall we say doth love us most?
That we our largest bounty may extend...

Goneril, Our eldest-born, speak first.

GONERIL

Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter;
Dearer than eye-sight, space, and liberty;
Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare;
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour;
As much as child e'er loved, or father found;
A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable;
Beyond all manner of so much I love you.

CORDELIA

[Aside] What shall Cordelia do?
Love, and be silent.

LEAR

Of all these bounds, even from this line to this,
With shadowy forests and with champains rich'd,
With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads,
We make thee lady.... What says our second daughter,
Our dearest Regan, wife to Cornwall? Speak.

REGAN

Sir, I am made
Of the self-same metal that my sister is,
And prize me at her worth. In my true heart
I find she names my very deed of love;
Only she comes too short: that I profess
Myself an enemy to all other joys...
And find I am alone felicitate
In your dear highness' love.

CORDELIA

[Aside] Then poor Cordelia!
And yet not so; since, I am sure, my love's
More richer than my tongue.

KING LEAR

To thee and thine hereditary ever
Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom;
No less in space, validity, and pleasure,
Than that conferr'd on Goneril. Now, our joy,
Although the last, not least; ...what can you say to draw
A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.

CORDELIA

Nothing, my lord.

KING LEAR

Nothing!

CORDELIA

Nothing.

KING LEAR

Nothing will come of nothing: speak again.

CORDELIA

Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave
My heart into my mouth: I love your majesty
According to my bond; nor more nor less.

KING LEAR

How, how, Cordelia! mend your speech a little,
Lest it may mar your fortunes.

CORDELIA

Good my lord,
You have begot me, bred me, loved me: I
Return those duties back as are right fit,
Obey you, love you, and most honour you.
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry
Half my love with him, half my care and duty:
Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,
To love my father all.

KING LEAR

But goes thy heart with this?

CORDELIA

Ay, good my lord.

KING LEAR

So young, and so untender?

CORDELIA

So young, my lord, and true.

KING LEAR

Let it be so; thy truth, then, be thy dower:
For, by the sacred radiance of the sun,
The mysteries of Hecate, and the night;
By all the operation of the orbs
From whom we do exist, and cease to be;
Here I disclaim all my paternal care,
Propinquity and property of blood,
And as a stranger to my heart and me
Hold thee, from this, forever.... *King Lear*, I.1

CHRONOLOGY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S CAREER, AND THE GUNPOWDER PLOT

- 1564 – Shakespeare born in Stratford-upon-Avon
- 1582 – Shakespeare marries Anne Hathaway
- 1584 – Birth of Hamnet and Judith Shakespeare
- c. 1590 – Shakespeare relocates to London, begins writing plays
- c. 1592 – Shakespeare writes *Richard III*
- 1596 – Death of Hamnet Shakespeare
- c. 1596 – Shakespeare writes *The Merchant of Venice*, a play featuring a Jewish moneylender as the antagonist
- 1599 – Opening of the Globe Theatre
- c. 1599 – Shakespeare writes *Hamlet*, a play about (among other things) a son avenging his father
- c. 1602 – Shakespeare writes *Twelfth Night*, the play referred to in *Equivocation* as containing one very hidden dirty joke
- 1603 – Queen Elizabeth I of England dies, and King James VI of Scotland becomes King James I of England, uniting the two kingdoms, and takes on Shakespeare's troupe as his personal servants, the King's Men
- c. 1603 – Shakespeare writes *Othello*, a play featuring a Moor as its tragic protagonist
- 1605 – November 4, Guy Fawkes is arrested in the process of attempting to destroy the House of Parliament, including the King and Queen, as part of what comes to be known as the Gunpowder Plot, a plot by English Catholics to remove the Protestant James from the throne and return the country to Catholicism. By 1605, England has undergone three violent changes of religions – from Catholicism to Protestantism when King Henry VIII broke with the Catholic Church, back to Catholicism

under Queen Mary, and then back to Protestantism (the Church of England) under Queen Elizabeth I. The conspirators seek to end the religious strife, and return their nation to what they believe is the one true faith. Fawkes's arrest is made based on the contents of a letter received by Robert Cecil, Earl of Salisbury and King James's spymaster. To this day, November 5, the day Fawkes was brought before James, is celebrated in the UK as Guy Fawkes Day, with fireworks marking the averted explosion. Over the following months, many other co-conspirators with Fawkes, including Thomas Wintour and Father Henry Garnet, were found guilty and executed for treason. Bill Cain's implication, in *Equivocation*, that their executions were motivated far more by a desire to quell political and religious dissent than by their actual guilt in the plot, is completely possible.

- c. 1606 – Shakespeare writes *Macbeth*, widely considered to have been written for King James I, due to its Scottish theme (particularly the heroism of Banquo, James's ancestor) and its witches, as James was fascinated by witches
- c. 1608 – Shakespeare writes *Pericles*
- c. 1610 – Shakespeare writes *The Winter's Tale*
- c. 1611 – Shakespeare writes *Cymbeline*
- c. 1611 – Shakespeare writes *The Tempest*, largely agreed by scholars to be the last play written entirely by himself. *The Tempest*, along with *The Winter's Tale*, *Pericles*, and *Cymbeline*, the four last plays referred to by Judith in *Equivocation*, all have at their core a relationship between a father and his – often lost – daughter.
- c. 1611 – Shakespeare retires, and returns to Stratford-upon-Avon
- 1611 – Printing of the King James Bible, an official translation of the Bible into English, approved by King James I for his Protestant Great Britain
- 1616 – Death of Shakespeare

OTHER PLAYWRIGHTS MENTIONED IN EQUIVOCATION

Shag, Cecil, and Sharpe, among other characters, refer to several other playwrights who were Shakespeare's contemporaries. John Fletcher (1579-1625) collaborated widely, including some work with Shakespeare himself on *Henry VIII* and *Two Noble Kinsmen*. When Shakespeare retired from the theatrical life to return to Stratford, Fletcher took over as the primary playwright of the King's Men. Fletcher wrote *The Tamer Tamed*,

a sequel to Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. Francis Beaumont (1584-1616) was best known as a frequent collaborator with Fletcher. Thomas Kyd (1558-1594) was most well-known for his drama *The Spanish Tragedy*, and is widely considered by scholars to have written an earlier *Hamlet* play, upon which Shakespeare based his version. Ben Jonson (1572-1637), known early in his career for his biting comedies, spent the latter part of his career writing masques, or fantastic court spectacles, for the court of King James I. Jonson's flair for masques involving elaborate sets, costumes, and stage play delighted James's theatrical tastes. Some of his most well-known plays include *Volpone*, *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair*. Shakespeare's perhaps best known contemporary, Christopher Marlowe, is not mentioned in the play, but this can be explained by his having been killed in a bar fight twelve years prior to the events of *Equivocation*.

EXCERPT FROM FATHER HENRY GARNET'S A TREATISE OF EQUIVOCATION, C. 1598

The book that Cecil refers to during Father Garnet's trial is one that actually existed. As Garnet states in the play, his work is about "telling the truth in difficult times." Below are two brief excerpts:

Subtitle of the treatise: "Whether a Catholic or any other person before a magistrate being demanded upon his oath whether a priest were in such a place, may (not withstanding his perfect knowledge to the contrary) without perjury and securely in conscience answer, No, with this secret meaning reserved in his mind, that he was not there so that any man is bound to detect it."

"Finally there is never falsehood in the voice but there is first falsehood in the mind. Whereas verity and falsity are principally in the understanding, and then secondarily in the voice, as in an expressive instrument of that which was false in the mind. But here is no falsehood in the understanding, when I say inwardly, 'I know not for to tell you,' for it is most true; then is there none in the words. And yet these words which are uttered, if they be taken alone, are most false; therefore we may clear them of falsehood, we must say of necessity that they be but a part of a proposition, the rest being reserved in the mind. And so are we constrained to acknowledge such a kind of mixed proposition which we have defended."

EXCERPT FROM KING JAMES'S DAEMONOLOGIE

Equivocation's portrayal of King James as obsessed with witches is not an exaggeration. Fascinated by the existence of humans with supernatural powers, used for evil, most often, in his estimation, against those in power, James went so far as to write an entire book on witches. His *Daemonologie*, written and published in 1597, while James was still simply James VI of Scotland, is written in the form of a dialogue, and details, among other things, the many forms of magic, the different powers and habits of witches, and how and why rulers should be particularly aware of them. The work begins as follows:

“The fearful abounding at this time in this country, of those detestable slaves of the Devil, the Witches or enchanterers, hath moved me (beloved reader) to dispatch in post, this following treatise of mine, not in any wise (as I protest) to serve for a show of my learning and ingenuity, but only (moved of conscience) to press thereby, so far as I can, to resolve the doubting hearts of many; both that such assaults of Satan are most certainly practiced, and that the instruments thereof, merits most severely to be punished: against the damnable opinions of two principally in our age, whereof the one called Scot an Englishman, is not ashamed in public print to deny, that there can be such a thing as Witchcraft.”