Equivocation in *Macbeth*

“Nothing is, but what is not.”

**Parent:** “What time did you get in last night?”

**You (an equivocating teenager):** “Well, we left the Civic Center at eleven, and it’s only a half hour drive, so there was plenty of time to be in by midnight.”

Were you home by midnight? You neglected to mention that you stopped for pizza and took the long way home. You didn’t actually lie, but you deliberately tried to mislead your parent into believing something not true – that you met your curfew.

This above is an example of *equivocation*: the art of misleading, usually through language. An *equivocator* is a person who tries to mislead through language. *Equivocal* is a statement or event that is open to two or more interpretations and is actually intended to mislead.

The two major elements of *equivocation* are:

1. A lie is not actually told
2. The truth is not told either, but a false idea is deliberately fostered.

Why all this talk about *equivocation*? Because *Macbeth* is a play based on it. Macbeth equivocates; so do the witches; so does Lady Macbeth. Equivocation is everywhere; the atmosphere is thick with it. The action is motivated by it.

If you hope to understand this play, keep *equivocation* in mind. Be alert for it, and be prepared by it.

Between 1598 and 1606, in England, there was much talk of equivocation. The Gunpowder Plot, a conspiracy to blow up Parliament, had failed, and the conspirators had been arrested. One of them, Father Garnet, a Jesuit, used equivocation during the trial. He was found guilty anyway and sentenced to death, but before he died, he claimed that equivocation is sometimes justified. England promptly split into “for” and “against” groups, and the word “equivocation” was on everyone’s lips.

In the play, *Macbeth*, equivocation begins on the next to last line of the first scene. The three witches are huddled on a heath, amid thunder and lightening. The witches chant:

*Fair is foul, and foul is fair…*

The day is indeed “fair” for Macbeth and Banquo, leaders of the king’s forces, for they have defeated the rebels on the battlefield. But the day is also “foul,” for thunder is raging and lightening streaks across the sky; so “fair” and “foul,” opposite in meaning, seem to become equal. The witches here set the stage: little is as it *seems* to be.

Banquo to Macbeth, after the first meeting with the witches:

"oftentimes, to win us to our harm, / The instruments of darkness tell us truths, / Win us with honest trifles, to betray's / In deepest consequence" (1.3.123-126)

What does this mean and what does it have to do with equivocation?

BE ALERT FOR MORE EXAMPLES! Equivocation is the key to the tragic turns this story takes…