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# Lady Macbeth Not Alone in Her Quest for Spotlessness

By **BENEDICT CAREY**  
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Liars, cheats, philanderers and murderers are not renowned for exquisite personal hygiene, but then no one has studied their showering habits.

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Sam Weber

They may scrub extra hard after a con job, use \$40 hyacinth shampoo after a secret tryst or book a weekend at a spa after a particularly ugly hit. They are human beings, after all, and if a study published last week is any guide, they feel a strong urge to wash their hands — literally — after a despicable act in an unconscious effort to ease their consciences.

And it works, at least for minor guilt stains. People who washed their hands after contemplating an unethical act were less troubled by their thoughts than those who didn't, the study found.

"The association between moral and physical purity has been taken for granted for so long that it was startling that no one had ever shown empirical evidence of it," said Chen-Bo Zhong, an author of the new research and a behavioral researcher at the University of Toronto. The study, which he wrote with Katie Liljenquist, a graduate student at [Northwestern University](#), appeared in the journal Science.

The researchers call this urge to clean up the "Macbeth effect," after the scene in [Shakespeare's](#) tragedy in which Lady Macbeth moans, "Out, damned spot! Out, I say!" after bloodying her hands when her husband,

at her urging, murders King Duncan.

In one of several experiments among Northwestern undergraduates, the researchers had one group of students recall an unethical act from their past, like betraying a friend, and another group reflect on an ethical deed, like returning lost money. Afterward, the students had their choice of a gift, either a pencil or an antiseptic wipe. Those who had reflected on a shameful act were twice as likely as the others to take the wipe.

In another experiment, the researchers found that students who had been contemplating an unethical deed rated the value of cleaning products significantly higher than peers who had been thinking about an ethical act.

Psychologists have known for years that when people betray their values, they feel a need to compensate. Christians who have read a blasphemous story about Jesus express a desire to go to church more frequently; social liberals who feel they have discriminated express an increased desire to volunteer for civil rights work. "It's sometimes called symbolic cleansing, or moral cleansing, and it's an attempt to repair moral identity," said Dr. Philip Tetlock, a professor of organizational behavior at the [University of California](#), Berkeley.

Sure enough, Mr. Zhong and Ms. Liljenquist found that students who had been thinking about past sins were very likely to agree to volunteer their time to help with a graduate school project — unless they had been allowed to wash their hands, which cut their willingness to volunteer roughly in half.

Several people known to have expressed guilt over spreading rumors were asked to comment for the record on the findings, but all declined. And efforts to contact hit men to inquire about personal hygiene were deemed unwise; none had publicists.

But Macbeth was available for comment. Liev Schreiber, who played Macbeth to critical acclaim this summer at

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the Delacorte Theater in Central Park, said the moral weight of the murder in the play was exhausting. And he said that cast members lined up to shower at the theater, rather than waiting until they got home.

“That was unusual — usually no one uses those theater showers,” Mr. Schreiber said in an interview. “I had to shower. I was covered in eight gallons of fake blood by the end.” He said he had no idea how much the cast’s cleansing was because of to the moral horror of the play and how much was because of the muggy summer weather.

Either way, the Macbeths, by the last act, have fallen to pieces, physically and mentally, despite compulsive efforts to purge their sins. Mr. Zhong said in an interview that for this couple at least, all the kingdom’s washbasins were not enough to ease their consciences.

But the murder of a king, he acknowledged, falls into a different category from the confessed sins of the undergraduates, which included shoplifting, lying and “kissing a married man.”

“We do believe there might be limits to how well simple hand washing can clean your slate,” he said, “but it remains to be seen where that limit is.”

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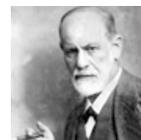
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