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Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

William Shakespeare's Macbeth

NEW EDITION



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Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations

William Shakespeare's

Macbeth

New Edition

Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

Sterling Professor of the Humanities

Yale University

 BLOOM'S
LITERARY CRITICISM
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Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations: Macbeth—New Edition

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Editor's Note

My introduction engages the ruthless economy of *Macbeth*, which has always seemed to me to be set in a Gnostic cosmos.

James L. Calderwood traces the shadows of *Hamlet* that encircle and influence the later drama, after which Janet Adelman suggests that *Macbeth* solicits both a destructive maternal power and the desire to be free of it.

Stanley Cavell contends that competing interpretations give rise to the melodramatic responsiveness that characterizes the play, while Susan Snyder weighs theological tradition and the work's murky morality.

Tom Clayton focuses on childlessness and ambiguous parentage, followed by Ralph Berry's perusal of the ways the drama sexualizes regicide.

Robert Lanier Reid moves beyond the definitive killing of the king to consider Macbeth's entire murderous history, after which R. Chris Hassel Jr. returns to the legacy of Herod as one of Macbeth's possible antecedents. The volume concludes with Piotr Sadowski's assessment of the central characters and of the blending of mutually exclusive qualities evident in the title character.

HAROLD BLOOM

Introduction

Macbeth ought to be the least sympathetic of Shakespeare's hero-villains. He is a murderer of old men, women, and children and has a particular obsession with overcoming time by murdering the future: hence his failed attempt to kill Fleance and his successful slaughter of Macduff's children. And yet the playgoer and the reader cannot resist identifying with the imagination of Macbeth. A great killing machine, Macbeth has few attributes beyond imagination to recommend him, and that imagination itself is anything but benign. Yet it is open to the powers of the air and of the night: Occult, mediumlike, prophetic, and moral at least in part, it must be the most singular imagination in all of Shakespeare's plays. And yet it has great limitations; it is not much allied to Macbeth's far more ordinary, indeed inadequate intellectual powers. Its autonomy, together with its desperate strength, is what destroys all of Macbeth's victims and at last Macbeth himself. Imagination or "fantasy" is an equivocal term in the Renaissance, where it can mean both poetic furor, a personal replacement for divine inspiration, and a loss in reality, perhaps as a consequence of such a displacement of sacred by secular.

Shakespeare has no single position in regard to the fantasy-making power, whether in *Macbeth* or in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *The Tempest*. Yet all these are visionary dramas and in some sense pragmatically exalt imagination even as they question it. But *Macbeth* is a tragedy, and a visionary tragedy is a strange genre. Like Hamlet, Othello, and Lear, Macbeth is a tragic protagonist, and yet like Claudius, Iago, and Edmund, Macbeth is a villain, indeed a monster of murderousness far surpassing the others. We

find it difficult, as we read or watch a performance of *Macbeth*, to think of its protagonist as a criminal dictator, a small-scale Hitler or Stalin, and yet he is pragmatically just that. I do not think that Macbeth's wistful scruples, his nostalgias and regrets, draw us to him; he is never in any danger of collapsing back into the innocence he rarely ceases to crave. The reader and playgoer need to ask: "Why, even in despite of myself, do I identify with Macbeth, down to the very end?" It cannot be that Macbeth's desires and ambitions essentially are our own, even if the Oedipal desire to slay the father (the good King Duncan) is universal. Even if we are all would-be usurpers, most of us presumably do not desire to terrorize our societies. The appeal of Macbeth, hardly to be resisted, seems to me at the heart of Shakespeare's concerns in this great domestic tragedy of blood.

Macbeth's imagination is at once his greatest strength and his destructive weakness, yet it does not provoke an ambivalence in us. We thrill to its poetic, expressionistic strength, whatever its consequences. Shakespeare, on some level, may be making a critique of his own imagination, which has much in common with Macbeth's, and yet the play is anything but a condemnation of the Macbethian imagination. Indeed, as Macbeth increasingly becomes outraged by the equivocal nature of the occult promises that have been made to him, his sense of being outraged contaminates us, so that we come to share in his outrage. He becomes our paradigm of confounded expectations, and we are moved by him as we are moved by Captain Ahab, who in Melville's *Moby-Dick* plays the role of an American Macbeth. Ahab is not a murderer, and yet his obsessive hunt for Moby Dick destroys the *Pequod* and its entire crew, except for the storytelling Ishmael. Melville modeled Ahab's imagination on Macbeth's, and a close comparison of Ahab and Macbeth is capable of illuminating both figures. Like Ahab, Macbeth is made into a monomaniac by his compulsive imagination, though killing King Duncan has little in common with the vain attempt to kill the White Whale, who has maimed poor Ahab. Still, like Ahab, Macbeth attempts to strike through the mask of natural appearances in order to uncover the malign principles that, at least in part, would seem to govern the universe. The cosmos, both in Shakespeare's play and in Melville's prose epic, seems to have resulted from a creation that was also a fall. Both Macbeth and Ahab are central and appropriate to their universes; their imaginings of disaster bring about fresh disasters, and their battles against their own sense of having been outraged by supernatural forces bring about cataclysmic disorders, both for themselves and nearly everyone else about them.

The comparison between Macbeth and his descendant Ahab has its limits. Ahab's guilt is only that of an instrument; he leads his crew to destruction, but he himself is neither a tyrant nor a usurper. Macbeth, a far greater figure

than Shakespeare's Richard III or his Claudius, nevertheless is in their tradition: He is a plotter and an assassin. And yet he has sublimity; an authentic tragic grandeur touches and transfigures him. That difference arises again from the nature and power of his prophetic imagination, which is far too strong for every other faculty in him to battle. Macbeth's mind, character, and affections are all helpless when confronted by the strength and prevalence of his fantasy, which does his thinking, judging, and feeling for him. Before he scarcely is conscious of a desire, wish, or ambition, the image of the accomplished deed already dominates him, long before the act is performed. Macbeth sees, sometimes quite literally, the phantasmagoria of the future. He is an involuntary visionary, and there is something baffling about his ambition to become king. What do he and Lady Macbeth wish to do with their royal status and power, once they have it? An evening with King and Queen Macbeth at court is an affair apocalyptically dismal: The frightened thanes brood as to just who will be murdered next, and the graciousness of their hostess seems adequately represented by her famous dismissal to stay not upon the order of their going, but go! Whether the Macbeths still hope for progeny is ambiguous, as is the question of whether they have had children who then died, but they seem to share a dread of futurity. Macbeth's horror of time, often remarked by his critics, has a crucial relation to his uncanniest aspect, transcending fantasy, because he seems to sense a realm free of time yet at least as much a nightmare as his time-obsessed existence. Something in Macbeth really is most at home in the world of the witches and of Hecate. Against the positive transcendence of Hamlet's charismatic personality, Shakespeare set the negative transcendence of Macbeth's hag-ridden nature. And yet a negative transcendence remains a transcendence; there are no flights of angels to herald the end of Macbeth, but there is the occult breakthrough that persuades us, at last, that the time is free.

II

Critics remark endlessly about two aspects of *Macbeth*, its obsession with "time" and its invariable recourse to metaphors of the stage, almost on the scale of *Hamlet*. *Macbeth*, my personal favorite among Shakespeare's dramas, always has seemed to me to be set in a Gnostic cosmos, though certainly Shakespeare's own vision is by no means Gnostic in spirit. Gnosticism always manifests a great horror of time, since time will show that one is nothing in oneself, and that one's ambition to be everything in oneself is only an imitation of the Demiurge, the maker of this ruined world.

Why does Shakespeare give us the theatrical trope throughout *Macbeth*, in a universe that is the *kenoma*, the cosmological emptiness of the Gnostic seers? In *Hamlet*, the trope is appropriate, since Claudius governs a play-act

kingdom. Clearly, we confront a more desperate theatricality in *Macbeth*, where the cosmos, and not just the kingdom, is an apocalyptic stage, even as it is in *King Lear*. Macbeth's obsession with time is the actor's obsession, and the director's, rather than the poet-playwright's. It is the fear of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, thus ruining the illusion, which is that one is anything at all.

What always remains troublingly sympathetic about Macbeth is partly that he represents our own Oedipal ambitions and partly that his opposition to true nature is Faustian. Brutally murderous, Macbeth nevertheless is profoundly and engagingly imaginative. He is a visionary Jacobean hero-villain, but unlike Richard III, Iago, and Edmund, and unlike the hero-villains of Webster and Tourneur (Bosola, Flamino, Ludovico, Vindice), Macbeth takes no pride or pleasure in limning his night piece and finding it his best. Partly that is because he does not and cannot limn it wholly by himself anyway. Both the supernatural and the natural play a very large part—the witches throughout and the legitimately natural, almost genealogical revenge of Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane.

These interventions, demonic and retributive, mean that Macbeth never can get anything quite right, and he is always too cursed with imagination not to know it. Macbeth, far from being the author of that greatest of all night pieces, *Macbeth*, is merely the object of the drama's force, so much a part of its terrible nature that he needs to augment his crimes steadily just so as to prolong himself in time.

Macbeth's originality as a representation is what makes him so shockingly more interesting than anyone else in the play. This is not just to repeat the commonsense notion that literary evil is much more fascinating than literary good; Lady Macbeth after all is considerably less absorbing for us than her husband is. Nor is it even the consequence of what Howard Felperin terms Macbeth's "literary modernity," his constant reinvention of his own nature, his inability to take that nature for granted. Why are the other male characters in *Macbeth* so gray, so difficult to distinguish from one another in character or personality? Shakespeare wastes little labor in portraying even Duncan and Banquo, let alone Macduff, Malcolm, and Donalbain. As for Lennox, Rosse, Menteth, Angus, Cathness—you could not tell these players apart even if a scorecard were provided. The dramatist grants high individuality only to Macbeth and, by doing so, makes us confront what it is that we find so attractive in this very bloody villain.

I surmise that Macbeth is so dreadfully interesting because it is his intense *inwardness* that always goes bad and indeed keeps getting worse down to the very end. His is an inversion of that biblical dualism set forth by Jeremiah the prophet, in which we are taught the injustice of outwardness and the

potential morality of our inwardness, which demands justice against the outside world. As a Shakespearean representation, Macbeth empties out inwardness without making it any less interesting; we cannot understand either his nihilism or his imaginative force if we rely on a superior moral stance in relation to him. That moral stance is not available to us, not just because our own ambitions are perpetually murderous, but primarily because we *are* interesting to ourselves for precisely the reasons that Macbeth is interesting to us. And what makes us interesting to ourselves is that we have learned to see ourselves as we see Macbeth.

He has taught us that we are more interesting to ourselves than others can be precisely because their inwardness is not available to us. If cognitively we have learned disinterestedness from Hamlet, or learned that we can love only those who do not seem to need our love, then cognitively we have learned a dangerously attractive solipsism from Macbeth. Hamlet and Falstaff are not solipsists, for wit demands both other selves and a world external to the self. Macbeth is neither a wit nor a counter-Machiavel, like Hamlet and Falstaff, nor a Machiavel, like Edmund and Iago. He neither writes with words nor with the other characters. He simply murders what is outward to himself and at the end is not even certain that Lady Macbeth was not outward to himself. He remains so original a representation of the simultaneous necessity and disaster of a constantly augmenting inwardness that we have not caught up with him yet. Perhaps his greatest horror for us is his brooding conviction that there is sense in everything, which means that he is totally overdetermined even as he tries so murderously to make himself into something new.

III

Macbeth, even in the somewhat uncertain form that we have it, is a ruthlessly economical drama, marked by a continuous eloquence astonishing even for Shakespeare. It cannot be an accident that it is the last of the four supreme tragedies, following *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *Lear*. Shakespeare surpasses even those plays here in maintaining a continuous pitch of tragic intensity, in making everything overwhelmingly dark with meaning. Early on, Macbeth states the ethos of his drama:

My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not.

Murder is the center and will not cease to perplex Macbeth, for whom its ontological status, as it were, has been twisted askew:

The time has been,
 That when the brains were out, the man would die,
 And there an end; but now they rise again
 With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,
 And push us from our stools. This is more strange
 Than such a murder is.

Everything that Macbeth speaks in the course of the drama leads into its most famous and most powerful speech, as fierce a Gnostic declaration as exists in our language:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
 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.

The dramatist, according to Macbeth, is the Demiurge, who destroys all meaning whatsoever. But his nihilistic play, featuring life as hero-villain, is so badly acted in its most crucial part that the petty pace of fallen time is only accentuated. Macbeth therefore ends in total consciousness that he has been thrown into the cosmological emptiness:

I gin to be a-weary of the sun,
 And wish th' estate o' th' world were now undone.

Mysticism, according to an ancient formulation, fails and then becomes apocalyptic. The apocalyptic fails and then becomes Gnosticism. Gnosticism, having no hopes for or in this life, necessarily cannot fail. Macbeth, at the close, cannot fail, because he has murdered all hope and all meaning. What he has not murdered is only interest, our interest, our own deep investment in our own inwardness, at all costs, at every cost. Bloody tyrant though he be, Macbeth remains the unsurpassed representation of imagination gone beyond limits, into the abyss of our emptiness.

JAMES L. CALDERWOOD

Macbeth: *Counter-Hamlet*

When Shakespeare came to write *Macbeth* I think he found himself guided somewhat obscurely by his awareness of what he had done, or rather not done, in *Hamlet*. Probably that's true of the writing of several of his subsequent plays. That is, one might profitably study, say, *Othello* or *Lear* not merely in their own right but as post-*Hamlet* plays, because the range and complexity of *Hamlet's* language, styles, and forms make it a theatrical matrix for the plays that not merely follow it but also repeat it, vary it, suppress it, or take off from it. But I think *Macbeth* has a special relation to *Hamlet*. In some respects it is like a photographic negative of the earlier play, not merely different from it as the other tragedies are, but the inverse of it—a counter-*Hamlet*. That has a metaphysical ring to it, as though under pressure of the great mass of its language (not to mention the critical language with which it has been freighted), *Hamlet* collapsed into a literary black hole and emerged into a parallel universe of anti-matter as *Macbeth*. But this astrophysical notion goes awry for several instructive reasons. For one thing black holes emit no light, while *Hamlet*, judging from the perpetual squint of its critics, is still there blinding us all. For another, in addition to being invisible, anti-matter is supposed also to be identical to its ordinary counterpart, but no one would suggest that Shakespeare's two tragedies mirror one another. Finally, anti-matter is a negative energy state, whereas

From *If It Were Done: Macbeth and Tragic Action*, pp. 3–31, 135–37. Copyright © 1986 by the University of Massachusetts Press.

in the Shakespearean universe *Hamlet* is best characterized by negation and absence, where *Macbeth* is, I suggest, positively charged.

So if *Macbeth* is a counter-*Hamlet*, it is not in these ways. Let me abandon these ethereal anti-matters and come down to earth, or at least to a text. I want to examine *Macbeth* in light of certain concepts that play a prominent role in *Hamlet*—concepts like time, action, and mediation—in hopes of bringing to the fore some aspects of *Macbeth*, perhaps some of *Hamlet* too, that might otherwise pass unnoticed.¹ Most of these notions center in action, not language, because language seems to me less of an issue in the later play. Although eloquent in himself, Macbeth is not interested in language as Hamlet is. In fact, like Othello and Lear, he could profit from some of the Dane's verbal sophistication.² But despite what his wife says, he is most anxious “to catch the nearest way,” and the nearest way is almost never a verbal way—which is why it is Hamlet's way. Macbeth's way is action. Let us begin there then.

Action

In both plays a central concern of the action is action itself—the act of revenge that remains unperformed for so long by Hamlet, the act of regicide that is performed so soon by Macbeth. The location of these acts has a significant bearing on the constitution of the two plays. Hamlet's revenge takes place at the end of the play, so that for about four “acts” the focus is not on action but on pre-action—on all that deters, calls in question, and at last prepares for action. On the other hand, Macbeth's murder of Duncan occurs relatively early in his play, so that the focus is on what Macbeth himself most fears, consequences—on all that lingers out and follows from an action. This stress on action is so great in *Macbeth* as to merit special sustained attention—hence the following chapter, which examines the issue of doing and undoing in the play. Let me comment here only briefly on the origins of action.

In each play the instigation to act has a preternatural source. Hamlet receives ghostly instructions, Macbeth witchy predictions. However, the Ghost's instructions are in the active voice, the Witches' predictions in the passive. Hamlet is told what *to do*—take revenge, kill the King—Macbeth is merely told what is *to be*—his own kingship. When Macbeth converts this prediction of a future state of royal being into an active invitation to kill a king, he very nearly reverses the process by which Hamlet converts the Ghost's command to kill a king into a prolonged exploration of his own state of being as a disenfranchised prince.

As a minor point, we might observe that the swiftness with which each man acts is “predicted” by the way in which the preternatural invitations to act are dramatically presented. That is, the postponement of Hamlet's revenge

throughout the play is in keeping with the postponement of his initial meeting with the Ghost. In Act 1 the Ghost does not come directly to Hamlet as it does in the Closet Scene, but arrives by stages, appearing twice to the soldiers and once again for the benefit of Horatio before confronting Hamlet himself. Who is the Ghost to complain later of Hamlet's roundaboutness?

By the same token, the swiftness with which Macbeth dispatches Duncan after meeting the Witches is in keeping with the abruptness with which they appear to him and Banquo on the heath: "What are these / So withered and so wild in their attire?" Of course the Witches' meeting with Macbeth is also deferred—they appear in the opening scene of the play to announce that they will meet with Macbeth later, "when the hurlyburly's done." But this is only a momentary postponement, not as with the Ghost an ostentatiously prolonged process that makes us conscious of impediments and intermediaries.

Inbetweenness and Imagination

To speak of impediments and intermediaries is to raise the issue of inbetweenness, which constitutes a significant difference between the modes of the two plays. In *Hamlet* the middle—the interim, the gap, the space between two persons or events—is always clogged. Direct action and immediate presence are hard to come by. Claudius cannot deal directly with Hamlet but only through such sifting agents as Polonius, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Ophelia, Gertrude, and finally Laertes. In the duel of mighty opposites these are the royal weapons, whose thrusts Hamlet parries with a targe of assumed madness embossed with puns and riddling figures. Only when these intermediaries have been swept aside by death—and when Hamlet's madplay and wordplay have been abandoned in the Graveyard Scene—is the space between the King and the Prince cleared for a mortal engagement. Thus one movement of the play is through an obstructive mediateness toward immediacy, in accord with Polonius's principle of finding directions out by means of indirections.

If *Hamlet* demonstrates the resistant force of inbetweenness, *Macbeth* features an increasingly easy erasure of inbetweenness in the interests of immediacy. Consider for instance the gap between the word and the thing. In *Hamlet* this is the gap between the Ghost's command to revenge and Hamlet's final act of revenge, a gap that is writ wide by Hamlet's infamous delay. In *Macbeth*, on the other hand, the gap is between the Witches' prophecies and Macbeth's future kingship, a gap that would have been much wider than it is had Macbeth not erased it by regicide. Killing Duncan kills the interim.

But even before the actual murder Macbeth erases the interim between prophecy and kingship when on the heath he has "horrible imaginings" of

the murder of Duncan. Of course Hamlet is given to imagining also, but according to his own analysis “thinking too precisely on the event” deters rather than promotes action. And though he constantly berates himself for it, he clearly prefers the capaciousness of the imagination, where everything is possible, to the confinements of action, where one must do one thing and not another, let alone all others. For Hamlet an imagined revenge in the unspecified future—

when [Claudius] is drunk asleep, or in his rage,
Or in the incestuous pleasure of his bed,
At game a-swearing, or about some act
That has no relish of salvation in it

—takes precedence over a revenge that is as immediate as the blade in his hand (3.3). For Macbeth on the other hand a murder that “yet is but fantastical” may momentarily smother function in surmise, but surmise is not the thing itself, and he is anxious to pass from illusion to reality.

For Hamlet imagination is an impediment to action, even at times an end in itself, whereas for Macbeth it is the genesis and agency of action. Duncan’s murder takes place in the mind before it occurs in the castle, and the route from the subjunctive “If it were done” to the indicative “I go, and it is done” is paved by murderous fancies. This is most compactly demonstrated in Act 2, Scene 1, when a “dagger of the mind” creates a dagger in the hand, and an imagined half-world of darkness prowled by wolves and withered murder provides a scene in which Duncan’s death is a foregone conclusion.

Actually Macbeth’s imagination is something of a paradox, since it is both a get-between and a go-between for action. As a get-between it occupies the space between the desire to act and the act itself, and hence can even deter action, as in the Hamlet-like “If it were done” soliloquy. At that point Macbeth is momentarily deterred from acting by considerations of justice, duty, and emotion, all arguing that he should get between Duncan and his murderer, “not bear the knife [himself].” On the other hand, as a go-between Macbeth’s imagination envisages and conduces to action, most obviously in the “Is this a dagger that I see” soliloquy. As his murderous career advances, however, his imagination becomes less and less a get-between. The retarding mediations of the mind yield to forwarding intermediaries outside—the three murderers of Banquo, and those who slaughter Macduff’s family. Yet even in these later instances Macbeth is still taking the most direct and murderous route to the satisfaction of his desires. It is not so much that he has relinquished action to others as that he has extended his range of evil-doing. We simply have Macbeth taking action at a distance.

This impression is created largely by Macbeth's remarks about erasing inbetweenness within himself. The moral imagination that momentarily deters him from killing Duncan and that unmans him in the presence of Banquo's ghost must be totally elided. It is a matter between the heart or head that conceives a villainy and the hand that enacts it: "Strange things I have in head, that will to hand, / Which must be acted ere they may be scanned" (3.4.140). And after seeing the Witches and then hearing of the flight of Macduff, he says

From this moment
The very firstlings of my heart shall be
The firstlings of my hand. (4.1.46)

Having thus eliminated the middleman conscience, he orders the castle of Macduff seized and all within given to the sword. With Macduff safely abroad, Macbeth lashes out at anyone or anything that stands between him and his ambitions—a pointless but typically inhuman act by a dehumanized tyrant, a man who has ceased to be a man by virtue of having closed the gap of humankindness that properly exists between the heart and the hand. Thus when Macduff learns of his woes in far-off England, Macbeth seems almost physically present, in part because of Malcolm's imitation of him when he tests Macduff (4.3.1–114), and in part because of the contrast between the saintly hand of Edward the Confessor, whose royal touch cures "evil" so easily, and the diabolic hand of Macbeth that reaches forth its evil in this scene and touches Macduff. Macbeth has not merely erased inbetweenness; he has extended himself everywhere.

Reactive/Initiative

If we transpose inbetweenness from space to time we could think of it as the present, the point of transition between past and future. From this perspective the present of *Hamlet* is reactive and retentive, that of *Macbeth* initiative and protentive. In this section let me look at the opposition of the reactive and the initiative, reserving the retentive and protentive for later.

Both heroes, as we have seen, react to preternatural instigations to action; but whereas Hamlet continues in a reactive vein throughout the play, having let the initiative pass to Claudius, Macbeth is himself a source of action. There is a certain appropriateness in Hamlet's being reactive, because revenge itself is reactive and past-conscious. Though often self-perpetuating, as in feuds, its ideal aim is a point for point matching or even overmatching of "re-venge" to "venge" so that the latter is symbolically cancelled. As René Girard has emphasized, violence fosters mimesis.³ If Hamlet's father was taken full of

bread, so must Claudius be; and if Claudius incestuously pursued a union with Gertrude in life, then so metaphorically must he in death: "Drink off this potion. Is thy union here? Follow my mother." The present takes cues from the past in hopes of evening things up and so making an end. The essential reactivity of revenge is underscored in *Hamlet* by having it issue from a fencing match, where thrust is normally answered by riposte, as the thrust of the King's plot is answered by Hamlet's quick retaliation.

To some extent Macbeth, like Hamlet, reacts to supernatural soliciting. "Soliciting," however, is Macbeth's word (1.3.130). The Witches solicit no one; they merely reveal the future. Macbeth's imagination invents the murder of Duncan. The heinousness of the act is owing in part to its being unprovoked and unprecedented. Perhaps a kind of precedent consists in the recently defeated rebels, who also sought Duncan's life and crown. But slaughter in the open field is one thing and murder in private chambers another; and Macbeth, who engages in both, registers the difference between the two as he passes full of self-loathing from field to chamber to do a deed so grotesquely original that it cannot be named. By the conventions of his assignment, Hamlet, like all revengers, is required to model himself upon his enemy. Had he done so more readily, he had made an end. Had Macbeth modeled himself upon Duncan, he had never made a beginning. But he does. His is not a reactive but an initiative mode. He makes a radical break with what was and sets out ambitiously for what is to be.

The distinction between reactive and initiative may even apply to the composition of the two plays. *Hamlet* is of course patterned on the lost revenge play known as the *Ur-Hamlet*, presumably written by Thomas Kyd. Thus a Shakespeare who takes revenge-play instruction from Kyd's old-*Hamlet* is like his hero taking orders for revenge from Old Hamlet his father. Each is given the paternal command, "Remember me!" Because Shakespeare's rewrite and Hamlet's revenge are both modeled on a prior act, the problem arises how to maintain a certain likeness to the model without sacrificing the unlikeness that makes for individuality. Such a problem does not present itself in *Macbeth*, however, because Shakespeare's models for this play are not dramatic but narrative: Holinshed's *Chronicles* and perhaps Page's translation of Buchanan's *Rerum Scotticarum Historia*. Individuality and difference are almost guaranteed when the narrative mode is transposed into the dramatic. Hero and playwright are both engaged in a deed without precedent—Macbeth's murder of a king and Shakespeare's dramatization of Macbeth's murder of a king.⁴

Past/Future

If Danish history was of little interest to Shakespeare when he wrote *Hamlet*, its fictive past is an almost obsessive concern of his hero. For the grieving

Prince the past, or his illusion of the past, is a repository of all that is good and grand—a noble and royal father, a loving mother, the beautiful and innocent Ophelia, loyal schoolfellows, and himself the heir-apparent glass of fashion and mold of form. When that world of dignity and grace is exposed by the Ghost's tale as merely the bright surface of corruption, Hamlet is asked not so much to premeditate revenge as to remember, the last words of that ghostly tale being "Remember me!" And in a sense Hamlet makes his own way through the play much as Ophelia says he left her chamber, "with his head over his shoulder turned," yearning backwards as though where he has been were infinitely preferable to where he must go. To supplement his own remembering, he takes it upon himself to summon up remembrance of things past in others as well. His production of "The Mousetrap" calls up guilty memories, if not true penitence, in the normally forward-looking Claudius; and even the oblivious Gertrude can be made to remember how easily she forgets if she is forced to examine the "counterfeit presentiment of two brothers" and to suffer the pangs of her son's daggerlike speech. Wielded verbally on Ophelia and bloodily on her father, Hamlet's daggers produce a distracted maid whose own mad words sound a flowery keynote to the play:

There's rosemary, that's for remembrance; pray you, love, remember.
And there is pansies, that's for thoughts.

"A document in madness," her brother cries, "thoughts and remembrance fitted" (4.5.177). A document in revenge also, could Hamlet but fit the two to action. But when the revenge comes it is not by an intention based on retention, a plot to revenge ("thoughts and remembrance fitted"), but in rash reaction to the plots of others. Finally, even when the revenge is done and the hero under strictest arrest, his dying concerns remain retrospective as he commandeers Horatio's voice to "report [him] and [his] cause aright / To the unsatisfied."

Macbeth on the other hand is prophetic and premeditative. In contrast to the elaborate preparations in *Hamlet* for the Ghost's tale about past evils, the opening scene with the Witches is not designed to call up the past—there is scarcely any exposition early in the play—but to forecast a meeting with Macbeth on the heath. That later meeting introduces the prophecies that cast the hero's thoughts and the audience's expectations even further into the future. Then a series of anticipatory imaginings and conversations between Macbeth and his wife lead step by step to the murder of Duncan. Once Duncan is in his grave the murder of Banquo is forecast by Macbeth's meeting with the two murderers, and finally the ending of the play is portended by

the apparitions and the Witches' second set of prophecies, which assure the uneasy tyrant that he is safe unless the impossible occurs and which assure the audience that the impossible will indeed occur.⁵

To these outside prophecies and forecasts correspond Macbeth's inner readings for the future. Like his wife, he can close the temporal gap between "is" and "will be" and "feel now / The future in the instant" (1.5.57). Although he wants something more substantial than an imagined future, imagining is his means of acquiring it. Not merely does he premeditate his acts but he imagines scenes in which they can properly take place:

Now o'er the one half-world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtained sleep; witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's offerings, and withered murder,
Alarumed by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost. (2.1.50)

Light thickens, and the crow
Makes wing to the rooky wood;
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,
Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse. (3.2.53)

Thus whereas in *Hamlet* future action is repeatedly deferred and frustrated, in *Macbeth* it is constantly anticipated and impending. The play is full of imagined scenes of darkness and evil receptively awaiting the murderous acts that will occur within them.

If Hamlet edges reluctantly into the future, leaving an ideal world behind him, Macbeth rushes with increasing speed toward an ideal future that keeps receding before him. Macbeth forgoes one good for a greater good in prospect. Yet that greater good—his possession of present crown and future succession—is no more attainable than the means by which he seeks it are erasable. A Tantalus figure in time, Macbeth cannot quite reach the desired future because he cannot extricate himself from the past. On the heath his "horrible imaginings" collapse tomorrow into today as he feels "the future in the instant," but when he contemplates Duncan's murder in his "If it were done" soliloquy it is the completedness of the doing that he desires, the swift conversion of a future "to do" into a past "done" without the intermediate discomforts of a present doing.

But that is precisely what does not happen. The act that, once performed, should be altogether done and sealed securely in the past remains instead disastrously undone and still to do. The following chapter will expand upon this point, but for the moment let me observe merely that each of Macbeth's murderous deeds remains incomplete. The present will not conveniently recede into a closed past. Ultimately the unresolved past reenters the present in the form of the army of Malcolm and Macduff and takes possession of the future, even as the escaped Fleance will take possession of the long-range future by means of James I and the Stuart succession. In pursuit of the future, Macbeth has imagined murders before their time, become king before his time, made Duncan, Banquo, and Macduff's family die before their time. And now time takes its revenge on Macbeth. At the end it is appropriate that he to whom the future has been so infinitely desirable, the locus of all meaning, should register his losses by a total indifference to it. His once passionate hope that the future might enter and become the present—that the prophetic "hereafter" of "All hail, Macbeth, that shall be king hereafter" might be "here"—is fulfilled in the death of his wife, who "should have died hereafter" but did so now, before her time. In Macbeth's famous speech that follows he acknowledges the unalterable sequentiality of time, the metronomic "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" of the future as it keeps coming in at its own pace. Yet it comes mockingly at his pace too. For these trivial tomorrows are also "today," becoming "now" by virtue of Macbeth's use of the present tense—"creeps in," not "will creep in"—and they bring with them only death and a sense of pervasive meaninglessness.

Interior/Exterior

Having glanced at the ways in which Shakespeare temporalizes action, let us see how he spatializes it with reference to such concepts as interior and exterior. Somewhat roundaboutly, let me begin by associating these notions with sleep and wakefulness. In his most famous soliloquy Hamlet says that to sleep forever is a "consummation devoutly to be wished" were it not at the risk of bad dreams. "Consummation" is apt here, since it is poised between the meanings of fulfillment and extinction, much as sleep is poised between life and death. In keeping with the death-plus or life-minus character of sleep, Hamlet's father passes not directly from life to death as Old Fortinbras did in the field but, aided by an application of hebenon, from a midday sleep in his orchard to death. Looking like death, sleep may readily become it. But it may also be a shelter from life's slings and arrows, as it is in Hamlet's case.

If sleep is construed as a deathlike shutting of the eyes to life's affairs, a kind of faint that obliterates oppression, then it can be seen to symbolize inaction in a play that calls insistently for one revengeful act. Thus Hamlet compares himself unfavorably to the militant Fortinbras by saying

How stand I then,
That have a father killed, a mother stained,
Excitements of my reason and my blood,
And let all sleep? (4.4.56)

Peaking like "John-a-dreams" (2.2.567), he metaphorically lets his revenge sleep throughout the middle of the play, as the figure of Revenge literally sleeps throughout the middle of Kyd's *Revenge's Tragedy*. That is, the intense subjectivity of Hamlet's soliloquies and his psychological isolation from the court world during this period of delay can be likened to sleep and dream.⁶ The dreams he has are all bad dreams; otherwise he could be content though bounded in a nutshell. And having suffered life's bad dreams, in which his uncle kills his father and marries his mother, he fears all dreams, even those that might disturb the sleep of death (3.1.67). If his revenge is to awake, however, he must himself stir from inward dreams and take his place in the outward world where kings are killed. But he cannot do so until he has slept very near to death itself. Thus in the last act, when he describes to Horatio the decisive actions he took at sea, wakefulness saves his life and releases him from Denmark's prison:

Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting
That would not let me sleep. Methought I lay
Worse than the mutines in the bilboes. (5.2)

This half-sleep from which he wakes is in some symbolic degree the half-sleep of his delayed revenge, and the swift actions that follow—his rewriting of the King's deadly commission and his felicitous boarding of the pirate ship—suggest that he has become fully alert to the dangers of the world and to the need to counter them forcefully, even brutally. From sleep and dream Hamlet emerges, as he defines it, into a state of wakeful "readiness" that seems prerequisite to his revenge.

In *Hamlet*, then, sleep and dream are associated with the hero's dilatory subjectivity, in which all outward matters are interiorized as soliloquy and wordplay, and from which he must waken to the exigencies of action if he and his play are ever to make an end. In *Macbeth* on the other hand subjectivity is not so much opposed to action as in league with it. On the heath, "rapt" by

supernatural solicitings, Macbeth can observe that “function / Is smothered in surmise,” and yet the “horrible imaginings” that momentarily numb him to his surroundings nevertheless contain the murder of Duncan *in potentia*, a waking nightmare that will become real. Still there is a point where the borders between fantasy and fact, potency and action, dissolve, and we are not sure if the murder has fully made its exit from Macbeth’s imagination. Thus in Act 2, Scene 1, Macbeth is ostensibly preparing to depart for bed when the hallucinated dagger appears, marshalling into existence a real dagger a moment later. Then Macbeth imagines a dead world in which “wicked dreams abuse / The curtained sleep” and sets out somnambulistically toward the sleeping Duncan. Afterwards, outside the chambers, he is like a man abruptly awakened from a murderous nightmare, unsure whether he has only dreamed or actually done the deed. He keeps remembering a voice that cried “Sleep no more! / Macbeth does murder sleep”:

Still it cried “Sleep no more!” to all the house;
 “Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor
 Shall sleep no more; Macbeth shall sleep no more.”

And from this point on Macbeth does go sleepless, lying “in restless ecstasy” and envying Duncan, who “after life’s fitful fever . . . sleeps well” (3.2.24). Toward the end this sleeplessness takes its toll. Lady Macbeth sleepwalks her way to a guilty death, and Macbeth, like a man kept awake so long that he can feel nothing (“I have almost forgot the taste of fears” [5.5.9]), dully regards it as merely a premature instance of the inevitable exit from life’s fitful illusions.

Play/Reality

One reason for Hamlet’s notorious delay is that his act of revenge is defined like all acts by its scene of enactment, and the Danish scene is deeply contaminated. In a Denmark foully “tainted” the hero is charged by the Ghost both to act and in the process to “Taint not thy mind” (1.5.87). How Hamlet is to do this, to venture into a contaminated world and kill a king while remaining uncontaminated himself, he is not informed. Attempting to puzzle it out, he finds temporary recourse in transforming action into an “act”—into madplay, wordplay, and finally a stage play. This kind of acting, which occupies a space somewhere between inaction and action, is at least untainted by guilt. Players, after all, are the perfect criminals, capable night after night of robberies and murders for which they are never indicted.

But of course their victims never bring charges, having no evidence of injury. Hamlet’s major act in this mode is his rewriting and staging of

“The Murder of Gonzago,” the performance of which frights the King with false fire but, alas, draws no blood. It is evident that if Hamlet is to perform his ghostly assignment he must graduate from acting to action, from madman to revenger. And so he does. In fact when the revenge takes place it illustrates this process graphically, issuing as it does from an inner-“play,” the swordplay of Hamlet and Laertes. But let me bate that point for a moment.

Hamlet uses madplay, wordplay, and even stageplay as substitutes for revengeful action, though each is sharply edged and draws some inward blood from his enemies and friends alike. In *Macbeth* there are comparatively few references to play and small stress on theatricality. But let me sketch what there is. The first major reference is Macbeth’s line upon learning that he is thane now of both Glamis and Cawdor:

Two truths are told
As happy prologues to the swelling act
Of the imperial theme. (1.3.127)

One effect of this is to lend an air of inevitability to the notion of drama by associating the Witches’ prophecies with an already-written play scheduled for performance on the stage of Scotland. Phrasing it in this manner, Macbeth attempts to preserve a certain innocence for himself. He who “wouldst not play false, / And yet wouldst wrongly win” (1.5.21), as his wife says, cannot be accused of playing false if he is merely acting his part in this large drama of the times.

In keeping with this, Macbeth can murder Duncan only by writing and acting in his own “play.” Thus in the hallucinated dagger scene we see him transforming himself from an honored subject and host about to retire to bed into an extreme version of the stage villain—“withered murder” striding like Tarquin toward his design—about to do an evil deed upon a stage whose imaginative setting he describes to the audience like a prologue:

Now o’er the one half-world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtained sleep; witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate’s offerings . . . (2.1.50)

Given such a scene an act of horror is not only fitting but virtually inevitable.⁷ Thus in Duncan’s bedchamber Macbeth’s “act” becomes a regicidal deed. Unlike “The Murder of Gonzago,” “The Murder of King Duncan” draws real blood, enough to incarnadine the seas.

Afterwards, when Macbeth exits from the scene he is like an actor who only gradually distinguishes self from role and knows his deed is real: "I am afraid to think what I have done; / Look on it again I dare not." Nor dare he look upon himself: "To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself." Best too that others not know him. And so he adopts the role of affable if somewhat uncommunicative host leading Macduff to Duncan's door, then of stunned hearer of the murderous fact, and finally of vengeful subject unable to restrain "the expedition of [his] violent love" (2.3). But despite his innocent roles the first fiction is indelible. Like Antonio in *The Tempest*, who plays the ducal role of his brother Prospero until in his mind he becomes the Duke (1.2.90 ff.), Macbeth plays "withered murder" in Duncan's chambers and then becomes what he played in all Scotland. But to his unusual credit at some level of consciousness Macbeth the man—he who "wouldst not play false"—knows Macbeth the actor for what he villainously is, and rejects him. By then, however, it is far too late. Life has become a "walking shadow," the transient performance of a "poor player." But this image of theater does not entail a fictionality that erases guilt. Macbeth has bloodied all the stages in Scotland, and will make no easy exit.

Let me return to the issue of play and action. In *Hamlet*, I suggested earlier, wordplay and madplay substitute for and hence defer the revengeful act the hero is commanded to perform; whereas in *Macbeth*, as we have just seen, role-playing enables the Hero to perform an act he cannot manage in his own person. When Hamlet at last does kill Claudius, he seems to have passed from play to reality. But that is not entirely the case, since in *Hamlet* what is most real is, paradoxically, play itself, whereas the reverse is true in *Macbeth*. Let me clarify this by comparing the killing actions with which the two plays end.

The meeting of Macbeth and Macduff climaxes a demystifying process in which the Witches' prophecies of apparently supernatural events—Birnam Wood moving to Dunsinane, a man not born of woman—come true in quite ordinary ways. This stripping of the supernatural to the natural—a moving wood to camouflaged soldiers and an invulnerable Macbeth to mortality—leaves us simply with two armies fighting for Scotland and then with two leaders fighting for their lives. This stress on the natural in Scotland runs parallel to the stress on the realistic in the Globe. We have two levels of action—stage action and *Macbeth*-action—and we are invited to see through the one to the other, to see for instance not two actors swinging property-swords but Macbeth and Macduff dueling to the death.

But consider the swording at the end of *Hamlet*. Again we have two levels of action, on-stage and in-court, and we are asked to transform actors with property-swords into Hamlet and Laertes fencing. "Fencing," however,

not dueling to the death. For fencing converts dueling into play, into sword-
"play," where the stakes are not one's life but Barbary horses on one side and
French rapiers and poinards with their assigns on the other. This complicates
everything—especially because in keeping with the principle of "to be and
not to be" in *Hamlet*, the swordplay is both play (i.e., fencing on Hamlet's
part) and not-play (i.e., murderous attack on Laertes' part). But then again it
is not both play and not-play but all-play—pretense—since Hamlet as fencer
is pretending to duel and Laertes as duelist is pretending to fence, though to
judge from their actions they are both doing the same thing, whatever it is.
Then, with the discovery of the unbated foil, both cease playing and are really
dueling. With this quick passage from play to deadly dueling, the swordplay
in this scene coalesces with the overall metaphoric duel throughout the play
featuring the "mighty opposites" Hamlet and Claudius, between whose "fell
incensed points" so many die (5.2.61). Now death as a scoreable "touch" on
the surface of the body finds its way to more penetrable stuff when Hamlet
cries "The point envenomed too? Then, venom, to thy work!"

From this perspective it seems that in *Hamlet* as in *Macbeth* play con-
ducts the hero to reality; "acting" conduces to murderous action. However,
the paradoxes of the sword-"play" cannot help alerting the audience to the
stageplay in the Globe where two actors are playing two characters who are
also playing in their different and confusing ways. Thus as dueling becomes a
reality in Elsinore, play becomes a reality in the Globe—the outer play that
encloses all inner-play. What seems real in *Hamlet* keeps turning into play by
virtue of Shakespeare's metadramatic paradoxes, whereas what is stage-play
in *Macbeth*—the hero's imaginings, the Witches' prophecies—turns into real-
ity in Scotland. For all its Witches and demonism, *Macbeth* is a positive and
ultimately realistic play, whereas *Hamlet* negates its realities again and again
with a self-frustrating vengeance.

Meaning Without and Within

Action in *Hamlet* is figured as external to the hero, a realm he must gird
himself to enter, but action in *Macbeth* originates within the hero and issues
outward. Perhaps this is because in *Hamlet* the public world is poisoned,
whereas in *Macbeth* the hero's imagination is contaminated. At any rate,
having given a kind of spatial location to action, let us attempt something
similar with meaning.

In a broad linear sense *Hamlet* moves "toward" and *Macbeth* "from"
meaning. Thus Hamlet begins on a note of meaninglessness as he delivers a
soliloquy about "how weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable" are all the uses of the
world, at least to his dejected mind. Whatever illusions of value he still retains
are destroyed by the Ghost's story, and as a result he spends much of the rest

of the play measuring how far into evil and absurdity the world has fallen from what it should have been. Somewhat mysteriously, however, by indirections that take him first to sea and then through the graveyard, he arrives at a state of watchful acquiescence in which he has come to terms with death, defers to the shapings of divinity, and discerns a special providence in the fall of sparrows, not to mention those of Danish princes.

Macbeth's movement "from" meaning is less anfractuou. From a world of just-recovered order and significance in which he has bought "golden opinions from all sorts of people" (1.7.33), he passes by way of murder and tyranny to a point where his own meaningless acts are paralleled by his feeling that all of life is an idiot's tale signifying nothing.

Hamlet's plight is complicated by the fact that he inherits a world already contaminated by murder, incest, and royal lies in which he must somehow act without tainting his mind. Revenge in such circumstances would seem difficult enough. But Hamlet, being Hamlet, will arrange to make it more difficult still. Why settle for a relatively straightforward assignment like killing the King when he can transform it into a cosmic affair? Thus for him, "Kill the King" is readily translated into "The time is out of joint. O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right" (1.5.189). As time's orthopedist in Elsinore, his business, he assumes, is not merely to excise from ailing Denmark its hidden imposthume the King but to diagnose all the symptoms of the pursy times—disease, degeneration, death. He will constitute an investigative committee of one to prescribe for Denmark, meanwhile tabling the motion to kill the King.

Death is Hamlet's most fixed obsession, beginning of course with the death of his father. Death is in abundance at the opening of *Macbeth* too, but it is battlefield death—rebellion in the open field, not a sly poisoning in the garden—and it attends the quelling of disorder, not its crowning. Thus for a brief period after the hurlyburly's done, order reasserts itself, or strives to do so, in the noblesse of a king who, as even Macbeth admits, has been meek, clear, and virtuous in his great office (1.7). Thus if Hamlet inherits contamination, Macbeth seems to introduce it. Rapt by witches and wife, his imagination brings forth its monstrous regicidal issue in Duncan's bedchamber, an act that warps the natural orderings of the world (2.4) and even recreates Scotland herself in its image: "It weeps, it bleeds, and each new day a gash / Is added to her wounds" (4.3). But however widespread the consequences of Macbeth's acts, his special brand of evil is in him before it is in the world. As a result, unlike Hamlet, who must deal with evil in the world as well as in himself, Macbeth must come to terms with himself alone.

This sketchy charting of these movements "toward" and "from" meaning in the two plays situates meaning or its absence primarily in the world

outside the hero, although of course it is he who perceives it as being or not being out there. However if we situate meaning within the hero, by regarding it as awareness, recognition, or the tragic *anagnorisis*, then a different pattern emerges. Meaning in *Hamlet* then seems not merely the ultimate quasi-religious destination of the hero but his constant attendant on the journey. Meaning, that is, is distributed throughout the play in the form of Hamlet's self-searchings and world-probings, and may even be most present when he registers its apparent absence. *Hamlet*, as someone may have mentioned before, is dominated by the consciousness of the Prince.

Macbeth, however, is dominated by the suppression of consciousness in the usurping King. If Macbeth's killing of Duncan creates a world in the image of that act, it creates Macbeth in its image as well. The murderous deed he brings into being brings him into being also, in a form so repellant that he says "To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself" (2.2). The deed is a violation of Macbeth's "conscience," in the old double sense of "consciousness" as well as "knowledge of right and wrong." Thus the extraordinary conscience revealed by his "If it were done" soliloquy must be deliberately secreted even from himself if he is to continue to function. In his encounter with Banquo's ghost his conscience surfaces again, but that, he assumes, is because he is still "but young in deed" (3.4). After his second meeting with the Witches, as noted earlier, he suppresses conscience altogether, closing the gap between the heart's evil impulse and the hand's blind execution (4.1.146). He now seems perfect tyrant, a murderous reflex action.

In *Hamlet* we are kept conscious not so much of what is happening as of what is not happening—the hero's revenge. Hamlet does his share of acting, both theatrical and actual, yet his and the Ghost's repeated insistence that he is not doing the one large thing he was assigned to do negates his smaller deeds. At the same time this palpable stress on nonaction negates Hamlet's identity, since it tells us not what he is but what he is not—a revenger. But that is only one, albeit the most important, of his non-identities. In the soliloquies that should manifest him to us, he says instead all that he is not: the passionate Player who can weep for Hecuba, the dispassionate Horatio who stoically weeps at nothing, the dutiful obedient son of a murdered father, the compliant son and heir of a murderous stepfather, the lover of Ophelia, the bluff and warlike Fortinbras, or the headlong man of honor Laertes. Most of all he is not what he once was, the Danish courtier-prince whom Castiglione might have called the "expectancy and rose of the fair state, / The glass of fashion and the mold of form." Nor on the other hand is he a madman, except perhaps north-northwest. In a world whose operant principle is "seems" Hamlet cannot "be," not at least until he comes to the graveyard where death "is" and men and maids are "not." There, in the

presence of the Great Negative, he can at last affirm his identity: "This is I, / Hamlet, the Dane!"

The action of *Macbeth* is more positive, present, and immediate. The play begins with violence afield and proceeds murderous deed by deed to its bloody end. In keeping with this, its hero is self-constitutive. He shapes his identity in the deeds he performs. Hamlet finds in madplay and wordplay a deflated cleft between action and inaction, a place where he can be, not do. But the question for Macbeth is not "to be or not to be" but "to act or not to act." Given an either/or moral choice—either kill Duncan and risk the life to come or do not kill him and remain innocent—he chooses evil, and becomes evil, and knows what he has done and has become. His act of innocence after the murder, played for himself as well as for the Scots, fools no one for long, least of all himself. Increasingly as his murderous acts multiply he becomes a known and proclaimed quantity. But not self-proclaimed. Hamlet's "This is I" is a public announcement that marks how far he has come from his early "But I have that within which passeth show." Macbeth's "My way of life / Has fallen into the sear, the yellow leaf" is a private admission that marks how far he has come from his early "I have bought golden opinions from all sorts of people." Yet even at this late point Macbeth seeks his identity in deeds. Whereas Hamlet is content to wait in readiness for a revenge that ultimately comes to him and inflicts a murderous identity upon him, Macbeth, though surrounded like a bear at the stake, cries "Come, wrack! / At least we'll die with harness on our back" and plunges forth to discover who he finally is—mortally guilty or proof against the world.

Negation and Interpretation

Hamlet defers the murderous act that Macbeth finds increasingly easy to perform. That, it seems to me, is because Hamlet finds himself in a far more complex world than Macbeth's, a world that demands action of him but at the same time calls action in doubt. The Ghost's command to kill Claudius requires young Hamlet to become old Hamlet, acting for and as his father. At the same time the conventions of mimetic revenge require that he also become Claudius, his new "father" ("Be as ourself in Denmark"), matching poison with poison, damnation with damnation. Hamlet is too much in the sun/son. Like his favorite figure the pun, which is not either "sun" or "son" but both at once, Hamlet occupies a world that simultaneously is and is not. Such a duck-rabbit world does not invite clearcut choices, nor does Hamlet make any. From action he retreats to "acting," from killing the King to playing mad. Even after he proclaims his identity—"This is I, Hamlet, the Dane!"—he does not sally forth to slay the King crying "Revenge is all!" but says rather "The readiness is all," which is a little like saying "The

pre-revenge is all.” His readiness assumes that divine providence will bring his revenge to him or, presumably, if not, not. Hamlet is a poststructuralist with an undecidable text. Neither within nor outside himself can he find grounds on which to choose, and so he falls back on faith and impulse (“And praised be rashness for it . . . / and that should learn us / There’s a divinity that shapes our ends”).

Macbeth on the other hand is something of an existentialist. The Witches may announce that “fair is foul and foul is fair” and issue equivocal prophecies, and Macbeth can murmur that “nothing is but what is not,” but when it is time to choose he and especially his Lady readily transform these both/and’s into unequivocal either/or’s. Instead of Hamlet’s “maybe,” Macbeth first says “no” to a clearly identified evil and then, prompted by his wife and with eyes averted, whispers “yes.” It is a “yes” he pronounces more firmly as he goes on, until he is so habituated to evil that he can let his heart and hand speak for him automatically. Unlike Hamlet, who shies away from choosing until at last death chooses him, Macbeth chooses again and again and pays the price of doing so.

This either/or-ness of Macbeth is consistent with a world whose moral poles are the demonic Witches and the saintly Edward the Confessor. And perhaps Hamlet’s both/and-ness is consistent with a Denmark governed by a conscience-stricken usurper, brooded over by a Ghost from a purgatorial neither/nor, and ruled at large by an inscrutable providence. When polymorphic clouds contain camels, weasels, and whales, and when man himself is simultaneously a paragon of animals and a quintessence of dust, no wonder Hamlet’s Danish text is hard to read. No wonder too that Shakespeare’s text is hard to read, for like Elsinore, where everything only “seems,” Shakespeare’s Globe is a house of mirrors in which every image is captioned “Not this.” As the history of *Hamlet* criticism attests to, undecidability is built into the play.

One reason for this undecidability is Shakespeare’s reliance on negation and metadrama. Negation is perhaps most evident near the end of the Closet Scene when Gertrude asks what she should do and Hamlet prefaces a vividly seamy description of her betraying him to the bloated King in bed with the words “Not this, by no means, that I bid you do.” Negation thus divides words from their meanings, which we are told not to register, leaving us with mere sounds. Or rather we are left in the divide between words and meanings. In this light one form of metadrama—metatheatrical illusion—is a species of negation. As a visual alienation device, it says “Not this, by no means, that you seem to see.” It negates the apparent presence of Ophelia, Hamlet, and Elsinore and leaves us with a boy actor, Richard Burbage, and the stage of the Globe. Or rather, as with verbal negation, it leaves us in the divide between the two. For having imagined Hamlet’s sordid scene of Gertrude

and Claudius between incestuous sheets, we cannot unimagine it at the command even of Hamlet's double negative—any more than we can unimagine Hamlet himself at Shakespeare's metatheatrical suggestion. In the theater of imagination to see a unicorn is far easier than to unsee one.

In *Macbeth* the speech that is comparable to Hamlet's double negation occurs when Malcolm tests the potential spy Macduff in Act 4. Here Malcolm out-Macbeths Macbeth in evils, all self-attributed, in order to discern evil in Macduff. There is no bottom to his voluptuousness, no limit to his avarice, no end to his malice. But when Macduff denounces him, Malcolm rejoices and then "unspeaks [his] own detraction," abjuring "the taints and blames [he] laid upon [himself]." In him as in Macduff, evil is mere illusion. The negative is employed here not to introduce unforgettable images to the mind but to erase the obviously false. This evil is palpably alien to what we already know of the two men, and hence easily negated, just as evil in England is easily purified by the touch of the sainted Edward. By contrast, the evil in Scotland is as indelible as the blood on Lady Macbeth's hand; it cannot be negated, only eradicated.

In *Macbeth*, then, negation is genuinely negative. It erases its subject instead of foregrounding it while pretending to erase it as in *Hamlet*. Perhaps that is why negation and metadrama are so much rarer in *Macbeth* than in *Hamlet*, and consequently why it has not presented us with the interpretive problems of the earlier play. Its dramatic mode is positive, a sweeping away of what-is-not in favor of getting to what-is. When Hamlet advises Gertrude *not to do* an evil he then graphically describes, we see that in his world evil is positive, and good is but its pale and bodiless negation. In such times good itself is more illusion than substance—"Assume a virtue, if you have it not"—at best merely habit, custom, the apparel of abstention worn until it seems natural, for "that monster custom"

who all sense doth eat,
Of habits devil, is angel yet in this,
That to the use of actions fair and good
He likewise gives a frock or livery
That aptly is put on." (3.4)

Macbeth reverses this by taking the more orthodox view that evil is the negation of good. Thus in Macbeth's "If it were done" soliloquy good is powerfully imaged as angels trumpeting, the babe pity striding the blast, and cherubim horsed, whereas the evil murder is reduced to an unspecified "it," a nameless deed, clearly a "not good." And to such a deed Macbeth says "No" until Lady Macbeth supplants his images of good with others

associated with sexual potency and manhood and babes not striding blasts but with brains dashed out. And to these he says “Yes.” And as he proceeds “that monster custom,” whom Hamlet invokes to guide Gertrude into the fashion of virtue, gradually “all sense doth eat” in Macbeth until he becomes habituated to murder, though the “frock and livery” he has put on, his “title / Hangs loose about him, like a giant’s robe / Upon a dwarfish thief” (5.2).

Time and Dramatic Form

As a final point of comparison let me turn now to the issue of time and form. As I mentioned earlier *Hamlet* has a kind of poststructuralist character inasmuch as its hero confronts a deviously undecidable world in which every signifier promises a signified that on inspection turns out to be merely another signifier. His frustrating experience has served as a model for Shakespeare’s audiences, struggling as they have over the centuries with his deviously undecidable play. Again, *Hamlet* is poststructuralist, or quasi-Derridean, in its concern for the past, for there is a sense in which Derrida’s account of linguistic distinctions is retentive or past-oriented. Concepts like the trace, the supplement, and the remainder presuppose a past that the trace traces, the supplement supplements, and the remainder carries over.⁸ From this perspective we can hardly help thinking of the Ghost as a “trace” of Hamlet’s father which generates the action of the play by commanding Hamlet—already a genetic trace of his father—to “Remember [him]” by performing an act of revenge that traces Claudius’s original murder. Thus Hamlet spends much of his time remembering the past, until near the end when he assumes a readiness that implies anticipation of the future.

Inversely, Macbeth spends much of his time anticipating the future, until near the end when as the failures of the past begin to invade the present he becomes indifferent not merely to the future but to time itself. If we had to call on a philosopher to help us interpret *Macbeth* it might well be Nietzsche, whose theory of signs is protentive or future-oriented in terms of the Will-to-Power. Or instead of Derrida’s trace we could rely on his non-concept of “*différance*,” not in its synchronic sense of “differing” but in its diachronic sense of “deferring.” Instead of a tracelike Ghost of his father crying “Remember me!” Macbeth encounters three witches intoning prophecies about “hereafter.” As these prophecies strike Macbeth’s ear they add to Derrida’s French term “*différance*,” with its pun on “differ/defer,” the meaning of the English “deference.” They not only emphasize how in the normal course of things the gratification of desire must be postponed—though Macbeth’s will-to-power insists that it be now—but also how in this case the present, in its poverty, should humbly defer to a richer future as the bringer of gratification.⁹

To move these issues from Hamlet and Macbeth to *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, we would expect to find that the experiences of the two heroes somehow reflect the dramatic form in which their experience is depicted. Is the form of *Hamlet* for instance as disregarding of the future as Hamlet himself? Of course we know from the Ghost's command that we are witnessing a revenge tragedy and therefore that a certain future, a climactic act of revenge, is somewhere in the offing. But this future is vague to begin with, and as the play proceeds, or rather does not proceed, we begin to wonder with the Ghost and Hamlet himself if the revenge will in fact be consummated. When the revenge does take place, it does not issue from a plot devised by Hamlet but comes by accident and improvisation. It is less that Hamlet's revengeful aim has found its target than that Claudius's plot has gone awry. "Indiscretion," Hamlet says, "sometimes serves us well / When our deep plots do pall" (5.2.8).

This palling of plots within *Hamlet* does not speak auspiciously for the plot of *Hamlet* itself. Nor does Horatio when he characterizes the play in terms of less than Aristotelean endearment:

So shall you hear
Of carnal, bloody, and unnatural acts,
Of accidental judgments, casual slaughters,
Of deaths put on by cunning and forced cause,
And, in the upshot, purposes mistook
Fallen on the inventors' heads.

All plots seem to fail in *Hamlet*, even Shakespeare's. Why should that be? Perhaps for the same reason the unity of time "fails" in the play: because Shakespeare is not interested in it. Creating a lockstep causal progression, a functionally efficient teleology, a clean neoclassic act of murder, is simply not his intent. Rather he is preoccupied with what we might call the retentive mode, with exploring like Hamlet the magnitude of the dramatic moment, the richness of its being and not-being, and the range of its potentialities. This magnification of the moment implies a resistance to time's passage, an unwillingness to commit oneself to that functional aspect of the moment that will thrust it into the future. We see this macrocosmically in Hamlet's truancy from his revenge and microcosmically in his reluctance verbally to abandon a thought, as in his "O that this too too sullied flesh would melt, / Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!" or in his habitual wordplay, which dilates upon meaning at the expense of functional progression. In ways like these, with each dramatic moment lingering out its being as long as possible, the present becomes most fully present as an end in itself, not a means to the future.

Not so in *Macbeth*, which exploits the protentive mode. Here the presence of prophecy announces the presence of pre-plotted action. The future is made explicit so that the audience is not obliged as in *Hamlet* to trail the hero as he wanders toward a terminal act but proceeds by careful directions toward Macbeth's kingship, Banquo's line of kings (Jacobean audiences knew precisely how and when *that* prophecy is fulfilled!), the militant movement of Birnam Wood, and Macbeth's death from a man unnaturally born. All is well conducted. The prophecy about Macbeth's kingship enkindles his ambition and generates the regicidal action that dominates Acts 1 and 2. The prophecy about Banquo's royal offspring enkindles Macbeth's fears and generates the second murder that is featured in Act 3. Then in Act 4 an insecure Macbeth revisits the Witches and hears the prophecies that will govern the remaining action of the play.

Instead of lingering out and magnifying a valued present occasion, the Witches' prophecies and Macbeth's proleptic imaginings assume the poverty of the present and the comparative richness of the future to which it defers. The present is by no means an end in itself but a launching point for the future. Macbeth's asides and soliloquies are not action-quelling explorations of the self, not instances of "thinking too precisely on the event," but incitements to dangerous deeds. The dagger he hallucinates brings a real dagger to his hand, whereas the importuning Ghost—coined, Gertrude claims, by Hamlet's distempered mind—brings only another self-recriminating soliloquy to his lips a few scenes later (4.4). When Macbeth says "Now o'er the one half-world / Nature seems dead" he is not memorializing the moment but imaginatively transforming it into a scene of future killing.

In *Hamlet* "presence," which takes the form of a maximal experiencing of both what is and what is not, is in the present, or at least it is sought for there by both Shakespeare and Hamlet as each seeks to exhaust the verbal, theatrical, and imaginative possibilities of the moment. This maximizing of the present occasion implies that Shakespeare and his hero repeatedly attempt to spatialize time by retarding the flow of events. But of course such attempts are futile, belying as they do the nature of drama as a temporal performance. Resist it as they will, Hamlet's dilatory madplay and wordplay and Shakespeare's stageplay must all continue on if they are ever to end. Time, death, and the Gravemaker are in readiness for their roles. So at last is *Hamlet*.

On the other hand "presence" in *Macbeth*, which takes the illusory form of satisfied desire, lies vaguely in the future. For Macbeth himself presence is the satisfaction of ambitious yearnings; for the audience it is the satisfaction of formal expectations. Shakespeare is kinder to his audience in this respect than he is to his hero, since Macbeth's desire is never satisfied. No sooner is he on the throne than he grows restless, for "To be thus is nothing, / But to

be safely thus" (3.1.47). So Banquo must die, else he will be "father to a line of kings" (3.1.59). And so Banquo dies. But Fleance escapes, and Macbeth, who "had else been perfect" (3.4.21), suffers his "fit" again. Ultimately Macbeth achieves a state of indifference in which desire has subsided not from satisfaction but from enervation. Presence arrives in abundance to a Macbeth replete but not fulfilled:

I have supped full with horrors;
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,
Cannot once start me. (5.5.13)

For the audience, however, the plot of the play guarantees more authentic satisfactions as cause leads to effect, and motive issues in action. The prophecies, which are merely the most obvious form of dramatic anticipation, are structural promises given his audience by the playwright, and they are all kept. Macbeth's kingship, the march of Birnam Wood to Dunsinane, the killing of Macbeth by one "not of woman born"—these are fully meaningful not in themselves but as "that which was predicted." Thus the play is not only pro- tentive but retentive; it remembers its past and the obligations incurred there, and in fulfilling those obligations it creates dramatic form. This making and keeping of promises by the playwright imparts order to theatrical time, enabling the play to transcend Macbeth's final conception of life as an entropic drama rendered absurd by the petty pace of indistinguishable tomorrows. More than that, it imparts meaning. For Macbeth this drama of life signifies "nothing." Literally, it seems, it has no signified. This is in keeping with the fact that Macbeth's pursuit of desire is like the postmodern view of the signifier's pursuit of the signified, which on attainment turns into merely another signifier, another meaningless "tomorrow." But that is not the experience of the audience, which as I have said finds gratification in Shakespeare's conversion of ambitious desire on Macbeth's part into prophetic form in *Macbeth*, so that the climax of the play is not undifferentiated happenings but predicted events whose verbal mysteriousness becomes comprehensible in action. The endless current of signification is at least momentarily, meaningfully arrested in time by Shakespeare's fulfilling form.

NOTES

1. For a fuller discussion of many of the following comments about *Hamlet*, see my *To Be and Not To Be: Negation and Metadrama in Hamlet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).

2. For an insightful discussion of language in *Macbeth*, see Lawrence Danson, *Tragic Alphabet: Shakespeare's Drama of Language* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), pp. 122–41.

3. René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (1972; reprint ed., Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

4. It may be significant, then, that the most frequent term for action in *Hamlet* is “act,” whereas in *Macbeth* it is “do.” “Act” of course has histrionic overtones, and thus helps underscore the oft-noted theatricality of *Hamlet* as it re-enacts the source play it re-acts to. *Macbeth*’s “do-done-deed,” on the other hand, refers not to acting, to doing a part, but to executing and concluding. Though theatrical enough in itself, *Macbeth* addresses itself to historical instead of histrionic accomplishments.

A comparison of the incidence of the key actional words in the two plays is interesting, although a mere word-count is misleading since *Hamlet* is almost twice as long as *Macbeth* (29,551 words versus 16,436; 1,115 speeches versus 647). That means for instance that although “do” appears eighteen times in *Hamlet* and only fourteen times in *Macbeth*, it occurs in only 1.6 percent of the speeches in the longer play as compared to 2.2 percent in the shorter one. Statistics levels all differences and emphases, of course, but “act” and “action” usually carry histrionic overtones in Shakespeare—they certainly do in these two plays—so that their greater frequency in *Hamlet* does, it seems to me, reinforce tale obviously greater theatricality of that play. Anyhow, if only to create an air of hard science and deep calculation, here are some comparisons:

	<i>Hamlet</i>	<i>Macbeth</i>
do:	18	14
done:	4	22
deed:	11	18
act:	17	7
action:	11	2

5. For a perceptive discussion of the “art of preparation” in *Macbeth* see Wolfgang Clemen, *Shakespeare’s Dramatic Art: Collected Essays* (London: Methuen and Co., 1972), especially pp. 76–86.

6. Marjorie Garber discusses “dream and conscience” in the two plays in *Dream in Shakespeare: From Metaphor to Metamorphosis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), especially pp. 88–117.

7. This is a classic example of Kenneth Burke’s “scene-act ratio,” whereby the real or imagined environment contains or even creates acts that reflect its character; see *A Grammar of Motives and a Rhetoric of Motives* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1962), pp. 3–7. With reference to *Macbeth* at this moment, see Arnold Stein’s excellent analysis of “Macbeth and Word-Magic,” *Sewanee Review*, 59 (Spring 1951), pp. 271–84.

8. Derrida underscores this retentional aspect when he says “The instituted trace cannot be thought without thinking the retention of difference within a structure of reference” (*Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975], p. 51). In his *Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) T. K. Seung argues that Derrida’s account of linguistic differences is essentially conservative by virtue of being retentional and referential (pp. 252–54), though perhaps he takes too little account of the futuristic element of “deferring” in Derrida’s “différance.”

9. I am talking here about the temporal “deference” involved in “deferral,” but Murray Krieger, I should note, sees “deference” playing an unacknowledged role in Derrida’s concept of the trace, since the trace, instead of asserting a positive identity of its own, modestly defers to those absent traces which constitute it (as their trace). However, Krieger adds, Derrida’s own term “*différance*” belies its purported character as a trace by “behaving most undeferentially,” by parading its “capacity to contain its divergent meanings” very much as poetic signs do (*Theory of Criticism* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976], p. 232).

JANET ADELMAN

*“Born of Woman”:
Fantasies of Maternal Power in Macbeth*

In the last moments of any production of *Macbeth*, as Macbeth feels himself increasingly hemmed in by enemies, the stage will resonate hauntingly with variants of his repeated question, “What’s he / That was not born of woman?” (5.7.2–3; for variants, see 5.3.4, 6; 5.7.11, 13; 5.8.13, 31).¹ Repeated seven times, Macbeth’s allusion to the witches’ prophecy—“none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (4.1.80–81)—becomes virtually a talisman to ward off danger; even after he has begun to doubt the equivocation of the fiend (5.5.43), mere repetition of the phrase seems to Macbeth to guarantee his invulnerability. I want in this essay to explore the power of these resonances, particularly to explore how Macbeth’s assurance seems to turn itself inside out, becoming dependent not on the fact that all men are, after all, born of woman but on the fantasy of escape from this universal condition. The duplicity of Macbeth’s repeated question—its capacity to mean both itself and its opposite—carries such weight at the end of the play, I think, because the whole of the play represents in very powerful form both the fantasy of a virtually absolute and destructive maternal power and the fantasy of absolute escape from this power; I shall argue in fact that the peculiar texture of the end of the play is generated partly by the tension between these two fantasies.

From *Cannibals, Witches, and Divorce: Estranging the Renaissance*, edited by Marjorie Garber, pp. 90–121. Copyright © 1987 by the English Institute.

Maternal power in *Macbeth* is not embodied in the figure of a particular mother (as it is, for example, in *Coriolanus*); it is instead diffused throughout the play, evoked primarily by the figures of the witches and Lady Macbeth. Largely through Macbeth's relationship to them, the play becomes (like *Coriolanus*) a representation of primitive fears about male identity and autonomy itself,² about those looming female presences who threaten to control one's actions and one's mind, to constitute one's very self, even at a distance. When Macbeth's first words echo those we have already heard the witches speak—"So fair and foul a day I have not seen" (1.3.38); "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.11)—we are in a realm that questions the very possibility of autonomous identity. The play will finally reimagine autonomous male identity, but only through the ruthless excision of all female presence, its own peculiar satisfaction of the witches' prophecy.

* * *

In 1600, after the Earl of Gowrie's failed attempt to kill James VI, one James Weimis of Bogy, testifying about the earl's recourse to necromancy, reported that the earl thought it "possible that the seed of man and woman might be brought to perfection otherwise then by the *matrix* of the woman."³ Whether or not Shakespeare deliberately recalled Gowrie in his portrayal of the murderer of James's ancestor,⁴ the connection is haunting: the account of the conspiracy hints that, for Gowrie at least, recourse to necromancy seemed to promise at once invulnerability and escape from the maternal matrix.⁵ The fantasy of such escape in fact haunts Shakespeare's plays. A few years after *Macbeth*, Posthumus will make the fantasy explicit: attributing all ills in man to the "woman's part," he will ask, "Is there no way for men to be, but women / Must be half-workers?" (*Cymbeline*, 2.5.1–2).⁶ The strikingly motherless world of *The Tempest* and its potent image of absolute male control answers Posthumus' questions affirmatively: there at least, on that bare island, mothers and witches are banished and creation belongs to the male alone.

Even in one of Shakespeare's earliest plays, male autonomy is ambivalently portrayed as the capacity to escape the maternal matrix that has misshaped the infant man.⁷ The man who will become Richard III emerges strikingly as a character for the first time as he watches his brother Edward's sexual success with the Lady Grey. After wishing syphilis on him so that he will have no issue (a concern that anticipates Macbeth's), Richard constructs his own desire for the crown specifically as compensation for his failure at the sexual game. Unable to "make [his] heaven in a lady's lap," he will "make [his] heaven to dream upon the crown" (*3 Henry VI*, 3.2.148, 169). But his failure to make his

heaven in a lady's lap is itself understood as the consequence of his subjection to another lady's lap, to the misshaping power of his mother's womb:

Why, love forswore me in my Mother's womb;
 And, for I should not deal in her soft laws,
 She did corrupt frail nature with some bribe
 To shrink mine arm up like a withered shrub;
 To make an envious mountain on my back.
 [3.2.153–57]

Richard blames his deformity on a triad of female powers: Mother, Love, and Nature all fuse, conspiring to deform him as he is being formed in his mother's womb. Given this image of female power, it is no wonder that he turns to the compensatory heaven of the crown. But the crown turns out to be an unstable compensation. Even as he shifts from the image of the misshaping womb to the image of the crown, the terrifying enclosure of the womb recurs, shaping his attempt to imagine the very political project that should free him from dependence on ladies' laps:

I'll make my heaven to dream upon the crown
 And, whiles I live, t'account this world but hell
 Until my misshaped trunk that bears this head
 Be round impalèd with a glorious crown.
 And yet I know not how to get the crown,
 For many lives stand between me and home;
 And I—like one lost in a thorny wood,
 That rents the thorns and is rent with the thorns,
 Seeking a way and straying from the way,
 Not knowing how to find the open air
 But toiling desperately to find it out—
 Torment myself to catch the English crown;
 And from that torment I will free myself
 Or hew my way out with a bloody axe.
 [3.2.168–81]

The crown for him is "home," the safe haven. But through the shifting meaning of "impalèd," the crown as safe haven is itself transformed into the dangerous enclosure: the stakes that enclose him protectively turn into the thorns that threaten to impale him.⁸ Strikingly, it is not his head but the trunk that bears his head that is so impaled by crown and thorns: the crown compensatory for ladies' laps fuses with the image of the dangerous womb

in an imagistic nightmare in which the lap/womb/home/crown become the thorny wood from which he desperately seeks escape into the open air. Through this imagistic transformation, these lines take on the configuration of a birth fantasy, or more precisely a fantasy of impeded birth, a birth that the man-child himself must manage by hewing his way out with a bloody axe.⁹ Escape from the dangerous female is here achieved by recourse to the exaggeratedly masculine bloody axe. This, I will argue, is precisely the psychological configuration of *Macbeth*, where dangerous female presences like Love, Nature, Mother are given embodiment in Lady Macbeth and the witches, and where Macbeth wields the bloody axe in an attempt to escape their dominion over him.

* * *

At first glance, Macbeth seems to wield the bloody axe to comply with, not to escape, the dominion of women. The play constructs Macbeth as terrifyingly pawn to female figures. Whether or not he is rapt by the witches' prophecies because the horrid image of Duncan's murder has already occurred to him, their role as gleeful prophets constructs Macbeth's actions in part as the enactments of their will. And he is impelled toward murder by Lady Macbeth's equation of masculinity and murder: in his case, the bloody axe seems not an escape route but the tool of a man driven to enact the ferociously masculine strivings of his wife.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the weight given the image of the man not born of woman at the end suggests that the underlying fantasy is the same as in Richard's defensive construction of his masculinity: even while enacting the wills of women, Macbeth's bloody masculinity enables an escape from them in fantasy—an escape that the play itself embodies in dramatic form at the end. I will discuss first the unleashing of female power and Macbeth's compliance with that power, and then the fantasy of escape.

In the figures of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, and the witches, the play gives us images of a masculinity and a femininity that are terribly disturbed; this disturbance seems to me both the cause and the consequence of the murder of Duncan. In *Hamlet*, Shakespeare had reconstructed the Fall as the death of the ideal father; here, he constructs a revised version in which the Fall is the death of the ideally androgynous parent. For Duncan combines in himself the attributes of both father and mother: he is the center of authority, the source of lineage and honor, the giver of name and gift; but he is also the source of all nurturance, planting the children to his throne and making them grow. He is the father as androgynous parent from whom, singly, all good can be imagined to flow, the source of a benign and empowering nurturance the

opposite of that imaged in the witches' poisonous cauldron and Lady Macbeth's gall-filled breasts. Such a father does away with any need for a mother: he is the image of both parents in one, threatening aspects of each controlled by the presence of the other.¹¹ When he is gone, "The wine of life is drawn, and the mere less / Is left this vault to brag of" (2.3.93–94): nurturance itself is spoiled, as all the play's imagery of poisoned chalices and interrupted feasts implies. In his absence male and female break apart, the female becoming merely helpless or merely poisonous and the male merely bloodthirsty; the harmonious relation of the genders imaged in Duncan fails.

In *Hamlet*, the absence of the ideal protecting father brings the son face to face with maternal power. The absence of Duncan similarly unleashes the power of the play's malevolent mothers. But this father-king seems strikingly absent even before his murder. Heavily idealized, he is nonetheless largely ineffectual: even while he is alive, he is unable to hold his kingdom together, reliant on a series of bloody men to suppress an increasingly successful series of rebellions.¹² The witches are already abroad in his realm; they in fact constitute our introduction to that realm. Duncan, not Macbeth, is the first person to echo them ("When the battle's lost and won" [1.1.4]; "What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won" [1.2.69]). The witches' sexual ambiguity terrifies: Banquo says of them, "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (1.3.45–47). Is their androgyny the shadow-side of the King's, enabled perhaps by his failure to maintain a protective masculine authority? Is their strength a consequence of his weakness? (This is the configuration of *Cymbeline*, where the power of the witch-queen-stepmother is so dependent on the failure of Cymbeline's masculine authority that she obligingly dies when that authority returns to him.) Banquo's question to the witches may ask us to hear a counterquestion about Duncan, who should be man. For Duncan's androgyny is the object of enormous ambivalence: idealized for his nurturing paternity, he is nonetheless killed for his womanish softness, his childish trust, his inability to read men's minds in their faces, his reliance on the fighting of sons who can rebel against him. Macbeth's description of the dead Duncan—"his silver skin lac'd with his golden blood" (2.3.110)—makes him into a virtual icon of kingly worth; but other images surrounding his death make him into an emblem not of masculine authority, but of female vulnerability. As he moves toward the murder, Macbeth first imagines himself the allegorical figure of murder, as though to absolve himself of the responsibility of choice. But the figure of murder then fuses with that of Tarquin:

wither'd Murther,
 . . . thus with his stealthy pace,

With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
 Moves like a ghost.
 [2.1.52–56]

These lines figure the murder as a display of male sexual aggression against a passive female victim: murder here becomes rape; Macbeth's victim becomes not the powerful male figure of the king, but the helpless Lucrece.¹³ Hardened by Lady Macbeth to regard maleness and violence as equivalent, that is, Macbeth responds to Duncan's idealized milky gentleness as though it were evidence of his femaleness. The horror of this gender transformation, as well as the horror of the murder, is implicit in Macduff's identification of the king's body as a new Gorgon ("Approach the chamber, and destroy your sight / With a new Gorgon" [2.3.70–71]). The power of this image lies partly in its suggestion that Duncan's bloodied body, with its multiple wounds, has been revealed as female and hence blinding to his sons: as if the threat all along was that Duncan would be revealed as female and that this revelation would rob his sons of his masculine protection and hence of their own masculinity.¹⁴

In *King Lear*, the abdication of protective paternal power seems to release the destructive power of a female chaos imaged not only in Goneril and Regan, but also in the storm on the heath. Macbeth virtually alludes to Lear's storm as he approaches the witches in act 4, conjuring them to answer though they "untie the winds, and let them fight / Against the Churches," though the "waves / Confound and swallow navigation up," though "the treasure / Of Nature's germens tumble all together / Even till destruction sicken" (4.1.52–60; see *King Lear*, 3.2.1–9). The witches merely implicit on Lear's heath have become in *Macbeth* embodied agents of storm and disorder,¹⁵ and they are there from the start. Their presence suggests that the absence of the father that unleashes female chaos (as in *Lear*) has already happened at the beginning of *Macbeth*; that absence is merely made literal in Macbeth's murder of Duncan at the instigation of female forces. For this father-king cannot protect his sons from powerful mothers, and it is the son's—and the play's—revenge to kill him, or, more precisely, to kill him first and love him after, paying him back for his excessively "womanish" trust and then memorializing him as the ideal androgynous parent.¹⁶ The reconstitution of manhood becomes a central problem of the play in part, I think, because the vision of manhood embodied in Duncan has already failed at the play's beginning.

The witches constitute our introduction to the realm of maternal malevolence unleashed by the loss of paternal protection; as soon as Macbeth meets them, he becomes (in Hecate's probably non-Shakespearean words) their "wayward son" (3.5.11). This maternal malevolence is given its most horrifying

expression in Shakespeare in the image through which Lady Macbeth secures her control over Macbeth:

I have given suck, and know
 How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
 I would, while it was smiling in my face,
 Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
 And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn
 As you have done to this.
 [1.7.54–59]

This image of murderously disrupted nurturance is the psychic equivalence of the witches' poisonous cauldron; both function to subject Macbeth's will to female forces.¹⁷ For the play strikingly constructs the fantasy of subjection to maternal malevolence in two parts, in the witches and in Lady Macbeth, and then persistently identifies the two parts as one. Through this identification, Shakespeare in effect locates the source of his culture's fear of witchcraft in individual human history, in the infant's long dependence on female figures felt as all-powerful: what the witches suggest about the vulnerability of men to female power on the cosmic plane, Lady Macbeth doubles on the psychological plane.

Lady Macbeth's power as a female temptress allies her in a general way with the witches as soon as we see her. The specifics of that implied alliance begin to emerge as she attempts to harden herself in preparation for hardening her husband: the disturbance of gender that Banquo registers when he first meets the witches is played out in psychological terms in Lady Macbeth's attempt to unsex herself. Calling on spirits ambiguously allied with the witches themselves, she phrases this unsexing as the undoing of her own bodily maternal function:

Come, you Spirits
 That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
 And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
 Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood,
 Stop up th'access and passage to remorse;
 That no compunctious visitings of Nature
 Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
 Th'effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
 And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers.
 [1.5.40–48]

In the play's context of unnatural births, the thickening of the blood and the stopping up of access and passage to remorse begin to sound like attempts to undo reproductive functioning and perhaps to stop the menstrual blood that is the sign of its potential.¹⁸ The metaphors in which Lady Macbeth frames the stopping up of remorse, that is, suggest that she imagines an attack on the reproductive passages of her own body, on what makes her specifically female. And as she invites the spirits to her breasts, she reiterates the centrality of the attack specifically on maternal function: needing to undo the "milk of human kindness" (1.5.18) in Macbeth, she imagines an attack on her own literal milk, its transformation into gall. This imagery locates the horror of the scene in Lady Macbeth's unnatural abrogation of her maternal function. But latent within this image of unsexing is the horror of the maternal function itself. Most modern editors follow Johnson in glossing "take my milk for gall" as "take my milk in exchange for gall," imagining in effect that the spirits empty out the natural maternal fluid and replace it with the unnatural and poisonous one.¹⁹ But perhaps Lady Macbeth is asking the spirits to take her milk *as* gall, to nurse from her breast and find in her milk their sustaining poison. Here the milk itself is the gall; no transformation is necessary. In these lines Lady Macbeth focuses the culture's fear of maternal nursery—a fear reflected, for example, in the common worries about the various ills (including female blood itself) that could be transmitted through nursing and in the sometime identification of colostrum as witch's milk.²⁰ Insofar as her milk itself nurtures the evil spirits, Lady Macbeth localizes the image of maternal danger, inviting the identification of her maternal function itself with that of the witch. For she here invites precisely that nursing of devils so central to the current understanding of witchcraft that the presence of supernumerary teats alone was often taken as sufficient evidence that one was a witch.²¹ Lady Macbeth and the witches fuse at this moment, and they fuse through the image of perverse nursery.

It is characteristic of the play's division of labor between Lady Macbeth and the witches that she, rather than they, is given the imagery of perverse nursery traditionally attributed to the witches. The often noted alliance between Lady Macbeth and the witches constructs malignant female power both in the cosmos and in the family; it in effect adds the whole weight of the spiritual order to the condemnation of Lady Macbeth's insurrection.²² But despite the superior cosmic status of the witches, Lady Macbeth seems to me finally the more frightening figure. For Shakespeare's witches are an odd mixture of the terrifying and the near comic. Even without consideration of the Hecate scene (3.5) with its distinct lightening of tone and its incipient comedy of discord among the witches, we may begin to feel a shift toward the comic in the presentation of the witches: the specificity and predictability of

the ingredients in their dire recipe pass over toward grotesque comedy even while they create a (partly pleasurable) shiver of horror.²³ There is a distinct weakening of their power after their first appearances: only halfway through the play, in 4.1, do we hear that they themselves have masters (4.1.63). The more Macbeth claims for them, the less their actual power seems: by the time Macbeth evokes the cosmic damage they can wreak (4.1.50–60), we have already felt the presence of such damage, and felt it moreover not as issuing from the witches but as a divinely sanctioned nature’s expressions of outrage at the disruption of patriarchal order. The witches’ displays of thunder and lightning, like their apparitions, are mere theatrics compared to what we have already heard; and the serious disruptions of natural order—the storm that toppled the chimneys and made the earth shake (2.3.53–60), the unnatural darkness in day (2.4.5–10), the cannibalism of Duncan’s horses (2.4.14–18)—seem the horrifying but reassuringly familiar signs of God’s displeasure, firmly under His—not their—control. Partly because their power is thus circumscribed, nothing the witches say or do conveys the presence of awesome and unexplained malevolence in the way that Lear’s storm does. Even the process of dramatic representation itself may diminish their power: embodied, perhaps, they lack full power to terrify: “Present fears”—even of witches—“are less than horrible imaginings” (1.3.137–38). They tend thus to become as much containers for as expressions of nightmare; to a certain extent, they help to exorcise the terror of female malevolence by localizing it.

The witches may of course have lost some of their power to terrify through the general decline in witchcraft belief. Nonetheless, even when that belief was in full force, these witches would have been less frightening than their Continental sisters, their crimes less sensational. For despite their numinous and infinitely suggestive indefinability,²⁴ insofar as they are witches, they are distinctly English witches; and most commentators on English witchcraft note how tame an affair it was in comparison with witchcraft belief on the Continent.²⁵ The most sensational staples of Continental belief from the *Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) on—the ritual murder and eating of infants, the attacks specifically on the male genitals, the perverse sexual relationship with demons—are missing or greatly muted in English witchcraft belief, replaced largely by a simpler concern with retaliatory wrongdoing of exactly the order Shakespeare points to when one of his witches announces her retaliation for the sailor’s wife’s refusal to share her chestnuts.²⁶ We may hear an echo of some of the Continental beliefs in the hint of their quasi-sexual attack on the sailor with the uncooperative wife (the witches promise to “do and do and do,” leaving him drained “dry as hay”) and in the infanticidal contents of the cauldron, especially the “finger of birth-strangled babe” and the blood of the sow “that hath eaten / Her nine farrow.” The cannibalism that is a staple of Continental belief may be implicit

in the contents of that grim cauldron; and the various eyes, toes, tongues, legs, teeth, livers, and noses (indiscriminately human and animal) may evoke primitive fears of dismemberment close to the center of witchcraft belief. But these terrors remain largely implicit. For Shakespeare's witches are both smaller and greater than their Continental sisters: on the one hand, more the representation of English homebodies with relatively small concerns; on the other, more the incarnation of literary or mythic fates or sybils, given the power not only to predict but to enforce the future. But the staples of Continental witchcraft belief are not altogether missing from the play: for the most part, they are transferred away from the witches and recur as the psychological issues evoked by Lady Macbeth in her relation to Macbeth. She becomes the inheritor of the realm of primitive relational and bodily disturbance: of infantile vulnerability to maternal power, of dismemberment and its developmentally later equivalent, castration. Lady Macbeth brings the witches' power home: they get the cosmic apparatus, she gets the psychic force. That Lady Macbeth is the more frightening figure—and was so, I suspect, even before belief in witchcraft had declined—suggests the firmly domestic and psychological basis of Shakespeare's imagination.²⁷

The fears of female coercion, female definition of the male, that are initially located cosmically in the witches thus find their ultimate locus in the figure of Lady Macbeth, whose attack on Macbeth's virility is the source of her strength over him and who acquires that strength, I shall argue, partly because she can make him imagine himself as an infant vulnerable to her. In the figure of Lady Macbeth, that is, Shakespeare rephrases the power of the witches as the wife/mother's power to poison human relatedness at its source; in her, their power of cosmic coercion is rewritten as the power of the mother to misshape or destroy the child. The attack on infants and on the genitals characteristic of Continental witchcraft belief is thus in her returned to its psychological source: in the play these beliefs are localized not in the witches but in the great central scene in which Lady Macbeth persuades Macbeth to the murder of Duncan. In this scene, Lady Macbeth notoriously makes the murder of Duncan the test of Macbeth's virility; if he cannot perform the murder, he is in effect reduced to the helplessness of an infant subject to her rage. She begins by attacking his manhood, making her love for him contingent on the murder that she identifies as equivalent to his male potency: "From this time / Such I account thy love" (1.7.38–39); "When you durst do it, then you were a man" (1.7.49). Insofar as his drunk hope is now "green and pale" (1.7.37), he is identified as emasculated, exhibiting the symptoms not only of hangover, but also of the green-sickness, the typical disease of timid young virgin women. Lady Macbeth's argument is, in effect, that any signs of the "milk of human kindness" (1.5.17) mark him as more womanly than she; she proceeds to enforce his masculinity by demonstrating her willingness to

dry up that milk in herself, specifically by destroying her nursing infant in fantasy: “I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums, / And dash’d the brains out” (1.7.56–58). That this image has no place in the plot, where the Macbeths are strikingly childless, gives some indication of the inner necessity through which it appears. For Lady Macbeth expresses here not only the hardness she imagines to be male, not only her willingness to unmake the most essential maternal relationship; she expresses also a deep fantasy of Macbeth’s utter vulnerability to her. As she progresses from questioning Macbeth’s masculinity to imagining herself dashing out the brains of her infant son,²⁸ she articulates a fantasy in which to be less than a man is to become interchangeably a woman or a baby,²⁹ terribly subject to the wife/mother’s destructive rage.

By evoking this vulnerability, Lady Macbeth acquires a power over Macbeth more absolute than any the witches can achieve. The play’s central fantasy of escape from woman seems to me to unfold from this moment; we can see its beginnings in Macbeth’s response to Lady Macbeth’s evocation of absolute maternal power. Macbeth first responds by questioning the possibility of failure (“If we should fail?” [1.7.59]). Lady Macbeth counters this fear by inviting Macbeth to share in her fantasy of omnipotent malevolence: “What cannot you and I perform upon / Th’unguarded Duncan?” (1.7.70–71). The satiated and sleeping Duncan takes on the vulnerability that Lady Macbeth has just invoked in the image of the feeding, trusting infant;³⁰ Macbeth releases himself from the image of this vulnerability by sharing in the murder of this innocent. In his elation at this transfer of vulnerability from himself to Duncan, Macbeth imagines Lady Macbeth the mother to infants sharing her hardness, born in effect without vulnerability; in effect, he imagines her as male and then reconstitutes himself as the invulnerable male child of such a mother:

Bring forth men-children only!
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males.
[1.7.73–75]

Through the double pun on *mettle/metal* and *male/mail*, Lady Macbeth herself becomes virtually male, composed of the hard metal of which the armored male is made.³¹ Her children would necessarily be men, composed of her male mettle, armored by her mettle, lacking the female inheritance from the mother that would make them vulnerable. The man-child thus brought forth would be no trusting infant; the very phrase *men-children* suggests the presence of the adult man even at birth, hence the undoing of

childish vulnerability.³² The mobility of the imagery—from male infant with his brains dashed out to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth triumphing over the sleeping, trusting Duncan, to the all-male invulnerable man-child, suggests the logic of the fantasy: only the child of an all-male mother is safe. We see here the creation of a defensive fantasy of exemption from the woman's part: as infantile vulnerability is shifted to Duncan, Macbeth creates in himself the image of Lady Macbeth's hardened all-male man-child; in committing the murder, he thus becomes like Richard III, using the bloody axe to free himself in fantasy from the dominion of women, even while apparently carrying out their will.

Macbeth's temporary solution to the infantile vulnerability and maternal malevolence revealed by Lady Macbeth is to imagine Lady Macbeth the all-male mother of invulnerable infants. The final solution, both for Macbeth and for the play itself, though in differing ways, is an even more radical excision of the female: it is to imagine a birth entirely exempt from women, to imagine in effect an all-male family, composed of nothing but males, in which the father is fully restored to power. Overtly, of course, the play denies the possibility of this fantasy: Macduff carries the power of the man not born of woman only through the equivocation of the fiends, their obstetrical joke that quibbles with the meaning of *born* and thus confirms circuitously that all men come from women after all. Even Macbeth, in whom, I think, the fantasy is centrally invested, knows its impossibility: his false security depends exactly on his commonsense assumption that everyone is born of woman. Nonetheless, I shall argue, the play curiously enacts the fantasy that it seems to deny: punishing Macbeth for his participation in a fantasy of escape from the maternal matrix, it nonetheless allows the audience the partial satisfaction of a dramatic equivalent to it. The dual process of repudiation and enactment of the fantasy seems to me to shape the ending of *Macbeth* decisively; I will attempt to trace this process in the rest of this essay.

The witches' prophecy has the immediate force of psychic relevance for Macbeth partly because of the fantasy constructions central to 1.7:

Be bloody, bold, and resolute: laugh to scorn
The power of man, for none of woman born
Shall harm Macbeth.

[4.1.79–81]

The witches here invite Macbeth to make himself into the bloody and invulnerable man-child he has created as a defense against maternal malevolence in 1.7: the man-child ambivalently recalled by the accompanying apparition of the Bloody Child. For the apparition alludes at once to the bloody

vulnerability of the infant destroyed by Lady Macbeth and to the blood-thirsty masculinity that seems to promise escape from this vulnerability, the bloodiness the witches urge Macbeth to take on. The doubleness of the image epitomizes exactly the doubleness of the prophecy itself: the prophecy constructs Macbeth's invulnerability in effect from the vulnerability of all other men, a vulnerability dependent on their having been born of woman. Macbeth does not question this prophecy, even after the experience of Birnam Wood should have taught him better, partly because it so perfectly meets his needs: in encouraging him to "laugh to scorn / The power of men," the prophecy seems to grant him exemption from the condition of all men, who bring with them the liabilities inherent in their birth. As Macbeth carries the prophecy as a shield onto the battlefield, his confidence in his own invulnerability increasingly reveals his sense of his own exemption from the universal human condition. Repeated seven times, the phrase *born to woman* with its variants begins to carry for Macbeth the meaning "vulnerable," as though vulnerability itself is the taint deriving from woman; his own invulnerability comes therefore to stand as evidence for his exemption from that taint. This is the subterranean logic of Macbeth's words to Young Siward immediately after Macbeth has killed him:

Thou wast born of woman:—
 But swords I smile at, weapons laugh to scorn,
 Brandish'd by man that's of a woman born.
 [5.7.11–13]

Young Siward's death becomes in effect proof that he was born of woman; in the logic of Macbeth's psyche, Macbeth's invulnerability is the proof that he was not. The *but* records this fantasied distinction: it constructs the sentence "You, born of woman, are vulnerable; but I, not born of woman, am not."³³

Insofar as this is the fantasy embodied in Macbeth at the play's end, it is punished by the equivocation of the fiends: the revelation that Macduff derives from woman, though by unusual means, musters against Macbeth all the values of ordinary family and community that Macduff carries with him. Macbeth, "cow'd" by the revelation (5.8.18),³⁴ is forced to take on the taint of vulnerability; the fantasy of escape from the maternal matrix seems to die with him. But although this fantasy is punished in Macbeth, it does not quite die with him; it continues to have a curious life of its own in the play, apart from its embodiment in him. Even from the beginning of the play, the fantasy has not been Macbeth's alone: as the play's most striking bloody man, he is in the beginning the bearer of this fantasy for the all-male community that depends on his bloody prowess. The opening scenes strikingly construct

male and female as realms apart; and the initial descriptions of Macbeth's battles construe his prowess as a consequence of his exemption from the taint of woman.

In the description of his battle with Macdonwald, what looks initially like a battle between loyal and disloyal sons to establish primacy in the father's eyes is oddly transposed into a battle of male against female:

Doubtful it stood;
 As two spent swimmers, that do cling together
 And choke their art. The merciless Macdonwald
 (Worthy to be a rebel, for to that
 The multiplying villainies of nature
 Do swarm upon him) from the western isles
 Of Kernes and Gallowglasses is supplied;
 And Fortune, on his damned quarrel smiling,
 Show'd like a rebel's whore: but all's too weak;
 For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),
 Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
 Which smok'd with bloody execution,
 Like Valour's minion, carv'd out his passage,
 Till he fac'd the slave;
 Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
 Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th' chops,
 And fix'd his head upon our battlements.

[1.2.7–23]

The two initially indistinguishable figures metaphorized as the swimmers eventually sort themselves out into victor and victim, but only by first sorting themselves out into male and female, as though Macbeth can be distinguished from Macdonwald only by making Macdonwald functionally female. The "merciless Macdonwald" is initially firmly identified; but by the time Macbeth appears, Macdonwald has temporarily disappeared, replaced by the female figure of Fortune, against whom Macbeth seems to fight ("brave Macbeth, . . . Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel"). The metaphorical substitution of Fortune for Macdonwald transforms the battle into a contest between male and female; it makes Macbeth's deserving of his name contingent on his victory over the female. We are prepared for this transformation by Macdonwald's sexual alliance with the tainting female, the whore Fortune;³⁵ Macbeth's identification as valor's minion redefines the battle as a contest between the half-female couple Fortune/Macdonwald and the all-male couple Valor/Macbeth. Metaphorically, Macdonwald and

Macbeth take on the qualities of the unreliable female and the heroic male; Macbeth's battle against Fortune turns out to be his battle against Macdonwald because the two are functionally the same. Macdonwald, tainted by the female, becomes an easy mark for Macbeth, who demonstrates his own untainted manhood by unseaming Macdonwald from the nave to the chops. Through its allusions both to castration and to Caesarian section, this unseaming furthermore remakes Macdonwald's body as female, revealing what his alliance with Fortune has suggested all along.

In effect, then, the battle that supports the father's kingdom plays out the creation of a conquering all-male erotics that marks its conquest by its triumph over a feminized body, simultaneously that of Fortune and Macdonwald. Hence, in the double action of the passage, the victorious unseaming happens twice: first on the body of Fortune and then on the body of Macdonwald. The lines descriptive of Macbeth's approach to Macdonwald—"brave Macbeth . . . Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel . . . carved out his passage"—make that approach contingent on Macbeth's first carving his passage through a female body, hewing his way out. The language here perfectly anticipates Macduff's birth by Caesarian section, revealed at the end of the play: if Macduff is ripped untimely from his mother's womb, Macbeth here manages in fantasy his own Caesarian section,³⁶ carving his passage out from the unreliable female to achieve heroic male action, in effect carving up the female to arrive at the male. Only after this rite of passage can Macbeth meet Macdonwald: the act of aggression toward the female body, the fantasy of self-birth, marks his passage to the contest that will be definitive of his maleness partly insofar as it is definitive of Macdonwald's tainted femaleness. For the all-male community surrounding Duncan, then, Macbeth's victory is allied with his triumph over femaleness; for them, he becomes invulnerable, "lapp'd in proof" (1.2.55) like one of Lady Macbeth's armored men-children.³⁷ Even before his entry into the play, that is, Macbeth is the bearer of the shared fantasy that secure male community depends on the prowess of the man in effect not born of woman, the man who can carve his own passage out, the man whose very maleness is the mark of his exemption from female power.³⁸

Ostensibly, the play rejects the version of manhood implicit in the shared fantasy of the beginning. Macbeth himself is well aware that his capitulation to Lady Macbeth's definition of manhood entails his abandonment of his own more inclusive definition of what becomes a man (1.7.46); and Macduff's response to the news of his family's destruction insists that humane feeling is central to the definition of manhood (4.3.221). Moreover, the revelation that even Macduff had a mother sets a limiting condition on the fantasy of a bloody masculine escape from the female and hence on the kind of manhood defined by that escape. Nonetheless, even at the end, the play enables

one version of the fantasy that heroic manhood is exemption from the female even while it punishes that fantasy in Macbeth. The key figure in whom this double movement is vested in the end of the play is Macduff; the unresolved contradictions that surround him are, I think, marks of ambivalence toward the fantasy itself. In insisting that mourning for his family is his right as a man, he presents family feeling as central to the definition of manhood; and yet he conspicuously leaves his family vulnerable to destruction when he goes off to offer his services to Malcolm. The play moreover insists on reminding us that he has inexplicably abandoned his family: both Lady Macduff and Malcolm question the necessity of this abandonment (4.2.6–14; 4.3.26–28); and the play never allows Macduff to explain himself. This unexplained abandonment severely qualifies Macduff's force as the play's central exemplar of a healthy manhood that can include the possibility of relationship to women: the play seems to vest diseased familial relations in Macbeth and the possibility of healthy ones in Macduff; and yet we discover dramatically that Macduff has a family only when we hear that he has abandoned it. Dramatically and psychologically, he takes on full masculine power only as he loses his family and becomes energized by the loss, converting his grief into the more "manly" tune of vengeance (4.3.235); the loss of his family here enables his accession to full masculine action even while his response to that loss insists on a more humane definition of manhood.³⁹ The play here pulls in two directions. It reiterates this doubleness by vesting in Macduff its final fantasy of exemption from woman. The ambivalence that shapes the portrayal of Macduff is evident even as he reveals to Macbeth that he "was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd" (5.8.15–16): the emphasis on untimeliness and the violence of the image suggest that he has been prematurely deprived of a nurturing maternal presence; but the prophecy construes just this deprivation as the source of Macduff's strength.⁴⁰ The prophecy itself both denies and affirms the fantasy of exemption from women: in affirming that Macduff has indeed had a mother, it denies the fantasy of male self-generation; but in attributing his power to his having been untimely ripped from that mother, it sustains the sense that violent separation from the mother is the mark of the successful male. The final battle between Macbeth and Macduff thus replays the initial battle between Macbeth and Macdonwald. But Macduff has now taken the place of Macbeth: he carries with him the male power given him by the Caesarian solution, and Macbeth is retrospectively revealed as Macdonwald, the woman's man.

The doubleness of the prophecy is less the equivocation of the fiends than Shakespeare's own equivocation about the figure of Macduff and about the fantasy vested in him in the end. For Macduff carries with him simultaneously all the values of family and the claim that masculine power derives from

the unnatural abrogation of family, including escape from the conditions of one's birth. Moreover, the ambivalence that shapes the figure of Macduff similarly shapes the dramatic structure of the play itself. Ostensibly concerned to restore natural order at the end,⁴¹ the play bases that order upon the radical exclusion of the female. Initially construed as all-powerful, the women virtually disappear at the end, Lady Macbeth becoming so diminished a character that we scarcely trouble to ask ourselves whether the report of her suicide is accurate or not, the witches literally gone from the stage and so diminished in psychic power that Macbeth never mentions them and blames his defeat only on the equivocation of their male masters, the fiends; even Lady Macduff exists only to disappear. The bogus fulfillment of the Birnam Wood prophecy suggests the extent to which the natural order of the end depends on the exclusion of the female. Critics sometimes see in the march of Malcolm's soldiers bearing their green branches an allusion to the Maying festivals in which participants returned from the woods bearing branches, or to the ritual scourging of a hibernal figure by the forces of the oncoming spring.⁴² The allusion seems to me clearly present; but it serves, I think, to mark precisely what the moving of Birnam Wood is not. Malcolm's use of Birnam Wood is a military maneuver. His drily worded command (5.4.4–7) leaves little room for suggestions of natural fertility or for the deep sense of the generative world rising up to expel its winter king; nor does the play later enable these associations except in a scattered and partly ironic way.⁴³ These trees have little resemblance to those in the Forest of Arden; their branches, like those carried by the apparition of the "child crowned, with a tree in his hand" (4.1.86), are little more than the emblems of a strictly patriarchal family tree.⁴⁴ This family tree, like the march of Birnam Wood itself, is relentlessly male: Duncan and sons, Banquo and son, Siward and son. There are no daughters and scarcely any mention of mothers in these family trees. We are brought as close as possible here to the fantasy of family without women.⁴⁵ In that sense, Birnam Wood is the perfect emblem of the nature that triumphs at the end of the play: nature without generative possibility, nature without women. Malcolm tells his men to carry the branches to obscure themselves, and that is exactly their function: insofar as they seem to allude to the rising of the natural order against Macbeth, they obscure the operations of male power, disguising them as a natural force; and they simultaneously obscure the extent to which natural order itself is here reconceived as purely male.⁴⁶

If we can see the fantasy of escape from the female in the play's fulfillment of the witches' prophecies—in Macduff's birth by Caesarian section and in Malcolm's appropriation of Birnam Wood—we can see it also in the play's psychological geography. The shift from Scotland to England is strikingly the shift from the mother's to the father's terrain.⁴⁷ Scotland "cannot / Be call'd

our mother, but our grave" (4.3.165–66), in Rosse's words to Macduff: it is the realm of Lady Macbeth and the witches, the realm in which the mother *is* the grave, the realm appropriately ruled by their bad son Macbeth. The escape to England is an escape from their power into the realm of the good father-king and his surrogate son Malcolm, "unknown to woman" (4.3.126). The magical power of this father to cure clearly balances the magical power of the witches to harm, as Malcolm (the father's son) balances Macbeth (the mother's son). That Macduff can cross from one realm into the other only by abandoning his family suggests the rigidity of the psychic geography separating England from Scotland. At the end of the play, Malcolm returns to Scotland mantled in the power England gives him, in effect bringing the power of the fathers with him: bearer of his father's line, unknown to woman, supported by his agent Macduff (empowered by his own special immunity from birth), Malcolm embodies utter separation from women and as such triumphs easily over Macbeth, the mother's son.

The play that begins by unleashing the terrible threat of destructive maternal power and demonstrates the helplessness of its central male figure before that power thus ends by consolidating male power, in effect solving the problem of masculinity by eliminating the female. In the psychological fantasies that I am tracing, the play portrays the failure of the androgynous parent to protect his son, that son's consequent fall into the dominion of the bad mothers, and the final victory of a masculine order in which mothers no longer threaten because they no longer exist. In that sense, *Macbeth* is a recuperative consolidation of male power, a consolidation in the face of the threat unleashed in *Hamlet* and especially in *King Lear* and never fully contained in those plays. In *Macbeth*, maternal power is given its most virulent sway and then abolished; at the end of the play we are in a purely male realm. We will not be in so absolute a male realm again until we are in Prospero's island-kingdom, similarly based firmly on the exiling of the witch Sycorax.

NOTES

1. All references to *Macbeth* are to the new Arden edition, edited by Kenneth Muir, (London: Methuen, 1972).

2. I have written elsewhere about Coriolanus' doomed attempts to create a self that is independent of his mother's will; see my "Anger's My Meat: Feeding, Dependency, and Aggression in *Coriolanus*," in *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, ed. Murray M. Schwartz and Coppélia Kahn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 129–49. Others have noted the extent to which both *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus* deal with the construction of a rigid male identity felt as a defense against overwhelming maternal power; see particularly Coppélia Kahn, *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), 151–92, whose chapter title—"The Milking Babe and the Bloody Man in *Coriolanus* and *Macbeth*"—indicates the similarity of our concerns. Linda Bamber

argues, however, that the absence of a feminine Other in *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus* prevents the development of manliness in the heroes, since true manliness "involves a detachment from the feminine" (*Comic Women, Tragic Men: A Study of Gender and Genre in Shakespeare* [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1982], 20, 91–107).

3. "Gowries Conspiracie: A Discoverie of the unnaturall and vyle Conspiracie, attempted against the Kings Maiesties Person at Sanct-Iohnstoun, upon Twysday the Fifth of August, 1600," in *A Selection from the Hadeian Miscellany* (London: C. & G. Kearsley, 1793), 196.

4. Stanley J. Kozikowski argues strenuously that Shakespeare knew either the pamphlet cited above ("Gowries Conspiracie," printed in Scotland and London in 1600) or the abortive play on the conspiracy, apparently performed twice by the King's Men and then canceled in 1604 ("The Gowrie Conspiracy against James VI: A New Source for Shakespeare's *Macbeth*," *Shakespeare Studies* 13 [1980]: 197–211). Although I do not find his arguments entirely persuasive, it seems likely that Shakespeare knew at least the central facts of the conspiracy, given both James's annual celebration of his escape from it and the apparent involvement of the King's Men in a play on the subject. See also Steven Mullaney's suggestive use of the Gowrie material as an analogue for *Macbeth* in its link between treason and magical riddle ("Lying Like Truth: Riddle, Representation and Treason in Renaissance England," *ELH* 47 [1980]: 32, 38).

5. After the failure of the conspiracy, James searched the dead earl's pockets, finding nothing in them "but a little close parchment bag, full of magicall characters, and words of inchantment, wherin, it seemed, that he had put his confidence, thinking him selfe never safe without them, and therefore ever carried them about with him; being also observed, that, while they were upon him, his wound whereof he died, bled not, but, incontinent after the taking of them away, the blood gushed out in great abundance, to the great admiration of al the beholders" ("Gowries Conspiracie," 196). The magical stopping up of the blood and the sudden return of its natural flow seem to me potent images for the progress of *Macbeth* as he is first seduced and then abandoned by the witches' prophecies; that Gowrie's necromancer, like the witches, seemed to dabble in alternate modes of generation increases the suggestiveness of this association for *Macbeth*.

6. All references to Shakespeare's plays other than *Macbeth* are to the revised Pelican edition, *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Alfred Harbage (Baltimore, Penguin Books, 1969).

7. Richard Wheeler, Michael Neill, and Coppélia Kahn similarly understand Richard III's self-divided and theatrical masculinity as a defensive response to real or imagined maternal deprivation. See Wheeler, "History, Character and Conscience in *Richard III*," *Comparative Drama* 5 (1971–72): 301–21, esp. 314–15; Neill, "Shakespeare's Halle of Mirrors: Play, Politics, and Psychology in *Richard III*," *Shakespeare Studies* 8 (1975): 99–129, esp. 104–6; and Kahn, *Man's Estate*, 63–66.

8. *Impale* in the sense of "to enclose with pales, stakes or posts; to surround with a pallisade" (*OED*'s first meaning) is of course the dominant usage contemporary with *Macbeth*. But the word was in the process of change. *OED*'s meaning 4, "to thrust a pointed stake through the body of, as a form of torture or capital punishment," although cited first in 1613, clearly seems to stand behind the imagistic transformation here. The shift in meaning perfectly catches Richard's psychological process, in which any protective enclosure is ambivalently desired and threatens to turn into a torturing impalement.

9. Robert N. Watson notes the imagery of Caesarian birth here and in *Macbeth* (*Shakespeare and the Hazards of Ambition* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984], esp. 19–20, 99–105); the metaphors of Caesarian section and Oedipal rape are central to his understanding of ambitious self-creation insofar as both imagine a usurpation of the defining parental acts of generation (see, for example, pp. 3–5). Though it is frequently very suggestive, Watson's account tends too easily to blur the distinction between matricide and patricide: in fantasies of rebirth, the hero may symbolically replace the father to re-create himself, but he does so by means of an attack specifically on the maternal body. In Shakespeare's images of Caesarian birth, the father tends to be conspicuously absent; indeed, I shall argue, precisely his absence—not his defining presence—creates the fear of the engulfing maternal body to which the fantasy of Caesarian section is a response. This body tends to be missing in Watson's account, as it is missing in his discussion of Richard's Caesarian fantasy here.

10. In an early essay that has become a classic, Eugene Waith established the centrality of definitions of manhood and Lady Macbeth's role in enforcing Macbeth's particularly bloodthirsty version, a theme that has since become a major topos of *Macbeth* criticism ("Manhood and Valor in Two Shakespearean Tragedies," *ELH* 17 [1950]: 262–73). Among the ensuing legions, see, for example, Matthew N. Proser, *The Heroic Image in Five Shakespearean Tragedies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), 51–91; Michael Taylor, "Ideals of Manhood in *Macbeth*," *Etudes Anglaises* 21 (1968): 337–48 (unusual in its early emphasis on the extent to which the culture is complicit in defining masculinity as aggression); D. W. Harding, "Women's Fantasy of Manhood: A Shakespearean Theme," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 20 (1969): 245–53 (significant especially in its stress on women's responsibility for committing men to their false fantasy of manhood); Paul A. Jorgensen, *Our Naked Frailties: Sensational Art and Meaning in "Macbeth"* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), esp. 147ff.; Jarold Ramsey, "The Perversion of Manliness in *Macbeth*," *SEL* 13 (1973): 285–300; Carolyn Asp, "Be bloody, bold, and resolute: Tragic Action and Sexual Stereotyping in *Macbeth*," *Studies in Philology* 25 (1981): 153–69 (significant especially for associating Macbeth's pursuit of masculinity with his pursuit of omnipotence); Harry Berger, Jr., "Text Against Performance in Shakespeare: The Example of *Macbeth*," in *The Forms of Power and the Power of Forms in the Renaissance*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt, special issue of *Genre* (15 [1982]), esp. 67–75; and Robert Kimbrough, "Macbeth: The Prisoner of Gender," *Shakespeare Studies* 16 (1983): 175–90. Virtually all these essays recount the centrality of 1.7 to this theme; most see Macbeth's willingness to murder as his response to Lady Macbeth's nearly explicit attack on his male potency. Dennis Biggins and James J. Greene note particularly the extent to which the murder itself is imagined as a sexual act through which the union of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is consummated; see Biggins, "Sexuality, Witchcraft, and Violence in *Macbeth*," *Shakespeare Studies* 8 (1975): 255–77; Greene, "Macbeth: Masculinity as Murder," *American Imago* 41 (1984): 155–80; see also Watson, *Shakespeare and the Hazards of Ambition*, 90. My account differs from most of these largely in stressing the infantile components of Macbeth's susceptibility to Lady Macbeth. The classic account of these pre-Oedipal components in the play is David B. Barron's brilliant early essay "The Babe That Milks: An Organic Study of *Macbeth*," originally published in 1960 and reprinted in *The Design Within*, ed. M. D. Faber (New York: Science House, 1970), 253–79. For similar readings, see Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Macbeth* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of

California Press, 1978), 81–82, 270–72, and especially Kahn, *Man's Estate*, 151–55, 172–92, and Richard P. Wheeler, *Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1981), 144–49; as always, I am deeply and minutely indebted to the two last named.

11. Harry Berger, Jr., associates both Duncan's vulnerability and his role in legitimizing the bloody masculinity of his thanes with his status as the androgynous supplier of blood and milk ("The Early Scenes of *Macbeth*: Preface to a New Interpretation," *ELH* 47 [1980]: 26–28). Murray M. Schwartz and Richard Wheeler note specifically the extent to which the male claim to androgynous possession of nurturant power reflects a fear of maternal power outside male control (Schwartz, "Shakespeare through Contemporary Psychoanalysis," in *Representing Shakespeare*, 29. Wheeler, *Shakespeare's Development*, 146. My discussion of Duncan's androgyny is partly a consequence of my having heard Peter Erickson's rich account of the Duke's taking on of nurturant function in *As You Like It* at MLA in 1979; this account is now part of his *Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985); see esp. pp. 27–37.

12. Many commentators note that Shakespeare's Duncan is less ineffectual than Holingshed's; others note the continuing signs of his weakness. See especially Harry Berger's brilliant account of the structural effect of Duncan's weakness in defining his (and Macbeth's) society ("The Early Scenes," 1–31).

13. Many note the appropriateness of Macbeth's conflation of himself with Tarquin, given the play's alliance of sexuality and murder. See, for example, Ian Robinson, "The Witches and Macbeth," *Critical Review* 11 (1968): 104; Biggins, "Sexuality, Witchcraft, and Violence," 269; and Watson, *Shakespeare and the Hazards of Ambition*, 100. Arthur Kirsch works extensively with the analogy, seeing the Tarquin of *The Rape of Lucrece* as a model for Macbeth's ambitious desire ("Macbeth's Suicide," *ELH* 51 [1984]: 269–96). Commentators on the analogy do not in general note that it transforms Macbeth's kingly victim into a woman; Norman Rabkin is the exception (*Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning* [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981], 107).

14. Wheeler sees the simultaneously castrated and castrating Gorgon-like body of Duncan as the emblem of the world Macbeth brings into being (*Shakespeare's Development*, 145); I see it as the emblem of a potentially castrating femaleness that Macbeth's act of violence reveals but does not create.

15. The witches' power to raise storms was conventional; see, for example, Reginald Scot, *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (London 1584; reprint, with an introduction by Hugh Ross Williamson, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1964), 31; King James's *Daemonologie* (London, 1603), 46; and the failure of the witches to raise a storm in Jonson's *Masque of Queens*. Jonson's learned note on their attempt to disturb nature gives his classical sources for their association with chaos: see *Masque*, 11.134–37, 209–20, and Jonson's note to l. 134, in *Ben Jonson: The Complete Masques*, ed. Stephen Orgel (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 531–32.

16. Many commentators, following Freud, find the murder of Duncan "little else than parricide" ("Those Wrecked by Success," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey [London, Hogarth Press, 1957], 14: 321); see, for example, Rabkin, *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning*, 106–9, Kirsch, "Macbeth's Suicide," 276–80, 286, and Watson, *Shakespeare and the Hazards of Ambition*, esp. 85–88, 98–99 (the last two are particularly interesting in understanding parricide as an ambitious attempt to redefine

the self as omnipotently free from limits). In standard Oedipal readings of the play, the mother is less the object of desire than “the ‘demon-woman,’ who creates the abyss between father and son” by inciting the son to parricide (Ludwig Jekels, “The Riddle of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*,” in *The Design Within*, 240). See also, for example, L. Veszy-Wagner, “*Macbeth*: ‘Fair Is Foul and Foul Is Fair,’” *American Imago* 25 (1968): 242–57; Norman N. Holland, *Psychoanalysis and Shakespeare* (New York: Octagon Books, 1979), 229; and Patrick Colm Hogan’s very suggestive account of the Oedipal narrative structure, “*Macbeth*: Authority and Progenitorship,” *American Imago* 40 (1983): 385–95. My reading differs from these Oedipal readings mainly in suggesting that the play’s mothers acquire their power because the father’s protective masculine authority is already significantly absent; in my reading, female power over *Macbeth* becomes the sign (rather than the cause) of that absence.

17. For those recent commentators who follow Barron in seeing pre-Oedipal rather than Oedipal issues as central to the play, the images of disrupted nurturance define the primary area of disturbance; see, for example, Barron, “The Babe That Milks,” 255; Schwartz, “Shakespeare through Psychoanalysis,” 29; Berger, “The Early Scenes,” 27–28; Joan M. Byles, “*Macbeth*: Imagery of Destruction,” *American Imago* 39 (1982): 149–64; Wheeler, *Shakespeare’s Development*, 147–48; and Kirsch, “*Macbeth*’s Suicide,” 291–92. Although Madelon Gohlke (now Sprengnether) does not specifically discuss the rupture of maternal nurturance in *Macbeth*, my understanding of the play is very much indebted to her classic essay, “‘I wooed thee with my sword’: Shakespeare’s Tragic Paradigms,” in which she establishes the extent to which masculinity in Shakespeare’s heroes entails a defensive denial of the female (in *Representing Shakespeare*: 170–87); in an unfortunately unpublished essay, she discusses the traumatic failure of maternal protection imaged by Lady *Macbeth* here. In his brilliant essay “Phantasmagoric *Macbeth*” (forthcoming in *ELR*), David Willbern locates in Lady *Macbeth*’s image the psychological point of origin for the failure of potential space that *Macbeth* enacts. Erickson, noting that patriarchal bounty in *Macbeth* has gone awry, suggestively locates the dependence of that bounty on the maternal nurturance that is here disturbed (*Patriarchal Structures*, 116–21). Several critics see in *Macbeth*’s susceptibility to female influence evidence of his failure to differentiate from a maternal figure, a failure psychologically the consequence of the abrupt and bloody weaning imaged by Lady *Macbeth*; see, for example, Susan Bachmann, “‘Daggers in Men’s Smiles’—The ‘Truest Issue’ in *Macbeth*,” *International Review of Psycho-Analysis* 5 (1978): 97–104; and particularly the full and very suggestive accounts of Barron, “The Babe That Milks,” 263–68, and Kahn, *Man’s Estate*, 172–78. In the readings of all these critics, as in mine, Lady *Macbeth* and the witches variously embody the destructive maternal force that overwhelms *Macbeth* and in relation to whom he is imagined as an infant. Rosenberg notes intriguingly that *Macbeth* has twice been performed with a mother and son in the chief roles (*Masks of Macbeth*, 196).

18. Despite some overliteral interpretation, Alice Fox and particularly Jenijoy La Belle usefully demonstrate the specifically gynecological references of “passage” and “visitings of nature,” using contemporary gynecological treatises. (See Fox, “Obstetrics and Gynecology in *Macbeth*,” *Shakespeare Studies* 12 [1979]: 129; and La Belle, “‘A Strange Infirmity’: Lady *Macbeth*’s Amenorrhoea,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 31 [1980]: 382, for the identification of *visitings of nature* as a term for menstruation; see La Belle, 383, for the identification of *passage* as a term for the neck of the womb. See also Barron, who associates Lady *Macbeth*’s language here with contraception [“The Babe That Milks,” 267].)

19. *For* is glossed as "in exchange for" in the following editions, for example: *The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare*, ed. Sylvan Barnet (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1972); *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. Hardin Craig (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1951), rev. ed. edited by David Bevington (Chicago: Scott, Foresman, 1973); *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974); *William Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Alfred Harbage (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969); *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. George Lyman Kittredge (Boston: Ginn, 1936), rev. ed. edited by Irving Ribner (Boston: Ginn, 1971). Muir demurs, preferring Keightley's understanding of *take* as "infect" (see the Arden edition, p. 30).

20. Insofar as syphilis was known to be transmitted through the nursing process, there was some reason to worry; see, for example, William Clowes's frightening account, "A brief and necessary Treatise touching the cure of the disease called Morbus Gallicus" (London, 1585, 1596), 151. But Leontes' words to Hermione as he removes Mamillius from her ("I am glad you did not nurse him. / Though he does bear some signs of me, yet you / Have too much blood in him" [*The Winter's Tale*, 2.1.56–58]) suggest that the worry was not fundamentally about epidemiology. Worry that the nurse's milk determined morals was, of course, common; see, for example, Thomas Phaire, *The Boke of Chylidren* (1545; reprint, Edinburgh: E. & S. Livingstone, 1955), 18. The topic was of interest to King James, who claimed to have sucked his Protestantism from his nurse's milk; his drunkenness was also attributed to her. See Henry N. Paul, *The Royal Play of "Macbeth"* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1950), 387–88. For the identification of colostrum with witch's milk, see Samuel X. Radbill, "Pediatrics," in *Medicine in Seventeenth-Century England*, ed. Allen G. Debus (Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1974), 249. The fear of maternal functioning itself, not simply of its perversions, is central to most readings of the play in pre-Oedipal terms; see the critics cited in note 17 above.

21. Many commentators on English witchcraft note the unusual prominence given to the presence of the witch's mark and the nursing of familiars; see, for example, Barbara Rosen's introduction to the collection of witchcraft documents she edited (*Witchcraft* [London: Edward Arnold, 1969], 29–30). She cites contemporary documents on the nursing of familiars, for example, pp. 187–88, 315; the testimony of Joan Prentice, one of the convicted witches of Chelmsford in 1589, is particularly suggestive: "at what time soever she would have her ferret do anything for her, she used the words 'Bid, Bid, Bid, come Bid, come Bid, come Bid, come suck, come suck, come suck'" (p. 188). Katharine Mary Briggs quotes a contemporary (1613) story about the finding of a witch's teat (*Pale Hecate's Team* [New York: Arno Press, 1977], 250); see also Wallace Notestein, *A History of Witchcraft in England from 1558 to 1718* (Washington: American Historical Association, 1911), 36; and George Lyman Kittredge, *Witchcraft in Old and New England* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1956), 179. Though he does not refer to the suckling of familiars, King James believed in the significance of the witch's mark, at least when he wrote the *Daemonologie* (see p. 33). M. C. Bradbrook notes that Lady Macbeth's invitation to the spirits is "as much as any witch could do by way of self-dedication" ("The Sources of *Macbeth*," *Shakespeare Survey* 4 [1951]: 43).

22. In a brilliant essay, Peter Stallybrass associates the move from the cosmic to the secular realm with the ideological shoring up of a patriarchal state founded on the model of the family ("*Macbeth* and Witchcraft," in *Focus on "Macbeth"*, ed. John Russell Brown [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982], esp. 196–98).

23. Wilbur Sanders notes the extent to which “terror is mediated through absurdity” in the witches (*The Dramatist and the Received Idea* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968], 277); see also Berger’s fine account of the scapegoating reduction of the witches to a comic and grotesque triviality (“Text Against Performance,” 67–68). Harold C. Goddard (*The Meaning of Shakespeare* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951], 512–13), Robinson (“The Witches and Macbeth,” 100–103), and Stallybrass, (“*Macbeth* and Witchcraft,” 199) note the witches’ change from potent and mysterious to more diminished figures in act 4.

24. After years of trying fruitlessly to pin down a precise identity for the witches, critics are increasingly finding their dramatic power precisely in their indefinability. The most powerful statements of this relatively new critical topos are those by Sanders (*The Dramatist and the Received Idea*, 277–79), Robert H. West (*Shakespeare and the Outer Mystery* [Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1968], 78–79), and Stephen Booth (“*King Lear*,” “*Macbeth*,” *Indefinition, and Tragedy* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983], 101–3).

25. For their “Englishness,” see Stallybrass, “*Macbeth* and Witchcraft,” 195. Alan Macfarlane’s important study of English witchcraft, *Witchcraft in Tudor and Stuart England* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), frequently notes the absence of the Continental staples: if the witches of Essex are typical, English witches do not fly, do not hold Sabbaths, do not commit sexual perversions or attack male potency, do not kill babies (see pp. 6, 160, 180, for example).

26. Macfarlane finds the failure of neighborliness reflected in the retaliatory acts of the witch the key to the social function of witchcraft in England; see *ibid.*, 168–76 for accounts of the failures of neighborliness—very similar to the refusal to share chestnuts—that provoked the witch to act. James Sprenger and Heinrich Kramer, *Malleus Maleficarum*, trans. Montague Summers (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1970), is the *locus classicus* for Continental witchcraft beliefs: for the murder and eating of infants, see pp. 21, 66, 99, 100–101; for attacks on the genitals, see pp. 47, 55–60, 117–19; for sexual relations with demons, see pp. 21, 112–14. Or see Scot’s convenient summary of these beliefs (*Discoverie*, 31).

27. The relationship between cosmology and domestic psychology is similar in *King Lear*; even as Shakespeare casts doubt on the authenticity of demonic possession by his use of Harsnett’s *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures*, Edgar/Poor Tom’s identification of his father as “the foul Flibbertigibbet” (3.4.108) manifests the psychic reality and source of his demons. Characteristically in Shakespeare, the site of blessing and of cursedness is the family, their processes psychological.

28. Although *his* was a common form for the as yet unfamiliar possessive *its*, Lady Macbeth’s move from “while it was smiling” to “his boneless gums” nonetheless seems to register the metamorphosis of an ungendered to a gendered infant exactly at the moment of vulnerability, making her attack specifically on a male child. That she uses the ungendered *the* a moment later (“the brains out”) suggests one alternative open to Shakespeare had he wished to avoid the implication that the fantasied infant was male; Antony’s crocodile, who “moves with it own organs” (*Antony and Cleopatra*, 2.7.42), suggests another. (*OED* notes that, although *its* occurs in the Folio, it does not occur in any work of Shakespeare published while he was alive; it also notes the various strategies by which authors attempted to avoid the inappropriate use of *his*.)

29. Lady Macbeth maintains her control over Macbeth through 3.4 by manipulating these categories: see 2.2.53–54 (“’tis the eye of childhood / That fears

a painted devil") and 3.4.57–65 ("Are you a man? . . . these flaws and starts . . . would well become / A woman's story"). In his response to Banquo's ghost, Macbeth invokes the same categories and suggests their interchangeability: he dares what man dares (3.4.98); if he feared Banquo alive, he could rightly be called "the baby of a girl" (l. 105).

30. In "Phantasmagoric *Macbeth*," David Willbern notes the extent to which the regicide is reimagined as a "symbolic infanticide" so that the image of Duncan fuses with the image of Lady Macbeth's child murdered in fantasy. Macbeth's earlier association of Duncan's power with the power of the "naked new-born babe, / Striding the blast" (1.7.21–22) prepares for this fusion. Despite their symbolic power, the literal babies of this play and those adults who sleep and trust like infants are hideously vulnerable.

31. See Kahn, *Man's Estate*, 173, for a very similar account of this passage.

32. Shakespeare's only other use of *man-child* is in a strikingly similar context: Volumnia, reporting her pleasure in Coriolanus' martial success, tells Virgilia, "I sprang not more in joy at first hearing he was a man-child than now in first seeing he had proved himself a man" (*Coriolanus*, 1.3.15–17).

33. De Quincy seems to have understood this process: "The murderers are taken out of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires. They are transfigured: Lady Macbeth is 'unsexed'; Macbeth has forgot that he was born of woman" ("On the Knocking at the Gate in 'Macbeth,'" in *Shakespeare Criticism: A Selection, 1623–1840*, ed. D. Nichol Smith [London: Oxford University Press, 1946], 335). Critics who consider gender relations central to this play generally note the importance of the witches' prophecy for the figure of Macduff; they do not usually note its application to Macbeth. But see Kahn's suggestion that the prophecy sets Macbeth "apart from women as well as from men" (*Man's Estate*, 187) and Gohlke's central perception that, "to be born of woman, as [Macbeth] reads the witches' prophecy, is to be mortal" ("I wooed thee," 176).

34. See Kahn's rich understanding of the function of the term *cow'd* (*Man's Estate*, 191).

35. Many comment on this contamination; see, for example, Berger, "The Early Scenes of *Macbeth*," 7–8; Hogan, "Macbeth," 387; Rosenberg, *The Masks of Macbeth*, 45; Biggins, "Sexuality, Witches, and Violence," 265.

36. Watson notes the suggestion of Caesarian section here, through not its aggression toward the female. Barron does not comment specifically on this passage but notes breaking and cutting imagery throughout and relates it to Macbeth's attempt to "cut his way out of the female environment which chokes and smothers him" ("The Babe That Milks," 269). I am indebted to Willbern's "Phantasmagoric *Macbeth*" specifically for the Caesarian implications of the unseaming from navel to chops.

37. The reference to Macbeth as "Bellona's bridegroom" anticipates his interaction with Lady Macbeth in 1.7: only the murderous man-child is fit mate for either of these unsexed, quasi-male figures.

38. To the extent that ferocious maleness is the creation of the male community, not of Lady Macbeth or the witches, the women are scapegoats who exist partly to obscure the failures of male community. For fuller accounts of this process, see Veszy-Wagner, "Macbeth," 244, Bamber, *Comic Women*, 19–20, and especially Berger, "Text Against Performance," 68–75. But whether or not the women are scapegoats insofar as they are (falsely) held responsible for Macbeth's murderous

maleness, fear of the female power they represent remains primary (not secondary and obscurantist) insofar as the male community and, to some extent, the play itself define maleness as violent differentiation from the female.

39. A great many critics, following Waith ("Manhood and Valor," 266–67), find the play's embodiment of healthy masculinity in Macduff. They often register some uneasiness about his leaving his family, but they rarely allow this uneasiness to complicate their view of him as exemplary. But critics interested in the play's construction of masculinity as a defense against the fear of femaleness tend to see in Macduff's removal from family a replication of the central fear of women that is more fully played out in *Macbeth*. See, for example, Wheeler, *Shakespeare's Development*, 146; and Berger, "Text Against Performance," 70. For these critics, Macduff's flight is of a piece with his status as the man not born of woman.

40. Critics interested in gender issues almost invariably comment on the centrality of Macduff's fulfillment of this prophecy, finding his strength here in his freedom from contamination by or regressive dependency on women: see, for example, Harding, "Women's Fantasy," 250; Barron, "The Babe That Milks," 272; Berger, "The Early Scenes," 28; Bachmann, "Daggers," 101; Kirsch, "Macbeth's Suicide," 293; Kahn, *Man's Estate*, 172–73; Wheeler, *Shakespeare's Development*, 146; and Victor Calef, "Lady Macbeth and Infanticide or 'How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth Murdered?'" *Journal of the American Psychoanalytic Association* 17 (1969): 537. For Barron and Harding, Macduff's status as the bearer of this fantasy positively enhances his manhood; but for many of these critics, it qualifies his status as the exemplar of healthy manhood. Perhaps because ambivalence toward Macduff is built so deeply into the play, several very astute critics see the fantasy embedded in Macduff here and nonetheless continue to find in him an ideal manhood that includes the possibility of relatedness to the feminine. See, for example, Kahn, *Man's Estate*, 191; and Kirsch, "Macbeth's Suicide," 294.

41. The triumph of the natural order has of course been a commonplace of criticism since the classic essay by G. Wilson Knight, "The Milk of Concord: An Essay on Life-Themes in *Macbeth*," in his *Imperial Theme* (London: Methuen, 1965), esp. 140–53. The topos is so powerful that it can cause even critics interested in gender issues to praise the triumph of nature and natural sexuality at the end without noting the exclusion of the female; see, for example, Greene, "Macbeth," 172. But Rosenberg, for example, notes the qualifying effect of this exclusion (*Masks of Macbeth*, 654).

42. See, for example, Goddard, *Meaning of Shakespeare*, 520–21; Jekels, "Riddle," 238; John Holloway, *The Story of the Night* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), 66; Rosenberg, *Masks of Macbeth*, 626; and Watson, *Shakespeare and the Hazards of Ambition*, 89, 106–16. Even without sensing the covert presence of a vegetation myth, critics often associate the coming of Birnam Wood with the restoration of spring and fertility; see, for example, Knight, "Milk of Concord," 144–45; and Greene, "Macbeth," 169. Only Bamber demurs: in her account Birnam Wood rises up in aid of a male alliance, not the Saturnalian disorder of the Maying rituals (*Comic Women*, 106). My view coincides with hers.

43. When Malcolm refers to planting (5.9.31) at the play's end, for example, his comment serves partly to reinforce our sense of his distance from his father's generative power.

44. Paul attributes Shakespeare's use of the imagery of the family tree here to his familiarity with the cut of the Banquo tree in Leslie's *De Origine, Moribus, et*

Rebus Gestis Scotorum (*Royal Play*, 175). But the image is too familiar to call for such explanation; see, for example, the tree described in *Richard II* (1.2.12–21).

45. As Wheeler notes, the description of Malcolm's saintly mother makes him "symbolically the child of something approximating virgin birth" (*Shakespeare's Development*, 146)—in effect another version of the man not quite born of woman. Berger comments on the aspiration to be "a nation of bachelor Adams, of no woman born and unknown to women" ("Text Against Performance," 72) without noting the extent to which this fantasy is enacted in the play; Stallybrass calls attention to this configuration and describes the structure of antithesis through which "(virtuous) families of men" are distinguished from "antifamilies of women" (*Macbeth and Witchcraft*, 198). The fantasy of escape from maternal birth and the creation of all-male lineage would probably have been of interest to King James, whose problematic derivation from Mary, Queen of Scots must occasionally have made him wish himself not born of (that particular) woman, no matter how much he was concerned publicly to rehabilitate her image. See Jonathan Goldberg's account of James's complex attitude toward Mary and especially his attempt to claim the Virgin Queen, Elizabeth, rather than Mary as his mother as he moved toward the English throne (*James I and the Politics of Literature* [Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983], 11–17, 25–26, 119); see also Goldberg's very suggestive discussions of James's poetic attacks on women (*ibid.*, 24–25) and his imaging himself as a man taking control of a woman in becoming king of England (*ibid.*, 30–31, 46). Stephen Orgel speculates brilliantly about the ways in which James's concerns about his own lineage and hence about the derivation of his royal authority are reflected in *The Tempest*: James "conceived himself as the head of a single-parent family," as a paternal figure who has "incorporated the maternal," in effect as a Prospero; the alternative model is Caliban, who derives his authority from his mother ("Prospero's Wife," *Representations* 8 [1984]: 8–9). Perhaps *Macbeth* indirectly serves a cultural need to free James from entanglement with the problematic memory of his witch-mother (portrayed thus, for example, by Spenser in book 5 of *The Faerie Queene*), tracing his lineage instead from a safely distanced and safely male forefather, Banquo.

46. Although neither Berger nor Stallybrass discusses the function of Birnam Wood specifically, I am indebted here to their discussions of the ideological function of the play's appeal to cosmology in the service of patriarchy, Berger seeing it as "a collective project of mystification" ("Text Against Performance," 64), Stallybrass as "a returning of the disputed ground of politics to the undisputed ground of Nature" (*Macbeth and Witchcraft*, 205–6). If, as Bradbrook suggests, witches were thought able to move trees ("Sources," 42), then we have in Malcolm's gesture a literal appropriation of female power, an act of making the unnatural natural by making it serve patriarchal needs.

47. See Erickson's fine discussion of this geographic distinction (*Patriarchal Structures*, 121–22).

STANLEY CAVELL

Macbeth Appalled (I)

When a given text is claimed to work in the light, or in the shadow, of another—taking obvious extremes, as one of a given work's sources or as one of its commentaries—a measure of the responsibility of such a linking is the degree to which each is found responsive to the other, to tap the other, as for its closer attention. *Macbeth* is a likely work to turn to in these terms on a number of counts. Being Shakespearean melodrama, it takes up the question of responsiveness, the question, we might say, of the truth of response, of whether an action or reaction is—or can be—sensually or emotionally adequate to its cause, neither withholding nor excessive (Macbeth's to news of his wife's death, or Macduff's to his wife's and his children's, or Macbeth's to Banquo's reappearance, or Lady Macbeth's to Macbeth's return from the wars). More than any other Shakespearean tragedy, *Macbeth* thematically shows melodramatic responsiveness as a contest over interpretations, hence over whether an understanding is—or can be—intellectually adequate to its question, neither denying what is there, nor affirming what is not there (a deed, a dagger). As if what is at stake is the intelligibility of the human to itself.

The question of human intelligibility takes the form, in what I want to begin to work through in *Macbeth*, of a question of the intelligibility of human history, a question whether we can see what we make happen and tell its difference from what happens to us, as in the difference between human

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action and human suffering. I conceive of *Macbeth* as belonging as much with Shakespearean histories as with the tragedies, but not as a history that takes for granted the importance of the political and of what constitutes a pertinent representation of its present condition. It raises, rather, the question of what history is a history of, hence the question of how its present is to be thought of. This continues the direction I was taking the last time I was caught up in a text of Shakespeare's, in thinking about *Antony and Cleopatra*. There, accepting as uncontroversial the ideas that a Shakespeare history play forms some precedent or parable for its own political present, and that the playing of Antony and Cleopatra and their company is a setting for world catastrophe, I proposed thinking through the play as a representation of the catastrophe of the modern advent of skepticism (hence also of the advent of the new science, a new form of knowing), taken as an individual and a historical process. (This is recorded in the introduction to my *Disowning Knowledge*.) But while certain contemporary historical events are accepted as sources for *Macbeth*—accounts of the Gowrie Conspiracy and of the Gunpowder Plot—there is not, to my knowledge, an uncontroversial sense of the play as unfolding, in its claustrophobic setting, its own sense of its present politics and of human history. On the reading of the play proposed here this lack of clarity itself becomes a certain confirmation of the play's invocation of its sense of its own matrix, specifically a sense of the political as itself changing, as itself a scene of obscurity, even, one might say, of the occult.

I might describe the drift of this reading as following out my sense that the texts of *Macbeth* and of *Antony and Cleopatra*—I am glad to accept them as dating within a year or so of one another—are opposite faces of a study of the interpenetration of the erotic and the political. Here is a way I described the changeover of worlds envisioned in *Antony and Cleopatra*: “Hegel says that with the birth of Christianity a new subjectivity enters the world. I want to say that with the birth of skepticism, hence of modern philosophy, a new intimacy, or wish for it, enters the world; call it privacy shared (not shared with the public, but from it).” *Macbeth*, I conjecture, secretes its own environment of a new intimacy, of privacy shared, a setting not exactly of world catastrophe but of a catastrophe of privacy, hence of a certain politics. This privacy is expressed in philosophy as a catastrophe of knowledge. It may be thought of as the skeptical isolation of the mind from the body, simultaneously a sense that everything is closed to, occluded in, human knowledge (in philosophy?) and at the same time that everything is open to human knowledge (in science? in magic?). The aspiration and eroticization of the new science invoked at the opening of *Antony and Cleopatra* (“Then must you needs find out new heaven, new earth”) marks its relation to and distance from the closing of the world of *Macbeth* within magic, science's origin and shadow.

It matters to me, in ways some of which will become explicit, to mention in passing another sort of unfinished or continuing business of mine determining my interest in history in *Macbeth*—my attention in recent years to the work of Emerson, in which narrative history, let us say, is under incessant attack. It is clear enough that Emerson's mission as a writer of the philosophical constitution of a new nation is in part to free its potential members from an enslaving worship of the past and its institutions, in religion, in politics, in literature, in philosophy. But the anticipation is quite uncanny, in his "History," the first essay of his First Series of Essays, of the spirit of the *Annales* historians' disdain for great events, their pursuit of the uneventful, a pursuit requiring an altered sense of time and of change, an interpretation of what I call the ordinary or the everyday. I had thought that Emerson's formulations concerning history would play a more extensive role in this text—or in some unwritten one of which the present text is perhaps a fragment—than has so far proven the case. At present I will be content with four citations from "History":

I have no expectation that any man will read history aright, who thinks that what was done in a remote age, by men whose names have resounded far, has any deeper sense than what he is doing to-day.

But along with the civil and metaphysical history of man, another history goes daily forward—that of the external world,—in which he is not less strictly implicated.

I am ashamed to see what a shallow village tale our so-called History is. . . . What does Rome know of rat and lizard? What are Olympiads and Consulates to these neighboring systems of being? Nay, what food or experience or succor have they for the Esquimaux seal-hunter, for the Kanaka in his canoe, for the fisherman, the stevedore, the porter?

When a thought of Plato becomes a thought to me,—when a truth that fired the soul of Pindar fires mine, time is no more.

* * *

The immediate background for what follows formed itself in an unpredicted interaction of two seminars I was teaching two springs ago. The more elaborate of these was a large seminar on recent trends in Shakespearean criticism that my colleague Marjorie Garber and I were offering on an experimental basis to a group of students divided between the study of literature and of philosophy. The division itself is one that various trends in contemporary

literary theory have promised to move beyond, but which, in my part of the academic forest, is kept in place by all but immovable institutional forces. The trends in criticism we proposed to consider fell, not surprisingly, into the more or less recognizable categories of feminist, psychoanalytic, and new historicist work; but while as an outsider to the institutions of Shakespeare study I was happy for the instruction in recontextualizing this material, and while the feminist and the psychoanalytic continued to seem to me about what I expected criticism to be, the new historicist, for all its evident attractions, kept presenting itself to me as combating something that I kept failing to grasp steadily or clearly. Put otherwise, in reading the feminist and/or the psychoanalytic critics I did not feel that I had *in advance* to answer the questions, What does Shakespeare think women are, or think psychology is?, but that I could read these pieces as part of thinking about these questions; whereas I found myself, in reading the new historicist critics, somehow required to have an independent answer to the question, What does Shakespeare think history is?

The form the question took for me more particularly was, How does Shakespeare think things happen?—is it in the way science thinks, in the way magic thinks, or religion, or politics, or perhaps in the way works of art, for example, works of poetic drama think? It is not clear that these questions make good sense. You may even feel in them a certain unstable frame of mind, as if there is already palpable in them a response to *Macbeth*.

This form of the question of history was shaped for me by the other seminar I was offering that spring, on Romanticism and skepticism, in which the romantic fantasy of a union between philosophy and poetry was a recurrent topic, particularized in the question to what extent Emerson is to be thought of as a philosopher and the question of the extent to which, or sense in which, Wittgenstein's thinking is a function of his writing. An important theoretical statement of the questions of philosophy and writing for the seminar was Heidegger's "On the Origin of the Work of Art," taking up its formulation according to which the *work* of the work of art is that of letting truth happen; and taking up Heidegger's relating, as the German does, of the idea of happening to the idea of history; so that the implied notion is that truth becomes historical in art. This can be seen as a contesting of Hegel's finding that the belief in art as the highest expression of truth is a thing of the past. Behind both Heidegger and Emerson we read Friedrich Schlegel, the great translator and follower of Shakespeare, who had called for the union of philosophy and poetry, who had said that what happens in poetry happens in a given work always or never, whose concept of *poesis*, or poetic making or work, evidently inspires Heidegger's idea of the particular, irreplaceable work art does, and who in his extraordinary essay "On Incomprehensibility"

cites Shakespeare's "infinitely many depths, subterfuges, and intentions" as an example of the conscious artist enabled to carry on "ironically, hundreds of years after their deaths, with their most faithful followers and admirers," and who also in that essay on incomprehensibility had said, "I absolutely detest incomprehension, not only the incomprehension of the uncomprehending but even more the incomprehension of the comprehending"—the moral of which I take to concern the present human intellectual task as one of undoing our present understanding of understanding, a task I find continued with startling faithfulness to Schlegel's terms in Emerson's "Self-Reliance," understanding this essay to be, as it quite explicitly declares itself to be, an essay on human understanding.

In the reading we assigned ourselves for our Shakespeare seminar, I found *Macbeth* to be the text of Shakespeare's about which the most interesting concentration of current critical intelligence had been brought to bear. Both Marjorie Garber and Janet Adelman have recently published major discussions of the play, as has Steven Mullaney, whose work cites its affiliation with, and is cited in the work of, Stephen Greenblatt. While *Macbeth* is not given special attention in Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations*, certain sentences from that book's introduction—entitled "The Circulation of Social Energy"—rather haunt the preoccupations that will guide my remarks here. Greenblatt's introduction concludes with the sentence, "The speech of the dead, like my own speech, is not private property," about which I feel both that I agree with the intuition or impulse being expressed, and at the same time, that this expression invites me to deny something—something about the privacy of language—that I have never affirmed, that no one can simply have affirmed. I must try, even briefly, to articulate this double feeling.

I am not alone in finding the most significant work of this century on the idea of the privacy of language to be Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein rather cultivates the impression—which the prevailing view of him takes as his thesis—that he denies language is private; whereas his teaching is that the assertion or the denial either of the publicness or of the privateness of my language is empty. Philosophers, typically modern philosophers, do chronically seem to be denying something, typically that we can know there is a world and others and we in it, and then denying that they are denying it. Wittgenstein is distinguished by *asking* (as it were nonrhetorically), "What gives the impression that I want to deny anything?" His answer has to do with his efforts to destroy philosophical illusions (ones he takes apparently as endemic in Western philosophical thought): denial is in the effect of a presiding, locked philosophical struggle between, let us say, skepticism and metaphysics. To understand this effect or impression is part of Wittgenstein's philosophical mission. For him simply to *deny* that he is

denying privacy, say by asserting publicness, would accordingly amount to no intellectual advance. It would merely constitute a private assertion of publicness, as though publicness itself had become private property. Something of the sort is a way of putting my intuition of what *Macbeth* is about; one might call it the privatization of politics or think of it as a discovery of the state of nature.

Because at the moment I see my contribution to the study of *Macbeth* to lie perhaps in addressing certain features of its language that I find peculiar to it, I shall mostly forgo discussion of recent important work, and its conflicts, on the question of gender in *Macbeth*, as for instance Janet Adelman's proposal (in "Born of Woman") that the play embodies at once fantasies of absolute maternal domination and of absolute escape from that domination (a discussion, besides, whose generosity in the notation of the critical literature goes beyond my scholarship); and as Marjorie Garber's rather conflicting proposal (in "Macbeth: The Male Medusa") that the play studies gender indeterminacy. I mark this elision here and at the same time give a little warm-up, out-of-context exercise in the way I read Shakespeare's lines, by taking a certain exception to Garber's interpretation in that piece of a familiar exchange in *Macbeth*, one that can be taken as involving a discourse of gender.

When Macbeth says, "I dare do all that may become a man. / Who dares do more is none," Lady Macbeth replies, "What beast was't then / That made you break this enterprise to me? / When you durst do it, then you were a man" (I, vii, 46–49). Garber reads this as an all-too-familiar sexual taunt, a questioning of her partner's masculinity. Without denying the taunt in Lady Macbeth's question, I find myself struck by her taunting interpretation of Macbeth's idea of excessive daring as meaning that to strike beyond certain human limits is to be a beast. If we take it—something that will come back—that Lady Macbeth shares with Macbeth, as they share every other idea, something like the idea of men as beasts, then this tells another way to hear her puzzling continuation: "To be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man" (I, vii, 50–51). That is: To be more beast *is* to be more man. On this way of thinking, her sexual taunt is something more than, or is prejudicially confined in being called, an "attack upon his masculinity, his male identity." It is as much an attack on human sexuality as such, as it has revealed itself; surely including an attack on its presence in her.

My fastening on to the species reading of the sexual taunt—its expression of an anxiety about *human* identity—has been prepared by the way I have over the years addressed the issue of philosophical skepticism as an expression of the human wish to escape the bounds or bonds of the human, if not from above then from below. I call it the human craving for, and horror of, the inhuman, of limitlessness, of monstrousness. (Besides being a beast, another

species-like contrast with being human is being a monster. It may be that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have reason to suppress this possibility while they can, to cover it with a somewhat different horror.) There is in me, accordingly, a standing possibility that I use the more general, or less historical (is it? and is it more metaphysical?) species anxiety to cover a wish to avoid thinking through the anxiety of gender. If there is a good reason to run this risk it is that the reverse covering is also a risk, since knowing what is to be thought about the human is part of knowing what is to be thought about gender.

The risks of confining interpretation—to move now further into the play—are exemplified in the much-considered announcement of Macduff's that he was untimely ripped from the womb. Macbeth's response is to denounce, or pray for, or command disbelief in, the "fiends / That palter with us in a double sense; / That keep the word of promise to our ear, / And break it to our hope" (III, viii, 19–22). The picture here is that to wish to rule out equivocation, the work of witches, is the prayer of tyranny. The picture is itself equivocal, however, since it must be asked why Macbeth believes Macduff. That means both: Why does he believe this man? and Why does he believe what this man says? Here I can merely assert something. In turning against Macduff (to "try the last against him"), Macbeth is contesting not simply a man (whatever that is) but an interpretation; or really a double interpretation. The first interpretation, I believe uncontested, is that being of no woman born just means being untimely ripped from the womb. Some critics have expressed puzzlement and dissatisfaction over this interpretation, feeling that a fateful moment is made to depend on a quibble, as if Shakespeare is being superficial or sloppy; yet they feel forced to accept it, presumably because Macbeth accepts it. But I do not know that any have expressed a sense that Macbeth may himself (though he has suggested other possibilities—that Macduff derives from a girl, or from witches) have felt forced.

This is the burden of what I suggest as the second interpretation Macbeth contests in his fatal encounter with Macduff, one that associates with the name of Caesar the procedure of delivering a child by an incision through the abdominal wall and uterus. Macbeth had identified Banquo as the one "under [whom] / My genius is rebuk'd; as, it is said, / Mark Antony's was by Caesar" (III, i, 53–55). It is congenial to my sense of things that this fact of Caesar's rebuke cited by Macbeth about Mark Antony is notable in *Antony and Cleopatra*; beyond this, my suggestion that Macbeth silently associates Macduff's origin as partaking of Caesar's and so transfers to the antagonist before him the power to rebuke or subdue his spirit (for example the power to force his acceptance of that other's interpretation of what is between them), is a reading which reveals Macbeth to be afraid of domination by a masculine as much as by a feminine figure. I say he is contesting an interpre-

tation (or fantasy), and it is one to which, this being tragedy, he succumbs, having (always) already accepted an interpretation (that of witchery)—as if the other face of tyranny (or a redescription of its fear of equivocation) is fixation, say superstition. (Of course my second interpretation depends on granting that Shakespeare knew the surgical procedure in question under the Caesarean interpretation.)

Since (what proves to be) the equivocation of “no woman born” is a construction of the witches, and since fixating its meaning as being ripped untimely is Macbeth’s response to Macduff’s fixing of himself as rebuker and subduer, I am taking the play to characterize interpretation as a kind of inner or private contest between witchcraft and tyranny, which it almost identifies as a war between the feminine and the masculine. This formulation contests, while to an unassessed extent it agrees with, the perception of the play in Steven Mullaney’s “Lying Like Truth.” I agree particularly with Mullaney’s sense that the play virtually announces its topic as, whatever else, equivocation, and that standing interpretations of equivocation, or ambiguity, do not account for the extraordinary language of this play. But, putting aside here Mullaney’s elegant presentation of the play as a presentation of treasonous language (which nevertheless seems to me a confined interpretation), he cites too few of the actual words of the play to clarify his claim of their specialness. For example, he claims that the “language [Macbeth] would use [to lie] instead masters him.” How shall we assess whether Mullaney’s idea of being mastered comes to more than an assertion of one of the common facts of words, that they have associations beyond their use on a particular occasion? Certainly we must not deny it: A word’s reach exceeds a speaker’s grasp, or what’s a language for?

This is to say: words recur, in unforetellable contexts; there would be no words otherwise; and no intentions otherwise, none beyond the, let me say, natural expression of instinct; nothing would be the expression of desire, or ambition, or the making of a promise, or the acceptance of a prophecy. Unpredictable recurrence is not a sign of language’s ambiguity but is a fact of language as such, that there are words.

I strew my reservation concerning Mullaney’s description of *Macbeth*’s language with references to various of the play’s famous topics—ambition, prophecy, promise—to register my awareness that in claiming, despite my reservation, to share a sense of the play’s specialness of language, the weight of this reservation depends on proposing an alternative account. I shall sketch two elements of such a proposal, isolating two common features or conditions of the medium of the play—its language to begin with—that the text of *Macbeth* particularly acknowledges, or interprets. One can think of the idea of a text’s uniqueness, or difference, as the theory of language the text holds

of itself, as Friedrich Schlegel more or less puts it. I will call these features of language as prophecy and as magic or mind-reading.

These features interpret conditions of what can be called the possibility of language as such. Prophecy, or foretelling, takes up the condition of words as recurrent; mind-reading takes up words as shared. Philosophy has wished to explain the recurrence of words (which may present itself as their evanescence) by a theory of what it calls universals; and similarly (taking universals as concepts or as rules) to explain their sharing or mutuality, so far as this is seen to be a separate question. Wittgenstein's *Investigations* questions precisely the necessity and possibility of these places of philosophical explanation. In this light, *Macbeth* represents the world whose existence philosophy is horrified by, and created by—the possibility that there is no end to our irrationalities, to our will to intellectual emptiness.

My idea of the first of the conditions of language acknowledged by this play—language as prophecy—is that a kind of foretelling is effected by the way the play, at what prove to be charged moments, will bond a small group of generally small words so that they may then at any time fall upon one another and discharge or expel meaning. The play dramatizes the fact that a word does not exist until it is understood as repeated. Examples I specify a bit here are the foretelling of the words *face*, *hand*, *do* and *done*, *success* and *succession*, *time*, *sleep*, and *walk*. That the acknowledgement of words as foretelling is a specific strain within the Shakespearean virtuosity is indicated in contrasting it with words as telling or counting in *The Winter's Tale* (as recounted in *Disowning Knowledge*). Foretelling emphasizes the unpredictable *time* of telling, unguarded as it were from the time of understanding. Take the case of *do* and *done*. The word leaps from a witch's "I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do," to Lady Macbeth's "What's done cannot be undone," and Macbeth's "[I] wish the estate o' th' world were now undone." I take up the word from what is perhaps its most intricate instance: "If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly" (I, vii, 1–2).

As a statement is grammatically what can prove to be true or false, and be verified or modified, so a human action is what can prove to succeed or fail, and be justified or excused—words and deeds carry within themselves the terms, or intentions, of their satisfaction. With recurrence on my mind, and having said that without the recurrence of words there are no words (hence no expression beyond that of organic need, no expression, we might say, that *contains* desire), I hear Macbeth's speculation of deeds done in the doing, without consequence, when surcease is success, to be a wish for there to be no human action, no separation of consequence from intention, no gratification of desire, no showing of one's hand in what happens. It is a wish to escape a condition of the human which, while developing terms of Emerson's essay

“Fate,” I have described as the human fatedness to significance, ourselves as victims of intelligibility. And I have claimed that it is this perception that Wittgenstein captures in identifying the human form of life as that of language. Something of the sort is, I believe, meant in recent years when it is said that language speaks us, or that the self is created by language. The implication in these formulations seems often to be that we are not exactly or fully responsible for what we say, or that we do not have selves. And yet the only point of such assertions—cast in a skeptical tone—is to deny a prior stance or tone of metaphysics, a metaphysical “picture” of what it is to “be” responsible or to “have” a self (a picture no doubt at the service of politics, but what is not?). Such skeptical assertions would deny that the self is everything by asserting that it is nothing, or deny that we are in control of a present plenum of meaning by denying that we have so much as a single human hand in what we say. These assertions and denials of metaphysics are the victories of tyranny over witchcraft, Macbeth’s occupation. Whose story is it that the self is self-presence, that meaning is the fullness of a word? It is not truer than it is false.

A famous registration of what I am calling the fatedness to significance is Freud’s idea of the overdetermination of meaning in human action and passion. If we follow Jean Laplanche (in *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*) in watching the origins of human significance in the emergence of human sexuality, tracing the transfiguration of psychic drives out of biological instincts, then may we not further recognize in this origin of desire the origin of time, say of the delay or interval or containment in human satisfaction; hence the origin of the end of time, say of the repetitiveness of desire’s wants and satisfactions; hence the origin of reality, say of something “beyond” me in which my satisfaction is provided, or not? Then we have a way of thinking about why Macbeth, in wishing for the success of his act to be a surcease of the need of action, for a deed that undoes doing, must (logically) wish for an end to time. For to destroy time is what he would, with paralyzing paradox, risk the future for: “that but this blow / Might be the be-all and the end-all—here, / But here, upon this bank and shoal of time” (I, vii, 4–6). This is what “We’d jump the life to come” in favor of (whether the life to come is taken to mean the rest of his time, or the rest of time). Why? (And suppose the life to come suggests the life to come *from* him. He says that the worth of his kingship is bound up for him with the question of his succession. But we have just heard him say in effect that success would consist for him in surcease, in remaining, with respect to the act which is the type of the consequential—producing progeny—“unlineal,” “unfruitful.” Well, does he want babies or not? Is this undecidable? If we say so, then Macbeth is the picture of undecidability.)

Both he and Lady Macbeth associate doing, in addition to time, with thinking: “I am afraid to think what I have done,” he says (II, ii, 50); and a few lines earlier she had said, “These deeds must not be thought / After these ways; so, it will make us mad” (II, ii, 32–33). If there were nothing done or to do there would be nothing to think about. Before we come to ponder what it is they have to think about, I note that the opposite of thinking in Macbeth’s mind is sleep (“sore labour’s bath, / Balm of hurt minds” (II, ii, 37–38), and that in acting to kill action and end time Macbeth “does murder Sleep” (II, ii, 35); so that in acting metaphysically to end thought he consigns himself absolutely to thinking, to unending watchfulness. Lady Macbeth at last finds a solution to the problem of thinking how not to think, when there is no obvious way not to think, in sleepwalking, which her witness describes as a version of watchfulness.

Before moving from language as foretelling to the second of the conditions of language which I hypothesize the play particularly to acknowledge—language as magic or mind-reading—I simply note two foretellings or occurrences of the idea of walking (or walking as sleeping) that bond with the ambiguity or reciprocity, real or imagined, of action without consequence, say of the active and the passive becoming one another. First, the witnessing Doctor’s description of Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking—“to receive at once the benefit of sleep, and do the effects of watching”—seems most literally a description of the conditions of a play’s audience, and play-watching becomes, along with (or as an interpretation of) sleepwalking, exemplary of human action as such, as conceived in this play—yet another of Shakespeare’s apparently unending figurations, or explorations, of theater; here, theater as the scene, and as the perception or witnessing of the scene, that is, of human existence, as sleepwalking. Macbeth’s all but literal equivalent of sleepwalking is his walking, striding, pacing (all words of his), to his appointment to murder, led by “a dagger of the mind, a false creation” (II, i, 38), moving like a ghost (II, i, 56).

Another bonding of the idea of walking with that of acting without acting is Macbeth’s description of life as “but a walking shadow; a poor player” (V, v, 24). While in this inaudibly familiar speech about all our tomorrows I remark that Macbeth has a use for something like the idea that life, construed as a tale, signifies nothing—he has, as said, been trying to achieve the condition of insignificance ever since his speech about ending time, and before that. That life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player, like both mad Lady Macbeth and sad Macbeth and like the perhaps sane players playing them, is a tremendous thought, but not something Macbeth learned just now, upon hearing of his wife’s death. Perhaps it is something he can *say* now, say for himself, now that she is dead—that human life does not, any more than a human player,

signify its course for and beyond itself; it is instead the scene or medium in which significance is found, or not. She is apt to have found this idea unmanly, anyway as diverging from her point of view. To speak of a player who “struts and frets” is simply, minus the melodramatic mode, to speak of someone who walks and cares, hence signifies acting and suffering and talking about both in view of others, which pretty well covers the human territory. And what is wrong with strutting and fretting for an “hour on the stage” that is not wrong with time altogether? Is “signifying nothing” the decay of their having been “promised greatness” (favorite words of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in their opening speeches)? And is this announcement of greatness taken as a hint of pregnancy and issue, or is it perhaps the promise of exemption from time (if that is different); or is it, given the hints of religious contestation in the play, a charge against the promise of eternity, against something Macbeth calls, thinking of the Witches, the “metaphysical”? It is imaginable that Macbeth is taking revenge against any and all of these promises of consequence, perhaps against the idea of history as fulfilling promises.

Of course this speech about insignificance, or say inexpressiveness, is an expression of limitlessly painful melancholy; but again, that pain is not new to Macbeth, not caused by the news of his wife’s death. His response to that news I find in full—before the metaphysics of time and meaning, so to speak, take over—to be: “She should have died hereafter; / There would have been a time for such a word.” That is all. Is it so little? He says that like everything else that happens her death is untimely, as if not hers: nothing is on or in time when nothing is desired, when desire is nothing, is not yours. And he says that he is incapable of mourning now; and if not capable now, then when not? The wrong time for death is an ultimately missed appointment; no time for mourning death sets an ultimate stake in disappointment. Here is a view of human history, history as unmournable disappointment. Macbeth’s speech goes on to explore it. Perhaps it is a perception Lady Macbeth perished in trying to protect her husband from. This is something he can say now, no longer protecting her from her failure to protect him. If so, then the play’s study of history is a study of their relationship, this marriage. What is this marriage?

SUSAN SNYDER

Theology as Tragedy in Macbeth

Modern chronologies of Shakespeare's works generally place *Macbeth* directly after *King Lear*. The two tragedies may even have been written in the same year, 1606. They are nevertheless very different, in a way that can be turned to account in structuring a course in Shakespearean tragedy. *Macbeth's* moral clarity stands out against *King Lear's* flirtation with nihilism. *Macbeth* from this point of view is seen as still very much in the tragic mode, but moving in a quite opposite direction from the earlier tragedy. Such an approach is akin to that taken by Alexander Leggatt with the romantic comedies. Leggatt finds each successive play in this series sharply diverging from the one before, "as though the later play was created by taking the major impulses behind its predecessor and throwing them into reverse" (221).

The contrast is workable. On the one hand, *King Lear* sets forth not only personal tragedies but a tragic universe. Some of the wholesale destruction is significant—Edmund is killed by the brother he wronged. But some of it is random—Cordelia dies by accident. In the Fool's giggling non-sequiturs and in other flashes of deflating comedy, meaning itself keeps breaking down in absurdity. Though characters constantly appeal to the gods who rule over men's affairs to deal justly and restore order, the gods revealed by the course of dramatic action are not like that. They are indifferent, or actively malevolent, or just nonexistent. The action of *King Lear* takes its characters to the limits

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of moral apprehension and then propels them beyond, into uncharted and perhaps unchartable terrain. Individuals may make new sense of their suffering lives, forgive and be forgiven, rediscover the value of human community; in the great world, however, all order seems to crumble away, even the grim consequentiality of tragedy.

Possibly Lear's journey took Shakespeare too close to total chaos. In any case the play he wrote next seems to work in the opposite way, enclosing its personal tragedy in a universe that is not only morally comprehensible but even shares our ethical sympathies. When Macbeth kills his kinsman and guest in violation of his sacred "double trust," the natural world reacts violently with storms, earthquakes, unnatural behavior by animals. The sun, "as troubled with man's act" (II.iv.6), refuses to shine on the day following Duncan's murder—and for dramatic purposes darkness continues in Scotland until the usurper's reign comes to its violent end.¹ To expel Macbeth and his wrongs, the natural world contorts its own laws: a dead man walks; a forest moves; a man exists who was not born of woman. When the tyrant is gone, the orderly processes that Duncan fostered—planting and growth, loyalty properly enacted and rewarded—can be renewed by Malcolm. The disintegration and chaos that Macbeth experiences inside this cosmic frame is peculiar to himself, and we understand it as the result of his own action, an action he recognized from the beginning as unambiguously evil. To do what he did, he had to suppress by force part of his own nature, what Lady Macbeth calls the "milk of human kindness" (I.v.17), and separate himself as much as possible from his own criminal actions. When this violent, almost schizophrenic, repression leads him to nihilism and despair, his painful course makes sense psychologically and morally.

But this scheme, individual chaos enclosed in a larger moral order, is not the whole story about *Macbeth*. From a different perspective its moral frame appears troublingly unstable. Several years ago I team-taught, with a colleague from the Department of Religion, a course called "Tragedy and Theology."² Our texts ranged from Sophocles to Fyodor Dostoevsky, from the Old English *Genesis B* to Carl Jung's *Answer to Job*. We focused on situations where divine justice was mysterious, where the ways of God to men seemed to call for a tragic understanding along with—or in place of—the traditional "justifying." We probed certain episodes in the Bible: the Fall of Adam and Eve with its curiously displaced responsibility; God's endorsement of Abel's sacrifice but not Cain's; the hardening of Pharaoh's heart while plagues rained down on Egypt; the God-initiated afflictions of Job. In this context *Macbeth* looked very different. Students who had grown accustomed to querying theodicies and become alert to problems in supernatural causality did not find

Macbeth morally straightforward at all. And especially they asked, what about those Weird Sisters?

What about them, indeed? Where do they come from? Where do they go after they disappear from the action in Act IV? Why do they confront Macbeth with their prophecies? What is their place in the moral universe that the play seems to manifest? The Weird Sisters do not abide our question. They are unaccountable, in all senses: their nature is mysterious; their origins are inexplicable; they cannot be called to account (see *OED* 1a, b2). Most of all, their impact on the action is problematic. They know that Macbeth will be king. Does their foreknowledge make inevitable the action by which he achieves that state? Do they incite him, anyway, toward murdering Duncan by letting him know what the reward will be? Or do they merely spell out an end, leaving any decisions about the means to that end—active or passive—entirely to him? “If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me / Without my stir” (I.iii.159–60).

The question of responsibility has, of course, been much canvassed in *Macbeth* criticism, especially the older studies. It is not my main concern here, and I do not propose to go over the pros and cons in detail. In trying to apportion responsibility between the Macbeths and the Weird Sisters, it seems fair to say that the text does not place the blame entirely with either party. The witches do not compel or even urge Macbeth to his murderous course; but if they had not hailed him as future King of Scotland, he probably would not have killed the incumbent king. Between these extremes of black and white is a large grey area; and the grey, like the hell Lady Macbeth sees in her night visions, is murky.

In dramatic terms at least, the Weird Sisters have primacy as a malevolent agency. They open the play, and before we see Macbeth we hear of him from them, as the object of a plot already conceived. (The sense this creates in a theatre audience, that they take the first initiative and not he, is reinforced by contrast when he next meets them in Act IV. By then it is Macbeth, far gone in blood, who initiates the encounter and demands that they tell him what will happen.) Returning to the play's beginning, in the second scene we hear of Macbeth as a grimly effective captain of the King's forces, unseemingly rebels from the nave to the chops. It is this loyal soldier Macbeth who finally comes onstage in the third scene. And yet, as editors and critics are fond of observing, his first line—“So foul and fair a day I have not seen”—echoes the “fair is foul” chant of the opening scene and thus suggests that something in him has affinities with the witches before they even meet. Or does it? Macbeth, after all, seems merely to be commenting on the bad weather in conjunction with the good outcome of the battle.

Perhaps Macbeth echoes the witches' linguistic reversal of values because he already harbors an intention, or at least a wish, that resonates with the prophecy they will give him—a wish to kill Duncan and take the crown for himself. Later Lady Macbeth, in a rage at Macbeth's indecision, accuses him of wavering from some earlier resolve:

What beast was't, then,
That made you break this enterprise to me?
When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man. Nor time nor place
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both.
They have made themselves, and that their fitness now
Does unmake you. (I.vii.54–61)

She would have taken her baby from the breast and dashed its brains out, she says, “had I so sworn as you / Have done to this” (I.vii.66–67).

When did he propose “the enterprise” (one of those chilling euphemisms by which Lady Macbeth makes murder sound heroic)? Before the action of the play, as Coleridge thought (68–69)? In a scene that was cut from the text we have, as John Dover Wilson thought (xxxiv–xxxvii)? In an unwritten scene meant to have taken place some time after I.v, as Alwin Thaler supposed (89–91)? Or is she talking about the letter she read onstage in I.v, sent by Macbeth to his “dearest partner of greatness”? Like the witches' prophecies that prompted it, the letter told only of outcomes; but like her husband on hearing those prophecies, Lady Macbeth in her mind leaped easily from desired end to murderous means—so easily that she might well think later, or wish to think, that the letter actually talked of killing Duncan.³ Certainly, given the play as we have it, she is exaggerating when she says that Macbeth swore to do it. (Unless Thaler is right about the “unwritten scene,” but would Shakespeare have left such a significant exchange unwritten?) There may well have been some predisposition on Macbeth's part to get rid of Duncan and take over the throne, but the play denies us any clear assessment of his guilty intentions before the encounter with the Weird Sisters.

I have been using two titles interchangeably for the mysterious trio, “witches” and “Weird Sisters.” They are called witches in the stage directions, though not in the dialogue, and their appearance and activities are like those described in contemporary works on witchcraft (Curry 53–54, 223–24). Seen as human witches, they are fairly limited in power—allied with evil spirits, to be sure, but able only to abet the turn to evil in a fellow human, not to bring it about. In the language of the play, though, they are “the Weird Sisters,” a

repeated title that suggests actual control of events. And even in this area of their significance the murk descends again, because the First Folio printers sometimes spell the word *weyard* and sometimes *weyward*. Should we see them as versions of the Norns or Fates, or on a smaller scale as *wayward*, in the sense of “perverse” or “perverting”? The adjective that should define them instead mystifies their nature, situates them somewhere between causative power and mere ill-intentioned speech.

However the witches’ prophecy figures in directing Macbeth toward the murder of Duncan, its import as a message is straightforward. They say he will be king hereafter, and he does become king. The oracles they give when Macbeth returns for more knowledge in Act IV sound to him equally direct in meaning: he should beware of Macduff; none of woman born will harm him; he will not be vanquished till Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane. But while the words, at least those of the second and third prophecies, confirm Macbeth’s grasp on power, they encode alternative meanings that foretell his defeat. A baby that has to be taken from its mother’s womb is not, properly speaking, “born.” “Wood” may be understood as a fixed topographical designation, but it may also designate a substance that can be cut down and transported somewhere else. The Weird Sisters, as Macbeth will realize only later, use the slipperiness of language to foretell disaster in the guise of absolute security.⁴

Fiends, he calls them, when he finds out that Macduff was not “born” of woman, “fiends . . . / That palter with [him] in a double sense” (V.viii.23–24). But earlier, when the advance of Birnam Wood on Dunsinane showed that assurance to be false as well, he attacked the “equivocation of the fiend, / That lies like truth” (V.v.49–50). “Fiend,” in the singular, reminds us that equivocation is the favored weapon of the capital-F Fiend himself, Satan. The first instance in human history of what Rebecca Bushnell has called “oracular silence”⁵ occurs in the primal words of temptation that caused the fall of our first parents. In the biblical narrative God warns Adam not to eat of the Tree of Knowledge, “for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” But the serpent assures Eve, “You will not die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil” (Gen. 3:4–5). Like the Weird Sisters, the serpent gives three prophecies. All three will come true in some sense but not as the hearer imagines. “You will not die”: no, not right away, but all life from this point will be shadowed by mortality, “a long day’s dying” in the bleak phrase of Milton’s fallen Adam in *Paradise Lost* (10.964). “Your eyes will be opened”: yes, but the new awareness will be only of the body’s shame and weakness. “You will be like God, knowing good and evil”: yes, but this “knowing” entails subjection rather than mastery, apprehending evil by experience and good only in contrast with

evil—and therefore not knowing like God at all. What Adam and Eve will know, to make use again of Milton’s succinctness, is “good lost, and evil got” (9.1072).⁶

In the long view the witches may have their place in a moral universe. When the riddling prophecies eventually unfold their full meaning, they show us an organism purging itself of infected matter and regaining healthy equilibrium: Macbeth falls; Malcolm institutes good rule; Banquo’s line will triumph.⁷ When in *Paradise Lost* the Archangel Michael foretells Christ’s eventual redemption of man and the glory of his Second Coming, Milton’s Adam too can see the place of temptation and transgression in a larger scheme of good:

O goodness infinite, goodness immense!
That all this good of evil shall produce,
And evil turn to good. . . .

.....

Full of doubt I stand,
Whether I should repent me now of sin
By me done and occasioned, or rejoice
Much more, that much more good thereof shall spring.

(12.469–71, 473–76)

Yet if the long view can reveal sin and suffering as God’s instruments in bringing about an eventual larger good, that does not cancel out the tragedy of the short view: the perspective of the single individual who must act according to his limited human vision and take responsibility for the results.

The mystification of responsibility in Macbeth’s story comes into clearer focus when that story is put in dialogue with one from the very repository of moral order in Shakespeare’s culture, the Bible. In 2 Kings the account of Hazael, servant of the King of Syria, and Elisha, the man of God, similarly blurs the line between supernatural and human causality:

Now Elisha came to Damascus. Ben-hadad the king of Syria was sick; and when it was told him, “The man of God has come here,” the king said to Hazael, “Take a present with you and go to meet the man of God, and inquire of the Lord through him, saying, ‘Shall I recover from this sickness?’” So Hazael went to meet him, and took a present with him, all kinds of goods of Damascus, forty camel loads. When he came and stood before him, he said, “Your son Ben-hadad king of Syria has sent me to you, saying, ‘Shall I

recover from this sickness?” And Elisha said to him, “Go, say to him, ‘You shall certainly recover’; but the Lord has shown me that he shall certainly die.” And he fixed his gaze and stared at him, until he was ashamed. And the man of God wept. And Hazael said, “Why does my lord weep?” He answered, “Because I know the evil that you will do to the people of Israel; you will set on fire their fortresses, and you will slay their young men with the sword, and dash in pieces their little ones, and rip up their women with child.” And Hazael said, “What is your servant, who is but a dog, that he should do this great thing?” Elisha answered, “The Lord has shown me that you are to be king over Syria.” Then he departed from Elisha, and came to his master, who said to him, “What did Elisha say to you?” And he answered, “He told me that you would certainly recover.” But on the morrow he took the coverlet and dipped it in water and spread it over his face, till he died. And Hazael became king in his stead. (8:7–15)

The short view here is murky indeed. The prophecy that prompts Hazael to murder his king comes not even from some Weird Sisters of mysterious origin but from God’s own prophet. And along with this message for Hazael, God sends an assurance to Ben-hadad that will make the king feel falsely secure. Is God, through his prophet, engaging in entrapment? To give the dialogue I propose between *Macbeth* and the 2 Kings narrative some cultural common ground, it is useful to examine sixteenth- and seventeenth-century commentary on Hazael. Biblical scholarship around Shakespeare’s time betrays some uneasiness over this passage. In the Hebrew, Hazael is to tell Ben-hadad “Living, thou shalt live,” though God has shown Elisha that “dying, he shall die.” The Geneva Bible translates the first part as “Thou shalt recouer” but then takes pains to clarify in the margin: “Meaning that he shulde recouer of this disease.” This does not take care of the whole difficulty, since Ben-hadad does not, in fact, have time to recover before Hazael kills him. The Bishops’ Bible also gives “Thou shalt recouer” with a similarly inadequate marginal explanation. The King James translators apparently saw the persistent problem even with the usual gloss and altered the passage to read, “Thou *mayest* certainly recover.” That is, according to one later commentary, because the disease in itself was not mortal “he *might have* lived if no other thing had intervened” (my emphasis).⁸

Elisha’s problematic prophecy to the sick king is at worst simply false, at best equivocal; it promises to Ben-hadad a safety that is totally illusory, as the Weird Sisters’ equivocations did to Macbeth. The question of divine entrapment is even stickier. Did the prophet’s double assurance, that the king would

surely die and that his servant would be king of Syria, create in a previously blameless Hazael the will to murder Ben-hadad? The story's laconic brevity offers little help to commentators struggling to absolve God. But they make the most of verse 11, directly after Elisha privately foretells Ben-hadad's death: "And he fixed his gaze and stared at him, until he was ashamed." Hazael is ashamed under the prophet's scrutiny, they reason, because he already harbors a guilty desire to kill his master. Alas, like the hazy reference in *Macbeth* to some earlier resolve of the hero to take Duncan's crown by violence, the evidence here of Hazael's previous bent to crime is ambiguous. "He stared at him, until he was ashamed": the first "he" who stares is Elisha, but, while the second "he" could indeed be Hazael, revealing his sinful intentions, it might equally well still designate Elisha, staring too long for politeness.⁹ Those who want to find Hazael already guilty in his heart must also account for his apparent shock and disbelief when Elisha describes the atrocities he will commit against Israel. Perhaps he is being hypocritical, or perhaps he lacks self-knowledge. One seventeenth-century commentator reflects, "It may be supposed that Hazael at this time did not think he should do such cruel acts: but no man knows the depth of his own corruption" (Downname L114v). Does this apply to the murder of Ben-hadad too? It was this act, as far as we know, that started Hazael on his bloody career, as Macbeth's murder of his own king led him into wholesale killing.¹⁰ We are back at the basic question for both Hazael and Macbeth: if both have the potential for corruption and are moved to actualize it by an authoritative prophecy, to what extent does the agency of that prophecy share with the human murderers responsibility for their crimes?

Beyond the murky short view, however, readers of the Bible see something larger, the great epic of God's dealings with his chosen people Israel. The wider context for these events is Israel's desertion of Yahweh to worship Baal, which began in the later years of Solomon's reign and took firmer hold under subsequent rulers of the two kingdoms. In the first book of Kings, the still small voice of the Lord has already given to his prophet Elijah three missions. He must call Elisha as his own successor, and he must anoint two rulers who will rain destruction on Israel for its apostasy—Jehu king of Israel, and Hazael king of Syria. "And him who escapes from the sword of Hazael shall Jehu slay; and him who escapes from the sword of Jehu shall Elisha slay" (1 Kings 19:15–17).

In the big picture, then, Hazael is the counterpart of Jehu, both instruments of divine chastisement. Their destructive acts receive their sanction from the "scourge of God" principle which shapes, in 2 Kings and elsewhere, prophecies of the Assyrian defeat of Israel and the Babylonian exile.¹¹ Elijah in fact carries out only one of these three missions, casting his mantle on

Elisha and implicitly leaving the other two tasks to this successor. But in the narratives that follow in 2 Kings, Jehu fits the pattern of God's scourge much better than Hazael. He is actually anointed by an emissary of Elisha, as Hazael is not. He is given divine orders to strike down Jezebel and the house of Ahab (2 Kings 9:1–10). And as he carries out his bloody program, which wipes out Ahab's entire family and purges the worshipers of Baal, Jehu directly invokes the divine word: Joram's body is placed on Naboth's vineyard in conscious fulfillment of Elijah's prophecy to Ahab, and when little is left of Jezebel's trampled body he recalls another of Elijah's prophecies, that dogs will eat her flesh.¹² Nothing in Hazael's story indicates that he is aware of himself as a divine instrument, or that anyone else is. Jehu's inner motives in his carnage are not unmixed with greed and ambition, but the presentation makes it easy to keep his personal failings separate from his role as God's agent. Although he wiped out the worship of Baal, he kept on the golden-calf cult, and God deals with him accordingly. He says to Jehu, "Because you have done well in carrying out what is right in my eyes, and have done to the house of Ahab according to all that was in my heart, your sons of the fourth generation shall sit on the throne of Israel." On the other hand, the golden-calf lapse is punished with loss of territories (2 Kings 10:28–33).

Hazael's moral situation presents no such neat boundaries and distinctions. As a foreigner, not of Israel, he is of less interest to the narrator than Jehu, and we are told nothing of his motives. Was he already ill-disposed, waiting an opportunity to betray Ben-hadad? Or did the prophet's words give him a new goal, which he then went on to achieve by criminal means? Even if he can be understood in the long view as God's scourge,¹³ where does that leave the question of individual culpability? If God implants a goal in a man for His own larger purposes, can the man be said to choose his actions and thus to bear full responsibility? Hazael's story as set forth in 2 Kings, like *Macbeth's*, resists moral logic. If we understand it at all, it must be tragically, as a mysterious knot of fate and free will that cannot be disentangled. The seventeenth-century commentary I quoted above instructs us to understand Ben-hadad's murder on two levels at once: "The event was according to the murderer's intent and the Prophet's answer." Much virtue in "and." The commentators use a simple conjunction to glide over potential contradiction. In an earlier try they assert that Hazael must have already had an evil disposition, but they find that the prophecy "You are to be king over Syria" was necessary to move him to act on it: "This Sovereignty was it that not onely gave him the occasion, but also stirred him up to execute that cruelty" (Downname L114v).

This returns us once more to questions of motivation in *Macbeth*. What purpose do the Weird Sisters have for confronting the hero—or what is their

masters' purpose, if they in fact have such masters? To these questions the play offers no answers. Even Macbeth's personal motives are mystified. In early soliloquies he explores at length the moral and political consequences of killing Duncan but not his reasons for doing so. Does he long to be king? Lady Macbeth says that he does, but what comes through in her speeches of I.v and I.vii is more her desire than his. Perhaps we should take it as self-evident that royal power and prestige are devoutly to be wished. Yet it is strange that, apart from one passing reference to "vaulting ambition" (I.vii.27), there is nothing in Macbeth's long soul-searchings about the sweet fruition of an earthly crown. He seems not so much consumed by desire as driven by some kind of obligation. Positive longings are oddly absent in him, as A. C. Bradley long ago observed: "The deed is done in horror and without the faintest desire or sense of glory,—done, one may almost say, as if it were an appalling duty" (358).

What duty? What obligation? Perhaps to be what he is meant to be, to fulfill his destiny.¹⁴ Macbeth does consider simply letting it happen to him ("If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me"). But his wife convinces him, by appealing to his manhood, to take the initiative. Not only will the promised crown render him more than what he was, but taking positive action to reach that crown will in itself make him "so much more the man" (I.vii.57–58). The laconic narrative of Hazeal tells nothing of what he felt as he followed out his destined role, but it is clear enough that the prophecies Macbeth and Hazeal encounter totally alter their sense of what they are, as if an enormous mountain had suddenly appeared on their internal landscapes. The mountain's very presence may be felt as an imperative, as Mount Everest challenges men like George Mallory to climb it "because it is there." Mallory died trying for the summit; Macbeth is lost *because* he reaches his summit. Hazeal lacks his heroic stature but has a place with him nevertheless in a tragic theology.

NOTES

1. All citations are from the New Folger Library edition of *Macbeth*. Most of the play's major scenes take place at night or look forward to night. Macbeth's early morning visit to the Weird Sisters is marked by stormy weather as well as the atmosphere created by the "secret, black, and midnight hags" themselves (IV.i.48). Significantly, only the one scene that takes place outside of Scotland, Malcolm and Macduff meeting in England, contains a possible reference to sunlight in the need to "seek out some desolate shade" (IV.iii.1).

2. I wish to record my debt in what follows to the students in this course, given at Swarthmore College in Spring 1978; and especially to my co-leader Patrick Henry, now director of the Institute for Ecumenical and Cultural Research, Collegeville, Minnesota. It was Dr. Henry who first called my attention to the biblical narrative of Hazeal, discussed below.

3. “She might naturally take the words of the letter as indicating much more than they said; and then in her passionate contempt at his hesitation, and her passionate eagerness to overcome it, she might easily accuse him, doubtless with exaggeration, and probably with conscious exaggeration, of having actually proposed the murder” (Bradley 483).

4. Bushnell observes that “the language of the witches becomes duplicitous as the play progresses, in proportion to Macbeth’s own irony and hypocrisy” (202).

5. “Although oracular communication looks like dialogue, . . . unlike the human speaker, the oracle will only state the facts, but not interpret the causes, mechanisms, and results of these circumstances” (Bushnell 197).

6. On the specific equivocation involved in “knowing good and evil,” see Blackburn. Renaissance commentators on Genesis 3 such as Pareus and Pererius note the serpent’s equivocating promises, usually citing Rupert of Deutz’s *De trinitate* 3.8. In Willet’s paraphrase they are likened to oracles: “The deuill in euery one of these points speaketh doubtfully, as he gauē the oracles of *Apollo*, that euery word which he spake, might haue a double meaning: ye shall not die, that is, not presently the death of the bodie; though presently made subject to mortalitie: *your eyes shall be opened*, so they were to their confusion: *knowing good and euill*, not by a more excellent knowledge, but by miserable experience after their transgression” (D6r). Sir Thomas Browne uses Satan’s temptations to demonstrate words with multiple meanings: “This fallacy is the first delusion Satan put upon Eve, and his whole tentation might be the same continued; so when he said, Yee shall not dye, that was in his equivocation, ye shall not incurre a present death, or a destruction immediatly ensuing your transgression. Your eyes shall be opened, that is, not to the enlargement of your knowledge, but discovery of your shame and proper confusion. You shall know good and euill, that is you shall have knowledge of good by its priuation, but cognisance of euill by sense and visible experience. And the same fallacy or way of deceit so well succeeding in Paradise, hee continued in his Oracles through all the world” (24). George Hughes agrees that “the Tempter dealeth in equivocations with double words and senses” (D3r).

7. And perhaps indirectly even when first given. Stallybrass notes that, unlike the riddling speech that accompanies them, the apparitions the witches display (the armed head, the bloody child, the child crowned with a tree, and the line of kings) convey with increasing clarity an ultimate “good’ dramatic fate.” When “cursed witches prophesy the triumph of godly rule [a]t one level . . . this implies that even evil works providentially” (199).

8. These glosses on 2 Kings 8:10 appear in Downname L114r.

9. Coverdale sees both pronouns as referring to Elisha. So does Giovanni Diodati, who glosses “until he was ashamed” as “for a long time”—that is, Elisha was made ashamed by the continuation of his staring at Hazael (Cc3r).

10. Hazael’s status under Ben-hadad is unclear in the biblical text but may be parallel to Macbeth’s under Duncan. The Downname annotators find it likely that Ben-hadad would send on such a mission “the greatest in the kingdom next to himself and suggest that Hazael was commander of the king’s armies. On Hazael’s apparently easy ascent to the throne they remark, “It appears by this that none of the Syrians suspected this murder of their King, and therefore questioned not Hazael for it, but quietly suffered him to succeed in the throne, either because the King had no children, and Hazael was of kin to him; or because he was so powerfull as none durst oppose him, or so gracious with the people as they chose him” (L114r–v).

11. See especially 2 Kings 24:2–4 and Jeremiah 25:8–12 on Babylon as God’s agent in punishing Judah: “Therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Because you have not obeyed my words, behold I will send for all the tribes of the north, says the Lord, and for Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and I will bring them against this land and its inhabitants. . . . This whole land shall become a ruin and a waste, and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years. Then after seventy years are completed, I will punish the king of Babylon and that nation, the land of the Chaldeans, for their iniquity.” Note that Babylon, though acting for God’s purposes (“my servant”), does not escape punishment. Armstrong discusses the prophets’ perception of God’s hand in Israel’s disasters as part of Yahweh’s evolution from tribal war-god to the lord of all nations, chastising moral deficiencies in His people (Ch. 2).

12. See 1 Kings 21:19, 23, 29; 2 Kings 9:25–26, 36–37.

13. This argument raises another sort of question, directed this time to the biblical chronicler: why did Yahweh need the usurping Hazeel as His chastising instrument when Ben-hadad was already making war on Israel? The chronicler cannot do a perfect job of retrospectively rationalizing history.

14. My thinking on this subject has been clarified by a discussion with Professor Paul Yachnin of the University of British Columbia.

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TOM CLAYTON

Who “Has No Children” in Macbeth?

He has no children.

Macbeth 4.3.216

He that has no children knows not what love is.

Tilley, Dent C341

The *Masks* of Shakespeare’s plays demonstrate throughout that Shakespeare’s ways make a settled view of his proceedings impossible to maintain unaltered so long as one continues to return to the scene of his playwrighting. The view I hold of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* at this writing is that he is a villain-hero—more than a mere protagonist—fatally ambitious but once full enough of the milk of human kindness to require letting by his wife in order to dare do more than may become a man, and so become none. He lives just long enough to know himself, too well, a regicide and worse, and to die in action by another’s deed of the kind that made him a hero in the first place. He thus restores in a measure, however high his head upon a pole at play’s end, something of the sometime man in place of the type and title of his reign, the Tyrant. He is throughout the observed of all observers, like Hamlet in this and in his vividness of imagination. His hope shattered in “success,” he passes through security to desperation. The Weird Sisters gave him the first two, by his subjective piecing out of the first alone and taking

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the second too trustingly for granted—until he hears the word of promise of his ear broken to his hope in the word of Macduff’s birth from his mother’s womb untimely ripped. The better parts of even a desperate Macbeth are both there in the end, as traces of the man of milk as well as of defender’s blood he was and fleetingly becomes again:

Of all men else I have avoided thee [Macduff].
 But get thee back, my soul is too much charg’d
 With blood of thine already.
 (5.8.4–6)¹

His initial lack of fear is due to his “security,” but even when that proves to have been a delusion he accepts Macduff’s challenge with alacrity:

Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane,
 And thou oppos’d, being of no woman born,
 Yet I will try the last. Before my body
 I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff,
 And damn’d be him that first cries, “Hold, enough!”
 (5.8.30–34)

Famous last words, matter for an epitaph.

In 1.3 with fortune-teller’s trifles like “hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor” (a transfer of title already declared by Duncan in 1.2.64–65 but news to Macbeth) and “hail to thee, that shall be King hereafter,” the Weird Sisters marshalled Macbeth the way that he was going. When he goes of his own volition to visit *them* in 4.1, the dramatic (and literary) design, as foreshadowing, converges with motivation, mimetic action, and significance as prophetic truth itself, the power of which Macbeth seems to have conferred upon the Weird Sisters by killing Duncan and sealing his own fate. Each of their three prophesying caveats comes true—in reverse of the order in which they were given, and Macbeth dies to his deep damnation when he tries “the last”—that is, the first—of the Weird Sisters’ caveats:

Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! Beware Macduff,
 Beware the Thane of Fife.
 (4.1.71–72)²

2

“He has no children.” The half-line is declarative, metrical and limpid, and apparently without depth or guile on anyone’s part—until one asks who

"He" is. And thereby hangs a tale. More hangs on the answer than appears at first glance, and the question requires referring not to those two familiar, mild-mannered misleaders, preemptive paraphrase and tendentious description, but to the primary evidence of word and other action of the context, for an answer. There is an unwritten standing law that quotations should be few and brief; when this law is combined with the fact that readers seldom have a copy of the subject texts open at their side, a not uncommon result is some critical slippage between text and reader, occasionally including slippage between text and critic that is compounded in the reader. The pertinent local context follows, with my interpolations (of 1, 2, and 3) marked by angular brackets. In 4.3, the first subscene consists in the long duologue between Macduff and Malcolm on the latter's fitness for rule that is terminated when the Doctor enters for the subscene concerned with the miracles of Edward the Confessor, which in turn gives way to the third subscene with Ross's entrance (at 160) and arrival from Scotland with news that he is understandably loath and slow to deliver.³ Asked by Macduff, "Stands Scotland where it did?" he replies,

Alas, poor country,
 Almost afraid to know itself! It cannot 165
 Be call'd our mother, but our grave; where nothing,
 But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile;
 Where sighs, and groans, and shrieks that rent the air
 Are made, not mark'd; where violent sorrow seems
 A modern ecstasy. The dead man's knell 170
 Is there scarce ask'd for who, and good men's lives
 Expire before the flowers in their caps,
 Dying or ere they sicken.
Macduff. O relation!
 Too nice, and yet too true.
Malcolm. What's the newest grief?
Ross. That of an hour's age doth hiss the speaker; 175
 Each minute teems a new one.
Macduff. How does my wife?
Ross. Why, well.
Macduff. And all my children?
Ross. Well too.
Macduff. The tyrant has not batter'd at their peace?
Ross. No, they were well at peace when I did leave 'em.⁴ 179

Ross. Your castle is surpris'd; your wife, and babes, 205

Savagely slaughter'd. To relate the manner,
 Were on the quarry of these murther'd deer
 To add the death of you.

<1> *Malcolm*. Merciful heaven!
 What, man, ne'er pull your hat upon your brows;
 Give sorrow words. The grief that does not speak
 Whispers the o'er-fraught heart, and bids it break.⁵ 210

Macduff. My children too? (*to Ross, ignoring Malcolm*)
Ross. Wife, children, servants, all
 That could be found.
Macduff. And I must be from thence!
 My wife kill'd too? (*to Ross*)
Ross. I have said.

<2> *Malcolm*. Be comforted.
 Let's make us med'cines of our great revenge
 To cure this deadly grief. 215

Macduff. He has no children. All my pretty ones?
 (*to Ross, ignoring Malcolm*)
 Did you say all? O hell-kite! <*i.e.*, *Macbeth*> All?
 What, all my pretty chickens, and their dam
 At one fell swoop?

<3> *Malcolm*. Dispute it like a man.
Macduff. I shall do so; (*finally, to Malcolm*) 220
 But I must also feel it as a man;
 I cannot but remember such things were,
 That were most precious to me. Did heaven look on,
 And would not take their part? Sinful Macduff,
 They were all strook for thee! naught that I am, 225
 Not for their own demerits, but for mine,
 Fell slaughter on their souls. Heaven rest them now!
Malcolm. Be this the whetstone of your sword, let grief
 Convert to anger; blunt not the heart, enrage it.
Macduff. O, I could play the woman with mine eyes, 230
 And braggart with my tongue! But, gentle heavens,
 Cut short all intermission. Front to front
 Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself;
 Within my sword's length set him; if he scape,
 Heaven forgive him too!

Malcolm. This [tune] goes manly. 235
 Come go we to the King, our power is ready,
 Our lack is nothing but our leave. Macbeth

Is ripe for shaking, and the pow'rs above
 Put on their instruments. Receive what cheer you may,
 The night is long that never finds the day. 240

Exeunt.

(4.3.164–180, 205–40)

In this triologue, Malcolm is mostly silent but three times speaks briefly to Macduff as prompted by his verbal reactions to Ross's answers. Macduff does not respond to Malcolm, speaking only to Ross, formally and as much or more to himself, finally responding directly to Malcolm only the *third* time Malcolm speaks to him (4.3.219, 220).⁶

So who "has no children" in line 216? Malcolm, who is present, or Macbeth, who is not? The gloss in David Bevington's Bantam edition (1988) reads, "i.e., no father would do such a thing (?), or he (Malcolm) speaks comfort without knowing what such a loss feels like (?)" (4.3.217n). If "no father" is as presumably meant to be Macbeth, this note levels opposing solutions to the problem of ambiguity of reference—the "indeterminacy" or "indefiniteness" of a sort—and the differences of interpretation attending it. To my present way of thinking, the immediate context and the whole scene quite readily disambiguate by themselves, but the local reference in this case is also germane to *Macbeth* and Macbeth in relation to the meaning and significance of the whole play.⁷

When such critical questions arise—about the parental status of the Macbeths, for example—it is natural for students of all kinds to turn from the script itself to diverse authorities, such as current scholarly and reading editions; studies of the play in performance and performances themselves; perennials like A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904) and later discussions like Geoffrey Bullough's *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (1975); and classic essays on or near the subject, notably L. C. Knights's celebrated (and for its title notorious) "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?" and Cleanth Brooks's equally celebrated "Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness." The respective collections of their own essays reprinting these came out in the same year, 1947, two years after the end of World War II, appropriately enough, nearly half a century ago but still—or again—worth reading, along with Bradley and many studies now out of print.

For its comprehensiveness and circumspection the first of all resorted to—and also the last, often enough and for good reason—might well be Marvin Rosenberg's masterful *Masks of Macbeth* (1978), which makes a case both persuasive and (in an appendix) genially speculative for the Macbeths' parenthood. He sums up the critical position at the time as represented by the Variorum edition of 1901–3, which, "canvassing a spectrum of criticism, cites

about as many who refer the *He* to Macbeth as to Malcolm” (554). Perhaps that is still the case at this end of the century, but it is not easy to tell, because when the half-line is not glossed in place or somewhere else it is impossible to know the editor or critic’s view further than to suppose that he must have thought interpretation obvious and a gloss redundant.⁸ And if obvious, then by implication Shakespeare’s unambiguous intention. Editorial silence seems to mean that “He” is Macbeth. The lengthier the gloss, the more likely is identification of “He” as Malcolm, who is technically eligible as “yet / Unknown to woman” (126–27), if he is telling Macduff the truth at that point; but such a contrast suggests that his proponents may protest too much, Occam’s razor-wise.

Perhaps the most self-assured recent case for Malcolm is given by Nicholas Brooke in his Oxford/World’s Classics edition (1990, 4.3.216n):

1. Malcolm would *not offer such a simplistic cure* if he had children of his own; 2. Revenge on Macbeth’s children is impossible because he has none; 3. If Macbeth had children, he would not have slaughtered others. The first sense seems to me *an inevitable snub to Malcolm’s glib haste*. See proverb “he that has no children knows not what love is,” Dent C341 (emphasis mine)

—which proverb applies as well—and better—to Macbeth.

The locus classicus of modern critical reasoning on the subject is Bradley’s Note EE, beginning “Three interpretations have been offered of the words ‘He has no children’” (399). Brooke (1990) naturally follows Bradley’s exposition there with his own “spin,” as does Kenneth Muir without spin in the New Arden edition (1962, 4.3.216n), whose neutral description reads,

There are three explanations of this passage, (i) He [Macduff] refers to Malcolm, who if he had children of his own would *not suggest revenge as a cure* for grief. Cf. *John* III.iv.91: “He talks to me that never had a son.” This was supported by Malone and Bradley. (ii) He refers to Macbeth, on whom he cannot take an appropriate revenge. . . . (iii) He refers to Macbeth, who would never have slaughtered Macduff’s children if he had had any of his own. Cf. *3 Hen. VI* V.v.63: “You have no children, butchers if you had, / The thought of them would have stirred up remorse.” (Delius). *I adhere to (ii)*. (emphasis mine)

Bradley had cited in more detail the parallels in *King John* and *Henry VI, Part Three* (5.5.63): in *King John*, “Pandulph says to Constance, ‘You hold

too heinous a respect of grief,' and Constance answers, 'He talks to me that never had a son'" (399), a parallel supporting Malcolm. In *3H6* "Margaret says to the murderers of Prince Edward, 'You have no children, butchers! if you had, / The thought of them would have stirred up remorse'" (400), a parallel supporting Macbeth; but Bradley "see[s] no argument except that the words of Macduff almost repeat those of Margaret; and this fact does not seem to have much weight. It shows only that Shakespeare might easily use the words in the sense of (c) if that sense were suitable to the occasion" (400).

Bradley's reasoning in favor of Malcolm is sound, as far as it goes, and I do not slight it here in quoting only his conclusions and primary reasons. Unlike Muir later, Bradley could not "think interpretation (*b* [= ii]) the most natural," partly because

Macduff is not the man to conceive at any time the idea of killing children in retaliation; and that he contemplates it *here*, even as a suggestion, I find it hard to believe. . . . Macduff listens only to Ross. . . . When Malcolm interrupts, therefore, he puts aside his suggestion with four words spoken to himself, or (less probably) to Ross (his relative, who knew his wife and children), and continues his agonised questions and exclamations. (400)⁹

There are two main arguments *against* Macduff's referring to Malcolm. The first and most obvious is the immediate dramatic context itself. The difference between Bradley's neutral and Brooke's indignant characterizing of Malcolm's attempted interventions demonstrates the latitude and subjectivity of perception here, but the primary emphasis should be not on Malcolm's "glib haste" (or whatever it is) but on what Macduff's dialogue shows of himself: he is in shock, preoccupied with his loss and its causes, his guilty absence as he sees it and the murderer acting in his absence. He gives no hint that he even hears Malcolm until his third try; and, while an actor's delivery could easily effect a glancing reference to Malcolm, such reference is gratuitous, the more so in reproach of Malcolm. In the lines in question, 216–19, his concentration alternates between his murdered children and their murderer—"He" (Macbeth), all his children, "hell-kite" Macbeth, his children and their mother:

Macduff. He has no children. All my pretty ones?
(*to Ross, ignoring Malcolm*)
Did you say all? O hell-kite! (*i.e., Macbeth*) All?
What, all my pretty chickens and their dam
At one fell swoop?

This intense concentration does not change direction until Malcolm's "Dispute it like a man." From there to the end of the scene Malcolm and the just retribution in prospect carry his attention and his animus, which includes his self-rebuke to "sinful Macduff and his invoking "gentle heavens" to

Cut short all intermission. Front to front
 Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself;
 Within my sword's length set him; if he scape,
 Heaven forgive him too!
 (4.3.231–35)

The scene ends on a stirring martial note that heralds the coming end of oppression and the Tyrant, advancing the "Western" aspect of *Macbeth* toward the showdown and the morality play that combines poetic justice with the tragic finale.

I should add that I think—not everyone does—that Malcolm's character in the entire play and in this scene as King-in-waiting is that of a worthy successor to Duncan very like his father, one whose attempted interventions with Macduff seem intended to be seen as sympathetic, and tentative and inexperienced in such cases rather than as gauche, callow, and deserving of rebuke.¹⁰ Within the earlier part of the scene there is little enough to go on, however, which partly justifies Bradley and others' confining their attention to the immediate context alone: earlier Macduff was first shocked by Malcolm's confession of his vices of lust and avarice, and then stunned by his abrupt change when convinced of Macduff's integrity. Not surprisingly, to Malcolm's "Why are you silent?" then, he replies laconically, "Such welcome and unwelcome things at once / 'Tis hard to reconcile" (137–39).

3

The second argument and the more telling is the connection of him who "has no children" with the play as a whole. With Malcolm as "He," there is no connection of consequence, and the effect is local and the line an ephemeral throwaway. With Macbeth as "He," there is profound and reverberating resonance, and the line articulates a theme of the play and tacit motive of the protagonist hinted at elsewhere but made explicit—and succinctly so—here. As L. C. Knights describes one aspect of it (*Explorations* 40n), "The Macbeth–Banquo opposition is emphasized when we learn that Banquo's line will 'stretch out to the cracke of Doome' (4.1.117). Macbeth is cut off from the natural sequence, '*He has no children*' (4.3.217), he is a 'Monster' (5.7.54). Macbeth's *isolation* is fully brought out in the last Act" (emphasis mine).

The ambiguous question of parental status is forced tantalizingly upon any interpreter's attention, critical or theatrical, at several points. Presumably we are meant to believe that Lady Macbeth has "given suck" (1.7.54), as she says she has;¹¹ and though Macbeth tells her to "Bring forth men-children only!" (1.7.72), there is no evidence in the received text of when she might have had this experience of breast-feeding (a Scottish practice not shared by upper-class English women), and no explicit reference made to a child or children dead or alive begotten by Macbeth *or* born to Lady Macbeth. In the sources Lady Macbeth had at least one son (Lulach) by an earlier marriage (to Gillecomgain, Bullough 433), and those may well explain the origin of "I have given suck"—but cannot explain its significance and effect in the play as we have it, where the details in context are

I have given suck, and know
 How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;
 I would, while it was smiling in my face,
 Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
 And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
 Have done to this.
 (1.7.54–59)

In a play in which others' children figure so prominently by themselves and in relation to their parents—Banquo's, Duncan's, Macduff's and Lady Macduff's, Old Siward's, and one might add the second and third Apparitions as well as Banquo's royal descendants—this is a curious oversight. Certain it is that Macbeth is haunted by his fear of Banquo, for "'Tis much he dares" (3.1.50), despite the fact that he might well find reason for security in Banquo's further strength, that "He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valor / To act in safety" (52–53), except that "under him / My genius is rebuked, as it is said / Mark Antony's was by Caesar" (54–56). He immediately recalls of the Weird Sisters that speaking to Banquo,

prophet-like,
 They hail'd him father to a line of kings.
 Upon my head they plac'd a *fruitless crown*,
 And put a *barren sceptre* in my gripe,
 Thence to be wrench'd with an unlineal hand,
 No son of mine succeeding. If 't be so,
 For Banquo's issue have I fil'd my mind,
 For them the gracious Duncan have I murder'd,
 Put rancors in the vessel of my peace

Only for them, and mine eternal jewel
 Given to the common enemy of man,
 To make them kings—the seeds of Banquo kings!
 Rather than so, come fate into the list,
 And champion me to th' utterance!
 (58–71, emphasis mine)¹²

“No son of mine” stillborn or otherwise dead, or living now, or to be born hereafter. But one thing is very clear about the play as we have it, that we see no Macbeth child, son or daughter, and we hear no unequivocal reference to one. It would be reasonable (if idle) therefore to infer that Macbeth offspring were little if at all on Shakespeare’s mind, as they well might not be, since he had none in the sources. “Following” sources in silence leaves ambiguous traces (propter hoc or only post hoc?), but the play as it is concentrated on Macbeth, the relationship between wife and husband, and to a lesser extent Lady Macbeth herself.¹³

It is surprising that in his classic essay on the play Cleanth Brooks says nothing at all about these matters, but as his title implies his interest was especially in the contrasting symbolism of pity, as with “the naked babe” of 1.7, and with the mere “cloak of manliness” of one who dressed but could not act the part (“Now does he feel his title / Hang loose about him, liked giant’s robe / Upon a dwarfish thief,” 5.2.20–22ff.)

It is not surprising that L. C. Knights in his ironically witty title did not address his own question, because his purpose in discussing “a re-orientation of Shakespeare criticism” (*Explorations* 15, “How Many” part 1) was to discourage the study of Shakespeare’s characters as persons in their own right beyond the limits of the plays in which they are articulated.

[T]he bulk of Shakespeare criticism is concerned with his characters, his heroines, his love of Nature or his “philosophy”—with everything, in short, except with the words on the page, which it is the main business of the critic to examine. I wish to consider . . . how this paradoxical state of affairs arose. To examine the historical development of the kind of criticism that is mainly concerned with “character” is to strengthen the case against it. (20)

Concluding, with the polemical exclusiveness usual to theoretical claim-staking, that “the only profitable approach to Shakespeare is a consideration of his plays as dramatic poems, of his use of language to obtain a total complex emotional response” (20), in part 2 he asks “How should we read Shakespeare?” and gives as example a detailed analysis of *Macbeth* (ii), beginning “*Macbeth* is a statement of evil” (32)—“but it is a statement not

of a philosophy but of ordered emotion" (45). In keeping with his method, he says nothing of the "I have given suck" speech in relation to character or action, but finds it an instance of "the violence of the imagery" that complements "explicit references to the unnatural" (37).¹⁴

Both essays seem to me salutary for and beyond their day, and I see little enough to fault in either their orientation or their particular treatment, insofar as both were very much interested in the play as written, and attending to important aspects of the play previously neglected or ignored altogether. Because they are critical and text/script-centered, such addresses translate readily enough into the terms of theatrical performance and criticism.

4

The local (in 4.3) and the global (the whole play, its world and its action) reciprocally affect each other according to the reader's interpretation or the actor's expression of their relationship and may also be said to affect each other, according to how either is interpreted and given priority, entailing a correlative significance in the other. If the Macbeths have children, or at least a child, then it would be nonsense for Macduff to say Macbeth "has no children." If there is no evidence that the Macbeths at the time of the play's action have children, for all practical purposes they have not. And it matters especially that Macbeth "has no children."

Closest to his wife in our perception when she reads his letter aloud before we see them together and again when they plan and execute their regicidal plot, Macbeth is by degrees cut off first from her, as he becomes progressively more depressed, fearful, and finally desperate; and then from virtually all but Seyton, by which time he has

... liv'd long enough: my way of life
 Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf,
 And that which should accompany old age,
 As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
 I must not look to have; but in their stead,
 Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath,
 Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.
 (5.3.22–28)

There is no mention of the unique solace of children, here, and the prospect of living progeny, greater than the earlier greatest, is behind. Macbeth is alone to face his future—his death and his damnation.

Finally, Macbeth's barrenness is significant as an unspecified but implicit motive for his killing others and their children, and it is significant in

another—perhaps more—important way as symbolizing a moral desiccation and a spiritual sterility contrasting with the symbolic green thumbs (or fingers) of the “gardener”-kings, both Duncan the unfortunate and too trusting, who in 1.4.28–29 says he has “begun to *plant* thee [Macbeth], and will labor / To make thee full of *growing*”; and his son and heir, Malcolm, who, summing up his immediate obligations and responsibilities at the end of the play, says,

What’s more to do
Which would be *planted* newly with the time,
.....
... This, and what needful else
That calls upon us, by the grace of Grace,
We will perform in measure, time, and place.
(5.9.30–31, 37–39, emphasis added)

5

Although the play, scene, and dialogue require identification of “He” for performance and for audience (and reader) understanding, a stage direction so refined might well seem impossible, Shavian, or absurd: easy enough as “glances at Malcolm” or “he means Macbeth” (SDs no editor understandably has seen fit to supply), but inevitably somewhat Shavian, and therefore not Shakespearean, if meant to indicate Macbeth and, more, suggest an array of nuances in action and verbal expression scarcely to be scored. It seems doubtful whether many stage or screen Macbeths can have referred “He has no children” to Malcolm, and I can say with certainty that Colum Convey did not in the most recent *Macbeth* I have seen, not at least on the evening of 21 August 1996 at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre.¹⁵

I admire unabashedly a view that humanizes a protagonist increasingly desperate and cornered by entertaining as his motive his natural concern for his son’s patrimony, and on that account I warmly applaud “Lady Macbeth’s Indispensable Child” (Rosenberg, *Masks* 671–76), the more so when the author’s witty caveat is over the entrance to qualify his generosity:

Every Shakespearean is entitled to an imaginative speculation now and then, as long as he labels it speculation. This appendix speculates on an *extra-textual* possibility in the staging of *Macbeth*. Anti-speculationists are warned. (671, author’s emphasis)

No anti-speculationist I, just a pro-inferentialist, to whom 4.3 and the play say and show that Macbeth is the man of the hour in his play until he is out of time, a giant even as a “dwarfish thief,” the Tyrant whose assassins

have indeed battered at the peace of Macduff's wife and children (and also brought them the peace that passeth all understanding), and the King of fruitless crown and barren scepter accordingly on Macduff's distracted—hypothetical—mind as "He" who "has no children" and has been driven to desperation and libericide to try to prevent a future that comes upon him *pari passu* with his striving. That seems to be what makes *Macbeth* a tragedy, what made Macbeth Macbeth.

NOTES

1. Quotations from *Macbeth* are from G. Blakemore Evans's *Riverside Shakespeare*, 2d ed. (1997).

Modern editions differ in the number of scenes in act 5. Hunter has six scenes. The Folio (followed by Brooke) has seven, occupying TLN 2395–2529 on a single opening at nn3^v–4^r (758–59 of Charlton Hinman's *Facsimile*). Editions with eight scenes (e.g., Bevington, Foakes, Harbage) begin scene 8 at TLN 2435 ("Why should I play the Roman fool, and die"). Editions with nine scenes (e.g., Dent, Evans, Muir) begin 9 at TLN 2477 ("I would the friends we miss were safe arriv'd"). Wells and Taylor (and after them Greenblatt) have eleven scenes, distinguishing two scenes at TLN 2415 ("That way the noise is. Tyrant, show thy face!") and 2427 ("This way, my lord, the castle's gently render'd").

There are typographical and formal reasons (e.g., "Exeunt" and "Exit") in F itself for nine or eleven scenes, but the practical effects on the stage or in the reading are slight indeed; and, since fewer than 100 lines are involved, passages are easily located in any text.

2. For "the last" as fulfilling *the first* of the Weird Sisters' caveats, see my note, "Macbeth's 'Yet I will try the last' What?" The *last* caveat given in 4.1 is the *first* to be realized in a moving Birnam wood in 5.5; the second ("none of woman born") remains second, leaving the first given as "the *last*" to be tried.

3. Stephen Booth (106–11) gives detailed and witty attention both to 4.3 and "to Malcolm's behavior" as "the most perverse element in a perverse scene" (107), concluding that "Malcolm and Macduff are and remain our allies, but in the morally insignificant terms of our likes and dislikes as audience to an entertainment they are—because this scene is—irritating to us" (111). "Shakespeare develops the socially and emotionally awkward exchange between Ross and Macduff in such a way that it resembles the work of a clumsy playwright. Not only does Macduff have to prod Ross, he does so in lines that lack verisimilitude and seem prompted by the despair of a writer who does not know his trade" (110). One doesn't have to share this view to find it thoughtfully and productively provocative.

4. Similar circumlocutory dialogue continues until Ross gives the awful news, beginning in line 204.

5. Lines 208–9 may go some way to explain the apparent design of Lear's last speech—a single half-line—and death in the 1608 Quarto version of the play, "Breake hart, I prethe breake" (L3), *if* the line in Q is Lear's by design and not by misplaced speech-heading: it is Kent's line in the Folio.

6. Evans and Muir make a single line of blank verse of the part-lines (220). Bevington, and Wells and Taylor (+ Greenblatt), treat both Malcolm's speech of

three iambic feet and the two feet of the first line of Macduff's reply as short lines aligned with the left margin, like the ambiguous Folio (TLN 2069–70), in which part-lines of blank verse are all so aligned. Brooke leaves "I shall do so" as a short line, joining "Dispute it like a man" with "At one fell swoop?" (219). The distinction among the three would be lost in the theater and is of mainly editorial significance—there being some justification for all three—on the page.

7. Most undergraduates, in my experience, infer without hesitation that "He" is Macbeth, which I accordingly take to be the natural, spontaneous reading and often assume without comment in discussing the play in the classroom—where in spring 1996 Oliver Thoenen, a history major originally from the United Kingdom, who had done *Macbeth* on his A levels, rightly drew me up short with the note in Bevington's Bantam edition (just quoted). The present essay germinated from class discussion of the matter.

8. Among post-1950s editors silent on "He" are Dent, Evans, Harbage, Hunter, and Greenblatt. I sympathize with this exercise of editorial restraint.

9. Noting that Bradley "strongly supported the view that this refers to Malcolm," R. A. Foakes (1968) continues that "it is more often taken as a reference to Macbeth" and that he "think[s] Macduff has Macbeth in mind" (4.3.216, 127).

10. Garry Wills has recently expressed the view that

Malcolm becomes a physician to Macduff's grief for his wife and children. . . . It is true that Malcolm is manipulative here, as in the testing scenes. He is fashioning Macduff into an instrument of his purpose. . . . The shrewd manipulator is far closer to James's image of himself than is the wimp or milksop Malcolm so often seen on the stage. Malcolm only takes his proper station in the play if we see him as the great counter-witch pitted against Macbeth. He has "purged" and strengthened Macduff. Now he launches him at the target, "devilish Macbeth." (123–24)

11. There is in fact no way of knowing whether she remembers or fantasizes—as well as no reason to doubt her. Thus it is easy to see why some might argue that Shakespeare fulfilled his dramatic intentions in the contextual impact of this speech, without giving further thought to the child or children alluded to, presumably because not part of his envisioning and design. Stephen Booth writes that "Lady Macbeth's mysteriously missing children present an ominous, unknown, but undeniable time before the beginning" (94); and that's true, too.

12. It is significant that while Macduff invokes "gentle heaven" to related purposes, Macbeth invokes "fate" and brings it on himself, not unassisted but of his own will in a special application of the idea that "character is fate" (Novelis), which George Eliot (*The Mill on the Floss*, 1860) thought "one of his questionable aphorisms" (6.5) but Thomas Hardy approved (*The Mayor of Casterbridge*, 1886, chap. 17). The idea is expressed first in the West by Heraclitus: ἦθος ἀνθρώπων δαίμων.

13. In round numbers supplied by Marvin Spevack's Character Concordance (in vol. 3, *Tragedies*) based on the first edition of Evans's *Riverside Shakespeare*, Macbeth has 32% of the dialogue to Lady Macbeth's 12%, ranking fifth in percentage of dialogue behind Hamlet (of course; 39%), Timon (36%), Henry V (33%), and Iago (33%—.02% less than Henry).

14. It follows that his treatment of 4.3 looks beyond character: "the conversation between Macduff and Malcolm has never been adequately explained" (42). It has three functions, "but the main purpose of the scene is obscured unless we realize its function as choric commentary. In alternating speeches the evil that Macbeth has caused is explicitly stated, without extenuation. And it is stated impersonally" (43)—and he quotes in illustration. Since in much of the scene "the impersonal function of the speaker is predominant, . . . [t]here are only two alternatives: either Shakespeare was a bad dramatist, or his critics have been badly misled by mistaking the *dramatis personae* for real persons in this scene" (44).

15. Tim Albery, director; Roger Allam as Macbeth. Cf. Rosenberg:

In the theatre some Macduffs have alluded to Macbeth, some to Malcolm. The *New Monthly Magazine*, in 1828, complaining about one stage Macduffs implication that Macbeth was meant, argued for Malcolm, "who is so forward with his counsel to a heartbroken father." . . . [Leigh] Hunt, too, saw Macduff turning away from Malcolm as "unable to understand a father's feelings," rather to Ross, for sympathy. When a Macduff of Kean's played it as Hunt suggested, the critic was impressed at the "deep and true effect . . . far beyond that which can be produced by any denunciation of impotent vengeance." (554)

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RALPH BERRY

Macbeth: The Sexual Underplot

The centrality of *Desire* and *Act* in *Macbeth* is obvious enough, and has received its due of recognition.¹ I want here to concentrate on the deep ambivalence of these terms, that is, their impregnation with sexual and nonsexual meanings. Nothing need be said of the “innocent” senses of these terms. They are the stuff of everyday discourse and need no comment. But the course of the action suggests a sexual coloration, which offers a perspective on the psychology of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and thus on the archetypal action of the drama. In this, Shakespeare is following the linguistic strategy of *Measure for Measure*, in which a number of generally innocent terms are increasingly seen to bear a heavily sexual charge, until finally all becomes overt in the duke’s proposal of marriage. But in *Macbeth*, the action around which the sexual meanings cluster occurs early: killing the king. It is to this action that our inquiry into the sexual vibrations of the piece must be directed.

* * *

Macbeth’s early invocation “Stars, hide your fires; / Let not light see my black and deep desires” (1.4.50–51) initiates the sequence. On it, Jorgensen comments: “The black and deep desires—an expression which by its vagueness enhances the terrible sense of obscure evil—are not to be exposed

From *Tragic Instance: The Sequence of Shakespeare’s Tragedies*, pp. 150–63, 221–22. Copyright © 1999 by Associated University Presses.

to the light of moral vocabulary.”² It is precisely this obscurity (Jorgensen well describes it as a linguistic characteristic of the play³) that creates an imaginative hinterland where meanings can breed. Here, the association of “desire” with “night” and (implied) “shame” is at least interesting. Macbeth’s letter to his wife phrases his impulse a little more provocatively: “When I burned in desire to question them further . . .” (1.5.3–4). This scene then clarifies into Lady Macbeth’s great invocation. “Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here” (1.5.40–41), and the sexual presence in the play becomes overt.

It is manifest in the encounter between Macbeth and his wife later in the scene. As a general rule in Shakespeare, linguistic meanings cannot adequately be considered in a lexical vacuum. The words are charged with meanings by theater itself. Here, the stage context is the meeting between Macbeth and his lady. It is unnecessary today to dispose of the idea that Lady Macbeth is a stage virago, a repellent termagant. That was a cliché of stage practice that has long been allowed to lapse.⁴ There is no textual reason to doubt the mien and attraction of the “Fair and noble hostess,” as Duncan calls her (1.6.24). With her, Macbeth is on terms of deep intimacy and regard. Other indications aside, the terms of address are decisive. “My dearest partner of greatness” is in Macbeth’s letter (1.5.11), and his first words on greeting her are “My dearest love” (1.5.58). Moreover, when Duncan says

but he rides well,
And his great love, sharp as his spur, hath hold him
To his home before us.
(1.6.22–24)

he leaves it tactfully open as to whether “love” refers to Macbeth’s solicitude for Duncan, or his desire to greet his wife. The latter possibility is scarcely dispelled by Duncan’s reference to “Fair and noble hostess,” which follows immediately. The intimacy between Macbeth and his wife is the fundamental stage fact on which all the sexual possibilities in the language of the two are based.

These possibilities arise almost immediately in their dialogue. Lady Macbeth’s imposition of will over her husband has a subtext of sexual suasion:

He that’s coming
Must be provided for; and you shall put
This night’s great business into my dispatch,
Which shall to all our nights and days to come
Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.
(1.5.66–70)

This, following the sequence *beguile, bear welcome in your eye, Your hand, your tongue*, reads like a scarcely veiled sexual promise. Why “nights”? And why the order, “nights *and days*”? But it is in the great encounter of 1.7 that these possibilities arise in their most striking and concentrated form. Macbeth’s soliloquy ends in

I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself
And falls on th’other.
(1.7.25–28)

There is a generally available sexual symbolism in riding, to be invoked or ignored as occasion warrants. Sometimes Shakespeare makes open use of the symbolism, as in *Henry V* (the pre-Agincourt dialogue in the French camp, 3.7.44–58) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (“Ride on the pants triumphing,” 4.8.16). Often an explicit reference to riding has no symbolic value whatever, since it is a necessary observation of a literal fact. Here, Macbeth’s language is totally metaphoric (there is no formal necessity for alluding to riding), so there is free play for associations. These, beginning with “spur,” hark back to Duncan’s “great love, sharp as his spur”; and the whole sequence of “spur,” “prick,” “vaulting,” “o’erleaps,” “falls on th’other” has a repeated sexual reference. The soliloquy is interrupted at this point in the most significant of tunings:

Enter Lady Macbeth

There follows Macbeth’s attempt to back off and Lady Macbeth’s counter. Her speech demands quotation in its entirety:

Was the hope drunk
Wherein you dress’d yourself? Hath it slept since?
And wakes it now, to look so green and pale
At what it did so freely? From this time
Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem’st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting “I dare not” wait upon “I would,”
Like the poor cat i’t’h’adage?
(1.7.36–46)

Her rhetoric is imbued with sexuality, and it conditions the mode in which Macbeth perceives the enterprise. Consider the sequence: “drunk,” “dress’d,” “slept,” “wakes” suggest purely a carousal; but “At what it did so freely” begins to insinuate a sexual possibility into the revel, which is enhanced by the shift from “you” to the intimate “thou” form. “Such I account thy love” immediately links this metaphoric possibility with his feelings for her—and moreover leaves open the extent of the parallelism initiated by “Such.” Is “thy love” a continuous state of feeling, or an act? It seems the ambiguity meets its resolution in the next line, “To be the same in thine own act and valour / As thou art in desire.” Clearly, “act” carries over some of the sexual energy in “love” (and is reinforced by “desire”) while simultaneously affirming the sense of *action*. “Act” is always a chameleon word, and here is colored by the sexual potential present throughout the speech. The subtextual wave laps around everything hereabouts: I am not even convinced that “ornament of life” refers so unequivocally to the crown as editors assume.

The general sense of the passage has long been recognized. “Lady Macbeth,” as D. W. Harding observes, “commits him to the role not of manhood, but of what she imagines manhood should be.”⁵ It is the business of *Macbeth* to parse the word *man* exhaustively, and the dialogue turns here on a perfectly clear if unstated sense of the word:

Macbeth. Prithee, peace!
 I dare do all that may become a man;
 Who dares do more is none.
Lady Macbeth. What beast was’t, then,
 That made you break this enterprise to me?
 When you durst do it, then you were a man;
 And, to be more than what you were, you would
 Be so much more the man.
 (1.7.46–52)

A man acts: and *action* is validated by the sexual approval of his mate. Macbeth’s perception of the event is deeply colored by the vision and the person of his wife. She clinches her argument:

When in swinish sleep
 Their drenched natures lie as in a death,
 What cannot you and I perform upon
 Th’unguarded Duncan? What not put upon
 His spongy officers, who shall bear the guilt
 Of our great quell?
 (1.7.68–73)

These lines are the culmination of Lady Macbeth's appeal and of her sexual rhetoric. "Perform" is the most obviously important of the chameleon words here. It alerts us to the underlying sense of the passage. But consider the five lines as a whole. The syntactic force of the impulse is active, transitive: the "spongy" officers are to receive what is put upon them, and "quell" becomes that which is achieved upon others. The syntax conduces to the half-realized metaphor which lies just beyond formulation here. The furniture, so to speak, of the unstated action is the bed. The words are "sleep," "lie," "perform upon," "put upon," "bear" (with its dual suggestion of "receive imprint" and "give birth to"). The tenor of the passage is sexual congress, and its final term, "great quell," is the achievement of the act.

Our great quell. The commentaries, with their usual solidarity in the face of difficulties, offer a single gloss on "quell": murder, killing, slaying. If it meant only that, Shakespeare might just as well have written "Our great kill," which works perfectly well to accommodate the exigencies of scansion and editors. But Lady Macbeth's language is characterized by evasion or euphemism ("business," "enterprise," and so on), and "kill" is far too direct for her. "Quell" means something that "kill" does not. It is a curious word, used as a substantive by Shakespeare only in this passage. Its meaning must assimilate the verbal meanings of *quell*, and of the verb there is only a handful of instances in Shakespeare.⁶ These instances comprehend *OED* sense 2: "To destroy, put an end to, suppress, extinguish, etc." and sense 3: "To crush or overcome (a person or a thing); to subdue, vanquish, reduce to subjection or submission; to force down to." The general meaning of "suppress," "subdue" is clearly permissible. But suppress what? The obvious associates are rebellion, insurrection, and so on. But Rabelais—in Urquhart's translation—thought that "Carnal concupiscence is cooled and quelled . . . by the means of wine."⁷ Parallel, and even more striking, is a passage from Shakespeare himself:

Timon. plague all,
That your activity may defeat and quell
The source of all erection.
(*Timon of Athens*, 4.3.164–66)

In each of these passages, "quell" has the idea of suppressing (male) sexual potency. They do, I think, establish that the sexual tenor of Lady Macbeth's suasion endures to the final word. I add an outer but not remote possibility. The *OED* gives a rare sense of the verb *quell* (citing a 1340 usage) "To well out, flow" which is congruent with the argument here. It also relates well to the earlier "spongy." This other possibility reinforces but does not disturb the position. In sum: I hold that "quell" comprises the uppermost sense, "killing," and the underlying sense of "subdue sexual desire." Since the most

direct way of subduing sexual desire is to yield to it, “quell” becomes a metaphor for killing the king. In this, the word fits naturally and climactically into the sequence of terms that comprise the sexual underplot.

The message is understood by Macbeth. He and his lady have no difficulty with their oblique and nuanced communication. “Bring forth men-children only” is his tribute, and at that moment it is much more than a simple recognition of her dauntlessness. A further question and answer, then comes Macbeth’s decision. He delivers it in the mode in which their entire dialogue has been framed, and he assents, not so much to the argument, as to the metaphor:

I am settled, and bend up
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.
(80–81)

“Bend up”: howsoever the force of this metaphor is diffused over the body generally (“Each corporal agent”), its prime meaning originates from one agent only. At this play’s heart of darkness, the killing of the king is conceived as phallic.

* * *

During this phase of the action, the play’s language is saturated with the covert sexuality I have described. The opening lines of the following scene (2.1), the apparently normal dialogue between Banquo and Fleance, convey oddly sexual overtones. Thus

Fleance. The moon is down . . .
Banquo. And she goes down at twelve . . .
Hold, take my sword. There’s husbandry in heaven . . .
[cf. Lucio’s pun on “husbandry,” *Measure for Measure*, 1.4.44.]
Their candles are all out.
(2.1.2–5)

Is Shakespeare implying a kind of oblique report on Macbeth and his wife? At all events, the thematic ligature binding the consecutive scenes, 1.7 and 2.1, is sexual. Macbeth, in his following soliloquy, formalizes the matter. He identifies himself with

wither’d murder,
Alarum’d by his sentinel, the wolf

Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
 With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
 Moves like a ghost.

(2.1.53–57)

“Tarquin's ravishing strides:” the nature of the deed receives open confirmation.

Now on to the second scene and Lady Macbeth. Her opening lines, uttered in a state of high excitement, would in a different play-context (as, comedy of manners) pass easily as erotic:

That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold;
 What hath quench'd them hath given me fire.

(2.2.1–2)

Lady Macbeth has taken wine with the two attendants. She has now left Duncan's bedchamber, leaving her husband to commit the murder. But the act is incomplete:

And 'tis not done. Th'attempt and not the deed
 Confounds us.

(2.2.10–11)

“Deed:” there is here the same terrible ambivalence that Middleton knew in “Y'are the deed's creature.”⁸ The words she breathes on Macbeth's return are of infinite significance: “My husband.” She never calls him this at any other time. It is at this moment that their union is, by her, most fully acknowledged. Query or recognition? The Folio gives a query after “My husband,” while modern editors allow her an exclamation. We need in effect both, for the qualities of wonder, doubt, and recognition are in her greeting.

Recognition is the theme of the question–answer passage that follows. Consider the dark awareness of meaning, the precognition vital to Shakespeare, in

Macbeth. Who lies i'the second chamber? . . .

.....

Lady Macbeth. There are two lodged together.

(2.2.17, 23)

It is editorial officiousness to identify the “two lodged together” as Malcolm and Donalbain, and not the two grooms. A literal meaning does not arise

readily from the passage at all. The only two who matter are Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, “lodged together.” It is the meaning of the event *for them* that is the dominant fact of the drama and impregnates their words. So, “sleep no more,” the thought which catches hold of Macbeth, is countered with Lady Macbeth’s

Why, worthy thane,
You do unbend your noble strength, to think
So brainsickly of things.
(2.2.42–44)

“Unbend” answers the “bend up / Each corporal agent” of 1.7. The implied phallic image has a consistent narrative development, for now the idea is of failure, of one “infirm of purpose,” disturbed by interruptions and knockings. The close of 2.2. (responding to the opening of 2.1) gives us terms that point again toward bed, this time with wholly changed implications:

Lady Macbeth. retire we to our chamber . . .
.....
Get on your nightgown, lest occasion call us,
And show us to be watchers.
(2.2.64, 68–69)

But now the potential is stilled by circumstances and tone.

* * *

This point, as Shakespeare demonstrates, is made more clear in the ensuing scene, the Porter’s. Now the play’s sexuality moves out from the hinterland and assumes explicit form. Shakespeare’s strategy, as so often, is to use his clowns to make plain that which was previously implicit. The “lechery” passage, then, fits easily with this strategy. But first, consider the symbolist setting. To the mass of commentary on the Porter’s scene, I add that the dark room has a natural womb referent; and “turning the key,” together with “knocking,” are commonplace usage for sexual entry.⁹ This is symbolist drama, and the scene’s hell references take over the senses of *hell* that Shakespeare explores in Sonnet 144 (“Two loves I have of comfort and despair”). The key line is “I guess one angel in another’s hell” (line 12), and the best coverage is Stephen Booth’s. His immediate gloss is “(1) each is a punishment for the other; they are one another’s punishment; (2) one angel (the man) is in the other’s (the woman’s) hell.”¹⁰ Booth goes on to quote Ingram and Redpath on line 12:

Several meanings appear to be present: (1) they are both in the “Hell” or middle-den of a game of barley-break; (2) as contemporaries averred, such a position was often used as a pretext for a sexual tumble; (3) “Hell” is probably also, as in Boccaccio’s story of Rustico and Alibech (*Decameron*, III, 10), the female sexual organ.¹¹

These associations, particularly (2) and (3), appear to me to bear directly upon *hell-gate*, the symbolist milieu of the Porter. The associations of sexuality (stemming from the female organ) and joint punishment for sin are paramount.

In the play, the actual intruders turn out to be Macduff and Lennox. I agree with Dowden’s speculation that we “should ask whether Shakespeare did not make the porter use this word . . . with unconscious reference to Macbeth, who even then had begun to find that he could not equivocate to heaven.”¹² “Equivocate” is Macbeth’s word, and he, unmentioned, is behind everything the Porter says. The connection is carried forward into this sardonic account of the matter:

Porter. Lechery, sir, it provokes, and unprovokes; it provokes desire, but takes away the performance. Therefore much drink may be said to be an equivocator with lechery: it makes him, and it mars him; it sets him on, and it takes him off; it persuades him, and disheartens him; makes him stand to, and not stand to; in conclusion, equivocates him in a sleep, and, giving him the lie, leaves him.

(2.3.28–35)

High tragedy become for a moment *opera buffa*, and there is a gross parody of the sexual impulse that has animated Macbeth. The idea is one of aspiration and failure, and this is the best single version of Macbeth’s activities throughout the play. But the Porter’s lines open out an additional vista, which the play’s tinning leaves technically available. Does he, in effect, identify literally the failure of Macbeth?

The language of the play speaks to us on several levels, and moreover sexual action in *Macbeth* may be conceived of in several ways. It may be thought of as a “pure” metaphor (desire for the throne is akin to desire for anything else), or as an impulse that flows around the margin of the possible, or as a literal fact, untranslated. We shall not expect Shakespeare to close up his options for us. His art is to multiply possibilities, to preserve the sense of life constantly oscillating between metaphor and literal, between

analogue and the thing itself—and of a reality that embraces both. I point out, then, that the Porter’s address to Macduff and Lennox has the force of a derisive epitome of Macbeth’s relations with his lady. In the logic of stage time, this is a possible if unlikely outcome. The several minutes of Macbeth’s absence offstage (though lengthened in stage dynamics by the slowness of the Porter) scarcely furnish an ideal opportunity, and the psychology of the moment, for both, is shock. But we have to remember the nature of Lady Macbeth’s appeal in 1.7 and of the unstatable idea, which Shakespeare had stated explicitly near the beginning of his career. It occurs in *Titus Andronicus*, that repository of information concerning the operations of the subconscious. Chiron and Demetrius, having slain Bassianus, resolve to take his wife upon her dead husband:

Chiron. Drag hence her husband to some secret hole,
And make his dead trunk pillow to our lust.
(2.3.129–30)

I think it implausible that Shakespeare, in *Macbeth*, had forgotten what he knew during the writing of *Titus Andronicus*. But the main thrust of the Porter’s epitome surely lies toward the future. There is a long-range failure of aspiration and act, and everything in the text tells us that it is lodged in the bed of the “two lodged together.”

* * *

The play now moves into what, even so early, is in metaphor its latter phase. The idea of impotence and failure cannot be developed, only restated. Time and again the note of failure and doubt, often with a glancing sexual reference, is struck. There is an obvious hint in Banquo’s “And when we have our naked frailties hid, / That suffer in exposure” (2.3.127–28), and in Macbeth’s response: “Let’s briefly put on manly readiness” (2.3.134). The definitive statement is given to Lady Macbeth:

Nought’s had, all’s spent,
Where our desire is got without content.
(3.2.6–7)

“Spent” has the senses of expenditure, loss and waste, and sexual discharge. Partridge gives for *spend* “to discharge seminally,”¹³ and his citation from *All’s Well That Ends Well* is unarguable:

Parolles. He wears his honour in a box unseen,
That hugs his kicky-wicky here at home,
Spending his manly marrow in her arms . . .
(2.3.278–80)

It is reinforced by “The expense of spirit in a waste of shame.” “Spent,” then, joins “desire” and “content” in a grouping of chameleon words.

In the subliminal narrative there is a certain resistance to the process of failure. In 3.2 Lady Macbeth is still “love” (32), “dear wife” (39), “dearest chuck” (48). But this resistance diminishes. The motif of failure returns in 3.4, following the apparition of Banquo, and it comes out in these comments from Lady Macbeth: “O, these flaws and starts . . .” (63); “What, quite unmann’d in folly?” (74); and “Only it spoils the pleasure of the time” (99). To this impression of twitching, pleasureless impotence may be added the caricature of abject weakness contained in Macbeth’s “And push us from our stools” (83). “Stool,” ludicrously, enlarges the hint in “purg’d” (77). The dialectic of weakness and resistance continues, but with a sense of ebbing powers, and the final words that Macbeth exchanges onstage with his wife contain the strangely imprecise hint of something lacking, that resolution cannot supply:

Macbeth. Come, we’ll to sleep. My strange and self-abuse
Is the initiate fear that wants hard use.
We are yet but young in deed.
(3.4.143–45)

The sleep-walking scene is the final statement of the sexual underplot. It is the terminal revelation of Lady Macbeth’s mind, and in the play’s design it is a kind of replay of 2.1–2, the murder scenes. The hallucinatory flux of impressions is not to be confined to a chronology of date, but the dominating mental context is clearly the night of the murder. Shakespeare, as Brian Vickers remarks, has “not only shown her perspective of time as being totally blurred, but has made her oscillations return always to the moments of severest guilt.”¹⁴ Even so, the indicators are as fascinatingly imprecise as precise, and there is room for the imagination to roam over Lady Macbeth’s words.

“Yet here’s a spot” and “Out, damned spot” must be subsequent to the murder. But the next words indicate a point just before the murder: “One—two” (5.1.34–35) I take to be a precise time reference, the sound of the clock. We have a fix on the murder, for Fleance and Banquo state that it is after twelve (2.1.1–3), and the Porter, roused by the same knocking that

has disturbed Macbeth, says that “we were carousing till the second cock” (2.3.23–24). *Romeo and Juliet* is unambiguous: “the second cock hath crowed, / The curfew-bell hath rung, ’tis three o’clock” (4.4.3–4). So the murder takes place around three o’clock, or shortly before. “One—two—why, then, ’tis time to do’t,” Lady Macbeth’s incitement to her husband, may be addressed to him in their own bedchamber or outside Duncan’s. *When?* is the question her words insinuate, over and over. “No more o’that, my lord, no more o’that, you mar all with this starting” (43–44) suggests a sexual context. The “starting” (cf. “flaws and starts,” 3.4.63) suggests the sudden, nervous movements characteristic of Macbeth, which mar an activity altogether. “Mar” was the Porter’s word: “it mars him” (2.3.31). “Oh, oh, oh!” (5.1.51) is available in Shakespeare as an orgasmic sigh. In this sense, Colman allows as probable passages from *Troilus and Cressida* and *Cymbeline*.¹⁵ The possibility can be plotted on the Shakespearian curve, from shadow towards light: a moment later Lady Macbeth has “wash your hands, put on your nightgown; look not so pale” (61–2). This appears as a paraphrase of her act 3 injunctions:

retire we to our chamber:
A little water clears us of this deed: . . .
Get on your nightgown, lest occasion call us,
And show us to be watchers.
(2.2.64–69)

I point out that Lady Macbeth’s later words refer as easily to the context of their own bedchamber, as the antechamber to Duncan’s. Thus, Lady Macbeth’s utterances from “No more o’that” to “look not so pale” form, or can be taken to form, a natural sequence.

The possibility of a time fix dissolves in her final

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!
(5.1.65–68)

This must conflate her recollections of the murder with events since; as John Russell Brown remarks, she had not asked for his hand after the real murder.¹⁶ The temporal and spatial imprecision of all this enfolds “To bed, to bed, to bed,” a summons whose agonizing poignancy lies in the fact that it is divested of all erotic import. The unstated furniture of the 1.7 appeal has now become explicit; and in being acknowledged, it has lost all its meaning.

* * *

That is the play's last glimpse of Lady Macbeth, and what follows is in the nature of an epilogue. Macbeth's metaphors in act 5, to the extent that they are mildly sexual, all imply defeat. Thus, the "goose" and "lily-livered" images (5.3.12–13); "out, brief candle" (5.5.23); "it hath cow'd my better part of man" (5.8.18). The *act* of 1.7 achieves its final coloration in "a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage" (5.5.24–25), signifying that the earlier meanings of *act* have led to *nothing*. A course of action based on relationship has left Macbeth to face its consequences, alone. All this is well understood on today's stage, where (as Carol Carlisle remarks) "the heavy modern emphasis is on the relationship between husband and wife," where "Lady Macbeth is a partner rather than a tyrant."¹⁷ Of late years, the best stage practice has depicted a strongly sexual bond between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, most emphatically in 1.7.¹⁸ My concern here has been to examine the linguistic foundations of the drama: to explore the meaning of the act for Macbeth and his relations with his wife. The stage directions are all in the words. Ultimately, they point toward the "dark, flowing current out of which surge the horrors" that Peter Brook discerned in an earlier play of Shakespeare's.¹⁹ *Macbeth* then becomes a statement of sin and damnation, founded upon an archetypal action of killing and sexuality. No other play of the mature Shakespeare reminds one so strongly that its author also wrote *Titus Andronicus*.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Kenneth Muir's introduction to the New Arden ed. of *Macbeth* (London: Methuen, 1962), xxix.
2. Paul A. Jorgensen, *Our Naked Frailties: Sensational Art and Meaning in "Macbeth"* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 48.
3. *Ibid.*, 47–51.
4. There is an excellent account of the changes in the playing of Lady Macbeth in Carol Carlisle's *Shakespeare from the Greenroom* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 395–424. Much information is available *passim* in Dennis Bartholomeusz, *Macbeth and the Players* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969).
5. D. W. Harding, "Women's Fantasy of Manhood: a Shakespearean Theme," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 20 (1969): 247. Paul A. Jorgensen draws attention to the association between manhood and valor, and argues (with a primary reference to Falstaff) that "valor" is a sexually charged term. See "Valor's Better Parts," *Shakespeare Studies* 9 (1976): 141–58.
6. "The least whereof would quell a lover's hope" (*The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, 4.2.13).
 "Quail, crush, conclude, and quell!" (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 5.1.292).
 "Either to quell the Dauphin utterly" (*1 Henry VI*, 1.1.163).

- "To quell the rebels and their complices" (2 *Henry VI*, 5.1.212).
Sir Thomas More, in the fragment, has "How order should be quell'd"
 (Concordance, 1844), 1. 82.
7. Quoted by Muir, introduction, on the Porter's scene. He does not make the connection with the "quell" of 1.7.72.
8. *The Changeling*, ed. Patricia Thomson, New Mermaid edition (London: Ernest Benn, 1964), 3.4.137.
9. Partridge's two pages on *knock* begin with citations from the sixteenth century. He cites Florio, "Cunnata, a woman knocked" (*World of Wordes*, 1598). See Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English*, 2 vols., 5th ed. (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961). An entry from 1560 is given in the older work, J. S. Farmer and W. E. Henley's *Slang and its Analogues: Past and Present* (reprint in 3 vols., New York: Kraus Reprint, 1965). *Key* with sexual implications is generally available in proverbial sayings: Farmer and Henley cite "Lets the man in and the maid out."
10. *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, edited with analytic commentary by Stephen Booth (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), 499.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Quoted in Muir, introduction, 61.
13. Eric Partridge, *Shakespeare's Bawdy* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955), 191.
14. Brian Vickers, *The Artistry of Shakespeare's Prose* (London: Methuen, 1968), 380.
15. E. A. M. Colman, *The Dramatic Use of Bawdy in Shakespeare* (London: Longman, 1974), 205. See *Troilus and Cressida*, 3.1.125–36; and *Cymbeline*, 2.5.15–17.
16. John Russell Brown, *Shakespeare's Plays in Performance* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), 202.
17. Carlisle, *Shakespeare from the Greenroom*, 420.
18. I cite a few passages from reviews of productions in the 1970s that set the tone for later versions. Of the Birmingham Repertory Company's production in 1972 (directed by Derek Goldby), "Sara Kestelman . . . strongly establishes Lady Macbeth's sensual power over the Thane" (Charles Lewsen, *The Times*, 17 October 1972).
- Of the RSC production in 1974 (directed by Trevor Nunn), "this is the first time I have seen sexual blackmail playing its proper part in the first murder. Helen Mirren's Lady Macbeth is not only a voluptuous figure but also capable of making the most atrocious action sound like an enchanting game. 'My dearest love', begins her husband back from the war, and it seems minutes before he breaks his embrace to speak the next line. Up to the coronation Miss Mirren is sex triumphant; afterwards her collapse begins from the sense of being sexually discarded" (Irving Wardle, *The Times*, 30 October 1974). "That success lies in the sexual electricity generated in the play's earlier stages between the unfortunate couple. On returning home, the Macbeth of Nicol Williamson is easy prey for her seductive advances" (Michael Coveney, *Plays and Players*, December 1974, 19).
- Of the RSC version in 1976, again directed by Trevor Nunn, with Ian McKellen and Judi Dench in the leading parts: "The meeting between them was orgasmic in movement, and we later remembered the pushing movements of her hips and thighs when she gently but insidiously pulled Duncan into her castle. Macbeth's

doubts were as much quelled by a sexually expressed love as by vehement protestation . . . The general isolation of Macbeth from Lady Macbeth was more telling than is customary because of the sexual rapport emphasized at the beginning" (Gareth Lloyd Evans, "The RSC's *King Lear* and *Macbeth*," *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 28 (1977): 192).

19. Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968), 95.

ROBERT LANIER REID

Macbeth's Three Murders

Macbeth is a milestone in man's exploration of . . . this "depth of things" which our age calls the unconscious.

—Harold Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare*

Shakespeare inherited a five-act dramaturgical pattern that he refined into a symmetrical 2–1–2 series of cycles, focusing each cycle on a central "epiphanal encounter," a moment of intense recognition. In the mature tragedies, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, those three cycles (and epiphanal moments) form stages of psychological development: a comprehensive inner plot. What transpires in the protagonist's soul during each of the three phases, and how does each prepare for the next? What holistic psychological development occurs in the course of each play?

Interpreters of *Macbeth* have focused almost exclusively on the first murder, the killing of a king in acts 1–2, as the basis for understanding the play—its social, psychological, and metaphysical meanings. Macbeth's subsequent two assassinations, of Banquo in act 3, and of Macduff's wife and children in acts 4–5, either are ignored, or are treated simply as efforts to secure the usurped crown, or perhaps as a kind of Freudian "repetition compulsion"—the blooded man's first heinous kill engendering serial slayings.¹ Neither of the subsequent murders has been accorded its own distinctive meaning and psychological motivation; they are seen as mere shadowy reenactments of the

From *Shakespeare's Tragic Form: Spirit in the Wheel*, pp. 111–22, 162–65. Copyright © 2000 by Associated University Presses.

Oedipal complex which is presumed to underlie the one essential crime, the slaying of the patriarchal king.²

As R. A. Foakes puts it, “the murder of Duncan was the equivalent in mountaineering terms of scaling Everest, and after this [Macbeth] has no trouble with lower hills.”³ This exclusive highlighting of the regicide (as the “be-all and end-all” of the play) entails, however, that the final three acts must dwindle from real theatrical power to melodramatic spectacle⁴—a result of the victims’ shrinking symbolic import and, correspondingly, the shrinking spiritual grandeur of the protagonists, who deliver fewer and fewer eloquent soliloquies, consign their villainies to hired thugs, and finally are swept aside by the nobler (but less charismatic) avengers, Macduff and Malcolm. Many astute critics of the play—including Bradley, Rossiter, Heilman, Sanders, Jorgensen, Mack, Kirsch, and Muir—have struggled with this central conundrum: can the playwright sustain great tragedy if the only true kingly spirit is dispatched at the outset?⁵

Like most of these critics, I believe that Macbeth’s capacious mind, despite its moral degeneration, remains at center-stage, showing the horrific consequences of a truly heroic spirit embracing evil. But instead of conceiving the tragedy as one great cosmos-shaking act of regicide followed by two subordinate aftershocks, I would characterize the Macbeths’ journey into darkness as three equally significant stages of spiritual catastrophe, three distinctive and theatrically potent dimensions of evil as it evolves and festers in the human psyche. Macbeth murders first a politically authoritative *parental ruler*, then a *brotherly friend* (his “chiefest friend” according to Holinshed), and finally a *mother and her children*.⁶ His victims thus represent the three fundamental human bonds, together comprising (in reverse order) the three basic stages of human maturation, or the three essential cathexes of the human psyche. Thus, in the course of the three murders Macbeth deconstructs the entire psychological infrastructure of human identity. Shakespeare’s awareness of this pattern is underscored by its earlier prototypical appearance in *Richard III*, where that villain-hero similarly kills a king (Henry VI), then a brother (Clarence), then children (the Princes).⁷ In *Macbeth*, however, the playwright is far more apprised of the scheme’s psychological implications, which he methodically exploits.

The dramaturgical design of *Macbeth* precisely emphasizes this three-phase pattern: acts 1 and 2 present, in a continuous sequence, the regicide and its immediate consequences; act 3 shows the murder of Banquo and then its impact on Macbeth at the banquet; acts 4 and 5, another continuous cycle of action, presents the slaughter of Macduff’s family, then its social and psychological consequences.⁸ This 2–1–2 structure, the dramaturgic pattern of all of Shakespeare’s mature tragedies, perfectly accommodates his treatment of Macbeth’s three murders.

To attain this neatly coherent pattern of psychological devolution, Shakespeare has drastically altered Holinshed's *Chronicles*⁹—first, by condensing all the major crises of Duncan's six-year reign and of Macbeth's seventeen-year reign into the two-hour traffic of the stage. The entire battery of wars and assassinations seems to transpire in a matter of days, rather than a quarter of a century, making the three murders (as well as the broader framework of political violence in acts 1 and 5) seem closely and causally connected.

Equally striking is Shakespeare's moral reshaping of the victims, casting them as iconically benevolent members of the human family, in order to accommodate his three-phase tragic pattern. Instead of the chronicles' portrait of a weak, cowardly, and greedy king, about the same age as his cousin Macbeth, Shakespeare portrays Duncan as aged, humble, and generous—an ideal, almost saintly monarch. Though some recent critics, in the radically revisionist spirit of New Historicism, interpret Duncan's "womanliness" as Shakespeare's indication of his unkingly impotence, I believe Wilbur Sanders's view is correct: Duncan's nurturing, fertile, self-mortifying traits contribute positively to Shakespeare's portrait of "a most sainted king" (4.3.109). Duncan begins where *Lear* and *Cymbeline* end, as a king who can "see feelingly."¹⁰

Similarly Banquo, in the chronicles a co-conspirator in regicide, is recast as a devoted friend in life's warfare, modestly resisting each temptation to which his colleague falls prey. Many critics have questioned the probity of Banquo even more than Duncan. Berger's and Calderwood's subtle criticism of Duncan's "aggressive giving" would also pertain to Banquo's lavish praise of his warrior-colleague (1.4.54–58).¹¹ Yet that Duncan's and Banquo's compliments are essentially benevolent is underscored not only by their repeated association with "royalty" and "grace," but also by the contrast with Macbeth's deceitful, murderous mode of "aggressive giving"—especially his forceful invitation of Banquo to the feast (3.1.11–39) and flattery of the missing guest (3.2.30–31, 4.41–44, 91–92). Though Shakespeare implies political shortcomings in Duncan's aged weakness and in Banquo's Hamlet-like inertia after the regicide (thus qualifying the playwright's compliment to James I), nevertheless in revising the chronicles Shakespeare has taken pains to idealize the moral character of both victims; their frailties, like Hamlet's, derive more from warring evils of the world than from their own innate urges.

Likewise Macduff, who in the chronicles enters the story belatedly, mainly seeking personal revenge, is transmuted by Shakespeare into an ever-present touchstone of charitable social compassion. He is the Man of Feeling, who enacts what his wife and babes, those "strong knots of love," have engendered: the most primitive human bond. Adelman and Hunter devalue Macduff's moral character by taking seriously Lady Macduff's anxious but wittily exaggerated accusations of her husband (4.2.6–14, 44–45);¹² yet even

the child appreciates the irony of her remarks. In spite of the pointed criticisms leveled at Macduff by his wife, by Malcolm (4.3.26–28), and, most emphatically, by himself (4.3.224–27), it is clear that he is moved by generous compassion for Scotland as a whole, and that his compassion grows out of the intense family feeling manifested by his wife and child. It is Macduff's horrified response to Duncan's murder that initiates the knocking of conscience in the Macbeths; and it is his patriotic opposition to the usurper that galvanizes Scotland and England into a retributive force.

Shakespeare's radical reconstruction of the chronicles, especially his amelioration of the victims' moral character, thus emphasizes the destruction of three primordial human bonds. This three-phase sequence of psychological disintegration (and implicit affirmation of the values destroyed) provides a paradigm of Shakespeare's mature tragic form.

Killing Duncan: Usurping and Dismantling Superego

In presenting an initial assault on regal or parental authority in acts 1–2, *Macbeth* is comparable to all the tragedies from *Hamlet* to *Coriolanus*. The murder of a parent-like king, reflecting the Macbeths' aspiration to Godlike greatness and power, is an Oedipal repudiation of superego (as commentators since Freud and Jekels have acknowledged). Yet the gender implications of Duncan's rule have been too reductively construed by Oedipal-oriented psychoanalysts. For centuries it has been assumed that Duncan's *fatherliness* forms the basis of his comprehensive social identity (Scotland) and of his Christlike spiritual identity ("The Lord's anointed temple," 2.3.70)—that as *patriarch* he, like Lear and Cymbeline, represents the acme of psychological development, the mature conscience of the race, or, in Freudian terms, "superego."¹³ Critics persistently construe the regicidal motive as an Oedipal antagonism, citing Lady Macbeth's distress at Duncan's fatherly appearance during the assault (2.2.12–13), to which one might add Macbeth's condemnation of the murder as a "parricide," projecting his own Oedipal urges onto Malcolm and Donalbain (3.1.31).

Yet the Macbeths envision Duncan not just as a *father*, who "bath been / So clear in his great office" (1.7.17–18), but also as a *mother*, who vies with Lady Macbeth in expressing love for her husband and for the other thanes, and who is cast as Lucrece to Macbeth's "ravishing Tarquin" with his phallic dagger (2.1.33–55). In addition, both Macbeths at critical moments in their soliloquies envision the monarch as a vulnerable and soul-like *child*, the heavenly infant that Lady Macbeth would deny the chance to "peep through the blanket of the dark, / To cry, 'Hold, hold!'" (1.5.53–54), and which Macbeth projects apocalyptically as a "naked new-born babe" of Pity (1.7.21). Thus, in psychoanalytic (or "object-relational") terms Duncan is not just the father,

but all aspects of the human family—perhaps most poignantly, mother and child. By their own gender obsessions, the Macbeths have promoted the erroneous and reductive conception of sovereignty as a pure patriarchy. As recent critics have noted, the Macbeths' urge for sovereign greatness is expressed as a fantasy of becoming exclusively "manly" by taking up phallic weaponry to eliminate womanly and childlike characteristics.¹⁴

Similarly, in acts 1–2 of each mature tragedy Shakespeare portrays an assault on conscience or synteresis (or Freudian superego), not merely as a fatherly or kingly power, but increasingly as a consolidating, androgynous figure of authority: Othello and Desdemona defend themselves conjointly before the Venetian council; Lear's initial attempt to arrogate and then to suppress female nurture confirms the flaw in his sovereignty; Duncan is androgynous; Antony and Cleopatra struggle toward that communion; in contrast, Coriolanus, like Macbeth, seeks a constrictive autonomy and absoluteness through eliminating "female" relationality and compassion. As Stephen Orgel and Louis Montrose have observed, both Elizabeth I and James I promoted the idea of their monarchy as an androgynous consolidation of paternal authority and female nurture.¹⁵

The Macbeths' notable series of monologues in acts 1–2, fueled by willful hyperbole, confirms their aspiration to a male-oriented version of "greatness" (a word whose variants appear seventeen times in act 1, more than in the other four acts combined). To the extent that we as audience identify with the Macbeths' grand speechmaking, hypnotic role-playing, and cosmic aspiration for greatness in these acts, we must also experience the ironies that emerge in the actual performance of the murder: pettiness, furtiveness, cowardice, and utter deceit.

As the hyperbolic fantasy of these early soliloquies reveals, the ego function informing this regicidal-parenticidal stage of Macbeth's career in villainy is *sublimation* but in its most perverted form. Anna Freud describes sublimation as the highest phase of psychic functioning in the construction of selfhood, the ultimate means of enriching the ego.¹⁶ Ideally, sublimation resolves the Oedipal struggle (a struggle for the final, genital stage of sexual maturation), not by evading bodily consummation of sexual energies, nor by suppressing their female component, but, as Loewald and Kohut have shown, by promoting comprehensive and free interplay between gender-components of the self. Thus the Macbeths' brutish rape of kingly greatness works exactly contrary to authentic sublimation. By furtively killing the king they not only destroy the bond with this androgynous parent, they also violate the illuminating and consolidating powers of their own superego, or conscience, inducing a deeper regression into self-divisive and annihilative ego defenses.

Killing Banquo: Envyng the Ego Ideal

The murder of Macbeth's "chiefest friend" in act 3 is motivated not by further aspiration to greatness, but by rivalrous envy of a brotherly alter-ego. In acts 1–2 Macbeth's basic motivation was not envy of Duncan, Banquo, or Malcolm (though the basis for later envy is established): in spite of anxiety over Duncan's appointing his son Prince of Cumberland, Macbeth never considers killing Malcolm along with Duncan (leaving the unappointed Donalbain to shoulder the guilt). In his initial embracing of evil Macbeth is preoccupied with the sublime fantasy of regicide as the "be-all and end-all," conferring inviolable supremacy; only on discovering its failure to provide such aggrandizement does he turn to bitter envy of others, now conceived as rivals. According to Aquinas, "After the sin of pride [whereby Lucifer aspired to be a deity] there followed the evil of envy . . . whereby he grieved over man's good."¹⁷ Macbeth's fury toward Banquo is thus a second stage of evil, resulting from the failure to satisfy the hunger for greatness, just as Cain's envious fratricide stemmed from his parents' frustrated desire to emulate God.¹⁸ Envy, and the rivalrous doubling and splitting that necessitates confronting distasteful mirror-images of the self at the center of each of the tragedies, is secondary to that earlier violent effort to displace divine-regal-parental authority. The regicide-parenticide thus leads to fratricide-amiticide, a chronologically secondary but equally universal phenomenon, which carries its own momentous psychological implications.

This assault on a warrior-friend who is virtually the mirror-image or double of Macbeth ("all hail, Macbeth and Banquo! / Banquo and Macbeth, all hail!" 1.3.68–69) is a direct violation of ego, involving a psychological "splitting" into self and shadow-self, as Macbeth perversely identifies with the darker, more illusory component. Though he rationalizes the murder of Banquo in only one soliloquy, far less grandiose than the monologues of acts 1–2, Macbeth throughout act 3 continues the fiery expression of his inner powers by a number of intense dialogues in which he no longer effectively communicates his deeper meaning either to his auditors or to himself. They can only guess at the dark nuances in his spate of bestial images: serpents and scorpions (3.2.13–15, 36; 3.4.28–30); bat, "shard-bound beetle," and crow (3.2.40–42, 50–53); "greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs" (3.1.92–94); "Russian bear, arm'd rhinoceros, or th'Hyrcean tiger" (3.4.99–100); "magot-pies, and choughs, and rooks" (3.4.121–24). Jorgensen calls these speeches (like the similar ravings of Lear in act 3) "soliloquies made public."¹⁹ Equally important, they are soliloquies made obscure through intense repression, so that neither Macbeth and Lear nor their auditors can easily fathom the profound self-divulgence in their speeches. If acts 1–2 show a perverse mode of hyperbolic aspiration (appropriating sublimation as a means of overthrowing the

superego or conscience), this furtive imagery of act 3 shows Macbeth's regression to the prior psychic function of *projection*, the defensive externalization of his depraved and problematic qualities onto others, which enforces a general process of "decomposition" and "splitting" of the ego.²⁰ At its best, projection (an expulsive psychic function deriving from the anal stage of infancy) plays a key role in the development of selfhood, enabling one to influence others by projecting onto them one's own ego ideals and inadequacies, and also enabling one thereby to experiment with and test those values and identities. But at its worst, as in malicious rituals of murder and scapegoating, projection revises reality so drastically that "nothing is, / But what is not," and the murderer's own selfhood, his "single state of man," is increasingly shaken and disjoined (1.3.134–42).

Envy, and the resultant splitting of selfhood, dictates the entire sequence of act 3: Macbeth's spiteful soliloquy in which he feels "rebuked" by Banquo's "royalty of nature"; his strange ranking of dogs in the abusive hiring of the assassins, humiliating them, even as he claims to raise and "make love" to them; his furtive insecurity even with his wife (rehearsing her part while concealing his full intent); and his "half-participation" in the murder itself, perhaps as the third murderer. In spite of Macbeth's show of surprise at Fleance's survival (3.4.20–24), it is tempting to believe that Macbeth is the mysterious third assassin²¹—so that he only half-participates in the second murder. That Macbeth can hardly admit (even to himself) his involvement suggests the extent of his splitting psyche: for if he is the third murderer, it reveals both a deepening insecurity and a growing obsession with rational control (utter self-repression, anal attentiveness to detail, and a host of other defensive mechanisms aimed at sustaining to others and to himself the illusion of kingship, including the pretense of shock on learning of Fleance's escape—which resembles his extravagant show of dismay on learning of Duncan's death). Macbeth's furtive pretense of uninvolved even for his own cutthroats would thus demonstrate his increasing cowardice, alienation, and lack of a stable central self. Hence, for the second murder Macbeth both is and is not an active participant, owing to his descent into psychic bifurcation.

George Williams notes that performing the play with Macbeth as the third murderer "necessitates a staging that twice violates the 'Law of Reentry.'"²² Though the assignment of a third murderer may indicate Macbeth's growing anxiety and may vicariously show his grasping for control (attending more closely than the other assassins to the usurper's crucial purposes), stage convention would thus seem to argue against Macbeth's schizoid reappearance as monarch-cutthroat-monarch in such rapid sequence. Yet if we consider the extraordinary liberties and experimentation in the staging of other Shakespearean plays of this period (e.g., the Dover cliff scene in *King Lear*),

one wonders at the theatrical ingenuity of having Macbeth immediately reenter, perhaps with a dark cape only thinly disguising his kingly garments, so that the audience would actually be *aware* of his devious schizophrenic “doubling.” If so, it is the most stunningly purposeful violation of the Law of Reentry in the Shakespearean canon.

Macbeth’s self-division builds to a climax during the banquet when his vacillation between noblemen and assassins, between true and feigned selves, gives way to a deeper vacillation between conscious and unconscious realities. His obscene praise of the missing guest (“Aid to our dear friend Banquo, whom we miss”) serves the psychic function of invoking his double’s macabre presence, filling the central seat to which Macbeth himself is inexorably drawn. In “*Macbeth: King James’s Play*” George Williams notes that the ghost of Banquo rather than of Duncan holds sway in the drama’s central scene, thus inflating the compliment to King James I though it subverts decorum.

Williams also explains the symbolic seating that underlies the doppelgänger effect at the banquet: “Macbeth does not sit in his throne (the “state” where Lady Macbeth remains)—to which he has no spiritual right; he does expect to sit at the table—a level to which he does have a right.” The “place reserved” for Banquo, to which Macbeth is drawn as to his own natural place, is centrally located: “Both sides are even: here I’ll sit i’ th’ midst” (3.4.11).²³ Almost exactly the same event occurs in Dostoyevsky’s *The Double*, and similar psychic displacements occur in James’s *The Turn of the Screw* and Conrad’s “The Secret Sharer”; but only Macbeth confronts a double who represents not his sinister shadow, but the ruination of his better self.²⁴

Throughout act 3 Macbeth’s insecurity focuses no longer on the proud aspiration for kingly greatness, but on envious rivalry with his antithetical friend Banquo, who is to hire what Edgar is to Edmund, Hal to Hotspur, Orlando to Oliver: the child favored with a loving heart, who thus calls into question the unloving self’s entire “being” and must be utterly eliminated:

every minute of his being thrusts
 Against my near’st of life: and though I could
 With bare-faced power sweep him from my sight,
 And bid my will avouch it, yet I must not,
 For certain friends that are both his and mine,
 Whose loves I may not drop.
 (3.1.116–21)

Instinctively Macbeth envisions the bond with his “chiefest friend” in the context of a universal siblinghood, making the murder of Banquo as broadly symbolic as that of Duncan: first he eliminates the universal parent

or greater self, then the archetypal sibling or mirror-self. In each of the mature Shakespearean tragedies this shattering confrontation with an anti-theoretical self-image occurs at the play's center, the middle of act 3: Othello's temptation by Iago (3.3), Lear's discovery of "Poor Tom" (3.4), Macbeth's spectral encounter with Banquo (3.4), Antony's battle with Octavius and (more important) the interplay with his female alter-ego, Cleopatra (3.7–13). This positing of an "indissoluble tie" (*Macbeth* 3.1.15–18) between self and shadow-self (or alter-ego) occurs at the exact center of *Othello* and *Macbeth* (and, with more benevolent implications, at the center of *King Lear*). At this moment each protagonist confronts the darkest possibilities of selfhood: the imputed treachery of Desdemona, the feigned sins of Poor Tom, the butchery inflicted by Macbeth himself. As in Lear's meeting with the mad beggar, Macbeth's rencontre with his mutilated alter-ego engages him in full awareness of fraternal Otherness; but while this stunning encounter leads the kingly Lear instinctively to affirm the oneness of human souls, it provokes the usurper Macbeth to repudiate "that great bond" (3.2.49). In discarding Banquo, Macbeth thus divests himself of brother-love, the homoerotic bond, the second crucial cathexis forming the normative identity of the human psyche.

Killing Lady Macduff and Her Children: Annihilating the Id, and All Otherness

In acts 4 and 5, focusing on the slaughter of a mother and children (and the immediate social and psychological consequences of that deed), Macbeth eliminates the third and most fundamental human bond as he violates the primitive core of selfhood, what Freud called the id. Most critics treat this third assault as mere "fourth-act pathos," as a dim echo of the previous kills, or as a hasty and illogical afterthought testifying to a kind of madness in the tyrant, since these victims offer neither militant opposition nor patrilineal threat to Macbeth's royal claim.²⁵

But Macbeth's essential motive for the third murder is not a reenactment of the Oedipal struggle (casting Macduff as the new parent-power to be deposed); nor is it another envious rivalry with a mirroring sibling (seeing Macduff's goodness, like Banquo's, as a galling comparison to his own evil). Rather, building upon and blossoming out of those two previous modes of aggression, Macbeth's "black and deep desires" now enter a third and culminating phase: scornful annihilative hatred of the simple passional core, the mother-and-child matrix of selfhood—the healthy "oral-narcissist" bonding which contrasts the perverse narcissism now unfolding in Macbeth.²⁶ Macbeth's contemptuous repudiation and perversion of the affective-cognitive human core (the "id") informs this final sequence of psychic degradation in

acts 4 and 5. The ego-function which dominates this earliest phase of psychic development (and which most pertinently informs the final two acts of Shakespeare's mature tragedies) is *introjection*, the ego's incorporation of desired aspects of the nurturant other in order to construct its own identity.²⁷ Introjection of the beloved, for the purpose of achieving (or re-achieving) total selfhood, is the psychological principle that is either violated or embraced in the final phase of each of Shakespeare's major tragedies. Acts 4 and 5 invariably draw their cathartic and transforming energy not from the killing of a king, but from the heroic male's reaction to the destruction of a *beloved maiden* (Ophelia, Desdemona, Cordelia) or, in the final tragedies, a *mother with children* (Lady Macduff and Lady Macbeth, Cleopatra, Virgilia and Volumnia).²⁸

A wholesome mode of introjective bonding informs the poignant scene of Lady Macduff and her son (4.2), where in the father's absence she frets over the child's continued sustenance. But the boy's affirmation that Providential if not parental care will feed him, echoing Matthew 6.26, suggests the dignity of what he has thus far introjected from his parents. This humane and spiritual nurture contrasts the strikingly perverse mode of introjection in the preceding scene: the witches' materialistic, cannibalistic ritual. Into their womblike cauldron's mouth (the *vagina dentata*)²⁹ they fling fragments of poisonous and ravenous beasts (toad, snake, dragon, wolf, shark, tiger) and parts representing the erotic and sensory powers of non-Christians (Jew's liver, Turk's nose, Tartar's lips)—including those lower senses of smell and taste involved in feeding. This travesty of Otherness (like Othello's suicidal reminiscence of killing a Turk in the service of Christianity) is a too-appropriate symbolism for what the witches and Macbeth himself have come to represent.

The final and focal object in the witches' catalogue of dismembered parts is "Finger of birth-strangled babe / Ditch-deliver'd by a drab" (4.1.26–31). Thus, from the "pilot's thumb" of the witches' early scene (1.3.28), symbolizing the perversion of parental guidance or superego, Macbeth regresses inexorably to the aborted potency of the child (or id), as symbolized by the foetal "finger" or phallus, "strangled"-castrated-devoured by the cauldron-womb-mouth of the Voracious Mother, the "drab" or prostitute. Introjection (an incorporative mode of identification deriving from the experience of sucking and swallowing during the oral stage of infancy) is thus materialized and brutalized by the witches to secure worldly power.

From the vicious opening ritual of act 4 (which provokes the entire cycle of action in acts 4–5), Macbeth embraces the witches' omnivorous perversion of the primal introjective principle. Each of his three murders has been associated with imagery of feasting, but it is particularly in his impulsive butchering of mother and babes that Macbeth has willingly and unhesitatingly "supp'd

full with horrors" (5.5.13). Thus the third murderous assault, a Herod-like massacre of innocents from which Macbeth completely distances himself, but which Shakespeare exposes to the audience with the most excruciating intimacy, brings us to the peak of horror, the breaking of the deepest taboo, which violates the very rudiment of selfhood and of social bonding.

Far more than King Duncan and Banquo, whose entrapment in political motivations partly cloaks their essential being, the intimacy of mother and child brings us closest to the core of human nature. In each of Shakespeare's mature tragedies, the final cathartic sequence of acts 4–5 jeopardizes the primal psychic ground of being, the inception of love: the drawing of woman, "fool," or child into the web of deceit and violence promotes in the male authority-figures not merely revulsion against evil, but clear and intense awareness of the rich essence of life which has been lost. Macbeth himself, in his finest show of inner light, envisioned the soul's greatest power in its early innocence and in its affective mode of "pity": "like a naked new-born babe / Striding the blast" (1.7.19–20). As he loses touch with that childlike and woman-nurtured essence in himself, Macbeth also loses his capacity for true sovereignty.

NOTES

1. Freud's argument for the second instinctual drive, the aggressive death-wish, grew out of his reflections on the "repetition compulsion"—obsessive reenacting of a pleasurable sensation, or of a painful and self-destructive behavior. The motive, he felt, was not simply to sustain pleasure or pain, but subconsciously to use it as a means of recovering primal experience, especially in the case of the aggressive and destructive obsession, which he attributed to a desire to return to peaceful nothingness. See Bibliography, 5H, "Repetition Compulsion."

2. See Bibliography, 5E, "Oedipal Conflict (*Macbeth*)." For revisionary studies of gender-psychology, shifting attention from embattled father to devouring mother, or reformulating gender roles, see Bibliography, 5F, "Preoedipal Conflict (*Macbeth*)," and 5B, "Gender Stereotyping, Reversal, and Transference."

3. Foakes, "Images of Death: Ambition in *Macbeth*," *Focus on Macbeth*, ed. John Russell Brown (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982), 18.

4. Julian Markels, "The Spectacle of Deterioration: Macbeth and the 'Manner' of Tragic Deterioration," *SQ* 12 (1961): 293–303.

5. Heilman, Muir, and Sanders insist on Macbeth's greatness of spirit but also on the sordid depths of his degradation (Robert B. Heilman, "The Criminal as Tragic Hero: Dramatic Methods," *Sbs* 19 [1966]: 12–24; Kenneth Muir, introduction, *Macbeth*, New Arden Ed. [London: Methuen, 1987], xliii–liiii, lxv; Wilbur Sanders, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968], 253–316). Cf. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedies*, 2nd ed. (1905; reprint, New York: Macmillan, 1949), 349–65; A. P. Rossiter, *Angel with Horns*, ed. Graham Storey (New York: Theatre Arts, 1961), 209–34; Paul A. Jorgensen, *Our Naked Frailties: Sensational Art and Meaning in Macbeth* (Berkeley: University of

California Press, 1971), 185–216; Maynard Mack, Jr., *Killing the King* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973), 138–85; Arthur Kirsch, “Macbeth’s Suicide,” *ELH* 151 (1984): 269–96.

6. This “object relations” pattern was (in slightly different form) first noted by L. Veszy-Wagner, “*Macbeth*: ‘Fair is Foul and Foul is Fair,’” *AI* 25 (1968): 242–57. Though she subordinates each victim to a patriarchal version of the Oedipal struggle, she acutely observes that Macbeth’s “main problem is . . . uncertain identity” with regard to gender.

7. See Jones, *Scenic Form in Shakespeare*, 195–224.

8. For detailed treatment of this three-part structure of *Macbeth*, see *ibid.* For discussion of three stages of self-discovery in Shakespeare’s tragic form, see Maynard Mack, “The Jacobean Shakespeare,” 11–42.

9. See Muir’s Introduction to *Macbeth*, xxxvi–xiii; Muriel C. Bradbrook, “The Sources of *Macbeth*,” *SbS* 4 (1951): 35–48; David Norbrook, “Macbeth and the Politics of Historiography,” in *Politics of Discourse: The Literature and History of 17th-Century England*, ed. Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 78–116.

10. Sanders, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea*, 253–316. Cf. Harry Berger, Jr., “The Early Scenes of *Macbeth*: Preface to a New Interpretation,” *ELH* 47 (1980): 1–31; James L. Calderwood, *If It Were Done: Macbeth and Tragic Action* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 119–21; Graham Bradshaw, *Shakespeare’s Skepticism* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987), 244–50; Adelman, “Born of Woman,” 93–94.

11. Berger, “The Early Scenes of *Macbeth*”; Calderwood, *If It Were Done*. Other sharp questioners of Banquo include Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedies*, 379–87; Roy Walker, *The Time Is Free* (London: Andrew Dakers, 1949), 89–92; Richard J. Jaarsma, “The Tragedy of Banquo,” *L&P* 17 (1967): 87–94.

12. Adelman, “Born of Woman”; Hunter, “Doubling, Mythic Difference.”

13. See Bibliography, 5J, “Superego-formation.”

14. See D. W. Harding, Robert Kimbrough, Marilyn French, Coppélia Kahn, Janet Adelman, and Dianne Hunter in Bibliography, 5B, “Gender Stereotyping, Reversal, and Transference,” and 5F, “Preoedipal Conflict.”

15. See Stephen Orgel and Louis A. Montrose in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Margaret W. Ferguson, Maureen Quilligan, and Nancy J. Vickers (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 58–59, 65–87. For the Renaissance view of conscience or synteresis as a means of consolidating mental powers and gender-components of human nature, see Pierre de la Primaudaye, *The French Academie*, 2:364–511, esp. on restoring the Edenic communion between heart (437–511) and head (364–436).

16. See Bibliography, 51, “Sublimation.” In *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* Anna Freud described ego-functions as not only defensive but constructive. Hartmann and other ego psychologists, by replacing “sublimation” with “neutralization” and “desexualization,” tended to vilify the libido and to ignore the constructive activity of sublimation. It plays a vital role in the struggle for what Kohut calls “grandiose selfhood,” the process so travestied by the Macbeths. For discussion of the closely related processes of sublimation, superego formation, and therapeutic transference, see Loewald, *Sublimation*, chaps. 1–2; and Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self*, 309–24.

17. Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2 vols. (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 1.63.2.

18. For a different view of the analogy between Cain and Macbeth, see Jorgensen, *Our Naked Frailties*, 47–51, 190–95, 200, 213.

19. *Ibid.*, 194. Robert Weimann similarly explains Lear's drifts from dialogue to monologue during his madness (*Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theater*, 217–21). Cf. Barry Weller, "Identity and Representation in Shakespeare," *ELH* 49 (1982): 356–58.

20. On the key role of projection in psychological development, see Bibliography, 5G, "Projection and Projective Identification." Melanie Klein, in "Notes on Some Schizoid Mechanisms" and in *The Psychoanalysis of Children* (142–48, 178), established a pattern in childhood development of *introjection–projection–reintrojection*. But the reintroduction-phase occurs on a higher level, as in sublimation, and this higher level is made possible by the stimulating effect of projection. Thus reintroduction, like Wordsworth's "recollection in tranquillity," is a culminating mode of psychic internalization and identity-construction occurring on a more comprehensive, controlled, and "sublime" level. Cf. Fright, "Introjection, Projection, and Identification"; and Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense*, 50–53.

21. This theory, first advanced by Allan Park Paton, *N&Q* (1869), was lucidly reformulated by Harold Goddard in Vol. 2 of *The Meaning of Shakespeare*, 122–26.

22. George W. Williams, "The Third Murderer in *Macbeth*," *SQ* 23 (1972): 261.

23. George W. Williams, "*Macbeth*: King James's Play," *SoAR* 47 (1982): 12–21.

24. See Bibliography, 5A, "Dissociation, Doubling, Multiple Personality, and Splitting." No critic has fully considered Banquo as Macbeth's "double." Robert N. Watson briefly mentions Banquo as "doppelgänger" ("'Thrifless Ambition, Foolish Wishes, and the Tragedy of *Macbeth*,'" in *William Shakespeare's Macbeth*, ed. Harold Bloom [New York: Chelsea House, 1987], 142–47); James Kirsch describes the "participation mystique" of the two men, Macbeth being more attuned to the unconscious, but the weaker ego (*Shakespeare's Royal Self* [New York: G. P. Putnam, 1965], 331–39); Matthew N. Proser describes Banquo's ghost "as a kind of analogy for Macbeth's mutilated soul" (*The Heroic Image in Five Shakespearean Tragedies* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965], 76–78). In *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature*, Robert Rogers builds on Freud's reading of *Macbeth* when he identifies Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as doubles; Rogers does not distinguish between the customary homoerotic phenomenon of mirror-transference (between close friends, sibling rivals, or hero and alter-ego) and the more complex psychic transference between heterosexual partners in marriage.

25. Hogan, "*Macbeth*: Authority and Progenitorship," sees the slaughter as repeating the Oedipal struggle, an indirect blow at Macduff as threatening authority and as fertile progenitor.

26. See Bibliography, 5D, "Narcissism and Self-love." One must distinguish Macbeth's tyrannous infantilism (culminating in narcissistic rage) from the healthy oral-narcissistic bond, involving mutual respect between parent and child during the sucking stage. For negative aspects of narcissism, see S. Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction"; Kernberg, *Borderline Conditions and Pathological Narcissism*; and the important Shakespearean studies by Kirsch, "Macbeth's Suicide"; and Adelman, "'Born of Woman,'" and "'Anger's My Meat.'" For positive modes of narcissism, see Kohut, "Forms and Transformations of Narcissism"; and Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love*. Shakespeare seems particularly attuned to this primitive cathexis which forms

the core of human identity, emphasizing not just negative but positive aspects of mother-child bonding in the cathartic sequence of each mature tragedy, most strikingly in Cleopatra's death-scene ("Dost thou not see the baby at my breast / That sucks the nurse asleep?").

27. See Bibliography, 5C, "Introjection, Internalization, Identification."

28. Though the cathartic valuation of womanly/matronly nurture in acts 4–5 holds true for all of Shakespeare's major tragedies, *Hamlet* requires qualification. Never fully reunited with Ophelia or Gertrude, Hamlet only incipiently comprehends the meaning of a grave holding his "fool" and his beloved (a synthesis so richly explored in *King Lear*). *Hamlet's* final focus on the killing of a false parent-king, of an inadequate sibling-double (Laertes), and of a disloyal nurturing mother suggests unresolved Oedipal (and pre-Oedipal) anxieties and an incomplete quest for identity.

29. See Bibliography, 5K, "Vagina Dentata and Penis Dentata," especially Roy Schafer, *Language and Insight*, who provides a broad gender analysis (153–60). The demoniac symbolism in *Macbeth* combines male and female perversions. In tempting Macbeth to annihilate children, the demon masters' "armed head" (*penis dentata*) joins the witches' devouring cauldron (*vagina dentata*) (4.1.69–86). This satanic collusion of perverted gender components, a marital travesty which promotes mutual deception and annihilation rather than mutual support and procreation, evolves throughout the play.

R. CHRIS HASSEL JR.

“No boasting like a fool”? Macbeth and Herod

David Staines suggests that “the diversity of Herod in the mystery cycles gives him a host of contrasting descendants in the Elizabethan theatre,” and Shakespeareans have not ignored this invitation in their discussions of *Macbeth*. But though we have occasionally moved beyond the central analogy that both Herod and Macbeth order a slaughter of innocents in a vain and futile attempt to preserve kingships threatened by prophecies, we have still not done justice to *Macbeth*’s dynamic legacy from the Herod plays, either to the frequent similarities or to the instructive differences that sometimes reside within them.¹ I think I can show that the witches’ prophecies and apparitions echo and may even try to outdo the *ordo prophetarum* or line of prophets and kings which bludgeons Herod into accepting the promised Messiah and his own consequent overthrow.² I think Macbeth’s gestural and verbal struttings and frettings in response to the prophets and messengers of his doom parallel the “grotesque boasting and ranting” of the comic Herod as well as the grandiose greetings and epithets that so often mark, and mock, Macbeth’s counterpart in the mysteries. Even Macbeth’s frantic commands to Seyton about being prematurely armed for battle may parallel Herod’s own vain and frantic dressing and undressing.³ At his end Macbeth almost consciously resists being dwarfed but also defined—dressed, addressed, and finally undressed—not only by the robes of the damned and

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diseased tyrant that Herod must also finally wear, but also when he invokes against all signifying the very theatrical metaphor that places him, though never so firmly as his predecessor tyrant of the cycle plays, within the theater of God's judgment. Though I consider such a reconstruction of similarity and difference valuable in itself, I think it will also enrich our sense of the play's connections not only to the mystery tradition but also to James I and allow us through both connections to query and refine recent assertions of the play's aesthetic and theological ambiguity.⁴

Shakespeare reveals in other plays his considerable knowledge of the Herod figure from art as well as the mysteries. Hamlet uses the name as the theatrical eponym for overacted villainy: "It out-herods Herod."⁵ Henry V overcomes Harfleur by threatening to match the deeds and to reproduce the visual and audible affects of Herod's cruel slaughter of the innocents even as he imitates the ranting tyrant with his own purposeful overacting:

Your naked infants spitted upon pikes,
 Whiles the mad mothers with their howls confused
 Do break the clouds, as did the wives of Jewry
 At Herod's bloody-hunting slaughtermen.
 (3.3.38-41)

Mrs. Ford's "What a Herod of Jewry is this" (2.1.19) probably associates Falstaff's preposterous love letters and the equally preposterous self-image which wrote them with Herod's over-inflated ego and his usual obliviousness to the possibility of failure. Herod is not named in *Macbeth*, but I think it will become clear that the overwhelming general analogy joins so many detailed echoes from the characters, actions, themes, the props, and stage business, even the language of the Herod plays, that more explicit allusion in the Scottish play would have been not only unnecessary but insulting.⁶ Though Robert Weimann has spoken of the "virtually proverbial" dimensions of the Herod figure around 1600, at least two of these allusions suggest that Shakespeare also knew the theatrical Herod. The most likely venue for that knowledge is Coventry, since its great cycle was only a day's walk from Stratford and the performances not finally suppressed until 1579, when Shakespeare was fifteen.⁷

The *ordo prophetarum* is a traditional procession of prophets and kings which actually occurred in liturgical drama before it became a staple of the mysteries. According to Young and Lumiansky, it "seems designed to confirm the blindness of the Jews in general and of Herod in particular" about the divinity of Christ "through utterances of their own prophets and of certain

pagans.”⁸ In the *N-Town* “Jesse Root,” twenty-seven kings and prophets parade across the stage, each with at least a quatrain to assert his place in either the prophecy or the succession of Christ. This business takes 136 lines, and cryptic endnotes suggest the possibility of still more witnesses.⁹ Some of them even participate in a counting which is part of the pounding, like Joathas Rex who is “the ixte kynge spronge of Jesse” (ll. 97–98). “Of jesse rote” becomes the chief refrain of these appearances, and it is often accompanied by phrases like “Abraham and his seed forever.” The Herod of this cycle does refer to “tals ys þat I haue ben tolde” of a child who will be king, but he does not see this procession of prophets and kings.¹⁰

Though other Herod plays try various ways of bringing the prophecies closer to Herod on the stage, even to having him request their recitation, it would apparently have broken even their rules of anachronism to have either the prophets or the kings actually appear before him. In the *Coventry* “Pageant of the Shearmen and Tailors,” Herod’s arrogant entrance comes immediately after the prophets discuss “this chy[l]dis lenage” and “the lyne of Jude” as well as Christ’s redemptive role: “*There the profettis gothe furthe and Erod cumyth in, and the messenger.*” In this same play, one of Herod’s most extravagant moments of boasting in the mysteries is followed by the three kings recalling the prophecies which undermine and expose his hubris: “A seyde there schuld a babe be borne / Comyng of the rote of Jesse, / To sawe mankynd that wasse forlorne.”¹¹ In the *Chester* “Magi,” when a boasting Herod demands that his clerks and clergy (as in Matthew) report what “thy bookes of prophecy / of Daniell, David, and Isaye” say of this, their reply is overwhelming. He himself names fourteen of the prophets we heard in the *Coventry* “Pageant,” and then the Doctor, provoked by such characteristic bluster and blasphemy as Herod’s “That is false by Mahound [Mohammed],” recites for sixty lines, Herod often interrupting, the prophecies of Daniel, Micah, Isaiah, David, and Jeremiah that foretell the “kinge and hys messye / of Abrahams seede descendinge lineallye.”¹²

The many verbal references to Macbeth’s actually seeing the prophetic apparitions and the line of kings during the witches’ scene emphasizes the greater intensity of Shakespeare’s parallel and possibly competing procession. The witches invite Macbeth to “speak,” “demand” “if th’hadst rather hear it from our mouths / Or from our masters,” to which Macbeth responds arrogantly, “Call ’em. Let me see ’em” (4.1.61–63). After the apparitions appear and speak, Macbeth asks, “Shall Banquo’s issue ever / Reign in this kingdom?” The witches tease him with “Seek to know no more,” and he responds with the same blind arrogance, “I will be satisfied.” “Let me know.” So they exult:

Show!
 Show!
 Show!
 Show his eyes, and grieve his heart.
 (4.1.102–10)

Macbeth himself attests again and again to the superior dramatic and psychological power of this visual representation of prophecy, their “*show of eight kings and Banquo, last [King] with a glass in his hand.*” “Thy crown does sear mine eyeballs,” he laments; “Why do you show me this?” “Start, eyes.” “What, will the line stretch out to th’crack of doom?” “I’ll see no more” (4.1.112–18). But of course he is powerless to resist the way this seeing and this knowing contradict his earlier hubris that the first three apparitions are “sweet bodements, good,” that he need not fear a Macduff who must be “of woman born,” that Birnam Wood cannot come to Dunsinane (4.1.96, 80, 92–94).¹³ He even enhances the power of these prophetic seeings with a counting that may be analogous to Herod’s and the Doctor’s:

And yet the eighth appears, who bears a glass
 Which shows me many more; and some I see
 That twofold balls and treble sceptres carry.
 Horrible sight! Now I see ’tis true.
 (4.1.119–22)¹⁴

While the fact that the witches’ primary role here is temptation rather than prophecy, and equivocation rather than truth-telling potentially makes Macbeth more sympathetic than Herod, more like the victim of the moralities than the villain of the mysteries, we might also find Macbeth more reprehensible than Herod when despite such moments of greater clarity and honesty he still persists in his horrific evil.

Herod characteristically tries to minimize the threat by exaggerating the youth of his nemesis. In the *Chester* “Magi” he says of “ylke swedlinge [swaddling] swayne / I shall choppe of his head,” calls him the “yonge godlinge,” the “pevish page,” the “elvish godlinge” and “this boye” who cannot possibly threaten him.¹⁵ Both before and after he sees the prophesied line of kings, Macbeth too tries to belittle the prophesied successors by referring to “the boy Malcolm” as well as “the worm” Fleance “that’s fled” and has “no teeth for th’present” (5.3.3; 3.4.29–31). More ambiguous than anything in Herod’s repertoire, however, is Macbeth’s simultaneous crediting and belittling of the third apparition, which “rises like the issue of a king / And wears upon his baby-brow the round / And top of sovereignty” (4.1.87–89). Also parallel are

the many colloquial insults and threats that Macbeth and Herod both so formulaically lavish on the messengers of their doom.¹⁶ Of course there are also depths in the “sound and fury” of Macbeth’s fear and denial that the Herod figures never plumb. The first two messengers provoke the searching lament, “My way of life / Is fall’n into the sere the yellow leaf,” as well as all this intimidating and self-deceptive bluster; the news of Lady Macbeth’s death inspires the regret as well as the denial of the “tomorrow” speech. And even as Macbeth threatens to hang the last messenger on the tree, again in tandem with one of the Herods, he also concedes from his news the possibility of “th’equivocation of the fiend,” “gin[s] to be awearry of the sun,” even reverses Herod’s threat with “If thy speech be sooth, / I care not if thou dost for me as much [i.e., as hang me alive upon the next tree].”¹⁷

Staines and Weimann also agree that “grandiose epithets” and “grotesque boasting and ranting” become “almost proverbial attributes” of the foolish and the fearsome Herod.¹⁸ The *Chester* figure characteristically boasts of his powers over “this world,” “the devills,” the sun, the moon, and the rain. The “mightiest conqueror” of the *Coventry* “Pageant” proclaims that he “made bothe hevin and hell, / And of my myghte powar holdith vp this world rownd.” He also calls himself “the cawse of this grett lyght and thunder” as well as earthquakes and clouds, adding: “All the whole world . . . / I ma tham dystroie with won worde of my mowthe.” *York’s* Herod boasts that all the planets are his subjects, and includes under his heavenly dominance “Blonderande per blastis to blaw when I bidde.”¹⁹ The ironic impotence of these claims is manifest in their outrageous impossibility, like the threats of an evil Sheriff of Nottingham in a Robin Hood pantomime, at which even the children can hiss their disapproval. This hubris is also repeatedly punctuated in these Corpus Christi plays through mocking epithets like the *Towneley’s* “kyng of kyngys . . . / Chefe lord of lordyngys,” or the *Chester* Herod’s claims that “This realme is myne and shalbe aye,” since Herod is obviously to be superseded by a Creator-Christ who is called in Revelation “king of kings and lord of lords” and prophesied to “reign for ever and ever.”²⁰

One wonders if Herod’s boastfulness lurks behind Macbeth’s promise to Lady Macbeth that he would

Let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer,
Ere we will eat our meal in fear, and sleep
In the affliction of these terrible dreams
That shake us nightly.
(3.2.16–19)

His rhetoric, much more sophisticated than Herod’s, almost convinces us of his potential to reduce the frame of things to chaos, shake heaven and earth

(or heaven and hell) to their very foundations. But we know at the same time that Macbeth cannot even command his dreams to stop, for all his impotent ranting. These are words of desperation, not power. Nor can he, despite his sonorous and ominous greeting to the witches in 4.1, control any more than Herod the wind or the waves, earthquakes and floods and seasons, the very principles of created matter:

Though you untie the winds and let them fight
 Against the churches, though the yesty waves
 Confound and swallow navigation up,
 Though bladed corn be lodged and trees blown down,
 Though castles topple on their warders' heads,
 Though palaces and pyramids do slope
 Their heads to their foundations, though the treasure
 Of Nature's germins tumble all together
 Even till destruction sicken, answer me
 To what I ask you.
 (4.1.52–61)

Macbeth's ironic disadvantage is even greater than Herod's because there is such a discrepancy between his powerful poetry and his cosmic impotence.

Likewise, for all his exultation when "light thickens" in apparent response to his blustering words, Macbeth can no more command "seeling night" to come than Herod can direct the sun and the moon. And though Macbeth may resolve "For mine own good / All causes shall give way" (3.2–50, 46; 3.4.135–36), he is no more first cause than his ranting predecessor. He is not king of kings and lord of lords, master of the universe; he can no more destroy the whole world than Herod can create it. Nor will he reign for ever and ever. The witches remind us just after his culminating boast that Macbeth cannot even command the apparitions: "Listen, but speak not to't." "He will not be commanded" (4.1–75, 89). The *Towneley* Herod is similarly undercut by the learned men he tries to intimidate when they hand him the scripture and say: "Here the sothe youreself may se, / If ye can rede."²¹ But though such sarcasm undercuts Herod's presumptuousness, and Macbeth's, both figures still terrify us with their potential to do violence to themselves and to others. It is in smallness taking itself too seriously that both characters are at once most frightening and most absurd. Chaplin's Hitler and Hitler's Chaplin become a vivid twentieth-century manifestation of a similar paradox. In fact, if such dictators as Herod or Macbeth are pushed too far, they may enact their genocidal rage.

Herod is so often all-hailed in these grandiose and ironic terms that this greeting also becomes a rhetorical commonplace of his portrayal as sinister

and silly lord of misrule. We find this in the *Towneley* and the *N-Town* plays,²² but the most elaborate use of this motif of ironic greeting occurs in the *Coventry* massacre:

Hayle, kynge, most worthist in wede!
 Hayle, manteinar of curtese throgh all this world wyde!
 Hayle, the most myghtyst that eyuer bestrod a stede!
 Ha[y]ll, most monfullist mon in armor man to abyde!
 Hayle, in thyne hoonowre!²³

The Magi have just greeted the Christ child, “Hayle, Lorde thatt all this worlde hath wrought! / Hale, God and man to-gedur in fere! / . . . / Hayle be thow, Lorde of by mangnyffecens / . . . / Hayle be thow, Lorde longe lokid fore!”²⁴ This deserved praise and selfless adoration of Christ powerfully oppose the perfunctory greetings and superficial praise that falsely glorify Herod.²⁵ So do the Magi’s gifts of healing, spirituality, and true power, represented in the myrrh, frankincense, and gold. The witches lavish their own “all hails” on Macbeth:

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.
 (1.3.48–50)

After a similar flurry of “Hails” for Banquo, they conclude, “So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo! / Banquo and Macbeth, all hail!” (1.3.68–69). Lady Macbeth’s subsequent “Great Glamis! worthy Cawdor! / Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter” (1.5.52–53) seems to conflate the ironic greetings, the blasphemy, and the grandiose epithets of the Herod tradition as she begins in hubris her own fatal ministry.

Herod’s traditional splendor of dress is still preserved in the seventeenth- (and twentieth-) century Santons of Provence, where Herod remains a popular and always resplendent figure. Staines calls his “extravagant physical trappings” “remarkably rich and spectacular, so ostentatious that [they] must have appeared ludicrous to his audience.”²⁶ The recorded golden costume of Herod’s own child who is ironically massacred in the *Chester* play may be our most vivid reminder of this irony today. A bright suit of armor was part of this traditional picture. The *Coventry* Herod is called the “most monfullist mon in armor” and boasts of “my contenance and my colour / Bryghtur then the sun in the meddis of the dey.” The *N-Town* tyrant describes himself as “pe comelyeste kynge clad in gleterynge golde,”

a soldier in the *Chester* "Innocents" hails him as "comely kinge crowned in gould," and other references to his bright armor and his soldiers' appear in various lines and stage directions across the mysteries.²⁷

Chester stage directions as well as *Coventry* repair bills for his falchion, scepter, sword, and crest all suggest the prominence of Herod's clothing in performances of the mysteries. Doob also notices the *Towneley* Herod's ostentatious robe-changing.²⁸ A typical entry from the *Coventry* records and accounts for the Corpus Christi plays reads, "a fauchion, a septur, and a creste for Heroude repaired. . . . it payd for iij platis to Heroddis crest of iron [and] it. . . . gold foyle and sylver foyle for the crest and for the fawchen." Craig's notes refer to "many similar entries for" "peynting the fauchon and Herods face" and repairing or making the crests in the glittering to which he had become accustomed that "occur in subsequent years."²⁹ There were also three suits of armor for Herod and his two knights, or murderers. Scattered stage directions in the *Chester* play, items like "Cast downe the sword," "Breake a sword," "Staffe," and several "Cast up[s]," also suggest how often these emblems of Herod's fury and his pride were buffeted by rough stage business. "Staffe and another gown" is another *Chester* stage direction which suggests that a frantic undressing and dressing also punctuated Herod's fear and his fury in response to the prophecies. The *Digby* Herod's "My robys I rende ato" just before he "Here dieth," like the *York* Herod's immediate response to Christ's prophesied succession, "Do rewle us þan in riche array," must be part of the same tradition.³⁰

Macbeth's panicked impetuosity about arming and disarming himself may parallel both Herod's overly elaborate dress and his characteristic throwing of his sword, his scepter, and his helmet at the messengers when he learns of the Magi's escape or the distressing prophecy of his succession. "Give me my armor," Macbeth commands Seyton in 5.3, who coolly replies, "Tis not needed yet." "I'll put it on" is therefore perverse in its bluster of willful futility, and Macbeth apparently remains unarmed despite his second command. Seyton must also refuse the second "Give me my armor," because Macbeth says yet again "Come, put my armor on" and then adds "Give me my staff" when Seyton finally accedes to his wishes. Like the eternal footman who holds Prufrock's coat and snickers, Seyton seems more self-possessed here than his master. Macbeth is hardly armed before he commands "Pull't off, I say" and "Bring it after me." "Arm, arm, and out," like "At least we'll die with harness on our back," suggests one last furious and fearful dressing (5.3.33-34, 36, 48, 54, 58; 5.5.46, 52). Like Herod, if Macbeth must die, he will die well-dressed. He does not have to throw his sword, scepter, and crest across the stage, nor does he need to have been dressed and undressed by Seyton each time he asked to mirror the more obvious business of the Herod

plays. Both Angus and Caithness associate Macbeth's clothing with misrule, one saying, “For certain / He cannot buckle his distempered cause / Within the belt of rule,” the other imaging Macbeth's moral and political decline in terms of ill-fitting garments of authority: “Now does he feel his title / Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe / Upon a dwarfish thief.” One wonders how many Herod actors were overmatched on the stage of the mysteries by the size and splendor of their handed-down costumes. From the golden opinions Macbeth had earned and wanted to wear “now in their newest gloss, / Not cast aside so soon,” he has come at the end to be dwarfed by the garments of human greatness.³¹

The disease and damnation that explicitly mark Herod's deserved end are likewise burnt, blown, bent, and made new on Shakespeare's anvil, but they are not discarded. Herod's judgment here is a catalog of hideous diseases which can include a “raging fever,” “continuous pains in the intestines,” “gangrene in the privy parts,” worms, asthma, convulsions, itching. Herod's judgment hereafter is just as explicit. The *N-Town* “Proclamation” announces his damnation—“Whan he is sett at hese most pryde / . . . þe devyl per soulys xal take.” The *Chester* Demon tells us that he is “sent / to fetch this kinges sowle here present / into hell,” and Herod just earlier has affirmed that this judgment is both imminent and deserved. “Dampned I must bee,” he says near his tragic end, and “I see of feindes swarmes—/ I have donne so many harmes—/ from hell comminge after mee.”³² The consequences of the Macbeths' commitment to evil include at least one “mind diseased”; their life is reduced to a “fitful fever” and their kingdom to a “sickly weal.” Macbeth both denies and ignores these symptoms, but the nearly choral community universally knows that if Scotland is to return to “a sound and pristine health,” they are “the purge,” the “cure,” the “med'cines” of his “pestered senses,” and his “deadly grief.” Macbeth's judgment hereafter, his damnation, is also written indelibly if never quite so objectively across Macbeth's story.³³ I concede that the dazzling array of references which connect Macbeth and his wife to “Hell,” “devil,” “damned,” and “fiend” express a community's fury and frustration, its need for a sense of order and justice, reward and punishment here, eternal “signifying” hereafter. I agree that they may manifest personal needs, Malcolm's for authenticity, Macduff's for justifiable vengeance. But Macbeth's own dread of death and judgment is mixed with his blustering attempts at intimidation and denial, and even Lady Macbeth proves unable not to think of “these deeds” “after these ways.” While Macbeth's hell-broth is undeniably composed of more sophisticated psychological, sociological, and iconographic ingredients than Herod's, almost every character in the play believes that hell exists and that Macbeth and his “fiend-like queen” are embarked on “the primrose way to th'everlasting bonfire.”³⁴

As this imagery of disease and damnation suggests, Macbeth's misrule may have a dwarfish side, but like Herod's it also contains the potential for almost inconceivable violence as well as "deepest consequence." After his visit to the witches Macbeth resolves upon an act of wanton cruelty that will eliminate whatever shreds of loyalty Macbeth still commands. In a more stable ruler, the psychic necessity of the act would be overruled by its political absurdity if not its illogic. Here there is no such mediation of head or heart, for Macbeth has ruled away all such mediation in the willed oblivion of his moral desperation. He has not only declined the promptings to repent: "Returning were as tedious as go o'er." He has also resolved no longer to think before acting. "Strange things I have in head, that will to hand, / Which must be acted ere they may be scanned" and "From this moment / The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand" are the best examples.³⁵ The seed of Banquo threatens his succession; Macduff threatens his life; so Macbeth responds to the witches' prophecy and the news of Macduff's flight to England by resolving upon the useless eradication of the seed of Macduff:

give to Wedge o'th' sword
 His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls
 That trace him in his line. No boasting like a fool;
 This deed I'll do before this purpose cool.
 (4.1.151-54)

"No boasting like a fool" is, however, both right and wrong as an allusion to Herod. Herod, at least as he is represented in the mysteries, can hardly be described as capable of moral choice, so fixed is his role in the cycle's drama of human salvation. Though the point is often qualified, few readers would disagree that Shakespeare first establishes Macbeth as a fully, though not of course a perfectly functioning moral agent in a well-defined moral universe and then dramatizes both his willed and his unwilled decline.³⁶

The "If it were done" soliloquy is a particularly brilliant piece of this pattern, one where Macbeth's reason and his understanding, his memory, imagination, and will are at least for a moment all "strong . . . against the deed." However much we may continue to pity and fear him, Macbeth first changes his mind and then relentlessly rewrites himself from this heroic figure imbued with a deep moral consciousness and even perhaps too much "o'th' milk of human kindness" towards a being who rivals Herod's usually unconsidered, stereotypical villainy. Even after the murder Lady Macbeth tries and fails to keep him from "consider[ing]" their deed not just "deeply" but theologically, in terms of prayer and blessing, grace, and forgiveness, the "Amen" that Macbeth

said stuck in his throat. If Macbeth becomes like Herod “almost crazy” with rage, even if he is prompted to his self-destruction by all the powers of darkness, he is still the idiot who has untold one life and then scripted another, one “full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.” This understanding underlies the witches’ gleeful “Something wicked this way comes” as he arrives, already almost completely lost, to receive their last equivocating prophecies.³⁷ Macbeth’s strenuous self-directed movement towards moral misrule may be his most distinctive departure from the almost entirely external moral grotesquerie of the tyrant of the Herod plays.³⁸

That words like “seed” and “root” betoken both Herod’s prophesied successors and victims and Macbeth’s is hardly news; genealogical language is often grounded in such imagery. More interesting is the possible connection between what the *N-Town* “Jesse Root” play calls Christ’s “sacerdotale lynage” and the sacred, sometimes sacramental cast Shakespeare gives to Macbeth’s intended victims and prophesied successors. Macduff calls Duncan’s murder a “most sacrilegious” act that “hath broke ope / The Lord’s anointed temple and stolen thence / The life o’th’ building.” Of course this reference can be trivialized, materialized, but Macduff is obviously drawing an analogy between the murder of Duncan and the theft of the Host, the body of Christ, from the sanctuary.³⁹ Macbeth, though feigning, may also associate the murdered Duncan with the sacrament when he calls him “the wine of life” (2.3.63–65, 91). Later Macduff calls Duncan “a most sainted king,” his wife a queen who “Oft’ner upon her knees than on her feet, / Died every day she lived” (4.3.109–11). Malcolm, the issue of these holy parents, fashions himself as a sacrificial lamb to Macbeth’s wrathful god: “You may deserve of him, through me . . . / To offer up a weak, poor, innocent lamb / T’appease an angry god” (4.3.15–17). Though Malcolm shows us that he has apparently learned something more than his sainted father about surviving in this fallen world, I find no convincing evidence that we are supposed to distrust this testimony of his family’s extraordinary innocence, even its sacerdotal holiness. In fact, Malcolm and Donaldbain have to fly to England and Ireland, their Egypts if you will, to escape this tyrant’s wrath.

Shakespeare’s evocation of a theatrical and a sacramental past through such analogies and allusions interestingly parallels a strategy Weimann describes in the Herod plays as “the dramatic potential of anachronism,” which, because they presented a figure who “stood, as it were, between biblical history and contemporary reality,” Herod and the feudal lord,

established a broad range of links with, and realized the most affective tensions between, the world and time of biblical myth and the world and time of contemporary England.⁴⁰

Wickham also mentions the linking of historical, ritual, and universal time in the mysteries. Emrys Jones has already suggested that Shakespeare uses the mysteries in a similar way, not so much to mark something as particularly Protestant or Catholic as to evoke from their time as well as their genre “a suggestion of spiritual greatness overwhelming in its resonance.” Of course this strategy is complicated in *Macbeth* by the fact that historical verisimilitude is also served by such references, especially since the mysteries and the moralities shared an imagined sacramental past with the actual historical time of the play, a time of Edward the Confessor’s miracles and Duncan’s extraordinary sanctity. Shakespeare also continues what David Bevington has called Marlowe’s “vital fusion of secular subject and traditional form” as he conflates in the “semihistorical personage” of Macbeth “a specific individual as well as a spiritual abstraction.”⁴¹ The transformation of Holinshed’s tainted Banquo into such a good man that he sometimes suggests the good angel of the moralities is a much simpler example of this appropriation from the theatrical conventions of an earlier time, when people either thought of “these things” “after these ways” (2.2.43) or were represented as doing so.

Of course, Banquo’s seed is hardly Abraham’s, nor is James Christ. Still, it apparently did not offend Shakespeare’s new monarch to have the waters of his land touched by such analogies, any more than it apparently bothered Elizabeth or Mary to be compared to the Virgin Mary in what John King calls their “royal iconography.”⁴² George Walton Williams reminds us that James’ lineal descent was so important to him that he addressed Parliament on the subject in 1607, reiterating his claim to have been the 108th king to be descended from Fergus in 330 B.C., a line which goes of course through Banquo and Fleance. Arthur Kinney argues that the show in *Macbeth* of the line of kings parallels various of its contemporary Lord Mayor’s shows and other entertainments which were paying tribute to the new king by displaying his lineage “from Brut himself.” Kinney adds that James had “empowered himself theoretically” in his work *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* (Edinburgh, 1598; London, 1603) with “a special divine sanction” derived from biblical authority. “Kings are called Gods,” King James says (more than once apparently), “by the propheticall King *David*,” not to mention Solomon, Jeremiah, Samuel, and even St. Paul.⁴³

I doubt if this list of many of the same prophets and kings who proclaimed the divinity and authority of Christ in the *ordo prophetarum* is coincidental, especially when I learn from Wickham of “the messianic quality which James I’s succession possessed for his subjects in the early years of his reign,” am reminded by Roy Strong that Ben Jonson compares the marriage of James in his wedding masque *Hymenaei* “to that union wrought by God in the world through Love,” and read in King that “James is the first British

monarch whose crown is known to have been interpreted explicitly as a variation of the crown of thorns.” James also implies in his *Meditation upon the Lord’s Prayer* that he, like King Solomon, “was a figure of Christ,” as well as a recipient of “the greatest gift that our Saviour gave his Apostles,” because he was given “the *dicton* of PACIFICUS”; James of course asserts here his own beatitude, from Christ’s “blessed are the peacemakers.” It was apparently hard for James to think too highly of himself. But whether Shakespeare is trying in *Macbeth* to warn his new monarch against “the inherent dangers of imperialist and absolutist thought,” as Kinney interestingly suggests, or whether he is merely flattering him in the mode of the day through the idealized Banquo’s prophesied succession and Malcolm’s extraordinary goodness, the theatrical and the literal genealogy in *Macbeth* are important parts of its conversation about political and moral legitimacy.⁴⁴ I will return to this question after a final look at Macbeth’s possible place, and Herod’s, in the theatrical and theological metaphors that conclude the play.

Macbeth asserts in his last soliloquy his role as a “poor player” “who,” “full of sound and fury,” “struts and frets his hour” upon a meaningless stage in a meaningless universe (5.5.19–28). He has just earlier naively told the Doctor that if he could “cast / The water of my land, find her disease, / And purge it to a sound and pristine health” Macbeth would “applaud thee to the very echo, / That should applaud again” (5.3.50–53). Macduff sees himself as a supporting actor in a play which Malcolm and heaven are both directing about Macbeth’s human and divine retribution and the restoration of a divinely appointed lineage on the throne of Scotland.⁴⁵ Asserting that he is acting with God’s permission, Macduff prays that the “intermission,” the space of time between Macbeth’s misrule and his execution, be “cut short” by the “gentle heavens” (4.3.231–35). Macduff feels so competent in this editorial and acting role that he can ask heaven to forgive Macbeth if his own “intermission” or intervention fails.⁴⁶ But Macduff, like Macbeth, has room within this metaphor and this universe to improvise. If, unlike Herod, “He has no children,” Macduff will find another “great revenge” for Macbeth (4.3.214–16).⁴⁷ And if Macbeth refuses to fight and die in heaven’s blocked-out scene, Macduff will become instead the impresario of a freak show whose star attraction is a coward-tyrant and whose action is his public humiliation on earth:

Then yield thee, coward,
And live to be the show and gaze o’th’ time.
We’ll have thee, as our rarer monsters are,
Painted upon a pole, and underwrit
“Here may you see the tyrant.”
(5.8.23–27)

Macbeth will be damned and dead in the dignifying drama of divine retribution; but if he declines to play that role he will be reduced to something even less, a Herod-like tyrant caricatured in paint and print, “gazed” on like a Cleopatra reduced to an “Egyptian puppet” and “shown” to “mechanic slaves” who cannot possibly understand her greatness, or Antony’s.⁴⁸ Though Macbeth is bullied by Macduff’s bluff and his own pride into the more significant role, he never quite escapes the belittling alternative.

Macbeth feels so trapped in what he sees as this preordained denouement that he compares himself to his fellow actor down the street in the bear garden: “They have tied me to the stake. I cannot fly, / But bear-like I must fight the course.” But the intriguing connection here between Macbeth’s theatrical self-awareness and Herod’s ritual and formulaic theatricality is complicated by Macbeth’s persistent use of the theatrical figure to deny a moral responsibility and a moral choice he still possesses. He has after all tied himself to this stake, chosen this end much more clearly than a Herod who was apparently born evil or a bear who was merely born a bear. In fact, Macbeth continues to choose, albeit desperately, as he moves towards his death and damnation by putting on and casting off roles as furiously as Herod shucked robes. Ironically, the course Macbeth chooses—unreasoned fury—is more befitting “a beast that wants discourse of reason” than a human being. Macbeth casts off the enacted suicide of “Roman fool[s]” only to put on a greater folly even than Herod’s or a bear’s, the idiocy of indiscriminate gashing: “Whiles I see lives, the gashes / Do better upon them.” Once Macduff’s execution is played out, once “the usurper’s cursed head” is mounted rather than painted on a pole, Malcolm promises to “perform” whatever “the grace of grace” “calls upon us” to do, “in measure, time, and place.” The new king thus closes the play and begins his reign by choosing to assert and to enact the great signifying of the very scripted universe that Macbeth has tried to deny, in concert with the equally traditional image of the harmony of its composition and performance.⁴⁹

I have tried to show that *Macbeth* gains power, shape, and clarity not only because its central figure looks back in defining and sometimes deflating ways to this theatrical and mythic Herod, but also because Shakespeare connects Herod’s story as well as Macbeth’s to the accession of James I to the English throne. I cautiously agree with Kinney that Shakespeare’s new absolutist and imperialist king might have found gentle admonitions in this material as well as lavish compliments. I am less comfortable, however, with Stephen Mullaney’s idea that “the projection of James’ line” in *Macbeth* is both “a complimentary gesture” and “what amounts to a genealogy of treason and equivocation.” Though Mullaney is technically correct, one has to wonder who would have put Shakespeare up to such a dangerous enterprise, why on

earth he would have dared to undertake it, and if he did, why there were no consequences. Of course, James and his people might have been nodding, and so missed both the potentially insulting ambiguity and the unsolicited advice. My sense of the play is rather that Shakespeare often used the Herod tradition to mute the potential awkwardness of this material and to enhance the potential praise. Echoes of the familiar line of prophets and kings would have joined the more general sacramental and sacred spin of the whole mystery tradition to encourage most of Shakespeare's court audience, and certainly the king, to perceive yet another celebration of this redeeming succession which leads up to the Stewart monarchy and beyond, “out to th' crack of doom.” Herod's great familiarity as a theatrical fool and tyrant would have buffered the potentially medicinally warnings, even as the court audience inevitably distanced itself from the “dead butcher and his fiend-like queen” who attempted to suppress James' line.⁵⁰ This may go against our recent distaste for the relatively unambiguous, but it probably would have protected Shakespeare against a breach he would not have been wise to risk and might have had trouble surviving.

NOTES

1. David Staines, “To Out-Herod Herod: The Development of a Dramatic Character,” in *The Drama in the Middle Ages*, ed. Clifford Davidson, et al. (New York: AMS Press, 1982), 207–8. Emrys Jones in *The Origins of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 82, calls Herod “the chief prototype of Macbeth in the mystery plays.” Glynne Wickham, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Heritage* (London: Routledge, 1969), 214–31, agrees and encourages more “careful comparison.” Roy Battenhouse, *Shakespearean Tragedy: Its Art and Its Christian Premises* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), 72, 94, 179; Clifford Davidson, *The Primrose Way* (Conesville: John Westburg, 1970), ix, 21, 77; and Paul Jorgensen, *Our Naked Frailties* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1971), 143, mention other analogies.

2. See Staines, “To Out-Herod Herod,” 224; and Karl Young, *The Drama of the Medieval Church*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933), 2:125, 131–70, 458–62. See also *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, ed. R. M. Lumiansky and David Mills, 2 vols., Early English Text Society s.s. 3, 9 (London: Oxford University Press, 1974, 1986), 2:131–32. M. D. Anderson, *Drama and Imagery in English Medieval Churches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), 23, mentions Maurice Serpet's idea that the Old Testament liturgical plays, and thus the mysteries, might have been offshoots of the *ordo prophetarum*. See also Hardin Craig, *English Religious Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 66–67.

3. *Macbeth*, 5.2.15–16, in *The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, ed. Alfred Harbage (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969); subsequent quotations from Shakespeare will refer to this edition. Robert Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition in the Theatre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 65. Staines, “To Out-Herod Herod,” 208–9, 228–29.

4. Both Stephen Booth and James L. Calderwood accept Macbeth's moral decline, but Booth argues that "indefiniteness" characterizes our responses, and Calderwood heroicizes Macbeth's "existential assertion," stressing "gaps and contradictions within his deconstructive world." See Booth, *King Lear, Macbeth, Indefiniteness, and Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 85, 117–18, 113–15; Calderwood, *If It Were Done* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1986), 117. See also H. W. Fawcner, *Deconstructing Macbeth* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1990). Robert G. Hunter and Carolyn S. Tufts find Macbeth's moral decline just as problematic from a Thomistic or a Calvinistic perspective. See Hunter, *Shakespeare and the Mystery of God's Judgments* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1976), 168–69; and Tufts, "Shakespeare's Conception of Moral Order in *Macbeth*," *Renaissance* 39 (1987): 340–53.

5. *Hamlet*, 3.2.13. Penelope Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 129, calls Herod a "Lord of Misrule who would be perfectly at home in the Feast of Fools." See also E. K. Chambers, *The Medieval Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1903), 2:56–57; Young, *Drama of the Medieval Church*, 1: 104, 2: 100; and Anderson, *Drama and Imagery*, 20.

6. The main biblical account of the Herod story comes from Matt. 2: 2–7, 12–20. See Michael Grant, *Herod the Great* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971) on the historical Herod.

7. Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition*, 66; Craig, *English Religious Drama*, 354–63; Harold C. Gardiner, *Mysteries' End* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1946), 73–76; R. W. Ingram, "Fifteen Seventy-Nine and the Decline of Civic Religious Drama in Coventry," in *The Elizabethan Theatre VIII*, ed. G. R. Hibbard (Port Credit, Ontario: P. D. Meany, 1982), 114–28; and Jones, *Origins*, 31–35, all speak of the varying popularity and official suppression of the mysteries during the first two decades of Shakespeare's life. Richard Dutton describes "the last recorded mystery play, at Kendal, [which] was [only] apparently suppressed" in 1605 ("Censorship," in *A New History of Early English Drama*, ed. John D. Cox and David Scott Kastan [New York: Columbia University Press, 1997], 290, citing Audrey Douglas and Peter H. Greenfield, eds., *Records of Early English Drama: Cumberland, Westmoreland, Gloucestershire* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1986], 17–19).

8. Young, *Drama of the Medieval Church*, 2:125, 131–70, 458–62. See also Staines, "To Out-Herod Herod," 224; and *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, ed. Lumiansky and Mills, 2:131–32. Cf. Craig, *English Religious Drama*, 58–59, 66–67; and Wickham, *Early English Stages*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (London: Routledge, 1980), 1: 230.

9. "Jesse Root," *The N-Town Play*, ed. Stephen Spector, 2 vols., Early English Text Society s.s. 11, 12 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 1: 65–70; cf. the incomplete "Processus Prophetarum," in *The Towneley Plays*, ed. Martin Stevens and A. C. Cawley, 2 vols., Early English Text Society s.s. 13, 14 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 1: 64–71, which includes among its four voices that of a *Sibylla propheta*, a woman who prophesies.

10. See *N-Town* "Jesse Root," 1: 66–68, ll. 17–25, 49, 74, 82, 90. See also "Shearmen," from *Two Coventry Corpus Christi Plays*, ed. Hardin Craig, Early English Text Society E.S. 87 (London: Oxford University Press, 1957), 14–15, ll. 416–17, 424, 393, 396; and *Chester* "Magi's Gifts," 1: 179, l. 109. For Abraham's seed, see *Chester* "Magi," 1: 171, l. 343; *Chester* "Nativity," 1: 101, l. 106; *Chester* "Abraham," 1: 64, l. 172. See also the "Magnificat," in *The Book of Common Prayer*, 1559, ed. John E. Booty (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1976), 61–62.

Anderson, *Drama and Imagery*, compares the many old “Jesse windows” in British churches to the *ordo prophetarum* (36–38). *N-Town* “Adoration,” 1:176, ll. 217–19.

11. *Coventry* “Shearmen and Tailors,” 12–16, ll. 332–474; see esp. ll. 393, 424–27, and later, 19, ll. 544–46.

12. *Chester* “Magi,” 1: 165–71, ll. 221, 234–35, 259, 261–68, 276, 283, 342–43. “Herod and the Magi,” in *The York Plays*, ed. Richard Beadle (London: Edward Arnold, 1982), 141–42, also has the Magi mention prophecies to Herod. Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (London: Routledge, 1972), 204, calls “the doctors’ solemn recitation of prophecies . . . in effect a substitute for a prophets play.”

13. Lumiansky and Mills note that “Herod shows a knowledge of Jewish scriptures, but fails to appreciate the ironic implications of the reference for his own situation” (*Chester*, 2: 131–32, 135, notes 234, 354).

14. Gertrud Schiller, *Iconography of Christian Art*, trans. Janet Seligman, 2 vols. (London: Lund & Humphries, 1971), 1: 14, mentions the prominence of the line of prophets in Gothic cathedral sculpture; Notre Dame (which also has a massacre) and Rheims have twenty-eight and fifty-six prophets respectively, most of whom “wear crowns and carry sceptres,” as in *Macbeth*.

15. *Chester* “Magi,” 1: 169–74, ll. 400–1, 307, 325–26, 412; for parallels see the *Towneley* “Herod the Great,” 1: 192–93, ll. 324, 340, 352, 359–60, 349.

16. For some of the parallel threats and insults, see *Macbeth*, 5.3.11; 5.5.35, 38–39; *Towneley* “Herod,” 1: 188–90, ll. 235–37, 192–93; and *York* “Massacre,” 169, ll. 106, 129.

17. *Macbeth*, 5.3.22–23; 5.5.17–28, 38–52.

18. Staines, “To Out-Herod Herod,” 212, 219; Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition*, 66.

19. *Chester* “Magi,” 1: 164, ll. 173–85; *Coventry* “Shearmen,” 17–18, ll. 488–89, 493, 503. 498–99; *York* “Herod and the Magi,” 134, l. 4. Cf. Staines, “To Out-Herod Herod,” 223; Woolf, *English Mystery Plays*, 203.

20. *Towneley* “Herod,” 1: 185, ll. 53–55; *Chester* “Magi,” 1: 172, l. 362; Rev. 19:16, 11:15.

21. *Towneley* “Offering of the Magi,” 1: 172, ll. 459–60.

22. *Towneley* “Herod the Great,” 1: 186, ll. 103–5; 1: 195, ll. 421, 426; 1: 200, l. 599; *N-Town* “Magi,” 1: 174, ll. 151–52; 1: 177, ll. 235–37. Art also juxtaposes Herod’s massacre with the Magi’s adoration to distinguish true king from false (Schiller, *Iconography*, 1: 115).

23. *Coventry* “Shearmen,” 26–27, ll. 768–72.

24. *Coventry* “Shearmen,” 24–25, ll. 699–709.

25. Staines, “To Out-Herod Herod,” 224.

26. Staines, “To Out-Herod Herod,” 227, and *Coventry*, Appendix 2.

27. See Lumiansky and Mills, *Chester*, 2:145, 156. *Chester* “Innocents,” 1:188, l. 89; 1: 200–201, ll. 403–4, 409, 410; see also *Chester* 2: 124. *Coventry* “Shearmen,” 27, l. 771; 18, ll. 507–8; 22, l. 643; *N-Town* “Magi,” 1: 169, ll. 2, 9, 12; *Chester* “Innocents,” 1: 190, l. 89.

28. See the *Chester* “Magi,” 1: 164–73; and Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar’s Children*, 124–25.

29. See *Coventry*, Appendix 2, 82–87. Though Shakespeare’s audience would not have had access to these records, those who recalled the mysteries or had heard of them would have known the flamboyant stage business they imply. The crest is a helmet or headpiece, according to the *OED* (1 *Crest* 4).

30. See *Chester* "Magi," 1: 170–74, ll. 326, 349, 357, 365, 389, and notes to ll. 363, 414; *York* "Herod and the Magi," 138, l. 147; "The Killing of the Children," in *The Late Medieval Religious Plays of Bodleian MSS Digby 133 and E Museo 160*, ed. Donald C. Baker, John L. Murphy, and Louis B. Hall, Early English Text Society o.s. 283 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 109, ll. 383–88. The still bloody hands of an otherwise resplendent seventeenth-century Santon figure of Herod in the Vieux Musee in Aix-en-Provence recently reaffirmed for me this rich network of interacting images in art, popular culture, the mysteries, and *Macbeth*.

31. *Macbeth*, 5.2.14–16, 20–22; 1.7.34–35.

32. Staines, "To Out-Herod Herod," 208; Young, *Drama of the Medieval Church*, 2: 194–95; Woolf, *English Mystery Plays*, 209–11. *N-Town* "Proclamation," 1: 12, ll. 234–42; *Chester* "Innocents," 1: 201–2, ll. 442–44, 421–25. *Lydgate's Fall of Princes*, ed. Henry Bergen, 4 vols. (Washington: Carnegie Inst., 1923), 3:781, has a particularly vivid account of Herod's retributive diseases.

33. For some of the play's other references to damnation, see 1.2.14; 1.3.107, 124; 1.5.49–52; 1.7.20; 2.1.63–64; 2.2.55; 2.3.1–2, 15–18; 3.4.61; 3.6.10–11; 4.1.39, 105; 4.3.55–57, 117, 217, 233; 5.1.32–33; 5.3.11, 16; 5.5.43; 5.7.6–9; 5.8.3, 19, 34, 69. Jones, *Origins*, 32, calls the Porter scene "a pointed allusion to the Harrowing of Hell plays." For other disease images, see 3.2.23; 4.3.214–15; 5.1.67; 5.2.22–29; 5.3.40–56.

34. *Macbeth*, 2.2.32–33; 5.8.69; 2.3.17–18. Articles by Clifford Davidson ("The Fate of the Damned," 52–56) and Pamela Sheingorn ("The Iconography of Hell-Mouth," 8–10), both in *The Iconography of Hell*, ed. Clifford Davidson and Thomas H. Seiler (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), suggest that the iconography of the cauldron found in English wall-paintings, illuminations, and painted glass might suggest the tortures of hell or even hell-mouth itself. One painted Last Judgment with a cauldron apparently appeared in "the guild chapel in Stratford-upon-Avon" (Davidson, "Fate," 52).

35. *Macbeth*, 1.3.126; 3.4.138–40; 4.1.146–48.

36. See Dolora Cunningham, "*Macbeth*: The Tragedy of the Hardened Heart," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 14 (1963): 39–47; G. R. Elliott, *Dramatic Providence in "Macbeth"* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1970); Jorgensen, *Naked Frailties*, 52–57; R. M. Frye, "Launching the Tragedy of *Macbeth*: Temptation, Deliberation, and Consent in Act I," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 45 (1982): 1–19; and Walter Clyde Curry, *Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1937), chaps. 3 and 4. Battenhouse, in "Macbeth: Comment," in *Shakespeare's Christian Dimension* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 473–74, refers to John Chrysostome on moral decline as a consequence of accustomed evil and a punishment for it. Jay L. Halio, ed., *Macbeth* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1972), 1, also speaks of this "open-eyed awareness of what they are about to do."

37. *Macbeth*, 1.7.14; 1.5.15; 2.2.26–32; 5.5.27–28; 4.1.45.

38. It is in Herod's exaggerated, external behavior patterns that Weimann finds "definitely popular associations with the spirit of misrule or topsy-turveydom" (*Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition*, 66).

39. See *N-Town* "Jesse Root," 1: 66, l. 13. In the Bible kings as well as priests, temples, and altars may be called "anointed," and kings such as Saul are often called "the Lord's anointed." See 1 Sam. 16:6, 24:10. Jesus is also called the Lord's anointed in Acts 4:26–27 and 10:38.

40. Weimann, *Shakespeare and the Popular Tradition*, 65.

41. Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 63–64; Jones, *Origins*, 51, 83–84; Bevington, *From “Mankind” to Marlowe* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 260–62.

42. See King, *Tudor Royal Iconography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 6, 52–53, 182, 197–98, 218, 259, 261.

43. Williams, “*Macbeth*: King James’s Play,” *South Atlantic Review* 47 (1982): 18; Kinney, “Scottish History, the Union of the Crowns, and the Issue of Right Rule: The Case of Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*,” in *Renaissance Culture in Context*, ed. Jean R. Brinks and William F. Gentrup (Cambridge: Scholar Press, 1993), 20–27, 39–52.

44. Wickham, *Shakespeare’s*, 258, 265; Strong, *Art and Power* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 29; King, *Tudor Royal Iconography*, 146; Kinney, “Scottish History,” 27, 39. John Cox, *Shakespeare and the Dramaturgy of Power* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 154, cites James’ speech to Parliament in 1610 as another place where he publicly asserted that “kings are justly called gods.” Leah Marcus, *Puzzling Shakespeare* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), also discusses the common image of James as Jove early in his reign (118–19, 123, 137) and argues that in *Cymbeline* “all of the play’s tangled lines converge upon the point at which the ‘Jacobean line’ originated” (131). Marcus, however, also mentions the “complaints of contemporaries who found [the language of Stuart power] threateningly excessive” (207).

45. In *Theatrum Mundi* (New York: Garland, 1987) Linda G. Christian discusses the rich classical and Christian roots of Augustine’s trope of the theater of the world as a signifier of God’s providential if also mysterious control of human affairs. See also Wickham, *Early*, 3: 63. Peter Milward, *Biblical Influences in Shakespeare’s Great Tragedies* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1987), 152–54, mentions the variety of ironic biblical echoes in the “Tomorrow” speech, and Arthur Kirsch, “Macbeth’s Suicide,” *ELH* 51 (1984): 269–96, discusses some Augustinian dimensions of Macbeth’s final sense of futility and his movement towards nothingness, comparing Macbeth and Adam.

46. *OED* 1 *Intermission* 2, but see as well *OED* 2 *Intermission* 2 as “intervention.”

47. Herod’s slaughtered son is represented in the glass of the Lady Chapel in York (Anderson, *Drama and Imagery*, 137).

48. *Antony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.208–12.

49. *Macbeth*, 5.7.1–2; *Hamlet*, 1.2.150; *Macbeth*, 5.8.1–3, 55, 72–73.

50. Kinney, “Scottish History,” 39–52; Mullaney, “Lying Like Truth: Riddle, Representation, and Treason in Renaissance England,” *ELH* 47 (1980): 41. Wickham, *Shakespeare’s*, 261–65, illustrates how commonly Shakespeare’s contemporaries might have identified their new King James with the idea of a redeeming succession. *Macbeth*, 4.1.117; 5.8.69.

PIOTR SADOWSKI

Macbeth

This darkest, most brooding, and sinister of Shakespeare's tragedies begins ominously with the magic evocation of thunder, lightning, and rain (1.1.2), the awesome atmospheric phenomena traditionally associated with the power of male, uranic gods, and in the context of the play with masculine, endodynamic violence and power struggle. Even the fact that the magical incantation is pronounced by witches, that is, female figures, takes nothing away from the gruesomely warlike, masculine aspect of their message. Ostensibly women, that is, inviting associations with the gentle, life-affirming qualities of traditional femininity, the witches talk of the "hurlyburly" of the battle and of worldly power and its inevitable ruin, in their confused gender creating "a murky atmosphere of blurred distinctions, mingled opposites, equivocations, and reversals."¹ As I noted elsewhere, femininity is stereotypically associated with exodynamic forms of behavior, as explored for example in Shakespeare's romantic comedies with their exuberant, playful, and assertive female heroines, but in *Macbeth* the exodynamic behavior first signaled by the witches' female sex is instantly obliterated by the dark powers of the masculine, endodynamic magic of violence, of moral ambivalence, of confusion and chaos, where "fair is foul, and foul is fair," and things "hover through the fog and filthy air" (1.1.11–12).² Even the witches' physical appearance, wild and otherworldly (1.3.40–41),

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belies their female sex, causing confusion and apprehension in Banquo: “you should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so” (45–47). The witches’ cauldron, this hell-broth betokening chaos and destruction, is an antithesis of the fertile female womb, producing poison and death instead of health and new life.

As also discussed earlier, the tragic mode is usually characterized by endodynamic forms of behavior, connected with ruthless acquisition of power, in the majority of cases associated with male characters. What often happens in tragic plays as a result of the domination of masculine endodynamism is that female figures either become helpless victims of masculine oppression, like Ophelia, Gertrude, Cordelia, or Lady Macduff, or become masculinized into endodynamic characters full of “unfeminine” ambition, ruthlessness, and cruelty, like Goneril, Regan, Volumnia, or Lady Macbeth. This gender inversion is emblemized in the opening scene of *Macbeth* by the witches, in whom the exodynamic, feminine principle is symbolically transformed into its endodynamic, masculine opposite, setting the pattern, to culminate in the sinister figure of the endodynamic Lady Macbeth, of gender and moral inversion and confusion, where “nothing is, but what is not” (1.3.142).³

Macbeth

Male violence materializes in all its gory terror in the first scene with a blunt question, “What bloody man is that?” (1.2.1), followed by a realistic report of the battle, full of upbeat military rhetoric of manly courage of the victors and the villainy of the traitors.⁴ It is in this context of unmitigated violence that the “brave Macbeth” is mentioned for the first time, highly regarded by fellow soldiers for his undaunted courage, fighting skills, and spectacular efficacy in battle, and now publicly glorified in Homeric terms as an eagle, a lion, “Valour’s minion,” and “Bellona’s bridegroom” (1.2.16–19). Valor in fighting for the just cause is a static virtue, and such is the opinion that the “valiant cousin” Macbeth enjoys with King Duncan. Macbeth’s efficaciousness receives due praise because it helped to win the battle, but Macbeth’s unceremonious killing of the traitor Macdonwald, with whom he “ne’er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him” (1.2.21), signals an endostatic character, prepared to break the accepted rules if necessary—a quality as yet unsuspected by others who still regard Macbeth as a “worthy gentleman,” that is, a static man of honor. Macbeth’s potentially dangerous endostatism is further suggested by a comparison and unintentional identification with the traitorous thane of Cawdor, whose title Macbeth now assumes as an immediate reward for his spectacular performance in the battle (1.2.67–68). In dynamic terms, Macbeth’s promotion from the thane of Glamis to the thane of Cawdor marks a transition of his

character from honest, honorable statism to potentially disloyal, opportunistic, and traitorous endostatism.

The third and ultimate step in Macbeth's social advancement is announced in the witches' triple all-hails, which imply a natural progression from Glamis to Cawdor to king, while in dynamic terms they supply the final, endodynamic phase in the evolution of Macbeth's character, first represented by Lady Macbeth and later by Macbeth himself.⁵ If the witches' prophesy anticipates the development of Macbeth's character, their balanced, symmetrical equivocations also define the essentially static character of Banquo, whose fate is to be "lesser than Macbeth, and greater. / Not so happy, yet much happier" (1.3.65–66). The almost immediate confirmation of the middle element of the prophesy concerning Macbeth fixes him firmly in the role of the traitor ("I am Thane of Cawdor," 1.3.133) and defines his character as unequivocally endostatic. Macbeth's mental distance from the static and straightforward Banquo is marked by the former's absentmindedness and the appearance of asides to hide his dark thoughts ("Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor: / The greatest is behind," 1.3.115–16). While Banquo prudently dismisses the prophesy as a temptation to "win us to our harm" (1.3.123), Macbeth is unable to control the ever-swelling flow of ambitious thoughts, experiencing, for a time at least, an acute dilemma.

The particular nature of Macbeth's dilemma has occasioned a considerable debate in the critical history of the play, caused by what the critics perceived as an inconsistency in Shakespeare's characterization of the figure: how could a man fully aware of the horror of his deeds be able to commit them? The critics did not deny Macbeth his deep moral sense, noting at the same time his ability to overcome his scruples, to commit one atrocious deed after another, and to live with guilty conscience. A. C. Bradley found in the play "the most remarkable exhibition of the [psychological] development of a character to be found in Shakespeare's tragedies," but later critics accepted the view that Shakespeare sacrificed psychological consistency to theatrical effect.⁶ For example, according to J. I. M. Stewart, "for the sake of theatrical excitement the gap between character and action has been widened beyond credibility," and "there is something like a deliberate omitting of clear and sufficient motives for action, there is a lack of discernible correspondence between the man and his deed."⁷ Stewart talks in fact about two Macbeths: the criminal and the hero.⁸ Kenneth Muir too concludes that "Shakespeare was not so much concerned with the creation of real human beings, but with theatrical or *poetical* effect," and that the playwright was "fascinated by the very difficulty of making the psychologically improbable . . . appear possible."⁹ In his characterization of Macbeth Shakespeare, it has been argued, made the bold experiment of mixing mutually exclusive qualities—a brave warrior who is a moral coward and a brutal murderer who is racked by feelings of guilt.¹⁰

I would argue, however, that rather than sacrificing psychological realism for artistic effect Shakespeare achieved both, and that what the critics perceive as a characterological inconsistency is a classic endostatic dilemma of a man whose “conscious or reflective mind . . . moves chiefly among considerations of outward success and failure, while his inner being is convulsed by conscience,” as perceived intuitively by Bradley.¹¹

As I observed in chapter 3, from the dynamic point of view a state identified as a dilemma occurs when an individual finds himself in a transitional state between two dynamic stages, in the case of endostatic Macbeth between statism and endodynamism. (The opposite case of a dilemma experienced by an exostatic personality has been earlier described in connection with Hamlet.) Macbeth is pulled one way by his static preoccupation with honor, conscience, and loyalty, and the other way by his endodynamic tendency to accumulate power. Hence his short period of suspension between scruples and ambition, until he is swayed by his endodynamic wife toward action.¹² The dilemma of being caught between static loyalty and endodynamic thirst for power is borne out by Macbeth’s introspective asides and by his indecision, until Lady Macbeth tips the scales in favor of manly action. The progression of social success and power promised by the witches’ prophesy thus appeals to Macbeth’s already existing endodynamic appetites, and as basically an endostatic man of action he cannot resist the challenge to reach for the highest reward, now that the victorious battle brought him promotion and raised him nearer to the king than he was ever before. Macbeth’s soliloquies from act 1 mark a progression from the domination of static scruples over the possibilities that Macbeth is still even afraid to verbalize, to the disappearance of the voice of conscience after Macbeth’s endostatic character manages to suppress the uncomfortable thoughts, for a time at least, under his wife’s influence. The terrible possibility first enters Macbeth’s consciousness only as a suggestion,

Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
 And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
 Against the use of nature? Present fears
 Are less than horrible imaginings.
 My thought, whose murder is yet but fantastical,
 Shakes to my single state of man,
 That function is smother’d in surmise,
 And nothing is, but what is not.
 (1.3.135–42)

At this stage the “thought” of breaking the fundamental ethical laws can shake Macbeth’s moral sense profoundly, but it stops him from acting

upon the “horrible imaginings,” his “function” still “smother’d in surmise.” Macbeth’s first soliloquy ends with a victory of static scruples over endodynamic ambition, and with a stoic resignation to leave the matter to fate: “If Chance will have me King, why, Chance may crown me, / Without my stir” (1.3.144–45). Macbeth is still addressed by Banquo as “worthy Macbeth,” and when he suggests to his companion that they “speak [their] free hearts each to other” (1.3.155–56), he means as yet no subterfuge.

But the full realization of Macbeth’s endostatic tendency moves inexorably forward. By a stroke of dramatic irony, Macbeth’s earlier identification with the traitorous thane of Cawdor soon reveals a contrast between the two characters, to Macbeth’s moral disadvantage. The report of the execution of “that most disloyal traitor” testifies in fact to the static character of Cawdor who

very frankly . . . confess’d his treasons,
 Implor’d your Highness’ pardon, and set forth
 A deep repentance. Nothing in his life
 Became him like the leaving it: he died
 As one that had been studied in his death,
 To throw away the dearest thing he ow’d,
 As ‘twere a careless trifle.
 (1.4.5–11)

First perceived as an endostatic traitor, Cawdor thus turns out to be a misled static, while Macbeth, thought to be honest by the gullible Duncan, turns out to be a much more dangerous traitor, whose own ignoble death at the end of the play contrasts sharply with Cawdor’s dignified departure. The static Duncan in turn is, like Othello, trust incarnate, whose main concern is the fair settlement of his accounts with the “worthiest cousin” to whom he owes victory in battle, hence his genuinely apologetic rhetoric of “the sin of my ingratitude,” “recompense,” “the proportion both of thanks and payment,” “thy due,” and “pay” (1.4.14–21). This icon of regal dignity and justice, “the sacred embodiment of his country’s life needing a reverent and tender protectiveness,” balances in himself the attributes of both father and mother.¹³ Duncan is the center of authority, the source of lineage and honor, but he is also the source of all nurturance, planting his children to his throne and making them grow and extending his “gardening” function to his cousin Macbeth: “I have begun to plant thee, and will labour / To make thee full of growing” (1.4.28–29). Tragically misled by appearances, Duncan identifies Macbeth’s castle as an idyllic place promising comfort and safety (“the air / Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself / Unto our gentle senses” 1.6.1–3), an

illusion also shared by the unsuspecting Banquo, who finds the air “delicate” and compares the castle to the fertile “procreant cradle” where the birds “most breed and haunt” (1.6.8–9). As a protective father concerned with the well-being of his large family, Duncan stands in symbolic opposition to Macbeth’s later “barren scepter” (3.1.61), as well as to the masculinized female characters: to the witches with their poisonous cauldron and to the childless and murderous Lady Macbeth.¹⁴

Every next event seems to stir more and more Macbeth’s awakened ambition and his endostatic urge to act. Circumstances may be playing into his hands, but how Macbeth will act in these circumstances depends primarily on his intrinsic psychological makeup. Bradley correctly observed therefore that “there is no sign whatever in the play that Shakespeare meant the actions of Macbeth to be forced on him by an external power.”¹⁵ If we can talk at all about determinism of behavior, the deterministic factors involved always form a unique combination of external, social influences and of internal, psychological dispositions. What first whets Macbeth’s ambition and brings him closer to action is Duncan’s official appointment of the eldest son, Malcolm, as the royal successor, the fact instantly resented by Macbeth, who for the first time feels the “black and deep desires” giving rise to the thoughts of the deed itself: “yet let that be, / Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see” (1.4.52–53). Macbeth’s first reaction to his heightened ambition is to write a letter to his wife to inform her about the witches’ prophesy, but it is not immediately clear why Macbeth should write to his wife at all, because the object of the letter is clearly not to inform her about the coming of Duncan to their castle, and Macbeth himself takes his early leave of the king to return to Inverness to make the necessary preparations.¹⁶ His ostensible reason is to let his wife, his “dearest partner of greatness,” know as quickly as possible about their good fortune as revealed by the witches, so that she might not “lose the dues of rejoicing, by being ignorant of what greatness is promis’d” her (1.5.13). However, it would appear that Macbeth’s real, unconscious reason is to give his wife more time to strengthen her resolve on the right course of action and to decide the matter for him. The frankness of the letter betrays a character who, notwithstanding his endostatic manliness, is psychologically dependent on his wife, a fact that indicates a configuration of consecutive characters with its mixture of adoration and submission in the less mature partner and protection and domination in the more mature partner, who in this case happens to be Lady Macbeth, the endodynamic, masculinized woman.

The presence and vulnerability of Duncan lodging in Macbeth’s castle provide the now-or-never opportunity, which the endodynamic Lady Macbeth cannot fail to seize, and which the endostatic Macbeth finds difficult to let slip, not so much as a means to achieve the aim as a challenge to prove his

worth in action. The understatements and fearful equivocations of Macbeth's earlier soliloquies give way to the bluntness and directness of his monologue, as he now uneuphemistically calls the deed by its proper name ("assassination," "blow," "bear the knife myself," "the horrid deed," 1.7.2-4) and carefully weighs scruples against ambition for the last time. As an endostatic he is tantalized not so much by the ultimate material prize, but by the very possibility of doing that which is most expressly forbidden by all sacred and human laws. The absolute outrageousness and sacrilege of the deed committed in open violation of the most sacred feudal and familial bonds and of traditional hospitality excite Macbeth's boldness, his "vaulting ambition," as the only motive for his action. Because his ambition is as ineradicable as his endostatic character from which it derives, Macbeth *de facto* cannot choose but to act, not so much to become king as to become the man who dared to kill the king. As observed by Bernard McElroy, unlike (endodynamic) Richard Gloucester, Macbeth "is not driven by a compulsive need to command . . . he scarcely gives a thought to the spoils that will proceed from the act and keeps his attention unwaveringly upon the act itself."¹⁷ Macbeth is so unforeseeing and so preoccupied with the immediate challenge that just a few minutes before Duncan's murder, in a conversation with Banquo about the weird sisters, he does not for an instant consider the fact that his own posterity would benefit nothing from his crime. Macbeth's endostatic preoccupation with action for its own sake is captured succinctly by J. I. M. Stewart: "it is veritably the crime and not the crown that compels Macbeth."¹⁸ The tragedy of Macbeth relies therefore not only on his ultimate disappointment with what he has gained, on his isolation and his disgraceful death, but on the trap that the givens of the circumstances and of his character have arranged for him: he cannot abstain from action because he will loath himself for not daring to kill the king, but when he kills the king he loathes himself for having done it, no third option being available. The static and the endodynamic are battling in Macbeth's transitional character, although the crime marks a decisive shift of Macbeth's mind toward endodynamism. Jan Kott phrases Macbeth's problem in terms of assertion of identity: "Macbeth has killed not only to become king, but to assert himself. He has chosen between Macbeth, who is afraid to kill, and Macbeth, who has killed. But Macbeth, who has killed, is a new Macbeth."¹⁹ But "identity" has clearly to do here with dynamism of character: suspended between two definite dynamic categories and unable to embrace either, Macbeth remains in a limbo of indecision, unable to define himself except by negation: in Kott's words, "to himself he is not the one who is, but rather the one who is not."²⁰

With Duncan now practically at his mercy and with his mind now finally made up, the execution of "the terrible feat" is a matter of determinism beyond

Macbeth's control. The vision of the dagger leading the murderer to Duncan's chamber betokens a mind no longer undecided, confused, or guilt-stricken, but clear of purpose and action oriented. The visionary dagger embodies the murderous thoughts, "a dagger of the mind" (2.1.38), leading to the real dagger at Macbeth's side, now drawn for the murderous act, anticipated by drops of blood on the visionary dagger. "The bloody business" thus inexorably accomplishes itself in thought a moment before it is done in real action, as it now must be, all physical and psychological obstacles being removed: "I go, and it is done" (2.1.62). And when the deed is done, its irrevocability confirms the tragic trap in which Macbeth has found himself after the revelation of the witches' prophesy: just as the endostatic in him could not accept his failure to act, so his residual statism cannot now accept the crime and the violation of the most sacred laws that it represents. Since Macbeth was not interested in the profit of the crime to begin with, but rather in the challenge posed by the execution of an outrageous deed, the power gained as a result of the crime does not outweigh the pressure of guilt caused by the crime. In other words, gone forever is the peace of mind, as indeed is perfectly clear to Macbeth, who has murdered his "innocent Sleep" together with the king. The earlier threefold progression of Macbeth's "good" fortune predicted by the witches and echoed optimistically by Lady Macbeth now reveals its true face to the guilt-stricken murderer: "Glamis hath murder'd Sleep, and therefore Cawdor / Shall sleep no more, Macbeth shall sleep no more!" (2.2.41-42), where the "king" is appropriately now replaced with "Macbeth."

Where Macbeth is crushed, for a time at least, by a sense of guilt, loses his nerve and almost botches up the murder by bringing the blood-stained daggers with him from the scene of the crime, Lady Macbeth, entirely unmoved by the moral implications of the deed, displays perfect self-control and composure, upbraiding her husband for his infirmity of purpose and "brainsickly" thoughts. While for the remorseful Macbeth "all great Neptune's ocean" will not wash the blood from his hand, for the remorseless Lady Macbeth the removal of blood from her hands has no moral or symbolic connotations but is merely a practical problem, to remove the trace of implicating evidence: "A little water clears us of this deed" (2.2.66). For Macbeth no sooner is the deed committed than he wishes it undone, as he discovers, after it is too late, that it would have been easier to come to terms with the former Macbeth who was afraid to do a daring deed than to accept the present Macbeth, the man who has dared to do it: "To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself" (2.2.72). The result is a terrible psychological self-injury that has left Macbeth "a mutilated human being," a "shattered personality," a victim as much as a villain who, according to E. A. J. Honigmann, deserves our sympathy as well as condemnation.²¹ Until the end Macbeth will feel painfully the loss of normal life,

with the accompanying “honour, love, obedience, troops of friends” (5.3.25), but he has moved too far from the static moral mean to even contemplate the need for reparation or penance, the privilege afforded the static Cawdor, who atoned for his treachery by accepting his death with dignity. Macbeth’s existential and moral limbo will only lead to philosophic nihilism, already signaled in his seemingly hypocritical public lament after Duncan’s death, but which expresses, intentionally or unintentionally, his profoundest feelings:

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
 I had liv’d a blessed time; for, from this instant,
 There’s nothing serious in mortality;
 All is but toys: renown, and grace, is dead;
 The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
 Is left this vault to brag of.
 (2.3.89–94)

The murder of Banquo marks another step in Macbeth’s development away from the early statism toward the endodynamic extreme of the dynamic spectrum, the movement repeatedly emphasized in the play by Macbeth’s threefold progression from Glamis through Cawdor to king, corresponding respectively with the static, endostatic, and endodynamic stages in the evolution of his character. As a static Glamis, Macbeth was able to win his noble reputation by courageously risking his own life in a face-to-face battle; as an endostatic traitor he still took a risk by murdering Duncan with his own hands; but now as an endodynamic king he no longer risks his own safety but hires assassins or gives orders to have his victims killed. Also, with every crime Macbeth is more and more psychologically removed from his victims, has fewer and fewer scruples, while his motivation becomes less personal and more political. In Duncan Macbeth kills, not without remorse, his lord, his kinsman, and his guest; by hiring assassins to murder Banquo he kills a friend whom he envies; and when he decides to destroy the house of Macduff he is motivated less by revenge but more by a desire to forestall the menace of future loss of power, and in doing so he causes the deaths of people he has probably never even seen.²²

Typical for an endodynamic person holding power, Macbeth lives in constant fear of losing it. Obsessively preoccupied with real and imagined dangers, the tyrannous Macbeth craftily designs his actions as preemptive strikes to forestall possible threats to his position: “We have scorch’d the snake, not kill’d it: / She’ll close, and be herself; whilst our poor malice / Remains in danger of her former tooth” (3.2.13–15). Also gone are the last remnants of static scruples and a sense of guilt; if Duncan’s name is recalled it

is because Macbeth envies the murdered king's peace, not because he regrets murdering him:

Better be with the dead,
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave;
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well;
Treason has done his worst: nor steel, nor poison,
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing
Can touch him further!
(3.2.19–26)

The voice of static conscience, still strong in act 1, now vanishes without a trace, giving way entirely to endodynamic cruelty and unscrupulousness (“full of scorpions is my mind,” 3.2.36), which grow bigger and bigger: “Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill” (3.2.55). Even the Ghost of Banquo is not a projection of Macbeth's guilt, as is sometimes supposed, but of his paranoid fear and insecurity.²³ During the banquet the Ghost sits in Macbeth's seat, replacing him as king, as the weird sisters prophesied, a visible proof of the futility of Macbeth's efforts to dispose of his political rival, who now returns to push the usurper from his stool (3.4.81). But while there was still a concrete, “rational” reason to assassinate Banquo, there is none in Macbeth's plan to pursue Macduff except the pretext of the latter's avoidance of Macbeth. State terror, as in Stalinist Russia, now gets out of control, becoming all-pervading, random, indiscriminate, and inescapable, motivated solely by the tyrant's insecurity and paranoid fear rather than by any pragmatic reasons. Macbeth has entered an insane, irrational phase of extreme endodynamism, in which he has severed all positive social ties and completely alienated himself from all humanity, trapped in the ever-intensifying compulsion to commit more and more violence:

I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.
Strange things I have in head, that will to hand,
Which must be acted, ere they may be scann'd.
(3.4.135–39)

Even the visions induced by the witches confirm Macbeth's present sole obsession with security, power, and violence. The apparition of an armed

head confirms his fear of Macduff; the apparition of a bloody child strengthens his determination to “be bloody, bold, and resolute” (4.1.79) and verbalizes his wish to be invulnerable (“none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth”); the apparition of a crowned child again tells him to “be lion-mettled” and “proud” and reiterates his irrational desire to remain untouchable (“until / Great Birnam wood”); while the final show of eight kings confirms his fear concerning Banquo’s predicted fortune. In this sense Macbeth learns hardly anything new during his second visit to the weird sisters, and so understandably neither his character nor his actions change in any way: he was “yet but young in deed” (3.4.143) before consulting the witches, and now too “the very firstlings of [his] heart shall be / The firstlings of [his] hand” (4.1.147–48).

The apparent indifference with which Macbeth greets the news of his wife’s death (“She should have died hereafter,” 5.5.17) signals the next step in his own alienation from life, typical for endodynamic tyrants. Also consistent with his endodynamic character is Macbeth’s unconscious desire to place himself outside the natural scheme of things by achieving a quasi-divine immortality and invulnerability—the ultimate dream of an endodynamic who cannot tolerate any loss of power, here, the physiological power that sustains his life. It has always been some small consolation to the victims of tyranny that the tyrants, for all their formidable sociological power, cannot compensate for the loss of their own physiological power indefinitely and eventually have to die, like their victims. This explains the irrational obsessions of despots with longevity and with all sorts of “elixirs of immortality,” with which they hope to escape natural laws. Hence also Macbeth’s illusion that he can practically live forever, embodied in the vision of a bloody child reassuring Macbeth that no man born of a woman can harm him (4.1.80–81). The critic Madelon Gohlke reads Macbeth’s nihilism, childlessness, indifference to his wife’s death, and rejection of all “feminine” values of trust and hospitality as a systematic attempt by the masculine hero to deny an awareness of dependence on women in general, even in their maternal, procreative role, in an ultimate affirmation of masculinity defined in terms of its absolute opposition to femininity.²⁴ Similarly, Janet Adelman interprets Macbeth’s desire to be invulnerable as a masculine “fantasy of escape from the maternal matrix” and as an attempt to be exempt from the universal human condition of being “born of woman.”²⁵ But even in this last illusion Macbeth is disappointed, as his endodynamic dream of immortality is shattered by a last-minute revelation that Macduff, his principal personal foe, “was from his mother’s womb / Untimely ripp’d” (5.8.15–16), a circumstance that for some reason predestines him to be, metaphorically, the medicine to purge the country’s “sickly weal.”

Lady Macbeth

We first see Lady Macbeth reading her husband's letter containing the "happy" news, and her immediate resolve, so different from Macbeth's vacillation, resounds in the unshaken confidence with which she echoes the witches' prophesy, confirming the progression of Macbeth's fortune as if it was already a fait accompli: "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be / What thou art promis'd" (1.5.15–6).²⁶ Where the endostatic Macbeth experiences an acute moral dilemma, for his endodynamic wife a choice does not exist: the crown must be seized, and the only problem is how to do it. "Macbeth has a divided mind about some of the most fundamental issues of existence; Lady Macbeth is the voice of one side of it."²⁷ In this sense the spouses complement and need each other: she is most self-assured and able to take a firm decision when Macbeth's nerve is failing, but only Macbeth is capable of carrying out the plan and of dealing the fatal stroke. As a more mature partner in dynamic terms Lady Macbeth regards her husband as psychologically dependent on her, not unlike a mother guiding her adolescent son: "Lady Macbeth has to guide, protect and mother her husband, whose voice sounds pitifully human and almost child-like."²⁸ Some critics even interpret the relations between the Macbeths in terms of gender inversion, which is not accurate given Macbeth's decisively manly, endostatic gender, consecutive to but not opposite to his wife's endodynamic masculinity.²⁹ In his Jungian analysis of the play, H. R. Coursen argues for example that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth "exchange characteristics" and represent "opposite developments," in that "the woman does not correspond to the feminine stereotype, and Macbeth has 'unmanly' scruples."³⁰ By extending the psychological distance between the characters beyond what the play can in fact support, the couple is sharply polarized by the critic, for whom Lady Macbeth's "unconscious 'maleness' has forced Macbeth into the stereotypical role of yielding female."³¹ Coppélia Kahn does not deny Macbeth his manliness but at the same time she suggests that he "has not fully separated himself from the feminine source of his identity."³² However, I would argue that if Macbeth depends on his wife in decision making, it is his wife's endodynamic masculinity, not her absent femininity, that he depends on. The play provides enough cross-gender imagery to "unsex" Lady Macbeth and emphasize her "un-feminine character," in which the inversion of gender and of the corresponding dynamism of character is not a "fiction,"³³ but is at least as complete as in Regan and Goneril. In her famous evocation of evil spirits (1.5.38–54) Lady Macbeth suppresses all exodynamic traces of femininity and motherhood ("take my milk for gall"), acquiring traits more characteristic of endodynamic sexual violence, as she summons the night and the smoke of hell to hide her keen knife making the

wound (1.5.51–52), while she transforms herself into a masculinized creature of “direst cruelty.”

Untouched by any scruples herself, Lady Macbeth correctly diagnoses her husband’s nature as “too full o’th’ milk of human kindness” (1.5.16–17), thus ascribing to him a static quality of gentleness deriving from the woman’s nurturing function.³⁴ This does not make Macbeth automatically a “woman,” as some critics have implied (see above), his “milky” kindness being indeed confirmed nowhere in the play. Lady Macbeth’s remark does indicate, however, that on the dynamic scale her husband’s character is less mature than hers, so that now Lady Macbeth deliberately exaggerates her husband’s weakness to steel his heart to action. The kindness she talks about refers rather to Macbeth’s static scruples, his reluctance to “catch the nearest way” and “play false,” while at the same time she is aware of his endostatic ambition to achieve what he is afraid to achieve. Lady Macbeth’s analysis of her husband’s transitional character touches the essence of his dilemma:

Thou wouldst be great;
 Art not without ambition, but without
 The illness should attend it: what thou wouldst highly,
 That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
 And yet wouldst wrongly win; thou’dst have, great Glamis,
 That which cries, “Thus thou must do,” if thou have it;
 And that which rather thou dost fear to do,
 Than wishest should be undone.
 (1.5.18–25)

What she must do now is to use all her psychological domination and power of persuasion (“that I may pour my spirits in thine ear,” 1.5.26) to sway her husband toward action by relieving him of the burden of making an independent decision, which as an endostatic he is unable to do on his own. Macbeth is unconsciously aware of this psychological deficiency in himself, and this rather than the need to speed up preparations for the reception of Duncan is the real reason for sending the letter to his wife ahead of his arrival.

Lady Macbeth’s onslaught on Macbeth is immediate, as she greets him excitedly with the witches’ prophesy and, full of elation, talks about the future as if it was already present (“I feel now / The future in the instant,” 1.5.57–58), unshaken in her conviction that Duncan will never leave their castle alive: “O! never / Shall sun that morrow see!” (1.5.60–61). She instructs the novice in the political game in Machiavellian tactics: “To beguile the time, / Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye, / Your hand, your tongue: look like th’innocent flower, / But be the serpent under’t” (1.5.63–66). As an

endodynamic she has no problems in hiding her real motives and in taking full advantage of her “innocent” womanly appearance, but Macbeth is still at this stage too much of a static to be able to hide his true intentions, his face being “as a book, where men / May read strange matters” (1.5.62–63). As Bernard McElroy puts it: “Macbeth is constitutionally incapable of tolerating false appearances, especially evil masquerading as good,” which explains his continual sense of self-loathing after committing the crime.³⁵ Aware of her husband’s static scruples, which as an endodynamic she regards as an unnecessary hindrance in her plan, Lady Macbeth, her mind totally engrossed by the idea of “sovereign sway and masterdom,” takes full charge and control of the situation, reducing her husband to the position of an executor (and executioner) of her design: “Leave all the rest to me” (1.5.73).

Still dependent on his wife to take responsibility for the decision, Macbeth provokes her persuasiveness by pretending to be more static than he is, as he did earlier by sending her a letter and giving her food for thought in advance of his arrival. With Duncan already under his “protection,” Macbeth admits greater resolve and ambition before himself than he does before his wife—precisely to provoke her strong, determined reaction to spur him to action. Almost contradicting his own ambitious thoughts, he tries to dissuade his wife from proceeding any further in “this business” and mentions “honour” and “golden opinions from all sorts of people,” as if good reputation still mattered for him now. This static pose is unconsciously calculated to provoke Lady Macbeth’s vehement dismissal of Macbeth’s remaining scruples as unmanly cowardice and a failure to act according to one’s ambition: “Art thou afraid / To be the same in thine own act and valour, / As thou art in desire?” (1.7.39–41). As a woman more manly in character than her husband, Lady Macbeth raises the standard of manliness above static concern with honor and reputation, grading it on the endodynamic scale of ambition, competitiveness, and the ability to suppress “unmanly” scruples:

Mac. I dare do all that may become a man;
 Who dares do more, is none.
Lady M. What beast was’t then,
 That made you break this enterprise to me?
 When you durst do it, then you were a man;
 And, to be more than what you were, you would
 Be so much more the man.
 (1.7.46–51)

Lady Macbeth’s ultimate argument is to taunt her husband with effeminacy and to embarrass his manliness by presenting herself, a woman, as more of

a man than he is, which, considering the dynamisms of their characters, is in fact true. She “unsexes” herself psychologically through a powerful and cruel image of the mother killing her own infant (1.7.54–59), thereby showing that if a woman, traditionally a weaker and gentler sex, can so banish all tenderness that she can act “unnaturally” and destroy the fruit of her own body, then a man should have no compunction in acting according to his manly, violent nature. To spur her husband toward action Lady Macbeth cleverly plays on gender stereotypes, and the evoked image of an innocent and vulnerable infant sucking its mother’s breast is calculated to contrast in Macbeth’s mind her female sex with her present unblinking manly resolution, and to embarrass her husband by showing that a woman can be even more manly than a man, if she puts her mind to it. If Macbeth does not fully appreciate his wife’s true gender, other characters in the play can be forgiven for making a stereotypical mistake of identifying a womanly, respectable appearance with a static personality. The trusting Duncan unsuspectingly lays his life in the hands of a “fair and noble hostess” (1.6.24), while later the static Macduff naively assumes that the news of Duncan’s murder will “kill” the “gentle lady” (2.3.82–83). Lady Macbeth can even pretend a fainting fit to confirm the men’s perception of her “weak” sex (2.3.117, 123). Although a woman by sex, Lady Macbeth is in fact masculine and endodynamic in her character, so that remorse after Duncan’s murder is as alien to her as tender motherhood. Any vestige of familial sympathy in her occurs not in the context of motherhood, whose very idea is hateful to her, not even in relation to her husband, whom she patronizes and treats with contempt, but in relation to her father, for whom she reserves the final commitment of love.³⁶ The cruel image of a mother plucking her nipple from the infant’s boneless gum and dashing its brains out is thus calculated to make the right impression on the manly Macbeth, who will not be outdone in violence by a woman. The contrast between his wife’s womanly appearance and her firm endodynamic resolve does not fail to impress Macbeth, who acknowledges the manliness of her spirit and sees her “as a kind of man,” a woman of “undaunted mettle” who should “bring forth men-children only” (1.7.73–75).³⁷ Lady Macbeth’s unshaken resolution, determination, certitude, cold planning, calculation, and optimism in the success of the enterprise finally tip the scales of Macbeth’s dilemma decisively in favor of action and away from static scruples; he is now “settled” and ready to “bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat” (1.7.80–81).

The characterization of Lady Macbeth does not evolve in the same way as does Macbeth’s, for while she is an endodynamic from the start, her husband is becoming one in the course of the play. If the identification of Macbeth as king with endodynamism is correct, then by act 3 he has

psychologically “caught up” with his wife by attaining the same dynamic character. This means that at this stage he is no longer dependent on his wife in decision making and in fact does not need her psychologically, emotionally, or otherwise, which is indeed reflected from act 3 onward. Identical dynamism of character accounts for relations based on mutual understanding and solidarity in the pursuit of common goals, but it removes the element of psychological difference and dependence that gives the relations between Macbeth and his wife so much dramatic tension in the first two acts of the play. Since the later acts focus primarily on Macbeth, his wife moves more and more to the background, at first reduced to being Macbeth’s spouse and companion but no longer his support and later disappearing from the plot altogether. The last opportunity for Lady Macbeth to exercise her earlier domination happens when Macbeth loses his nerve at the sight of Banquo’s Ghost, giving his wife an occasion to question his manliness (“Are you a man?” 3.4.57). But just as earlier on she was correct in ascribing Macbeth’s scruples to his static nature, she is wrong now in attributing his fit to womanly fearfulness (3.4.62–65): a hardened endodynamic, he is not afraid of ghosts (3.4.58–59) but of losing power. It is characteristic that while Lady Macbeth’s domination and determination were crucial in convincing Macbeth to commit the first crime, he does not even consult her, let alone seek her decision or approval, in arranging for the next murders. The decision to assassinate Banquo is clearly done by Macbeth’s own initiative, as is fully explained in the soliloquy (3.1.47–71) and confirmed in Lady Macbeth’s uncharacteristically helpless, “What’s to be done?” (3.2.44), answered with her husband’s confident and almost patronizing “Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, / Till thou applaud the deed” (3.2.45–46). It is now Macbeth who does all the reasoning and independently takes all the murderous decisions, while the main quality that connects him now with his wife is the mutually shared and almost paranoid sense of fear and insecurity, so typical for endodynamics holding power. The Macbeths eat their meals in fear, and their sleep is afflicted with terrible dreams (3.2.17–19). The most powerful man in the kingdom regards his power as nothing, unless it gives him safety and freedom from fear which he evidently lacks: “To be thus [i.e., the king] is nothing, but to be safely thus” (3.1.47), a sentiment echoed by Lady Macbeth, for whom likewise power is empty unless it gives security:

Nought’s had, all’s spent,
Where our desire is got without content:
‘Tis safer to be that which we destroy,
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.
(3.2.4–7)

With the shift of Macbeth's character decisively toward endodynamism, his wife's dramatic role ends effectively in the scene with Banquo's Ghost (3.4), in which she has the last chance to rebuke her husband for his alleged lack of manliness. Unlike in *King Lear*, whose endodynamic women play an active dramatic role by fighting remorselessly with Cordelia's army and treacherously between themselves to the very end, from act 3 onward Lady Macbeth has really nothing more to do in the play in terms of plot development. Her last appearance is in the famous sleepwalking scene, which presents something of an interpretive problem, because instead of hardened mercilessness or insanity and paranoia, realistically expected in extreme endodynamics, we have a disintegration of personality caused by what looks like the long-stifled voice of conscience and pity.

With the sleepwalking scene in mind it was possible for Coleridge to read back into the early scenes of the play Lady Macbeth's repressed conscience: "she endeavours to stifle its voice, and keep down its struggles, by inflated and soaring fancies, and appeals to spiritual agency."³⁸ The apparent lack of consistency in the characterization of Lady Macbeth across the play has baffled critics, and G. Wilson Knight for example could call her on the one hand a woman "possessed of evil passion," "inhuman," and an embodiment of "evil absolute and extreme," and "a pure woman, with a woman's frailty," on the other.³⁹ It is as if the critics had difficulty accepting a literary female character of utter depravity and were trying if not to exonerate her then at least to qualify her wickedness. There is a tradition of blaming not Lady Macbeth's conscious will but her demonical possession for the evil she commits, and even of sentimentalizing her as the loving wife with an affectionate and gentle disposition, a maternal figure, a sensual woman, and a neurotic.⁴⁰ Without the sleepwalking scene Lady Macbeth's character would be as consistent (or even more so) as her husband's, but as it is the critics are faced with a paradoxical situation, whereby a visibly depraved, endodynamic character has to be denied its depravity: "although it is true that Lady Macbeth is not naturally depraved or conscienceless . . . she deliberately chooses evil."⁴¹

Despite its apparent characterological inconsistency, the sleepwalking scene on its own remains dramatically powerful and poignant. Lady Macbeth's somnambulism offers a version of complete alienation from life and human relations to which her complicity in Macbeth's crimes has led her. The Doctor describes her state as "a great perturbation in nature," the oxymoronic "slumberry agitation," a sort of living death in which she receives "at once the benefit of sleep, and . . . the effects of watching" (5.1.9–11). The paradox of being awake, active, able to speak, and at the same time unconscious and absentminded provides a moving tableau of isolation and alienation. But it is

difficult to interpret most of what Lady Macbeth says or does in her sleepwalking as an expression of her guilty conscience, and Bradley was probably right in saying that “in Lady Macbeth’s misery there is no trace of contrition.”⁴² The letter she writes in her somnambulistic state has been variously interpreted as a confession, a warning for Lady Macduff, or a message to Macbeth indicating that she still wishes to control him, but it could indeed be anything.⁴³ For example, Lady Macbeth may be writing a reply to her husband’s early letter informing her about the witches’ prophecy (1.5.1–14), in which case she may be either dissuading him from taking any steps (the static variant) or, to the contrary, telling him to go ahead, the way she did (the endodynamic variant). The famous gesture of washing the hands, linked with Lady Macbeth’s direct implication in Duncan’s murder (2.2.66), can again be interpreted as a sign of belated remorse but also as a desire to escape detection: “Out, damned spot! Out, I say!” (5.1.33). The line “What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to accompt?” (5.1.35–37) repeats the same cynical confidence in their invulnerability, with which Lady Macbeth answered her husband’s earlier fear of being found out (1.7.75–80). The only moment that can be interpreted as betraying Lady Macbeth’s pity and regret is a “feminine” reference to the perfumes of Arabia unable to “sweeten this little hand” (5.1.48), which is linked back to Macbeth’s regretful realization that “all great Neptune’s ocean” will not wash the blood from his hand (2.2.59–60) and is indeed interpreted by the Doctor as an indication of a heart “sorely charg’d” (5.1.50). The poignancy of this scene lies therefore not so much in the feelings of pity in the supposedly guilt-stricken Lady Macbeth as in the reenactment of her past crimes and her present helplessness and isolation as indications of the ultimate pointlessness and futility of these crimes.⁴⁴ In her loss of power and self-control, in her alienation even from her husband, and in her desperate suicidal death announced by “the cry of women” (5.5.8), Lady Macbeth appears to be womanized at the end of the play—another characterological inconsistency that perhaps restores gender balance and psychological realism, disturbed earlier in the play by the poetic license of presenting a female character with a mind more masculine, that is, more endodynamic, than the most manly man. For Kenneth Muir, the seeming inconsistency in the characterization of Lady Macbeth “may reflect an ambiguity in Shakespeare’s mind, which he cultivated for dramatic reasons,” but “the audience could take it either way.”⁴⁵

Banquo

During the first scene with the witches, Banquo’s quiet skepticism concerning the prophecy serves as a contrast to Macbeth’s growing agitation and excitement, but it is not until after Duncan’s murder that Banquo assumes

a more important dramatic role. The sudden escape of Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, after their father's death is readily and unambiguously interpreted by the credulous and straightforward statics Macduff and Rosse as a proof of their involvement in the murder, and the first to suspect foul play in Macbeth is Banquo, the only character apart from Macbeth and his wife privy to the witches' prophesy. The behavior of Banquo has puzzled critics, who at times have implicated him in the evil that the witches and the Macbeths have unleashed. Bradley found the character "not very interesting," a man who instead of playing the part of an honest man "has yielded to evil" by acquiescing in Macbeth's accession.⁴⁶ G. Wilson Knight went further in his condemnation, speaking of "the evil in Banquo" and of "a bond of evil between him and Macbeth." Rather strangely, Knight even ascribed "blood-lust" and "unprecedented ferocity" to Banquo (cf. 1.2.40).⁴⁷ Nicholas Grene takes a more sensible approach by regarding Banquo as "a norm of approved orthodoxy," which the character represents in his calm, authoritative speech after Duncan's murder (2.3.124–30), and as a man whose "part is to wait upon events in a wise passiveness."⁴⁸ Basically, the opinions vary between regarding Banquo as another endostatic (Bradley, Knight) or as a static (Grene), which the character in fact appears to be in his lack of "impulse towards transgression which drives on Macbeth," as well as in his patience to watch and understand "without trying to resist what is felt to be an irresistible current of events."⁴⁹ Banquo is indeed Macbeth's accomplice in the chronicles (Holinshed), but he is exonerated by Shakespeare, who tactfully did not want to show the legendary ancestor of King James I as a party to regicide. Besides, for purely dramatic reasons it was desirable to contrast Macbeth and Banquo and to give Macbeth and his wife no accomplices. It also makes greater dramatic sense to introduce another innocent static character who suffers at the hands of the endodynamic villain than to turn Macbeth's former soldier-friend into an active rival in the competition to "help" realize their fortunes as foretold by the witches.

Banquo's initial role is to provide a positive, heroic foil for his more opportunistic companion and to illustrate the sort of honor and good name that Macbeth has forfeited by moving away from the mean of static honesty. Their performance in the battle with the Norwegians is still equally impressive and courageous; they are both compared to eagles and lions for their ferocity (1.2.35) and are equally acknowledged for their valor by Duncan: "Noble Banquo, / That hast no less deserv'd, nor must be known / No less to have done so" (1.4.29–31). Banquo and Macbeth are of course treated differently by the witches, but their predicted fortunes are equivalent in the long term, even to Banquo's advantage, as is borne out by the witches' equivocal, paradoxical, but balanced pronouncements:

Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.
 Not so happy, yet much happier.
 Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none:
 So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!
 Banquo and Macbeth, all hail!
 (1.3.65–69)

Where Macbeth and Banquo differ is in the individual reactions to the prophecies, and these reflect their endostatic and static characters, respectively. Macbeth “starts” and seems to “fear” at the fortune that leaves him “rapt withal,” while Banquo is calmly skeptical, treats the witches as a hallucination (“have we eaten on the insane root,” 1.3.84), and following conventional wisdom is the first to include them among the devil’s party (1.3.107). The partial confirmation of the prophecy is for the eager and ambitious Macbeth a proof of its veracity, but for the prudent and cautious Banquo it is a warning of the devil’s trap: “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” (1.3.123–26). Later, when the whole of the prophecy concerning Macbeth has been fulfilled, Banquo no longer talks about the devil, accepting the oracle as genuine truth, but stoically resigns himself to fate, refraining from any action with regard to his part of the prophecy (“But, hush; no more,” 3.1.10). Sententious and straightforward, Banquo believes in Providence and natural order, but he is also dull as a character in a play, his pint-size rightness and decency becoming completely overshadowed by Macbeth’s agonizing inner struggle and mammoth crime. To Macbeth’s ambiguous proposal to Banquo to “cleave to [his] consent” and support Macbeth’s claim to the crown in the event of Duncan’s natural demise, Banquo reasserts his loyalty (“allegiance clear”) to the present king and intends to remain free from guilt (“keep / My bosom franchis’d,” 2.1.25–26), thus making clear his commitment to honorable means in advancing his fortune and disassociating himself forever from his former companion.

A morally ambiguous moment comes when Banquo begins to suspect Macbeth’s foul play and neither does nor says anything to expose him, a circumstance that proved for Bradley that Banquo was an accessory to the murder and now keeps silent out of ambition.⁵⁰ But Banquo’s private and unproven suspicion (“I fear, / Thou play’dst most foully for’t,” 3.1.2–3) offers no grounds for open accusation, made even less likely now that Macbeth enjoys royal immunity and is, in the absence of Duncan’s sons, a legitimate ruler. Kenneth Muir argues on the other hand that Banquo “ought to have behaved loyally to Macbeth until Malcolm had set foot on Scottish soil,”

because James I's theory of government condemned rebellion even against manifest tyrants.⁵¹ But professing loyalty to the ruler suspected of sacrilegious crime would not be consistent with Banquo's static, honest character and would have required an opportunistic, time-serving, endostatic disposition, which Banquo simply did not possess. Having his doubts and being unable to openly accuse or oppose Macbeth, all that Banquo as an honest person can do is to remove himself from the royal presence without appearing ostentatious or discourteous—which is precisely what he does by politely excusing himself from the banquet and riding away with his son Fleance in an unspecified direction.⁵²

But Banquo is trapped, first because of his knowledge of the weird sisters' prophesy, which makes him a menace to Macbeth, and second because of the promise that his descendants would inherit the throne, which makes him a political rival that Macbeth would not tolerate. These are the main practical reasons (for the now endodynamic Macbeth at any rate) why Banquo must be eliminated, rather than Macbeth's resentment about Banquo's noble character, "his royalty of nature," "dauntless temper of his mind," "wisdom," and "valour" (3.1.49, 51–53), as Kenneth Muir rather naively suggests.⁵³ Macbeth probably wouldn't care less about Banquo's moral character at this moment, because his sole concern is his personal safety and the future of his reign. Banquo's praises appear rather to exonerate once and for all King James I's reputed ancestor from all blame, and in the more immediate dramatic context they also serve to contrast the victim's noble character with the murderer's cold-blooded callousness, as he calls Banquo his chief guest at the banquet after already arranging for his assassination.

Macduff

In folklore, the child born through what later became called the Caesarian section was said to possess great strength and the power to find hidden treasure and to see spirits. In any case, the unusual circumstances of birth denoted an unusual character, a person singled out from others to perform some extraordinary deed. In Shakespeare's play the special status of Macduff counterbalances and in fact cancels Macbeth's illusion of his own special status as a man immune to injury and death, but there are more elements that place these two figures at opposite dramatic poles and set them on a collision course. With their identical first syllables the two names even sound similar, and although this fact is purely coincidental in the chronicles that Shakespeare used as his source, it does acquire a special dramatic significance in the play, in which it links and contrasts the two characters. The static Macduff makes his first powerful dramatic appearance even before he appears in person in Macbeth's castle on the night of

Duncan's murder by famously knocking at the gates as many as ten times, while the Macbeths are washing their hands from Duncan's blood (2.2.56, 64, 68, 72; 2.3.1, 3, 7, 12, 15, 20).⁵⁴ With his static insistence on punctuality Macduff was determined to be on time to wake the king, as he had been commanded to do, and one cannot help thinking that he narrowly missed preventing Duncan's murder, had he knocked at the gate a moment sooner: "he did command me to call timely on him: / I have almost slipp'd the hour" (2.3.45–46). The ultimate avenger of Duncan, Macduff is the first to discover the murder after entering the king's chamber, the first to do so after Macbeth, again because he was so commanded: "I'll make so bold to call, / For 'tis my limited service" (2.3.50–51). It is also the role of "the good Macduff" to voice public outcry at the sacrilegious murder of "the Lord's anointed Temple" (2.3.67). A straightforward static, Macduff accepts without suspicion the official version that the murder was committed by the king's sons, but, interestingly, unlike all other Scottish nobles, including the already suspicious Banquo, he does not attend Macbeth's coronation (2.4.36)—a dramatic device to remove him from the plot for some time, and especially from Macbeth's presence. Macduff's snubbing absence and his escape to England (3.4.127–28; 3.6.21–23, 29–31, 40; 4.2.142), combined with the witches' warning against the thane of Fife (4.1.71–72), indeed provide the tyrant with an excuse to invade his castle and massacre his family, in an act of political revenge as much as of personal spite against Macduff's happy family life. Childless himself, Macbeth resentfully puts "to th'edge o'th'sword / [Macduff's] wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls / That trace him in his line" (4.1.151–53).

Macduff's absence is dramatically necessary, but it still has to be justified psychologically. To leave his family at the mercy of a vindictive tyrant looks unwise to say the least, but the decision was motivated by a noble desire to organize political support in England and Northumbria to free Scotland from Macbeth's oppression. It would appear therefore that Macduff's actions result from a decisive choice between familial obligations and patriotic duties, a typical situation for a static, so that once Macduff has chosen to serve the political cause all qualms about abandoning his family became suppressed.⁵⁵ In a similar way the static Brutus, totally dedicated to his political cause, remains remarkably unmoved by the news of the suicidal death of his wife, Portia (*Julius Caesar* 4.3.156, 164). The spirited, outspoken, static Lady Macduff, on the other hand, who does not seem to understand the political reasons of her husband's departure, interprets his absence as a betrayal of his familial duties and as lack of love ("He loves us not," 4.2.8), a view also shared, again rather strangely, by G. Wilson Knight, for whom Macduff is "involved in evil," as seen in his "cruel desertion of his family."⁵⁶ Rosse, all too familiar

with the grim realities of Macbeth's regime ("cruel are the times") and with his own delay in deserting the tyrannous king, is nearer the mark when he praises Macduff for being "noble, wise, judicious," one who "best knows / The fits o'th'season" (4.2.16–17). Unlike other time-servers such as Rosse or Lenox, Macduff has the courage, if not the wisdom, to be the first to leave Scotland and organize opposition around Malcolm, before he is joined by other lords.

The long conversation between Malcolm and Macduff (4.3) stands out from the rest of the play for being perhaps too long, almost tedious, but in E. A. J. Honigmann's view its deliberately slow tempo has a dramatic quality of arresting the play's onward-rushing momentum just before Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking, where time stands still.⁵⁷ As a "choric commentary" the scene draws closer attention to the figures whose political importance, one as the avenger of Duncan and the other as Duncan's legitimate successor, has not yet been acknowledged by due dramatic prominence, given almost entirely to the tyrannous Macbeth.⁵⁸ It is interesting to note that Malcolm, Macbeth's main political opponent, is also the latter's opposite in a dramatic and psychological sense; that is, in terms of dynamism of character Malcolm's still immature exostatism complements Macbeth's mature endostatism. During the initial battle with the Norwegians, in which Macbeth displayed such feats of heroic valor and efficiency, Duncan's eldest son was taken prisoner and had to be rescued (1.2.4–5), a circumstance suggesting lack of manhood and valor expected from an heir to the throne in a heroic society. Still it is the inept Malcolm who is officially announced as Duncan's successor, a fact naturally resented by Macbeth, whose political ambitions have been whetted by his military victory (1.4.48–50). During the night of Duncan's murder the two royal sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, staying in the room next to their father's, are awoken from their sleep by a nightmarish dream of murder, but instead of getting up and checking to see if everything is all right, they give in to unmanly fear, say their prayers, comfort each other, and fall back to sleep.⁵⁹ When the murder is discovered, the royal sons are the last to arrive at the scene; they have practically nothing to say, nor are they consulted on anything, their immediate reaction being to flee: "where we are, / There's daggers in men's smiles: the near in blood, / The nearer bloody" (2.3.137–39). Their cowardly escape puts the blame for the murder on them and removes the last obstacle in Macbeth's ascent to the throne. In this way, by shirking his responsibility as the appointed royal successor, the unmanly, exostatic Malcolm has in fact indirectly contributed to the national calamity that was Macbeth's reign.

In the context of his early immaturity, the long conversation with Macduff illustrates Malcolm's "coming of age," as he gradually prepares himself for the assumption of his duties as the future king of Scotland. He has

now enough statism of character to appreciate the seriousness of his task, but he is still too much of an exostatic to cope with the task effectively on his own: he is determined to save his country from tyranny, but he can only do so by enlisting a foreign power to his aid and by using Macduff as a personal avenger. Malcolm is now mature enough to initially mistrust Macduff's good intentions and to test his loyalty, but he arranges his test in the form of a spectacle, a bit like Hamlet, by pretending to be worse than he actually is. Malcolm openly talks of his "vices" that would make "black Macbeth . . . seem as pure as snow" (4.3.52–53), describing at great length his lust, avarice, and falsehood, but his simulation of tyranny is so theatrical that only someone as straightforward, not to say dull, as Macduff could take it literally. (A person possessing these vices would have an endodynamic character, in which case he or she would not be talking so frankly about them.) In this almost comic scene Malcolm's exostatic playacting succeeds as a test of Macduff's integrity, whereupon the virgin boy-king hails the manly, static Macduff as the true champion of Scotland, leaving the latter quite confused at Malcolm's contradictory confession: "Such welcome and unwelcome things at once, / 'Tis hard to reconcile" (4.3.138–39).⁶⁰ With the support of England and Macduff, Malcolm is now firmly in charge, more and more confident in his role as Scotland's savior and future king, as evidenced in his upbeat, commanding tone at the end of act 4:

This tune goes manly.
 Come, go we to the King: our power is ready;
 Our lack is nothing but our leave. Macbeth
 Is ripe for shaking, and the Powers above
 Put on their instruments. Receive what cheer you may;
 The night is long that never finds the day.
 (4.3.235–40)

It is also Malcolm's idea to hide the number of his army under the branches cut from the Birnam wood, a clever endostatic trick not fully consistent with his exostatic character displayed so far. Dramatically, however, the association of Malcolm with the Birnam wood links him, together with Macduff, with the witches' threefold warning to Macbeth and places him, indirectly at least, in the context of revenge for Duncan's death.

Macbeth and Macduff as the ultimate opponents are brought together at last in what looks like a fair, face-to-face combat, but while the static Macduff risks his life to fight his cause and avenge his family, the endodynamic Macbeth enters the fight additionally protected, as he thinks, by the spell of invulnerability. In his view therefore Macbeth is not risking anything

and can still inflict death on others, as he does by killing the young Siward. However, the revelation of Macduff's extraordinary birth has an immediate debilitating effect on Macbeth: "Accursed be that tongue that tells me so, / For it hath cow'd my better part of man" (5.8.17-18), and for the first time Macbeth is afraid ("I'll not fight with thee," 5.8.22). Deprived of the confidence afforded him by the magical spell, Macbeth, deceived by fate, now finds himself fighting on equal terms with his deadly foe. After the endo-dynamic tyrant is killed by a static champion, Malcolm, the exostatic young king, safely takes his father's throne without having to fight for it. Even the young Siward, without any personal grudge against Macbeth, showed greater valor by dying a heroic death in direct combat than did Malcolm, with the murder of his father to avenge:

Your son [young Siward], my Lord, has paid a soldier's debt:
 He only liv'd but till he was a man;
 The which no sooner had his prowess confirm'd,
 In the unshrinking station where he fought,
 But like a man he died.
 (5.9.5-9)

The arrival of Macduff carrying Macbeth's head to hail Malcolm as the king of Scotland provides a telling tableau of the latter's ineffectuality and dependence on his executive branch, so to speak, and emphasizes the nominality of Malcolm's office. Having cowardly fled the country after Duncan's murder, Malcolm has returned on the shoulders of stronger and more efficient allies to take the office, and the last words of the play belong, ironically, to him. Now secure on the throne due to no credit of his own, Malcolm promptly adopts the royal plural, graciously promotes the thanes to earls, condemns "this dead butcher, and his fiend-like Queen" (5.9.35), officially invites the émigrés to return home, and promises, "by the grace of Grace," a just reign, in which everything will be performed "in measure, time, and place" (5.9.39). If Malcolm is his father's son, his present exostatism will evolve eventually into statism, with all the accompanying virtues of "Justice, Verity, Temp'rance, Stableness, / Bounty, Perseverence, Mercy, Lowliness, / Devotion, Patience, Courage, Fortitude" (4.3.92-94), and other "king-becoming graces" that no doubt characterized Duncan, and in this way the circle will close. In Roman Polanski's film version of *Macbeth* (1971), the last scene shows Donalbain, Malcolm's younger brother and successor to the throne, riding alone on a misty moor at the spot where Macbeth and Banquo had met the three witches for the first time . . .

NOTES

1. Kahn, *Man's Estate*, 176.
2. Sadowski, *Gender and Literature*, 166–68.
3. Cf. Janet Adelman, “Born of Woman: Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*,” in *Shakespearean Tragedy and Gender*, ed. Shirley N. Garner and Madelon Sprengnether (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 111.
4. It has been observed on a number of occasions that the word *bloody* is mentioned over a hundred times in the course of the play. All quotations throughout are from Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir.
5. Grene, *Shakespeare's Tragic Imagination*, 196. For Brents Stirling the triple prophesy reflects the progression of Macbeth's character marked by the growth of his pragmatic awareness (Stirling, *Unity in Shakespearean Tragedy*, 155).
6. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 330.
7. Stewart, *Character and Motive in Shakespeare*, 87.
8. *Ibid.*, 90–91.
9. Muir, Introduction to *Macbeth*, xlvii.
10. *Ibid.*, xlvii.
11. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 324.
12. By analogy, Hamlet's period of indecision extends practically for the entire duration of the play, because his exodynamism is too strong to allow the static Ghost and the sense of family honor and justice to sway the prince toward pragmatic action.
13. Grene, *Shakespeare's Tragic Imagination*, 195.
14. Cf. Adelman, “Born of Woman,” 108.
15. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 316.
16. We are not given the whole of Macbeth's letter to his wife, but her surprise at the news about the king's arrival at Inverness delivered by a messenger *after* she has read the letter clearly indicates that the fact was not mentioned in the letter itself, and consequently that Macbeth had sent his letter before Duncan announced that he would stay at Inverness, for Macbeth surely would not have failed to mention this important fact to his wife. Upon his arrival home Macbeth brings the news about the king again, uncertain whether she knew about it (1.5.58).
17. McElroy, *Shakespeare's Mature Tragedies*, 220.
18. Stewart, *Character and Motive*, 93.
19. Kott, *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*, 73.
20. *Ibid.*, 74.
21. Honigmann, *Shakespeare: Seven Tragedies*, 128, 129ff., 135.
22. Grene, *Shakespeare's Tragic Imagination*, 212. E. A. J. Honigmann notices a similar progression in Macbeth's character: “We observe a steady decline as he becomes hardened to murder. . . . He struggles desperately against the killing of Duncan; he proceeds to the murder of Banquo without the same agonizing preliminaries, . . . whereas Macduff's death means nothing at all to him. . . . And he decides to massacre Macduff's family after even less preliminary hesitation, as a mere act of revenge” (Honigmann, *Shakespeare: Seven Tragedies*, 136).
23. Cf. Muir, *Macbeth*, 91 n.
24. Madelon Gohlke, “I wooed thee with my sword’: Shakespeare's Tragic Paradigms,” in *Representing Shakespeare: New Psychoanalytic Essays*, ed. Murray

M. Schwartz, Coppélia Kahn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 176–77.

25. Janet Adelman, “Born of Woman,” 117.
26. Lady Macbeth repeats the prophesy again when greeting her husband (1.5.54–55).
27. McElroy, *Shakespeare’s Mature Tragedies*, 223.
28. Honigmann, *Shakespeare: Seven Tragedies*, 117.
29. Sadowski, *Gender and Literature*, 306.
30. H. R. Coursen, “A Jungian Approach to Characterization: *Macbeth*,” in *Shakespeare’s “Rough Magic”: Renaissance Essays in Honor of C. L. Barber*, ed. Peter Erickson and Coppélia Kahn (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1985), 240.
31. *Ibid.*, 241.
32. Kahn, *Man’s Estate*, 173.
33. Marianne Novy, *Love’s Argument: Gender Relations in Shakespeare* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 196. Juliet Dusinberre talks about Lady Macbeth’s “fiction of masculinity,” arguing that ultimately her “sense of self is rooted in a traditional pattern of femininity—mother, wife, helpmeet” (Dusinberre, *Shakespeare and the Nature of Women*, 284).
34. Woodbridge (*Women and the English Renaissance*, 39) discusses the image of woman’s milk as a symbol of gentle, nurturing qualities as a commonplace in the Renaissance.
35. McElroy, *Shakespeare’s Mature Tragedies*, 231.
36. Lady Macbeth would have killed Duncan herself, “had he not resembled [her] father as he slept” (2.2.12–13). On the theme of Lady Macbeth’s filial dependence on her father see Garber, *Coming of Age in Shakespeare*, 47.
37. Kahn, *Man’s Estate*, 173.
38. Qtd. in Muir, Introduction to *Macbeth*, lviii.
39. Knight, *Wheel of Fire*, 152.
40. Cf. Muir, Introduction to *Macbeth*, lviii–lx.
41. *Ibid.*, lviii.
42. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 378.
43. Muir, *Macbeth*, 137 n.
44. “We need not deny her (what Shakespeare must have given her) pity” (*ibid.*, lx).
45. *Ibid.*, lx.
46. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 353, 355.
47. Knight, *Wheel of Fire*, 141, 151.
48. Grene, *Shakespeare’s Tragic Imagination*, 209, 210.
49. *Ibid.*, 210.
50. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, 384–85.
51. Muir, Introduction to *Macbeth*, lvi–ii.
52. The purposelessness of Banquo’s journey is made clear by his evasive answer to Macbeth’s ominous, direct question concerning the destination: “Is’t far you ride?” to which Banquo replies: “As far, my Lord, as will fill up the time / ‘Twixt this and supper” (3.1.23–25). Given Banquo’s suspicion of Macbeth the vagueness of his answer is also motivated by fear for his safety—a feeling promptly and tragically confirmed for Banquo.
53. Muir, Introduction to *Macbeth*, lv–lvi.

54. To emphasize the effect of knocking, interpreted by the Porter as knocking at Hell Gate (2.3.2), the word *knock* is repeated as many as sixteen times.

55. Characteristically, when Ross announces the bad news to Macduff, the latter's first thought is of the country and only the second about his personal situation: "What concern they? / The general cause? Or is it a fee-grief, / Due to some single breast?" (4.3.195–97).

56. Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*, 151.

57. Honigmann, *Shakespeare: Seven Tragedies*, 141.

58. Knights, "*Hamlet*" and *Other Shakespearean Essays*, 297.

59. Rather curiously, of the two royal brothers, "one did laugh in's sleep, and one cried, 'Murther!'" (2.2.22), although it is not clear which did what.

60. Cf. Grene, *Shakespeare's Tragic Imagination*, 214, 216.

Chronology

- 1564 William Shakespeare christened at Stratford-on-Avon on April 26.
- 1582 Marries Anne Hathaway in November.
- 1583 Daughter Susanna born, baptized on May 26.
- 1585 Twins Hamnet and Judith born, baptized on February 2.
- 1587 Shakespeare goes to London, without family.
- 1589–90 *Henry VI, Part 1* written.
- 1590–91 *Henry VI, Part 2* and *Henry VI, Part 3* written.
- 1592–93 *Richard III* and *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* written.
- 1593 Publication of *Venus and Adonis*, dedicated to the Earl of Southampton; the *Sonnets* probably begun.
- 1593 *The Comedy of Errors* written.
- 1593–94 Publication of *The Rape of Lucrece*, also dedicated to the Earl of Southampton. *Titus Andronicus* and *The Taming of the Shrew* written.
- 1594–95 *Love's Labour's Lost*, *King John*, and *Richard II* written.
- 1595–96 *Romeo and Juliet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* written.
- 1596 Son Hamnet dies.

- 1596–97 *The Merchant of Venice* and *Henry IV, Part 1* written; purchases New Place in Stratford.
- 1597–98 *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *Henry IV, Part 2* written.
- 1598–99 *Much Ado About Nothing* written.
- 1599 *Henry V, Julius Caesar*, and *As You Like It* written.
- 1600–01 *Hamlet* written.
- 1601 *The Phoenix and the Turtle* written; father dies.
- 1601–02 *Twelfth Night* and *Troilus and Cressida* written.
- 1602–03 *All's Well That Ends Well* written.
- 1603 Shakespeare's company becomes the King's Men.
- 1604 *Measure for Measure* and *Othello* written.
- 1605 *King Lear* written.
- 1606 *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra* written.
- 1607 Marriage of daughter Susanna on June 5.
- 1607–08 *Coriolanus, Timon of Athens*, and *Pericles* written.
- 1608 Mother dies.
- 1609 Publication, probably unauthorized, of the quarto edition of the *Sonnets*.
- 1609–10 *Cymbeline* written.
- 1610–11 *The Winter's Tale* written.
- 1611 *The Tempest* written. Shakespeare returns to Stratford, where he will live until his death.
- 1612 *A Funeral Elegy* written.
- 1612–13 *Henry VIII* written; The Globe Theatre destroyed by fire.
- 1613 *The Two Noble Kinsmen* written (with John Fletcher).
- 1616 Daughter Judith marries on February 10; Shakespeare dies April 23.
- 1623 Publication of the First Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays.

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