

Macbeth Study Guide

Macbeth by William Shakespeare

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Introduction

At about 2100 lines, *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's shortest tragedy and among the briefest of his plays. Scholars generally agree that the drama was written around 1606 because various references in the play correspond to events which occurred in that year. Many also believe that it was composed for a performance before King James I, who had a deep interest in witchcraft. Quite possibly the play was one of the court entertainments offered to King Christian IV of Denmark during his visit to London in 1606. In addition, researchers suggest that Shakespeare may have written *Macbeth* to glorify King James's ancestry by associating him, through the historical Banquo, to the first Scottish king, Kenneth MacAlpin. The principal literary source for *Macbeth* is Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Irelande* (1577). However, Shakespeare took great liberties with this source, adapting various historical events to increase the dramatic effect of his tragedy. Considerable debate exists regarding the tragic context of Macbeth's downfall. In drama, a tragedy tradition ally recounts the significant events or actions in a protagonist's life which, taken together, bring about the catastrophe. Classical rules of tragedy also require that the hero's ruin evokes pity and fear in the audience. Some critics assert that since Macbeth's actions throughout the play are inherently evil, he gets what he deserves in the end and therefore his downfall is not catastrophic in a tragic sense. Other commentators, however, argue that although Macbeth embraces evil, his feelings of guilt, combined with the coercion of the witches and his wife, generate pity and fear among readers and spectators at his ruin, a feeling identified in classical tragedy as catharsis.



Plot Summary

After crushing Macdonwald's rebellion against Duncan, Macbeth and Banquo are journeying to the king's castle when they are surprised by the sudden appearance of three witches. The hags predict that Macbeth, who holds the title of Thane of Glarais, will also become Thane of Cawdor and then king of Scotland and that although Banquo will never rule, his heirs will.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

Three Witches meet in a desert place with thunder, lightening and rain. They vow to meet again when some mighty battle is over before the sun sets on the heath. They will meet with Macbeth. There is something murky, something terrible in the air; a sense of anticipation of something about to happen on a large scale.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

We are introduced to Macbeth's key deceivers in this play. Undeniably interesting, the Witches' give themselves away as deceptive and cruel in the very beginning.



Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

Duncan, Malcolm, Donalbain, Lennox, in a camp near Forres, meet a wounded Sergeant, who Malcolm solicits to inform Duncan, the King of Scotland, regarding the battle fought to liberate Malcolm from captivity. The soldier replies that the rebel, Macdonwald, initially fought valiantly, as equals, against Macbeth until finally Macbeth ripped him in half with his sword and hung his head upon the battlements. Then, the enemy, the Norwegian lord, struck hard again. But the two captains, although perhaps outnumbered, redoubled their efforts, facing a painful defeat. Surgeons are sent for to assist the Sergeant who is overcome by his wounds. Ross enters, reporting that the fight against the Norwegian King, assisted by the thane of Cowdor is over. Victory belongs to Duncan! The Norwegian King must pay tribute in order to bury his men. The thane of Cowdor, who rebelled against Duncan, will die, surrendering his title to Macbeth.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

This is a scene which celebrates a great victory over a rebellious nobleman, the thane of Cowder, who assisted Sweno, a Norwegian King. We see in this scene the great contempt the victors have for the rebels. Macbeth has literally split his enemy with his sword and cut off his head, displaying it for all the armies to see. The enemy is characterized as powerful, but very evil and rebellious. Macbeth is a kind of cruel hero.



Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

The battle is now over and the Witches now show up in a heath near Forres, scene of the battle. One of the Witches has been affronted by a sailor's wife who would not share her chestnuts, munching them ungraciously while she watched. In revenge, the Witch vows revenge against her husband, cursing him with sleeplessness and tempests, drained and exhausted. Macbeth and Banquo come, surprised and disgusted with these strange creatures. The Witches prophesy that Macbeth will become thane of Cowdor and, eventually King. Banquo is skeptical and somewhat disgusted with their manly, though female, appearance. They answer his request for prophesy with the claim that he will not be a king, but he will be father to kings. Suddenly, the Witches vanish, leaving both of them astonished. Suddenly, Ross and Angus appear. In fact, Macbeth will be thane of Cowdor after all, for the thane, although still alive, faces execution. Does that prove that Macbeth will be King? Macbeth is full of this idea but Banquo is skeptical, thinking that sometimes the dark forces will feed men a little bit of truth in order to destroy them later by the strength of some great deception.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

Is Macbeth making a mistake by ignoring his friend, Banquo? Banquo has warned him about taking himself too seriously just because the Witches have made a prophecy. As in Hamlet, the force of the supernatural is looked at as grievous and very dark and ugly. The Witches themselves are sly, cruel and mischievous- as revealed in their conversations with each other. Should Macbeth really trust them? Macbeth is the story of ambition fed and supported by a supernatural influence. We do not have to hunt far for Macbeth's hubris or fatal weakness. It is right here in the beginning when allows the Witch's ambiguous and unclear prophecy to support and feed his ambition. Banquo, at this point, when faced with the same temptation, refuses to be ruled by these creatures' promises.

Act 1, Scene 4

Act 1, Scene 4 Summary

Duncan inquires as the status of the original thane of Cowdor's execution. Malcolm tells him that the rebel thane confessed, asked Duncan's pardon- then died like a gentleman, with great dignity, with a seeming indifference to his death. Macbeth, Banquo, Ross and Angus enter. Duncan expresses his great gratitude towards Macbeth. He expresses the same towards Banquo but bestows the title of Prince of Cumberland and his estate on Malcolm, his eldest son, who is now clearly heir to the throne. Macbeth, still reeling from the Witches' prophecy, sees this as an obstacle to his climb towards the throne.

Act 1, Scene 4 Analysis

Macbeth knows that he is carrying "black and deep desires." He is consciously evil. In that sense, his relationship to Duncan, as his true and faithful servant, is tainted by his ambition, as will be his relationship to himself and to all others in this play.

Act 1, Scene 5

Act 1, Scene 5 Summary

The next scene takes place in Macbeth's castle in Inverness, where Lady Macbeth is reading a letter from Macbeth. The letter recounts his encounter with the three "weird sisters" and the prophecy of his ensuing Kingship. He wishes her to share in his rejoicing, referring to her as "my dearest partner of greatness." She, in soliloquy, conveys her fear that Macbeth is too soft, too filled with "the milk of human kindness" to do the things he must do to fulfill the prophecy. She waits eagerly to advise him as to his course now the Fates have stepped in to prepare his for his glorious crown. Hearing that Duncan will arrive in her castle after Macbeth, she invokes the forces of darkness to prepare her for a murderous intrigue against the King that will accelerate her husband to the throne. Macbeth now comes. She tells him- play the innocent before Duncan, but underneath retain the serpent's cunning. She tells him to leave everything else to her.

Act 1, Scene 5 Analysis

Before, Macbeth's ambition had been aimless. Though there are obstacles offered to him by Duncan's passage of the throne to his eldest, Malcolm, he makes no plot or calculation. His wife, hearing the news, decides that she will drive him to his destiny, to assume the throne and fulfill the prophecy; namely, murder. He says little regarding her offer to him and we are unsure if he will take this dark step to fulfill his "black and deep desire." Lady Macbeth is the very personification of warped, murderous ambition.



Act 1, Scene 6

Act 1, Scene 6 Summary

Duncan, Malcolm, Donalbain and Banquo, Lennox, Macduff, Ross, Angus, and attendants enter the scene stand before Macbeth's castle. Duncan and Banquo discuss how pleasant and inviting Macbeth's castle appears to them. Lady Macbeth greets them. Duncan says how they had tried to catch up with him but his great love of his lady no doubt helped spur his horses on, fast ahead of the royal entourage. She is painfully obsequious in making them welcome. He asks her to lead him to his host, Macbeth.

Act 1, Scene 6 Analysis

After their great victory, Duncan and his royal entourage eagerly await the presence of Macbeth again, partaking of his hospitality, no doubt in celebration of his newly appointed title and his contribution to their cause. Duncan and perhaps the audience are disarmed by the welcoming hospitality of the smiling, adoring Lady Macbeth. She, like the witches, is a great deceiver.



Act 1, Scene 7

Act 1, Scene 7 Summary

Macbeth, in soliloquy, states very clearly that it is not the time to kill Duncan. He will very likely, if committing this crime, be forced to take the "poison'd chalice" to his own lips. He is both a precious kinsman to Duncan as well as his host. Besides this, Duncan has been such a great and true king to his people that the tears following his death would "drown the wind." But Macbeth's caution does not sit well with his "dear partner," Lady Macbeth, who furiously chides him for his fastidiousness in taking action, implying even that he is a rank coward. She would tear her child from her own breast and dash its brains out if she had made the promises that Macbeth has made. Her plan is to drug Duncan's chamberlains with wine and kill Duncan with their daggers while they sleep. Their chambers will be covered with blood, as well as their daggers. Their guilt will be assumed as Lady Macbeth and her husband cry out in anguish at Duncan's death.

Act 1, Scene 7 Analysis

In this scene, we clearly see two kinds of evil- the evil of ambition, personified by Macbeth, who, though seeming capable of plotting murder without remorse, has not lost touch with the social and political consequences of his action. Lady Macbeth personifies an even deeper type of evil, uncontrolled ambition completely unchecked by inhibition or conscience. Lady Macbeth represents an overwhelming, emotional commitment and surrender to the lust for power. While Macbeth, an ambitious but brave man, has some contentment within himself, some semblance of self-esteem with or without the throne, his wife sees no contentment without the throne and is totally lost in her dreams of power. For her, there are no alternatives to her goals but total ruthlessness.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

Banquo speaks with Fleance, his son, who is holding a torch before him. Banquo is having a bad night, filled with unpleasant thoughts. Macbeth enters the scene. Banquo notes that he, also, appears to be up. Banquo remarks that the King, however, is asleep. Duncan is greatly happy with Macbeth and his wife and has rewarded Lady Macbeth with a diamond. Banquo had dreamt again of the Witches and wishes to speak to Macbeth about it. He feels there is some truth in what the Witches have told him. Macbeth asks Banquo to leave the time to him and he will be rewarded for his interest. Banquo leaves. Macbeth sends a message through a servant to Lady Macbeth telling her to ring a bell when his drink is ready and then to retire to bed after he has done this chore. Macbeth, now alone, sees a vision- a dagger is before him, palpably, but he cannot take its handle. Soon he will, though- and will bring Duncan before the gates of the afterlife. The bell tolls. The time is now at hand.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

Macbeth painstakingly takes the audience through each stage of murderous ambition. First, we have the seeding of Macbeth's ambition by the Witches. Then, we have Macbeth succumbing to the temptation to reap the Witches' prophecy by committing Duncan's murder. In this chapter, Macbeth fully contemplates the dark deed by confronting the vision of the murder weapon itself, almost as a supernatural portent. Macbeth clearly sees before him a tangible, but yet, in truth, untouchable vision of the dagger, like a holy grail of pure evil.



Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

The same wine that has caused the chamberlains to lie in drunken slumber has now emboldened Lady Macbeth. She has heard the owl shriek, but she thinks she hears the chamberlains. But, no, it is her husband, claiming that he has killed Duncan. Macbeth had visited the chamberlains who waked briefly, talking to each other, but fell asleep again. Macbeth, perhaps gripped with the anguish of his terrible deed has heard a voice proclaim, "Macbeth shall sleep no more." Lady Macbeth chides him for this foolishness, this brain sickness, and tells him to wash his hands and return the daggers. He refuses to visit them again. She says she will do it. She leaves. Macbeth hears a knocking. He is now appalled by every noise. He fears he cannot wash the stain of blood away, even with the help of the mighty Neptune. Rather, he would turn the green sea red. He is that deeply infested with fear and self-loathing at this point, moments after he has dealt Duncan the fatal blow. There is more knocking. Lady Macbeth warns Macbeth not to be so lost in his thoughts. He dearly wishes that Duncan were alive to answer the knocking that summons him to his door. Macbeth is now submerged in guilt.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

And now Shakespeare has us follow to the next stage of observing murderous ambition's path. This is the effect of the deed on Macbeth, who now, unlike his wife, is tormented by sleeplessness, acute sensitivity to every noise around him and deep, unmitigated guilt. Much is made of the blood on his hands, his fear of revisiting the chamberlains' room, his useless wish that Duncan were still alive. This scene is filled with the wretchedness of the deeds' aftermath.



Act 2, Scene 3

Act 2, Scene 3 Summary

A Porter begins this scene with "knock-knock" jokes about the Afterlife. When Macduff enters with Lennox, the same Porter jokes with Macduff regarding the effect of drink. Lennox then asks for the King, who has asked him to wake him, and Macbeth says he will escort him to him. While Macduff goes within the King's chamber, Lennox tells Macbeth what a horrendous night they had, replete with strange noises, prophecies and lamentations. Macduff comes out of the King's room, horror-stricken by the murder. He tells Macbeth and Lennox to go in and see for themselves while he loudly proclaims the death to his friends in the castle. He has the bell rung, summoning Lady Macbeth. She asks what's wrong. He replies to her and to Banquo- of the terrible murder that has been committed. Macbeth and Lennox return. The "outraged" Macbeth has murdered the chamberlains, whose daggers and faces were stained with Duncan's blood. Lady Macbeth calls for help. Macduff, Macbeth, Donalbain and Malcolm say that they'll meet shortly to discuss the situation but Malcolm and Donalbain, both sons of the King, decide to leave suddenly. Malcolm, the eldest, says he will leave to England and Donalbain to Ireland before the meeting. They are suspicious of those who appear grief-stricken..

Act 2, Scene 3 Analysis

As the Gravedigger's scene in Hamlet, who makes light of light and death, here is a Porter who regales the audience with Afterlife jokes in the scene following Macbeth's submergence in guilt. The jokes concern a farmer who kills himself to get to heaven and is rewarded with the fires of hell; an equivocator, one who can see both sides of an argument, finds that he cannot equivocate in heaven. This comic respite is Shakespeare's macabre reminder of the further consequences of the crime, its metaphysical consequences. This scene is followed by a litany of horror and fear as others discover the murder. Malcolm and Donalbain seem the wisest for, as potential targets of further crimes, they flee the unknown assailants by returning to their homelands.



Act 2, Scene 4

Act 2, Scene 4 Summary

Outside Macbeth's castle, Ross and an Old Man speak about some of the anomalies they have seen recently. The Old man is seventy years old but he has never seen strange things like this. For instance, it is day, but darkness shrouds the Earth. A powerful falcon was killed a few nights ago by a considerably smaller and weaker mousing owl. Duncan's horses have broken loose, turned wild against men and were seen, by Ross himself, to eat each other. Macduff appears and tells Ross that it was the chamberlains, who Macbeth killed, that dispatched Duncan. But the quick flight of Malcolm and Donalbain, both the King's sons, have cast suspicion on them as ultimate perpetrators. This suspicion has made Macbeth a logical candidate for King and he has gone to Scone to be made King.

Act 2, Scene 4 Analysis

The very sensible flight of Malcolm and Donalbain has worked against them- for they are now thought to have plotted to kill their father. Macbeth has now been chosen to be King. The Witches' prophesy is about to come true- but in the midst of tremendous and dark portents- the disappearance of day, the escape and cannibalism of Duncan's horses, the successful attack of a smaller bird upon a falcon. All of nature protests Macbeth's terrible crime.



Act 3, Scene 1

Act 3, Scene 1 Summary

Banquo, speaking in soliloquy, acknowledges the Witches' prophecy. Perhaps his own prophecy will come true- for although Macbeth is King, he, not Macbeth, will become the father of kings. Macbeth, as King, and Lady Macbeth, as Queen, now enter with a royal entourage. Banquo will be the chief guest at their celebration feast. He will attend in the evening, but he has a long ride to make in the afternoon. Duncan's sons are in England and Ireland denying they have murdered their father. Macbeth has an attendant summon his men from beyond the palace gate. Alone, he speaks of his fear of Banquo. He is aware that the Witches' prophecy, although giving him Kingship, stripped him of his lineage. He now hires two murderers to dispatch Banquo and his son.

Act 3, Scene 1 Analysis

Banquo and Macbeth have suspicions about each other. Banquo believes Macbeth may have earned his throne through wrongdoing, perhaps murder. On the other hand, Macbeth is concerned about the Witches' prophesy. He wants to get rid of Banquo and so assure the succession on the throne. Macbeth's criminality extends to anything in his path.



Act 3, Scene 2

Act 3, Scene 2 Summary

Lady Macbeth finds out that, indeed, Banquo will be there tonight. She speaks with Macbeth, who cannot put his past deeds behind him and is obviously plotting to destroy Banquo. He does not tell Lady Macbeth his plans, however. She can celebrate their victory after the deed is done.

Act 3, Scene 2 Analysis

Macbeth takes total responsibility for ending the threat of Banquo. He is, in some way, taking on the pro-active ruthlessness of his wife.

Act 3, Scene 3

Act 3, Scene 3 Summary

The Murderers lie in wait for Banquo in a park near the Palace. When Banquo and Fleance come, they set upon Banquo. He calls on his son to escape, which he does, successfully. Banquo is vanquished.

Act 3, Scene 3 Analysis

Since Banquo's son still lives, Macbeth has not yet circumvented the Witches' prophecy that Banquo's successors will be Kings.



Act 3, Scene 4

Act 3, Scene 4 Summary

Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Ross, Lennox, Lords, and Attendants take their positions in a hall in the Castle. As they are seated, one of Banquo's murderers appears at the door. There is blood on his face- Banquo's. Macbeth asks him to stand outside. Banquo is dead, buried in a trench with twenty gashes in his head. But his son, Fleance, is still alive, a fact which terrifies Macbeth. Macbeth joins the banquet, but the ghost of Banquo sits in his place. Macbeth sees the ghost. His guests think that he is just ill.. Lady Macbeth says he has been like that since he was very young and says it will be over soon. They talk. Lady Macbeth tells him he is looking at a stool. It is an hallucination like the dagger he saw before Duncan was killed. He protests, but then the ghost vanishes. Macbeth sits, drinking to the health of Banquo. As he has begun new revelries, Banquo's ghost returns. Macbeth says he would not be afraid of any other form- tiger, bear or rhinoceros- except for this, his vanquished friend. The ghost leaves once more. Now Lady Macbeth is worried and she asks the guests to leave. Macduff appears to have refused his summons. Macbeth decides to sleep and to see the Witches the next day.

Act 3, Scene 4 Analysis

Banquo's murderer appears at the banquet to talk to Macbeth. There is even blood on his face. With the appearance of Banquo's ghost, things are now taking on a form that exposes Macbeth to public attention. His ravings about the ghost are so explicit, that Lady Macbeth must ask the guests to leave. Macbeth's guilt and his manipulations are becoming increasingly visible. The nightmare is escalating.



Act 3, Scene 5

Act 3, Scene 5 Summary

The Witches meet Hecate, Queen of the Witches. Hecate is mad at them for not alerting her about Macbeth. For Macbeth, to her, is just a "wayward son," who cares not for them, probably not worth trifling with. But, in the morning, all of them will meet and he will shortly know his destiny. She is off to the moon, where she will capture a "vaporous drop," which she will distill to cause great artificial sprites to manifest. These creatures will then draw Macbeth through deep illusions to hold a false security about his life.

Act 3, Scene 5 Analysis

With Hecate, Queen of the Witches, Shakespeare has stepped up the import of the drama. Although discounting Macbeth, Hecate takes extra special measures to assure her involvement in the spell. The importance of Macbeth's fate is enhanced.

Act 3, Scene 6

Act 3, Scene 6 Summary

Lennox comments to a Lord on the patricide of Banquo and of Duncan. Further, Macduff has fled to England where, in disgrace, he is plotting against Macbeth with Malcolm, Duncan's heir. Macbeth has summoned Macduff, but Macduff has refused to come.

Act 3, Scene 6 Analysis

Everything is upside down. Macbeth's deception about the double patricide has worked. Lennox has bought his nobility and Macduff's infamy.



Act 4, Scene 1

Act 4, Scene 1 Summary

The Witches stir horrid things (like lizard scales and dragons teeth) in their cauldron as they wait on Macbeth. Hecate comes briefly. They dance and sing. Macbeth meets them, demanding to know his fate. They present powerful apparitions to counsel him. The first, an armed head, warns Macbeth against Macduff. The second, a loud, bloody child, tells Macbeth he will not be harmed by any born of a woman. He rests more comfortably after that discussion but still decides to kill Macduff. Next, a child appears to him, holding a tree in his hand. This child tells him that he will not be destroyed until "Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill shall come against him." Macbeth is content because how should he be concerned with a wood coming against him? Still, he seeks to know one more thing- will Banquo be granted his legacy? Will his sons be kings? Having demanded, in no certain terms, this information from the Witches, they oblige him with a vision of eight kings being followed by Banquo. The last king has a glass in his hand, showing him even more kings. The Witches dance with Hecate and disappear. He is left alone. Lennox enters, informing him that Macduff has fled to England in time to escape Macbeth's plans on his life. Macbeth will not wait. He will attack Macduff in his castle.

Act 4, Scene 1 Analysis

In this critical scene, Hecate's deception reaches its apex. By disguising prophecies in illusions borne by poignant apparitions, Macbeth is led to believe certain things about his capacity to survive. His lust for power and the throne has warped his critical faculties and what seems literally true- like the woods coming to his castle- is taken at its face value.



Act 4, Scene 2

Act 4, Scene 2 Summary

Lady Macduff enters with Ross, her cousin, and her son. She indicates that her husband's flight makes them look like traitors, joining the likes of Fleance, Malcolm and Donalbain, who also fled. She tells Ross that Macduff has cruelly abandoned her. Ross tells her she needs to be more schooled in her husband's ways. Macduff is, in fact, noble and wise. He takes his leave of her. She asks her son what will he do now that her father's dead. He tells her he will do as birds do- find what they need. Besides, he tells her, his father is not dead. As they banter, in a kind of jesting way, a messenger enters, warning them to leave. Murderers come and kill her son. After he dies, she runs, screaming for help.

Act 4, Scene 2 Analysis

This is a very tragic scene in which Lady Macduff voices her thought of abandonment by her husband. Ross tries to tell her that her husband left for a reason, that he is a brave and good man. But she will not live to her know her husband's intentions nor his valor. Instead, she and her son die at the hands of murderers. Like everything else in this play, a web of deception is woven around everyone's character and intentions.



Act 4, Scene 3

Act 4, Scene 3 Summary

Malcolm and Macduff, England, talk before the King's Palace. Malcolm speaks to Macduff as though he was filled with sadness and would weep at the horror of all that has happened. Macduff tells him to be strong and take up his sword for Scotland. Malcolm is worried that Macduff may offer him to Macbeth as "a weak poor innocent lamb to appease an angry god." Macduff says he is no traitor. Malcolm says that if he were to take over Macbeth's crown, Scotland would suffer more because of his many vices. Compared to his vices, Macbeth will seem "as a lamb." No woman will be safe in his realm. Macduff tries to appease him, saying he will have plenty of opportunities for women as King, but cautions him against the ravages of lust. Malcolm now tells him how his avarice will extend to other men's property. Macduff says he will have plenty of opportunities to expand his estate as King. Malcolm tells Macduff he has not actual virtues but relishes crime. Is he fit to govern? Macduff replies that he isn't really fit to live and mourns for Scotland under a new tyrant. But then, it turns out that Malcolm was testing Macduff. He is really a virgin, does not covet other's property, and delights "no less in truth than life." Macduff is bewildered by his change of appearance. Ross comes, reporting that much ill has befallen Scotland. Ross enjoins them to come to Scotland. Malcolm says that they will be coming with Siward, an English general. Ross tells him that his wife and child have been killed in his castle as the murderers were searching for him. Macduff swears vengeance against Macbeth.

Act 4, Scene 3 Analysis

In this scene, Malcolm, Duncan's displaced heir to the throne, tests Macduff. First, he plays very weak- sick to the point of tears about what has happened to his native Scotland. Then, he plays very vice-ridden, full of lust and covetness. He finds Macduff to be appalled by his professions and wishes him dead rather than King. But then he reveals himself. Later, in the scene Ross comes, initially informing Macduff that everything is fine with his family, and then later tells him that his family has been killed. This scene is filled with the "good" side deceiving each other. Is Shakespeare telling us that human nature is filled with deception?



Act 5, Scene 1

Act 5, Scene 1 Summary

This scene takes place in Dunsinane, in an anteroom in Macbeth's castle, where a doctor and a Gentlewoman are discussing Lady Macbeth, who is sleepwalking. She will actually even write in her sleep. While they are conversing, Lady Macbeth, eyes completely open, sleepwalks in front of them. She is rubbing her hands, trying to rid herself of a "damned spot." She speaks aloud, talking about how it was possible for an old man to have so much blood in him. Is the old man Banquo? She talks about Macduff's wife. Is she dead to- by her hand? Now, she mentions Banquo explicitly. He is dead. He cannot come out of his grave, she says- and then retires. The doctor does not know what to say. He has heard the unthinkable. He believes she needs a priest more than a physician.

Act 5, Scene 1 Analysis

The horror of their deeds is now slowly destroying Macbeth and his wife. Lady Macbeth is now sleepwalking at night, trying to wash the blood off of her hands produced by the murder of Banquo. She and a gentlewoman watch as she confesses to her crimes. This play continues to meticulously follow-through on the consequences of the Macbeths' bloody crimes and shows the deterioration of their psyche.



Act 5, Scene 2

Act 5, Scene 2 Summary

In a country setting near Dunsinane, soldiers with Menteith, Caitness, Angus and Lennox enter the scene with a drum and colors. They speak of meeting with Malcolm and the English General Siward near Birnam wood. The English soldiers are young and untried. Macbeth, in his highly fortified castle in Dunsinane, seems possessed by an fiery rage, Angus speaks of Macbeth's guilt over his "secret murders." They and their soldiers will purge Macbeth of his illness- through a righteous war!

Act 5, Scene 2 Analysis

The drums of war beat harder now as the soldiers march to meet Malcolm in the fated Birnam wood. They do not realize how much Macbeth feels protected from his enemies..



Act 5, Scene 3

Act 5, Scene 3 Summary

Macbeth, at Dunsinane, tells his doctor and attendants not to give him any more reports. He is not worried about anything unless "Birnam wood remove to Dunsinane." Also, owing to the prophecy, he also believes he cannot be touched by any man "born of woman." When a servant tries to warn him of the approaching 10,000 soldiers, he flies into a rage, calling him a coward. Macbeth calls Seyton and has him prepare his armor. Seyton says it is not necessary, but Macbeth wants to prepare himself. Macbeth is not afraid because of the prophecy but the Doctor has reservations.

Act 5, Scene 3 Analysis

The Macbeth derives its forward thrust through events that hover around the witches' prophecy. Is Macbeth wrong in his unthinking belief in his invulnerability? In this scene, his anger is kindled at anyone even daring to challenge his almost divine protection.



Act 5, Scene 4

Act 5, Scene 4 Summary

An expedition, near Birnam wood, marches towards Dunsinane. It is composed of Malcolm with General Siward and his son, young Siward, Macduff, Menteith, Caithness, Angus, Lennox, Ross, and Soldiers. Malcolm suggests that each soldier saws off a bough and carries it before himself as camouflage to hide their numbers. Although many have revolted, Macbeth stays in Dunsinane, in his castle, thinking he will somehow triumph.

Act 5, Scene 4 Analysis

The suspense builds as the audience first gets a glimpse of how cleverly the witches have deceived Macbeth. But, instead of telling the audience definitively, Shakespeare relies on Malcolm's suggest to use the branches from Birnam wood to camouflage the soldiers.



Act 5, Scene 5

Act 5, Scene 5 Summary

Macbeth in Dunsinane speaks confidently about withstanding a siege in the fortified castle. His enemies risk famine and ague. Macbeth hears a shrill cry. He finds out devastating news. His wife has died. He philosophizes about all his days only point the way to "dusty death." While caught in the somber mood, he hears more devastating news. A sentry reports that Birnam wood appears to be itself moving to Dunsinane. The sentry does not realize that he has seen camouflaged soldiers. Macbeth now is truly alarmed- for it appears the Witches' prophecy is coming true- Birnam wood is coming to Dunsinane.

Act 5, Scene 5 Analysis

In a final burst of *hubris*, Macbeth speaks with enthusiasm about his chances. Then, his hopes are chiseled down a notch with the news that his wife has died. He speaks somberly about how all roads lead to death. Now, the suspense curve of the tragedy nears the climax as the witches' deception unravels before Macbeth. Birnam woods is coming to Dunsinane. Macbeth knows that he is not really safe at all.

Act 5, Scene 6

Act 5, Scene 6 Summary

The army of Malcolm, with Siward and Macduff, replete with their drums and banners, rests before the castle. Malcolm orders his men to put down their boughs. Siward will lead the first assault against the castle.

Act 5, Scene 6 Analysis

The moment of attack comes as the soldiers put down their Birnam boughs. The play is approaching its climax.



Act 5, Scene 7

Act 5, Scene 7 Summary

Macbeth now knows he must make his stand against his English assailants, led by General Siward and Malcolm. In the beginning of this scene, Macbeth battles young Siward in a bloody sword fight, slaying young Siward. He leaves, feeling confident in his defeat of young Siward. Macduff enters the scene, hunting for Macbeth, eager to avenge himself against Macbeth directly. Siward comes and they enter in the castle.

Act 5, Scene 7 Analysis

Macbeth's last act of villainy is killing young Siward. The fight increases his confidence. Macduff now enters the castle with young Siward's father. Macbeth's last prophecy buffers his confidence. How could a man who was not born of a woman kill him?



Act 5, Scene 8

Act 5, Scene 8 Summary

Macbeth will not to fall upon his sword like the ancient Caesars, but fight to the death. When Macduff enters, he has his opportunity. But when he tells Macduff the prophecy about how he cannot be killed by a man born of woman, Macduff tells him how he was ripped out of his mother womb- so he was not born in a natural way, thereby fulfilling the prophecy. Macbeth wishes to yield, but Macduff mocks him, calling him coward and threatening to "paint" him on a pole, with a sign below saying "Here you may see the tyrant." Macbeth throws down his shield and battles him with complete abandon. They exit, fighting. Malcolm, Siward, Ross and others enter with the Soldiers. Macduff is missing and so is Siward's son. Ross tells General Siward his son died nobly and Siward, though greatly saddened, is glad that he died with such dignity. Now, Macduff enters with Macbeth's head. He hails Malcolm as King. Malcolm responds by making his military leaders the royal title of earls. He invites all to Scone to see him crowned.

Act 5, Scene 8 Analysis

Even though believing in the prophecy, Macbeth knows a great confrontation is ahead. He will not fall on his sword, but fight to the end. In the climactic scene, the fight to the death with Macduff, he finds out the strange circumstances of Macduff's birth. He was ripped out of his mother's womb- so Macduff was not born of a mother. Macduff threatens Macbeth with horrible humiliation if he surrenders. They leave the scene fighting. Siward learns of his son's brave death. When Macduff returns with Macbeth's head, the tragedy is finished. Macbeth is the true tragic hero with his flaw being his gullibility, which is augmented by his ambition and his pride.



Characters

Angus:

Angus is a Scottish nobleman. He travels with Rosse to bring King Duncan news of the battle and to bestow upon Macbeth the title thane of Cawdor. Angus also accompanies Duncan on the journey to Macbeth's castle. Finally, he appears in Act V with the Scottish rebels.

Apparitions:

In IV.i, three apparitions come from the witch es' cauldron after animal and human blood is poured in on top of a variety of other ingredients. The first apparition, described in the stage directions as "an armed head," tells Macbeth to beware the thane of Fife (Macduff). The second apparition is a bloody child who tells Macbeth that "none of woman born" (IV.ii.80) can harm Macbeth. The third apparition is a child wearing a crown and carrying a tree in his hand. He tells Macbeth that he will not be vanquished until "Great Birnan wood to high Dunsinane hill" rise against him (IV.i.93-4).

Attendants:

The king is surrounded by attendants who can carry out such tasks as helping the bleeding sergeant to find surgeons. They travel with the king. His personal attendants are supposed to guard him in his sleep. Macbeth stabs them in the confused moments following the discovery of the murdered king. Macbeth has his own attendants. They help with Macbeth's banquet and are with him in the castle in the last act of the play.

Banquo:

Banquo is a Scottish general in the king's army and Macbeth's friend. With Macbeth, Banquo helps Duncan's forces claim victory over the king of Norway and the thane of Cawdor. Following the battle, Banquo and Macbeth encounter the witches, who make several prophecies about Macbeth. They then speak to Banquo about his own future, saying that Banquo's descendants will be kings. Unlike Macbeth, who appears to be fascinated by the weird sisters, Banquo expresses doubts about the witches and their prophecies. He comments to Macbeth, for example, that "oftentimes, to win us to our harm, / The instruments of darkness tell us truths, / Win us with honest trifles, to betray [us]" (I.iii. 123-25). This unwillingness to subscribe wholeheartedly to the visions of the witches, in addition to Banquo's demonstrated valor in battle contribute to the view that Banquo is a virtuous man. Yet Banquo's virtue is an area of some controversy. A common view is that Shakespeare intended Banquo to be seen as a virtuous character who was not responsible in any way for Macbeth's murderous actions, despite the fact that the source material from which Shakespeare drew depicts Banquo as a co-conspirator.



tor in Duncan's death. This line of thinking is supported by the popular belief that *Macbeth* was performed (perhaps even written) for King James I in 1606. Historically, Banquo was an ancestor of King James, and some critics argue that because of this, Shakespeare would not portray him in an unfavorable way. Other observers argue that Banquo's inaction makes him in part morally responsible for the king's murder. These critics cite Banquo's soliloquy following Duncan's death as evidence of his knowledge of (and therefore at least partial responsibility for) Macbeth's actions. In this speech Banquo acknowledges to himself his suspicions about Macbeth's actions: "Thou hast it now: King, Cawdor, Glamis, all, / As the weird women promis'd, and I fear / Thou play'dst most foully for't..." (III.i.1- 3).

Shortly after Macbeth kills Duncan, he remembers the witches' prophecy regarding Banquo: that Banquo's descendants would be kings. Macbeth then arranges to have Banquo and his son Fleance murdered. Fleance escapes the attack; Banquo does not.

Boy:

Macduff's son is a young boy. When the murderers sent by Macbeth arrive at the Macduff residence, the child tries to defend his father's honor and calls the murderer a name. After he is stabbed, he tells his mother to run away.

English Doctor:

The English doctor comments to Malcolm on the healing touch of the saintly Edward, the English king. Edward's healing stands in contrast to Macbeth's murderous touch.

Fleance:

Fleance is Banquo's son. He and his father encounter Macbeth just before Macbeth murders Duncan. Prior to the banquet to which Macbeth has invited Fleance and Banquo, father and son are approached by murderers who have been ordered by Macbeth to kill both of them. Fleance escapes the attack.

Gentlemen:

Unnamed gentlemen are addressed by Rosse at Macbeth's banquet.

Cathness (in some editions, Caithness):

Cathness is a Scottish nobleman who is another one of the rebels against Macbeth under Malcolm's leadership.



Gentlewoman:

The gentlewoman is an attendant on Lady Macbeth. She speaks knowledgeably to the Scottish doctor about Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking routine.

Donalbain:

Donalbain is the king's son and brother to Malcolm. He is present but silent in the early scenes with the king. When the murder of his father is disclosed, he suggests that he and Malcolm flee the country, and he leaves for Ireland. For a time, he and his brother are under suspicion for the murder. He is not present at the battle at the end of the play.

Duncan (King Duncan of Scotland):

Duncan is said by Macbeth to be virtuous and meek in his conduct in office and in his bearing. He seems to be regarded as a good king and, on the battlefield, he appears to be a competent leader who confronts both a rebellion and an invasion. He announces his son Malcolm as the prince of Cumberland, the next in line to the Scottish throne. Duncan does not seem to be a particularly good judge of character, since he misjudged both the former thane of Cawdor and his designated replacement, Macbeth who murders Duncan in his sleep.

Ghost of Banquo:

Banquo's ghost appears at Macbeth's banquet scene and is only seen by Macbeth. It is commonly held that the ghost is a hallucination, conjured from Macbeth's guilt.

Hecat (also Hecate):

Hecat is the goddess of witchcraft. She is described by the weird sisters as looking angry when she first appears on stage. She scolds them for their dealings with Macbeth, who loves the witches not for themselves but for his own purposes. She plans apparitions that will confuse and mislead Macbeth. Accompanied by three other witches, she appears briefly in the cauldron scene, commending the witches and instructing them to dance and sing.

King of Scotland (King Duncan of Scotland):

See Duncan



Earl of Northumberland (Siward, Earl of Northumberland):

See Siward

Lennox:

Lennox is a Scottish nobleman who appears with the king at his camp near the battlefield. He travels with the king to Macbeth's castle. The morning after Duncan's murder, Lennox arrives with Macduff, intending to awaken the king. Based on his initial survey of the evidence Lennox speculates that the king's chamberlains were his killers. Lennox appears again in III.iv at Macbeth's banquet. During the hasty departure of the guests from the banquet, he wishes a better health to the king. In the final scene of Act III, he speaks of recent events in Scotland. In the first scene of Act IV, when he brings Macbeth word of Macduff's departure from England, he does not see the weird sisters vanish past him in the air. He is aligned with the Scottish noblemen rebelling against Macbeth in Act V.

Lords:

Some unnamed lords attend Macbeth's banquet. One lord speaks to Lennox after the banquet about recent events in Scotland, the whereabouts of Malcolm and lately of Macduff, and the anger of Macbeth at Macduff's absence from the banquet. He prays for better times in Scotland.

Macbeth:

Macbeth is nobleman and a Scottish general in the king's army. At the beginning of the play, he has gained recognition for himself through his defeat of the king of Norway and the rebellious Macdonwald. Shortly after the battle, Macbeth and another of the king's general's, Banquo, encounter three witches (or weird sisters), who greet Macbeth as thane of Glamis, thane of Cawdor, and future king. Macbeth, unaware that King Duncan has bestowed upon him the title thane of Cawdor, appears to be startled by these prophecies. As soon as the witches finish addressing Macbeth, Banquo asks him, "why do you start, and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?" (I.iii.51-52). The witches vanish after telling Banquo that he will father kings. Shortly thereafter, Ross and Angus arrive to tell Macbeth that the title of thane of Cawdor has been transferred to him. Upon hearing this he says to himself that the greatest title, that of king, is yet to come. When Duncan announces that his son Malcolm will be next in line for the throne, Macbeth acknowledges the prince as an obstacle which will either trip him up, or one which he must overcome.

After Macbeth sends words to his wife about the witches prophecies, Lady Macbeth hears that the king will be coming to stay at the castle. She then decides that the king will



die there. When Macbeth arrives at Inverness, Lady Macbeth discusses with her husband her intentions. Soon after, he reviews in his own mind the reasons for not killing the king. He has many, including his obligations to the king as a kinsman, a loyal subject, and a host. Other reasons listed by Macbeth include the goodness of the king, and the general lack of any reason other than ambition. However, when his wife argues with him, attacking his manhood, Macbeth resolves to follow through with the murder.

The extent of Lady Macbeth's power over her husband is debated. Some critics blame Lady Macbeth for precipitating Macbeth's moral decline and ultimate downfall. Others argue that while Lady Macbeth appears to be increasingly guilt-ridden as the play progresses, as evidenced by her sleepwalking episodes, Macbeth becomes increasingly murderous.

After murdering Duncan, then framing and murdering Duncan's attendants, Macbeth, disturbed by the witches' prophecy about Banquo's descendants, orders the murder of Banquo and Banquo's son, Fleance. The son escapes, but Banquo is slain, as the murderers report to Macbeth at the banquet in III.iv. Upon hearing this news, Macbeth is haunted throughout the banquet by Banquo's ghost, who no one else can see. As the scene ends, Macbeth vows to visit the weird sisters again, which he does in IV.i. During this visit, Macbeth receives three messages from apparitions conjured by the witches. The first apparition warns Macbeth to beware the thane of Fife; the second tells him that he cannot be harmed by anyone born of a woman; the third states that Macbeth will not be vanquished until "Great Birnan wood to high Dunsinane hill" rise against him (IV.i.93-4). Next, Macbeth asks whether or not Banquo's descendants will ever rule Scotland, and the witches show him a vision of Banquo, followed by eight kings. The vision and the weird sisters disappear as Lennox arrives with the information that Macduff has gone to England, and that Malcolm is there as well. At this point, Macbeth decides to have Macduff's family murdered.

As Act V opens, Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking is revealed, Malcolm and Macduff have gathered an army against Macbeth, and many of Macbeth's own thanes have deserted him. But Macbeth seems to rely on his belief in his interpretation of the witches' prophecies, which he reviews in V.iii. He vows that his heart and mind will not "shake with fear" (V.iii. 10). After learning of his wife's death, however, Macbeth in a famous speech (V.v. 16-28) expresses his weariness with life.

Clinging to the witches' words about his not being harmed by any one "of woman born," (IV.ii.80) Macbeth tells Macduff that his life is charmed, only to learn that his opponent was delivered via cesarean birth ("from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd" [V.viii.150-16]). Offstage, Macduff kills Macbeth and returns with his severed head. Overall assessment of Macbeth's character varies. Some view him as a tragic hero, who held every potential for being a good man, but was overcome by the evil forces in his world. Others argue that Macbeth completely lacked any moral integrity. Finally, he is viewed most harshly by some who see him as a Satanic figure, in that he knowingly chose evil and unleashes it upon the world.



Macbeth (Lady Macbeth):

Lady Macbeth is Macbeth's wife. When the audience first sees her in I.v, she is reading a letter from Macbeth about his encounter with the weird sisters and about his new title. Lady Macbeth promises to provide Macbeth with the courage he needs to make the prophecy come true, fearing that his nature is too soft to take the direct route to the throne.

There is some controversy over the role Lady Macbeth plays in the murders that follow. Some critics maintain that responsibility for the deaths of Duncan and Banquo rests solely with Macbeth, whose own ambition and nature are the cause of his deeds. Others cite Macbeth's reluctance prior to Duncan's murder and argue that Lady Macbeth goads her husband into the action. Lady Macbeth does however set the time and the place of Duncan's murder, claims that she would kill a baby at her breast to honor a vow, and argues that when Macbeth first conceived of killing Duncan, then he was a man.

In contrast to Lady Macbeth's forceful disposition on the first three acts of the play, her actions in the last two acts are much less confident or ambitious. Lady Macbeth in the sleepwalking scene appears to be tormented by her knowledge of Macbeth's actions. In V.i Lady Macbeth reviews the various crimes her husband has committed and appears to be attempting to wash blood from her hands. This scene contains Lady Macbeth's famous "Out damn'd spot!" (V.i.35) speech. The doctor diagnoses her mind as "infected" (V.i.72) and says she needs spiritual counsel more than she needs a doctor. Later she commits suicide.

Macduff:

Macduff, the thane of Fife, is a Scottish nobleman. He travels with Duncan to Macbeth's castle, and with Lennox, arrives the morning after the king has been murdered to awaken Duncan, but instead finds him dead. Macduff announces to the gathered nobleman, including the king's sons, that Duncan has been killed.

Macduff's words in the next scene are considered significant by some observers who argue that Macduff is the first character to suggest his suspicion regarding Macbeth's ascension to the throne. Macduff tells Rosse that will not be attending Macbeth's coronation, but will instead be returning home to Fife. After Rosse states that he will be going to the coronation, Macduff replies: "Well, may you see things well done there: adieu, / Lest our old robes dit easier than our new" (II.iv.37-8). Additionally, Macduff is not present at the banquet during which Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost. This absence is noted by Macbeth directly after the banquet, at which time Macbeth vows to see the weird sisters again. When he does, the apparition they conjure tells him to beware the thane of Fife, and just after the witches vanish, Lennox approaches with the news that Macduff has fled to England. Macbeth then vows to have Macduff's family killed.

Meanwhile, Macduff has met with Malcolm in England. The two return to Scotland, having gathered an army with which to challenge Macbeth. At this time, Macduff learns



of his family's death. Although many readers view Macduff, and Malcolm as well, as Scotland's saviors, Macduff is often harshly criticized for deserting his family. At the same time, critics have praised Macduff for not being ashamed to show his emotion when he learns that his family has been murdered.

In V.viii, Macduff and Macbeth confront each other. Macbeth appears to be convinced by the witches' prophesy that "none of woman born" can harm him. When he reveals this to Macduff, Macduff replies that he wasn't *born* of woman; rather, he was "from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd" (V.viii. 15-16). Macduff then kills and beheads Macbeth, clearing the way for Malcolm's ascension to the throne.

Macduff (Lady Macduff):

Lady Macduff is Macduff's wife. When Macduff leaves for England, she is left unprotected with her son at her castle. She questions her husband's wisdom in leaving his family, and later speaks gently yet seriously to her son of Macduff's absence, saying he is dead. They have a conversation about how they will live without Macduff. She and her son are murdered by those sent by Macbeth.

Malcolm:

Malcolm is one of King Duncan's sons, the other being Donalbain. In the early part of the play he is scarcely present, but overall he has one of the three main speaking parts, the other two being Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Early in the play Malcolm introduces to King Duncan the sergeant who saved Malcolm from capture. When the king's assassination is discovered, Malcolm agrees with his brother's suggestion to flee for their lives, and he goes to England, where he is later said to be living at the court of King Edward the Confessor, an English king noted for his holiness. The sudden departure of the king's sons casts some suspicion on their complicity in his murder.

In IV.iii, Macduff goes to England to seek Malcolm's help in restoring rightful rule in Scotland. In the interview that then takes place, Malcolm acknowledges his doubts about Macduff's motives quite directly to Macduff. He wonders whether Macduff is a paid agent of Macbeth, and he also questions why Macduff suddenly left his family unprotected to come to England. In order to test his suspicions about Macduff, Malcolm tells Macduff that he himself loves women, land and jewels, and discord among people. In sum, he accuses himself of lacking all kingly graces. When Macduff responds with a cry of hopelessness and despair for his country, Malcolm reveals that this is the first lie he has ever told. Later, Malcolm encourages Macduff to use the sudden news of his family's slaughter as a motive to fight Macbeth.

In the final scene of the play, Malcolm shows himself assuming the role of kingship with grace and dignity, expressing his concern for the soldiers who are not present, and urging Siward to take time to mourn for his son. In his final speech, he states his plans to inaugurate a new era in Scotland, rewarding the soldiers, calling home exiles, and serving by the grace of God.



Menteth (in some editions, Menteith):

Menteth is a Scottish nobleman who is one of the rebels against Macbeth serving under Malcolm. He seems confident that their cause will succeed and restore peace and order to Scotland.

Messengers:

One messenger brings news to Lady Macbeth that the king is coming to stay at their castle.

Another messenger tries to warn Lady Macduff that her family is in danger at Macduff's castle. In the last act, as Malcolm's army advances under cover of branches cut from trees, another messenger brings Macbeth word that the woods seem to be moving.

Murderers (Three Murderers, or murderers):

The murderers are hired by Macbeth to kill Banquo and Fleance. He speaks to two of them, who say they are willing to perform as ordered. At the site of the murder a third appears, apparently unknown to the other two, making the first two murderers think that Macbeth does not trust them. The first one goes with blood on his face to the door of Macbeth's banquet hall to tell him about the deed. Macbeth is happy about Banquo's death but shaken by the news that Fleance escaped. He plans to meet the murderers again. These may be the murderers who kill Lady Macduff also.

Officers:

Nonspeaking parts. These would be appropriate to battle scenes, camp scenes, and Duncan's arrival at Macbeth's castle.

Old Man:

The anonymous old man represents experience and memory, and is at least 70 years old ("Threescore and ten I can remember well" he says in II.iv.1). He comments on the disturbances in nature on the night of Duncan's murder, unprecedented in his recollection. He is referred to by Rosse several times as father. He wishes a blessing on Rosse as he travels to Scone.

Porter:

He is the doorman at Macbeth's castle. He hears knocking but takes his time in answering the knocking, imagining that he is at hell's gate and letting in "some of all professions" into the "everlasting bonfire" (II.iii.18-19). After he opens the gate, admitting



Lennox and Macduff, he reveals that he was up until the early hours of the morning, drinking and "carousing" (II.iii.24).

In his drunken rambling, the porter, speaks at length about welcoming "equivocators" to the castle. In Elizabethan England, the word equivocate meant much more than speaking with a double meaning. Shakespeare's audience would most likely have been familiar with the Doctrine of Equivocation, which gave Catholics permission to perjure themselves for morally acceptable reasons. In 1606, two Catholics were interrogated about their role in what became known as the Gunpowder Plot, which was a conspiracy to kill King James I and blow up Parliament in an effort place a Catholic on England's throne. Henry Garnet and Guy Fawkes invoked the Doctrine of Equivocation during their trial. Critics note that in the porter's speech about equivocation, Shakespeare associates the use of equivocation by Elizabethan Catholics like Garnet and Fawkes with the words of the weird sisters. Like Garnet and Fawkes the witches words invariably carry double meanings. Perhaps the most notable instance of this is when the witches tell Macbeth that "none of woman born" (IV.i.80) can harm him. Macbeth finds out just before Macduff kills him the real truth behind the witches' words: that Macduff was taken from his mother's womb through cesarean section.

Rosse (in some editions, Ross):

Rosse is a Scottish nobleman who reports to the king on the Macdonwald's rebellion and on the Norwegian king's desire to have a peace treaty. Rosse and Angus bring the news to Macbeth of his new title. He goes to Macbeth's castle with the king. Rosse comments on unusual things happening in nature after the king's assassination, such as the king's horses eating each other. He plans to travel to Scone to see Macbeth crowned. He attends Macbeth's banquet and notices that the king is unwell. Rosse's appearance at Macduff's castle is unclear in intent, but it seems to be only to check on Lady Macduff. He brings the news to Macduff of her death, but appears to have a difficult time stating clearly what happened, saying initially that Macduff's family is well and at peace. He appears with the rebelling Scottish noblemen in Act V, and he is present in the final scene bringing Siward news of his son's death.

Scots Doctor:

The Scots (or Scottish) doctor attends to Lady Macbeth. He has watched for several nights and not seen the sleepwalking. He questions the gentlewoman about Lady Macbeth's actions during the sleepwalking, and advises that Lady Macbeth needs spiritual rather than physical healing. When he reports to Macbeth, he gives his opinion that she is not sick but troubled by her imagination. He says to himself that if he can get away from the castle, no desire for profit will make him come back.



Sergeant:

This soldier, sometimes identified as a captain, is present only in the second scene in the play, but introduces the image of the spreading bloodshed which stains the land. He begins reporting to Duncan on the battle and on Macbeth's bravery but is too weakened from his wounds to finish his speech.

Servant:

In V.iii, a servant brings Macbeth news of the ten thousand English invaders approaching the castle.

Sewer:

The sewer is a butler who waits on Macbeth and his guests at the castle. A supper goes on in the other room while Macbeth deliberates about Duncan's murder. This is not a speaking part.

Seyton:

Seyton is Macbeth's only trusted subordinate at the end of the play. He brings Macbeth confirmation of battle reports. He also brings news of the death of Lady Macbeth. Although Macbeth calls for him impatiently, he does not scream at him the way he does at other messengers. It has often been noticed that his name resembles Satan.

Siward (Siward, Earl of Northumberland):

Siward's help for the Scottish cause is sought by Malcolm and Macduff at the English court of Edward the Confessor. Siward is described by Malcolm as an experienced and accomplished soldier. Siward and Malcolm enter Macbeth's castle together. Some of Macbeth's own people turn against him and join with the invaders. When Siward learns the news of his son's death in the final scene, he is satisfied that his son received his injuries on the front of his body, facing the battle rather than running away, and declares him now "God's soldier" (V.ix.13).

Siward (Young Siward):

Siward's son is a young man. He fights against Macbeth, and dies in the battle at Macbeth's sword.



Soldiers:

The soldiers marching with Malcolm and the rebelling Scottish nobles in Act V suggest the numbers massing against Macbeth. The Scottish have their soldiers, and Siward arrives with ten thousand English soldiers.

Weird Sisters (Three Witches, The Weird Sisters):

See Witches

Witches (Three other Witches):

See Hecat

Witches (Three Witches, The Weird Sisters):

The witches in *Macbeth* are present in only four scenes in the play, but Macbeth's fascination with them motivates much of the play's action. When they meet with Banquo and Macbeth, they address Macbeth with three titles: thane of Glamis, thane of Cawdor, and king hereafter. Next, they predict that Banquo will father kings, though he will not be king himself. Refusing to answer questions, they vanish. Later in III.v, Hecat lectures the witches for talking to Macbeth without involving her. In IV.i, when Macbeth pays another visit to the witches, Hecat has briefly appeared to the witches, but leaves before Macbeth's arrival. Though the Riverside edition has her accompanied by three other witches, most editions do not. In this scene, the witches make a thick gruel in a cauldron, using animal and human body parts. Many of the animals are reptilian or associated with night. The human body parts come from people who were considered outsiders to the Christian world of the English Renaissance: Jews, Turks, Tartars. The witches refer to their activity as a "deed without a name" (IV.i.49). They sense that Macbeth is coming; one says she can tell "By the pricking of my thumbs, / Something wicked this way comes" (IV.i.44-45). This time, the witches submit to some of Macbeth's questions. They pour in sow's blood and a murderer's blood into the cauldron, and produce apparitions. When Macbeth has seen the apparitions (see Apparitions) and heard their messages, he demands to know about Banquo. The weird sisters then produce a show of eight kings followed by Banquo. As the witches produce this display, they say "Show his eyes, and grieve his heart" (IV.i. 110). When Macbeth grows enraged, they dance and depart with great cheer.

There is a frustrating duplicity about the witches' nature as there is about their prophecies and predictions to Macbeth. They are interpreted variously as custodians of evil, spinners of the future, and as something slightly more neutral, creatures with knowledge of the future but with limited powers.



Character Studies

One of the most significant reasons for the enduring critical interest in Macbeth's character is that he represents humankind's universal propensity to temptation and sin. Macbeth's excessive ambition motivates him to murder Duncan, and once the evil act is accomplished, he sets into motion a series of sinister events that ultimately lead to his downfall. But Macbeth is not merely a coldblooded, calculating murderer; even before he kills the king, he is greatly troubled by his conscience. While plotting Duncan's murder, his better nature warns him that the act is wrong; he nearly persuades himself to reject the plan, but his wife forces him to reaffirm his determination. In addition, Macbeth possesses a powerful imagination demonstrated by his excessive philosophizing over his condition—that sways his actions. In fact, the hero's imagination contributes greatly to his decision to murder Duncan: after his first meeting with the Weird Sisters, Macbeth acknowledges that he can wait to see if their prediction of his imminent kingship will come true, but his imagination persuades him to fulfill the prophecy with his own hands. Later, Macbeth's overworked imagination produces feelings of guilt and betrayal that throw his mind into disorder, gradually eroding his bravery and replacing it with inexplicable fear and paranoia. Several critics remark that although Macbeth fully embraces evil, his philosophizing over the hopelessness of his situation results in some of the greatest poetry ever written on the human condition. Others argue, however, that the hero's rhetoric becomes less sincere as his actions become more ruthless.

Most critics contend that Lady Macbeth's principal dramatic function in *Macbeth* is to persuade her husband to commit evil. Some critics further suggest that Lady Macbeth embodies a feminine malevolence in the play that corresponds to a masculine fear of domination by women. This antagonism is particularly evident in the unusual level of control Lady Macbeth exerts over her husband. Further, she serves much the same role as the witches do in manipulating Macbeth to murder Duncan, but her influence is of a more frightening nature. As supernatural beings, the Weird Sisters represent a remote, abstract evil, and their mode of exploitation exists only on a cosmic level. Lady Macbeth's coercion of her husband is more terrifying because she brings the full magnitude of the witches' evil influence to the domestic level by calling on demonic forces to suppress her femininity and give her the power to make Macbeth murder Duncan. This unholy contract does not endure, for, after she actively participates in covering up Duncan's murder, Lady Macbeth's feminine nature reasserts itself, and she is driven insane. Many commentators assert that Lady Macbeth's mental breakdown manifests itself in the sleepwalking episode (Act V, scene i), in which she is not so much distracted by the guilt over her role in Duncan's murder as she is by the inability to escape the memory of it.

While much of the action of *Macbeth* revolves around the protagonist and his wife, Banquo is also an important figure. One critical perspective views Banquo's function as essentially symbolic: he is portrayed as a man who, like Macbeth, has the capacity for both God's grace and sin; but unlike the protagonist, he puts little stock in the Weird Sisters' prophecies and does not succumb to their temptations. Banquo's reluctance to



dwelling on the witches' predictions therefore underscores, by contrast, the nature of Macbeth's descent into evil. Another critical viewpoint, however, suggests that Banquo is just as guilty as Macbeth of succumbing to the witches' temptations. By complying with Macbeth's accession to the throne and not raising suspicions about the protagonist's role in Duncan's murder, Banquo reveals a secret hope that the Weird Sisters' prophecy for him will also come true. Shakespeare also contrasts Duncan and Macbeth. Through his benevolence, graciousness, and almost naive trust, Duncan embodies a sense of harmony which generally inspires loyalty among his followers. These attributes become inverted in Macbeth, who introduces tumult and disorder into the kingdom when he murders the king and assumes his place on the throne. The sense of order inherent in Duncan's reign is thus displaced until the end of the play when Malcolm and Macduff, who signify purification in *Macbeth*, restore a proper sense of "measure, time, and place" (V. ix. 39) to a world devastated by Macbeth's evil actions.

Conclusion

Frank Kermode asserts that "*Macbeth* is a play about the eclipse of civility and manhood, the temporary triumph of evil; when it ends, virtue and justice are restored." Shakespeare displays a remarkable perception of the human condition by dramatizing not only the way in which evil enters Macbeth's world, but also the devastating effect it has on those who yield to temptation and sin. Shakespeare concludes the tragedy on a hopeful note, however, for as awesome and corruptive as the evil is that pervades *Macbeth*, it is only temporary. Ultimately, time and order are restored through the actions of the defenders of goodness.

(See also *Shakespearean Criticism*, Vol. 3)



Themes

Macbeth is a complex study of evil and its corrupting influence on humanity. Some critics argue that Shakespeare adapted historical accounts of Macbeth to illustrate his larger view of evil's operation in the world. The particular evil that the protagonist commits has wide-spread consequences, causing a series of further evils. As a result, the tragedy is not fully resolved through the fallen hero's death, but through the forces of good that ultimately correct all the evil Macbeth has unleashed. The witches, through their ambiguous prophecies, represent a supernatural power that introduces evil into *Macbeth*. Their equivocations—the intentional stating of half-truths—conceal the sinister nature of their predictions, and Macbeth does not consider the possibility that they are trying to deceive him. In fact, the Weird Sisters' attempts at misinformation succeed not only because they favorably interpret the hero's future, but also because their revelations seem to come true almost immediately. Although inherently malevolent, the witches' prophecies do not necessarily signify the actual existence of evil, but suggest instead the potential for evil in the world. The Weird Sisters themselves do not have the power to enact a diabolic course of events such as that which ensues in *Macbeth*; rather, their power lies in tempting humans like Macbeth to sin. When Macbeth succumbs to the temptation to commit murder, he himself is the active catalyst that unleashes evil upon the world. The evil which initially manifests itself in Duncan's murder not only disintegrates Macbeth's personal world, but also expands until it corrupts all levels of creation, contaminating the family, the state, and the physical universe. For example, Macduff's family is murdered, Scotland is embroiled in a civil war, and during Duncan's assassination "the earth was feverous, and did shake" (II. iii. 60).

Shakespeare's depiction of time is another central concern in *Macbeth*. Macbeth dislocates the passage of time—a process fundamental to humankind's existence—when he succumbs to evil and murders Duncan. Shakespeare uses this displacement as a key symbol in dramatizing the steady disintegration of the hero's world. Macbeth's evil actions initially interrupt the normal flow of time, but order gradually regains its proper shape and overpowers the new king, as demonstrated by his increasing guilt and sleeplessness. Ironically, the Weird Sisters can be seen as an element that contributes to the restoration of order. Although Macbeth disrupts the natural course of events by acting on the witches' early prophecies, their later predictions suggest that his power will shortly end. This premonition is apparent in the Birnam wood revelation; while Macbeth believes that the prediction insures his invulnerability, it really implies that his rule will soon expire. Some critics observe that different kinds of time interact in *Macbeth*. The most apparent form of time can be described as chronological. Chronological time establishes the sense of physical passage in the play, focusing on the succession of events that can be measured by clock, calendar, and the movement of the sun, moon, and stars. Another aspect of time, identified as providential, overarches the action of the entire play. Providential time is the divine ordering of events that is initially displaced by Macbeth's evil actions, but which gradually overpowers him and re-establishes harmony in the world. Macbeth conceives of another kind of time that



seems to defy cause and effect when he unsuccessfully attempts to reconcile his anticipation of the future with the memory of his ignoble actions. This dilemma initiates a period of inaction in the protagonist's life that culminates in his resigned acceptance of death as the inexorable passage of time. This confused displacement of time pervades the action of *Macbeth* until Malcolm and Macduff restore a proper sense of order at the end of the play.

Another important issue in *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's ambiguous treatment of gender and sex roles. In many instances, the playwright either inverts a character's conventional gender characteristics or divests the figure of them altogether. Lady Macbeth is perhaps the most obvious example of this dispossession. In Act I, scene v, she prepares to confront her husband by resolving to "unsex" herself, to suppress any supposed weakness associated with her feminine nature, so that she can give Macbeth the strength and determination to carry out Duncan's murder. After the king is killed, however, her feelings of guilt gradually erode her resolve and she goes insane. Macbeth is perhaps the character most affected by the question of gender in the tragedy. From the beginning of the play, he is plagued by feelings of doubt and insecurity which his wife attributes to "effeminate" weakness. Fearing that her husband does not have the resolve to murder Duncan, Lady Macbeth cruelly manipulates his lack of self-confidence by questioning his manhood. Some critics maintain that as a result of his wife's machinations, Macbeth develops a warped perspective of manliness, equating it with the less humanistic attribute of selfseeking aggression. The more the protagonist pursues his ideal understanding of manliness-first by murdering Duncan, then Banquo, and finally Macduff's family-the less humane he becomes. Commentators who subscribe to this reading of Macbeth's character argue that the ruthlessness with which he strives to obtain this perverted version of manhood ultimately separates him from the rest of humankind. Through his diminishing humaneness, the protagonist essentially forfeits all claims on humanity itself-a degeneration, he ultimately realizes, that renders meaningless his ideal of manliness. Various image patterns support the sense of corruption and deterioration that pervades the dramatic action of *Macbeth*. Perhaps one of the most dominant groups is that of babies and breastfeeding. Infants symbolize pity throughout the play, and breast-milk represents humanity, tenderness, sympathy, and natural human feelings, all of which have been debased by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's evil actions. Another set of images focuses on sickness and medicine, all of which occur, significantly, in the last three acts of the play, after Macbeth has ascended the Scottish throne. These patterns are given greater depth through Shakespeare's graphic depiction of blood in the tragedy. The numerous references to blood not only provide Macbeth's ruthless actions with a visual dimension, they also underscore Scotland's degeneration after Macbeth murders Duncan and usurps the crown. Ironically, blood also symbolizes the purifying process by which Malcolm and Macduff-the restorers of goodness-purge the weakened country of Macbeth's villainy. Other major image patterns include sleep and sleeplessness, order versus disorder, and the contrast between light and darkness.

Modern Connections

The witches, or weird sisters, of *Macbeth* have remained one of the most popular aspects of the play. The three witches, the first characters the audience encounters, are mysterious beings who set the tone for the rest of the play, most of which takes place in a similarly dark and stormy atmosphere. When the play was performed during the late English Renaissance, the witches would make their initial appearance coming up and out of the trap door on the stage of the Globe theater. Later productions included singing, dancing, and flying witches, attached to ceiling wires.

The witches also perform a more serious function than that of entertainment: their appearance in the play poses the question of whether Macbeth's actions are governed by fate, or determined by his own free will. Critics have questioned the meaning behind the witches statement "All hail, Macbeth, that shall be King hereafter!" (I.iii.50). Is this statement a warning to Macbeth or does it tempt him to consider possibilities he may have thought of before? Or, is it a prophesy of the future? Through the witches, some maintain, Shakespeare questions whether our own lives are governed by fate or free will.

Questions regarding gender roles in *Macbeth* may also strike modern students as particularly compelling, as these roles in contemporary society continue to shift and evolve. Some observers read Lady Macbeth's persuasion of her husband to follow through on the murder of Duncan as being guided by her fascination with male power. She appeals to her husband's sense of manhood, and in effect, some maintain, uses seduction and humiliation to convince him to commit the murder. It has also been argued that Lady Macbeth rejects her own feminine "sensibilities" and takes on a more masculine role for herself because of her perception that femininity is equated with weakness. She assumes this masculine role for herself in an effort to act on her own ambition and desire for power.

Masculinity in this play appears to be defined almost exclusively by violent action and Macbeth seems driven to prove his manhood through violent deeds, first in battle, then by murder. Macbeth's brutal slaying of Macdonwald is detailed by a sergeant: "he unseam'd him from the nave [navel] to the chops [jaws], / And fix'd his head upon our battlements" (I.ii.22-3). When Macbeth begins to back away from the thought of murdering Duncan, telling his wife "We will proceed no further in this business" (I.vii.31), she questions his manhood, stating that when he initially broached the subject with her, then he was a man (I.vii.48-49). By the end of the scene, he has decided that he will kill the king. In addition to murdering Duncan, Macbeth murders the king's guards, and then orders the murders of Banquo, Fleance, and Macduff's family. When Macduff learns of these last killings, Malcolm urges the grieving Macduff to take revenge, to act "like a man" (IV.iii.219).

It has been argued that Macbeth himself is distanced somewhat from the violence of the play in that he commits the murders of Duncan off-stage, and he orders other people to commit the murder of Banquo, Fleance, and Macduff's family, rather than committing



them himself. The notion that in the society in which Macbeth lived, the stereotypical male was characterized by violence, and that the violence was legitimized through warfare, is agreed upon by many critics, however. Just as Macbeth uses violent means to further his own ambition, the play ends with Macbeth's violent removal from the throne, and with Macduff appearing on stage with Macbeth's severed head.

Finally, the theme of ambition and how it relates to governance is a major issue in the play. Macbeth lets his ambition supersede his own judgement. In I.vii he discusses the reasons why he should not kill Duncan. He states that his loyalty to the king has several layers: he is the king's subject, his kinsmen, and his host. After highlighting the king's virtues Macbeth acknowledges that the only reason to kill Duncan is his own "vaulting ambition" (I.vii.27). At this point, his thoughts are interrupted by Lady Macbeth. He seems to have had a change of heart, but after his wife's speech, Macbeth is determined to murder the king. After he himself is crowned, he is driven to protect what he has gained by ordering the deaths of anyone who he considers a threat. While violence is an integral part of this warrior society, Macbeth's use of it the battlefield to further his personal ambition, while unchecked through most of the play, is in the end, not tolerated by his subjects. The twentieth century provides numerous examples of world leaders who to varying degrees abused power until their actions were checked by the citizens of their own nation, or by the rest of the world. This abuse of power could take the form of one man's effort to improve his own political position, as in the case of Richard M. Nixon; his actions resulted in his resignation from the presidency. A far more extreme example would be that of Adolph Hitler, who used the power he attained to practice genocide until he was stopped through international warfare.

Overviews

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Critical Essay #1

[Van Doren presents a broad survey of Macbeth. asserting that Shakespeare's triumph lies in his construction of a strange, dark, and shapeless world which from the outset pits itself against the protagonist. Ironically, Macbeth himself represents the ever-changing form and shape of this bizarre world, the critic notes, for his own wavering over whether or not to kill Duncan is a predominant trait of his character. Van Doren also discusses the figure of Lady Macbeth, arguing that because she is less imaginative than her husband, her mind cannot withstand the torture of guilt as long as Macbeth's does. The critic also briefly examines some important symbols in Macbeth including fear, blood, and sleep-but focuses chiefly on the representation of time and death. According to Van Doren, time-an element fundamental to human experience-goes awry and disintegrates Macbeth's world. Consequently, the hero develops a pessimistic view of death as merely an extension of the inexorable and eternal passage of time. The critic also discusses Duncan's dramatic function in Macbeth. observing that many of his characteristics directly contradict those of Macbeth. In addition, Malcolm and Macduff bring order and healing to Macbeth's strange and shapeless world, and with their return "blood will cease to flow, movement will recommence, fear will be forgotten, sleep will season every life, and the seeds of time will blossom in due order.]

The brevity of *Macbeth* is so much a function of its brilliance that we might lose rather than gain by turning up the lost scenes of legend. This brilliance gives us in the end somewhat less than the utmost that tragedy can give. The hero, for instance, is less valuable as a person than Hamlet, Othello, or Lear; or Antony, or Coriolanus. or Timon. We may not rejoice in his fall as Dr. [Samuel] Johnson says we must. yet we have known too little about him and have found too little virtue in him to experience at his death the sense of an unutterable and tragic loss made necessary by ironies beyond our understanding. He commits murder in violation of a nature which we can assume to have been noble, but we can only assume this. Macbeth has surrendered his soul before the play begins. When we first see him he is already invaded by those fears which are to render him vicious and which are finally to make him abominable. They will also reveal him as a great poet. But his poetry. like the poetry of the play, is to be concerned wholly with sensation and catastrophe. *Macbeth* like *Lear* is all end; the difference appearing in the speed with which doom rushes down. so that this rapidest of tragedies suggests whirlwinds rather than glaciers, and in the fact that terror rather than pity is the mode of the accompanying music. *Macbeth*, then, is not in the fullest known sense a tragedy. But we do not need to suppose that this is because important parts of it have been lost. More of it would have had to be more of the same. And the truth is that no significant scene seems to be missing. *Macbeth* is incomparably brilliant as it stands, and within its limits perfect. What it does it does with flawless force. It hurls a universe against a man, and if the universe that strikes is more impressive than the man who is stricken. great as his size and gaunt as his soul may be, there is no good reason for doubting that this is what Shakespeare intended. The triumph of *Macbeth* is the construction of a world, and nothing like it has ever been constructed in twenty-one hundred lines.



This world, which is at once without and within Macbeth, can be most easily described as strange. The word, like the witches, is always somewhere doing its work. Even in the battle which precedes the play the thane of Glamis has made "strange images of death" [I. iii. 97], and when he comes home to his lady his face is "as a book where men may read strange matters" [I. v. 62-3]. Duncan's horses after his murder turn wild in nature and devour each other—"a thing most strange and certain" [n. iv. 14]. Nothing is as it should be in such a world. "Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" [V. i. 39-40]. There is a drift of disorder in all events, and the air is murky with unwelcome miracles. It is a dark world too, inhabited from the beginning by witches who meet on a blasted heath in thunder and lightning, and who hover through fog and filthy air as they leave on unspeakable errands. It is a world wherein "men must not walk too late" [III. vi. 7], for the night that was so pretty in *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Merchant of Venice* has grown terrible with illsmelling mists and the stench of blood. The time that was once a playground for free and loving spirits has closed like a trap, or yawned like a bottomless pit. The "dark hour" that Banquo borrows from the night is his last hour on an earth which has lost the distinction between sun and gloom.

Darkness does the face of earth entomb,
When living light should kiss it.
[II. iv. 9-10]

The second of these lines makes a sound that is notable in the play for its rarity: the sound of life in its normal ease and lightness. Darkness prevails because the witches, whom Banquo calls its instruments, have willed to produce it. But Macbeth is its instrument too, as well as its victim. And the weird sisters no less than he are expressions of an evil that employs them both and has roots running farther into darkness than the mind can guess.

It is furthermore a world in which nothing is certain to keep its shape. Forms shift and consistencies alter, so that what was solid may flow and what was fluid may congeal to stone.

The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,
And these are of them,
[I. iii. 79-80]

says Banquo of the vanished witches. Macbeth addresses the "sure and firm set earth" [11.1. 56], but nothing could be less firm than the whole marble and the founded rock he has fancied his life to be. At the very moment he speaks he has seen a dagger which is not there, and the "strange infirmity" he confesses at the banquet will consist of seeing things that cannot be. His first apostrophe to the witches had been to creatures

That look not like the inhabitants O' the
earth,
And yet are on 't.
[I. iii. 41-2]



So now a dead man lives; Banquo's brains are out but he rises again, and "this is more strange than such a murder is" [III. iv. 81-2].

Take any shape but that, and my firm
nerves
Shall never tremble.
[III. iv. 10 1-02]

But the shape of everything is wrong, and the nerves of Macbeth are never proof against trembling. The cardinal instance of transformation is himself. Bellona's bridegroom has been turned to jelly. The current of change pouring forever through this universe has, as a last effect, dissolved it. And the dissolution of so much that was solid has liberated deadly fumes, has thickened the air until it suffocates all breathers. If the footing under men is less substantial than it was, the atmosphere they must push through is almost too heavy for life. It is confining, swarming, swelling; it is viscous, it is sticky; and it threatens strangulation. All of the speakers in the play conspire to create the impression that this is so. Not only do the witches in their opening scene wail "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" [I. i. 11], but the military men who enter after them anticipate in their talk of recent battle the imagery of entanglement to come.

Doubtful it stood,
As two spent swimmers that do cling to
gether
And choke their art. . . .
The multiplying villainies of nature
Do swarm upon him. . . .
So from that spring whence comfort
seem'd to come
Discomfort swells.
[I. ii. 7-9; 11-12; 27-8]

Macbeth's sword is reported to have "smok'd with bloody execution" [I. ii. 18], and he and Banquo were "as cannons overcharg'd with double cracks" [I. ii. 37]; they

Doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe.
[I. ii. 38]

The hyperbole is ominous, the excess is sinister. In the third scene, after what seemed corporal in the witches has melted into the wind, Ross and Angus join Banquo and Macbeth to report the praises of Macbeth that had poured in on Duncan "as thick as hail" [I. iii. 97], and to salute the new thane of Cawdor. The witches then have been right in two respects, and Macbeth says in an aside:

Two truths are told,
As happy prologues to the swelling act
Of the imperial theme.
[I. iii. 127-29]



But the imagined act of murder swells in his mind until it is too big for its place, and his heart beats as if it were choking in its chamber.

Why do I yield to that 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 yet is but fan-
tastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that
function Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not.
[I. iii. 134-42]

Meanwhile Lady Macbeth at home is visited by no such fears. When the crisis comes she will break sooner than her husband does, but her brittleness then will mean the same thing that her melodrama means now: she is a slighter person than Macbeth, has a poorer imagination, and holds in her mind less of that power which enables it to stand up under torture. The news that Duncan is coming to her house inspires her to pray that her blood be made thick; for the theme of thickness is so far not terrible in her thought.

Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it
makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of
the dark
To cry, "Hold, hold!"
[I.v.50-4]

The blanket of the dark—it seems to her an agreeable image. and by no means suggests an element that can enwrap or smother. With Macbeth it is different; his soliloquy in the seventh scene shows him occupied with images of nets and tangles: the consequences of Duncan's death may coil about him like an endless rope.

If it were done when 't is done, then 't were
well It were done quickly. If the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and
catch
With his surcease success; that but this
blow Might be the be-all and the end-all here.
But here, upon this bank and shoal of
time,
We'd jump the life to come. But in these
cases
We still have judgement here. that we but
teach
Bloody instructions. which, being taught,
return



To plague the inventor.
[I. vii. 1-10]

And his voice rises to shrillness as he broods in terror upon the endless echo which such a death may make in the world

His virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued,
against
The deep damnation of his taking-off: And pity, like a naked new-born babe Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin
hors'd
Upon the sightless couriers of the air. Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye, That tears shall drown the wind.
[I. vii. 18-25]

It is terror such as this that Lady Macbeth must endeavor to allay in what is after all a great mind. Her scolding cannot do so. She has commanded him to screw his courage to the sticking-point, but what is the question that haunts him when he comes from Duncan's bloody bed. with hands that can never be washed white again?

Wherefore could not I pronounce
"Arnen"?
I had most need of blessing. and "Arnen"
Stuck in my throat.
[II. ii. 28-30]

He must not consider such things so deeply, his lady warns him. But he does, and in good time she will follow suit. That same night the Scottish earth, shaking in a convincing sympathy as the Roman earth in *Julius Caesar* never shook. considers the grievous state of a universe that suffocates in the breath of its own history. Lamentings are heard in the air, strange screams of death, and prophecies of dire combustion and confused events [III. iii. 56-8]. And the next morning, says Ross to an old man he meets,

By the clock .t is day,
And yet dark night strangles the travelling
lamp.
[II. iv. 6-7]

Macbeth is now king, but his fears "stick deep" in Banquo [III. i. 49]. The thought of one more murder that will give him perhaps the "clearness" he requires [III. i. 132] seems for a moment to free his mind from its old obsessive horror of dusk and thickness, and he can actually invoke these conditions-in the only verse he ever uses with conscious literary intention.

Come, seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,
And with thy bloody and invisible hand



Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale! Light thickens. and
the crow
Makes wing to the rooky wood;
Good things of day begin to droop and
drowse,
While night's black agents to their preys
do rouse.
[III. ii. 46-53]

The melodrama of this, and its inferiority of effect, may warn us that Macbeth is only pretending to hope. The news of Fleance's escape brings him at any rate his fit again, and he never more ceases to be "cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd" [III. iv. 23]. He is caught in the net for good, his feet have sunk into quicksands from which they cannot be freed, his bosom like Lady Macbeth's is "stuff'd" with "perilous stuff which weighs upon the heart" [V. iii. 445]-the figure varies, but the theme does not. A strange world not wholly of his own making has closed around him and rendered him motionless. His gestures are spasmodic at the end, like those of one who knows he is hopelessly engulfed. And every metaphor he uses betrays his belief that the universal congestion is past cure:

What rhubarb, senna, or what purgative
drug,
Would scour these English hence?
[V. iii. 55-6]
The answer is none.

The theme never varies, however rich the range of symbols employed to suggest it. One of these symbols is of course the fear that shakes Macbeth as if he were an object not human; that makes him start when the witches call him "King hereafter," that sets his heart knocking at his ribs, that wrings from him unsafe extremities of rhetoric, that reduces him to a maniac when Banquo walks again, that spreads from him to all of Scotland until its inhabitants "float upon a wild and violent sea" of terror [IV. ii. 21], and that in the end, when he has lost the capacity to feel anything any longer, drains from him so that he almost forgets its taste

[V. v. 9]. Another symbol, and one that presents itself to several of our senses at once, is blood. Never in a play has there been so much of this substance, and never has it been so sickening. "What bloody man is that?" [I. ii. 1]. The second scene opens with a messenger running in to Duncan red with wounds. And blood darkens every scene thereafter. It is not bright red, nor does it run freely and wash away. Nor is it a metaphor as it was in *Julius Caesar*. It is so real that we see, feel, and smell it on everything. And it sticks. "This is a sorry sight,"_ says Macbeth as he comes from Duncan's murder, staring at his hands [II. ii. 17]. He had not thought there would be so much blood on them, or that it would stay there like that. Lady Macbeth is for washing the "filthy witness" off, but Macbeth knows that all great Neptune's ocean will not make him clean; rather his hand, plunged into the green, will make it all one red. The blood of the play is everywhere physical in its looks and gross in its quantity. Lady Macbeth "smears" the



grooms with it, so that when they are found they seem "badg'd" and "unmannerly breech'd" with gore, and "steep'd" in the colors of their trade. The murderer who comes to report Banquo's death has blood on his face, and the "blood-bolter'd Banquo" when he appears shakes "gory locks" at Macbeth [IV. i. 123], who in deciding upon the assassination has reflected that

I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no
more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.
[III. iv. 135-37]

Richard III had said a similar thing, but he suggested no veritable pool or swamp of blood as this man does; and his victims, wailing over their calamities, did not mean the concrete thing Macduff means when he cries, "Bleed, bleed, poor country!" [IV. iii. 31]. The world of the play quite literally bleeds. And Lady Macbeth, walking in her sleep, has definite stains upon the palms she rubs and rubs. "Yet here's a spot. . . . What, will these hands ne'er be clean? . . . Here's the smell of the blood still; all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand" [V. i. 31; 43; 50-1]. A third symbol, of greater potency than either fear or blood, is sleeplessness. Just as there are more terrors in the night than day has ever taught us, and more blood in a man than there should be, so there is less sleep in this disordered world than the minimum which once had been required for health and life. One of the final signs of that disorder is indeed the death of sleep.

Methought I heard a voice cry. "Sleep no
more! Macbeth does murder sleep. . . . Glamis hath murder'd sleep, and therefore
Cawdor
Shall sleep no more; Macbeth shall sleep
no more."
[II. ii. 32-3; 39-40]

Nothing that Macbeth says is more terrible than this, and no dissolution suffered by his world is more ominous. For sleep in Shakespeare is ever the privilege of the good and the reward of the innocent. If it has been put to death there is no goodness left. One of the witches knows how to torture sailors by keeping sleep from their pent-house lids [I. iii. 19-20], but only Macbeth can murder sleep itself. The result in the play is an ultimate weariness. The "restless ecstasy" with which Macbeth's bed is made miserable, and the affliction of these terrible dreams

That shake us nightly [III. ii. 18-19]

-such things are dreadful, but his final fatigue is more dreadful still, for it is the fatigue of a soul that has worn itself out with watching fears, wading in blood, and waking to the necessity of new murders for which the hand has no relish. Macbeth's hope that when Macduff is dead he can "sleep in spite of thunder" [IV. i. 86] is after all no hope. For there



is no sleep in Scotland [III. vi. 34], and least of all in a man whose lids have lost the art of closing. And whose heart has lost the power of trembling like a guilty thing.

The time has been, my senses would have
 coord

To hear a night-shriek. and my fell of hair Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir As
 life were in 't. I have supp'd full with
 horrors;

Direness, familiar to my slaughterous
 thoughts,

Cannot once start me.

[V. v. 10-15]

Terror has degenerated into tedium, and only death can follow, either for Macbeth who lacks the season of all natures or for his lady who not only walks but talks when she should sleep, and who will not die holily in her bed.

Meanwhile, however, another element has gone awry, and it is one so fundamental to man's experience that Shakespeare has given it a central position among those symbols which express the disintegration of the hero's world. Time is out of joint, inoperative, dissolved. "The 'time has been,'" says Macbeth, when he could fear; and "the time has been" that when the brains were out a man would die, and there an end [III. iv. 77-9]. The repetition reveals that Macbeth is haunted by a sense that time has slipped its grooves; it flows wild and formless through his world, and is the deep cause of all the anomalies that terrify him. Certain of these anomalies are local or specific: the bell that rings on the night of the murder, the knocking at the gate, the flight of Macduff into England at the very moment Macbeth plans his death, and the disclosure that Macduff was from his mother's womb untimely ripped. Many things happen too soon, so that tidings are like serpents that strike without warning. "The King comes here tonight," says a messenger, and Lady Macbeth is startled out of all composure: "Thou 'rt mad to say it!" [I. v. 31]. But other anomalies are general, and these are the worst. The words of Banquo to the witches:

If you can look into the seeds of time, And say which grain will grow and which
 will not,

[I. iii. 58-9]

plant early in the play a conception of time as something which fulfills itself by growing- and which, the season being wrong, can swell to monstrous shape. Or it can find crannies in the mold and extend secret, sinister roots into dark soil that never has known them. Or it can have no growth at all; it can rot and fester in its place, and die. The conception wavers, like the courage of Macbeth, but it will not away. Duncan welcomes Macbeth to Forres with the words:

I have begun to plant thee, and will labour
 To make thee full of growing.

[I. iv. 28-9]



But Macbeth, like time itself, will burgeon beyond bounds. "Nature's germens" will tumble all together,
Even till destruction sicken.
[IV. i. 59-60]

When Lady Macbeth, greeting her husband, says with excited assurance:

Thy letters have transported me beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant,
[I. v. 56-8]

she cannot suspect, nor can he, how sadly the relation between present and future will maintain itself. If the present is the womb or seed-bed of the future, if time is a succession of growths each one of which lives cleanly and freely after the death of the one before it, then what is to prevail will scarcely be recognizable as time. The seed will not grow; the future will not be born out of the present; the plant will not disentangle itself from its bed, but will stick there in still birth.

Thou sure and firm set earth,
Hear not my steps. which way they walk.
for fear
Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts,
And take the present horror from the time, Which now suits with it.
[II. i. 56-60]

prays Macbeth on the eve of Duncan's death. But time and horror will not suit so neatly through the nights to come; the present moment will look like all eternity, and horror will be smeared on every hour. Macbeth's speech when he comes back from viewing Duncan's body may have been rehearsed and is certainly delivered for effect; yet he best knows what the terms signify:

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.
[II. iii. 91-3]

He has a premonition even now of time's disorders; of his own premature descent into the sear, the yellow leaf [V. iii. 23]; of his failure like any other man to

pay his breath
To time and mortal custom.
[IV. i. 99-100]

"What, will the line stretch out to the crack of doom?" he cries when Banquo's eight sons appear to him in the witches' cavern [IV. 1. 117]. Time makes sense no longer; its proportions are strange, its content meaningless. For Lady Macbeth in her mind's



disease the minutes have ceased to march in their true file and order; her sleep-walking soliloquy [V. i] recapitulates the play, but there is no temporal design among the fragments of the past—the blood, the body of Duncan, the fears of her husband, the ghost of Banquo, the slaughter of Lady Macduff, the ringing of the bell, and again the blood—which float detached from one another in her memory. And for Macbeth time has become a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, Signifying nothing.
[V. v. 26-8]

Death is dusty, and the future is a limitless desert of tomorrows. His reception of the news that Lady Macbeth has died is like nothing else of a similar sort in Shakespeare. When Northumberland was told of Hotspur's death he asked his grief to wait upon his revenge:

For this I shall have time enough to
mourn.
[2 *Henry IV*, I. i. 136]

And when Brutus was told of Portia's death he knew how to play the stoic:

With meditating that she must die once,
I have the patience to endure it now.
[*Julius Caesar*, IV. iii. 191-92]

But Macbeth, drugged beyond feeling, supped full with horrors, and tired of nothing so much as of coincidence in calamity, can only say in a voice devoid of tone:

She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a
word.
[V. v. 17-18]

There would, that is, if there were such a thing as time. Then such words as "died" and "hereafter" would have their meaning. Not now, however, for time itself has died.

Duncan was everything that Macbeth is not. We saw him briefly, but the brilliance of his contrast with the thane he trusted has kept his memory beautiful throughout a play whose every other feature has been hideous. He was "meek" and "clear" [I. vii. 17-18], and his mind was incapable of suspicion. The treachery of Cawdor bewildered him:

There's no art
To find the mind's construction in the
face. He was a gentleman on whom I built An absolute trust
[I. iv. 11-14]

-this at the very moment when Macbeth was being brought in for showers of praise and tears of plenteous joy! For Duncan was a free spirit and could weep, a thing impossible



to his murderer's stopped heart. The word "love" was native to his tongue; he used it four times within the twenty lines of his conversation with Lady Macbeth, and its clear beauty as he spoke it was reflected that night in the diamond he sent her by Banquo [II. 1. 15]. As he approached Macbeth's castle in the late afternoon the building had known its only moment of serenity and fairness. It was because Duncan could look at it and say:

This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air
Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
Unto our gentle senses.
[I. vi. 1-3]

The speech itself was nimble, sweet, and gentle; and Banquo's explanation was in tone:

This guest of summer,
The temple-haunting martlet, does appear,
By his loved masonry, that the heaven's
breath
Smells wooingly here; no jutty, frieze,
Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this
bird
Hath made his pendent bed and procreant
cradle.
Where they most breed and haunt. I have
observ'd
The air is delicate.
[I. vi. 3-10]

Summer, heaven, wooing, and procreation in the delicate air—such words suited the presence of a king who when later on he was found stabbed in his bed would actually offer a fair sight to guilty eyes. His blood was not like the other blood in the play, thick and fearfully discolored. It was bright and beautiful, as no one better than Macbeth could appreciate:

Here lay Duncan,
His silver skin lac'd with his golden blood
[II. iii. 109-10]

—the silver and the gold went with the diamond, and with Duncan's gentle senses that could smell no treachery though a whole house reeked with it. And Duncan of course could sleep. After life's fitful fever he had been laid where nothing could touch him further [III. ii. 22-6]. No terrible dreams to shake him nightly, and no fears of things lest they come stalking through the world before their time in borrowed shapes. Our memory of this contrast, much as the doings of the middle play work to muffle it, is what gives power to Malcolm and Macduff at the end.



Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell.
[IV. iii. 22]

Scotland may seem to have become the grave of men and not their mother [IV. iii. 166]; death and danger may claim the whole of that bleeding country; but there is another country to the south where a good king works miracles with his touch. The rest of the world is what it always was; time goes on; events stretch out through space in their proper forms. Shakespeare again has enclosed his evil within a universe of good, his storm center within wide areas of peace. And from this outer world Malcolm and Macduff will return to heal Scotland of its ills. Their conversation in London before the pious Edward's palace [IV. iii] is not an interruption of the play; it is one of its essential parts, glancing forward as it does to a conclusion wherein Macduff can say, "The time is free" [V. ix. 21], and wherein Malcolm can promise that deeds of justice, "planted newly with the time,"_ will be performed "in measure, time, and place" [V. ix. 31, 39]. Malcolm speaks the language of the play, but he has recovered its lost idiom. Blood will cease to flow, movement will recommence, fear will be forgotten, sleep will season every life, and the seeds of time will blossom in due order. The circle of safety which Shakespeare has drawn around his central horror is thinly drawn, but it is finely drawn and it holds. (pp. 252-66)

Mark Van Doren, "Macbeth," in his Shakespeare, Henry Holt and Company, 1939, pp. 252-66.



Critical Essay #2

[Ribner maintains that Macbeth symbolizes Shakespeare's larger view of evil's operation in the world. Therefore, the tragedy is not resolved through the fallen hero's redemption, but through good correcting the evil that Macbeth has unleashed. The critic further contends that the play provides comparisons between Macbeth and Satan: both are always conscious of the evil they embrace; both have excessive ambition and pride; and both openly defy the natural law of God, the devil by rebelling against his maker and Macbeth by calling on satanic forces in order to gain the kingship. This "voluntary choice of evil," Ribner notes, "closes the way of redemption to [Macbeth], for in denying nature he cuts off his source of redemption, and he must end in total destruction and despair. "According to the critic, the other major characters serve similar symbolic functions in Macbeth: the witches represent evil, tempting man's sinful nature by means of prophecy; Banquo, in contrast to Macbeth, stands as a kind of morality figure who is able to resist the witches' temptation because the grace of God inherent in his nature is stronger than his propensity to sin; Lady Macbeth, who supports her husband in his wrong moral choice and quells the forces in him opposed to evil, signifies an unnatural reversal of the common symbol of woman as the giver of life and nourishment. Ribner then examines Duncan's murder, arguing that this specific act of evil corrupts all levels of creation, contaminating the family, the state, and the physical universe. Shakespeare chiefly focuses on the disintegration of Macbeth himself, the critic asserts, initially portraying him as a great man and savior of his country, but one who ultimately becomes the symbol of unnatural man, "cut off from his fellow men and from God" Macbeth's spiritual ruin must be reflected in ignoble physical destruction, Ribner concludes, and "thus the play ends with the gruesome spectacle of the murderer's head held aloft in triumph.]

Macbeth is in many ways Shakespeare's maturest and most daring experiment in tragedy, for in this play he set himself to describe the operation of evil in all its manifestations: to define its very nature, to depict its seduction of man, and to show its effect upon all of the planes of creation once it has been unleashed by one man's sinful moral choice. It is this final aspect which here receives Shakespeare's primary attention and which conditions the sombre mood of the play. Shakespeare anatomizes evil both in intellectual and emotional terms, using all of the devices of poetry, and most notably the images of blood and darkness which so many commentators have described. For his final end of reconciliation, he relied not upon audience identification with his hero, but rather upon an intellectual perception of the total play. In this lay his most original departure.

Macbeth is a closely knit, unified construction, every element of which is designed to support an intellectual statement, to which action, character, and poetry all contribute. The idea which governs the plays is primarily explicit in the action of the central character, Macbeth himself; his role is cast into a symbolic pattern which is a reflection of Shakespeare's view of evil's operation in the world. The other characters serve dramatic functions designed to set off the particular intellectual problems implicit in the action of the central figure. The basic pattern of the play is a simple one, for which Shakespeare returned to an earlier formula he had used in *Richard III*. The hero accepts



evil in the third scene of the play. In the second act he commits the deed to which his choice of evil must inevitably lead him, and for the final three acts, as he rises higher in worldly power he sinks deeper and deeper into evil, until at the end of the play he is utterly and finally destroyed. There is here no pattern of redemption or regeneration for the fallen hero as in *King Lear*. Shakespeare's final statement, however, is not one of despair, for out of the play comes a feeling of reconciliation which does affirm the kind of meaning in the world with which great tragedy must end. In the earlier tragedies this feeling had been created largely through the regeneration of an essentially sympathetic hero. In *Macbeth*, however, there can be little doubt of the final damnation of "this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen" [V. ix. 35]. The audience is made to see, however, that Macbeth is destroyed by counterforces which he himself sets in motion. We may thus, viewing the play in its totality, see good, through divine grace, inevitably emerging from evil and triumphant at the play's end with a promise of rebirth. (pp. 147-48)

The action of *Macbeth* falls into two distinct parts, each carefully shaped as part of the greater whole. There is first a choice of evil by the hero, in which Shakespeare defines the nature of evil and explains the process by which man is led to choose it. This occupies roughly the first two acts, although Shakespeare by recurrent image and symbol keeps these dominant ideas before his audience throughout the rest of the play. The last three acts exhibit the manner of evil's operation simultaneously on four levels: that of fallen man himself, that of the family, the state, and the physical universe. As evil operates on each of these planes, however, it generates at the same time forces of good, until at the end of the play we see evil destroyed on each of the four planes of creation and the harmonious order of God restored. The play is an ordered and controlled exploration of evil, in which Shakespeare fulfills the function of the philosophical poet as surely as did Dante in the *Divine Comedy*.

II

It has been pointed out that Othello and Lear in their falls parallel the fall of Adam, and like Adam they are able to learn in their disasters the nature of evil and thus attain a kind of victory in defeat. The destruction of Macbeth, on the contrary, is cast in the pattern of the fall of Satan himself, and the play is full of analogies between Satan and Macbeth. Like Satan, Macbeth is from the first entirely aware of the evil he embraces, and like Satan he can never renounce his free-willed moral choice, once it has been made. It is thus appropriate that the force of evil in *Macbeth* be symbolized by Satan's own sin of ambition. This sin for Shakespeare, as it had been for Aquinas, was an aspect of pride, the worst of the medieval seven deadly sins. In the neatly ordered and harmonious universe of which Renaissance man conceived, it stood for a rebellion against the will of God and thus against the order of nature. . . . Macbeth, through love of self, sets his own will against that of God, chooses a lesser finite good-kingship and power-rather than a greater infinite one. Shakespeare in Macbeth's moral choice is offering a definition of evil in fairly traditional terms.

The ambitious man will strive to rise higher on the great chain of being than the place which God has ordained for him. To do so he must break the bond which ties him on the



one hand to God and on the other to humanity. Immediately before the murder of Banquo, Macbeth utters lines which often have been misinterpreted by commentators:

Come seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day; And with thy bloody and invisible hand Cancel and
tear to pieces the great bond Which keeps me pale!
[III. ii. 46-50]

The "great bond" has usually been glossed either as the prophecy of the witches or as Banquo's lease on life, neither of which is very meaningful within the context of the passage. The bond. . . can only refer to the link which ties Macbeth to humanity and enjoins him to obey the natural law of God. Macbeth is calling upon the Satanic forces of darkness to break this bond of nature and thus enable him again to defy the laws of man and God, to murder his friend and guest. (pp. 148-50)

Macbeth's sin, like that of Satan before him, is thus a deliberate repudiation of nature, a defiance of God. All of the natural forces which mitigate against the deed are evoked by Macbeth himself:

He's here in double trust,
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject, Strong both against the deed; then, as his
host,
Who should against his murderer shut the
door.
Not bear the knife himself. Besides, this
Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath
been So clear in his great office, that his virtues Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued,
against
The deep damnation of his taking-off.
[I. vii. 12-20]

His realization of the unnaturalness of the act he contemplates is in his reply to his wife's reflection on his courage:

I dare do all that may become a man,
Who dares do more is none.
[I. vii. 46-7]

It is Macbeth's knowing and deliberate denial of God and his rejection of the law of nature which set him apart from the heroes of *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *Lear*. His voluntary choice of evil, moreover, closes the way of redemption to him, for in denying nature he cuts off the source of redemption, and he must end in total destruction and despair. He is like [Christopher] Marlowe's Faustus in this. Once he has given his "eternal jewel" to the "common enemy of man", he must abide by the contract he has made. (p. 150)

III



The characters of *Macbeth* are not shaped primarily to conform to a psychological verisimilitude, but to make explicit the intellectual statements with which the play is concerned. They have choral and symbolic functions. The illusion of reality with which Shakespeare endows them serves merely to embody their symbolic functions in specific emotional terms. Successful as the illusion may be, Lady Macbeth, Banquo, the witches are not whole figures about whom we can ask such questions as [A. C.] Bradley asked [in his *Shakespearean Tragedy*] and could only answer by divorcing them from the context of the play. All that we need know about the witches is that they are as [John] Dover

Wilson has well put it [in the Cambridge edition of *Macbeth*], "the incarnation of evil in the universe, all the more effective dramatically that their nature is never defined". They are no more than convenient dramatic symbols for evil. To question closely the motives of Banquo or Lady Macbeth, with their many and obvious inconsistencies, is equally fruitless, for they function primarily as dramatic vehicles whose action is governed by the demands not of fact or psychology, but of intellectual design.

As symbols of evil, the witches are made contrary to nature. They are women with the beards of men; their incantation is a Black Mass, and the hell broth they stir consists of the disunited parts of men and animals, creation in chaos. They deliberately wait for Macbeth and Banquo, as they wait for all men. They do not, however, suggest evil to man. . . ., for the impulse to evil must come from within man himself. They simply suggest an object which may incite the inclination to evil which is always within man because of original sin, and they do this by means of prophecy. Thus the good man, like Banquo, can resist their appeal, for man shares in the grace of God as well as in original sin.

The witches hold forth the promise of worldly good, as all evil must, for if it were not attractive it would offer no temptation to man. What Shakespeare wishes to stress is that its promises are false ones, that seeming truths are half truths, and that, in general, evil works through deception, by posing as the friend of man. Thus Eve had been seduced by Satan, and thus Othello had been seduced by "Honest" Iago. Banquo recognizes the Satanic origin of the witches: "What, can the devil speak true?" [I. iii. 107], and he perceives the manner in which they work:

And 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.
[I. iii. 123-26]

To make this statement about the deceptive nature of evil, Shakespeare works into the texture of his play the theme of appearance versus reality which so many critics have noticed. There is always confusion and uncertainty in the appearance of evil, darkness rather than light, never the clear, rational certainty which is in the natural order of the good. This theme is in Macbeth's opening remark: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" [I. iii. 38]. "There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face" [I. iv. 11-12] says Duncan, and Lady Macbeth cautions her husband to "look like the innocent



flower, / But be the serpent under't" [I. v. 65-6]. Macbeth himself acknowledges that "False face must hide what the false heart doth know" [I. vii. 82].

Not until the very end of the play does Macbeth learn how evil works. It offers to him, it seems, the finite good, kingship and power, which his perverted will causes him to place above the infinite good of God's order; thus evil becomes his good. He relies upon this promise, trusting the prophecy of the witches to the very last, and thus unknowingly bringing about his own destruction and the restitution of natural order. Only when Birnam wood has in fact come to Dunsinane and he faces a foe not born of woman, does the deception in the witches' promises become apparent to him:

And be these juggling fiends no more be lived.
That palter with us in a double sense;
That keep the word of promise to our ear,
And break it to our hope.
[V. viii. 19-22]

Banquo, as [Leo] Kirchbaum has indicated, stands opposed to Macbeth as a kind of morality figure [see excerpt in section on Banquo]. The witches offer him temptation not unlike what they offer Macbeth, and Banquo is sorely tempted, as any man must be. This is best revealed in a short speech which both for Bradley and [G.] Wilson Knight [in his *Shakespearean Tragedy*] was evidence that Banquo too had been corrupted by evil:

yet it was said
It should not stand in thy posterity,
But that myself should be the root and fa
ther
Of many kings. If there come truth from
them
As upon thee, Macbeth, their speeches
shine
Why, by the verities on thee made good, May they not be my oracles as well, And set
me up in hope? But hush! no
more.
[III. i. 3-10]

The difference between the two men is that Banquo is able to resist the temptation to which Macbeth succumbs. Banquo is ordinary man, with his mixture of good and evil, open to evil's soliciting, but able to resist it. It is in such a man, Shakespeare is saying, that the hope for the future lies. This hope is embodied in Fleance, and thus, in terms of the play's total conceptual pattern, it is impossible for Macbeth to kill him. Evil can never destroy the ultimate promise of good.

Banquo, humanly weak and subject to temptation, stands nevertheless, "in the great hand of God" [III. iii. 130]. Symbolically he represents one aspect of Macbeth, the side of ordinary humanity which Macbeth must destroy within himself before he can give his soul entirely to the forces of darkness. For this reason he must murder Banquo, and it is



why the dead Banquo returns to him as a reminder that, as a man, he cannot easily extinguish the human force within himself, that the torment of fear, the "terrible dreams / that shake us nightly" [III. ii. 18-19], the scorpions in his mind [III. ii. 36], will continue until his own final destruction. Banquo and his ghost are used to illuminate the basic conflict within the mind of Macbeth.

Macduff and Malcolm serve similar symbolic functions. Macduff, in particular, is a force of nemesis generated by Macbeth's own course of evil. Malcolm. . . is Shakespeare's portrait of the ideal king, and his function chiefly is to represent a restitution of order in the state. (pp. 151-53) Just as Banquo symbolizes that side of Macbeth which would accept nature and reject evil, Lady Macbeth stands for the contrary side. Her function is to second Macbeth in the moral choice which is his alone, to mitigate against those forces within him which are in opposition to evil. Macbeth is thus much in the position of the traditional morality play hero placed between good and evil angels.

The side of his wife seduces him, and that of Banquo must be destroyed. It is for this reason, as has so often been pointed out, that the imagery of her speeches draws upon corruptions of nature and reversal of the normal life impulses. She calls upon the forces of darkness to support her in her purposes:

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 the access and passage to re-
morse, That no compunctious visiting of nature Shake my fell purpose. nor keep peace
between
The effect and it! Come to my women's
breasts.
And take my milk for gall, you murdering
ministers, Wherever in your sightless substances You wait on nature's mischief! Come,
thick night, And pall me in the dunkest smoke of hell, That my keen knife see not the
wound it
makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of
the dark,
To cry 'Hold, hold.'
[I. v. 40-54]

It is fitting that Shakespeare should use a woman for this purpose, for woman is the normal symbol of life and nourishment, and thus the dramatist can emphasize the strangeness and unnaturalness of the very contraries to which Lady Macbeth appeals and for which she stands. She must become unsexed, and her milk must convert to gall. Her very need, moreover, to put aside her feminine nature informs the illusion of reality in her characterization and gives to her emotional appeal as well as intellectual meaning.



The motif of the unnatural is evoked again in her savage cry:

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.
[I. vii. 54-8]

We cannot say whether she actually has children or not, for this speech is not designed to convey fact. It is a ritual statement in which Shakespeare seizes upon a strikingly unnatural image to emphasize that she is urging Macbeth on the basis of all which is opposed to nature and the order of God. If Shakespeare, later in the play, in Macduff's "He has no children" [IV. iii. 216] seems to indicate that Macbeth is childless, it is not that he has forgotten the earlier speech. There he wishes merely to emphasize the intensity of Macduff's feeling in the same ritual manner.

Throughout the play Lady Macbeth's femininity is held in constant juxtaposition to the unnatural forces she would call into play. In the murder scene her unnatural aspect is dominant, but her femininity comes through in her inability to kill the king herself. When the body is discovered, she is the first to collapse. This careful juxtaposition of contraries comes to a head when she walks in her sleep in the fifth act. Here the images of blood are mingled with her feminine desire for the "perfumes of Arabia" to "sweeten this little hand" [V. 1. 51]. No more than Macbeth can lightly break his bond with humanity, can his wife escape the woman in her which mitigates against the unnatural force of evil which in the thematic structure of the play she represents. In her death by suicide, moreover, there is further emphasis upon the theme which dominates the play: that evil inevitably must breed its own destruction. (pp. 153-54)

IV

The specific act of evil occurs on two planes, that of the state and that of Macbeth's "single state of man" [I. iii. 140]; the crime is both ethical and political, for Macbeth murders not only his kinsman and guest, but his king as well. Once evil is unleashed, however. It corrupts all of the planes of creation, not only those of man and the state, but those of the family and the physical universe as well. Action, character, symbolic ritual and the powerful emotional impact of poetic imagery all combine to further a specific intellectual concept: the all-embracing destructive force of evil which touches every area of God's creation.

That the physical universe itself is thrown out of harmony is made clear in the speech of Lennox immediately following the murder:

The night has been unruly: where we lay. Our chimneys were blown down; and, as
they say,
Lamentings heard I' the air; strange
screams of death.



And prophesying with accents terrible
Of dire combustion and confused events
New hatched to the woeful time: the obscure bird
Clamour'd the livelong night: some say,
the earth
Was feverous and did shake.
[II. iii. 54-611]

This theme is even more strongly emphasized in a short scene in which Ross speaks to a nameless old man. The strange phenomena here described are all perversions of physical nature which indicate that one man's crime has thrown the entire universe out of harmony:

Thou seest. the heavens, as troubled with
man's act,
Threaten his bloody stage: by the clock 'tis
day,
And yet dark night strangles the travelling
lamp:
Is't night's predominance. or the *day's*
shame.
That darkness does the face *of* earth en
tomb.
When living light should kiss it?
[11.iv. 5-10]

The order of nature is reversed. the sun blotted out. On the animal level, a falcon is killed by a mousing owl, and most horrible of all:

Duncan's horses-a thing most strange
and certain
Beauteous and swift. the minions *of* their
race.
flung out.
Contending 'gainst obedience. as they
would make
War against mankind.
[II. iv. 14-18]

Man by his sin has forfeited his dominion over nature: horses turn against their natural master, and, as the old man affirms, "they eat each other" [II. iv. 18].

This perversion of nature, however, contains within itself the means of restoring harmony, for Shakespeare uses the very perversion itself, a moving forest and a child unborn of mother to herald the downfall of the tyrant and thus to restore the physical universe to its natural state of perfection. That the forest does not really move, and that Macduff was only technically so born is of no significance, for Shakespeare is giving us



here not scientific fact, but dramatic symbol to emphasize the theme of the play that in the working out of evil is implicit a rebirth of good.

On the level of the state Macbeth unleashes the greatest evils of which Shakespeare's audience could conceive, tyranny, civil war, and an invading foreign army. The tyranny of Macbeth's reign, moreover is set off by the initial description of the gentility and justice of Duncan's previous rule. Shakespeare here deliberately alters his source, for Holinshed had stressed Duncan's feeble and slothful administration, and he had, by way of contrast, praised Macbeth for his striving after justice and for the excellence of at least the first ten years of his reign.

The disorder in the state as it works out its course is also the source of its own extinction and the restoration of political harmony. The very tyranny of Macbeth arouses Macduff against him, causes Malcolm to assert the justice of his title, and causes the saint-like English King, Edward the Confessor, to take arms against Macbeth. King Edward's curing of the scrofula [IV. iii. 146-49], an episode which Dover Wilson like so many other critics has regarded as "of slight dramatic relevance", is Shakespeare's means of underscoring that Edward is an instrument of supernatural grace, designed to cleanse the unnatural evil in the state, just as he may remove evil from individual man. It is Macbeth's very tyranny which has made him "ripe for shaking, and the powers above / Put on their instruments" [IV. iii. 238-39].

On the level of the family, the relationship between Macbeth and his wife steadily deteriorates. At the beginning of the play their relationship is one of the closest and most intimate in all literature. She is "my dearest partner in greatness" [I. v. 11], and much as it harrows him himself to think of its implications, he sends her immediate word of the witches' prophecy, so that she may not "lose the dues of rejoicing" [I. v. 12]. The very terror of the murder scene only further emphasizes the closeness of the murderers. But as the force of evil severs Macbeth from the rest of humanity, it breaks also the bond which ties him to his wife. He lives more and more closely with his own fears into which she cannot intrude, as the banquet scene well illustrates. She cannot see the ghost which torments her husband.

The gradual separation of man and wife first becomes apparent just before the murder of Banquo. No longer does he confide in her. At the play's beginning they plan the future together; at the end each dies alone, and when the news of her death comes to Macbeth, he shows little concern:

She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a
word.

[V. v. 17-18]

This theme of family disintegration is echoed, moreover, in Macduff's desertion of his wife and children to be destroyed by the tyrant whom the father flees.



It is upon the disintegration of Macbeth himself, however, that Shakespeare lavishes his principal attention. He is careful to paint his hero in the opening scenes as a man of great stature, the savior of his country, full of the "milk of human kindness" [I. v. 17], with an infinite potentiality for good. He has natural feelings which link him to his fellow men and make him view with revulsion the crime to which ambition prompts him. Once the crime is committed, however, these feelings are gradually destroyed, until at the end of the play he is a symbol of unnatural man, cut off from his fellow men and from God. As his link with humanity weakens, moreover, so also does his desire to live, until finally he sinks into a total despair, the medieval sin of *acedia* [apathy], which is the surest evidence of his damnation.

Macbeth's extraordinary powers of imagination have been amply commented upon. Imagination itself, however, cannot be viewed as a cause of man's destruction within any meaningful moral system. Shakespeare endows Macbeth with this ability to see all of the implications of his act in their most frightening forms even before the act itself is committed as an indication of Macbeth's initial strong moral feelings. Bradley wisely recognized the "principle of morality which takes place in his imaginative fears". Imagination enables Macbeth emotionally to grasp the moral implications of his crime, to participate imaginatively, as does the audience, in the full horror of the deed. Macbeth is entirely aware of God's moral system with its "evenhanded justice", which "commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice / To our own lips" [I. vii. 10-12]. His great soliloquy in contemplation of Duncan's murder [I. vii. 1-28] is designed to underscore Macbeth's initial feelings of kinship with the natural order.

As he prepares to commit the act he dreads, he calls for the suppression of these feelings within him. In a kind of devilish incantation he calls for darkness and the extinction of nature, conjuring the earth itself to look aside while he violates the harmonious order of which he and it are closely related parts:

Now o'er the one half world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams
abuse The curtain'd sleep, witchcraft celebrates Pale Hecate's offerings, and 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. Thou sure and firm-set
earth.
Hear not my steps, which way they walk.
for fear
Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts. And take the present horror from the time,
Which now suits with it.
[II. i. 49-60]

The figure of the wolf is an appropriate one, for here Macbeth allies himself with the destroyer of the innocent lamb, symbolic of God, just as he allies himself with the



ravisher Tarquin, the destroyer of chastity, symbolic in the Renaissance of the perfection of God.

That Macbeth cannot say "amen" immediately after the murder is the first clear sign of his alienation from God. He will sleep no more, for sleep is an aspect of divine mercy. Steadily Macbeth moves farther and farther from God and his fellow men, and his bond with nature is weakened. He becomes committed entirely to an unnatural course from which he cannot retreat:

For mine own good.

All causes shall give way: I am in blood Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,

Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

[III. iv. 134-37]

He has become the center of his own little alien world, for which "all causes shall give way". Now Macbeth is ready to seek the witches out, a commitment to evil as total as that of Marlowe's Faustus in his summoning of Mephistopheles. And the words of the weird sisters lead him to the most horrible excess of all, the wanton murder of the family of Macduff. At the beginning of the play, evil had come to Macbeth unsought, as it does to all men; he had followed its promptings in order to attain definite ends, and not without strong misgivings. Now he seeks evil himself; he embraces it willingly and without fear, for no other end than the evil act itself. The divided mind and the fear felt by the early Macbeth were not weakness; they were. . . signs of his kinship with man and God. But, by the fifth act:

I have almost forgot the taste of fears:

The time has been, my senses would have cool'd To hear a night-shriek; and my fell of hair Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir

As life were in't: I have supped full with horrors;

Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts.

Cannot once start me.

[V. v. 9-15]

With the loss of human fear, Macbeth must forfeit also those human attributes which make life livable: "that which should accompany old age, / As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends" [V. iii. 24-5]. There is nothing left for him but the utter despair of his "To-morrow and to-morrow" speech [V. v. 19-28]. Even with this unwillingness to live, which is in itself a denial of the mercy of God (as the medieval mind conceived of *acedia*), Shakespeare will not allow to Macbeth the heroic gesture of suicide which he grants to Brutus [in *Julius Caesar*] and Othello. Macbeth will not "play the Roman fool" [V. viii. 1]. His spiritual destruction must be reflected in an ignominious physical



destruction, and thus the play ends with the gruesome spectacle of the murderer's head held aloft in triumph. (pp. 155-59)

If we are to isolate a dominant theme in the play, it must be one of idea: that through the working out of evil in a harmonious world order good must emerge. This idea is embodied in specific action and specific character, and thus by imaginative exploration the dramatist is able to illuminate it more fully than any prose statement ever could. Great tragedy involves a tension between emotion and intellect. The horrors of the action move our emotions as the play progresses, but when the last curtain has fallen and we can reflect upon *Macbeth* in its totality, we see that although one man has been damned, there is an order and meaning in the universe, that good may be reborn out of evil. We may thus experience that feeling of reconciliation which is the ultimate test of tragedy. (p. 159)

Irving Ribner, "Macbeth": The Pattern of Idea and Action," in Shakespeare Quarterly, Vol. X, No.2, Spring, 1959, pp. 147-59.



Critical Essay #3

[Shanley considers the tragic context of Macbeth's evil actions in an attempt to determine whether or not his downfall warrants sympathy or arouses fear at the end of the play. The critic maintains that Macbeth has a fundamentally different experience from Shakespeare's other great tragic heroes: he does not achieve a great recovery in the end because his actions throughout the play were ignoble. Shanley suggests, however, that Macbeth's end is perhaps more tragic than that of the other heroes because he ultimately loses himself to a degree that none of them does. According to the critic, our pity for Macbeth might therefore lie in the fact that by declaring that life signifies nothing, he acknowledges "the almost complete destruction of the human spirit" Shanley also observes that our ability to pass judgment on the hero's ruin is further complicated by several factors. While it is true that Macbeth sins, his actions rouse our pity and fear not only because he succumbs, as we might, to temptation, but also because he feels tremendous guilt for his actions. Further, the critic contends, Macbeth is a victim of external circumstances; he falls into a trap set by the witches, who tempt him with prophecies that stimulate his excessive pride and ambition. The hero may have resisted this temptation had he been left to himself, Shanley continues, but Lady Macbeth uses her superior willpower to overrule his "moderately good" nature and coaxes him into murdering Duncan. After Macbeth performs the evil deed, our sympathy for him increases as he tries to extricate himself from evil, only to be pulled deeper into its depths. In the critic's opinion, "we are deeply moved by Macbeth's suffering and ruin because we are acutely aware of the dangerous forces before which he falls, and because we recognize their power over one like ourselves. . . . Of such suffering and loss is tragedy made".]

Nowhere can we see the essential humanity of Shakespeare more clearly than in *Macbeth*, as he shows that the darkest evil may well be human, and so, though horrible, understandable in terms of our own lives and therefore pitiable and terrible.

Yet nowhere apparently are we so likely to miss the center of Shakespeare's view of the action; for *Macbeth*, while less complex than Shakespeare's other major tragedies, frequently raises the crucial question: Is Macbeth's fall really tragic? Many who are deeply moved by the action of the play cannot satisfactorily explain their feelings. The doctrine of *Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner* [if all is understood then all is pardoned] leads them to think (most of the time) that there is no guilt, that there should be no punishment. When faced with unpardonable evil and inescapable punishment for the guilty, and when moved at the same time to pity and fear by the suffering of the evil-doer, they are confused. Since they confound the understanding of an act with the excusing of it, they are prevented from understanding acts (and their reactions to them) for which excuse is impossible. Some, of course, find an excuse for Macbeth in the witches. But those who do not see him as the victim of agents of destiny appear to wonder if they have not been tricked into sympathy by Shakespeare's art. How, they ask, in view of Macbeth's monstrous career and sorry end, so different from those of Hamlet, Lear, or Othello, how can his fortunes win our pity and arouse our fear?



I

Macbeth is defeated as is no other of Shakespeare's great tragic figures. No pity and reverent awe attend his death. Dying off-stage, he is, as it were, shuffled off, in keeping with his dreadful state and the desire of all in his world to be rid of him. The sight of his "cursed head" is the signal for glad hailing of Malcolm as king; all thought of him is dismissed with "this dead butcher and his fiendlike queen" [V. ix. 35]. The phrase is dramatically fitting, but it does not express the whole truth that Shakespeare shows us of Macbeth's story. Seldom do we feel so strongly both the justice of the judgment and the retribution and at the same time pity for him on whom they fall; for behind this last scene lies the revelation of Macbeth's almost total destruction.

Hamlet, Lear, and Othello lose much that is wonderful in human life; their fortunes are sad and terrible. So near, their stories seem to say, is man's enjoyment of the world's best gifts-and yet so far, because his own errors and weakness leave him unable to control his world. To lose Hamlet's delight in man and his powers, and the glory of life; to have Cordelia's love and tender care snatched away, after such suffering as Lear's; or to have thrown away the jewel of one's life as did Othello this is painful. But their fortunes might have been worse. At one time they were: when the losers thought that what they had served and believed in were mere shows that made a mockery of their noblest love; when life and all their efforts seemed to have been utterly without meaning.

But before the end they learned that their love had value and that life had meaning. On this knowledge depends the twofold effect of the heroes' deaths: death at once seals, without hope of restitution, the loss of the world and its gifts, but at the same time it brings relief from the pain of loss. Furthermore, this knowledge restores the courage and nobility of soul that raise them far above their enemies and the ruins of their world. Without this knowledge, Hamlet and Lear and Othello were far less than themselves, and life but a fevered madness. With it, there is tragedy but not defeat, for the value of what is best in them is confirmed beyond question. "

But in the end of Macbeth we have something fundamentally different. Macbeth's spirit, as well as his world, is all but destroyed; no great recovery is possible for him. He does not, for he cannot, see that what he sought and valued most was good and worthy of his efforts. He is aware that he has missed much; shortly before Lady Macbeth dies, he broods over the "honour, love, obedience, troops of friends" [V. iii. 25] he has lost and cannot hope to regain. But this knowledge wins no ease for his heart. It does not raise him above the conditions that have ruined him. Macbeth, it is true, is no longer tortured as he once was, but freedom from torture has led only to the peace of despair in which he looks at life and denounces it as "a tale told by an idiot" [V. v. 26-7].

Bitter as life was for Hamlet, Lear, and Othello, it was not empty. But all Macbeth's efforts, all his hopes and dreams were in vain, because of the way he went; and when he discovers that they were, he concludes that nothing can be realized in life. Hence his terrible indictment of life-terrible because it reveals him to be all but hopelessly lost in the world of Shakespearean tragedy, as he desperately and ironically blasphemes



against a basic tenet of that world, to the truth of which his own state bears overwhelming evidence: that man's life signifies everything.

It is the despair and irony in this blasphemy that makes Macbeth's lot so awful and pitiful. We see the paralyzing, the almost complete destruction of a human spirit. The threat of hostile action galvanizes Macbeth into action to protect himself, but the action is little more than an instinctive move toward self-preservation and the last gesture of despair. "At least," he cries, "we'll die with harness on our back" [V. v. 51]. There is no sense of effective power and will to give life meaning, such as there is in [Gerard Manley] Hopkins' lines:

Not. I'll not, carrion comfort, Despair, not
feast on thee;
Not untwist-slack they may be-these
last strands of man
In me or, most weary, cry *I can no more*.
lean;
Can something, hope, wish day come, not
choose not to be.
[Carrion Comfort]

Here the speaker knows despair for what it is, and knows that something else is both possible and worth any effort. But not so Macbeth; he can see only the circumstances from which his despair arises; he can imagine no condition of life other than that he is in.

He has not even the bitter satisfaction of rebelling and saying, "As flies to wanton boys, are we to the gods" [*King Lear*, IV. i. 36]. Only sheer animal courage remains to flash out and remind us of a Macbeth once courageous in an honorable cause. This reminder is pitiful, for Macbeth has not even the slim hope of a trapped animal which, if it fights loose, has something to escape to. All Macbeth did resulted in nothing; whatever he does now will result in nothing but the anguish of meaningless action. It is hard enough to realize that one has been on the wrong track for part of life; to be convinced that there is no right track to get on because there is no place for any track to go-this is to be lost with no hope at all.

At the very end we see some saving touches of humanity in Macbeth: he has not lost all human virtue; he would have no more of Macduff's blood on his soul; and even with the collapse of his last security, his bravery does not falter. These touches show him a man still, and not a fiend, but they by no means reestablish him in his former self. There is no greatness in death for him. Rather than the human spirit's capacity for greatness in adversity, we see its possible ruin in evil. Because we never see Macbeth enjoying the possession of the great prize he sought, and because from the beginning of his temptation we have no hope that he will be able to enjoy it, his loss of the world's gifts is not so poignant as that of Hamlet, Lear, or Othello. But to a degree that none of them does, Macbeth loses himself, and this is most tragic of all.



II

It may be objected, however, that Macbeth alone of Shakespeare's great tragic figures is fully aware of the evil of the act by which he sets in motion the train of events leading to his ruin. His culpability seriously weakens the sympathy of many. In the face of this difficulty, some interpreters justify sympathy for Macbeth by seeing him as the victim of the witches, the agents of destiny. This point of view, however, seems to cut through the complex knot of human life as Shakespeare saw it, instead of following the various strands which make it up. We cannot dodge Macbeth's responsibility and guilt-he never does.

His ruin is caused by the fact that he sins: he wilfully commits an act which he knows to be wrong. This ruin and sin are seen to be tragic, as Shakespeare, like Dante, reveals the pity and fear in a man's succumbing to grievous temptation, and in the effects of sin on his subsequent thoughts and deeds. Macbeth's guilt and the circumstances upon which it depends do not decrease our pity and fear; they produce it; for Shakespeare presents Macbeth as one who had hardly any chance to escape guilt.

The concatenation of circumstances which make Macbeth's temptation is such as to seem a trap. At the very moment when he is returning victorious from a battle in which he has played a chief part in saving his country from disaster, there comes to him a suggestion-touching old dreams and desires-that he may be king. Shakespeare uses the witches to convey the danger of the suggestion. The witches and their prophecies are poetic symbols of the bafflingly indeterminate character of the events that surround men. The witches force nothing; they advise nothing; they simply present facts. But they confound fair and foul; just so, events may be good or ill. The witches will not stay to explain their greetings any more than events will interpret themselves. The witches' prophecies and the events that forever surround men are dangerous because they may appear simple and are not, because they may be so alluring as to stultify prudence, and because their true significance may be very hard to come at. Depending on conditions, they may be harmless, or they may be delusive, insidious, and all but impossible to read correctly.

Macbeth is in no condition to read them aright. He had restrained his desire for greatness in the past since he would not do the wrong which was needed to win greatness. The hunger of his ambitious mind had not died, however; it had only been denied satisfaction. Now, when the sense of his own power and his taste of it are high indeed, the old hunger is more than reawakened; it is nourished with hope, as immediate events seem to establish the soundness of the suggestion. Enough hope to lead him to ponder the suggestion seriously, and then, in spite of an attempt to put it out of his mind since he recognizes the evil of his thoughts, to retail the wonderful news of possible greatness to his wife.

There follow immediately two events which press the matter on most hastily. The king proclaims his eldest son as his heir, and in the next breath announces his visit to



Macbeth's castle. Thus, while desire and hope are fresh, Macbeth sees put before him, first, an obstacle which time will only make greater, and then an opportunity for him to prevent time from working against him. "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly" [I. vii. 1-2]. In fact, it must be done quickly if it is to be done at all.

Desire, apparent promise of fulfillment, need for speedy action, and immediate opportunity fall together so rapidly as to create an all but inescapable force.

Yet Macbeth would have resisted temptation had he been left to himself. Great though his hunger for power and glory, especially when whetted by such circumstances, it would not have completely overcome his fears and scruples. Even if he were to jump the life to come, he knew that if he could and would kill Duncan, another might well do the same for him. On a higher plane, the double loyalty he owed to the king held him back. Finally, a point that reveals the virtue that was in him, he felt the goodness of Duncan so strongly that killing him seemed too terrible a thing to do. Worldly prudence, loyalty, reverence for what is good—these turned Macbeth back. Lady Macbeth's fears were well founded; his nature was not such as to let him "catch the nearest way."

But that nature could, as she felt, be worked. It was good, but not firm in its goodness. Macbeth is a moderately good man, no better, but also no worse, than the next one. The point is (and it is a grim one) that the virtue of the ordinarily good man is not enough to keep him from disaster under all possible circumstances—especially when some of them are such as may be for good or evil.

This was the nature of Lady Macbeth's influence on Macbeth. She could sway him because she understood him and loved him, and because he loved her and depended on her love and good thoughts of him. She could and would have urged him to noble deeds had occasion arisen. To prevent her from urging him on to evil ones, he needed more than the ordinary firmness to act as he saw right. But to cut clear of such a source of strength and comfort is difficult; too difficult for Macbeth. It is the old story of the perversion of the potentially good, and of the problem of getting only the good from the baffling mixture of good and evil in all things. Just after Macbeth has decided to give up his murderous plot, but before intention can harden to resolve, Lady Macbeth adds the force of her appeals to that of Macbeth's desires and the press of circumstance. She sees his chance to win the prize of life; she knows he wants it, as she does not know in their full strength his reasons for renouncing it. She beats down, at least long enough for her immediate purpose, the fears and scruples which would otherwise have kept him from the crown, and murder and ruin. She does not answer Macbeth's scruples; her attack is personal. Whether she knows or simply feels his need of her admiration and support, she strikes at the right point. The spur of ambition did not drive Macbeth too hard toward his great opportunity, but her goading taunts he could not withstand, though they drove him on to horrors.

All this does not excuse Macbeth; no excuse is possible for one who, with full knowledge of the nature of the act, murders a good man to whom he owes hospitality, loyalty, and gratitude. Shakespeare makes us realize, however, how dangerous the battle, how practically irresistible may be the forces arrayed against a man. Some men



are saved from evil because they marry a Cordelia or a Viola [in *Twelfth Night*]; others because opportunity never favors their desires; and still others because the stakes do not justify the risk of being caught in evil doing. For Macbeth, the stakes are the highest, the opportunity golden, and the encouragement to evil from a wife whom he loves and needs.

Macbeth is terrified by the warnings of his conscience, but he cannot surrender. That he acts with full knowledge of the evil only increases the pity and fear aroused by his deed. For this knowledge causes much of his suffering; it makes his condition far worse than it would have been had he acted with less than complete knowledge; and, finally, it emphasizes the power of the trickery, the lure, and the urging to which he was subjected. We pity his suffering even as he does evil because we understand why he could not hold on to the chance which he ought to have taken to save himself; and we are moved to fear when we see his suffering and understand how slight may be the chance to escape it.

III

Once that chance is lost greater suffering and evil follow inescapably. The bloody career on which Macbeth now embarks can no more be excused than could his first crime, but it increases rather than detracts from our pity and fear. The trap of temptation having been sprung, there is no escape for Macbeth, and his struggles to escape the consequences of his sin serve only to ensnare him more deeply. As we witness that struggle, our pity and fear increase because we feel how incompetent he is to do anything but struggle as he does.

Evil brings its own suffering with it, but Macbeth cannot learn from it. The unknown fifteenth-century author of *The Book of the Poor in Spirit* wrote of evil and suffering: "One's own proper suffering comes from one's own sins and he suffers quite rightly who lives in sins, and each sin fosters a special spiritual suffering. . . . This kind of suffering is similar to the suffering in hell, for the more one suffers there the worse one becomes. This happens to sinners; the more they suffer through sin the more wicked they become and they fall more and more into sufferings in their effort to escape." Just so did Shakespeare conceive of Macbeth's state.

Macbeth has no enemy he can see, such as Iago or one of Lear's savage daughters; he is within him self. In first overriding the warnings of his conscience, he brings on the blindness which makes it impossible for him to perceive his own state and things outside him as they really are, and which therefore sends him in pursuit of a wholly illusory safety. When he puts away all thought of going back on his first evil deed, he deals the last blow to his conscience which once urged him to the right, and he blinds himself entirely.

No sooner does he gain what he wanted than he is beset by fears worse than those he overrode in murdering Duncan. But having overridden the proper fears, he cannot deal rightly with the new ones. His horror of murder is lost in the fear of discovery and revenge, and the fear of losing what he has sacrificed so much to gain. Briefly at least



he wishes the murder undone and Duncan waking to the knocking at the gate. But just as earlier he thought, but failed, to put the witches' prophecies and his evil thoughts out of mind, so now his better thoughts die. By the time he appears in answer to the knocking at the gate, he is firmly set on a course to make good the murder of Duncan and to keep himself safe. All is terrible irony from this point on. With a new decisiveness Macbeth kills the grooms in Duncan's chamber; alive, they were potential witnesses; dead, they can serve as plausible criminals. Then he plays brilliantly the part of a grief-stricken host and loyal subject:

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.

[II. iii. 91-6]

Irony could not be sharper. At the very moment when he seems to himself to be complete master of the situation, Macbeth, all unknowingly, utters the bitter truth about his state. He is still to be troubled by thoughts of evil, but the drive of his desire for peace from fear is greater; and to win security he is hurrying on the way in which he thinks it lies, but it is the way to the utter, empty loneliness he describes for us here. Macbeth finds that the death of the grooms was not enough; Banquo and Fleance must go if he is to be free from torment. Through Macbeth's conversation first with Banquo about his journey, then with the murderers, and finally with Lady Macbeth, we comprehend to its full extent the disastrous change in him; he now contemplates murder with hope rather than horror. He still sees it as something to be hidden: "Come, seeling night, scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day" [III. ii. 46-7]. But he is willing to do more evil since he believes it will insure his safety: "Things bad begun make good themselves by ill" [III. ii. 55]. With the appearance of Banquo's ghost comes the last flicker of conscience, but also an increasing terror of discovery and revenge which drives Macbeth further than ever: "For mine own good all causes shall give way" [III. iv. 134-35]. The only thing he can gain in his blinded state is the very worst for him. He now seeks out the witches to get that reassurance in his course which he cannot find in himself. Although they will not stay for all his questions, he unhesitatingly accepts their equivocations; since they do reassure him, his doubts of them are gone. With their answers, and having lost "the initiate fear that wants hard use" and being no longer "young in deed" [III. iv. 142-43]. Macbeth enjoys the sense of security of any gangster or tyrant who has the unshrinking will to crush any possible opponents, and who thinks he has power to do so with impunity. All that he has gained, however, is the freedom to commit "every sin that has a name to it" [IV. iii. 59-60].

His delusion is complete; his ruin inevitable. Not until he experiences the bitter fruition of his earthly crown does he discover what has happened to him. Even then, however, he sees only in part; the blindness he suffered when he succumbed to temptation was never to be lightened; and hence the final irony of



a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.

[V. v. 26-8]

In [Nathaniel Hawthorne's] *The Scarlet Letter* when Hester Prynne seeks mercy for Dimmesdale from Roger Chillingworth, the old physician replies: "It is not granted me to pardon. I have no such power as thou tellest me of. My old faith, long forgotten, comes back to me, and explains all that we do, and all we suffer. By thy first step awry thou didst plant the germ of evil: but since that moment, it has all been a dark necessity." So we feel, in part, about Macbeth, since we see him, not as a victim of destiny, but as one responsible for the misery and deaths of others as well as for his own suffering. But in spite of his responsibility we cannot withhold our sympathy from him.

The action of *Macbeth* evokes a somber "there but for the grace of God." We understand but we do not therefore pardon all. Rather we acknowledge the evil and the guilt and so acquiesce in the inevitable retribution, but at the same time we are deeply moved by Macbeth's suffering and ruin because we are acutely aware of the dangerous forces before which he falls, and because we recognize their power over one like ourselves—a moderately good man who succumbs to temptation and who, having succumbed, is led to more evil to make good the first misstep, until there is no chance of withdrawal or escape. As we watch him, we know that he should not have fallen; he might have resisted; but Shakespeare's vision here is of a world in which men can hardly do better amid the forces of circumstance; and in which, if men do no better, they must suffer, and lose not only the world but themselves as well. Of such suffering and loss is tragedy made. (pp. 305-11)

J. Lyndon Shanley, "Macbeth": *The Tragedy of Evil*, in *College English*, Vol. 22, No.5, February, 1961, pp. 305-11.



Critical Essay #4

[Curry examines the Weird Sisters and the precise nature of the evil they embody in Macbeth. The critic argues that Shakespeare's witches are consistent with how Elizabethans envisioned demonic spirits, not as mere hallucinations, but as representatives of an actual evil. Curry also explores the nature of the witches' prophecies in Macbeth, asserting that while their predictions are inherently sinister, only Macbeth can introduce evil into the world by yielding to the temptation of their assertions. The Weird Sisters, the critic continues, represent only one element of the demonic forces which pervade Macbeth; the natural disturbances, Macbeth's visionary dagger, Banquo's ghost, and Lady Macbeth's "demoniacal somnambulism," or sleepwalking episode, are also manifestations of these evil powers. Taken together, Curry declares, these supernatural phenomena in Macbeth represent the Christian perspective of a world full of objective evil.] That the Weird Sisters possess. . . perennial and astounding vitality is attested by the whole sweep of Shakespearean criticism. All hands seem to be convinced that they symbolize or represent evil in its most malignant form, though there is to be found little unanimity of opinion regarding the precise nature of that evil, whether it is subjective or objective or both, whether mental or metaphysical. (pp. 55-6) The single purpose of this study is to examine, as thoroughly as possible, the nature of that evil which the Weird Sisters are said to symbolize or represent, and to reproduce one aspect at least of the metaphysical groundwork of the drama. It presupposes that in Shakespeare's time evil was considered to be both subjective and, so far as the human mind is concerned, a nonsubjective reality; that is to say, evil manifested itself subjectively in the spirits of men and objectively in a metaphysical world whose existence depended in no degree upon the activities of the human mind. This objective realm of evil was not governed by mere vague and irrational forces; it was peopled and controlled by the malignant wills of intelligences-evil spirits, devils, demons, Satan-who had the ability to project their power into the workings of nature and to influence the human spirit. Such a system of evil was raised to the dignity of a science and a theology. (p. 58)

Since. . . this belief was so universal at the time, we may reasonably suppose that Shakespeare's Weird Sisters are intended to symbolize or represent the metaphysical world of evil spirits. Whether one considers them as human witches in league with the powers of darkness, or as actual demons in the form of witches, or as merely inanimate symbols, the power which they wield or represent or symbolize is ultimately demonic. Let us, therefore, exercise wisdom in the contemplation of the nature, power, and illusions of unclean spirits. In the meantime, we may conveniently 'assume that in essence the Weird Sisters are demons or devils in the form of witches. At least their control over the primary elements of nature. . . would seem to indicate as much. Why, then, should Shakespeare have chosen to present upon his stage these witch-likenesses rather than devils in devil-forms? Two equally valid reasons maybe suggested. In the first place, the rather sublime devils and his angels of the earlier drama, opponents of God in the cosmic order and destroyers of men, had degenerated in the hands of later dramatists into mere comic figures; by Shakespeare's time folk



conception had apparently so dominated dramatic practice and tradition that cloven hoof, horns, and tail became associated in the popular imagination only with the ludicrous. . . . In the second place, witches had acquired no such comic associations. They were essentially tragic beings who, for the sake of certain abnormal powers, had sold themselves to the devil. As we have seen, everybody believed in them as channels through which the malignity of evil spirits might be visited upon human beings. Here, then, were terrifying figures, created by a contemporary public at the most intense moment of witchcraft delusion, which Shakespeare found ready to his hand. Accordingly he appropriately employed witch-figures as dramatic symbols, but the Weird Sisters are in reality demons, actual representatives of the world of darkness opposed to good. (pp. 59-61).

[The] Weird Sisters take on a dignity, a dark grandeur, and a terror-inspiring aspect which is in no way native to the witch-symbol as such. In the first place they are clairvoyant in the sense that whatever happens outwardly among men is immediately known to them. In the thunder and lightning of a desert place they look upon the distant battle, in which Macbeth overcomes the King's enemies, and conjecture that it will be lost and won before the day ends. They do not travel to the camp near Forres where Duncan receives news of the battle, but when Macbeth is created Thane of Cawdor they seem to know it instantly. They must be aware that it is Macbeth who murders Duncan, because Hecate berates them for having trafficked with him in affairs of death without her help. All the events of the drama—the murder of Banquo and the escape of Fleance, the striking down of Lady Macduff and her children, Macbeth's accumulating sins and tragic death—must, as they unfold in time, be immediately perceived by these creatures in whom the species of these things are connatural. Moreover, by virtue of their spiritual substance they are acquainted with the causes of things, and, through the application of wisdom gained by long experience, are able to prognosticate future events in relation to Macbeth and Banquo: Macbeth shall be king, none of woman born shall harm him, he shall never be overcome until Birnam wood shall come against him to Dunsinane; Banquo shall be no king, but he shall beget kings. The external causes upon which these predictions are based may to a certain extent be manipulated by these demonic forces: but the internal causes, *i.e.*, the forces which move the will of Macbeth to action, are imperfectly known and only indirectly subject to their influence. They cannot read his inmost thoughts—only God can do that—but from observation of facial expression and other bodily manifestations, they surmise with comparative accuracy what passions drive him and what dark desires of his await their fostering. Realizing that he desires the kingdom, they prophesy that he shall be king, thus arousing his passions and inflaming his imagination to the extent that nothing is but what is not. This influence gained over him is later augmented when they cause to appear before him evil spirits, who condense the air about them into the shapes of an armed Head, a bloody Child, and a crowned Child. These demonic presences materialize to the sound of thunder and seem to speak to him with human voices, suggesting evil and urging him toward destruction with the pronouncement of half-truths. These are illusions created by demonic powers, objective appearances with a sensible content sufficient to arouse his ocular and auditory senses. Indeed, the Weird Sisters are always illusions when they appear as such upon the stage; that is to say, their forms clothe the demonic powers which inform them. This is suggested by the



facility with which they materialize to human sight and disappear. King James suspects that the Devil is able to render witches invisible when he pleases. but these Weird Sisters seem of their own motion to melt into thin air and vanish like a dream. instead of disappearing with the swift movement which characterizes demonic transportation of bodies, they simply fade into nothingness. This suggests that their movements from place to place are not continuous necessarily. Though one of them plans to sail to Aleppo in a sieve. we feel that for the most part they appear in one place at one instant and at another place the next instant, or at whatever time pleases them, without being subject to the laws of time and place. I would not, however, force this point. At any rate, all their really important actions in the drama suggest that they are demons in the guise of witches.

But the witch-appearances constitute only a comparatively small part of the demonic manifestations in *Macbeth*. Many of the natural occurrences and all of the supernatural phenomena may be attributed to the activities of the metaphysical world of evil spirits. Whether visible or invisible these malignant substances insinuate themselves into the essence of the natural world and hover about the souls of men and women; they influence and in a measure direct human thought and action by means of illusions, hallucinations, and inward persuasion. For example, since they are able to manipulate nature's gergens and control the winds, we may reasonably suppose that the storm which rages over Macbeth's castle and environs in Act II is no ordinary tempest caused by the regular movements of the heavenly bodies, but rather a manifestation of demonic power over the elements of nature. Indeed, natural forces seem to be partly in abeyance; o'er the one half-world nature seems dead. A strange, mephitic atmosphere hangs over and pervades the castle and adjacent country-side; an unnatural darkness, for ages the milieu of evil forces, blots out the stars and in the morning strangles the rising sun. Where Lennox liesevidently not far distant-the night is so unruly that chimneys are blown down, lamentings and strange screams of death are heard in the air; and the finn-set earth is so sensitized by the allpervading demonic energy that it is feverous and shakes. Macbeth senses this magnetization, and fears that the very stones will prate of his whereabouts. As the drunken Porter feels, Macbeth's castle is literally the mouth of hell through which evil spirits emerge in this darkness to cause upheavals in nature. Within the span of his seventy years the Old Man has experienced many strange and dreadful things, but they are as trifles in comparison with the occurrences of this rough night. Demonic powers are rampant in nature. (pp. 77-81)

Macbeth's vision of a dagger is an hallucination caused immediately, indeed, by disturbed bodily humours and spirits but ultimately by demonic powers, who have so controlled and manipulated these bodily forces as to produce the effect they desire. And a like explanation may be offered of the mysterious voice which Macbeth seems to hear after the murder, crying exultantly to all the house, 'Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep' [II. ii. 32-3]. (p. 84)

Banquo's ghost is an infernal illusion, created out of air by demonic forces and presented to Macbeth's sight at the banquet in order that the murderer may be confused and utterly confounded. The second appearance of Banquo's ghost, together with the show of eight kings [IV. 1. 112], is undoubtedly the result of demonic machinations.



Having persuaded and otherwise incited Macbeth to sin and crime, the Devil and his angels now employ illusions which lead to his betrayal and final destruction.

And finally, certain aspects of Lady Macbeth's experience indicate that she is possessed of demons. At least, in preparation for the coming of Duncan under her battlements, she calls upon precisely those metaphysical forces which have seemed to crown Macbeth. The murdering ministers whom she invokes for aid are described as being sightless substances, *i.e.*, not evil thoughts and 'grim imaginings' but objective substantial forms, invisible bad angels, to whose activities may be attributed all the unnatural occurrences of nature. Whatever in the phenomenal world becomes beautiful in the exercise of its normal function is to them foul, and *vice versa*; they wait upon nature's mischief. She recognizes that they infest the filthy atmosphere of this world and the blackness of the lower regions; therefore she welcomes a night palled in the dunnest smoke of hell, so dense that not even heaven may pierce the blanket of the dark and behold her projected deed. Her prayer is apparently answered; with the coming of night her castle is, as we have seen, shrouded in just such a blackness as she desires. (pp. 85-6)

What happens to Lady Macbeth in the course of Act IV is not immediately clear. Apparently there is a steady deterioration of her demon-possessed body until, at the beginning of Act V, the organs of her spirit are impaired to the point of imminent dissolution. Such a great perturbation of nature has seized upon her that she walks night after night in slumbry agitation, with eyes wide open but with the senses shut. There appears a definite cleavage in her personality. Her will, which in conscious moments guards against any revelation of her guilty experiences, is submerged; and her infected mind is forced to discharge its secrets in the presence of alien ears. Her symptoms in these circumstances resemble those of the ordinary somnambulist, but the violence of her reactions indicates that her state is what may be called 'somnambuliform possession' or 'demoniacal somnambulism: . . . The most outstanding characteristic of this demoniacal somnambulism, which in the course of history has been more common than any other form of possession, is that the normal individuality disappears and seems to be replaced by a second personality, which speaks through the patient's mouth. This strange individuality always confesses wrong-doing, and sometimes relates a sort of life-history consisting frequently of the patient's reminiscences or memories. Now the physician to Lady Macbeth recognizes these symptoms in his patient. Sometimes, to be sure, he has known those who have walked in their sleep who have died holily in their beds.

But this disease is beyond his practice; this heart sorely charged with perilous stuff needs the divine more than the physician. The demonic substances she welcomed into her body now employ her bodily functions to disclose her criminal experiences. (pp. 89-90)

Shakespeare's age would undoubtedly have pronounced Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking an instance of demoniacal somnambulism. Practically everybody, so far as may be determined, accepted demonic possession as an established fact. The New Testament affirmed it; the Church Fathers had elaborated and illustrated it; the Catholic Church made of it a firm article of faith and proceeded to exorcise demons by means of



recognized rituals involving holy-water and cross, bell, book, and candle; and Protestants could not consistently deny it, or if some of them did, peremptory experience forced them to take a doubtful refuge in the conception of obsession, which produced the effects of possession. . . . Fortunately Shakespeare has spared us, in the case of Lady Macbeth, a representation of the more disgusting physical symptoms of the diabolically possessed, such as astounding contortions of the body and fantastic creations of the delirious mind. He merely suggests these horrors in the report of the Doctor that the Lady is troubled with thick-coming fancies and in the expressed opinion of some that she took her own life by self and violent hands. He is interested primarily in presenting not so much the physical as the spiritual disintegration of this soul-weary creature possessed of devils.

In this manner, it seems to me, Shakespeare has informed *Macbeth* with the Christian conception of a metaphysical world of objective evil. The whole drama is saturated with the malignant presences of demonic forces; they animate nature and ensnare human souls by means of diabolical persuasion, by hallucination, infernal illusion, and possession. They are, in the strictest sense, one element in that Fate which God in his providence has ordained to rule over the bodies and, it is possible, over the spirits of men. And the essence of this whole metaphysical world of evil intelligences is distilled by Shakespeare's imagination and concentrated in those marvellous dramatic symbols, the Weird Sisters. (pp. 91-3)

Walter Clyde Curry, "The Demonic Metaphysics of Macbeth," in his Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns, Louisiana State University Press, 1937, pp. 53-93.



Critical Essay #5

[Driver proposes that Macbeth contains three kinds of time: chronological time, providential time, and Macbeth's time. The critic notes that at a literal level, frequent references to chronological time serve to establish the concrete reality of time in the play. Driver describes providential time as "an expression of social and universal righteousness," a natural order which is initially displaced by Macbeth's evil actions, but which gradually overwhelms the protagonist and re-establishes its position in the universe. Opposed to providential time, the critic contends is Macbeth's view of time, in which he futilely attempts to control the future by separating it from the past. Macbeth ultimately acknowledges his inability to reconcile these two elements of time, the critic concludes. By realizing in his soliloquy in Act V, scene v, that "the mortality of time is followed by. . . man's mortality. "]

In *Macbeth* there are three kinds of time: (1) time measured by clock, calendar, and the movement of sun, moon, and stars, which for the sake of convenience we may call "chronological time"; (2) an order of time which overarches the action of the entire play and which may be called "providential time"; and (3) a time scheme, or an understanding of time, belonging to Macbeth, which may be called "Macbeth's time." (pp. 143-44)

The play contains a very large number of references to chronological time; that is, to the day, the night, or the hour. There is no point in citing all of them, but one example may serve to show the deliberateness with which the hour is sometimes established. Act I, scene vii, in which the resolution to commit the murder of Duncan is made firm, takes place at supper time.

The next scene (II. i) must establish that the hour has come for all to be retired. a matter accomplished in four lines:

BAN. How goest the night, boy?

FLE. The moon is down; I have not heard the clock.

BAN. And she goes down at twelve.

FLE. I take 't, 'tis later, sir.

BAN. Hold, take my sword. There's husbandry in heaven: Their candles are all out.

[II. 1. 1-5]

(p. 145)

In addition to such specific references to time (of which there are many) the play contains a very great number of lines which give merely a sense of time, inducing in the spectator a kind of temporal anxiety. For instance, there is such a large number of speeches employing the words "when," "yet," and "until" that the effect is striking. As an example, the opening lines of the play:



1. WITCH. When shall we three meet again
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?
2. WITCH. When the hurlyburly's done.
When the battle's lost and won.
[I. i. 1-4]

Throughout the play, adverbs of time are important because the weird sisters, at the beginning, put the future into our minds. In scene iv, Macbeth, having learned that two of the prophecies are true, talks with himself about the third:

Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that
function
Is smother'd in surmise. . . .
[I. iii. 137-41]

At the end of the scene he invites Banquo to speak with him "at more time" regarding what has transpired, and arouses our expectations with the concluding phrase, "Till then, enough" [I. iii. 153, 156]. (p. 146)

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare, as usual, is careful in his "imitation" of chronological time. He is not slavish to detail, but he strives for an effect in which the feeling of being in a real world of time is extremely important. Shakespeare's adroit compression of time, his use of a fast and slow scheme of double-time, his concrete references to passing time, and the temporal note diffused throughout the speeches, all locate the audience in a temporal world and prepare it to accept time as a meaningful reality upon which rests much of the imaginative structure of the play.

Connected with chronological time in *Macbeth*, but not equated with it, is providential time, which is to say, time as an expression of social and universal righteousness. (p. 148)

How does Shakespeare communicate the idea of a providential time? In the first place, he assumes an objective, temporal order, distinguished on the one hand from mere chronology and on the other hand from anyone's subjectivity. Early in the play, Duncan sets the order of historical succession:

Sons. kinsmen. thanes,
And you whose places are the nearest.
know We will establish our estate upon Our eldest, Malcolm, whom we name here
after
The Prince of Cumberland; which honor
must Not unaccompanied invest him only. But signs of nobleness, like stars, shall
shine



On all deservers.

[I. iv. 35-42]

Here is the proper relationship of past and future, the historical succession guaranteeing order a passage through the present into what comes "hereafter." To such historical order, Macbeth is immediately thrown into opposition:

MACB. (*Aside*) The Prince of Cumberland!

That is a step

On which I must fall down, or else

o'erleap.

For in my way it lies.

[I. iv. 48-50]

The prophecies of the weird sisters also contribute to an idea of objective time. They provide a sense of destiny, or an order in future events already set. The objectivity of the time they represent would, of course, evaporate if it were admitted that the weird sisters are primarily a symbol of Macbeth's imagination. That they are not. They appear to the audience before they are seen by Macbeth, so that the spectator naturally takes them to have an existence apart from Macbeth. The sisters therefore stand for a knowledge of the future, and the accuracy of their knowledge is confirmed in the unfolding events of the play. After seeing them, the audience harbors a conception of what is *supposed* to happen, which it continually plays off against what it sees taking place.

The weird sisters' first speeches to Macbeth (I. iii) imply a fulfillment of time. "Glarois," "Cawdor," and "King" are not only names designating rank in the Scottish hierarchy, they are also, in this case, expressions of past, present, and future; Macbeth has been thane of Glarois, he this day becomes thane of Cawdor, and he shall "be King hereafter"

[I. iii. 50]. (pp. 149-51)

In Macbeth's second meeting with the weird sisters the temporal note is struck yet more distinctly. Macbeth is given assurance of victory until a certain event ("until / Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him"-[IV. i. 92-4]. Although he does not know it, the moment of his defeat is set. It is noteworthy that he is not given a certain number of days, but rather he is vouchsafed power until certain things shall come to pass. He is actually given a lease which will expire very shortly, while he confidently interprets it to be "the lease of nature" [IV. i. 99]. In this scene also there is a return to the theme of historical continuity. The time which the weird sisters proclaim is partner to the time which Duncan had represented in establishing the historical succession upon his son. The show of eight kings, which is set before Macbeth upon his own insistence to know the future of Banquo's line, implies a continuation of the historical succession through Banquo's descendants as far as the mind can reach:

What. will the line stretch out to th' crack

of doom? Another yet! A seventh! I'll see no more. And yet the eighth appears, who bears a



glass

Which shows me many more.

[IV. i. 117-20]

This vision of the ordering of the future, bringing the constituted authority in a straight line to Shakespeare's new monarch, James I, and on to the rim of time, is a step which Macbeth cannot o'erleap. It is a "horrible sight" [IV. i. 122) and be cause of it Macbeth damns the time in which he stands: "Let this pernicious hour / Stand aye accursed in the calendar!" [IV. i. 133-34). It is possible to see the full reality of providential time only when Macbeth's time is thrown into relief against it. More than one critic has noticed that a change takes place in Macbeth's understanding and experience of time. (pp. 151-52)

Macbeth opposes a more ultimate time than his own. He would "let the frame of things disjoint" [III. ii. 16); he would "jump the life to come" [I. vii. 7); he murders sleep, that daily symbol of man's finitude in time; he destroys the meaning of tomorrow and tomorrow, the ironic consequence of his attempt to control the future.

In his attempt to gain control over the future. . . , Macbeth reveals that his experience of time is compounded of memory and anticipation. In order to gain control of the future, to o'erleap the steps which lie in his way, he must create memories. Memories, the past haunting the present as guilt, reduce Lady Macbeth to her pitiful end. Her "What's done is done" of Act ill [m. ii. 12) later becomes, "What's done cannot be undone" [V. i. 68). It is as a bulwark against memories that Macbeth erects his doctrine of the meaninglessness of life.

Much as he would like, Macbeth cannot separate the present from the past and the future. By the act of murder he has made his own history, and the rest of the play is the account of the fulfillment of that history, ultimately self-defeating. His sin (skillfully portrayed by Shakespeare as a combination of will and temptation) blinds him to the meaning of providential time, while it does not remove him from subordination to it, nor does it remove him from his own inner historical experience. He therefore continues. . . to make use of biblical images of history and human finitude, although entirely without the biblical awareness of grace. The petty pace creeps in "To the last syllable of recorded time" [V. v. 21), a phrase which not only recalls Macbeth's earlier vision of the line which stretches out "to the crack of doom" [IV. i. 117), but which also reflects biblical eschatology. This picture of the mortality of time is followed"by that of man's mortality, sketched in four images: the brief candle, the walking shadow, the strutting and fretting upon the stage, and the tale which is told, each of which has biblical parallels. Even in his final despair. therefore, Macbeth is made to speak of an order of time which he has not been able to destroy, although that had been his hope when he and his Lady stood in what proved to be a completely decisive moment upon the "bank and shoal of time" [I. vii. 6). (pp. 153-54)

Tom F. Driver. "The Uses of Time: The 'Oedipus Tyrannus' and 'Macbeth_' in his The Sense of History in Greek and Shakespearian Drama, Columbia University Press, 1960, pp. 143-67.



Critical Essay #6

[Spender discusses the unsuccessful efforts of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to separate the past, present, and future aspects of time. In the critic's opinion, the couples' happiness depends on their ability to prevent both the anticipated and, later, the remembered murder of Duncan from affecting their present situation. In addition, the critic observes, the "chaos of time" initiated by Duncan's murder pervades Macbeth until Malcolm restores a proper sense of order at the end of the play. Spender concludes his discussion by paralleling the "loss of the sense of time and measure and place" in Macbeth with a similar loss in the modern world.]

I do not know whether any Shakespearean critic has ever pointed out the significant part played by ideas of time in *Macbeth*. One often hears quoted:

Come what may
Time and the hour runs through the
roughest day.
[I. iii. 146-47]

Actually the tragedy of Macbeth is his discovery that this is untrue.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are . . . haunted. . . by the sense of time. After she has received his letter describing the meeting with the witches, Lady Macbeth's first words to her husband are:

Thy letters have transported me beyond
The ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant.
[I. v. 56-8]

Their trouble is though that the future does not exist in the instant. There is another very unpleasant instant preceding it which has to be acted on the murder of Duncan.

In the minds of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth there are, after the prophetic meeting with the weird sisters, three kinds of time: the time before the murder, the time of the murder of Duncan, and the enjoyable time afterwards when they reap the fruits of the murder. Their problem is to keep these three times separate and not to allow them to affect each other. If they can prevent their minds showing the sense of the future before the murder, and of the past, after it, they will have achieved happiness. As soon as the murder has been decided on, Lady Macbeth scents the danger:

Your face, my thane, is as a book where
men
May read strange matters: to beguile the
time.
Look like the time.
[I. v. 62-4]



How little Macbeth succeeds in this, we gather from his soliloquy before the murder:

If it were done-when 'tis done-then
'twere well if it were done quickly: if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and
catch
With his surcease, success: that but this
blow Might be the be-all and the end-all here, But here upon this bank and shoal of
time,
We'd jump the life to come. But in these
cases
We still have judgement here; that we but
teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught,
return
To plague th' inventor.
[I. vii. 1-10]

Macbeth certainly has good reason to fear 'evenhanded justice' [I. vii. 10]. But, I think, the second part of this speech is only a rationalization of his real fear, as unconvincing in its way as Hamlet's reasons against self-murder. The real fear is far more terrible: it is a fear of the extension into infinity of the instant in which he commits the murder. 'The bank and shoal of time' is time that has stood still; beyond it lies the abyss of a timeless moment.

He loses his nerve, but Lady Macbeth rallies him:
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. 49-54]

She forces his mind upon the conjunction of time and place which may never occur again. They never do, indeed, recur. The murder of Banquo is ill-timed, Malcolm escapes, everything is botched, and Macbeth swears that after this he will carry out those crimes which are the 'firstlings of his heart' [IV. i. 147].

The soliloquy in which Macbeth sees the dagger before him is the first of his hallucinations. Yet the delusion is not complete. He is able to dismiss it from his mind, and he does so by fixing down the time and place, in order to restore his mind to sanity.



There's no such thing:

It is the bloody season which informs Thus to mine eyes. Now o'er the one half world

Nature seems dead.

[II. i. 47-50)

He reminds himself of the exact time of night, and this calms him. He invokes the hour, and he invokes the place, with a reason: to relegate this moment preceding the murder to the past from which it cannot ever escape into a future. As some people say, 'I will remember this moment for the rest of my life,' Macbeth tries to say, 'I will uproot this moment from my memory.'

Thou sure and firm-set earth,

Hear not my steps, which way they walk,
for fear

Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts,

And take the present horror from the time Which now suits with it.

[II. i. 56-60]

He is more afraid of the associations of the stones than any evidence they may actually reveal to living witnesses.

Immediately after the murder we are left in no doubt that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have failed in their main purpose of killing in memory the moment of the murder itself.

Macbeth tells his wife how he could not say 'Amen' to the prayer of the man in his sleep. 'Amen' is the conclusion of prayer, which is inconcludable. 'Methought I heard a voice cry, "Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep"' [II. ii. 32-3].

There is no 'Amen' nor night of sleep which will ever end that moment which opens wider and wider as the play proceeds. Macbeth's speech in the next scene is a naïf deception, which happens also to be the truth wrung from his heart:

Had I but [died] an hour before this
chance,

I had lived a blessed time.

[II. iii. 91-2]

With this he tries to fob off his followers. Mean while, one is left in some doubt as to Lady Macbeth's state of mind. The Sleepwalking scene is a shocking revelation which shows that the moment when she smeared the faces of the grooms has died no more for her than has the murder for Macbeth.

'Here's the smell of blood still' (V. i. 50). The ailment of indestructible time is revealed by Macbeth to the doctor:

Canst thou not minister to a mind dis-
eased;



Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow;
Raze out the written troubles of the brain;
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff bosom of the perilous
stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?
[V. iii. 40-5]

Thus, after the murder the past comes to life again and asserts itself amid the general disintegration. An old man appears on the stage to compare the horrors of the past with the monstrosities of the present. Ross says:

By the clock 'tis day,
And yet dark night strangles the travelling
lamp.
[II. iv. 6-7]

The present disgorges the past. The horror of not being able to live down his deeds is symbolized by the appearance of Ban quo's ghost. Macbeth looks back on a time when the past was really past and the present present:

The time has been
That, when the brains were out, the man
would die.
And there an end.
[III. iv. 77-9)

There is no end within the control of Macbeth. In the fourth act, we even have a feeling that everything has stopped. The play seems to spread out, burning up and destroying a wider and wider area, without moving forward.

'To-morrow, and to-morrow and to-morrow' [V. v. 19-28] is not merely the speech of a disillusioned tyrant destroyed by the horror which he has himself created; it has a profound irony, coming from Macbeth's mouth, because he of all people ought to have been able to make to-morrow different from to-day and yesterday. But all his violence has done is to create a deathly sameness. This view of *Macbeth* struck me as I was reading it recently. The only doubt in my mind was whether the last speech in the play would bear out my theory that it was time which, even more than in *Hamlet*, had got out of joint in *Macbeth*. This is what Malcolm says to the lords who have rebelled against the tyrant:

We shall not spend a large expense of time
Before we reckon with your several loves
And make us even with you. . . .
What's more to do,
Which would be planted newly with the
time.. .
We will perform in measure, time, and



place.
[V. ix. 26-39]

The emphasis of Malcolm is on time and measure and place, which he is restoring.

Macbeth is naturally the play of Shakespeare's to which we are most likely to turn if we look for parallels with the present. It is impossible to read the lines beginning 'Our country sinks beneath the yoke; It weeps, it bleeds' [IV. iii. 38-9], without thinking of half a dozen countries under the yoke of a tyrant. It is impossible not to wonder whether modern tyrants are haunted by their Banquos, and surrounded by a sense of gloomy waking nightmare. But the instruments of justice are weaker than in Shakespeare's time; the consciences of men, brought up on an inverted philosophy of materialism, are not so tender, or so superstitious perhaps. The loss of the sense of time and measure and place, the past rising in solemn visions and portents in the midst of the present, the sense of endless waiting and of time standing still in the midst of the most violent happenings; these provide deeper parallels.

In his book *Pain, Time and Sex*, Gerald Heard claims that man has reached a stage in his evolution in which he has to take a great and decisive step forward which would involve revising not only his social institutions but also his whole conception of the meaning of life. A tyranny, a murder, and a great decision at the end, are the plot of *Macbeth*. The chaos of time, the sense of being haunted by past examples, is connected not only with the tyranny, but also with the decision. The strange scene between Malcolm and Macduff in which Malcolm recites all the vices of past kings and declares that he embodies them; and then contradicts himself and stands forth in his virginity; this is a ranking of all the forces of evil against the forces of the good; and the decision is for the good.

But Malcolm is a restorer, not a revolutionary or an innovator. He takes it for granted that the strange confusion of time that has opened out in *Macbeth* is wrong. It is here that the parallel of our own day with Shakespeare fades. It is even possible that in a sense the stage which we have reached is an advance on Shakespeare. We are living in an age of chaos and confusion, but we cannot go back, we have to go forward. It may be then that the very disorder may show us the way out of our confusion. Our loss of the sense of the continuity of time may give us an entirely new idea of time within which it will be possible to establish a new kind of order. We cannot dismiss the dreams and hallucinations of art in our time as a sign of decadence and of an end. They may be an end; on the other hand, they may be the beginning of something. We only know that we do not exist to restore a past, but to create a future which embodies the greatness of the past. (pp. 120-26)

Stephen Spender, "Books and the War-II." in The Penguin New Writing. No.3, February. 1941, pp. 115-26.



Critical Essay #7

[Ramsey argues that one of the organizing themes of Macbeth is that of manliness. Furthermore, the critic maintains, the more Macbeth pursues his ideal of manliness, the less humane he becomes, until he at last forfeits humanity, only to realize that his concept of manhood is worthless. Ramsey then explores Lady Macbeth's repudiation of gender and her cruel questioning of Macbeth's manhood in an attempt to turn his wavering over Duncan's murder into determination. According to the critic, the upshot of this "incredible mixture of insinuation and bullying is that Macbeth is forced to accept a concept of manliness that consists wholly in rampant self-seeking aggression." Even after Macbeth murders Duncan, the critic contends, he continues to distance himself from humaneness by ruthlessly pursuing this vision of manliness. Ramsey also examines the interview between Malcolm and Macduff in Act IV, scene iii, noting that their emphasis on manhood reflects Shakespeare's notion that to "purge Scotland of Macbeth's diseased 'manliness,' the forces of right and order must to some extent embrace that inhuman code. Ramsey concludes his analysis by observing that the swift recovery of the audience's pity for the hero represents one of Shakespeare's greatest manipulations of tone. Unlike the Scottish soldiers who celebrate Macbeth's execution at the end of the play, the critic maintains, we who have been privy to his inner turmoil as he heads toward his ruin sympathize with his tragic downfall.]

One of the organizing themes of *Macbeth* is the theme of manliness: the word (with its cognates) echoes and re-echoes through the scenes, and the play is unique for the persistence and subtlety with which Shakespeare dramatizes the paradoxes of self-conscious "manhood." In recoiling from Macbeth's outrageous kind of manliness, we are prompted to reconsider what we really mean when we use the word in praising someone. Macbeth's career may be described in terms of a terrible progressive disjunction between the manly and the humane. In any civilized culture—even among the samurai, Macbeth's counterparts in feudal Japan—it would be assumed that the first set of values is complementary to and subsumed in the second. But, as he so often does, Shakespeare exposes with memorable clarity the dangers of such a comfortable assumption: the more Macbeth is driven to pursue what he and Lady Macbeth call manliness—the more he perverts that code into a rationale for reflexive aggression—the less humane he becomes, until at last he forfeits nearly all claims on the race itself, and his vaunted manhood, as he finally realizes, becomes meaningless.

After the play begins with the three witches promising a general season of inversion—"Fair is foul, and foul is fair" [1. 1. 1]—in 1. i., the human action commences with the arrival of a wounded sergeant at Duncan's camp: "What bloody man is that?" [1. ii. 1]. The sergeant's gore, of course, is emblematic of his valor and hardihood and authorizes his praise of Macbeth himself, "valor's minion"—and it also betokens his vulnerable humanity, his mortal consanguinity with the King and the rest of his nation, which he like Macbeth is loyally risking to preserve. These are traditional usages, of course, and they are invoked here at the beginning as norms which Macbeth will subsequently disjoin from each other and pervert. That process of disjunction begins in



Scene v when Lady Macbeth contemplates her husband's hereto fore humane character against what the coming on of time might bring:

It is too full O' the milk of human kindness To catch the nearest way. 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.
[I. v. 17-22]

Greatness must be divorced from goodness, highness of estate from holiness, "the nearest way" from "human kindness" -with, as usual, a serious Shakespearian play on *kindness*: charity, and fel lowship in the race. And then, carrying the process to its logical end, Lady Macbeth ritually prepares herself for the deed her husband must commit by calling on The spirits of murder first to divest her of all vestiges of womanliness-"unsex me here" [I. v. 41]-with the implication that she will be left with male virtues only; and then to nullify her "kind-ness" itself: "Make thick my blood, / Stop up the access and passage to remorse, / That no compunctious visitings of nature / Shake my fell purpose" [I. v. 43-6].

In his great agonized soliloquy while Duncan is at dinner, the object of this dire rehearsal sternly reminds himself that he owes the King a "double trust," as subject to his monarch, and, on the basis of kindness again, simply as host to his guest. He then clinches the argument by conjuring up that strange image of "pity, like a naked newborn babe / Striding the blast" [I. vii. 21-2]-strange indeed for the battle hero, so recently ruthless in his king's behalf, to embrace this vision of an ultimate object of human pity. The sexless naked babe is the antithesis of himself, of course, as the manly military cynosure: and Macbeth's failure to identify with his own cautionary emblem is foretold, per haps, in the incongruously strenuous postures of the babe: "*striding* the blast," "*horsed* / Upon the sightless couriers of the air" [I. vii. 22-3].

At any rate, Lady Macbeth enters and makes short work of her husband's virtuous resolution. The curious thing about her exhortation is that its rhetorical force is almost wholly negative. Dwelling hard lyat all on the desirability of Duncan's throne, she instead cunningly premises her arguments on doubts about Macbeth's manly virtue. All of his previous military conquests and honors in the service of Duncan will be meaningless unless he now seizes the chance to crown that career by killing the king. And, striking more ruthlessly at him, she scornfully implies that his very sexuality will be called into question in her eyes if he refuses the regicide- "From this time / Such I account thy love" [I. vii. 38-9]. When Macbeth sullenly retorts, "I dare do all that may become a man, / Who dares do more is none" [I. vii. 46-7], he gives Lady Macbeth the cue she needs to begin the radical transvaluation of his code of manliness that will lead to his ruin. As Robert Heilman has observed about this and other plays [in "Manliness in the Tragedies: Dramatic Variations," in *Shakespeare 15641964*, ed. Edward A. Bloom], the psychic forces concentrated in that code are all the more potent for being ill-defined;



and in the scene at hand, Lady Macbeth's onslaught against Macbeth-coming from a woman, after all, his sexual partner-is virtually unanswerable:

What beast was it 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. . . .
[I. vii. 47-51]

Against Macbeth's stem but theoretical retort that he will perform only that which becomes a man, and no more, she replies that, on the contrary, by his own manly standards he will be a dull-spirited beast, no man, if he withdraws from the plot.

Then, with a truly fiendish cunning she goes on to tie up all the strands of her argument in a single violent image, the murder of her own nursing infant. In this, of course, she re-enacts for Macbeth her earlier appeal for a strategic reversal of sex the humiliating implication being that she would be more truly masculine in her symbolic act than he can ever be. And in offering to dash out the brains of "the babe that milks me" [I. vii. 55], in effect she ritually murders the naked babe of pity that Macbeth has just summoned up as a tutelary spirit. The upshoot of this incredible mixture of insinuation and bullying is that Macbeth is forced to accept a concept of manliness that consists wholly in rampant self-seeking aggression. True masculinity has nothing to do with those more gentle virtues men are supposed to share with women as members of their kind; these are for women alone, as Lady Macbeth's violent rejections of her own femaleness prove. When she has finished the exhortation, Macbeth can only respond with a kind of over-mastered tribute to her ferocity, which would be more proper in him-"Bringforth men children only, / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males" [I. vii. 72-4].

When the murder of Duncan is discovered, Macbeth betters his wife's instructions to "make our griefs and clamors roar / Upon his death" [I. vii. 78-9], and slays the grooms outright, before they can talk. Even in his state of grief and shock, the humane Macduff is astonished at this new burst of violence-"Wherefore did you so?" [II. iii. 107]and, in a speech that verges steadily towards hysteria, Macbeth explains that he slew the grooms in a reflex of outraged allegiance and love for his murdered king. It is the praiseworthy savage and ruthless Macbeth of recent military fame who is supposed to be talking: his appeal is to a code of manly virtue he has already perverted. "Who can be wise, amazed, temperate, and furious, / Loyal and neutral, in a moment? *No man*" [II. iii. 108-09]. The speech runs away with itself, but after Lady Macbeth's timely collapse, Macbeth collects his wits and calls for an inquest: "Let's briefly put on manly readiness, / And meet in the hall together" [II. iii. 133-34]. "Manly" here, of course, means one thing-vengeful self-control-to the others, and something else-the ability to be crafty and dissemble-to Macbeth.



In Act III, confirming Hecate's later observation that "security / Is mortals' chief est enemy" [iii. v. 32-3]-or in this case the vexing lack of it-King Macbeth seeks to be "safely thus" by killing Banquo and cutting off his claims on the future in Fleance. Macbeth's exhortation to the three murderers is an instance of the general principle of repetition and re-enactment that governs the entire drama and helps give it its characteristic quality of compulsive and helpless action. Macbeth begins his subornation by identifying for the murderers the very same grievance against Banquo he has just named for himself

Do you find
Your patience so predominant in your nature
That you can let this go? Are you so gospelled,
To pray for this good man and for his
issue,
Whose heavy hand hath bowed you to the
grave
And beggared yours forever?
[III. i. 85-90]

When the First Murderer retorts ambiguously, just as Macbeth has earlier to Lady Macbeth, "We are men, my liege" [iii. i. 90], the King twists this appeal from an undefined code of manliness exactly as his wife taught him to do in I. vii

Aye, in the catalogue ye go for men,
As hounds and greyhounds, mongrels,
spaniels, curs,
Shoughs, water rugs, and demiwolves are
clept
All by the name of dogs.
[III. i. 91-4]

In protesting that he and his fellows are *men*, the First Murderer means that they are as capable of moral indignation and of violent response to wrongs "as the next man." But Macbeth, like his wife before him, undermines this position by declaring that this hardly qualifies them as men or even as humans, except in the merely zoological sense. There is simply no intrinsic distinction, no fundamental basis of identity to be had in declaring one's male gender and beyond this one's membership in the human race. What Macbeth in the next scene refers to as "that great bond / Which keeps me pale" [iii. ii. 49-50], that shared humanity deeper than sex or class denoted in the cry "Man overboard," is here pronounced to be a mere figment, valid neither as a source of positive virtue nor as the ultimate basis of moral restraint. "Real men" (the argument is old and has its trivial as well as its tragic motives) will prove their manhood in violently self-assertive action: Macbeth is, in a sense, talking here to himself, still answering his wife's aspersions. Those aspersions return to haunt him-along with Banquo's ghost-in the banquet scene. As he recoils from the bloody apparition, Lady Macbeth hisses, predictably, "Are you a man?" and his shaky reply, "Aye, and a bold one, that dare look upon that / Which might appall the Devil" [iii. iv. 57-9], she mocks with another



insinuation that under duress he is womanish. One thinks of Goneril's sneer at Albany, "Marry, your manhood! Mew!" [*King Lear*, IV. ii. 68], but Lady Macbeth's humiliating slur is a continuation of her strategy of negative exhortation Oh, these flaws and starts,

Imposters to true fear, would well become
A woman's story at a winter's fire
Authorized by her grandam. Shame itself!
[III. iv. 62-5]

When the ghost reappears, Macbeth in a frenzy "quite unmanned" recapitulates as if by rote everything he has heard against his manliness. Once more there is the dubious appeal to a perverted code—"What man dare, I dare" [iii. iv. 98]. And then follows the references to beasts, here prefiguring Macbeth's own fall from humaneness to bestiality—the beasts he names *would be* fitting adversaries:

Approach thou like the rugged Russian
bear,
The armed rhinoceros, or the Hyrcan tiger,
Take any shape but that and my firm
nerves
Shall never tremble.
[III. iv. 99-102]

and then an almost pathetic desire to prove himself in single combat, like the old Macbeth: "Or to be alive again, / And dare me to the desert with thy sword" [III. iv. 102-03], and finally a humiliating comparison, worthy of his wife, to the antithesis of manliness: "If trembling I inhabit then, protest me / The baby of a girl" [III. iv. 104-05].

This harrowing scene concludes with Macbeth now isolated not just in his crimes from his peers but in his hallucination from Lady Macbeth brooding on the emblematic meanings of blood: the gore of regicide and homicide, of retribution in the name of human blood—ties he had denied. The "bloody man" of the first scenes, whose wounds, like Macbeth's, were public tokens of his manly courage and valor, is now succeeded wholly in the play's imagery by "the secret'st man of blood" [III. iv. 125].

The final step in the degeneration of Macbeth's manliness comes in Act IV when he appears before the witches demanding to know his manifest future more certainly. The first of the prophetic apparitions, an "Armed Head,"_ is suggestive both of the traitor Macdonwald's fate and of Macbeth's own gruesome final appearance; the second apparition, a bloody child, points backward to the "naked newborn babe" of pity and to Lady Macbeth's hypothetically murdered child, and ahead to the slaughter of Macduff's children, as well as to Macduff himself, Macbeth's nemesis, who was from his mother's side "untimely ripped."_ With a fearsome irony, the prophecy of the second apparition, an object of pity, serves to release Macbeth from all basic humane obligations to his fellows. If "none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" [IV. i. 80-1], then he need recognize no common denominators either of origin or of mortal vulnerability with his kind, and nothing in the name of "kind-ness" can interfere, it seems, with the perfection



of his monstrous "manliness." "Be bloody, bold, and resolute, laugh to scorn / The power of man" [IV. i. 79-80].

The pageant of Banquo's lineage and the bad news of Macduff's flight to England, which follow immediately according to the breakneck pace of this play, only serve to confirm Macbeth in his new freedom from all kindness: henceforth, beginning with the slaughter of Macduff's family, he will act unconstrained either by moral compunction or by reason. "From this moment / The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand" [IV. i. 146-47]. So, having earlier remarked, ominously, that "Returning were as *tedious* as go o'er" [III. iv. 137], and having just witnessed a seemingly endless procession of Scottish kings in Banquo's line, he now enters fully into what can be termed the doom of reflex and repetition, in which Lady Macbeth, with her hellish somnambulism, shares. At this point in the play, as he so often does in the histories and tragedies, Shakespeare widens our attention beyond the fortunes of the principals; we are shown the cruel effects of such villainous causes, and much of the action on this wider stage parallels and ironically comments on the central scenes. The evils of Macbeth's epoch are dramatized in a peculiarly poignant way, for example, in IV. ii., when Lady Macduff denounces her virtuous husband to their son for what seems to her to be Macduff's unmanly, even inhuman abandonment of his family. It is a strange twisted version of Lady Macbeth's harangue and her husband's responses earlier; there is the inevitable appeal to an assumed human nature, and even the by-now-familiar comparison of man and beast

He loves us not,
He wants the natural touch. For the poor
wren, The most diminutive of birds, will fight, Her young ones in her nest. against the
owl.
[IV. ii. 8-11]

And this poor woman, who fears her husband lacks that milk of human kindness that Lady Macbeth deplores in *her* spouse, ends her life with a terrible commentary on the badness of the times, in which to protest one's innocence is accounted mere womanish folly. Macbeth's reign of "manliness" prevails: "Why, then, alas, / Do I put up that womanly defense, / To say I have done no harm?" [IV.ii. 77-9]. This lament assumes a really dreadful irony in the next scene when Ross assures Malcolm in Macduff's presence that "your eye in Scotland / Would create soldiers, make our women fight / To doff their dire distress" [IV. iii. 186-88].

In this next scene, before Macduff learns of the sacrifice he has made to his patriotism, he labors to persuade young Malcolm to lead an army of "good men" in the liberation of Scotland. For the first time since the opening scenes, a concept of manly virtue that is alternative to Macbeth's is broached; it is, of course, the code that Macbeth himself once served so valorously. Malcolm shrewdly responds to the invitation with a remarkable double test of Macduff as the emissary of the Scottish loyalists—first and directly of his honesty and allegiance (is he really only another assassin sent by Macbeth?), and second and indirectly of the depth and quality of that allegiance. By representing himself vice by vice as a monster even more depraved than Macbeth, by



forcing a disjunction of patriotism from morality, the politic Malcolm can determine the exact limits of Macduff's offered support. As King he could not, presumably, accept an allegiance so desperate and indiscriminant that it would ignore the total viciousness he paints himself with. (pp. 286-94)

Given Macduff's straightforward soldierly goodness, his fervent hopes for his country, and his growing apprehensions (which Malcolm plays on) about the family he has left at the mercy of the tyrant, it is a deeply cruel if necessary test, one that the unhappy patriot must painfully "fail" in order to pass. In its tone and in the logic of its placement, the entire scene in London is analogous to that remarkable sequence of scenes in [2 *Henry IV*] Hal's oblique denunciation of Poin and other small beer [II. ii], Lady Percy's denunciation of Northumberland [II. iii], and Hal and Poin's spying on and rather brutal exposure of Falstaff [II. iv]. There, as here, a persistent cruelty between allies seems to signal the beginnings of a drastic homeopathic cure of the whole diseased nation. In *Macbeth*, this homeopathy takes a predictable form: in order to purge Scotland of Macbeth's diseased "manliness," the forces of right and order must to some extent embrace that inhuman code. As Macduff collapses under the news of his family's slaughter, Malcolm exhorts him to convert his grief and guilt without delay into "manly" vengeful rage: "Be comforted. Let's make us medicines of our great revenge / To cure this deadly grief. . . .

Dispute it like a man." To which advice Macduff cries back, "I shall do so, But I must feel it like a man" [IV. iii. 214-15; 220-21]. Nowhere in the play is there a more cruel disjunction of the moral claims on "Man", between a narrow code of manliness, and a general "natural" humaneness. Soon Macduff is driven into that familiar harsh polarization according to sex of human feelings that should belong to the race as a whole: "Oh I could play the woman with mine eyes" [IV. iii. 230]. In other circumstances, Macduff would be profoundly unworthy of his manhood if he could not feel and show his losses, and Malcolm's impatient urgings would simply be intolerable. As it is, if his strategy is cruelly necessary, there is an unpleasant note of politic satisfaction in his endorsement of Macduff's wrenching of private grief into public wrath, the wrath, after all, that will place Malcolm on the throne: he says, briskly, "This tune goes manly" [IV. iii. 235]. As Edmund says to the murderer of Cordelia in a very different context, "men / Are as the times is" [*King Lear*, V. iii. 30-1]: the reformers, it seems, to a considerable degree, as well as the evildoers. Whatever his kingly virtues otherwise, it seems clear that Malcolm will never rule Scotland with the simple graciousness and humane trust of a Duncan. The times forbid it; Macbeth's savage reign requires that he be succeeded by a king of cold blood and clear mind who stands with that Shakespearean company distinguished by "little love but much policy" [cf. *Richard II*, V. 1. 84]. . . .

In the concluding scenes, while Macbeth betrays his special preoccupations by referring to "the *boy* Malcolm" and abusing his servant as "lily-livered *boy*", [V. iii. 2,15] Malcolm has, we are told, enlisted the support of a whole generation of untried "boys" whose valorous service in his great cause will "Protest their first of manhood" [V. ii. 11]. Young Siward is their leader, and his subsequent brave, fatal encounter with Macbeth is recognized by all as evidence of a resurgent true manliness in Scotland, based (as Macbeth's conduct was at the beginning!) on selflessness and heroic violence in the



cause of right and justice. Old Siward refuses to allow Malcolm to lionize his dead son beyond the simple terms of Ross's eulogy:

He only lived but till he was a man,
The which no sooner had his prowess con-
firmed
In the unshrinking station where he
fought
But like a man he died.
[V. ix. 6-9]

The larger questions in this familiar declaration of praise—"What *is* a man? What should he be? What standards of manhood?" are begged, as they were in the beginning of Macbeth's story: indeed, there is again the existentialistic implication that man's nature is not an *a priori* [presumptive] constant but rather an evolving and unstable set of possibilities. But if young Siward's kind of manliness is seen in the context of the story as being ambiguous, volatile, capable of hideous perversions as well as of glories, it is nonetheless offered to us dramatically as the only moral alternative in the play. In the familiar Shakespearan manner, a hypothetical code has been realistically *tested* in action for us as viewers—not merely nullified and replaced with another set of unexamined verities. No one would deny that young Siward has indeed achieved a form of manhood—but the structure of the play allows us to cherish no illusions about that kind of achievement.

The swift resurgence of a measure of sympathy for Macbeth in the last scenes has always been recognized as one of Shakespeare's most brilliant manipulations of tone. As Wayne Booth [see excerpt in section on Macbeth's character] and others have demonstrated, it is based upon our almost insupportable intimacy with Macbeth—we know him as no one in his own world does—and upon the terrible imaginative fullness of his knowledge of his crimes, if not of the effects of those crimes on himself. What triggers an access of sympathy in the final scenes is chiefly his return to a semblance of direct, uncomplex action, "we'll die with harness on our back," [V. v. 51] so painfully suggestive of the old Macbeth. But now he is champion of nothing human or humane; he must "try the last" [V. viii. 32] in utter alienation from the community of men, which in some other life would have granted him, as to any man, "that which should accompany old age, / As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends" [V. iii. 24-5]. At the last, all the invidious comparisons of earlier scenes between men and beasts come due as he feels himself reduced to the state of a solitary animal in a bear-baiting: "bearlike I must fight the course" [V. vii. 1-2].

Nowhere is Macbeth's alien condition more starkly revealed than at the moment of his wife's death in Scene v. As he and his followers doubtfully parade on stage with banners and prepare for the siege of Dunsinane, there comes a "cry of women" offstage [s.d., V. v. 7]. It is a hair-raising stroke of theater, worthy of the Greeks: at the death of the ambitious wife who would have unsexed herself to provoke her husband into forgetting his ties with humanity, the women of Dunsinane raise the immemorial voice of their sex in grief and sympathy, so long banished from Scotland. It is as if a spell is broken; all the



deaths in the play are bewailed, those of the victims as well as that of the murderess-but so barren is Macbeth now of humane feeling that it takes Seyton to tell him that what he has heard is "the cry of women" [V. v. 8], and when he learns it is his own wife who has died, he can only shrug wearily over what he cannot feel, and then lament a life devoid of all human meaning: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" [V. v. 19]. After a brutal career of striving "manfully" to impose his own consequentiality upon the future, Macbeth now foresees a future of mere repetitive subsequence-"time and the hour" do *not* "run through the roughest day" but are stuck fast in it [I. iii. 148]. The First Witch's curse against the Master of the *Tiger*. "I shall drain him dry as hay" [I. iii. 18], has come true in Macbeth's soul.

Yet it is still a human soul, and in the last scene Shakespeare seems to take pains to enforce our unwilling rediscovery of that fact. Confronted at last by Macduff, Macbeth recoils momentarily with an unwonted remorse: "get thee back, my soul is too much charged / With blood of thine already" [V. viii. 5-6]. And when he perceives that Macduff is the object of the witches' equivocation, the mortal man Fate has chosen to be its instrument against him, Macbeth gains the last and fullest fragment of tragic knowledge the dramatist grants him in this tragedy of limited and helpless knowledge. Though he confesses that Macduff's revelation "hath cowed my better part of man" [V. viii. 18] meaning the reckless, savage manhood he has embraced-the insight itself suggests a step back towards the common human condition and its "great bond:"

be these juggling fiends no more
believed

That palter with us in a double sense, That keep the word of promise to our ear
And break it to our hope. I'll not fight with
thee.

[V. viii. 19-221

The plurality of these pronouns is more than royal: having already extrapolated from his own ruin to a nihilistic view of all human life in the "tomorrow" speech, Macbeth here generalizes validly for the human race at large. Fate is enigmatic to us all; it is, he realizes too late, one of the immutable common denominators of our condition; no career of rampant "manly" self-assertion can hope to circumvent or control it.

In this frame of mind, then, at least tenuously reawakened to the circumstances binding him to his race, Macbeth is roused by Macduff's threat that he will be exhibited ', 'as our rarer monsters are" if captured alive [V. viii. 25], and hurls himself into single combat for the first time since he was "valor's minion," There is no more question of redemption than of escape, of course, as Macbeth himself knows: but who would deny a stirring of fellow-feeling at this spectacle of a single mortal man actively facing his mortality, "trying the last" [cf. V. viii 32]? When Macduff reappears bearing Macbeth's severed head, and Malcolm triumphantly announces his succession to "this dead butcher and his fiendlike queen" [V. ix. 35], it seems impossible to deny the sense of a dramatic imbalance between the claims of justice and those of humaneness. We know Macbeth far better than do any of the Scottish worthies who celebrate his gruesome death; we have been privy to all the steps of his ruin: the tragic paradox in his nature is that the



medium of his degeneration-his extraordinary imaginative susceptibility-is also the medium of our never wholly suspended empathy with him. Such is the main thrust of these concluding scenes: they reveal Macbeth to us as a monster of degenerate "manliness"-but as a human monster for all that. The circle of human sympathy and *kindness*, broken by Macbeth's career of regicide and slaughter, is re-formed: narrowly and vengefully, on-stage; broadly and with a heavy sense of man's undefinable limits and capabilities, in the audience. (pp. 295-99)

Jarold Ramsey, "The Perversion of Manliness in 'Macbeth'," in Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900, Vol XIII, No.2, Spring, 1973, pp. 285-300.



Critical Essay #8

[Muir analyzes various image patterns in *Macbeth*. The first pattern the critic examines is that of babies and breast-feeding. According to Muir, infants symbolize pity throughout the play, and breast-milk represents "humanity, tenderness, sympathy, natural human feelings, [and] the sense of kinship, all of which have been outraged by the murderers. "Another group of images focuses on sickness and medicine, all of which occur, significantly, in the last three acts of the play, after *Macbeth* has ascended the throne. Images of sickness, the critic contends, signify the "disease of tyranny" which has infected Scotland, and which can only be cured by "bleeding or purgation. " Muir also observes a contrast between the powers of light and darkness in *Macbeth*. Darkness pervades all the action in *Macbeth*'s world, whereas light manifests itself in the scenes in England and those in which Malcolm and Macduff restore order at the end of the play. Other dualities related to the light/dark motif include contrasts between angel and devil, heaven and hell, and truth and falsehood. Muir briefly discusses several other image patterns in *Macbeth*, focusing especially on blood, sleep and sleeplessness, and order versus disorder.] The total meaning of [*Macbeth*] depends on a complex of interwoven patterns and the imagery must be considered in relation to character and structure.

One group of images to which Cleanth Brooks called attention [in his *The Well-Wrought Urn*] was that concerned with babes. It has been suggested by Muriel C. Bradbrook that Shakespeare may have noticed in the general description of the manners of Scotland included in Holinshed's *Chronicles* that every Scotswoman 'would take intolerable pains to bring up and nourish her own children' [*Shakespeare Survey* 4 (1951)]; and H. N. Paul pointed out that one of the topics selected for debate before James 1, during his visit to Oxford in the summer of 1605, was whether a man's character was influenced by his nurse's milk [*The Royal Play of 'Macbeth'*].

Whatever the origin of the images in *Macbeth* relating to breast-feeding, Shakespeare uses them for a very dramatic purpose. Their first appearance is in Lady Macbeth's invocation of the evil spirits to take possession of her:

Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring
ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief.
[I. v. 47-50]

They next appear in the scene where she incites Macbeth to the murder of Duncan:

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.
[I. vii. 54-9]

In between these two passages, Macbeth himself, debating whether to do the deed, admits that

Pity, like a naked new-born babe
Striding the blast,
[I. vii. 21-2]

would plead against it; and Lady Macbeth, when she first considers whether she can persuade her husband to kill Duncan, admits that she fears his nature:

It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way.
[I. v. 17-18]

Later in the play, Malcolm, when he is pretending to be worse even than Macbeth, says that he loves crime:

Nay, had I pow'r, I should
Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell, Uproar the universal peace, confound
All unity on earth.
[IV. iii. 97-100]

In these passages the babe symbolizes pity, and the necessity for pity, and milk symbolizes human ity, tenderness, sympathy, natural human feel ings, the sense of kinship, all of which have been outraged by the murderers. Lady Macbeth can nerve herself to the deed only by denying her real nature; and she can overcome Macbeth's scruples only by making him ignore his feelings of human kindness-his kinship with his fellow-men. Cleanth Brooks suggests therefore that it is appro priate that one of the three apparitions should be a bloody child, since Macduff is converted into an avenger by the murder of his wife and babes. On one level, the bloody child stands for Macduff: on another level, it is the naked new-born babe whose pleadings Macbeth has ignored. Helen Gardner took Cleanth Brooks to task for considering these images in relation to one another. She argued that in his comments on 'Pity, like a naked new-born babe' [I. vii. 21] he had sacrificed a Shakespearian depth of human feeling. . . by attempting to interpret an image by the aid of what associations it happens to arouse in him, and by being more interested in making symbols of babes fit each other than in listening to what Macbeth is saying. *Macbeth* is a tragedy and not a melodrama or a symbolic drama of retribution. The reappearance of 'the babe symbol' in the apparition scene and in Macduff's revelation of his birth has distracted the critic's attention from what deeply moves the imagination and the conscience in this vision of a whole world weeping at the inhumanity of helplessness betrayed and innocence and beauty destroyed. It is the



judgment of the human heart that Macbeth fears here, and the punishment which the speech foreshadows is not that he will be cut down by Macduff, but that having murdered his own humanity he will enter a world of appalling loneliness, of meaningless activity, unloved himself, and unable to love. [*The Business of Criticism*]

Although this is both eloquent and true, it does not quite dispose of Brooks's interpretation of the imagery. Miss Gardner shows that elsewhere in Shakespeare, 'a cherub is thought of as not only young, beautiful, and innocent, but as associated with the virtue of patience'; and that in the *Macbeth* passage the helpless babe and the innocent and beautiful cherub 'call out the pity and love by which Macbeth is judged. It is not terror of heaven's vengeance which makes him pause, but the terror of moral isolation: Yet earlier in the same speech Macbeth expresses fear of retribution in this life-fear that he himself will have to drink the ingredients of his own poisoned chalice-and his comparison of Duncan's virtues to 'angels, trumpet-tongued' [I. vii. 19] implies a fear of judgment in the life to come, notwithstanding his boast that he would 'jump' it. We may assume, perhaps, that the discrepancy between the argument of the speech and the imagery employed is deliberate. On the surface Macbeth appears to be giving merely prudential reasons for not murdering Duncan; but Shakespeare makes him reveal by the imagery he employs that he, or his unconscious mind, is horrified by the thought of the deed to which he is being driven, Miss Gardner does not refer to the breast-feeding images-even Cleanth Brooks does not mention one of the most significant-yet all these images are impressive in their contexts and, taken together, they coalesce into a symbol of humanity, kinship and tenderness violated by Macbeth's crimes. Miss Gardner is right in demanding that the precise meaning and context of each image should be considered, but wrong. I believe, in refusing to see any significance in the group as a whole. *Macbeth*, of course, is a tragedy: but I know of no valid definition of tragedy which would prevent the play from being at the same time a symbolic drama of retribution.

Another important group of images is concerned with sickness and medicine, and it is significant that they all appear in the last three acts of the play after Macbeth has ascended the throne; for Scotland is suffering from the disease of tyranny, which can be cured, as fever was thought to be cured, only by bleeding or purgation. The tyrant, indeed, uses sickness imagery of himself. He tells the First Murderer that so long as Banquo is alive he wears his health but sickly; when he hears of Fleance's escape he exclaims 'Then comes my fit again' [III. iv. 20]; and he envies Duncan in the grave, sleeping after life's fitful fever, since life itself is one long illness. In the last act of the play a doctor, called in to diagnose Lady Macbeth's illness, confesses that he cannot

minister to a mind diseas'd,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff 'd bosom of that perilous
stuff
Which weighs upon the heart.
[V. iii. 40-5]



Macbeth then professes to believe that what is amiss with Scotland is not his own evil tyranny but the English army of liberation:

What rhubarb, cyme, or what purgative
drug
Would scour these English hence?
[V. iii. 55-6]

On the other side, the victims of tyranny look forward to wholesome days when Scotland will be freed. Malcolm says that Macbeth's very name blisters their tongues and he laments that 'each new day a gash' [IV. iii. 40] is added to Scotland's wounds. In the last act Caithness refers to Malcolm as 'the medicine of the sickly weal',

And with him pour we in our country's
purge
Each drop of us.
Lennox adds:
Or so much as it needs
To dew the sovereign flower and drown
the weeds.
[V. ii. 27-30]

Macbeth is the disease from which Scotland is suffering; Malcolm, the rightful king, is the *sovereign* flower, both royal and curative. Macbeth, it is said,

Cannot buckle his distemper'd cause
Within the belt of rule.
[V. ii. 15-16]

James I, in *A Counter-blast to Tobacco*, referred to himself as 'the proper Phisician of his Politickebodye', whose duty it was 'to purge it of all those diseases, by Medicines meet for the same'. It is possible that Shakespeare had read this pamphlet, although, of course, disease-imagery is to be found in most of the plays written about this time. In *Hamlet* and *Coriolanus* it is applied to the body politic, as indeed it was by many writers on political theory. Shakespeare may have introduced the King's Evil as an allusion to James I's reluctant use of his supposed healing powers; but even without this topical reference, the incident provides a contrast to the evil supernatural represented by the Weird Sisters and is therefore dramatically relevant. The contrast between good and evil is brought out in a variety of ways. There is not merely the contrast between the good and bad kings, which becomes explicit in the scene where Malcolm falsely accuses himself of avarice, lechery, cruelty and all of Macbeth's vices, and disclaims the possession of the king-becoming graces:

Justice, verity, temperance. stableness. Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness,
Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude.
[IV. iii. 92-4]



There is also a contrast throughout the play between the powers of light and darkness. It has often been observed that many scenes are set in darkness. Duncan arrives at Inverness as night falls; he is murdered during the night; Banquo returns from his last ride as night is again falling; Lady Macbeth has light by her continually; and even the daylight scenes during the first part of the play are mostly gloomy in their setting—a blasted heath, wrapped in mist, a dark cavern. The murder of Duncan is followed by darkness at noon—'dark night strangles the travelling lamp' [II. iv. 7]. Before the murder Macbeth prays to the stars to hide their fires and Lady Macbeth invokes the night to conceal their crime:

Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell .
That my keen knife see not the wound it
makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of
the dark
To cry 'Hold. hold'.
[I. v. 50-4]

Macbeth, as he goes towards the chamber of the sleeping Duncan, describes how

o'er the one half-world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams
abuse
The curtain'd sleep.
[11. i. 49-51]

The word 'night' echoes through the first two scenes of the third act; and Macbeth invokes night to conceal the murder of Banquo:

Come, seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day. . .
Light thickens, and the crow Makes wing to th' rooky wood; Good things of day begin to
droop and
drowse,
Whiles night's black agents to their preys
do rouse.
[III. ii. 46-53]

In the scene in England and in the last act of the play—except for the sleep-walking scene—the darkness is replaced by light. The symbolism is obvious. In many of these contexts night and darkness are associated with evil, and day and light are linked with good. The 'good things of day' [III. ii. 52] are contrasted with 'night's black agents' [III. ii. 53]; and, in the last act, day stands for the victory of the forces of liberation (V. iv. 1: V. vii. 27; V. ix. 3). The 'midnight hags' are 'the instruments of darkness' [I. iii. 124]; and some editors believe that when Malcolm (at the end of Act *w*) says that 'The Powers



above / Put on their instruments' [IV. iii. 238-39]'he is referring to their human instruments-Malcolm. Macduff and their soldiers.

The opposition between the good and evil supernatural is paralleled by similar contrasts between angel and devil, heaven and hell, truth and falsehood-and the opposites are frequently juxtaposed:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill; cannot be good.
[I. iii. 130-31]
Merciful powers
Restrain In me the cursed thoughts that
nature
Gives way to in repose!
[II. i. 7-9]
It is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell.
[II. i. 63-4]

Several critics have pointed out the opposition in the play between night and day, life and death, grace and evil, a contrast which is reiterated more than four hundred times.

The evidence for this has gone beyond imagery proper and most modern imagistic critics have extended their field to cover not merely metaphor and simile, but the visual symbols implied by the dialogue, which would be visible in performance, and even the iteration of key words. . . . *Macbeth* is about blood: and from the appearance of the bloody sergeant in the second scene of the play to the last scene of all we have a continual vision of blood. Macbeth's sword in the battle 'smok'd with bloody execution' [I. ii. 18]; he and Banquo seemed to 'bathe in reeking wounds' [I. ii. 39]: the Sergeant's 'gashes cry for help' [I. ii. 42]. The Second Witch comes from the bloody task of killing swine. The visionary dagger is stained with 'gouts of blood' [II. i. 46]. Macbeth, after the murder, declares that not all great Neptune's ocean will cleanse his hands:

this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.
[II. ii. 58-60]

Duncan is spoken of as the fountain of his sons' blood; his wounds

look'd like a breach in nature
For ruin's wasteful entrance.
[II. iii. 113-14]

The world had become a 'bloody stage'. Macbeth, before the murder of Banquo, invokes the 'bloody and invisible hand' of night [III. ii. 48]. We are told of the twenty trenched gashes on Banquo's body and his ghost shakes his 'gory locks' at Macbeth,



who is convinced that 'blood will have blood' [III. iv. 121]. At the end of the banquet scene, he confesses wearily that he is 'stepp'd so far' in blood, that

should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.
[III. iv. 136-37]

The Second Apparition, a bloody child, advises Macbeth to be 'bloody, bold, and resolute' [IV.1. 79]. Malcolm declares that Scotland bleeds,

and each new day a gash
Is added to her wounds.
[IV. iii. 40-1]

Lady Macbeth, sleep-walking, tries in vain to remove the 'damned spot' from her hands:

Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this
little hand
IV. i. 50-1]

In the final scene, Macbeth's severed head is displayed on a pole. As [Jan] Kott has recently reminded us, the subject of the play is murder, and the prevalence of blood ensures that we shall never forget the physical realities in metaphysical overtones.

Equally important is the iteration of sleep. The first statement of the theme is when the First Witch curses the Master of the *Tiger*:

Sleep shall neither night nor day
Hang upon his penthouse lid
[I. iii. 19-20]

After the murder of Duncan, Macbeth and his wife sleep

In the affliction of these terrible dreams That shake us nightly;
[III. ii. 17-19]

while Duncan, 'after life's fitful fever. . . sleeps well' [III. ii. 23]. Anonymous lord looks forward to the overthrow of the tyrant, when they will be able to sleep in peace. Because of 'a great perturbation in nature', Lady Macbeth

is troubled with thick coming
fancies
That keep her from her rest.
[IV. iii. 38-9]

The key passage in the theme of sleeplessness. . . occurs just after the murder of Duncan, when Macbeth hears a voice which cries 'Sleep no more!' [II. ii, 38]. It is really the echo of his own conscience, As [A C.] Bradley noted, the voice 'denounced on him,



as if his three names [Glamis, Cawdor, Macbeth] gave him three personalities to suffer in, the doom of sleeplessness' [*Shakespearean Tragedy*]: and, as [J. M.] Murry puts it: He has murdered Sleep, that is 'the death of each day's life'-that daily death of Time which makes Time human. [*Shakespeare*] The murder of a sleeping guest, the murder of a sleeping king, the murder of a saintly old man, the murder, as it were, of sleep itself, carries with it the appropriate retribution of insomnia. As Murry's comment suggests, the theme of sleep is linked with that of time. Macbeth is promised by the Weird Sisters that he will be king 'hereafter' and Banquo wonders if they 'can look into the seeds of time' [I. iii. 58], Macbeth, tempted by the thought of murder, declares that 'Present fears / Are less than horrible imaginings' [I. iii. 137-38] and decides that 'Time and the hour runs through the roughest day' [I. iii. 147], Lady Macbeth says she feels 'The future in the instant' [I. v, 58]. In his soliloquy in the last scene of Act I, Macbeth speaks of himself as 'here upon this bank and shoal of time' [I. vii. 6], time being contrasted with the sea of eternity. He pretends that he would not worry about the future. or about the life to come, if he could be sure of success in the present; and his wife implies that the conjunction of time and place for the murder will never recur. Just before the murder, Macbeth reminds himself of the exact time and place, so that he can relegate (as Stephen Spender suggests) 'the moment to the past from which it will never escape into the future' [see excerpt in section on Time]. Macbeth is troubled by his inability to say amen, because he dimly realizes he has forfeited the possibility of blessing and because he knows that he has become 'the deed's creature'. The nightmares of the guilty pair and the return of Banquo from the grave symbolize the haunting of the present by the past. When Macbeth is informed of his wife's death, he describes how life has become for him a succession of meaningless days, the futility he has brought upon himself by his crimes:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.
IV. v. 19-23]

At the very end of the play, Macduff announces that with the death of the tyrant 'The time is free' (V, ix. 21] and Malcolm promises, without 'a large expense of time' (V. ix. 26] to do what is necessary ('which would be planted newly with the time' (V. ix. 31]) and to bring back order from chaos 'in measure. time, and place' [V. ix. 39].

From one point of view *Macbeth* can be regarded as a play about the disruption of order through evil, and its final restoration. The play begins with what the witches call a hurly-burly and ends with the restoration of order by Malcolm. Order is represented throughout by the bonds of loyalty; and chaos is represented by the powers of darkness with their upsetting of moral values ('Fair is foul and foul is fair' [I. i. 11]). The witches can raise winds to fight against the churches, to sink ships and destroy buildings: they are the enemies both of religion and of civilization. Lady Macbeth invokes the evil spirits to take possession of her; and, after the murder of Duncan, Macbeth's mind begins to dwell on universal destruction. He is willing to 'let the frame of things disjoint, both the world suffer' [III. ii. 16] merely to be freed from his nightmares. Again, in his conjuration of the



witches in the cauldron scene, he is prepared to risk absolute chaos, 'even till destruction sicken' through surfeit [IV. i. 60], rather than not obtain an answer. In his last days, Macbeth is 'awearry of the sun' and he wishes 'the estate of the world' were undone (V. v, 48-9). Order in Scotland, even the moral order in the universe, can be restored only by his death. (pp. 45-51)

All through the play ideas of order and chaos are juxtaposed When Macbeth is first visited by temptation his 'single state of man' is shaken and 'nothing is but what is not' [I. iii. 140-42]. In the next scene [I. iv] Shakespeare presents ideas of loyalty, duty, and the reward of faithful service, in contrast both to the treachery of the dead Thane of Cawdor and to the treacherous thoughts of the new thane. Lady Macbeth prays to be spared 'compunctious visitings of nature' [I. v. 45] and in the next scene, after the description of the 'pleasant seat' of the castle with its images of natural beauty, she expresses her gratitude and loyalty to the king. Before the murder, Macbeth reminds himself of the threefold tie of loyalty which binds him to Duncan as kinsman, subject and host. He is afraid that the very stones will cry out against the unnaturalness of the murder, which is, in fact, accompanied by strange portents:

Lamentings heard i' th' air, strange
screams of death,
And prophesying, with accents terrible.
Of dire combustion and confus'd events
New hatch'd to th' woeful time.
[II. iii. 56-9]

The frequent iteration of the word 'strange' is one of the ways by which Shakespeare underlines the disruption of the natural order. (pp. 51-2)

Reference must be made to two other groups of images. . . , those relating to equivocation and those which are concerned with with the contrast between what the Porter calls desire and performance. The theme of equivocation runs all through the play. . . . [It] links up with 'the equivocation of the fiend / That lies like truth' (V. v. 42-3), the juggling fiends 'That keep the word of promise to our ear / And break it to our hope' (V.viii. 21-2), and Macbeth's own equivocation after the murder of Duncan:

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
I had liv'd a blessed time: for, from this in
stant,
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.
[II. iii. 91-6]

Macbeth's intention is to avert suspicion from himself by following his wife's advice to make their 'griefs and clamour roar upon' Duncan's death [I. vii. 78]. But, as he speaks



the words, the audience knows that he has unwittingly spoken the truth. Instead of lying like truth, he has told the truth while intending to deceive. As he expresses it later, when full realization has come to him, life has become meaningless, a succession of empty tomorrows, 'a tale told by an idiot' (V. v. 26-7).

The gap between desire and performance, enunciated by the Porter, is expressed over and over again by Macbeth and his wife. It takes the form, most strikingly, in the numerous passages contrasting eye and hand, culminating in Macbeth's cry

What hands are here? Ha! They pluck out
mine eyes
[II. ii. 56]

and in the scene before the murder of Banquo when the bloodstained hand is no longer Macbeth's, but Night's:

Come, seeling night.
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,
And with thy bloody and Invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale.
[III. ii. 46-50]

In the sleep-walking scene, Lady Macbeth's unavailing efforts to wash the smell of the blood from her hand symbolize the indelibility of guilt; and Angus in the next scene declares that Macbeth feels

His secret murders sticking on his hands.
IV. ii. 17]

The soul is damned for the deeds committed by the hand. (pp. 52-3)

A study of the imagery and symbolism in *Macbeth* does not radically alter one's interpretation of the play. It would, indeed, be suspect if it did. In reading some modern criticisms of Shakespeare one has the feeling that the critic is reading between the lines and creating from the interstices a play rather different from the one which Shakespeare wrote and similar to a play the critic himself might have written. Such interpretations lead us away from Shakespeare; they drop a veil between us and the plays: and they substitute a formula for the living reality, a philosophy or a theology instead of a dramatic presentation of life. I have not attempted to reshape *Macbeth* to a particular ideological image, nor selected parts of the play to prove a thesis. Some selection had to be made for reasons of space, but I have tried to make the selection representative of the whole.

We must not imagine, of course, that *Macbeth* is merely an elaborate pattern of imagery. It is a play; and in the theatre we ought to recover, as best we may, a state of critical innocence. We should certainly not attempt to notice the images of clothing or breast-feeding or count the allusions to blood or sleep. But, just as Shakespeare conveys to us the unconscious minds of the characters by means of the imagery, so, in watching the



play, we may be totally unconscious of the patterns of imagery and yet absorb them unconsciously by means of our imaginative response to the poetry. In this way they will be subsumed under the total experience of the play. (p. 53)

Kenneth Muir. "Image and Symbol in 'Macbeth: "' in Shakespeare Survey: An Annual Survey of Shakespearian Study and Production, Vol 19, 1966, pp. 4554.



Critical Essay #9

[Booth discusses the dramatic technique Shakespeare used to portray Macbeth as a sympathetic tragic hero. The critic argues that the testimony of the other characters as well as Macbeth's own moral vacillations early in the play suggest that the protagonist "is not a naturally evil man but a man who has every potentiality for goodness." Booth also points out the effect that Macbeth's limited role in the onstage murders has on his sensitive portrayal. Duncan's death, the critic observes, is neither explicitly shown nor described, and the murders of Banquo and Macduff's family are committed by accomplices. Thus the hero is never seen as an active participant in any act of violence. In addition, Booth contends, the protagonist's eloquent poetic language seemingly contradicts the evil of his actions and, instead, helps establish him as a sympathetic tragic figure. The critic concludes that the spectator "can feel great pity that a man with so much potentiality for greatness should have fallen so low." For further commentary on Macbeth's character, see the excerpts by Mark Van Doren, Irving Ribner, J. Lyndon Shanley, Walter Clyde Curry, Tom F. Driver, Stephen Spender, Jarold Ramsey, Kenneth Muir, Mary McCarthy, and Leo Kirschbaum.]

Put even in its simplest terms, the problem Shakespeare gave himself in *Macbeth* was a tremendous one. Take a good man, an noble man, a man admired by all who know him—and destroy him, not only physically and emotionally, as the Greeks destroyed their heroes, but also morally and intellectually. As if this were not difficult enough as a dramatic hurdle, while transforming him into one of the most despicable mortals conceivable, maintain him as a tragic hero—that is, keep him so sympathetic that, when he comes to his death, the audience will pity rather than detest him and will be relieved to see him out of his misery rather than pleased to see him destroyed. Put in Shakespeare's own terms: take a "noble" man, full of "conscience" and "the milk of human kindness" [I. v. 17], and make of him a "dead butcher" (V. ix. 35), yet keep him an object of pity rather than hatred. If we thus artificially reconstruct the problem as it might have existed before the play was written, we see that, in choosing these "terminal points" and these terminal intentions, Shakespeare makes almost impossible demands on his dramatic skill, although at the same time he insures that, if he succeeds at all, he will succeed magnificently. If the trick can be turned it will inevitably be a great one, (p. 17)

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The first step in convincing us that Macbeth's fall is a genuinely tragic occurrence is to convince us that there was, in reality, a fall: we must believe that Macbeth was once a man whom we could admire, a man with great potentialities. One way to convince us would have been to show him . . . in action as an admirable man. But, although this is possible in a leisurely novel, it would, in a play, have wasted time needed for the important events, which begin only with Macbeth's great temptation at the conclusion of the opening battle. Thus the superior choice in this case (although it would not necessarily always be so) is to begin your representation of the action with the first real temptation to the fall and to use testimony by other characters to establish your



protagonist's prior goodness. We are thus given, from the beginning, sign after sign that Macbeth's greatest nobility was reached at a point just prior to the opening of the play. When the play begins, he has already coveted the crown, as is shown by his excessively nervous reaction to the witches' prophecy; it is indeed likely that he has already considered foul means of obtaining it. But, in spite of this wickedness already present to his mind as a possibility, we have ample reason to think Macbeth a man worthy of our admiration. He is "brave" and "valiant," a "worthy gentleman": Duncan calls him "noble Macbeth." These epithets have an ironic quality only in retrospect: when they are first applied, one has no reason to doubt this. Indeed, they are true epithets, or they would have been true if applied, say only a few days or months earlier.

Of course, this testimony to his prior virtue given by his friends in the midst of other business would not carry the spectators for long with any sympathy for Macbeth if it were not continued in several other forms. We have the testimony of Lady Macbeth (the unimpeachable testimony of a "bad" person castigating the goodness of a "good" person):

Yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. 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.
[I. v. 16-22]

No verbal evidence would be enough however, if we did not see in Macbeth himself signs of its validity, since we have already seen many signs that he is *not* the good man that the witnesses seem to believe. Thus the best evidence we have of his essential goodness is his vacillation before the murder, Just as Raskolnikov is tormented [in Dostoevski's *Crime and Punishment*] and just as we ourselves-virtuous theater viewers-would be tormented, so Macbeth is tormented before the prospect of his own crime. Indeed, much as he wants the kingship, he decides in Scene iii against the murder:

If chance will have me King. why. chance
may crown me
Without my stir. . . .
[II. iii. 143-44]

And when he first meets Lady Macbeth he is resolved not to murder Duncan. In fact, as powerful a rhetorician as she is, she has all she can do to get him back on the course of murder.



In addition. Macbeth's ensuing soliloquy not only weighs the possible bad practical consequences of his act but shows him perfectly aware, in a way an evil man would not be. of the moral values involved: He's here in double trust:

First, as I am his kinsman and his subj_ Strong both against the deed; that as his
host,
Who should against his murderer shut the
door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this
Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek. hath
been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues Will plead like angels. trumpet-tongued.
against
The deep damnation of his taking-off. . . .
[I. vii. 12-16]

In this speech we see again, as we saw in the opening of the play, Shakespeare's wonderful economy: the very speech which shows Macbeth to best advantage is the one which shows the audience how very bad his contemplated act is, since Duncan is blameless. One need only think of the same speech if it were dealing with a king who *deserves* to be assassinated or if it were given by another character commenting on Macbeth's action, to see how right it is as it stands.

After this soliloquy Macbeth announces again to Lady Macbeth that he will not go on ("We will proceed no further in this business" [I. vii. 31]). but her eloquence is too much for him. Under her jibes at his "unmanliness," he progresses from a kind of petulant, but still honorable, boasting ("I dare do all that may become a man: / Who dares do more is none" [I. vii. 46-7]), through a state of amoral consideration of mere expediency ("If I should fail?" [I. vii. 59]), to complete resolution, but still with a full understanding of the wickedness of his act ("I am settled. . . this terrible feat" [I. vii. 80]). There is never any doubt, first, that he is bludgeoned into the deed by Lady Macbeth's superior rhetoric and force of character and by the pressure of unfamiliar circumstances (including the witches) and, second, that even in the final decision to go through with it he is extremely troubled by a guilty conscience ("*False face must hide what the false heart doth know*" [I. vii. 82]). In the entire dagger soliloquy he is clearly suffering from the realization of the horror of the "bloody business" ahead. He sees fully and painfully the wickedness of the course he has chosen, but not until after the deed, when the knocking has commenced, do we realize how terrifyingly alive his conscience is: "To know my deed, 't were best not know myself. / Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!" [II. ii. 70-1]. This is the wish of a "good" man who, though he has become a "bad" man, still thinks and feels as a good man would.

To cite one last example of Shakespeare's pains in this matter, we have the testimony to Macbeth's character offered by Hecate:



And which is worse, all you have done Hath been but for a wayward son, Spiteful and wrathful, who, as others do, Loves for his own ends, not for you.

[III. v. 10-14]

This reaffirmation that Macbeth is not a true son of evil comes, interestingly enough, immediately after the murder of Banquo, at a time when the audience needs a reminder of Macbeth's fundamental nobility. The evil of his acts is thus built upon the knowledge that he is not a naturally evil man but a man who has every potentiality for goodness. This potentiality and its frustration are the chief ingredients of the tragedy of Macbeth. Macbeth is a man whose progressive external misfortunes seem to produce, and at the same time seem to be produced by, his parallel progression from great goodness to great wickedness. Our emotional involvement (which perhaps should not be simplified under the term "pity" or "pity and fear") is thus a combination of two kinds of regret: (1) We regret that any potentially good man should come to such a bad end: "What a pity that things should have gone this way, that things should *be* this way!" (2) We regret even more the destruction of this particular man, a man who is not only morally sympathetic but also intellectually and emotionally interesting. In eliciting both these kinds of regret to such a high degree, Shakespeare goes beyond his predecessors and establishes trends which are still working themselves out in literature. The first kind-never used at all by classical dramatists, who never employed a genuinely degenerative plot-has been attempted again and again by modern novelists. Their difficulty has usually been that they have relied too completely on a general humane response in the reader and too little on a realized prior height or potentiality from which to fall. The protagonists are shown succumbing to their environment-or, as in so many "sociological" novels, already succumbed-and the reader is left to himself to infer that something worth bothering about has gone to waste, that things might have been otherwise, that there is any real reason to react emotionally to the final destruction. The second kind-almost unknown to classical dramatists, whose characters are never "original" or "fresh" in the modern sense-has been attempted in ever greater extremes since Shakespeare, until one finds many works in which mere *interest* in particular characteristics completely supplants emotional response to *events* involving men with interesting characteristics. The pathos of Bloom [in James Joyce's *Ulysses*], for example, is an attenuated pathos, just as the comedy of Bloom is an attenuated comedy; one is not primarily moved to laughter or tears by events involving great characters, as in *Macbeth*, but rather one is primarily interested in details about characters. It can be argued whether this is a gain or a loss to literature, when considered in general. Certainly, one would rather read a modern novel like *Ulysses*, with all its faults on its head, than many of the older dramas or epics involving "great" characters in "great" events. But it can hardly be denied that one of Shakespeare's triumphs is his success in doing many things at once which lesser writers have since done only one at a time. He has all the generalized effect of classical tragedy. We lament the "bad fortune" of a great man who has known good fortune. To this he adds the much more poignant (at least to us) pity one feels in observing the moral destruction of a great man who has once known goodness. And yet with all this he combines the pity one feels when one observes a highly characterized individual-whom one knows intimately, as it were, in whom one is *interested-going* to destruction. One difference between watching Macbeth go to destruction and watching the typical modern hero,



whether in the drama (say, Willy Loman [in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*]) or in the novel (say, Jake [in *The Sun Also Rises*] or any other of Hemingway's heroes), is that in *Macbeth* there is some "going." Willy Loman doesn't have very far to fall: he begins the play on the verge of suicide, and at the end of the play he has committed suicide. Even if we assume that the "beginning" is the time covered in the earliest of the flashbacks, we have not "far to go" from there to Willy's destruction. It is true that our contemporary willingness to exalt the potentialities of the average man makes Willy's fall seem to *us* a greater one than it really is, dramatically. But the reliance on convention will, of course, sooner or later dictate a decline in the play's effectiveness. *Macbeth* continues to be effective at least in part because everything necessary for a complete response to a complete action is given to us. A highly individualized, noble man is sent to complete moral, intellectual, and physical destruction.

II

But no matter how carefully the terminal points of the drama are selected and impressed on the spectator's mind, the major problem of how to represent such a "plot" still remains. Shakespeare has the tremendous task of trying to keep two contradictory dynamic streams moving simultaneously: the stream of events showing Macbeth's growing wickedness and the stream of circumstances producing and maintaining our sympathy for him. In effect, each succeeding atrocity, marking another step toward complete depravity, must be so surrounded by contradictory circumstances as to make us feel that, in spite of the evidence before our eyes, Macbeth is still somehow admirable.

The first instance of this is the method of treating Duncan's murder. The chief point here is Shakespeare's care in avoiding any "rendering" or representation of the murder itself. It is, in fact, not even narrated. We *hear* only the details of how the guards reacted and how Macbeth reacted to their cries. We *see* nothing. There is nothing about the actual dagger strokes: there is no report of the dying cries of the good old king. We have only Macbeth's conscience-stricken lament for having committed the deed. Thus what would be an intolerable act if depicted with any vividness becomes relatively bearable when seen only afterward in the light of Macbeth's suffering and remorse. This may seem ordinary enough; it is always convenient to have murders take place offstage. But if one compares the handling of this scene, where the perpetrator must remain sympathetic, with the handling of the blinding of Gloucester [in *King Lear*], where the perpetrators must be hated, one can see how important such a detail can be. The blinding of Gloucester is not so wicked an act, in itself, as murder. If we had seen, say, a properly motivated Goneril come in from offstage wringing her hands and crying, "Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more' [cf. *Macbeth*, II. ii. 32]. Goneril does put out the eyes of sleep. . . I am afraid to think what I have done,"_ and on thus for nearly a full scene, our reaction to the whole episode would, needless to say, be exactly contrary to what it now is.

A second precaution is the highly general portrayal of Duncan before his murder. It is necessary only that he be known as a "good king," the murder of whom will be a wicked act. He must be the *type* of benevolent monarch. But more particular characteristics are



carefully kept from him. There is nothing for us to love, nothing for us to "want further existence for," within the play. We hear of his goodness: we do not see it. We know practically no details about him, and we have little, if any, personal interest in him at the time of his death. All the personal interest is reserved for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. So, again, the wickedness is played up in the narration but played down in the representation. We must identify Macbeth with the murder of a blameless king, but only intellectually; emotionally we should be concerned as far as is possible only with the *effects on Macbeth*. We know that he has done the deed, but we feel primarily only his own suffering. Banquo is considerably more "particularized" than was Duncan. Not only is he also a good man, but we have seen him acting as a good man, and we know quite a lot about him. We saw his reaction to the witches, and we know that he has resisted temptations similar to those of Macbeth. We have seen him in conversation with Macbeth. We have heard him in soliloquy. We know him to be very much like Macbeth, both in valor and in being the subject of prophecy. He thus has our lively sympathy; his death is a personal, rather than a general, loss. Perhaps more important, his murder is actually shown on the stage. His dying words are spoken in our presence, and they are unselfishly directed to saving his son. We are forced to the proper, though illogical, inference; it is more wicked to kill Banquo than to have killed Duncan.

But we must still not lose our sympathy for Macbeth. This is partially provided for by the fact that the deed is much more necessary than the previous murder: Banquo is a real political danger. But the important thing is again the choice of what is represented. The murder is done by accomplices, so that Macbeth is never *shown* in any real act of wickedness. When we see him, he is suffering the torments of the banquet table. Our incorrect emotional inference: the self-torture has already expiated the guilt of the crime.

The same devices work in the murder of Lady Macduff and her children, the third and last atrocity explicitly shown in the play (except for the killing of young Siward, which, being military, is hardly an atrocity in this sense). Lady Macduff is more vividly portrayed even than Banquo, although she appears on the stage for a much briefer time. Her complaints against the absence of her husband, her loving banter with her son, and her stand against the murderers make her as admirable as the little boy himself, who dies in defense of his father's name. The murder of women and children of such quality is wicked indeed, the audience is made to feel. And when we move to England and see the effect of the atrocity on Macduff, our active pity for Macbeth's victims is at the high point of the play. For the first time, perhaps, pity for Macbeth's victims really wars with pity for him, and our desire for his downfall, to protect others and to protect himself from his own further misdeeds, begins to mount in consequence.

Yet even here Macbeth is kept as little "to blame" as possible. He does not do the deed himself, and we can believe that he would have been unable to, had he seen the wife and child as we have seen them. . . . He is much further removed from them than from his other victims; as far as we know, he has never seen them. They are as remote and impersonal to him as they are immediate and personal to the audience, and personal blame against him is thus attenuated. More important however, immediately after Macduff's tears we shift to Lady Macbeth's scene—the effect being again to impress on



us the fact that the punishment for these crimes is always as great as, or greater than, the crimes themselves. Thus all three crimes are followed immediately by scenes of suffering and self torture. Shakespeare works almost as if he were following a master-rulebook: By your choice of what to represent from the materials provided in your story, insure that each step in your protagonist's degeneration will be counteracted by mounting pity for him. All this would certainly suffice to keep Macbeth at the center of our interest and sympathy, even with all our mounting concern for his victims. But it is reinforced by qualities in his character separate and distinct from his moral qualities. Perhaps the most important of these is his gift . . . of expressing himself in great poetry. We naturally tend to feel with the character who speaks the best poetry of the play, no matter what his deeds (Iago would never be misplayed as protagonist if his poetry did not rival, and sometimes surpass, Othello's). When we add to this poetic gift an extremely rich and concrete set of characteristics, over and above his moral qualities, we have a character which is in its own way more sympathetic than any character portrayed in only moral colors could be. Even the powers of virtue gathering about his castle to destroy him seem petty compared with his mammoth sensitivity, his rich despair. When he says:

my way of life

Is fall'n into the sere. the yellow leaf: And that which should accompany old age.

As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends.

I must not look to have.

[V. iii. 22-61

we feel that he wants these things quite as honestly and a good deal more passionately than even the most virtuous man could want them. And we rent deeply the truth of his conclusion that he "must not look to have" them.

III

If Macbeth's initial nobility, the manner of representation of his atrocities, and his rich poetic gift are all calculated to create and sustain our sympathy for him throughout his movement toward destruction, the kind of mistake he makes in initiating his own destruction is equally well calculated to heighten our willingness to forgive while deploring. On one level it could, of course, be said that he errs simply in being overambitious and underscrupulous. But this is only partly true. What allows him to sacrifice his moral beliefs to his ambition is a mistake of another kind-of a kind which is at least to modern spectators, more probable or credible than any conventional tragic flaw or any traditional tragic error such as mistaking the identity of a brother or not knowing that one's wife is one's mother. Macbeth knows what he is doing, yet he does not know. He knows the immorality of the act, but he has no conception of the effects of the act on himself or on his surroundings. Accustomed to murder of a "moral" sort, in battle, and having valorously and successfully "carv'd out his passage" with "bloody execution" [I. ii. 18-19] many times previously, he misunderstands completely what will be the devastating effect on his own character if he tries to carve out his passage in civil



life. The murder of Duncan on one level resembles closely the kind of thing Macbeth has done professionally, and he lacks the insight to see the great difference between the two kinds of murder. He cannot foresee that success in the first murder will only lead to the speech "to be thus is nothing; But to be safely thus" [III. i. 47-8], and to ever increasing degradation and suffering for himself and for those around him. Even though he has a kind of double premonition of the effects of the deed both on his own conscience and on Duncan's subjects ("If it were done when 't is done, then 't were well. . .")

[I. vii. Iff.]), he does not really understand. If he did understand, he could not do the deed. This ignorance is made more convincing by being extended to a misunderstanding of the forces leading him to the murder. Macbeth does not really understand that he has two spurs "to prick the sides" of his intent [I. vii. 26], besides his own vaulting ambition. The first of these is, of course, the witches and their prophecy. A good deal of nonsense has been written about these witches, some in the direction of making them totally responsible for the action of Macbeth and some making them merely a fantastical representation of Macbeth's mental state. Yet they are quite clearly real and objective, since they say and do things which Macbeth could know nothing about—such as their presentation of the ambiguous facts of Macduff's birth and the Birnam wood trick. And equally they are not "fate," alone responsible for what happens to Macbeth. He deliberately chooses from what they have to say only those things which he wishes to hear: and he has already felt the ambition to be king and even possibly to become king through regicide. Dramatically they seem to be here both as a needed additional goad to his ambition and as a concrete instance of Macbeth's tragic misunderstanding. His deliberate and consistent mistaking of what they have to say objectifies for us his misunderstanding of everything about his situation. He should realize that, if they are true oracles, *both* parts of their prophecy *must* be fulfilled. He makes the mistake of acting criminally to bring about the first part of the prophecy, and then acting criminally to prevent the fulfilment of the second part, concerning Banquo. But only if they were not true oracles would the slaying of Duncan be necessary or the slaying of Banquo be of any use. Macbeth tries to pick and choose from their promises, and they thus aid him in his self-destruction.

The second force which Macbeth does not understand, and without which he would find himself incapable of the murder, is Lady Macbeth. She, of course, fills several functions in the play, besides her inherent interest as a character, which is great indeed. But her chief function, as the textbook commonplace quite rightly has it, is to incite Macbeth to the murder of Duncan. Shakespeare has realized the best possible form for this incitation. She does not urge Macbeth with pictures of the pleasures of rewarded ambition: she does not allow his thoughts to remain on the moral aspects of the problem, as they would if he were left to himself. Rather, she shifts the whole ground of the consideration to questions of Macbeth's valor. She twits him for cowardice, plays upon the word "man," making it seem that he becomes more a man by doing the manly deed. She exaggerates her own courage (although significantly she does not offer to do the murder herself), to make him fear to seem cowardly by comparison. Macbeth's whole reputation for bravery seems at last to be at stake, and even questions of success and failure are made to hang on his courage: "But screw your courage to the



sticking-place / And we'll not fail" [I. vii. 60-1]. So that the whole of his past achievement seems to depend for its meaning on his capacity to go ahead with the contemplated act. He performs the act, and from that point his final destruction is certain.

His tragic error, then, is at least three-fold: he does not understand the forces working upon him to make him commit the deed, neither his wife nor the weird sisters: he does not understand the differences between "bloody execution" in civilian life and in his past military life: and he does not understand his own character-he does not know what will be the effects of the evil act on his own future happiness. Only one of these-the misunderstanding of the witches' prophecy-can be considered similar to, say, Iphigenia's ignorance of her brother's identity [in Euripides's *Iphigenia in Tauris*].

Shakespeare has realized that simple ignorance of that sort will not do for the richly complex degenerative plot. The hero here must be really aware of the wickedness of his act, in advance. The more aware he can be-and still commit the act convincingly-the greater the regret felt by the reader or spectator. Being thus aware, he must act under a special kind of misunderstanding: it must be a misunderstanding caused by such powerful forces that even a good man might credibly be deceived by them into "knowingly" performing an atrocious deed.

All these points are illustrated powerfully in the contrast between the final words of Malcolm concerning Macbeth-"This dead butcher and his fiendlike queen" (V. ix. 35]-and the spectator's own feelings toward Macbeth at the same point. One judges Macbeth, as Shakespeare intends, not merely for his wicked acts but in the light of the total impression of all the incidents of the play. Malcolm and Macduff do not know Macbeth and the forces that have worked on him; the spectator does know him and, knowing him, can feel great pity that a man with so much potentiality for greatness should have fallen so low. The pity is that everything was not otherwise, since it so easily could have been otherwise. Macbeth's whole life, from the time of the first visitation of the witches, is felt to be itself a tragic error, one big pitiful mistake. And the conclusion brings a flood of relief that the awful blunder has played itself out, that Macbeth has at last been able to die, still valiant, and is forced no longer to go on enduring the knowledge of the consequences of his own misdeeds. (pp. 1825)

Wayne C. Booth, "Macbeth as Tragic Hero," in *The Journal of General Education*, Vol. VI, No.1, October, 1951, pp. 17-25.



Critical Essay #10

[McCarthy provides a detailed analysis of Macbeth's character, asserting that he is an average man with common thoughts and little imagination, who is manipulated into performing evil deeds by both the witches and his wife. In the critic's opinion, Macbeth's response to the witches's predictions is too literal; it never occurs to him to test their assertions, which were commonly known to be "ambiguous and tricky." McCarthy further declares that Macbeth is dominated by his wife, noting that while he is "old Iron Pants in the field," at home "she has to wear the pants; she has to unsex herself." Among the protagonist's other traits, the critic asserts, is a lack of feeling for others, excessive envy, and absence of conscience. Each of these traits not only contributes to the hero's deliberate choice to murder Duncan, but also to his subsequent isolation as the play unfolds. McCarthy also addresses the claim that Macbeth speaks some of Shakespeare's finest poetry throughout the tragedy, arguing that since the verses come from his mouth, they are merely empty words difficult to take seriously. According to the critic, Macbeth's soliloquies "are not poetry but rhetoric. They are tirades. . . . Like so many unfeeling men, he has a facile emotionalism, which he turns on and off." Ultimately, McCarthy observes that it is not just the hero who rants in Macbeth, but also Nature, whose stormy disorder turns the world upside down and unleashes numerous physical disturbances in Scotland. For further commentary on Macbeth's character, see the excerpts by Mark Van Doren, Irving Ribner, J. Lyndon Shanley, Walter Clyde Curry, Tom F. Driver, Stephen Spender, Jarold Ramsey, Kenneth Muir, Wayne C. Booth, and Leo Kirschbaum.]

He is a general and has just won a battle; he enters the scene making a remark about the weather. "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" [I. iii. 38]. On this flat note Macbeth's character tone is set. "Terrible weather we're having," "The sun can't seem to make up its mind," "Is it hot/cold/wet enough for you?" A commonplace man who talks in commonplaces, a golfer, one might guess, on the Scottish fairways, Macbeth is the only Shakespeare hero who corresponds to a bourgeois type: a murderous Babbitt [in Sinclair Lewis's *Babbitt*], let us say. You might argue just the opposite, that Macbeth is over-imaginative, the prey of visions. It is true that he is impressionable. Banquo, when they come upon the witches, amuses himself at their expense, like a man of parts idly chaffing a fortuneteller. Macbeth, though, is deeply impressed. "Thane of Cawdor and King." He thinks this over aloud. "How can I be Thane of Cawdor when the Thane of Cawdor is alive?" [cf. I. iii. 72-5] When this mental stumbling-block has been cleared away for him (the Thane of Cawdor has received a death sentence), he turns his thoughts *sotto voce* [under his breath] to the next question. "How can I be King when Duncan is alive?" The answer comes back, "Kill him" [cf. I. iii. 137-42]. It does fleetingly occur to Macbeth, as it would to most people, to leave matters alone and let destiny work it out. "If chance will have me King, why, chance may crown me, Without my stir" [I. iii. 143-44]. But this goes against his grain. A reflective man might wonder how fate would spin her plot. As the Virgin Mary must have wondered after the Angel Gabriel's visit. But Macbeth does not trust to fate, that is, to the unknown, the mystery of things; he trusts only to a known quantity-himself-to put the prophecy into action. In short, he



has no faith, which requires imagination. He is literal-minded; that, in a word, is his tragedy.

It was not *his* idea, he could plead in self-defense, but the witches', that he should have the throne. *They* said it first. But the witches only voiced a thought that was already in his mind: after all, he was Duncan's cousin and close to the crown. And once the thought has been put into *words*, he is in a scrambling hurry. He cannot wait to get home to tell his wife about the promise; in his excitement, he puts it in a letter, which he sends on ahead, like a businessman briefing an associate on a piece of good news for the firm.

Lady Macbeth takes very little stock in the witches. She never pesters her husband, as most wives would, with questions about the Weird Sisters: "What did they say, exactly?" "How did they look?" "Are you sure?" She is less interested in "fate and metaphysical aid" [I. v. 29] than in the business at hand-how to nerve her husband to do what he wants to do. And later, when Macbeth announces that he is going out to consult the Weird Sisters again, she refrains from comment. As though she were keeping her opinion-"O proper stuff !" [III. iv. 59]-to herself. Lady Macbeth is not superstitious. Macbeth is. This makes her repeatedly impatient with him, for Macbeth, like many men of his sort, is an old story to his wife. A tale full of sound and filly signifying nothing. Her contempt for him perhaps extends even to his ambition. "Wouldst not play false, And yet wouldst wrongly win" [I. v. 21-2]. As though to say, "All right, if that's what you want, have the courage to get it." Lady Macbeth does not so much give the impression of coveting the crown herself as of being weary of watching Macbeth covet it. Macbeth, by the way, is her second husband, and either her first husband was a better man than he, which galls her, or he was just another general, another superstitious golfer, which would gall her too. Superstition here is the opposite of reason on the one hand and of imagination on the other. Macbeth is credulous, in contrast to Lady Macbeth, to Banquo, and, later, to Malcolm, who sets the audience an example of the right way by mistrusting Macduff until he has submitted him to an empirical test. Believing and knowing are paired in Malcolm's mind; what he *knows* he believes. Macbeth's eagerness to believe is the companion of his lack of faith. If all works out right for him in this world, Macbeth says, he can take a chance on the next ("We'd jump the life to come" [I. vii. 7]). Superstition whispers when true religion has been silenced, and Macbeth becomes a ready client for the patent medicines brewed by the jeering witches on the heath.

As in his first interview with them he is too quick to act literally on a dark saying, in the second he is too easily reassured. He will not be conquered till "great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come against him." "Why, that can never happen!" [ef. IV. i. 92-4] he cries out in immediate relief, his brow clearing. It never enters his mind to examine the saying more closely, test it, so to speak, for a double bottom, as was common in those days (Banquo even points this out to him) with prophetic utterances, which were known to be ambiguous and tricky. Any child knew that a prophecy often meant the reverse of what it seemed to say, and any man of imagination would ask himself how Birnam Wood *might* come to Dunsinane and take measures to prevent it, as King Latus took measures to prevent his own death by arranging to have the baby Oedipus killed [in Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*]. If Macbeth had thought it out, he could have had Birnam



Wood chopped down and burned on the spot and the ashes dumped into the sea. True, the prophecy might still have turned against him. . . ,but that would have been another story. another tragedy, the tragedy of a clever man not clever enough to circumvent fate. Macbeth is not clever: he is taken in by surfaces, by appearance. He cannot think beyond the usual course of things. "None of woman born" [IV. i. 80]. All men, he says to himself, sagely, are born of women; Malcolm and Macduff are men; therefore I am safe. This logic leaves out of account the extraordinary: the man brought into the world by Caesarean section. In the same way, it leaves out of account the supernatural-the very forces he is trafficking with. He might be overcome by an angel or a demon, as well as by Macduff.

Yet this pedestrian general sees ghosts and imaginary daggers in the air. Lady Macbeth does not, and the tendency in her husband grates on her nerves; she is sick of his terrors and fancies. A practical woman, Lady Macbeth, more a partner than a wife, though Macbeth treats her with a trite domestic fondness-"Love," "Dearest love," "Dearest chuck," "Sweet remembrancer." These middleaged, middle-class endearments, as though he called her "Honeybunch" or "Sweetheart," as well as the obligatory "Dear," are a master stroke of Shakespeare's and perfectly in keeping with the prosing about the weather, the heavy credulousness. Naturally Macbeth is dominated by his wife. He is old Iron Pants in the field (as she bitterly reminds him), but at home *she* has to wear the pants; she has to unsex herself. No "chucks" or "dearests" escape her tightened lips, and yet she is more feeling, more human finally than Macbeth. She thinks of her father when she sees the old King asleep, and this natural thought will not let her kill him. Macbeth has to do it, just as the quailing husband of any modern virago is sent down to the basement to kill a rat or drown a set of kittens. An image of her father, irrelevant to her purpose, softens this monster woman; sleepwalking, she thinks of Lady Macduff. "The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now?" [cf. IV. 1. 150-53]. Stronger than Macbeth, less suggestible, she is nevertheless imaginative, where he is not. She does not see ghosts and daggers: when she sleepwalks, it is simple reality that haunts her-the crime relived. "Yet, who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" (V. i. 39-40). Over and over, the epiphenomena of the crime present themselves to her dormant consciousness. This nightly reliving is not penitence but more terrible-remorse, the agenbite of the restless deed. Lady Macbeth's uncontrollable imagination drives her to put her self in the place of others-the wife of the Thane of Fife-and to recognize a kinship between all human kind: the pathos of old age in Duncan has made her think, "Why, he might be my father!" This sense of a natural bond between men opens her to contrition-sorrowing with. To ask whether, waking, she is "sorry" for what she has done is impertinent. She lives with it and it kills her.

Macbeth has no feeling for others, except envy, a common middle-class trait. He *envies* the murdered Duncan his rest, which is a strange way of looking at your victim. What he suffers on his own account after the crimes is simple panic. He is never contrite or remorseful: it is not the deed but a shadow of it, Banquo's spook, that appears to him. The "scruples" that agitate him before Duncan's murder are mere echoes of conventional opinion, of what might be *said* about his deed: that Duncan was his king, his cousin, and a guest under his roof. "I have bought golden opinions," he says to



himself (note the verb), "from all sorts of people" [I. vii. 32-3]; now these people may ask for their opinions back-a refund-if they suspect him of the murder. It is like a business firm's being reluctant to part with its "good will,"_ The fact that Duncan was such a good king bothers him, and why? Because there will be universal grief at his death. But his chief "scruple" is even simpler. "If we should fail?" he says timidly to Lady Macbeth [I. vii. 59]. Sweet chuck tells him that they will not. Yet once she has ceased to be effectual as a partner, Dearest love is an embarrassment. He has no time for her vapors. "Cure her of that" (V. iii. 39), he orders the doctor on hearing that she is troubled by "fancies," Again the general is speaking. The idea of Macbeth as a conscience-tormented man is a platitude as false as Macbeth himself. Macbeth has no conscience. His main concern throughout the play is that most selfish of all concerns: to get a good night's sleep. His invocation to sleep, while heartfelt, is perfectly conventional: sleep builds you up, enables you to start the day fresh. Thus the virtue of having a good conscience is seen by him in terms of bodily hygiene. Lady Macbeth shares these preoccupations. When he tells her he is going to see the witches, she remarks that he needs sleep. Her wifely concern is mechanical and far from real solicitude. She is aware of Macbeth; she *knows* him (he does not know her at all, apparently), but she regards him coldly as a thing, a tool that must be oiled and polished. His soul-states do not interest her; her attention is narrowed on his morale, his public conduct, the shifting expressions of his face. But in a sense she is right, for there is nothing to Macbeth but fear and ambition, both of which he tries to hide, except from her. This naturally gives her a poor opinion of the inner man. Why is it, though, that Lady Macbeth seems to us a monster while Macbeth does not? Partly because she is a woman and has "unsexed" herself, which makes her a monster by definition. Also because the very prospect of murder quickens an hysterical excitement in her, like the discovery of some object in a shop-a set of emeralds or a sable stole which Macbeth can give her and which will be an "outlet" for all the repressed desires he cannot satisfy. She behaves as though Macbeth, through his weakness, will deprive her of self-realization; the unimpeded exercise of her will is the voluptuous end she seeks. That is why she makes naught of scruples, as inner brakes on her throbbing engines. Unlike Macbeth, she does not pretend to harbor a conscience, though this, on her part, by a curious turn, is a pretense, as the sleepwalking scene reveals. After the first crime, her will subsides, spent: the devil has brought her to climax and left her. Macbeth is not a monster, like Richard III or Iago or Iachimo [in *Cymbeline*], though in the catalogue he might go for one because of the blackness of his deeds. But at the outset his deeds are only the wishes and fears of the average, undistinguished man translated into halfhearted action. Pure evil is a kind of transcendence that he does not aspire to. He only wants to be king and sleep the sleep of the just, undisturbed. He could never have been a good man, even if he had not met the witches; hence we cannot see him as a devil incarnate, for the devil is a fallen angel. Macbeth does not fall; if anything, he somewhat improves as the result of his career of crime. He throws off his dependency and thus achieves the "greatness" he mistakenly sought in the crown and scepter. He swells to vast proportions, having supped full with horrors. The isolation of Macbeth, which is at once a punishment and a tragic dignity or honor, takes place by stages and by deliberate choice; it begins when he does not tell Lady Macbeth that he has decided to kill Banquo and reaches its peak at Dunsinane, in the final action. Up to this time, though he has cut himself off from all human contacts, he is counting on the



witches as allies. When he first hears the news that Macduff is not "of woman born" (V. viii. 12-15), he is unmanned; everything he trusted (the literal word) has betrayed him, and he screams in terror, "I'll not fight with thee!" [V. viii. 22]. But Macduff's taunts make a hero of him: he cannot die like this, shamed. His death is his first true act of courage, though even here he has had to be pricked to it by mockery, Lady Macbeth's old spur. Nevertheless, weaned by his very crimes from a need for reassurance, nursed in a tyrant's solitude, he meets death on his own, without metaphysical aid. "Lay on, Macduff" (V. viii. 33). What is modern and bourgeois in Macbeth's character is his wholly *social* outlook. He has no feeling for others, and yet until the end he is a vicarious creature, existing in his own eyes through what others may say of him, through what they tell him or promise him. This paradox is typical of the social being-at once a wolf out for himself and a sheep. Macbeth, moreover, is an expert buckpasser: he sees how others can be used. It is he, not Lady Macbeth, who thinks of smearing the drunken chamberlains with blood (though it is she, in the end, who carries it out), so that they shall be caught "red-handed" the next morning when Duncan's murder is discovered. At this idea he brightens: suddenly, he sees his way clear. It is the moment when at last he decides. The eternal executive, ready to fix responsibility on a subordinate, has seen the deed finally take a *recognizable* form. Now he can do it. And the crackerjack thought of killing the grooms afterward (dead men tell no tales-old adage) is again purely his own on-the-spot inspiration; no credit to Lady Macbeth. It is the sort of thought that would have come to Hamlet's Uncle Claudius, another trepidant executive. Indeed, Macbeth is more like Claudius than like any other character in Shakespeare. Both are doting husbands; both rose to power by betraying their superior's trust; both are easily frightened and have difficulty saying their prayers. Macbeth's "Amen" sticks in his throat, he complains, and Claudius, on his knees, sighs that he cannot make what priests call a "good act of contrition,"_ The desire to say his prayers like any pew-holder, quite regardless of his horrible crime, is merely a longing for respectability. Macbeth "repents" killing the grooms, but this is for public consumption. "O, yet I do repent me of my fury, That I did kill them" [II. iii. 106-07]. In fact, it is the one deed he does *not* repent (*i.e.*, doubt the wisdom of) either before or after. This hypocritical self-accusation, which is his sidelong way of announcing the embarrassing fact that he has just done away with the grooms, and his simulated grief at Duncan's murder ("All is but toys. Renown and grace is dead, The wine of life is drawn" [II. iii. 94-5], etc.) are his basest moments in the play, as well as his boldest; here is nearly a magnificent monster.

The dramatic effect too is one of great boldness on Shakespeare's part. Macbeth is speaking pure Shakespearean poetry, but in his mouth, since we know he is lying, it turns into facile verse, Shakespearean poetry buskined. The same with "Here lay Duncan, His silver skin lac'd with his golden blood. . ." [II. iii. 111-12]. If the image were given to Macduff, it would be uncontaminated poetry: from Macbeth it is "proper stuff" -fustian. This opens the perilous question of sincerity in the arts: is a line of verse altered for us by the sincerity of the one who speaks it? short, is poetry relative to the circumstances or absolute? Or, more particularly, are Macbeth's soliloquies poetry, which they sound like, or something else? Did Shakespeare intend to make Macbeth a poet, like Hamlet, Lear, and Othello? In that case, how can Macbeth be an unimaginative mediocrity? My opinion is that Macbeth's soliloquies are not poetry but rhetoric. They are tirades. That is, they do not trace any pensive motion of the soul or



heart but are a volley of words discharged. Macbeth is neither thinking nor feeling aloud; he is declaiming. Like so many unfeeling men, he has a facile emotionalism, which he turns on and off. Not that his fear is insincere, but his loss of control provides him with an excuse for histrionics. These gibberings exasperate Lady Macbeth. "What do you mean?" [II. ii. 37] she says coldly after she has listened to a short harangue on "Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more!'" [II. ii. 32]. It is an allowable question—what *does* he mean? And his funeral oration on *her*, if she could have heard it, would have brought her back to life to protest. "She should have died hereafter" [V. v. 17]—fine, that was the real Macbeth. But then, as if conscious of the proprieties, he at once begins on a series of bromides ("Tomorrow, and tomorrow. . ." [V. v. 19ff.]) that he seems to have had ready to hand for the occasion like a black mourning suit. All Macbeth's soliloquies have that ready-to-hand, if not hand-me-down, air, which is perhaps why they are given to school children to memorize, often with the result of making them hate Shakespeare. What children resent in these soliloquies is precisely their sententiousness—the sound they have of being already memorized from a copybook. (pp.3-12)

The play between poetry and rhetoric, the *conversion* of poetry to declamation, is subtle and horrible in *Macbeth*. The sincere pent-up poet in Macbeth flashes out not in the soliloquies but when he howls at a servant. "The Devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon! Where got'st thou that goose look?" (V. iii. 11). Elsewhere, the general's tropes are the gold braid of his dress uniform or the chasing of his armor. If an explanation is needed, you might say he learned to *use* words through long practice in haranguing his troops, whipping them and himself into battle frenzy. Up to recent times a fighting general, like a football coach, was an orator.

But it must be noted that it is not only Macbeth who rants. Nor is it only Macbeth who talks about the weather. The play is stormy with atmosphere—the screaming and shrieking of owls, the howling of winds. Nature herself is ranting. Like the witches, and Night, black Hecate, is queen of the scene. Bats are flitting about; ravens and crows are hoarse: the house-martins' nests on the battlements of Macbeth's castle give a misleading promise of peace and gentle domesticity. "It will be rain tonight," says Banquo simply, looking at the sky (note the difference between this and Macbeth's pompous generality), and the First Murderer growls at him, striking, "Let it come down" [III. iii. 16]. The disorder of Nature, as so often in Shakespeare, presages and reflects the disorder of the body politic. Guilty Macbeth cannot sleep, but the night of Duncan's murder, the whole house, as if guilty too, is restless; Malcolm and Donalbain talk and laugh in their sleep; the drunken porter, roused, plays that he is gatekeeper of hell. Indeed, the whole action takes place in a kind of hell and is pitched to the demons' shriek of hyperbole. This would appear to be a peculiar setting for a study of the commonplace. But only at first sight. The fact that an ordinary philistine like Macbeth goes on the rampage and commits a series of murders is a sign that human nature, like Nature, is capable of any mischief if left to its "natural" self. The witches, unnatural beings, are Nature spirits, stirring their snake-filet and owl's wing, newt's eye and frog toe in a camp stew: earthy ingredients boil down to an unearthly broth. It is the same with the man Macbeth. Ordinary ambition, fear, and a kind of stupidity make a deadly



combination. Macbeth, a self-made king, is not kingly, but just another Adam or Fall guy, with Eve at his elbow.

There is no play of Shakespeare's (I think) that contains the words "Nature" and "natural" so many times, and the "Nature" within the same speech can mean first something good and then something evil, as though it were a pun. Nature is two-sided, double-talking, like the witches. "Fair is foul and foul is fair," they cry [l. 1. 11], and Macbeth enters the play unconsciously echoing them, for he is never original but chock-full of the "milk of human kindness" [l. v. 17], which does not mean kindness in the modern sense but simply human "nature," human kind. The play is about Nature, and its blind echo, human nature.

Macbeth, in short, shows life in the cave. Without religion, animism rules the outer world, and without faith, the human soul is beset by hobgoblins.

This at any rate was Shakespeare's opinion, to which modern history, with the return of the irrational in the Fascist nightmare and its fear of new specters in the form of Communism, Socialism, etc., lends support. It is a troubling thought that bloodstained Macbeth, of all Shakespeare's characters, should seem the most "modern," the only one you could transpose into contemporary battle dress or a sport shirt and slacks. (pp. 12-14)

Mary McCarthy, "General Macbeth," in her The Writing on the Wall and Other Literary Essays, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970, pp. 3-14.



Critical Essay #11

[Adelman discusses Lady Macbeth's character based on her reading of *Macbeth* as a play that illustrates both a fantasy of absolute and destructive maternal power and a fantasy of escape from this power. According to the critic, maternal power in *Macbeth* is not evoked in the figure of a particular mother; rather, it is projected through both the witches and Lady Macbeth's manipulation of the protagonist. Adelman argues that Shakespeare initially associates Lady Macbeth with the Weird Sisters by showing how she attempts to mirror their disturbance of gender in psychological terms by desiring to unsex herself. Despite the witches' supernatural status, the critic continues, Lady Macbeth ultimately appears to be the more frightening figure. For all of their eeriness, the Weird Sisters exist on a cosmic level apart from *Macbeth*'s physical world; but, by embracing evil herself, Lady Macbeth brings the psychic force of their power home. Lady Macbeth exercises the full potential of this maternal malevolence over her husband by attacking his virility, the critic asserts, and she acquires this strength "partly because she can make him imagine himself as an infant vulnerable to her." For further commentary on Lady Macbeth's character, see the excerpts by Mark Van Doren, Irving Ribner, J. Lyndon Shanley, Walter Clyde Curry, Stephen Spender, Jarold Ramsey, and Mary McCarthy.]

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, 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. (p. 90)

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. . . their "wayward son" [III. v. 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.
[I. vii. 54-9]

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. 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 be
tween
Th'effect and it! Come to my woman's
breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring
ministers.
[I. v. 40-8]

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. 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" [I. v. 17] 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 [Samuel] 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. 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. 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 devil-imps 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. 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. 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 [III. v] 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. There is a distinct weakening of their power after their first appearances: only halfway through the play, in [IV. ii], do we hear that they themselves have masters [IV. i. 63]. The more Macbeth claims for them, the less their actual power seems: by the time Macbeth evokes the cosmic damage they can wreak [IV. i. 50-61], 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 [I. iii. 54-61], the unnatural darkness in day [II. iv. 5-10], the cannibalism of Duncan's horses [II. iv. 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" [I. iii. 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. (pp. 96-9)

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.

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" [I. vii. 38-9]; "When you durst do it, then you were a man" [I. vii. 49]. Insofar as his drunk hope is now "green and pale" [I. vii. 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" [I. v. 171] 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" [I. vii. 56-8]. 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, she articulates a fantasy in which to be less than a man is to become interchangeably a woman or a baby, 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 fallure ("If we should fall?" [I. vii. 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?" [I. vii. 69-70]. The satiated and sleeping Duncan takes on the vulnerability that Lady Macbeth has just invoked in the image of the feeding, trusting infant; 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.

[I. vii. 72-4]

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. 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. 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 manchild, 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 manchild: 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. (pp. 100-03)

Janet Adelman, "Born of Woman": Fantasies of Maternal Power in 'Macbeth,'" in Cannibals, Witches, and Divorce: Estranging the Renaissance, edited by Marjorie Gruber, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, pp. 90-121.



Critical Essay #12

[Bradley asserts that Banquo is influenced by the Weird Sisters "much more truly than Macbeth." According to the critic, Banquo essentially loses his innocence when he acquiesces to Macbeth's method of accession, even though he suspects Macbeth of committing Duncan's murder. When Banquo willingly complies with Macbeth's rise to power, Bradley argues, he reveals his own secret hope that the witches' prediction concerning his descendants will also come true. For a reaction to this reading of Banquo, see the excerpt below by Leo Kirschbaum For other commentary on the character, see the excerpts by Irving Ribner and Walter Clyde Curry.]

The main interest of the character of Banquo arises from the changes that take place in him, and from the influence of the Witches upon him. And it is curious that Shakespeare's intention here is so frequently missed. Banquo being at first strongly contrasted with Macbeth, as an innocent man with a guilty, it seems to be supposed that this contrast must be continued to his death: while, in reality, though it is never removed, it is gradually diminished. Banquo in fact may be described much more truly than Macbeth as the victim of the Witches. If we follow this story this will be evident.

He bore a part only less distinguished than Macbeth's in the battles against Sweno and Macdonwald. He and Macbeth are called 'our captains,' and when they meet the Witches they are traversing the 'blasted heath' alone together. Banquo accosts the strange shapes without the slightest fear. They lay their fingers on their lips, as if to signify that they will not, or must not, speak to *him*. To Macbeth's brief appeal, 'Speak, if you can: what are you?' [I. iii. 47] they at once reply, not by saying what they are, but by hailing him Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and King hereafter. Banquo is greatly surprised that his partner should start as if in fear, and observes that he is at once 'rapt'; and he bids the Witches, if they know the future, to prophesy to *him*, who neither begs their favour nor fears their hate. Macbeth, looking back at a later time, remembers Banquo's daring, and how

he chid the sisters,
When first they put the name of king upon
me,
And bade them speak to him.
[III. i. 56-8]

'Chid' is an exaggeration; but Banquo is evidently a bold man, probably an ambitious one, and certainly has no lurking guilt in his ambition. On hearing the predictions concerning himself and his descendants he makes no answer, and when the Witches are about to vanish he shows none of Macbeth's feverish anxiety to know more. On their vanishing he is simply amazed, wonders if they were anything but hallucinations, makes no reference to the predictions till Macbeth mentions them, and then answers lightly.



When Ross and Angus, entering, announce to Macbeth that he has been made Thane of Cawdor, Banquo exclaims, aside, to himself or Macbeth, 'What! can the devil speak true?' [I. iii. 107]. He now believes that the Witches were real beings and the 'instruments of darkness.' When Macbeth, turning to him, whispers,

Do you not hope your children shall be
kings,
When those that gave the Thane of Caw
dor to me
Promised no less to them?
[I. iii. 118-20]

he draws with the boldness of innocence the inference which is really occupying Macbeth, and answers,

That, trusted home,
Might yet enkindle you unto the crown
Besides the thane of Cawdor.
[I. iii. 120-22]

Here he still speaks, I think, in a free, off-hand, even jesting, manner ('enkindle' meaning merely 'excite you to hope for'). But then, possibly from noticing something in Macbeth's face, he becomes graver, and goes on, with a significant 'but,'

But 'tis strange:
And 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.
[I. iii. 122-261]

He afterwards observes for the second time that his partner is 'rapt'; but he explains his abstraction naturally and sincerely by referring to the surprise of his new honours; and at the close of the scene, when Macbeth proposes that they shall discuss the predictions together at some later time, he answers in the cheerful, rather bluff manner, which he has used almost throughout, 'Very gladly: Nor was there any reason why Macbeth's rejoinder, 'Till then, enough' [I. iii. 156], should excite misgivings in him, though it implied a request for silence, and though the whole behaviour of his partner during the scene must have looked very suspicious to him when the prediction of the crown was made good through the murder of Duncan.

In the next scene Macbeth and Banquo join the King, who welcomes them both with the kindest expressions of gratitude and with promises of favours to come. Macbeth has indeed already received a noble reward. Banquo, who is said by the King to have 'no less deserved' [I. iv. 30], receives as yet mere thanks. His brief and frank acknowledgment is contrasted with Macbeth's laboured rhetoric; and, as Macbeth goes out, Banquo turns with hearty praises of him to the King.



And when next we see him, approaching Macbeth's castle in company with Duncan, there is still no sign of change. Indeed he gains on us. It is he who speaks the beautiful lines,

This guest of summer,
The temple-haunting martlet, does appear,
By his loved mansionry, that the heaven's
breath
Smells wooingly here: no jutty, frieze,
Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this
bird
Hath made his pendent bed and procreant
Cradle:
Where they most breed and haunt, I have
observed,
The air is delicate;
[I. vi. 3-10]

...lines which tell of that freedom of heart, and that sympathetic sense of peace and beauty, which the Macbeth of the tragedy could never feel.

But now Banquo's sky begins to darken. At the opening of the Second Act we see him with Fleance crossing the court of the castle on his way to bed.

The blackness of the moonless, starless night
seems to oppress him. And he is oppressed by something else.
A heavy summons lies like lead upon me,
And yet I would not sleep: merciful powers,
Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that
nature
Gives way to in repose!
[II. 1. 6-9]

On Macbeth's entrance we know what Banquo means: he says to Macbeth-and it is the first time he refers to the subject unprovoked,

I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters.
[II. i. 20]

His will is still untouched: he would repel the 'cursed thoughts'; and they are mere thoughts, not intentions. But still they are 'thoughts,' something more, probably, than mere recollections: and they bring with them an undefined sense of guilt. The poison has begun to work.

The passage that follows Banquo's words to Macbeth is difficult to interpret:



I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters:

To you they have show'd some truth.

Macb. I think not of them:

Yet, when we can entreat an hour to serve, We would spend it in some words upon that business,

If you would grant the time.

Ban. At your kind'st leisure.

Macb. If you shall cleave to my consent, when 'tis, It shall make honour for you.

Ban. So I lose none

In seeking to augment it, but still keep

My bosom franchised and allegiance clear,

I shall be counsell'd.

Macb. Good repose the while!

Ban. Thanks, sir: the like to you!

[II. i. 20-30]

Macbeth's first idea is, apparently, simply to free himself from any suspicion which the discovery of the murder might suggest, by showing himself, just before it, quite indifferent to the predictions, and merely looking forward to a conversation about them at some future time. But why does he go on, 'If you shall cleave,' etc.? Perhaps he foresees that, on the discovery, Banquo cannot fail to suspect him, and thinks it safest to prepare the way at once for an understanding with him (in the original story he makes Banquo his accomplice *before* the murder). Banquo's answer shows three things, - that he fears a treasonable proposal, that he has no idea of accepting it, and that he has no fear of Macbeth to restrain him from showing what is in his mind.

Duncan is murdered. In the scene of discovery Banquo of course appears, and his behaviour is significant. When he enters, and Macduff cries out to him,

O Banquo, Banquo,

Our royal master's murdered, and Lady Macbeth, who has entered a moment before, exclaims,

Woe, alas!

What. in our house?

his answer,

Too cruel anywhere,

[II. iii. 86-8]

shows, as I have pointed out, repulsion, and we may be pretty sure that he suspects the truth at once. After a few words to Macduff he remains absolutely silent while the scene is continued for nearly forty lines. He is watching Macbeth and listening as he tells how he put the chamberlains to death in a frenzy of loyal rage. At last Banquo appears to have made up his mind. On Lady Macbeth's fainting he proposes that they shall all retire, and that they shall afterwards meet,



And question this most bloody piece of
work
To know it further. Fears and scruples
shake us:
In the great hand of God I stand. and
thence
Against the undivulged pretence I fight
Or treasonous malice.
[II. iii. 128-32]

His solemn language here reminds us of his grave words about 'the instruments of darkness' [I. iii. 124], and of his later prayer to the 'merciful powers.' He is profoundly shocked, full of indignation, and determined to play the part of a brave and honest man.

But he plays no such part. When next we see him, on the last day of his life, we find that he has yielded to evil. The Witches and his own ambition have conquered him. He alone of the lords knew of the prophecies. but he has said nothing of them. He has acquiesced in Macbeth's accession, and in the official theory that Duncan's sons had suborned the chamberlains to murder him. Doubtless, unlike Macduff, he was present at Scone to see the new king invested. He has, not formally but in effect, 'cloven to' Macbeth's 'consent': he is knit to him by 'a most indissoluble tie' [III. i. 17]: his advice in council has been 'most grave and prosperous' [III. i. 21]: he is to be the 'chief guest' at that night's supper. And his soliloquy tells us why:

Thou hast it now: king, Cawdor, Glamis,
all,
As the weird women promised, and, I fear,
Thou play'dst most foully for't: yet it was
said It should not stand in thy posterity, But that myself should be the root and fa
ther
Of many kings. If there come truth from
them
As upon thee, Macbeth, their speeches
shine
Why, by the verities on thee made good, May they not be my oracles as well, And set
me up in hope? But hush! no
more.
[III. i. 1-10]

This 'hush! no more' is not the dismissal of 'cursed thoughts': it only means that he hears the trumpets announcing the entrance of the King and Queen.

His punishment comes swiftly, much more swiftly than Macbeth's, and saves him from any further fall. He is a very fearless man, and still so far honourable that he has no thought of *acting* to bring about the fulfilment of the prophecy which has be guiled him. And therefore he has no fear of Mac beth. But he little understands him. To Macbeth's tormented mind Banquo's conduct appears highly suspicious. *Why* has this bold and



circumspect man kept his secret and become his chief adviser? In order to make good *his* part of the predictions after Macbeth's own precedent. Banquo, he is sure, will suddenly and secretly attack him. It is not the far-off accession of Banquo's descendants that he fears: it is (so he tells himself) swift murder; not that the 'barren sceptre' will some day droop from his dying hand, but that it will be 'wrenched' away now [III. 1. 62]. So he kills Banquo. But the Banquo he kills is not the innocent soldier who met the Witches and daffed their prophecies aside, nor the man who prayed to be delivered from the temptation of his dreams. (pp. 379-86)

A. C. Bradley, "*Lecture X: Macbeth*," in *his* *Shakespearean Tragedy: Lectures on 'Hamlet,' 'Othello,' 'King Lear,' 'Macbeth,'* 1904. Reprint by Macmillan and Co., 1905, pp. 366-400.



Critical Essay #13

[Kirschbaum challenges the position taken by A. C. Bradley that Banquo, as well as Macbeth, is influenced by the witches' prophecies (see excerpt above). Bradley, the critic charges, misinterprets Banquo as a "psychologically valid being" whose motives contribute to the advancement of the dramatic action of Macbeth rather than as a symbolic contrast to Macbeth's evil. Kirschbaum argues that Banquo represents innocence, and thus he is less a fully developed character than an "instrument" that "must be maintained as contrast" to Macbeth. The critic concludes that Macbeth's murder of Banquo essentially reflects his efforts to "destroy his own better humanity" because he "is jealous of Banquo's virtues, wants them but cannot have them, feels belittled by them, fears them, and hence must destroy them.. " For further commentary on Banquo's character, see the excerpts by Irving Ribner and Walter Clyde Curry.]

If we consider Banquo as a dramatic function rather than as a character in the usual sense, we shall be able to avoid [A.C.] Bradley's erroneous and confusing misreading of him as another whom the witches' influence finally debases [*Shakespearean Tragedy*]. Bradley, with his customary approach, tended to consider Banquo as a whole man, a psychologically valid being: he did not see that the playwright has so depicted the character that he will always be a dramaturgic foil to Macbeth.

As Banquo and Macbeth meet the witches in [I. iii], Banquo notes that Macbeth 'start[s]' and 'seem[s] to fear' the witches' [I. iii. 51] prophecies, that he 'seems rapt withal': but by his bold words to them, Banquo indicates that *he* has a free soul, 'who neither beg nor fear / Your favors nor your hate' [II. iii. 60- 1] Again, when Ross calls Macbeth Thane of Cawdor, it is Banquo who once and for all clearly indicates to the audience the true nature of the witches: 'What, can the devil speak true?' [III. iii. 107]. Although Banquo suspects nothing of Macbeth's intentions, he does know the nature of man and of Satan:

And 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.
[III. iii. 123-26]

Hence, he already knows what Macbeth does not learn completely until the very end: he has immediately recognized the witches as cunning emissaries of the enemy of mankind. And it is significant that Macbeth immediately wants to win Banquo to his side: 'let us speak / Our free hearts each to other' [III. iii. 154-55]. *Free* means *open* as well as *innocent* Banquo replies, 'Very gladly.' The ease of the answer indicates once more a truly free heart. So, already, Shakespeare's pattern is emerging: Macbeth, tempted by evil, feels a strong desire to negate the difference which Banquo stands for.

In [I. v], Lady Macbeth prays (I mean this word literally) the 'murth'ring ministers' to unsex her. Begging the devil to deprive her of the ordinary human qualities of pity and remorse, she requests the 'dunest smoke of hell' [I, v, 51] in which to commit the crime.



It is meaningfully to Banquo in [I. vi] that Shakespeare gives the lines describing Inverness castle in semi-religious terms-'templehaunting martlet', 'heaven's breath', 'pendent bed and procreant cradle' [I. vi. 4-8]. We are meant to feel deeply here the contrast between Banquo's vision and the devil-haunted castle of actuality. The next scene, [I. vii] shows us a Macbeth who almost seems to have felt the implications of those words of Banquo:

[Duncan's] virtues

Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu'd.

against

The deep damnation of his taking off; And pity, like a naked new-born babe, Striding the blast or heaven's cherubin,

hors'd

Upon the sightless couriers of the air, Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye, That tears shall drown the wind.

[I. vii. 18-25]

But his devil-possessed lady wins him over. And note how tightly Shakespeare has woven his pattern of contrasts: In [I.v] Lady Macbeth prayed to Satan to turn her 'milk' into 'gall', In [I. vi] Banquo referred to the evidence of a godly home, the 'procreant cradle'. In [I. vii] Macbeth speaks of 'pity, like a naked new-born babe' [I. vii. 21]. Later in [I, vii] Lady Macbeth says that she could snatch the smiling babe from her breast and dash its brains out!

At the beginning of Act II, just before the entrance of Macbeth, who will leave the stage to murder Duncan, Shakespeare once more presents Banquo. In his customary manner, he is aware of the supernatural powers above and below. It is a dark night: 'There's husbandry in heaven; / Their candles are all out' [II. 1. 4-5], ('Stars, hide your fires! "Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark' [I. iv. 50, I. v. 53]. Apparently, the demonic prayers of Macbeth and his lady have been answered.) But though the night is indeed dark, Banquo's words have, beyond his awareness, a prophetic undertone: if *husbandry* means thrift, it also means wise management. Hence, through Banquo, obliquely, the irresistible justice and omniscience of heaven is being urged. Banquo continues to Fleance, 'A heavy summons lies like lead upon me, / And yet I would not sleep' [II. 1. 6-7]. The first line might suggest that the dark powers are working upon him to get him out of the way of the criminals: at any rate, his soul apprehends evil. So, being the kind of man he is, he prays to the instruments of light to fight against the instruments of darkness:

Merciful powers,

Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that

nature

Gives way to in repose.

[II. 1. 7-9]

To Bradley, 'the poison [of the witches] has begun to work' but that is not at all the purport of these lines; they are there for comparison. Everyman is constantly being



tempted by evil: during waking hours, he is free to expel it from his mind; but while he and his will are asleep, the demons can invade his dreams. (Macbeth a few lines later puts the matter clearly: 'wicked dreams abuse / The curtain'd sleep' [I. if. 50-1].) Therefore, Banquo prays for grace, for holy power outside himself to repel the demons. In contrast Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have prayed far otherwise. After Macbeth's entrance, Banquo declares: 'I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters. / To you they have showed some truth' [I. ii. 20-1]. These are the 'cursed thoughts' that Banquo wishes to expunge-and it is as though Banquo, as instrument rather than as character, unwittingly, is testing Macbeth. Macbeth feels this, he wants to get Banquo on his side, he wants to talk to Banquo about the witches.

Ban. At your kind'st leisure.

Mac. If you shall cleave to my consent, when 'tis,
It shall make honor for you.

Ban. So I lose none

In seeking to augment it but still keep My bosom franchis'd and allegiance clear, I shall be counsel'd.

[I. ii. 24-9]

Bradley found this Banquo-Macbeth colloquy 'difficult to interpret'. So it is, inspected as realism, but if one regards the two speakers here not so much as people but as morality play figures who have chosen different sides in the struggle between Heaven and Hell, there is little difficulty. Macbeth is the representative of the Tempter, and Banquo refuses the bait, not with polite evasiveness but with formal rejection. For there is a dichotomy both in Macbeth and in Macbeth's world as long as Banquo represents the good; from Macbeth's viewpoint. Banquo must either be absorbed or destroyed if Macbeth is to gain ease.

In [II. iii], when Macduff tells Banquo that their king has been murdered, Lady Macbeth cries, 'Woe, alas! / What, in our house?' [II. iii. 87-8]. Banquo's reply is a semi-rebuke that comes automatically to his lips, 'Too cruel anywhere' [II. iii. 88]. He is not hiding anything: there is such correspondence between his mind and his mouth that his three words dismiss his hostess' apparently limited morality and express a universal reaction. But Banquo is not suspicious of any single person, yet; he does not know who or what the enemy is, yet. All he knows is that he is innocent and that a great crime has been committed:

In the great hand of God I stand, and
thence Against the undivulg'd pretense I fight
Of treasonous malice.

[II. iii. 130-32]

Note how the combatants in the action have been depersonalized by Banquo's words; the war between Good and Evil is larger than people. (pp. 2-5) Act III begins with Macbeth king, and Banquo suspecting he played most foully for it. It is not allowable, dramatically speaking, to conjecture any thing about Banquo between his last appearance and his present appearance. Furthermore, the 'indissoluble tie' is that between a king and his subject, and there is nothing evil in it. The 'grave and



prosperous' advice [III. 1. 21] is not criminal aid to the murderer but political counsel to his sovereign. As to Banquo's character and motives in regard to the crown, all the soliloquy tells us is that he anticipates great honour as a founder of a royal line. There is not a hint that he will play 'most foully' to make the prophecy come true. Primarily, the soliloquy is meant to remind the audience of what the witches told Banquo two full acts back, for that promise may be said to guide the action of the play until the blood-boltered Banquo points at the show of the eight kings-and even then Macbeth's horror at this truth motivates his slaughter of Lady Macduff. As usual Shakespeare's purpose with Banquo here is not similarity but dissimilarity. Dramaturgically, Banquo *must* be maintained as contrast. That it is not Banquo so much as person but what he still epitomizes which prompts Macbeth to kill his one-time companion is brought out, I believe, in Macbeth's famous soliloquy:

To be thus is nothing
But to be safely thus. Our fears in Banquo
Stick deep, and in his royalty of nature
Reigns that which would be fear'd. . . .
[III. 1. 48-51]

What is it that Macbeth fears? Is it really Banquo the man? Or is it the latter's still unsullied qualities-his natural royalty, his dauntless temper, his wise valour? Banquo represents what a part of Macbeth wants and, also, what a part of Macbeth hates. He is truly, as the witches declared, both happier and greater than the regicide. Let us put it this way: Macbeth is jealous of Banquo's virtues, wants them but cannot have them, feels belittled by them, fears them, and hence must destroy them. The killing of Banquo may be interpreted as a futile effort on Macbeth's part to destroy his own better humanity; it is a ghastly effort to unify Macbeth's inner and outer world, for Banquo has a daily beauty in his life that makes Macbeth ugly. The fear of an 'unlineal hand', the belief that Banquo's issue will immediately succeed him are rationalizations, the false coinage of an agonized man who has sold his soul to the devil, who has exchanged his 'eternal jewel' for a poisoned, tortured mind. It is not really Banquo the person whom Macbeth fears: it is Banquo as symbol, he who stood 'In the great hand of God'. (pp. 6-8)

Leo Kirschbaum, "Banquo and Edgar: Character or Function?" in Essays in Criticism, Vol. VII, No.1, January, 1957, pp. 1-21.



Adaptations

Macbeth. Republic, 1948.

Motion picture version of Shakespeare's tragedy, featuring Orson Welles, Jeanette Nolan, Dan O'Herlihy, and Roddy McDowall. Directed by Orson Welles. Distributed by Republic Pictures Home Video. 111 minutes.

Macbeth. Andrew Draunsberg and Hugh Hefner, 1971.

Roman Polanski's controversial film adaptation of the tragedy, which features realistic design, graphic violence, and a fatalistic atmosphere. The cast includes Jon Finch, Nicholas Selby, and Martin Shaw. Distributed by RCA/Columbia Pictures Home Video. 139 minutes.

Macbeth. BBC, Time Life Television, 1976.

Television adaptation of *Macbeth* and part of the series "The Shakespeare Plays." Features Eric Porter and Janet Suzman. Distributed by TimeLife Video. 137 minutes.

Macbeth. Miami Dade Community College, BBC, 1978.

Presents key scenes from Shakespeare's tragedy. Narrated by Jose Ferrer. Distributed by Films, Inc. 60 minutes.



Further Study

Literary Commentary

Asp, Caroline. "'Be bloody, bold and resolute': Tragic Action and Sexual Stereotyping in *Macbeth*." *Studies in Philology* LXXVIII, No.2 (Spring 1981): 153-69.

Discusses the effect that stereotyping sexual roles has on the major characters in *Macbeth*.

Biggins, Dennis. "Sexuality, Witchcraft, and Violence in *Macbeth*." *Shakespeare Studies* VIII (1975): 255-77.

Contends that there are structural and thematic links between sexuality and various forms of violence in *Macbeth*. Biggins notes that these issues are also associated with the depiction of witchcraft in the play.

Boyer, Clarence Valentine. "Macbeth." In his *The Villain as Tragic Hero in Elizabethan Tragedy*, pp. 187-219. 1914. Reprint. New York: Russell & Russell, 1964.

Presents a detailed examination of Macbeth's character, tracing the development of his thought throughout the play's action.

Brown, John Russell, ed. *Focus on "Macbeth"*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982, 258 p.

Contains eleven essays on *Macbeth* by prominent critics. The subjects of these essays range from thematic concerns and language to theatrical considerations of the play.

Foakes, R. A. "Macbeth." In *Stratford Papers on Shakespeare*, edited by B. W. Jackson, pp. 150-74. Toronto: W. J. Gage Limited, 1963.

Comments on the overall intensity of *Macbeth*, which is chiefly apparent in its language and imagery. Foakes argues that the drama's simplicity of action and character belies the fact that Shakespeare was attempting to develop a new kind of tragedy distinct from *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, and *Othello*.

Fosse, Jean. "The Lord's Anointed Temple: A Study of Some Symbolic Patterns in *Macbeth*." *Cahiers Elisabethains*, No.6 (October 1974): 15-22.

Studies a group of images in *Macbeth* concerned with the human body to demonstrate that they are closely related and that they form an important symbolic pattern.

Heilman, Robert B. "The Criminal as Tragic Hero: Dramatic Methods." *Shakespeare Survey* 19 (1966): 12-24.



Focuses on Shakespeare's attempts to evoke sympathy for Macbeth despite the character's increasing villainy. Heilman asserts that the playwright "so manages the situation that we become Macbeth or at least assent to complicity with him."

Jaarsma, Richard J. "The Tragedy of Banquo." *Literature and Psychology* XVII, Nos. 2-3 (1967): 87-94.

Maintains that Banquo undergoes a radical change as a result of the witches' prophecies and becomes Macbeth's "silent accomplice" to Duncan's murder. Jaarsma argues that by illustrating how evil affects a man "who is more realistic and less susceptible to it than Macbeth," Shakespeare generalizes the tragedy of yielding to temptation.

Kimbrough, Robert. "Macbeth: The Prisoner of Gender." *Shakespeare Studies* XVI (1983): 175-90.

Examines the role of gender in *Macbeth*, asserting that the protagonist's "failure to allow the tender aspects of his character to check those tough characteristics which are celebrated by the chauvinistic war ethic of his culture [and] championed by his Wife" results first in his emotional, then his physical death.

Knights, L. C. "'Macbeth.'" In his *Some Shakespearean Themes*, pp. 120-42. London: Chatto and Windus, Ltd., 1959.

Provides a general overview of the play's major themes and images, noting that "the essential structure of *Macbeth*. . . is to be sought in the poetry."

Lawlor, John. "Natural and Supernatural." In his *The Tragic Sense in Shakespeare*, pp. 107-46. London: Chatto & Windus, 1966.

Presents abroad discussion of *Macbeth*, touching on the subjects of free will, Shakespeare's wordplay, and imagery.

Leary, William G. "The World of *Macbeth*." In *How to Read Shakespearean Tragedy*, edited by Edwin Quinn, pp. 234-49. New York: Harper & Row, 1978.

Analyzes the "world" of *Macbeth*, dividing it into four parts: the physical, the psychological, the political, and the moral. Leary considers each of these aspects separately, but maintains that they are "all parts of a unified whole."

Moorthy, P. Rama, "Fear in *Macbeth*." *Essays in Criticism* XXIII, No.2 (April 1973): 154-66.

Asserts that fear is a unifying theme in *Macbeth*. Moorthy examines how fear affects Macbeth in particular, noting that it is his peculiar fate to be continually exposed to its horrifying consequences.



Rackin, Phyllis. "Macbeth." In her *Shakespeare's Tragedies*, pp. 107-22. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1978.

Offers a general discussion of *Macbeth*. Rackin's book, which she states is "written for amateurs," includes photographs from numerous theatrical productions.

Sadler, Lynn Veach. "The Three Guises of Lady Macbeth." *CLAJournal* XIX, No.1 (September 1975): 10-19.

Declares that Lady Macbeth is more imaginative than her husband and that she projects three guises in the play: the public Lady Macbeth, the woman who plays to the audience of her husband only, and the private Lady Macbeth.

Smidt, Kristian. "Two Aspects of Ambition in Elizabethan Tragedy: *Doctor Faustus* and *Macbeth*." *English Studies* 50, Nos. 1-6 (1969): 235-48.

Discusses how Elizabethan attitudes toward ambition are represented in the protagonists of both Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. Smidt notes that Macbeth's primary character fault is that "he mistakes the honours received and promised for his natural right and greatness for a thing he may seize into his own hands."

Speaight, Robert. "Macbeth." In *his Nature in Shakespearian Tragedy*, pp. 44-68. London: Hollis and Carter Limited, 1955.

Examines Shakespeare's depiction of nature in *Macbeth*, arguing that it maintains an adversarial relationship with Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, whose unnatural actions force it "to [take] up arms in self-defence."

Stirling, Brents. "The Unity of Macbeth." *Shakespeare Quarterly* IV, No.4 (October 1953): 385-94.

Proposes that the poetic and dramatic structures of *Macbeth* are unified in four traditionally Elizabethan themes: darkness, sleep, raptness, and contradiction.

Walton, J. K. "Macbeth." in *Shakespeare in a Changing World*, edited by Arnold Kettle, pp. 102-22. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1964.

Analyzes Macbeth's individualism and associates it with the play's imagery of isolation and sterility. Walton also notes that opposed to this individualism is a combination of forces that challenge Macbeth, stating that the play's optimism is partly suggested by "the fact that a unified people overcome the tyrant."

West, Robert H. "Night's Black Agents in *Macbeth*." *Renaissance Papers* (1956): 17-24,

Contends that the witches are agents of supernatural evil in *Macbeth*. West asserts that such an interpretation is necessary to apprehend the "wholeness of the dramatic effect."



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Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Shakespeare for Students (SfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's □For Students□ Literature line, SfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels



frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel; and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members □educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized



Each entry, or chapter, in SfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- **Introduction:** a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- **Author Biography:** this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- **Plot Summary:** a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- **Characters:** an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed—for instance, the narrator in *Invisible Man*—the character is listed as "The Narrator" and alphabetized as "Narrator." If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name "Jean Louise Finch" would head the listing for the narrator of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname "Scout Finch."
- **Themes:** a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- **Style:** this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- **Historical Context:** This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- **Critical Overview:** this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- **Criticism:** an essay commissioned by SfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).



- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an "at-a-glance" comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SfS includes "The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature," a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Shakespeare for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.



Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Shakespeare for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Shakespeare for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Shakespeare for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Shakespeare for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Shakespeare for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Shakespeare for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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