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Theatrical tradition has made *Macbeth* the unluckiest of all Shakespeare's plays, particularly for those who act in it. Macbeth himself can be termed the unluckiest of all Shakespearean protagonists, precisely because he is the most imaginative. A great killing machine, Macbeth is endowed by Shakespeare with something less than ordinary intelligence, but with a power of fantasy so enormous that pragmatically it seems to be Shakespeare's own. No other drama by Shakespeare—not even *King Lear*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or *The Tempest*—so engulfs us in a phantasmagoria. The magic in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest* is crucially effectual, while there is no overt magic or witchcraft in *King Lear*, though we sometimes half expect it because the drama is of such hallucinatory intensity.

The witchcraft in *Macbeth*, though pervasive, cannot alter material events, yet hallucination can and does. The rough magic in *Macbeth* is wholly Shakespeare's; he indulges his own imagination as never before, seeking to find its moral limits (if any). I do not suggest that Macbeth represents Shakespeare, in any of the complex ways that Falstaff and Hamlet may represent certain inner aspects of the playwright. But in the Renaissance sense of imagina-

tion (which is not ours), Macbeth may well be the emblem of that faculty in Shakespeare, a faculty that must have frightened Shakespeare and ought to terrify us, when we read or attend *Macbeth*, for the play depends upon its horror of its own imaginings. Imagination (or fancy) is an equivocal matter for Shakespeare and his era, where it meant both poetic furor, as a kind of substitute for divine inspiration, and a gap torn in reality, almost a punishment for the displacement of the sacred into the secular. Shakespeare somewhat mitigates the negative aura of fantasy in his other plays, but not in *Macbeth*, which is a tragedy of the imagination. Though the play triumphantly proclaims, "The time is free," when Macbeth is killed, the reverberations we cannot escape as we leave the theater or close the book have little to do with our freedom.

Hamlet dies into freedom, perhaps even augmenting our own liberty, but Macbeth's dying is less of a release for us. The universal reaction to *Macbeth* is that we identify with him, or at least with his imagination. Richard III, Iago, and Edmund are hero-villains; to call Macbeth one of that company seems all wrong. They delight in their wickedness; Macbeth suffers intensely from knowing that he does evil, and that he must go on doing ever worse. Shakespeare rather dreadfully sees to it that *we are* Macbeth; our identity with him is involuntary but inescapable. All of us possess, to one degree or another, a proleptic imagination; in *Macbeth*, it is absolute. He scarcely is conscious of an ambition, desire, or wish before he *sees* himself on the other side or shore, already having performed the crime that equivocally fulfills ambition. Macbeth terrifies us partly because that aspect of our own imagination is so frightening: it seems to make us murderers, thieves, usurpers, and rapists.

Why are we unable to resist identifying with Macbeth? He so

dominates his play that we have nowhere else to turn. Lady Macbeth is a powerful character, but Shakespeare gets her off the stage after act 3, scene 4, except for her short return in a state of madness at the start of act 5. Shakespeare had killed off Mercutio early to keep him from stealing *Romeo and Juliet*, and had allowed Falstaff only a reported death scene so as to prevent Sir John from dwarfing the “reformed” Hal in *Henry V*. Once Lady Macbeth has been removed, the only real presence on the stage is Macbeth’s. Shrewdly, Shakespeare does little to individualize Duncan, Banquo, Macduff, and Malcolm. The drunken porter, Macduff’s little son, and Lady Macduff are more vivid in their brief appearances than are all the secondary males in the play, who are wrapped in a common grayness. Since Macbeth speaks fully a third of the drama’s lines, and Lady Macbeth’s role is truncated, Shakespeare’s design upon us is manifest. We are to journey inward to Macbeth’s heart of darkness, and there we will find ourselves more truly and more strange, murderers in and of the spirit.

The terror of this play, most ably discussed by Wilbur Sanders, is deliberate and salutary. If we are compelled to identify with Macbeth, and he appalls us (and himself), then we ourselves must be fearsome also. Working against the Aristotelian formula for tragedy, Shakespeare deluges us with fear and pity, not to purge us but for a sort of purposiveness without purpose that no interpretation wholly comprehends. The sublimity of Macbeth and of Lady Macbeth is overwhelming; they are persuasive and valuable personalities, profoundly in love with each other. Indeed, with surpassing irony Shakespeare presents them as the happiest married couple in all his work. And they are anything but two fiends, despite their dreadful crimes and deserved catastrophes. So rapid and foreshortened is their play (about half the length of *Hamlet*)

that we are given no leisure to confront their descent into hell as it happens. Something vital in us is bewildered by the evanescence of their better natures, though Shakespeare gives us emblems enough of the way down and out.

Macbeth is an uncanny unity of setting, plot, and characters, fused together beyond comparison with any other play of Shakespeare's. The drama's cosmos is more drastic and alienated even than *King Lear*'s, where nature was so radically wounded. *King Lear* was pre-Christian, whereas *Macbeth*, overtly medieval Catholic, seems less set in Scotland than in the *kenoma*, the cosmological emptiness of our world as described by the ancient gnostic heretics. Shakespeare knew at least something of gnosticism through the Hermetic philosophy of Giordano Bruno, though I think there can be little or no possibility of a direct influence of Bruno on Shakespeare (despite the interesting surmises of Frances Yates). Yet the gnostic horror of time seems to have infiltrated *Macbeth*, emanating from the not-less-than-universal nature of Shakespeare's own consciousness. The world of *Macbeth* is one into which we *have been thrown*, a dungeon for tyrants and victims alike. If *Lear* was pre-Christian, then *Macbeth* is weirdly post-Christian. There are, as we have seen, Christian intimations that haunt the pagans of *Lear*, though to no purpose or effect. Despite some desperate allusions by several of the characters, *Macbeth* allows no relevance to Christian revelation. Macbeth is the deceitful "man of blood" abhorred by the Psalms and elsewhere in the Bible, but he scarcely can be assimilated to biblical villainy. There is nothing specifically anti-Christian in his crimes; they would offend virtually every vision of the sacred and the moral that human chronicle has known. That may be why Akira Kurosawa's *Throne of Blood* is so uncannily the most successful film version of *Macbeth*,

though it departs very far from the specifics of Shakespeare's play. *Macbeth's* tragedy, like *Hamlet's*, *Lear's*, and *Othello's*, is so universal that a strictly Christian context is inadequate to it.

I have ventured in other publications my surmise that Shakespeare intentionally evades (or even blurs) Christian categories throughout his work. He is anything but a devotional poet and dramatist; there are no *Holy Sonnets* by Shakespeare. Even Sonnet 146 ("Poor soul, the centre of my sinful earth") is an equivocal poem, particularly in its crucial eleventh line: "Buy terms divine in selling hours of dross." One major edition of Shakespeare glosses "terms divine" as "everlasting life," but "terms" allows several less ambitious readings. Did Shakespeare "believe in" the resurrection of the body? We cannot know, but I find nothing in the plays or poems to suggest a consistent supernaturalism in their author, and more perhaps to intimate a pragmatic nihilism. There is no more spiritual comfort to be gained from *Macbeth* than from the other high tragedies. Graham Bradshaw subtly argues that the *terrors* of *Macbeth* are Christian, yet he also endorses Friedrich Nietzsche's reflections on the play in Nietzsche's *Daybreak* (1881). Here is section 240 of *Daybreak*:

On the morality of the stage.—Whoever thinks that Shakespeare's theatre has a moral effect, and that the sight of *Macbeth* irresistibly repels one from the evil of ambition, is in error: and he is again in error if he thinks Shakespeare himself felt as he feels. He who is really possessed by raging ambition beholds this its image with *joy*, and if the hero perishes by his passion this precisely is the sharpest spice in the hot draught of this joy. Can the poet have felt otherwise? How royally, and not at all like a

rogue, does his ambitious man pursue his course from the moment of his great crime! Only from then on does he exercise “demonic” attraction and excite similar natures to emulation—demonic means here: in defiance *against* life and advantage for the sake of a drive and idea. Do you suppose that Tristan and Isolde are preaching *against* adultery when they both perish by it? This would be to stand the poets on their head: they, and especially Shakespeare, are enamoured of the passions as such and not least of their death-welcoming moods—those moods in which the heart adheres to life no more firmly than does a drop of water to a glass. It is not the guilt and its evil outcome they have at heart, Shakespeare as little as Sophocles (in Ajax, Philoctetes, Oedipus): as easy as it would have been in these instances to make guilt the lever of the drama, just as surely has this been avoided. The tragic poet has just as little desire to take sides *against* life with his images of life! He cries rather: “it is the stimulant of stimulants, this exciting, changing, dangerous, gloomy and often sun-drenched existence! It is an adventure to live—espouse what party in it you will, it will always retain this character!”—He speaks thus out of a restless, vigorous age which is half-drunk and stupefied by its excess of blood and energy—out of a wicked age than ours is: which is why we need first to *adjust* and *justify* the goal of a Shakespearean drama, that is to say, not to understand it.

Nietzsche links up here with William Blake’s adage that the highest art is immoral, and that “Exuberance is beauty.” *Macbeth*

certainly has “an excess of blood and energy”; its terrors may be more Christian than Greek or Roman, but indeed they are so primordial that they seem to me more shamanistic than Christian, even as the “terms divine” of Sonnet 146 impress me as rather more Platonic than Christian. Of all Shakespeare’s plays, *Macbeth* is most “a tragedy of blood,” not just in its murders but in the ultimate implications of Macbeth’s imagination itself being bloody. The usurper Macbeth moves in a consistent phantasmagoria of blood: blood is the prime constituent of his imagination. He *sees* that what opposes him is blood in one aspect—call it nature in the sense that he opposes nature—and that this opposing force thrusts him into shedding more blood: “It will have blood, they say: blood will have blood.”

Macbeth speaks these words in the aftermath of confronting Banquo’s ghost, and as always his imaginative coherence overcomes his cognitive confusion. “It” is blood as the natural—call that King Duncan—and the second “blood” is all that Macbeth can experience. His usurpation of Duncan transcends the politics of the kingdom, and threatens a natural good deeply embedded in the Macbeths, but which they have abandoned, and which Macbeth now seeks to destroy, even upon the cosmological level, if only he could. You can call this natural good or first sense of “blood” Christian, if you want to, but Christianity is a revealed religion, and Macbeth rebels against nature *as he imagines it*. That pretty much makes Christianity as irrelevant to *Macbeth* as it is to *King Lear*, and indeed to all the Shakespearean tragedies. Othello, a Christian convert, falls away not from Christianity but from his own better nature, while Hamlet is the apotheosis of all natural gifts, yet cannot abide in them. I am not suggesting here that Shakespeare himself was a gnostic, or a nihilist, or a Nietzschean

vitalist three centuries before Nietzsche. But as a dramatist, he is just as much all or any of those as he is a Christian. *Macbeth*, as I have intimated before, is anything but a celebration of Shakespeare's imagination, yet it is also anything but a Christian tragedy. Shakespeare, who understood everything that we comprehend and far more (humankind never will stop catching up to him), long since had exorcised Marlowe, and Christian tragedy (however inverted) with him. *Macbeth* has nothing in common with Tamburlaine or with Faustus. The nature that *Macbeth* most strenuously violates is his own, but though he learns this even as he begins the violation, he refuses to follow Lady *Macbeth* into madness and suicide.

Like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, *Macbeth* is a visionary drama and, difficult as it is for us to accept that strange genre, a visionary tragedy. *Macbeth* himself is an involuntary seer, almost an occult medium, dreadfully open to the spirits of the air and of the night. Lady *Macbeth*, initially more enterprising than her husband, falls into a psychic decline for causes more visionary than not. So much are the *Macbeths* made for sublimity, figures of fiery eros as they are, that their political and dynastic ambitions seem grotesquely inadequate to their mutual desires. Why do they want the crown? Shakespeare's Richard III, still Marlovian, seeks the sweet fruition of an earthly crown, but the *Macbeths* are not Machiavellian over-reachers, nor are they sadists or power-obsessed as such. Their mutual lust is also a lust for the throne, a desire that is their Nietzschean revenge against time and time's irrefutable declaration: "It was." Shakespeare did not care to clarify the *Macbeths*' childlessness. Lady *Macbeth* speaks of having nursed a child, presumably her own but now dead; we are not told

that Macbeth is her second husband, but we may take him to be that. He urges her to bring forth men children only, in admiration of her "manly" resolve, yet pragmatically they seem to expect no heirs of their own union, while he fiercely seeks to murder Fleance, Banquo's son, and does destroy Macduff's children. Freud, shrewder on *Macbeth* than on *Hamlet*, called the curse of childlessness Macbeth's motivation for murder and usurpation. Shakespeare left this matter more uncertain; it is a little difficult to imagine Macbeth as a father when he is, at first, so profoundly dependent on Lady Macbeth. Until she goes mad, she seems as much Macbeth's mother as his wife.

Of all Shakespeare's tragic protagonists, Macbeth is the least free. As Wilbur Sanders implied, Macbeth's actions are a kind of falling forward ("falling in space," Sanders called it). Whether or not Nietzsche (and Freud after him) were right in believing that we are lived, thought, and willed by forces not ourselves, Shakespeare anticipated Nietzsche in this conviction. Sanders acutely follows Nietzsche in giving us a Macbeth who pragmatically lacks any will, in contrast to Lady Macbeth, who is a pure will until she breaks apart. Nietzsche's insight may be the clue to the different ways in which the Macbeths desire the crown: she wills it, he wills nothing, and paradoxically she collapses while he grows ever more frightening, outraging others, himself outraged, as he becomes the nothing he projects. And yet this nothingness remains a negative sublime; its grandeur merits the dignity of tragic perspectives. The enigma of *Macbeth*, as a drama, always will remain its protagonist's hold upon our terrified sympathy. Shakespeare surmised the guilty imaginings we share with Macbeth, who is Mr. Hyde to our Dr. Jekyll. Robert Louis Stevenson's marvelous story emphasizes that Hyde is younger than

Jekyll, only because Jekyll's career is still young in villainy while old in good works. Our uncanny sense that Macbeth somehow is younger in deed than we are is analogous. Virtuous as we may (or may not) be, we fear that Macbeth, our Mr. Hyde, has the power to realize our own potential for active evil. Poor Jekyll eventually turns into Mr. Hyde and cannot get back; Shakespeare's art is to suggest we could have such a fate.

Is Shakespeare himself—on any level—also a Dr. Jekyll in relation to Macbeth's Mr. Hyde? How could he not be, given his success in touching a universal negative sublime through having imagined Macbeth's imaginings? Like Hamlet, with whom he has some curious affinities, Macbeth projects an aura of intimacy: with the audience, with the hapless actors, with his creator. Formalist critics of Shakespeare—old guard and new—insist that no character is larger than the play, since a character is “only” an actor's role. Audiences and readers are not so formalistic: Shylock, Falstaff, Rosalind, Hamlet, Malvolio, Macbeth, Cleopatra (and some others) seem readily transferable to contexts different from their dramas. Sancho Panza, as Franz Kafka demonstrated in the wonderful parable “The Truth About Sancho Panza,” can become the creator of Don Quixote. Some new and even more Borgesian Kafka must rise among us to show Antonio as the inventor of Shylock, or Prince Hal as the father of Sir John Falstaff.

To call Macbeth larger than his play in no way deprecates my own favorite among all of Shakespeare's works. The economy of *Macbeth* is ruthless, and scholars who find it truncated, or partly the work of Thomas Middleton, fail to understand Shakespeare's darkest design. What notoriously dominates this play, more than any other in Shakespeare, is time, time that is not the Christian mercy of eternity, but devouring time, death nihilistically re-

garded as finality. No critic has been able to distinguish between death, time, and nature in *Macbeth*; Shakespeare so fuses them that all of us are well within the mix. We hear voices crying out the formulas of redemption, but never persuasively, compared with Macbeth's soundings of night and the grave. Technically, the men in *Macbeth* are "Christian warriors," as some critics like to emphasize, but their Scottish medieval Catholicism is perfunctory. The kingdom, as in *King Lear*, is a kind of cosmological wasteland, a creation that was also a fall, in the beginning.

Macbeth is very much a night piece; its Scotland is more a mythological Northland than the actual nation from which Shakespeare's royal patron emerged. King James I doubtless prompted some of the play's emphases, but hardly the most decisive, the sense that the night has usurped the day. Murder is the characteristic action of *Macbeth*: not just King Duncan, Banquo, and Lady Macduff and her children are the victims. By firm implication, every person in the play is a potential target for the Macbeths. Shakespeare, who perhaps mocked the stage horrors of other dramatists in his *Titus Andronicus*, experimented far more subtly with the aura of murderousness in *Macbeth*. It is not so much that each of us in the audience is a potential victim. Rather more uneasily, the little Macbeth within each theatergoer can be tempted to surmise a murder or two of her or his own.

I can think of no other literary work with *Macbeth's* power of *contamination*, unless it be Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, the prose epic profoundly influenced by *Macbeth*. Ahab is another visionary maniac, obsessed with what seems a malign order in the universe. Ahab strikes through the mask of natural appearances, as Macbeth does, but the White Whale is no easy victim. Like Macbeth, Ahab is outraged by the equivocation of the fiend that lies

like truth, and yet Ahab's prophet, the Parsi harpooner Fedallah himself is far more equivocal than the Weird Sisters. We identify with Captain Ahab less ambivalently than we do with King Macbeth, since Ahab is neither a murderer nor a usurper, and yet pragmatically Ahab is about as destructive as Macbeth: all on the *Pequod*, except for Ishmael the narrator, are destroyed by Ahab's quest. Melville, a shrewd interpreter of Shakespeare, borrows Macbeth's phantasmagoric and proleptic imagination for Ahab, so that both Ahab and Macbeth become world destroyers. The Scottish heath and the Atlantic Ocean amalgamate: each is a context where preternatural forces have outraged a sublime consciousness, who fights back vainly and unluckily, and goes down to a great defeat. Ahab, an American Promethean, is perhaps more hero than villain, unlike Macbeth, who forfeits our admiration though not our entrapped sympathy.

William Hazlitt remarked of Macbeth that "he is sure of nothing but the present moment." As the play progresses to its catastrophe, Macbeth loses even that certitude, and his apocalyptic anxieties prompt Victor Hugo's identification of Macbeth with Nimrod, the Bible's first hunter of men. Macbeth is worthy of the identification: his shocking vitality imbues the violence of evil with biblical force and majesty, giving us the paradox that the play seems Christian not for any benevolent expression but only insofar as its ideas of evil surpass merely naturalistic explanations. If any theology is applicable to *Macbeth*, then it must be the most negative of theologies, one that excludes the incarnation. The cosmos of *Macbeth*, like that of *Moby-Dick*, knows no savior; the heath and the sea alike are great shrouds, whose dead will not be resurrected.

God is exiled from *Macbeth* and *Moby-Dick*, and from *King Lear* also. Exiled, not denied or slain; Macbeth rules in a cosmological emptiness where God is lost, either too far away or too far within to be summoned back. As in *King Lear*, so in *Macbeth*: the moment of creation and the moment of fall fuse into one. Nature and man alike fall into time, even as they are created.

No one desires *Macbeth* to lose its witches, because of their dramatic immediacy, yet the play's cosmological vision renders them a little redundant.

Between what Macbeth imagines and what he does, there is only a temporal gap, in which he himself seems devoid of will. The Weird Sisters, Macbeth's Muses, take the place of that will; we cannot imagine them appearing to Iago, or to Edmund, both geniuses of the will. They are not hollow men; Macbeth is. What happens to Macbeth is inevitable, despite his own culpability, and no other play by Shakespeare, not even the early farces, moves with such speed (as Samuel Coleridge noted). Perhaps the rapidity augments the play's terror; there seems to be no power of the mind over the universe of death, a cosmos all but identical both with Macbeth's phantasmagoria and with the Weird Sisters.

Shakespeare grants little cognitive power to anyone in *Macbeth*, and least of all to the protagonist himself. The intellectual powers of Hamlet, Iago, and Edmund are not relevant to Macbeth and to his play. Shakespeare disperses the energies of the mind, so that no single character in *Macbeth* represents any particular capacity for understanding the tragedy, nor could they do better in concert. Mind is elsewhere in *Macbeth*, it has forsaken humans and witches alike, and lodges freestyle where it will, shifting capriciously and quickly from one corner of the sensible emptiness to another. Coleridge hated the Porter's scene (2.3), with its

famous knocking at the gate, but Coleridge made himself deaf to the cognitive urgency of the knocking. Mind knocks, and breaks into the play, with the first and only comedy allowed in this drama. Shakespeare employs his company's leading clown (presumably Robert Armin) to introduce a healing touch of nature where *Macbeth* has intimidated us with the preternatural, and with the Macbeths' mutual phantasmagoria of murder and power:

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

[2.3.1–20]

Cheerfully hungover, the Porter admits Macduff and Lennox through what indeed is now Hell gate, the slaughterhouse where Macbeth has murdered the good Duncan. Shakespeare may well be grimacing at himself on “a farmer, that hanged himself on the

expectation of plenty,” since investing in grain was one of Shakespeare’s favorite risks of venture capital. The more profound humor comes in the proleptic contrast between the Porter and Macbeth. As keeper of Hell gate, the Porter boisterously greets “an equivocator,” presumably a Jesuit like Father Garnet, who asserted a right to equivocal answers so as to avoid self-incrimination in the Gunpowder Plot trial of early 1606, the year *Macbeth* was first performed. Historicizing *Macbeth* as a reaction to the Gunpowder Plot to me seems only a compounding of darkness with darkness, since Shakespeare always transcends commentary on his own moment in time. We rather are meant to contrast the hard-drinking Porter with Macbeth himself, who will remind us of the Porter, but not until act 5, scene 5, when Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane and Macbeth begins: “To doubt the equivocation of the fiend / That lies like truth.” Thomas De Quincey confined his analysis of the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth* to the shock of the four knocks themselves, but as an acute rhetorician he should have attended more to the Porter’s subsequent dialogue with Macduff, where the Porter sends up forever the notion of “equivocation” by expounding how alcohol provokes three things:

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

[2.3.26–33]

Drunkenness is another equivocation, provoking lust but then denying the male his capacity for performance. Are we perhaps made to wonder whether Macbeth, like Iago, plots murderously because his sexual capacity has been impaired? If you have a proleptic imagination as intense as Macbeth's, then your desire or ambition outruns your will, reaching the other bank, or shoal, of time all too quickly. The fierce sexual passion of the Macbeths possesses a quality of baffled intensity, possibly related to their childlessness, so that the Porter may hint at a situation that transcends his possible knowledge, but not the audience's surmises.

Macbeth's ferocity as a killing machine exceeds even the capacity of such great Shakespearean butchers as Aaron the Moor and Richard III, or the heroic Roman battle prowess of Antony and of Coriolanus. Iago's possible impotence would have some relation to the humiliation of being passed over for Cassio. But if Macbeth's manhood has been thwarted, there is no Othello for him to blame; the sexual victimization, if it exists, is self-generated by an imagination so impatient with time's workings that it always overprepares every event. This may be an element in Lady Macbeth's taunts, almost as if the manliness of Macbeth can be restored only by his murder of the sleeping Duncan, whom Lady Macbeth cannot slay because the good king resembles *her* father in his slumber. The mounting nihilism of Macbeth, which will culminate in his image of life as a tale signifying nothing, perhaps then has more affinity with Iago's devaluation of reality than with Edmund's cold potency.

A. C. Bradley found in *Macbeth* more of a "Sophoclean irony" than anywhere else in Shakespeare, meaning by such irony an augmenting awareness in the audience far exceeding the protagonist's consciousness that perpetually he is saying one thing, and

meaning more than he himself understands in what he says. I agree with Bradley that *Macbeth* is the masterpiece of Shakespearean irony, which transcends dramatic, or Sophoclean, irony. Macbeth consistently says more than he knows, but he also imagines more than he says, so that the gap between his overt consciousness and his imaginative powers, wide to begin with, becomes extraordinary. Sexual desire, particularly in males, is likely to manifest all the vicissitudes of the drive when that abyss is so vast. This may be part of the burden of Lady Macbeth's lament before the banquet scene dominated by Banquo's ghost:

Nought's had, all's spent,
Where our desire is got without content.
'Tis safer to be that which we destroy
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.

[3.2.4-7]

The madness of Lady Macbeth exceeds a trauma merely of guilt; her husband consistently turns from her (though never against her) once Duncan is slain. Whatever the two had intended by the mutual "greatness" they had promised each other, the subtle irony of Shakespeare reduces such greatness to a pragmatic desexualization once the usurpation of the crown has been realized. There is a fearful pathos in Lady Macbeth's cries of "To bed," in her madness, and a terrifying proleptic irony in her earlier outcry "Unsex me here." It is an understatement to aver that no other author's sense of human sexuality equals Shakespeare's in scope and in precision. The terror that we experience, as audience or as readers, when we suffer *Macbeth* seems to me, in many ways, sexual in its nature, if only because murder increasingly becomes Macbeth's mode of sexual expression. Unable to beget children, Macbeth slaughters them.

Though it is traditional to regard *Macbeth* as being uniquely terrifying among Shakespeare's plays, it will appear eccentric that I should regard this tragedy's fearsomeness as somehow sexual in its origins and in its dominant aspects. The violence of *Macbeth* doubtless impresses us more than it did the drama's contemporary audiences. Many if not most of those who attended *Macbeth* also joined the large crowds who thronged public executions in London, including drawings-and-quarterings as well as more civilized beheadings. The young Shakespeare, as we saw, probably heaped up outrages in his *Titus Andronicus* both to gratify his audience and to mock such gratification. But the barbarities of *Titus Andronicus* are very different in their effect from the savageries of *Macbeth*, which do not move us to nervous laughter:

For brave Macbeth—well he deserves that name—
 Disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel,
 Which smoked with bloody execution,
 Like valor's minion carved out his passage
 Till he faced the slave—
 Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
 Till he unseamed him from the navel to th' chops,
 And fixed his head upon our battlements.

[I.2.16–23]

I cannot recall anyone else in Shakespeare who sustains a death wound from the navel all the way up to his jaw, a mode of unseaming that introduces us to Macbeth's quite astonishing ferocity. "Bellona's bridegroom," Macbeth is thus the husband to the war goddess, and his unseaming strokes enact his husbandly function. Devoted as he and Lady Macbeth palpably are to each other, their love has its problematic elements. Shakespeare's sources gave

him a Lady Macbeth previously married, and presumably grieving for a dead son by that marriage. The mutual passion between her and Macbeth depends upon their dream of a shared “greatness,” the promise of which seems to have been an element in Macbeth’s courtship, since she reminds him of it when he wavers. Her power over him, with its angry questioning of his manliness, is engendered by her evident frustration—certainly of ambition, manifestly of motherhood, possibly also of sexual fulfillment. Victor Hugo, when he placed Macbeth in the line of Nimrod, the Bible’s first “hunter of men,” may have hinted that few of them have been famous as lovers. Macbeth sees himself always as a soldier, therefore not cruel but professionally murderous, which allows him to maintain also a curious, personal passivity, almost more the dream than the dreamer. Famously a paragon of courage and so no coward, Macbeth nevertheless is in a perpetual state of fear. Of what? Part of the answer seems to be his fear of impotence, a dread related as much to his overwhelming power of imagination as to his shared dream of greatness with Lady Macbeth.

Critics almost always find an element of sexual violence in Macbeth’s murder of the sleeping and benign Duncan. Macbeth himself overdetermines this critical discovery when he compares his movement toward the murder with “Tarquin’s ravishing strides” on that tyrant’s way to rape the chaste Lucrece, heroine of Shakespeare’s poem. Is this a rare, self-referential moment on Shakespeare’s own part, since many in Macbeth’s audience would have recognized the dramatist’s reference to one of his nondramatic works, which was more celebrated in Shakespeare’s time than it is in ours? If it is, then Shakespeare brings his imagination very close to Macbeth’s in the moment just preceding his protagonist’s initial crime. Think how many are murdered onstage in

Shakespeare, and reflect why we are not allowed to watch Macbeth's stabbings of Duncan. The unseen nature of the butchery allows us to imagine, rather horribly, the location and number of Macbeth's thrusts into the sleeping body of the man who is at once his cousin, his guest, his king, and symbolically his benign father. I assumed that, in *Julius Caesar*, Brutus's thrust was at Caesar's privates, enhancing the horror of the tradition that Brutus was Caesar's natural son. The corpse of Duncan is described by Macbeth in accents that remind us of Antony's account of the murdered Caesar, yet there is something more intimate in Macbeth's phrasing:

Here lay Duncan,
His silver skin laced with his golden blood,
And his gashed stabs looked like a breach in nature
For ruin's wasteful entrance.

[2.3.110–113]

Macbeth and "ruin" are one, and the sexual suggestiveness in "breach in nature" and "wasteful entrance" is very strong, and counterpoints itself against Lady Macbeth's bitter reproaches at Macbeth's refusal to return with the daggers, which would involve his seeing the corpse again. "Infirm of purpose!" she cries out to him first, and when she returns from planting the daggers, her imputation of his sexual failure is more overt: "Your constancy / Hath left you unattended," another reminder that his firmness has abandoned him. But perhaps desire, except to perpetuate himself in time, has departed forever from him. He has doomed himself to be the "poor player," an overanxious actor always missing his cues. Iago and Edmund, in somewhat diverse ways, were both playwrights staging their own works, until Iago

was unmasked by Emilia and Edmund received his death wound from the nameless knight, Edgar's disguise. Though Iago and Edmund also played brilliantly in their self-devised roles, they slowed their genius primarily as plotters. Macbeth plots incessantly, but cannot make the drama go as he wishes. He botches it perpetually, and grows more and more outraged that his bloodiest ideas, when accomplished, trail behind them a residuum that threatens him still. Malcolm and Donalbain, Fleance and Macduff—all flee, and their survival is for Macbeth the stuff of nightmare.

Nightmare seeks Macbeth out; that search, more than his violence, is the true plot of this most terrifying of Shakespeare's plays. From my childhood on, I have been puzzled by the Witches, who spur the rapt Macbeth on to his sublime but guilty project. They come to him because preternaturally they *know* him: he is not so much theirs as they are his. This is not to deny their reality apart from him, but only to indicate again that he has more implicit power over them than they manifest in regard to him. They place nothing in his mind that is not already there. And yet they undoubtedly influence his total yielding to his own ambitious imagination. Perhaps, indeed, they are the final impetus that renders Macbeth so ambiguously passive when he confronts the phantasmagorias that Lady Macbeth says always have attended him. In that sense, the Weird Sisters are close to the three Norns, or Fates, that William Blake interpreted them as being: they gaze into the seeds of time, but they also act upon those they teach to gaze with them. Together with Lady Macbeth, they persuade Macbeth to his self-abandonment, or rather they prepare Macbeth for Lady Macbeth's greater temptation into unsanctified violence.

Surely the play inherits their cosmos, and not a Christian universe. Hecate, goddess of spells, is the deity of the night world, and

though she calls Macbeth “a wayward son,” his actions pragmatically make him a loyal associate of the evil sorceress. One senses, in rereading *Macbeth*, a greater preternatural energy within Macbeth himself than is available to Hecat or to the Weird Sisters. Our equivocal but compulsive sympathy for him is partly founded upon Shakespeare’s exclusion of any other human center of interest, except for his prematurely eclipsed wife, and partly upon our fear that his imagination is our own. Yet the largest element in our irrational sympathy ensues from Macbeth’s sublimity. Great utterance continuously breaks through his confusions, and a force neither divine nor wicked seems to choose him as the trumpet of its prophecy:

Besides, this Duncan
 Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
 So clear in his great office, that his virtues
 Will plead like angels, trumpet tongued, against
 The deep damnation of his taking off,
 And pity, like a naked newborn babe
 Striding the blast, or heaven’s cherubim, horsed
 Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
 Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
 That tears shall drown the wind.

[1.7.16–25]

Here, as elsewhere, we do not feel that Macbeth’s proleptic eloquence is inappropriate to him; his language and his imaginings are those of a seer, which heightens the horror of his disintegration into the bloodiest of all Shakespearean tyrant-villains. Yet we wonder just how and why this great voice breaks through Macbeth’s consciousness, since clearly it comes to him unbidden.

He is, we know, given to seizures; Lady Macbeth remarks, "My Lord is often thus, / And hath been from his youth." Visionary fits come upon him when and as *they* will, and his tendency to second sight is clearly allied both to his proleptic imaginings and to the witches' preoccupation with him. No one else in Shakespeare is so occult, not even the hermetic magician, Prospero.

This produces an extraordinary effect upon us, since we *are* Macbeth, though we are pragmatically neither murderers nor mediums, and he is. Nor are we conduits for transcendent energies, for visions and voices; Macbeth is as much a natural poet as he is a natural killer. He cannot reason and compare, because images beyond reason and beyond competition overwhelm him. Shakespeare can be said to have conferred his own intellect upon Hamlet, his own capacity for more life upon Falstaff, his own wit upon Rosalind. To Macbeth, Shakespeare evidently gave over what might be called the passive element in his own imagination. We cannot judge that the author of *Macbeth* was victimized by his own imagination, but we hardly can avoid seeing Macbeth himself as the victim of a beyond that surmounts anything available to us. His tragic dignity depends upon his contagious sense of unknown modes of being, his awareness of powers that lie beyond Hecat and the witches but are not identical with the Christian God and his angels. These powers are the tragic sublime itself, and Macbeth, despite his own will, is so deeply at one with them that he can contaminate us with sublimity, even as the unknown forces contaminate him. Critics have never agreed as to how to name those forces; it seems to me best to agree with Nietzsche that the prejudices of morality are irrelevant to such daemons. If they terrify us by taking over this play, they also bring us joy, the utmost pleasure that accepts contamination by the daemonic.

Macbeth, partly because of this uncanniness, is fully the rival of *Hamlet* and of *King Lear*, and like them transcends what might seem the limits of art. Yet the play defies critical description and analysis in ways very different from those of *Hamlet* and *Lear*. Hamlet's inwardness is an abyss; Lear's sufferings finally seem more than human; Macbeth is all too human. Despite Macbeth's violence, he is much closer to us than are Hamlet and Lear. What makes this usurper so intimate for us? Even great actors do badly in the role, with only a few exceptions, Ian McKellen being much the best I've attended. Yet even McKellen seemed haunted by the precariousness of the role's openness to its audience. I think we most identify with Macbeth because we also have the sense that we are violating our own natures, as he does his. *Macbeth*, in another of Shakespeare's startling originalities, is the first expressionist drama. The consciousness of Hamlet is wider than ours, but Macbeth's is not; it seems indeed to have exactly our contours, whoever we are. And as I have emphasized already, the proleptic element in Macbeth's imagination reaches out to our own apprehensiveness, our universal sense that the dreadful is about to happen, and that we have no choice but to participate in it.

When Malcolm, at the play's end, refers to "this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen," we are in the odd position both of having to agree with Duncan's son and of murmuring to ourselves that so to categorize Macbeth and Lady Macbeth seems scarcely adequate. Clearly the ironies of *Macbeth* are not born of clashing perspectives but of divisions in the self—in Macbeth and in the audience. When Macbeth says that in him "function is smothered in surmise," we have to agree, and then we brood on to what more limited extent this is true of ourselves also. Dr. Johnson said that in *Macbeth* "the events are too great to admit the influence

of particular dispositions.” Since no one feared more than Johnson what he called “the dangerous prevalence of the imagination,” I have to assume that the greatest of all critics wished not to acknowledge that the particular disposition of Macbeth’s prophetic imagination overdetermines the events of the play. Charting some of the utterances of this leaping-ahead in Macbeth’s mind ought to help us to leap ahead in his wake.

In a rapt aside, quite early in the play, Macbeth introduces us to the extraordinary nature of his imagination:

This supernatural soliciting
 Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,
 Why hath it given me earnest of success,
 Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
 If good, 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 fantastical,
 Shakes so my single state of man that function
 Is smother’d in surmise, and nothing is
 But what is not.

[1.3.130–142]

“My single state of man” plays upon several meanings of “single”: unitary, isolated, vulnerable. The phantasmagoria of murdering Duncan is so vivid that “nothing is / But what is not,” and “function,” the mind, is smothered by “surmise,” fantasy. The dramatic music of this passage, impossible not to discern with the inner ear, is very difficult to describe. Macbeth speaks to himself in a kind of trance, halfway between trauma and second sight. An in-

voluntary visionary of horror, he *sees* what certainly is going to happen, while still knowing this murder to be “but fantastical.” His tribute to his own “horrible imaginings” is absolute: the implication is that his will is irrelevant. That he stands on the border of madness may seem evident to us now, but such a judgment would be mistaken. It is the resolute Lady Macbeth who goes mad; the proleptic Macbeth will become more and more outraged and outrageous, but he is no more insane at the close than he is here. The parameters of the diseased mind waver throughout Shakespeare. Is Hamlet ever truly mad, even north-by-north-west? Lear, Othello, Leontes, Timon all pass into derangement and (partly) out again, but Lady Macbeth is granted no recovery. It might be a relief for us if Macbeth ever went mad, but he cannot, if only because he represents all our imaginations, including our capacity for anticipating futures we both wish for and fear.

At his castle, with Duncan as his royal guest, Macbeth attempts a soliloquy in Hamlet’s mode, but rapidly leaps into his own:

If it were done when ’tis done, then ’twere well
 It were done quickly. If th’ 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.

[1.7.1–7]

“Jump” partly means “risk,” but Shakespeare carries it over into our meaning also. After the great vision of “pity, like a naked newborn babe” descends upon Macbeth from some transcendent realm, the usurping host has another fantasy concerning his own will:

I have no spur
 To prick the sides of my intent, but only
 Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
 And falls on the other—

[1.7.25–28]

Lady Macbeth then enters, and so Macbeth does not complete his metaphor. “The other” what? Not “side,” for his horse, which is all will, has had its sides spurred, so that ambition evidently is now on the other shoal or shore, its murder of Duncan established as a desire. That image is central in the play, and Shakespeare takes care to keep it phantasmagoric by not allowing us to see the actual murder of Duncan. On his way to this regicide, Macbeth has a vision that takes him even further into the realm where “nothing is, but what is not”:

Is this a dagger which I see before me,
 The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
 I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
 Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
 To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but
 A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
 Proceeding from the heat oppressèd brain?
 I see thee yet, in form as palpable
 As this which now I draw.
 Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going,
 And such an instrument I was to use.
 Mine eyes are made the fools o' the other senses,
 Or else worth all the rest. I see thee still,
 And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,
 Which was not so before. There's no such thing.
 It is the bloody business which informs

Thus to mine eyes. Now o'er the one halfworld
 Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
 The curtained sleep. Witchcraft celebrates
 Pale Hecat's offerings, and withered murder,
 Alarumed by his sentinel, the wolf,
 Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
 With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
 Moves like a ghost. 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. Whiles I threat, he lives:
 Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.

A BELL RINGS

I go, and it is done. The bell invites me.
 Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell
 That summons thee to heaven, or to hell.

[2.1.32-63]

This magnificent soliloquy, culminating in the tolling of the bell, always has been judged to be an apotheosis of Shakespeare's art. So accustomed is Macbeth to second sight that he evidences neither surprise nor fear at the visionary knife but coolly attempts to grasp this "dagger of the mind." The phrase "a false creation" subtly hints at the gnostic cosmos of *Macbeth*, which is the work of some demiurge, whose botchings made creation itself a fall. With a wonderful metaphysical courage, admiration for which helps implicate us in Macbeth's guilts, he responds to the phantasmagoria by drawing his own dagger, thus acknowledging his oneness with his own proleptic yearnings. As in *King Lear*, the

primary meaning of *fool* in this play is “victim,” but Macbeth defiantly asserts the possibility that his eyes, rather than being victims, may be worth all his other senses together.

This moment of bravura is dispersed by a new phenomenon in Macbeth’s visionary history, as the hallucination undergoes a temporal transformation, great drops of blood manifesting themselves upon blade and handle. “There’s no such thing,” he attempts to insist, but yields instead to one of those openings-out of eloquence that perpetually descend upon him. In that yielding to Hecat’s sorcery, Macbeth astonishingly identifies his steps toward the sleeping Duncan with Tarquin’s “ravishing strides” toward his victim in Shakespeare’s narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece*. Macbeth is not going to ravish Duncan, except of his life, but the allusion would have thrilled many in the audience. I again take it that this audacity is Shakespeare’s own signature, establishing his complicity with his protagonist’s imagination. “I go, and it is done” constitutes the climactic prolepsis; we participate, feeling that Duncan is dead already, before the thrusts have been performed.

It is after the next murder, Banquo’s, and after Macbeth’s confrontation with Banquo’s Ghost, that the proleptic utterances begin to yield to the usurper’s sense of being more outraged than outrageous:

Blood hath been shed ere now, i’ the olden time,
 Ere humane statute purged the gentle weal.
 Ay, and since too, murders have been performed
 Too terrible for the ear. The time has been
 That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
 And there an end, but now they rise again,
 With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,

And push us from our stools. This is more strange
Than such a murder is.

[3.4.78–86]

Since moral contexts, as Nietzsche advised us, are simply irrelevant to *Macbeth*, its protagonist's increasing sense of outrage is perhaps not as outrageous as it should be. The witches equivocate with him, but they are rather equivocal entities in any case; I like Bradshaw's remark that they "seem curiously capricious and infantile, hardly less concerned with pilots and chestnuts than with Macbeth and Scotland." Far from governing the *kenoma*, or cosmological emptiness, in which *Macbeth* is set, they seem much punier components of it than Macbeth himself. A world that fell even as it was created is anything but a Christian nature. Though Hecat has some potency in this nature, one feels a greater demiurgical force at loose in this play. Shakespeare will not name it, except to call it "time," but that is a highly metaphorical time, not the "olden time" or good old days, when you bashed someone's brains out and so ended them, but "now," when their ghosts displace us.

That "now" is the empty world of *Macbeth*, into which we, as audience, *have been thrown*, and that sense of "thrownness" is the terror that Wilbur Sanders and Graham Bradshaw emphasize in *Macbeth*. When Macduff has fled to England, Macbeth chills us with a vow: "From this moment / The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand." Since those firstlings pledge the massacre of Lady Macduff, her children, and all "unfortunate souls" related to Macduff, we are to appreciate that the heart of Macbeth is very much also the heart of the play's world. Macbeth's beheading by Macduff prompts the revenger, at the end, to proclaim, "The time is free," but we do not believe Macduff. How

can we? The world is Macbeth's, precisely as he imagined it; only the kingdom belongs to Malcolm. *King Lear*, also set in the cosmological emptiness, is too various to be typified by any single utterance, even of Lear's own, but Macbeth concentrates his play and his world in its most famous speech:

She should have died hereafter.
 There would have been a time for such a word.
 Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
 To the last syllable of recorded time,
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing.

[5.5.17–28]

Dr. Johnson, rightly shocked that this should be Macbeth's response to the death of his wife, at first insisted that "such a word" was an error for "such a world." When the Grand Cham retreated from this emendation, he stubbornly argued that "word" meant "intelligence" in the sense of "information," and so did not refer to "hereafter," as, alas, it certainly does. Johnson's moral genius was affronted, as it was by the end of *King Lear*, and Johnson was right: neither play sees with Christian optics. Macbeth has the authority to speak for his play and his world, as for his self. In Macbeth's time there is no hereafter, in any world. And yet this is the suicide of his own wife that has been just reported to him. Grief, in any sense we could apprehend, is not expressed by him. Instead of an

elegy for Queen Macbeth, we hear a nihilistic death march, or rather a creeping of fools, of universal victims. The “brief candle” is both the sun and the individual life, no longer the “great bond” of Macbeth’s magnificent invocation just before Banquo’s murder:

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 th’ rooky wood.
 Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,
 Whiles night’s black agents to their preys do rouse.
 Thou marvell’st at my words. But hold thee still.
 Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill.

[3.2.46–55]

There the night becomes a royal falcon rending the sun apart, and Macbeth’s imagination is wholly apocalyptic. In the “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow” chant, the tenor is postapocalyptic, as it will be in Macbeth’s reception of the news that Birnam Wood has come to Dunsinane: “I gin to be aweary of the sun, / And wish the estate o’ the world were now undone.”

Life is a walking shadow in that sun, a staged representation like the bad actor whose hour of strutting and fretting will not survive our leaving the theater. Having carried the reverberation of Ralph Richardson as Falstaff in my ear for half a century, I reflect (as Shakespeare, not Macbeth, meant me to reflect) that Richardson will not be “heard no more” until I am dead. Macbeth’s finest verbal coup is to revise his metaphor; life suddenly is no longer a bad actor, but an idiot’s story, nihilistic of necessity.

The magnificent language of *Macbeth* and of his play is reduced to “sound and fury,” but that phrase plays back against *Macbeth*, his very diction, in all its splendor, refuting him. It is as though he at last refuses himself any imaginative sympathy, a refusal impossible for his audience to make.

I come back, for a last time, to the terrible awe that *Macbeth* provokes in us. G. Wilson Knight first juxtaposed a reflection by Lafew, the wise old nobleman of *All's Well That Ends Well*, with *Macbeth*:

Lafew They say miracles are past; and we have our philosophical persons to make modern and familiar, things supernatural and causeless. Hence is it that we make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into seeming knowledge, when we should submit ourselves to an unknown fear.

[2.3.1–6]

Wilbur Sanders, acknowledging Wilson Knight, explores *Macbeth* as the Shakespearean play where most we “submit ourselves to an unknown fear.” My own experience of the play is that we rightly react to it with terror, even as we respond to *Hamlet* with wonder. Whatever *Macbeth* does otherwise, it certainly does not offer us a catharsis for the terrors it evokes. Since we are compelled to internalize *Macbeth*, the “unknown fear” finally is of ourselves. If we submit to it—and Shakespeare gives us little choice—then we follow *Macbeth* into a nihilism very different from the abyss-voyages of Iago and of Edmund. They are confident nihilists, secure in their self-election. *Macbeth* is never secure, nor are we, his unwilling cohorts; he childers, as we father, and we are the only children he has.

The most surprising observation on fear in *Macbeth* was also

Wilson Knight's: "Whilst Macbeth lives in conflict with himself there is misery, evil, fear; when, at the end, he and others have openly identified himself with evil, he faces the world fearless: nor does he appear evil any longer."

I think I see where Wilson Knight was aiming, but a few revisions are necessary. Macbeth's broad progress is from proleptic horror to a sense of baffled expectations, in which a feeling of having been outraged takes the place of fear. "Evil" we can set aside; it is redundant, rather like calling Hitler or Stalin evil. When Macbeth is betrayed, by hallucination and foretelling, he manifests a profound and energetic outrage, like a frantic actor always fated to miss all his cues. The usurper goes on murdering, and achieves no victory over time or the self. Sometimes I wonder whether Shakespeare somehow had gotten access to the gnostic and manichaeic fragments scattered throughout the church fathers, quoted by them only to be denounced, though I rather doubt that Shakespeare favored much ecclesiastical reading. Macbeth, however intensely we identify with him, is more frightening than anything he confronts, thus intimating that we ourselves may be more dreadful than anything in our own worlds. And yet Macbeth's realm, like ours, can be a ghastly context:

Old Man Threescore and ten I can remember well,
 Within the volume of which time I have seen
 Hours dreadful and things strange. But this sore night
 Hath trifled former knowings.

Ross Ah, good father,
 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 traveling lamp.

Is't night's predominance, or the day's shame,
That darkness does the face of earth entomb,
When living light should kiss it?

Old Man 'Tis unnatural,
Even like the deed that's done. On Tuesday last,
A falcon, towering in her pride of place,
Was by a mousing owl hawked at and killed.

Ross And Duncan's horses—a thing most strange and
certain—
Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race,
Turned wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,
Contending 'gainst obedience, as they would make
War with mankind.

Old Man 'Tis said they eat each other.

Ross They did so, to the amazement of mine eyes
That look'd upon 't.

[2.4.1–20]

This is the aftermath of Duncan's murder, yet even at the play's opening a wounded captain admiringly says of Macbeth and Banquo: "they doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe. / Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds, / Or memorize another Golgotha, / I cannot tell." What does it mean to "memorize another Golgotha"? Golgotha, "the place of skulls," was Calvary, where Jesus suffered upon the cross. "Memorize" here seems to mean "memorialize," and Shakespeare subtly has invoked a shocking parallel. We are at the beginning of the play, and these are still the *good* captains Macbeth and Banquo, patriotically fighting for Duncan and for Scotland, yet they are creating a new slaughter ground for a new crucifixion. Graham Bradshaw aptly

has described the horror of nature in *Macbeth*, and Robert Watson has pointed to its gnostic affinities. Shakespeare throws us into everything that is not ourselves, not so as to induce an ascetic revulsion in the audience, but so as to compel a choice between Macbeth and the cosmological emptiness, the *kenoma* of the gnostics. We choose Macbeth perforce, and the preference is made very costly for us.

Of the aesthetic greatness of *Macbeth*, there can be no question. The play cannot challenge the scope and depth of *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, or the brilliant painfulness of *Othello*, or the world-without-end panorama of *Antony and Cleopatra*, and yet it is my personal favorite of all the high tragedies. Shakespeare's final strength is radical internalization, and this is his most internalized drama, played out in the guilty imagination that we share with Macbeth. No critical method that works equally well for Thomas Middleton or John Fletcher and for Shakespeare is going to illuminate Shakespeare for us. I do not know whether God created Shakespeare, but I know that Shakespeare created us, to an altogether startling degree. In relation to us, his perpetual audience, Shakespeare is a kind of mortal god; our instruments for measuring him break when we seek to apply them. *Macbeth*, as its best critics have seen, scarcely shows us that crimes against nature are repaired when a legitimate social order is restored. Nature *is* crime in *Macbeth*, but hardly in the Christian sense that calls out for nature to be redeemed by grace, or by expiation and forgiveness. As in *King Lear*, we have no place to go in *Macbeth*; there is no sanctuary available to us. Macbeth himself exceeds us, in energy and in torment, but he also represents us, and we discover him more vividly within us the more deeply we delve.