

Images of Death: Ambition in Macbeth

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R. A. Foakes, an English scholar, is an editor for the New Arden Shakespeare and the author of *Shakespeare: From Satire to Celebration*. In his study of "images of death" in *Macbeth*, Foakes asserts that previous critics have failed to understand adequately the function of ambition in the play. He argues that Macbeth, rather than simply aspiring to Scotland's throne, experiences ambition as the desire to fulfill himself in his greatest skill: killing. Regicide—the murder of the king—constitutes for him the most challenging "image of death." As a consequence to this act of daring, however, Macbeth also sets in motion a process that ends in despair and damnation. Foakes ultimately contends that Shakespeare's attention to the aftermath of the ambitious act in *Macbeth* sets this play apart from the playwright's other studies in "the theme of the ambitious prince finally brought low."

Macbeth is Shakespeare's last and most original play on the theme of the ambitious prince finally overthrown. Its roots lie deep in the medieval and Renaissance preoccupation with tragedy as the fall of great men or women, brought low by fortune's wheel and so exemplifying the mutability of human life, or overreaching themselves and illustrating the retribution visited upon the proud and sinful. It was natural for Shakespeare to explore the possibilities for tragedy of

sad stories of the death of kings:

How some have been depos'd, some slain in war,

Some haunted by the ghosts they have depos'd,

Some poison'd by their wives, some sleeping kill'd,

All murder'd.

(*Richard II*, III. ii. 156-60)

In writing his early plays he had the impact of Marlowe to absorb, who had broken the moralising pattern of such stories as mirrors for magistrates by showing Tamburlaine striding on to ever further conquests, and endowed with a mind aspiring to beauty and poetry as well as to power and an earthly crown. The **Henry VI** plays are full of aspiring princes, and culminate in the rise of Gloucester, whose ruthless ambition is qualified by his wit and energy; these plays, and **Richard III**, nevertheless remain within the conventional pattern. A much more complex study of an ambitious prince is realised in Bolingbroke, who, without seeming to recognise the extent of his ambitions, overthrows and effectively murders Richard II, and achieves the throne, only to be punished by ill health, by constant rebellions, and by the vagaries of Prince Hal. A further variant is developed in Brutus, whose confidence in his own rectitude, the name of 'honour' for which his line has always been noted, blinds him to the true nature of the murder of Caesar. Then, in **Hamlet**, Shakespeare was to develop still subtler variations, in Claudius, a 'good' and effective monarch who, we discover, has gained the throne by murder, and in Hamlet himself, driven by events to act as if he were indeed, as he says to Ophelia, 'very proud, revengeful, ambitious' (

Hamlet, III. i. 124), but delaying and avoiding action in an attempt to escape from the implications of what he feels he must do, kill Claudius.

Superficially, *Macbeth* seems to return to a more conventional mode, and on one level it is much more straightforwardly a play about an ambitious prince who overreaches himself in murdering the King, and who brings about his own downfall in the end. But it goes beyond Shakespeare's earlier treatments of the theme, notably in two ways. One is the new dimension given by the witches, and the sense of evil which is generated largely through their presence in the play; for this enables Shakespeare to show a more profound spiritual change in Macbeth than in any of his earlier protagonists. Bolingbroke and Claudius feel their guilt, but Macbeth is shown as creating his own hell. In this the play has links with Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, but whereas Faustus achieves nothing in return for selling his soul, and in the end, terrified at the prospect of punishment, is whisked off by devils into a traditional stage hell-mouth, Shakespeare expresses dramatically through his presentation of Macbeth that subtler idea of hell verbalised in Mephistopheles' description of it as 'being depriv'd of everlasting bliss' (Scene III, 1.82). Faustus himself seems to begin to understand this in his curses at the end:

curse Lucifer

That hath depriv'd thee of the joys of heaven;

(Scene XIX, II. 181-2)

but in Marlowe's play hell as deprivation remains merely a concept. It remained for Shakespeare to realise on stage what this means in terms of character.

A second way in which Shakespeare breaks new ground in *Macbeth* is in his deeper study of the nature of ambition, which is the special concern of this essay. Ambition is usually understood in its straightforward sense as an eagerness to gain promotion and power, to rise in the world, and, as Duncan's general in the field, Macbeth might be expected to fit Bacon's conception in 'Of Ambition': 'Good Commanders in the Warres, must be taken, be they never so *Ambitious*. . . . And to take a Soldier without *Ambition*, is to pull off his Spurres.' Charles Lamb saw further than this in a striking comment provoked by the actor G. F. Cooke's playing of Richard III as a 'very wicked man' who kills for pleasure:

The truth is, the Characters of Shakespeare are so much the objects of meditation rather than of interest or curiosity as to their actions, that while we are reading any of his great criminal characters—Macbeth, Richard, even Iago, we think not so much of the crimes which they commit, as of the ambition, the aspiring spirit, the intellectual activity, which prompts them to overleap those moral fences.

Lamb was led to notice something especially significant in *Macbeth*—that the emphasis when we *read* the play is less on what he does than on the activity of mind connected with his deeds. Lamb strikingly linked, perhaps equated, ambition, aspiration and intellectual activity, in a way which now may seem a little eccentric. For on the one hand, the meaning of ambition is more restricted than this on the one occasion when Macbeth speaks the word, at that point towards the end of Act I when he comes nearest to abandoning the murder of Duncan. At this moment of revulsion against the killing of the King,

We will proceed no further in this business,

(I. vii. 31)

Macbeth reduces all that has been exciting him in the contemplation of the death of Duncan to 'only vaulting ambition', the mere desire to be King. This would seem to justify the claim that

Macbeth has not a predisposition to murder; he has merely an inordinate ambition that makes murder itself seem to be a lesser evil than failure to achieve the crown.

On the other hand, Lamb's comment reduces to a subordinate role the moral issues which to many have seemed of primary importance. The play has been seen as effectively a morality, with an action that can be summarised thus:

Its hero is worked upon by forces of evil, yields to temptation in spite of all that his conscience can do to stop him, goes deeper into evil-doing as he is further tempted, sees the approach of retribution, falls into despair, and is brought by retribution to his death.

This way of regarding *Macbeth* as an exemplary play displaying the degeneration of a great criminal who has 'no morally valid reason for killing Duncan', has satisfied many, although it does not account for a sense that somehow, in spite of everything, Macbeth retains an heroic stature at the end, when 'in the very act of proclaiming that life "is a tale told by an idiot, *signifying nothing*" personal life announces its virtue, and superbly *signifies itself*.' Lascelles Abercrombie's extraordinary use here of the word 'virtue' may be related to Wilson Knight's view that Macbeth 'has won through by excessive crime to an harmonious and honest relation with his surroundings. . . . He now knows himself to be a tyrant confessed, and wins back . . . integrity of soul.'

The word 'ambition' is used only three times in the play, and always in simple relation to the idea of worldly power, of gaining the throne, as when Lady Macbeth says her husband is 'not without ambition' (I. v. 16), or Ross explains the supposed guilt of Malcolm and Donalbain for the death of Duncan in terms of 'thrifless ambition' (II. iv. 28). The compulsion that drives Macbeth is more complex than this, and requires further analysis. A better understanding of why Macbeth does what he does may in turn help to explain the curious contradictions that tend to emerge in the common moralistic accounts of the play, which are torn between condemning him as a criminal and rescuing a grandeur, integrity, even virtue for him at the end. A sense of this difficulty has in part prompted a recent account of Macbeth as lacking 'the requisite moral sense and agony of conscience that any proper tragic hero must have'; this is a response to critics who see Macbeth as essentially good, when he has 'neither moral sense nor awareness of its existence.' Such an account of Macbeth may seem a strange, even perverse, reading, but it stems from a genuine problem, and involves an important recognition, that Macbeth's 'imagination is not under his control; he is its creature.' For another common assumption about Macbeth is that because he has great poetry to speak he must be an 'intellectual giant', when a very important question the text raises is how far Macbeth understands his own words.

Moralistic accounts of Macbeth as falling into temptation, committing a terrible crime and ending in despair, pass too readily by the question that haunts the first two acts, why does Macbeth kill Duncan? It seems plain that he has thought of such a possibility before meeting the witches, or at least that his starting at their greetings of him (I. iii. 51) registers his awareness at this moment that what they say gives conscious expression to a half-formed image; and this is confirmed by the first scene in which Lady Macbeth appears, for the death of Duncan is already an idea familiar to her, even to the murder weapon, the 'keen knife' that is to do the deed (I. v. 49). If the thought of murdering Duncan is already there, so to speak, in the minds of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, then the notion of Macbeth as tempted needs further scrutiny. The Weird Sisters announce that Macbeth will be king, and since their other prophecy, that he will be Thane of Cawdor, is immediately fulfilled, what they say might rather

prompt him to sit tight than to plot to murder the King. Whatever it is that tempts Macbeth to do the deed is in himself and in his wife. And yet, hard on receiving notice of his new 'honour', the title of Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth reveals that he is already thinking of murder.

The context for all this is the opening of the play, with its emphasis on the butchery of war. According to Holinshed Macdonwald killed himself in his castle, and Macbeth, finding the dead body, and 'remitting no piece of his cruel nature', cut the head off and sent it as a present to Duncan. In the play the bleeding Captain describes a much stranger image of death. Macbeth, brandishing his sword, 'which smok'd with bloody execution', as if burning with rage, or steaming with hot blood, 'carv'd' a passage through men to confront the living Macdonwald:

Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,

Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th' chops,

And fix'd his head upon our battlements.

(I. ii. 21-3)

The suggestion of ripping Macdonwald's flesh like cloth from the navel to the jaws completes an image of startling ferocity, quite overshadowing the attribute of courage in 'brave Macbeth . . . Like Valour's minion'. It is as if Macbeth delights in such brutal killing, and loves

to bathe in reeking wounds

Or memorize another Golgotha,

(I. ii. 40-1)

Is the force of this to suggest that in the heat of battle Macbeth and Banquo destroy all indiscriminately who come in their way, turning the battlefield into another place of a skull, or dead bones? Are they being likened to the soldiers who crucified Christ?

The bleeding captain's narrative of the battle is supported by the report of Ross, who, on the immediate sentencing of Cawdor to death, is sent to greet Macbeth from the King:

He finds thee in the stout Norwegian ranks

Nothing afeard of what thyself didst make,

Strange images of death.

(I. iii. 95-7)

Here, in these opening scenes, if anywhere, Macbeth comes near to being represented as a 'butcher' (V. viii. 69), so habituated to the horror of the battlefield that he is untroubled by the 'strange images of death' he makes and sees all round him.

Yet it is at this point he learns he is Thane of Cawdor: the Weird Sisters have told two truths—he is Thane of Glamis 'by Sinel's death' (I. iii. 71), and Thane of Cawdor because the previous holder of the title has just been executed. Shakespeare omits to tell his audience that Sinel was, according to Holinshed, Macbeth's father, and so leaves us to suppose that Sinel too may have met a violent end. Within a short space Macbeth has his first soliloquy in the form of a long aside on 'the imperial theme' (I. iii. 129) which has already been troubling his imagination, and he now sees an image of death he cannot face so easily:

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

(I. iii. 134-42)

The 'horrid image' of murder is stranger than any of the earlier images of death, and it both terrifies him and excites him. It is part of the 'swelling act of the imperial theme', with the promise of the crown as reward, and at the same time it fills him with present fears and horrible imaginings. He attributes the suggestion or image to 'supernatural soliciting', as if the Weird Sisters have incited or importuned him, and are responsible for the disturbance of his mind; but they have merely announced that he will be King, and as Macbeth knows, 'chance may crown me Without my stir' (I. iii. 143-4). He has realised a new kind of challenge, one which so shakes his 'single state of man', suggesting something like an earthquake afflicting his individual little kingdom or 'state', that ordinary activity is stifled, and only 'what is not', those 'horrible imaginings', seems real. The speech records Macbeth's horror at, and fascination with, a new vision of death—not the brutal and casual slaughter of the battlefield, but the calculated murder of a king.

In Holinshed's account, the Weird Sisters first appear after the conclusion of peace between the Scots and the Danes, when Macbeth and Banquo meet them. Shakespeare introduces them in the opening scene, so that they contribute to the creation of atmosphere right away, and establish a sense of distance from the world of the audience. The first few scenes build up the suggestion of a barbaric and violent world, one in which Macbeth is habituated to images of death. The new image that first confronts him in I. iii., 'My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical', fascinates him as a new challenge. In Holinshed, Macbeth only thinks of using force against Duncan after Malcolm has been nominated as 'successor in the kingdom', but in the play Macbeth has already imagined the death of the King before the advancement of Malcolm is mentioned in I. iv., echoing in his word 'fantastical' Banquo's question to the Weird Sisters, 'Are ye fantastical, or that indeed / Which outwardly ye show?' (I. iii. 53-4). The boundary between the fantastical, the imaginary or illusory, and actuality is indeterminate, as Macbeth proceeds to create a new image of death.

For Macbeth the gap between the familiar images of death on the battlefield or by execution and the new image is terrifying, and his speeches, especially the soliloquies, in the scenes leading up to the killing of Duncan, record his difficulties in bridging that gap. His sense of the enormity of the act is made all the more impressive in relation to the Weird Sisters, whose stark malevolence is brought home in their vindictiveness towards the 'master o' th' *Tiger*' (I. iii. 7); it is also presented in sharp contrast to Lady Macbeth's coolness, for her unfamiliarity with images of death perhaps makes it easy for her to contemplate the murder of Duncan without anxiety. Coleridge thought of her as having a 'visionary and day-dreaming turn of mind', 'accustomed only to the Shadows of the Imagination, vivid enough to throw the every day realities into shadows, but not yet compared with their own correspondent realities'; it seems to me rather that Shakespeare presents her as lacking a fullness of imagination, as able only to envisage the deed as a triumph of the will. In her terrible soliloquy in I. v. she turns herself by an act of will into another Weird Sister, shedding her sex ('unsex me here', I. v. 38) and suppressing pity and remorse, so that when Macbeth enters at the end of it she greets him with an echo of the Weird Sisters' greeting in I. iii.:

Great Glamis! Worthy Cawdor!

Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter!

(I. v. 52-3)

She has indeed been 'transported' beyond the present, and feels 'The future in the instant', as if she were a wizard; so she has no thought of *him* as a man, of his battle-scars, of what he has endured, and overleaps the past and present in the glow of anticipated success. At the same time, she has no experience of death itself, and her confused image of the murder obscures it as if she is unable to see the deed:

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)

'Thick night' is so to obscure 'thee' (Duncan? or the knife?) that the wound will not be seen; and the distancing of the deed from herself under a pall of smoke is accentuated by the transference of vision from herself to the knife, which is not to 'see' what it does. Metaphorically the knife becomes a free agent acting on its own; her words evade the deed, as if she cannot bear to see the weapon, or the wound it makes, or the actual shape of the man to be murdered.

Macbeth, by contrast, sees the weapon and the deed clearly enough. Familiar as he is with images of death, the unpremeditated slaughter of the battlefield, this new image, requiring the planning of a murder, makes him 'afear'd', and brings a new strain to bear on the courage and imagination of 'brave Macbeth'. He has to contemplate what he is about:

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 myself.

(I. vii. 12-16)

It is more than a 'double trust'— Duncan is his kinsman, his King, his guest in his own home, and, Shakespeare suggests, a surrogate father-figure, and a holy man. Here again Holinshed's account is transformed, in which Duncan and Macbeth are roughly the same age, while Duncan, 'soft and gentle of nature', is merely a rather weak and incompetent monarch. Shakespeare changes their relationship so as to maximise the horror and challenge in the killing of the King. It is no ordinary murder, but rather the equivalent in its own kind of, say, breaking through the sound barrier for the first time. Macbeth fully recognises the 'deep damnation' of such a deed, and sees what it will give birth to, the 'naked babe' of pity, stirring universal sorrow for the victim, and hatred for the murderer.

His soliloquy at the beginning of I. vii ends with his one reference to ambition, as the only 'spur' to prick on his intention, and at this point he has talked himself into abandoning the project. Lady Macbeth enters to rouse him by calling him 'coward', invoking a concept of manliness, and reducing the issue to gaining the crown:

Wouldst thou have that

Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,

And live a coward in thine own esteem,

Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would'?

(I. vii. 41-4)

As earlier, she avoids confronting the murder itself, or translates it into a more familiar, if revolting, image of what she *might* have done, in dashing out the brains of her own child. For her it is a matter of Macbeth screwing 'his courage to the sticking place', and she seems to miss a dimension present in Macbeth's,

I dare do all that may become a man;

Who dares do more is none.

(I. vii. 46-7)

What does it 'become' a man to do? In one sense this suggests actions that grace a man, as in the penitent death of Cawdor,

Nothing in his life

Became him like the leaving it.

(I. iv. 7-8)

At the same time Macbeth's words raise a question about the limits of human action; at what point should daring stop? Daring is what Macbeth is known for, as 'valour's minion' (I. ii. 19), and Lady Macbeth effectually prompts him in terms that remind him of this; she displaces his brooding on the enormity of the deed and its consequence with the renewed sense of challenge, and he goes off resolved to

bend up

Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.

(I. vii. 79-80)

She is oblivious to the terror of the feat, but succeeds in making it again for him part of the fascination of a daring beyond anything he has faced before.

This is brought home in his soliloquy in the next scene, in that 'fatal vision' (II. i. 36) of the dagger, fatal as deadly, as foreboding his own as well as Duncan's death, and as inescapable, fateful. The dagger of the air is terrifying, but embodies too Macbeth's desire to achieve the deed. The dagger of the mind is, in its way, as real

as the one Macbeth draws, though conjured out of words. At first it is a duplicate of the one he holds, but as it ushers him towards Duncan the illusory dagger changes:

I see thee still

And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,

Which was not so before.

(II. i. 45-7)

At first symbolising his terror and desire to do the deed, it then becomes an emblem of the deed achieved, and as the vision fades, Macbeth's soliloquy ends with a series of images willing his identification with the powers of darkness, even as they register the 'present horror' of the moment. The lines suggest a link with the Weird Sisters, in their reference to witchcraft and to Hecate, and mark Macbeth's awareness that he is aligning himself with evil; but his full sense of the terrible nature of the murder he is about to do also makes the overcoming of his own scruples, of the horror he feels, of all the large part of himself that rebels against it, so much the greater challenge. The central lines of his soliloquy register this:

Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going,

And such an instrument I was to use.

Or else worth all the rest.

(II. i. 42-5)

These lines reaffirm the double nature of that image of the death of Duncan which Macbeth sees here in the visionary dagger; his eyes are worth all the other senses in so far as they show through this illusion what is compelling him from within. When in the next scene Macbeth returns from the murder with two bloody daggers, one in each hand, the vision of his soliloquy here is made actual on the stage, and characteristically, this moment of triumph is also the moment when his sense of terror and guilt are maximised:

I am afraid to think what I have done;

Look on't again I dare not.

(II. ii. 51-2)

This scene powerfully registers Macbeth's feelings immediately after the murder, when he is appalled by what he has done. The revulsion of the moment, marvellously expressed in the image of the blood on his hands staining the seas and 'Making the green one red' (II. ii. 63), confirms the magnitude as well as the horror of the deed. But this quickly passes, for we learn in the next scene that Macbeth has returned to the scene of the crime to

confront another image of death when he kills the grooms, accounting for it in terms of anger and love for Duncan. Whatever other explanations may be adduced for Lady Macbeth fainting at this point, the news of the killing of the grooms is enough to account for it. Here Macbeth's explanation shows how far he has gone beyond her in taking the initiative on his own; killing the grooms in addition to the King was not in her thoughts, and this marks the point at which she begins to lose him. He was at first horrified at his own deed in killing Duncan, but can return to look on the dead King and kill the grooms without a qualm:

Here lay Duncan,

His silver skin lac'd with his golden blood;

And his gash'd stabs look'd like a breach in nature

For ruin's wasteful entrance: there, the murderers,

Steep'd in the colours of their trade, their daggers

Unmannerly breech'd with gore. Who could refrain,

That had a heart to love, and in that heart

Courage to make's love known?

II. iii. 110-7)

Killing the grooms is nothing for him after killing Duncan, but paradoxically it shocks Lady Macbeth as a consequence she had not foreseen when she said, 'The sleeping and the dead Are but as pictures' (II. ii. 53-4). For Macbeth the murder of Duncan was the equivalent in mountaineering terms of scaling Everest, and after this he has no trouble with lower hills; but Lady Macbeth never feels the magnitude or the horror of killing the King, whose murder is for her merely the means of fulfilling her ambition that her husband shall wear the crown, 'the golden round' (I. v. 25), and she supposes that the death of Duncan finishes the business:

A little water clears us of this deed;

How easy is it then!

(II. ii. 67-8)

The further killing of the grooms begins also to bring home to her what Macbeth has felt all through, not how easy, but how difficult it is both to kill a king, and then to be 'clear' of the deed, and 'trammel up the consequence' (I. vii. 3).

Although Macbeth felt the weight of the consequences of the murder,

that we but teach

Bloody instructions, which being taught return

To plague th'inventor,

(I. vii. 8-10)

he did not foresee what they would be. The worst is that having scaled Everest, he finds soon that he must overcome an obstacle almost as great, another kingly figure who fills him with dread:

Our fears in Banquo

Stick deep; and in his royalty of nature

Reigns that which would be fear'd.

(III. i. 48-50)

The 'bloody instructions' he gives the murderers return to plague him in the banquet scene, when the ghost of Banquo sits in his place.

When Simon Forman saw the play at the Globe in the spring of 1611 he recorded the way in which the first entry of the ghost was played:

The next night, being at supper with his noble men whom he had bid to a feast to the which also Banquo should have come, he began to speak of Noble Banquo, and to wish that he were there. And as he thus did, standing up to drink a Carouse to him, the ghost of Banquo came and sat down in his chair behind him. And he fuming about to sit down again saw the ghost of Banquo, which fronted him so, that he fell into a great passion of fear and fury.

Lady Macbeth, who does not see the ghost, relates this apparition to the 'air-drawn dagger' Macbeth saw in II. i., and many leading actors, from John Philip Kemble in 1786 and Edwin Booth in 1828 down to Ian McKellen in 1976, have treated the ghost as another figment of Macbeth's 'heat-oppressed brain.' A good actor can indeed create a sense that he alone sees some appalling vision which terrifies him, and perhaps this is more acceptable to modern audiences less ready to believe in ghosts; but it seems that in Shakespeare's time an actor played the ghost, and Macbeth and the audience actually witnessed here another image of death. The ghost with his 'gory locks' echoes visually the First Murderer who came with blood upon his face (III. iv. 13) to report the death of Banquo, and the blood smeared upon the faces of the grooms accused by Macbeth of killing Duncan (II. ii. 50, 56; II. iii. 114). Macbeth recognises the Ghost simultaneously as real, 'Avaunt, and quit my sight!' (III. iv. 93), and unreal,

Hence, horrible shadow!

Unreal mock'ry, hence!

(III. iv. 106-7)

It is appropriate that the audience should have this sense too, and see embodied on stage the cause of Macbeth's fear. Macbeth can boast with reason 'What man dare, I dare' (III. iv. 99), for he has achieved a most 'terrible feat' in killing Duncan and Banquo; but the consequences include something he had not bargained for at all, the 'strange infirmity' (III. iv. 86) that unmans him in trembling, as his murders leave him still 'bound in To saucy doubts and fears' (III. iv. 24-5).

The banquet scene brings him to an important recognition about his condition:

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. 136-8)

This picks up again the image of the multitudinous seas stained with blood, but with a difference marked especially in the word 'tedious': now, wading in that flood of blood he has spilt, he begins to realise that the excitement has gone, and the only way left for him is the repetitive boredom of further bloodshed as he ensures that 'All causes shall give way' (III. iv. 136). His next move is to bully the Weird Sisters, confronting them as if he could command them; 'More shall they speak' he had said at the end of the banquet scene (III. iv. 134), and his imperative echoes in 'I conjure you ... answer me' (IV. i. 50-1). Perhaps the best justification for the Hecate scene is that it exposes Macbeth's desperation and the emptiness of his imperatives, which are countered by those of Hecate:

that, distill'd by magic sleights,

Shall raise such artificial sprites

As, by the strength of their illusion,

Shall draw him on to his confusion.

(III. v. 26-9)

The three apparitions produced by the Weird Sisters rise and descend, if the Folio directions are followed, requiring actors to play them, or perhaps a kind of voice-over or ventriloquism by one of the witches. They must

be seen by everyone on stage and the audience. The first, an armed head, both suggests Macduff ('Beware the thane of Fife'), and anticipates the bringing on of the head of the dead Macbeth at the end of the play. The second, a bloody child, seems at once an image of birth and death, saying to Macbeth that none of woman born shall harm him, but connecting for the audience with the other images of the spilling of blood in the play, and anticipating Macbeth's readiness to murder even the children of Macduff. The third, a child crowned with a tree in its hand, seems to promise security to Macbeth, but symbolises too what is brought home in the final 'show' of kings, that Banquo's line will inherit the throne. These are all externally created shows, stage-managed by the Witches, culminating in another appearance of the Ghost of Banquo, bloody as in III. ii., who must be played by an actor,

For the blood-bolter'd Banquo smiles upon me,

And points at them for his.

(IV. i. 123-4)

So the visions Macbeth imagined earlier, the air-drawn dagger, and the Ghost of Banquo unseen by the others at the banquet, were more 'real' and emotionally disturbing than those apparitions or shows witnessed by all. This scene marks the change in Macbeth; the dagger and the Ghost terrified him as images of murder that appalled him, and these figures of his imagination embodied his moral fear, his conscience and sense of guilt as well as his deep desire and compulsion to achieve the ultimate in killing. Now, in seeking out the Witches, and demanding to see the worst they can show, he is no longer afraid of such images. The culmination of the scene is the return of Banquo's ghost, an image which sears Macbeth's eyeballs, but not with terror any more, merely with anger. Macbeth's ability to face these images and ask for more until he is confronted again by the murdered Banquo, shows how far he has travelled morally and mentally since the opening of the play; once unable to look on what he has done, or to think of what he was about to do without perturbation, he is now no longer troubled by sights that might appal. He has lost his sense of fear, and is no longer shocked or disturbed by blood and killing. He has found his routine, and the tedium that goes with it.

At this point, the end of IV. i., Shakespeare removes his protagonist from the stage for the equivalent of about an act of the play, or roughly 420 lines. This is in accordance with his practice in the other central tragedies, and quite apart from giving the leading actor a well-earned rest, it serves a deeper function. Macbeth has passed beyond the point of no return, and terrible deeds no longer shock or disturb him. What remains in action is the confirmation of this in the murder of Lady Macduff and her children, and the gathering of the forces that will bring about Macbeth's downfall; for Macbeth himself there is yet to come the full recognition of what has happened to him, of the wasteland he has created for himself. The destruction of the innocent mother and children can be seen as analogous to Richard III's murder of the princes in the Tower, as marking the last degradation of the criminal, but in Macbeth's case the effect is more complex, for it is also in some sense a breakthrough for him, a liberation from the 'terrible dreams' and 'torture of the mind' (III. ii. 18, 21) which afflicted him. In relation to this Shakespeare's finest stroke of irony is to place Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking scene before the reappearance of Macbeth. The two have moved in opposite directions mentally, and she is now in a condition not unlike that of Macbeth before the murder of Duncan; when he saw visionary daggers and imagined nothing could wash away his blood-guilt, she had no apparent sense of horror; but as he has moved from a state of emotional turmoil and moral anxiety to one of blank indifference, so her cool self-command has given way, and the disturbance of her mind is now expressed in nightmare images like that of the blood on her hand and the bell striking 'One; two: why, then 'tis time to do't' (V. i. 33-4).

Here the horror of the murder of Duncan is borne in on us again just prior to the return of Macbeth, who, by contrast feels nothing, so that even the news of her death has no effect on him, except to prompt his last and most profound acknowledgment of his loss of all sense of guilt or feeling for others. The difference between Macbeth in IV. i. and Macbeth in V. v. lies not in his condition, but in his discovery of its nature and implications, and of the price he has paid for his liberation from fear. This is most marked not in the merely selfish disappointment at losing the social rewards and pleasures of growing old, such as 'honour, love, obedience, troops of friends' (V. iii. 25), but in the wider reverberations of his inability to respond to the death of his wife:

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

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,

To the last syllable of recorded time,

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools

The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,

And then is heard no more; it is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing.

(V. v. 19-28)

Here the collapse of time, the future ('to-morrow'), the present (marvellously signalled in the word 'creeps'), and past ('All our yesterdays'), into the boredom of mere repetition betrays Macbeth's crushing sense of deprivation, and now what reverberates is not the loss merely of social rewards, but of any reason for remaining alive.

In this speech too the image of the 'poor player' is especially poignant. It daringly reminds us of the actor playing the King, and by extension of ourselves playing roles, strutting and fretting, and so generates sympathy for Macbeth; at the same time, it brings home to us, through the weight of the action of the play that lies behind the lines, how inadequate such a definition of life is. For life had meant more for Macbeth than this, in his ambition to be King, to rule in Scotland and found a dynasty, to be a 'man', an heroic warrior, to be honoured and loved. Another meaning for life has been established for the audience through the play's Christian frame of reference, notably the sketching in of Duncan as a 'most sainted' monarch (IV. iii. 109), and the account of Edward the Confessor, both showing up the image of the 'poor player' as reductive against a proper sense of the purpose

and value of using time to a good end, against fulfilment to be thought of in the terms in which Edward is described:

sundry blessings hang about his throne

That speak him full of grace.

(IV. iii. 158-9)

The play ends, as it began, with a battle, in which Macbeth again confronts death as a warrior, killing young Siward before he is himself slain by Macduff. The last image of death is one Macbeth has not looked for, when his head is brought on, probably as in Holinshed's account, on a pole, recalling the armed head among the apparitions of IV. i., and the bloody head of Banquo's ghost. If Macbeth's head was brought on in this way at the Globe (a possibility hinted at in Macduff's lines at V. viii. 25-6, 'We'll have thee. . . . Painted upon a pole'), it would have suggested the image of an executed criminal, like the heads mounted on London Bridge; this marks the devaluation of Macbeth for Malcolm and his allies from the powerful tyrant of Scotland into 'this dead butcher' (V. viii. 69). It is the last irony of the play that Macbeth should himself become an image of death that no longer terrifies anyone. The audience knows more than Malcolm, however, having experienced with Macbeth all that has happened; Malcolm sees merely the death of a hated tyrant and usurper, which is certainly what Macbeth has become for his own people. But this is to conceive Macbeth's ambitions on a basic and elementary level as merely concerned with power. What we have witnessed is something much more complex. If anyone embodies this cruder sense of ambition it is Lady Macbeth, whose one thought in the early scenes is to gain the crown for her husband.

The action of the play reveals how little Macbeth understands himself when he says ambition to leap into Duncan's seat is the only spur that pricks him on to murder. The phrase occurs in one of his great soliloquies which expresses an emotional turmoil rather than a grasp of issues. Here, as in his incantatory speeches in III. ii. in relation to the murder of Banquo, his words express more than he understands, and the sense is so complicated that, as I have put it elsewhere, theatre audiences cannot fully comprehend what is being said:

in the theatre the rhetoric dominates over the sense, which permits only tortured glimpses into the dark recesses of Macbeth's state of mind, and establishes a mood in which, with Lady Macbeth, we marvel at his words; and the point of it all arguably is to bring home the extent to which Macbeth himself understands the force of what he says, but not the implications.

So, in Macbeth's soliloquy in I. vii., the final images are muddy and compressed, and reverberate with significances which can be teased out through pages of commentary;

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 have no spur

To prick the sides of my intent, but only

Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself,

And falls on th'other

(I. vii. 21-8)

The sudden shifts from the 'babe' to cherubs 'horsed' on the winds, to tears flooding to 'drown', to another kind of horse in the spur-pricking intent, do not allow any clear grasp of Macbeth's meaning, and dramatically establish that he does not fully understand himself; his words and images convey the anguish of his tortured mind, and a sense of bewilderment.

Macbeth does not comprehend the reasons why he is drawn, in spite of his full consciousness of the 'deep damnation of his taking-off', to murder Duncan. If the spur were merely ambition for the crown, he could overcome it; he has in any case the prophecy of the Witches that he will be King. The play explores more profoundly the compulsion that drives him in the series of 'strange images of death' it presents. A warrior, accustomed to killing on the battlefield, Macbeth, to be fully a 'man' in this limited sense, is driven to face the challenge of killings of a different kind, and his inner drive, embodied in the air-drawn dagger that marshals him towards Duncan, overcomes for him his revulsion at the deed. It is reinforced by Lady Macbeth:

Art thou afeard

To be the same in thine own act and valour

As thou art in desire?

(I. vii. 39-41)

Her desire is for the crown, but his is larger, the urge to fulfil himself, as we now say, and in pursuing this Macbeth appals by what he does, and excites admiration for his ability to meet such a challenge, for the sheer daring of it. In order to bring this across to an audience, Macbeth has to be established as a rugged fighter, whose world is that of slaughter, as opposed to the saintly, gentle Duncan, whose world is that of the court. Macbeth is young as imagined in the play, as Duncan's lines show:

I have begun to plant thee, and will labour

To make thee full of growing;

(I. iv. 28-9)

but Macbeth has begun as a killer, and his growth and fulfilment lie in confronting further and more terrible images of death. The play reveals, of course, the price Macbeth pays in achieving his desire, and exposes too the inadequacies of self-fulfilment as a goal; and yet there remains a sympathy for the tough and indomitable figure who ends in a hell of his own creating. The 'great intellect' of the play is Shakespeare's, realising dramatically through the magnificent compressed poetry given to Macbeth the inner impulses that he does not fully understand, but which drive him to overcome his scruples and fulfil himself in terms of what he is good at, killing. So finally **Macbeth** is a play that escapes from ordinary moral boundaries and judgments; it is less about a criminal who must be morally condemned than about a great warrior who breaks through the fear-barrier only to find on the other side not the release and fulfilment he looks for, but a desert of spiritual desolation.

In this way Shakespeare adds a new dimension to the theme of the ambitious prince finally brought low. He had earlier shown an awareness of the mixture of emotions and motives that could be involved in ambition, as, for instance, in his treatment of Caesar and Brutus in **Julius Caesar**. He understood the contradictory viewpoints which might make ambition appear sinful, foul, pitiful or thriftless, on the one hand, and 'divine' (**Hamlet**, IV. iv. 49) on the other, as Macbeth himself begins from 'the big wars That makes ambition virtue' (**Othello**, III. iii. 353-4). In **Macbeth** he went further. To start with he brilliantly dramatised that state of the man seized by ambition, 'a proud covetousness, or a dry thirst of honour, a great torture of the mind', as [Robert] Burton was later to define it [in his *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621)]. In coveting the throne, and plotting the death of Duncan, Macbeth is like those Burton describes as 'seeking that, many times, which they had much better be without; . . . with what waking nights, painful hours, anxious thoughts, and bitterness of mind, *inter spem metumque* [i.e., between hope and fear], distracted and tired, they consume the interim of their time.' Burton's analysis, however, was confined to the perpetually unsatisfied aspirers, always seeking to rise, and swelling in the end until they burst or 'break their own necks.' Macbeth achieves his aspirations, gains the throne, all at one throw, or so it seems when he kills Duncan, before the end of Act II; but Shakespeare's concern was to probe further in the last three acts into what happens then, into the way he becomes a prisoner of his own imagination, bound into doubts and fears, and is able to achieve release from these only at the appalling cost of losing his capacity to care. In daring to do all that may become a man, he destroys the best part of himself; and in showing the process by which Macbeth comes to realise this, Shakespeare makes his most searching analysis of the effects of ambition.

- [Macbeth Hesitates: Lady Macbeth Persuades \(I. vii. 1-83\)](#)
- [Macbeth Sees a Dagger \(II. i. 33-64\)](#)
- [Macbeth Prepares for Murder \(II. i. 33-64\)](#)
- [The Witches Cast a Spell \(IV. i. 1-38\)](#)
- [Lady Macbeth Sleepwalks \(V. i. 30-76\)](#)
- [Macbeth Talks of Death \(V. v. 15-28\)](#)
- [A Show of Kings](#)

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