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[(essay date 2001) *In the following essay, McGrail approaches Macbeth as a study in tyranny, focusing on Macbeth's unbounded cruelty and ambition, his general disinterestedness in royal succession, and his dehumanized lack of conscience and self-awareness.*]

The Title Is Affeer'd

Contemporary approaches to *Macbeth* treat the central problem of tyranny as an historical aberration or, in one notable instance, as an apparently archaic term, antecedent of the modern bourgeois individualist.¹ *Macbeth* provides an excellent starting point for recovery of Shakespeare's teaching about tyranny, and what it has to do with an attempt to find natural limitations to human desire. In particular, Macbeth's fate describes a very direct but unexpected path to tyranny, that of the patriot, or lover of honor. The authoritative man, authoritative because unbeatable on the field of battle and so the necessary prop of any regime, must often be subordinate to men whom he considers his inferiors. They are inferior to him primarily in courage.²

There is lengthy dialogic exploration of tyranny in act 4, scene 3, a scene that has been largely ignored or dismissed by critics. Of all the scenes in *Macbeth*, this scene is most difficult to place within the thematic framework of the play. Malcolm attempts to persuade Macduff that he is tyrannical by nature. Dramatically, it seems a peculiar place to situate the longest expository scene in the play, a lengthy deception that does not immediately further the action. But this conversational interlude occurs just before the denouement, the accelerated movement of act 5, and invites reflection on the issue of good and bad kingship. No one has yet satisfactorily explained the presence of this, the longest scene in the shortest tragedy. The absence of any prolonged analysis of this undramatic scene in a tightly constructed, highly dramatic play, can perhaps be explained by a reluctance to regard the play as an exploration of the evolution of a tyrant. The scene takes on importance and makes most sense as drawing the audience's attention to the question, What is a tyrant? Or, what does a tyrant do that sets him apart from others of great political ambition, Malcolm or Banquo, for instance? Menteth's question about military strategy in act 5, scene 2 might be extended--What does the tyrant want?

One may either interpret Malcolm's self-label to Macduff as his insecurity in a moment of crisis (he is, after all, first seen as ineffectual or at least immature in acts 1 and 2), or it may be seen as a sign of his necessary subtlety in Macbeth's world of spies. E. K. Chambers attributes it to a loss of nerve:

I think there is a touch of deeper psychological insight in this [than a trial of Macduff's patriotism]. Is it not true that in the critical moments of life one is often suddenly oppressed with a sense of one's own weaknesses, and dormant, if not actual, tendencies to evil, which seem to cry aloud for expression, confession?³

The editors of the Clarendon edition dismiss this encounter with a comment on dramaturgy: "The poet no doubt felt that this scene was needed to supplement the meager parts assigned to Malcolm and Macduff."⁴ A. W. Verity, in his notes to *The Pitt Press Shakespeare* (1901) says,

Dramatically this scene seems, at first sight, more open to criticism than any other in the play. ... The real design is, I think, to mark the pause before the storm. ... The denouement must be led up to gradually; there must be an antecedent period in which the storm clouds gather: and this long scene as it were, fills the period.⁵

No doubt, but this comment, too, avoids the significance of the discussion of tyranny. Most recent critics make no mention of the scene at all. E. A. J. Honigmann, a rare exception, argues that the scene is designed to moderate the audience's condemnation of Macbeth (excited by the murder of Lady Macduff and her children in the scene just before), "blunting its edge by first directing it upon a false target."⁶ But this complex and indirect psychological account does not help account for the brief concluding description of the "King's Evil." It would be more powerful if the discussion between Malcolm and Macduff were not immediately succeeded by Rosse's reminder of the slaughter.

None of the above explanations is implausible, but none is complete, because all overlook the critical element of the scene. It presents a definition of what the tyrant is--one who rules oppressively, solely in his own self-interest, and for the satisfaction and excitement of his own desires. And along with this definition it offers a glimpse of a standard of good rule.⁷

Not only does Malcolm force a discussion of what constitutes a tyranny, but, within the scene, he holds conference with a doctor and gives a detailed account of a remarkable, presumably divine aspect of the king of England: he can cure the "king's evil." This scene is recollected three scenes later in Macbeth's conversation with his wife's doctor. In the first reference to medicine's powers, the king cures the people, in the second, Macbeth, king of Scotland, turns to a doctor for a "purgative drug" (V.iii.55)⁸ for his country. He, too, sees the realm as diseased, but not in the same way that Malcolm and Macduff do. The disease of Scotland, "my land" (51), is the English force which, in support of Malcolm, has invaded Scotland. Macbeth does not mention Malcolm; it is the English who infect Scotland. He understands the final conflict not as a civil war, but, from a nationalist perspective, as a foreign invasion. Malcolm spends some time in England and he has learned about monarchical politics there, as we might gather from the fact that he renames his Thanet Earls at the end of the play ("the first that ever Scotland / In such an honour nam'd," V.ix.29-30.)⁹ The scenic paradox of Malcolm's deception and the Doctor's description of the King's Evil affords an anecdotal account of the differences between good and bad kingship. Why call our attention to the question of good rule here? Or why call our attention to the problem so fully this late in the play?

The scene takes place between the execution of Lady Macduff and her children--the most pathetic instance of Macbeth's increasing inhumanity in the play--and Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking scene, with commentary by another doctor. The execution scene is such a startling excess that Coleridge felt compelled to defend it as dramatically necessary from the accusation that Shakespeare "wounds the moral sense by the unsubdued, undisguised description of the most hateful atrocity--that he tears the feelings without mercy, and even outrages the eye itself with scenes of insupportable horror."¹⁰ The bloodiness of the play as a whole is striking; we witness at least two murders and overhear another being committed. (By contrast in *Richard III*, with the exception of the murder of the guilty Clarence, Richard's atrocities are talked of rather than shown.) This discussion, then, is preceded by a scene of utmost physical brutality and followed by a scene of mental anguish (Lady Macbeth overheard by her Doctor and Gentlewoman). The first scene exemplifies the consequences of tyrannical action for society as a whole (the cold-blooded murder of innocents and the destruction of the family), and the second scene examines the consequences of tyrannical rule for those who exercise it. The point of connection between the destructive act and the ensuing guilt comes in the midst of Lady Macbeth's disjointed utterances, "The Thane of Fife had a wife, where is she now?" (38) She calls Macbeth by his original, unsullied title. Underlying this question is Lady Macbeth's implied loss of self, her guilty fears, and her collapse back into the role of vulnerable wife.

In the play we are shown two unsuccessful versions of rule, Duncan's and Macbeth's. Duncan is credulous, kindhearted, generous, and apparently ineffectual militarily. Macbeth is victorious in the short term, but bloody. In this scene we have brief reference to a third standard, Edward's kingship--one which seems to work well. He is a strong king, honored and given a semi-divine status by the people--some sort of elevated mean between the two kinds of kingship we observe more carefully in Scotland.

Perhaps the most interesting passage in the portion of Holinshed's *Chronicles* pertaining to *Macbeth* is the passage in which Duncan and Macbeth are compared. Macbeth is described as

One that if he had not beene somewhat cruiele of nature, might have beene thought most woorthie the government of a realme. On the other part, Duncane was so softe and gentle of nature, that the people wished the inclinations and maners of these two cousins to have beene so tempered and enterchangeable bestowed betwixt them, that where the one had too much clemencie, and the other of cruelte, the meane vertue betwixt these two extremities might have reigned by indifferent partitions in them both, so should Duncane have proved a woorthie king, and Makbeth a excellent capteine.¹¹

Shakespeare interprets this difference in character at several points in the play and act 4, scene 3 presents us with an alternative to the overly ambitious captain, Macbeth, and the unsuspecting, pious Duncan in the persons of Malcolm and Macduff. This curiously placed, nondramatic scene instructs us in how the tragedy might have been averted, and in so doing offers an analysis of the component vices of tyranny and its effects.

Malcolm's Correction of Macduff

Malcolm, unlike his father, who finally concludes that there is no art "To find the mind's construction in the face" (I.iv.12), straight off acknowledges "that which you are, my thoughts cannot transpose: / Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell: / Though all things foul would wear the brows of grace, / Yet grace must still look so" (21-24). This emphasizes how highly thought of Macbeth originally was, a fact often overlooked. Malcolm echoes not only his father, but also Macbeth: "False face must hide what false heart doth know." He conflates these two teachings. He serves as a correction to Duncan--there is an art to finding the mind's construction, though not through simple appearances. One must search out intentions by indirect means, such as the test of loyalty and intellect he administers to Macduff.

In offering his services, Macduff twice refers to Macbeth as a tyrant:

Bleed, bleed, poor country!
 Great tyranny, lay thou thy basis sure,
 For goodness dare not check thee! wear thou thy wrongs;
 The title is affeer'd!--Fare thee well, Lord:
 I would not be the villain that thou think'st
 For the whole space that's in the tyrant's grasp,
 And the rich East to boot.
 (IV.iii.32-37)¹²

But what does Macduff mean by "tyrant"? The central lament of this sincerely self-righteous outburst is that "the title is affeer'd," which means the title is confirmed, Macbeth has won the title "king" by default, he has succeeded in usurping the legitimate heir.¹³ Macduff assumes the simplest definition of tyranny, that it is illegitimate rule. Macbeth is a tyrant because he has usurped the throne from Malcolm, the rightfully appointed heir.¹⁴ But Malcolm's understanding of tyranny is significantly more complicated. He begins with a list of seven of Macbeth's supposed vices, recalling the cardinal sins, with the notable omission of pride (II.57-66).¹⁵ Yet Macbeth seems, if anything, somewhat plain, even Spartan, except in his desire to gain and secure the crown.¹⁶ When Malcolm speaks of Macbeth as "luxurious," does this refer to his excessive desire for power? He certainly does not seem to mean it in the narrow sense in which he applies it to himself (physical lust). Macbeth, after all, speaks contemptuously of the "English epicures" before the decisive battle (V.iii.8). "Luxurious" is a curious term to apply in the midst of all the other epithets he uses, most having immediately to do with the crimes Macbeth has committed--regicide, infanticide, treason.¹⁷

Malcolm dwells as well on Macbeth's being "false, deceitful," and "sudden," those characteristics most absent from his father and most responsible for Macbeth's success as usurper. To speak of someone, or of an action, as "sudden" may be a commendation (see *King John* V.vi.26, *Richard III* I.iii.345, *Julius Caesar* III.i.19, *Hamlet* V.ii.46). If Duncan is to be found lacking in any royal qualities it is these--he is too trusting and he is slow to act. We first see Duncan in act 1, scene 2 completely ignorant of the battle events, depending on a wounded soldier for information on whether the rebellion has succeeded. He is well behind battle lines, and his son, Malcolm, has just been rescued from enemy soldiers by a sergeant. He has apparently had no presentiment of the revolt of Cawdor, which allowed or furthered the invasion of King Sweno of Norway. Duncan presents himself as wholly dependent on his soldiers for success, without any sense that a strong subordinate military leader is as much a danger as a necessity to the throne. Malcolm emphasizes about Macbeth, then, several of the traits he himself must acquire in order to regain the throne and to secure it as his father could not. Malcolm's first deceitful act is one of self-preservation when he urges his brother to fly and says that he, too, will secretly escape Scotland to avoid being killed. His second, more elaborate deceit is the one he practices on Macduff in this scene.

Malcolm accuses himself of sins in the same order in which he applies them to Macbeth, excluding the first epithet "bloody" since the prince has yet to show himself as murderous. First he describes the extent of his voluptuousness (recalling his description of Macbeth as "luxurious" just before). He describes all his vices in terms of immoderate sexual desire, or limitlessness: "confineless harms" (55), "there's no bottom" (60), "could not fill up" (62), "my desire ... would o'erbear" (63-64). Macduff's response to this circumvents the point at issue: "boundless intemperance in nature is a tyranny" (66-67). This line is usefully glossed by Delius, a nineteenth-century German commentator, as follows: "This belongs to 'tyranny,' such organic intemperance is compared with the political tyranny of Macbeth."¹⁸ But this is a theoretical argument; Macduff does not relate it to fitness for political rule. Malcolm is trying to bring him to make this connection, as Shakespeare is trying to bring his audience to this connection. Tyranny is not simply a political or historical aberration but a particular human condition. Macduff understands these as private vices unrelated to the political evils of tyranny. Malcolm is forcing Macduff to acknowledge the connection between private and public vice, showing that legitimacy does not mitigate vicious character.

What would it prove to Malcolm that Macduff concede this point? Macduff's first response to Malcolm's self-accusation (that he is too lustful for Scotland to sustain his desires), is to say that this vice will cost Malcolm his life, possibly his throne. The implication that he will die an early death from his excesses is stronger than that he will be overthrown for it. Still it will not cause fatal or even critical harm to Scotland, only to the occupant of the throne. He insists "fear not yet / To take upon you what is yours: you may / Convey your pleasures in a spacious plenty" (69-71). Again Macduff sees no connection between the world of private vice and public rule; legitimacy is everything. He goes on to suggest that Malcolm might "hoodwink" the time, drawing our attention back to Macbeth's decision to "mock the time" (I.vii.82, see also I.v.61). He still has a right to the throne, as legally appointed heir to it, even though his vices rival Macbeth's. The usurpation of reason by boundless intemperance is equated, implicitly, with Malcolm's usurpation by Macbeth (see note 14). The word tyranny here has the same connotation of illegitimacy as in Macduff's earlier speech, but it has become associated with unnatural rule (rule that is not according to nature, or rule by a disordered soul--where reason, in the Platonic tripartite division of the soul, has been overthrown) as well as rule that goes against conventions of legitimacy. Macduff's position has implicitly altered. But Malcolm is still the ruler of choice, argues Macduff, because he is legally heir to the throne, and Macbeth, whatever his tyrannical qualities, is responsible for "our down-fall birthdom" (14). Clearly such an argument is not sufficient to convince Malcolm; and it is in order to gain near certain conviction that he has presented himself as weak (weeping) and vicious in this critical moment before a battle for which he is eminently well-prepared, as we are immediately to learn.

Macduff's adherence to a legal formality that overlooks a potential for greater evil could be construed in many ways. Macduff might

simply be a traitor, or he might support Malcolm for the wrong reasons, as Macbeth supported Duncan against the traitorous Thane of Cawdor and Norway--with less thought for the right of Scotland and Duncan's merits than for military honor. (This scene is preceded, of course, by the discussion between Lady Macduff and her son as to what a traitor is, with Macduff's son arguing for realpolitik.) Macduff concludes that kingly vice can play on ordinary human vice, women willing to sell themselves to powerful men, and can satisfy itself more easily by virtue of its station. In other words, there is no difference in character between the vices of a king and those of a commoner, only a difference of degree and ability to indulge. This conclusion could not explain the existence of tyranny. If every self-indulgence were taken as tyranny, we would all be named tyrants. Why is Malcolm forcing Macduff into the position of choosing between two evils? This dialogue points up the paradoxical notion of all-important legitimacy. Is it enough that a legitimate ruler be considered a monarch and a usurper be termed a tyrant, that arguments of merit be ignored for the sake of formality and custom? On a historical note, the issue of the status of legitimacy can more easily be raised in a play about the Scottish line at a time before it became one with the English line (at a time when royal primogeniture was not firmly established) without immediate political risk to the playwright.

James I, of course, spoke and wrote extensively on the question of proper rule. He gave a speech before Parliament on his "Opinion of a king, of a Tyrant," which makes Malcolm's point:

I do acknowledge that the special and greatest point of difference that is betwixt a rightful King and a usurping tyrant, is in this: That whereas the proud and ambitious Tyrant doth think his Kingdom and People, are only ordained for satisfaction of his Desires, and unreasonable appetites; The righteous and just King doth by the contrary acknowledge himself to be ordained for the procuring of the Wealth and Prosperity of his People; and that his great and principal worldly Felicity, must consist in their Prosperity.¹⁹

What is interesting about this excerpt from James's speech is that he begins by denoting the tyrant a "usurping tyrant" thereby further distancing the tyrant from the king, just as Macduff does. James begins with the implicit assumption that a tyrant is primarily a tyrant by virtue of his illegitimacy. The dangers of expanding the definition of tyrant to include legitimate rulers who rule solely in their own interest must have been obvious to him.²⁰

Malcolm explains next that he is avaricious as well, the second vice he attributes to Macbeth. He vows he will "cut off the nobles" for their lands (79), something Macbeth has not yet done (though he has apparently killed those he considered a danger to his power). Macduff responds that former Scottish kings have used their "sword" to fill their coffers: imperialism prevents abuse of one's subjects (consider Shakespeare's account of Henry V's decision to invade France). Both these vices are excusable, so long as a legitimate king possesses "other graces."

Malcolm denies he possesses any of the king-becoming graces and names them.²¹ All are public, political virtues appropriate to a Christian king as well as private moral virtues. At this, Macduff succumbs, and, for the first time, speaks of Macbeth as "an untitled tyrant," rather than speak, as before, of Macbeth as simply a "tyrant" because he is a usurper. The addition of "untitled" implies that there is a distinction to be made between titled and untitled tyrants, or, that lack of legitimacy is not the only grounds for, or definition of, a tyranny. One can be a tyrant irrespective of one's title.

Macduff then lapses into pious exclamations, nearly canonizing Duncan, pronouncing himself "banish'd" from Scotland. This convinces Malcolm of two things. First, that he is not Macbeth's spy, and second that his allegiance is to a proper occupant of the throne, not just to anyone with a legitimate claim. Macduff's quarrel with Macbeth is not an individual one, but one based on principle, a principle that Malcolm brings out through his deception. This principle is also important to our view of the play. Macduff's speech shows that he can, and does, without realizing it, make the distinction between legitimacy as an unqualified claim to the throne, and capacity for good rule. Macduff's abhorrence of Malcolm's description of himself also convinces him that Macduff's is not a personal quarrel with Macbeth. Had it been so, Macduff would be a far more dangerous man, likely to use Malcolm's rightful claims to the throne to promote his own interest, another Macbeth perhaps. In his final speech of the play, Macduff refers no longer to the tyrant, but to "Th'usurper's cursed head" (V.ix.21), a technically correct understatement demonstrating what he has learned from Malcolm, which the newly restored king immediately corrects.

Malcolm brings to light the distinction between tyranny as the exercise of rule by an illegitimate king and tyranny as bad rule by a king whether legitimate or illegitimate. This is fitting since he defines Macbeth's reign in the final speech of the play as "watchful tyranny" (V.ix.33). Malcolm's deception exhibits the superiority of his political understanding to that of his father. As Pierre Sahel points out in "*Machiavélisme Vulgaire et Machiavélisme Authentique dans Macbeth*," "Malcolm a remplacé pour un temps ses vertus personnelles par la *virtu* indispensable à la réussite de son entreprise imminente."²² Sahel argues that in this scene Malcolm practices an authentic Machiavellianism, whereas Macbeth's Machiavellianism is crude and so fails.²³ The superficially tedious dialogue of act 4, scene 3 forcefully introduces a moment of reflection on the question of what tyranny means and so is an appropriate starting point for a discussion of Shakespeare's understanding of tyranny. The tyrant, for Shakespeare, is no mere usurper.²⁴

The King's Evil

Malcolm calls upon "God above" to deal between himself and Macduff. He puts himself in Macduff's hands--proclaiming his honesty, not asserting his kingly virtues, but denying all the tyrannical vices. The confrontation between Malcolm and Macduff under these circumstances provides us with alternative courses of action to those taken by Duncan, Banquo, and Macbeth earlier in the play. Malcolm is more cautious than Duncan, and Macduff is more cautious than Banquo, less ambitious than Macbeth. Malcolm is a more prudent statesman than his father and Macduff is a soldier whose ambitions are circumscribed by his patriotism. There is a pause and a Doctor enters to tell them of the imminent arrival of the English king (in a show of support for Malcolm and Siward). While a brief announcement would have been adequate to establish dramatically the forceful presence of England, Malcolm instead offers commentary on the manner of the king. J. P. Collier, in agreement with other early editors, notes that this entire intrusion was "struck out by the MS corrector" and suggests it was included only as a compliment to King James, during his lifetime, since he had revived the practice.²⁵ Arden editor Kenneth Muir suggests, rightly I think, that it is integral and provides a contrast of good supernatural force with evil supernatural force--a counter-poise to the witches.²⁶ The dramatic importance of Malcolm's account of this supernatural healing process is not simply the scientific miracle or the potentially valuable flattery of King James, however, but the illustration of an aspect of kingship wholly lacking in Macbeth's reign, and just barely attempted by Duncan during his rule (see I.ii.48, I.vi.10-14).

The mythology of the king's semi-divine powers has been extended to his heirs as well, suggesting his concern with founding a stable monarchical line. As Malcolm notes prudently, "How he solicits Heaven / Himself best knows" (149-150). Already word has spread that Edward's heirs will possess the same virtue, as Malcolm reports: "'tis spoken / To the succeeding royalty he leaves / The healing benediction" (154-156). He takes this from Holinshed's account: "He used to help those that were vexed with the disease, commonlie called the kings euill, and left that vertue as it were a portion of inheritance into his successions the kings of this realme."²⁷ Malcolm has apparently come to learn the importance of the continuity of such a myth. Shakespeare emphasizes this with the change of one detail; in Malcolm's account the king also hangs a golden stamp around those he has cured--he does not simply depend on word of mouth to enhance his reputation as healer. Malcolm also mentions Edward as having a "gift of prophecy" (157), merely a rumor in Holinshed.

This is yet another indication that Malcolm has learned something during his enforced sojourn in England; he is well-acquainted with helps such as these (popular superstition) to royal authority. If we are to take his renaming of the thanes at the end of the play as a serious sign of the British influence on him, we could expect a greater attention to the semi-divine trappings of kingship during Malcolm's reign as well.²⁸

Malcolm's bitter experience might lead him to look to Edward's more successful reign for a solution to the problem of succession (next to founding, the greatest problem of kingship).²⁹ This account of Edward's convenient godly gift is in stark contrast to the open criminality of Macbeth's reign. This is one of the rare instances in the play where the commons are mentioned; Shakespeare's Macbeth (unlike Holinshed's) seems wholly unpersuaded of the importance of the high regard of his subjects, making oblique reference to them only once when he speaks, with some contempt, of having "bought / Golden opinions from all sorts of people" (I.vii.32-33). The honors Duncan has accorded him have purchased rather than earned him the good opinion of others.

According to Holinshed, Duncan seems to have been a weak king, overly pious, too scrupulous and lenient with offenders.³⁰ There is immediate evidence of this in his handling of the revolt of Cawdor as the play begins. Shakespeare emphasizes Duncan's saintly nature (I.iv.15, I.vi.12-14, I.vii.16-25, IV.iii.108-111). Malcolm's exposure to Edward contrasts with his knowledge of the private character of Duncan's piety.

Macbeth, on the other hand, is heedless of reputation for sanctity altogether, openly acknowledging his consultation of the witches (IV.i.136-139, V.iii.5). In doing so he violates one of the most infamous and important of all Machiavelli's teachings, that, since it is the case that princes cannot truly possess all moral virtues, (including piety), "it behooves a prince to use that discretion whereby he maye avoyde the infamie especiallye of such vices as maye weken his power, or hazarde the losse of his principallitie."³¹ Malcolm's exposition of this curious detail about the English king draws attention to the problem Macbeth ignores, that of making the kingship appear to the people to have some foundation aside from that of superior strength. From this perspective Macbeth is not only a tyrant, but also his unselfconscious superstition causes him to be an incompetent one. The complete self-confidence inspired in him by the witches causes him to act in contempt of popular opinion. There are kings of private piety and kings who take pains to publicize their piety. Drawing on the problems with Duncan's and Macbeth's experiences respectively, we are shown the advantages of the latter in Edward's gold stamps.

The Succession Crisis

This suggestive rumor about the divinely sanctioned powers of the English line is in marked contrast to the justification Duncan gives for appointing Malcolm his heir. In the past, the Scots throne had been transferred from generation to generation by appointment or election, nominally on the basis of merit. (The English throne historically was passed on by the same means, election by the Witan, a council of leaders.) The one strong indication Shakespeare gives us in the play that primogeniture was not solidly established is Duncan's appointment of Malcolm as heir in act 1, scene 4. There is no comparable instance in the rest of Shakespeare. If a ruler has a legitimate son, the line of succession is clear.

Here Duncan provides no other justification (to quiet resentment or envy) for his choice of Malcolm than that he is "our eldest." To

forestall the most superficial objections, he promises that others, too, will be invested with "signs of nobleness," though we never learn what these are (I.iv.38). Certainly Duncan cannot justify his choice of Malcolm on the basis of military valor or proven merit. We know from the first that, while Macbeth and Banquo are fighting against all odds, Malcolm has been captured by the enemy and has barely been saved.

In act 1, scene 2 we get a very indistinct first impression of Duncan--his first line is a question: "What bloody man is that?" In contrast to his apparent confusion, we first learn of Macbeth by hearing of his bloody deeds, his having "unseam'd" a traitor and beheaded him (I.ii.22-23). Duncan terms this bloodthirsty warrior a "valiant Cousin, worthy Gentleman": these are euphemistic, courtly terms for our first heroic introduction to Macbeth. This description may derive in part from Holinshed's reference to Macbeth's cruelty.³² Our first impression of Malcolm is that he shares his father's unmilitary manner. The early depiction of this great disparity in temperament between Duncan and his son on the one hand, and Macbeth on the other, prepares us to view more sympathetically the latter's strong reaction to Duncan's announcement.

Duncan is apparently in the process of founding his hereditary line in a country where hereditary succession is not yet established. Primogeniture has not yet entirely replaced the former procedure of appointment or election by merit. Shakespeare draws our attention to this necessary and troublesome aspect of founding a dynasty in this scene when Duncan announces to whom he will give his crown (33-34).

The fact that public appointment of an heir is necessary should also moderate our response to Macbeth's outburst. He would be less justified in his apparent resentment of Malcolm if royal primogeniture were an established custom. The inclusion of this scene suggests that Shakespeare wished us to consider that Malcolm's succession was not a given. Though it might be expected, it had to be formally and publicly announced.³³ Holinshed emphasizes Macbeth's rival claim to the throne by his mother rather than his reasonable or unreasonable expectations of reward for service in battle. While Shakespeare alludes to this (Duncan calls Macbeth "cousin" at I.iv.14), Macbeth never asserts he has a right to the throne by blood lines. The reasons for Macbeth's accession to the throne in the absence of Malcolm and Donalbain are left obscure. We could assume he succeeds in part because of general consensus about his superior power and reputation (after his recent victory against Norway) rather than because he is a blood relation. But that he will succeed on Duncan's death and Malcolm's flight, is a foregone conclusion (II.iv.30). (Characteristically, Macbeth has not thought ahead to the possibility that Malcolm might have stayed and claimed the throne.)

The hopes Macbeth reveals when he reacts to this announcement are not then, from this perspective, so entirely unreasonable. By merit he might consider--his ambition having been piqued by the witches--that he ought to be made Prince of Cumberland since he has saved Scotland from conquest by Norway. This is not to say that Duncan's appointment of Malcolm is surprising or unexpected, only that Macbeth's experience with the Witches seems to have expanded a slender, unarticulated hope into a strong desire. They provide Macbeth with a twisted reasoning for imposing or re-introducing a standard of selection by merit that existed in Scotland within recent memory. By such a standard he would be heir apparent.

Historically, no Scottish monarch was succeeded by his own son or grandson until the accession of Duncan after Malcolm II in 1034.³⁴ According to Holinshed, royal primogeniture had been introduced in Scotland by Kenneth I, Duncan's great-great-grandfather by this account, who murdered the rightful heir, Malcolm Prince of Cumberland, and "got the nobles to agree that succession should henceforth be by primogeniture."³⁵ George Buchanan in *Rerum Scotticarum Historia* gives an account closer to historical fact, noting that Kenneth III slew the rightful heir to the throne (again Malcolm) and persuaded the nobles to pass a new law, "That as the Kings Eldest Son should succeed his Father; so, if the son died before the Father, the Nephew should succeed the Grandfather."³⁶ At best it would have been an imperfect system at the time Duncan became king and Shakespeare could reasonably have chosen this point in Scottish history to pose dramatically the problem of the institution of royal primogeniture rather than succession by appointment. In any event the succession of Duncan before Macbeth posed a problem historically as both were the sons of princesses. But Shakespeare does not draw our attention to Duncan's questionable succession (as he does to that of King Edward IV in *Richard III* or to Prince Hal's in the *Henriad*), but to the necessity of his appointing an heir, and to his appointment of his eldest son.

Shakespeare's refashioning of his historical sources only supplements the evidence within the play that he is interested in this aspect of the founding, the problem of succession and how the transition from succession by appointment or election to succession by inheritance occurred in Scotland.³⁷ This is one way of presenting the problem of the creation of kingship by divine right out of the superstition of the many and the founding ambition of an individual. This helps explain the pointed reference to Edward's divine healing powers.

Of all Shakespeare's kings, Macbeth seems the least concerned, in a positive sense, with succession. He is at pains to eliminate rivals to the throne, he goes to great lengths to exterminate Macduff's line lest it prevent his act of founding, and he attempts to kill Fleance (Banquo's son). He does not, however, mention his own childlessness (except indirectly when he mentions that he has "fil'd his mind" for "Banquo's issue"). Only once in the play is Macbeth's lack of an heir mentioned: by Macduff in the scene following his interview with Malcolm. Macbeth appears wholly unconscious of what or who will succeed him, except in the abstract. His reign, as we see it, is spent, because of its origins, in securing his throne and not in preparing for more than the immediate future. This focus on the immediacy of power is part of his implicit assumption that the moment of his supreme power as tyrant may be frozen in time, and in this sense he may overcome his own mortality.

The problem of the founding or refounding (with which Malcolm is faced) is rivaled by this problem of succession, which Macbeth addresses only in the negative. The absence of explicit attention to his childlessness is a striking example of the supreme confidence Macbeth derives from the witches. Much like Coriolanus, who aspires to godhead, he comes to believe himself wholly self-sufficient; after all, he cannot be killed by man "of woman born." Just as he does not doubt he will win the battle, he does not entertain the idea that he will remain childless, until his wife dies. He understands his task to be eliminating obstacles (such as Fleance, Macduff's household, and the English), not as taking positive steps to insure his rule.

If it is unclear that he makes a serious attempt to found a line of kings, are Macbeth's aims, then, merely instantaneous gratification? If so, he fails utterly and we are left with Shakespeare's unattractive portrait of an honor-seeking tyrant and the conclusion Macbeth draws from this way of life that life "is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing" (V.v.26-28). But he is not the egotistic individualist that Richard III is; the tone of his other speeches and the nihilism of this one indicate he had hopes for greater satisfactions--satisfactions derived from a community, "As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends" (V.iii.25). The play invites us to examine how reasonable these hopes are. To do this we must account for their genesis.

It is important to see that Macbeth has a claim to rule on the basis of merit--a claim no longer admissible in a country coming to be ruled by one dynastic line. Still, he is a far stronger ruler, potentially, than Duncan was, or than Malcolm promises to be (even in his moment of greatest perspicuity in act 4, scene 3). Consider the problematic character of Rosse, whose reluctance to commit himself to one side or the other indicates the strength of Macbeth's claim to the throne.³⁸ This capacity, coupled with his seduction by the witches, engenders a growing, irrational belief in his own complete self-sufficiency. He falls into evil not all at once, but more and more rapidly. The indications that Scotland is in a vulnerable state and that Macbeth is the man to lead his country increase the tension of the tragedy, but do not soften the delineation of his destruction of his own soul. But it is critical that we see at the beginning of the play that Scotland might be better off under Macbeth, because he is encouraged to view this reasonable alternative in a compellingly favorable light by the perverse and elliptical logic of the Witches' pronouncements. As Holinshed (as well as his predecessor Machiavelli) points out vividly, cruelty is often a valuable commodity in a prince. This is a quality that has no bounds for Macbeth.

Vaulting Ambition

Holinshed says of Macbeth after he has killed Duncan that he

used great liberalitie towards the nobles of the realme, thereby to win their favour, and when he saw that no man went about to trouble him, he set his whole intention to mainteine justice, and to punish all enormities and abuses, which had chanced through the feeble and slouthfull administration of Duncane [Macbeth punished murderers sternly] in such sort, that manie yeares after all theft and reiffings were little heard of, the people inioieng the blissefull benefit of good peace and tranquillitie.³⁹

Shakespeare follows the tempo of Macbeth's inner dynamic, not historical reality, and so he omits the first ten good years of his reign.⁴⁰ This inner dynamic is constituted by what he describes as "vaulting ambition," which does and must "o'erleap" (I.iv.49, I.vii.27).

Holinshed says that Macbeth reconciled the nobles and paid court to the commons, reinstated harsh penalties, and successfully restored order in the kingdom for ten years before he grew into insolent tyranny. Why omit any mention of the advantages of Macbeth's rule? Shakespeare's intent seems to be to focus on the inner motions of Macbeth's desire for and attainment of the throne, or on the tyrannical impulse itself. I do not claim that the tragic hero's interior world is an isolable point of interest in the play. Such a dramatic fracture has led at least one critic to dismiss the consequences of Macbeth's tyranny altogether. With a peculiarly modern apolitical resistance to the term "tyrant," E. A. J. Honigmann argues that, "Hearing him [Macbeth] described as a *tyrant, usurper, butcher* and so on, an audience ... cannot but feel that a man's outer life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying very little, and that the inner life is all in all."⁴¹ But the name "tyrant" is not accidentally applied to Macbeth more than to any other Shakespearean character. In Macbeth, he presents us with a tyrant distilled to his essentials, and a tyrant in abeyance for ten years is still a tyrant.

One of the more surprising aspects of Macbeth's condensed reign in the drama is that he never seems to be greatly concerned with the effects of his rule, of his beliefs, or of his manner on the commons or the nobles. His marginally successful cover-up of Duncan's assassination is followed dramatically two scenes later by his bold plot to murder Banquo and his effective confession of guilt at the banquet. He apparently stops making a pretense of honoring the nobles and respecting their property soon after this murder (III.vi.33-37, IV.iii.4-5), and he is increasingly and dangerously open about his reliance on the Witches.

Macbeth grows careless of appearances, overconfident of his innate powers and takes no pains to solidify positive support or to justify his claim to the throne properly--he consistently asserts superior force. Malcolm acts in opposite fashion. A weaker ruler from the first, he has no grounds to claim that he merits the throne of Scotland except through appointment by his murdered father.

Shakespeare implicates, in his exploration of political rule in *Macbeth*, as elsewhere, the question of sexual difference, a focus of much critical interest in the play. There is, however, a fundamental question underlying debate about sexual difference in *Macbeth* that has been avoided. This question is at the core of such attacks on feminist criticism as Richard Levin's "Feminist Thematics and

Shakespearean Tragedy."⁴² The question is, Does Shakespeare understand sexual difference as natural, and therefore determinant, or as mostly conventional and so malleable?⁴³

The Witches provide an escape from or confusion of sexual identities--a standard which does not judge Lady Macbeth's unsexing of herself or Macbeth's striving to be more than a man. Yet both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth end tragically--what does this suggest is Shakespeare's view of their attempts to redraw sexual boundaries? An answer to this question would help establish whether the playwright was an adherent of a patriarchal notion of sexual difference (even sexual hierarchy) given currency in his day, or whether he attempted to subvert this. Janet Adelman asserts the former in "'Born of Woman': Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*." She argues that the end of the play reasserts the primacy of the masculine against the frightening power of the maternal, replacing Macbeth's masculinity with the only slightly less misogynistic masculinity of Macduff. Terry Eagleton asserts that the Witches are an example of the latter kind of subversion in *Macbeth* and that they are the play's true heroines.

We are offered three versions of sexual difference in the play, with minor variations: first, the Witches, whose sexual nature is obscure, though they incline towards the womanly; second, Lady Macbeth, who wishes to "unsex" herself in order to commit deeds to which she believes femininity is unsuited; and third, Macbeth, who is urged to be more than a man, fears losing his humanity by being so, and ends describing himself as an animal, "bear-like."

Malcolm, Duncan, and Macduff, present variations on the problem of how one may possess the "womanly" virtues of pity and charity and still be a strong king or warrior--still be manly. The final success of Malcolm, in his state of sexual innocence ("yet unknown to woman" IV.iii.125-126)⁴⁴ and unproved manhood, suggests a preference for some androgynous standard. As many critics have pointed out, Duncan's meekness allows Macbeth to view him and treat him as a woman--speaking of the murder in terms of a rape, as he approaches with "Tarquin's ravishing strides" (II.i.55). Macduff, like Macbeth, the warrior who must save Scotland, must learn to "feel it as a man" (IV.iii.221), to grieve at the slaughter of his family. Lady Macduff--a woman who has not only "given suck" but has children--offers an alternative view (to Lady Macbeth's) of femininity and its vulnerability.

If we still incline to forget that sexuality is fundamentally at issue in *Macbeth*, we are asked to "remember the Porter" and the provoking and unprovoking of sexual desire. (II.iii.21). In support of his assertion that "the murderers are taken out of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires," Thomas De Quincey in his famous essay "On the Knocking at the Gate in *Macbeth*," points to the fact that Lady Macbeth has been "unsexed" and Macbeth "has forgotten that he was born of woman"--the latter a neat interpretive inversion of the dramatic facts. He attributes their "fiendishness" in part to attempts to escape their own sexuality--Lady Macbeth wishes to be unburdened of her femininity and Macbeth to forget the connection between his masculinity and the feminine process of generation. The movement beyond "human desires" De Quincey describes is an abandonment of sexuality.

This movement beyond sexual definition results, of course, in their sterility, which is never explained and on which Macbeth is the last to comment obliquely just before he commands Banquo's murder, referring in a dual sense to his "barren sceptre" (III.i.61). This sterility is connected to both Lady Macbeth's and Macbeth's seeking empowerment by escaping sexuality. After the murder of Duncan, Macbeth loses any positive concern for establishing a line of his own. His last affirmative remark about the succession is "bring forth men-children only"--after that his purpose becomes exclusively negative. He is intent on eliminating all other possible heirs to the throne rather than producing one of his own. Other than in her famous speech on infanticide, Lady Macbeth never mentions children. One might expect that the tyrant Macbeth, so concerned to ensure the throne for his progeny by eliminating all potential threats--Banquo and his son, Macduff's wife and children--would be concerned about an heir--but he never shows such concern. Macduff offers it as an explanation for Macbeth's cold-blooded killing of Lady Macduff and her sons: "He has no children" (IV.iii.216).

The confusion of sexual roles begins just before the murder of Duncan and results in a "fruitless crown" (III.i.60). Jointly Lady Macbeth and Macbeth attempt to detach themselves from procreative cycles. Lady Macbeth, hearing that her husband has come, impels herself into the frame of mind for murder:

unsex me here

And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood,
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse;
That no compunctious visitings of Nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th'effect and it!
(I.v.41-47)

Janet Adelman suggests, rightly I believe, that there are allusions to menstruation here. Lady Macbeth wishes to divest herself of all natural differences she possesses as a woman--especially her reproductive cycle, or her connection with generation. According to Lady Macbeth, her sex stands as a barrier to the commission of a crime such as regicide. She views her sexuality as the root of that "Nature" which impedes her ruthlessness. Lady Macbeth concludes with the boastful challenge

I have given suck, and know

How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
 I would, while it was smiling in my face,
 Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
 And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn
 As you have done to this.
 (54-58)

I say that this challenge is boastful because Lady Macbeth is not able to sustain it--she cannot kill Duncan and she cannot support the guilt she feels at her complicity in his murder.

In her husband, Lady Macbeth sees the impediment as high-mindedness "what thou wouldst highly, / That wouldst thou holily" (I.v.20-21). After he has faltered for the first time she says, "When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And, to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man" (I.vii.49-51). She argues that by intensifying his manly qualities he will be more masculine.⁴⁵ Macbeth will echo this argument later in act 3 when he challenges the murderers to prove they are not "i'th'worst rank of manhood" (i.95-97). There are different kinds of men as there are different kinds of dogs, he argues, though they are all the same species. If Macbeth falters then he must have been a "beast" when he proposed the plan to her, says Lady Macbeth--and this is precisely what he becomes by the end of the play, likening himself to a bear being baited by his enemies (V.vii.2). Like his wife, Macbeth rejects the procreative process (and his own sexuality), but on a cosmic scale. He is willing to see "the treasure / Of Nature's germen's tumble all together" (IV.i.58-59)--to have all nature's procreative potential destroyed in order to know his destiny.

Lady Macbeth's and Macbeth's attempts to exceed sexual boundedness are connected to their sterility and eventual dehumanization in the play. They become like the farmer who "hang'd himself on th'expectation of plenty" (II.iii.5)--profoundly unnatural in their rejection of natural cycles. Ambition prompts the desire to exceed natural and conventional boundaries. But what results from these excesses is sterility--domestic and public.

Though Macbeth's "bear-like" end has drawn significant critical attention, Lady Macbeth's apparent guilt-ridden suicide tends to be slighted. It is a dramatic fact that is difficult to reconcile with any reading of the play as a praise of the attempt to escape sexuality. Janet Adelman, for example, briefly mentions the suicide as indicative of loss of interest in the character, "Lady Macbeth becoming so diminished a character that we scarcely trouble to ask ourselves whether the report of her suicide is accurate or not." But there is an entire scene between Doctor and Gentlewoman devoted to describing her collapse. Though Macbeth has no time for such a "word,"⁴⁶ he is a man who no longer places any value on his own life; much less is he able to weigh the import of his wife's death, as he watches the Witches' prophecies turn against him. I think the suicide is critical to an understanding of whether the play deconstructs or reinforces sexual roles.

A way of generalizing this question is to ask whether natural differences determine other differences--the ability to divest oneself of conscience, for instance? To fully answer this question in Shakespeare one would have to look beyond the "fiend-like Queen" at least to Shakespeare's other women "fiends" (Katherina Minola, La Pucelle, Goneril, Regan and Cymbeline's Queen).⁴⁷ Goneril and Cymbeline's Queen also kill themselves and confess all in the last instant. Shakespeare conceives of no ultimate woman villain--no female Iago, who, even if caught, can maintain silence about her crimes and motivations. What does this imply about his representation of the naturalness of sexual boundaries? Of the natural limits of femininity? Obviously we have to look outside this play for a complete answer to the question. The Macbeths are particular examples of failed attempts to exceed sexual boundedness, attempts which result in sterility and self-destruction. But the question of the stability of sexual differences arises within each of Shakespeare's dramas of tyranny as intimately connected to the tyrannical problem.

Lady Macbeth dehumanizes herself by trying to escape her own sexuality--to become like a man, to lose those traits most associated with woman--pity and remorse--to lose all frailty and to dissociate herself from natural cycles. Macbeth, in trying to be more than a man, becomes a beast. With all their concern for succession and lineage in the play, the Macbeths remain childless and never speak of children after the murder scene. The judgment of the play against Macbeth and Lady Macbeth seems to be that the attempt to escape one's sexuality is foredoomed. The woman who attempts to become a man in order to commit the ultimate crime destroys herself and the man who is urged to go beyond himself, to be more than a man, becomes like an animal. What is interesting is that the play begins with such remarkable erotic tension between Lady Macbeth and her lord: she taunts him sexually to force him to the crime of regicide and he challenges her to "bring forth men-children only" in complimenting her boastful fortitude. After the first crime is committed, this erotic tension disappears, or, more accurately, dissipates; nor is there further mention of children, no further articulated concern with establishing a royal line.

One could describe the efforts of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth as attempts to step out of conventionally determined sexual roles.⁴⁸ But if these roles are merely founded on convention, if there are no natural differences, why aren't they able to succeed? Macbeth's erotic attention shifts to the Witches (who "drain him dry as hay," I.iii.18, as Dennis Biggins has pointed out), and Lady Macbeth collapses in on herself. Their failures to escape sexuality suggest that Shakespeare presents sexual difference as having its foundations in nature, and as being determinate in some fundamental way of what we are. There is a strong connection in the play between loss of sexuality and loss of humanity. The play is filled with allusions to and images of disruption of natural, procreative cycles. These disruptions are directly related to the criminality of the Macbeths, and to their sterility, which is in turn related to their mutual attempts to go beyond

their sexuality. The only proffered alternatives to this sexual boundedness are the Witches. But are they attractive alternatives?

Lady Macbeth is thrown back on her conception of womanliness from the instant of Duncan's murder: "Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't.--My husband!" (II.ii.12-13). She has both a father and a husband (the only time in the play she refers to Macbeth as such). But Macbeth rejects his original understanding that one may "dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more, is none" (I.vii.46-47). He aspires to be, as Lady Macbeth puts it, "so much more the man" (51), and ends as less than one, "bear-like" (V.vii.2).

Just before the murder of Duncan he asks that the earth be deaf to his "steps" and earlier he has asked nature to be blind to the inner workings of his soul ("Stars hide your fires," I.iv.50). In his anxiety before Banquo's assassination, Macbeth swears, "But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer, / Ere we will eat our meal in fear, and sleep / In the affliction of these terrible dreams, / That shake us nightly. Better be with the dead."⁴⁹ After Banquo's death his pronouncements become even more fatalistic: "For mine own good, / All causes shall give way: I am in blood / Stepp'd in so far, that should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er" (III.iv.134-137). The image of the river of blood betrays the fact that Macbeth is still hopeful--there is a shore to be reached; there are a finite number of murders he must yet commit to land himself safely on the other side. His belief that he can secure himself by a certain number of discreet actions implies his basic misunderstanding of the ever tenuous position of an illegitimate ruler (consider the complete distrustfulness and ultimate exhaustion of Henry IV, or the constant watchfulness of Richard III). Like the previous images, it is not clearly thought through. He knows what he wants, but he does not know how to get it; more importantly, he does not know that what he wants he cannot obtain. His desires themselves are surprisingly simple, even barren. He does not fit Malcolm's caricature of the tyrant in act 4, scene 3; he expresses no desire to indulge vices gratuitously. Instead, he wishes to rule, to be honored, to be truly loved, to be the most admired man in Scotland. How is it that his methods so directly defeat his aims? Is what he wishes for possible?

His oaths become more desperate as he aspires to know what he takes to be the truth about his future from the Witches and Hecate. To this end, he is willing that nature rebel and human science and religion be overthrown:

Though you untie the winds, and let them fight
Against the Churches; though the yesty waves
Confound and swallow navigation up;
Though bladed corn be lodg'd, and trees blown down;
Though castles topple on their warders' heads;
Though palaces, and pyramids, do slope
Their heads to their foundations; though the treasure
Of Nature's germens tumble all together,
Even till destruction sicken, answer me
To what I ask you.
(IV.i.52-61)

Human monuments to political and religious power, the science of navigation, nature's procreative potential--manifestations of human reason, civilization, and the natural cycle--may all be destroyed in order for him to know. He is willing to sacrifice forever all of human achievement--all that which gives his ambitions context and meaning.

Ironically, he subverts his own elaborate oath not forty lines later. Having been told that he will not be defeated till Birnam wood come to Dunsinane, he confidently asserts, "That will never be" (94)--an assertion that relies on the predictability of natural forces. Finally, when the prophecy proves true he defies nature altogether, "I'gin to be aweary of the sun, / And wish th'estate o'th'world were now undone.--/ Ring the alarum bell!--Blow wind! come, wrack!" (V.v.49-51).

The self-defeating images in Macbeth's oaths underscore the contradiction between his desires and the means he uses to satisfy them. He cannot discover how to achieve what he truly wants because he comes to regard himself as beyond humanity, as more than a man (as Lady Macbeth argues he must do in act 1, scene 7), with superhuman capacities. Above, he offers that the world be destroyed to satisfy his desire to know his fate. He appears wholly unaware of the self-contradiction such desire betrays. Macbeth seems remarkably devoid of any impulse to self-justification, even from the point of view of political expediency, once Banquo is murdered. Why does he wish to rule?

He has no far-reaching plan such as Richard's, nothing like Prospero's project, no interior yearning for a purity of soul such as Leontes. If he is not simply covetous or licentious, why isn't he content with his original position as king's favorite? He speaks remarkably little about what he hopes to gain in achieving the "golden round"; Lady Macbeth mentions only once the increased honors and power ("shall to all our days and nights to come / Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom," I.v.70), a prediction proven exactly wrong. Is his "vaulting ambition" simply unharnessed desire? What is it he hopes to gain? He does not clearly reveal his desires until they have been frustrated, in a rare reflective moment in act 5, scene 3, after he has learned of battle reverses.

Macbeth articulates what he has lost:

--This push
Will cheer me ever, or disseat me now.

I have liv'd long enough: my way of life
 Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf;
 And that which should accompany old age,
 As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
 I must not look to have; but in their stead,
 Curses, not loud, but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
 Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.
 (V.iii.20-28)

The way of life he has led is the life of a man who dies young, not the way of life of someone who wishes to be loved and enjoy honors. The logic he has followed is simple. His military successes spur him on to greater glories: he is the greatest warrior in Scotland, "Valour's minion," "Bellona's bridegroom." But he perceives that the greatest honors in the kingdom are reserved for the king. He cannot be king by direct means; Malcolm bars his succession. He takes a quicker route and achieves the crown, but with it neither the honor nor the loving regard he sought--there can be no sense to life. How could he be given overpowering ambitions that he could never satisfy?

This moment of clarity is coupled with his persistent misunderstanding--he reasons, if I only manage to overcome this last obstacle it will "cheer me ever" (see also I.iii.53-56, III.ii.13-15, III.iv.28-30, III.iv.134-139). There is no last obstacle for the tyrant--this is the superiority of Richard III's understanding. He comprehends that to be tyrannical is to be supremely powerful, and as a consequence to live in fear and to be in ceaseless turmoil. Macbeth is not self-aware in this way--he is a simpler man, credulous, superstitious, of preeminent martial ability, of overreaching ambition, with only occasional moments of self-understanding (after the murder of Duncan, he wishes to shut out self-knowledge altogether, II.ii.72). But with Macbeth, who does not possess Richard's soliloquizing gloss of self-consciousness, the tyrannical impulse is more visible in its raw, primitive form--an urge to immediate domination without well-defined, far-reaching goals. By releasing his ambition, Macbeth is successful in destroying his own conscience--a feat of great difficulty--and in gaining the Scottish kingdom for a time, but to what further end? Simple dreams of power and certain knowledge of an unbroken succession, such as that promised Banquo, are shown to be finally impossible by the death of his wife. He strives to know what he can never know--that he has captured the throne of his heirs who will possess it uninterruptedly. It is as if he expects to witness this inheritance from that realm he intimates exists beyond the life to come. Learning of Lady Macbeth's suicide, he despairs of this ultimate satisfaction (the ability to view, after death, his own achievement) and so life can only be "a tale told by an idiot." His necessary rejection of any attempt at reflection or self-knowledge is done in order to commit the crimes that his ambition directs. This leaves him with only the externalities--the incoherence of possessing the crown and winning "Curses, not loud, but deep, mouth-honor, breath"--and a soul that neither horror, nor its counterpart, grace, can touch.

I have supp'd full with horrors:
 Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,
 Cannot once start me.
 (V.v.11-13)

The compact Macbeth believes he has established with the Witches allows him to set free all his forceful, irrational desires, but it offers him no guidance as to how to satisfy them. To the extent that he believes in the superficial meaning of the prophecies, he does not see himself as susceptible to human exigencies. Without this susceptibility he has no reason to reflect on his situation, his passions, or his goals. Without such reflection he embodies the crude tyrannical impulse to power, blind to the contradictory nature of its ends, and standing in the way of any attempt at self-understanding or self-justification. The Witches provide the seductive refrain that questions the status of honor and nobility in the play: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." Macbeth, in distinguishing "mouth-honor" from true honor, incidentally confronts the problem posed by the desire to be first in honors: natural superiority is not reflected in conventional rewards. Macbeth is superior to everybody in the play, his closest rival, Macduff is too conventional (as IV.iii points up) to have the imagination necessary for great ambition, and Malcolm's very intellectual superiority seems to deplete him of the grand and attractive passion Macbeth experiences for rule.

From the unthinking passion for tyranny we move to the more refined, sophisticated, and carefully laid plottings of Richard III. The fundamental urge to "solely sovereign sway and masterdom" remains the same, but the methods are far more immediately successful. Richard is self-aware, a tyrant looking forward to growing old in crime and glory, with little concern for his progeny, but clever enough to assure himself the throne with less difficulty and less compunction than Macbeth. Where Macbeth is passionately, misguidedly hopeful, Richard is detachedly pragmatic.

Notes

1. Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 5. Eagleton opens his book with a discussion of *Macbeth* in the first chapter. He speaks of the Macbeths' "impulse to transgress" and refers in this context to "the different but related disruptiveness of bourgeois individualist appetite" (5). This reading implies an underestimation of both Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's ambitions to power. I will argue that the tyrant, for Shakespeare, is far rarer than the "bourgeois individualist" and far more deadly.

2. José A. Benardete argues this: "According to Aristotle courage and justice are both moral virtues--for the simple reason that a moral virtue is taken to be any praiseworthy trait of character, and it is not to be doubted that courage as well as justice is a praiseworthy trait

of character. If we accept that account of moral virtue we may venture to say (doubtless with exaggeration) that Macbeth kills Duncan for the sake of virtue, for the sake--at any rate--of one of the virtues." "Macbeth's Last Words," in *Interpretation* 1 (Summer 1970), 69.

3. Horace H. Furness, ed., *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare, Vol. 2 of *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare* (New York: American Scholar, 1963), 281, n. 60-65. This edition of the variorum will subsequently be referred to as Variorum 2. (cf. *Hamlet* III.i.124.)

4. Horace H. Furness, ed., *Macbeth*, Vol. 2 of *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1873), 226, note to scene iii. This edition of the Variorum will subsequently be referred to as Variorum.

5. Variorum 2, 276.

6. E. A. J. Honigmann, "Macbeth: The Murderer as Victim," *Shakespeare: The Tragedies* (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1984), 145.

7. Three other scenes contain dialogues seemingly outside the main current of events and themes in the plays: the famous Porter scene (II.iii), Rosse's conversation with the Old Man (II.iv), and the brief scene where Old Siward is told of his son's death (V.ix). Of these only the first is generally recognized as setting up a thematic resonance. I will argue later that the other two scenes serve similarly to reconnect us with another question central to the play, that of the importance of military valor.

8. Kenneth Muir, ed., *Macbeth*, the Arden Edition (New York: Methuen, 1962). All citations from this play will be taken from this edition.

9. Geoffrey Bullough, ed., *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, Vol. 7 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1973). A fact that Holinshed notes with great interest, as signifying the start of English influence over the Scots crown: "He created manie earles, lords, barons, and knights. Manie of them that before were thanes were at this time made earles, as Fife, Menteth, Atholl, Levenox, Murrey, Cathnes, Rosse, and Angus. These were the first earles that have bene heard of amongst the Scottishmen, (as their histories doo make mention.)" (506). Holinshed also translates from "Vol. II. The Description of Scotland by Hector Boece" concerning the English influence: "In processe of time ... and cheeflie about the daies of Malcolme Canmore, our manner began greatlie to change and alter. [Through contact with the English the Scots began] through our dailie trades and conversation with them, to learne also their maners, and therewithall their language." (507). See note 23 for an interpretation of this renaming.

10. Variorum, 226, n. 84.

11. Bullough, Vol. 7, 488.

12. The word, or forms of it, is used more in this scene than in any other. It is used seventeen times in this play, substantially more than in any other play.

13. There are two competing glosses to this line offered in the Arden edition (124) and the Variorum (230-231). I take the more popular definition of "confirmed" for "affeer'd." The suggestion that there is a pun on "feared for" strengthens my argument.

14. The Clarendon editors correctly gloss "tyranny" as Macduff uses it here to mean "usurpation in consequence of which the rightful king loses his throne" (Variorum 2, 282). Shakespeare uses the term to suggest oppressive or wrongful rule elsewhere (consider *Measure for Measure* II.ii.108; *The Winter's Tale* III.ii).

15. There seems to be a suggestion of the seven deadly sins (Variorum 2, 281, n. 69-71), though pride, gluttony, and sloth are omitted. This is balanced by the later enumeration of the "King-becoming Graces" (106); see note 19.

16. George Wilson Knight notes that Malcolm deliberately emphasizes the vices of lust and avarice by the imagery he uses, in *The Imperial Theme* (London: Methuen & Co., 1951), 132. These two vices, as they refer to man's attitude towards material things, seem inappropriate to Macbeth, though Malcolm applies them to himself with this specific sense.

17. *The Rape of Lucrece* might serve as a gloss on *Macbeth* in this regard. Luxuriousness is a tyrannical passion. The connection that Malcolm draws is particularly important because Macbeth recognizes this in himself: before he is about to murder Duncan he likens himself to Tarquin (II.i.55).

18. Variorum, 233.

19. "K. James's Opinion of a King, of a Tyrant, and of The English Lawe, Rights, and Priviledges In Two Speeches The first to Parliament, 1603, the second, 1609" (London: printed for R. Baldwin near the Black Bull in the Old-Bailey, 1689), [1]. This quote is from the first speech; in the second speech he argues that a king rules according to the laws, and the tyrant does not, leaving open an appeal (by the king) to divine law, which is higher than human law. See also "The Trew Law of Free Monarchies" (1603) in *The Political Works of James I*, 53-70.

20. This scene alone compared with James's speech on the difference between kings and tyrants should be enough to suggest why the play cannot simply be regarded as a compliment to James I, Banquo's descendent. Several other critics have explored Shakespeare's revision and subversion of contemporary political views and historical accounts, for example, David Norbrook's "Macbeth and the Politics of Historiography" in *Politics of Discourse: The Literature and History of Seventeenth-Century England*, eds. Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 78-116, and Jonathan Goldberg's *James I and the Politics of Literature* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983). But neither Norbrook nor Goldberg notes the radical politics of the debate between Malcolm and Macduff. Arthur Melville Clark's *Murder Under Trust or The Topical Macbeth and Other Jacobean Matters* (Edinburgh: The Scottish Academic Press, 1981) catalogues detailed topical references within the play but cautiously maintains that Shakespeare's contemporary and other political insights stayed in service "to the purely dramatic requirement" (3). This begs the question of the purposefulness of political observations in Renaissance literature altogether. An earlier and even more theoretically circumscribed approach is made by Lilian Winstanley in *Macbeth, King Lear and Contemporary History* (New York: Octagon Books, 1970). She makes the essential historicist argument that, "A dramatic poet appeals first and foremost to the mentality of his audience and it is through the mentality of his audience that his plays must consequently be interpreted" (1).

21. There may be a reference here to Spenser's twelve proposed virtues in the "Letter of the Authors" introducing *The Faerie Queene* (i.e. a Christian revision of Aristotle's ten virtues in the *Nicomachean Ethics*) [*Complete Poetical Works*, The Cambridge Edition of the Poets, ed. R. Neil Dodge (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1908), 136-138] or, as suggested in a Variorum reading, to the twelve virtues in the Vulgate of Galatians 5:22-3; love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, long-suffering, meekness, faith, modesty, temperance, chastity (Variorum 2, 285, nn. 106-109).

22. Pierre Sahel, "Machiavelisme Vulgaire et Machiavelisme Authentique dans *Macbeth*," *Cahiers Élisabéthains: Études sur la Pre-Renaissance et la Renaissance Anglaises*, no. 14 (October 1978), 17.

23. This interpretation depends implicitly on a view of Machiavelli, or at least Machiavellianism, as preeminently concerned with patriotism and civic republicanism. The end justified by any means is the end which secures a nation's good. The most forceful advocate of this interpretation of Machiavelli's writings is J. G. A. Pocock, in *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republic Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975). For Pocock, as for Sahel, the *virtù* of Machiavelli's prince is civic virtue that had to be divorced from the corrupting influence of Christian values: "The truly subversive Machiavelli was not a counsellor of tyrants, but a good citizen and patriot" (505, 218). ... [This] understanding of Machiavelli underestimates his Machiavellianism. I am indebted to Harvey C. Mansfield's argument for the "vulgar" interpretation of Machiavelli as a teacher of evil in his *Machiavelli's New Modes and Orders: A Study of the "Discourses on Livy"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979): "The true Machiavelli is more Machiavellian, not less, than the vulgar Machiavelli" (11).

24. There is a variation on this question in *Measure for Measure*, when Claudio speaks to the imprisoned Lucio about Angelo, who stands in for the true Duke Vincentio. Claudio speculates "Whether the tyranny be in his place / Or in his eminence that fills it up" (I.ii.163-164). Is it the illegitimacy of the office or the abuse of it which makes for tyranny?

25. Variorum, 242-243 and Variorum 2, 289-90, n. 157. This surmise is supported by the fact that Macduff's speech before the entrance of the doctor makes a perfect verse with the entrance of Rosse.

26. Muir, 130-131, nn. 140-159.

27. Bullough, vol. 7, 508.

28. Malcolm might be thinking of Duncan's remark when he appoints him Prince of Cumberland, "which honour must / Not unaccompanied invest him only, / But signs of nobleness, like stars, shall shine / On all deservers" (I.iv.39-42). All honors are to derive from the king. Malcolm's renaming of the thanes emphasizes his power over the dispensation of honors and it also serves as a reminder, to other ambitious nobles, of the foreign power that helped enthrone him. The renaming of the thanes is also mentioned as symbolic of Scotland's coming under English influence. The thanes of Cawdor have so tainted the title that Malcolm may feel called on to impose an outside hierarchy to centralize monarchical power. ...

29. Consider the problem of succession Lear faces in act 1, scene 1 of *King Lear*, the problem of Cymbeline with his daughter Imogen, the problem Leontes has with a lost heir, the problem King Henry IV has with his apparently recalcitrant son, the problem of the quarrel over succession in *King John*, as well as the question of who will succeed the founder of the Roman Empire in *Julius Caesar* and in *Antony and Cleopatra*.

30. See page 6.

31. Hardin Craig, ed., *Machiavelli's "The Prince": An Elizabethan Translation* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1944), 67. This manuscript translation of *The Prince* was in circulation in the late sixteenth century. The first published translation, by Henry Dacres, was not issued until 1640. It is conceivable that Shakespeare could have known the work itself, not just Gentillet's distorted version of it, which was very popular in England at the time (*Discours Sur les Moyens de Bien Gouverner*, first pub. 1576, translated: *A Discourse Upon the Meanes of Wel Governing and Maintaining in Good Peace, A Kingdome, or Other Principallitie*, first pub. 1602). For subsequent citations I use Harvey C. Mansfield's literal translation of *The Prince* (Chicago: University of Chicago

Press, 1985), 62. The Elizabethan edition of *The Prince* will be referred to as Craig.

32. Both the Sergeant's and Rosse's account of Macbeth's achievements contain telling ambiguities to which Duncan is apparently oblivious. The implicit comparisons between Macdonwald and Macbeth in Rosse's speech are made in such a way that the traitor and the defender are syntactically confused (I.ii.55-59). Given Rosse's duplicity, the confusion might well be intentional.

33. I have found only one parenthetical reference to this curiously overlooked circumstance, in Graham Holderness's article "Radical Potentiality and Institutional Closure: Shakespeare in Film and Television" in *Political Shakespeare* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 190. I quote: "When Duncan declares Malcolm his successor (a declaration which indicates that this is not a hereditary dynasty) he is simultaneously creating a hierarchy and rendering it open to assault by suppressing the very power, vested in the thanes, which sustains his authority."

34. "Scotland," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1911 (eleventh edition), Vol. 24, 431.

35. Bullough, Vol. 7, 485. Editorial paraphrase.

36. Bullough, 510.

37. For a treatment of Shakespeare's use of Buchanan see Norbrook (in *Politics of Discourse*), who emphasizes the historian's republican sympathies and concludes, "As a regicide who was condemned equally by Buchanan and by conservatives, and yet had half-buried associations with constitutionalist traditions, Macbeth was a figure bound to evoke ambivalent responses from a Renaissance humanist," 116.

38. Rosse enters describing Scotland as a country "almost afraid to know itself!" (165) (an analogy is invited with Lady Macbeth's insanity and Macbeth's inner soul turmoil). Rosse is certainly the play's slipperiest character, an opportunist par excellence. Significantly, Malcolm does not recognize Rosse when he enters (IV.iii.159). Rosse repeats of Scotland his earlier words of consolation to Lady Macduff. He says Scotland is "Almost afraid to know itself." It is a grave rather than a mother, and he confirms Macduff in that Macbeth has been slaughtering his opposition and the best men no longer die natural deaths. Macduff, a man of fewer words, comments on Rosse's elaboration (174). Rosse does not at first tell Macduff of the murder of his family. It is not plausible that he hesitates for humanitarian reasons. He reveals the slaughter to Macduff only after he has learned that Malcolm has English support and so is in the stronger military position. Once he has decided to throw his lot in with Macduff and Malcolm it is safe for him to tell Macduff of Macbeth's actions. Had he told him earlier, he could not then have expected to return unhindered to Macbeth's troops. Rosse is here still waiting to see which will be the stronger of the two. This suggests how very close to ultimate success Macbeth is--Rosse is too prudent a man to consider siding with Macbeth for reasons of loyalty or patriotism (to keep the English out). He manages to play both sides and survive. The ambivalence of the most politically astute observer in the play implies that Rosse believes Macbeth could succeed in ruling Scotland, however oppressively, and in keeping the English out. See Variorum 2, 194 for a suggestion that this interview shows Rosse's circumspection. Rosse is a survivor (see chapter 6).

39. Bullough, 497.

40. Gustav Landauer, *Shakespeare* (Hamburg: Rutter and Loenig Verlag, 1962), 238. "Shakespeare who here proceeds as always, doesn't measure the time of Macbeth's reign according to astronomical time, but according to the inner workings of his fate, the tempo of his life-force and intensity; he doesn't present the reality, the relativity and heterogeneity of political society, but rather the truth of the basic individual drives *sub specie aeternitatis*; he doesn't need the long interval between Duncan's and Banquo's murder, or the hypocrisy and normality. In Holinshed, by contrast to Shakespeare, Banquo remains peacefully in his grave." Unpublished translation by James H. Read.

41. E. A. J. Honigmann, "Macbeth: The Murderer as Victim," *Shakespeare: The Tragedies*, ed. Robert Heilman (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1984), 148.

42. Richard Levin, "Feminist Thematics and Shakespearean Tragedy," *PMLA* 103, no. 2 (March 1988), 125-138.

43. See Dennis Biggins's "Sexuality, Witchcraft, and Violence in *Macbeth*," *Shakespeare Studies* 8 (1975) 255.0. See also Terry Eagleton's *William Shakespeare* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1986); Janet Adelman's "Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*," *Cannibals, Witches, and Divorce: Estranging the Renaissance*, ed. Marjorie Garber (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 90-121; and Marjorie Garber's *Shakespeare's Ghostwriters: Literature as Uncanny Causality* (New York: Methuen, 1987).

44. There is here perhaps some recollection of Elizabeth, the Virgin Queen. Sir Thomas Elyot in *The Book Named the Governor* (Menston, England: Scholar Press, Ltd., 1970), advises the education of a child above seven: "For though there be no perille of offence in that tender and innocent age / yet in some children nature is more open to vice than to vertue / and in the tender wittes be sparkes of voluptuositie: whiche norished by an occasion or objecte / encrease often tymes in to so terrible a fire / that ther with all vertue and reason is consumed. Wherefore to eschewe that daunger / the most sure counsaile is / to withdrawe him from all company of women," folio 21 verso.

45. The argument is reversed by Antonio in *Measure for Measure* when he says "Be that you are, / That is, a woman; if you be more, you're none" (II.iv.143-45), as Terry Eagleton points out in *William Shakespeare*, p. 4. There it is equally insidious. See also Michael Taylor's "Ideals of Manhood in *Macbeth*."

46. See Joan Larsen Klein's "Lady Macbeth: Infirm of Purpose" for a version of the feminine/masculine debate surrounding Lady Macbeth (in *The Woman's Part*, eds. Lenz, Greene, and Neely, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983). This volume is after referred to as Lenz.

47. The word "fiend" is significant here since it is used of only these five female characters in Shakespeare, in every case to suggest a lack of femininity and an unnaturalness. See W. Moelwyn Merchant's "His Fiend-Like Queen" for a discussion of Lady Macbeth's connection with the supernatural and for the supernatural associations of the word "fiend."

48. Marjorie Garber states what I am calling the "conventional" argument when she identifies in the play a "Medusa complex" that centers on "gender undecidability and anxiety about gender identification," 97. She argues that feminist critics and others "merely replicate the fundamental resistance we have seen in Freud, the refusal to regard the enigma as such, to gaze upon the head of the Medusa, to recognize the undecidability that may lie just beneath the surface of power--and perhaps of sexuality itself," *Shakespeare's Ghostwriters*, 119.

49. Abraham Lincoln read this speech to a party with him on the boat returning to Washington after a visit to the fallen confederate capital, Richmond, in 1865, three days before he was shot. He found *Macbeth* Shakespeare's most powerful play. As quoted from Lincoln's letters by Harry V. Jaffa in *Shakespeare As Political Thinker*, eds. John Alvis and Thomas G. West (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 1981), 283.

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