interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Spring 1989 *Volume 16 Number 3*

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Macbeth: Shakespeare Mystery Play

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PRELIMINARY VIEW OF THE SUBJECT

In its date of composition, *Macbeth* falls about midway between *Julius Caesar* and *The Tempest*, and like them is known only from the First Folio. Its condition, however, seems not to be as good as theirs, or so say the editors, some of whom find it too short—it is one of the shortest of the plays—and suspect paring by hands other than Shakespeare's. All the editors are sure there have been additions by another hand in at least one or two scenes (see K. Muir's Arden edition, pp. xii–xiii, xxiii–xxxiii). Despite such scholarly uncertainties, *Macbeth*, along with *Caesar*, and some of the history plays, is popularly considered one of Shakespeare's most political plays, as well as one of his best. To Abraham Lincoln it *was* the best: "Nothing," he said, "equals *Macbeth*." How simple and moral is its story! Led on by the prophecy of witches, Macbeth and his Lady succeed in secretly murdering King Duncan and gaining Scotland's throne. Yet they never enjoy the happiness they anticipated from this cruel regicide. Macbeth becomes engrossed in a series of additional murders, one worse than the other, until opposition to him mounts. When Malcolm, Duncan's elder son, returns to Scotland at the head of an English army, he is joined by those suffering under Macbeth's tyrannies, and together they lay siege to his castle. Shortly afterward, Lady Macbeth commits suicide, and Macbeth himself dies in face-to-face combat with Macduff, leaving Malcolm as Scotland's next king.

This is the obvious dramatic action of the play, but there are also signs of a deeper philosophical subject. In a play better known for memorable lines or phrases than speeches, no doubt the most memorable speech is one of Macbeth's last, just after the queen's death. Launching into a very abstract reflection on life, with its endless and aimless "tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow," Macbeth cries

> 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.

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According to this "atheistic" speech, as it has been called, Macbeth finds that life itself, like a tale told by an idiot, is completely unintelligible. Now he could not mean by this simply that life has no moral plan or purpose, for he thinks of himself as deeply immoral, and might easily have concluded, from his wife's fate and his own imminent downfall, that injustice is always punished, that the world is indeed moral—which is the conclusion usually drawn by the audience. But Macbeth has something else in mind when he calls life a "tale told by an idiot," something very radical, and going far beyond the atheism often attributed to him at this point. For an idiot cannot tell a tale: his words do not hang together, or, better, are not words at all, but only noises, only fury. When an idiot "speaks," one noise follows another unpredictably, and so, Macbeth seems to think, is it with life. Life too has no connections among things, no intelligible sequences of cause and effect. What made Lady Macbeth sick? Why is she now dead? Why is he about to be overcome? Why have they both failed? Macbeth finds himself completely unable to explain this turn of events. To him it is simply unintelligible.

In fact, the play does contain a real and great puzzle of causality, for, knowing what Macbeth and Lady Macbeth were like when they planned Duncan's murder, could we have predicted their ultimate fate? No one has stated the problem better than Sigmund Freud, who found it inexplicable that, over so short a span of time, the remorseless Lady Macbeth should be suicidally "borne down" by remorse, while the fearful Macbeth ends up "all defiance." Freud criticizes Shakespeare because he finds these apparent reversals of character unintelligible; quite rightly he refuses to allow the dramatist any leeway that "breaks the causal connection" (*Macbeth Casebook*, pp. 132, 136–37). If Freud is correct in his diagnosis, Shakespeare seems to have constructed an unintelligible play, almost as if to corroborate Macbeth's view of life's unintelligibility.

Freud may well be correct on one point: the changes Shakespeare depicts in his protagonists could not naturally have occurred over a brief span of time—certainly not if Freud has accurately gauged the time involved (he thinks it a mere matter of days). But it is possible Shakespeare has consciously sought a kind of compression in the play—that what by nature would take much longer he has caused to occur within not only a relatively short period of time but in a very small number of pages as well. If he could do this while providing the thread of intelligibility—of cause and effect in the seeming reversal of the main characters—better than Freud thinks he does, he will have engineered a special kind of dramatic shock, and a special goad to searching out these causes and effects, much as would a scientist or philosopher like Freud himself. The cause of *Macbeth*'s oft-noted brevity would then lie not in paring by others but in Shakespeare's dramatic and philosophical intentions combined. If we can prove, further, that the scenes thought to be superfluously added by someone else are also intrinsic to Shakespeare's overall plan, the play will be completely freed from the kind of editorial censure it has received.

But there is more. What would life be like if it is *not* a "tale told by an idiot?" In what sense is life a "tale" or story at all? If it is a tale told by a nonidiot, a normal man, life must be intelligible and capable of being understood in terms of cause and effect. But does its being a tale suggest an overall purpose or meaning to life? Is life intelligible in the higher sense of being what reason or wisdom would choose? Is it conclusively moral, directed by a providential supreme power working for the just and the good and guaranteeing their triumph? Certainly this would be the case if the God Christians believe in ruled the world. *Macbeth* does have a number of minor characters who seem to be the very embodiment of Christian belief and conduct, and who trust in a universe where good inevitably triumphs over evil. Duncan (and earlier, his queen as well) is said to have been like that; at first Lady Macduff is, and also the English king, who miraculously cures men of a disease known as the Evil (IV, 3: 108–11, 146–60; IV, 2: 73–79). In fact, there is a strong element of this belief in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as well: Macbeth fears what will happen to him in the life to come, and knows he has lost his "eternal jewel"; Lady Macbeth, sleepwalking, thinks she is in hell. Yet the witches opening the play, and giving it its essential atmosphere, seem to personify evil rather than good, and it is they, rather than any invisible good God, that, by arranging Macbeth's doom, seem to triumph in the play.

Macbeth is a mystery play—like a mystery story or novel—in more ways than one, and not simply in the sense that all Shakespearean plays are mysteries. Beyond the mystery of its character reversals and of imposing elements like the witches, it is filled with mysteries of fact left to the reader's notice and investigation. To mention only the most prominent: to whom does Ross refer (toward the beginning) by the term "Bellona's bridegroom"? What makes Macbeth decide to slay the sleeping guards when he goes up to see the dead Duncan (since it was not part of his plan)? To whom does Banquo so insistently travel the day of Macbeth's banquet, and who is the third murderer involved in his slaying? Why does Ross turn up at Lady Macduff's castle shortly before her murder, and who sends the messenger to warn her? What brings Ross to England? These questions of fact and motivation are essential to the understanding of life—of human affairs—and we must not be willing to notice an unexplained gap in the sequence without trying to pursue it. We cannot remain satisfied with the chaotic surface of things, or with superficial and apparent motivations. In ways small as well as large, we are given incentives to observe and think, to search for cause and effect, and thus to confirm life's intelligibility in at least this sense. We are also given sufficient information to decide upon its intelligibility in the higher sense of rational or moral order.

THE WITCHES FROM BEGINNING TO END

More than any Shakespearean play that is neither English history nor Roman, *Macbeth* derives its content from historical narratives. It is amazing to find how much of the characters, and of their speech and action, Shakespeare drew from Holinshed's *Chronicles* and like sources. It is even more amazing, and instructive, to discover the changes he made, using certain features but not others, inventing new ones, and putting them all together in a manner conducive to his own purpose. The general outlines of the story of Macbeth are followed, but many of the details of Duncan's murder come from Donwald's earlier murder of King Duff. Various witches and wizards are already in the story, waiting to be congealed into three witches, to whom Shakespeare, defiantly anachronistic, adds Hecate. Most of Macbeth is already there, and even Macduff. But Lady Macbeth had to be constructed out of a few lines referring to her ambition and her inciting Macbeth to murder Duncan. And while Ross and Lady Macduff are present in the story, their character and role had to be wholly invented. (See the Furness edition (Dover), pp. 379–95, and *Shakespeare's Holinshed* (Dover), pp. 18–45.) Let us begin by examining those eerie yet contemptible witches.

The play opens with a brief appearance of the three witches and then a much longer one two scenes later. Their meeting with Hecate, so universally spurned by the editors, occurs at the end of Act III and the beginning of Act IV There, after a reproving lecture from Hecate, the witches are directed to prepare for a final glorious deception of Macbeth, which all four then consummate together. The details of word and deed provided in all these scenes are more than "atmospherics," though they certainly create a most particular atmosphere and mood. The reader is intended to think seriously about the witches: What kind of beings are they? Are they real? What is their significance? Who is Hecate, and why is she needed? In their very first lines, the witches show a predilection for bad weather ("thunder, lightning or in rain"), a taste for paradox ("when the battle's lost and won"), and a gift of prophecy (knowing that the battle will be finished "ere the set of sun"). Their "fair is foul, and foul is fair" seems to reek of moral as well as meteorological paradox; their answering the call of little spirits ("I come, Graymalkin!", "Paddock calls") propounds an equally perplexing metaphysical paradox—that of the greater being seeming to serve the lesser, like a pet owner his pet. And, of course, why they are intent on meeting Macbeth is never discussed or divulged.

When they have convened again a little later to meet Macbeth, the witches begin a rather lengthy conversation, asking each other what they had just been doing in the interim. They address each other as "sister," indicating a kinship either of blood or kind, but they use no first names, and give the impression that they may lack such names, even though their petlike spirits have them.

And since they must ask about each other's doings, some drastic limits to their foreknowledge are indicated: perhaps it extends only to the doings of men, or to the things receiving their attention. Their answers are equally interesting. One has been killing swine—evidently an activity needing no further explanation. The other begs for chestnuts from a sailor's wife, who interrupts her chewing only to dismiss the witch quite airily, fully aware she is a witch. Out of what looks like a desire for revenge, this one—knowing the wife's husband is the master of a ship at sea—will pursue him in a sieve and "do" something to him. One thing she will clearly do is use the wind she commands, and the winds offered by her two sisters, to blow his ship about for "nine times nine" (that is, eighty-one) weeks, tossing it in a tempest, but unable to destroy it. Suddenly, she interrupts this train of thought to show her sister, childishly eager to see it, the thumb of a wrecked pilot. Hearing, then, a drum, they dance around three-times-three times to make up nine, and set the charm for Macbeth's appearance before them, apparently not knowing, or caring, that Banquo will be with him.

What, so far, has Shakespeare told us with these witches? Remembering Macbeth's later claim that "life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," it cannot quite be said that the witches talk like idiots, since their conversation makes some sense. But it makes very little sense, and what strikes us most of all is their childishness, combined with a singular inclination to relish acts (or relics) of human harming, even while exhibiting kindness toward each other. We do not know what they look like yet, but they seem to have certain human needs (for example, the desire for food) and therefore bodies. They have command of the winds and can travel anywhere swiftly, but their powers of destruction seem oddly restricted—swine yes, but the master of the Tiger, no. The net impression overall remains one of unintelligibility and hence impossibility: their powers or traits seem inconsistent with each other. Above all, we do not perceive—nor would it be at all consistent with what we do perceive—any link between these witches and the devil. Satanically bent on evil, in defiance of God's commands, these witches are not. There is nothing Christian about them.

What the witches look like we must wait to learn from Banquo, the first to see them. They are withered, wild in their attire, female yet bearded, standing on the earth yet looking not like its "inhabitants." They can understand Banquo's "Live you? or are you aught that man may question?" though by placing wrinkled fingers on their thin lips they apparently signal him to remain silent. Only when Macbeth, both commanding and asking, says "Speak, if you can. What are you?" do they break their own silence and give him the famous "hails." To Banquo they say nothing, but at his subsequent urging also address their hails to him, prophesying his destiny, and making comparisons between it and Macbeth's. With their final "Banquo and Macbeth, all hail," they refuse to answer Macbeth's further questioning and disappear.

Why the witches seem originally concerned with Macbeth alone, and why they accede to Banquo's demands, cannot be known, nor even whether they anticipated those demands—which seems unlikely. The "hails" given Macbeth mention three heights of place and power, two of them—the thanedoms—already achieved, one—the kingdom—to be gotten in the future. Since we have just witnessed (in the previous scene) the bestowal of Cawdor's title on Macbeth, in his absence, by King Duncan, and learn from Macbeth himself that he is already Thane of Glamis due to his father's death, two-thirds of what the witches tell him are not prophecies at all, though the power of the witches to know even these seems beyond any human power. Only Macbeth's becoming king can be considered a prophecy, which, as the story unfolds, turns out to be true. But the "hails" to Macbeth contain utterly no reference to any evils he may encounter along the way, or to any defects in his greatness. These emerge only with the prophecy given to Banquo, which is actually stated in terms of comparison with Macbeth. Banquo will be lesser or greater, not so happy, yet much happier, a begetter of kings but not a king himself. These too are largely confirmed by the further action of the play, but the evil Banquo will encounter along the way—being murdered with twenty gashes in his head and thrown in a ditch, all by command of his friend, Macbeth—could hardly be gathered directly from what the witches say.

At this point in the play, we have no idea whether it is the purpose of the witches to praise and please the great humans they single out for their attention, or—as it turns out—to tempt them by the promise of great good into actions that lead to a doom concealed from them. We have no idea whether the witches form part of a large organized group or are out there uncoordinated, in unknown numbers, perhaps even working at cross-purposes to each other, in a kind of chaos. To clarify the larger framework of their operations, Shakespeare later arranges for them to meet with Hecate, in the scene (penultimate in Act III) that most editors seem intent on extruding as spurious. Duncan has already been murdered and replaced by the Macbeths. Banquo (but not his son, Fleance) has also been murdered, and Macbeth, still shuddering after seeing Banquo's ghost at the banquet, and anticipating his need for still further murders, has just declared his intent to visit the "weird sisters." He is "bent on knowing, by the worst means, the worst"—and this we only learn indirectly when the visit takes place. He wants to learn what will happen to him now that he has again waded, and will continue to wade, in blood.

When the witches meet Hecate, Macbeth has already indicated to Lady Macbeth his intent to visit him, and Hecate is aware of it. The first witch has the first and last lines of the scene: all the rest are Hecate's. Told by the first witch that she looks angry, Hecate begins by explaining and justifying her anger, which is directed at them. She takes command of their further operations, indicates her own general principle and the one underlying their future strategy regarding Macbeth, and concludes by responding to the call of her "little spirit." Of these three parts of Hecate speech, the first has caused the most trouble:

> Have I not reason, beldams as you are,
> Saucy, and overbold? How did you dare
> To trade and traffic with Macbeth,
> In riddles, and affairs of death;
> And I, the mistress of your charms,
> The close contriver of all harms,
> Was never call'd to bear my part,
> Or show the glory of our art?
> And, which is worse, all you have done
> Hath been but for a wayward son,
> Spiteful and wrathful; who, as others do,
> Loves for his own ends, not for you.

An earlier American editor named W.A. Rolfe presented one of the strongest attacks on the authenticity of this scene. To begin with, Rolfe notes that Hecate speaks in iambics, whereas "the eight-syllable lines that Shakespeare puts into the mouth of supernatural beings are regularly trochaic." Furthermore, in what sense could the witches have been said to "trade and traffic" with Macbeth, since no bargain or exchange has transpired between them? What were the "gains" in which they were all to share, according to Hecate (said a little later, at IV, 1:43)? And how has Macbeth proved a "wayward son, spiteful and wrathful?" These and similar considerations lead Rolfe to conclude that the part of Hecate is the work of some "hack writer in the theater" (Furness, pp. 232–33).

Rolfe's criticisms are sensible, and deserve an adequate response. In accusing the witches of "trading" ("trafficking" emphasizes the same idea), Hecate seems to look upon their presentation to Macbeth as something like a rational exchange, where the trading partners both have in view an end or benefit to themselves. But the gravamen of her complaint comes in the next lines: You failed, Hecate says, to bring me into the action; I, who both control your charms and secretly contrive all harms; I, who alone can show the full "glory" of our art. In short, you set up shop on your own, so to speak, and were therefore "saucy, and overbold." And the complaint has a second even stronger component, for, "which is worse," you have done this for a "wayward," not a loving or devoted "son," who loves selfishly, "for his own ends" (but not different from others in this respect), rather than "for you." In this part, the image of commerce or rational exchange is dropped, and replaced by that of love, with Hecate picturing the witches as Macbeth's mother, who loves her son and expects both love and devotion from him. In both cases, Hecate seems, rather paradoxically, to presume that the witches are bestowing a benefit, not inflicting a harm, on Macbeth—a benefit they expect to result in some good to themselves, either in the form of a benefit rationally exchanged or one bestowed through love.

What can possibly be the reason for such complications? Shakespeare has Hecate call herself the "close contriver of all harms," almost along the way, not unproudly, yet matter-of-factly. What she means is that all the harm—at least the human harm, and perhaps harm to all beings capable of being harmed—is under her control. Hecate is not Satan—she is very unlike Satan—but she affords Shakespeare something like a substitute for Satan through whom he can raise, more guardedly, the questions that ought to be directed at Satan himself. Satan had to be brought into existence to help explain the persistence, gravity, and frequent success (short of domination) of evil in a universe completely created by a good God. Since he could not create himself, he must have been created by God, as a good being that somehow manages to derange itself, thus leaving God without responsibility for evil. Satan must, to oppose God completely, represent evil loved for itself. Hecate demonstrates the impossibility of this idea. Once one postulates beings that bring evil into the world, and contrive all harms, they do so for the sake of either harming or benefiting. But a being that wants only to harm must want to harm itself, and such a being contradicts the very notion of being. Every being must therefore want to benefit at least itself. This is also why Hecate can later say to the witches, "O, well done! I commend your pains, and everyone shall share i' the gains" (IV, I: 42–43)—leaving us wondering what possible gains they can obtain either from this successful performance before Macbeth or from his ultimate downfall. Will Macbeth become something like that wrecked "pilot's thumb" the first witch carries around in her pocket? What needs of Hecate and the witches—and how must they be constructed to have such needs—are satisfied by the contriving of harm?

While Hecate may look "angerly," and is clearly angered, it is surprising how little of the punitive or vindictive she manifests toward her "saucy" minions. On the contrary, all she asks is that they "make amends now" by following her directions. She plans a great display of their art, in all its glory, and is engrossed in the thought of it—but not as a malevolent Satan, anticipating with joy the pain, suffering, and destruction to be brought about. Hecate is, above all, an artisan—or, better still, an artist who must create all the elements necessary to a successful charming of Macbeth. And the shortness, lightness, and rhyme of her lines are perfectly in keeping with this approach to her job as "chief contriver of harms." We never learn whether there is a "chief contriver of benefits," or by whom—other than themselves—the "glory of our art" is to be appreciated. Nevertheless, she gives the impression that bringing about harm is a difficult and complicated thing, and hence in need of a complex and glorious art. She is therefore characterized by something like the human love of excellence—an excellence which in her eyes remains untarnished because harms, presumably, are a necessary part of the nature of things. The witches seem to do, by impulse, what Hecate does out of a sense of rational necessity, and by art. They can therefore be pictured as childlike, she as a mature adult.

Yet Shakespeare wants us to see an essential kinship between them as well, and therefore makes her leave in response to the call of her "little spirit," just as they had in the very first scene. Not only must one wonder how a devotion to harming is consistent with this love of pets, but also how the higher and greater being can seek to serve the lower. This touch is meant to draw even more sharply the contrast between Hecate and these witches, on the one hand, and Satan and his witches—viewed in the context of Christianity—on the other. Satan is all evil, from top to toe, but Hecate and her witches are peculiar combinations of good and evil, and hardly reek of malevolence in their evildoing. Their peculiarity provokes our interest not only in their motive for doing harm but in their motive for doing good. Is there a counterpart to Hecate responsible for causing good, and if so, what is the relation between the two? Or is evil subservient to good—somehow more difficult to bring about than good? Applied in the context of Christianity, what causes God to do good? What possible want or desire in Him could make Him create a world, and then suffer for one of His creatures?

Rolfe is quite right in his criticism of Hecate's speech, so long as one considers it a set of charges against the witches that, in a literal and simply factual sense, are either true or false. In this sense they are false, and seem entirely wide of the mark—hence the work of some hack writer. But the sheer poetry should have told him better than that, and if one thinks of Hecate's lines primarily as a vehicle for exposing the general problem of the relation between good and evil in the universe, Rolfe's objections disappear. That Shakespeare wants to confront this problem is shown, much more graphically than ever before, in the next witches' scene, set, as Hecate had told us, at the "pit of Acheron," where Macbeth will soon come. Here we find the witches boiling in a cauldron a stew made of things that would utterly and instinctively repel the audience as evil: hideous animals that crawl and fly, run and swim, poisoned entrails, poisonous plants, parts of Jews, infidels, and the strangled offspring of prostitutes.

These ingredients are not selected in accordance with the strictest of principles, however. Some—like toads, snakes, bats, sharks—may be considered clearly repellent by nature, but others—Jews, Turks, and Tartars—only by divine law, or from a Christian point of view, and still others—poisoned entrails and prostitutes' strangled offspring—at least partly by human intervention. None are simply characteristic of a universe evil by nature or in itself. In fact, as if to remind us faintly of those parts of the universe that do not repel, or that even attract, Shakespeare has the witches include in their stew items of questionable repugnance, like "toe of frog" and "tongue of dog." Later, as if to make sure the mood of the horrid is sustained, the witches throw into the cauldron the blood of a sow that has devoured her nine farrow, and grease from the noose of a murderer's gibbet, reminding us, with the last, of the most repellent spectacle in the play—that of the murderous Macbeth and Lady Macbeth themselves.

Macbeth insists on being answered by the witches concerning the future even if all things must be destroyed by the winds they command. But even before he can frame his question, the First Apparition knows how to answer it. The spectacle now presented to Macbeth—evidently Hecate's masterful contrivance—is in fact much more complicated than what the witches had originally presented on their own. In each of three cases, an unnamed and puzzling apparition explicitly tells him how to act, practically calling for injustice, and apparently promising him impunity. Finally, at his own insistence, he is given shattering confirmation of the earlier prediction that Banquo's issue will reign in this kingdom, which leads him to call for this "pernicious hour" to "stand aye accursed in the calendar!" But Hecate has done her job well, and, true to her word, led him on "to his confusion" by assuring him security for his crimes. This she has done not through outright lies but through equivocation, using words that in their ordinary meaning give guarantees, while in some unusual meaning withdrawing them.

Toward the play's end, on discovering these extraordinary meanings, Macbeth senses the "equivocation of the fiend that lies like truth," and exclaims against these "juggling fiends" that "palter with us in a double sense" (V, 5:50; V, 8:25–28). He ends up dead and headless, after the wife concerning whose destiny he had never inquired has already committed suicide. But his last meeting with the witches, at the pit of Acheron, concludes in their effort to cheer him up with music and dancing, as he stands distracted. Their spell is now complete, and its ultimate consequences guaranteed, without any necessity on their part to check later. Hecate and her helpers—beings whose function and good it is to do harm, without malice—must be satisfied with their success. And Shakespeare must have been satisfied with his. For by this point he has clearly distinguished the witches in *Macbeth* from Christian witches, and plainly entitled them to be headed by Hecate rather than Satan. At the same time, he has deepened our interest in the problem of evil in the universe. How is it to be accounted for? Why are so many things in nature repellent to man? Why is evil so important a feature of all human affairs? What causes evil in people like Macbeth and Lady Macbeth?

Clearly the perspective from which Shakespeare views these matters, in the play, is not Christian, although the protagonists are. With the help of his witches, Shakespeare can illuminate the problem of intelligible being (to help us decide whether life is a tale told by an idiot), using as a specimen case the nature of beings supposedly dedicated to the contrivance of harm. At the same time—allowing the witches to tempt men by promising security for injustice—Shakespeare can study, as if under artificial laboratory conditions, the rapid amplification and intensification of tyrannical evildoing, and the state of soul motivating and accompanying it. He will have recourse to important elements of Christian expectation—the porter as hell's gatekeeper, Lady Macbeth thinking hell murky—but only to show the natural hell, the hell on this earth, to which wickedness can lead. And he will have his little joke: a character named Seyton is suddenly introduced toward the end (and as suddenly disappears) to serve simultaneously as a bringer of bad news and Macbeth's assistant, in the process showing a supernatural ability that makes it impossible to identify him as a mere man (see M. Levith, *What's in Shakespeare's Names?* pp. 20, 56).

GOOD PLAN, BAD PLAN

We must now turn to two bold plans of which we learn early in the play. The Macbeths' plan to murder Duncan, while paraded before our eyes, is poorly planned and executed, but successful. On the other hand, Duncan's plan to frustrate Macbeth's ambition is almost invisible, well planned, and well executed—but unsuccessful. We must begin with Duncan's plan, since it shows itself almost at once, in Act I, scene 2. Duncan has always struck the careless reader as even less capable of forethought than King Lear, who had at least constructed a plan for the succession in Britain. Duncan seems old, weak, impetuous, too trusting, and too ready to distrust. We first see him in the midst of a combined revolt and invasion, relying not on his own efforts in battle but on Macbeth, Banquo, and his older son, Malcolm. Looks can be deceiving, however, for Duncan's support among the thanes is amazingly solid: only Cawdor has joined the rebel, Macdonwald. The chief problem facing Duncan, once we put all the facts together, has to do not with the invasion or the rebellion, as might first appear, but with the succession. Scotland was not then a strict hereditary monarchy, and, with its feudal aristocracy, obviously needed a mature soldier at its helm. Not only was Malcolm young for this task, but his military ineptitude has just shown itself for all to see: only the efforts of the bleeding sergeant keep him from being captured in this battle. At the same time, the sergeant's story testifies to the unrivaled military prowess of Macbeth, who proves himself to be the kingdom's salvation against the rebels.

This predicament accounts for a series of apparently disparate actions on Duncan's part that, taken together, display the coherence of a plan—and a good plan. Duncan had not yet made his son Malcolm the Prince of Cumberland—that is, he had not yet publicly made him his heir. Since hereditary succession (as shown by this very fact) was still not automatic, the king had perhaps delayed to keep from seeming selfish for his family and insufficiently devoted to the public good, hoping for some impressive military accomplishment from Malcolm that might justify his choice. But the king's own advanced age, Malcolm's youthfulness and incapacity as a soldier, and Macbeth's recent successes on the battlefield make Macbeth rather than Malcolm the all but irresistible choice for the throne. In these circumstances, what can Duncan do, and do instantly? We do not know for sure whether Duncan, like Macduff and others we learn about later, was already suspicious of Macbeth's moral character (for example, Macduff at II, 4: 88, Banquo at I, 3: 121–24 and III, 1: 1–3; even Banquo's prospective murderers at III, 1: 76–79). It is quite likely that he was, or he may have simply favored his own sons. In any case, he must quickly proclaim Malcolm Prince of Cumberland, and thus his heir, but in such a way as to prevent violent dissidence and opposition from Macbeth.

Already Duncan had tried to dilute Macbeth's influence by the unusual step of making him and Banquo co-captains in the war: we can see this motive in his question, after hearing of Macbeth's prowess alone, as to what effect the entrance of the Norwegian force into battle had on "our captains, Macbeth and Banquo"—thus bringing Banquo to the center of attention along with Macbeth. But the presumed treason of the thane of Cawdor gives Duncan a new and much more substantial opportunity, for Macbeth can instantly be invested with his title and lands just at the time the announcement about Malcolm is made. It strikes the reader as most precipitate on Duncan's part to call for Cawdor's death, especially on a mere verbal report of his treason by Ross. But the action had to be calculated, and Duncan speaks truly—of himself if not of Cawdor—when he says, "There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face." His plan, as we must reconstruct it, is to make Macbeth obligated and grateful to him publicly—to double his thanedom—at the very moment that his own son, Malcolm, is openly and legally set in line for the throne.

These conjectures can be confirmed by scrutinizing the events immediately surrounding Duncan's proclamation of the succession in scene 4. He has already sent Ross and Angus to greet Macbeth, on the way to Forres, where the king is staying, with the title "thane of Cawdor." When Macbeth enters, the king calls him "O worthiest cousin," thus indicating a family kinship later confirmed by Macbeth himself, and of course all the more dangerous in light of the succession problem. Duncan then talks of how much he owes Macbeth, without going into details, and ends with "More is thy due than more than all can pay." Notice no mention yet of the title of Cawdor, amid large but vague promises of reward. Macbeth responds dutifully, expressing—to excess, it seems—the obligations generally owed not only to Duncan's "throne and state" and his children but to his *servants* as well! "Welcome hither!" responds Duncan. "I have begun to plant thee, and will labour to make thee full of growing." Again, large but vague promises, this time permitting the inference that until then he has *not* "planted" Macbeth. In short, Macbeth—and we can understand why—had not been one of his favorites hitherto.

Then Duncan addresses Banquo as of equal deserving, and he embraces him, leading the reader to wonder whether anything he had just said to Macbeth indicated an embrace for him as well. By this point Duncan seems to have tears of joy in his eyes. Suddenly, without warning, he launches into the announcement naming Malcolm Prince of Cumberland and heir to his estate and, without saying so explicitly, his throne. The nobility of others shall also be honored. Then, with suddenness again, and striking brevity: "From hence to Inverness." What this means is that he has just invited himself to Macbeth's castle! Probably as surprised as anyone, Macbeth says he will ride ahead and bring the good news of Duncan's coming to his wife, and only then does Duncan say: "My worthy Cawdor!" That is, only after receiving Macbeth's earlier public commitment of duty, and now his acquiescence in receiving him as a guest in his castle, does Duncan publicly confirm by his own words the honor he had had Ross bestow on Macbeth. Once at Inverness, Duncan's plan culminates in his sending Banquo to Lady Macbeth with the gift of a diamond that night, just before going to sleep. Nor has he been without protective care for himself, even then, for his grooms are just outside his bedchamber, and he has asked *Macduff* to call upon him early that morning (II, 1: 13–16; II, 3: 50–51). So there is the plan in full: another high honor for Macbeth, a bauble for his wife, the appointment of the next king (so killing Duncan, as Macbeth realizes at once, still leaves an equally large obstacle in the way), and then arranging to become Macbeth's guest, taking some precaution nonetheless. It is an excellent plan and would have worked, even in spite of the witches' favorable prophecies, had it not been for the extraordinary ambition and persuasiveness of Lady Macbeth, coupled with her and her husband's stupidity, and one other unanticipated factor, to be discussed below.

This is the well-conceived plan that did not work. Now let us see the ill-conceived one that did. If one examines carefully Macbeth's written and oral communications to his wife, one will discover that he never reveals to her two important facts—the prophecy the witches made for Banquo, and the naming of Malcolm as Prince of Cumberland. Had he done so, their task in usurping the throne would have looked at least doubly difficult and far less promising. This is why they make no overt plan for killing Malcolm, though both he and Donalbain, his younger brother, are at Inverness with their father that night. And it is also why—after luck, not brains, catapults them into the throne—Macbeth plans Banquo's murder alone, without the queen's help. In the case of Duncan's murder, Lady Macbeth must first persuade Macbeth to do a deed they both acknowledge to be deeply immoral, and also convince him it can be done with impunity. To prove the latter, she suggests that by plying the two chamberlains with alcohol she can put them into a deep sleep, leaving Duncan at their mercy. Macbeth adds a touch of his own: they will use the chamberlains' daggers for the dead, and then spread blood on their bodies as well. In the ensuing clamor, their guilt will be accepted by all.

As it turns out, although her plan called for their doing the deed together, it ends up wholly in Macbeth's hands. And some improvisations are made. From Lady Macbeth the audience learns that she has drugged the grooms' wine and only then done her part in laying out their daggers for Macbeth's use immediately thereafter. But, stricken with terror after committing the murder, Macbeth forgets to smear the grooms with blood and leave the bloody daggers with them—a task that must then be undertaken by Lady Macbeth, whose hands are bloodied in the process, like Macbeth's. And a final improvisation, wholly uncalled for in the perfected plan, occurs when Macbeth goes up to see the king after the murder has been discovered and on his own kills the grooms. This is the real reason why Lady Macbeth, upon hearing Macbeth blurt out his account to those assembled in the castle, faints straightaway.

How good is this plan, both in its original and its improvised variations? The weak point of the former was its blaming the chamberlains, who, if they had any motive for killing the king, would not be so obliging as to lie down immediately in the very spot where they were expected to stay for the night and fall asleep there, defiled with blood. And, of course, once awake the chamberlains would stoutly deny they had such a motive, would tell of being plied with liquor by the queen, and might receive support from those in the king's trust (see Lennox's allusion at III, 6: 11–16). Now, for some reason we never learn from Macbeth's own lips, he quickly decides to kill the guards when he goes up to see the dead king. From Lennox, who accompanied him, we learn that the guards "star'd, and were distracted." Macbeth must have observed this himself, and perhaps thought it unnatural that they were not simply asleep (the drug applied by Lady Macbeth may have caused this unusual condition). What, he might have wondered, would happen if they were shaken and still would not awaken from their drunken stupor? Did he guess that they had been drugged—a fact of which he was not informed by Lady Macbeth? Did he fear that an inquiry into their condition might lead back to Lady Macbeth and himself?

By killing the guards, Macbeth does something exceedingly strange, and hardly justifiable on the grounds of the righteous indignation to which he pretends. But he takes this risk, and Lady Macbeth—not seeing what it can accomplish for them—swoons. At this point, a huge piece of unanticipated luck falls their way: Malcolm and Donalbain, fearing for their own lives after their father's murder, flee, which, as Macduff later tells Ross, "puts upon them suspicion of the deed," it being thought—no doubt with much urging from the Macbeths—that the chamberlains were suborned by them to murder their father. The story is still highly improbable, but another accident helps make it accepted. It was Macduff who demanded that Macbeth explain why he killed the grooms; after he does, Lady Macbeth's apparent fainting spell may have kept him from pursuing the matter further. That Macduff did indeed harbor suspicions is shown by his later refusal to be present at Macbeth's coronation. But there was one person in the castle that morning who had much more solid grounds than Macduff for suspecting Macbeth, and who had actually concluded the murder was done by him. This, of course, was Banquo. Just after Lady Macbeth's collapse, Banquo calls for everyone to get dressed and return "to question this most bloody piece of work, to know it further." But we can easily guess why he never gives voice to his suspicions (explicitly admitted at the beginning of Act III): he must have thought the witches' prophecy about the future kingship of his sons would be realized after their prediction about Macbeth's gaining the throne is. We can therefore imagine that the Macbeths unexpectedly found in Banquo a strong supporter for their effort to condemn the king's sons and then install Macbeth in Duncan's place. This, too, was how the Macbeths overcame the obstacle Lady Macbeth had never been told about—that of Malcolm's being named Prince of Cumberland. In other words, by one and the same piece of luck, wholly unanticipated, Malcolm could be blamed for Duncan's murder and removed from the line of succession! His flight became the key to Macbeth's success.

Why all this emphasis on plans? For one thing, it tells us something about Duncan and about the Macbeths—about their mental stature. It permits us to distinguish further between a tyrannical usurper like the Duke of Gloucester (in *Richard III*) and the Macbeths, the latter being more superstitious, more moral, and a good deal less intelligent than the former. But there is a general purpose as well, for it refines the reader's perception and understanding of human affairs generally, and moves him closer to being able to say whether life is a tale told by an idiot or not. To the extent that intelligent purpose, human or non-human, directs life, it is not such a tale—in fact it is the precise opposite of such a tale. In *The Tempest* we see the wise, premeditated plan of its hero, Prospero, determine the action of practically the whole play. In *Macbeth* we learn how one serious bit of miscalculation or ignorance (of Lady Macbeth's character by Duncan) can thwart an otherwise excellent plan, and how chance can make a very poor one succeed. These are important features of human life, but in neither case does life lose its causal intelligibility. In other words, we can see just what it is that makes the two plans develop and eventuate as they do, showing that no part of life is a tale told by an idiot. And the part of life least deserving that description is the perfectly designed work of art—the philosophical drama—which allows no part of itself to bear any but a necessary relationship to all other parts and the whole. The play *Macbeth* itself is an entirely sufficient proof that life is not unintelligible sound and fury!

MACDUFF AND ROSS

Macduff and Ross are cousins, but they are very unlike each other. Much of Macduff's character was already available to Shakespeare in Holinshed's *Chronicles*, whereas Ross was barely named and had to be built up from scratch. We see Ross before we see Macduff. With Angus, he comes riding in from Fife. There, according to the account he gives King Duncan, the traitor Cawdor and the King of Norway himself were defeated in battle by someone

Ross refers to as "Bellona's bridegroom." Bellona was the goddess of war, and most commentators take this hero to be Macbeth again. But Fife is a great distance from the area near Forres where the first battle has just taken place—the battle involving the bleeding sergeant, Malcolm, Macbeth, Banquo, Macdonwald, and the Norwegian lord. For that simple reason Macbeth could not also have been the hero of Fife—a conclusion fortified by the fact that Macbeth knows nothing of Cawdor's disloyalty (I, 4: 11–12). And who a more likely candidate for this role than that other great warrior, the thane of Fife himself? For reasons unknown to us, Ross' strange reference to "Bellona's bridegroom" seems to have had the purpose of concealing from Duncan's view the heroic deeds of that other thane and Ross' own cousin, Macduff.

Macduff himself has not yet arrived at Forres, nor is he present when Duncan makes his announcement about the succession. But he must have ridden in from the battle at Fife before the king's party leaves for Inverness, because he is with that party as it arrives there. Within the castle, he and Lennox have been quartered in a kind of annex, and we first hear Macduff speak in the famous porter scene early the next morning, when he and Lennox knock at the gate to be admitted into the main part of the castle. Minutes before, both Macbeths had heard the knocking just as Lady Macbeth leaves to return the chamberlains' daggers. Macbeth goes to the gate and is greeted rather coolly by Macduff: "Is the king stirring, worthy thane?" He adds that the king had commanded him "to call timely on him. I have almost slipp'd the hour." Hearing this the reader once again senses the importance of accident: a few minutes earlier, and the Macbeths might have been caught red-handed, literally.

Calling alone on the king, Macduff is the first to find him murdered, and from his exclamation we learn that he is a very pious man: "Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope the Lord's anointed temple"—the last phrase combining elements from the Old and New Testaments. He rouses the whole house, calling by name Banquo, Donalbain, and Malcolm, but not Ross or Lady Macbeth. It is Macduff who asks Macbeth why he had just killed the guards, and who then seconds Banquo's proclaimed opposition to the "undivulged pretense . . . of treasonous malice." The next we see of him is at a meeting with Ross, apparently as he emerges from Macbeth's castle. For some reason Ross must have left the castle quickly after the murder, for he asks Macduff what happened there. Macduff tells him that the flight of Malcolm and Donalbain cast suspicion of their father's murder on them, that Macbeth had already been named king (presumably by a council of the thanes, unattended by Ross, in the castle) and that he has already left for Scone to be invested. Asked by Ross whether he will go to Scone, Macduff says he will go instead to Fife, his own castle. And to Ross' declaring his own intention to follow Macbeth to Scone, Macduff bids him see that things are well done there, "Lest our old robes sit easier than our new!" Either suspecting Macbeth or murder, or knowing of his character otherwise, Macduff is clearly uneasy, and is courageous—or imprudent—enough to reveal his state of mind by absenting himself from the coronation.

In Act III Macbeth has Banquo murdered, and in Act IV, the family of Macduff. The editors are never able to make out where Banquo and Fleance are riding the afternoon of their murder, and think it unimportant to boot. A guess could be hazarded rather easily, had they not followed one of the earliest editors (Capell) in locating Macbeth's palace at Forres, not far from Cawdor and Inverness in northern Scotland. In all likelihood, they do so not because of any stage directions, of which there are none, but because they assume Macbeth's second visit to the witches (at the end of Act III) takes place where he originally met them—a heath near Forres. From Inverness (near Forres), however, he had gone to Scone to be crowned, and no direction of any sort ever has him coming away from there (historically, the Scottish kings were likely to reside in Perth, close to Scone). If one also realizes that the final action of the play, in Act V, plainly takes place in or near the castle he had been busy fortifying at Dunsinane—close to both Scone and Perth—one will not have Macbeth spend all his time in Acts III and IV one hundred or more miles to the north at Forres. Moreover, he seeks out the witches not at the heath near Forres but at something called "the pit of Acheron"—a fictitious location derived from the Bible (2 Kings i, 2–7). Like its Biblical archetype, this pit seems to be known for its supernatural clientele. Nor should we forget that the three witches in the play are associated with the various winds and can therefore meet anywhere with one who seeks them—all the more if they are, so to speak, hovering over him and watching his destiny, as they are with Macbeth.

If Macbeth's castle in Act III is actually located at either Scone or Dunsinane, it is also within twenty or thirty miles of wherever it was in Fife that Macduff had his castle. Could this have been Banquo and Fleance's destination, so mysteriously left unidentified when Macbeth questions Banquo about their ride the day of the banquet? The reason for Banquo's reserve is perfectly clear: Macduff had refused to attend Macbeth's coronation and was already under suspicion. No doubt Banquo had worries to share with a close friend—only Banquo calls him "Dear Duff" the morning of Duncan's murder—and therefore, despite being Macbeth's chief guest, and despite Macbeth's strong and repeated urgings that he stay, Banquo insists on departing for several hours, perhaps until the early evening. This, and possibly the news of Banquo's murder as well, may have contributed to Macduff's decision to rebuff Macbeth's messenger and flee to England—a decision of which we learn very shortly afterward (II, 3: 94; III, 6: 39–43).

On his visit to the witches, Macbeth is told both that he should beware the thane of Fife and that (as he interprets it) he can be harmed or defeated by no human hand. Despite this last guarantee, he decides to kill Macduff, just to make sure. Discovering Macduff's flight to England, however, he decides immediately, and without any reason, to slaughter his wife and babes instead. The next scene is as mystifying as it is pathetic. Last present at the banquet, Ross is suddenly found in conversation with his cousin Lady Macbeth (and her son) in her castle, hearing her castigate her husband for leaving his wife, babes, mansion, and titles "in a place from whence himself does fly. . ." Ross says he will return before long, hints he would burst into tears at their plight if he stays longer, and then departs—leaving the reader, as well, in complete ignorance as to the purpose of his visit. A moment later an unidentified messenger enters, warning Lady Macbeth to flee with her children, and in another moment the murderers themselves appear to kill her and the boy.

Let us try to explain these puzzles. The murderers, of course, were sent by Macbeth, and the messenger could only have been sent by Lennox, whom we know to be in Macbeth's confidence, yet opposed to him. But why Ross? Why has he come to Macduff's castle? He offers his cousin no assistance, gives her no warning, tells her nothing of Macbeth's hostility and tyranny. Only one possibility remains: Ross had to be sent by Macbeth, for Macbeth could not know in advance how Macduff had left his castle guarded, and only someone Lady Macduff trusted—in this case a cousin of hers—could easily gain access and find out. Of course, this casts Ross in the worst possible light as a tool of the tyrannt and a traitor to his relatives and friends. (Furness cites M.F. Libby's old suspicions of Ross in *Some New Notes on Macbeth* [1893].) Whether he actually returned (per his promise) as one of the murderers is hard to say, though not impossible, since they may be masked, and only one of them speaks. But startling as this deduction is, one fact is even more startling: Macduff had left his castle entirely unprotected! No army, no guards, no servants at the gates or door, as shown by the fact that both the messenger and the murderers are able to enter without the slightest interposition, obstruction, or disturbance. There is no one else around, so that Lady Macduff hardly exaggerates when she pictures her situation as one of complete and unnatural abandonment, and her husband as a traitor to his family.

Before trying to explain this, let us examine the last scene coupling Ross and Macduff, at the very end of Act IV. Macduff is already with Malcolm in England, and has passed the test of his loyalty to which he has been subjected by a suspicious young Malcolm, who explains to the older but rather simple-minded and naive man that "Devlish Macbeth by many of these trains hath sought to win me into his power, and modest wisdom plucks me from over-credulous haste." Suddenly Ross appears and is greeted by Macduff as his "ever-gentle cousin." Ross speaks of their poor country, Scotland, groaning in oppression and suffering, and is then asked directly by Macduff: "How does my wife?" Answer: "Why, well." Question: "And all my children?" Answer: "Well, too." Question: "The tyrant has not batter'd at their peace?" Answer: "No; they were well at peace when I did leave 'em."

Only with this last answer does Ross indicate—though Macduff does not seem to notice—his earlier presence at Macduff's castle. But that answer has one or more of three possible defects: either it is politically naive, or much less cognizant of Macbeth's intentions toward the Macduffs than Ross should have been, even as an innocent; or it is technically true, since when he left them they had not yet been assailed; or it is only metaphorically true—wickedly true—since their being "well at peace" would be consistent with their being dead, if he left them a second time as one of their murderers, or immediately afterward. In any case, it seems entirely odd that Ross should not know of, and report upon, the horrible fate of Macduff's family.

Very shortly afterward, this last peculiarity is shown to be such by an astonishing reversal. In line 178, Ross had just spoken of Macduff's family as "well at peace." In line 201 he prepares Macduff for hearing the worst possible news, which he then delivers, full force, in 204: "Your castle is surprised; your wife and babes savagely slaughtered. To relate this manner, were, on the quarry of these murder'd deer, to add the death of you." Incredulous, Macduff asks, "My children too?" Answer: "Wife, children, servants, all that could be found." Macduff: "And I must be from thence! My wife kill'd too?" And finally:

> Did Heaven look on,
> And would not take their part? Sinful Macduff!
> They were all struck for thee. Naught that I am,
> Not for their own demerits, but for mine,
> Fell slaughter on their souls: Heaven rest them now!

By this point, we have learned quite a bit about both Macduff and Ross. First, Ross knows about the complete extermination of Macduff's household, down to the last detail. He speaks as if he could even "relate the manner" of it, though he is never pressed to do so. Since he himself makes no claim to have learned this from others, after he left the Macduff castle, he must have learned it while he was there, at the time of the murders themselves.

As for Macduff, notice that he and Ross both confirm our suspicion that he had left no soldiery, no guards to defend the castle. How could this possibly happen, particularly since Macduff is not without suspicion that the "tyrant" might have "batter'd at their peace." Only one explanation seems possible, and it may be seen in the line "Did heaven look on, and would not take their part?" Macduff is portrayed as having trusted to heaven to defend his family—trusted, that is, to the God of Christianity, the "gentle heavens" he even now begs to let him confront Macbeth in personal combat. That God, Macduff's lines suggest, could be expected to defend innocent people against attack, and only failed to do so not because of any sins of theirs, which were nil, but because of *his*, Macduff's, sins! In short, Macduff takes it to follow from his Christian belief that God permits harms, or at least injustices, only to those who have sinned against Him, or to those for whom a sinner cares. Nor does it strike him that some question about God's justness is raised by the latter case—the case he takes to apply to his own family.

If one responds to this conjecture that it is entirely unrealistic to suppose a man like Macduff so fanatically given to such beliefs as to take no precautions for his family, one would be correct—on the level of real psychological probability. But Shakespeare frequently makes a motive unrealistically extreme in order to display it, to bring it to our attention, even at the risk of a certain unrealism. Or better, he gives up a more superficial realism for a deeper one. Many examples can be cited to show this. In real life, would a Jew (Shylock) really try to cut a pound of flesh out of a Christian (Antonio)? Would a friar be likely to give Juliet an apparently fatal potion? Could there be a girl so naive as Miranda? Would Enobarbus, after deserting Antony, drop dead out of a sense of guilt? Or, from *Macbeth* itself, would Lady Macbeth never have complained to Macbeth of her increasing isolation from him? Is it realistically possible, in the superficial sense (as Freud, taking this to be the only sense, denied it was), for Macbeth to have changed so rapidly after becoming king? Still a murderer by premeditation, as he showed with Banquo, he knowingly becomes, only a short time later, a murderer by impulse with Macduff's family, announcing that "From this moment, the very firstlings of my heart shall be the firstlings of my hand."

The exaggeration in Macduff's motivation must have some relation to the subject of the play as a whole, which is the extent to which human life, and the universe, are intelligible, reasonable, moral. Christianity represents one pole among the possible conceptions, for, whatever place it allows to evil and sin, it insists on the supremacy of good, and of good manifested more through love than through justice, though both must be combined in the ultimate divine dispensation and governance. The primacy Christianity gives to love, and thus to "gentleness" (again, as in Macduff's appeal to "gentle heaven"), is an element closer to the feminine than the masculine; it results in excessive trust, excessive confidence that a good God will come to our rescue, so that we need not make sure we ourselves are stronger than, and smarter than, the human forces of evil.

This problem is explicitly brought to our attention in Macduff's castle just before the murders. Lady Macduff is talking to her cousin Ross, whom Macduff later addresses as "my ever-gentle cousin," but who—we now know—intends, in but a moment, to have her murdered. She complains bitterly that her husband has acted unnaturally in leaving his family unprotected. Her example is that of the mother wren, most diminutive of birds, that will fight to protect her young against attack. Ross, of course, tells her to have confidence in her husband's judgment—just as his actions are about to confirm hers. After Ross leaves, a conversation occurs between Lady Macduff and her small son, in which she talks as if his father is dead and asks how he will survive. He says, like the birds she has just been talking about—that is, by foraging on his own, by nature. But what about the traps men have laid for birds, she asks. He responds that such traps are laid not for "poor" birds but (by implication) for rich ones, and he has become a poor bird. What she means, of course, is that children cannot take care of themselves, nor can good people generally, and he—naively—thinks that only the wealthy must protect themselves against attack, since the poor offer no temptation to would-be attackers.

Asked what he will do for a father, the son asks, in turn, what she will do for a husband. Her joking reply that she can buy twenty (and his, that she could then equally sell them) tells us something about the inner core of human life, which is founded, necessarily, on ties far stronger than those of commercial advantage and exchange. The family, the root of society, is based on love and loyalty, on mutual devotion and protection. Otherwise it cannot last, children will receive neither proper nurture, nourishment, or protection, and all will fall asunder. To strengthen this loyalty, men take vows, and are held to them by a moral sense they themselves heighten, supported by the most drastic sanctions. This is why Lady Macduff can tell her son that his father was a traitor, one who swore and lied. She is thinking of his loyalty to her and the children, not to Macbeth, of whose relations to Macduff she seems entirely ignorant. A traitor must be hung—though, as the boy shrewdly reports, this will require that there be more honest men than wicked ones. And when she says, "Now God help thee, poor monkey!" we realize that their discussion of human affairs, up to that point, had included no reference to and shown no need for, an almightly Being, a God or gods. But the inherent instability, and insecurity, of human affairs seems—as her prayerful remark shows—to require the belief in some supreme and stable power that can be appealed to when all else fails, that can strengthen the dedication of human society itself to its necessary bonds and institutions. Society requires religion—and Christianity seems to be the main example here—but religion can also make men too dependent on God, and insufficiently dependent on themselves.

After the mysterious messenger comes in to warn her of grave danger, Lady Macduff asks why she should fly if she has done no harm, and immediately corrects herself by acknowledging what "this earthly world" is like, suggesting a distinction between it and the afterworld. It was a "womanly defence," she says, to have thought that because she has done no harm, she would not be harmed. No, this earthly world is not like that, for here "to do harm is often laudable, to do good sometime accounted dangerous folly." In a moment, she and her son will be subjected to the most blameable harm of murder—to deter or repel which it would have been most proper, most laudable to harm the would-be attackers. Similarly, to do good to enemies is not only accounted but *is* most dangerous folly—Lady Macduff does not speak strongly enough. She too remains under the influence of her Christian upbringing, which asks that evil not be resisted and that all men be loved, thus making it hard for her to acknowledge the crucial political distinction between friends and enemies, the former to be benefited, the latter harmed. This accounts for her hoping her husband is in "no place so unsanctified" that murderers such as these could find him. This is the same thought Macduff himself must have had when he left his family unprotected, thinking it a place sanctified by their innocence. But of course there is no place which by any sanctification whatsoever could keep men like the murderers from committing their crimes.

The scene's end shows not only the immoral strong slaying the moral weak, but gives us another view of the problem of treason. Like Lady Macduff before, the murderers accuse Macduff of treason. She, of course, had in mind his apparent disloyalty to his family, but the murderers his supposed (by them) disloyalty to Macbeth. Disloyalty is sometimes merited, however, as the latter case shows: it may be necessary to averting, or expelling, great evil. The moral laws, which society necessarily thinks of as absolute—and which are stated most aboslutely, if unpolitically, by Christianity—must bow to a larger understanding of justice, looking to the real benefits and harms of society. The spirited loyalty of Macduff's son is necessary, but not enough; his mother's affection and moral demands are necessary, but not enough: both must be directed by a wisdom capable of suppressing the wicked and advancing the good. In this play, Malcolm, young as he is, represents such a widsom.

ROSS

By its outcome, *Macbeth* gives the impression of being an extremely moral play—a play in which two murdering usurpers at first succeed but ultimately, and by some kind of cosmic necessity (or so its appears) come to horrible ends, the one killing herself, the other meeting a violent death in battle, with both utterly miserable in the final period of their lives. Why then Ross? What does he stand for in this play? Having come to know Ross for what he is in the two last acts, we are anxious to return to the earlier parts of the play and reexamine his entire career. This Ross is perhaps the most successful scoundrel in all of Shakespeare, and never, from beginning to end, does he suffer misfortune or defeat. Not only is he never discovered: at the very end he even reaps the rewards of the thanes who opposed the tyrant, being elevated, with them, to an earldom!

Let us see whether Shakespeare provides any sign of Ross' true colors early in the play. If he did not, would he be Shakespeare? But we must look with eagle eyes, for men like Ross are most difficult to penetrate. After all, he is, to simple eyes like Macduff's, the "ever-gentle" Ross—a tribute to his powers of deception. When he first arrives at Forres, in Act I, scene 2, Duncan does not recognize him, but Malcolm does. Ross and Angus seem to have just ridden up, and Duncan asks him from where, again not knowing. It is at this point that Ross tells about the battle at Fife—a battle editors often place Macbeth at both because Ross names no one but "Bellona's bridegroom" as its hero and because they have not consulted a map. We have conjectured earlier that Ross uses this rhetorical invention to keep from naming Macduff—the logical person to be fighting at Fife—but we do not know why. He certainly has no hesitation to go to greet Macbeth, coming from a battle scene not too far from Forres, as the new thane of Cawdor. He says, "I'll see it done," but when it is done, Angus is there again accompanying Ross.

The words Ross first addresses to Macbeth, when they meet, are peculiar. He mentions the king's "reading" of Macbeth's personal success in the fight against the rebels, and finding him responsible for many deaths among the Norwegians. "As thick as hail came post after post" praising Macbeth's defense of Duncan's kingdom—but this is queer, for Ross was not in the scene when the bleeding sergeant spoke, since he seems to have entered with Angus just afterward. Yet he never mentions the sergeant, speaks as if only written messages appeared, and exaggerates the number of them ("post after post"). This leads us to think that Ross may have at least overheard the bleeding sergeant but does not wish to mention it, and then flatters Macbeth by overstating the number of messengers. In that case, perhaps Ross, from the beginning, wanted to see Macbeth elevated, and had no wish to see Macduff—his own cousin—elevated. This inclination (his flattery of Macbeth, and his playing on his ambition) even shows itself at the beginning of Ross' speech to Macbeth, where he says the king did not know whether he should be praising Macbeth or himself (as the one Macbeth serves)—something the king certainly never expressed, but bound to have a subtle effect on Macbeth. And the same tendency shows itself in Ross' last words on that occasion, when he says that "for an earnest of a greater honour, he [the king] bade me, from him, call thee thane of Cawdor. . . ." This "earnest" or promise is certainly a bald invention by Ross, meant to play upon Macbeth's ambition, and flatter—the opposite of Angus' intention, which was to reduce, rather than to add to, the king's words.

It is interesting that when Macbeth, Banquo, Ross, and Angus enter the king's presence together, the king speaks to both Macbeth and Banquo, makes his crucial announcement about Malcolm (as we have already seen), but says nothing at all to Ross and Angus, who simply stand there without a word. We shall see the importance of this in a moment. The next time Ross' name is mentioned, he is simply numbered among those nobles who accompany the king into Macbeth's castle, and the time after that is one some overbold editors want to undo. Here is why. We must realize that the king's chamber was in a hall of the castle that had several adjoining rooms, and that was probably approached by mounting a staircase. When Macduff and Lennox come in from the annex early in the morning, Macduff is shown to the king's chamber by Macbeth, who must then be presumed to return to the central area at the foot of the staircase (off of which, incidentally, must be his own bedroom). When Macduff comes out, he must run at least to the head of the staircase, if not to the floor below, and shout out about the murder. Macbeth and Lennox then go running up and Macbeth kills the guards, but, according to the stage direction in the folio, they come down with one other person—our old friend Ross.

Ross says nothing, and, throughout the excitement, still says nothing. Rub him out, say some editors and critics: what purpose does he serve? How could he appear out of nowhere and then say nothing? In the Arden edition he is expunged, without a word of explanation.

We can turn this apparent chaos into an intelligible pattern by thinking along with Shakespeare, instead of presuming ourselves superior to him. In the two previous scenes where Ross was present (because named in the stage directions there too), he also said nothing. Here he surprises us by his very appearance even more than his silence. Looking ahead, we know that in the next scene he has quite a bit to say, telling Macduff he will follow Macbeth to Scone, despite Macduff's veiled warning. But he lets us infer that he had been mysteriously absent from the castle when the discussion of Duncan's murder took place and the other thanes decided upon Macbeth as his successor. Now, in the castle, just after the discovery of the murder, he does not go up with Macbeth and Lennox, but he does come down with them. What does this suggest? In the rooms in the hall before the king's, we had already been rather curiously told there was a second chamber Macbeth had to pass on his way to, and back from, the king's. We learn from the queen, responding to Macbeth's inquiry, that in it were Donalbain and someone else—the second person is not named by the queen. Editors who suppose that Malcolm and Donalbain were lodged together, since they are shown together after the clamor, ask why Lady Macbeth mentions only Donalbain (Arden edition, p. 53, note 25). But let us assume she knew what she was saying. This means Malcolm was in still another room—a third chamber, probably beyond the king's, either alone, or, like his brother, with someone else. In one of those chambers was probably Angus, and in the other, Ross.

Given the attention Donalbain and his unnamed partner get from Shakespeare, through Macbeth's narration, we would have to say that Ross is more likely to have been Donalbain's than Malcolm's chambermate. Why such apparently irrelevant details, as telling us what Macbeth heard outside the door of the second chamber? It is, I suspect, to cause us to put two things together: the problem Malcolm posed for Macbeth (without his wife's knowing it), and the character of Ross, which we have begun to suspect, and which later on becomes as clear as Shakespeare can allow in such a case. Macbeth understood that the Prince of Cumberland would inherit the title from his murdered father, yet he could not dispose of Malcolm the same night without giving himself away. What he could do is begin a relationship that at some point would lead to Malcolm's undoing, and Ross, already so useful, might be glad to associate with the young men, preferring Donalbain, perhaps, because it seemed less direct, and because of his youth, but really with Malcolm in mind from the outset. It is then interesting to speculate which of the two men Macbeth heard was Ross and which Donalbain. In any case, Ross would not be told of Duncan's intended murder—he was hardly enough of an intimate for that—and so, when the clamor broke out, might be expected to bolt, as a person whose sense of self-interest was peculiarly keen. That is why he comes flying down the stairs with Macbeth and Lennox!

Why did Ross absent himself from the ensuing meeting of thanes by which Macbeth's fate was decided? He could not know in advance, for sure, how that meeting would go—after all, the possibility that suspicion would be directed at Macbeth himself could hardly be ruled out. Nor could he be sure just how he himself was perceived, just then, by others—that is, whether the group headed by Macduff would sense his recently having favored Macbeth over his own cousin. As it turns out, he need not have feared. In response to his inquiry, Macduff tells him that Macbeth has already left for Scone—but Ross, somewhat nervous up to the point of decision, and outside the castle, might already have observed Macbeth's departure himself. And if anyone doubts Ross' capacity as a most thoroughgoing liar and deceiver, let him look at the cruel way he talks to the superstitious old man in that very scene. First he assures the old man that Duncan's horses broke out of their stalls that night, an apparent omen of the disobedience soon to be demonstrated in the murder. Then, hearing the old man report, from hearsay, that those horses ate each other, Ross—no doubt enjoying himself immensely—extends his lie quite a bit further, saying: "They did so, to th'amazement of mine eyes that look'd upon't." After this, no word of Ross' should be viewed without suspicion by the reader, and, as we soon learn, there is much more to be suspicious of.

True to his word to Macduff, Ross follows Macbeth to Scone, and is next seen at the banquet Macbeth has prepared in his palace for Banquo, and just after Banquo's murder some distance from the palace. Throughout that banquet scene, Ross shows himself to be a most serviceable courtier, almost always saying just the sort of thing Macbeth would want him to (a possible exception is his asking about the strange sights Macbeth reports seeing). But by that point another flagrant mystery has been waved before us, like a bloody flag, and that is the identity of the Third Murderer. Without going into all the details, Macbeth has been shown directly talking to two men, convincing them to murder Banquo, and Fleance as well. He tells them he will advise them of where to stay and the exact time for the deed. This he actually does, at least in part, through the Third Murderer, with whom he is never shown talking, and who comes independently of the other two to the scene of the crime. Why so much mystery about this man? The first two murderers are from some other part of the country than the palace area, and have been chosen because Macbeth placed greater trust in the reliability of revenge as a motive, rather than profit. These men think they have been wronged by Macbeth, but he persuades them that Banquo was responsible, not himself. It is the Third Murderer who knows his way around the palace and knows the habits of visitors, such as the strange one of leaving their horses a mile from the palace and walking the rest of the way. He must also make sure Fleance does not escape. As it turns out, all three set on Banquo, whose denunciation of one of them as a "slave" suggests that he was known to him. Perhaps not unintentionally, the First Murderer puts out the torch Fleance was carrying, allowing his escape into the night, unpursued.

Even Macbeth has been suspected of being the Third Murderer, so great has been the urge to solve this mystery. But Macbeth will not do for more reasons than one, the foremost being that he seems spontaneously surprised at hearing the First Murderer's report about what happened, particularly in connection with Fleance. On the other hand, it is entirely possible that Macbeth would have arranged for independent reports from both the First and the Third Murderer—and that the Third Murderer was able to find his way back to the palace before the First, who knew little of the area. This might account for a certain jocular quality in Macbeth when the banquet scene opens, though his good humor also suggests that the Third Murderer could not have told him the whole truth, that he reported Banquo's death, but perhaps said of Fleance only that one of the others was in pursuit of him. It is also possible, however, that the Third Murderer did not get a chance to report to Macbeth, or perhaps preferred not to, knowing that Fleance had escaped. Macbeth's good spirits at the banquet could have been based on expectation rather than report. In either case, Ross might well have been the Third Murderer. His aptitude for such concealment we learn shortly afterward, when he visits the Macduff castle for hidden and murderous reasons. Whether, or what, he reported to Macbeth before the banquet—and before the First Murderer reports—is much less certain.

We need not recapitulate the role Ross must have played in the Macduff murders, nor the deft but striking change in his story about that tragedy when, again mysteriously, he shows up in England. Let us try to explain the reason for that change, between lines 178 and 193, growing to a climax at 204, where Ross had first denied, and then admitted, what in fact happened to Macduff's family. To begin with, why is he in England at all? His reason is given in line 186: "now is the time of help; your eye in Scotland would create soldiers, make our women fight, to doff their dire distresses." But we must realize that by "your eye" Ross means Macduff's eye, not Malcolm's: Ross has come to win Macduff's return. Why? So that Macbeth can kill him. Ross thus turns out to be precisely the kind of person Malcolm feared Macduff might be, that is, someone sent by Macbeth to trick him into returning. Why Macbeth took such interest in Macduff can easily be guessed: Macduff was a potent soldier, and the only living person against whom the witches had warned him.

At this point, the conversation—as Ross must have viewed it—takes an unexpected turn, for Malcolm, not Macduff, responds: "Be't their comfort we're coming thither. Gracious England hath lent us good Siward and ten thousand men; and older and a better soldier none that Christendom gives out." And in the very next lines, Ross begins his shift. Having just learned that he will not be able to separate Macduff from Malcolm, and that both are about to invade Scotland with a very powerful English army, it is "Goodbye Macbeth, hello

Malcolm!" From this point onward, in the course of the last act, Ross' history is all told in stage directions. Scene 4 shows that he is absent from Malcolm's invading army, but in the final scene (scene 8) he appears out of the blue, alongside Malcolm and Old Siward, flattering the latter and his son, receiving—along with the other thanes—the title of earl, and avoiding being classified among the "cruel ministers of this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen"—in short, apparently crowned with success.

Ross is the consummate opportunist, always looking out for himself, content to remain in the shadow of great men, and completely unscrupulous in their service, willing to do anything, however foul, that they require of him, yet so good at appearing otherwise, and deceiving everybody, that he is never detected and never punished. Whatever the forces in human nature or the world at large that are working for justice, they are not so powerful as to prevent the coming into existence, and even the flourishing, of men without a speck of justice in them. Ross is also important because he makes us even more aware of the hidden motive, the secret action in human affairs, linking together and making intelligible a whole series of events. These events, stretching from the very beginning to the very end of the play, would have to be considered unintelligible mysteries were it not for the clues, carefully left by Shakespeare, pointing to a solution in the character and deeds of Ross. Thus understood, Ross is not a mere superfluity, or of merely marginal interest in the play, but an essential element, staking out one pole of evil in human affairs that must never be forgotten, either by political practitioners—statesmen—or moral and political philosophers. As for the judgment to be placed on this apparently happy scoundrel, we would have to consider not only the evil done to others, so manifest in the play, but the state of his soul in itself, the full deformity of which Shakespeare was compelled to leave to the reader's surmise. Alone, without friends, caring for no one, willing to kill anyone, never in open command of events, completely dependent on the rise and fall of the great, always calculating, never at ease, exulting only in the success of his machinations—here is not a whole man but a narrow part of a man, worked to a peak of efficiency within that narrow range, and sacrificing all else to it.

THE FATE OF THE MACBETHS

The central focus of the play is on Macbeth and his wife—not only on their words and actions, but on the state of soul from which these emanate. Of all the mysteries in the play, the chief, by far, is how their internal condition at the beginning can develop into what it becomes by the end. The paradox was well stated by Freud: their conditions seem to interchange, with Lady Macbeth becoming much more like what Macbeth had been, and Macbeth becoming much more like what she had been: "She becomes all remorse, he all defiance."

Freud does not regard such a transformation as psychologically impossible in itself, but he does think it impossible within the very compressed time frame of the play (one week, he says), and on the basis of the motives explicitly suggested there. For psychological plausibility, Freud prefers the historical account in Holinshed, where Macbeth, after his usurpation, rules justly for ten years, and only then begins the murders of Banquo and others. That chronology would be consistent with Macbeth's increasing desperation as the childless condition of his marriage persists.

Freud is mistaken about the *actual* time frame of the play, but he is correct about its *felt* duration, which certainly seems exceedingly short, with actions swiftly succeeding each other from beginning to end (see Furness, pp. 504–07 for a time analysis and some of its complications). In either case, his charge of lapsed causality against Shakespeare would be devastating, because the states of mind of the protagonists are so obviously at the center of Shakespeare's attention, and the general problem of the intelligibility of human affairs so particularly important in this play. A gap or void in causal explanation would, in fact, be fatal, despite the play's dramatic effectiveness. But let us remember Lincoln's praise: "I think nothing equals *Macbeth*. It is wonderful." Given Lincoln's inclination to search deeply for causes, he must have found in the play all the connections necessary to explaining its outcome. Let us see.

Both Macbeths want the crown badly, and immediately think of murder as the means of getting it. Clearly this is the case with Macbeth once he receives his prediction from the witches, and with his wife once she receives word of it by letter from him. In fact, it seems they had spoken of assassination even before the action of the play begins, and that he had then been the author of "this enterprise," not she (I, 7: 47– 48). Clearly also their present views of the enterprise are sharply divergent. She is absolutely determined to do everything required for the purpose, tarrying for no moral or religious compunctions. On the other hand, the thought of murdering Duncan makes Macbeth's very soul tremble with fear and foreboding. While his conscience tells him that the act is immoral and irreligious, he would risk the life to come (I, 7: 1– 28; I, 3: 130–42) were it not for the likely consequences of the assassination here on earth. To kill such a king as Duncan, under such circumstances, would make Macbeth himself hated and the likely victim of a second assassination.

Until that point Macbeth had evidently not considered concocting a plan both to keep from becoming known as the murderer and to lay the guilt on someone else. We can also see from his great "If it were done . . . " speech that he partly conceals direct moral considerations, as such, from himself by trying to think of them as merely prudential: thus all he says about being Duncan's kinsman, subject, host (he omits beneficiary here), and about Duncan's virtues is taken up under this head. Yet, Macbeth *does* seem to be "too full of the milk of human kindness," as Lady Macbeth had told herself earlier. These decent moral sentiments, and his wish to enjoy the "golden opinions" coming from his recent accomplishments and honors, do not win out. They succumb to a combination of his own "vaulting ambition," Lady Macbeth's attack on his manliness (through relentless accusations of cowardice), and her suggesting a way of pinning guilt for the murder on others (the guards). He is made ready to do what both religion and reason tell him is deeply wrong by her appeal to ambition, pursued with courage, as the most profound element of his nature as a man. No longer fearing detection or failure, they lose the last restraint on immoral conduct, and the process of murder begins (I, 7: 30–82).

Yet it would be wrong to think of Lady Macbeth, even then, as wholly without conscience. Someone wholly without conscience would not have to think of conscience—of the "compunctious visitings of nature"; someone utterly lacking in the gentleness of her sex would not have to ask to be "unsexed," and for the milk in her breasts to be replaced by gall; someone unashamed of her deed would be willing to look upon it herself, and would not ask that it be hidden in night, darkened further by the smoke of hell, so that her "keen knife will not see the wound it makes," nor heaven be able to see the act and call a stop to it. This impression is strengthened by small facts strewn along the way by Shakespeare. Watched with care, Lady Macbeth is first shown saying that the whole murder should be left to her, then that the two of them will do it, and finally arranging for Macbeth to do it alone, with only auxiliary help from her. As further extensions of the same pattern, we learn that she had to strengthen herself with some of the same wine she gave the guards, and that she would have killed Duncan herself when she went up to prepare the daggers for Macbeth "had he not resembled my father as he slept." So all of Lady Macbeth's coldness before and immediately after the murder, her pedestrian literalness, her apparent firmness of purpose, hide another kind of element in her—gentler, weaker, conscious that the murder is a horrible deed, believing in the afterlife. Viewed in this light, her swooning at Macbeth's improvised slaying of the guards is much more likely to have been involuntary than deliberate. For a moment, after all the keyed-up effort and tension, it looked like the whole plan they had concerted would come crashing down. The swoon, rather than a sign of rational strength, is a small indication pointing in the direction of her later sleepwalking and suicide (I, 5: 53; I, 7: 69; II, 2: 1, 13–14).

We are not told what made Lady Macbeth so ambitious, but we do get some idea of what she and Macbeth looked forward to. Macbeth thinks about "the imperial theme" when he thinks of the kingship; his letter to his wife calls her "his dearest partner in greatness," and speaks of the "greatness" promised her by the witches' prophecy, even though it can only be indirectly, since her name was never mentioned. As she sees it, the murder that night "shall to all our nights and days to come give solely sovereign sway and masterdom." When Lady Macbeth persuades Macbeth to surrender his compunctions, she does not do so by magnifying his vision of what ruling would bring, but by castigating his inconsistency, his weakness in wanting it—which she simply takes for granted—yet not being willing to do what is necessary to get it. Along the way, they say nothing about their children enjoying the succession, even though there are other allusions to children. Macbeth has asked Banquo, "Do you not hope your children shall be kings . ?" Lady Macbeth says, "I have given suck, and know how tender life 'tis to love the babe that milks me" (another sign she is gentler than she makes out). Macbeth tells her to "Bring forth men-children only." But if any children have already come from this union, they have not survived, and others are not consciously anticipated or discussed by these peculiar would-be parents. The ambition motivating both Macbeths therefore seems primarily for themselves, and of very moderate, even ordinary, scope. They want to be king and queen in the way Duncan and his predecessors have been, want the power and the honor (not any increase in wealth), want to be the commanding force at the top—but that is all. They have no plans for conquest, or for domestic political changes; they have no past injustices or even slights to avenge. They certainly do not anticipate being involved in a series of grizzly murders: on the contrary, their notion seems to be that they will simply step into Duncan's shoes and rule in a most ordinary way—so weak are their powers of understanding and foresight (I, 3: 86, 117; I, 7: 54–55, 73–75. See also V, 2: 22–28).

We have no reason to believe Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to be anything but a loving couple, and, despite certain appearances, even to the end. The puzzle, however, is to explain their mutual attraction. Coriolanus was also an outstanding soldier, also a spirited and ambitious man, but his wife, Virgilia, was utterly unlike Lady Macbeth. She was the soul of gentleness, and meant to be quite different, in this respect, from the only other woman in Coriolanus' life, his mother Volumnia. Macbeth's marriage would be comparable to Coriolanus' choosing a mate modelled on his mother. This suggests a peculiar weakness in Macbeth, who too readily thinks of greatness as something that must be shared equally with his wife, perhaps because she possesses some element lacking in him. He may think of her as more realistic, of greater resolve, more daring, steadier. He certainly does not regard her as bringing to political rule the typically feminine virtues: on the contrary, he senses in her more of what he considers manliness—the manly virtues—than he possesses. This coincides with her conception of herself, as necessary to suppressing his weaker elements, only thereby enabling him to realize his potential for greatness. What he admires in her is strength in areas where he is weak, and vice versa: he could not rise to the heights without her, nor she without him.

We can only speculate whether Lady Macbeth became lividly ambitious because of not having children, or whether not having children—children who survived and grew up—was due to (or symbolic of) a masculinity in her that was already there, and that would have given any children of hers two fathers, rather than a father and a mother. Coriolanus and Virgilia have a small son. In *Macbeth*, Banquo has a son of some years, the Macduffs a small son and other children as well, and Duncan two older boys. The Macbeths' lack of issue is therefore far from accidental. Whatever its cause, it certainly helps to explain their capacity for subsequent acts of inhumanity. Duncan reminded Lady Macbeth of her father, which made it impossible to kill him. And, as Macduff later exclaims upon learning the fate of his family: "He has no children"—which, if it is a reference to Macbeth, probably means that Macbeth was able to kill mere children only because he had none himself (IV, 3: 216). Being a child tended by parents, and tending children of one's own, seem to strengthen the sense of moral limits or the natural conscience. In further support of this, Ross is portrayed as utterly without family—without father, mother, wife, children. And the witches, also without progenitors or progeny, have what moral feelings they possess only because they are, or regard themselves as, sisters.

While the Macbeths are very close— perhaps too close—prior to murdering Duncan, their paths immediately start to diverge once they are king and queen. Macbeth's thoughts are all on Banquo: "There's none but he whose being I do fear," both because of his "royalty of nature" and the witches' prophecy. That prophecy left Macbeth only "a barren sceptre" and therefore made his murder of Duncan, his sacrifice of "mine eternal jewel"—his soul—serve only "Banquo's issue." After this reflection Macbeth consults and incites the two men he has chosen for murdering Banquo and Fleance. No longer is his conduct at least consonant with the prophecies, as in the case of Duncan's murder: he now tries to defy the prophecy for Banquo by making its fruition impossible. All this is done secretly, and without any prior discussion with Lady Macbeth. He had not been frank with her about the prophecies originally, narrating only the favorable ones applying to him (and hence to her) while withholding Banquo's, which was unfavorable to them in the longer run. Tempted by the favorable good prospect, he might have thought he could overcome the unfavorable evil one. He would grasp the former first, and worry about the latter afterward.

Here we see him doing just that. But his separation from his wife involves more than simply planning an important operation without her: he becomes physically less available to her, compelling her practically to make an appointment to speak with him. Already, by this separation, and his giving himself (as she thinks) to fearful solitude, worrying still about the murder of Duncan, she begins to sense the happiness they both thought easily within their grasp slipping away:

> Nought's had, all's spent,
> Where are desire is got without content.
> 'Tis safer to be that which we destroy
> Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy (III, 2: 4–8).

Her ensuing interview with Macbeth reads queerly. He speaks as if they are still in danger, as if they cannot eat without fear or sleep without "terrible dreams," as if he is preoccupied not with Banquo's murder but with those who might be conspiring against the throne now, and as if the whole frame of things in this and the other life may need to be "disjointed" in order to free them from these fears. Nothing he says, of course, could possibly strike Lady Macbeth as being directed against Banquo. No names are named—he must speak vaguely—and if anything his remarks seem directed against Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain.

She tells him to be "bright and jovial among your guests tonight"; he tells her to give "eminence" with eye and tongue to Banquo, and then seems to return to the theme of their needing to flatter and disguise out of a fear for their safety. "You must leave this," she says, probably not comprehending the drift of his remarks. Then: "O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!"—but the scorpions are horrible things that might kill others as well as fill Macbeth himself with loathing and fear. His addition, "Thou know'st that Banquo and his Fleance lives," must have struck Lady Macbeth as quite irrelevant, and her reply, "But in them nature's copy's not eterne," should not be read as extending to Macbeth a license to have them killed—certainly not now. Impressed, perhaps, by a strong note of concern in his voice, she may have wished to calm him, as if to say: "If ever they become worrisome to us, we know that they are not immortal, that things can happen to them." Macbeth's rejoinder—that "they are assailable"—might have comforted him but certainly not her. His words start to become the poetry of death, and at her inquiry, "What's to be done?", he tells her to be "innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck," and continues to talk with funereal but poetic expectation.

The last times we see Lady Macbeth, prior to hearing about and then seeing her plight in Act V, are at and just after the banquet scene. Macbeth's vision of Banquo's ghost sitting in his place is the last such vision he will have. The scene starts off quietly enough, with Macbeth apparently in a good mood—probably because he expected good news about Banquo and Fleance, and perhaps also because he thought he had received some sign of acquiescence from the queen. The First Murderer reports: Banquo is dead, Fleance escaped. Suddenly, he sees Banquo sitting in his seat and is completely unnerved and terror-stricken: the murdered no longer stay put, as they had both before and after human laws were instituted to protect the common good. Lady Macbeth, of course, thinks his visions cowardly and womanly. She tells him to act like a man, which he says he would do in the face of any natural challenge from beast or man. After his guests leave, he shows what deeply worries him—that the universe is so made that it reveals, one way or another, the identity of secret murderers. The universe is on the side of the just! All the more startling, then, Macbeth's next thought, which concerns Macduff. Banquo's ghost has just scared the living daylights out of him, but his mind moves, by some spontaneous inner force, to the next possible source of opposition. He will send for Macduff and visit the "weird sisters" to learn—what, he does not say. As we can now guess, and later discover, it is whether any evils will occur to him (that is, whether, unlike Duncan, he will die a natural death), and whether the prophecy about Banquo's sons still holds. He will do anything now "for mine own good," including murder after murder, so steeped in blood is he already (he does not mention again his lost soul). He has in mind "strange things" that will be acted upon without delay, without even being "scann'd." He expects his strange "self-abuse" to cease as he grows inured to the doing of evil. This, not the sleep Lady Macbeth says he lacks and needs, will do away with his visions (III, 4: 128–44).

Lady Macbeth seems utterly unaware of their need to protect themselves; she simply wants to relax and enjoy sovereignty. Macbeth, on the other hand, is gripped by excessive insecurity. Having killed his own king, he seems deeply convinced that murderers cannot get away with their deeds, not only in the afterlife but in this life as well. He now engages in a struggle against this moral power of the universe, refusing to bow to it, and striking out against all he thinks might oppose him. His very courage leads him to rashness and cruelty, whereas less impulsiveness and greater understanding of the world would have made him solidify his position by acts of beneficence and justice. Macbeth is hardly a politic man. His successful and secret usurpation leads into tyranny, but he differs from the tyrant Socrates describes in *The Republic*. Macbeth is not dominated by erotic and other appetites aimed at uninhibited pleasure or gain. There is no riotous living. Only in ambition and fear does he seem excessive, and these, unguided by superior intellect, lead him to actions that make his ultimate success increasingly unlikely. By apparently guaranteeing him impunity, the witches only accelerate a tendency that was plainly in him before his second visit, just as their very first message to him only intensified an ambition that was already there.

Now for the end of this amazing and mystifying story. After her absence from all of Act IV, Lady Macbeth sweeps back into our purview most dramatically. Only her nighttime activity is disclosed, all of it done unconsciously, in sleep. Either she silently writes and seals a letter, or she walks with a light in her hand—a light she always has next to her. She is trying to rub out a spot on her hands, just as she had said a little water would wash off Duncan's blood from her hands and Macbeth's. But this blood will not wash off—and it is literally a "damned spot," since it has helped land her in hell. The candle is meant to help her see through the murkiness of hell. And each utterance, in this marvellous reconstruction of her consciousness, is tied to a particular point in her experience, from the time Duncan was killed up to the recent past, when Macbeth was still fearing Banquo had emerged from his grave, and news of Lady Macduff's murder had come to her ears. Quite properly, the doctor fears she may do harm to herself, and the next thing we hear is a wail of women, signifying the queen's death.

The letter she writes in her sleep can only be to Macbeth, who has now undertaken the murder of Banquo and the Macduff family on his own, in a headlong rush he explains to no one. Would the letter simply ask to see him? Would it in any way express her deep confusion? The reason why Lady Macbeth thinks in unconnected pieces is that she believes herself lost and damned, yet without being able to understand how it has all happened. She is in utter misery and can only recollect points along the way. But, having importuned Macbeth to murder Duncan against his will, and having so often told him what to do in the course of that great action, she is in no position to criticize now. Nor will she complain of being left alone. Strong in the midst of her unhappiness, convinced it will not diminish, she will take the one way out available to her: suicide. At her own urging, Macbeth did indeed murder sleep, the "season of all natures"—her sleep.

That Macbeth still loves his wife is shown in his conversation with the doctor he has called in to observe her. He knows she has a "mind diseased," and asks whether "physic" or medicine can, with physical remedies, cure such a condition. Clearly he wishes deeply for her cure, but he is also preoccupied with the English forces coming to defeat him and place Malcolm on the throne. He has told himself the prophecies keep him secure and free of fear, but he is shaking inwardly with fear as he humiliates the messenger who comes to report the approach of the English army. And he admits to being entirely "sick at heart," convinced that

> My way of life
> Is fallen into the sear, 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, 2: 22–28).

This is the most pathetic passage in the play. It shows how decent and ordinary were the ends Macbeth had sought to achieve through ambition, all unattainable because he had pursued his ambition through murder. It is amid this fear that he puts on his armor and takes it off again, and gives orders to "Hang those that talk of fear."

A moment later, Macbeth hears a dreadful cry, and remarks that "I have almost forgot the taste of fears," remembering how easily set off his fears used to be, and thinking he has gotten so used to plotting horrible murders that such cries can no longer startle him. Informed that it was the cry of women at the death of the queen, Macbeth says "She should have died hereafter; there would have been a time for such a word." And this leads him into "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow"—the most memorable speech in the play by far. Macbeth has not forgotten the taste of fears: the cry fails to startle him because he is already brimming over with fear, a fear with a more obvious and pressing claim on his attention. His speech, it is true, says nothing directly about his wife, but this does not mean he feels nothing, or would not have had more to say (and think) had she died "hereafter"—that is, at a less frantic moment. But neither does he dwell upon himself or his present preoccupations. Instead, he gives voice to a reflection that covers them both, and all other men as well—or so his thinks. Tired, desperate, concealing both his sorrow and his fear, he seeks a vantage point external and superior to life's strivings.

Still, it is surprising that in a great speech at this point Macbeth does not reaffirm the moral nature of the universe—its finally detecting his wife and himself, gravely criminal, and meting out condign punishment. This would correspond to that deep strand in him that used to regard the world in this fashion. And we must also admit to something peculiar in the manner of his delivery, with its air of a set declamation. Macbeth's greatest stupidity, his greatest self-deception, one is tempted to say, comes in his finding the world, not his wife and himself, to blame. Life may be like a brief candle, but our tomorrows, todays, and yesterdays do not constitute a patternless sequence with no end but death. Just like his wife, Macbeth seems not to understand how what happened to them both could possibly happen. As several critics have remarked, his speech is to be read with the counterpart of the Bible in mind. It charges the Bible—the book that more than any other affirms the moral nature of the universe—with error. Replacing the Bible is an almost equally apodictic statement deposing the perfect God, and enthroning aimless idiocy as the ruling principle of the universe.

Those who find this great speech unsuitably pronounced by Macbeth, at this moment, are not entirely wrong. We should bear in mind, however, that the one person before whom it is delivered—Seyton—has certain unique characteristics. Seyton appears in only two scenes (3 and 5 of Act V) in the entire play. Before the former, no one knew Macbeth had an attendant or assistant by that name; in the latter, after announcing the death of the queen, he is heard from no more: following the "Tomorrow" speech, spoken, apparently, in his speechless presence, he completely disappears. When Macbeth first calls Seyton, he repeats his name three times within one speech, making sure the audience catches it. When he finally appears, he confirms the bad news about the coming of Malcolm and his English army. When Macbeth asks him for his armour—as if Seyton were also a kind of armour-bearer, a protector of the body—he asserts, rather pertly and knowingly: "'Tis not needed yet." In scene 5, when Macbeth hears what the stage direction calls "a cry of women within" and asks what that "noise" was, Seyton presently tells him: "The Queen, my lord, is dead."

At this point the editors run into an obvious difficulty, for in the text no call is made for Seyton to go out, discover the queen to be dead, and return. Nor is he asked to do so by Macbeth, who, lost in a reverie about himself lasting seven lines, only then asks "Wherefore was that cry?" and receives Seyton's answer immediately. To make this answer physically possible, the editors add stage directions to the text calling for Seyton's exit after he says "It is the cry of women" and his reentrance just before Macbeth's "Wherefore was that cry?" But tinkering with the folio is always dangerous, as we have already seen with the character of Hecate, whom so many editors consider spurious and expendable. Here we must go by Shakespeare's mischievous indications and try to make sense of them. Seyton would not have to leave if he is Satan in disguise—a character with supernatural capacities, whose primary function in the play is witnessing and confirming the coming of evils. Without taking a step away, Satan knows the queen is dead. And after he hears the "Tomorrow" speech, he is gone—his function in the play ended. As something like an extension of Hecate and the witches, he is there to make sure that all—that is, all harm-doing—is going well.

Because of the presence of this unusual being, the "Tomorrow" speech may have to be interpreted in a special way. It is almost as if the view of life expressed in the speech must please Satan—as if the forces of harm and evil have no desire to make the world wholly evil, but are content if they can keep it from being understood as a moral place, directed by a good God. In reality, however, to convince men that "Life is a tale told by an idiot" is to disarm them utterly, and to make life itself impossible. It is, in fact, the view the forces of evil, by a stroke of genius, might have hit upon to harm men the most! So when Macbeth expresses this general conception, it is almost as if a mind not given to philosophizing suddenly sets forth a profound alternative to all religious and rational views of life. Considered from the standpoint of Macbeth's psychology, this view could only be the consequence of a mind fearing the existence of a good God, yet still unable to understand how two such criminals as himself and his wife come to the end they do. And the end comes soon enough for Macbeth. Sensing that he is doomed in body as well as soul, and despite learning of the witches' equivocation, earlier working in his favor but now against him, he fights on, lifting himself, by this courage, above the execrable and pathetic. Even when all is lost he refuses to bend or break.

Let us return to Freud's observation about the reversal of roles in *Macbeth*: Lady Macbeth goes from initial remorselessness to becoming "all remorse," whereas Macbeth, who became "all defiance," had earlier been filled with compunctions and fear. But does Lady Macbeth show remorse at the end? Keeping a light by her side is not remorse but fear. And when she is rubbing out the "damned" blood spots on her hand, or rueing the smell of blood on her "little" hand, what does she have in mind? At that point, her sigh—"oh, oh, oh!"—is taken by the doctor to mean that "the heart is sorely charged," but, again, is it regret at actions that have led to deep disappointment and misery, or is it repentance, remorse at having done unjust and evil things? Her reference to her hand and her sigh may be evidence of femininity, gentleness, and moral conscience trying to express themselves, but such is the pride Lady Macbeth still takes in her masculinity, and in the hardness of her ambition, that she cannot openly acknowledge them. What she does is relive some of her own words and actions, particularly in connection with Duncan's murder, but all the while she senses herself damned in hell, undergoing punishment for her part in the murder, and trying desperately to undo the signs and symbols of her part in it. She undoubtedly connects her suffering with her crime, but of direct remorse, direct contrition, she gives no sign.

It is particularly remarkable how little of Macbeth's recent conduct, or of their recent relationship, is at the forefront of her mind. A word here about Lady Macduff, and there about Banquo, is all. Her present misery, the rupture in their closeness, are never mentioned directly. Her mind returns, again and again, to the past, to the words and deeds that set the awful train of events in motion. Nor can we presume that her daylight hours are free from care. After all, she keeps light by her continually—that is, day and night—and her suicide itself occurs during the day. But we learn directly of her nocturnal life alone. We gather from her gentlewoman's remarks that her nocturnal movements are repeated again and again, indicating that she is completely unable, on her own, to find a way out of her misery. Nor does her literal or pedestrian cast of mind alter at the end: the audience is aware of the symbolic importance of what she remembers, much of it having to do with how easily involvement in a grave crime can be cleansed and forgotten. Still, her own awareness of this is at best subconscious, and her mind does not expand into ramifications of what she remembers: there are no reverberations of belief or sentiment even in the stricken Lady Macbeth.

Macbeth is quite different. Initially he experiences both compunctions and extravagantly fearful visions at the thought of murdering Duncan, and during the murder. But with Banquo and Macduff's family there are no compunctions, and his visions of the former's ghost is not repeated with the latter. Originally, Macbeth's fears, and to some extent his compunctions, were based on his religious belief—on the deep sense that the good God of the Bible protects the good and punishes the evil, and that the world as a whole hunts down murderers. As he moves successfully from murder to murder, with apparent impunity, he does become hardened. Considering himself irretrievably destined for hell, his compunctions disappear as his fear for his earthly security mounts. Nevertheless, we cannot say with Freud that he is "all defiance." At the end, he is sick at heart about what his life has turned into, and while he does not complain of being separated from his wife, he remains deeply concerned about her health. Nor does his remark at learning of her death, and the ensuing "Tomorrow" speech, breathe defiance but, rather, an awareness of hopeless and contemptible unintelligibility. Only at the very end, when he knows he must die, is he defiant, spurning suicide and choosing to die in battle.

CHRISTIANITY AND ITS OPPOSITE

It is disconcerting to realize that Macbeth's Christian belief helps worsen his tyranny. Thinking himself already damned beyond redemption for murdering Duncan, fearing punishment here as well as in the afterlife, he plunges into a series of heinous murders he did not foresee originally. Having grown somewhat hardened to these crimes, he finds no security in them. Judging by the fears that continually agitate him during the day, his nights must be as miserable as his wife's: together they had indeed murdered their own sleep. And while she thinks of herself as already undergoing divine punishment in hell, he never ceases to anticipate a similar destiny for himself. Recognizing this, Macduff, at the very end, addresses him as "hell-bound," and refers to the angel he has served—meaning the fallen angel, Satan. Jose Benardete argues that Macbeth's last words "Lay on, Macduff, and damn'd be him who first cries, 'Hold, enough!'" imply that Macbeth did not think of himself as necessarily damned by his murders, or at least thought that acts of courage or cowardice on his part could still be decisive in determining his eternal fate. While the words are subject to this interpretation, it does not jibe with Macbeth's actual outlook that day. He is filled with fear and foreboding, and neither speaks nor acts with the optimism this view of bravery and victory should instill in Scotland's greatest warrior. (See "Macbeth's Last Words" in *Interpretation*, Summer 1970, pp. 63–64.)

The importance of hell to the play had been prefigured in a very humorous scene some editors have also thought un-Shakespearean and sought to delete. It involves the famous knocking-at-the-gate, the dramatic effect of which De Quincey so admired. The scene occurs just after Duncan's murder, as Macduff and Lennox seek to enter the main part of the castle early that morning. The porter imagines himself the "porter of hell-gate," and fancies himself answering, in the name of Beezlebub (and Lucifer), the knocks of those who deserve to sweat in hell. He finally gives up the task, exclaiming:

> But this place is too cold for hell. I'll devil-porter it no further. I had thought to let in some of all professions that go the primrose way to th' everlasting bonfire.

The castle is too cold for hell, says the porter, but frigidity would not prevent it from being considered part of hell, as every reader of Dante's *Inferno* knows. There, in the ninth and deepest circle of hell, held by a frozen sea of ice, Lucifer is eternally fixed for his treason against God, and Judas, Brutus, and Cassius for like sins. Of course, what has just occurred in Macbeth's castle is an act of treasonous murder. The hell begun with that act in the castle may be said, in fact, to constitute one of the play's main themes, closely linked to its central issue of the intelligibility of life. But the hell Shakespeare describes is the natural hell to which these simpleminded murderers unknowingly bring themselves: their suffering, fear, and sleeplessness is their hell.

By all appearances, an equally irrelevant episode dealing with a related religious theme occurs toward the end of Act IV, and some editors retain it for reasons that, were they the only ones, would hardly suffice. Macduff had just tried to persuade Malcolm to return to Scotland and save it from Macbeth's tyranny. Testing him, Malcolm claims to be a very vicious man himself—lecherous, avaricious, with none of the virtues, and eager to

> Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell,
> Uproar the universal peace, confound
> All unity on earth.

Somewhat strangely, Macduff is willing to accommodate the first two of these vices, but he gives vent to anger and despair at the rest, and perhaps particularly at the last. Finding Malcolm so "accurs'd," he compares him with his parents:

> Thy royal father
> Was a most sainted king; the queen that bore thee,
> Oftener upon her knees than on her feet,
> Died every day that she liv'd. Fare thee well!
> These evils thou repeat'st upon thyself
> Hath banish'd me from Scotland.

That Macduff is a deeply Christian man is again shown by these lines. Concord, universal peace, the unity of mankind are living ideals for him—however little realized in practical political life. And the queen's spending her days on her knees, and dying every day, the thane of Fife considers great virtues. His despair comes from thinking that the evils of Macbeth have counterpart evils in Malcolm, and that Scotland is doomed to suffer on interminably.

This induces Malcolm to reveal that he spoke as he did to test Macduff and make sure he had not been sent by Macbeth. No doubt with some exaggeration, Malcolm now denies he has the vices to which he had so vehemently confessed and lays claim instead to their opposite virtues. He adds that Siward was on the point of leading ten thousand Englishmen against Macbeth, but now they will all return together, hoping "the chance of goodness" being achieved is as great as their quarrel with Macbeth is warranted. At this point in the final scene of Act IV a doctor enters—the first to show himself in the play, and very soon to be succeeded, at the beginning of Act V, by the doctor in attendance on Lady Macbeth. After the brief incident with the English doctor is concluded, none other than the ever-gentle (the ever-evil) Ross arrives. What happens during this brief interlude with the doctor? Malcolm asks whether the English king will come forth, once he is finished curing a "crew of wretched souls," whose malady defeats the medical art, but quickly amends at his touch —"Such sanctity hath Heaven given his hand."

We are not told, of course, what a doctor was doing there if the king's touch had such efficacy: perhaps the testimony of a doctor to the superiority of supernatural (to natural) capacities serves as the most effective of all testimonies. The doctor departs, leaving Malcolm to explain to Macduff that the disease the king cures is called "the evil," and that he has seen the king work these miracles with his own eyes. Malcolm does not know how the king gets heaven's help, but he cures people with sickly and deformed bodies by "hanging a golden stamp about their necks" and pronouncing certain "holy prayers." This "healing benediction," says Malcolm, is rumored to be a legacy the king will leave to his successors. He also has a "gift of prophecy," and is shown to be "full of grace" by "sundry blessings" that "hang about his throne." Toward the very end of the scene, after the exchange with Ross, Malcolm is still intent on seeing the English king, but not to ask for his "healing benediction," or to solicit his "gift of prophecy." It is to bid farewell and then march on Macbeth with the help of the English army the king has provided.

Nothing in a Shakespearean play is irrelevant to its central theme, and here the relevancy lies almost at the surface. How is human evil (symbolized by a disease called "the evil") to be cured? By his actions, Malcolm makes it clear that he will not depend on Christian prayers, love, or miracles. The evil of Macbeth must be fought against, outsmarted, overpowered, and only in this way can it be eradicated and the good established in its place. Another variation on the same theme occurs later when the besieged Macbeth asks his doctor "What rhubarb, senna, or what purgative drug, would scour these English hence?" (V, 3: 54–55) Just as it is absurd to purge military evils by medical drugs, so is it absurd to purge political evils by either medical drugs or religious rites. Politics may benefit from widespread religious belief, but only if that belief permits the political art to cope with political evils as part of the natural world in the broad sense of the term. Macduff is pictured by Shakespeare as having false and dangerous confidence in God's interventions, much in the spirit of Malcolm's mother. But Malcolm himself is wary, distrustful, sober. He directly asks Macduff, "Why in that rawness left you wife and child, those precious motives, those strong knots of love, without leave-taking?"—referring to his having hurriedly abandoned them to the "rawness" of Macbeth (IV, 3: 24–28). Yet while Malcolm will not solicit secret prayers and amulets from the English king, and sees the political danger of Macduff's piety, he is not above playing on that piety. He adroitly makes himself seem, in Macduff's eyes, to be a wholehearted believer in the practices of the English king, and therefore a fit successor to his own "sainted" father and kneeling mother.

After the final scene in England, at the end of Act IV, we are shown Malcolm in Scotland four brief times. Three of these are in battlefield scenes, the fourth in the finale. In the first, he orders the army to deceive the enemy about its numbers by camouflaging themselves with branches cut from Birnam Wood. In the second, he sends Old and Young Siward into the vanguard of the battle, keeping back with his fellow Scotsman, Macduff. The third occurs after

Macduff goes off hunting for Macbeth, with Malcolm learning from Old Siward that the castle has been surrendered, and that they have been assisted by the thanes and many of Macbeth's own people. At no point is there any sign that Malcolm himself entered the battle: he seems to have remembered full well the occasion with which the play began, when he was almost captured by the enemy. So Malcolm's contribution to Scotland will not consist in abilities of the sort Macbeth and Macduff preeminently possess. He will be a smarter, less superstitious leader than them both. He will need all his wariness, since his first act—one of beneficence as compared to Macbeth's murder of Banquo—is to reward his thanes by making them all earls, including Ross. Yet Ross may not have escaped completely, for Malcolm intends not only to call home exiled friends (he does not mention his brother by name) but also to find and punish the "cruel ministers" of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. And in a final contrast to Macbeth and Macduff again, he vows that, whatever else is needful, "by the grace of Grace"—that is, apparently by God but in fact by his own resources, his own acumen—he will perform "in measure, time, and place." The firstlings of his heart will not, like Macbeth's, be the firstlings of his hand, and he will not be as impetuous and trusting as he knows Macduff to have been.

Macbeth may be said to be a play about two defective extremes of evil, one "masculine," one "feminine," and its setting is most suitable to this purpose. Eleventh-century Scotland contains two powerful and mutually antagonistic elements: a feudal aristocracy, devoted to the virtues of courage and manliness, best shown in war, and the Christianity in which the nobles believe, with its absolute demand for love and peace. As a practical matter it might seem that the former needed the restraint of the latter—that warlike thanes would be constantly in revolt against their king, and in contention with themselves, were it not for the influence of Christianity. It was Christianity that made them regard their king as the vicar of God, and themselves as fellow believers in Christ. In the play, obedience to Duncan is plainly strengthened by the Christian belief of men like Macduff, who refers to the murdered king as "the Lord's anointed temple."

Macbeth, who begins by killing the rebel, Macdonwald, and then himself rebels against Duncan, is moved to this act by Lady Macbeth's appeal to his valor and manliness, traits on which she prides herself above all. The question as to whether this manliness—connected to war, ambition, mastery, the love of superiority and honor—is the highest good, or is itself subordinate to the virtue of justice, keeps animating events in the play. Excessive manliness occurs when the ends and qualities of manliness are made to rise superior to all. Not only does it show itself in the Macbeths, but also in Old Siward, who is perfectly happy to lose a son who has died bravely, and even in Macduff, who refuses to cry at the news of his family's murder, and whom Malcolm somewhat unsympathetically tries to goad into manly action against Macbeth.

Almost equally dangerous to human life is the opposite extreme, which denies the difference between friends and enemies, and exhorts men to love all men as they love and trust the good God. Warned about her imminent murder, Lady Macduff first asks why she should flee if she has done no harm, and then berates herself for having used this false "womanly defence." But it is her husband, Macduff, who much more than she embodies trust in God for the protection of good human beings. Neither Macbeth's excessive manliness, nor Macduff's excessive womanliness, can form the basis of human society (compare Jose Benardete's account of these opposites, *op. cit.*, p. 68). The former turns everyone into enemies and leaves no room for friendship—for the concord of good people in a body politic. The latter turns everyone into friends and offers no protection against enemies, internal or external, again subverting the body politic.

In the play these defective views of human life seem to be associated with opposite views of the universe at large. One is expressed by Macbeth in the form of "Life is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing," but it is also related to an older view, first formulated by the pre-Socratic philosopher, Heracleitus, according to which "War is the father of all things." Heracleitus generalizes into the first cause of everything the contention and vying for mastery that are characteristic of warring men. Nothing is simply at rest or in harmony. All states of seeming concord and rest are only temporary phases—the resultants of clash themselves—in a never-ending sea of change. The difficulties with Heracleitus' view, so much at odds with the rule of mind in Anaxagoras, and the self-sufficiency of being in Parmenides, received much attention from Plato and Aristotle. It cannot account for the coherence of individuals or species, for the causal interconnection of things, for the existence of human knowledge, or for the range of beings in the universe. Even while granting the existence of individuals, it cannot allow for their holding together, for the persistence of any classes, unities, or wholes, or for any transcendence of the flux whatsoever. Its defect comes from its very simplicity. It says war is the father of all things, not the partial cause of all or some things. Its whole intention is to make war the cause of things it does not seem to be the cause of—to make it the supreme and sole cause. And not the least of its weaknesses is its inability to account for itself as an eternally true and universal thought about flux in a world of flux.

By having Macbeth compare life to the unintelligible sound and fury of an idiot, Shakespeare takes Heracleitus' thought to its logical conclusion. He seems to have realized that the very idea of nature—of kinds of things and their necessary developments—could not be sustained on the basis of a philosophy of total flux: Heracleitus' natural philosophy destroys nature. In this respect, Christianity may at first seem to be the very opposite of Heracleitus. It considers the universe an essential harmony and even unity founded in the good will of God. But if nothing happens without God's active will and its imperative for ultimate good, Christianity and Heracleitus may in fact have something in common. Heracleitus' view, taken full strength, would deprive human life of its nature and render it unintelligible sound and fury: nothing makes life exist or change in ascertainable ways; nothing holds it together. But from the Christian view as well the world, constantly subject to God's exercise of his will and miraculous power, is undetermined by anything like the independent natures of things. Both views make nature in its original and proper sense impossible.

Everything in *Macbeth is* bound by the natures of things (and by chance). Even Hecate and the witches have a nature they are bound by—a nature filled, perhaps, with mutually inconsistent elements and therefore physically impossible, but a nature imagined, nonetheless. Not that the working out of the natures, particularly in the case of man, is simple. Over and above the general, sexual, and individual parts of our nature, we are affected by life in society, and particularly by the high commanding voices of politics and religion. To such causes must be added the range of invention and choice available to each of us, along with the mind's unique ability to control its face and hide its purpose. The consequence is an amazing complexity of human affairs, where motives, actions, and plans are frequently concealed, and where idiotic chaos might appear to rule rather than intelligible causes of any kind. This is why the play is filled with mysteries of fact and cause, and the hovering presence of the witches almost prepares us for such a world. Nevertheless, on closer scrutiny, the mysteries vanish. We can discover Duncan's good plan and see why it failed; we see why the unsound plan to kill him happened to succeed. We can guess why Banquo had to take his trip. We are no longer mystified by Ross' descent from the level of the royal bedchambers, by his remaining outside the castle, by his appearance at Lady Macbeth's castle and soon afterward in England, by his return with the invading forces, his disappearance in the subsequent battle, and his reappearance among the thanes at their final elevation to earldoms.

Shakespeare is also interested in determining the place of reason within human nature, and the extent to which it guides human conduct. This is why the play gives much more prominence to involuntary visions, incoherent sleep-talking, impulses, and passions that reason does not master than it does to deliberate planning. By having Macbeth degenerate to the point where his impulses become the basis for action, untested and undirected by reflection, he brings life as close as it can get to the behavior of an idiot. The witches at the outset prefigured much of this irrational impulsiveness, and no better symbol of the return to a more completely human life can be found than Malcolm's accession to the throne. With him comes not only an avoidance of the extremes of both masculinity and femininity but a restoration of rational calculation and deliberateness dedicated to the common good—in short, of justice under the direction of prudence. Malcolm will not make the mistake made by the obviously Christian "Old Man" when he says to the departing Ross, "God's benison go with you; and with those that would make good of bad, and friend of foes!" (II, 4, at the end)—a lesson in benignity that can only feed the malignity of the morally worst character in the play. Malcolm will not follow excessive masculinity in making foes of friends, nor excessive femininity in making friends of foes.

Of course Shakespeare is particularly anxious to trace the causal lines that bring Macbeth and Lady Macbeth to their surprising fates. Quite clearly the witches do not put ambition into these would-be murderers but play upon an ambition already there, promising it success, and later assuring Macbeth that he cannot be conquered or killed. As a general matter, they facilitate courses of action already prepared for in the souls of men by removing obstacles to their success, and in this respect function very much like the ring of Gyges in Plato's *Republic* (Book II, 359–61). But all the while, hidden from their own eyes, the characters and circumstances of Macbeth and his wife are at work, leading them to their peculiar and separate dooms. And it all happens within a span of time compressed even further by Shakespeare's dramatic art, with indications given in speeches that unnaturally accelerate a process already unnaturally accelerated by the witches' guarantees of success and security. It would be easy to conclude that this is what happens to murderers: God catches up with them and punishes their crimes. And the confidence that such is the case may be politically salutary. But the real fate of the Macbeths is entirely natural, just like that of the Macduffs. It stems from the fixed nature of things, and not essentially from accident or external supernatural intervention of any sort, demonic or divine.

GOOD AND EVIL

Despite the optimism associated with Malcolm's final accession to the throne, the atmosphere of *Macbeth* is generally dark, repellent, threatening. This effect is achieved by an unnatural poetic exaggeration, emphasizing those elements of reality most in keeping with the problem of the play, and omitting those that would point in other directions. The sunlight, summer, flowers, plain enjoyment of life, jocularity, even the use of moonlight for romantic associations that color so many other plays are for the most part absent from this one. Instead, we have fog, darkness, blood, and foreboding. The witches embody the subject by their visible ugliness and their proclivity to harm. They also combine unnaturally, and therefore confuse, not only masculinity and femininity but old age and childishness, purpose and purposelessness, even a kind of wisdom and folly. When they receive Macbeth's visit much later in the play, a palpable magnification of their connection with the humanly repellent occurs. Hecate is certainly quite matter-of-fact in her approach to their art, but once she steps in the results are much more powerful than in Act I. And as the witches add to their cauldron the parts of so many abhorrent things, we can see the kinship these things have with the Macbeths themselves, whose distortion of their own nature makes them frightful and horrifying to behold.

What bearing does the existence of so much that is abhorrent have on the nature of the universe? Why are abhorrent human beings possible? Clearly, the universe is not simply the theater or home of human happiness, and many beings exist despite the fact that man fears and detests them. Nevertheless, like man's potential for good, the many splendid things in the universe—the ones understated in this play—may not be available without allowing for those that repel as well. In a material world, a world of separate beings and classes of beings, the possibility of harm and evil derives inevitably from the presence of benefit and good, and the good of some things will be the harm of others. To ask for a world in which all men are always rational, always in control of their passions and appetites, never errant, is to ask for a world that is physically impossible. To ask for a world filled only with things attractive and beneficial to man—for cows and dogs but not rats, for health but not disease, for growth but not decay—is also to ask the impossible. Moreover, man has a natural place in this world. While sharing characteristics, moral and physical, with various parts and gradations of the world, he also adds something necessary to its completion. Without him the world would lie there unknown, uncelebrated, unrhymed; and poets, like philosophers, would never be called upon (with Hecate) "to show the glory of our art."

That the Macbeths meet with such bad endings seems to prove the world emphatically moral, but it does not. If the world were good in a simple and unqualified way, the Macbeths could not have gone wrong in the first place. And while it may be said that Banquo's conniving in Macbeth's crime made him deserve a punishment almost as serious as the harm he receives from Macbeth, the same cannot be said of Lady Macduff and her children. They prove that some good people perish solely through the evil of others, and the example of Ross shows that some evil people are never punished for their evil. So evil— human evil—is a permanent feature of the human world. Nor is an abhorrence of even the worst evil-doing—a conscience—to be found in all human beings, though it is most unusual to find it completely lacking. Shakespeare seems to associate the growth of conscience in us with family upbringing—Lady Macbeth finds she cannot kill Duncan because he reminds her of her father. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth both do what they do despite their consciences: the former knows murder is a crime that God and human societies have always condemned most strongly, and the latter refers to ambition's need for such instruments as an "illness." Only Ross is the kind of man likely to have no conscience or contrition, and we know less about him than we do about Richard III and Iago, his greater but less successful peers in evil-doing.

But what is this evil of which we speak? Do evil men have a conscious will to do evil for its own sake? Are they lovers of harm rather than good? In the case of the Macbeths, evil is not sought for itself. They commit murder not because they enjoy slaughter but because they are willing to do something wrong in order to achieve something they know to be good. The goods they seek are all too ordinary: to rule, to be admired and loved. Even in the case of Macbeth's most irrational undertaking—the Macduff family murders—his motives, while far from clear, do not include any kind of sadism. He expresses no reasons, not even any wish to strike at Macduff in some way, or to warn others against deserting to Malcolm. From his failing to act instantly against Macduff he has concluded that he must in the future act on impulse rather than on slower-moving reflection if he is to prevail. We must imagine that Ross himself probably enjoys his superior ability to deceive and defeat more than the pain of those he hurts: in short, human evil is primarily the consequence of seeking some good at the cost of harming others, whether the good is sovereignty, superiority, or any of many other goals that entice men. What defects of upbringing or nature could bring a Ross to be what he is we can only guess. Nor does this play contain any direct evidence (as *The Tempest* does, for example) of a way of life—philosophical or poetical—rising superior to politics per se and making the soul essentially gentle rather than rough. The closest to this, in the play, is Hecate's devotion to the excellence of her craft—the craft of contriving harm. Hecate speaks in rhymed couplets, as if to remind us of the kinship between her mastery of "charms"—using combinations of words and apparitions—and the poetic art. (See III, 5, and IV, 1, where the witches do Hecate's bidding and receive her praise.)

This dependence of harm on good accounts for the peculiar work and character of Hecate and her witches, for there is nothing satanic about them, not even the slightest sign of an urge to do evil for the sake of evil. Is arranging Macbeth's doom on a par for the witches with cherishing a pilot's thumb? Hecate's motive seems to be her art or craft itself: paradoxically, it is only her love of excellence that makes her enjoy the contrivance of harm, for no other motive for her activity is ever given. Shakespeare never ascribes either to her or the witches any need of their own nature requiring them to bring harm to others. It is false, moreover, to consider harm an independent and separate element in the universe. By nature men seek only good, and it is their limited intelligence and their passions that cause them to do harm. They rarely understand what is really good in general or for themselves in particular, and often miscalculate the actual consequences of their actions. They are not so solicitous of the well-being of others as to avoid harming them if an important benefit to themselves is at stake. These characteristics often cause men to engage in acts of grave injustice that bring grave harm to themselves as well. Exaggerated, magnified, and compressed for dramatic effect, this is certainly the most obvious moral lesson of *Macbeth*.

If we put together what the play divulges directly with what it consciously keeps from our view, the world is not the dark place it seems, and certainly not unintelligible. It is intelligible because the natures of the things in it are, and must be, intelligible. With its amazing array of beings, culminating in man, it is even the kind of world reason would choose, given what is possible. It contains ugliness because it also contains beauty, baseness because it also contains nobility, evil because it also contains good. But it is far from a moral order in the simple sense, where forces internal or external to it guarantee the flourishing of good and the failure of evil. Life is not a tale told by an idiot, but neither is it a parable told by a perfectly good and all-powerful God. It is a dangerous place for men, who are subject not only to natural perils but to those deriving from themselves. All too readily tempted into distortions of their nature and harboring false or imperfect notions of good, they are the source of their own greatest misery. Political, religious, and social institutions can do much for them, but they may also do harm, and, like all other things, are subject to decay. Human happiness is therefore very difficult to achieve, and even modest contentment may not easily be within man's grasp. At the end of the play Malcolm returns to a wise and just course, but we are never told what it is in Malcolm that will resist temptations and hold him to this course.

The darker side of life does not seem to have embittered Shakespeare, despite his having had as full a view of it as anyone can have. He seems to have concluded, as a general matter, that good is more fundamental than evil in the world, whatever the practical difficulties in the way of realizing it, and however great the actual predominance of evil. From this came the composure making it possible for him to write both tragedy and comedy, and even to commingle them appropriately. And his confidence in the good must have been confirmed, or given its highest expression, in his own philosophizing and poetry, which perhaps more than anything else show man's connection with the divine. If Macbeth's great "Tomorrow" speech expresses the deepest pessimism, the conclusion to which Shakespeare himself points in this play mixes pessimism with a more fundamental optimism.