

Interpretation

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Inquiries: (Ms.) Joan Walsh, Assistant to the Editor
INTERPRETATION, Queens College, Flushing, N.Y.
11367-1597, U.S.A. (718)997-5542 Fax (718) 997-5565

E Mail: interpretation_journal@qc.edu

“A Soldier and Afeard”:

Macbeth and the Gospelling of Scotland

PAUL A. CANTOR

University of Virginia

I regard the bad conscience as the serious illness that [men were] bound to contract under the stress of the most fundamental change [they] ever experienced—that change which occurred when [they] found [themselves] finally enclosed within the walls of society and of peace. . . . Suddenly all their instincts were disvalued and “suspended.” . . . They felt unable to cope with the simplest undertakings; in this new world they no longer possessed their former guides, their regulating, unconscious and infallible drives: they were reduced to thinking, inferring, reckoning, co-ordinating cause and effect . . . they were reduced to their “consciousness.” . . . I believe there has never been such a feeling of misery on earth . . . and at the same time the old instincts had not suddenly ceased to make their usual demands! Only it was hardly or rarely possible to humor them: as a rule they had to seek new and, as it were, subterranean gratifications.

Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*

I

A seldom noticed but revealing moment occurs in *Macbeth* when the newly crowned king is trying to convince some desperate men to murder Banquo for him. Claiming that in the past Banquo thwarted their advancement, Macbeth challenges the chosen murderers: ‘Will you take this injury lying down?’ But more specifically his challenge takes the form of saying: ‘Will you turn the other cheek?’:

Do you find
Your patience so predominant in your nature
That you can let this go? Are you so gospell’d,
To pray for this good man, and for his issue,
Whose heavy hand hath bow’d you to the grave,
And beggar’d yours for ever?

(III.i.85–90)¹

In Macbeth’s remarkable use of the word *gospell’d* here,² we can hear the noble warrior’s contempt for Christian forbearance and the tame willingness to endure injury without responding. The murderers understand what Macbeth is getting

at, and, realizing that their very manhood is being questioned, they reply accordingly: “We are men, my liege” (III.i.90).

Macbeth goes on to articulate the concept of manliness the murderers are alluding to:

Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men,
As hounds and greyhounds, mungrels, spaniels, curs,
Shoughs, water-rugs, and demi-wolves are clipt
All by the name of dogs; the valued file
Distinguishes the swift, the slow, the subtle,
The house-keeper, the hunter, every one,
According to the gift which bounteous nature
Hath in him clos'd; whereby he does receive
Particular addition, from the bill
That writes them all alike; and so of men.

(III.i.91–100)

In its sense that all dogs are not created equal, this speech embodies the aristocratic or heroic conception of manhood. Macbeth is asking the murderers: Are you merely run-of-the-mill human beings or are you real men, he-men, men who know how to stand up for themselves? The distinction Macbeth is making is best captured in Homeric Greek, in the difference between the terms *aner* and *anthropos*.³ The Homeric hero is an *aner*, a he-man, raised above the ordinary run of human beings (*anthropoi*) by virtue of his strength and courage. In Homer, the difference between the hero and the ordinary human being is often presented as the difference between two kinds of animals, like the contrast between noble and base dogs in Macbeth’s speech, or even more like the contrast between tame and wild species drawn earlier in the play when a character talks of “sparrows” versus “eagles” or “the hare” versus “the lion” (I.ii.35). Macbeth sees a natural hierarchy among human beings: some are noble and some are base and they are so by nature.⁴ Taking the view that a noble man would scorn to receive an injury tamely, Macbeth tries to shame the potential murderers into doing his will. But he realizes that this notion of noble heroism may be challenged in Scotland. A new gospel is abroad in the land, which teaches a Christian way of life, a gospel of peace and humility, opposed to the way of life of the warrior.

Shakespeare develops the tragedy of *Macbeth* out of this tension between the heroic warrior’s ethic and the gospel truth. The story of Macbeth gave Shakespeare a chance to portray a world in which Christianity has penetrated and indeed changed the fabric of society, but in which some characters still think back—*nostalgically* is too weak a word—to the time before their nation was gosselled. Shakespeare seems to have been drawn to the situation of characters caught between two ways of life, an old and a new. In his tragedies, he often chose locales that allowed him to portray the clash of ethical alternatives, set-

ting his action at a point of intersection, a place where two antithetical ways of life cross. The Scotland of *Macbeth* is such a border land. It seems to lie at the crossroads of two different worlds, poised between warlike paganism and saint-like Christianity. At the beginning of the play, the peace of Scotland has been shattered by attacks by more primitive forces stemming from the west and the north, from the Hebrides and Norway (I.i.12, 31). These soldiers are referred to as “kerns and gallowglasses” (I.i.13), archaic terms that suggest foreign and barbaric troops.⁵ To the south of Scotland lies England, presented within the terms of the play as a more fully Christian land. In fact England is explicitly said to have a saint as a king, Edward the Confessor, who is repeatedly described in profoundly Christian terms:

To the succeeding royalty he leaves
 The healing benediction. With this strange virtue,
 He hath a heavenly gift of prophecy,
 And sundry blessings hang about his throne
 That speak him full of grace.

(IV.iii.155–59. See also III.vi.26–34.)

In the symbolic geography of the play, then, Scotland stands as it were midway between Norway and England, less barbaric than Norway but less Christian than England.⁶

This situation is similar to the symbolic geography Shakespeare creates in other tragedies. In *Othello*, for example, Cyprus stands as it were midway between the Christian civilization of Venice and the pagan barbarism of the Ottoman Empire, a situation that reflects the division within Othello’s soul. An even closer parallel to the geography of *Macbeth* can be found in *Hamlet*. Shakespeare’s Denmark conveys the same sense of lying on the fringes of European civilization. To the north of Denmark lies, again, Norway, a land of warlike characters such as Fortinbras, and hence the source of the Homeric heroism of single combat. To the south lie the centers of sophisticated Christian civilization, such as Paris and Wittenberg. The geographic divisions in the play once again reflect divisions within the hero’s soul. Hamlet is tragically divided between paganism and Christianity, especially when faced with the duty of revenge, a task to which the two ways of life dictate antithetical responses.⁷ *Macbeth* embodies a similar, and perhaps even stronger, sense of geography as fate. The characters find themselves poised between the poles of Norway and England, between the oldstyle pagan heroism of the battlefield and the newer Christian ideals represented by the saintly English king.

The Scottish characters in *Macbeth* are on the whole presented as believing Christians. Christian expressions come readily to their lips, as, for example, in Macduff’s report of the death of Duncan, when he speaks of how “Most sacri-

legious murder hath broke ope / The Lord's anointed temple" (II.iii.67–68). Macbeth himself clearly shows the influence of Christianity, as his wife notes when she is wondering whether he really is up to the challenge of becoming king:

Yet do I fear thy nature,
It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly,
That wouldst thou holily.

(I.v.16–21)

Lady Macbeth here thinks of her husband in the same terms he later applies to the murderers of Banquo; his compassionate religion threatens to undermine his heroic manliness.

But there are signs that the Christianity of the characters in *Macbeth* does not always run deep, or that it may be confused with older, pagan notions. Consider Macbeth's bewilderment at his inability to join the grooms in their prayers:

Macb. One cried, "God bless us!" and "Amen!" the other,
As they had seen me with these hangman's hands.
List'ning their fear, I could not say "Amen,"
When they did say "God bless us!"

Lady M. Consider it not so deeply.

Macb. But wherefore could not I pronounce "Amen"?
I had most need of blessing, and "Amen"
Stuck in my throat.

(II.i.24–30)

Someone might offer this passage as proof of Macbeth's Christianity, but in fact it points to a certain superficiality in his embrace of the newer religion. He thinks of *Amen* as a kind of pagan talisman, a magic formula that can be mechanically invoked, even by a criminal in the middle of his crime. As this passage suggests, Macbeth would gladly take any benefits he might obtain from Christianity, but he does not fully accept the moral demands the religion makes upon its believers. At least Claudius in *Hamlet* understands that his deeds are incompatible with his attempt to pray like a Christian. But here Macbeth seems to reduce Christianity to a mere set of verbal formulas. His case suggests that Christianity has not yet completely triumphed in the Scotland of *Macbeth* and is in fact in competition with and threatened by other forces. In the minds of warriors like Macbeth, older pagan ideas still maintain their force, strangely mixing with newer Christian beliefs.

II

This analysis of the basic situation in *Macbeth* helps explain Duncan's problem in the play. Duncan is trying to act like a Christian monarch in a country that is not fully Christianized and that thus retains a strong element of an older, savage heroism. He is obviously not a warlike king; when we first see him (I.ii), he is allowing his nobles to do his fighting for him.⁸ When characters in the play speak of Duncan's good qualities, they never credit him with the kind of virtues associated with a king's military function. Rather they tend to speak of his generosity or, in a key speech by Macbeth, of his meekness and his ability to evoke pity (I.vii.16–25). In all these respects, he seems to resemble England's Edward rather than the bellicose king of Norway. By his own admission, Duncan is too trusting of humanity, blind to the ambition lurking in the hearts of his nobles (I.iv.12–15). Within the terms of the play, he is presented as an anomaly in Scotland (see Sanders, *Shakespeare's Magnanimity*, p. 69). All the other leaders in Scotland are warlike men, great field generals like Macbeth, Banquo, and Macduff. Only Duncan does not lead his troops into battle; instead he must stand on the sidelines, receiving reports, asking like an outsider to the war: "What bloody man is that?" (I.ii.1). Duncan is crucially dependent on his great nobles to fight his battles for him and to stand up to the barbaric invaders.⁹

Hence Duncan's fatal error is not to recognize and acknowledge how weak and insecure his position truly is. The Scotland of the play is presented as a kind of elective monarchy, one in which the powerful nobles have a say in who becomes their king. The Scottish king cannot be said to serve at the pleasure of the great nobles, but he is so dependent on their military power to support him that he must constantly work to maintain their allegiance. Duncan's generosity with titles, honors, and gifts to his thanes is a way of dealing with this problem. But he makes one key error: he nominates Malcolm as Prince of Cumberland, thereby trying to ensure his son's designation as the next king of Scotland.¹⁰ Duncan acts as if he were already living under a system of hereditary monarchy, as if he were in fully civilized England rather than more primitive Scotland. By prematurely naming Malcolm as his successor, Duncan undermines one of the holds a king in his circumstances has on his thanes. They might remain loyal to him in the hope that he would eventually throw his weight in favor of one of them succeeding him to the throne. Certainly Duncan's designation of Malcolm as his successor proves disastrous as the action unfolds, provoking Macbeth into murdering the king, rather than perhaps allowing events to propel him to the throne.

Duncan does not seem to understand the political necessities of the regime of which he is the head. Moreover, he seems temperamentally unsuited to maintaining rule in a land in which constant warfare has become a way of life. The civil war in Scotland with which the play begins is testimony to Duncan's

failure as a king. Shakespeare found this point made explicitly in his source in Holinshed's *Chronicles*:

The beginning of Duncans reigne was verie quiet and peaceable, without anie notable trouble; but after it was perceived how negligent he was in punishing offenders, manie misruled persons tooke occasion thereof to trouble the peace and quiet state of the common-wealth, by seditious commotions which first had their beginnings in this wise. (Bullough, p. 488)

Holinshed blames the failure of Duncan's rule on his forbearance toward his subjects. The very meekness of Duncan, which makes him admirable as a Christian, works against his success as a king in a warlike society. The idea that the ethical principles of Christianity might not always work well in the rough-and-tumble world of Scottish politics is developed later in *Macbeth* when Lady Macduff finds herself in danger even though, or perhaps precisely because, she is morally innocent:

I have done no harm. But I remember now
I am in this earthly world—where to do harm
Is often laudable, to do good sometimes
Accounted dangerous folly. Why then, alas,
Do I put up that womanly defense,
To say I have done no harm?

(IV.ii.74–79)¹¹

This idea of a double standard, of a conflict between worldly and otherworldly principles, is basic to *Macbeth*, often imaged, as here, in terms of manliness versus womanliness.

The germ of this conception can be found in Holinshed's contrast of Duncan's character with Macbeth's:

Makbeth [was] a valiant gentleman, and one that if he had not been somewhat cruell of nature, might have beene thought most woorthie the government of a realme. On the other part, Duncane was so soft and gentle of nature, that the people wished the inclinations and maners of these two cousins to have beene so tempered and entexchangeable bestowed betwixt them, that where the one had too much of clemencie, and the other of crueltie, the meane vertue betwixt these two extremities might have reigned by indifferent partition in them both, so should Duncane have proved a woorthie king, and Makbeth an excellent capteine. (Bullough, p. 488)

By juxtaposing cruelty and clemency, this passage points to the contrast between the warlike spirit of paganism and the meek resignation of Christianity.¹² We are used to concentrating on the tragedy of Macbeth, but the play also presents the tragedy of Duncan, tragically caught between the more civilized notion of Christian kingship embodied in Edward the Confessor and the more primitive notion of the king as battlefield warrior, embodied in the person of Norway.

This contrast in notions of kingship is expressed most vividly in Shakespeare’s source in Holinshed by the traitor, Makdowald, who calls Duncan “a faint-hearted milkesop, more meet to governe a sort of idle monks in some cloister, than to have the rule of such valiant and hardie men of warre as the Scots were” (Bullough, p. 489). More than any other passage in Holinshed, this may have suggested to Shakespeare the theme of the heroic warrior’s contempt for Christian meekness. Makdowald’s taunt to Duncan resembles the speech of the usurper York to Henry VI in one of Shakespeare’s first plays:

That head of thine doth not become a crown:
 Thy hand is made to grasp a palmer’s staff
 And not to grace an awful princely sceptre.
 That gold must round engirt these brows of mine,
 Whose smile and frown, like to Achilles’ spear,
 Is able with the change to kill and cure.

(2 *Henry VI*, V.i.96–101)

As this passage suggests, the contrast between Duncan and Macbeth recapitulates and deepens the contrast Shakespeare drew between the saintly Henry VI and the warlike Richard III in one of his earliest works (and his first study of tyranny).¹³

The outcome of *Macbeth* harks back to the result of the Wars of the Roses in Shakespeare’s First Tetralogy. The destruction of the great aristocratic leaders in England, culminating in the carnage created by Richard III, made possible the centralizing of the English monarchy under Henry VII and the Tudor dynasty. Similarly in *Macbeth*, a sufficient number of potential rivals to the throne have been eliminated by the end of the play to give some plausibility to the idea that Malcolm may reign more peacefully than his father did. Such considerations might explain Shakespeare’s dwelling on the moment when Malcolm attempts to reconstitute his feudal followers: “My thanes and kinsmen, / Henceforth be earls, the first that ever Scotland/ In such an honor nam’d” (V.ix.28–30). The transformation of the thanes into earls seems to represent an anglicizing of Scotland, an attempt to convert a barbaric consortium of feudal chieftains into a comparatively centralized monarchy, in which all honors and titles now flow from the throne. Thus, by inducing his enemies to call in English aid from the saintly Edward, Macbeth may ironically have completed the process of the gospelling of Scotland he scorns.¹⁴ Despite his contempt for the overrefinement of the “English epicures” (V.iii.8), Macbeth ends up giving them a foothold in Scotland. Malcolm anticipates that the English aid will bring about the domestication of Scotland: “I hope the days are near at hand / That chambers will be safe” (V.iv.1–2), and he strongly associates the English forces with the power of Christianity (IV.iii.189–92). Though Malcolm begins the play just as dependent as his father on help from his subordinates in warfare (I.ii.3–5), by the end he shows signs of having learned from Duncan’s mistakes. In particular, judging by Malcolm’s canny behavior with Macduff in Act IV, scene iii, he evi-

dently has outgrown his father's overly trusting attitude. Perhaps Malcolm is ready by the end of the play to provide the synthesis of Duncan and Macbeth Holinshed projected. Having learned a certain toughmindedness from his enemies, Malcolm may be able to bridge the gap between Christian and pagan kingship.¹⁵

Nevertheless, in the main action of *Macbeth* the tension between these two worlds remains acute. Duncan goes blindly to his death, never realizing his errors, but Macbeth has some sense of the peculiarity of his situation. Consider his speech when he is terrified by the appearance of Banquo's ghost at his feast:

Blood hath been shed ere now, i' th' olden time,
 Ere humane statute purg'd the gentle weal;
 Ay, and since too, murthers have been perform'd
 Too terrible for the ear. The time has been,
 That when the brains were out, the man would die,
 And there an end; but now they rise again
 With twenty mortal murthers on their crowns,
 And push us from our stools.

(III.iv.74–81)

The horror of the occasion calls forth from Macbeth a strong sense of the contrast between the past (the "olden time") and the present moment. He acknowledges that a kind of progress has been made in Scotland, a process of civilizing in which the Christian spirit has tamed the barbarism of its warriors ("humane statute" has "purg'd the gentle weal"). But Macbeth does not see this process as an unequivocal gain. And what troubles him about the new dispensation in Scotland is something specifically Christian: quite literally the new possibility of resurrection ("now they rise again"; see also III.iv.73–75). In this speech he is looking back with nostalgia to the pagan past, when a man, once dead, had the decency to stay dead.

Macbeth's reaction reflects the disorientation of the oldstyle pagan warrior faced with the new worldview and expanded cosmic horizons of Christianity.¹⁶ He has never had a problem dealing face to face with a living human opponent. That is the sort of situation he has been trained to handle as a warrior. What he cannot deal with is some kind of supernatural apparition, a power not of this world:

What man dare, I dare.
 Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,
 The arm'd rhinoceros, or th' Hyrcan tiger,
 Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
 Shall never tremble.

(III.iv.98–102)

Nothing in or of this world could frighten the courageous warrior Macbeth, but forces that appear to come from another world terrify him, although as we shall see they also appear to touch—or perhaps even call into being—something deep within his soul. To be sure, one cannot simply equate supernatural apparitions with the force of Christianity; as Senecan drama reminds us, ghosts are possible in a pagan framework as well. Though Shakespeare evidently worked to reduce the element of the supernatural in his portrait of the early Roman Republic in *Coriolanus*, one way he dramatized the weakening of the old civil religion as the Republic waned was to emphasize supernatural forces in *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*.¹⁷ But even when they are confronted by ghosts, and genuinely shaken by the experience, Shakespeare’s Romans do not react with the pure panic that seizes Macbeth.

Brutus’ cool encounter with the ghost of Caesar is representative:

Bru. Art thou some god, some angel, or some devil,
That mak’st my blood cold, and my hair to stare?
Speak to me what thou art.

Ghost. Thy evil spirit, Brutus.

Bru. Why com’st thou?

Ghost. To tell thee thou shalt see me at Philippi.

Bru. Well; then I shall see thee again?

Ghost. Ay, at Philippi.

Bru. Why, I will see thee at Philippi then. [*Exit Ghost.*]
Now I have taken heart thou vanishest.
Ill spirit, I would hold more talk with thee.

(IV.iii.279–88)

Though at first quite frightened by the appearance of Caesar’s ghost, Brutus quickly pulls himself together. His calm and collected response—“Why, I will see thee at Philippi then”—is a good measure of the moderation with which Shakespeare’s Romans accept the intrusion of the supernatural in their lives, especially when this scene is contrasted with Macbeth’s reaction to the ghost of Banquo. Shakespeare was aware that the pagan world allowed for the possibility of the supernatural, but, as he shows, the gulf between the natural and the supernatural was not as wide or as sharply drawn in paganism. Strictly speaking, one might even say that paganism predates the genuine and full distinction between the natural and the supernatural. Allowing for a continuum between god and man, with all sorts of intermediary figures such as heroes and *daimonia*, paganism does not tend to separate a divine realm from a human realm in the radical way that Christianity does, with its transcendent conception of deity and hence its sense of the unbridgeable gulf between man and God. This is admittedly a complicated issue, but with all the necessary qualifications being made, it is accurate to say that Christianity is distinctly more otherworldly

as a religion than classical paganism. Macbeth reacts more violently to the supernatural apparitions in his life because he thinks of them as causing a radical rift in his existence, marking a kind of epoch (“The time has been, / That when the brains were out, the man would die”). In short, the key point in *Macbeth* is not the impact of Christianity per se, but the impact of Christianity on a man who has been used to thinking in pagan terms. Of all Shakespeare’s tragedies, *Macbeth* is perhaps the one in which supernatural forces have the most disturbing effect. The subject gave Shakespeare a chance to explore what happens to a pagan warrior wrenched out of his narrow horizons and displaced into a Christian context, with its radical divide between this world and the next.

III

These speeches in Act III, scene iv, highlight the peculiar fact about Macbeth: for a courageous man, he is, as Shakespeare portrays him, remarkably subject to moments of fear. He begins the play as a model of courage; no one could be braver on the battlefield. But in the course of the action, he is increasingly tormented by doubts and fears. Lady Macbeth states the paradox of his character succinctly: “Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier and afeard?” (V.i.36–37). Though basically a stalwart warrior, with his feet planted firmly on the ground, Macbeth finds himself living in a slippery world of ghosts and apparitions that haunt his waking hours and torment his dreams, leaving him in a confused state in which “present fears / Are less than horrible imaginings,” and “function / Is smother’d in surmise” until for him “nothing is / But what is not” (I.iii.137–42). Faced with a world where “the earth hath bubbles, as the water has” (I.iii.79), Macbeth constantly experiences the melting away of anything he thought provided a foundation for his existence. Shaken to the core of his being by the strange visions that come upon him, Macbeth is left at sea and wonders how his wife can keep her equilibrium:

Can such things be,
And overcome us like a summer’s cloud,
Without our special wonder? You make me strange
Even to the disposition that I owe,
When now I think you can behold such sights,
And keep the natural ruby of your cheeks,
When mine is blanch’d with fear.

(III.iv.109–15)

Perhaps no character in Shakespeare undergoes a greater transformation than Macbeth does in the course of the play, from a manly hero to what he himself describes as “the baby of a girl” (III.iv.105). This strange pattern results from Macbeth’s unnerving displacement from a pagan to a Christian cosmos.

At the beginning of the play Macbeth appears to be the most admired man in Scotland. In the second scene, people are singing his praises, celebrating precisely his courage as a warrior:

For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),
 Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
 Which smok'd with bloody execution,
 (Like Valor's minion) carv'd out his passage
 Till he fac'd the slave;
 Which nev'r shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
 Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th' chops,
 And fix'd his head upon our battlements.

(I.ii.16–23)¹⁸

Macbeth first appears in the play as a kind of Homeric hero, cutting his way through lesser men on the battlefield like a Scottish Achilles (the Homeric similes throughout this battle narrative give an epic feel to the passage). In our first glimpse of Macbeth, he is hacking a man in half—and is being commended for it. Even the meek King Duncan is favorably impressed by Macbeth's heroism, calling him "valiant cousin, worthy gentleman" and "noble Macbeth" (I.ii.24, 67).¹⁹ Later in the play, characters view Macbeth as a bloody, cruel, violent tyrant, but at the beginning he is praised for the same savage qualities—as long as they are directed against Scotland's enemies. This is the problem the warrior faces: how he is evaluated depends on the context of his violence, whether it is perceived as in the service of his own community or opposed to it (see Berger, pp. 10–11, and especially p. 14). The epic language of Act I, scene ii, suggests a situation typical of the genre. It involves a variant of the original epic conflict, what one might call the Achilles-Agamemnon problem, the dilemma of the legitimate king who is weaker as a military figure than one of his great warriors.²⁰

But if Macbeth begins the play as a kind of Scottish Achilles, he certainly does not end that way. We cannot imagine Achilles plotting to murder Agamemnon in secret—he may want to kill the king, but he would do it openly. Achilles is very cruel, but the *Iliad* builds up to the moment when he shows compassion to Priam. The movement of *Macbeth* is just the reverse—the hero becomes crueller as the play progresses. What accounts for this difference between Achilles and Macbeth as heroes? I want to make what will at first sound like an extremely perverse argument, that the transformation of Macbeth is to be traced to the impact of Christianity.²¹ This point is to say the least counterintuitive: as a gospel of meekness Christianity ought to tame the fierceness and savagery of a warrior, not inflame it. Indeed we witness this process happening in Scotland; as we have seen, it may explain Duncan's imprudent clemency and seems to have provoked Macbeth's contempt for gosselling.

But now I am not examining the case of the warrior tamed by Christianity. Rather I want to consider the more complicated case Shakespeare is intrigued by in *Macbeth*: what happens when a warrior retains his martial spirit, and yet allows it to be redirected or reconstituted in a new Christian context. Macbeth very much stays a warrior, and even as we have seen expresses scorn for the new religion of meekness. And yet he is secretly affected by it, secretly accepts its premises, almost against his will. As much as he tries to remain the heroic soldier, Macbeth is not immune to the Christian critique of heroism and hence he cannot remain true to the oldstyle pagan ethic in its pure form. Christianity has changed his view of heroism, especially pagan heroism. Consider the moment just before Macbeth's death when he refuses to kill himself: "Why should I play the Roman fool, and die / On mine own sword?" (V.viii.1-2). Who taught Macbeth that the Romans were fools? My answer is: the Christian gossellers. The principle of Roman suicide was that honor is more precious than life and thus in certain circumstances a noble man would rather kill himself than live on in disgrace. To Christian thinkers, this principle was an example of pagan vanity, of placing the transitory value of worldly honor above the eternal value of one's immortal soul. Macbeth is obviously not approaching the issue as a theologian, but the way he abjures suicide and desperately clings to life does suggest something in him opposed to pagan attitudes.

What Macbeth has learned from Christianity is contempt for the transitoriness of pagan values and an appreciation of eternity. I am not saying that he behaves like a good Christian, in the way, for example, Duncan does. Rather he tries to remain loyal to the end to a warrior's ethic, but he reinterprets that ethic with a distinctly Christian inflection, though this obviously involves a significant distortion of Christianity. Holinshed held out the prospect of a positive synthesis of pagan and Christian ethics, of combining "cruelty" and "clemency" and thus moderating the bad effects of both. In the figure of Macbeth, Shakespeare contemplates the demonic counterpart of this happy synthesis of pagan and Christian, a heroic warrior who turns tyrant in pursuit of a secularized version of the Christian Absolute.²²

To clarify Macbeth's transformation of the heroic ideal, it is useful to contrast him with Achilles. Homer's hero is famous for having been confronted with a tragic choice between a long but obscure life and a brief but glorious one. His character is defined by his opting for the second possibility, and to many his decision has seemed to be the prototype of all tragic choices.²³ But what is characteristic of Macbeth is precisely his refusal to be bound by the terms of Achilles' choice. Macbeth wants to have the best of both worlds; he obsessively pursues the goal of a long *and* glorious life. He is driven by the idea that any glory is worthless to him unless it can be prolonged, perhaps forever (through his posterity). This is the way Macbeth covertly accepts the Christian critique of pagan heroism. For Christian thinkers, Achilles is the archetype of pagan vanity, willfully embracing glory at the price of his own

transitoriness. Macbeth rejects this pagan foolishness. At the peak of his success as King of Scotland, he says: “To be thus is nothing, / But to be safely thus” (III.i.47–48). This line is profoundly characteristic of Macbeth and shows his peculiarity as a hero. He is an absolutist, with an all-or-nothing attitude; his achievement is worthless to him unless it is perfectly *secure*. Macbeth’s scorn for the transitoriness of pagan values leads to a concern for safety that seems unheroic by classical standards. One cannot imagine Achilles saying at the moment of his triumph over Hector: “To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus.” Achilles’ scorn for his safety is the hallmark of his character and his distinctive brand of heroism. One can find no better measure of the transformation of the idea of heroism in the figure of Macbeth than his almost bourgeois concern for the security of his achievement.²⁴ This puzzling nonheroic element in Macbeth—his fear for his safety—is somehow related to the Christian context of his actions.

IV

We can see the impact of the Christian context on Macbeth’s thinking in the famous opening of his soliloquy contemplating the murder of Duncan:

If it were done, when ’tis done, then ’twere well
 It were done quickly. If th’ assassination
 Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
 With his surcease, success; that but this blow
 Might be the be-all and the end-all—here,
 But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
 We’d jump the life to come.

(I.vii.1–7)

The simple fact that Macbeth is thinking about the “life to come” immediately suggests his difference from a pure pagan hero. As Shakespeare does in the key scene in which Hamlet is considering killing Claudius, the playwright indicates how the expansion of Christian horizons to include an afterlife changes the terms of heroic action (see my *Shakespeare: Hamlet*, pp. 43–45). Someone might immediately object that Macbeth’s point in this passage is precisely that he would like to “*jump* the life to come,” to exclude thoughts of the afterlife from his deliberations. As in his later complaint about the dead coming back to life, he seems to long for the contraction of his horizons back to pagan dimensions, so that he would only have to worry about what happens in this life. But the very fact that Macbeth wishes to exclude thoughts of the afterlife shows that Christianity has in fact altered his manner of thinking.

Indeed, no matter how unchristian the object of Macbeth’s thinking in this soliloquy is, his thought processes display the influence of Christianity. Instead

of unthinkingly plunging into action, he tries to analyze his situation with an almost priestly dissection of motive and consequence. The tortuous syntax of his speech reveals a mind turning inward, opening up its depths. If Macbeth is an Achilles, he is an Achilles with a conscience.²⁵ As becomes even more evident later in his anguished reaction to having murdered Duncan, Macbeth has become aware of the moral dimension of human action, even though he does not act morally. That is why he strikes us as a more complex figure than a purely pagan hero. His exposure to Christianity has created a division in his soul, which makes it impossible for him to act singlemindedly or to face the consequences of his actions without flinching. The initial description of Macbeth on the battlefield might lead us to expect to meet a kind of brainless fighting machine. Instead, in Macbeth's soliloquies in Act I, Shakespeare reveals a character with a richly developed psychological interior, torn by conflicting impulses and struggling with a nascent conscience.

Whatever else one may say about the impact of Christianity on the pagan hero, it gives him psychological depth.²⁶ The length, frequency, and convoluted syntax of Macbeth's soliloquies give him a complex interior as a character that is lacking in any of Shakespeare's Romans. Even as thoughtful a character as Brutus, who at first is clearly troubled by the prospect of killing Caesar, is not anguished by his decision to do so in the way that Macbeth reacts in roughly similar circumstances. To be sure, Brutus images himself as undergoing a psychic civil war when trying to decide whether or not to kill Caesar (see *Julius Caesar*, II.i.61–69), but he never experiences the kind of inner division that tears Macbeth apart. Indeed, once Brutus convinces himself that he is justified in killing Caesar, unlike Macbeth, he never once wavers in his resolve, nor does he suffer pangs of remorse or even regret after the deed.²⁷ That is why, as we have seen, Brutus is able to confront the ghost of Caesar as calmly as he does, whereas Macbeth is tormented by his visions of the murdered Duncan and Banquo. Despite his initial doubts, Brutus kills Caesar with a sense of moral conviction; by contrast, Macbeth must resolve to kill Duncan against his own moral scruples, and thus approaches the deed with a deeply divided soul. The complexity introduced into Macbeth's situation by the conflict between pagan and Christian principles in his soul is what makes him a profoundly tragic figure. A purely pagan Macbeth might have killed his king without any pangs of conscience; a purely Christian Macbeth might not have murdered Duncan at all; it is the combination of paganism and Christianity in Macbeth that produces his peculiar tragic situation as a murderer with a bad conscience.

Moreover, in analyzing Macbeth's "If it were done" soliloquy, we can see how Christianity has given him new desires and in fact transformed his ambition in a subtle but profound way. Although Macbeth appears to be rejecting "the life to come," what he is really doing is trying to gain here in this life what Christianity promises to believers in the afterlife, a kind of absolute perfection, an infinite satisfaction. As he first reveals in this speech, Macbeth is questing for what I will call the Absolute Act, what he calls "the be-all and the end-all,"

a single deed that will give him everything he desires and give it to him securely and forever.²⁸ What gives him pause at this moment in Act I, scene vii, is the consideration that no human act is entirely self-contained; every deed has consequences, and hence a misdeed may come back to haunt its perpetrator. Macbeth would have done well to heed his own warning, which turns out to characterize prophetically the course of his career in crime. But he cannot close his eyes to the tantalizing vision of the Absolute Act that will yield him complete and perfect happiness.

Thus Macbeth kills Duncan in expectation of gaining at one stroke all he desires, only to have his hopes thwarted, since once in power he finds himself exposed to a new sense of insecurity as a tyrant. But Macbeth does not rethink the futility of his quest for the Absolute Act; rather he tries to reformulate it. Instead of focusing on Duncan, now his thoughts dwell obsessively on Banquo, and he concludes that the only obstacle standing between him and perfect happiness is his rival general: “There is none but he / Whose being I do fear” (III.i.53–54); hence “his death” would leave Macbeth “perfect” (III.i.107). In his obsession with the royal succession, we can see the concern for eternity Macbeth has absorbed from Christianity. What troubles him is the thought that the Weird Sisters promised Banquo that he would found a “line of kings” (III.i.59). Macbeth cannot be content with having achieved his personal ambition of becoming king if it now appears to lead nowhere in the future:

Upon my head they plac'd a fruitless crown,
And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,
Thence to be wrench'd with an unlineal hand,
No son of mine succeeding. If't be so,
For Banquo's issue have I fil'd my mind,
For them the gracious Duncan have I murther'd,
Put rancors in the vessel of my peace
Only for them, and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common enemy of man,
To make them kings—the seeds of Banquo kings!

(III.i.60–69)

In the most unchristian act of contemplating another murder, Macbeth thinks in Christian terms. He is tormented by the thought that he has given up his “eternal jewel” to the devil for the sake of Banquo’s heirs, not his own. For all his contempt for Christianity, the heroic warrior cannot resist thinking like a Christian in one decisive respect. Once he has been told of the immortality of the soul, he cannot help conceiving of the issue of his happiness differently from the way a pagan hero like Achilles would. He comes to desire a perfection unimaginable to a pagan living in a world of finite horizons.

Having failed to satisfy his infinite desire by killing Duncan, Macbeth nevertheless feels that perfection is still within his grasp. All he has to do now is to have Banquo killed, together with his son Fleance. Shakespeare does not reveal

the full extent of Macbeth's hopes until the second attempt at the Absolute Act goes awry. When the murderers are forced to report that, although Banquo is dead, Fleance escaped, Macbeth responds in despair:

Then comes my fit again. I had else been perfect,
 Whole as the marble, founded as the rock,
 As broad and general as the casing air;
 But now I am cabin'd, cribb'd, confin'd, bound in
 To saucy doubts and fears.

(III.iv.20–24)

This speech provides the most forceful expression of Macbeth's all-or-nothing attitude. He is constantly searching for a kind of pure perfection, an analogue to Christian salvation; in its absence, he feels himself left with nothing, in a kind of damnation. The height of Macbeth's hopes is thus responsible for the depth of his despair. He desires something infinite ("as broad and general as the casing air"), but he discovers that every human act is finite, something is always left over, like Fleance, to provoke further consequences. Contrary to Macbeth's hopes, no single act can "trammel up" all the consequences and forestall the need for future action. Hence Macbeth's quest for perpetual satisfaction yields only perpetual dissatisfaction. As his wife painfully sums up his situation: "Nought's had, all's spent, / Where our desire is got without content" (III.ii.4–5), and she correctly diagnoses her husband's problem as an inability to live with "doubtful joy" (III.ii.7). Yet despite the mounting evidence of the failure of his quest for the Absolute Act, Macbeth allows himself to be drawn into a series of deeds that only succeed in damning him further. Even toward the end of his life, when his world seems to be crashing down around him, he still hopes for some kind of enduring happiness and is willing to risk everything on one last gamble to achieve perfection: "This push / Will cheer me ever, or disseat me now" (V.iii.20–21).²⁹

This analysis sheds light on what is probably Macbeth's most famous speech, his response to the news of his wife's death:

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

(V.v.19–28)

Struck by the profound nihilism of this speech, some critics have wondered whether to attribute this attitude to Shakespeare himself. But Shakespeare is careful to place Macbeth's nihilism in a specific context. Given what we have seen of his all-or-nothing attitude, it is not surprising that the collapse of his quest for the Absolute Act should generate this glimpse into a nihilistic abyss. This speech is surely not an expression of Christian sentiments, and yet once again we see how even in opposition to Christianity Macbeth turns out to be influenced by it. When he speaks of "the last syllable of recorded time," he clearly is no longer thinking in pagan terms, but is rather haunted by the apocalyptic expectations of Christianity. Indeed in its feeling for time, this speech marks a turn from a pagan to a Christian outlook, as Macbeth learns to devalue this world from the standpoint of eternity.³⁰

What is characteristic of Macbeth's words in Act V, scene v, is that he speaks of *tomorrow* and *yesterday*, but he has no thought for *today*. He has lost the pagan ability to take pleasure in the moment, to live happily in this world, without looking beyond its borders to eternity. This speech thus sums up all that has destroyed Macbeth's happiness. Futurity has cast a shadow over his life, driving him to leave the past behind ("what's done, is done"; III.ii.12) and in the process poisoning the present for him.³¹ The profoundest transformation in the nature of Macbeth's heroism is his reorientation toward the future, brought about by the intervention of the Weird Sisters in his world, who in some way stand for the impact of the supernatural on human life and hence the subversion of the natural. Recall that when we first hear of Macbeth in the play, he is "Disdaining Fortune" (I.ii.17). Like any good pagan warrior, at first he is not obsessed with the future but fights for the glory of the present moment, oblivious to the consequences for his safety. But by suggesting to Macbeth that there may be some providential order to events in this world, the Weird Sisters shake his faith in himself and in his own efforts, and awaken his longing to ally himself to whatever force in the universe represents the wave of the future. Lady Macbeth quickly picks up the same attitude (On this point, see Mack, p. 192.):

Thy letters have transported me beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant.

(I.v.56–58)

Here is the key to the transformation of Macbeth's sense of time: the present moment becomes contemptible whenever one thinks one can see beyond it confidently to a perfect future. Drawn inexorably into the future, Macbeth eventually sees all present moments voided of meaning, and, since in one basic sense life can be lived only in the present, this means that life itself loses all meaning for Macbeth.³² His contempt for the "brief candle" and the "poor player" who

merely “struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more” is one last reflection of the disdain for the transitory he has absorbed from Christianity. Ultimately Shakespeare shows that Macbeth’s nihilism is the obverse of a kind of religious faith; this world becomes worthless to him when it fails to live up to an otherworldly standard of absolute perfection.

V

To understand more fully how Macbeth comes to be governed by a demonic parody of a religious faith, we must analyze the role of the Weird Sisters in the play. Of course, on the face of it, as witches, they appear to represent an anti-Christian force within the world of *Macbeth*. But although as “instruments of darkness” (I.iii.124) the witches must be viewed as enemies of orthodox religion, the principles in which they in effect instruct Macbeth are at least in one respect indistinguishable from Christian beliefs. What the witches teach Macbeth is after all a lesson in providence. The providential order they represent may be demonic and lead Macbeth to his damnation, but the fact remains that their prophecies embody for Macbeth a form of religious teaching, that earthly events are governed by higher powers. Indeed the fulfillment of their specific prophecies in Macbeth’s case suggests to him that the world is governed by a particular providence, as in the Christian understanding, rather than by a general providence, as is more typical of the classical view.

As we have seen, Macbeth begins the play with the faith of a Homeric warrior—whether he succeeds in battle depends largely on whether he behaves bravely on the battlefield. But the Weird Sisters undermine Macbeth’s belief that the outcome of his actions lies in his own hands and teach him instead to rely on supernatural aid. As the play unfolds, Macbeth becomes increasingly hesitant to take the risks a hero normally accepts as a matter of course, and instead seeks guarantees from the witches that his success is assured because it is foreordained. One would expect that Macbeth’s turn from heroic self-reliance to a faith in a providential order would lead him to act more virtuously in conventional moral terms. But in the paradoxical world of *Macbeth*, the hero’s newfound faith in providence actually makes him crueller in his actions. As long as Macbeth believes that the outcome of single combat is a function chiefly of the behavior of the combatants, he acts nobly, as shown by the general admiration he initially evokes. But once Macbeth believes himself in league with hidden powers, he begins to act secretly himself, concealing his evil intentions behind false displays of good will (I.vii.82), working through proxies, and striking down opponents when they least expect it, rather than in honest open combat. Moreover, once Macbeth comes to believe that his victories are fated, he loses all restraint and becomes willing to do anything to achieve his goals, including murdering women and children. Macbeth develops

a kind of fanaticism; he becomes so convinced that he is favored by providence that he comes to view his personal cause as universal (III.iv.134–35).

Thus in line with their paradoxical nature, the Weird Sisters, who seem to offer new power to Macbeth, in fact take away whatever power he originally possessed and turn him into a creature of their own ends. He thinks that providence is serving him, but in reality he ends up serving providence, or at least whatever order the witches represent. Macbeth's loss of freedom is reflected in the diminishing proportion of thought to deed that characterizes his behavior in the course of the play.³³ As we have seen, at first a significant expansion and deepening of Macbeth's consciousness occurs. Once he leaves the battlefield, he begins to behave differently than a pagan hero would. He agonizes over the decision to kill Duncan, running over in his mind all the moral objections to the deed. Speaking of meekness and pity with respect (I.vii.16–25), Macbeth comes closest to espousing genuine Christian principles in this speech. Even once he has killed Duncan, Macbeth cannot rest content with the deed or put it out of his mind. Although it may be inaccurate to speak of remorse in his case, he is clearly troubled by what he has done and convinced that he will never sleep peacefully again (II.ii.38–40). The way his conscience plays tricks on him, making him see visions and hear voices, is one more indication of his transformation from a purely pagan hero. His behavior provokes a reproach from his wife, who would like to see him act like an oldstyle warrior again: "You do unbend your noble strength, to think / So brain-sickly of things" (II.ii.42–43).

But the new interiority that has opened up in Macbeth eventually begins to close down under the pressure of events. To be sure, it is still evident when he is faced with the prospect of murdering Banquo. Shakespeare again gives Macbeth a long soliloquy before the deed, in which he reflects on why he must do it. And once Banquo has been killed, Macbeth's conscience wreaks havoc with his peace of mind, perhaps even producing the apparitions that haunt his banquet. Lady Macbeth once again tries to restore his heroic attitude by shaming him: "What? quite unmann'd in folly?" (III.iv.72). But Shakespeare introduces subtle variations into Macbeth's second murder, which suggest how his attitudes are changing. In considering the murder of Banquo, Macbeth dwells more on prudential than on moral considerations. Moreover, as he finishes his soliloquy, he has the potential murderers enter and indicates that they will be going over matters they discussed the night before. It is thus clear that even before the soliloquy Macbeth had already reached the decision to kill Banquo. Unlike what happened in the case of Duncan, this time Macbeth's soliloquy merely confirms a choice he has already made. Furthermore, his decision to hire murderers to kill Banquo suggests that he is trying to distance himself from the deed and perhaps avoid the fits of conscience his murder of Duncan provoked (unsuccessfully as it turns out). Macbeth seems to be reacting against the moral scruples that go along with the opening up of interiority in his soul. As the

banquet scene confirms, the warrior wishes he could return to an earlier state of affairs, when he was a simpler man and remained undisturbed by the prickings of conscience.

Thus at the end of III.iv, Macbeth proclaims:

Strange things I have in head, that will to hand,
Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd.

(III.iv.138–39)

Here we see Macbeth provoked into a willful contraction of his consciousness. Up to this point he has been characterized by the unusual amount of thought he gives to his deeds before acting (at least unusual for a warrior). Now he wishes to reverse this pattern: act first and then think about it. The new principle of interiority in his soul has clearly become painful to him, a burden from which he now wishes to escape. But the price Macbeth pays for this escape is his freedom. Reacting against the agonizing thought processes that have been going into his decisions, he starts to act mechanically, without thinking, and that means to act more brutally than ever before. The very fact that up to this point he has been deliberating at length about his deeds indicates that he has been free to act or not. But from this point on, he allows himself to be drawn into a pattern in which he reacts automatically to events, rather than planning them, thus gradually surrendering his freedom of action.

When Macbeth is shaken by the news that Macduff has fled to England, he conceives the idea of what would today be called a pre-emptive strike:

Time, thou anticipat'st my dread exploits:
The flighty purpose never is o'ertook
Unless the deed go with it.

(IV.i.144–46)

This attitude is the result of the Weird Sisters' success in increasingly convincing Macbeth that events in life are fated. If his destiny is already decided, then there is no point in Macbeth debating what is right or wrong for him to do; rather his one task becomes to try to figure out, with the aid of the witches, what is fated to happen next and act accordingly. Once he believes that he can have certain knowledge of the future, he thinks that haste, and not due deliberation, will be the key to his success:

From this moment

The very firstlings of my heart shall be
The firstlings of my hand. And even now,
To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done:
The castle of Macduff I will surprise,
Seize upon Fife, give to th' edge o' th' sword

His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls
That trace him in his line. No boasting like a fool;
This deed I'll do before this purpose cool.
But no more sights!

(IV.i.146–55)

After debating at length killing both Duncan and Banquo, here Macbeth plunges precipitately into several murders, all of them crueller and more repugnant morally than his earlier deeds. But having had enough of moral scruples, Macbeth goes to the opposite extreme of unthinking action, which in this case leads him into indiscriminate violence.

One might be tempted to view this development as simply a return to pagan impulsiveness, an attempt to annul the new Christian principle of interiority. But lurking behind this speech is a model that cannot be traced to pagan sources. “To crown my thoughts with acts”: as several critics have noted, in this speech Macbeth is attempting to live out a dream of omnipotence (see, for example, Kirsch, pp. 94–95, and Turner, p. 138). He fantasizes that he need only think something and it will instantaneously happen, a pattern fully embodied only in the biblical God. Just as he has been attracted to the Christian idea of eternity, Macbeth feels the pull of the Christian idea of an omnipotent God, whose thoughts translate directly into actions. As part of the absolutism we have observed in Macbeth, he now covets the omnipotence of the biblical God for himself. Reacting against his discovery of his vulnerability as a mortal, he goes to the opposite extreme of wishing to believe himself invulnerable, which is what makes him prey to the witches’ schemes. Once he places himself entirely in their hands, he is able to overcome his unheroic sense of insecurity and in fact develops a remarkable faith in himself as unconquerable. Toward the end of the play, in a reversal of the way he is portrayed in the middle, Macbeth begins to sound conventionally heroic again: “The mind I sway by, and the heart I bear, / Shall never sag with doubt, nor shake with fear” (V.iii.9–10); he actually says: “I have almost forgot the taste of fears” (V.v.9). But the irony is that Macbeth’s sense of absolute power comes just before his experience of absolute powerlessness.³⁴ Seeking to take total command of his world, he in fact quickly loses control of events, forced to watch his enemies seize the initiative, while he is reduced to waiting passively and reacting to their moves, precisely because of his faith in the witches’ prophecies (V.iii.2–7). In the end, he even loses his freedom of movement: “They have tied me to a stake; I cannot fly, / But bear-like must fight the course” (V.vii.1–2).

As his speech in Act IV, scene i, indicates, Macbeth repudiates thinking prior to acting in the hope of avoiding “more sights,” that is, he does not want to contemplate the moral consequences of his deeds. Thus his speech fulfills a wish that both he and his wife express earlier in the play—to be able to act without seeing, that is, without having to face up to the consequences of one’s

deeds.³⁵ But the ultimate realization of this hope is Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking: "to receive at once the benefit of sleep and do the effects of watching!" (V.i.9–11). In *Lady Macbeth* we see literalized what happens metaphorically in her husband's case. He comes to sleepwalk through life, going through the motions, his actions provoked by his opponents' moves and lacking any inner motive or meaning, even in his own eyes. The ultimate result of the deepening of Macbeth's consciousness is paradoxical—it leads him to act mechanically, without consciousness. As we have repeatedly seen, the opening up of Macbeth's consciousness causes a deep rift to develop in his soul, a painful division between what he wants to do and what his conscience tells him is morally right to do. Though for much of the play he wrestles with his newfound conscience, in the end he starts to repudiate it and all consciousness. Troubled by what he finds in the depths of his soul—"full of scorpions is my mind" (III.ii.36)—Macbeth searches for a way to heal the rift in his consciousness and "raze out the written troubles of the brain" (V.iii.42). But in seeking to extinguish consciousness, he leaves himself prey to the unconscious forces in his soul, which make him act more savagely than he ever did before. Chafing under the constraints of a new morality, he eventually repudiates all restraints on his actions, and becomes a slave to his basest desires. That is how his seemingly newfound freedom turns into a new form of slavery.

VI

In examining the impact of the Weird Sisters on Macbeth's thinking, we have seen what he dimly suspects from the beginning and finally confirms to his horror—their effect is thoroughly ambiguous and equivocal. As Macbeth himself says: "This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill; cannot be good" (I.iii.130–31). It is of course notoriously difficult to pin down the exact role of the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*. As the opponents of the legitimate Christian forces in the play, they seem to represent a link to the older pagan forces in Scotland, as was of course historically true of witches in medieval Europe. But in many respects the Weird Sisters seem to be aligned with the tendencies that are leading Macbeth out of the pagan world—they concretely represent the impact of the supernatural and above all they lead him to believe in particular providence.

Ultimately it is as difficult to place the witches squarely in either the pagan or the Christian camp as it is to place Macbeth. As we have seen, Macbeth is a strange hybrid, neither fully pagan nor fully Christian, but torn between the two worlds, combining aspects of both. In Macbeth's case, Christianity does not, as it usually does, temper the fierceness of the pagan spirit, but paradoxically inflames it. Supplying an absolutism to Macbeth's pagan spirit, Christianity—or rather his distorted interpretation of it—turns him into a crueller and more

devious figure. Convinced of the inevitability of his triumph, he lets nothing stand in his way, becoming a demonic parody of the crusading Christian warrior and hence a fiend in the eyes of the genuine Christians in the play. One might think that a combination of classical and Christian principles would produce some kind of higher synthesis, incorporating the best of both worlds. But Macbeth himself suggests the difficulty of synthesizing antithetical qualities: "Who can be wise, amaz'd, temp'rate, and furious, / Loyal, and neutral in a moment?" (II.iii.108–9). If Macbeth achieves a kind of synthesis, he might be said to combine the worst of both worlds, pursuing pagan goals with a Christian absolutism or, alternatively phrased, pursuing Christian goals with a pagan ferocity.³⁶

The witches are similarly hybrids, walking violations of any category one is tempted to impose on them (On this point, see Lowenthal, p. 354.). *Macbeth* may seem to be a play that deals in sharp and well-defined polarities: good versus evil, Christian versus pagan, male versus female, supernatural versus natural, and so on. But from their first appearance, the witches work to break down any simple sense of binary opposition in the play: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (I.i.11). The way they violate fundamental category distinctions is the first thing Banquo notices about them: they "look not like th' inhabitants o' th' earth, / And yet are on't" (I.iii.41–42). Above all, the witches seem to cloud the normally clear distinction between male and female:

You should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so.

(I.iii.45–47)

The masculine-feminine dichotomy is unusually important in *Macbeth*, in part because it becomes aligned with the pagan-Christian opposition. The pagan heroic ideal is associated with a vision of manliness in battle, while Christianity is associated with a softer, sensitive, more feminine view of life. When Macbeth worries that the murderers have become too gossiped, he might as well have questioned whether they have become too feminized. As we have seen, the fact that they reply, "We are men, my liege" (III.i.90) shows that they are aware that Macbeth is calling their manliness into question.

The issue of what it is to be a man is raised frequently in *Macbeth*—whether it involves acting solely like a male, true to the warrior's code of aggressive behavior, or whether the notion of manhood needs to be extended to encompass a feminine, sensitive side of human nature. (For a thorough discussion of this issue, see José Benardete's essay.) Lady Macbeth is able to taunt her husband into murdering Duncan early in the play by appealing to a narrowly masculine conception of manhood and speaking with contempt for compassion (I.vii.39–59), thus treating him as he later does the murderers of Banquo. But toward the

end of the play, when Malcolm tries similarly to goad Macduff into savage action, the older warrior stands up for a broader definition of manhood as compassionate humanity:

Malcolm. Dispute it like a man.

Macduff. I shall do so;

But I must also feel it as a man.

(IV.iii.220–21)

Passages such as this give some idea of how complicated the masculine/feminine dichotomy becomes in *Macbeth*. Far from constituting a simple, straightforward opposition in the play, the boundary between male and female is always on the verge of dissolving, creating new hybrid forms. One of the signs of Macbeth's disorientation as a warrior is the degree to which he allows himself to be influenced by female forces, the Weird Sisters, of course, but also his wife, who plays a major role in determining his course of action. But even as the masculine is being feminized in the play, the feminine is being masculinized. This tendency is evident in the beards of the witches, or in Lady Macbeth's various attempts to act the part of a male, most fully demonstrated in her famous speech in which she desires to be "unsexed" and to exchange her soft femininity for a cruel masculinity (I.v.40–50). One cannot simply equate the masculine with the pagan in *Macbeth* or the feminine with the Christian. Nevertheless, the repeated images in the play of hybrids of masculinity and femininity, most fully realized in the imaging of the Weird Sisters, suggest the larger point I have been making about Shakespeare's attempt in *Macbeth* to portray a world that is a hybrid of pagan and Christian elements.

VII

One final aspect of the Weird Sisters' impact on Macbeth remains to be considered: the way they change his view of nature. As he is drawn into the world of what Lady Macbeth calls "metaphysical aid" (I.v.29), his increasing obsession with supernatural forces leads him to develop a contempt and even hatred for the world of nature. In part, this development reflects the fact that Macbeth's desire for the infinite leads him to despise anything merely finite in the world, and hence ultimately the natural world itself.³⁷ Shakespeare establishes a connection between Macbeth's desire for the infinite and his tyrannical nature. In the long exchange between Malcolm and Macduff concerning the character of the tyrant, infinite desire emerges as his distinguishing trait: "Boundless intemperance / In nature is a tyranny" (IV.iii.66–67). Testing Macduff by pretending to be a tyrant, Malcolm accuses himself of "stanchless avarice," indeed an insatiable desire for wealth: "my more-having would be as a

sauce / To make me hunger more” (IV.iii.78, 81–82). He also presents himself as lecherous, and claims that his lust would brook no restraints:

but there’s no bottom, none,
In my voluptuousness. Your wives, your daughters,
Your matrons, and your maids could not fill up
The cestern of my lust, and my desire
All continent impediments would o’erbear
That did oppose my will.

(IV.iii.60–65)

As Shakespeare presents the tyrannical character, his infinite desire makes him fight against any limits set to his will.³⁸ Thus the tyrant ultimately finds himself at war with nature itself, since the very idea of a natural order is that things have natures that define how they behave, that is, set limits to their actions. Macbeth seems characteristically to long for the moment when “Nature seems dead” (II.i.50).

As Macbeth plunges deeper and deeper into tyranny, Shakespeare reveals the titanic egotism that fuels the tyrant’s actions: “But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer, / Ere we will eat our meal in fear” (III.ii.16–17); “For mine own good / All causes shall give way” (III.iv.134–35). Ultimately Macbeth’s tyrannical ego leads him to challenge all the forces of nature and even the natural order itself:

Though you untie the winds, and let them fight
Against the churches; though the yesty waves
Confound and swallow navigation up;
Though the bladed corn be lodg’d, and trees blown down;
Though castles topple on their warders’ heads;
Though palaces and pyramids do slope
Their heads to their foundations; though the treasure
Of nature’s germains tumble all together,
Even till destruction sicken; answer me
To what I ask you.

(IV.i.52–61)

This passage provides a profound insight into the character of Macbeth’s soul and his tyrannical desires. His imagination leaps to picturing the dissolution of all order in nature, and that means particularly the dissolution of all natural boundaries. What Macbeth’s tyrannical soul cannot stand is the limits nature sets to all activity and especially to human desire. He would rather see the world in chaos than accept natural constraints on his will. Ultimately he rejects the idea that there can be any kind of order subsisting in nature, independent of human will. That explains his attraction to the idea of a supernatural order, the notion that what happens in the world is always the product of some will, even

if it must be a sinister one. The more Macbeth feels in league with supernatural forces, the more tempted he is to look down upon the world of nature and view it as justifiably subject to his own will, destined to serve his purposes and his purposes alone.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Macbeth's speech is his curse on "nature's germins," the seeds out of which all the world of nature springs. He despises the generative power of nature, its fecundity. Ultimately Macbeth turns out to be at war with natural generation. It is no accident that his most horrible crime is the murder of Macduff's wife and children. But there is a profound irony in Macbeth's attack on the children of Scotland—his own marriage appears to be barren, thus leaving him without the heirs he needs to perpetuate his line and hence his achievement. Even the tyrant cannot dispense with the power of nature, for he needs it to generate an heir. Early in the play Lady Macbeth unnaturally tries to deny her role as a woman (I.v.40–50) and in particular lays a kind of curse on her natural potential as a mother (I.vii.54–59). Shakespeare seems to be establishing a pattern that those who curse natural powers will live to regret it, for nature will come back to take its revenge. Having tried to deny the womanly side of her nature, Lady Macbeth finds herself unequal to the aggressively masculine role she tries to play and her mind snaps in the process.

In Act V, Shakespeare brings in a Doctor of Physic to treat Lady Macbeth. Perhaps he was aware that the root of *physician* is *physis*, the Greek word for nature (related to the Greek word for *plant* and thus emphasizing nature as a generative power). The doctor diagnoses Lady Macbeth's problem as "a great perturbation in nature" (V.i.9) and supplies a formula for the fate of both Macbeth and his wife: "Unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles" (V.i.71–72). The doctor suggests that, having turned against the natural order, Lady Macbeth can be helped now only by supernatural forces: "More needs she the divine than the physician" (V.i.74). Faced with the doctor's failure to cure his wife, Macbeth expresses his contempt for medicine: "Throw physic to the dogs, I'll none of it" (V.iii.47). For all Shakespeare's supposed lack of classical learning, here it is difficult to believe that he was not aware of the Greek root of *physic*. Macbeth's rejection of the physician is consistent with the rejection of nature that has informed his whole career as a tyrant.

And yet in his attempt to reject the natural and embrace the supernatural, Macbeth turns out to be profoundly confused. The Weird Sisters prey upon his confusion in order to instill a false sense of security in him and lead him to his destruction. The riddling prophecies with which they deceive him build his confidence only because of his lingering faith in the power of the natural order. The prophecies suggest that Macbeth can be overthrown only by powers beyond the natural order, such as a man not born of woman. When Macbeth hears that he cannot be defeated "until / Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him" (IV.i.92–94), his reaction depends on his belief in the limits of the natural world:

That will never be.

Who can impress the forest, bid the tree
Unfix his earth-bound root? Sweet bodements! good!
Rebellious dead, rise never till the wood
Of Birnam rise, and our high-plac'd Macbeth
Shall live the lease of nature.

(IV.i.94–99)

We see here how truly egotistical Macbeth has become. He expects everybody and everything to be bound by the order of nature with one exception: Macbeth himself (On this point, see Davis, p. 226.). As the last line in the passage shows, he is relying on the power of nature at just the moment when he conceives himself as raised above it. To see how inconsistent his thinking has become, one need only note that here he is rejecting the possibility of resurrection that only two scenes earlier he himself had contemplated. Macbeth has become totally confused in sorting out the natural and the supernatural in his world. Having demanded to be above the limits of nature himself, he forgets that someone else might achieve the same power.

In the end it is purely natural forces that destroy Macbeth, even though the conclusion of the play is surrounded by a supernatural aura. The prophecies suggest that only mysteriously supernatural powers could defeat Macbeth, but in the event the forces that triumph have simple natural explanations.³⁹ The man not born of woman turns out to be simply the product of a Caesarean section. And the miraculously moving forest turns out to be nothing more than a camouflaging maneuver. Having attacked the natural order, Macbeth finds himself ultimately defeated by it. And the deepest irony is that the Weird Sisters did not in fact conceal his fate from him. As several critics have noted, the prophetic apparitions come with their own explanations.⁴⁰ The prophecy concerning the man not born of woman is delivered by a bloody child, suggesting a Caesarean section, and the prophecy concerning Birnam wood is delivered by a child with a tree in his hand, suggesting the exact manner of Malcolm's later stratagem. Macbeth's problem is that he does not look carefully enough at what the Weird Sisters show him; he only listens to what he hears and interprets the prophecies in light of his own desires, above all, his wish to be invulnerable and omnipotent.

Earlier in the play, when Macbeth sees the apparition of the dagger, he says: "Mine eyes are made the fools o' th' other senses, / Or else worth all the rest" (II.i.44–45). This disjunction between sight and the other senses forms an important pattern in the play. Had Macbeth followed the advice of his eyes in this scene, he might have been spared destruction. His experience with the witches' apparitions suggests even more strongly that he would have been better off trusting what he saw with his own eyes, rather than allowing himself to be tricked into interpreting the revelations in light of his own hopes and desires.

The ultimate trick the Weird Sisters play on Macbeth is to make him think he is seeing with his own eyes when in fact he is interpreting what he sees in light of what he hears from the witches and their apparitions. As Macbeth finally comes to understand, the Weird Sisters only “keep the word of promise to our ear” (V.viii.21); perhaps the ultimate lesson Macbeth ought to learn is the difference between hearsay and seeing with one’s own eyes (cf. Romans 10:17). One might sum up the Weird Sisters’ strategy this way: awakening Macbeth’s infinite desire and appealing to his dream of omnipotence, they make him long for a supernatural alliance and breed a contempt for the natural world in him. Thus they blind him to the power of nature, which eventually destroys him.

No interpretation will ever seem fully adequate to the mysteries and paradoxes of *Macbeth*. But I have tried to show that the strangeness of *Macbeth*, the many riddles that have puzzled critics of the play, can in part be traced to the peculiar situation of its hero. Macbeth is in the odd position of a heroic warrior whose ambitions have been redirected and redefined along lines suggested to him by the Christian influences in his world. Faced with the Christian critique of the transitoriness of pagan values, Macbeth can no longer settle for the kind of glory that satisfied Achilles and all those Roman fools. In particular, under the influence of the Christian idea of eternity, Macbeth feels a need for something absolute in his life, something absolutely secure and absolutely lasting. Transposed into a world with the expanded horizons of Christianity, he finds a desire for the infinite awakening within his soul, which Shakespeare links with Macbeth’s new form of tyranny and his new attitude toward nature as subject to human will. If one were to analyze fully Shakespeare’s portrait of the transformation of the pagan hero into the tyrant of infinite desire, one would see that he was prophetically looking to the future; the tragedy of the Scottish warrior prefigures the tragedy of modernity. Indeed, if Macbeth could have found a way to translate his personal hopes for heaven on earth into a political program, into what we would call an ideology, he might well have served as the prototype of the distinctively modern tyrant.

NOTES

1. All quotations from Shakespeare are taken from G. Blakemore Evans, ed., *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974). The original version of this essay was given as a lecture at the Carl Friedrich von Siemens Foundation in Munich on November 28, 1991. An expanded version was published in German translation under the title “*Macbeth*” und die Evangelisierung von Schottland by the Siemens Foundation in 1993 (translated by Anke Heimann and edited by Heinrich Meier). I want to thank Dr. Meier for the opportunity to lecture in Munich and for the original publication of this *Macbeth* essay in book form. I have used this opportunity to update the scholarship, although I have been able to take into account only a fraction of the work on *Macbeth* that has appeared since I first formulated my interpretation of the play. I have substantially revised the text based on criticism I received of the earlier version and my own rethinking of certain aspects of the play.

2. According to the concordances, this is the only appearance of the word *gospell'd* in all of Shakespeare.

3. For an insightful discussion of the concept of manliness in *Macbeth*, see José A. Benardete, "Macbeth's Last Words," *Interpretation*, 1 (1970): 63–75. For another good discussion of manliness in *Macbeth*, see Matthew N. Proser, *The Heroic Image in Five Shakespearean Tragedies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), pp. 51–91. On the distinction between *aner* and *anthropos*, see Seth Benardete, "Achilles and the Iliad," *Hermes*, 91 (1963): 1–5.

4. On this point, see Michael Davis, "Courage and Impotence in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*," in *Shakespeare's Political Pageant*, ed. Joseph Alulis and Vickie Sullivan (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), p. 221.

5. The terms are taken directly from Shakespeare's source in Holinshed's *Chronicles*; see Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973), vol. 7, p. 490 (all references to Bullough will be to vol. 7).

6. For a similar analysis, see David Lowenthal, "Macbeth: Shakespeare Mystery Play," *Interpretation*, 16 (1989): 351. The best attempt I have seen to characterize the Scotland of *Macbeth* is by Wilbur Sanders in an imaginative essay entitled "*Macbeth*: What's Done, Is Done," in Wilbur Sanders and Howard Jacobson, *Shakespeare's Magnanimity: Four Tragic Heroes, Their Friends and Families* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1978); see especially pp. 59–65.

7. See my "*Othello*: The Erring Barbarian Among the Supersubtle Venetians," *Southwest Review*, 75 (1990): especially pp. 300–301, and my *Shakespeare: Hamlet* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), especially pp. 54–55.

8. Holinshed speaks of Duncan's "small skill in warlike affaires" (Bullough, p. 490).

9. Here Shakespeare departs from his sources to sharpen the contrast. At one point Holinshed writes of Duncan: "he set all slouthfull and lingering delaiies apart, and began to assemble an armie in most speedie wise, like a verie valiant capteine: for oftentimes it happeneth, that a dull coward and slouthfull person, constrained by necessitie, becommeth verie hardie and active . . . the king himselfe governed in the maine battell or middle ward" (Bullough, p. 492).

See Sanders, *Shakespeare's Magnanimity*, p. 65. For an incisive critique of the tendency of critics to idealize Duncan as a perfect ruler, see Harry Berger, Jr., "The Early Scenes of *Macbeth*: Preface to a New Interpretation," *ELH*, 47 (1980): 1–31. For further analysis of Duncan's problems and weakness as a king, see Graham Bradshaw, *Shakespeare's Skepticism* (Brighton, UK: Harvester Press, 1987), pp. 244–49, and John Turner, "The Tragic Romances of Feudalism," in Graham Holderness, Nick Potter, and John Turner, *Shakespeare: The Play of History* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1987), pp. 130–31, 137.

10. On Scotland as an elective monarchy, see II.iv.29–32 and Nicholas Brooke, ed., *Macbeth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 74. On the complicated matter of the historical details of the principle of succession in Scotland, see Bullough, pp. 431–32. For a contrary view of Duncan's policy, see Lowenthal, pp. 321–23. Turner, pp. 125–31, also develops a positive view of Duncan's kingship.

11. For a good discussion of this passage, see Lowenthal, p. 331.

12. Although clearly Shakespeare derived his sense of Macbeth's cruelty from Holinshed, the idea of giving it a specifically ant-Christian inflection seems to be Shakespeare's own. At one point in Holinshed's account of Macbeth, he writes that "he also applied his whole indevor, to cause young men to exercise themselves in vertuous maners, and men of the church to attend their divine service according to their vocations" (Bullough, pp. 497–98). This passage comes from a section Holinshed writes on a period of ten years during which Macbeth ruled Scotland justly and well, a part of the story Shakespeare chose to suppress. In general, Shakespeare found a confused mixture of pagan and Christian elements in Holinshed's account of Macbeth and Scotland; the playwright worked to sharpen and develop the contrast.

13. *Macbeth* also appears to be returning to Shakespeare's *Henry VI* plays in the way it considers the influence of women on politics, and especially the question of witches, as originally embodied in the figure of Joan de Pucelle.

14. This point is suggested by a passage in Hector Boetius' *The Description of Scotland* (which may well be one of Shakespeare's sources for *Macbeth*, since Holinshed included it as a preface to

his history of Scotland). Boece discusses the decline of the virtue of the Scots as they came to imitate the English, specifically in their handling of aristocratic titles: "Furthermore as men not walking in the right path, we began to follow also the vaine shadow of the Germane honor and titles of nobilitie, and boasting of the same after the English maner, it fell out yer long, that whereas he in times past was accompted onlie honorable, which excelled other men not in riches and possessions, but in prowesse and manhood, now he would be taken most glorious that went loaden with most titles, whereof it came to pass, that some were named dukes, some earles, some lords, some barons, in which vaine puffes they fixed all their felicitie. Before time the noble men of Scotland were of one condition, & called by the name of Thanes . . . and this denomination was giuen vnto them after their desert and merit." See Vernon Snow, ed., *Holinshed's Chronicles: England, Scotland and Ireland* (reprinted New York: AMS, 1965; London: J. Johnson, 1807–8), vol. 5, p. 26. For a discussion of this passage, see Turner, pp. 123–24. As Turner points out, this passage in Boetius sheds a new light on the end of *Macbeth*, suggesting something negative about Malcolm's renaming of the Scottish thanes as earls. In general, Boetius' *Description* may have contributed to Shakespeare's fundamental conception in *Macbeth*. As if he were a sixteenth-century Walter Scott, Boetius contrasts a primitive and barbaric but austere and heroic Scotland with a civilized and sophisticated but overrefined and effete England. Turner, p. 143, aptly characterizes Macbeth as "the heroic destroyer of a heroic age."

15. In a late exchange with Macduff, Malcolm indicates that he is at least aware of what a remarkable combination of virtues a true king must possess, in particular a synthesis of "mercy" and "lowliness" with "courage" and "fortitude." See IV.iii.93–94. For helpful discussions of Malcolm's role in the play, see Lowenthal, pp. 353–54, and Turner, pp. 144–45.

16. For a discussion of how Macbeth "is unnerved by what he does not understand," see Howard B. White, "Macbeth and the Tyrannical Man," *Interpretation*, 2 (1971): 149.

17. For a fuller discussion of this point, see my *Shakespeare's Rome: Republic and Empire* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976), pp. 142–45.

18. On the importance of this passage, see Bradshaw, pp. 219–20, and Davis, pp. 219, 223.

19. On the "epic rhetoric" of I.ii, see Bullough, p. 426. On the importance of Macbeth's "pagan lightness of conscience," see Wilbur Sanders, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea: Studies in the Plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), p. 297. The peculiar phrasing—that Macbeth and Banquo "meant to memorize another Golgotha" in this battle (I.ii.39–40)—lends a strangely anti-Christian feeling, and hence a pagan aspect, to this action. On the oddness of this moment, see Bert O. States, "The Horses of *Macbeth*," *Kenyon Review*, 7 N.S. (1985): 56–58. On the possible implications of the Golgotha reference, see also Berger, p. 11. For an insightful analysis of Duncan's praise of Macbeth, see Bradshaw, p. 221.

20. For a general discussion of this theme in epic literature, see W. T. H. Jackson, *The Hero and the King: An Epic Theme* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982). That Shakespeare may indeed have had Agamemnon specifically in mind when writing *Macbeth* is suggested by the fact that critics have found a number of verbal echoes in the play of John Studley's 1566 English translation of Seneca's *Agamemnon*. See Bullough, p. 452: "This tragedy of Seneca's seems especially to have seized on Shakespeare's imagination." The most remarkable of these verbal parallels can be found in the Act I Chorus of Studley's *Agamemnon*: "One hurlye burlye done, another doth begin" (Bullough, p. 523; cf. *Macbeth*, I.i.3).

21. Cf. Lowenthal's parallel formulation: "It is disconcerting to realize that Macbeth's Christian belief helps worsen his tyranny" (p. 348).

22. The phenomenon of religious wars, and especially the Crusades, shows that Christianity is not simply antithetical to the warlike spirit and may in fact be combined with it. Shakespeare explores the strange ways in which religion may supply motives for warfare throughout his history plays, especially in *Henry V*.

23. See, for example, David Lenson, *Achilles' Choice: Examples of Modern Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975).

24. The contrast between Macbeth and Achilles may seem to be blurred by the Greek hero's appearance in the underworld in the *Odyssey*, which would seem to undermine the distinction between pagan thisworldliness and Christian otherworldliness. But the point of Homer's presenta-

tion of the underworld in the *Odyssey* is precisely its attenuated character. Whatever afterlife there may be in Homer is a pale shadow of this life, not a higher state as in the Christian vision. Far from being desirable, the afterlife in the *Odyssey* is so close to nonexistence that Achilles says that he would rather be a slave on earth than rule in the underworld. As Achilles' case shows, unlike the Christian hero, the pagan hero does not take his bearings from the afterlife. When in this life, the Christian hero thinks longingly ahead to the afterlife; even when in the afterlife, the pagan hero thinks longingly back to this life.

Cf. Mary McCarthy, "General Macbeth," in Sylvan Barnet, ed., *Macbeth* (New York: New American Library, 1963), p. 229: "A commonplace man who talks in commonplaces, a golfer, one might guess, on the Scottish fairways, Macbeth is the only Shakespeare hero who corresponds to a bourgeois type: a murderous Babbitt, let us say." Originally appearing in *Harper's Magazine* (June, 1962), this wrong-headed article nevertheless verges on interesting insights into *Macbeth*, though it loses sight of the heroic dimension of the play.

25. Cf. Bradshaw's formulation: "Shakespeare's Macbeth is still the terrifying warrior—but a warrior with an intensely moral imagination" (p. 250).

26. Cf. Bradshaw, p. 252: "The 'Christian', decidedly unclassical and unSenecan, character of *Macbeth* appears in its terrors, rather than in certitudes or assurances, and corresponds with that sense of the psyche as something stratified, vertiginous, which [Erich] Auerbach analyses in *Augustine*." Cf. also p. 255: "Shakespeare has sunk himself into the mindfalls of Macbeth's anguished imagination. . . . We are . . . intimately involved in the inner workings and processes of Macbeth's thought and feeling; and that difference corresponds with Auerbach's distinction between classical and Christian modes of feeling."

27. One can grasp the difference between Macbeth and Brutus simply in the opening of their soliloquies. Whereas Brutus begins with the straightforward: "It must be by his death" (II.i.10), Macbeth immediately gets twisted up in the convoluted: "If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly" (I.vii.1–2). In these lines, one can hear the difference between Shakespeare's Romans and his Christians just in the syntax. I discuss the distinctive nature of the soliloquies in the Roman plays in *Shakespeare's Rome*, pp. 113–16.

28. Cf. Maynard Mack's formulation in *Everybody's Shakespeare: Reflections Chiefly on the Tragedies* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), p. 194: "Macbeth and his wife seek to make hereafter now, to wrench the future into the present by main force, to master time."

The best discussion I have seen of this pattern in *Macbeth* is to be found in Gordon Braden, "Senecan Tragedy and the Renaissance," *Illinois Classical Studies*, 9 (1984): 287–88. See also Terence Eagleton, *Shakespeare and Society: Critical Studies in Shakespearean Drama* (New York: Schocken, 1967), pp. 130–32. The use of the term *Absolute* may sound anachronistic in a discussion of Shakespeare, as if he were some kind of Elizabethan Hegel. But in fact Shakespeare does use the word *absolute* three times in *Macbeth* (I.iv.14, III.vi.40, IV.iii.38), and with something of the force the word acquired in German Idealism. Indeed, much of what I am arguing about *Macbeth* is contained in the movement it portrays between "absolute trust" (I.iv.14) and "absolute fear" (IV.iii.38).

29. Macbeth's speech in Act III, scene iv, offers an interesting parallel to Hamlet's lines: "O God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself a king of infinite space—were it not that I have bad dreams" (II.ii.254–56). As different as Hamlet and Macbeth are, they share the all-or-nothing attitude I have been discussing. See my *Hamlet* book, pp. 50–52. For a provocative discussion of parallels between Hamlet and Macbeth, see Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), vol. 2, pp. 110–11. Macbeth's dilemma is expressed in a very different context by Shakespeare's Troilus: "This is the monstrosity in love, lady, that the will is infinite and the execution confin'd, that the desire is boundless and the act a slave to limit" (*Troilus and Cressida*, III.ii.81–83). Macbeth's all-or-nothing attitude apparently even infects the murderers of Banquo, one of whom describes himself as: "So weary with disasters, tugg'd with fortune, / That I would set my life on any chance, / To mend it, or be rid on't" (III.i.111–13).

30. See also Macbeth's mention of the "crack of doom" at IV.i.117. For the importance of the apocalyptic mode in *Macbeth*, see States, especially his characterization of Macbeth as "an apoca-

