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### 3

## “Nothing is but what is not”: Emotional Worlds of Characters in *Macbeth*

Quite a lot of evidence suggests that the study of character for its own sake is a relatively modern preoccupation. Before William Hazlitt, who perhaps provocatively at the time named his book *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* in 1817, the personages represented in a play seem to have been regarded as roles dictated by the plot and design of a play as a whole, rather than individuals with anything like the modern conception of an “inner life” or an existence beyond the words in the play. Hazlitt was primarily a theatre critic and reviewer, and his interest lies in the different ways that actors, depending on their own temperament and styles, can play a character. On the Elizabethan stage, actors would have been so busy in doubling and trebling the “parts” they played (since the company had only about a dozen personnel to represent many more figures), and attending to their cues for when to enter and exit, that they may not have had time to develop subtle, singular traits to separate each character from others at a psychological level, relying more on broad, differentiating effects. As we have partly seen, Shakespeare himself found hints of personal traits for each personage in the source he was using (in this case Holinshed's *Chronicles* and Buchanan's history of Scotland), since most of his plays adapt to the stage stories already authored by others and printed. He also drew to some extent on the medical model then current of “humours” in which body and mind were closely connected, and some

figures show mental characteristics that stem from an imbalance in their physiology – Hamlet as a melancholic (too much black bile), for example (see Babb 1951; Arikha 2007; Schoenfeldt 1999; Paster 1993 and 2004). Macbeth seems to be “choleric”, with an over-balance of blood, and in another category of early modern medicine he is also driven by a “passion” which amounts to an obsession, in his case arguably fear (Hobgood 2013).

Other character types came from different dramatic traditions, such as the classical device of giving masks to actors (Frow 2014: 253-65), Italian *commedia del arte*, or the use of “vice” figures from medieval drama. Shakespeare was also certainly aware of a minor literary genre called “The Character” dating back to the ancient Greek writer Theophrastus and used in the Renaissance by writers like John Earle in *Micro-cosmographie*, Bishop Hall’s *Characters of Virtues and Vices*, and Sir Thomas Overbury’s *New Characters (Drawne to the Life) of Several Persons in Several Qualities*. Here, distinctive delineations between people are drawn through stereotypical typologies based on occupations, or single-minded passions, and sometimes humours (“The Surly Man” [Theophrastus]; “A Discontented Man” and “A Poor Fiddler” [Earle]; “A vaine-glorious Coward in Command” and “A fayre and happy Milk-mayd” [Overbury]; “The Envious Man” [Hall]). Like the humoral approach, this also gives a model of people being functions partly of temperament and partly of their outer circumstances. Macbeth on this typology is defined as a soldier. Thus we can see the dramatist building up a character, layer by layer. Onto these techniques, Shakespeare grafted individualising notes like use of dialects and particular speech idiosyncrasies. He edged towards a notion that people “have that within that passeth show” (*Hamlet*) – emotional states which can be concealed and revealed at will, evident especially in his sonnets. However, this does not mean he thought of his characters as we do in our world informed by modern psychology. When characters like Falstaff and Cleopatra break out of types and act inconsistently, it is more likely a situational change to suit the plot rather than attributable to some deeper, inner principle stemming from a unified identity. Besides, Falstaff and Cleopatra are depicted as prone to lying and exaggerating, which intrinsically means they are not consistent truth-tellers, while Macbeth sees visions and ghosts, which equally distorts

any sense of mental continuity in his perceptions, and makes him the sort of person who rapidly changes his mind and his moods according to circumstances. It is those circumstances and how he reacts to them which make the play what it is.

Nonetheless, despite bits and pieces of their origins taken from contemporary literary, dramatic and physiological constructs, the remarkable thing about Shakespeare's creations is that they have continued to be susceptible to analysis using later ways of modelling human mental processes, such as the novelistic and the psychological. It was the rise of the novel in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which encouraged readers, and therefore audiences, to think about fictional figures having plausible motivation, emotional consistency, and some kind of imputed “backstory” of the kind that we find in works by Dickens, George Eliot and Virginia Woolf. As her title suggests, Mary Cowden Clark's *The Girlhood of Shakespeare's Heroines*, published in the 1850s at the height of the Victorian novel's popularity, is a largely fictional construction along the lines of a novel, using Shakespeare's words as little more than a starting point for speculation about where these characters “came from”. But a moment's thought tells us that novels and plays are different. In the former there is generally a narrator on hand, or an omniscient author, who subtly manipulates readers to make judgements about their characters and often describes their mental and emotional states, while in drama there is no authorial mouthpiece. All we have are the words, no more and sometimes less depending on cuts in performance. Sympathetic identification is possible but negotiable, depending on the director and actors who make their own choices about what is plausible behaviour. In the twentieth century there followed the rise of psychology as a study of the mind, especially of the Freudian kind, which imputed to individuals conscious and unconscious desires, ego and id. In the theatre, also in the early twentieth century, the famous Russian director Konstantin Stanislavski took a step further in training “method” actors to think in a self-searching and disciplined way of their roles in terms of characters having rounded personalities with emotions, motivations and subconscious desires, which can be represented in performance as justifying their actions. Actors were encouraged to “live” the role they

happened to be playing, no doubt to the frustration of their families and friends outside the theatrical context.

Even if this psychologising is not the way Shakespeare would have conceived of his actors (whom he sometimes refers to as “shadows”) representing different roles on the stage, it is nonetheless impossible nowadays to ignore a character-based approach, since so much in theatre and movies today hangs on casting or “star quality”, and presupposes some degree of psychological realism and depth, while in teaching drama “characterisation” is a virtually obligatory tool of analysis. More enlightening in understanding Shakespeare’s practice of “situational” characterisation, looking at the dramatic personages in detail is one way of revealing underlying patterns of dramatic design, as well as different ways of evaluating the action and making moral judgements about behaviour on stage – both important aspects of Elizabethan playwriting. An approach through character also opens up a dynamic experience changing from moment to moment since, at least in Shakespeare’s practice, each personage brings to situations a set of emotional awarenesses and desires not shared by others. They do sometimes express their feelings, even when these are disguised, mixed or explicit. Malcolm urges Macduff to exercise stoicism on hearing that his wife and children have been slaughtered, but the latter replies that he must “feel it as a man” (4.3.221), one point where an unashamedly affective response is voiced as an understandable and valid reaction to appalling circumstances, and a moment when Shakespeare’s unerring humanity intrudes to guide the audience. Each role represents a unique emotional world either in conflict or accord with those of others who interact, in an enactment of “discrepant emotional awarenesses” (White and Rawnsley 2015).

In this chapter we look at the circles of characters “around” the central ones, reserving consideration of the Macbeths themselves for the next. Initially, characters in *Macbeth* broadly might be seen as fitting into a threefold scheme (so much in *Macbeth* runs in threes, as we have seen) – the good, bad and indifferent. However, on closer inspection, the large qualification that the interpretation offered in this book argues is that the good are not all wholly good, the bad not wholly bad, and the indifferent are like the Weird Sisters, standing inscrutably apart and disinterested in human affairs, neither good nor

bad. There will be an opportunity later to consider other structuring concepts and underlying, unifying patterns such as dominant themes, ideas, and trains of imagery, after looking at how the characters, each envisaged as an “emotional world” acting with and against others, may support or undermine general interpretations of the play. All are to some extent either victims or observers of “what happens”, of the plot or action in which they are intertwined. It is this approach, acknowledging the primacy of plot, linked with a notion of each character being an emotional world capable of feelings that are sometimes inscrutable and sometimes barely articulated in language, which will be pursued in this chapter. We first turn our attention to others like Duncan, Banquo, Malcolm, Macduff, Lady Macduff, the Weird Sisters, and even children, whose more limited parts in the pattern show in microcosm aspects of the fuller picture given of *Macbeth* as a play in which nothing is certain, and where events and people often seem what they are not. Each may be seen as caught up at a different point on the spectrum from desiring power to holding it, although the Macbeths are the ones who are unhappily carried through the whole curve of the play’s action, from go to woe. Radical ambivalence in both theatrical and psychological senses rests upon the clash of different emotional worlds of human beings acting in a political context, a milieu in which the mind’s construction is not necessarily registered on the face and true feelings may not be expressed in words.

## Duncan

In terms of trying to discriminate between characters as morally “good” or “bad”, it is not easy to be categorical about the characters in *Macbeth* as ethical beings. Duncan is the most complete victim of the plot and historical narrative, a cause more than a character, but even this depiction is ambiguous. The pro-monarchist or older orthodoxy of the play would have us believe he is, in Macduff’s words, “a most sainted king” (4.3.109), and in Macbeth’s description, “so meek” (1.7.17), commanding universal respect, whose undeserved fate is self-evidently appalling and a violation of his “golden blood” (2.3.110). Unfortunately, however, there is little strong evidence to support such a conclusion,

although equally there is just as little evidence in the play to suggest that he is the opposite. We are simply not given enough information about Duncan in the play to make firm judgements, and he exists more in terms of his state function as king than as an individual. Ambivalence operates at the level of what the text gives us, although directors and actors do need to make choices about how to realise (“make real”) the text in performance, and the position of Duncan is one area in which such decisions can be made, with implications for the effect of the play as a whole. Is he a paragon, or simply a weak cipher whose fragile hold on the state creates a power void which becomes the visible and obvious target for rebellion, invasion and usurpation? He is described by Macbeth as “meek” (1.7.17), which suggests virtuous, but this may not be the best qualification for the office of king in a warring state. Which type is chosen – meek or weak – will obviously make a great deal of difference to how we view Macbeth, and to the play as a whole.

Little is explained about what is happening to Duncan’s kingdom at the start of the play. It is torn with two violent wars which are clearly aimed at Duncan himself as king. One is a civil war waged by rebellious thanes (Scottish lords or barons). We are not informed why they are rebelling, nor why their claim is significant enough to sway the original Thane of Cawdor to join their ranks. The distraction of this insurgency has secondly encouraged the traditional enemy of Scotland, Norway, to make an opportunistic strike. Alternatively (and it is not entirely clear), Norway has invaded and the thanes, rather than defend the realm, have joined forces with them to oppose Duncan jointly. “The merciless Macdonald – / Worthy to be a rebel” (1.2.9–10) has gathered a large army from the Western Isles, while the forces of Sweno, king of Norway, have invaded on the east coast at Fife, “with terrible numbers, / Assisted by that most disloyal traitor / The Thane of Cawdor” (1.2.51–2). The inbuilt perspective of the speakers here is supportive of Duncan, but their view is self-interested and partial, leaving the politics unexplained. Duncan is particularly upset by the rebelliousness of Cawdor, since he had firmly trusted him. This may be a sign of his own lack of judgement, and it is a clear irony that he confers the disgraced thane’s title on Macbeth, who is also that very night to betray him. At the very least, then, there is evidence that Duncan is not popular enough to command universal obedience from his more powerful subjects, and

that, indeed, assailed from within Scotland and without, his closest lords are one by one turning against him. Critics such as Maynard Mack and Harry Berger have pointed out that Duncan spends a lot of time asking questions, as though he does not really know what is going on and does not have a firm hold even on his own troops. His position is being tenuously defended by a bloodthirsty military led by a professional soldier like Macbeth who thinks nothing of slicing an enemy (albeit a fellow Scottish nobleman) up the middle, chopping off his head and displaying it unceremoniously on the battlements. As Arthur Kinney sharply reminds us, “Reared in a war culture, Macbeth is its hero in warlike terms; trained to kill, his achievement is in killing large numbers and under great danger. His success is so saturated with such activity that once King, he knows no other means of rule and survival short of murder” (Kinney 2001: 199). Again, an irony is that the same ugly fate awaits Macbeth, suggesting a cyclical structure is being employed in designing the play. Such behaviour seems *de rigueur* for the military troops loyal to Duncan, who, although not directly linked with such bloodthirsty conduct, cannot escape the fact that the army is fighting on his behalf and under his orders. He congratulates and thanks Macbeth and Banquo for their loyal actions, and on being told that “brave Macbeth” has “unseamed” Macdonald “from the nave to th’chops, / And fixed his head upon our battlements” he says, “O valiant cousin, worthy gentleman!” (1.2.16; 22-4). Of the traitor Cawdor he abruptly and in an ominous couplet (rhyming “death” with “Macbeth”) says, “Go pronounce his present death, / And with his former title greet Macbeth” (1.2.64-5). Of course Duncan has no way of anticipating that the conferral will endanger himself, but his decision makes him unwittingly and indirectly complicit in his own future fate by bringing Macbeth within expectation of a future crown. He is also fallible, if not flawed. The prototype for Duncan in Shakespeare’s source emerges as an ineffectual king, unable to control rebels and his own army. For Holinshed, the two characters are opposite extremes. Macbeth, who inherited from his mother the title Thane of Glamis, is “a valiant gentleman, and one that if he had not beene somewhat cruell of nature, might have been thought most woorthie the government of a realme” (Muir 1962: 173). His cousin Duncan,



On the other part was so soft and gentle of nature, that the people wished the inclinations and maners of these two cousins to have been so tempered and interchangable bestowed betwixt them, that where the one had too much of clemencie, and the other of crueltie, the meane virtue betwixt these two extremities might have reigned by indifferent partition in them both. (Muir 1962: 173)

The implication is that neither is fully suited to rule, but for opposite reasons, Duncan's over-merciful "inclinations" and Macbeth's "cruelty", which Holinshed regards as at least part of the job of being a king. At first Duncan's reign had been peaceful but "after it was perceived how negligent he was in punishing offenders" (Muir 1962: 173), rebellions began. Shakespeare seems to have built into his portrayal of Duncan the same amalgam of qualities in a man too "soft and gentle of nature" to perform effectively the ruthless business of ruling.

Nor do we find much in Shakespeare's play by way of disinterested, trustworthy comment unequivocally praising Duncan's stewardship of the state. Lady Macbeth gives an obsequious speech of welcome to her castle, but then, as we say now, "she would, wouldn't she?"; and in fact her words are more easily understood as expressing hospitality rather than praise. Macbeth, at his moment of conscience before the murder, says of Duncan that "He hath honoured me of late" (1.7.32) and that he "Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been / So clear in his great office" (1.7.17-18). Of these forms of praise we could say first that a king with "meek" faculties in the violent state of Scotland might not be the best candidate for such a potentially bloody job; secondly that it takes only a brief conversation with his wife to change his mind; and thirdly that Macbeth goes on, not to confirm Duncan's virtues, but to say that the memory of them will endanger him after the murder – which is a strategical and self-interested way of praising those virtues. It is of course a hypocritical rather than honest compliment for Macbeth to say to Lennox after the murder that "Renown and grace is dead" (2.3.93). As the host of the house in which the king is slain, he would have to say such things. Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, are too fearful for their own lives to express eulogy or even tears of grief ("our tears are not yet brewed" [2.3.124]), and Malcolm curiously says he does not want to stay and pretend "an unfelt sorrow" (2.3.135): they flee, one to England

and the other to Ireland, laying themselves open to damaging rumours. Duncan is never heard of again in the play, not even in hindsight to contrast his reign with Macbeth's. Occasionally he is called “gracious”, but this word is a formula, like calling a monarch “your Majesty”. For a king whom critics have extolled, Duncan gets surprisingly little praise even from his own supporters and family. One conclusion that might be drawn is that ruling always requires violence, whether it is performed by a virtuous but weak man through his soldiers, or a regicide who becomes a tyrant – both face the same bloody outer circumstances.

Nor are Duncan's own actions any more substantial a foundation for good reputation or competence as a king. He is aware enough of dangers stemming from his political position to make sure there is a “sewer” (official taster) on hand before he eats anything in case it is poisoned at banquets given by his lords (1.7, stage direction; in Shakespeare's plays there are remarkably few original stage directions, so those that exist are of significance). But he still manages to make a series of misjudgements which amount to fatal blunders. First, looking both backwards and forwards in time, his trust has been, and will be, spectacularly misplaced: “No more that Thane of Cawdor shall deceive / Our bosom interest” (1.2.63-4). He generalises on his sense of betrayal in a manner that could equally suggest his own bad judgement:

There's no art  
To find the mind's construction in the face.  
He was a gentleman on whom I built  
An absolute trust. (1.4.11-14)

Lisa Hopkins has traced the importance of this trope in many modern detective stories which explicitly acknowledge the quotation (Hopkins 2016, 21-7). As events turn out, by immediately trusting himself to the hospitality of Macbeth and his wife, Duncan proves the same point and his own lack of insight into people, even if he is surrounded by hypocritical subjects concealing their motives. At the battle, as J.L. Calderwood points out (1986: 80), Duncan is apart and isolated from his own troops – unlike Shakespeare's “ideal” kings such as Henry V – as if he is out of touch and subsidiary to his thanes who risk their lives on his behalf in a civil war.

Next, whether it is a misjudgement or an indiscretion, Duncan makes a clumsy and again fatal blunder when he publicly nominates his own first son, Malcolm, as Prince of Cumberland. This position, in the Scottish system, effectively makes Malcolm heir to the throne, a pivotal moment in the play carrying an implication immediately spotted by Macbeth:

(*Aside*) The Prince of Cumberland – that is a step  
On which I must fall down or else o’erleap,  
For in my way it lies. (1.4.48-51)

Like the position of Prince of Wales in the English system, the Prince of Cumberland was that of king in waiting. We are not privy to Malcolm’s thoughts at this stage and at least on the page if not the stage we cannot find the mind’s construction in the face, but he must have in his mind a phrase like “And shall be king hereafter”. For Macbeth, to whose thoughts we are privy, Duncan’s words provoke a sudden glimpse of a future holding menace, which he already knows will not bear bringing to the daylight of consciousness. Through his rather confusing imagery he seeks to dissociate his mind from his hand:

Stars, hide your fires,  
Let not light see my black and deep desires;  
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be  
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. (1.4.50-3)

By revealing Macbeth’s dread at what lies in his thoughts, Shakespeare aligns the audience with him, and we are the “light” that sees his black and deep desires, the “eye” which he hopes to blind to the “hand” of execution. Queen Elizabeth I was by contrast far more canny than Duncan in holding her cards close to her chest when she faced precisely the same decision about naming her successor. Duncan’s action is both constitutionally wrong and politically risky to the point of ineptness. The Scottish system of monarchy at the time was not automatically hereditary like England’s, but to some extent elective, and in Holinshed’s account it is implied that Macbeth could hold a legitimate expectation that he would succeed as king, which Duncan appears to

encourage: “More is thy due, than more than all can pay” (1.4.21), reinforcing Ross’ hint that the conferral of Thane of Cawdor on Macbeth is “an earnest of a greater honour” (1.3.104). In his letter to his wife recounting the prophetic greeting of the Witches, “King that shalt be” (1.5.9), Macbeth shows no signs of thinking he needs to kill the king, and he may assume the crown will be his as a matter of destiny. Before he is promoted by Duncan, and after meeting the Witches, he reminds himself that he may become king in the normal course of events: “If chance will have me King, why, chance may crown me / Without my stir” (1.3.142-3). Banquo might have cause to be even more resentful, since Duncan offers him no reward at all, so that in his one gesture of nominating Malcolm, Duncan potentially alienates both his powerful supporters. Until Duncan names Malcolm, it is clear that Macbeth at least, and others tacitly, do not know who will succeed Duncan, but the situation is such that Macbeth, Duncan’s cousin, seems the next most senior. Malcolm’s succession cannot be assumed in a system based on tanistry rather than primogeniture (see Chapter 1). What Shakespeare does not tell us is that Malcolm was a minor at the time. Where Duncan is doubly wrong, and even needlessly provocative, is in bypassing the formalities of the customary elective system, and in demonstrating overt nepotism in advancing his own son. To say the least, Duncan is unwise to provoke his few remaining loyal thanes at this moment of his greatest vulnerability, faced with both a civil war and foreign invasion. He may think the gesture will stabilise Scotland’s future, but it perversely leads to the opposite outcome. However, even if Duncan’s judgement and history may be open to different interpretations, he is apparently guileless and predisposed to see good rather than evil. When he approaches the Macbeths’ castle, he sees only healthy and natural signs:

This castle hath a pleasant seat. The air  
Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself  
Unto our gentle senses. (1.6.1-3)

Whether in retrospect this can be seen as a sign of Duncan’s gullibility or is simply a signal that nothing bad has yet happened is open to debate, but at least Banquo confirms the general impression by noticing

the “temple-haunting martlet” or house martins (swallows) nesting where “the heavens’ breath / Smells wooingly here” (1.6.5–6). We shall examine Banquo’s role later, but like Duncan he emerges as a figure whose destiny is shaped by his place in the plot and his motivations remain opaque. The subtle point made by Shakespeare through the imagery of birds, as perceived by individuals, seems to be that both Duncan and Banquo in their different ways demonstrate innocence and even naivety. By contrast, it is striking that Lady Macbeth, who lives in the castle, notices the birds associated with premonitions of death:

The raven himself is hoarse  
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan  
Under my battlements. (1.5.37–9)

It is a rather sorry state when the only thing approaching a positive that we may say about a king whom most critics have treated as a paragon is that he is too innocent for his own good, and therefore for his office, and that he shows flawed judgement. At face value it seems that, compared with Shakespeare’s other kings (certainly Bolingbroke in becoming Henry IV and his son Henry V), Duncan is strangely without obvious, positive qualities, and is presented in a kind of effacing light. For the purposes of the argument pursued in this book, there is no need to make any particular judgement either way of Duncan as some kind of rounded character, since it is his dramatic role to be the first victim in the play, and it is certainly his position as king that leads to his death, rather than some serious character flaw. Most importantly, he is not presented as a complex human being, but as no more nor less than a target in his position as king. J.L. Calderwood, while looking at the play as a whole in a different light, in this context sums up what seems to be the central point: “The impression given is that violence arises not from anything Duncan himself has done but from the mere fact of kingship itself, the royal difference” (1986: 80). It is the unlucky fate of Duncan to hold “the royal difference” at the start of the play. In the shark’s bath of Shakespeare’s history plays, personal motives and sentiment usually matter less than the mere existence of a piece of dented metal called a crown, which many feel entitled to and are prepared to kill for.

## Banquo

While Duncan cannot really be said to be an ambivalent character (he does not show two opposed sides but rather stands as a possibly weak incumbent of the impersonal formality of a regal office that requires strength), Banquo, although just as briefly etched, can be seen as ambiguously presented. There is little evidence of Banquo's private attitudes, feelings or motives, but there may be some legitimate debate about whether he is expected to resist Macbeth or collude with him, since he knows about the Witches' prophecies and has an obvious vested interest in the outcome. Again, there is a tendency among critics simply to assume that Banquo is unequivocally “good”, because the orthodox reading requires the isolation of Macbeth as a uniquely individual tyrant. This impression is built also on a presumption that the Witches' prophecy means that Banquo's descendants – whom the *Chronicles* claim (fictionally, as it turns out) led down to James VI of Scotland (James I of England) – will rule Scotland legitimately and wisely. These, it should be pointed out, are simply presumptions, and the text neither confirms nor denies them. The argument of this book is that the play as a whole may be seen as covertly subversive while sheltering, like Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, under a blander moral pattern that asserts tyrants must be punished and the good will eventually succeed. There is nothing to stop us from submitting Banquo to the same kind of close critique that we applied to Duncan, and to or from exploring his elusive role in the pattern.

When we look at the evidence, we may conclude that Shakespeare pays Banquo (and by implication King James) a double-edged but genuine compliment. He is a wary and even wily politician. The unlucky attribute Banquo shares with Duncan is that he gets in the way of Macbeth's ambitions and the play's plot. Yet unlike Duncan, the future afterlife for Banquo predicted by the Witches, and his immediate, ghostly reappearance to Macbeth at the banquet, are signs that his power is potent even after death. Banquo would make an effective poker player, never revealing what he thinks or feels, or even how much he knows of Macbeth's motives, actions and intentions, in the early part of the play. It is precisely this inscrutability which poses a threat to

Macbeth – on top of the Witches’ prophecy that he will beget kings – and both lead directly to Banquo’s silencing through murder.

In a political sense, Banquo certainly knows too much for his own good. As the person accompanying Macbeth when the Witches appear, he witnesses the prophecies that Macbeth will be Thane of Cawdor and afterwards king. He also hears that his own child, Fleance, will beget kings. Banquo is the more self-possessed and rational: he directly addresses the Witches, asking them questions, reproving Macbeth for his fear and questioning his “raptness”. He is also more circumspect, withholding judgement about the status of the Witches, and asks questions rather than making assertions: “What, can the devil speak true?” (1.3.105):

Were such things here as we do speak about,  
Or have we eaten on the insane root  
That takes the reason prisoner? (1.3.81-3)

He muses to himself that

oftentimes ... to win us to our harm  
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,  
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's  
In deepest consequence ... (1.3.121-4)

By contrast, Macbeth’s response is more credulous, excitable, to the point even of hysteria. Lady Macbeth, perhaps strangely, immediately believes in the Witches’ powers of prophecy as soon as she receives her husband’s letter.

Banquo’s knowledge alone makes him somebody whom Macbeth must treat with the utmost caution, and from this point on they play a watchful game of cat and mouse, each unsure of what the other is doing. On two occasions (1.3.154-8 and 2.1.12-30) they sound each other out, but both prevaricate and neither divulges an opinion. On the second occasion Banquo goes so far as to say “All’s well. I dreamt last night of the three Weird Sisters”. Macbeth lies that he does not think of them, but hints that to speak more of the Weird Sisters will be to Banquo’s

advantage: “It shall make honour for you”. So hedged is Banquo’s non-committal response (“I shall be counselled”) that Macbeth could glean neither support nor warning from it. After the murder of Duncan, Banquo reveals in a rare soliloquy that he strongly suspects Macbeth of foul play:

Thou hast it now: King, Cawdor, Glamis, all  
As the weird women promised; and I fear  
Thou played’st most foully for’t ... (3.1.1-3)

However, at this stage he is unreadable as to his own feelings. To the audience he confides that he holds “hope” that the Witches’ prophecy about him begetting kings will come true, but to Macbeth as king he shows nothing but the formalities of a loyal subject’s obedience:

Let your highness  
Command upon me, to the which my duties  
Are with a most indissoluble tie  
For ever knit. (3.1.15-18)

If only Banquo knew that Macbeth had already arranged to meet two hired assassins to plot his death, he would have spared his feats of diplomacy and fled with Malcolm and Donalbain. Macbeth cunningly persuades two poor and desperate men that Banquo was the cause of their ruin, and that they must kill him. The rest of this part of the story tells itself. The two murderers are joined by the mysterious third and in the dark night, before rain, Banquo’s life is terminated in the forest while his son escapes. In a spellbinding scene (3.4), the bloodstained ghost of Banquo returns, seen by Macbeth alone as a recrimination, at the dinner party which goes horribly wrong. The play on words – Banquo and banquet – may be a kind of grisly joke on Shakespeare’s part.

Fear of Banquo seems to be the only real feeling Macbeth experiences after attaining the crown:



To be thus is nothing,  
But to be safely thus. Our fears in Banquo  
Stick deep, and in his royalty of nature  
Reigns that which would be feared. 'Tis much he dares,  
And to that dauntless temper of his mind  
He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour  
To act in safety. There is none but he  
Whose being I do fear, and under him  
My genius is rebuked, as, it is said,  
Mark Antony's was by Caesar. He chid the Sisters  
When first they put the name of king upon me,  
And bade them speak to him. Then, prophet-like,  
They hailed him father to a line of kings.  
Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown,  
And put a barren sceptre in my grip,  
Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand,  
No son of mine succeeding. If't be so,  
For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind,  
For them the gracious Duncan have I murdered,  
Put rancours 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.  
Rather than so, come Fate into the list,  
And champion me to th'utterance ... (3.1.49-73)

The second half of this soliloquy explains something of Macbeth's resentment of Banquo, and rationalises his decision to kill him and his son Fleance. His reasoning is based on an acknowledgement of what I have called "discrepant emotional awarenesses", suggesting that such a concept is part of Shakespeare's dramatic understanding. Macbeth expresses his own feelings of fear and resentment, and suits his actions by imputing to Banquo different feelings of anticipating future triumph. Understandably, Macbeth, fearing that his own usurpation will benefit Banquo's issue, assumes that Banquo will be as ambitious as he is, despite the fact that neither Macbeth nor the audience can tell what Banquo's feelings are. The earlier part of the speech is even more

interesting, implying a different reason for Macbeth’s fear, and one that goes to the heart of the issue of kingship itself in the play. Not only does Macbeth concede that Banquo is more “kingly” in manner than he is, and that he breathes “royalty of nature” and exhibits both a dauntless temper and “a wisdom that doth guide his valour / To act in safety” (the politician’s skill); he also acknowledges that Banquo has a specific grievance that poses direct threats to Macbeth as king. The most serious of these is that, without stretching the evidence too far, Banquo could legitimately have expected to be named as a possible heir apparent in his own right. In 1.4, Duncan had named Macbeth and Banquo after the battle as equal in his estimation as his “captains” in combat (1.2.35). Banquo does not know that Duncan has received only a report of Macbeth’s bravery in killing Macdonald. Therefore, when they meet King Duncan, Banquo must expect some reward for his services at least equivalent to Macbeth’s elevation to Thane of Cawdor. Duncan’s own words confirm this expectation, and Banquo’s response shows that he hopes to “grow” as Macbeth has done:

DUNCAN (*to Macbeth*)

Welcome hither.

I have begun to plant thee, and will labour  
To make thee full of growing. Noble Banquo,  
That hast no less deserved, nor must be known  
No less to have done so, let me enfold thee,  
And hold thee to my heart.

BANQUO

There if I grow,  
The harvest is your own. (1.4.27–33)

In a curious way, Duncan’s words and their reception by Banquo reinforce the Witches’ prophecies. Despite his laconic brevity, if we spare some sympathy for Banquo in terms of the role already allotted to him in the story, we can divine his feelings by summarising the chain of events. Macbeth has just been promoted for deeds in a battle in which Banquo was at least equal in status; if we take seriously Macbeth’s words later we know that Banquo acts naturally like a king, and he seems in some ways superior in moral status to Macbeth, akin to the

dimming of Mark Antony's light beside Octavius Caesar's, In this kind of military state the highest honours would automatically go to the most distinguished soldiers; Duncan himself raises anticipation by saying that Banquo "no less deserved, nor must be known ... to have done so"; and the only elective position apparently left in Duncan's discretion at this moment is Prince of Cumberland, the future king. The audience has been primed to expect that his descendants will be kings, so his own personal claims must have some legal validity to be argued at least in later times. Banquo in all these circumstances could be forgiven for expecting some "harvest" in his fortunes now, picking up Duncan's metaphor of planting and growing and the repeated references to "seeds". Therefore, Duncan's next statement must come to Banquo, as much as to Macbeth, as a dismaying shock, coming out of the blue and against all the expectations set up for the characters and an alert audience alike:

Sons, kinsmen, thanes,  
And you whose places are the nearest, know  
We will establish our estate upon  
Our eldest, Malcolm, whom we name hereafter  
The Prince of Cumberland ... (1.4.35-9)

This dashes the hopes of Macbeth becoming king by legitimate means, and also signals a rebuff for Banquo, who has been very publicly passed over. His claims to advancement, which are just as compelling as Macbeth's and far more so than Malcolm's, are completely ignored. In the triangle of Duncan, Macbeth and Banquo in this scene, we have a clear and fascinating example of discrepant emotional awarenesses built up by the dramatist, of three different emotional worlds colliding, the third of which is not made explicit to the audience.

Given the withholding of clear expression of Banquo's feelings at this stage, he can be "read" in opposite ways. He can be seen as a wise, restrained and valuable counsellor (which is how Duncan and even Macbeth may view him), yet on the other hand, a further deduction by Macbeth, he is potentially a man aggrieved, politically savvy, and fully as dangerous as Macbeth himself. He knows too much for his own safety, and has cause to be at least resentful. His political discretion, as

well as the repetition of multiple ambivalences operating in the play, makes Banquo seem more neutral than his situation might suggest, and besides, he is soon to become a murder victim on the suspicion that he is embittered and a likely assassin of Macbeth. The question unanswered within the play is how Banquo’s issue eventually gets the throne, but in the fictional scheme at least there would be a kind of poetic justice if Fleance were to kill Malcolm to avenge the insult of one father upon the other. The murder attracts audience sympathy to him, while the appearance of his gory ghost to Macbeth turns him into a spectral threat to the current king. In *Macbeth*, the real cause for evil in the world lies not in warped, individual motives like ambition, but in the very existence of the monarchy itself, which creates such motives and ambitions in men. The institution of kingship itself fuels the bloody pattern of death after death, which seems likely to be ceaseless even after the play ends.

## Malcolm

Early in the play not enough is seen of Malcolm to construct a clear impression of him, though what we do see is formal rather than revealing and forceful. This character gives actors options about how to play the role, ranging from a callow, unformed youth to a future and legitimate king. He appears with his father Duncan, who nominates him Prince of Cumberland and therefore the next king of Scotland. Malcolm was saved in the battle from being taken prisoner by an unnamed captain, and he witnesses and describes the death of the disgraced Thane of Cawdor, who managed to redeem himself to some extent before dying, as Malcolm attests, by unexpectedly expressing “a deep repentance”:

Nothing in his life  
Became him like the leaving it. He died  
As one that had been studied in his death  
To throw away the dearest thing he owed  
As ’twere a careless trifle. (1.4.7-11)

After the death of Duncan, Malcolm and his brother Donalbain are too panic-stricken to mourn properly, or even to feign grief, for they see that their own lives are in danger, and they flee, Malcolm to join the king of England, which to some Scottish historians could be construed as immediate treachery:

MALCOLM

This murderous shaft that's shot  
Hath not yet lighted, and our safest way  
Is to avoid the aim. Therefore to horse,  
And let us not be dainty of leave-taking,  
But shift away. There's warrant in that theft  
Which steals itself when there's no mercy left.

*Exeunt* (2.3.140-5)

Macbeth takes immediate advantage of their flight, as their defection allows him to claim that they solicited the murder of Duncan to take power themselves. While exhibiting prudence, they do not show signs of a will to resist or of future bravery, and Donalbain, having spoken very few lines, chooses to flee to Ireland and plays no further part in the play.

Six scenes then pass without trace of Malcolm, and we would be forgiven for thinking that, his claim defeated, he is like his brother, a forgotten man who will take no more part in the play. (He is not even given the role of killing Macbeth, who had murdered his father.) But in 4.1 we learn from Lennox's report that he is with the "pious" English king, Edward the Confessor, and has been joined by Macduff. This brief scene gives the background to the meeting between Malcolm and Macduff in 4.3, which is a puzzling and deeply troubling scene, stretching radical ambivalence and conflicting emotional worlds to an extreme. After his earlier cryptic and formal lines, which tell us very little about him, Malcolm's talkativeness in this scene comes as a surprise. The content is even more alarming. To a confused and increasingly alarmed Macduff, Malcolm speaks with apparent relish of the dreadful things he will do when he becomes king, or rather, as he forecasts, tyrant. He will, he says, display vices so dreadful that "black Macbeth / Will seem as pure as snow" (4.3.52-3). His "voluptuousness" or sexual depravity is so

insatiable that no woman will be safe from him, and he will be so avaricious as to seize wealth and land from nobles as ruthlessly as he can. Further, he says he has “no relish” of virtues but rather loves crime and division. At first Macduff indulges this inexplicable revelation, saying more or less that Malcolm as king will find enough willing women and enough wealth to keep him happy without ever approaching Macbeth’s evil. But as Malcolm’s monologue relentlessly continues, Macduff becomes increasingly alarmed and outspoken:

MACDUFF  
O Scotland, Scotland.  
MALCOLM  
If such a one be fit to govern, speak:  
I am as I have spoken.  
MACDUFF  
Fit to govern?  
No, not to live. O nation miserable,  
With an untitled tyrant bloody-sceptered,  
When shalt thou see thy wholesome days again,  
Since that the truest issue of thy throne  
By his own interdiction stands accused  
And does blaspheme his breed? Thy royal father  
Was a most sainted king ... (4.3.103-10)

At this moment there comes a bewildering shift of tone. Malcolm reassures Macduff that he was in effect “just joking”, testing Macduff’s integrity and trustworthiness, and that in fact his life is blameless. But his explanation is very strange (4.3.114-40), and Macduff for one does not know what to think or say:

MALCOLM  
Why are you silent?  
MACDUFF  
Such welcome and unwelcome things at once  
'Tis hard to reconcile. (4.3.138-40)

What is so “unwelcome” to Macduff is paralleled in the audience’s awareness that Malcolm’s somewhat gleeful nightmare vision is presented in a light very similar to Macbeth’s division of mind about the Witches, reporting that Macbeth has tried to bewitch him:

Devilish Macbeth  
By many of these trains hath sought to win me  
Into his power, and modest wisdom plucks me  
From over-credulous haste ... (4.3.118-21)

Since there are several points in the play which subtly “double” Malcolm with Macbeth even if we do not see his innermost thoughts, this may well be his “Is this a dagger I see before me?” moment, a point at which fantasy takes over from reality. It is all very well for Malcolm to say ambiguously “My first false speaking / Was this upon myself”, designed to congratulate Macduff for passing the “test”, but the reverie of evil has been too intense and effective to be so casually dismissed by Macduff, and by an audience attuned to assuming that those who do not speak the truth on stage may be under suspicion as liars or at least devious machiavels. Even as a test of Macduff’s integrity (as most critics assume, taking Malcolm at his word) it is remarkably convoluted and barely appropriate, and the “explanation” is contradictory and unconvincing, as Macduff suspiciously protests. He has been described as a “pious fraud” in whose words “the piety does not wholly eclipse the fraudulence” (Calderwood 1986: 104).

Braunmuller writes of this scene, “Whether or not it was revised, and whether or not it was well revised, *Macbeth* Act 4, Scene 3, poses some extraordinary theatrical, dramatic, and intellectual puzzles for producers, audiences, and critics”, and he speaks of “an unsettling effect” (Braunmuller 1997: 88-93, 204fn). He suggests the scene may have been “maladroitly revised” (Braunmuller 1997: 88), perhaps by Middleton. Another explanation which has not been mooted is that perhaps Shakespeare was drawn to the episode since it is recounted at length by Holinshed, and the dramatist whose main structural unit was the scene simply could not have resisted it in its dramatic mystery. However, there are other explanations if we adopt a more subversive thematic reading. The scene would, after all, have appealed to at least

one witness, John Milton, whose attitude to the unreliability of monarchs and their propensity to turn into tyrants was enshrined in his published justification for the execution of Charles I. At the very least we must see Malcolm's behaviour in Act 4 Scene 3 as markedly and even dangerously ambiguous, inviting two diametrically opposed and irreconcilable readings: either he is a lily-white future king who with a kind of imaginative fancifulness tests his subject's loyalty to see how far he can go without losing support; or he is a mirror image of Macbeth, full of warring potential and self-division, torn between virtue and vice, young and as yet untested with kingship. He knows in theory that “A good and virtuous nature may recoil / In an imperial charge” (4.3.20-1) without necessarily applying the lesson to himself that he is unable to know, except through imagination, what he will be like when he does get “an imperial charge”, a phrase echoing Macbeth's anticipation of “the imperial theme” (1.3.128). Malcolm's understanding of masculinity seems more like Macbeth's when he challenges Macduff for breaking under grief instead of pursuing a “great revenge” (4.3.214) against Macbeth, a callow soldier's attitude to “Dispute it like a man” (4.3.220), which is quietly reprovved for lacking empathy by Macduff's feelings on being told his children have been murdered: “He has no children. All my pretty ones?” (4.3.216).

Given the scene's ambiguities and the general air in the play of duplicity, we might recall both Lady Macbeth's image of the flower with the serpent hidden under it and Duncan's worries about reading motives from the human face, and be tempted to suspect deception and self-deception at many points. The uneasy implication is that subjects in a kingdom cannot actually know in advance whether they are getting a saint or a tyrant, an Edward or a Macbeth, until it is too late, and in fact even the future incumbent will not know in advance. Which kind of king Malcolm will become on enthronement is beyond the play's brief, but the issue is certainly raised and left unresolved. The figure who becomes king at the end of the play is a revival of the earlier, bland and unknowable Malcolm, simply mouthing official language in a competent and suspiciously well-rehearsed manner, just as his father did at the beginning. As we shall see when we examine the theme of time, the uncertainty of the future is inescapable. Similarly, we might say again that the very existence of kingly power is an inducement



to tyranny. Just as a question is implicitly raised about exactly how Banquo's descendants will become kings eventually (legitimately or through assassination?), even the puzzling absence of Malcolm's brother Donalbain before battle is emphasised (5.2.7-8), and he is conspicuously absent from the final scene when his brother is enthroned. Polanski, in his popular film of *Macbeth*, clearly found some possibility of an unending cycle of power-seeking, since his last, eerie and sinister scene is of Donalbain going to meet the Witches. Although he may be among the unnamed "thanes", or else more mundanely the actor who had played Donalbain is now doubled as one of the group, it is yet another open question left at the end of the play.

Once again, in the treatment of Malcolm's actions, the play's unresolved ambivalences, "smothered in surmise" (1.3.140), suggest that tyranny is not inherent in "human nature" but is an all-too-possible consequence of the simple fact of investing absolute power in any monarch. Far from being a "personality trait", it is the opposite – the potential alienation of a personal self through identification with the impersonality and inhumanity of office. This may have been one of the lessons taken by the young Milton from his experience of watching *Macbeth* on stage, given his own Puritan aversion to the trappings of authority, especially vested in the system of monarchy.

## Macduff

The killing of Banquo does not solve problems for Macbeth but opens up new ones. Not only is Fleance still at large but also by definition other enemies are created by Macbeth's tyranny. He is told by the Witches to "beware Macduff, / Beware the Thane of Fife" (4.1.87-8). Enigmatically, the prediction runs that "none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" (4.1.96-7), and so Macbeth concludes "Then live, Macduff – what need I fear of thee?" (82). In order, however, to make "assurance double sure" he decides to kill Macduff. At this moment he learns from Lennox that Macduff has fled to England, and he authorises the sacking of Fife castle, Macduff's home, and the slaughter of "His wife, his babes, and all the unfortunate souls / That trace him in his line" (4.1.168-9). He has learned the lesson of botching the job of killing

Banquo’s issue, and this time he is ruthless. The scene of the murder of Lady Macduff and her children (4.2) is even more horrifying because it is pointless in terms of Macbeth’s aims because Macduff is absent. By this point of the play Macbeth has lost all audience sympathy and is significantly offstage for a substantial time, suggesting that the worst atrocities of a tyrant are delegated to hired functionaries.

In one sense the play presents Macduff as a hero, since he is the one who finally kills the tyrant, and he is given personal reasons alongside loyalty to Scotland for doing so. But as a moral centre he is wanting, and this play does not allow any male character to remain unscathed as unambiguously heroic. There is an uncomfortable harping on Macduff’s decision to flee for England while leaving his wife and children in Scotland, first and most strongly by his wife and later by Malcolm:

MACDUFF

I have lost my hopes.

MALCOLM

Perchance even there where I did find my doubts.

Why in that rawness left you wife, and child,

Those precious motives, those strong knots of love,

Without leave-taking? I pray you,

Let not my jealousies be your dishonours,

But mine own safeties. You may be rightly just,

Whatever I shall think. (4.3.25-32)

Macduff is understandably offended by this untimely accusation from a young and childless man (“He has no children. All my pretty ones?” [4.3.216-17]) who goes on to lie, apparently for his own ends. He uses the occasion to lament the state of the butchered nation:

MACDUFF

Bleed, bleed, poor country!

Great tyranny, lay thou thy basis sure,

For goodness dare not check thee. Wear thou thy wrongs;

The title is affered [confirmed]. Fare thee well lord,  
I would not be the villain that thou think'st  
For the whole space that's in the tyrant's grasp,  
And the rich east to boot.

MALCOLM

Be not offended. (4.3.32-8)

Macduff must stoically hear of the murder of his family, blaming himself for leaving them in danger like a traitor, an accusation levelled by his own wife and child in Act 4 Scene 2. The play offers no answer, plausible or otherwise, to the question why Macduff leaves his family in so vulnerable a situation in Fife. One possibility is that he did not expect Macbeth to see his family as a threat when he himself defects to Malcolm's cause, but if so one would expect Shakespeare to make this explicit. Instead, the only explanation offered is that of Macduff's wife, "he wants the human touch", equating to a modern "he lacks common sense", by, from her point of view, putting his own safety above his family's. If Macduff's "emotional world" seems somewhat defective, the riddle that he is "not of woman born" not only means he was born by Caesarean section but also takes on a possible negative resonance through metaphor, that he lacks the qualities that are dear to the heart of the mother of his children, such as concern, care and nurturing protection of his kin. Another implication is that men in this play for the most part almost obsessively try to make themselves independent of "womanly" feelings by asserting their masculinity. Other things tarnish the image of Macduff. We can be legitimately worried about his conduct, for example, in Act 4 Scene 2, when he more or less promises to supply Malcolm with a host of willing prostitutes when he is king, and when he suggests to him how nobles' loyalty can cynically be bought. If, indeed, this is a "trial" scene, then we might suspect that Macduff also has failed some of the tests. The final battle between Macduff and Macbeth takes on the nature of a struggle between flawed men in the moral sense, and although placed among the virtuous characters and chosen to be the righteous slayer of Macbeth, Macduff faces a surprisingly double-edged treatment within the play, from his wife's condemnation to his own self-recrimination. At least his remorse

proves his human feelings, unlike Macbeth’s hardened carapace, but his culpable misjudgement does not bring back his family.

Ambiguity of character motives and emotions marks minor characters as much as major. The Thane of Cawdor, for example, has been trusted by Duncan but turned rebel, and even more confusingly is reported then to have died a noble death, repenting and begging the king’s forgiveness. Ross’ actions are possibly those of a turncoat, since he is first loyal to Duncan, then to Macbeth to the extent of even apologising for Macbeth’s “fit” at the banquet. He acts as messenger between Malcolm and Macduff, and finally rejoices with the others at the accession of Malcolm. His own turning point against Macbeth may be the murders of Lady Macduff and the children since it is he who warns them of danger, though it may be questionable why he does not do more to save their lives. He does not suggest any course of action, his words are enigmatically self-referential – “But cruel are the times when we are traitors / And do not know ourselves” (4.2.17-18) – and he seems to worry on his own behalf rather than solicitous of his cousin, Lady Macduff: “I am so much a fool, should I stay longer / It would be my disgrace and your discomfort. / I take my leave at once” (4.2.28-30). So suspiciously does Ross act that in some productions he is one of the murderers of the family. This may be going too far, but at the least it can be said that his early enthusiasm for Macbeth in order to gain preferment – it is after all Ross who suggests Duncan’s sons have fled because they are the murderers – makes him look devious, and in the words of one critic, “By identifying himself as a Macbeth supporter, everything Ross does from this moment (2.4.27-30) onward is ambiguous (Baker 2016: 118). Lennox and Angus are more shadowy because they speak less, but they appear to follow the lead of Ross, switching allegiance midstream from Duncan to Macbeth to Malcolm in the invasion he mounts. These three may be examples of the Shakespearean characters who are used “situationally” to play differing roles required by the plot, but even so they emerge also as ambiguous figures. Few in the play are spared some taint, except some who act as subtle moral rudders at various points, such as the Old Man of seventy who discusses the unnatural weather with Ross and has a similar choric function as the Good Angel in *Faustus* in hoping unavailingly for some benign reconciliation of opposites: “God’s benison go with you; and

with those / That would make good of bad, and friends of foes” (2.4.41-2). There is one Doctor who reports the healing environment of Edward the Confessor in England, and another who later tends to the strange behaviour of Lady Macbeth, divining the nature of her illness as a sign of guilt amounting to a confession. Finally, there is Lady Macbeth’s Gentlewoman, who notes of her mistress that “heaven knows what she has known” (5.1.47). And beyond these are the most innocent of all, children.

### Children and Women

In such an apparently adult, masculine and military world as that of *Macbeth*, we find surprisingly frequent references made to children. It is instructive to look closely at some of these occurrences and ask what they add to the play. This time, we find a pattern of contrast: children are unquestionably presented as the symbols of innocence and of the future, throwing into dark relief the guilt of Macbeth’s court, and in particular emphasising the apparent barrenness of Macbeth and his wife, who (despite confusing evidence) appear to be childless.

The keynote struck at the outset is the glorification of war. After the framing scene of the Witches, the first thing we see is a “bloody man” (1.2.1) who talks with relish of seeing Macbeth brandishing steel “Which smoked with bloody execution”, ripping a soldier from head to toe, lopping off the head and hanging it up on the battlements. The messenger draws attention to his own “gashes”, which, Duncan says, smack of “honour” as much as his words, the phrase clinching the connection between military carnage and heroic values. The Witches seem to be spirited up by the battle in a spirit of mockery or parody, one reporting that she has been “Killing swine” (1.3.2) just as the soldiers have been reported as killing each other. Pig-killing was, and to some extent still is, a distressing activity, at least to city-dwellers, since the animal must be “bled” before it finally dies, in earlier times to the sound of blood-curdling screams. In *Macbeth*, the reference is not gratuitous, but gruesomely precise in defining the nature of the raging battle as a matter of slaughter. Shakespeare does his utmost to make it an especially bloody affair. “Strange images of death” (1.3.95) receive the

stamp of royal approval, and become as inextricably associated with kingship and the apparent inevitability of violent death as in *Richard III*.

Pitched against this culture of adult, masculine violence are the children, and their presence, once noticed, is as symbolically and visually compelling as the “*child crowned, with a tree in his hand*” that appears to Macbeth (4.1.103, stage direction), and as unending as the descendants of Banquo, whose line stretches out “to th’ crack of doom” (4.1.133). But the first references have a perversity about them which begins to make us uneasily aware of the way the world represented is an already fallen one in which the innocence of children is irrevocably and tragically lost. Macbeth equates “Children and servants” (1.4.25) as no more than images of obedience to the king. Lady Macbeth, reading her husband’s letter, invokes the first of her “anti-nursing” images when she expresses her fear that Macbeth is “too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness” (1.5.17) to carry out a political assassination, as though he has been breastfed for too long to attain full masculinity. This adds to the destabilisation of moral values which has already been described, since intuitively we would think of “the milk of human kindness” as being wholly good rather than a fatal weakness, and it does not seem appropriate from a woman. Lady Macbeth continues this topsy-turvy morality by calling upon spirits to “unsex” her and fill her “from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty” (1.5.41–2), and in particular she again specifies breastfeeding: “Come to my woman’s breasts / And take my milk for gall, you murd’ring ministers”. This perverse and sinister use of nursing imagery finds its terrible climax as Lady Macbeth galvanises her husband:

I have given suck, and know  
How tender ’tis to love the babe that milks me.  
I would, while it was smiling in my face,  
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums  
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn  
As you have done to this. (1.7.54–9)

If one thinks about this even for a brief minute, it will be seen to be truly shocking in the moral sense, and perhaps the most shocking speech Shakespeare ever wrote. Words like “tender”, “love”, “milks”, “smiling”

and even the vulnerable associations of “nipple” and “boneless gums” suddenly transpose into an image of dashing a baby’s brains out. The alert reader might recall these lines of infanticide much later in the play when a Witch incants over the bubbling cauldron: “Pour in sow’s blood that hath eaten / Her nine farrow; grease that’s sweaten / From the murderer’s gibbet” (4.1.80-2). In some productions another ironic echo is achieved when Lady Macduff is depicted as nursing a small child since she specifically has children (plural), although only one son actually speaks. Lady Macduff, as a striking contrast, is aligned with values of nurturing and parenting. Shakespeare’s lines have opened up enquiries along the lines of L.C. Knights’ question (parodying Bradley’s general approach although Bradley himself does not ask it), “How many children had Lady Macbeth?” (Knights 1946: title), and the reference is indeed puzzling since the couple are clearly childless during the play and can have no heir. Shakespeare lost one golden opportunity to clear up this mystery and to provide motivation to both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, since historically Macbeth had a son who was killed by Malcolm. It is often said that the text of *Macbeth* is incomplete, and this is one incident which could well have been pertinent to the theme of killing for kingship, but Shakespeare presumably omitted it because it would have put Malcolm in too bad a light early in the play when Malcolm was young (though not apparently a minor), and given unwanted sympathy to the Macbeths. As it stands, Lady Macbeth’s speech illustrates the inhumanity of a society driven by lust for power, when even a woman is perversely willing to sacrifice a child for the sake of misguided honour. In this she is not necessarily alone, and she merely articulates what this kingdom is based upon: murder either in battle or for the throne. In this context, as we have noticed, Macduff who was “not of woman born” stands as prototypical.

The other disturbing point to be made about Lady Macbeth’s blood-curdling speech is that Macbeth has not in fact “so sworn” to kill Duncan. From the very moment that she receives the letter, to her first words to him when he returns, it is she who fully articulates killing the king as an unavoidable act to gain power. In this instance the invocation of the child is to represent Lady Macbeth as a person whose morality has, for some reason which is not fully inscribed in the play, gone dreadfully wrong. It also focuses the underlying ambivalence

of the play, since Lady Macbeth, a woman, is here explicitly denying any construction of femininity which includes childrearing. She desires to be unsexed in order to perpetuate the dominant ethos of male destructiveness. In a slightly confused way, Macbeth expresses his admiration for her firm purpose by eliding the child and the male:

Bring forth men-children only,  
For thy undaunted mettle should compose  
Nothing but males. (1.7.72-4)

He is effectively colluding in the process that links masculinity and violence as heroic values.

Early in the play the more benign use of child imagery is subdued – a subtext too quiet to drown out the darker refrain. But it is present. Duncan speaks of the martlet’s nest as a “procreant cradle” (1.6.8) (curiously stirring distant echoes from nursery rhymes: “hush a bye baby, thy cradle will rock ...”). More powerfully, Macbeth uses the image of the child as a symbol of innocence which will proclaim his own guilt to future times. The train of metaphors is dense and complex, unweaving more through association than logic:

And pity, like a naked new-born babe,  
Striding the blast, or Heaven’s cherubim, horsed  
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,  
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye  
That tears shall drown the wind ... (1.7.16-25)

A detailed close criticism of this passage as poetry can be found in Cleanth Brooks’ famous essay “‘The Naked Babe’ and the Cloak of Manliness” in *The Well-Wrought Urn* (1947), but the significance to be drawn here is a straightforwardly moral one. This soliloquy marks the last chance Macbeth has to follow his conscience. The picture of Duncan as having a childlike meekness leads to the image of the naked newborn babe which, at least to the prelapsarian mind of Macbeth, is the most supreme symbol of original innocence (as opposed to both guilt and experience). Macbeth’s use of it shows his own dawning



horror at the deed he is about to do. It is the moment of moral awakening that could have saved him, but like Faustus hearing the good and evil angels, Macbeth allows himself to be steeled by his determined wife whose challenge comes soon after. Considerations of good and evil may have been swept away by this couple, and perhaps by the larger political world they inhabit, but the critical moment of Macbeth's conscience remains to haunt the mind of the reader or audience.

When he suppresses his scruples based on visualising the "naked new-born child", audience sympathy begins to ebb. The action from here on is held in a mode of hypnotic fascination with how the murder will be completed, moral bearings suspended, until one later scene reawakens all the intuitive knowledge of good and evil embodied in the image of the innocent child, allowing us to recoil in healthy shock. Until Act 4 Scene 2 we are given very little opportunity to judge Macbeth from the outside, so compellingly is his own mental state presented. Act 4 Scene 1 is the last scene in which we can say that the point of view of the play is established by Macbeth's inner processes, and it is the scene in which he visits the Witches, sees the apparitions, which include a "bloody child", and decides he must eliminate Macduff, "His wife, his babes, and all the unfortunate souls / That trace him in his line" (4.1.166-7). The next scene shows the murder of a child and a woman, and the tone switches instantly to a horror of the cold-blooded delegation of murder by Macbeth, who himself disappears from our view, hiding behind his ill-fitting robes of office, to reappear later wavering between manic bravado and desolate emptiness. We have time to breathe, collect our moral bearings, and distance ourselves. This scene is pivotal, and the deaths of the mother and children by anonymous, hired killers allow us finally to judge coolly and clearly.

Macduff has fled his castle in Fife. It may be harsh to blame him, but as we have seen, blunt questions are asked in the play itself about why he left his family so unprotected. Betrayal and equivocation are issues in this scene as in the play as a whole, since Lady Macduff feels her husband has deserted her. The scene is as much a reproach to Macduff as a badge of infamy to Macbeth, and it is disturbing that the child himself in the scene is already learning the way of such a world:

SON

Was my father a traitor, mother?

LADY MACDUFF

Ay, that he was.

SON

What is a traitor?

LADY MACDUFF

Why, one that swears and lies.

SON

And be all traitors that do so?

LADY MACDUFF

Everyone that does so is a traitor, and must be hanged.

SON

And must they all be hanged that swear and lie?

LADY MACDUFF

Every one.

SON

Who must hang them?

LADY MACDUFF

Why, the honest men.

SON

Then the liars and swearers are fools, for there are liars and swearers enough to beat the honest men and hang up them.

LADY MACDUFF

Now God help thee, poor monkey! But how wilt thou do for a father? (4.2.45-62)

Lady Macduff is employing a kind of bitter irony here, ostensibly saying that her husband is traitor to the king, and an “equivocator”, knowing full well that Macbeth is a tyrant and deserves no loyalty. However, she has already condemned her husband on family grounds, and the accusation of treachery operates in another way:

LADY MACDUFF

... His flight was madness. When our actions do not,

Our fears do make us traitors.

ROSS

You know not

Whether it was his wisdom or his fear.

LADY MACDUFF

Wisdom – To leave his wife, to leave his babes,

His mansion, and his titles, in a place

From whence himself does fly? He loves us not,

He wants the natural touch, for the poor wren,

The most diminutive of birds, will fight,

Her young ones in her nest, against the owl.

All is the fear and nothing is the love;

As little is the wisdom, where the flight

So runs against all reason. (4.2.3-14)

A law of nature is invoked here, an instinctively protective response to prolong life evident even in bird families. Ross tries to reassure Lady Macduff about her husband's nobility, wisdom and judiciousness, and says that things will improve, but the brutal action of this scene, the shocking brevity of the stabbing with the words which pick up the imagery of small birds preyed upon, "What, you egg! Young fry of treachery!" (4.2.84), prove that she is right. The scene could easily have fallen into sentimental pathos, but Shakespeare adjusts the tone so as not to focus on the boy's death in itself, which is over in the blink of an eye, but to stir outrage and judgement against tyranny itself, and secondarily upon the way in which the world of power-hungry men has betrayed the human values of a world of women and children.

The next scene shows the odd exchange between Malcolm and Macduff that was analysed previously. After Malcolm snaps out of his rhapsody in evil, news comes of the death of Macduff's wife and children. Ross breaks the news of "your wife, and babes, / Savagely slaughtered" like "murdered deer" (4.3.205-6). The dazed Macduff takes some time to comprehend, but when he does his language stirs pathos: "What, all my pretty chickens and their dam / At one fell swoop?" (4.3.219-20), and the innocent casualties signal the move. The play has shifted its centre further away from the world of male violence towards one of felt grief and human decencies, and the recantation by

Macduff reaches a level of moral stability which has not been attained before:

Sinful Macduff,  
They were all struck for thee. Naught that I am,  
Not for their demerits but for mine  
Fell slaughter on their souls. Heaven rest them now. (4.3.226-9)

Malcolm seems to have missed the point when, like a “Boy’s Own” hero, he utters “This tune goes manly” (4.3.235), but then he cannot afford to give way to any other mission than going to battle and maintaining the warlike ethos to ensure his father’s dynasty.

In a rather unexpected way, Lady Macbeth becomes a casualty of the action which she herself has helped to precipitate. Earlier on she had embraced the idea of assassination far more readily than her husband, and her only faint sign of compunction comes after the event when the experience sinks in as real – “Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done’t” (2.2.12-13) – a line which psychological critics could have a field day with (although Sigmund Freud himself is very restrained, saying that the springs of her conduct are impossibly obscure) – and which carries on a long train of references to fathers throughout the play. Otherwise, she is steely and determined, carrying the plan right through to its end. As we see in the last chapter of this book, she can be portrayed by film-makers such as Polanski and Orson Welles as young, vivacious, and sexually focused, reflecting the modern cinematic taste in female villains or femmes fatales stretching from film noir, whose heyday was in the 1940s when Welles worked, up to erotic thrillers of the 1990s influenced by Polanski. However we choose to depict her, we can see Lady Macbeth as wholeheartedly committing herself to the values which the play’s language links with masculinity and violence. It is she who was steadfast throughout the murder night, and who gallantly covered up for her husband’s erratic behaviour at the banquet. It seems all the sadder, then, that she becomes increasingly estranged from Macbeth, unconsulted by him, particularly since at the beginning they acted so cooperatively in a deadly but genuine team, unforgettably described by the critic Barbara Everett (1989) as an almost ideally compatible couple. Lady Macbeth’s increasing

marginalisation comes, not necessarily because she is being treated as a woman, but because the world they both entered was one of selfish individualism, and Macbeth comes to trust, and even need, nobody. There is precious little camaraderie even between men in this cut-throat world where there is one crown and more than one competitor, and Macbeth pays the price for the system he has entered. He has no contact on stage with his wife after the banquet, although he worries enough about her health to consult doctors (5.3.37-44). He is insomniac – has indeed “banish’d” sleep – while she is defined through the image of sleepwalking. Actors make their own decisions about how to speak his words after her death, whether in sorrow (she should not have died now, but later) or weary indifference (she would have died anyway, so it doesn’t much matter): “She should have died hereafter. / There would have been a time for such a word” (5.5.16-17). In the light of the play’s sharp polarity between masculine violence and the helplessness of Lady Macduff, the reported moment of the death of Lady Macbeth, who has forfeited a spirit of female nurturing in a capitulation to the plan to kill the king, is a strange and haunting one:

*A cry of women within*

MACBETH

What is that noise?

SEYTON

It is the cry of women, my good lord.

MACBETH

I have almost forgot the taste of fears. (5.5.8-10)

Again, Macbeth’s response is enigmatic, signalling either the end of all feeling, or a regretful glimpse of feelings he has lost. The cry of women seems to be one of grief as their queen dies, and it betokens qualities of loyalty to her, perhaps even love, despite her evil actions. We can only speculate on their unexplained but vocal response. From a feminist point of view, she has been placed in a fatal dilemma, “damned if she does and damned if she doesn’t” (Calderwood xiv) – another layer of radical ambivalence in the play’s world. Why she entered that world in the first place is left unexplained and not answered openly, but it may in a perverse way have been a “feminist” perception that

the world blocks women who wish to be active, and the only way for her to achieve any power is first through her husband’s agency, and secondly by being prepared to embrace the ethics of war, individualism and murder instead of peace and domesticity. The alternative is Lady Macduff’s resigned and hardened perception of the impossibility of action:

Whither should I fly?  
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 sometime  
Accounted dangerous folly. Why then, alas,  
Do I put up that womanly defence  
To say I have done no harm. (4.2.74-80)

The next line is the brutal stage direction “*Enter murderers*”, proving her point about the ineffectuality of virtue and of women.

Arguments rage about whether Shakespeare in his works reveals himself to be or not to be a proto-feminist, and if so, of what kind (in a movement with many different styles and stances), but the question is not resolved within the terms of this play, though actors, directors and audiences may come to their own conclusions. As we have seen, the playwright certainly draws upon distinctions between concepts of masculine and feminine values, but he does so in a complex way which, as in the case of Lady Macbeth (and the Witches, for that matter), does not enforce a single or simple judgement. As at all levels in this play, ambivalence operates in its presentation of gender as of other issues. One thing we can conclude, however, is that within the play’s horizon is a touchstone perception that there are children who deserve to grow up in a world safe from tyranny, cruelty, war and inhumanity – the very world which is not on offer in *Macbeth*.

## The Witches

Where radical ambivalence operates at its most profound level is in making unanswerable the crucial question, “to what extent did

Macbeth freely ‘choose’ his course of action?” Perfectly valid arguments could be mounted to justify opposite positions. On the one hand, it could be said that the Witches in their prophecies show that, whatever Macbeth wants, his future is already mapped out, foreordained, inevitable and impervious to individual choice or agency. The other argument says that the Witches simply record the future in the way that historians record the past, that Macbeth is shown in the process of freely choosing among options, and his options then become history as the play unfolds. A kind of in-between position would be that, borrowing again from a metaphor used by Joseph Furphy in *Such Is Life*, like a person catching a train, Macbeth chooses to get on one train rather than another, and is then at the mercy of the train’s route and must stay on it until it stops and he alights somewhere other than where he expected.

It is significant that in presenting the arguments above, the role of the Witches seems to be crucial but unexplained. Do they cause events or simply observe them? The questions are the same as those posed by Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, and by Milton in *Paradise Lost*, both within a Christian cosmology: if God knows the future of mankind, how can people meaningfully “choose” for themselves; and if they cannot choose, then is not God unjust? Does God make human history or merely observe it being made? Does omniscience include all-powerfulness? Unfortunately for those looking for easy answers, there are none, and the Witches remain inscrutable and mysterious, hovering through the fog and filthy air and apparently indifferent to human fates. The intriguing chant “Fair is foul and foul is fair” (1.1.11), throws us straight away into a moral “fog” where good and evil, fair and foul, are not opposites but somehow indistinguishable from each other and confused. The words recur: “So fair and foul a day I have not seen” (1.3.36), “Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?” (1.3.49–50). Macbeth falls “rapt” into a threshold state where “this supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good” (1.3.129–30), and where “nothing is / But what is not” (1.3.140–1). The word “witches”, at least in Shakespeare’s time and probably generally now, would have negative associations, but there could be “white” as well as “black” witches. On the other hand, we should note that the word occurs only once in the spoken text, and that the figures are

nominated not witches but “weird sisters” (1.3.30). This sounds more neutral and almost certainly is a survival from the Old English word *wyrd*, which meant fate and destiny. Perhaps even in the original spelling (“weyward”) there might be a touch of “wayward”, namely changeable, unreliable, and it is intriguing to notice that this is the word used by Hecate to describe Macbeth himself as a “wayward son / Spiteful and wrathful” (3.5.11-12). But in fact the “sisters” are proved to be entirely correct and reliable, and their function can be strictly construed as no more than predictive and prophetic rather than causative or malicious. They are even quite friendly to everybody, in ways that others in this play are not, and indeed they are reproved by their mistress, Hecate, for revealing too much to humanity (in a scene which many doubt is by Shakespeare), as though such knowledge is dangerous, as it is to Faustus. They might be said to “put ideas in Macbeth’s mind”, but then again without their prophecies he may himself have built hopes of further advancement on the event of his accelerated status of Thane of Cawdor. Even without meeting the Witches he could have taken this as a signal of further success. Whichever way we look, the Witches seem to be neutral, or even to symbolise the spirit of radical ambivalence running through the play.

The actual physical status of the Witches is just as problematical as the moral space they inhabit, as Banquo reports:

What are these,  
So withered, and so wild in their attire,  
That look not like th’inhabitants o’thearth  
And yet are on’t? – Live you, or are you aught  
That man may question? You seem to understand me,  
By each at once her choppy finger laying  
Upon her skinny lips. You should be women,  
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret  
That you are so. (1.3.37-45)

Macbeth asks not “*who* are you?” but “*what* are you?” Names like Paddock (toad) and Graymalkin (common name for a cat) place them more in the animal world than the human, while their goddess, Hecate,



belongs to the spirit world of classical mythology. It is questionable even what element they are made of:

BANQUO

The earth hath bubbles, as the water has,  
And these are of them. Whither are they vanished?

MACBETH

Into the air, and what seemed corporal  
Melted as breath into the wind. (1.3.77-80)

Like water but living on land, materially visible and yet vanishing into thin air, bearded women played in the theatre by boys, the sisters defy all categories of classification and remain obdurately ambiguous in their very nature as in their relation to the past and future. Much the same can be said of the three “Apparitions” which warn Macbeth against Macduff and the rising of Birnam Wood, of the “show of eight kings” presented by the sisters, giving a glimpse into the long line of Banquo’s issue holding the sceptres of office, the line stretching out to “th’ crack of doom” (4.1.133) as the Day of Judgement, and even of the phantom dagger which appears temptingly to Macbeth before he kills Duncan. All these illusions would have stretched the resources of the play’s original theatre – probably the Globe, an outdoor, public playhouse operating in daylight. Arguments have been mounted that it was performed indoors at the Blackfriars Playhouse or at court, but the production which Simon Forman attended in 1610–11 was at the Globe – and even today directors in presenting these “supernatural” scenes rarely escape an element of inadvertent absurdity, or at least unease in suspending audience disbelief. The repulsive ingredients tossed into the Witches’ cauldron to boil in a “hell-broth” (4.1.19), and the way Birnam Wood approaches Dunsinane, are especially tricky to stage without risking laughter through either over-literalism or over-stylisation. A part of the problem is that the Witches as stage representations are on a different theatrical plane, not individuated “characters” like the others who are interacting with each other, but more like an observing chorus, especially since there are three of them. Stephen Greenblatt follows a metatheatrical approach, suggesting that the Witches stand for the dramatist in the work, and their trade of “bewitchment” is analogous

to the dramatist’s art of intersecting fantasy and reality through a celebration of “the boundless energy and hallucinatory vividness of the imagination” (Greenblatt 1994: 31). After all (though it is a point not made by Greenblatt), they do know the plot before the play even starts, and they know where the play will end long before any of the characters themselves do.

