Macbeth

by **Peter Cash**



English Association Shakespeare Bookmarks
Longer Commentaries No. 6

For William Craig

Macbeth (1606)

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SCOPE OF TOPIC

Macbeth is a classical tragedy. One aim of this Bookmark will therefore be to show how faithful the arc of its plot is to the Aristotelian model of a tragedy.* At the same time as it will follow Shakespeare's narrative arc and trace the development of his tragic hero, this Bookmark will also examine the cause of his tragedy. *See **Appendix**.

Central to **Macbeth** is Shakespeare's intuition that evil is viral in nature. Contrary to the mythology of the Middle Ages, Shakespeare will write this play as if evil is not a theological concept, but biological force: a virus by which a man can become infected, a disease which he can catch. Consequently, another aim of this Bookmark will be to give a scene-by-scene account of the play, a running commentary, illustrating this radical intuition, paying special attention to the language in which Macbeth and Lady Macbeth exhibit their symptoms of the disease.

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COMMENTARY

ACT I Scene 1

Daring in its brevity, the opening scene of **Macbeth** – all ten lines of it – is the shortest opening scene in the Shakespearean canon,* but succeeds nevertheless in performing two functions: first, it creates the bleak atmosphere that prevails throughout the action; second, it provides the foreground for the proleptic ironies that chill and darken this atmosphere even further in Act I Scene 3. *The shortest is Act III Scene 9 of **Antony and Cleopatra**; this scene is the fourth shortest of all.

A. C. Bradley, the founding father of Shakespearean criticism, asserts that the Three Witches are "old women, poor and ragged, skinny and hideous, full of vulgar spite"; he states emphatically that they are not "external powers" practising black magic and super-imposing their wills upon innocent souls on the 'blasted heath' around them, but crones or hags. Although they may be maliciously 'killing swine', they are more akin to fortune tellers who, in their old age, draw on the wisdom of experience. Ever since **Hair** (1968) and **Oh! Calcutta!** (1970) appeared in the West End, stage directors of **Macbeth** have felt free to follow historical precedent and portray the Three Witches as bare-breasted camp- followers, much younger sex-workers who stave off starvation by following camps of soldiers from one battle to another. "When shall we three meet again?" Given this interpretation, the answer is that they will 'meet again' whenever and wherever the next battle is pitched.

To conclude their exchanges, the Three Witches chant a couplet which perceives a threat to the natural order of things:

"Fair is foul and foul is fair.
Hover through the fog and filthy air."

This insight suggests that there is something in 'the filthy air' by which a man can become infected, an evil brewed in a cauldron – a malignant force of which they are agents, the vectors spreading it.

ACT I Scene 2

From the outset, Macbeth is a man of action and a warrior of high renown. The first purpose of this scene is to establish his military reputation and exalt him to high estate ... At the start, Duncan King of Scotland and his son Malcolm receive news from a nearby field where Scotland and Norway are engaged in a fierce battle. The 'bleeding Captain' informs them that 'brave Macbeth' has shown valour ('O valiant cousin!') and distinguished himself in hand-to-hand combat.

No sooner has this 'bloody man' departed in search of medical attention than the Thane of Ross arrives from the battlefield with more news. He reports that the Thane of Cawdor – who had turned 'traitor' and joined forces with the Norwegian foe – has fought a losing battle and been vanquished. The second purpose of this scene is to provide the foreground for another proleptic irony in Act I Scene 3 [= foreshadow another event to come] and strengthen the credibility of the Three Witches:

"Go pronounce his present death
And with his former title greet Macbeth."

At the same time, another epithet – 'noble Macbeth' – is deployed to enhance Macbeth's reputation for valour.

ACT I Scene 3

It is in this scene that Shakespeare promptly presents the Three Witches in the act of stirring the strange brew and cooking up a storm: '*Thunder*'. Camp-followers they may be, but we see here that they are older prostitutes: scarlet women, but bearded ladies, scrawny creatures in garish garb – 'so withered and so wild in their attire' that they scare Macbeth and Banquo both by their unhealthy appearances and by their uncanny predictions.

The verse that Shakespeare shares between the Three Witches is significant because its trochaic rhythm simulates the pulse-rate of bodies sick with the same disease. The metre supplies stylistic evidence of the affliction from which they are suffering:

FIRST WITCH: Here I have a pilot's thumb,
Wracked as homeward he did come.

Drum within.

THIRD WITCH: A drum! A drum!
Macbeth doth come.

ALL: The Weird Sisters, hand in hand,
Posters of the sea and land
Thus do go about, about.

Since 'the Weird Sisters' are to appear both haggard and hideous, it makes sense to regard them as having been gradually disfigured by the evil disease that they incubate and spread – as if it brings with it the scarring characteristics of impetigo, scrofula, leprosy or venereal disease. Consistent with this interpretation, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth might – as the action progresses – begin to show equivalent signs of skin-scarring, wasting and finally of physical disability.

An audience cannot help but view this scene through the window of Act I Scene 2 in which King Duncan has bestowed upon Macbeth the title Thane of Cawdor. From this vantage-point, it will appear that the Three Witches are successful fortune-tellers, endowed indeed with the gift of prophecy. For this reason, the first line (of iambic pentameter) that Macbeth utters – "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" – is one of the most hair-raising and spine-tingling lines that Shakespeare ever managed. To put it mildly, it is ironic that Macbeth too should use in combination the two alliterative and contradictory adjectives that the Witches chanted only 100 lines ago. Chillingly, Macbeth already talks their language: by verbal means, Shakespeare is showing us that his protagonist has already 'caught something' identical to the malaise with which they are afflicted.

In A. C. Bradley's book, the dramatic irony at Macbeth's expense is Sophoclean irony in that Macbeth – like Oedipus in Sophocles' Greek tragedy **Oedipus Rex** – does not share the audience's awareness of the full situation and is dangerously unaware of the ominous echo. More precisely, this irony is proleptic in that it responds to an earlier use of language, consummating the idea that it proposed: whereas we pick up the clue, he doesn't.

In this scene, Macbeth – exactly according to the First Witch's prophecy – becomes the pilot ship-wrecked as he was on his way home. Upon hearing the prophecies of the Three Witches, Macbeth does not react with equanimity, but appears startled. For this stage- direction, we can rely upon Banquo's observation that his 'noble partner' seems to 'fear things that do sound so fair'. This time, the proleptic irony is at Banquo's expense, for he too is currently unaware that, in this Celtic twilight, things that sound 'fair' can have 'foul' consequences.

No sooner have the Weird Sisters vanished than the Thane of Ross and the Thane of Angus arrive to hail Macbeth ('most worthy thane') for his performance in battle and to report that King Duncan, in gratitude for his defence of the realm, has made him Thane of Cawdor. When he reacts with understandable incredulity to this dramatic development, he is assured that the current Thane of Cawdor is under sentence of death for 'treasons' and awaiting execution … Meanwhile, Banquo remains stand-offish, not unlike a man who mistrusts horoscopes. While Macbeth hastens to engage the three clairvoyants in conversation, Banquo ("If you can look into the seeds of time …") resists that temptation, seeks to reason with them and even appeal to their better natures. Cautious to the point of scepticism, he then warns Macbeth that the Weird Sisters may be 'instruments' of supernatural powers ('instruments of darkness') whose accurate prophecies are designed to deceive and 'harm' them. After all, the Three Witches are hardly radiant pictures of health: by contrast, they look as if they could well be the carriers of a fatal disease. Both Banquo and Macbeth hear the same 'prophetic greeting': why, then, does Banquo not embrace the 'skinny' women as Macbeth does? The reasons may be **a)** that he refuses to go near them in case he becomes unwell himself or **b)** that he has a natural immunity to the disease. In short, Banquo is not affected because he is not infected.

When Banquo, Ross and Angus 'walk apart', we learn that Macbeth, far from being convinced by Banquo's warning, is easily intrigued by the 'strange intelligence' from the Witches. Since two of their predictions have come true, why not the third? In his first soliloquy, he reasons as follows:

> "This supernatural soliciting
> Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,
> Why hath it given me earnest of success

Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
Against the use of nature?"

A. C. Bradley points out correctly that the 'prophetic' way in which the Witches greet Banquo and Macbeth is neither 'supernatural' nor 'soliciting': in other words, the Witches are not otherworldly creatures but emaciated whores and their utterances are not requests but announcements or statements. Why, then, does Macbeth mistake the tone of the 'greeting'? The answer is that he likes the sound of it because he is in the grip of a viral illness [= an evil ambition] of which the verse-movement in this soliloquy is symptomatic.

Consider G. Wilson Knight's analysis of Leontes' blank verse in **The Winter's Tale** (1611): "The spasmodic jerks of his language reflect Leontes' unease; he is, as it were, being sick." In Act I, Leontes King of Sicilia is suffering from a mental illness; he is suffering from paranoid schizophrenia, a psychiatric disorder that in his case has physical symptoms. For the Macbeth-actor in this soliloquy, the implication is clear: that he should not speak the lines of blank verse, but cough them up ('he is, as it were, being sick'). Evil attacks him as if it is a strain of viral pneumonia: by the spasmodic movement of the iambic pentameter, Shakespeare suggests that Macbeth is choking, struggling to catch his breath and/or fetching up phlegm. As he stumbles over the mid-line sentence-breaks, the Macbeth-actor ('cannot be good. If ill ...') might clutch at his chest to show that he is hyper-ventilating or struggling to control a fit of coughing. Conclusively, Macbeth's hair stands on end and his heart knocks at his ribs as if he is experiencing a form of atrial fibrillation; his hair is 'unfixed' and his heart is 'unseated' because he feels an irresistible temptation to act 'against the use of nature'. He has palpitations: specifically, his heart-rate increases as if he is troubled by an episode of supra-ventricular tachycardia. He suffers convulsions of the diaphragm because he is struggling to contain the malignant pressure building up inside him.

G. K. Hunter remarks that Macbeth's reaction to the Witches' prophecies points to 'a paralysis of the moral powers'. While the virus racks his body, Macbeth racks his brain. By the end of this soliloquy, it is clear that he is losing his sense of ethical identity:

"Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man
That function is smothered in surmise
And nothing is but what is not."

His 'thought' [= that the Crown of Scotland may lie ahead of him] so excites his imagination that his entire frame 'shakes' at the prospect. Thinking about the future, Macbeth ceases to 'function': one minute Thane of Glamis, the next minute Thane of Cawdor, he no longer knows who he is and does not know what to do next. Will he become King? He can only guess ('surmise') and finds himself in moral turmoil. He struggles to control the conflicts in his breast between 'fair' and 'foul', 'good' and 'ill', what is and 'what is not', but can no longer tell which is which. As we shall see, the metaphorical nightmare of not knowing one from the other [= right from wrong] is fast on its way to becoming a literal nightmare that deprives him entirely of sleep – 'the season of all natures, sleep' (III.4).

When his head clears, it occurs to Macbeth in a brief moment of restored sanity that he may not need to do anything: that he could become King of Scotland by 'chance' and – if, say, Duncan died of old age in his bed – without having to act at all ('without my stir'). Suppose – and there is no reason not to – that Duncan's death and Macbeth's succession to the Scottish throne were indeed pre-ordained:

that he had no need to 'stir' and had only to wait. In that case, the tragedy of Macbeth is that 'a worthy thane' felt an inner compunction to commit regicide in order to obtain what would have been his anyway. At this moment, Banquo applies to his partner this fourth epithet – 'Worthy Macbeth' – as if to signify that, although the evil disease is already at an advanced stage in him, it is not yet terminal. Not yet …

ACT I Scene 4

At the start of this scene, Malcolm informs his father that the Thane of Cawdor has been executed for his confessed 'treasons'. This is not merely a matter of tidying up the plot so that Macbeth – as predicted – can assume the title, for Malcolm also reports that the treacherous thane went to his death with a degree of dignity: that "nothing in his life became him like the leaving of it." In addition, this surprising report of Cawdor's execution opens up a theme of the play. Upon receiving it, King Duncan reflects that appearances can be deceptive:

"There's no art
To find the mind's construction in the face."

He despairs of the 'art' of physiognomy. Well he might, for he fails next to read Macbeth's character from his face. When Macbeth arrives, Duncan greets him with a fifth epithet – "O worthiest cousin!" – that makes a mistaken reference to his good character. The irony at Duncan's expense is that the former Thane of Cawdor, though he may have been disloyal, was no more disloyal than Macbeth who – even as the King showers praises on his head – is already minded to murder him.

Dramatic confirmation of this development in Macbeth's thinking comes with his reaction to King Duncan's decision to nominate an heir: upon his eldest son Malcolm, he confers the title Prince of Cumberland (equivalent in modern monarchy to the Prince of Wales). Upon his subsequent departure, Duncan applies a seventh epithet to Macbeth ("O worthy Cawdor") which Macbeth's immediate response ironically undermines. All of a sudden, Malcolm Prince of Cumberland is an impediment to Macbeth's ambition that must be overcome and he says so:

"Stars, hide your fires,
Let not light see my black and deep desires."

Because Macbeth is speaking 'aside', he is speaking confidentially to the audience (as in a soliloquy): that is, thinking aloud and thereby letting us know his true thoughts. In this couplet, he is admitting that, far from being 'a worthy thane' and 'a peerless kinsman', a loyal subject of King Duncan, he represents a mortal danger to him. He warns us that he is a villain in the making.

A. C. Bradley states that Shakespeare creates an "obviously intentional contrast" between 'noble Banquo' and 'black Macbeth'. In this short scene, its obviousness is enhanced: whereas Banquo remains trustworthy and upright, Macbeth proves powerless to resist the progress of the evil virus through his system and embraces the blackness of the night – on the grounds that it will conceal both his intentions ('deep desires') and his crimes themselves. Night becomes his natural element: in fact, this invocation of the starless sky is the first in a series of invocations in which either Macbeth or Lady Macbeth prefers the unnatural element of night to the natural 'light' of day. In these invocations, 'foul' becomes 'fair' to them.

ACT I Scene 5

This scene begins *in media res* – not only because we discover Lady Macbeth in the process of reading a letter from her husband, but also because she is midway through rationalising his potential reaction to its implications. The letter is a theatrical device, designed to acquaint Macbeth's wife with his encounter with the 'Weird Sisters' and appraise her of their prophecies before his return. What is

startling about Lady Macbeth's reaction is the revelation that her own infection (with an impatience for imperial power) is already well advanced:

> "Glamis thou art and Cawdor and shalt be
> What thou art promised. Yet I do fear thy nature:
> It is too full of the milk of human-kindness
> To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,
> Art not without ambition, but without
> The illness that should attend it."

Her 'fear' is that her husband may be 'too full of the milk of human-kindness' to seize the 'promised' opportunity: though 'not without ambition', he may lack the wherewithal to realise it. Put frankly, she fears that he may not be a nasty enough piece of work. She *thinks* she means that he may not be ruthless enough, but her metaphor for ruthlessness [= 'illness'] is ironic in that it unwittingly identifies the malignancy by which Macbeth is possessed and will be driven.

There is a physiological weakness in Macbeth (a strain of 'human-kindness'] that the evil virus exploits. How, however, has this virus been able to exploit this weakness and infect him? How – asks G. K. Hunter – was he 'first infected'? Although the Three Witches were visibly infected, Macbeth – "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" – was himself in the grip of infection *before* he encountered them … In an essay of 1823, Thomas De Quincey seeks to explain to himself why 'the knocking at the gate in **Macbeth**' has such a profound effect upon him. In the process, he points to the source of Macbeth's 'illness':

> "though in Macbeth the strife of mind is greater than in his wife, the tiger spirit not so awake, and *his feelings caught chiefly by contagion from her*, yet, as both were finally involved in the guilt of murder, the murderous mind … is finally to be presumed in both."

My italics highlight De Quincey's perception that Macbeth has caught a contagious disease from his wife. As soon as the Messenger 'brings great news' of King Duncan's impending arrival at Glamis' Castle, Lady Macbeth – as if to confirm her sickness – calls upon 'the instruments of darkness' to strengthen her resolve to murder him. Four times, she implores evil 'spirits' to visit her and ensure that she is in the right condition for such an undertaking: 'Come, you spirits', 'Make thick my blood', 'Come to my woman's breasts', 'Come, thick night …' A. C. Bradley notes that there is nothing intellectually skilful or subtle in her thinking: "The greatness of Lady Macbeth lies almost wholly in courage and force of will". The mid-line sentence-breaks which advertise these invocations require a flurry of enjambments, resulting in the dynamic expression of her 'force of will'. The pattern of the verse-movement – of which the imperative 'Come' takes charge – reveals her determination, not to fight off infection, but to succumb to the evil sickness incipient in her breast and go through with the crime. She exhorts this 'foul' sickness to take hold of her and fill her full of the 'direst cruelty'.

Except for its first sentence, Lady Macbeth's soliloquy is entirely in the imperative mood. More positively afflicted than her husband, she invites the virus to 'come' into her bloodstream, thicken it and ensure that 'no compunctious visitings of nature' soften her hardened heart. Specifically, she wants the evil spirits to 'unsex' her: that is, to annul her womanhood and cancel out any feminine tendencies towards compassion or 'remorse': accordingly, she trusts that the 'spirits' will turn sour any 'milk of human-kindness' in her breasts and recycle it in the form of bile ('gall'). Significantly, Lady Macbeth is in no doubt that evil is viral in nature. Implicit in her appeal to these 'spirits' [= 'murdering ministers'] is her belief that 'sightless substances' exist in the natural world: what better way to describe a virus that multiplies unseen in the sweaty 'blanket of the dark' than this oxymoronic metonym? Cause 'mischief' ('nature's mischief') is exactly what invisible viruses do.

When Macbeth returns home, Lady Macbeth notices at once that he is troubled. Although there is no art to find the mind's construction in the face, she worries that his face is an open book ('a book where one may read many strange matters') and advises him to keep up a deceptive appearance:

"Look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under 't."

Her extended metaphor advocates that he practise the virtue of duplicity.

ACT I Scene 6

Shakespeare sets the scene for King Duncan's assassination by means of two ironic descriptions. When Duncan and Banquo arrive at Glamis Castle, both comment upon their clement surroundings. First, they refer to the purity of the air. To Duncan's senses, 'the air nimbly and sweetly recommends itself'; to Banquo, the air 'smells wooingly' and 'is delicate'. Second, Banquo fails to notice that the castle is a haunt of croaking ravens and refers instead to the house martins ('the temple-haunting martlet') which nest benevolently under its battlements.

For explicit confirmation that the air of Glamis Castle is not 'delicate', an audience must wait till Act IV Scene 1: "Infected be the air whereon they ride." At the same time, we have already seen enough of the place to know that Duncan and Banquo, in praising its benign atmosphere, have made a misjudgement. Dramatic irony results: we know, whereas they do not, that an insidious virus is in the air and has already infected Macbeth and his wife with evil intent.

When Lady Macbeth greets her guests, she practises what she has just preached, looking so like an 'innocent flower' that Duncan ('Fair and noble hostess') has no inkling that she is a dangerous reptile, a treacherous hypocrite.

ACT I Scene 7

In Lecture IX, A. C. Bradley (1904) writes of Macbeth: "psychologically, it is perhaps the most remarkable exhibition of the *development* of a character to be found in Shakespeare's tragedies." In Lecture X, he adds that Shakespeare's presentation of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth "leaves on most readers the profound impression of the misery of a guilty conscience." Such analysis is accurate and extremely helpful, *but only as far as it goes*, for it suggests that the play is primarily interesting for its characters and without an overarching theme of any greater importance: eg. that evil is viral in nature and can – accordingly and insidiously – affect the natural order of things.

Given the sway of this attractive approach, Bradley (writing in 1904!) has been responsible for the misconception that has informed and pervaded the teaching of Shakespeare in schools: that is, by way of character-studies. Looking at GCSE and A-Level exam-questions over the decades, it can appear as if Shakespeare's aim as a playwright was to create characters entirely out of any wider thematic context. Bradley tends to write about Shakespeare's tragic heroes as if they were real people – or, at least, as if they were types of men whom we might know. He assumes a familiarity with them that pushes other considerations aside - with the result that it can sometimes seem as if the playwright is not also concerned to give dramatic shape to an idea.

It took John Middleton Murry (writing in 1936) to put things right. In Shakespeare's Method, his landmark essay on **The Merchant of Venice**, he was clear: that Shakespeare's characters "are simply the necessary agents for that situation or that story … He did what he could to make them credible human beings to himself. He gave them, so far as was possible, humanly plausible motives for their acts and situations", but he is clear that the plot is primarily responsible for these motives, not "humane psychology". For Bradley, Macbeth is primarily of psychological interest. To which

Murry replies in effect, "Yes, Shakespeare *did what he could* to endow this agent of evil with a *credible* personality, but – to do ultimate justice to this tragedy – as to the others – we must look elsewhere: that is, beyond characterisation."

Bradley's chummy approach to Shakespeare's characters is at its most obvious in his discussion of **Othello** (1603). Comparing him to King Richard III, he tells us that Iago "was by no means a man of strong feelings and passions, like Richard, but decidedly cold by temperament" – as if Iago had actually existed and even been 'a man' of his intimate acquaintance, not unlike the chap next door. Bradley can, however, be forgiven for thinking that Macbeth, as well as being a historical figure,* is a known quantity, for Shakespeare does so much to endow him with psychological realism:

> "If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
> It were done quickly. If the 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,
> We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases
> But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
> We still have judgement here – that we but teach
> Bloody instructions which, being taught, return
> To plague the inventor."

By the hesitant progress of the blank verse, he monitors the movement of Macbeth's mind in the act of thinking. The complex hypothesis ('If … when … then …') and the subjunctive mood ('were') testify to the complexity of Macbeth's thought-process. As he weighs up the pros and cons of the projected murder, Macbeth's tortuous syntax ('that but this blow …', 'that we but teach') reveals that this process is agonising, causing him acute consternation, torturing his conscience. As the soliloquy goes on, he continues to check himself with the result that the iambic pentameter keeps stopping and starting: 'here, but here', 'but in these cases'. He finds himself in a profound quandary, worrying that such a 'bloody' deed might come back to haunt him: 'return to plague the inventor'. Macbeth has three moral reservations. His first qualm is that King Duncan is a 'kinsman', a blood-relation: because Duncan is a member of his own family, killing him would be an unnatural act. His second qualm is that he is Duncan's host: because Duncan is staying at Macbeth's castle, murdering him would be the ultimate act of inhospitality. His third qualm is a supernatural one: because Duncan has been such a good king to his country, the forces above ('Heaven's cherubim, horsed upon the sightless curriers of the air') are hardly likely to approve of this breach in the natural law of succession [= 'a breach in nature', II.3] and certain to react against it. *Macbeth, King of Alba (1040-1057).

During these 28 lines, Shakespeare's blank verse explores the workings of Macbeth's mind and conveys his moral uncertainty. Grammar breaks down: as early as the second sentence, Macbeth – under pressure to justify the planned deed – struggles to order his ideas and extend his ichthyological metaphor coherently. Significantly, this metaphor – 'trammel', 'catch', 'bank', 'shoal' and 'jump' – is proof of the Christian influence upon his reasoning. Of equal significance to the fish-metaphor, three similes spring into his imagination: each also of Christian origin, they serve notice that his 'black and deep desires' must contend with a countervailing force for good in this world. Together, these images rise into his consciousness and permeate it, colouring his deliberations one after another:

- First, a 'chalice', an ornate cup from which Jesus is said to have drunk at the Last Supper, comes to mind. It implies to him that, in a world where good and evil are naturally in equilibrium, it would be equally just and logical to let Duncan live and kill himself.

- Second, Duncan's 'virtues' trouble him: because they are 'like angels', they will not take kindly or silently to his unlawful killing. Especially since Duncan is God's anointed ruler of

Scotland, they will protest loudly and with all their celestial might against his unscheduled departure from this world.

- Third, 'Pity, like a naked new-born babe' thrusts itself with an involuntary force to the forefront of his thoughts: if not of Jesus Himself, then this personification is of a heavenly cherub who, with the massed ranks of other cherubim, will blow 'horrid' dust into the eyes of all Scots so that their collective tears for King Duncan will 'drown the wind'.

Macbeth's vision is of a world in which 'sightless substances' contend with 'the sightless curriers of the air' for the souls of men; it is a world above which germ-warfare appears to take place between empires of good and evil. Being a Christian soldier, his assessment of this military campaign issues in his appropriate use of a fourth figure of speech: that of God's chevalier – a horseman who, at the end of his ride over the heath, has 'no spur to prick the sides' of an evil 'intent'. He ends this soliloquy feeling in better health: if not wholly cured, then in remission from 'the illness' that 'should attend' his evil 'ambition'.

Left to his own devices, Macbeth decides – for moral and religious reasons – not to kill Duncan and he tells his wife so: "We shall proceed no further in this business." She is having none of it and in effect retorts: "Oh yes, we will!" She shoots no fewer than six questions at him, one after another, asking him if he is afraid ("Art thou afeard ..?") and questioning his manhood: "When you durst do it, then you were a man …" By the time that she has finished, she is simply daring him to kill Duncan. For the second time in her two appearances, Lady Macbeth ('plucked my nipple ...') wishes away her womanhood and taunts him with her own bravado, claiming – in graphic and melodramatic detail – that she would have left off breast-feeding in order to kill her child if she herself had suffered such a cowardly change of heart. She expresses contempt for her own femininity and substitutes for it a masculine determination to realise her ambition. The cadences of the following exchange –

MACBETH If we should fail?
LADY MACBETH We fail!
But screw your courage to the sticking place
And we'll not fail.

– amplify the dramatic conflict between them. Whereas Macbeth ("If we should fail?") remains wary, Lady Macbeth exhibits a 'force of will' that the ruthless beat of the iambic line enacts: "We fail!" "So what?" she snaps. What has happened here is that Lady Macbeth, in her reckless determination to become Queen of Scotland, has 'jump[ed] the life to come'. Unlike her husband, she has not thought through the moral and psychological consequences of their 'enterprise'.

The scene moves at high speed and with emotional intensity. By the end of his monologue, Macbeth had lost the motivation required to fulfil his ambition; by the end of this dialogue, his wife has re-infected him with her own enthusiasm for the 'terrible feat'.

Macbeth (Thane of Glamis and Thane of Cawdor) conforms to the Aristotelian model of a tragic hero in that he is a man of high estate. Furthermore, he has a flaw in his character [= a hamartic element] that finally proves fatal to him: if not his regal ambition, then a weakness of will that leaves him susceptible to his wife's superior force of personality, her 'undaunted mettle'. By the end of his soliloquy, Macbeth, circumspect and doubtful that killing Duncan is the right thing to do, was not exhibiting hubris: on the contrary, he was resolved against the plot on both ethical and theological grounds. By the end of Lady Macbeth's speech, he has performed a volte-face. Even though her plan to incriminate Duncan's two chamberlains (his 'spongy officers') is too plausible to be convincing, he complies with it. Brow-beaten, he capitulates abruptly: "Bring forth men-children only!" Goaded, he gives in; confronted by a display of her 'mettle', he melts. Obsequiously, he does as he's told.

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ACT II Scene 1

Shakespeare sets the scene for Macbeth's murder of King Duncan. The stage direction – *Enter Banquo and Fleance with a torch before him* – suggests to a modern audience that the Director has dimmed the lights and sent two actors on to a darkened stage, their faces lit only by a naked flame. It is therefore important to remember that in 1605 stage lighting was not quite what it is today and that Shakespeare had to rely upon his poetry to create an atmosphere.* Banquo's observation – "There's husbandry in heaven" – imagines that there exists a celestial household round which a celestial housekeeper has hurried, putting out all of the 'candles' [= the stars] in order to economise on candle-wax. Likewise, his prayer presumes that there are above him 'merciful powers' to which he can appeal lest nightmares ('cursèd thoughts') mar his sleep ('repose'). *Performances at The Globe took place in daylight, but it is probable that the play was first performed in front of King James VI of Scotland [= King James I of England] at Hampton Court in the Summer of 1606.

Implicit in Banquo's prayer is a fear that, 'in repose', 'nature' more easily 'gives way' to the forces of darkness. There is an intentional contrast: whereas Lady Macbeth was afraid that 'compunctious visitings of nature' might thwart her 'fell purpose', Banquo fears that, unless 'merciful powers' are vigilant on his behalf, he could fall prey to the 'thoughts' that wait each night for their chances to gain an ascendancy over 'nature' … From the language of the play, it becomes increasingly clear that Duncan's rule of Scotland is predicated upon a belief in "the mighty principle of good planted in the nature of things" (G. Wilson Knight); there grows the suggestion that there is a natural order of things against which it is dangerous and offensive to rebel. Keeping watch over this kingdom (about which there is nothing exclusively Scottish) are heavenly 'powers' – superior to the forces of darkness – which will somehow see to it that malignant forces do not prevail. Throughout the disruption, there persists a reassuring suspicion that these benevolent powers will ultimately restore Divine Order.

At the end of the previous scene, set only minutes earlier, Macbeth ("Bring forth men- children only!") sounded resolved to match his wife's bravado with his own bravery. Left again to his own devices, he finds that his resolve is immediately shaken. In Macbeth's third soliloquy, Shakespeare continues to humanise him. The blank verse carries out another exploration of his consciousness, but this time in response to an external stimulus:

> "Is this a dagger which I see before me,
> The handle toward my hand ..? Come, let me clutch thee –
> I have thee not and yet I see thee still.
> Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
> To feeling as to sight ..? Or art thou but
> A dagger of the mind, a false creation
> Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?"

Even before he has killed Duncan, Macbeth suffers a psychological disturbance: already, he has started seeing things. In Act I Scene 3, his 'present fears' were 'less than horrible imaginings'; here, however, he hosts an 'imagining' so 'horrible' that it threatens his sanity. Macbeth has entered a nightmare in which hallucinations loom large. Because he is barely able to believe his eyes, his soliloquy is in the interrogative mood. He stammers out a triptych of questions – 'Is this?'/'Art thou?'/'Or art thou?' – that expresses an upsurge both in nervous tension and in body heat, confirming that his temperature has risen to fever-pitch. From the surprise-pauses that interfere with the blood-flow of the blank verse, his self-examination acquires the rhythm of delirium, rambling from one sighting of 'a dagger' to the next. As he hallucinates, Macbeth begins to question his grasp of reality: in particular, he wonders whether the dagger which he sees before him, as vividly as a 'palpable' dirk, is 'a dagger of the mind', a symptom of his guilty conscience [= his 'heat-

oppressed brain']. As the lurid vision of the blood-covered dagger fades, Macbeth ("There's no such thing") shrugs off his affliction and strives to man up. Foremost among the technical features of this blank verse is an avoidance of end-stopping:

> It is the bloody business which informs
> Thus to mine eyes. Now o'er the one half-world
> Nature seems dead and wicked dreams abuse
> The curtained sleep. Witchcraft celebrates
> Pale Hecate's offerings …"

Sentences do not end where the lines of iambic pentameter end, but rely for fluid movement upon repeated enjambments, thereby suppressing the choking rhythm of the speech. On no fewer than five occasions in 14 lines, full-stops fall in the middle of lines, charting both the decline in Macbeth's health and the simultaneous disintegration of his ethical identity, but this time creating a hiatus in which the actor can pause to catch his breath and recover his composure. At the end of his second soliloquy, Macbeth had begun to doubt the wisdom of regicide, but ends this third soliloquy with a couplet in which a monosyllabic rhyme (bell/knell) expresses his renewed determination to screw his courage 'to the sticking place' and do the 'wicked' deed.

ACT II Scene 2

At the end of his third soliloquy, Macbeth ("Nature seems dead …") comes to the sober conclusion that conditions for his planned assassination of Duncan are right: after all, it is necessary that 'nature seem dead' if an unnatural act – such as murder, such as regicide – is to succeed … By contrast, Lady Macbeth enters worse for wear. She admits that she has been drinking in order to give herself the courage which she will need in the aftermath of 'the bloody business': specifically, the uproar which will follow the discovery that the King of Scotland has been murdered under her battlements.

Neither for the first nor the last time in the play, Shakespeare has recourse to bird- imagery in order to create an atmosphere conducive to the triumph of evil. Whereas a raven croaked itself 'hoarse' upon Duncan's 'fatal entrance' to the Castle, an owl has now hooted or 'shrieked' ominously.

Lady Macbeth ("I have drugged their possets") confesses to her complicity in the crime, but confesses too that she lacked the Dutch courage necessary to commit it herself: "Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done 't." Consequently, she acclaims her husband when he re-enters *carrying two bloodstained daggers*: "My husband!" Shakespeare conveys the tension of this moment by the fragmentary organisation of the dialogue:

> LADY MACBETH: Did you not speak?
> MACBETH: When?
> LADY MACBETH: Now.
> MACBETH: As I descended?
> LADY MACBETH: Ay.
> MACBETH: Hark!
> Who lies i' the second chamber?
> LADY MACBETH: Donalbain.

In this rapid question-and-answer session, he distributes thirty words across nine lines: in the process, he spreads one line of iambic pentameter across four utterances and occupies a second such line with a fourth question-and-answer, thereby demonstrating that the Macbeths' nerves are on edges and in shreds. No sooner has Macbeth 'done the deed' than he begins to suffer remorse: "This is a sorry sight." If he was expecting sympathy from his wife, then it is because he was not at the castle earlier (II.5) to hear her explicitly implore evil spirits to thicken her blood and 'stop up the

access and passage to remorse'. Pragmatic and literally ruthless, Lady Macbeth ("A foolish thought, to say a sorry sight") retorts that he needs to stop staring at his blood-stained hands and pull himself together – or he'll go 'mad'. She is already too late, for Macbeth is already suffering another bout of psychological disturbance, hearing voices that recognise the importance of 'innocent sleep' [= a clear conscience] to a sound mind. Macbeth's expert diagnosis finds no fewer than four forms of metonymy for sleep: 'sore labour's bath', 'balm of hurt minds', 'great nature's second course' and 'chief nourisher in life's feast'. Significantly, each of these metonyms recognises the restorative power of sleep and relates to his specific fear that he will not be able to rely upon natural remedies to aid his recovery. Conversely, each metonym identifies a danger of sleep-deprivation and – in a proleptic irony – anticipates the scene (V.1) in which Lady Macbeth's sleep is even more seriously disturbed than his own.

Lady Macbeth is not slow to realise that her husband is suffering from a psychiatric disorder, but accuses him simply of being weak: 'brain-sickly' and 'infirm of purpose'. At this stage, she is confident that they can literally wash their hands of 'the bloody business' and orders him to return to Duncan's chamber to smear the faces of 'the sleepy grooms' with incriminating blood. Rather than respond, Macbeth – "I am afraid to think what I have done" – succumbs immediately to incapacitating introspection; in one simple line of iambic pentameter, he accounts completely for his reaction and his inaction. Undismayed, Lady Macbeth does not mess about. Such is her presence of mind that, when he is too frightened to go again, she seizes both the daggers and the initiative and goes herself.

Left briefly alone, Macbeth hears a *knocking* at the castle gate, stares again at his blood- soaked hands and awakes to the vast magnitude of his crime:

> "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
> Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
> The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
> Making the green one red."
>
> Translated: "Will even an ocean possess the capacity to wash a king's blood from my hand? No, it is more likely that the blood on my hands will turn the green seas flesh-red: specifically, turn them the colour of torn flesh."

In cold blood, Macbeth has killed a king: at once, his imagination expands in order to comprehend and encompass the cosmic scale of the consequences. His vocabulary expands too, finding in the extension of this oceanic metaphor a measure of his indelible guilt and reinforcing the effect by means of two polysyllabic adjectives, the second of which 'incarnadine' [= flesh-red] is pressed into vivid activity as a verb [= turn flesh-red]. Poetry was never more dramatic: in one sentence, two functions are spectacularly reversed so that the foul miniature of a man's blood-soaked hand acquires the capacity to transfigure the fair complexion of every sea [= make 'the green one red'].

To the noise of continued knocking at the Castle's south gate, Lady Macbeth re-enters, her own hands covered now with Duncan's blood. Upon seeing how bloody they are, she reacts with hubristic complacency: "A little water clears us of this deed." Her line of iambic pentameter expresses both practical and moral confidence that they can cleanse themselves both literally and metaphorically. As the audience has just heard, Macbeth himself – "To know my deed 'twere best not to know myself" – is not so sure, for he is now struggling to live with himself.

ACT II Scene 3

The Porter Scene

The Porter inhabits two roles: at a literal level, he is the porter of Glamis Castle; at a metaphorical level, he is the porter at the Gates of Hell ('a porter of hell-gate'). At the start of this scene, the Porter, admittedly in drink, imagines that the repeated knocking at the Castle gates, is by a cross-section of sinful tradesmen – farmer, lawyer, tailor – who are all seeking admission to Hell. Ultimately, he rejects this possibility on the grounds that they could not have mistaken Macbeth's castle for Hell because it is 'too cold':

> "But this place is too cold for hell. I had thought to have let in some of the professions that go the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire."

Ironically, the Porter is wrong, for, following Macbeth's murder of Duncan, all hell is about to be let loose in the place, the consequence of a 'most sacrilegious murder' there, of regicide ... Given the date of its composition, there is no doubt that **Macbeth** is Shakespeare's response to the Gunpowder Plot of 5th November 1605. Following the death of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603, King James IV of Scotland was invited to become King James I of England, thereby ensuring that England remained under Protestant rule. Robert Catesby and Guy Fawkes plotted to blow up the House of Lords, assassinate the King and replace him with a Catholic alternative, but did so – as is quite well known – with disastrous results. For English Catholics, the plot did not end well: in this context, **Macbeth** is a cautionary tale.

For his alleged complicity in the plot, Father Henry Garnett, England's foremost Jesuit priest, was arrested. Under interrogation, he was said to have given equivocal answers: while they were not untrue, they did not incriminate him or anyone else. Because Garnett (who was nevertheless executed) was a farmer, it is assumed that Macbeth's Porter has him in mind when he refers to 'a farmer' and 'an equivocator'.

It is in the early hours of the next morning that Macduff and Lennox knock at the Castle gates and reproach the Porter [= Hell's Gatekeeper] for being so sluggardly in letting them in. When the Porter confesses that he has spent all night 'carousing', Macduff asks him what good alcoholic drink does. At a dramatic level, the Porter's answer provides comic relief from the tension of the previous scene, for it sets out an entertaining treatise on the subject of sexual prowess:

> "Lechery, sir, it provokes and unprovokes. It provokes the desire but takes away the performance. Therefore much drink may be said to be an equivocator with lechery: it makes him and mars him …"

At the same time and at a poetic level, the Porter's answer comments upon the Macbeths' duplicity, for he compares 'much drink' to 'an equivocator' in that it can produce opposite outcomes: literally, it gives 'equal voice' to two contrasting possibilities – both erectness and flaccidity, but also fair face and 'false heart'. Because the Porter is a character of low rank, he speaks prose, but he speaks prose for another reason too: that he is setting out a logical argument. This he organises with a wit that his series of five syntactical parallelisms ('makes him stand to and not stand to') highlights.

Dramatic ironies abound. Greeting Macbeth, both Lennox ('noble sir') and Macduff ('worthy thane') apply to the murderer of their 'royal master' epithets which were once appropriate to him, but which – unknown to them – no longer are.

Lennox's atmospheric account of the 'unruly' night gives a timely point to Shakespeare's central intuition in this play: that nature will not take kindly to an interference with the law of succession.

There is a widespread disturbance in the air: for instance, Lennox claims that an owl 'clamoured' all night long and that the earth itself was 'feverous'. Accordingly, Macduff, upon discovering Duncan's body, refers to 'the Lord's anointed temple', a metonym which endorses the Elizabethan view that a man would not be a king if God had not anointed him and thereby emphasises the gravity of Macbeth's crime. It is an offence 'against the use of nature' of which Macbeth –

"Had I but died an hour before this chance
I had lived a blessèd time"

– already sounds painfully aware. Having done such a deed, he feels instantly that his life ('All is but toys') is no longer worth living; no sooner is it done than he is able to see what's done. He recognises that he has drunk 'the wine of life' [= lived the best days of his life] and sees himself as having been left merely with the dregs ('the mere lees'). In **Macbeth**, the crisis of the action (II.3) comes early. Structurally, this intervention is therefore of high importance, for it records the tragic hero's initial reaction: even more than his self-aware soliloquies, this melancholy reflection is likely to have a cathartic effect upon the audience because he is speaking after the event. In Aristotelian terms, it encapsulates the hero's first expression of regret for his crime and is likely to stir up feelings of pity for him. His subsequent reaction to Duncan's bloody corpse –

"Here lay Duncan,
His silver skin laced with his golden blood,
And his gashed stabs looked like a breach in nature
For ruin's wasteful entrance"

– confirms that he has seen the cosmic error of his way, for his simile – 'like a breach in nature' – expresses a full understanding of the carnage that he has caused. By the natural action of fibrins, gashes close themselves up; breaches in nature heal themselves. There is something in the natural world itself which will ensure that natural order is restored ... In **The Winter's Tale** (1611) Polixenes observes that there is 'an art which does mend nature' which 'itself is nature' (Act IV Scene 4).

ACT II Scene 4

The point of this short scene is to add a dimension to the 'unnatural' weather-conditions that Duncan's murder has created and advance the plot. Ross' description ("By the clock, 'tis day, And yet dark night ...') is of darkness at noon. It is as if broad daylight has been discoloured by a fungus or a disease.

To bring a sense of historical perspective to the 'confused events' of the 'sore night', Shakespeare introduces the character of an Old Man who confirms that they are unprecedented in his experience. Never in living memory has there been such wayward behaviour by creatures (eg. owls, horses) in the natural world. It is as if Three Weird Sisters have put a spell on them and infected the air that they breathe. NB. The adjective 'weird' is a variant of 'wayward'.

To begin with, Macduff believes Macbeth's lie: that 'the sleepy grooms' are directly responsible for the 'bloody deed'. At the same time, he believes that Duncan's sons and legitimate heirs – Malcolm and Donalbain – are indirectly responsible because they have immediately 'fled' the scene of the crime for England (Malcolm) and for Ireland (Donalbain); he suspects that they contracted the two grooms to kill their father. Given this 'suspicion', Ross concludes that, although Duncan's murder may not therefore interrupt the natural order of succession, it is a more serious offence 'against nature'. It is not only regicide, but also 'cruel parricide':

"Thriftless ambition that will raven up
Thine own life's means."

Ross' choice of verb ('raven up') is of thematic importance because it is not a verb, but a noun-turned-into-a-verb in order to suggest how recklessly ambitious [= *ravenous* for power] Malcolm and Donalbain must be if they are prepared to arrange the killing of their 'own' father. Derived from Lady Macbeth's soliloquy (I.5) in which a raven, upon Duncan's arrival at Glamis Castle, croaked himself hoarse on the battlements, this usage adds to the growing evidence that birds of a certain family – namely, corvidae – are not merely images for the evil virus in the Scottish air, but carriers of it.

Wrong though he is to blame Malcolm and Donalbain, Ross is right to attribute Duncan's murder to 'thriftless ambition': that is, an ambitiousness that cannot contain itself. So impatient is Macbeth to ascend the throne that he is 'already named and gone to Scone' – the town in Perthshire where Scottish kings were traditionally crowned.

To be fair to Macbeth, it remains necessary to recognise that 'ambition' was never more 'thriftless' [= excessive and reckless] than in his wife's case. If he has hastened to his coronation in Scone, then we can be certain that she has hurried him up.

* * * * * * * * * *

ACT III Scene 1

At the end of the previous scene, we learned that, following the precipitate flight of Duncan's sons and natural heirs, Macbeth has become King of Scotland. Structurally, it is important to recollect that Malcolm and Donalbain, rather than wait to succeed their murdered father, fled in fear of their lives: "There's daggers in men's smiles".

The speed at which Macbeth becomes suspected of Duncan's murder outpaces the action of the play. In the theatre, this discrepancy is barely noticeable because the audience is fully aware of the Macbeths' culpability and has no cause to question it. What is more, Banquo, at the start of this scene, delivers a soliloquy in which he reminds the audience that he has his own historic reason to suspect Macbeth of Duncan's murder:

> "Thou hast it now: King, Cawdor, Glamis, all
> As the weird women promised; and I fear
> Thou playedst most foully for 't."

In a word, Banquo's speech is little more than a summary of the story so far – except, of course, that it reveals that he, if nobody else, suspects Macbeth of foul play. It is ironic that he should derive 'hope' from the Witches' prophesy that he, not Macbeth, will become 'the root' of the Scottish monarchy, for Macbeth too has been bearing this prophesy in mind – and not in a good way. He has become convinced that, if his own line is to succeed him, then he must extinguish this hope …

During the dialogue that ensues, Shakespeare's subtle skills as a playwright alert his audience to the imminent danger in which Banquo finds himself. It is a dialogue in which solicitude – "Ride you this afternoon?"/"Is it far you ride?"/"Goes Fleance with you?" – repeatedly conceals a conspiracy to murder. Macbeth's reference to 'our bloody cousins' [= Malcolm 'in England' and Donalbain 'in Ireland'] tries too hard to smear them, not least because they have begun to talk: according to him, telling tales of 'strange invention'.

For a tragic hero, the character of Macbeth is not a conventional conception. When A. C. Bradley wrote that "psychologically, it is perhaps the most remarkable exhibition of the *development* of a character to be found in Shakespeare's tragedies", he is referring to the variety of moods in which the protagonist is discovered. In his fourth soliloquy, Macbeth is beginning to suffer from paranoia:

"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."

It is one thing for Macbeth to have become King of Scotland, but another altogether for him to feel secure in that positon ('to be safely thus') – not least because he played 'most foully for it'. Consequently, his 'fears in Banquo' are **a)** that Banquo, having been on the blasted heath with him to hear the Witches' prophecies, will be convinced that he has killed King Duncan and **b)** that Banquo, if he is equally ambitious of seeing his own 'royal hope' fulfilled, may act too. These fears 'stick deep' because Banquo *in addition* appears fit for such a role: that is, to possess a 'royalty of nature' which might **a)** inspire him to avenge Duncan's death and **b)** ideally equip his offspring/his 'issue' to succeed him to the Scottish throne.

If **Macbeth** is a tragedy in which the character of the tragic hero seems to *develop*, then this is because the plot requires him to react not to a single crisis, but to a series of crises, one crisis after another. Macbeth's killing of Duncan sets in train a series of cathartic events which means that audiences find in him a more complex character than any other Shakespearean hero.

Not least because Banquo 'hath a daily beauty in his life'* beside which he himself appears ugly, Macbeth cannot bear to think that he has killed a 'gracious' king and sacrificed his peace of mind ('filed my mind') 'only for' a line of Banquo's descendants (eg. King James VI) to become Kings of Scotland instead of his own. At the end of this soliloquy, it becomes clear that he has therefore been consorting already with two Murderers; by the end of the scene, he has made arrangements for the further killings of Banquo and his son Fleance. *In **Othello** (1603) Iago justified the killing of Cassio for this very reason.

ACT III Scene 2

In Act II Scene 1, Macduff, prior to the discovery of Duncan's body, remarks to Macbeth that Duncan's stay at his castle must be 'a joyful trouble' to him. Such an oxymoronic remark sets the tone for the climate of fear in which Macbeth and Lady Macbeth operate from the moment that Duncan sets foot in Glamis Castle. Before Macbeth enters, Lady Macbeth utters an aside –

"Naught's had, all's spent,
Where our desire is got without content.
'Tis safer to be that which we destroy
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy"

– in which she admits that she has achieved her ambition 'without content'; it concludes with another oxymoron ('doubtful joy') and anticipates Macbeth's own oxymoron ('restless ecstasy'). Disquiet – 'the torture of the mind' – is spoiling the party that the Macbeths had planned for themselves, a metaphor which will shortly be given literal point by the appearance of Banquo's Ghost at their 'great feast' (III.4). For the time being, Macbeth's anxiety is audible both in his delivery of his blank verse and in his choice of imagery:

"We have scorched the snake, not killed it …"

"O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!"

Macbeth – it might be said – has failed to take the sting out of the situation that has arisen in the wake of Duncan's death. He finds that the lower forms of animal life – reptiles and arachnids, if not poisonous, then pernicious ingredients of a witch's cauldron – prey on his mind. Ever since Duncan's

murder, his mind has been 'full of scorpions': now, he marks the time until Banquo's murder by reference to the 'cloistered flight' of the bat and the 'drowsy hums' of 'the shard-borne beetle'. As he prays for propitious conditions for the imminent 'deed of dreadful note', it is impossible not to hear echoes of Lady Macbeth's mid-line imperatives in Act I Scene 5. The common pattern of the verse illustrates that they share both an idiolect and an illness. Most obviously, her 'Come, thick night' becomes his

"Come, seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day …"

but there is more than the parallel wording of these invocations (to a personified night whose hand is both 'bloody and invisible') to suggest that both are vulnerable to an unseen force powerful enough to ruin their healths. The shared imagery is designed to show that the evil viral in nature is not merely represented by bats, beetles and birds of the crow family, but carried and spread by them:

"Light thickens
And the crow makes wing to the rooky wood.
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse
Whiles night's black agents from their preys do rouse."

Given Lady Macbeth's insistence that her blood be emulsified, it is significant that 'light thickens': that, in Macbeth's speech, the oncoming darkness is likewise portrayed as a noticeable sickening of the daylight. Given Lady Macbeth's recognition of the raven on her battlements, it is significant too that the bird which Macbeth observes – 'the crow', equally at home in 'the rooky wood' – should belong to the same ornithological class. It is no relation of 'the temple-haunting martlet': exactly like the hoarse raven, it is not merely a symbol of evil, but an actual embodiment of an evil spirit, a raucous vector of the germ itself. Like bats and beetles, these contagious corvidae are concrete forms of evil, nothing other than 'night's black agents' [= the 'black agents' of 'thick night'] rousing – punctual as vampires or witches – to prey on the 'good things of day'.

ACT III Scene 3

The purpose of this scene is to stage the murder of Banquo and to create the dramatic context for Act III Scene 4. In the event, Macbeth sets not two Murderers, but Three Murderers – *Enter three Murderers* – upon Banquo and his heir Fleance.

The fateful stage-direction reads*: Banquo falls. Fleance escapes*.

Well laid though Macbeth's plan is, 'merciful powers' spare Fleance. Hard though Macbeth tries to thwart the prediction of the Witches, events conspire against him …

ACT III Scene 4

The Banquet Scene

Although **Macbeth** is a classical tragedy, it deviates from the Aristotelian norm in that its tragic hero faces more than one crisis: here, in Act III Scene 4, at the 'great feast' to celebrate his accession to the Scottish throne, Macbeth faces his second crisis in the shape of Banquo's Ghost.

Following Banquo's assassination in the previous scene, this scene is set for the appearance of Banquo's Ghost, an apparition resulting from Macbeth's guilty conscience [= proceeding from his 'heat-oppressed brain']. At one fell swoop, Macbeth's 'great feast' becomes Banquo's Banquet.

Like **Othello**, **Macbeth** is a play remarkable for the number of scenes in which the stage is sparsely populated. Here, as there, the action advances by way of dialogue that rarely involves more than two characters. Act III Scene 4 (*Banquet prepared*) is one exception to this rule: *Enter Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, Ross, Lennox, Lords and Attendants*. Even so, the dialogue is predominantly between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

Between Line 1 and Line 118 of this scene, Shakespeare charts the decline of Macbeth's fortunes. No sooner has Macbeth welcomed his guests – "You know your own degrees, sit down" – than he rises from the table to meet the First Murderer who informs him that, although Banquo is dead in a ditch, Fleance 'is scaped'. Upon receiving this news, Macbeth – "Then comes my fit again" – becomes troubled again. Visibly unsettled, he confesses that he is unwell: if he is having a 'fit', then it would seem that he is suffering palpitations again. Indeed, his choice of language – 'cabined, cribbed, confined' – suggests that his 'seated heart' has once more been unseated and begun to knock against his rib-cage in a claustrophobic and feverish panic.

The stage-direction – *Enter the Ghost of Banquo and sits in Macbeth's place* – is an emblem of the way in which the line of succession to the Scottish throne will unfold. When Macbeth returns to the table, Lennox ("Here is a place reserved, sir") does not understand why he does not sit in the place that he vacated:

LENNOX	What is't moves your highness?
MACBETH	Which of you have done this?
LORDS	What, my good lord?
MACBETH	Thou canst not say I did it; never shake
	Thy gory locks at me.

At first, Macbeth sees only that the seat is occupied, but realises then who is occupying it. At first, he presumes that it must be an effigy of Banquo, put there as a prank by one of his Lords, but realises then that he is seeing a ghost. Banquo's Ghost is a figment of his diseased imagination, a product of his paranoid state of mind. It provokes an unguarded reaction ("Thou canst not say I did it") sufficient to incriminate him. Did what? The answer is obvious …

Once more showing her presence of mind, Lady Macbeth maintains that Macbeth's reaction is an epileptic 'fit' – a frequent affliction since his childhood and only 'momentary', an illness that will pass. In the meantime, she takes him to one side and gives him another talking to: "Are you a man?" Once more, she questions his manliness, accusing him of seeing things (as he had previously seen 'the air-drawn dagger') and comparing his hallucinations to the more sensational features of an old wives' tale [= 'a woman's story' handed down to her by her grandmother]. She is relentlessly unsympathetic, seeking to 'shame' him by comparison with her own naïve realism: "When all's done/You look but on a stool." In her view, he is 'quite unmanned in folly': that is, foolishly allowing the situation to get the better of him and losing his nerve. It is therefore ironic that, when he rallies and re-joins his guests, Macbeth, psychotic and sick, should propose the following toast to the whole table: "Come, love and health to all!"

Dramatic ironies proliferate. No sooner has Macbeth mentioned his 'dear friend Banquo' by name than Banquo's Ghost reappears to him; no sooner has he wished that Banquo were with them – "Would he were here!" – than he is! Macbeth, it becomes clear, is seeing a ghost: "Avaunt, and quit my sight!" His reaction to a cadaverous form with 'gory locks', 'marrowless' bones and glaring eyes is understandably hysterical, but none of the thanes or lords knows that he is seeing Banquo's ghost – since Banquo, to the best of their knowledges at this point – is alive and well ... This said, Lennox, Ross and the lords could well be forgiven for thinking that he has seen Duncan's ghost. Furthermore, it is only a matter of time before the news of Banquo's murder reaches them and they conclude – off stage – that Macbeth is not a royal 'highness', but a murderous tyrant.

In his delirium, Macbeth ("What man dare, I dare") insists that he remains an alpha male, maintaining that he stands ready to take on any beast (eg. 'rugged Russian bear', 'Hyrcanian tiger') and any man in 'any shape' – except an advanced stage of decomposition. Indeed, he does reclaim his manly status: once the 'horrible shadow' departs, he recovers his composure and pronounces himself 'a man again'. How, he asks Ross and Lennox, were they – by contrast with his own 'blanched' reaction – able to keep so calm in the face of 'such sights':

ROSS What sights, my lord?
LADY MACBETH I pray you speak not; he grows worse and worse.
Question enrages him. At once, good night.
Stand not upon the order of your going,
But go at once.

Lady Macbeth has seen enough of her husband's 'disorder' to know that this banquet is not going to end well; it is now clear to her the balance of his mind is seriously disturbed … At Line 1, the thanes and the lords knew their places in the social hierarchy (their 'degrees') and seated themselves at the table accordingly; by Line 118, Lady Macbeth is so anxious to see the backs of them that she tells them in no uncertain terms – a certainty that her iambic line enforces – 'not' to 'stand' upon ceremony as they leave. 'At once', Macbeth's mental disorder is reflected in the disorderly way in which the banquet breaks up. In turn, the broken-up banquet becomes an emblem of the social disorder that Macbeth's 'strange infirmity' is about to bring to Scotland.

At one level, Lennox's farewell hope that Macbeth will soon be in 'better health' is a phatic utterance. At another, it is an ironic remark in that Lennox expresses his wish without knowing the true nature of the viral illness by which Macbeth is infected. For a modern parallel, think of the polite inquiries after Regan McNeil's health in William Friedkin's film **The Exorcist** (1973).

On the one hand, Macbeth is guilty of both murder (Duncan) and conspiracy to murder (Banquo); on the other, he presents a piteous spectacle that has a cathartic effect in the theatre. For a second time, a crisis for this tragic hero requires a complex response from an audience: at the same time as he does not deserve pity, he inspires it.

For Macbeth, his encounter with Banquo's Ghost is instructive, for it confirms to him his worst fear: that nature will avenge itself – in short, that 'blood will have blood'. He begins to imagine the scale of the retribution in the natural world: "Stones have been known to move and trees to speak" – or, in his case, trees to move from Birnam Wood to Dunsinane Hill. He cites occasions on which men have apparently been able to talk to the animals: whereas once his mind was 'full of scorpions', now he has 'maggot-pies, and choughs, and rooks' on the brain – all, significantly, members of the same bird-family [= corvidae] as raven and crow. Not only do they share an ornithological classification, but magpies and choughs are also 'night's black agents', evil predators upon Macbeth's mind.

Following his encounter with Banquo's Ghost, Macbeth comes to a full appreciation of the psychological damage that he has done to himself, moving in the process towards the next stage in the development of a tragic hero: anagnorisis. This process – which commenced with his melancholy reflection (II.3) in the immediate aftermath of Duncan's death – advances apace. He ceases his delirious rambling and wholly comprehends the gravity of his situation:

"I am in blood
Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er."

He recognises that he has passed the point of no return – for which he has in mind the metaphor of wading across a river. Long experience of sharing a marital bed with him informs Lady Macbeth's diagnosis: "You lack the season of all natures, sleep." Insomnia is not the cause of his disorder, but a symptom of it. Macbeth hath murdered sleep …

It is ironic that Lady Macbeth should talk as if he – and not she herself – is suffering from a vitamin-deficiency and in need of a herbal remedy, for the next time that we see her (in V.1) it will be she – not Macbeth – who is plainly suffering from a 'lack' of the seasoning required to preserve men and women 'of all natures' in good health.

ACT III Scene 5

In Greek mythology, Hecate is the Goddess of Witchcraft. Consequently, this scene stages a crow-pleasing spectacle: a rendezvous between Hecate and the Three Witches who traditionally take her advice – not least about the efficacious ingredients of a witches' brew – and do her bidding. On this occasion, she reprimands them for having been so 'bold' as 'to trade and traffic with Macbeth' without consulting or involving her.

If other features of Hecate's speech (such as the couplets of iambic tetrameter) seem out of kilter with the earlier scenes in which the Three Witches appear, then this may be because the scene itself is an *interpolation*: that is, a scene inessential to Shakespeare's play and later inserted for fun by another hand such as the playwright Thomas Middleton (1580-1627).* This said, it makes sense that Macbeth – an actor 'for his own ends' – should at this stage of his development seek out the Weird Sisters again in an effort to ascertain what fate awaits him. *Middleton's own play **The Witch** was written and performed c. 1615.

Being clairvoyant, Hecate predicts correctly that Macbeth will do so – primarily because he wants to know from them whether he will get away with his crimes. He is wise to the grave danger in which he has placed himself, but hopeful that he can nevertheless escape retribution and damnation:

> "He shall spurn fate, scorn death and bear
> His hopes 'bove wisdom, grace and fear.
> And you all know security
> Is mortals' chiefest enemy."

At the end of Act III Scene 4, Macbeth was aware that he had 'stepped' so far into a river of blood that he had no choice but to carry on wading across it: in his choice of verb, it was impossible not to spot a pun upon 'stepped' and hear at the same time a recognition that he was 'steeped' [= soaked] so deep in blood that even the multitudinous seas would not be able to wash him clean. By Hecate, Macbeth is therefore portrayed as foolhardy and headstrong, still holding out 'hopes' that he can 'know security': that is, relax in the knowledge that – even now – he can do things to save himself.

ACT III Scene 6

This is a problematic scene. Is it essential to the plot of the play? No. Is it easy to follow? No … But it is nevertheless successful in establishing the mood of trepidation among Scottish nobles since the banquet broke up, the death of 'the right valiant' Banquo became common knowledge and Macbeth – no longer 'young in deed' – embarked upon a reign of terror. Because Lennox is a nobleman, he speaks blank verse appropriate to his status, but his speech to an anonymous Lord becomes increasingly sarcastic in tone, repeatedly questioning the official version of events even as it re-spins that narrative. Did not Macbeth kill Duncan's two delinquent grooms in a 'pious rage'? Maybe ... You can think that if you want … For a modern parallel, there is the catch-phrase of Michael Dobbs' creation Francis Urquhart: "You might think that. I couldn't possibly comment" (Michael Dobbs, **House of Cards**, 1990).

To begin with, it can sound as if Lennox is choosing his words carefully, proceeding on the basis that, in Macbeth's Scotland, careless talk can cost lives. By the end of his speech, he has abandoned his scathing scepticism ("Was not that nobly done?") and dropped any pretence that Macbeth is anything other than a 'tyrant'. In this scene, we hear the first uses of the epithet ('tyrant') which will condition our responses to Macbeth throughout the rest of the play. He loses his royal identity and becomes merely a common noun …

The role of the Lord is to bring news that Malcolm is safe in the English court of King Edward the Confessor (1042-1066) and furthermore that Macduff has set off for this court in an effort to persuade 'the holy king' to let 'Northumberland and the warlike Seyward' raise an army against Macbeth and free Scotland from his tyranny. Given the oppression under which they are living, Lennox hopes that 'some holy angel' will fly ahead of Macduff 'to the court of England' so that freedom 'may soon return' to his 'suffering country'. The importance of the scene, then, is that it both creates the climate of Macbeth's reign and points the way towards the end of it …

* * * * * * * * * *

ACT IV Scene 1

Atmospheric and spectacular though Act I Scene 1 is, Act IV Scene 1 intensifies that atmosphere and enhances that spectacle, compounding its poetic and theatrical effects ... Here, the coven convenes 'again'. We rediscover the Three Witches where we expect them to be: camped on the blasted heath, stirring 'poisonous entrails' in a cauldron, chanting charms. After 'the brinded cat hath mewed' and the hedgehog has 'whined', the Third Witch ('Harpier cries') identifies herself and her two sisters with the Three Harpies, bird-like creatures who – in Greek mythology – swooped upon human prey and carried it off in their beaks or claw-like feet. Such a self-identification implies a genetic link with crow, chough, magpie, raven and rook; it embraces the likelihood that witches, whilst not birds themselves, belong in effect to the crow-family ('night's black agents') and are likewise carriers of the evil disease in the Scottish air. In imaginative terms, this scene enlarges this likelihood …

Shakespeare's **Macbeth** was written two thirds of the way through the European Witch-Craze (1500-1650). Demonology was not therefore a cultural phenomenon remote from public consciousness in Jacobean Britain: after finding a dramatic function for Three Witches, Shakespeare adds to the witches' craft a poetic dimension that romanticises it. To the memorable couplet that concludes Act I Scene 1, he adds this chorus:

> "Double, double, toil and trouble;
> Fire burn and cauldron bubble."

It is mumbo jumbo, not in the sense that it is completely meaningless, but in the sense that it provides musical accompaniment to the ritualistic movement of the Witches 'round about the cauldron'. What is more, it manages – by means of its onomatopoeic vowel-sounds – to reproduce the very sound of the bubbling pot. To the same trochaic rhythm, the Second Witch proceeds to list the ingredients of this strange brew:

> "Fillet of a fenny snake
> In the cauldron boil and bake;
> Eye of newt, and toe of frog,
> Wool of bat, and tongue of dog,
> Adder's fork, and blind-worm's sting,
> Lizard's leg, and owlet's wing,
> For a charm of powerful trouble,
> Like a hell-broth, boil and bubble."

The verse gives stage-directions, assigning genitive phrases ('eye of newt', 'tongue of dog') to those body-parts of eviscerated mammals and reptiles which each Witch in turn tosses into the hellish stew. For good measure, the Second Witch herself pours 'a baboon's blood' into the hot broth, primarily for its cooling properties – to cool the 'gruel', as it were. It is at this point that Hecate – as arranged in Act III Scene 5 – makes a brief reappearance. It is more than likely that her short verse –

> "And now about the cauldron sing,
> Like elves and fairies in a ring"

– is an interpolation by another hand because 'elves and fairies', daintily encircling a cooking pot, are plainly what Shakespeare's Three Witches are *not* 'like'. More in tune with the menacing notes of the Witches' Chorus is the Second Witch's couplet, announcing Macbeth's imminent return to the heath:

> "By the pricking of my thumbs,
> Something wicked this way comes."

She subscribes to the superstitious belief that proximity to an evil presence ('something wicked') can be detected by a bodily reaction to that presence: eg. a shiver up the spine. In her case, she experiences pins-and-needles; it is 'by the pricking of [her] thumbs' that she picks up Macbeth's approach to her hovel. Upon meeting the Weird Sisters again, Macbeth – "How now, you secret, black and midnight hags" – greets them by three adjectives which, ironically or not, proclaim his kinship with them: if not his kindred evil spirits, then they are explicitly 'night's black agents'.

In Act I Scene 3, the Three Witches made three predictions – all of which came true: in this scene, they repeat the trick. At Macbeth's request, they look again into his future: by means of black magic, they conjure up Three Apparitions to read his horoscope. Confusingly for Macbeth, the Apparitions no longer make straightforward predictions, but issue cryptic warnings:

> FIRST APPARITION Macbeth, Macbeth, Macbeth, beware Macduff!
> Beware the Thane of Fife!
>
> SECOND APPARITION Be bloody, bold and resolute; laugh to scorn
> The power of man; for none of woman born
> Shall harm Macbeth.
>
> THIRD APPARITION Be lion-mettled, proud and take no care
> Who chafes, who frets or where conspirers are;
> Macbeth shall never vanquished be until
> Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill
> Shall come against him.

The Apparitions' imperatives – 'Be Bloody, bold and resolute' and 'Be lion-mettled, proud and take no care' – encourage in Macbeth a dangerous foolhardiness and inevitably inspire in him a false sense of security: in short, they invite him to exhibit hubris. Why – if he need not fear a man 'of woman born' – should he fear Macduff or any other man for that matter? Why – since 'earth-bound' trees cannot uproot themselves – should he have a 'care' in the world? Dramatic craftsmanship is rarely more skilful, for these enigmatic predictions get both the character and the audience guessing. We empathise with the tragic hero because we too wait to see how these contradictions can be resolved and these impossibilities come to pass ... For Macbeth, worse follows. When he asks finally whether Banquo's heirs will 'ever reign in this kingdom', the Three Witches stage for him a dumb show in which Banquo's line appears to stretch out 'to the crack of doom' …

When the Three Witches *vanish*, Lennox enters the scene and restores an air of normality. When Macbeth ("Saw you the Weird Sisters?") asks him if he saw them as they departed, he is astonished to learn that somehow he didn't. Macbeth's conclusion –

> "Infected be the air whereon they ride
> And damned all those that trust them"

– expresses the premise on which the play is based: that evil is viral in nature. This central theme he marks by his inversion of subject ('the air') and predicate ('be infected'); in this incarnation, the Witches *are* 'sightless curriers of the air', carrying the virus as if they themselves are particles of it. All that's missing from his traditional portrait of the witch – which dates from 1451 – is the magic broomstick on which she is supposed to 'ride': otherwise, his concept is of the 'filthy hag' who is in her element in 'the filthy air' and whom only the 'damned' have been foolish enough to 'trust'. Is Macbeth therefore accepting that he himself is damned? Not if he can help it. From this moment on, he devotes his entire energies to ensuring that the conflict between apparently irreconcilable opposites [= Birnam Wood and Dunsinane Hill] remains unresolved.

In the process, Macbeth reveals himself to be ruthless and tyrannical. Upon hearing from Lennox that none other than the aforementioned Macduff has 'fled to England', Macbeth – "The castle of Macduff I will surprise" – instantly announces his intention to murder Macduff's wife and 'babes'. As a result, the tragic hero alienates again any sympathy for him which may have been accruing in an audience …

ACT IV Scene 2

Shakespeare takes us straight to 'the castle of Macduff' in Fife which he has just sworn to 'surprise', threatening in the process to put 'his wife' and 'his babes' to the sword. This scene provides an emblem of Macbeth's tyrannical rule of Scotland, for he will prove to be as good as his word …

In Act III Scene 6, Lennox informed us that Macduff had left for England in search of English help to free Scotland from Macbeth's rule and put Malcolm rightfully in his place. The first purpose of this scene is to demonstrate how abandoned Lady Macduff feels by his 'flight' and how vulnerable she feels in his absence.

More than once, GCSE Examiners have required candidates to answer an essay question on 'the female characters in *Macbeth*' – of whom, of course, there are only two. To one extent, such a Question is a trick question because conscientious candidates can be forgiven for concentrating in their revision on Lady Macbeth, not least at the expense of Lady Macduff to whom Shakespeare assigns no more than 42 lines.* To another extent, the Question is fair because Lady Macduff [= Wife] is not without her own strength of character. In her dialogue with Ross, Lady Macduff, far from being a mere cipher, is a rational and spirited interlocutor, scornfully criticising her husband for having apparently fled Scotland for no good 'reason', leaving his family exposed to mortal danger. Even 'the poor wren', she observes, prefers fight to flight. *By contrast, Lady Macbeth [= Lady] has 259 lines/half-lines.

For reasons of security, Ross finds himself in a predicament: much though he would like to defend Macduff from this undeserved but understandable criticism, he remains guarded. 'Cruel are the times' in which he 'dare not' disclose to a man's wife that her loving husband has not fled in 'fear', but travelled to England for a fine and 'noble' reason: to recruit Malcolm to a concerted effort to overthrow the murderer and tyrant, Macbeth ... The interlude between Lady Macduff and her unnamed son inspires pathos, for we know that, when Ross departs, they are unprotected and speaking on borrowed time. We wait with trepidation for the tender dialogue between them to be rudely and brutally interrupted. Even as they banter, we fear for their personal safety …

During this interlude, Lady Macduff is characterised by her resentment towards her flown husband and her affection and concern for her 'fatherless' son. Accordingly, she applies to her son three epithets – 'poor bird', 'poor monkey', 'poor prattler' – that express her pity for him. He is resourceful ('As birds do, mother') and sharp-witted, ironically blessed with a precocious understanding of a world in which there are more 'traitors' and 'liars' than 'honest men' to hang them.

When Macbeth's hired assassins arrive, the action of the play gives point to the pity that Lady Macduff feels for her 'little ones' and arouses that same response in an audience. To demonstrate how evil Macbeth is, Shakespeare decides to stage the Slaughter of the Innocents.* Defenceless against the Murderers, both harmless mother ("I have done no harm") and brave, defiant son ("Thou liest, thou shag-haired villain!") are killed, innocent victims of his tyranny. *Matthew: Chapter 2 Verses13-18.

If Macbeth believes that murdering Macduff's 'wife and babes' will succeed in stalling the movement against him, then he is exhibiting hubris and of course turning Macduff himself into his nemesis.

ACT IV Scene 3

In Act III Scene 6, the unnamed Lord to whom Lennox speaks first reports that Macduff has gone to 'the English court' to liaise with Malcolm and ask King Edward the Confessor for his help in retaking the Scottish throne from Macbeth. In Act IV Scene 2, it is this sensitive information that Ross chooses to withhold from Lady Macduff.

In this scene, Shakespeare holds the reunion between Malcolm and Macduff. Because the scene makes dramatic sense, G. K. Hunter is able to make three claims for its structural importance: first, it stages Malcolm's regal testing of Macduff's motives; second, it permits a stark comparison between Edward ('this good king') and Macbeth ('this tyrant'); and third, it brings to Macduff the heart-breaking news that Macbeth's ruffians have murdered his wife and children 'at one fell swoop', an event that angers Malcolm and ultimately spurs him into military action. Consequently, there is no doubt that the scene is relevant; but is it absolutely necessary – except in a shortened form, simply to facilitate Ross' mournful contribution to the plot? At 239 lines, it is the longest, most tedious, most turgid and most unconvincing scene in the play: in a word, the worst. It is by no means the longest scene in a Shakespeare play; it just feels like it, not least when the dialogue between Malcolm and Macduff is a) at its most wordy and wearying and b) at its most illogical or unlikely.

The primary purpose of the scene is to demonstrate Malcolm's fitness for kingship. This purpose it seeks to achieve by showing how cannily he responds to Macduff … Together, Malcolm and Macduff consider the state of Scotland: compared to 'gracious England' under Edward the Confessor, it is a 'poor country' under 'black Macbeth'. They agree that 'the tyrant' must be replaced, but by whom? Prior to this scene, the epithet has been applied to Macbeth twice; by the end of it, he has been called 'tyrant' seven times (eg. tyrant's grasp, tyrant's head, tyrant's power) and his removal from power has become imperative. Macduff states his preference, based upon the natural assumption that Malcolm – the rightful heir to the Scottish throne – should supplant Macbeth, but Malcolm himself begs suddenly to differ, promptly claiming to have identified in himself a range of nefarious qualities that do not become/befit a king …

The scene dramatises a test of character, but whose? Approaching Malcolm, Macduff's aim was not to interrogate him, but purely and simply to implore him to lead a force against Macbeth. Receiving Macduff, Malcolm's aim – by cautious contrast – is not to befriend and embrace him, but to check that he is 'not treacherous'. He is aware that Macduff has history with Macbeth and is suspicious that he might yet be doing his bidding: for this reason, he decides first to test Macduff's character. He reports that he has raised an army 'of goodly thousands', but then stuns Macduff by his abrupt announcement that he himself is not fit to lead it and take on the royal role.

Although he is entitled to become King Malcolm III of Scotland, he presents himself as being unworthy to wear the crown. "Don't look at me," he says to Macduff. "If you're searching for the Next King of Scotland, you've got the wrong man." Malcolm reckons that he has 'more vices': compared to him, 'black Macbeth' – 'bloody, luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful, sudden, malicious' though he is – is a paragon of virtue. To support this reckoning, he confesses to two of the Seven Deadly Sins, claiming that he is a man in whom Lust ('voluptuousness') and Avarice ('a staunchless avarice') dominate to such an extent that they outweigh all other considerations. Even worse, he has 'none' of 'the king-becoming graces', such

> "As justice, verity, temperance, stableness,
> Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness,
> Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude"

to compensate for his sins: even at the lowest level of expectation, he finds himself wanting ... Macduff had embarked on his mission to England simply in order to confirm that Malcolm felt equal to the task of rescuing Scotland from Macbeth's 'tyranny': of wrenching his 'poor country' from 'the tyrant's grasp'. Now he listens in dismay to these frank disclosures and has no hesitation in agreeing with Malcolm ("I am as I have spoken") that he is not 'fit to govern' ...

Except that he is! Twelve lines later, Malcolm says to Macduff: "Only joking …" At a psychological level, it has sounded as if Malcolm were merely indulging in an exaggerated form of self-deprecation, courteously and modestly portraying himself in a bad and unpresumptuous light. Now he reveals that he was playing Devil's Advocate in order to test Macduff's loyalty to the Scottish cause, thereby to ensure that he and Old Seyward's 'ten thousand warlike men' were not led astray. After Macduff has reacted in commendable despair to his disclosures, Malcolm retracts them on the basis that he has been convinced by Macduff's 'noble passion' to change his ways. Except that he hasn't! He was just testing Macduff's 'integrity' and he proceeds next to admit that he has never had any ways which he needed to change or mend. To date, he has lived a blameless and celibate life, untainted except by his 'first false speaking' to Macduff on this occasion. Mistrusted and mistreated, Macduff receives Malcolm's retraction of his 'detraction' in silence and with mixed feelings …

In short, the scene does not work well at either a logical or a psychological level and therefore comes close to being *unactable*. At the same time, it facilitates an academic weighing up of the virtues and the vices that a king must and must not have. In the process, it pays an elaborate compliment to King James, explaining – with didactic skill – why he is eminently fit for coronation, not assassination. In short, there is a political reason for the scene: to extol the twelve listed virtues of King James VI of Scotland, still – thanks to the recent failure of the Gunpowder Plot – also King James I of England. In short, much of the scene is Jacobean propaganda. In 1604, King Henry IV of France famously said of King James that he was "the wisest fool in Christendom".

'Devilish' though Macbeth may be, Malcolm has remained reluctant to march on England 'in over-credulous haste'. When Ross finally reports that Macbeth has murdered every member of Macduff's household, he needs no more evidence that 'this fiend of Scotland' must be deposed and hesitates no longer. The metaphor which he extends –

> "Let's make us medicines of our great revenge
> To cure this deadly grief"

– recognises that, in avenging these particular murders, he will be administering an antidote to an infectious sickness in the Scottish air.

* * * * * * * * * *

ACT V Scene 1
The Sleep-walking Scene

In the meantime, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have continued to ail. We return to Dunsinane Castle to discover that all is not well with them …

Immediately, Shakespeare confronts his audience with a set-change which it could not have expecting. *Enter a Doctor of Physic and a Waiting-Gentlewoman*: suddenly, we are *in media res*, listening to a whispered conversation between two characters whom we have not encountered before. Both are troubled, referring by means of pronouns only – 'she' and 'her' – to the perturbed behaviour of a somnambulist, a sleep-walker. None other than Lady Macbeth …

Lady Macbeth is not as she was, but in a 'slumbery agitation'. When we last saw her, it was in Act III Scene 4 where she was in full command of both her faculties and the proceedings: there, she was an imperious figure, ushering the nobles from the banqueting hall and still exhorting her husband to screw his courage to the sticking place (as homicidal thanes invariably do). Nothing has prepared us for the change that we find in her: in each of her earlier appearances, she was auditioning successfully for the part of Fourth Witch; in this scene, she is suffering from a psychosomatic disorder and, her system badly infected, is teetering on the brink of insanity.

Ironically, Shakespeare is celebrated in popular culture not for particular scenes in his plays, but for the quotable speeches (often soliloquies) that bring his central characters to life. Unlike speeches, separate scenes are not to be found upon numbered lists, reasonably enough because any comparison could not possibly be of like with like. Even so, there are scenes which, having been hallowed by theatrical history, present a supreme challenge to actors, directors and critics alike, not least the Sleepwalking Scene from **Macbeth** with which the actress Sarah Siddons (1755-1831) made her reputation and to which Sarah Bernhardt (1884) and Ellen Terry (1888) added distinction.

For what it's worth, three other scenes which come to mind – owing to the exceptional impact that they make in the theatre – are **The Merchant of Venice** Act IV Scene 1, **Much Ado About Nothing** Act IV Scene 1 and **King Henry IV Part One** Act II Scene 4. These scenes illustrate the unique quality of **Macbeth** Act V Scene 1, for they – by contrast – are masterpieces of dramatic organisation, both in their conflicts and in their variations of tone, relying (as they do) upon the interplay among a number of characters. Lady Macbeth is on her own …

Indeed, Lady Macbeth, in this famous scene, offers an object lesson to GCSE and A-Level candidates in how to pick up marks without really trying – or revising! The stage- directions are embedded in the dialogue between the Doctor and the Gentlewoman …

The Gentlewoman describes Lady Macbeth's obsessive, compulsive and repetitive behaviour in her sleep: "take forth paper, fold it, write upon 't, read it, afterwards seal it and again return to bed …" The Doctor asks what 'she' has said, but the Gentlewoman swears herself to secrecy, creating the suspicion that she has heard Lady Macbeth confess to murder and that – *Enter Lady Macbeth with a taper* – she may be about to do so again. They put her under observation …

It is immediately obvious that she is suffering from nyctophobia and must have a candle ('a taper') by her 'continually' ... Here is an opportunity for those exam candidates with a flair for Drama to use their imaginations and direct the action. It is a remarkable fact that, although her definitive scene runs for 75 lines, Lady Macbeth herself speaks only 17 of them. Consequently, there is scope – even before she speaks – for an actress and her director to imply her troubled state of mind by means of her responses to the setting and the stage-directions. Drama – for once – is created not by any conflict on stage (eg. between characters' points of view or between their levels of awareness) but by means of a spectacle that inspires pity. Where the set text is a play, examiners will always reward

candidates who can visualise a scene in performance. What costume does the character wear? In this case, a threadbare 'nightgown' … What 'accustomed' movements does she make? "Look how she rubs her hands."

Here, in 1606, is a Freudian insight into human psychology: even before Lady Macbeth speaks, it is evident that her somnambulism is a direct consequence of a guilty conscience. When she does finally speak, it is immediately evident that Duncan's murder is on her mind, disrupting the rhythm of her consciousness: "Yet here's a spot." Even after washing her hands for 'a quarter of an hour', she cannot eradicate every 'spot' of his spilt blood, cannot clean off her feeling of guilt:

> "Out, damned spot ..! Out, I say! – One: two: why then, 'tis time to do 't. Hell is murky! – Fie, my lord, fie! A soldier and afeard?"

It is simultaneously noticeable that Lady Macbeth speaks prose. She no longer speaks blank verse, for neither its composed movement nor its dignity would any longer be appropriate to her. Furthermore, she speaks in fragments of prose, indicating that her sense of identity has disintegrated to the point at which she is no longer a coherent, functioning individual. Verse has given way to prose because even an irregular verse-rhythm would no longer be competent to capture the movement of her unstable mind. Lady Macbeth, eyes wide shut, has been reduced to random utterances, not unlike the cryptic utterances of the Witches. It is therefore all the more shocking when she arrives suddenly at a moment of complete clarity –

> "Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?"

– in which her nightmare is re-lived in lurid detail. The sixteen monosyllables convey her memory of the horrific experience with stark simplicity ... Whereas Macbeth was immediately aware of the personal impact of his crime, it has taken until this lucid moment for Lady Macbeth to realise that their crime was of cosmic proportions: neither 'the multitudinous seas' (Act II Scene 2) nor 'all the perfumes of Arabia' appear sufficient to wash away the stain of Duncan's blood on their hands. Both before he committed the regicide and immediately afterwards, Macbeth ("I am afraid to think what I have done") was aware of the vast consequences of this 'bloody business'. Only now – in her sleep – has it occurred to Lady Macbeth ('Hell is murky') that she is beyond exoneration and redemption.

It is 1606, but Shakespeare presents this case of somnambulism with the accuracy of a modern psychiatrist. He selects details with psychological precision: to illustrate the chaos in Lady Macbeth's sub-consciousness, he reproduces her memories of events – "I tell you yet again, Banquo's dead" and "There's knocking at the gate" – out of chronological order. He maps the movement of her 'infected mind' with such fidelity that he even succeeds in inspiring pity for this pitiless killer.

ACT V Scene 2

By the start of this scene, Scotland has entered a state of civil war. The Thanes of Menteth, Cathness and Angus have joined the fray and report that 'Malcolm, his uncle Seyward and the good Macduff' are marching on Dunsinane Castle where Macbeth is holed up. Like the royal villain in an earlier Shakespearean tragedy, Macbeth is about to discover that, "when sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions" (Claudius, **Hamlet**, Act IV Scene 5).

The Thane of Menteth ("What does the tyrant?") makes the eighth reference to 'the tyrant'. Macbeth is a complex character because Shakespeare intends that an audience should both share this verdict and at the same time question it ... For this reason, the Thane of Cathness reports that there are mixed feelings about him: whereas "some say he's mad", others refer to his "valiant fury". Once more, an oxymoron 'valiant fury' is required to do justice to his character.

By this time, Scottish noblemen – for example, those present at the banquet in Act III Scene 4 – have considered the 'secret murders' of Duncan and Banquo and come to their own conclusions. These minor characters perform a choric function. The Thane of Angus – in chorus with Menteth [= Menteith] and Cathness [= Caithness] – observes that, as King and Queen of Scotland, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have continued not only to ail, but also to alienate, shedding willing supporters at an increasing rate. His verse moves in an anaphoric pattern ("Now does he feel" x 2) towards the conclusion that Macbeth is not a majestic 'giant', but 'a dwarfish thief' – an epithet that deprives him of ethical stature, but not necessarily and ultimately of tragic grandeur.

It is significant that Cathness refers to Macbeth's 'distempered cause' and Menteth to his 'pestered senses', for such metaphors confirm that Macbeth is unwell and unbalanced. Cathness extends this metaphor, explicitly diagnosing a medical problem, a disease:

> "Meet we the medicine of the sickly weal,
> And with him pour we in our country's purge
> Each drop of us."

He means that they are marching to 'meet' Malcolm whom he describes in the form of a remedy: 'the medicine of our sickly weal'. In selecting this Old English noun, he chooses wisely, for 'weal' [= well-being, welfare] encompasses the concepts of both health and wealth. Such a metonym ('the medicine of our sickly weal') endorses the ideas that Macbeth has endangered both the common health and the common wealth of his country and that Malcolm is coming to restore it to both health and prosperity. He is coming to 'purge' Scotland of its ills.

ACT V Scene 3

Macbeth enters in hubristic mood: following the Three Witches' improbable prophecies, he remains confident that he is invulnerable, untouchable. How on earth can 'Birnam Wood remove to Dunsinane?' Wasn't Malcolm 'born of woman'?

By contrast, Macbeth's unnamed servant feels no such sense of invulnerability: having been up to the battlements of the castle and seen the size of 'the English force' [= 'ten thousand' strong] advancing from afar, he appears pale with 'fear'. This fear communicates itself to Macbeth who, upon receipt of this reality-check, begins for the first time to doubt those far-fetched prophecies and his own prospects of survival. To keep up a brave appearance, he hurls three epithets of abuse – 'thou cream-faced loon', 'thou lily-livered boy', 'whey-face' – at the frightened servant, first accusing him of cowardice, but then dismissing him so that he can privately re-assess his rapidly deteriorating situation. By virtue of its elegiac tone, his short soliloquy –

> "I have lived long enough: my way of life
> Is fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf"

– echoes his philosophical reflection in the wake of Duncan's death (Act II Scene 3). Whereas there the melancholy image was of a drained goblet of wine, here it is of an autumn leaf, fragile and 'yellow' [= drained of living colour]. He is suddenly aware of his isolation: not for him 'troops of friends' in his old age, but – in all increasing probability – a premature and violent end. Macbeth is painfully honest with himself. It is in this growth towards self-knowledge that he inspires pathos and retains or regains his dignity.

When Seyton enters, he asks Macbeth: "What is your gracious pleasure?" The irony is immediately audible, for there is no longer anything 'gracious' about Macbeth whose noble identity – at least outside his soliloquies – has continued to disintegrate. Once he emerges from his private thoughts

and resumes his public role, he becomes dictatorial again, ordering the Doctor to work miracles and cure his ailing wife: "Cure her of that." When the Doctor advises him that it is not so easy to 'minister to a mind diseased', Macbeth ("Throw physic to the dogs!") loses both his patience and his temper, continuing in this intemperate mood to the end of the scene …

ACT V Scene 4

During his History Plays, Shakespeare writes series of short scenes to convey the commotion of the battlefield. During both **Troilus and Cressida** (1602) and **Antony and Cleopatra** (1607) he also shifts scene rapidly and repeatedly from one camp to the other, thereby to suggest a fast-moving conflict between two rival factions.

For this reason, Act IV of **Antony and Cleopatra** consists of 13 scenes! The function of this short scene (of 21 lines) is to show how Birnam Wood can *appear* to come to Dunsinane Hill. Malcolm outlines his military strategy:

> "Let every soldier hew him down a bough
> And bear 't before him; thereby shall we shadow
> The numbers of our host and make discovery
> Err in report of us."

The practical step that each of his soldiers should take is to camouflage himself beneath a leafy bough, thereby to disguise the true number of troops assembled in his ranks. To a look-out posted on the battlements of Great Dunsinane Castle, such a formation will create the illusion of an advancing forest [= 'a moving grove'].

Correctly, Seyward predicts that 'the confident tyrant'* will stay put, not knowing that he will do so precisely because of his misplaced confidence that Birnam Wood cannot – in any way, shape or form – transport itself to Dunsinane. *This is the ninth reference to Macbeth as a 'tyrant'.

ACT V Scene 5

The first event of this scene is Seyton's solemn announcement that Lady Macbeth has died: "The queen, my lord, is dead." Macbeth reacts to the news not with a sense of personal loss, still less with a lament for the sterling qualities of his partner-in-crime, but with a third philosophical reflection. The speech is first a meditation upon the passage of time and then an elegy – not for a particular woman, but for mankind itself:

> "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
> 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 ..."

Likewise, the speech is not the swan song of a murderer-philosopher, a particular criminal, regretting that he ever turned to crime, but a general reflection upon the futility of life that any or every man might have formed towards the imminent end of his days. As he faces his final reckoning, Macbeth's speech-rhythms regain the dignified regularity of blank verse: whereas before his rhythms and images recorded his feverish agitation, now they express a melancholy resignation. The speech is memorable for its two extended metaphors, both of which attribute the meaningless of life to its brevity and its pointlessness. To convey the psychological experience of time, he transforms the common adverbs 'tomorrow' and 'yesterday' into nouns, thereby to suggest what transitory and inadequate terms of reference they are. Such usage reminds us that we need never wait longer than 48 hours before 'tomorrow' becomes 'yesterday': in Macbeth's experience, 'tomorrow' does come, but

to no avail. Worse, we reflect upon 'all our yesterdays' [= both distantly and recently, our 'tomorrows'] only to realise that they have been leading us nowhere except to the grave ('dusty death'). It seems to Macbeth that he lives his life like a candle in the wind:

"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."

For the brevity of human life, Macbeth's metaphor is a 'brief candle', waiting to be blown 'out'; for its pointlessness, his metaphor is an anxious actor who over-estimates his importance. All the world may be a stage, but a 'player'* – no matter how imposing a performance he gives – is 'an idiot' if he believes that he can make a lasting impact upon the world. Life, after all, is but a stage farce, a rigmarole of empty gestures … In modern terms, Macbeth's valedictory speech sets out an existentialist vision: in his view, man is no more than 'a walking shadow', 'a poor player' to be pitied for his fleeting existence. *This extended metaphor Shakespeare borrows from the speech that he gives to Jaques in **As You Like It** (Act II Scene 7).

The second event of this scene is the Messenger's sensational announcement that Birnam Wood appears to be moving towards Dunsinane Castle: "anon methought the wood began to move." Macbeth reacts to this news first with alarm ("Liar and slave!") but then with rueful acceptance that he is between a rock and a hard place: "There is nor flying hence or tarrying here." For Macbeth, the news that Birnam Wood has begun 'to move' is his first moment of anagnorisis, a recognition that the Third Apparition's impossible prophecy must have found a way to take practical effect. He does not stop to question whether the Messenger – deceived, perhaps, by an optical illusion – may be mistaken. Rather, he resigns himself promptly to his predicted fate and resolves to meet it with heroic defiance: "die with harness on our back."

Act V Scene 6

Although Shakespearean scholars agree where Act V Scene 6 begins, they do not agree where it ends.* In W. J. Craig's edition of Shakespeare's Complete Works, first published in 1906, Act V has seven scenes; in Peter Alexander's classic edition of Shakespeare's Complete Works, published in 1951, Act V has eight scenes. By contrast, G. K. Hunter, editing the play for Penguin in 1967, compresses the comings and goings to and from the battlefield into a single scene, but admits that his Scene 6 is "usually printed as four separate scenes" – and, in The Player's Shakespeare, edited by J. H. Walter in 1962, Act V does indeed have ten scenes. To complete the set, the Cambridge School Shakespeare divides Act V into nine scenes.

*The exact division of scenes is uncertain because Shakespeare wrote for the stage, not the page. When John Heminge and Henry Condell came in 1623 to compile the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays, they did so by collating the 'foul papers' from which actors had learned their parts. Likewise, there is no definitive spelling of Birnan/Birnam Wood.

As for Scene 4 and Scene 5, the stage-direction for Scene 6 – *Drums and colours* – proclaims that a battle for Great Dunsinane Castle is underway. On this occasion, Malcolm, Seyward, Macduff and their army enter *with boughs*, indicating that their advance from Birnam Wood to the outskirts of the Castle is complete: indeed, Malcolm instructs their soldiers to dispense with their camouflage ("Your leavy screens throw down") and to reveal their true strength in numbers. Taking the 'tyrant'-count into double figures, Seyward announces their intention to test 'the tyrant's power' that night. This is a dramatic moment of revelation. Whether at Hampton Court or at The Globe, its impact in 1606 would have been considerable, familiar as audiences then were with the skilful ways in which armies

made use of the natural resources to hand. Given the collective consciousness of theatre-audiences post-1968, it has become more difficult to stage this moment with due solemnity. Directors and actors must be careful, for it is nowadays more likely to make an audience laugh, bringing to mind – as it does – that closing sequence of **Dad's Army** where the cast is on manoeuvres!

ACT V Scene 7

Where the 105 lines (of spoken text) that close the play are divided, the Scene-divisions accord to exits and entrances: exits and entrances in that order ... When Malcolm, Seyward and Macduff *exeunt*, Macbeth enters, resolved to fight to the bitter end, not least because he cannot conceive of an adversary 'not born of woman': after all, how else is a man born if not 'of woman'? At once, he encounters Young Seyward who first establishes that he is facing the 'abhorrèd tyrant' himself and then engages in hand-to- hand combat with him. When Young Seyward is 'slain', Macbeth's hubristic conclusion – that he need not fear weapons 'brandished by man that's of a woman born' – reveals that his false of security has been reinforced.

To indicate that the hurly-burly of battle goes on, *alarums* [= trumpet-calls to arms] continue to sound: accordingly, representatives of the rival camps continue to barge about the battlefield. When Macbeth exits for another part of the field, Macduff enters in search of him and – at the start of a short soliloquy, showing what is uppermost in his mind – makes the twelfth reference to Macbeth's tyrannical rule: "Tyrant, show thy face."

When Macduff exits, Malcolm and Seyward enter. "This way, my lord": from Seyward's first words, it is clear that he is conducting Malcolm towards Macbeth's stormed castle. By this stage, Seyward is able to report that their forces have seized Great Dunsinane Castle and that 'the tyrant's people' have even begun to desert his side for theirs.

Although W. J. Craig and G. K. Hunter (New Penguin edition) choose not to make a scene-break here, as Peter Alexander and J. H. Walter do, it would be logical to do so, for Seyward's final words to Malcolm ("Enter, sir, the castle") confirm that they are no longer on the battlefield, but standing and speaking right outside the Castle gates. Presumably, Professor Hunter made his editorial choice because there are only seven lines between Seyton's two utterances before the action shifts again to that part of the field to which Macbeth has scurried off …

ACT V Scene 8

Macbeth enters again, refusing to take the easy way out [= die on his 'own sword'] and looking for his next challenger – who comes now in the fatal form of Macduff, the Thane of Fife. For Macbeth, Macduff's epithet of choice is 'hellhound'.

Macbeth, of course, has uppermost in his mind the First Apparition's imperative that he must "beware Macduff! Beware the Thane of Fife!" but is at the same time consoled by the Second Apparition's assurance that "none of woman born shall harm Macbeth". 'Of all men else', he has avoided Macduff **a)** because he is mindful of the First Apparition's warning and **b)** because his soul is 'too much charged' with Macduff blood already. Having ordered the murders of Lady Macduff and her children, he is aware that Macduff represents his potential nemesis: that, if Macduff were to kill him and avenge those deaths, then it would be poetic justice. Fortunately, he has reason to remain confident that Macduff cannot touch him:

> "I bear a charmèd life which must not yield
> To one of woman born."

Yes and no … Yes, he does bear a charmed life, but no: not if he engages in combat with Macduff. Unfortunately, Macduff 'was from his mother's womb untimely ripped': that is, born by Caesarean section. For Macbeth, this revelation is his second moment of anagnorisis, a recognition that there is another way (albeit rare) in which a man can be born, a loophole through which the charm can fall from his shoulders. Superstitious to the last, Macbeth refuses to tempt fate: "I'll not fight with thee." Only when Macduff taunts him with the charge of cowardice and threatens to humiliate him after death* does he recover his air of heroic defiance and 'try the last'. *Specifically, Macduff threatens to decapitate him and put his head 'upon a pole' beneath which he will write: 'Here may you see the tyrant'. This is the fourteenth and final time that the epithet is applied to Macbeth.

ACT V Scene 9

It transpires that, in Macduff's keen swordsmanship, Macbeth's hubris does meet its nemesis: *Enter Macduff with Macbeth's head*. Given the proximity of the Globe Theatre to the Tower of London, on the opposite bank of the River Thames, it is not unrealistic to surmise that in 1606 the Macduff-actor may sometimes have had an actual head ('the usurper's cursèd head') to hold aloft in triumph. Even in Shakespeare, it is difficult to imagine any prop more gruesome or more lifelike – or should that be 'death-like'?

G. K. Hunter (New Penguin Shakespeare) explains that he has not made a scene-break here because the juxtaposed stage-directions - *Exeunt fighting* and *Enter fighting* - are 'contradictory'. He suspects that, in the original theatre, there may have been both a main stage and then a side-stage or a balcony across which a curtain was drawn after Macbeth was 'slain'. This being so, Lines 74-92 (which Malcolm, Ross and Seyward share) give Macduff time and hidden space to behead Macbeth before he re-enters with his gory trophy.

At the end of a Shakespearean tragedy, it is conventional for a minor character to deliver a tribute to the dead hero: for example, Fortinbras in **Hamlet**, Edgar in **King Lear**. It is conventional for the speech to eulogise the qualities of the tragic hero and hold out a cathartic promise for the future. At the end of **Macbeth**, Malcolm ('King of Scotland') departs from this convention in that he cannot find a good word to say about the 'watchful tyranny' of 'this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen'. Malcolm promises that fairer dues for Scottish thanes will be 'newly planted with the time', but passes this damning judgement upon Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Given the political temper of Shakespeare's time, such a verdict is understandable ... Now that the battle is lost and won, the question which these epitaphs raise is: how fair are they? How just a judgement has Malcolm reached? Do audiences share it? Is it entirely adequate?

The obvious difference between Macbeth ('this dead butcher') and Lady Macbeth ('his fiend-like queen') is that, whilst his mind is 'full of scorpions' before he murders King Duncan, hers fills with ineradicable horrors (Act V Scene 1) only after the Arabian scale of her crime against nature becomes apparent to her. According to this argument, both Macbeth ('this fiend of Scotland') and Lady Macbeth ('his fiend-like queen') are one-dimensional characters. Following his butchery in Act II, Macbeth literally has blood on his hands; by proxy, he is also responsible for the brutal murders of Banquo (Act III) and Lady Macduff (Act IV). Following her complicity in the first crime, Lady Macbeth is a simple embodiment of evil. She is without common humanity, a she-devil in whom 'the milk of human kindness' has long turned sour or dried up and in whom the 'passage to remorse' has been blocked up.

On the other hand, it is possible to argue that such character-readings are not only simple, but also simplistic: that both characters exist in more than one dimension and deserve more nuanced interpretations. From start to finish, Macbeth is a complex character, possessed by an evil ambition, but at the same time given to honest and self-aware reflection. In the final analysis, he is *both* a 'butcher' *and* a serious thinker, a moral philosopher of considerable humility, prepared to conclude

that his own life, for all of its 'sound and fury', has signified 'nothing'. Likewise, Lady Macbeth is *both* a 'fiend' *and* a tortured soul. This is A. C. Bradley's point:

> "Yet if the Lady Macbeth of these scenes were really utterly inhuman, or a 'fiend-like queen', as Malcolm calls her, the Lady Macbeth of the sleep-walking scene would be an impossibility."

Prey to psychosomatic disturbances, caused by a guilty conscience, she commits suicide: 'by self and violent hands took off her life'. Both Macbeths meet their nemeses, receive their just deserts, but not before they have grown in self-knowledge: not before they have recognised and paid for the hubristic error of their ways.

APPENDIX:
SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

Shakespeare's tragedies tend to follow the classical pattern defined in Aristotle's ***Poetics*** (c. 320 BC). According to this Ancient Greek theory, the tragedian must craft his play according to a formula:

Hero
The tragic hero must be **a man of high estate**:

Hamlet is Prince of Denmark	Macbeth is King of Scotland
Lear is King of Britain	Cleopatra is Queen of Egypt.

Hamartia (cf. Achilles' heel)
To suffer a tragic fall, a hero must have a **fatal flaw** within his character: that is, a personal weakness that leads to his death. In Aristotle's language, he must have a hamartic element. In Act I Scene 4 of Hamlet, Hamlet is telling Horatio that he has heard of such characters and in this speech uses two terms to describe the **hamartic element**: 'some vicious mole of nature' and 'the stamp of one defect'.

Hamlet's imagery explains that a man is born with this 'particular fault' and can do nothing about it; even though it is his only failing, it cancels out his other virtues (which 'take corruption from that particular fault') and ensures his downfall. In Shakespeare's plays, the particular faults of his tragic heroes are well known: for example, Hamlet's procrastination, Macbeth's ambitiousness, Othello's credulity/gullibility.

Hubris
The tragic hero must **exhibit hubris**: that is, he does not know that he has a fatal flaw in his character and therefore expresses *a misplaced confidence in his own invulnerability*. In Aristotle's language, he will make speeches in which there is a **hubristic element**. Hamlet's speech to Horatio (Act I Scene 4) is just such a speech; here, he makes *a complacent assumption of his own invincibility*. Hubris involves **dramatic irony**; there is a dramatic irony at Hamlet's expense in that he is *unaware* of the defect in his own nature which will lead to his death.

Crisis
The classical pattern insists that the hero face a crisis.
Hamlet's famous soliloquy (Act III Scene 1) and Lear's tirade against the thunder-storm (Act III Scene 2) express these **crises of personal identity**.

Catharsis
Such crises should *inspire pity* for the hero.
In Aristotle's language, the **cathartic element** inspires **pathos**.

Anagnorisis
At this point, the hero loses his *hubristic unawareness of his hamartic element*.
This is a moment of **epiphany**, of dramatic revelation.

Nemesis
The tragic hero *meets his nemesis* in death: to be exact, his nemesis is the end that he meets in direct proportion to his hamartic weak-point and his hubristic error of judgement. Nemesis is **poetic justice**: in Act V, the tragic hero gets his **come-uppance** for his earlier failure to know himself and receives his **just deserts**.

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Macbeth by Peter Cash is **No 6** in the Shakespeare Bookmark Longer Commentaries series.