

Macbeth and Dismemberment

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THE SCHOOLROOM FAVORITE, *Macbeth*, is really the most impenetrable of Shakespeare's plays. It has a television thriller plot about an ugly murder and how the murderer is eventually brought down and punished, and, despite the contest between the bad people and the good people, a seeming vacuity of theme. If the evildoers are marvelously distinct, the upholders of law and order are nothings; the play focuses upon the evil protagonist and his evil wife and leaves everyone else vaguely sketched. It is the most phantasmagoric of the tragedies, locating its reality upon the very edge of the border between the human and the supernatural—so that it has never been clear whether the witches should be played as grim sibyls or ridiculous crones. Yet of all Shakespeare's tragedies it is also the most directly to be identified with contemporary events at a specific moment in English history. A major portion of critical discussion about the play continues to be concerned with either its relation to sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ideas about witchcraft or to the events of James I's reign around the year 1606, when it was probably produced.

But, like anyone who has submitted himself to the strange power of this work without necessarily being distracted by such issues, I have always found *Macbeth* deeply disturbing. It is, above all, a study of a murder less clearly motivated than one might first suppose, a terrible transgression of limits that tempts the criminal to enter a world from which there is no return. De Quincey, in his famous essay about the "knocking at the gate," perceived that where Macbeth arrived by killing Duncan was a place of transformative strangeness (which is why the Porter, with his low jokes, is such a welcome glimpse of a normal world outside). Empty of selfhood and motive, almost a nineteenth-century superfluous man like Raskolnikov, he discovers a self through the most terrible of deeds. In making

this remote comparison I am thinking chiefly of those extraordinary early chapters of *Crime and Punishment* in which the urge to transgress overcomes the pitiable, admirable, reprehensible young killer who hatchets the old pawnbroker for reasons unavailable in any system of morals or political principles or even explained by the motives of mere gain he thinks he is governed by. Perhaps he kills her in order to be one of those who can. The intransitive impulse to transgress, of course, has a Renaissance equivalent in the going-beyond of Machiavellianism—less the calculated program of power politics and intrigue that Machiavelli provided the Renaissance prince than the general desire to overreach that borrowed his name, especially in the theater. Before Shakespeare, only Marlowe had really expressed for the stage the price of this dangerous aspiration, which not only demolished the conventional idea of good and bad but also traditional ideas of personhood. The “machiavel” made himself the ultimate self-made man. He owed nothing of his character to anyone or to God. He might be identified in the remark of Inez to Garcin in Sartre’s *Huis Clos*: “Seules les actes decident de ce qu’on voulou. . . . Tu n’es rien d’autre que ta vie” (You are nothing else but your acts).

The play is taught in schools as a moral tragedy illustrating the evil consequences of ambition, but Macbeth is not ambitious in the ordinary sense. If Macbeth is a man ruined by his ambitious longings, his supposed ambition is an emotion peculiarly unexpressed. This has always made for a difficulty in a stage tradition that strives to supply what is missing in a script full of gaps where motive and explanation belong. Davenant’s 1663 rewrite of the play “improves” Shakespeare by turning Macbeth into an uncomplicated ambitious villain who does not agonize, after his meeting with the witches, about his intention to kill Duncan. In the next century, David Garrick’s acting version of the play responded to the need he saw to make the motive of ambition more distinct, and had Macbeth conclude his own story,

’Tis done! the scene of life will quickly close.
Ambition’s vain delusive dreams are fled,
And now I wake to darkness, guilt and horror.

Shakespeare's Macbeth speaks only once of his ambition, and knows that he lacks a "spur to prick the sides of [his] intent." But what might that spur have been? In the sixteenth-century *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* of Raphael Holinshed, Shakespeare's favorite history source, the real Macbeth had a lineal claim of succession to the throne of Scotland—until Duncan arbitrarily short-circuited him by placing his own son next in line. But in the play this claim is never made, and it is unclear whether or not Macbeth had been hypocritical a moment before, when he accepted Duncan's gratitude by saying,

The service and the loyalty I owe,
 In doing it, pays itself. Your highness' part
 Is to receive our duties, and our duties
 Are to your throne and state, children and servants.

Macbeth has just risked his life in Duncan's defense. He will continue up to the brink of his act of murder to be aware of his liege's virtues and his own obligations without appearing to calculate his prospects. Only when Malcolm is pronounced heir do we hear Macbeth's surprised exclamation, "this is a step on which I must fall down or else o'erleap"—suggesting ambition disappointed. We must also suppose that "dark and deep desires" and anticipations of the necessity of some evil action arose before Malcolm's promotion supplied a provocation. Even at the witches' prophecy that he is to be "king hereafter," "horrible imaginings" had made his hair stand on end and his heart knock against his ribs as though he already knew only one way to the throne. But the momentary vision, *perhaps* of murder, is not shared with us as we listen to his soliloquy. He recovers his balance when he says to himself, "chance may crown me without my stir." Perhaps he does not yet see how inevitable his own role will be in making his coronation come about. He may become king while looking the other way. His letter to Lady Macbeth, written directly after his meeting with the witches, simply reports that he was "rapt in wonder" at their prophecy and bids her rejoice not in the prospect of his own kingship, but only in the greatness promised *her*.

Macbeth has been thought to be a man of imagination, but his first murder does not spring from any anticipation of the “golden round” that promptly gleams in the inner vision of his wife. It is she who more obviously displays ambition. Understandably, she is often played as the virtual protagonist whose dream of the future gives motion to a puppet Macbeth. As far as we can detect from what we are shown, Macbeth seems, also, to lack the practical imagination that anticipates and embraces ways and means. It is Lady Macbeth who expresses the realization that “Thus thou must do.” And yet, again, even as she reads his letter, she seems to possess a plan of action already agreed upon between them. When Macbeth hesitates at the last moment to go forward with the murder, she reproaches him, “What beast was’t, then, / That made you break this enterprise to me? / [. . .] Nor time nor place / Did then adhere, and yet you would make both”—suggesting that *he* had initiated their planning. But when might that discussion have taken place? There was no opportunity, as Shakespeare shapes the action, for a further letter before he is immediately home again, Duncan arriving on his heels, and she can say that the morning sun will never see their royal guest go hence. If the discussion she claims to remember took place, it would have had to precede that opening scene when the witches come together for their stated purpose “to meet with Macbeth” as though to initiate the action to follow. The omission of any prior scene makes it always uncertain whether the hero/villain had needed their prompting. This uncertainty infects a central issue in the play: whether action is born in the self or somehow creates the self.

Macbeth, at the last moment, draws back. He has anticipated how Duncan’s virtues will plead against the “deep damnation” of his murder and blow the “horrid deed in every eye.” He tells his wife, “We will proceed no further in this business.” But he drops his hesitations when she asks, “Art thou afeared / To be in thine own act and valour, / As thou art in desire?” The desire she speaks of has gone unexpressed in our hearing, but he responds that he dares to do “all that may become a man.” This may mean that what he will do will not only be suitable or “becoming” to his masculinity but also that his deeds

themselves will make him a man, constitute or "become" his manhood as desire alone cannot do.

It has been said that Macbeth is a worthy man who does evil things. Dr. Johnson thought it the great defect of the play that it allows a personality to emerge whose qualities are not expressed by the action. "It has no nice discriminations of character," he complained, "the events are too great to admit the influence of particular dispositions, and the course of the action necessarily determines the conduct of the agents." But what Johnson observed may have been the result of Shakespeare's *intention* to sever Macbeth from his acts. This happens quite literally when the terrible regicide takes place offstage, although blood will be spilled plentifully on the boards as later murders succeed this first one. Our sympathy, instead of going to the invisible slaughtered Duncan who had come as a visitor to the Macbeths so trustingly and with such courteous grace, is wrung from us instead by the spectacle of his murderer's suffering. But once the deed is done, the deed is what the doer is—a man who has assassinated his king, his cousin, the guest in his house.

Macbeth's struggle between awareness and oblivion tempts one to read the play in the mode of psychological criticism. It could be said that his only partial self-consciousness stems from his being driven by unconscious rather than conscious intentions. So, the witches might represent the insurrectionary, inadmissible parricidal passions he does not recognize in himself. This may explain his weak sense of motive and his curious air of acting despite his knowledge that his acts are heinous—almost, as the critic A. C. Bradley observed, as though it were his "appalling duty" to commit murder. When Lady Macbeth admits that she had been unable to kill Duncan herself because he "resembled [her] father as he slept," she may be disclosing a dim sense that killing the king is parricide—and Macbeth's realization, on some unconscious level, of his oedipal anger and guilt accounts for his own mingled compulsion and horror. By this accounting, Macbeth's leap to the idea of murder when Duncan appoints Malcolm his heir is the outrage of the displaced son against the father who has favored a younger sibling. But however plausible

to the modern mind, the construct of character that compels one to imagine an “unconscious” or a past psychic history capable of “explaining” later behavior imposes itself awkwardly on either Macbeth or his Lady. They cannot be thought of as patients undergoing psychoanalysis.

But they can be thought of as dramatic conventionalities, despite the vividness of realization Shakespeare’s dramatic art endows. As with Hamlet, the past of the English stage provides patterns that Macbeth—like the playwright himself—is driven to fulfill, and it is significant that the prompting to kill comes from a source outside the self in both cases. The ghost of Hamlet’s father urges him to become a Revenger. On the Scottish battlefield, the witches suggest to Macbeth that he is bound to mount higher—provoking his assumption of the role, long familiar in the traditions of religious drama, in which an ambitious man submits himself to the devil’s influence and falls to his damnation—even though the “murdering ministers” Lady Macbeth calls upon are never visible. Macbeth does give the impression of having given his soul away, being forever inaccessible to remorse or redemption. The presence of dramatic precedent is visible in the play in other ways. There had been “mystery plays” about such biblical events as Christ’s Harrowing of Hell, in which Christ entered Hell’s castle through a “hell-gate” guarded by a devil-porter and rescued the souls of prophets and patriarchs—which might, it is thought, have given a suggestion to Shakespeare for the cleansing of Scotland by Macduff and Malcolm. Or, it has been guessed, Shakespeare could have remembered the play about Herod who, in response to a prophecy that he would be succeeded by the children of others, undertook wholesale murders of children. There is a necessary depthlessness, an absence of psychological individuation, in the roles that remain so evidently theatrical.

Or we can observe that in *Macbeth*, as elsewhere in his tragedies, particularly in *Lear*, Shakespeare poetically represents character as a garment, something put on or taken off. Caroline Spurgeon, who first noted these clothes images years ago, thought they suggest, in the case of Macbeth, that he was a small man who tried to wear

the dignities of someone greater. His appropriated honors are, in Banquo's words, "like strange garments [that] cleave not to their mould," or, as Angus later says, Macbeth comes to "feel his title / Hang loose upon him, like a giant's robe / Upon a dwarfish thief." But, taken as a whole, it is enough to note that the image of clothing suggests in *Macbeth* that character is a detachable costume, and that an essential man is only dubiously present beneath it. From the idea of character as costume, one moves readily to a view of personal role as theatrical, and Shakespeare makes reference to the theater in *Macbeth* in order to remind us of the factitiousness of character. Lady Macbeth, when she calls on the spirits who will unsex her, resorts, as Howard Felperin has said, "to the language of the tiring room, as if the speaker were an actress beckoning attendants to costume her and make her up for the part she is about to perform." Like Hamlet, who can be said to accept his revenger role only reluctantly and belatedly, Macbeth can be seen as an actor forced into an uncongenial part. The usual theater machiavel, like Shakespeare's own Richard III, was often played with a certain cheerful gusto, but there is neither cheer nor gusto in Macbeth. In the end, all roles fail. He is left with a self that is merely the actor who is only "a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more."

As I see it, the disjunction in Macbeth between some shadowy essential self and his acts emerges most profoundly as a symbolic condition of dismemberment. The idea of the body in pieces begins with the report of a previous traitor's head impaled on the royal battlements; it ends with the grim display of Macbeth's own head severed from his invisible trunk and brought out upon the stage. It is the head of a man who, as he began his career of murder, did not want to see or give a name to the action of his hand. Instead he skeptically separated consciousness from act, saying,

Stars hide your fires,
Let me not see my black and deep desires,
The eye wink at the hand. Yet let that be,
Which the eye fears when it is done to see.

The image of the chopping apart of body parts, as though on a butcher's block, recurs in the chant of the witches about the brew they concoct in their cauldron from animal and human parts—"eye of newt, and toe of frog, / Wool of bat and tongue of dog," and so forth, and a Jew's liver, a Turk's nose, a Tartar's lips, and the finger of a "birth-strangled babe." Macbeth, in killing Macdonald, has "unseam'd him from the navel to th' chops," and Lady Macbeth, preparing for the bloody slaughter of Duncan, seems to ask for a drastic surgery that will "unsex" her, as though she had undergone a hysterectomy. She wants to interpose separation in the inner channels of being so that "the access and passage to remorse" is blocked as her active role is made possible by the excision of her femaleness. Macbeth, in his last extremity, as he hears of the English armies massed to confront him, expresses the animal courage that has made him welcome the dismantling of self, and he declares to Seyton, "I'll fight till from my bones my flesh be hacked." After his first murder he had declared himself "settled and ben[t] up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat" as though uniting the elements in himself that he has separated. But when, at the very end, he is referred to as a "dead butcher," the name fits because he has dismembered the wholeness of his own personality as well as the physical selves of others.

Disloyalty is not only a cleaving of persons from one another, but a surgery performed upon the individual self, separating self-interest from affection and the sense of obligation. The acting hand is disloyal to the "eye" of conscience or pity while the bonds are cut that bind one person to another. The puzzle of Macbeth's criminal disloyalty is made greater by his history of loyalty: up until the time the play begins, his devotion as well as his prowess in demonstrating it have been exercised against traitors who stand as symbols of what he will become. He gorily destroys Macdonald, who is the traitor he is yet to be and who ends as he will. The "bleeding captain's" report shows Macbeth and Macdonald as twins, ambiguously joined in embrace on the battlefield "as two spent swimmers that do cling together / And choke their art." For his defeat of his king's enemy, Macbeth is also given the title just removed from another traitor, the Thane

of Cawdor, who has anticipated the inexplicable in Macbeth's own imminent betrayal of Duncan. Duncan remarks, "There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face. He was a gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust" at the moment when Macbeth, the traitor-to-be, enters, greeted by the King as his "worthiest cousin."

Macbeth is not yet unworthy, but his act will make him so. After his murder of Duncan his selfhood will begin its transition through successive replacements. Character, which one expects to find constant, is repeatedly altered by new deeds as Macbeth tries never to look back. "I am afraid to think what I have done," he confesses to Lady Macbeth, "Look on it again I dare not." If he accepts the reality of his deed he must forget the person he thought he was: "To know my deed, 'twere best not know my self." Each succeeding crime finds him less subject to those "compunctious visitings of nature" Lady Macbeth tried to rout from her own breast. She succumbs more devastatingly to the effects of her participation in bloody deeds. Her fierce assault upon her original nature, with its woman's breasts that once gave milk, destroys her altogether—despite her claim that she might have been ready to "pluck the nipple from [her babe's] boneless gums" were that toughness necessary. It is Macbeth, after all, who seems to succeed in changing his own nature almost physiologically. As though he, too, once had a woman's breasts, his murderous deeds make clear that he is no longer "too full o' th' milk of human kindness." In the end, he does not "scan" or identify in his own mind what he does until he does it: "Strange thoughts I have in head that will to hand / Which must be acted ere they can be scanned"—referring again to the sundering of mind (or "eye") from hand. Or, to quote him again more fully in the strange comment he makes after the banquet attended by Banquo's ghost in act 3,

I am in blood
 Stepped in so far that should I wade no more,
 Returning were as tedious as go o'er
 Strange things I have in head that will to hand
 Which must be acted ere they can be scanned.
 Come we'll to sleep. My strange and self-abuse

Is the initiate fear that wants hard use;
We are but young in deed.

He is but young in deed, and deed will make him the person who will never agonize over murder again, for “things bad begun, make strong themselves by ill.”

As Maynard Mack and other critics have noted, “deeds,” “do,” and “done” are words reiterated in this play, often in repetitious statements that make the words reverberate. The first witch says on the blasted heath, “I’ll do, I’ll do, and I’ll do.” Lady Macbeth says,

Thou’dst have, great Glamis
That which cries, “Thus thou must do if thou have it;”
And that which rather thou dost fear to do,
Than wishest should be undone.

But we should not overlook the shifting pun in the opening line of Macbeth’s famous soliloquy uttered before he has killed anyone: “If it were done when ’tis done, then ’twere well / It were done quickly.” The first occurrence of “done” means “finished” or “ended”; the second has the usual sense of “acted” or “performed”; the third, ambiguously, means either or both. The relation of doing to finishing—to cutting off the deed from the continuity of time, hence dismembering time itself—is Macbeth’s problem as he expresses his wish that “th’ assassination / Could trammel up the consequence” and be the “be-all”—the accomplishing act—and at the same time the end-all that would be without sequel. The “great quell” of Duncan’s murder, he and Lady Macbeth hope, will be not only a death but an end-making of itself. But they will discover that all acts are incomplete, all trail after them some not-to-be-trammeled-up consequence. Macbeth wants time to have an end and the murderous act to have no results beyond its immediate purpose. He is willing to “jump the time to come,” to forget the futurity of hell—cutting himself off from any vision of the apocalyptic end when, indeed, human deeds will have their ultimate consequences and timelessness will replace human time. On this side of eternity, “upon this bank and shoal of time,”

he fears the sequels of human history. "I go, and it is done," he says as he enters Duncan's chamber. But nothing is proved less true. Macbeth takes no account of the continuum that links events to one another. He cannot accept that nothing is ever "done," in the sense of "finished," that consequence succeeds consequence, and that he will be compelled to follow his first murder by further murders. Nor can he confront what must happen as a result in the world of men and before the ultimate judgment of God. He would like to ignore the ultimate issue of all human acts. When he cannot say "Amen" to the sleeping grooms' "God bless us," after he has killed Duncan, and does not understand why he cannot, Macbeth has no recognition of the future of divine judgment. At the end of the play he dies like a whipped and baited animal, with no view of the afterlife. He is not, finally, snatched to hell like Marlowe's Faustus while "Christ's blood streams in the firmament."

Yet the image of blood that flows and flows and cannot be stanchd is an image of continuity that cannot be stopped by dismemberment. "What hands are here?" he asks as though he does not realize that, bloody as they are, they are in fact attached to him. He cries, "Ha! they pluck out mine eyes" as though the mutilating deed removes his own his awareness of his self-mutilation, his disconnected hand, his act, itself removing that eye that knows what he has done. And yet, the deed signified by the irremovable blood on his hands is an unalterable and irremovable fact: "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." His deed stains all creation. As Macbeth approaches his second murder, the image of the dismembered bloody hand becomes an attribute of the night he invokes, like a metaphysical force, to obscure a cosmic eye of pity:

Come seeling night
 Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day
 And with thy bloody and invisible hand
 Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
 Which keeps me pale.

He asks night to blindfold the eye that is no longer personal but located in the universe at large, like the dismembered bloody hand he begs to destroy the universal connection or restraint, the “bond” that holds him back from what he is about to do.

But blood persists, the manifestation of the wounded body persists—whether the body is invisible, like Duncan’s, or visible, like Banquo’s or the bodies of Macduff’s murdered family. The play’s obsessive references to blood begin early, with the report of the “bloody man,” the bleeding captain who relates the “bloody execution” of Macdonald by Macbeth and the further slaughter of the Norwegian enemy by Macbeth and Banquo, who seemed as though “they meant to bathe in reeking wounds / Or memorize another Golgotha,” a description that makes reference, after all, to Jesus’ wounds that flow for mankind without stop. Redemption and punishment are associations strangely mingled in the admission Macbeth makes after Banquo’s ghost has appeared at the banquet: “It will have blood....Blood will have blood.” Finally, in the famous opening scene of the last act, Lady Macbeth is still unable to wash clean the bloodied hands with which she had emerged from Duncan’s death-chamber. Shakespeare uses this mystical, half-symbolic, half-supernatural persistence of blood to figure the persistence of consequence, the eternal persistence of what had been thought done when it was done. Lady Macbeth’s collapse is the collapse of a pragmatist who has not anticipated how the deed will stick upon her. The last words of hers we hear are, “what’s done cannot be undone.”

Blood is continuity in another sense, too, for it is the term traditionally used to express the linking of generations, or lineage. And lineage, of course, is what the play is about in its topical political dimension, for one can imagine how usurpation and even assassination, as attempts to deny royal familial succession, haunted the court and the public in 1606. It was only three years after the ascension to the English throne of a king, James I, whose mother Mary’s lineal claim to that throne had brought on her death. Macbeth destroys Macduff’s wife and children, trying to unite heart and hand, denying his own dismemberment, in doing so: “the very firstlings of my heart

shall be / The firstlings of my hand." But he has failed to destroy Malcolm, Duncan's son, and murder will not stop Banquo's blood from flowing in the veins of Fleance whose son will ultimately found the Stuart line. When he watches, in dismay, the visionary procession of future Scottish kings shown him by the witches, he fails, like Herod in the medieval mystery play, to stop the biological flow of time. Macbeth himself has no biological successor. As Macduff notes, "He has no children." It is Macbeth's exclusion from the procreative process that gives further meaning to his wife's "unsex me now," and adds irony to the false pregnancy of that "swelling act of the imperial theme" that promised so much.

Before they have committed any murders, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth feel, paradoxically, a limited lust for the futurity they will not see beyond. When her husband first arrives home from warfare Lady Macbeth expresses contempt for "this ignorant present" beyond which she already feels transported. She says, "I feel the future in the instant." But her impatience is linked to Macbeth's own unawareness of the step-by-step progress of events. And even the jokes of the Porter in the second act bear on such impatience. There is the farmer "who hanged himself on the expectation of plenty." He had not understood the mischances that may occur between expectation and achievement. The Porter's bawdy reference to the effect of drink, which "provokes the desire but takes away the performance," refers to an unwelcome gap between anticipation and event. Unlike the hoarding farmer disappointed by a good harvest, or the man who fails at sex because he has drunk too much, the Macbeths attain their predicted triumph—he is the King he was promised he would be. But in the hubbub that resounds immediately after the murder is discovered and the word "murder," hardly uttered in the text before, reverberates in earnest, Macbeth says,

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
I had lived a blessed time, for from this instant
There's nothing serious in mortality.
All is but toys, renown and grace is dead,

The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of.

This eloquent statement describes a stopping of time he has not foreseen when the "wine of life" is already drawn. It is uttered in a false pose of grief for Duncan, but it may be an aside, sincerely expressing his sudden perception of a diminished future. It is an anticipation of the time to come when all human history will seem a dull succession of disconnected days, the "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" of which he speaks in the most famous literary statement of existential weariness. Macbeth wishes for a recovery of the "blessed time" he might have lived, paradoxically, only if he had died before the murder of Duncan.

In writing *Macbeth*, Shakespeare, like the protagonist of his play, seems indifferent, as a fabricator of dramatic plot, to the concatenation that brings on events as causes of one another through time, each taking its due time. The duration of the action in *Macbeth* can only be a few months. On the day following Duncan's murder, the two royal princes flee, and Macbeth goes to Scone to be crowned. But, almost immediately, we learn that Malcolm is in England and Donalbain in Ireland, and we overhear Banquo say to Macbeth, under his breath, "Thou hast it now," on the very day Banquo himself will be murdered. The day after, Macbeth goes to see the Sisters again, after which he hears of Macduff's flight and decides to destroy his family. Between this event, in the fourth act, and the scene in which Macduff hears about it, there can be only a brief interval. Directly after, the events of the last act that lead to Macbeth's death follow. This "fiery speed," as Bradley called it, is something very different from the account given by Holinshed, from whom we learn that after the death of Duncan the historic Macbeth ruled for ten years. The compulsive mood of the play rushes us forward so swiftly as to make us as indifferent as Macbeth to the step-by-step progress of time.

The playwright does not entirely forget Holinshed when he conveys in the fourth and fifth acts the effects, as it were, of the

prolonged reign described by the chronicler, as though to remind us of a normal way of thinking about time. Macbeth will tell his last loyal follower, Seyton, that his "way of life / is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf," that time of year or life, as Shakespeare says in his seventy-third sonnet, when "yellow leaves, or none, or few do hang / Upon those boughs that shake against the cold." For the first time, also, we have a sense of the larger historical world in those "cruel times" that Ross mentions during his melancholy conversation with Lady Macduff and that Macduff, in exile, describes: Scotland cannot heal herself and must depend on the aid of saintly Edward the Confessor, but there is no certainty that a better time will come. Structurally, however, the play invites this expectation as the fall of Macbeth draws near.

Act 5 opens with Lady Macbeth sleepwalking, reliving the past that cannot be prevented from persisting into the present. Her disease, as Macbeth recognizes, is incurable; it is simply the universal disease of memory, which will not surrender the past. Threatened now by the rebel Scots and their English allies, Macbeth can only observe, "I have supped full with horrors." The queen "should have died hereafter; / There would have been a time for such a word." Instead of desiring the future in the present he wishes that the present might have been postponed. The man who would have liked to make time sustain the moment of success against its inevitable aftermath understands that he is forever cut off by the past from future possibilities he might have desired, "his secret murders sticking on his hands" like the bloody spots that seemed irremovable to Lady Macbeth. He says, "That which should accompany old age, / As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends, / I must not look to have." Life "creeps in its petty pace from day to day / To the last syllable of recorded time."

We do not, generally, pause to ask why Shakespeare has constructed *Macbeth* as he has. Thinking of how life's failure to compose itself as story defies the dramatist, or of how, as an actor, a poor player, he had been reminded of the way human behavior is itself a matter of roles and costumes, he may be offering a rare glimpse into his

own thought at its most skeptical as he makes Macbeth observe that life is only “a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing.” A taking-apart, a cutting-out, an insistent excision of connection, an acceptance of incoherence—these seem signs of the dismemberment I have spoken of expressed in the very structure of the play.

The play we know has, however, sometimes been seen as a mutilated version of an earlier text that contains all those scenes that seem missing, their omission being flaws the genius playwright could not have been responsible for. The Folio text is, after all, our only early version of the play, and the Folio edition was printed after Shakespeare’s death—which favors the view that it is a compressed version of a vanished original. It is one of the shortest of Shakespeare’s plays, little more than half the length of *Hamlet*. The argument goes that an early scene that would have strengthened our impression of Macbeth’s character and intentions was in the original version. It is even argued that scenes in addition to the one in which Duncan’s death is first conceived by the Macbeths must also have been removed—the scene of Macbeth’s coronation (which we are never shown) along with scenes in which Banquo clearly withdraws his allegiance from Macbeth, Macduff parts from his wife, and the so-called “Third Murderer,” who suddenly appears to participate in the murder of Banquo, are explained. But the critic Kenneth Muir was right to insist that the play would suffer from any of these additions. The gaps that elide the realist progression of dramatic plot do not seem mistakes or accidents.

Shakespeare’s admission of incoherence in the play may be a deliberate rebuke to our demand for obvious explanation. Macbeth’s mingling of compulsion and unawareness may even be a projection of Shakespeare’s mingled mood, his desire and reluctance to tell his murder-tale in the conventional way—his skepticism. He removes linkages we think indispensable to sense-making. He huddles the time scale so that we see events as though they were nearly simultaneous. The evolution of effects from causes, so fundamental to our sense of the meaningfulness of life, drops out of a history that

sometimes seems a sequence of disjointed happenings. The ending of *Macbeth* is the bleakest in Shakespeare: Macbeth meets his death with an animal fortitude that is all that remains of his diminished personality.

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