

Religion and Suffering in *Macbeth*

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Abstract: The tragic quality of Macbeth is inseparable from the play's imaginative eliciting of compassion on an explicitly Christian model. A. C. Bradley understood Shakespearean tragedy as inherent in character, and the historicists who reacted to Bradley reaffirmed the importance of religion, but only as historical background. New historicists are more interested in irony than tragedy, and they understand religion as a function of social or psychological relations. Though Macbeth is a murdering tyrant, the play constantly makes us aware of his intense suffering, which he himself identifies with his rejection of grace.

Macbeth is the most explicitly religious of all Shakespeare's tragedies, including those A. C. Bradley called "the famous four." In Bradley's view, religion is almost wholly subsumed by the imagination, which explains Macbeth's character. He is a "man of action" who "has, within certain limits, the imagination of a poet" (352), and Bradley treats this quality first in his analysis of the play, because he maintains that Shakespeare's interest lay "in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action," and "the supernatural" in tragedy "is always placed in the closest relation with character" (14). Religion per se became more important for historically minded critics in the early- to mid-twentieth century who argued—contrary to Bradley—that *Macbeth* is about more than its principal character, because he functions in an imagined world conditioned by the cultural assumptions of its creator, and because a large part of what conditioned that world was religion. These critics, now thought of as "old" historicists, therefore set about the task of understanding the play in light of what they took to

be its historical circumstances, including its explicit attention to religion. Religion as the history of ideas, however, is different from religion as lived by those who experienced it, and the latter is what I would like to try to recover in returning to Bradley's question, "What is the nature of the tragic aspect of life as represented by Shakespeare?" (5). My aim, in other words, is to capture the tragic quality of *Macbeth* by considering the play's attention to religion, as the old historicists did, but for different reasons from theirs.

An unusually fine and still informative example of how "old" historicists improved on Bradley is W. C. Curry's attention to the unusual word "germens," which occurs only in *Lear* and *Macbeth*.¹ Bringing his knowledge of medieval philosophy to the task, Curry pointed out that both passages draw on a neo-Platonic and stoic idea that when God transformed chaos into created matter, God first made "seeds of reason" (*logoi spermatakoï* in Greek, translated as *rationes seminales* in Latin), which mediate between ideal forms in the divine mind and material essences. Adopting this idea to explain how evil disrupts God's plan, Augustine speculated that God permits demons to know the "seeds of reason" and on occasion to speed up natural (i.e., divinely ordained) processes in a destructive manner. This is what Banquo refers to, Curry argued, when he says to the witches, "you can look into the seeds of time / And say which grain will grow and which will not" (*Macbeth*, 1.3.58-59), and it is what Macbeth refers to when he says that the witches, empowered by their "masters," can tumble nature's "germens" (or seeds) together even till destruction sicken. Curry does not say where he thinks Shakespeare may have come across the idea, but both Theobald's editorial commentary and Curry's explanation suggest that the playwright became aware of "germens" in about 1604, and that the idea captivated him enough for him to allude to it in three plays over the course of two or three years.²

Curry's point is just one of many that suggest the persuasiveness of taking religion seriously as religion in *Macbeth*, on the argument that the play was shaped by prevailing assumptions of one sort or another. The best of such arguments came late in the sequence—Paul Jorgensen's book, *Our Naked Frailties*, which sums up the kind of criticism it represents by insisting "impenitently" "that many of Macbeth's striking features ... come from demonic inspiration, from the spirits poured in his ear by his wife, and above all from the terrible torments of sense and mind visited upon him by condign punishment for a deed of supreme evil" (219). Jorgensen facetiously suggested that he would be "damned for my deed, for making

Macbeth something less than a Romantic poet" (219), because Jorgensen was still thinking of Bradley as the principal authority to be resisted, or at least qualified. Little did he know, when he published his book in 1971, how "damned" he would be by developments in Shakespearean criticism shortly thereafter as postmodern critical assumptions, and especially "new" historicist assumptions, would soon make Jorgensen's interpretation indeed seem beyond critical redemption in its assumptions.

One of the effects of new historicism, however, whether intended or not, has been to divert critical attention away from both religion and tragedy. New historicists from Stephen Greenblatt to John Parker have rediscovered a position akin to Bradley's by arguing, in various ways, that early modern religion was really about something other than religion—usually politics or economics, which religious believers suppressed (consciously and unconsciously) by disguising them under religious terms.³ "A pure spirituality *does* inhere in Christianity," Parker writes, "but it is neither pure, nor spirit, because it is art," and art (here he follows Adorno) serves the interests of power (x). Harry Berger's criticism is too original and too eclectic to be identified with new historicism, but his essay on *Macbeth* nonetheless illustrates in its own way the effect I am trying to describe. Berger focuses on "institutional (social and political) tendencies expressed in the action of the play and the behavior of its characters" because he understands Shakespeare to be "dramatizing failures or evasions of responsibility correlated with problematic structural tendencies that *seem* benign because it is in the interest of self-deceiving characters to view them that way" (71-72). Berger's principal example is Duncan, to whom Berger devotes more attention than Macbeth (in sharp contrast to Bradley), because Duncan illustrates that "there is something rotten in Scotland—that something intrinsic to the structure of Scottish society, something deeper than the melodramatic wickedness of one or two individuals, generates these tendencies toward instability, conflict, sedition, and murder" (74). In effect, Berger's reading of *Macbeth* makes it a history play—an exploration of how powerful men compete ambiguously and, for the most part, fatuously to acquire and maintain their power. For Berger, self-deception is incidentally Macbeth's ("What's the boy Malcolm? / Was he not born of woman?" [5.3.3-4]) because everyone in the play is equally self-blinded. New historicist readings are compelling if one is prepared to surrender *Macbeth* as tragedy in favor of corrosive irony.

In proposing something different from historicism, either old or

new, let me suggest that tragedy is as important as Bradley thought it was, and that religion is central to Macbeth's tragedy. I am not proposing a tragedy of character, as Bradley did, nor am I suggesting that the play reveals itself definitively in light of ideas that were prevalent in the early seventeenth century. *Macbeth*, I would argue, has important features in common with other Shakespearean tragedies where religion is concerned. Specifically, I would urge that *Romeo and Juliet* and Bradley's "famous four" share an implied view of human destiny with Shakespearean comedy, but that the two kinds of play imagine that destiny in different phases, as it were.⁴ Whereas comedy emphasizes growing self-awareness, resolution, reconciliation, and renewal, with wedding as its typical culminating symbol, tragedy emphasizes misunderstanding, treachery, loss, disastrous accident, and failure, with death as its culminating symbol. The difference may owe something to Aristotle, and Bradley also recognizes it in his observation that Shakespearean tragedy is "essentially a tale of suffering and calamity conducting to death" (7). Beyond an essentialist formalism, I want to suggest that both the comic and tragic emphases imagine what actually happens in the continuum of human experience and elicit responses appropriate to what they ask us to imagine.⁵ Both comic and tragic experiences, as Shakespeare imagines them, occur in light of the Last Things, thus emphasizing the fragility of goodness, and both alike happen to the good and the evil.⁶ Indeed, in Shakespearean tragedy, the tragic effect is usually proportionate to the goodness of those who suffer, and the point is not what they do—or fail to do—to bring on their suffering, but the sheer enigma of suffering itself.⁷

This is an effect that Shakespeare arguably created first in *Romeo and Juliet*, where both of the principals resort at one time or another to pointed hyperbole in locating their story in the continuum of time that reaches from the Creation to the Last Judgment. Romeo declares that the sun has never looked on anyone as beautiful as Rosaline, "since first the world begun" (1.2.95), and Juliet exclaims that the end of the world has come when she infers (half mistakenly, as a result of the Nurse's incoherent narrative style) that Tybalt and Romeo have killed each other: "Then, dreadful trumpet, sound the general doom! / For who is living, if these two be gone?" (3.2.67-68). Her situation is not apocalyptic, as she fears, but the allusion helps to identify how this tragedy relates to the divine comedy. In the world this play imagines, the loss of Romeo and Juliet has an apocalyptic impact, as if it were indeed the end of all things. "So quick bright things come

to confusion," as Lysander says in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1.1.149; compare *Romeo* 2.2.118-20). But in Shakespearean tragedy, the end of the play is no more the end of the world than it is in Shakespearean comedy. The meaning of the loss we experience imaginatively remains hidden, in contrast to the revelation of all things on the day of doom, just as the resolution that concludes comedy is not the perfection of a new heaven and earth, but merely a sign of continuing time. Yet part of the reason that *Romeo and Juliet* leaves such a strong sense of loss is that the deficit emerges from enormous promise—the young lovers' demonstrated capacity for change, their ebullient hope, the marriage of true hearts, and the potential for fruitful reconciliation between the feuding families (twice affirmed by the sage friar who marries them). Their tragedy consists not only in the loss but also in the promise, whose lack of fulfillment is made more powerful by the promise itself.

The response to *Romeo and Juliet* that I am trying to identify may be related to Aristotle's notion of pity, though Shakespeare did not know Aristotle's *Poetics*, and pity is not the effect of the Senecan tragedy Shakespeare knew best but rather admiration for heroic endurance.⁸ Empathy is one way to identify the response that *Romeo* elicits, though empathy evokes an innovative notion of sentiment that arose for the first time in the nineteenth century and that Elizabethans would struggle to recognize, if they could recognize it at all.⁹ All of Shakespeare's contemporaries, however, no matter what their confessional identity, would have identified the response as compassion and would have acknowledged its ultimate source in charity. "For as a man feeleth God in himself, so is he to his neighbor," writes William Tyndale, in a succinct statement of how love of neighbor depends on charity, the love of God, and Tyndale's formulation would have been no less acceptable to Catholics than to Protestants.¹⁰ When Miranda exclaims that she has suffered with those that she saw suffer—"O, the cry did knock against my very heart"—Prospero comments that the shipwreck "touched / The very virtue of compassion in thee" (*The Tempest*, 1.2.5-8, 26-27). Though the age was highly judgmental, everyone nonetheless knew that the love that was the height of Christian virtue required seeing the other as oneself and the other's situation as one's own—however difficult that might be, and however seldom anyone succeeded in doing it. *Romeo and Juliet* does not elicit judgment on the young lovers, as Brooke's *Romeus and Juliet* does; it elicits compassion for them by making their experience our own.¹¹

In *Macbeth*, the suffering is different, because it is so unquestionably

deserved, and because Macbeth insists more strongly than anyone else on his deserving it, so its meaning seems transparent—fully revelatory, truly apocalyptic, and unavoidably requiring judgment. This is in fact the burden of Paul Jorgensen's argument: it is what he means by "condign punishment," a point about the play that Bradley had already observed in his comment that "to gain a crown [Macbeth] would jump the life to come, and finds that the crown has brought him all the horrors of that life" (28). "Finds" is even too strong a description of what happens, because Macbeth knows before he murders Duncan what will necessarily ensue; it is not something he discovers, as if by experiment, as a consequence of the deed. The principal reason for Macbeth's meditative hesitation before the murder is that

We still have judgment here, that we but teach
 Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
 To plague th' inventor. This evenhanded justice
 Commends th' ingreience of our poisoned chalice
 To our own lips. (1.7.7-12)

More clearly than any other tragic hero Shakespeare created, Macbeth gets what he knows he deserves, and he knows he has it coming before he commits the deed that inevitably produces his suffering.

Recognizing the fact of condign punishment in *Macbeth*, however, still fails to plumb the depths of Macbeth's suffering that the play asks us to enter into—an irresistible imaginative compassion that Shakespeare emphasizes by having Malcolm contradict it in his closing summary. As he proclaims a new political order after Macbeth's destruction, Malcolm welcomes home the exiles who have been driven abroad by "this dead butcher and his fiendlike queen— / Who, as 'tis thought, by self and violent hands / Took off her life" (5.8.70-72). No matter how sympathetic one may be to Malcolm as a victim of Macbeth's tyranny, it is impossible not to recoil at these lines, because they so inadequately describe the experience we have had as witnesses to what has happened to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.¹² Why Shakespeare would elicit compassion for the perpetrators of murder and mayhem is one of the play's central questions, as Bradley noticed in his trenchant rhetorical question about good things in Macbeth's character: "Do they not make you, for all your horror, admire Macbeth, sympathise with his agony, pity him, and see in him the waste of forces on which you place a spiritual value?"¹³ Bradley's sense of Macbeth's goodness, however, was tendentious—designed to support Bradley's Romantic reading of a

character who is heroic because of “his imagination, his determination, and his conscience” (*Oxford* 89).

I would argue that the sympathy Macbeth elicits is more important as a mysterious fact about the play than as a perspicuous clue to its meaning. In one sense, Macbeth is indeed a dead butcher who deserves what he gets, but the play prevents us from experiencing him that way, because Macbeth is always so candid and so compelling in his unceasing private revelation of the pain he is enduring. To his credit, Malcolm seems prepared to have his assumption about Lady Macbeth’s violent suicide corrected—“who *as ’tis thought* ... took off her life,” he says—but his response is nonetheless very far from the deeply troubling reality of the woman we see walking in her afflicted sleep, especially given the responses of those attending her:

DOCTOR: What a sigh is there! The heart is sorely charged.

GENTLEWOMAN: I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body.

DOCTOR: Well, well, well. (5.1.52-56)

The doctor says of Lady Macbeth, “More needs she the divine than the physician” (5.1.74), making clear that a distinction between the physical and the spiritual not only exists but also exists in this play. “However appalling she may be,” Bradley comments, “she is sublime” (*Shakespearean* 368), and Shakespeare uses his enormous rhetorical resources to make her that way. As for Macbeth’s response to Lady Macbeth’s death, it elicits some of the play’s most famous lines, equally revelatory and opaque at the same time:

She should have died hereafter;
 There would have been a time for such a word.
 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. (5.5.17-23)

The echo of “time” and “tomorrow” establishes what Macbeth knew before the murder—that he would suffer “here, upon this bank and shoal of time” (1.7.6), if he committed it. “Dusty death” cannot be worse than what he is now experiencing, which is a living death, a meaningless life, irredeemably restless and hopeless. No one has explained all of this better than Jorgensen, in his explication of the language of futility and fruitless labor that haunts

this play (140-56). Still, Jorgensen's claim "that Macbeth's homicidal fear is a hopeless case of sin compulsively plucking on sin" (207) seems wide of the mark in our actual experience of the play. Jorgensen alludes in this summary to *Richard III*, as he acknowledges, but the contrast is as illuminating as the comparison, because Shakespeare never compels us to recognize and feel the suffering of Richard in the way he does that of Macbeth, and the mystery is how we can feel so deeply the affliction of a man who is a murderer. A closer parallel than Richard III is Claudius, in the brief moments of his fleeting remorse. Multiply those moments of remorse many times over, make them the central consciousness of the play, spread them out from beginning to end, invest them with the haunting rhetoric that is characteristic of Macbeth, and you have something closer to *Macbeth*. Even more than Othello, Macbeth thinks intensely about his salvation—"mine eternal jewel," as he calls it, "given to the common enemy of man" in his assassination of Duncan (3.1.69-70). Gratuitously murdering a king who had just honored him, Macbeth destroys not only his lord but also his guest and his kinsman (1.7.12-14), thus committing, as several critics have pointed out, the three sins of Dante's *Caïna*.¹⁴ For just one of those sins (betraying one's lord), Dante imagines Brutus, Cassius, and Judas being gnawed forever in the tripartite mouth of Satan. Macbeth's hell is this-worldly, as always for Shakespeare's tragic heroes, but his despair derives from a specifically Christian sense of what he does to himself, as Jorgensen has shown, and the background of grace is what makes the suffering of his "deep damnation" (1.7.20) so powerful. This is not the story of a cynical and reductive criminal mind but of an exceptionally conscientious man, as we know from what he reveals of his own consciousness—a man who is fully aware of his alternatives and of what he is doing to himself by rejecting them, yet he rejects them anyway and is afflicted accordingly, enduring constant pain because of what is happening to him but never being surprised by it (Stoll).

Still, the emphasis is on his suffering, not on a triumphalist, vindictive, or omniscient sense of revelatory judgment—and this in spite of the fact that Macbeth's absolute belief in his punishment as revealing and inevitable, because it is inherent in the deed, prevents any distance from it on our part. His hallucinations, lack of sleep, constant fear, self-deceived hope in the equivocal oracle, even his famously expressed despair (5.3.19-28, 5.5.17-28), all compel us to see what he is doing to himself and how painful the process is to him. Since he is not a disembodied shade, like the souls Dante

meets in hell, it is impossible to remove ourselves through allegory, symbol, or eschatological insight from what is happening to him. His degradation is palpable, and what he degrades is always so close to the surface of his words and actions that it never ceases to be part of them and therefore of him. Repeatedly his insight and eloquence continue in full force after the murder: "I could not say Amen" (2.2.32), "I had most need of blessing" (2.2.36), "Sleep no more" (2.2.40), "I am afraid to think what I have done" (2.2.55), "Had I but died an hour before this chance" (2.3.93), "I am sick at heart" (5.3.19), "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" (5.5.19).¹⁵ He says these things only to himself, though Shakespeare lets us overhear him, or to his wife, who does not understand him. The face he shows the world is harsh, cruel, and utterly self-serving, revealing nothing of the torment he suffers privately, yet Shakespeare wrote the play in such a way that Macbeth reveals his suffering to us, so we know more than anyone else, as so often in Shakespeare's plays, yet our knowledge (our relative omniscience where Macbeth is concerned) serves simply to deepen the play's mystery.

The ultimate destiny of Macbeth's soul is so certain to himself that it hardly leaves room for doubt, yet the boundaries of grace were variously defined in sixteenth-century eschatology, and by some theological standards Macbeth's very regret that he cannot regret would have been salvific. Berndt Hamm recounts an early sixteenth-century German story about Bernard of Clairvaux to precisely this effect: when Bernard asked a reprobate nobleman, "Do you not feel grief that you cannot feel grief for such a sin?" the nobleman replied, "To be sure it grieves me that I feel no grief."¹⁶ "Then Bernard instructed the priest to give him absolution and administer the sacrament "because he did as much as he could do" ("*quia fecit quod in se fuit*"). The point is not that the German story applies to *Macbeth* but that it offers a contemporary analogue to the play's profound "cultivation of compassionate suffering (*compassio*)" (Hamm 90), even though the play resists reflection on the eschatological outcome beyond Macbeth's apparent certainty about it. "He has lost not only fear but any kind of hope, purpose, or feeling," remarks Jorgensen (209), though Macbeth's tortured self-consciousness suggests quite otherwise.

An unexpected moment of self-revelation in Macbeth's language is Shakespeare's sole use of the unusual verb "gospelled," in the harsh rhetorical questions that Macbeth puts to the men he hires to murder Banquo:

Do you find
Your patience so predominant in your nature

That you can let this go? Are you so gospeled
 To pray for this good man and for his issue,
 Whose heavy hand hath bowed you to the grave
 And beggared yours forever? (3.1.87-92)

The speech is masterful in its appeal to the men's sense of injustice. They are not professional assassins; Macbeth has found individuals whom Banquo has oppressed—peasant tenants, presumably—and he plays on their indignation to stiffen their resolve in what he is asking them to do (Feur). "Gospeled" alludes to their exposure to Christian teaching—that one should return good for evil, turn the other cheek, forgive as one hopes to be forgiven, love one's neighbor as oneself.¹⁷ Are they, Macbeth demands sardonically, so steeped in Christian ethics that they will return good for evil where Banquo is concerned, even though he participates in a social system that has oppressed and impoverished them and their children—"beggared yours forever"? "We are men, my liege," one of them answers (3.1.92), admitting the force of Macbeth's appeal in a line that presumably means "We are not inhumanly insensible to what Banquo has done to us."

What is striking about this appeal is that it assumes a common affirmation of extraordinary goodness, shared by Macbeth with his interlocutors, though he is a murderer corrupting others to murder. He implicitly affirms that patience is an eschatological virtue, a sign of the kingdom established by Christ, which will be perfectly revealed at the Second Coming.¹⁸ This is clear in his linking patience so closely to "gospeled" in his next sentence: patience and charity (the heart of the gospel) are both gifts of grace, signs of divine surprise in human life, evidence of the Holy Ghost. Yet Macbeth affirms all this only in trying to deny it, and his affirmation is therefore evidence of his intense mental pain. His words are haunted by his own deeds—as he foresaw they would be before the murder. Where was patience when he killed Duncan? Why did he reverse the gospel admonition to return good for evil by returning evil for good? He refers to Banquo as "this good man" sarcastically, because he wants to reduce Banquo rhetorically to the injustices he has practiced, yet Banquo refused the same temptation to which Macbeth yielded (2.1.6-29), and the phrase "this good man" has a very different meaning for Macbeth in relation to the man he himself murdered, so his own phrase condemns him—as he somehow knows and even half acknowledges in the equivocation of his language. Such knowledge and such acknowledgment are at the heart of his suffering.¹⁹

"We are men, my liege" elicits a meditation by Macbeth on hierarchy—

“the valued file”—that ranks men above dogs and some men above others (3.1.93-109). The point of this meditation, he says to his fellow murderers, is that “if you have a station in the file / Not i’ the worst rank of manhood,” then “I will put that business in your bosoms / Whose execution takes your enemy off” (103-06). But Macbeth cannot escape, in this euphemistic meditation, close ironic echoes of his own thoughts before the murder. Then, he had resisted his wife’s temptation by insisting that “I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares to more is none” (1.7.47-48). Then, he had asserted, “We will proceed no further in *this business*” (1.7.32). Then, he had recognized “The deep damnation of his [Duncan’s] *taking-off*” (1.7.20). Perhaps the ultimate searing irony of Macbeth’s own rejected but still vividly remembered goodness is his self-deceived confidence that murdering Banquo will create an apocalyptic end of his suffering—an absolute revelation of meaning in his deed: “Who wear our health but sickly in his life, / Which in his death were perfect” (3.1.108-09). Characters in Shakespearean comedy (Isabella, for example) sometimes imagine that a particular beneficent outcome will amount to “most prosperous perfection” (*Measure for Measure*, 3.1.262-63); Macbeth is the only character who hopes for perfection in continuing evil.²⁰

Macbeth’s suffering would seem to be the least enigmatic of all the suffering in the tragedies, because he so clearly brings it on himself. No accident of chance waylays him; no demonically cunning enemy deceives him (the weird sisters are no Iago); no loved one betrays him; everything that happens to him happens because of a terrible choice he makes and continues to make, with consequences that he cannot avoid, no matter how hard he tries: “They have tied me to a stake. I cannot fly, / But bearlike I must fight the course” (5.7.1-2). Yet Macbeth’s tragedy resists superior moral judgment about his failure, as the contrast between his story and Malcolm’s closing speech makes clear. This is the principal difficulty with trying to apply Aristotle’s theory of *hamartia* to Shakespearean tragedy: besides the fact that Shakespeare did not know the *Poetics*, the theory of a “tragic flaw” misses the point. These are indeed flawed heroes, but simply to find their flaw (only one?) and to explain what happens to them in light of it is to join the grouchy priest who buries Ophelia, confident that we know what the sufferer deserves, even after death, and anxious to cast the shards, flints, and pebbles of our judgment on him.²¹

What moves us is the sheer pain of Macbeth’s suffering—for whatever reason—not gratification that he suffers as he deserves, and the play compels

us to apprehend the depth of his suffering by recognizing the grace that he effaces as he turns away irrevocably from the great animating principle of redemptive hope.²²

Religion in *Macbeth* includes witches, prophecy, and arcane details of demonology—many of them explicated by old historicists and all fascinating to the reigning monarch, as new historicists have compellingly recognized. But religion includes much more than those things, in that it goes to the heart of the tragedy itself. This is the story of a man who condemns himself, but since no one is more insightful or eloquent about what he is doing to himself, he is also the most mysteriously admirable character in the play and the one with whom we are most irresistibly compelled to identify. His damnation is inseparable not only from the possibility of his salvation, whose loss he recognizes and profoundly regrets (“mine eternal jewel / Given to the common enemy of mankind” [3.1.69-70]), but also from the expectation of ordinary mundane happiness—“As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends” (5.3.25)—that he gives up for “Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath / Which the poor heart would fain deny and dare not” (5.3.27-28). I take it “the poor heart” belongs not to Macbeth but to someone (anyone) who Macbeth imagines to be offering feigned service out of fear. Even at this late stage of his degradation—after the murder of Lady Macduff and her children, after the death of his wife, after the belated recognition that he deceived himself in believing the equivocating fiend—Macbeth is still capable of thinking pitifully, indeed almost compassionately, about someone who serves him equivocally, because Macbeth has produced a world in which equivocation is the rule. The thought is apparently not redemptive, but it is far from cold-bloodedly murderous. Macbeth is no butcher, though he is guilty of cold-blooded murder; he is a man who continues to suffer mysteriously from his own extraordinary awareness of goodness and of what he is doing to destroy it in himself and in the world around him. That is his tragedy.

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NOTES

¹Curry 29-49. Lear invokes a thunderstorm to “Crack nature’s moulds, all germens spill at once / That makes ingrateful man” (3.2.8-9). Macbeth commands the witches to answer his demand, even if they cause a storm that makes “the treasure / Of nature’s germens tumble all together, / Even till destruction sicken” (4.1.58-60).

Curry does not address the question of how Shakespeare's editors have treated this unusual word, or why Shakespeare might have used "germains" instead of "semens," but *germains* in Folio *Macbeth* and *Lear* seems to have been first recognized by Theobald as a technical reference to "seeds of matter." He printed the word as "germins" (in recognition of the Latin plural *germina*), and cross-referenced Florizel's lines in *The Winter's Tale* (4.4.481-82), where the idea again appears, though not the word "germains" itself: "Let nature crush the sides o' th' earth together / And mar the seeds within." Subsequent editors emended Theobald's "germins" to "germens," which has become standard. Other influential "old historicist" critics of *Macbeth* include Campbell, Farnham, Muir, and West.

²Bradley is certainly right that "*Macbeth* was not written for students of metaphysics or theology, but for people at large" (346), but Shakespeare's fascination with an unusually arcane idea is evident from his repeated allusion to it.

³The germ of Parker's idea appears in Greenblatt's comments on Spenser and Marlowe in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*: "What if Arthur and Tamburlaine are not separate and opposed? What if they are two faces of the same thing, embodiments of the identical power?" (224).

⁴Frye generalizes these emphases as mythic archetypes, referring to them as spring and winter, respectively (*Anatomy* 35-52). For Shakespeare in particular, see Frye, *Fools* and *Natural*. Frye is most helpful in seeing broad patterns and how Shakespeare's plays fit into them; he is less helpful in understanding Shakespeare in a particular time and place, how he wrote in light of it, and how his writing changed over the course of his career.

⁵Here I see comedy differently from Susan Snyder, who argues that "comedy is less at home with 'real experience' ... than is tragedy," because comedy focuses on "evitability" rather than its opposite (41). Death is certainly more inevitable than anything else in human life, but hope, forgiveness, and reconciliation are no less real in human experience than death, though they are indeed more evitable.

⁶"The fragility of goodness" is Martha Nussbaum's phrase, used by her to title a book about Greek tragedy. I am using the phrase not to suggest a link between Greek and Shakespearean tragedy, but to evoke the vision of human destiny that is enacted in both Shakespearean comedy and tragedy. "Last Things" is a phrase used commonly in medieval and early modern religion to refer to eschatological reality (what happens after this life); specifically, the Last Things are death, heaven, hell, and the last judgment.

⁷John Parker's demystification of the mystery in suffering (68-69) is a good example of construing religion as something else—in this case, power relations. The ultimate demystification is positivism, which aims at the transparent explanation of everything.

⁸Judging from what Shakespeare and others say about "the function of tragedy," Ekbert Faas cites Shakespeare's ignorance (or ignoring) of Aristotle's formulation and concludes that "The main function of tragedy ... is to overwhelm with amazement"

(44-47). This conclusion is consistent with what I am suggesting about the impact of suffering in Shakespearean tragedy.

⁹“Empathy” is an early twentieth-century neologism, introduced to translate the German *Einfühlung* in early psychology (*OED*)—a word that was ultimately a product of eighteenth-century sentiment. Deriving an English word from Greek in this case parallels James Strachey’s derivation of English neologisms from Greek in translating Freud—“psyche,” for example, where Freud used *die Seele*.

¹⁰Tyndale 1:113. I am grateful to Debora Shuger for this reference.

¹¹Though I would argue that this response originates in Christian ethics, it flatly contradicts every strain of Christian teaching about suicide available to Shakespeare, since all Christians in his day agreed that suicide was damnable (R. M. Frye 24-31). Shakespeare’s eliciting of compassion for suicidal lovers and even for a murderer (in *Macbeth*) is unusual, but the acknowledgment of grace in extreme circumstances had precedent in the sixteenth century, as I point out below.

¹²Berger describes Malcolm’s phrase as a “mental and rhetorical act of butchery” (84), and I agree. In the same passage, Berger goes on to compare Malcolm’s “morality-play antithesis” to Macduff’s praise of Duncan as a “most sainted King” (4.3.110): “To sublime a man to a saint is not much better, from a certain standpoint, than reducing him to a monster.” Shakespeare’s unabashed description of Edward the Confessor as a sainted king in *Macbeth* (4.3.142-60) seems problematic for Berger’s analysis, and I think Jorgensen is more helpful on this point (195-98).

¹³*Oxford* 88. Bradley does not address this question in *Shakespearean Tragedy*.

¹⁴Jorgensen 56; acknowledging others who had earlier noted the coincidence of Dante’s Caina and Macbeth’s relationship to Duncan.

¹⁵For cogent reflections on Macbeth’s inability to pray in particular, see Miola.

¹⁶Hamm 96. I am grateful to Bob Bast for bringing this point to my attention.

¹⁷Shaheen (633) notes a contrast between Macbeth’s rhetorical question to the hired murderers and the blessing that the anonymous Old Man invokes on Ross: “God’s benison go with you, and with those / That would make good of bad, and friends of foes!” (2.4.40-41).

¹⁸This is how Paul interprets patience, in his letter to the Romans: “Neither do we so [rejoice under the hope of the glory of God] only, but also we rejoice in tribulations, knowing that tribulation bringeth forth patience, And patience experience, and experience hope, And hope maketh not ashamed, because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost, which is given unto us” (Rom. 5:3-5, Geneva translation). This is not the stoic patience of heroic endurance but the patience that Herbert’s speaker learns in “Love (III)” and that Milton acknowledges in Sonnet 19, “When I Consider How My Light Is Spent.”

¹⁹Michael David Fox argues that response to the Macbeths derives from Shakespeare’s “nonrepresentational” theater, which makes the actor evident behind the act, because “bodied presence heightens emotional connectedness” (209). Surely, however, the play’s distinctive language contributes to the effect as well, or the effect

would be equal in every nonrepresentational play that stages suffering, including *Cambises* and *Titus Andronicus*.

²⁰Bradley identified Macbeth's ironic echoes of himself with the theme of equivocation that runs throughout the play, seeing it as a "Sophoclean irony" that is beyond the speakers (*Shakespearean* 339). I would argue, on the contrary, that Macbeth is both aware and unaware of his duplicitous language, because it expresses the self-deception that makes him prey to (and effectively identified with) demonic equivocation. The appropriate reference is not, therefore, Sophocles but something much closer to home for Shakespeare—the moral vision of Vice comedy, where "th' equivocation of the fiend" would have been most familiar to him. See Spivack 161-75 and Cox 72-76.

²¹*Hamlet*, 6.1.226-38. Aside from a tendency to allegorize the plays, the Danish priest's summary judgmentalism is the principal difficulty with Battenhouse's argument.

²²I would argue that this is Macbeth's way of avoiding love—the action that Stanley Cavell argues is central to *King Lear*. Theologically the suffering of Macbeth is identical to the suffering of Milton's Satan, but the difference is that Shakespeare imagines Macbeth in his living humanity, "here, upon this bank and shoal of time," rather than eschatologically, as Milton imagines Satan (and Dante imagines the shades of hell).

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