The Subversive Metaphysics of *Macbeth*

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THE PERSISTENCE OF THE providential reading of *Macbeth* may be the best evidence for the continuing influence of A. C. Bradley on Shakespeare studies. Based on the introductions to *Macbeth* in standard classroom editions,[1] Bradley's blend of metaphysical idealism and psychological realism which presents *Macbeth* as a drama about the purgation of the evil embodied in the figure of a murderer and the consequent restoration of a political and providential order is still the most common reading of the play presented to American students. This echoing of a Bradleyan line in *Macbeth* criticism would seem to have bypassed Harry Levin's attack, thirty years ago, on Bradley's approach to the tragedies. At that time, Levin characterized Bradley's metaphysical framework as an amalgam of Hegel and Aristotle,[2] in which Bradley's usual description of a Shakespearean tragedy as a process leading from the temporary disruption of cosmic order to its restoration displaced the idea of catharsis from an account of the experience of a playgoer to a description of the world of the play. In this interpretation of Aristotle, the *Poetics* has become, as Stephen Booth puts it, "a sign of the covenant between literature and the ultimate values of the universe."[2]

Interpretations of *Macbeth* which have departed from Bradleyan beliefs about the "ultimate values of the universe" have nonetheless generally remained faithful to Bradley's emphasis on character and action as the primary vehicles of the conceptual framework of the play. Bernard McElroy and E. A. J. Honigmann focus on the character of Macbeth and stress his capacity for conscience and his consequent suffering; Wilbur Sanders and Harry Berger, Jr. go past the level of individual characters to describe Duncan's Scotland as a troubled society; and Karl F. Zender seems to offer a challenge to

at least the more extreme views that *Macbeth* offers "an optimistic view of life" when he contends that Young Siward's death represents a shift from an ameliorative to a pessimistic conception of the significance of human struggle."[4] But Zender reinscribes Young Siward's death within a Bradleyan universe when he frames it thus: "His death reminds us, in the midst of the triumph of natural and providential order, of its limitations" (425). This is consistent with Bradley's principle that tragedy depends upon a sense of "waste" within the structure of a cosmic order.[5] Berger's and Sanders' critiques of Scottish society as depicted in *Macbeth* are not really, despite Berger's use of the word "structuralist"; Berger has done more than what he calls "smok[ing] the edges of this structuralist approach with an existentialist emphasis" when he describes *Macbeth* as expressing the "realistic view that history is largely the work and burden of man" (Berger 3), a conclusion that is far more traditionally humanist than it is structuralist.

There is not much about the witches in character and action criticism which seeks to assess the depth of Macbeth's character or his responsibility for his fate. A more truly structuralist analysis of the play that concentrates on the image of the witches in *Macbeth* is Peter Stallybrass's "*Macbeth* and Witchcraft," in which Stallybrass argues, I think justifiably, that the Weird Sisters of *Macbeth* embody all that stands in opposition to the political order not only of medieval Scotland but of Jacobean England. I agree entirely with Stallybrass that a reader should see as a "manoeuvre of power"[6] the creation of a symbolic order which demonizes witches in order to justify a patriarchal polis, but I do not agree with Stallybrass that to see this is to disagree with Shakespeare. Stallybrass seems to believe that Shakespeare actually wrote the play that Bradley et al. describe, but that a modern reader should dissent from Shakespeare's conservatism. I would argue that in *Macbeth* Shakespeare wrote a play that is profoundly subversive of the Christian metaphysics that structured the symbolic order of his society. The subversion is in the poetry of *Macbeth*, and the pattern, as Paul de Man said of the structural intentionality of Derrida's reading of Rousseau, is too interesting not to be deliberate.[7]

A shift from critical analysis of character and action to a concentration on the language of the play can bring about a markedly different view of the determining forces of *Macbeth*. At one level, the problem is put very well by L. C. Knights, who, although he advocated a providential reading of the play, showed exactly what

has to be ignored to come to that conclusion when he said of the "sound and fury" speech that "the poetry is so fine that we are almost bullied into accepting an essential ambiguity in the final statement of the play."[8] It seems an odd conception of poetic value to believe that "fine poetry" is to be resisted as one would a bully. But poetic language does not only figure as rhetorical persuasiveness in *Macbeth;* a poststructuralist conception of metaphor as the constitutive principle of metaphysics rather than as an ornament to meaning can demonstrate the close-knit integrity of the language of *Macbeth,* and can open up a reading of the play that goes beyond the quasi-naturalism of the Bradleyan universe of tragedy which, as Levin so succinctly put it, "presupposed that man is both the master of his fate and an object of supervision on the part of the gods, to a much greater extent than either science or theodicy would encourage us to believe."[9] The deconstruction of this providential view of *Macbeth*'s metaphysics has taken several forms in recent studies of the play. D. H. Fawkner, while avowing a Derridean approach to *Macbeth,* has simply flipped the metaphysical coin and discovered that the witches create a "hyperontological zone" in which "vanishing" is "structurally 'stronger' than presence"; Stephen Booth and Marjorie Garber have found reasons to celebrate the play's undecidability; and Malcolm Evans has adopted the Derridean principle of supplementarity to insist that "if 'nothing' is identifiable with sin and chaos, it is also the ground of all creation."[10] But I would argue that all of these readings underestimate the centrality of the weird sisters to *Macbeth.* What the witches represent is precisely the opposite of undecidability; they are more than a simple principle of absence, and are even more than a supplement to the Creator of the Christian tradition. When Booth's especially close reading of the effects of iteration and wordplay in *Macbeth* leads him to the conclusion that "cause and effect do not work in *Macbeth,*"[11] he puts his finger on the metaphysic embodied by the weird sisters. If Stallybrass's observation that the weird sisters represent a challenge to the entire symbolic order of a traditional Western political system is pursued, then the stakes of Booth's observation become clear: the action of *Macbeth* is determined either by the Christian God who guarantees a traditional symbolic order and the Bradleyan/Aristotelian covenant, or by the weird sisters who replace that Creator in the position of omniscience and represent an acausal determinism.

Macbeth clearly has much to say about Christian metaphysics,

and specifically with the central paradox of a metaphysic which asserts both the omniscience of a divinity possessed of a simultaneous vision of all eternity and the free will of mortal beings who exist within that vision. In the economy of *Macbeth*'s metaphysical speculations, the "sound and fury" speech subverts both halves of that Christian paradox, and comes to be far more than an eloquent expression of Macbeth's despair. The imagery of the speech draws together many of the themes of the play's own subversive metaphysics, and the speech itself functions as an anagnorisis in which Macbeth crystallizes the terms of the conditions he addresses as "fate" or "time" in his asides and soliloquies throughout the play. A trope that anchors the metaphysics of the speech and of the play occurs in Macbeth's imagining of days stretching to "the last syllable of recorded time." The notion that time should end on a "syllable" supplants the Christian notion of the Last Judgment, as this "syllable" recalls, and provides a tightly logical completion to, the opening of the Gospel according to John which says that "In the beginning was the Worde."[12] This wordplay about language completes a tropism which replaces the metaphysical governance of the word *(logos)* that gives order and purpose to the whole of creation with the prophecies of the witches, the "weyard sisters" who represent the blind determinism of Wyrd.

The subversive pun by which Wyrd supplants Worde anchors a metaphysics of linguistic determinacy that, in *Macbeth*, is a metaphysic devoid of allegorical reach—it "signifies nothing." The seemingly curious word choices which occur in the "sound and fury" speech are precise expressions of Macbeth's realization of the structure of this closed and meaningless determinism. When he responds to the news of Lady Macbeth's death by saying, "There would have been a time for such a word" (5.5.18),[13] "word" does not mean only "message," and one underestimates the degree of Macbeth's fatalism if the line is paraphrased to mean that there would have been a better time for such news.[14] There is an old English proverb about the operation of Wyrd which says "After word comes weird"—as the OED glosses it, "The mention of a thing is followed by its occurrence."[15] When Macbeth refers to his wife's death as a "word" he collapses the distinction between "word" and "weird," the saying of a thing and the thing itself. The irony here is that Macbeth has, for most of the play, attempted to live under the naturalistic assumption that he could race against time. Eliminating the space between imagining and doing seemed to him the

necessary means of his own success; he had sought to "trammel up" consequences and overtake time by making the "firstlings of [his] heart . . . The firstlings of [his] hand" (4.1.147–48). As he contemplates attacking Macduff's castle he says "be it thought and done" (149), but he echoes himself in a way that subverts his attempt to impose his own form of closure on history. His promise that "This deed I'll do" (154) unintentionally parodies his earlier assertion that "I have done the deed" (2.2.14), where the emphatic past participle expressed the wish that the murder of Duncan "Might be the be-all and the end-all—here" (1.7.5). When "I have done the deed" turns into "This deed I'll do," the iteration suggests an endlessly reopening chain of consequence.

In the "sound and fury" speech, time jeopardizes Macbeth not in its naturalistic speed but in its metaphysical scope; it "creeps in this petty pace," but comes relentlessly to the be-alls and end-alls of death and last syllable which end life and history. As Macbeth no longer sees any possibility of outracing time, the depth of his fatalism can be measured in the contrast between the flatness of the lines, "She should have died hereafter: / There would have been a time for such a word," and the eagerness which had informed his plans and desires to bring "Strange things . . . in head . . . to hand, / Which must be acted, ere they may be scann'd" (3.4.138–39), and "To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done . . . This deed I'll do, before the purpose cool" (4.1.149–54). By the time of the "sound and fury" speech, Macbeth is not inclined to think that there would have been a better time for Lady Macbeth to have died; he says, rather, that it doesn't really matter when an inevitability happens to occur. His collapse of "tomorrows" into "yesterdays" grounds his fatalism in a denial of the reality of "time" itself as it is seen within a mortal perspective, and his detachment depends upon his approximation to a perspective which is superior to temporality and is inhabited, in *Macbeth*, by the "weyard sisters." Lady Macbeth had defined the power of this perspective early in the play when she said that Macbeth's letters had transported her "beyond / This ignorant present" (1.5.56–57) until she felt "The future in the instant" (58). Seeing the "future" as the present is, in a Christian metaphysic, an attribute of God, who sees all time as simultaneous. The subversive metaphysics of *Macbeth* depersonifies this perspective which sees all time, all tomorrows and yesterdays, as simultaneous—that is, it removes the figure of "God," or the *logos*, from that position—but it does so

without restoring freedom to human action. Even after replacing the figure of God with a trio of exaggeratedly fantastic figures that cannot inspire literal belief, Shakespeare binds all of the action of *Macbeth* to the vision of these figures. They do not cause events to occur, but neither can the action of the play be explained without reference to their prophecies. The most seemingly commonsense interpretive questions, such as whether the witches are autonomous and cause Macbeth to murder Duncan, or if they are simply manifestations of Macbeth's unconscious, are made unanswerable by a play that does not operate within the assumptions about causality and temporality implicit in the questions. Such questions do not capture the mode of the "existence" of the Weyard Sisters, because these figures do not exist within the assumptions of a language which presumes causality. As Wyrd replaces Worde, the witches embody a literally nonexistent condition; what they represent defies the language, because it escapes the foundational categories of metaphysics of presence; "Wyrd," as Derrida says of "différance," is neither active nor passive, present nor absent, sensible nor intelligible.[16]

Macbeth thus engages the central problem of a Christian metaphysic, the conflict between divine omniscience and human free will, and emerges with the gloomiest of verdicts, as neither Divine Providence nor human volition can account for the action of the play. The idea of free will is dissipated in the failure of naturalistic questions to produce a causal chain that runs from motivation to action to consequence. The inadequacy of such questions shows through the prose of the foremost of Shakespeare's character-and-action interpreters when Bradley describes Macbeth's feelings at the murder of Duncan: "The deed is done in horror and without the faintest desire or sense of glory—done, one may almost say, as if it were an appalling duty; and, the instant it is finished, its futility is revealed to Macbeth as clearly as its vileness had been revealed beforehand."[17] It was, however, the futility of the act which Macbeth had noted well before it took place. He wished that "th' assassination could trammel up the consequence," and "be the be-all and end-all here" (1.7.2–5), but he finally came to acknowledge the inevitability of retribution, saying:

> in these cases
> We still have judgment here; that we but teach
> Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return

> To plague th'inventor: this even-handed justice
> Commends th'ingredients of our poisoned chalice
> To our own lips.
>
> (1.7.7–11)

Macbeth says that he has no desire to kill Duncan ("I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent," [1.7.25–26]). He sees that the prophecies mean that there is no necessity for him to do anything in order to become king; when he says "If Chance will have me King, why, Chance may crown me, / Without my stir" just after the meeting with the Witches [1.3.143–44], this suggests that the prophecies, rather than inciting Macbeth towards the killing of Duncan, should have led him to view Malcolm's nomination as the royal heir with an equanimity born of the certainty of his own eventual accession. And he shows no sense of accomplishment even immediately after he has performed the murder: "Wake Duncan with thy knocking: I would thou couldst" (2.2.73) he says, only minutes afterwards.

Why, then, does Macbeth kill Duncan? Bradley's description of Macbeth's motivation toward the murder is that it is "as if . . . an appalling duty." It is, Bradley sees, more accurately described as a compulsion than as a decision, and Bradley's attempt at a quantification of what drives Macbeth to the act of regicide, that "neither his ambition nor yet the prophecy of the Witches would ever without the aid of Lady Macbeth have overcome . . . [Macbeth's] resistance"[18] to the idea of killing Duncan will, to a modern ear, too easily recall "The woman gave me of the tree, and I did eat," to sound like a balanced assessment of blame. Macbeth's action is not entirely explicable in psychological terms, and the terms of any explanation are greatly complicated by the means of representation, in structure and language, of the murder itself. A significant feature of the representation of Duncan's murder is that it takes place offstage. This is a departure from the Shakespearean norm, and even from the norm in *Macbeth*, where Banquo, Macduff's son and Young Siward are murdered onstage, and Macduff exhibits the severed head of Macbeth. When this unseen murder is placed between Macbeth's wish that "I go, and it is done" (not "and I do it") and his emphatic assertion just after the killing that "I have done the deed," where the rhetorical finality expresses his desire to send the deed to a safely completed, "trammelled up" past, the psychological dimension of the dramatic absence of the murder becomes

clear; the play is representing Macbeth's avoidance of any thought of the act.

A thoroughly naturalistic vocabulary would offer, then, "repression" as the explanation for why Macbeth never discloses an adequate motivation for the killing of Duncan. One would say that Macbeth never allows himself to acknowledge that he has, of his own free will, committed this murder. But the imagery of the play suggests that there is something other than a personal unconscious below the level of autonomous will, and it uses the vehicle of dreams as the means of access to that world. When Macbeth contemplates the assassination of Duncan, he says "Stars, hide your fires! / Let not light see my black and deep desires" (1.4.50–51). This image of extinguished stars is recalled and given a domestic cast which counterpoints the impending horror of the murder when Banquo says to Fleance, "There's husbandry in heaven; / Their candles are all out" (2.7.4–5), but the imagery takes on a more ominous tone as Banquo goes on to say

> A heavy summons lies like lead upon me,
> And yet I would not sleep: merciful Powers,
> Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature
> Gives way to in repose!
>
> (2.1.6–9)

He gives definition to these "cursed thoughts" moments later when he meets Macbeth and says, "I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters" (2.1.20). Macbeth, on his way to murder the sleeping Duncan, then sees the bloody dagger and draws the conclusion that

> Now o'er the one half-world
> Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
> The curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates
> Pale Hecate's off'rings . . .
>
> (2.1.49–52)

This surreal "dream" world finally swallows Lady Macbeth; she had sought to live entirely on a naturalistic plane, only borrowing from the witches the expediency of a "fair is foul" morality. She ends, however, in a madness which cannot distinguish a "real" world from one of sleep and dreams. Macbeth's image of life as a player is a transformation of this experience of irreality. As he lives with the consequences of a murder which he consciously disavowed and then performed as if *in absentia*, his guilt is like that

experienced in dreams: retribution is relentless and its means exceed the scale of realism (as Birnam wood comes to Dunsinane) but the actual transgression which inspires this retribution has only a shadowy, ambiguous existence. In Macbeth's metaphor, he is playing the role of the regicide, coping with the consequences of that "even-handed justice" which returns his "bloody instructions" upon himself, but he is no more responsible for the action of this world than the self in a dream, or an actor for the drama in which he exists.

The larger context, the unknown which is not comprehended by the individual "player," is a metaphysical order rather than a personal unconscious in *Macbeth*. In the "sound and fury" speech, Macbeth surrenders the naturalistic assumptions that had constituted his belief that time's challenge resided in its fleetness, and that his own success would depend upon overtaking events. He speaks of the two natural divisions in time as they appear to a mortal consciousness—a day and a life—and he imagines the larger frame of history, or "recorded time." Just as he sees that tomorrows end by becoming yesterdays, he describes life and history from their endpoints of "dusty death" and "last syllable." But any perception which is limited to temporal terms, even one running from first Worde to last syllable, is only ignorance in relation to the perspective of the weyard sisters, who see that "tale" which tells all of history at the border where it meets the "nothing" that is an eternity beyond that last syllable. They themselves are only a literary device, a personification of such a perspective, and when Macbeth describes this perspective without personifying it, the place occupied by God in a Christian metaphysic is left empty. But the very possibility of an atemporal vision to which all time would be simultaneous abrogates causality and choice, and binds all human action to a single story.

Much of *Macbeth* is designed to give an audience the experience of living through such a predetermined tale. Macbeth's repeated professions of confidence in his own security "till Birnam wood come to Dunsinane" have the effect of assuring an audience that this realistically unlikely event will occur. The irony is intensified by the rapid alternation, in the later part of the play, of short scenes of Macbeth in Dunsinane with those of the forces attacking the castle; from both sides the references to Birnam and Dunsinane are so regular as to become almost incantatory. Angus, with the rebellious Scots, says of the English forces, "Near Birnam wood /

Shall we well meet them" (5.2.5–6); Caithness informs him that "Great Dunsinane he [Macbeth] strongly fortifies" (12), and Lennox closes the scene by saying "Make we our march towards Birnam" (31). Macbeth then opens the following scene by saying

> Bring me no more reports; let them fly all:
> Till Birnam wood remove to Dunsinane
> I cannot taint with fear
>
> (5.3.2–3)

and closes it with "I will not be afraid of death and bane, / Till Birnam forest come to Dunsinane" (59–60). When Siward then asks at the outset of scene 4 "What wood is this before us?", the answer is entirely predictable: "The wood of Birnam" (3). The realistic rationale behind Malcolm's order to "Let every soldier hew him down a bough / And bear't before him" (5.4.4–5)—that this will disguise their numbers—has already been dispensed with; Macbeth has just been warned that there are ten thousand soldiers in the English force moving toward the castle (5.3.15.) The fact that Birnam wood will move toward Dunsinane is locked into place by the witches' prophecies, but its explanation in realistic terms is, dramatically, an afterthought.

Macbeth's expressions of confidence in his own security create a dramatic irony that Bradley refers to as a "Sophoclean irony," in which, as Bradley puts it, "a speaker is made to use words bearing to the audience, in addition to his own meaning, a further and ominous sense, hidden from himself and, usually, from the other persons on the stage."[19] While broad structures of foreshadowing such as that employed with Birnam wood make this kind of irony available to an audience seeing the play for the first time, a more detailed sense of such irony increases with an audience's familiarity with the story. Lady Macbeth's statement that "A little water clears us of this deed" takes its resonance, for a knowledgeable audience, from her later obsessive hand washing. The exchange between Macbeth and Banquo in which Macbeth urges him to "Fail not our feast" and Banquo promises "My Lord, I will not" (3.1.27–28) is grimly amusing to those who know that Banquo will keep this promise despite the impediment of having been slain in the meantime. The better an audience knows the story, the more capable they become of escaping the illusion of suspense in an "ignorant present" and approximating the perspective of the witches. The ability to see the playing out of a tale from which there is no

possibility of deviation erodes any sense of morality; if there is no choice, there is no responsibility, and if there is no responsibility, there is no point to moral distinctions. As the sense of irony increases, partiality declines, and the foreshadowing of Banquo's death, although he is a "good" character, is more a source of black humor than of terror.

The play seems to begin and end happily, in each case with the victory of the "good" army, and its conclusion has encouraged traditional interpreters to overlook suggestions of cyclicity and to describe *Macbeth* as embodying a traditionally Christian story of the "temporary triumph of evil" but the ultimate restoration of "virtue and justice."[20] But the characteristic wordplay of pun and echo in the play's final scene subverts the optimistic interpretation of its events, and reinscribes the story of the dominion of Wyrd, in which, as the witches say, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." To their unearthly perspective, at the border where the entire tale of history drops into "nothing," all of history is a zero-sum game. This informs the detachment behind their initial plan to meet again "when the battle's lost and won" (1.1.4). To them, since the entire story is zero-sum, so are the individual events, or "words," and the play's language does much to reinforce this perspective. As we enter one of the camps to which it does matter who wins the battle, the supposedly "good" camp, moral distinctions seem nonetheless slippery. The first report of the battle is balanced, as the sergeant compares the two armies to "two spent swimmers, that do cling together / And choke their art" (1.2.8–9). The first character to be distinguished is "the merciless Macdonwald" (9), and this sounds like a condemnation, but then he is called "worthy to be a rebel" (10), and the usually positive connotation of "worthy" suggests for a moment that the sergeant may be praising Macdonwald for his valor. But then we find that "worthy" does not here mean "commendable" but only "appropriate," for, the sergeant says, "to that [name of 'rebel'] / The multiplying villainies of nature / Do swarm upon him" (10–12). His opposite is then named as "brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name)" (16), but so was Macdonwald worthy of his name, and the distinction between "brave" and "merciless" is difficult to maintain throughout the description of Macbeth's conduct on the battlefield:

> Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
> Which smok'd with bloody execution,

> Like Valour's minion, carv'd out his passage,
> Till he fac'd the slave;
> which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
> Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th' chops
> And fix'd his head upon our battlements.
> (1.2.17–23)

Duncan complicates the matter even further when he uses that ambiguous word just applied to Macdonwald in praise of Macbeth, saying, "O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman!" (24). These words echo again in the often-noted irony in which Duncan says of the executed traitor Cawdor, "There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face: / He was a gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust" (1.4.11–14), and then turns to greet Macbeth; his words of greeting are "O worthiest cousin!" (14).

The ironic perspective invites us to compare Macbeth with a rebel, and, in this case, one who has just been praised for the manner in which he faces death: first, because he repents his crimes ("frankly he confess'd his treasons, / Implor'd your Highness' pardon, and set forth / A deep repentance" [1.4.5–7]), and secondly because of his bravery, manifested in his ability to "throw away the dearest thing he ow'd / As 'twere a careless trifle" (10–11). When Macbeth comes to face his own death in the play's final scene, he expresses, first, remorse, and then courage; he is at first reluctant to fight with Macduff because of having already shed too much of Macduff's blood; he says "get thee back, my soul is too much charg'd / With blood of thine already" (5.7.5–6), and then, after he learns of Macduff's unnatural birth and recognizes him as the inevitable agent of his own death, he rejects the terms of surrender and accepts that inevitable death, saying:

> I will not yield,
> To kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet,
> And to be baited with the rabble's curse.
> Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane,
> And thou oppos'd, being of no woman born,
> Yet I will try the last: before my body
> I throw my warlike shield: lay on, Macduff;
> And damn'd be him that first cries, "Hold, enough!"
> (5.8.27–34)

The subsequent valorization of Young Siward's courage in the play's closing scene serves further to blur the distinction between the forces

of good and those of evil. The "good" characters attempt to enforce this distinction as they repeatedly refer to Macbeth in demonic terms just before his death. When young Siward confronts Macbeth, he says that he will not be afraid to hear his opponent's name "though thou call'st thyself a hotter name / Than any is in hell" (5.7.6–7). Then, when told that he faces Macbeth, he says, "The devil himself could not pronounce a title / More hateful to mine ear" (8–9). Macduff calls Macbeth "Hell-hound" (5.8.3) and bids him relinquish "the angel"—meaning a fallen angel, a devil—"whom thou still hast serv'd" (14). While Macduff is dueling with Macbeth offstage, the onstage action consists of young Siward's death being reported; the proof given that "like a man he died" (5.5.9) is that he "Had . . . his hurts before" (12). This is obviously the way in which Macbeth is dying even as they speak, and if the contrast between "Hell-hound" and "man" isn't pointed enough, Siward says that his son's wounds, gotten "on the front" (13) in battle prove him to be "God's soldier" (13) and that there could not be a "fairer death" (15).

The echo of "fair" in this phrase is the subtlest and most ominous reminder of the spirits to whom "fair is foul and foul is fair"; Siward's belief, that there could be "none fairer" than his son's death, recalls Macbeth's early line "So fair and foul a day I have not seen." Other jogs to the memory at the play's close are the "Hails" with which Malcolm is greeted, recalling the witches' greeting of Macbeth, and Malcolm's reiteration of his father's metaphor of planting, last used when Duncan thought that, having suppressed a rebellion, he had ushered in a era of peace and stability. These verbal repetitions are a device used in the early scenes of the play, where the characters repeat the witches' words (as, "When the battle's lost and won" comes back as "What he has lost, noble Macbeth has won," and "Fair is foul and foul is fair" returns as Macbeth's "So fair and foul a day I have not seen") and represent a determinism without temporal development or causality. The absurdity of a world governed by Wyrd, as is the dramatic universe of *Macbeth*, does not depend upon the degradation of reality into unassimilable pieces; when Macbeth finds his experience to be surreal, it is because it seems too much like the experience of an actor playing a part in a prescribed story, where the pieces fit together so perfectly that they form a matrix of absolute, and unalterable, interdependence. This sense of internal coherence is given substantive, auditory presence through the device of iteration, while the failure of the play to provide fully formed psychological or philosophical answers to the questions it generates about its

own nature makes it impossible to explain the whole through contexts of signification which exist beyond its borders. In Macbeth's words, this world "signifies nothing" beyond itself.

The explanations that reside within the play's own verbal context do not depend on causality; the witches do not "cause" the characters to repeat their words, and neither do they "cause" Macbeth to think of killing Duncan or cause any of the later action of the play. The determinism of "after word comes weird" operates without causality, because its agent does not really exist; the weyard sisters remain a hypothetical, rather than a reified, personification of the perspective which transcends time and sees past, present and future as simultaneous. As the play's conclusion, the time is not truly free, though it may look so from within the "ignorant present." In truth, the concluding action of the play remains within the ironic command of the representatives of Wyrd. They had provided two prophecies, one that told of the accession of a tyrant and a second that seemed, since it told of his displacement, to promise a liberation. But interpreters who have agreed with Macduff that at the conclusion of the play "the time is free" have underestimated the ability of the weyard sisters to speak in a double sense. The witches have told a literal truth, but through it they have inspired in interpreters, as in Macbeth, a false hope. The fact that they foretold Macbeth's inability to perpetuate his line places even the final action of the play within their vision, and makes the victory of Malcolm's forces just another word in the playing out of the story that the Weyard Sisters, if they really existed, would know comes in the long run to nothing.

Notes

1. Frank Kermode, in the introduction to *Macbeth* in *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974); Sylvan Barnet, ed., *Macbeth* (New York: New American Library, 1963) and Kenneth Muir, ed., *The New Arden Shakespeare: Macbeth* (London: Methuen, 1951) all give the play a fairly uncomplicated providential reading. There is an interesting change in emphasis away from the providential reading in the introduction to *Macbeth* in the *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, edited by David Bevington (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1992; formerly published by Scott, Foresman and Co., 3d edition 1980), possibly due to the addition of Jean E. Howard to the editorial advisory board for this play.

2. Harry Levin, "The Tragic Ethos" in *The Question of "Hamlet"* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), p. 134.

3. Stephen Booth, "*King Lear,*" "*Macbeth,*" *Indefinition, and Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p. 83.

4. Bernard McElroy, "Macbeth: The Torture of His Mind" in *Shakespeare's Mature Tragedies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), pp. 206–37; E. A. J. Honigmann, "*Macbeth*: The Murderer as Victim," in *Shakespeare: Seven Tragedies: The Dramatist's Manipulation of Response* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), pp. 126–49; Wilbur Sanders, "*Macbeth*: What's Done, Is Done" in Wilbur Sanders and Howard Jacobson, *Shakespeare's Magnanimity: Four Tragic Heroes, Their Friends and Families* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 57–94; Harry Berger, Jr., "The Early Scenes of *Macbeth*: A Preface To a New Interpretation," *ELH* 47 (1980), pp. 1–31 and "Text Against Performance in Shakespeare: The Example of *Macbeth*," *Genre* 15 (1982): 49–79; Karl F. Zender, "The Death of Young Siward: Providential Order and Tragic Loss in *Macbeth*," *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 17 (1975), pp. 415–25.

5. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (1904; New York: Fawcett World Library, 1966), pp. 40–41.

6. Peter Stallybrass, "*Macbeth* and Witchcraft," in John Russell Brown, ed., *Focus on "Macbeth"* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), pp. 189–210. Some recent un-Bradleyan studies of the symbolism of witchcraft in *Macbeth* are those of Dennis Biggins, "Sexuality, Witchcraft, and Violence in *Macbeth*, *Shakespeare Studies* 8 (1975), pp. 255–77; Luisa Guj, "*Macbeth* and the Seeds of Time," *Shakespeare Studies* 18 (1986), pp. 175–89, and Harry Berger, Jr.'s "Text Against Performance in *Macbeth*." While Biggins and Guj never seriously challenge the assumed Christian framework of the play, Berger sees a critique of a Christian ideology that valorizes *machismo* as it demonizes women. While I find Berger's essay acute at the level of social critique, I do not see why it is necessary, as Berger argues, to dissociate that critique from Shakespeare or from the dramatic structure of the play. Even Berger seems to have accepted, at least implicitly, Bradley's contention that Shakespeare was uninterested in or incapable of thinking in metaphysical terms.

7. Paul de Man, "The Rhetoric of Blindness," in *Blindness and Insight*, 2d ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 140.

8. L. C. Knights, *Explorations* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1951), p. 36.

9. Levin, "The Tragic Ethos," pp. 133–34.

10. D. H. Fawkner, *Deconstructing "Macbeth"* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), p. 123; Booth, "*King Lear*," "*Macbeth*," Indefintion and Tragedy, pp. 114–15; Marjorie Garber, *Shakespeare's Ghost Writers* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 118; and Malcolm Evans, *Signifying Nothing* (Sussex: Harvester Press, 1986), p. 117.

11. Booth, "*King Lear*," "*Macbeth*," p. 94.

12. "In the beginning was the Worde, and the Worde was with God, and that Worde was God" (John 1:1, Geneva Bible, 1560).

13. Quotations from the play are from *The New Arden Shakespeare: Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir (New York: Random House, 1962).

14. I am presuming that "should" in this case means "would." This is a common locution in Shakespeare, which occurs at least eleven other times in *Macbeth* (2.3.2; 3.1.4; 3.1.5; 3.1.20; 3.6.19; 3.6.20; 4.2.61; 4.3.79; 4.3.82; 4.3.97; 5.3.62).

15. Under "weird," this is meaning 4a in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 12, p. 273.

16. Jacques Derrida, "Différance," in *Margins of Philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 1–27.

17. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 297.

18. Ibid.

19. Ibid., p. 281.

20. Kermode, introduction to *Macbeth*, p. 1307.

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