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Journal

Shakespeare Quarterly, 35(4)

ISSN

0037-3222

Author

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Publication Date

1984

DOI

10.2307/2870162

Peer reviewed

George Washington University

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Source: *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (Winter, 1984), pp. 430-439

Published by: [Folger Shakespeare Library](#) in association with [George Washington University](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2870162>

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Shakespeare and Kierkegaard: “Dread” in *Macbeth*

KING-KOK CHEUNG

MACBETH, IN CHOOSING TO MURDER DUNCAN, exhibits what Kierkegaard would later diagnose as “dread.”¹ Though centuries apart, both Shakespeare and Kierkegaard are steeped in the Protestant tradition; and in both, dogma is accommodated in psychology. Kierkegaard, who quotes Shakespeare regularly to illustrate his psychological concepts, has the advantage of coming after the playwright and incorporating his insights. Partly for that reason, interpreting the playwright with the hindsight of Kierkegaard may deepen our understanding of Macbeth’s seemingly irrational behavior.

The Concept of Dread seems especially helpful in answering Walter Clyde Curry’s question, “By what processes does this essentially noble creature, whose will by nature desires the good or reasonable, come deliberately to choose evil?”² With few exceptions, answers that have been offered lean heavily on theology or faculty psychology. Such answers may be conducive to a moral judgment of Macbeth, but they do not account adequately for our emotional response toward the hero.

Suspending ethical judgment for the moment, I hope to account for our emotional response by seeing Macbeth’s enigmatic choice in the light of Kierkegaard’s notion of “dread.” Between possibility and reality lies the dread defined variously by Kierkegaard as “the alarming possibility of *being able*” (p. 40), as “the abiding state, that out of which sin constantly becomes (comes into being)” (p. 19), and as “a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy” (p. 38). It is the desire to do what one fears, the psychological state which precedes the leap into evil, even though dread “no more explains the qualitative

¹ See *The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie (1944; rpt. Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957). Subsequent references to this work will be given in the text. The latest translation by Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson of the same work is entitled *The Concept of Anxiety* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980). Since the word “anxiety” connotes an emotion pertaining to something more definable than does the Germanic word *angst* used by Kierkegaard, I find Lowrie’s translation—“dread”—preferable, especially when it is applied to the “unknown fear” in *Macbeth*. There is, however, no equivalent in English for *angst* as Kierkegaard uses it, which denotes a conjunction of fear and longing, unless one adopts the convoluted expression “a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy.”

² *Shakespeare’s Philosophical Patterns* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1937), p. 109.

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leap than it justifies it ethically” (p. 45). The most succinct definition of dread appears in Kierkegaard’s journal:

Dread is an alien power which lays hold of an individual, and yet one cannot tear oneself away, nor has the will to do so; for one fears, but what one fears one desires.³

Through drama and poetry, Shakespeare has *shown* what is thought out as a “concept” centuries later.

I

Although Shakespeare does not give it a name, dread informs the atmosphere, imagery, and diction of the opening act of *Macbeth*. As old hags who nevertheless captivate, the witches (the first to appear) seem to embody dread. The ambiguity of sympathetic antipathy and antipathetic sympathy is evoked by their chant: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair.”⁴ Like the stormy atmosphere in which the witches appear, the famous line conjoins opposites. It is both sinister and poetically enchanting, interfusing darkness and light, evil and good.

The three arrange to “meet with Macbeth” (I.i.8), who will be simultaneously repelled and attracted by them. Significantly, it is not a surprise encounter but a *meeting* that is to take place. Already there is a hint of intercourse between the witches and Macbeth, so that what seems to be an external temptation also can be interpreted, as many critics have done, as a psychological projection. That the words “fair” and “foul” will soon be echoed by Macbeth himself further suggests a liaison between the hero and the witches.

They alarm Macbeth with a possibility—the possibility of sovereignty. Whether or not Macbeth has already entertained this possibility, it is first enunciated for the audience by the witches, who hail him successively as “Thane of Glamis,” “Thane of Cawdor,” and “King hereafter” (I.iii.48–50).

The enunciation startles Macbeth. Banquo asks, “Why do you start, and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?” (I.iii.51–52). Why indeed? If Macbeth badly wants to be king, as many critics allege, the witches’ words should first fill him with joy, even if the joy were to be contaminated later by the thought of violent means. But he already seems preoccupied more by the foul means than by the fair end. Macbeth is not seeing a crown on his head; instead his hair is bristling. The witches may not have indicated the means to kingship, but in Macbeth’s mind it is immediately tied to crime. And the crime is engrossing. As much as he fears it, he also desires what he fears. In presenting kingship to Macbeth as a forthcoming fact, the witches have made the crown into a nagging possibility, henceforth ever in his mind, not to be relinquished till realized.

The ambiguity of the witches creates an apprehension—a dread which, as Kierkegaard keeps reminding us, does not cause sin but merely entices one with its possibility. On the one hand, the witches cannot be held responsible for Macbeth’s evil decision. (Though greeted by the same weird sisters, Banquo refuses to succumb to their temptation.) But on the other hand, since the witches’ words do come true, their prediction seems as ineluctable as fate; Macbeth seems destined to fulfill their prophecy. “In the Macbeth-witch equation,” as Marvin Rosenberg observes, “Shakespeare has created a dialectic between the

³ Quoted in Lowrie’s “Translator’s Preface,” *The Concept of Dread*, p. xii.

⁴ I.i.11. Citations are from the Arden *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1964).

extremes of control and free will that plays across the whole spectrum separating them”:

If we recognize the three as simply old crones pretending to be . . . possessed of magic, then Macbeth is mainly responsible for his acts, and his crimes fall heavily on himself—and on Lady Macbeth. Then the two choose . . . their fate. At the other extreme, if the Sisters . . . can determine behavior, Macbeth is a man trapped, helpless to choose good.⁵

As does Shakespeare in his presentation of the witches, so Kierkegaard “palters with us” in his concept of dread:

Just as the relation of dread to its object, to something which is nothing . . . is altogether ambiguous, so will the transition here from innocence to guilt be correspondingly so dialectical that the explanation is and must be psychological. The qualitative leap is outside of ambiguity, but he who through dread becomes guilty is innocent, for it was not he himself but dread, an alien power, which laid hold of him, a power he did not love but dreaded—and yet he is guilty, for he sank in the dread which he loved even while he feared it.

(*Dread*, p. 39)

In a sense the witches are nothing. They may be construed as “fantastical” (I.iii.53), vanishing “bubbles” (I.iii.79), arising from rainy fog and guilty imaginings, “Melted as breath into the wind” (I.iii.82). Yet they are apparitions perceived by both Macbeth and Banquo. In his first meeting with the witches, Macbeth seems both guilty and innocent; he is at once surprised by sin and bewitched by it. The dreadful meeting epitomizes the subtle interplay of compulsion and freedom throughout the play.

II

Dread suffuses Macbeth again upon his learning that he has become the Thane of Cawdor. The half of the witches’ prophecy that has been fulfilled points in his mind to the imminent possibility of the other half: “Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor: / The greatest is behind” (I.iii.117–18). Since the witches rightly foretell Macbeth’s promotion to Thane of Cawdor, their prophecy about his kingship may come true as well. But again instead of relishing the royal prospect Macbeth ruminates on the unsavory means:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill; cannot be good:—
If ill, why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor:
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man,
That function is smother’d in surmise,
And nothing is, but what is not.

(I.iii.130–42)

⁵ *The Masks of Macbeth* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1978), p. 2.

Macbeth's visceral description of his reaction to the witches pulsates with dread, experienced at once as an alien power and an intrinsic propensity. "This supernatural soliciting" suggests that the temptation comes from outside. But to be efficacious the soliciting requires a willing "client"; it remains something which can only lure but cannot force. Macbeth has read into the witches' prophecy an unutterable "suggestion"—surprising him from without—to which he must "yield." Likewise "horrid image" is presented as something outside which wreaks havoc in him "[a]gainst the use of nature" and alien to his nature. But the "horrid image" merges into his own "horrible imaginings" three lines later. The "thought," while explicitly autogenous, "[s]hakes so" the thinker that he becomes paralyzed.

Macbeth's reaction also evinces dread in the form of "sympathetic antipathy." On the one hand, he welcomes the announcement of his promotion as "happy prologues to the swelling act / Of the imperial theme" (II.28–29). On the other hand, however, the announcement unmans him, shaking his "single state of man." "Cannot be ill; cannot be good" is Macbeth's way of verbalizing what he experiences inwardly in response to the soliciting—an admixture of fascination and revulsion. The question "why do I yield" attests to the irresistible fascination of that appalling "suggestion." Its "horrid image" unfixes his hair but fixes his gaze, as is evident from his vivid and prolonged description. He resembles "the individual in dread [who] gazes almost desirously at guilt and yet fears it," for "though dread is afraid, yet it maintains a sly intercourse with its object, cannot look away from it . . ." (*Dread*, p. 92). Unnerved by the "suggestion," Macbeth is at the same time mesmerized by it.

Kierkegaard distinguishes dread from fear, which for him refers to something definite. The object of dread is indefinite: "In dread there is the egoistic infinity of possibility, which does not tempt like a definite choice, but alarms . . . and fascinates with its sweet anxiety" (*Dread*, p. 55). Shakespeare would have concurred. Macbeth's "fears" at this stage are "less than horrible imaginings," yet so powerful that "function is smother'd in surmise." He is immobilized by an imaginative projection, wherein "nothing is, but what is not." Because what is taking place in his mind is only a possibility—something not grounded in reality—it "is not." At the same time this possibility is so intense that it blots out everything else and becomes all there "is." The blurring of possibility and reality suggests the "dizziness" of dread, which occurs when "freedom gazes down into its own possibility, grasping at finiteness to sustain itself" (*Dread*, p. 55). Macbeth's flurry portends that the possibility has become too "real" to be dismissed. Though thoroughly shaken, he is hopelessly riveted to his imaginings. Or, as Banquo astutely observes, Macbeth is "rapt" (I.iii.143).⁶

III

After Duncan's nomination of Malcolm as successor, however, the nebulous fears of Macbeth crystallize into guilty "desires":⁷

⁶ Macbeth's soliloquy resembles that of Brutus in the orchard before he kills Caesar (II.i.34). Both speakers are simultaneously attracted and repelled by the thought of murder, both are haunted by a dreadful possibility; both talk of insurrection in their mental states, and both confuse possibility with actuality.

⁷ Norman Rabkin explains Macbeth's transition from inarticulate fear to explicit resolve in terms of sibling rivalry. The murder of Duncan, Rabkin suggests, is a form of parricide; see *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 105–8.

Stars, hide your fires!
 Let not light see my black and deep desires;
 The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,
 Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.
 (I.iv.50–53)

The erstwhile “suggestion,” along with its “horrid image” and “murder yet . . . fantastical,” has in the meantime developed into a full-blown vision of a violent act which Macbeth must hide from even himself.

With this sharpening focus dread reaches its apex, as is suggested by Macbeth’s highly ambivalent diction. Macbeth bids the eye to wink at the hand, betraying at once his fear at what the hand will do and his wish to connive at the act when it is done. The fiat “let that be” suggests on the one hand that the possibility of murder has become so intense that it will occur almost spontaneously, showing the speaker’s resolute commitment to the act and his wish for its instant fulfillment. On the other hand, the fiat suppresses the agent of the fell act, showing the speaker’s aversion to it and his anxiety to dissociate himself from it.

The semantic divisiveness becomes even more pronounced in the next line. The eye vacillates between what it “fears . . . to see” and what it strains to see, depending on how much emphasis the speaker (or the reader) gives to the intervening clause—“when it is done”—which furtively transports fears to longings. The eye would avert itself from the action but would gape at the finished act. Cognizant of the blackness of his desires and intensely fearful, Macbeth is nevertheless driven to pursue the felonious course to be king.

No mere promise of the crown wins Macbeth to evil, however. Exploring his enigmatic choice in the shadow of dread, I am trying to show that Macbeth is fascinated by the deed itself, that his dread increases as the possibility of that deed looms progressively larger. Macbeth seems a captive spectator in the theatre of his mind, shielding his eyes from the bloody scenes, yet aroused by them.

IV

But how can a treacherous act have such magnetic power? Commenting on the myth of the Fall in Genesis, Kierkegaard posits how God’s prohibition awakens dread in Adam:

The prohibition alarms Adam [induces a state of dread] because the prohibition awakens in him the possibility of freedom . . . the alarming possibility of *being able*. . . . After the word of prohibition follows the word of judgment: “Thou shalt surely die”. . . . The infinite possibility of being able (awakened by the prohibition) draws closer for the fact that this possibility indicates a possibility as its consequence.

(*Dread*, pp. 40–41)

As different as Macbeth is from Adam, prohibition and judgment seem to have a similar psychological effect on both. In Genesis both the prohibition and the judgment are announced by God, whereas Macbeth’s conscience dictates to him what is forbidden and what will be the punitive consequence. But the results in the two cases are similar: told to abstain, Adam eats the forbidden fruit; dissuading himself from murder, Macbeth makes the fatal decision. His anticipation of “judgment here” (I.vii.8) should deter him from murder, yet imag-

ined as a “consequence” of the murder, the judgment draws the forbidden possibility closer.

The paradox that prohibition incites violation was propounded by the Apostle Paul in Romans (vii), but Kierkegaard makes us feel its psychological manifestation through his notion of dread: “Scripture says that sin takes its opportunity in the command or in the prohibition. Precisely the fact that something is commanded or forbidden becomes the opportunity. . . . The opportunity is like a middleman, a mediator, merely helpful in the transaction, only causing to be arranged something which, in another sense, already existed, namely as possibility.” He gives a telling example: “If one said to a child that it was a sin to break a leg, what anxiety he would live in, and probably break it more often.”⁸

True to both theology and psychology, Shakespeare fleshes out the paradox by having Macbeth commit the very act he sees insistently as forbidding and damning. Macbeth enumerates the reasons against murdering Duncan:

First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu'd, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And Pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's Cherubins, hors'd
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.—I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on th'other—

(I.vii.13–28)

The bloody deed yields quickly in Macbeth's mind to the consequent retribution, but the more he dwells on the woeful consequence, which should be his deterrent, the more he seems bound to the act that triggers the consequence. Kierkegaard is illuminating here: “The possibility of freedom announces itself in dread. An admonition may now cause the individual to succumb in dread . . . and this in spite of the fact that the admonition was of course meant to produce the opposite effect” (*Dread*, pp. 66–67). An admonition often combats its own intention, for “*dread of sin produces sin*” (p. 65). Although Kierkegaard's observation by no means justifies the “qualitative leap” of Macbeth—his decision to murder—the observation casts some light on his decision, which seems rationally perverse but psychologically compelling. Macbeth fosters his murderous intent in the very act of stifling it; dread increases with each warning till it provokes precisely what is being warned against.

⁸ Quoted in Kreston Nordentoft, *Kierkegaard's Psychology*, trans. Bruce Kirmmse (Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1972), p. 67. Freud will later explain the attraction of the forbidden in terms of the pleasure principle: “The feeling of happiness derived from the satisfaction of a wild instinctual impulse untamed by the ego is incomparably more intense than that derived from satiating an instinct that has been tamed. The irresistibility of perverse instincts, and perhaps the attraction in general of forbidden things finds an economic explanation here.” See *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961), p. 28.

V

The lines with which Macbeth begins the soliloquy—"If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly" (I.vii.1-2)—succinctly define his state of apprehension.⁹ Present and future dissolve in "If it were done, when 'tis done"; the movement from the subjunctive to the indicative reveals a subconscious desire to reify an importunate possibility, to make it come to pass. The apodosis—"then 'twere well / It were done quickly"—indicates more explicitly than the protasis his impatient longing and his wish to get the possibility over with—to leave dread behind. Being anticipated forward as an act to be performed and backward as an act already done, the imagined act teases Macbeth with instant performance.

The temporal merging of cause and effect is enacted on a figurative level, so that present images are viewed from the perspective of future consequences. Duncan's meek virtues, which Macbeth invokes to hold back his aggression, are blown up as clarion-voiced accusers: the pacifiers become the aggressors; the victim the judge. The bizarre image of an equestrian babe likewise coalesces deterrent and punitive agent, blurring the line between present thought and future imaginings: a "naked newborn babe," a delicate object of pity and the very symbol of vulnerability, is conceived as riding roughshod over the blast, on a par with the vengeful "Cherubins" who, like the furies, rush blindly to "blow the horrid deed in every eye."¹⁰ Even "tears," the passive, impotent manifestation of pity, are transmuted into active, dynamic, tidal power with the incredible ability to "drown the wind."

The transformation of pitiful images into aggressive ones turns deterrents into stimulants. As his dread mounts, Macbeth becomes increasingly carried away by a fantastic imagination, culminating in a poetic wish-fulfillment whereby the very deed he admonishes himself against is euphemized, rationalized, and symbolized in poetry as "Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself." Macbeth gives ambition as his overt motive for murder and disclaims ambition as a spur in the same breath. Indeed by now he is too intent on the act to require any spur. Even though he later tells his wife "to proceed no further in this business" (I.vii.31), he himself already has proceeded too far.

VI

Lady Macbeth's role in engineering the regicide has been stressed by many critics. Like the witches, she embodies dread's ambiguity: she is both the abettor and the alter ego of Macbeth.¹¹ Furthermore, in projecting herself as the ruthless murderer she provides Macbeth with what Kierkegaard calls "the power of example," which produces the desired effect through dread (*Dread*, p. 67).

Her first words to Macbeth echo the witches' greeting:

Great Glamis! worthy Cawdor!
Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter!

⁹ Cf. Christ's words to Judas: "That thou doest, do quickly" (John 13:27). (See Kenneth Muir's note in the New Arden edition.) Both in the Bible and in Shakespeare, the bidding to "do" implies violation and precipitates it.

¹⁰ Cleanth Brooks also discusses the incongruity of this imagery; see *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947; rpt. New York: Harcourt, 1975), pp. 29 ff.

¹¹ Freud suggests that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are "two parts of the mind of a single individuality"; see "Some Character-Types Met With in Psychoanalytic Work," *Collected Papers*,

Thy letters have transported me beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant.

(I.v.54–58)

Being a nebulous, luring possibility, dread has its optimum climate in an “ignorant present” and entices one to realize “the future in the instant.” Lady Macbeth foreshortens and intensifies the possibility of murder by discussing it as an important task at hand and by focusing on its consequence:

. . . you shall put
This night’s great business into my dispatch;
Which shall to all our nights and days to come
Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.

(I.v.67–70)

Presenting the murder as the “night’s great business,” Lady Macbeth makes the act which is still under consideration seem imminent and pressing. Instead of looking closely at the horror, she looks beyond the horrid act into the power which will result from it. In this aspect she contrasts sharply with her husband, who drowns himself in horrid images and horrible imaginings despite his perfunctory profession of ambition.¹²

Had Lady Macbeth incited her husband solely by harping on the fair promises of sovereignty, she would not have gone very far. But she does more: she stands as a foul example to Macbeth and challenges his manhood. To bolster what she sees as her husband’s flagging courage, she offers to “dispatch” the hellish business herself. And later she drains him of “the milk of human kindness” by figuratively proscribing her own:

. . . I have given suck, and know
How tender ’tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dash’d the brains out, had I so sworn
As you have done to this.

(I.vii.54–59)

The speech is insidiously erotic. In stressing her dangerous power over the male and totally helpless infant, Lady Macbeth indirectly calls her husband’s potency into question. Macbeth asks, following her speech, “If we should fail?” (I. 59). The question betrays fear and desire: fear of failure and desire to perform. The pronoun “we” suggests that Macbeth wishes to identify with and to appropriate his wife’s absolute power, her ability to command performance. Playing on his dual anxiety over regicide and over virility, Lady Macbeth replies, “But screw your courage to the sticking-place, / And we’ll not fail” (II. 61–62). Her figure of speech couples readiness to kill with sexual prowess, confusing brutality with masculinity and displacing Macbeth’s ethical notion of what “may become a man” (I.vii.46) with erotic anxiety.¹³

trans. Joan Riviere (New York: Basic Books, 1959), IV, 333. A. C. Bradley takes a similar line in *Shakespearean Tragedy* (Greenwich: Fawcett Premier, 1904), pp. 303 ff.

¹² This difference between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is noted by Rabkin; see *Shakespeare and the Problem of Meaning*, p. 102.

¹³ For various discussions of the connection between sex and violence in *Macbeth*, see David

Dread, sexuality, and violence are inextricably fused in *Macbeth*. Norman Rabkin has called attention to Macbeth's image of himself as personified Murder moving with "Tarquin's ravishing stride" as though the murder of Duncan were an act of lust. Macbeth, Rabkin suggests, is motivated to kill the King (a symbolic father) "by a drive as fundamental and as irrational as that of sex" (p. 107). The analogy goes deeper, for Macbeth's murderous ferocity seems to feed on his sexual anxiety, an anxiety that is hinted at and probably aggravated by his not having any children. Yet he reacts to his wife's infanticidal avowal with stunned admiration—an antipathetic sympathy. Associating infanticide with procreation, he bids her to "Bring forth men-children only! / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males" (I.vii.73–75).

It is curious that a speech designed by Lady Macbeth to provoke murder should give rise to thoughts of patrimony in Macbeth, unless he too has come to equate virility with heartless aggression—males with mails of armor, mettle with steely metal. He is ready to prove his virility by translating his procreative impulse into a destructive one, his fear of female domination into masculine aggression. His destructive passion smacks of erotic self-abandonment: he is driven to perform "the swelling act / Of the imperial theme" (I.iii.127–28).

VII

Provoking effects of lust and dread are linked in the image of the hallucinated dagger. As a phallic symbol it suggests lust, in this case the lust for a perverted consumption; as an external object drawing Macbeth onward, it suggests dread, both as an alien power and as a personal susceptibility. Stained with blood, the dagger of the mind suggests the proleptic force of dread, which entices one with a future vision and presses one with its realization. Even so, Macbeth's real dagger will gravitate toward the imaginary dagger, as though the image of the bloody weapon dictates the bloody act: "Thou marshall'st the way that I was going" (II.i.42).

The line can also be addressed to Lady Macbeth. Faced with her "undaunted" example and overcome by her intoxicating provocations, Macbeth makes the evil leap:

I am settled, and bend up
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.
Away, and mock the time with fairest show:
False face must hide what the false heart doth know.
(I.vii.80–83)

Macbeth's decision to murder, like the psychological process from which the decision issues, is couched in ambivalent terms. Though he is "settled," his need to "bend up / Each corporal agent" conveys the immense effort required to overcome his mental resistance to an act still too unnerving to be named. His calling it a "terrible feat" sums up his ambivalent attitude: the term connotes attraction and revulsion, terror and grandeur, epitomizing the process by which Macbeth comes to his decision. His mixed reaction of sympathy and

Barron, "The Babe That Milks: An Organic Study of *Macbeth*," *American Imago*, 17 (1960), 133–61; Dennis Biggins, "Sexuality, Witchcraft, and Violence in *Macbeth*," *Shakespeare Studies*, 8 (1975), 255–77; Coppélia Kahn, *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakespeare* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981), pp. 151 ff.

antipathy, so inseparable in the process, contrasts sharply with the deliberate dichotomy of “false face” and “false heart” after the decision.

What makes the decision so haunting is its “dreadful” evolution. Dread haunts both Macbeth and his spectators. Under the spell of Shakespeare’s poetry, we too are startled by the witches, we too are fascinated by horrid images, we too are amazed by Lady Macbeth. While the scene of infanticide etched by her is inhuman and morally revolting, its graphic imagery is captivating. Shocked by the eidetic power of the grisly scene, we may be caught in a shuddering complicity. We are similarly taken by the entire play: appalled by evil, we nonetheless are fastened to its lurid dramatization.