

order our entire lives with respect to the natural rhythm of day succeeding night (cf. 2.1.49-50; 2.4.5-10; 3.2.50-3).

As the latter question might itself suggest, however, in *Macbeth* Shakespeare has embedded consideration of the 'supernatural,' represented primarily by the power of prophecy, in a still more comprehensive metaphysical problem, one that serves even more effectively to show how the issues of political life point beyond themselves to those of first philosophy. And that is the problem of Time: the nature of time itself, and the significance of the uniquely human awareness of time, of living with a memory of the past and a curiosity about the future - sometimes hopeful, other times anxious, but always cognizant of one's mortality, that abstract premonition of one's eventual death. Sufficiently thought about, the play shows how and why the normal human posture towards time is strangely ambivalent, or 'equivocal,' and necessarily bound up with questions of fate and free will. However, it would be best to approach these matters in the natural way, from the ground up, as it were. So, let us begin with the political story.

MACHIAVELLI VISITS SCOTLAND

A **challenging story** it is, one that obliges us to exercise the same array of rational powers - of observation, memory, imagination, and deduction, of analysis and synthesis - as is required to understand the equally challenging world of immediate experience. For *Macbeth* incorporates several overt mysteries that we cannot help but wonder about and attempt to solve by a careful sifting of the clues. The most prominent of these, of course, concerns the identity of the Third Murderer involved in the ambush of Banquo and his son: the other two murderers are as puzzled about him as we are meant to be (and like any good mystery writer, Shakespeare has strewn a fair number of false leads). But also, there is the mysterious messenger who calls to warn Lady Macduff just prior to the arrival of Macbeth's assassins. Who is this person who is not known to her, but who knows about Macbeth's murderous designs upon her and her entire household; and why does he not identify himself? Equally curious is Rosse's abrupt volte-face upon his arrival at the English court where Macduff is soliciting the exiled Malcolm - Rosse first placidly assuring an anxious Macduff that his wife and children are safe and well ("they were well at peace, when I did leave 'em" 4.3.179), then a moment later informing him that they have all been "savagely slaughter'd" (like Duncan, "sent to peace": after life's fitful fever, now they too sleep well). These are but the more obvious puzzles that challenge the reader to turn detective, and so consider carefully every line of the text, noticing the least nuances of speech or deed, attending to every detail, however seemingly inconsequential - in short, to *think* about the possible implications of everything that happens, about all that is said

and done, and what might have been said or done, but was not.¹² That is, to understand *Macbeth*, to understand it as its author understood it, one must practise the activity that, carried to perfection, has traditionally been known as philosophizing.

Approached in such a spirit, the first conclusion to emerge is that the play is designed to illustrate the political teachings we associate most readily with Machiavelli's *The Prince*. And what could be more appropriate for this purpose than the story of a man who would make himself king 'by his own arms and virtue,' and who moreover seems eminently suited to succeed? As is obvious to anyone familiar with both play and treatise, they similarly exploit the natural human fascination with danger, violence, crime, and power (a proven witch's brew for profitable storytelling throughout the ages). Both manifest a comparable 'realism' with respect to what most people regard as all-important - certainly not justice, or virtue, or happiness even - but matters of life and death. Shakespeare's chosen protagonist, however, ultimately fails to retain the principedom he has seized, being supplanted by another, apparently far less promising aspirant. The challenge is to understand *why*: to see what *really* explains Macbeth's failure. That it is the outcome decency would prefer is not an explanation. In addition to the test posed by this central problem, the natures and actions of all the characters in *Macbeth* provide concrete opportunities for analysis in terms of the tough-minded, cold-hearted political principles Machiavelli contends determine success or failure in this world.

Thus, one can reflect on the weakness of gentle Duncan, not a new prince whose situation necessarily involves great dangers, but rather an established prince whose legitimacy is widely recognized, and who should therefore be able to maintain himself without undue difficulty;¹³ gracious Duncan, who is loved, but - unfortunately for him and all of Scotland - not feared;¹⁴ who does not lead his own armies, and so is utterly dependent on the great warrior captains who do; honest Duncan, who to the very end is duped by appearances, lamenting upon confirmation of Cawdor's treachery, "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) - as next he does on Macbeth, it would seem;¹⁶ and 'artless' in judging men though he confesses himself to be, he nonetheless condemns Cawdor on the word of a man he does not recognize and may not even know (note 1.2.46); pious Duncan, who publicly shows himself, not "fierce and spirited," but "effeminate and pusillanimous," crying with joyful relief upon greeting the victorious chiefs that have saved his kingdom (1.4.33-5) - this in marked contrast to Macduff, who expressly declines to "play the woman with [his] eyes"¹⁷ (4.3.230); generous Duncan, who acknowledges that his indebtedness to Macbeth surpasses

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his ability to recompense: "More is thy due than more than all can pay" – yet who then promptly announces his intention to bestow the greatest award of all, the royal succession, on his son Malcolm, an inexperienced youth who, far from contributing to the day's victories, only escaped capture through the efforts of such "good and hardy" soldiers as the bleeding Captain (1.4.15–21, 35–9; cf. 1.2.3–5, 5.3.3).¹⁸ In short, "this Duncan hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been so clear in his great office," that Scotland is wracked with rebellion from within and threatened with conquest from without.¹⁹

However, there are things to be said in Duncan's favour as well. He apparently enjoys the affection and loyalty of a majority of the warrior elite (cf. 1.7.16–25), and not least of all, of Macduff (2.3.62–72). And while Duncan could hardly be called cruel, we see he is not invariably merciful. He readily applauds the bloody labours of Macbeth ("O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman!"); and confronted with Cawdor's first rebellion, he ensures there will not be another. Moreover, subsequent developments could be said to justify his passing over Macbeth in favour of Malcolm. Duncan may know his cousin well enough to have grounds for suspecting that Macbeth, though of surpassing excellence as a soldier, is not apt to make a temperate, prudent, and just king. In particular, Duncan may have some inkling of Macbeth's moral weakness. For resolute as he is in war, Macbeth shows himself far from *morally* resolute, given to wavering between 'I dare not' and 'I would' (like some poor cat i'th'adage). Whereas Malcolm proves a sound choice; his later behaviour provides an illuminating contrast with that of his father, perhaps because he learned from Duncan's mistakes.

To be fair, Duncan is confronting a tough political problem: that of ensuring a peaceful succession. If we credit him with some awareness that Macbeth poses the principal difficulty – ambitious to be king himself, yet temperamentally unsuited for it; unsurpassed as a military commander, hence invaluable as a loyal subordinate, but by virtue thereof capable of seizing power should he have a mind to²⁰ – we can begin to see Duncan's reasoning. To delay the announcement of his choice for successor might help keep Macbeth loyal, hoping to be that choice. But Duncan, an old man (5.1.37), could die at any time, thereby exposing the realm to the paramount evil of civil war were a legitimate successor not already named (and preferably well established as such in people's minds). So he cannot risk indefinite delay. Moreover, now would seem an opportune moment: in the full flush of victory, with local dissident barons firmly quashed and a foreign invasion repulsed at great loss to the invaders (which should discourage like attempts for the immediate future), there is a plenitude of honours as well as material rewards to be distributed (1.4.39–42). Thus, Duncan hopes to mollify Macbeth with lesser goods: the status and wealth attached to the just-vacated Thaneship of Cawdor; an effusive public declamation of royal gratitude, meant

to elicit in return – as it does – a fresh public confirmation of Macbeth's loyalty to the throne (this *prior*, we should notice, to the naming of Malcolm Prince of Cumberland, and as such the royal heir-designate); the honour of a royal visit to Macbeth's estate at Inverness, offering the prospect of more cordial personal relationships developing ("And bind us further to you"; 43); finally, the presentation of "great largess," including a rich gift for Macbeth's wife (2.1.14–15). By such means, Duncan hopes to "plant" Macbeth, promising he will "labour to make [him] full of growing" (1.4.28–30). And there is evidence that Duncan's plan might have succeeded, at least temporarily, for Macbeth informs his wife:

We will proceed no further in this business:

He hath honour'd me of late; and I have bought

Golden opinions from all sorts of people,

Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,

Not cast aside so soon.

(1.7.31–5)

But Duncan's calculations have failed to reckon adequately with Lady Macbeth. She is not the sort of woman to be put off with baubles and flattery.

Events prove, however, that neither is she quite as tough as she thinks she is – nor, consequently, tough enough for the enterprise she undertakes: engineering Macbeth's ascendance to Prince of the realm. When first we meet her, she seems formidable indeed, contrasting herself with her husband, whom she privately criticizes for being too pious, honest, timid, and scrupulous – altogether "too full of the milk of human kindness" (this of a man who disembowels opponents with a single stroke and makes trophies of their heads). In her "Thou wouldst be great; / Art not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it" (1.5.18–20), one recognizes a view unmistakably akin to Machiavelli's "It is necessary to a prince, if he wants to maintain himself, to learn to be able to be not good, and to use this and not use it according to necessity."²¹ Lady Macbeth means to be her lord's teacher, confident that she can through well-chosen words instil in him the requisite spiritedness, as well as exorcise any inner compunctions that might prevent him from "catching the *nearest way*" ("Hie thee hither," she prays, "That I may pour my spirits in thine ear, / And chastise with the valour of my tongue / All that impedes thee from the golden round"; 25–8). We are subsequently treated to a display of her potent speech, wherein is revealed the nature of the power she wields over Macbeth: not merely to permit or deny access to her female charms, but to validate or nullify his very manliness²² (1.7.35–54; cf. 2.2.63–4; 3.4.57–74).

Initially, however, she professes an intention to carry out Duncan's removal herself, having like a sorceress called down those "spirits that tend on mortal thoughts" to "unsex" her for this very purpose (while nonetheless preferring "thick Night" so to obscure things "that [her] keen knife see not the wound it makes" 1.5.40-52). Thus she first broaches the project to Macbeth: "you shall put this night's great business into *my* dispatch"; his sole responsibility will be to maintain an innocent appearance ("Only look up clear; ... Leave all the rest to me" 67-73). When next she speaks of this same "great business," it has become a joint enterprise: "What cannot *you* and *I* perform upon th'unguarded Duncan?" (1.7.70-1). And when the deed is finally to be executed, her role has somehow shrunk to that of drugging the grooms and laying out their daggers - although apparently she still had the opportunity to complete the job herself, privately musing, "Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done't" (2.2.11-13). Some reason, given the defeminized killer she aspired to become but apparently could not, even with the help of strong drink. Perhaps the Machiavellian ideal is more difficult to realize than it might first seem. In any event, from the moment she learns of Macbeth's precipitous murder of the grooms, she begins to lose her grip on events, and finally on herself as well (whether her fainting then is genuine, or feigned as a distraction, it is a symbolic premonition of her fatal weakness). Macbeth is increasingly led by the inner logic of his crimes, less and less by her. As she feels her isolation growing, and her power diminishing accordingly, she complains of his keeping so much alone, deserting her live companionship for that of "sorriest fancies" (3.2.8-12). With the atrocious violence of Macbeth's reign continuing to escalate, and he no longer consulting her on matters of gravest moment, "she comes quite apart, recognizing that what she set in motion is out of her control, wreaking effects she never envisaged" ("The Thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now?").²⁴ In sum, the psychic career of Lady Macbeth is the inverse of her lord's. At the outset, she is resolute and single-minded, whereas he vacillates, his soul divided. But in the course of the play, they exchange conditions, and she discovers too late that she is not really made of the right wrong stuff.

As for Macbeth himself, he provides a casebook illustration of how *not* to succeed in establishing oneself as a new prince. He assassinates Duncan, but fails to extinguish the rest of the line at the same time (and especially Malcolm, the formally recognized heir-apparent).²⁵ That is, Macbeth does not thoroughly and dispassionately reason out all of the injuries he must do to secure power - which would include killing not only Malcolm and Donalbain, but almost surely Banquo and perhaps Fleance as well - and then do them all at once, so that "being tasted less, they offend less" (whereas benefits ought to be done little by little so

that they may be tasted better and longer, something every successful politician knows).²⁶ Moreover, Macbeth had the perfect opportunity for doing what was necessary, since he had them all housed together under his own roof, and thus at his mercy; as his dear wife puts it, "time and place ... have made themselves" (1.7.51-3). But he is troubled by his conscience (a dangerous stupidity, Machiavelli teaches), and thus that much more inclined to wishful thinking. He realizes that if it is to be done at all, and done completely, "then 'twere well it were done *quickly*." He is daunted, however, by the scale of what might be required. If only the assassination of Duncan alone "Could trammel up the consequence, and catch / With [its] surcease success; that but this blow" - a single ignoble act - "Might be the be-all and the *end-all*" (1-6). So, instead of engaging in cruelties "well-used" (by which Machiavelli means those done at once for the necessity of securing oneself, and which are afterward not continued, but are converted to the greatest possible utility of one's subjects), Macbeth temporizes, and thereby unwittingly commits himself to a course of actions that exemplifies "cruelty *badly* used."²⁷ The injuries he inflicts increase over time, with the result that his subjects grow increasingly desperate, and he becomes profoundly hated - one thing above all that a prince must avoid, according to Machiavelli.²⁸ In short, Macbeth becomes a tyrant. This word is not mentioned until the play is more than two-thirds over (3.6.22), but thereafter it is used more often than in any other of Shakespeare's plays, necessarily raising the question of what in essence tyranny truly is. It is a term conspicuously absent from *The Prince*. According to Machiavelli's discussion of Agathocles (his prime example of one who has 'Attained a Principality through Crimes,' and who would certainly qualify as a tyrant in most people's eyes, willing as he was to "kill [his] citizens, betray [his] friends, ... without faith, without mercy, without religion," a man of "savagely cruelty and inhumanity," having committed "infinite crimes"), such 'tyranny' need not preclude political success.²⁹ So, why is Macbeth's bid to establish himself securely as sovereign prince such an abject failure?

The short answer has already been given: he went about it all wrong. But that simply raises the further question, why did he do so, given that he eventually shows himself fully capable of imitating the various crimes of Agathocles? To this, too, part of the answer has already been given: his initial lack of moral, or rather, immoral resolution; that is, his unwillingness, or inability, to commit himself whole-heartedly to doing *whatever* needed to be done to achieve success - well expressed by the person who knew him best:

- Yet I do fear thy nature:

It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness,

To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great;

Art not without ambition, but without

The illness should attend it: what thou wouldst highly,

That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,

And yet wouldst wrongly win; thou'dst have, great Glamis,

That which cries, 'Thou shalt do, if thou have it;

And that which rather thou dost fear to do,

Than wishest should be undone.

(1.5.16–25)³⁰

Eventually, having "in blood stepp'd in so far, that ... returning were as tedious as go o'er" (3.4.135–7), Macbeth acquires the resolution to wade on, come what come may. By then, however, it is too late; the political damage done cannot be undone. It was a matter of timing. Failing to lay to rest his moral reservations (or whatever) straight from the outset, he should have abstained from any attempt to become prince. That he did not see this himself points to his second serious limitation.

Macbeth seems singularly incapable of sound practical reasoning. For all his higher ponderings, there is scant evidence of his making solid connections between his theoretical reflections and his everyday affairs. In the first place, he evidently has not bestowed on political life the thoughtful attention it deserves, not having recognized what Machiavelli saw so clearly: that for all practical purposes, politics can be treated as a realm distinct unto itself, presenting problems every bit as perplexing as those posed by the heavens, and operating largely according to principles neither derivative from things higher nor reducible to things lower. Accordingly, Macbeth lacks prudential judgment. Lacking that perspicacity to discern the general principles at work in particular situations, and consequently unable to apply them himself, he has only a most ordinary capacity to respond rationally to concrete practical difficulties. That is, to think a problem through, evaluate alternative solutions, consider various contingencies that might arise, anticipate the responses of other interested parties, plan for each possible eventuality, and see clearly how it is to be finally resolved.³¹ Every time Macbeth attempts to plot some action, he bungles it; he evidently needs what Machiavelli offers Lorenzo, namely, himself as political adviser.³² Macbeth's only adviser, however, is Lady Macbeth, and she is no Machiavelli.

Simply consider the plan she and he concoct for killing Duncan without the blame falling on them: do it when he is asleep, besmear his drugged chamberlains with blood so that they will be blamed, and appear to grieve deeply when the murder is discovered. And should anyone doubt their version, just brazen it out (1.7.62–80). No thought given to credible motivation on the chamberlains' part, nor to why anyone truly guilty would remain at the murder site "Steep'd in the

colours of their trade, their daggers / Unmannerly breech'd with gore" (and conveniently lying upon their pillows, no less; 2.2.47–56; 2.3.101–2, 113–14), not to doing the job completely (for with Malcolm already named Prince of Cumberland and thus heir-apparent, the crown would devolve upon him, not Macbeth).³³ Lady Macbeth apparently lacks sufficient skill for her self-assigned part in the affair, so overdosing the grooms that they are still in a stupor when awakened. We may presume that their having been drugged was so obvious — "they star'd, and were distracted" (2.3.102) — that Macbeth, feigning impetuous rage, was obliged to kill them before they could be interrogated. At any rate, his doing so was not in the plan as we heard it discussed, and it is a suspect thing to do, as Macduff's reaction indicates (as also, perhaps, does Lady Macbeth's fainting; 105, 116). Their scheme succeeds only by chance, the timely flight of Malcolm and Donalbain allowing "suspicion of the deed" to be put upon them, thereby compromising Malcolm's claim to succeed his father (2.4.24–7). Add to this the subsequent failure of Macbeth's own design for eliminating both Banquo and his son Fleance, followed by the escape of Macduff, and one can begin to appreciate why he finally despairs of rational planning, vowing to become what might be called 'conscientiously impulsive': "From this moment, / The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand" (4.1.146–8).

In short, Macbeth is a strange combination of the contemplative and the impetuous, which may partly explain why we find him so fascinating, intrigued by what he says, appalled by what he does. Because he lacks the prudential judgment to bridge his inner life of reflection and outer realm of action, his frame of things is disjointed and "both the worlds suffer."³⁴

~~Macduff more could be remarked along these lines, applying Machiavellian prudential analysis to the actions of other characters, and in assessing what actually results. One might reflect on the case of Banquo, for example, who shows how he who helps another to become powerful ruins himself, and why anyone who is perceived to have some "nobility of nature" will sooner or later become suspects in him whom he has assisted.³⁵ Whereas in Malcolm, who ultimately succeeds in becoming prince, we see demonstrated the right combination of "the fox and the lion," and that "the one who has known best how to use the fox has come out best" (Macbeth relying too much upon the lion; 4.1.2.35).³⁶ Having been dispossessed of the principedom of which he was recognized to be the legitimate heir, Malcolm prudently escapes into exile and bides his time, awaiting an opportune moment to return.³⁷ Unlike Duncan, he is not easily beguiled by appearances, as shown by his elaborate testing of Macduff (4.3.114–20). Although his army is what Machiavelli would have called 'mixed,' Malcolm does command in the field himself, with the foreign contingent being led by a trustworthy member of his~~