The problem of pitying Macbeth

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THE PROBLEM OF PITYING MACBETH

A Thesis

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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this inquiry is to determine how it may be possible for Shakespeare to elicit pity for Macbeth, an unrepentant murderer.

Part I explains the way in which Shakespeare's use of a time breakdown, achieved through the use of "pivotal" words, takes us back to the moment before the murder, when Macbeth, at the height of his nobility, was deserving of our sympathy.

Part II, explaining how Macbeth's actions were not fated or pre-determined, examines the limits of the witches' prophetic ability, and the effect which Shakespeare's depiction of the witches has on pity.

Part III deals with Shakespeare's depiction of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth's understanding of chance as it relates to his tragic error and to the dissolution of time, concluding with an explanation of the way in which Shakespeare's entire method contributes to pity.
THE PROBLEM OF PITYING MACBETH
Macbeth is a play which most sorely tries any definition of tragic pity. If we rely on the everyday notion of pity as "a sympathetic sorrow for one in suffering" then it will seem that Macbeth is pitiable in as much as we lament his moral agony, until we reflect that sympathy implies entering into or sharing the feelings of another, something impossible with an unrepentant murderer. How much more difficult it is to apply to Macbeth the tragic definition of Aristotle, who states that "pity is aroused by the unmerited misfortune of one like ourselves," since we never feel that Macbeth's sufferings are unmerited.

Bradley states that human sympathy and pity are elicited by a "total reverse of fortune, coming unawares upon a man who 'stood in high degree' happy and apparently secure." This view, while applicable to other tragic heroes, presents difficulties in Macbeth's case which stem from the effect of the murders on our ability to sympathize. Bradley is perhaps most helpful in his description of the tragic catastrophe "not only or chiefly as something which happens to the persons concerned, but equally as something which is caused by them. . . .the hero always contributes in some measure to the disaster in which he perishes." This balanced perspective would steer clear of the sort of view which holds Macbeth as solely responsible for the murder of Duncan or of the sort which would make him a victim of supernatural forces. The former view, overemphasizing
free will, would destroy the possibility of any kind of pity by failing to take into account the circumstances which contribute to Macbeth's taking the course he does; while the latter view, overemphasizing circumstances, would destroy tragic pity by envisioning a man whose choices are of no account, a man run over by fate as a child by a car. Macbeth's tragedy must be seen both in the light of his circumstances and in his manner of exercising free will.

The best definition of tragic pity for Macbeth would be a sympathetic sorrow for one who, standing in high degree, apparently happy and secure, allows himself to be driven to murder by extraordinary circumstances, and incurs great suffering as a result. It must be admitted from the start that our sympathies for Macbeth are engaged by the way in which he allows himself to be driven or compelled to murder and the extraordinary nature of the circumstances which prompt him, and not by his sufferings as such. Bradley largely ignores the question of our pitying Macbeth, speaking only of the "profound impression of the misery of a guilty conscience," without pointing out that one never feels such misery is undeserved.

A great deal will be said in Parts II and III of this investigation about the responsibility of the witches and Lady Macbeth in Duncan's murder, about the fact that Macbeth's tragic error is not a willful decision to commit murder, and about the effect this has on our ability to pity Macbeth. Yet the circumstances in which Macbeth finds himself and the unique attitude which he has toward the murder in the beginning of the play, however much they may engage our sympathies before Duncan's
death, do little to assuage our feeling that Macbeth must suffer for what he has done. Shakespeare, in choosing to depict a character who knowingly commits a heinous crime, must use a different method from that which he uses to evoke pity for other tragic heroes. This method, described in Part I, relies entirely on a language technique which allows the reader to pity Macbeth obliquely, as it were, by reflecting the image of Macbeth as he was before Duncan's murder forward into the play. Such a technique places the reader in a unique relation to the tragedy, unlike that which he may hold with regard to any other. Because the severity of Macbeth's crime and his knowledge of it as a crime inhibit pity this technique is invaluable. It must be viewed as something separate from the depiction of character or circumstances. Such a technique, which makes pity possible through the dissolution of time, in combination with Shakespeare's manner of depicting the witches, Lady Macbeth and Macbeth's tragic error, will be shown capable of going a long way toward the accomplishment of the impossible: eliciting tragic pity for an unrepentant murderer.
It has been observed that at the end of Macbeth "we are aware of an unusual duality of reaction: on the one hand, our intelligence assures us it is necessary that Macbeth be laid low; on the other hand our sympathy for all he might have been makes us deplore his fall." Although we may sympathize with Macbeth for all he might have been, our judgments based on what he has been, keep us from deploring his fall. Bradley all but admits the impossibility of pitying Macbeth after the murder when he writes:

Pity has a much larger part in King Lear than in Macbeth, and is directed in the one case chiefly to the hero, in the other chiefly towards the minor characters.

How is it then that we pity Macbeth at all when our sympathies are "chiefly" directed toward those whom Macbeth has murdered? The answer lies in an artistic technique of language which dissolves time, detaching the distinction between "before" and "after" the murder of Duncan from our ability to pity Macbeth. The method becomes apparent only through careful reading, though it may affect an audience of the play unconsciously.

Shakespeare's handling of time enables us simultaneously to sympathize with Macbeth before he loses his "eternal jewel" and to pity his condition afterwards, insofar as we feel sadness at such a loss. This emotion is what Bradley calls "the impression of waste."
With Shakespeare, pity and fear which are stirred by the tragic story seem to unite with and even merge in a profound sense of sadness and mystery which is due to this impression of waste.

Sadness at the loss of Macbeth's moral nature, merging with pity for him elicited by the manner in which it was lost are made possible by the reader's being freed from the necessity of judging actions as they occur in time. Thus it is not a belief that Macbeth is somehow not responsible for his actions that elicits pity. It is a handling of time which prevents our judging Macbeth in those moments when judgment seems most necessary.

Viewing the effect of the play as if it were attached to a temporal sequence of before and after is incorrect. Shakespeare has given us numerous clues to the fact that in Macbeth time is shattered from start to finish. Lady Macbeth makes the broken nature of time most explicit when she says to her husband that "thy letters have transported me beyond/This ignorant present, and I feel now/The future in the instant" (I. v. 56).

Macbeth alludes to it when, while thinking of his future kingship, he feels "that function/Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is/But what is not" (I. iii. 140-142). It is suggested by the very first word of the play: "When...," beginning a question by one of the witches concerning time. The witches throughout the play "mock the time" with their insidious prophecies by which they hope to win Macbeth with "honest trifles."

Shakespeare's notion of distorted time does much more than simply inform us of the disorderly effect of sin. It creates an atmosphere in which pity can pervade the play almost regardless of events. The reader is
free to pity because he is not enslaved to time. As Lady Macbeth before
the murder is, through her anticipation, transported to a time after it,
so is the reader, after the murder, continually transported to a time
before it, when choice of the good and pity were possible. To reverse
Shakespeare's phrase, the reader from Act II onwards "is transported
behind Macbeth's immoral present and made to feel the past in the instant."
The past we are made to feel is the period of time in which Macbeth was
free to choose not to murder Duncan, and is referred to ironically by
Macbeth himself in front of two nobles as he pretends to grieve for the
king's death:

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
I had lived a blessed time; for from this instant
There's nothing serious in mortality:
All is but toys: renown and grace is dead,
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of
(II. iii. 91-96).

Macbeth's false grief, rather than evoking disgust, elicits in the
reader a fearful awe. Though it is moments like this, when Macbeth is
most "bloody, bold and resolute," that he should be most hateful to us,
it is precisely in these instances when Shakespeare subtly strips away
the temporal veneer of the play, making the scenes of Macbeth's despair
opportunities for pity. Though Macbeth's unrepentant anguish is not
pitiable in itself, the technique of punching holes in time gives our
pity an outlet by allowing it to be reflected backwards to a time when
Macbeth was at least potentially good, and therefore deserving of our
sympathy.

A pattern of alternating despair and resolution, accompanied by a
reflection back into a time before the murder, recurs throughout the play. Macbeth's agonizing regrets in Act II, scene ii, are fierce, coming as they do directly after the murder of the king, culminating in a desire for his resurrection: "Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!" (II. ii. 73). This despair is countered by Macbeth's resolute, but false, grief in the ironic lines mentioned above: "Had I but died an hour before this chance. . . ." "Chance" is a pivotal word which takes us back to that moment when Macbeth thought, "If chance will have me king, why,/ Chance may crown me/without my stir" (I. iii. 144-145). Even though the reader never seriously believes Macbeth will repent the murder, the sharp, sudden movement between the seeming extremes of resolution and despair unnerves the reader, allowing the pivotal word to knock him back to a time when the choice of the good -- and therefore pity -- was distinctly possible.

Macbeth's despair and resolution are not really two separate states, but are rather a single movement, like that of a pendulum which, hanging on a single word like "chance," swings back and forth, not to mark time, but to destroy it. The control which Shakespeare has over this movement is most artfully demonstrated in Act III, scene iv. In the space of less than one hundred and fifty lines, Macbeth moves from satisfaction on hearing of the murder of Banquo to despair at the knowledge that Fleance is alive; from lordly posturing in front of the banqueting noblemen to fearful despair at the sight of Banquo's ghost in his seat; from the resolution to feign recovery to having his cheeks "blanched with fear" at seeing the ghost a second time. Shakespeare chooses words for Macbeth
that the murderer would perhaps not have chosen himself had he been aware
of their deeper significance, pivotal words, that take the reader back
in time. Following Lady Macbeth's lead, Macbeth tries to excuse his
strange behavior, saying, "Do not muse at me, my most worthy friends,/ I have a strange infirmity which is nothing/To those that know me" (III.
iv. 84-86). Yet the infirmity is one he would not care to admit, one
which, ironically, was caused by Macbeth's following his wife's lead
earlier in the play. Lady Macbeth herself alluded to this "infirmity,"
which is in fact evil or wickedness, at a time before the murder of Duncan,
when, thinking of her husband, she said, "Thou wouldst be great,/Art not
without ambition, but without/The illness that should attend it" (I. v.
18-20). She alludes to it again just after the murder, when Macbeth
refuses to carry the daggers back to the grooms' chamber, calling him
"Infirm of purpose!" (II. ii. 52). The pivotal function of the word
"Infirm" is also shared by the word "dare." Upon seeing the ghost
appear a second time Macbeth speaks to it, saying, "What man dare, I
dare... .Take any shape but that, and my firm nerve/Shall never
tremble" (III. iv. 98). The double use of the word "dare" and the
use of the phrase "What man dare..." (as if Macbeth were not a man) takes
us back to a moment before Macbeth had lost his humanity, when he was able
to say, "I dare do all that may become a man;/Who dares do more is none"
(I. vii. 46).

Shakespeare allows the reader to slip between the extremes of
resolution and despair back to those moments when repentance was a distinct
possibility. But no such freedom is available to Macbeth. He, more than
Banquo, of whom he speaks, "must embrace the fate/Of that dark hour" (III. i. 136). The effect of stretching and bending time in the play frees the reader by placing him in an eternal moment, as it were, from which standpoint he may pity Macbeth. But Macbeth remains a slave to his crime. Act III, scene iv, begins with the "Banquet prepar'd" presumably at a reasonable hour, not long after dusk. Yet though the scene is one of continuous action, lasting under a quarter of an hour, it ends with night "at odds with morning" (III. iv. 126), in other words, at dawn. This sort of distortion keeps the reader out of the play, temporally speaking, and allows him to contemplate Macbeth from a timeless perspective. Macbeth, on the other hand, experiences a sort of temporal claustrophobia, which forces him not only to embrace a "dark hour," but to view Banquo as if he were a time sequence: "every minute of his being thrusts/Against my near'st of life" (III. i. 116). While such a distortion, often referred to as Shakespearean "double time," may in other plays, serve different figurative and dramatic purposes, in Macbeth the technique may be seen to have the added effect of positioning the reader relative to time, especially in light of the fact that Macbeth is in a sense, a play about time; and in light of the need to place the reader in such a frame of mind that he may be more able to sympathize with Macbeth despite his status as an unrepentant murderer.

The notion that one cannot pity Macbeth stems from the belief that Macbeth, by killing Duncan, kills pity within his own soul. After this point, tragedy becomes impossible because pity itself

    like a new-born babe,
    Striding the blast, or heaven's Cherubins, hors'd
11.

Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind
(I. vii. 21-25).

But this notion assumes a normal time scheme and neglects the fact that although the Macbeths are trapped in the future, the reader is free to be transported "behind this ignorant present," at any point in the play. Through this freedom the reader is given to know that the eternal Macbeth is "essentially a man framed for a good and noble life." This is the Macbeth of Act I, without whose portrayal tragedy would be impossible. It is because Shakespeare, throughout the play, keeps time from inhibiting pity that the image of Macbeth's nobility which we receive in Act I is reflected forward continually even to the end of the play.

The word "honor" is another one of those pivotal words which parts the fabric of time, allowing the reflection of the noble Macbeth to come through. In the last act, in one of his final moments of despair, Macbeth observes:

that which should accompany old age,
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not
(V. iii. 24-28).

Such despair hearkens back to an earlier moment when Macbeth is honored for his service to the king, whose messenger tells him, after tendering him thanks, "And for an earnest of a greater honor, He bade me, from him, call thee Thane of Cawdor..." (I. iii. 104-106). Macbeth remembers and appreciates this reward, for he cites it as a reason for not killing Duncan when he says, "We will proceed no further in this business:"
He hath honored me of late." The sort of honor which Macbeth desired in his most genuine moments, "love, obedience, troops of friends," was a possibility only at this point, not afterwards; and it is this image, of the good Macbeth which could have been, that hovers before the reader, more horrible than Banquo's ghost, inspiring pity and fear.

What the reader fears is the loss of an individual's spiritual and moral nature. Though at the end of the play Macbeth has nearly lost this sense of fear, the attentive reader has not, since the very word "fear" is pivotal for reflection. In Act V Macbeth says, "I have almost forgot the taste of fears" (V. v. 9), and "Till Birnam wood remove to Dunsinane,/ I cannot taint with fear" (V. iii. 2). He rebukes the "lily-livered boy" whose "linen cheeks" are "counsellors to fear" (V. iii. 15-17). Repetition of the word "fear" dispels Macbeth's "ignorant present" and conjures up a time when Macbeth elicited our sympathy, before he had "supp'd full with horrors"(V. v. 13). This was a time when Macbeth feared even the idea of murder, a "suggestion/Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair/And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,/Against the use of nature..." (I. iii. 134-136). The fact that Macbeth was at one time able to say, "present fears are less than horrible imaginings" (I. 137), assuring himself that such imaginings were only possibilities, is a fact that is continually reflected forward in the play.

Such a reflection has the force it does in eliciting pity only because the image of Macbeth the full man is so powerfully depicted in Act I. Macbeth contains in himself the seeds of both good and of evil. In this he is "one like ourselves." Perhaps no other hero in literature
is so carefully portrayed as being midway between good and evil, as is Macbeth in Act I. His ambivalence is deftly revealed to us in his first line, "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (I. iii. 38). Lady Macbeth's concern is with destroying her husband's potential for virtue. She fears his nature is "too full of the milk of human kindness/To catch the nearest way" (I. v. 17-18). But Macbeth is still concerned with virtue. He has not yet prayed to "spirits . . . , (to) murthering ministers . . . (that) in sightless substances . . . wait on nature's mischief" (I. v. 50). He still takes his personal obligation to Duncan seriously:

... He's here in double trust:
First as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murtherer shut the door,
Not bear the knife

This is the virtuous part of Macbeth speaking, which, when combined with the courageous hero Macbeth adds up to the full man, Macbeth the tragic hero, whose image, by way of the time break-down, is always reflected forward in the play.

It is the courageous element, in fact, more than anything else, that holds Macbeth's personality together (and therefore the drama), which would otherwise dissolve, as time itself does in the play. Our first impression of Macbeth's courage, through the Sergeant's description, attests to its primacy:

For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel,
Which smoked with bloody execution,
(Like Valor's minion) carv'd out his passage
Til he faced the slave ; . . .
(I. ii. 16-20).
Bravery is the one virtue that Macbeth never loses. We are reminded of it throughout the play up until the end, where Macbeth at least gives the appearance of dying heroically, crying, "Before my body/I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff,/And damned be him who first cries, 'Hold, enough!'" (V. viii. 32-34). No one does cry "Hold!" of course. The word signifies nothing to Macbeth, since the time is passed when Lady Macbeth was worried that Heaven might "peep through the blanket of the dark/To cry, 'Hold, hold!'" (I. v. 53-54) and arouse conscience.

Despite the importance of Macbeth's courage as a protection against the dissolution of his personality under the ravaging effect of time's distortion, it is not a source of pity. Macbeth's courage has only a dramatic purpose, not a tragic one. We are not meant to sympathize with Macbeth because he makes an energetic commitment to evil. We are not meant to praise Macbeth's inverted courage, as Bradley does when he exclaims "What a furious force is the instinct of life and self-assertion that drives him on!" Nor are we meant to feel ambivalent toward Macbeth, as Sanders believes, saying, "No interpretation which fails to reckon with the essential ambivalence of our reaction to the 'criminal' Macbeth can hope to do justice to the depth and subtly of Shakespeare's conception in this play." The subtlety of the conception lies in Shakespeare's ability to shuttle us backwards and forwards through time along the path of moral deterioration, that we may come to understand something of the nature of evil, not in some supposed talent to make us unsure as to whether we should in the final analysis condemn Macbeth as a criminal. We condemn him wholeheartedly. A view of the play which says that "the
tragic experience transcends both repudiation and justification," does not apply in this instance. Macbeth's acts are clearly repudiated and unjustifiable. Sanders comes closer to the mark when he observes the capacity of Shakespeare's verse to "imply judgment without being constricted by it." Consciously, Macbeth is being judged by the reader throughout the play, but more importantly the unconscious mind, which is not subject to time, holds onto the image of the full Macbeth presented in Act I. As Macbeth's moral nature deteriorates, the pivotal words, such as "chance," "infirmity," "dare," "honor," and "fear" cause the unconscious image of the pitiable Macbeth to leak through into the conscious mind while it passes judgment on the murderer. What Sanders describes as an ambivalence between repudiation and justification is actually a continuous movement from judgment to pity, from pity back to judgment, from the conscious mind to the unconscious, back and forth, rather like the pendulum movement mentioned earlier. But because the movement is steady we are not made to feel ambivalent. On the contrary, Shakespeare's artistry creates in us one single emotional-intellectual state which allows us to judge Macbeth and pity him simultaneously. This is not paradoxical or contradictory. The human personality apprehends a single truth through two different faculties, each operating in its own sphere. Human emotions have been directed to fear the loss of Macbeth's soul with horror and pity. The intellect has traced the process of moral deterioration and seen the result. The attitudes which ensue are judgment and pity coexisting in a pure, timeless unity.
II

Our ability to pity the hero is based upon our perception that Macbeth in Act I is capable of choosing not to murder Duncan, which is by no means obvious. In fact, a good case could be made for the reverse. Macbeth's entire fate, it may be argued, is laid out before the play begins, predetermined by the fact that Macbeth is a reprobate, and foreseen by the Weird Sisters by means of their ill-gotten prophetic powers. The prophecies would seem to be more than statements designed to lure Macbeth into an evil path or lucky guesses concerning the future, since the Sisters are accurate in predicting what by human standards are unpredictable events. The prophecy that Macbeth would become king, the prediction concerning Banquo's heirs ("thou shalt get kings"), the assurances that Macbeth will never be slain by one born of woman, that Macbeth should not be vanquished 'til Birnam wood came to Dunsinane, and the injunction to beware MacDuff all suggest the infallibility of the three Sisters. Foreseeing Macbeth's destiny implies a knowledge of the means whereby Macbeth would become king, and therefore that the Sisters knew Macbeth would kill Duncan as merely one step in a series of pre-determined acts. As in Oedipus, the paradigm of oracular drama, fate governs the actions of the hero, leading him into an inevitable end. The Weird Sisters as goddesses of Fate merely reveal destiny in order to
fulfill it, acting profanely under the direction of Providence.

Such a view hinders the ability of the reader to pity Macbeth, since in genuine tragedy "the main character encounters some significant misfortune for which he himself is partly, though not wholly responsible."\textsuperscript{15} If Macbeth is propelled solely by fate in such a way that none of his choices could make any significant difference, if the witches know for a certainty that their prophecy will cause, will necessitate the murder of Duncan, then Macbeth is denied the stature necessary to a tragic hero. He becomes pathetic rather than pitiable, drowning in a destiny which is foreseen and caused by others. His misfortune cannot be tragic if his choices cannot affect it, assuming we agree with Bradley's view that in Shakespearean tragedy "the hero always contributes in some way to the disaster." Overemphasis on the role of the witches leads to a severe difficulty. If the witches are believed to know with absolute certainty that Macbeth will become king by murdering Duncan, then there is no reason for them to prophesy. Such an action would be unnecessary, making the rest of the play a foregone conclusion, excluding a drama of choices. Assuming the witches know with absolute certainty that if they prophesy to Macbeth that he will become king, that he will murder Duncan, as surely as dropping a stone causes it to fall, then the witches must take full responsibility for Duncan's death, and in so doing deny Macbeth's tragic stature. A view of the play which places only \textit{some} of the responsibility on the witches will be more likely to arouse tragic pity than one which portrays Macbeth as a helpless victim of fate.

On the other hand, a view which dismisses the supernatural manifes-
tations as mere illusions is clearly unacceptable for the simple fact that illusions could not conceivably predict the future as the witches do, and for many other reasons that Bradley gives. Bradley, however, underestimates their importance, saying, "The prophecies of the witches are presented simply as dangerous circumstances with which Macbeth has to deal: they are dramatically on the same level as the story of the Ghost in Hamlet . . . ." This ignores the fact that, unlike Hamlet's ghost, the witches are tremendously powerful beings bent on the hero's downfall. It is in this role that they strongly contribute to tragic pity, their evil intent overshadowing Macbeth's own evil and engaging our sympathy for him. An analysis of the witches' prophetic powers must take into account their formidable supernatural ability, but do so without going to the extremes of making them completely responsible for Duncan's murder. It is with an eye towards the danger of exaggerating their power that we proceed.

The witches, in pronouncing Macbeth he who "shalt be king hereafter," however much they show of their supernatural ability, do not show themselves to be Fates or demonstrate that they know absolutely that Macbeth must become king through killing Duncan. Such knowledge would require looking directly into Macbeth's heart and fathoming the operation of his will. Concerning this sort of knowledge Aquinas writes,

A secret thought can be known in two ways: first in its effect. In this way it can be known not only by an angel, but also by man; and with so much the greater subtlety according as the effect is the more hidden. For thought is sometimes discovered not merely by outward act, but also by a change of countenance; and doctors can tell some
affections of the soul by the mere pulse. Much more then can angels, or even demons, the more deeply they penetrate these hidden bodily modifications. Hence Augustine says (De divin daemon) that demons 'sometimes with the greatest facility learn man's dispositions, not only when expressed by speech, but even when conceived by thought, when the soul expresses them by certain signs in the body;' although he says it cannot be asserted how this is done.

In another way thoughts can be known in the mind, and affections as they are in the will, and in this way God alone can know the thoughts of hearts and the affections of wills.  

Though the witches with the help of demons could "learn man's dispositions," or know certain thoughts from their effects, such knowledge is clearly distinguished from God's method of knowing thoughts directly by fathoming the will. Yet to know for certain that Macbeth would kill the king necessitates such direct knowledge of the will, not simply knowledge of his disposition, since knowledge of a man's disposition implies only probable knowledge of his future actions. In the treatise Daemonologie, which Shakespeare probably knew, King James never attributes this power of direct knowledge to spirits; nor does the Bible, which Aquinas quotes to prove that "angels do not know secret thoughts." According to Jeremiah 17:9 "the heart is . . . unsearchable; who can know it? I am the Lord, Who searches the heart," while also in reference to the will one may read I Corinthians 2:11: "the depths of man can be known only by his own spirit." The three Sisters, being only able to know Macbeth's disposition, had to estimate what effect their pronouncement would have on him, as a part of their design for his downfall. Their ability, while not perfect, is formidable beyond the limit of human
imagination, and thus engages our sympathies for Macbeth as a man dealing with forces beyond his ken, which, nonetheless, cannot force him against his will to any single course of action.

Since the witches in Macbeth are eminently successful in their prophecies, it will be wondered what keeps them from absolute knowledge of the future, aside from their limited capacity to know the human heart and will. Aquinas states that there are two ways of knowing the future, the first being a scientific knowledge of causes.

This manner of knowing future events exists in the angels, and by so much the more than it does in us, as they understand the causes of things both more universally and more perfectly . . . In another way, . . . God's one glance is cast over all things which happen in all time as present before Him, and He beholds all things as they are in themselves . . . But the intellect of an angel, and every created intellect, fall far short of God's eternity; hence the future as it is in itself cannot be known by any created intellect.  

The witches' success may be attributed not to some infallible power to know the future in itself, but rather to an ability to discern causes and understand their implications in a manner far beyond human comprehension. James I never wrote that witches possessed the ability to predict this or that man's free choice in any given instance, though he did believe they could "give such answers; of the event of battles, of matters concerning the estate of commonwealths, and such like great questions." James's statement is interesting in light of Bradley's observation that in the witches' prophecies "not one of the things fore-known is an action." Referring to their first prediction, Bradley writes: They merely announced events: they hailed
him as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and king hereafter. No connection of these announce-
ments with any action of his was even hinted by them. For all that appears, the natural death of an old man might have fulfilled the prophecy any day.22

Bradley is correct in questioning the logical connectedness of the murder and Macbeth's future kingship in the minds of the witches, and like Bradley, we might be inclined to imagine numerous ways in which Macbeth could have become king without killing Duncan, in order to show that the witches' prediction could come true without any absolute fore-
knowledge of individual actions. But such thought experiments are unneces-
sary, given that the witches' limitations are clearly indicated in Shakes-
peare's manner of portraying them, and by references made to them by Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, and Banquo.

The first stage direction, "Enter three Witches," should dispel any notion that Shakespeare intended these characters to be interpreted exclusively as goddesses of destiny, the Weird Sisters of legend. Their responses to summons received from familiars, "Graymalkin" and "Paddock," clearly show them to be human beings "who have contracted with devils," as James describes such procedures in his Daemonologie.23 The first witch's tale of the sailor's wife with "chestnuts in her lap" (I. iii. 4-25), illustrating as it does the speaker's petty motives and the limitations of her power, "though his boat cannot be lost,/Yet it shall be tempest-tost," (ll. 24-25) does not square with the image of a goddess of fate who governs the destinies of all mankind (though it does suggest a formidable supernatural ability). Nor does the dignity of any goddess
of destiny match with the image of old hags leaning over a kettle throwing in bits of disused body parts, chanting:

Scale of dragon, tooth of wolf,
Witches' mummy; maw and gulf,
Of the ravin'd salt-sea shark;
Root of hemlock, digg'd i' the dark;
Liver of blaspheming Jew;
Gall of goat, and slips of yew,
Slivered in the moon's eclipse,
Nose of Turk and Tartar's lips;
Finger of birth-strangled babe,
Ditch-delivered by a drab
Make the gruel thick and slab . . .

(IV. i. 21-32).

Wilson observes that the Turk, the Tartar, the Jew and the birth-strangled babe were all "unchristened, and hence valued by witches." Such an observation clearly places the three Sisters in a Christian cosmology as beings subservient to demonic powers from whom they gain their knowledge. They reveal their subservience in the course of the drama when Macbeth "conjures them by that which they profess," preferring to have his questions answered by their masters.

The extent to which we perceive the women as the Weird Sisters indicates the extent to which Shakespeare has us view them through Macbeth's eyes, since the witches' intend Macbeth to misconstrue them as goddesses of fate. Having us see the witches through Macbeth's eyes is a way of having us sympathize with Macbeth, of having us see how a belief in fate can undo a person. The witches' own reference to themselves as the Weird Sisters may be looked upon as a prelude to the impression which they wish to make upon Macbeth in light of their deceptiveness and the fact that Shakespeare states they are witches, and portrays them as such, especially
when Macbeth is not present. Even so, Macbeth gives some indications that he knows these women are not emissaries of fate, but of evil, coming to tempt him. He speaks not of prophecy but of "supernatural soliciting," realizing that he is being tempted by an evil fantasy, as he says "My thought whose murder is but fantastical . . ." (I. iii. 140), echoing the word used in Banquo's expression of doubt as to the witches' nature: "Are ye fantastical, or that indeed/Which outwardly ye show?" (I. iii. 53). Rather than perceiving the women as infallible, Macbeth says merely that "they have more than mortal knowledge in them" in his letter to his wife, biding her rejoice in "what greatness is promised thee" rather than in any greatness that is ordained. The word "promised" is important because it is used not only by Macbeth, but also by Lady Macbeth and later by Banquo in contexts where there is some doubt expressed about the witches' predictions. Lady Macbeth uses the word, saying, "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be/What thou art promis'd" (I. v. 15), as if to say, she will not trust in these predictions, but will take the matter into her own hands. She has more confidence in her power to

chastise with the valor of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round,
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crowned withal
(I. v. 27-30),

as is evidenced by the word "seem." Significantly enough there is no reference to fate or the Sisters during the argument which Macbeth begins by asserting he "will proceed no further." The idea that he is fated becomes meaningless to Macbeth when he considers making a moral decision. It is not, in fact, until Act III that he makes any further reference to
the women, whom he here calls "the Sisters," while reflecting on their message to Banquo: "then prophet-like, they hail'd him father to a line of kings" (III. i. 68). They are only "prophet-like" at this point, and we must wait until after the appearance of Banquo's ghost for Macbeth to say, "I will tomorrow/(And betimes I will) to the Weird Sisters..." (III. iv. 131), thus granting the witches full stature in his mind as goddesses of destiny. The deception which began as "supernatural soliciting," and progressed to a point where, in murdering Banquo, Macbeth bases his calculations on the witches' pronouncements, is complete by the end of Act III. The reader, to the extent that Shakespeare allows him to see the Sisters in moments when they are not appearing to Macbeth, is aware that they are witches posing as fates in order to achieve their purpose.

Banquo, more than any other character who sees them, clues us in to the real nature of the witches, though he is not completely immune from their illusion. When they first appear he is immediately aware of the discrepancy between what they are and "that which outwardly they show." Doubtful of their prophetic ability, and desiring to appear indifferent, he asks the witches to speak to him only if they can "look into the seeds of time,/And say which grain will grow and which will not" (I. iii. 58). Though he is not paralyzed by the appearance of the witches as is Macbeth, Banquo is interested in them, interested enough to desire information, but he does not wish to credit them a full reality at first.

Were such things here, as we do speak about,  
Or have we eaten of the insane root,  
That takes the reason prisoner?  
(I. iii. 83-85).
The first fully sensible statement about the real nature of the witches and their predictions comes when Macbeth receives the news that he has been made Thane of Cawdor. Rather than viewing the news as proof of the Sisters' prophetic ability, Banquo exclaims "What! can the Devil speak true?" (I. iii. 107), laying bare the fact that these "prophecies," whatever truth they may outwardly appear to possess, are treacherous statements designed not to reveal, but ensnare. When Macbeth asks Banquo if he hopes his children will be kings the latter's reply attributes no prophetic ability to the witches, but rather gives the definitive statement of their purpose and a warning to Macbeth that he might be incited to unlawful action.

That, trusted home,
Might yet enkindle you unto the crown,
Besides the Thane of Cawdor. But 'tis strange:
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of Darkness tell us truths;
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence
(I. iii. 120-125).

The words "trusted home," which in Elizabethan English meant "trusted largely or thoroughly," indicate that Macbeth's desire to trust the prediction, though it may gain him the crown, could also cause him to fall. The "truths" which seem impressive are only "honest trifles" spoken venomously by the witches, whose purpose, according to James, is always "to hurt men and their goods, or what they possess, for satisfying their cruel minds." Yet Banquo's later references to the witches as the legendary goddesses of destiny indicate a desire to believe in them, a desire which, however strong, never reaches the
level of blind trust that Macbeth evinces in Act V. When Banquo tells
Macbeth in Act II, "I dreamt last night of the Weird Sisters:/To you
have they show'd some truth," nothing has changed: Macbeth is still only
Thane of Glamis and Cawdor. Banquo has no new information which would
make him alter his former opinion of them, and yet here he prefers,
rather than calling them instruments of darkness, to term them the Weird
Sisters, giving credence to their illusion. Macbeth's refusal to speak
of such things ("I think not of them") forces us to wait until after
Duncan's murder to find out the extent of Banquo's ambivalence.

    Thou hast it now, king, Cawdor, Glamis, all,
    As the Weird Women promis'd; and, I fear,
    Thou play'dst most fouly for't; yet it was said,
    It should not stand in thy posterity;
    But that myself should be the root and father
    Of many kings. If there come truth from them-
    (As upon thee, Macbeth, their speeches shine),
    Why, by the verities on thee made good,
    May they not be my oracles as well,
    And set me up in hope?
    (III. i. 1-10).

More impressed than ever by the Sisters' power to predict, Banquo still
recognizes that they are mortal, calling them "the Weird Women."
Though the witches accurately stated that Macbeth would become Cawdor
and king, there remains the doubt, "If there come truth from them . . . ,"
expressing hesitancy about the illusory nature of their "oracles."
King James wrote, "all Oracles and such like kinds of illusions were
taken away and abolished by the coming of Christ," except those the
Devil gives to his sworn disciples.26 Macbeth becomes such a disciple
when he swears,"I conjure you by that which you profess," while Banquo
in asking himself if the witches' statements could become his oracles is
considering himself as an infernal disciple in a way that would enslave him to their illusion. Yet at no time does Banquo lose his awareness that the Sisters are not privy to destiny, for he says, "as the Weird Women promised," not as the Weird Women ordained, a far cry from Macbeth's "the spirits that know/All mortal consequences have pronounced me thus..." which virtually credits them with omniscience. Banquo, in asking whether those oracles which have "shined" on Macbeth may become his own, gives us a very different understanding of the whole notion of oracles from that contained in Oedipus, since the Greek cosmology does not portray an opposition between an omniscient God and finite fallen spirits, Apollo being venerated for having an access to fate that the witchly servants of demons could not. While the "sin" in Oedipus is to disbelieve in the oracles and believe one can avoid their pronouncements, the sin in Macbeth is to believe in them and act as if they were true, as Banquo points out when he says their messages are designed to "win us to our harm."

Apart from statements by Aquinas, James, and the Bible, evidence from the play suggests that the witches are not prophets, but "prophet-like," that they do not genuinely predict but "promise" in order to tempt, that though "they have more in them than mortal knowledge" they do not even appear infallible unless we trust them absolutely. What then are we to make of the prophecy concerning Banquo, "Thou shalt get kings though thou be none?" Since Banquo never comes to place his full trust in the witches, they can hardly be said to have the same influence over him as they do over Macbeth. Unfortunately our effort to understand
the witches' prophetic ability by reference to the characters in the play, must stop short here, since the prediction concerning Banquo's heirs is never actually fulfilled in the course of the drama. This might seem to pose no problem, since the fulfillment of the prophecy was assumed by a Shakespearean audience. But the matter is not so simple.

So do you not hope your children shall be kings
When those that gave the Thane of Cawdor to me
Promis'd no less to them?
(I. iii. 117-119).

The truth is that none of Banquo's children ever became kings, nor did any of his grandchildren. The nature of the prophecy is made all the more doubtful by the fact that after Fleance's escape there is no further reference to him or to any of Banquo's heirs, other than to say, after Banquo's murder, the worm that's fled,

Hath nature that in time will venom breed,
No teeth for th' present
(III. iv. 28-30).

History, and not the play, is the only lamp which can shed light on Banquo's descent, a brief look at which is justified since the facts were familiar to an aristocratic audience during the reign of James, whose ancestry Macbeth was supposed to glorify.

The prophecy given Banquo would have meant nothing to Fleance, nor to his son, his grandson or his great-grandson. According to Holinshed, after Banquo's murder, Fleance took refuge in Wales, where shortly after his courteous and amiable behavior, he grew into such favor and estimation with the prince of that country, that he might not wish any greater; at length also he came into such familiar acquaintance with the said prince's
daughter, that she of courtesy in the end suffered
him to get her with child; which being once under­
stood, her father the prince conceived such hateful
displeasure towards Fleance, that he finally slew
him and held his daughter in the most vile estate
of servitude, for that she had consented on this
wise to be deflowered by a stranger. 27

Condensing the full account of Fleance's descendants, the child born
from this union was named Walter, who had a son named Alane, who in turn
had a son named Alexander, and so on until the eighth generation, when
Walter, third of that name in Banquo's line, married Margaret Bruce,
daughter of King Robert Bruce, who produced a child, Robert that became
King Robert II of Scotland in fulfillment of the prediction that Banquo
would "be father to a line of kings." In truth he became the great-
great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandfather to a line of kings.
Shakespeare wisely left the ancestry out because it would clutter the
action of his most stream-lined drama, though it does have important
implications for evaluating the witches' prophetic ability. While
Macbeth is in part to be viewed as the celebration of the Stuart line,
the difference between the late tragedy and the early history Richard III
as a celebration of the Tudor line cannot go unnoticed, insofar as we
see Henry Tudor's succession as the culminating act of the latter play.
Since the prophecy in Richard III "that Richmond should be king" (Richard
III. IV. ii. 99) is fulfilled in the course of the drama, the prophecy
concerning Banquo's heirs in Macbeth may be seen as circuitous by com­
parison. Logically speaking, it may be possible to say that, given the
intermarrying common amongst the members of the Scottish nobility one
might predict that any well-born Lord would have descendants who at some
point would marry into the royal line. How much easier it is for spirits to make such forecasts, since they "know the future in the same way (as men) but much more acutely." Historical knowledge of the way in which Banquo's prophecy is fulfilled further reinforces the thesis that the witches' ability to see the future is an amplification of our human ability to predict, rather than a key to fate.

In delimiting the prophetic powers of the Sisters, one should not go far beyond the attempt to prove that their abilities are finite, that only God has perfect knowledge of future events in themselves. The use of thought experiments, logic, and historical examples can in no way undermine our impression that the three Sisters, though they fall short of being divinities, have a knowledge derived from spirits which far outstrips human knowledge, since spirits "understand the causes of things more universally and more perfectly." No analysis can undercut the feeling that it requires near infinite wisdom to predict that "none born of woman shall harm Macbeth" or to foresee that

Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be, until
Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill
Shall come against him
(IV. i. 92-94).

Even supposing that as Macbeth yields to evil his thoughts become more transparent to the witches, we cannot fathom their ability to accurately describe Macbeth's future in the terms they do. Nor can we, after seeing Macbeth sent to his doom at the play's conclusion, as if in fulfillment of a divine prophecy, keep from marvelling at the witches' warning, "Beware Macduff." Yet this is as it should be. We are immensely impressed
by the witches but not overwhelmed, as is Macbeth.

Whereas infinite darkness would blot it out, the witches' power casts a great shadow over the play which throws Macbeth's life into tragic relief. It is possible to pity Macbeth, not because he is the toy of fate, but for the simple fact that he is outmatched, in spite of all his noble human qualities, by superhuman intelligence. It is not a question of coercion or fatedness, but of superior knowledge conspiring to destroy a great man (as in the case of Iago's attempt to destroy Othello) by a direct attack upon him at his weakest point and in his weakest moment by the most devious means. It is the idea of fate, the idea of a glorious destiny that enables the witches to gain their success. The spectacle of Banquo's ambivalent consideration of his own supposed fate raises Macbeth still further in our esteem, since Banquo, though never corrupted, was neither offered so much nor the means to achieve it. The presentation of the witches as women who magically take the guise of fate in the form of the "Weird Sisters," as beings not capable of destroying Macbeth's moral nature without his consent, yet capable of throwing him into that state where "function is smothered in surmise," causes us to pity him as we would any tragic hero placed in profoundly unfortunate and difficult circumstances. Even as a man contemplating murder, Macbeth is pitiable, since his is no ordinary murder committed for personal gain, but a murder incited as a part of a plan virtually unfathomable to mortal minds, a plan whose supernatural design is the complete destruction of Macbeth in body, mind and soul.
III

Attempts to explain how it is that we may pity Macbeth often focus in on his emotional states. It is argued that we feel along with Macbeth the threat of exposure, the anxieties of a perilous position, relentless enclosure by men and circumstances, the dread of nightmares and insomnia, a pressing need for safety, the pain of miscalculation, a gnawing sense of the bad bargain, while we are of course sympathetic in the end to the role of underdog. Yet these emotions by themselves are insufficient to induce pity. We do not pity Macbeth as Macbeth after the murder of Duncan because we sense that his moral nature is virtually destroyed. We pity him reflectively, via the dissolution of time, remembering what he was in Act I; and we pity Macbeth as he is in Act I, before the murder, beset by the witches' devious ploys, insidious and life-destroying as they are, and by the even greater influence of his wife. Before discussing the tragic error which allows Macbeth's wife to exert her will over his, we must examine briefly the nature of her influence and its effect on our sympathy towards Macbeth.

However much we may pity Macbeth for the fact that the three Sisters have chosen him for their designs, our feeling for him is much further increased by the presence of Lady Macbeth, who is a far worse threat to her husband's well-being than any supernatural power, if only
by her proximity. While the witches seem intent on making Macbeth king by the worst means in order to destroy his moral nature, Lady Macbeth is most certainly intent upon destroying Macbeth's moral nature as a means of making him king. Despite her certainty of the fact that Macbeth desires the crown, she is wary of what she perhaps conceives to be his innate goodness.

--- Yet I do fear thy nature:
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great;
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it . . .
(I. v. 16-20).

"Illness" in Elizabethan English meant not sickness or disease, but evil or wickedness. If Lady Macbeth is afraid that her husband lacks the wicked nature that should accompany a desire for power, this may be because she fears something like innate goodness in herself, a capacity for conscience, a "milk of human kindness" which so threatens her designs that she fervently prays to have it removed.

make thick my blood,
Stop up the access and passage to remorse . .
Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall . . .
Come, thick Night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes . . .
(I. v. 42-53).

The desire not to see the knife implies an intention to perform the murder herself. She suggests so much when she says to her husband, "you shall put/This night's great business into my dispatch;" and again, after Macbeth says, "We will speak further" (I. v. 67), when she replies, "Leave all the rest to me" (ll. 71-74). Her prayers seem unanswered and her
fears about her own goodness justified when, after leaving the daggers close to Duncan where Macbeth could find them she observes, "-- Had he not resembled/My father as he slept, I had done't," revealing that she was not filled "top-full/Of direst cruelty" (One may wonder what she would have said if Macbeth had returned from Duncan's chamber with a similar excuse). Lady Macbeth's belief that she has some goodness in her that needs to be culled out, which is in small part substantiated by her failure to kill Duncan, plays a significant role in enabling the reader to pity Macbeth. If she were merely a fiend, it would be impossible to explain why Macbeth, "a man framed for a good and noble life," would ever trust her. Though not evil enough to do the deed herself, Lady Macbeth expends her energy in an effort to convince her husband to do it. She is much more successful in rooting out Macbeth's moral nature than her own, insofar as she convinces him to do what she could not.

It is ironically Macbeth's dependence on the bond he has with his wife, and his failure to evaluate it critically, which in the end lead to his being unable to mourn his wife's death. We pity him for the fact that this very bond (at one time perhaps a good thing in itself) becomes the source of his own undoing as it is misused by Lady Macbeth as a means of attacking her husband's resolve. We add Lady Macbeth's vigorous assault on her husband's moral nature to the supernatural calculations of the three Sisters, and they constitute the most frightful circumstance a tragic hero could endure: a conspiracy of profane and powerful enemies in the world at large who "have more in them than mortal knowledge" and the contrivances of one's own intimate wife in the home. Macbeth's own role
in his downfall is certainly not to be downplayed; otherwise he would not be a tragic protagonist according to the definition a hero who "encounters significant misfortune for which he himself is partly, though not wholly responsible." Though the Sisters and Lady Macbeth are in part responsible for the extent to which Macbeth is "enkindled unto the crown," and are therefore also crucial in determining the extent to which we pity him, Macbeth's tragic error is his own and must be understood as such.

The mistake which Macbeth makes, that leads him to trust in the witches' prophecies and in his wife's designs, the mistake for which he holds tragic responsibility, stems from his reasoning out the way in which he believes he may become king.

If Chance will have me King, why Chance may crown me, Without my stir
(I. iii. 143-144).

What Macbeth means here by the word "chance" is a flow of events over which he refuses to exert control, hence the qualification, "without my stir." Though we might demand a more precise definition of the word, this would be contrary to Shakespeare's intention, since it is the very ambiguity of the term, as Macbeth uses it, that signifies Macbeth's openness to what may come his way, whether good or ill. The OED defines chance variously as "the falling out or happening of events," "a casual or fortuitous circumstance," and as "a matter which falls out or happens; a fortuitous event or occurrence; often an unfortunate event, mishap, mischance." The word "accident" is also given as a synonym. The general sense of most of the definitions is that of an external event
over which an individual has no influence. Used by Shakespeare in this manner, the word would signify an intention on Macbeth's part to disregard his own ability to affect events in favor of allowing events to affect him. Shakespeare uses the word similarly in other plays, for instance when referring to Antony's decision to fight on the sea, where his men lack experience.

[You] quite forgo
The way which promises assurance; and
Give up yourself merely to chance and hazard,
From firm security


It is by taking control of events, insofar as it is humanly possible, that one avoids being victimized by circumstances, not by allowing the events to control life apart from will, as Nestor points out, using the crucial word, saying, "in the reproof of chance/Lies the true proof of men" (Troilus and Cressida. I. iii. 33). This same thought is expressed negatively by Florizel, whose equation of guilt and slavery to chance is roughly applicable to Macbeth's situation.

... as the unthought-on accident is guilty
To what we wildly do, so we profess
Ourselves to be the slaves of chance and flies
Of every wind that blows


Macbeth professes himself to be a slave to chance in saying "chance will crown him," not simply as a way of relieving himself of the responsibility of what follows, but more importantly, in hopes that circumstances will lead to his kingship. This outlook, which is certainly distinct from the conscious decision to commit murder, allows us to sympathize with Macbeth, much more than we might be able to if he vowed to become a
murderer, and contributes to tragic pity, in that a seemingly harmless attitude which trusts to circumstances becomes changed into a sort of willlessness which is easily manipulated. Of course, one cannot call Macbeth's murder "unthought-on," or deny that Macbeth takes the idea of murder seriously, but it will be seen that it is Macbeth's refusal to decide not to commit murder, combined with his trust in chance, rather than a full-fledged dedication to evil in the manner of Richard III, that leads to his killing Duncan.

There is one passage which editors include in the play that would seem to belie this view of Macbeth's relation to evil. After Shakespeare has taken great pains to depict Macbeth's ambiguous attitude toward murder and the kingship in Act I, scene iii., we read in scene iv, after Malcolm has been named Duncan's heir, the following lines:

Macb. [Aside] The Prince of Cumberland! -- That is a step
On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires!
Let not light see my black and deep desires;
The eye wink at the hand; let that be,
Which the eye fears, when it is done to see
(I. iv. 48-53).

This passage would seem to indicate a strong conscious decision to do evil, not just a desire, but a decision to hide and/or cultivate the desire. The commitment to chance would seem to have been abandoned at this point. In reply it may be argued first that we are dealing with an interpolation. Granville-Barker described this particular aside as "ineptly contrived," remarking that it "is surely, in such a play and with such a character un-Shakespearean," while the critic Fleay suspected that Middleton wrote the passage. But supposing we grant that it is
Shakespeare's, such an aside may be conceived as symptomatic of Macbeth's decision to commit one's affairs entirely to chance. Giving up the faculty of choosing, makes one as much a victim of base desires as a slave to external circumstances. The words, "let that be/Which the eye fears, when it is done to see," if we accept them as Shakespearean, should be viewed not so much as a conscious musing as a sign of the moral disorder in Macbeth caused by the renunciation of choice, a sign of the resulting separation of the mind, symbolized by the eye, and the will, symbolized by the hand: the eye winks at the hand. This image informs us of the divorce of the mind's power to decide what is good from the will's ability to enact it. A strong indication that trusting in chance is responsible for this divorce comes from Macbeth's words upon hearing from Macduff that Duncan is dead: "Had I but died an hour before this chance,/I had lived a blessed time . . ." (II. iii. 91). Macbeth speaks of Duncan's death as if it were a circumstance or an accident, using the crucial word "chance," suggesting ironically that it was his decision to trust chance that led to Duncan's murder. Although the statement "If Chance will have me king, why Chance/may crown me," might appear to signify a desire to become king without murdering Duncan, a stance which may seem to be abandoned after Malcolm is pronounced Duncan's heir, the statement's true import lies in an abandonment of will to external circumstances, an attitude which does not exclude or embrace murder, but which, because of its will-less character, has tragic consequences.

Macbeth's attitude, characterized as a complete faith in externals, or more accurately, as a decision to do nothing, differs in the extreme
from Lady Macbeth's philosophy of the active pursuit of the crown; but since she is the nearest "external" she is able to make his "murderous thought" somewhat less than fantastical, by filling the vacuum of his refusal to act. This is not so difficult, since no matter how afraid Macbeth may be of the idea of committing murder, he does not seem to mind the idea of the murder's being done.

If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly . . .
(I. vii. 1-2).

The mixed use in this short sentence of the conditional ("If it were done"), the indefinite present ("when 'tis done"), the subjunctive ("then 'twere well it were done"), plus the continued pounding use of the past participle ("done, . . . done, . . . done, . . .") serves tremendously to unnerve the time sense. Since choice is what links man in a meaningful way to time, Macbeth's decision not to do anything, to trust chance, makes him in a sense a non-entity existing outside of time. Saying, "'twere well it were done quickly" is not too different from saying "'twere well it were done without my stir," and while such an attitude releases Macbeth from the decision to commit murder, it simultaneously keeps him from deciding not to.

Macbeth's error, a supreme faith in chance, which never allows him a moment in which he could choose not to murder Duncan, becomes more and more acute as the instant of Duncan's death draws nearer. When Lady Macbeth insults her husband for deciding to break the vow he once made to kill Duncan, we are ironically informed of the significance this faith will have for Macbeth's future.
Faith in chance, it seems, has brought the crown close without his stir; but the "fitness" of the ensuing events will unmake Macbeth literally, both morally and spiritually. After his wife's chastisement, we have the illusion that Macbeth has made a decision to murder Duncan. He says, "I am settled, and bend up/Each corporal agent to this terrible feat" (I. vii. 80-81). Since, as Kittredge very plausibly explains, the image is one of a crossbow being strung, the suggestion is in reality not one of deliberate choice, but of Macbeth's preparing himself to be shot like a will-less arrow. Soon the illusion of choice disappears altogether. External objects take on the role of choosing for him. The dagger, which does not seem to exist any more than Macbeth's decision to kill Duncan ("There's no such thing."), gives him the command to continue moving forward ("Thou marshall'st me the way I was going"). This is necessary because Macbeth has no command over himself. He moves almost will-lessly, "like a ghost," while his passivity is contrasted with the strong enemy to whom he attributes the power to betray his steps, "Thou sure and firm-set earth" (II. i. 56). Macbeth speaks more than he acts in this scene, even as he realizes, "Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives" (II. i. 61). Actions speak louder than words, and by a similar logic, Macbeth's lack of action is a kind of silence. And because silence is consent, Macbeth's persistence in the error of not deciding, not consciously acting, not willing, is leading him to consent
to the murder. Macbeth has merely followed the marshaling of the
dagger without consciously willing or doing. Instead of "going in
order to do it," Macbeth says, "I go, and it is done" (II. i. 62).
But as the urging of the dagger becomes insufficient, another external
object is needed to become his commander.

... the bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell
That summons thee to Heaven, or to Hell
(II. i. 62-64).

Macbeth's last reflections, before going in, are on the summons that
Duncan will receive, and so indirectly on the summons he is receiving
from the bell to kill Duncan, the "invitation," as he calls it, without
any thought of his own choiceless drift toward disaster.

The error of trusting chance in Macbeth initiates the destruction
of time, though time is disrupted before the process of destruction
begins. Time is disrupted for Macbeth the moment the witches appear and
he becomes paralyzed, though it is only afterwards that he demonstrates
awareness of the disruption with the simple observation "... nothing
is, but what is not" (I. iii. 142). Still, Macbeth's fear is "less
than horrible imagining" as long as the "horrid image" of Duncan's murder
remains separate from the idea of Macbeth's own future kingship. Entrusting
the future to chance, however, leaves Macbeth unable to maintain that
separation, since it could only be maintained by deliberate choice. After
this point, Macbeth seemingly remains on the far side of time, strongly
desiring the end without rejecting the means which he so greatly dreads.
Strange reflections are the result of this perspective.
. . . if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease, success; that but this blow
 Might be the be-all and the end-all — here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time . . .
(I. vii. 2-6).

In trusting chance and trying to cast himself out of the stream of time, Macbeth perceives the stream as moving on without him, since, without choosing, he is not a participant in time. Yet trammelling (catching with a net) the consequences of an action implies entering the water.

The truth is that Macbeth will not become a detached observer on the bank, watching time pass in hopes that a crown will jump out of the stream onto his head. If he will trust chance, then such a trust will amount to a refusal to decide, a refusal to navigate the stream by keeping one eye on the future and one eye on the present; and as a result of this trust he will become a boat without a rudder, or worse yet, a finless fish to be tangled in someone else's net.

Time remains disrupted as long as Macbeth refuses to act, and then deteriorates, although the possibility of time's natural order being reestablished is presented whenever Macbeth imagines himself performing an action. This occurs when Macbeth sees himself as he "Who should against the murderer shut the door,/Not bear the knife . . ." (I. vii. 15), and leads him to assert, "We will proceed no further in this business" (I. vii. 31). The reestablishment of time's rightful order and Macbeth's connectedness to it is posited as early as Act I, scene iii, when thanks are extended to Rosse and Angus.

Kind gentlemen, your pains
Are registered where everyday I turn
The leaf to read them
(I. iii. 151-152).
The image of turning the pages, representing the passage of days, indicates a normal time sequence, while the grateful attitude, if expressed genuinely and continually to the king, would constitute the abandonment of chance in favor of love, the expression of which Duncan knows Macbeth to be capable, as he refers to "... his great love, sharp as his spur."
The image of the spur returns when Macbeth reasons that he can find nothing which will impel him to commit murder, even his inordinate desire for power.

--- I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, . . .
(I. vii. 25-27).

The words "but only" would appear to signify "but merely," preceding as they do Macbeth's refusal to go forward "in this business," and they would thus imply the insufficiency of ambition as a spur. There is just one spur which would enable Macbeth to act in any genuine sense, and so prevent him from choicelessly moving towards his end. This would be the spur Duncan mentioned, "his great love," which would cause Macbeth to feel more strongly his obligation toward Duncan or to see him for at least an instant as a father figure, as Lady Macbeth does, and so abstain from killing him. As it is, by placing his trust not in his own ability to choose, but in events which "have made themselves," events which lead him out of the reach of love, Macbeth permits himself to fall into that servitude which results in Duncan's murder. Shakespeare has Macbeth allude to this condition of servitude ironically, when Macbeth deplores his inability to have acted as a proper host to Duncan.

Being unprepared
Our will become the servant to defect,
Which else should free have wrought

(II. i. 18-19).

The waiting upon chance, which in Macbeth's mind has accompanied the refusal to act, is identical to becoming a "servant to defect" and carries with it a deleterious effect upon Macbeth's attitude toward time.

The effect is distortion, which first becomes evident in a curious twist of phrasing, revealing something about the relation between time and chance in Macbeth's mind.

Think upon what hath chanc'd; and
at more time,
The Interim having weighed, let us speak
Our free hearts each to other

(I. iii. 154-156).

The words "at more time" represent no passage of events, but conceive of time as location, while "The Interim having weighed" represents time as mass, something tangible. Macbeth, at this early stage in his decline, is beginning to see temporality as something quite apart from himself, as if he were situated outside of time on its "bank and shoal."

What "hath chanc'd" is the appearance of the witches. In this scene, the first in which Macbeth appears, the protagonist has already given himself a definition of chance. This definition, (following as it does Macbeth's reflection that chance might crown him without his stir) more than any other single statement determines the nature of Macbeth's tragedy.

Come what come may,
Time and the hour runs through the roughest day

(I. iii. 147).

Chance, which will crown Macbeth, is defined here as "Come what come may,"
whatever will happen will happen regardless of my decision. This thought initiates Macbeth's rejection of personal responsibility and involvement in time. Rather than keeping him hopeful of the future and obligated to the present, Macbeth's reflection that "Time and the hour runs through the roughest day" starts a break-down in temporality which accompanies a moral deterioration: Chance is defined in terms of time, in such a way that Macbeth may relieve himself of the responsibility to decide. Through the poetic dissolution of time, the moment when Macbeth formulates this definition is reflected forward to us after the murder, as are many crucial moments in the play by use of a pivotal word. When Lennox tells Macbeth, before Duncan's body has been discovered, that "the night has been unruly," adding a description of noises and "confused events," Macbeth succinctly agrees, "Twas a rough night" (II. iii. 63). The word "rough," used only once before in the sentence "Time runs through the hour and the roughest day," takes us backwards, and suggests the nature of the tragedy: Macbeth's day has become night, now that time has fallen prey to chance.

The effect of Macbeth's attitude toward chance is decisive in the reader's being able to pity him. We pity Macbeth because he does not begin with the overt intention of committing murder. He has a great ambition, but he trusts in chance, as many do without serious consequences. However, in Macbeth's case this is perilous. In trusting chance, Macbeth is trusting external influences rather than internal (moral) resources. The externals, the witches and Lady Macbeth, acting as the forgers of Macbeth's tragic predicament, are given credence and so allowed their
influence. The result is Macbeth's downfall. The distinction between choosing to trust in chance and choosing outrightly to commit murder makes the difference between our pitying and our despising Macbeth. Upon comparing out of context Hamlet's "... if it be not now, yet it will come. The readiness is all," and Lear's "the ripeness is all," with Macbeth's "Come what come may,/Time and the hour runs through the roughest day," we will note little difference in the sentiment. What differs primarily are the circumstances in which these words are uttered; and the circumstances in Macbeth's case are such that we do pity him, though in a very different way than we do either Hamlet or Lear. Macbeth's fall into immorality is made worthy of our pity by the fact that he trusts to chance in the very moment when external circumstances are most unfavorable: his own wife is hard at work praying to spirits to perfect her cruelty, the witches are conspiring to turn his military victory into a moral defeat ("When the battle's lost and won"), and Duncan is deciding to name Malcolm his heir and visit Macbeth's castle the very same day, when Macbeth's victory has made him most susceptible to temptation. The difficulty of these circumstances is compounded by the fact that the three Sisters most certainly know the dispositions of Duncan and Lady Macbeth and are using this to their advantage. Admittedly we find it difficult to pity Macbeth for his suffering after the murder of Duncan, since we feel that his suffering is deserved. But we do pity Macbeth on the whole because of the way in which he was drawn into that position where he had to suffer. Shakespeare's technique of sending the reader back to the point before Macbeth was led into that position, combined with the
depiction of the witches' tremendous supernatural power and Lady Macbeth's strong influence over her husband, together with an emphasis on Macbeth's dedication to chance, rather than to murder, makes for an unparalleled success in compelling the reader to pity an unrepentant murderer.
Notes


4 Bradley, p. 10-12.

5 Bradley, p. 386.


7 Bradley, p. 8.

8 Bradley, p. 23.


10 Grebanier, p. 1.

11 Bradley, p. 362.


13 Sanders, p. 292.
14 Sanders, p. 293.


16 Bradley, p. 340-349.

17 Bradley, p. 343.


19 Aquinas, p. 297.


21 Bradley, p. 345.

22 Bradley, p. 344.

23 James, p. 19.


25 James, p. 35.

26 James, p. 53.


28 Aquinas, p. 297.

30 Grebanier, p. 1.


33 Muir, p. 45.


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