

HUMANE STATUTE AND THE GENTLE WEAL: HISTORICAL READING AND HISTORICAL ALLEGORY

KATHLEEN McCLUSKIE

I

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* has come in for some critical battering in recent times. The recurrent retreat from bardolatry has disconnected the play from its author, and the critical consensus is based on an acceptance that the Folio text of the play is a palimpsest of at least two versions: one from the time of the Gunpowder plot and one, with Middleton's additional songs, late enough to have been influenced by Jonson's *Masque of Queens*. The bibliographical uncertainties of the text (which are not many) have been used to endorse a freedom of interpretation that releases the play from historical particularity into wider speculation.

Stephen Orgel, for example, can assert that the Folio version was 'prepared for a single, special occasion' (p. 144),¹ a performance for King James VI and I, named as the 'great king' for whom the witches perform their antic round in Act 4. Orgel is too serious a scholar to hide the absence of any evidence for a court performance. However his historicist methodology allows him both to develop a political reading that depends upon the presence of the king and to reverse the argument by suggesting that the additional witch scenes constituted an effort, 'with uncertain success, to liven up an unpopular play' (p. 148).

Orgel's speculations are part of the background to an eloquently persuasive reading of the play's political ambiguity and its explicit exclusion of women. In fact, he seems to reject pedantic searching after the facts of the case in favour of a butterfly chase after 'the free-floating signifiers of

post-modern theory, standing for an infinitely variable range of signifieds' (p. 143). The truth of the play's origins and the integrity of the text cannot be settled and so cannot act as any corrective to the free play of an imaginative critical reading. On the other hand, the indeterminacy of the play's historical existence cannot allow it to remain meaningless. The puzzling co-existence of the theatrical 'delights' of the witches' show and their terrible impact articulated by Macbeth must be resolved in a reading that insists on a political fable to do with the recurrent and dangerous instability brought about by the combination of a weak king and a powerful warrior.

The readings that result from this freedom do accumulate an authenticity of their own. Orgel's recent essay gains some of its authoritative impact from the prior existence of both Alan Sinfield's earlier work on the play's embodiment of oppositional early-modern politics and Janet Adelman's psychoanalytic account of the terror of maternity that runs through its action and language.² The methods of historical analogy and psychoanalytically informed close reading have replaced bibliography and positivist historicism as the building blocks of critical innovation. There is no longer

¹ Stephen Orgel, 'Macbeth and the Antic Round', *Shakespeare Survey* 52 (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 143–54.

² Janet Adelman, 'Escaping the Matrix: The Construction of Masculinity in *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus*', in *Suffocating Mothers: Fantasies of Maternal Origin in Shakespeare's Plays* (London, 1992), pp. 130–64; Alan Sinfield, 'Macbeth: History, Ideology and Intellectuals', *Critical Quarterly*, 28 (1986), 63–77.

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any need to find proof positive that 'the play as we have it derives from court performance' but where H. N. Paul used the connection with King James to valorize the contemporary cultural impact of Shakespeare's work,³ more recent critics have used the same connection to denounce Shakespeare's creative use of his source materials as no more than cheap opportunism.

Diane Purkiss, for example, uses the connections between *Macbeth*, a contemporary news-book account of James VI and I's trial of the witches of Berwick and *The Masque of Queens* to denounce Shakespeare's artistic integrity. She finds him 'unblushingly strip mining both popular culture and every learned text he can lay his hands on for the sake of creating an arresting stage event'.⁴ Purkiss's Shakespeare is guilty of the same politically motivated insensitivity as James VI. James had forced Gillies Duncan to display her bewitching songs for the court as an entertainment in the course of his trial of the Berwick witches, accused of causing the storm at sea that had endangered the life of the king on his return from Denmark with his bride. Shakespeare in the theatre is seen as responsible only for 'unbridled sensationalism, which looks less appealing once the listener is conscious of the female voices suppressed' (p. 207).

In Purkiss's case, too, the history invoked offers a generalized chronological connection that cannot fully sustain her distinction between suppressed women's voices and the appropriating male artist. As Christina Lerner has described, the language and references to legal processes in *News from Scotland* show that it must have been produced in England rather than Scotland, one of a series of news stories of witch trials published at the turn of the century.⁵ What made the Berwick witch accusations special was that they turned on an alleged attempt on the life of the king himself. Local practice had become treason. Even more significant was the fact that James had returned from a visit to the Danish court. As well as collecting his bride there, he had spent time engaged in learned discussion with Danish theologians, expert in the continental demonology which had provided the intellectual rationale for the witch trials in Europe. The initial charges that

witches had caused the gales which almost drowned the king and queen were initially made on the Danish side of the North Sea, but similar accusations were levelled at their Scottish counterparts, probably initiated by James himself. Unravelling the resulting murderous mix of local prejudice, clashing personalities, theological disputes and national politics is a daunting task for historical anthropologists: what it cannot do is to provide a simple line from a Scottish witch trial to the reception of an English play written nearly two decades later.

Both Orgel and Purkiss in different ways employ a method that Halpern has described as 'historical allegory'.⁶ They elucidate meanings which were not necessarily identified in their originating moment but which nonetheless depend on a sense of history for their validation and critical weight. They offer fables that resonate with modern instances but are given their significance by their historical context. Although this context is only sketched in, it can stand for a contextualizing approach against which alternative decontextualizing approaches can be framed.⁷

Frank Kermode, for example, addresses his study of Shakespeare's language to the ever-elusive 'non-professional audience with an interest in Shakespeare'.⁸ He acknowledges the quality of contemporary scholarship but explicitly chooses to ignore it, in favour of attention to the long-accepted superiority of Shakespeare's poetry. 'Language' here means poetry, not historical linguistics, and, in the account of *Macbeth*, other historical considerations of the provenance of the text, or the dating of the play are briskly dispatched. What follows

³ Henry N. Paul, *The Royal Play of Macbeth* (New York, 1950).

⁴ Daine Purkiss, *The Witch in History: Early Modern and Twentieth Century Representations* (London, 1996), p. 207.

⁵ Christina Lerner, 'James VI and I and Witchcraft' in Alan G. R. Smith, ed., *The Reign of James VI and I* (Basingstoke, 1973), pp. 74–90.

⁶ Richard Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns* (Ithaca, 1997), p. 12.

⁷ See Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns*, p. 40 on this 'oscillation within the critical dilemma of modernism'.

⁸ Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language* (London 2000), p. vii.

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is a brilliantly eloquent explication of the play's central ethical paradoxes: that action cannot provide resolution; that the 'mere successiveness of time' (p. 215) is ultimately uncontrollable. Those observations about the action of *Macbeth* are partly commonplaces, but the quotations and the connection to the narrative of regicide and remorse give them a resonance that comes, at least in part, from their familiarity. Kermode builds on the resonance of that familiarity by connecting these ideas to a world older even than Shakespeare. He traces analogies between Shakespeare's ideas expressed in *Macbeth* and the deep past of St Augustine's confessions (p. 205) to create the sense that these are truths transcending time. Yet, in spite of this historical gesture, his interpretation ultimately depends upon assertion rather than proof:

It is surely impossible to deny that certain words – 'time', 'man', 'done' – and certain themes – 'blood', 'darkness' – are the matrices of the language of *Macbeth*. In the period of the great tragedies these matrices appear to have been fundamental to Shakespeare's procedures. (p. 215)

His final statement acknowledges the open-endedness of his reading and its transcendence of history:

We cannot assign them any limited significance. All may be said to equivocate, and on their equivocal variety we impose our limited interpretation. (p. 216)

Kermode would certainly not echo Orgel's statement about the postmodern condition that informs all modern criticism⁹ but his open-ended conclusion suggests that the oscillation between contextualized and decontextualized criticism is becoming less pronounced. Whether critics focus on the history or the poetry, they are more willing to acknowledge the intellectual autonomy of their findings, the sense that they speak as much to our own preoccupations as to some essential character of the plays. Those preoccupations may be located in philosophical abstraction or in pressing contemporary concerns with tyranny or sexual difference but in either case they are addressed via aesthetic or imaginative appreciation.¹⁰

That aesthetic or imaginative appreciation, however, needs itself to be historicized. As Jonathan

Bate has described, the 'genius' of Shakespeare is itself a product of historical contingency.¹¹ The passages chosen by Kermode, the illustrative historical texts chosen by Purkiss and Orgel, had already been selected by the individuals in the long list of famous and obscure commentators who preceded those critics. Reading the notes to the late nineteenth-century Variorum edition is a salutary reminder of how much work stands between the play and its modern reception and how that work, in theatre history, comparative quotation and source study, defines the limits of the editorial process. Moreover, the practice in early editions of marking fine passages and the collection of these in volumes of 'beauties' throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reveals a palimpsest of the play that is more familiar even than that of the Folio text.¹² Editions of the Folio text themselves reinforce that tendency since they routinely smooth the uneven lineation into regular blank verse and retain emendations that support a view of *Macbeth* as a character poetically tormented by both his nature and his actions.

II

In the light of this critical consensus it is perhaps presumptuous to offer a corrective historicizing methodology, far less an alternative reading. It is perhaps inevitable that literary criticism should take the form of historical allegory. Its aim is to elucidate and thereby renew the meanings of the play. This process has been described as one that 'devalues its objects by subjecting them to a signifying intention. No longer meaningful in themselves, they can only point to a spiritual meaning

⁹ See above p. 1.

¹⁰ See Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns*, p. 40 for an account of the origins of this process in early twentieth century modernism.

¹¹ 'Macbeth lives *because* he was reinvented as an icon of the romantic imagination.' Jonathan Bate, *The Genius of Shakespeare* (London, 1997), p. 286.

¹² See Rebecca Rogers, 'Eighteenth Century Macbeths: The English Poet and the Scottish Play', PhD Thesis (University of Southampton, 1999).

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which does not inhabit their material realm.¹³ This critique of historical allegory is especially borne out by the literary critical treatment of the motif of equivocation in *Macbeth*. For the literary critic, equivocation becomes no more than another word for Macbeth's and the witches' statement of paradoxes: 'fair is foul and foul is fair'; 'nothing is but what is not'. This rhetorical trope is given an added resonance via the information that equivocation was associated with the gunpowder plotters whose connection with the play comes through the apparent reference in the porter scene to their trial and execution. The added resonance, however, is an effect of literary criticism, anxious to give signifying effect to a scene that in modern times has needed explication.

The Porter's reference to equivocation is an almost buried allusion which is not, at least in the Folio text, allowed to hold up the movement of the scene. It indicates no animus against the gunpowder plotters, except in commonplace assigning them to hell, and it includes nothing to deflect the essentially comic tone of the speech. It makes no comment on the specifically *political* issues, such as James's tolerance of the loyal majority among Catholics, or the threat from Spain or Rome.

Historical analysis of the Gunpowder plot, on the other hand, provides an irritating excess of information: too much for a commentary note and spilling beyond what will explicate the scene. It presents a highly complex political and historical event which remains controversial to this day. The plotters seem to have been members of a radical group who harboured desperate frustration at the lack of progress in James's toleration of Catholics. In this, their political views were different from the majority of loyalist Catholics who accepted the separation of spiritual and temporal power and remained faithful to the English crown.¹⁴ The Gunpowder plot was a disappointment to them, not because it failed to assassinate James and Members of Parliament, but because it provided a focus for anti-Catholic sentiments and justified further anti-Catholic penal laws. As Jenny Wormald has described:

The Gunpowder plot takes us back beyond James's accession to the last years of Elizabeth's reign and the problem of her heir. It was a problem that emphasised the deep division within the English Catholic community, a division, roughly speaking, between the Jesuits and the non-Jesuits, between those Catholics who looked to Spain for deliverance and those whose Englishness – and therefore anti-Spanishness – was as important in determining their political attitude as was their faith.¹⁵

Equivocation as a historical phenomenon similarly escapes the boundaries of the play. Its pejorative association, along with other forms of illusionism and prestidigitation, with Catholic theology and religious practice was a feature of Protestant polemic that dismissed the Catholic doctrine of the 'true presence' as a kind of sleight of hand, mocked as magic tricks and juggling. However, for Catholics this equivocation involved a genuine intellectual questioning of the relationship between abstract ideals of loyalty to the monarch and commitment to the policies of a particular king. As Alison Shell has shown,

It does most of them a disservice to equate Catholicism with subversion . . . it was their aim to re-integrate tributes to Caesar with those to God, and most would have hoped that this could be accomplished by the conversion of the reigning monarch.¹⁶

This excess of information could produce an anxious awareness that Shakespeare may not have been entirely fair to Catholics, any more than he was entirely fair to women and witches. However, history does not require this *parti pris* and nor, in this post-bardolatrous moment, does literary criticism.

If we return to the historical analysis (as opposed to historical allegory), we might note that the Porter's speech provides a rather unusual example in Shakespeare of a clown who is given ample

¹³ Halpern, *Shakespeare among the Moderns*, p. 12.

¹⁴ See Alison Shell, *Catholicism, Controversy and the English Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 142ff.

¹⁵ Jenny Wormald, 'Gunpowder, Treason and Scots', *Journal of British Studies*, 24 (1985), p. 154.

¹⁶ Shell, *Catholicism*, p. 111.

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opportunity to speak more than is set down for him; more, perhaps, than the compilers of the First Folio wished or bothered to record for posterity. In the historical moment of the turn of the century, this might have served a commercial as well as a political agenda. As Leeds Barroll has argued most persuasively, the traditional association between Shakespeare's play and the arrival of King James in England is not sustained by the evidence of the King's Men's work at court in the early years of the century.¹⁷ Rather, he suggests, the plague closures of those years may have been causing some anxiety to the proprietors and share-holders of the Globe and Shakespeare among them. The other volatile element in the commercial environment of the theatre in those years was the boys companies newly installed in the hall theatres of Blackfriars and Pauls. Between 1604 and 1608, the boy players took political topicality to extremes, producing *Philotas*, *The Isle of Gulls*, *Eastward Ho* and the *Biron* plays.¹⁸ The resulting political brouhaha ended their brief theatrical career and possibly acted as a warning to the adult companies about the limits of political support. The Folio text, by contrast, shows Shakespeare and the King's Men flirting with topicality in *Macbeth*, touching on the Gunpowder plot, echoing the *News from Scotland* and bringing history right up to date in the vision of the 'twofold balls and treble sceptres' (4.1.137) of the witches' vision. The possible topicality of those episodes never amounts to an alternative political vision and can be entirely subsumed within the narrative coherence of the text – the very features that allow it to be carried forward into succeeding ages, free of its local meanings and available for interpretation.

III

Rejecting the factitious resonances of topicality may seem to leave the play a little bare. If it carries no freight of historical significance, how are we to claim significance for it at the present time? This anxiety is compounded when we turn to the rare and thus invaluable evidence of the 1611 account of the play provided by Simon Forman.¹⁹

In spite of the fact that Forman indicated that his notes on the plays he saw were 'for Common Pollicie', he seems little interested in their external meanings. Instead, he noted the relationships within the play between motivation and action. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth were apparently 'moch amazed & Affronted' by their inability to wash Duncan's blood from their hands and Macbeth's second murder was 'for feare of Banko, his old companion, that he should beget kinges but be no kinge him selfe'. He also notes particular theatrical moments, drawing attention to the bloody daggers and the sleepwalking scene and giving detailed attention to the appearance of Banquo's ghost. He causes further problems for modern readings by referring to '3 women feiries or Nimphes' rather than three witches as the bearers of the prophecy.

There is, of course, no need to regard Forman as a paradigmatic viewer, a native informant who will give us unproblematic access to the true history of *Macbeth*. However, the fact that he makes no mention either of the Porter or of the Act IV show of kings does open up the possibility of multiple versions of the play. The Gunpowder plot and equivocation may have disappeared in the 1611 performance for reasons of topicality. The absence of the show of kings requires a rather different kind of explanation.

Orgel's alternative accounts – that it was specially written for a command performance or that it was added to liven up a failing play – separate out topicality from the formal requirements of the play and closes both off from the wider historical context. Yet the show of kings does more than validate James's extended right to succession. That role was fulfilled by the sybils who greeted the King on his visit to St John's College Oxford on his way south

¹⁷ J. Leeds Barroll, 'Shakespeare without King James', chapter 2 of *Politics, Plague and Shakespeare's Theatre* (Ithaca, 1991), pp. 22–69.

¹⁸ Roslyn Knutson, 'Falconer to the Little Eyases: A New Date and Commercial Agenda for the "Little Eyases" Passage in *Hamlet*', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 46 (1995), pp. 1–31.

¹⁹ Quoted in *The Norton Shakespeare*, General Editor Stephen Greenblatt (London, 1997), p. 3336.

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from Scotland. As Jonathan Bate observes, ‘the sole function of the Oxford interlude was to flatter King James. That is why it has never been performed again.’²⁰ The show of kings has an equally important role in the narrative and emotional structure of the play. It provides a new set of prophecies and a new dramatic impetus for the conflict between Macbeth and Macduff. The magical stories of the moving wood and the bloody babe extend the story beyond questions of dynastic succession and develop the motifs of kinship and personal bonds.

Forman’s account of the play gives us some idea of the nature of these changes. His description of the second half of the play has none of the vivid attention to detail of the earlier passages.

Then Macduff fled to England to the King’s son, and so they raised an army and came to Scotland, and at Dunsinane overthrew Macbeth. In the meantime, while Macduff was in England, Macbeth slew Macduff’s wife and children, and after in the battle Macduff slew Macbeth.

This rather bald account of the action in the second half does not necessarily mean that the show of kings and the new prophecies were omitted from the version Forman saw. However they do give a sense of how flat the play would be without them. The show of kings does more than provide information about the dynastic connection between Banquo and James I. The pacing of the sequence and the parallel focus on Macbeth’s reaction provides an opportunity for Macbeth to *enact* his horror at the realization of the succession that was to be denied to him. It directly connects the witches’ initial conundrum that Banquo would ‘beget kings though ye be none’ with Macbeth’s destructive rage that replaces the more anxious and remorseful character of the opening scenes.

Forman twice mentions the motif of succession, indicating that the death of Banquo was ‘for fear of Banquo, his old companion, that he should beget kings but be no king himself’. The Folio text pays particular poetic as well as narrative attention to the question in ways that connect inheritance to murder and, paradoxically, call into question the connection between inheritance and kingship. The

fact that Duncan names his son as his heir presents for Macbeth ‘a step / On which I must fall down or else o’erleap, / For in my way it lies’ (1.4.50–2). In the soliloquy that precedes the arrival of Banquo’s murderers, Macbeth reflects on the second part of the witches’ prophecy:

Then, prophet-like,
 They hailed him father to a line of kings.
 Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown,
 And put a barren sceptre in my grip,
 Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand,
 No son of mine succeeding. If’t be so,
 For Banquo’s issue have I filed my mind,
 For them the gracious Duncan have I murdered,
 Put rancours in the vessel of my peace
 Only for them, and mine eternal jewel
 Given to the common enemy of man
 To make them kings, the seed of Banquo kings.
 (3.1.60–71)

The witches’ prophecy had broken the connection between kin and kings. The murder of Banquo cannot restore it, which makes it a dead end for the emotional dynamic of the play. In the version Forman saw, Macbeth’s fear at Banquo’s ghost ‘fronted him so, that he fell into a great passion of fear and fury, uttering many words about his murder, by which when they heard that Banquo was murdered, they suspected Macbeth’. The story of regicide is concluded by a story of restoration but the motivation for that restoration is left unexplored.

The poetry of the Folio version together with the show of kings links all this together by sustaining the interest from king to kin. The murder after the show of kings is not of a father but of his kin – his wife and children. In the murder scene itself and in Macduff’s emotional reaction to it, we are presented with a different image of kin: the image of the affective, companionate family. It is tempting to sentimentalize Macduff’s relations with his family in a modern world that has privatized familial relations. However, the play provides a different set of relationships that link kin and kingship. Macbeth’s

²⁰ Bate, *Genius*, p. 221.

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suspicion of Macduff begins when he remembers that Macduff was absent from the feast. The insult is not merely from a subject to a king but from a subject who, like Macbeth, has absented himself from the ceremony with which those relations are established and sustained.

Earlier, the language used to describe the relationship between Macbeth and his king emphasizes its ethical and personal nature. Macbeth's agonized contemplation of regicide insists on obligations which go beyond the political:

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 murderer shut the door,
 Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
 Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
 So clear in his great office, that his virtues
 Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
 The deep damnation of his taking off
(1.7. 12–20)

Being a subject is part of being a kinsman and those double relationships are reinforced by a culture of gifts and feasting which tie the participants into a network of obligation and recompense. When Duncan welcomes Macbeth to the Scottish camp each of them acknowledges their mutual obligation. Duncan begins:

O worthiest cousin,
 The sin of my ingratitude even now
 Was heavy on me! Thou art so far before
 That swiftest wing of recompense is slow
 To overtake thee. Would thou hadst less deserved,
 That the proportion both of thanks and payment
 Might have been mine. Only I have left to say,
 More is thy due than more than all can pay.

Macbeth replies:

The service and the loyalty I owe,
 In doing it, pays itself. Your highness' part
 Is to receive our duties, and our duties
 Are to your throne and state children and servants
 Which do but what they should by doing everything
 Safe toward your love and honour. (1.4.14–27)²¹

This ring of obligation is broken after Duncan comes to Macbeth's castle. Macbeth is absent from

the feast and his isolation is marked by the contrast between his solitary figure and the preparation for the banquet which brings a '*Sewer, and divers servants with dishes and service over the stage*'. Immediately before Macbeth follows the dagger to Duncan's bedchamber, Banquo gives him the king's gift of a diamond, a symbolic sealing of a relationship between himself and Macbeth's household which is about to be irrevocably broken.

When Macbeth himself becomes king, he tries, in traditional fashion, to seal his authority with a feast for the thanes. The feast is, of course, poisoned by the murder of Banquo whose ghostly presence disrupts the harmony of the ceremonious occasion. As Lady Macbeth reminds him, the feast is more than the mere consumption of food:

the feast is sold
 That is not often vouched, while 'tis a-making,
 'Tis given with welcome. To feed were best at home.
 From thence the sauce to meat is ceremony,
 Meeting were bare without it. (3.4.32–6)

And when she fails to calm his hysterical response to the ghost, she chides him with

You have displaced the mirth, broke the good meeting
 With most admired disorder. (108–9)

In spite of Macbeth's catastrophic rupture of the cycle of obligation, he himself remains locked in the culture of feudal relations.

These familiar relations of gifts and feasting are presented in the play as the necessary ceremonies which protect the culture from atavistic violence. This image of pre-feudal feasting recurs in the conversation between Lennox and the Lord which occurs between the banquet scene and Macbeth's return to the witches. The Lord speaks of Malcolm's plan to solicit aid from England. He hopes that the outcome of Malcolm's embassy will be such that, with Gods help,

²¹ This exchange of formal statements of fealty is rhetorically similar to the exchange between Duncan and Lady Macbeth that Kermode calls an 'arithmetical measuring of gratitude'. Kermode, *Shakespeare's Language*, p. 207.

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we may again
 Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights,
 Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives,
 Do faithful homage, and receive free honours,
 All which we pine for now. (3.6.33–7)

There is no suggestion that Malcolm's return will produce a change in political or legal structures, merely that it will fulfil the deep desire for peace and the social harmony which is ensured by the familiar cycle of homage and honour and sealed by harmonious feasting.

These images of a world of feasting and extended kinship seem to have the effect of creating an explicitly historical framework for the action – a framework which puts the action beyond generalized political ideas about kingship and succession. Macbeth's reaction to Banquo's ghost, for example, describes it as an apparition which threatens the very foundations of his culture:

If charnel-houses and our graves must send
 Those that we bury back, our monuments
 Shall be the maws of kites. (3.4.70–2)

He recognizes that his action returns his world to 'th'olden time / Ere humane statute purged the gentle weal' (74–5). His offence in killing both Banquo and the king is not merely the sin of murder but a disruption of the civilizing ties which keep his social world in one piece. That social world is located at a moment in the past when the possibilities for a coherent connection between kingship and kin are in the balance. Macbeth's regicide tips the balance back to the more primitive world 'ere humane statute purged the gentle weal'. The vengeful return of Macduff, on the other hand, brings with it the possibility of establishing the institutions of kingship that will ensure its peaceful continuity. He comes in support of the rightful patrilineal king Malcolm.

Malcolm's legitimacy as king is assured by his leadership of the army and his ability to draw to him the support of Siward's forces. At the end of the play, however, he disperses his power and shares it with the Scottish thanes. He declares that his thanes and kinsmen should 'Henceforth be earls, the first that ever Scotland / In such an honour named'

(5.10.29–30). In returning peace to Scotland, he also ensured its continuity by establishing a new category of nobleman, an honour familiar to the English. The precarious and potentially bloody relations of kin are replaced by the legally endorsed social relations of formal institutions and the special kin relationship of patrilineal inheritance is assured.

It would, of course, be reductive to imagine that this finale or any of the other connections between the play and images of primitive kingship can close off the meanings of the play. However, it can perhaps act as a reminder that Shakespeare was himself involved in writing historical allegory. He is writing about a deep past that was even more distant from his time than he is from ours and making sense of it in terms that had gained a particular pressure because they had been re-opened by the succession debates and by the Scottishness of the new king. As James Pocock described many years ago, the constitutional debates in early modern England were part of a Europe-wide 'collision between the authority of kings and local or national privileges, liberties and constitutions'.²² Those debates took place using 'all the subtleties of the common-law technique of reading history backwards'. The history in question consisted of the continued assertion of an ancient constitution that existed from 'time immemorial' and assured the rights of subjects over kings who were themselves subject to the law.²³ Even James himself, who has been seen as an uncompromising exponent of the doctrine of the 'Divine right of Kings', subtitled *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies* with *The Reciproock and Mutuell Duetie betwixt a Free King and his Naturall Subjects*.²⁴

These issues of political theory were further inflected by the sense that the Scots represented a special case. The process of establishing James's legitimacy and authority was further compromised by endemic English hostility to the Scots. This hostility involved not only distrust of James as king but

²² J. G. A. Pocock, *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* (Cambridge, 1957), p. 16.

²³ See Pocock, *Ancient Constitution*, p. 46.

²⁴ See Michael Hawkins, 'History, Politics and Macbeth', in John Russell Brown, ed., *Focus on Macbeth* (London, 1982), p. 163.

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also a sense of the primitive character of Scottish kingship. A good deal of the resentment against a Scottish king arose from the fact that for many English people Scotland was regarded as backward and yet infuriatingly resistant to English imperialism.²⁵ In a notorious speech in Parliament, Sir Christopher Piggot alleged that the Scots 'have not suffered above two kings to die in their beds, these two hundred years'.²⁶ In reminding Parliament that murder had been a common mode of succession in Scotland, Piggot was calling into question not only the Scots' ethical authority but also the modernity of their ideas of kingship. His assertion was historically correct, but it also drew on long-standing historical debates which had been conditioned by the need to articulate the relative rights and strengths of Scots and English kingship in pursuit of the ancient conflict between the two nations. Nick Aitchison's account of the pre-history of the historical King Macbeth, for example, notes how Fordun's first complete narrative history of Scotland (c. 1336) 'emphasised the continuity of Scottish kingship to counter English claims of historical overlordship' and began the isolation of Macbeth as an exceptional murderous tyrant.²⁷

Political theories of kingship, the debate about the balance between kings' and subjects' rights, are never explicitly argued in *Macbeth*. Like other historical allegorists, he is able to bring together quite contradictory ideas. In the show of kings, he was able, by theatrical fiat, to represent the dynasty of Scots and British kings as a single unbroken line, while the finale of the play presents a more familiar image of relations between English and Scots: the invasion of Scottish territories by border magnates, acting in the name of the English king and with the connivance of Scottish aspirants to the throne. Malcolm's creation of the loyal thanes as 'earls, the first that ever Scotland / In such an honour named' may have had a special resonance at the time when James was attempting to create a 'union of nobility' by giving titles to both English and Scots gentry as a way of binding their allegiance to him personally and to the United Kingdom.²⁸ What is more important dramatically is that the thanes have been

given emotional credibility throughout the final act by their loyal fealty to their leaders in contrast to 'the wretched kerns whose arms / Are hired to bear their staves'. Historical knowledge is never a substitute for the theatrical, narrative and imaginative experience that the play affords. Indeed the critical challenge is to link that historical knowledge with those pleasures.

I have been arguing that the play's imagery of primitive kinship links it to the emergent establishment of patrilineal inheritance as the most legitimate source of royal authority. Nevertheless, it is also clear that the poetic discussions of patrilineal kingship deal with ethical and psychic as much as political considerations. When Macbeth considers the murder of his king he speaks of 'dark and deep desires', and the great soliloquy which opens 1.7 speaks in existential terms of an action which will, like all decisive and violent acts, be incapable of controlling its consequences. Though the vision of the line of kings is undoubtedly linked to the legitimation of the Stuart dynasty, Macbeth's reaction to it is emotionally powerful rather than politically analytical.

The poetic articulation of these essentially ethical and existential questions is one of the play's great strengths. It has allowed the play to be adapted and reproduced in cultures and circumstances in which the particular political significance of killing a king has very different resonances and for very different local political readings to be drawn from it. I would argue, nevertheless, that the resonance of these ethical questions depends upon their connection to the deep structures of the accounts of kinship that are invoked throughout the play and were possibly strengthened by the addition of the show of kings in Act 4.

²⁵ Wormald, 'Gunpowder, Treason and Scots', *Journal of British Studies*, 24 (1985), p. 158.

²⁶ Quoted in William C. Carroll, ed., *Macbeth: Texts and Contexts* (New York, 1999), p. 120. See also Brian P. Levack, *The Formation of the British State England, Scotland and the Union 1603–1707* (Oxford, 1987), p. 195.

²⁷ Nick Aitchison, *Macbeth, Man and Myth* (Stroud, 1999), p. 107.

²⁸ Levack, *Formation*, p. 188.

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Ideas of kinship in the play were fundamentally linked to notions of a world before and outside culture. That world involved the fantasy of an Edenic perfection which had no need of law. However it also invoked the terror of a lawless world in which atavistic individualism was unconstrained and in which the witches could arbitrarily break the connection between kingship and kin. By locating his story in the primitive world of pre-modern Scotland, Shakespeare was able both to speak of the particular history of early modern kingship but also to articulate it in terms of the deeper emotional links which joined people into kin. Whether we call these relationships feudal or familial, whether we describe them in anthropological or ideological terms, they articulate a desired, fantasized, ideal of kinship which could provide emotional support and an almost magical assurance of security. That fantasy is, of course, always unstable and threatened: the gracious

Duncan is murdered, Macduff's wife and child are killed, Lady Macbeth commits suicide and Banquo is assassinated. But Fleance gets away, Macduff avenges his children's death and Malcolm inherits.

Whether we are satisfied (either ethically or aesthetically) by this reassuring cycle of kinship depends on how far we are content to believe in the magical power of kings. In modern times when the understanding of different forms of kingship is subsumed in a generalized suspicion of political power and the extended relations of kin compromised by an awareness of the deformations of patriarchy, that belief is no longer possible. Instead history is invoked to undermine it or is ignored in order to claim a continuity of more generalized, poetically rendered human concerns as the heart of the play. Both of these processes are as inevitable in our version of the historical allegory as Shakespeare's was in his.