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The Perversion of Manliness in *Macbeth*

JAROLD RAMSEY

One of the organizing themes of *Macbeth* is the theme of manliness: the word and its cognates reverberate through the play. Where it is deeply affirmative for Hamlet to say of his father. "He was a man . . . .", in *Macbeth* Shakespeare exposes the ambiguities and the perils in a career premised upon "manliness." At the first of the play, Macbeth's "manly" actions in war are not contradictory to a general code of humaneness or "kind-ness" irrespective of gender: but as the play develops, his moral degeneration is dramatized as a perversion of a code of manly virtue, so that by the end he seems to have forfeited nearly all of his claims on the race itself. Lady Macbeth initiates this disjunction of "manly" from "humane" by calling Macbeth's manhood (in a narrowly sexual sense) into question: he responds by renouncing all humane considerations, and, when he learns that he cannot be killed by any man of woman born, this renunciation of human kinship and its moral constraints is complete. Other figures in the play–Banquo's murderers, Malcolm, Macduff–to some extent follow Macbeth in his disjunction of aggressive manliness from humaneness (the virtues that distinguish the race). The play ends with Macbeth restored as a tragic villain to human-kind, and Shakespeare's question remains open for the audience if not for Macbeth's killers: what is a man, and of what is he capable as part of his sex and of his race?

The most moving tributes the characters in Shakespeare's plays pay to each other are often the very simplest. The ambiguities in Antony's position as eulogist do not really undercut his eulogy of Brutus, "This was a man"–and nothing Hamlet says in the high style is as eloquent of his love for his father, of his grief, of the nobility of his own frustrated aspirations as that quiet declaration to Horatio–"He was a man, take him for all in all. I shall not look upon his like again."

The nature of the great tragedies is such that they require us to ask, "What *is* a man? Of what is he capable? Where does his distinguishing worth lie? What are his moral and metaphysical limits?" If those limits are ultimately drawn for us with tragic finality and a chastening narrowness in the careers of Sophocles' heroes, or Shakespeare's, there remains at play's end the compensatory knowledge that the meaning of a man's suffering may lie in the reality of his human worth, as it has been revealed, tested, and affirmed in the course of his suffering. Over against Hamlet's stirring but doctrinaire apostrophe to the race, "What

a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty!" there comes a certain and particular knowledge of the supreme worthiness of Hamlet himself: *he was a man.*

Yet what does this sort of declaration mean, really, skirting as it does the merely tautological? Clearly its meaning must be grounded in the context of the play in question, in the range of human examples it offers to us. But beyond this seem to lie two wider, concentric fields of significance: a code of manliness, the special virtues of the male gender (misogynists would point out that no one in the plays ever declares "This was a woman"); and wider yet, an ethos based on what best distinguishes the race itself, irrespective of gender. Thus Hamlet is both manly, "The courtier's, soldier's, scholar's eye, tongue, sword," and in his unharried moments, consummately *humane.* Paraphrasing William Hazlitt, we feel pride in being partakers of our sex and our race—when we recognize that the sex and the race can claim such redeeming nobility as Hamlet.[1] But time and again in the great Shakespearean tragedies, when *man* is invoked as an ideal or as a spur to action, we are compelled to wonder whether the word really stands for a coherent set of male virtues or a constant, "given" human nature, or whether the existentialists are right in supposing that *man* in either sense denotes an unfixed, evolving, unappealable nature.

One of the organizing themes of *Macbeth* is the theme of manliness: the word (with its cognates) echoes and re-echoes through the scenes, and the play is unique for the persistence and subtlety with which Shakespeare dramatizes the paradoxes of self-conscious "manhood." In recoiling from Macbeth's outrageous kind of manliness, we are prompted to reconsider what we really mean when we use the word in praising someone. Macbeth's career may be described in terms of a terrible progressive disjunction between the manly and the humane. In any civilized culture—even among the samurai, Macbeth's counterparts in feudal Japan—it would be assumed that the first set of values is complementary to and subsumed in the second. But, as he so often does, Shakespeare exposes with memorable clarity the dangers of such a comfortable assumption: the more Macbeth is driven to pursue what he and Lady Macbeth call manli-

[1]William Hazlitt, *The Characters of Shakespeare's Plays,* in *Collected Works,* Vol. I, ed. A. R. Waller and Arnold Glover (London, 1902), 200.

ness—the more he perverts that code into a rationale for reflexive aggression—the less *humane* he becomes, until at last he forfeits nearly all claims on the race itself, and his vaunted manhood, as he finally realizes, becomes meaningless.

After the play begins with the three witches promising a general season of inversion—"Fair is foul, and foul is fair"—in I.i., the human action commences with the arrival of a wounded sergeant at Duncan's camp: "What bloody man is that?" (I.ii.1) The sergeant's gore, of course, is emblematic of his valor and hardihood and authorizes his praise of Macbeth himself, "valor's minion"—and it also betokens his vulnerable humanity, his mortal consanguinity with the King and the rest of his nation, which he like Macbeth is loyally risking to preserve. These are traditional usages, of course, and they are invoked here at the beginning as norms which Macbeth will subsequently disjoin from each other and pervert.

That process of disjunction begins in Scene v when Lady Macbeth contemplates her husband's heretofore humane character against what the coming-on of time might bring:

> 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. What thou wouldst highly,
> That wouldst thou holily—wouldst not play false
> And yet wouldst wrongly win.
>
> (I.v.17-23)[2]

Greatness must be divorced from goodness, highness of estate from holiness, "the nearest way" from "human kindness"—with, as usual, a serious Shakespearian play on *kind*ness: charity, and fellowship in the race. And then, carrying the process to its logical end, Lady Macbeth ritually prepares herself for the deed her husband must commit by calling on the spirits of murder first to divest her of all vestiges of womanliness—"unsex me here'—with the implication that she will be left with male virtues only; and then to nullify her "kind-ness" itself: "Make thick my blood,/ Stop up the access and passage to remorse,/

[2]The text of this and all subsequent references to the plays is *Shakespeare: the Complete Works*, ed. G. B. Harrison (New York, 1952).

That no compunctious visitings of nature/ Shake my fell purpose. . ." (42-47).

In his great agonized soliloquy while Duncan is at dinner, the object of this dire rehearsal sternly reminds himself that he owes the King a "double trust," as subject to his monarch, and, on the basis of kindness again, simply as host to his guest. He then clinches the argument by conjuring up that strange image of "pity, like a naked newborn babe/ Striding the blast" (I.vii.21-22)–strange indeed for the battle hero, so recently ruthless in his king's behalf, to embrace this vision of an ultimate object of human pity. The sexless naked babe is the antithesis of himself, of course, as the manly military cynosure: and Macbeth's failure to identify with his own cautionary emblem is foretold, perhaps, in the incongruously strenuous postures of the babe: "*striding* the blast," "*horsed*/ Upon the sightless couriers of the air."

At any rate, Lady Macbeth enters and makes short work of her husband's virtuous resolution. The curious thing about her exhortation is that its rhetorical force is almost wholly negative.[3] Dwelling hardly at all on the desirability of Duncan's throne, she instead cunningly premises her arguments on doubts about Macbeth's manly virtue. All of his previous military conquests and honors in the service of Duncan will be meaningless unless he now seizes the chance to crown that career by killing the king. And, striking more ruthlessly at him, she scornfully implies that his very sexuality will be called into question in her eyes if he refuses the regicide–"From this time/ Such I account thy love" (I.vii.37-38). When Macbeth sullenly retorts, "I dare do all that may become a man,/ Who dares do more is none" (46-47), he gives Lady Macbeth the cue she needs to begin the radical transvaluation of his code of manliness that will lead to his ruin. As Robert Heilman has observed about this and other plays,[4] the psychic forces concentrated in that code are all the more potent for being ill-defined; and in the scene at hand, Lady Macbeth's onslaught against Macbeth–coming from a

[3]A similar reading of the rhetoric of this scene is given by Wayne Booth, "Shakespeare's Tragic Villain," in *Shakespeare's Tragedies: an Anthology of Modern Criticism,* ed. Laurence Lerner (Baltimore, 1963), p. 189.

[4]See Robert Heilman, "Manliness in the Tragedies: Dramatic Variations," in *Shakes-*

woman, after all, his sexual partner—is virtually unanswerable:

> What beast was it then
> That made you break this enterprise to me?
> When you durst do it, then you were a man,
> And to be more than what you were, you would
> Be so much more the man. . . . (47-50)

Against Macbeth's stern but theoretical retort that he will perform only that which becomes a man, and no more, she replies that, on the contrary, by his own manly standards he will be a dull-spirited beast, no man, if he withdraws from the plot.

Then, with a truly fiendish cunning she goes on to tie up all the strands of her argument in a single violent image, the murder of her own nursing infant. In this, of course, she re-enacts for Macbeth her earlier appeal for a strategic reversal of sex—the humiliating implication being that she would be more truly masculine in her symbolic act than he can ever be. And in offering to dash out the brains of "the babe that milks me," in effect she ritually murders the naked babe of pity that Macbeth has just summoned up as a tutelary spirit. The upshoot of this incredible mixture of insinuation and bullying is that Macbeth is forced to accept a concept of manliness that consists wholly in rampant self-seeking aggression. True masculinity has nothing to do with those more gentle virtues men are supposed to share with women as members of their kind; these are for women alone, as Lady Macbeth's violent rejections of her own femaleness prove. When she has finished the exhortation, Macbeth can only respond with a kind of over-mastered tribute to her ferocity, which would be more proper in him—"Bring forth men children only,/ For thy undaunted mettle should compose/ Nothing but males"(72-74).[5]

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peare 1564-1964, ed. Edward A. Bloom (Providence, 1964), pp. 26-27. I did not discover Professor Heilman's characteristically witty and perceptive essay until the present essay was nearly completed—but I am happy to acknowledge that what I have attempted to do with the theme of manliness in a single play, *Macbeth*, Professor Heilman has succeeded admirably in doing for all the mature tragedies, using a more general focus. Our conclusions about the fate of "manliness" in *Macbeth* are substantially the same; I have, in addition, endeavored to explore the relationships in the play between manliness and humaneness.

[5]Macbeth's tribute here also points to his growing obsession with lineage, as a means of inheriting his own royal future.

When the murder of Duncan is discovered, Macbeth betters his wife's instructions to "make our griefs and clamors roar/ Upon his death," and slays the grooms outright, before they can talk. Even in his state of grief and shock, the humane Macduff is astonished at this new burst of violence—"Wherefore did you so?" (II.iii.113)—and, in a speech that verges steadily towards hysteria, Macbeth explains that he slew the grooms in a reflex of outraged allegiance and love for his murdered king. It is the praiseworthy savage and ruthless Macbeth of recent military fame who is supposed to be talking: his appeal is to a code of manly virtue he has already perverted. "Who can be wise, amazed, temperate, and furious,/ Loyal and neutral, in a moment? *No man*" (114-115, italics mine). The speech runs away with itself, but after Lady Macbeth's timely collapse, Macbeth collects his wits and calls for an inquest: "Let's briefly put on manly readiness,/ And meet in the hall together" (138-139). "Manly" here, of course, means one thing—vengeful self-control—to the others, and something else—the ability to be crafty and dissemble—to Macbeth.

In Act III, confirming Hecate's later observation that "security/ Is mortals' chiefest enemy"—or in this case the vexing lack of it—King Macbeth seeks to be "safely thus" by killing Banquo and cutting off his claims on the future in Fleance. Macbeth's exhortation to the three murderers is an instance of the general principle of repetition and re-enactment that governs the entire drama and helps give it its characteristic quality of compulsive and helpless action.[6] Macbeth begins his subornation by identifying for the murderers the very same grievance against Banquo he has just named for himself—

> Do you find
> Your patience so predominant in your nature
> That you can let this go? Are you so gospeled,
> To pray for this good man and for his issue,
> Whose heavy hand hath bowed you to the grave
> And beggared yours forever?
> (III.i.86-90)

When the First Murderer retorts ambiguously, just as Macbeth

[6] See the detailed study of the "raptness" theme by Brents Stirling in his *Unity in Shakespearian Tragedy* (New York, 1956), pp. 111 ff.

has earlier to Lady Macbeth, "We are men, my liege" (91), the King twists this appeal from an undefined code of manliness exactly as his wife taught him to do in I.vii–

> Aye, in the catalogue ye go for men,
> As hounds and greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs,
> Shoughs, water rugs, and demiwolves are clept
> All by the name of dogs.
> (92-95)

In protesting the he and his fellows are *men*, the First Murderer means that they are as capable of moral indignation and of violent response to wrongs "as the next man." But Macbeth, like his wife before him, undermines this position by declaring that this hardly qualifies them as men or even as humans, except in the merely zoological sense. There is simply no intrinsic distinction, no fundamental basis of identity to be had in declaring one's male gender and beyond this one's membership in the human race. What Macbeth in the next scene refers to as "that great bond/ Which keeps me pale" (III.ii.49-50), that shared humanity deeper than sex or class denoted in the cry "Man overboard," is here pronounced to be a mere figment, valid neither as a source of positive virtue nor as the ultimate basis of moral restraint. "*Real* men" (the argument is old and has its trivial as well as its tragic motives) will prove their manhood in violently self-assertive action: Macbeth is, in a sense, talking here to himself, still answering his wife's aspersions.

Those aspersions return to haunt him–along with Banquo's ghost–in the banquet scene. As he recoils from the bloody apparition, Lady Macbeth hisses, predictably, "Are you a man?" and his shaky reply, "Aye, and a bold one, that dare look upon that/ Which might appall the Devil" (III.ii.58-60), she mocks with another insinuation that under duress he is womanish. One thinks of Goneril's sneer at Albany, "Marry, you manhood! Mew!," but Lady Macbeth's humiliating slur is a continuation of her strategy of negative exhortation–

> Oh, these flaws and starts,
> Imposters to true fear, would well become
> A woman's story at a winter's fire
> Authorized by her grandam. Shame itself!
> (63-66)

When the ghost reappears, Macbeth in a frenzy "quite unmanned" recapitulates as if by rote everything he has heard against his manliness. Once more there is the dubious appeal to a perverted code– "What man dare, I dare." And then follows the references to beasts, here prefiguring Macbeth's own fall from humaneness to bestiality–the beasts he names *would be* fitting adversaries:

> Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,
> The armed rhinoceros, or the Hyrcan tiger,
> Take any shape but that and my firm nerves
> Shall never tremble.

and then an almost pathetic desire to prove himself in single combat, like the old Macbeth: "Or to be alive again,/ And dare me to the desert with thy sword." and finally a humiliating comparison, worthy of his wife, to the antithesis of manliness: "If trembling I inhabit then, protest me/ The baby of a girl" (99-100).

This harrowing scene concludes with Macbeth–now isolated not just in his crimes from his peers but in his hallucination from Lady Macbeth–brooding on the emblematic meanings of blood: the gore of regicide and homicide, of retribution in the name of human blood-ties he had denied. The "bloody man" of the first scenes, whose wounds, like Macbeth's, were public tokens of his manly courage and valor, is now succeeded wholly in the play's imagery by "the secret'st man of blood" (126).

The final step in the degeneration of Macbeth's manliness comes in Act IV when he appears before the witches demanding to know his manifest future more certainly. The first of the prophetic apparitions, an "Armed Head," is suggestive both of the traitor Macdonwald's fate and of Macbeth's own gruesome final appearance; the second apparition, a bloody child, points backward to the "naked newborn babe" of pity and to Lady Macbeth's hypothetically murdered child, and ahead to the slaughter of Macduff's children, as well as to Macduff himself, Macbeth's nemesis, who was from his mother's side "untimely ripped." With a fearsome irony, the prophecy of the second apparition, an object of pity, serves to release Macbeth from all basic humane obligations to his fellows. If "none of woman born/ Shall harm Macbeth," then he need recognize no common

denominators either of origin or of mortal vulnerability with his kind, and nothing in the name of "kind-ness" can interfere, it seems, with the perfection of his monstrous "manliness." "Be bloody, bold, and resolute, laugh to scorn/ The power of man. . ." (IV.i.79-81).

The pageant of Banquo's lineage and the bad news of Macduff's flight to England, which follow immediately according to the breakneck pace of this play, only serve to confirm Macbeth in his new freedom from all kindness: henceforth, beginning with the slaughter of Macduff's family, he will act unconstrained either by moral compunction or by reason. "From this moment/ The very firstlings of my heart shall be/ The firstlings of my hand" (146-8). So, having earlier remarked, ominously, that "Returning were as *tedious* as go o'er" (III.iv.138), and having just witnessed a seemingly endless procession of Scottish kings in Banquo's line, he now enters fully into what can be termed the doom of reflex and repetition,[7] in which Lady Macbeth, with her hellish somnambulism, shares.

At this point in the play, as he so often does in the histories and tragedies, Shakespeare widens our attention beyond the fortunes of the principals; we are shown the cruel effects of such villainous causes, and much of the action on this wider stage parallels and ironically comments on the central scenes. The evils of Macbeth's epoch are dramatized in a peculiarly poignant way, for example, in IV.ii., when Lady Macduff denounces her virtuous husband to their son for what seems to her to be Macduff's unmanly, even inhuman abandonment of his family. It is a strange twisted version of Lady Macbeth's harangue and her husband's responses earlier; there is the inevitable appeal to an assumed human nature, and even the by-now-familiar comparison of man and beast—

> He loves us not,
> He wants the natural touch. For the poor wren,
> The most diminutive of birds, will fight,
> Her young ones in her nest, against the owl.
> (IV.ii.8-11)

And this poor woman, who fears her husband lacks that milk of

[7]Cf. Arnold Stein's tracing of a similarly-patterned doom of nonsense in the career of Milton's Satan—*Answerable Style* (Minneapolis, 1953).

human kindness that Lady Macbeth deplores in *her* spouse, ends her life with a terrible commentary on the badness of the times, in which to protest one's innocence is accounted mere womanish folly. Macbeth's reign of "manliness" prevails: "Why, then, alas,/ Do I put up that womanly defense,/ To say I have done no harm?" (IV.ii.77-79) This lament assumes a really dreadful irony in the next scene when Ross assures Malcolm in Macduff's presence that "your eye in Scotland/ Would create soldiers, make our women fight/ To doff their dire distress" (IV.iii. 186-8).

In this next scene, before Macduff learns of the sacrifice he has made to his patriotism, he labors to persuade young Malcolm to lead an army of "good men" in the liberation of Scotland. For the first time since the opening scenes, a concept of manly virtue that is alternative to Macbeth's is broached; it is, of course, the code that Macbeth himself once served so valorously. Malcolm shrewdly responds to the invitation with a remarkable double test of Macduff as the emissary of the Scottish loyalists—first and directly of his honesty and allegiance (is he really only another assassin sent by Macbeth?), and second and indirectly of the depth and quality of that allegiance. By representing himself vice by vice as a monster even more depraved than Macbeth, by forcing a disjunction of patriotism from morality, the politic Malcolm can determine the exact limits of Macduff's offered support. As King he could not, presumably, accept an allegiance so desperate and indiscriminant that it would ignore the total viciousness he paints himself with.

One aspect of his hypothetical depravity in particular—Malcolm's "bottomless lust"—seems to shed some light on Shakespeare's conception of Macbeth. Frequently, evildoers in the plays manifest their villainy (among other ways) in some form of sexual excess, actual or threatened; indeed, in Edmund and Richard III, Shakespeare shows that the freedom evil takes upon itself can make the villain sexually very compelling. We might theoretically expect, then (ignoring Shakespeare's debt to his sources), that Macbeth would ultimately add lustfulness to his moral degeneration, especially in view of his wife's repeated insinuation that he is "no man." But there is not the slightest suggestion, either in his speeches or in those of his adversaries, that his evil takes this familiar form—in fact, in the comparison he draws between his vices and Macbeth's, Malcolm seems to

acquit the tyrant of this one enormity at least:

> my desire
> All continent impediments would o'erbear
> That did oppose my will. Better Macbeth
> Than such a one to reign.
> (IV.iii.63-66)

The broad implication of this "deficiency" in Macbeth is that, unlike Edmund, unlike Iago and Richard of Gloucester, he is *not* capable of embracing the absolute freedom that a whole-hearted commitment to evil seems to give its Shakespearean champions. Where, say, Iago can improvise and shift with almost an artist's freedom of invention, Macbeth from the outset seems driven, compelled, "rapt": in the very narrowness of his degeneration into a bestial "manliness," he becomes a tragic villain, and his tragic claims on our sympathy, Shakespeare makes certain, are never wholly negated.[8]

But in the scene at hand, those claims must very nearly snap, beginning here with Malcolm's assay of Macduff. Given Macduff's straightforward soldierly goodness, his fervent hopes for his country, and his growing apprehensions (which Malcolm plays on) about the family he has left at the mercy of the tyrant, it is a deeply cruel if necessary test, one that the unhappy patriot must painfully "fail" in order to pass. In its tone and in the logic of its placement, the entire scene in London is analogous to that remarkable sequence of scenes in 2HIV–Hal's oblique denunciation of Poins and other small beer (II.ii), Lady Percy's denunciation of Northumberland (II.iii), and Hal and Poins's spying on and rather brutal exposure of Falstaff. (II.iv.) There, as here, a persistent cruelty between allies seems to signal the beginnings of a drastic homeopathic cure of the whole diseased nation.

In *Macbeth,* this homeopathy takes a predictable form: in order to purge Scotland of Macbeth's diseased "manliness," the forces of right and order must to some extent embrace that inhuman code. As Macduff collapses under the news of his family's slaughter, Malcolm exhorts him to convert his grief and guilt without delay into "manly" vengeful rage: "Be comforted.

[8]See Booth's essay for a full analysis of Shakespeare's methods in maintaining and shaping this sympathy.

Let's make us medicines of our great revenge/ To cure this deadly grief. . . . Dispute it like a man." To which advice Macduff cries back, "I shall do so, But I must feel it like a man" (IV.iii.213-215, 219-222). Nowhere in the play is there a more cruel disjunction of the moral claims on "Man", between a narrow code of manliness, and a general "natural" humaneness. Soon Macduff is driven into that familiar harsh polarization according to sex of human feelings that should belong to the race as a whole: "Oh I could play the woman with mine eyes. . ." (230). In other circumstances, Macduff would be profoundly unworthy of his manhood if he could not feel and show his losses, and Malcolm's impatient urgings would simply be intolerable. As it is, if his strategy is cruelly necessary, there is an unpleasant note of politic satisfaction in his endorsement of Macduff's wrenching of private grief into public wrath, the wrath, after all, that will place Malcolm on the throne: he says, briskly, "This tune goes manly" (235). As Edmund says to the murderer of Cordelia in a very different context, "men/ Are as the times is" (V.iii.30-1): the reformers, it seems, to a considerable degree, as well as the evildoers. Whatever his kingly virtues otherwise, it seems clear that Malcolm will never rule Scotland with the simple graciousness and humane trust of a Duncan. The times forbid it; Macbeth's savage reign requires that he be succeeded by a king of cold blood and clear mind who stands with that Shakespearean company distinguished by "little love but much policy": the young Antony, Octavius, Aufidius, Bolingbroke, Hal.

In the concluding scenes, while Macbeth betrays his special preoccupations by referring to "the *boy* Malcolm" and abusing his servant as "lily-livered *boy*", (V.iii.2,15) Malcolm has, we are told, enlisted the support of a whole generation of untried "boys" whose valorous service in his great cause will "Protest their first of manhood." (V.ii.11) Young Siward is their leader, and his subsequent brave, fatal encounter with Macbeth is recognized by all as evidence of a resurgent true manliness in Scotland, based (as Macbeth's conduct was at the beginning!) on selflessness and heroic violence in the cause of right and justice. Old Siward refuses to allow Malcolm to lionize his dead son beyond the simple terms of Ross's eulogy:

> He only lived but till he was a man,
> The which no sooner had his prowess confirmed
> In the unshrinking station where he fought
> But like a man he died.
> (V.viii.40-43)

The larger questions in this familiar declaration of praise—"What *is* a man? What should he be? What standards of manhood?" are begged, as they were in the beginning of Macbeth's story: indeed, there is again the existentialistic implication that man's nature is not an *a priori* constant but rather an evolving and unstable set of possibilities. But if young Siward's kind of manliness is seen in the context of the story as being ambiguous, volatile, capable of hideous perversions as well as of glories, it is nonetheless offered to us dramatically as the only moral alternative in the play. In the familiar Shakespearan manner, a hypothetical code has been realistically *tested* in action for us as viewers—not merely nullified and replaced with another set of unexamined verities. No one would deny that young Siward has indeed achieved a form of manhood—but the structure of the play allows us to cherish no illusions about that kind of achievement.

The swift resurgence of a measure of sympathy for Macbeth in the last scenes has always been recognized as one of Shakespeare's most brilliant maniuplations of tone. As Wayne Booth[9] and others have demonstrated, it is based upon our almost insupportable intimacy with Macbeth—we know him as no one in his own world does—and upon the terrible imaginative fullness of his knowledge of his crimes, if not of the effects of those crimes on himself. What triggers an access of sympathy in the final scenes is chiefly his return to a semblance of direct, uncomplex action, "we'll die with harness on our back," (V.v.52)—so painfully suggestive of the old Macbeth. But now he is champion of nothing human or humane; he must "try the last" in utter alienation from the community of men, which in some other life would have granted him, as to any man, "that which should accompany old age,/ As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends," (V.iii.24-5). At the last, all the invidious comparisons of earlier scenes between men and beasts come due

[9]Booth, pp. 189-190.

as he feels himself reduced to the state of a solitary animal in a bear-baiting: "bearlike I must fight the course" (V.vii.1-2).

Nowhere is Macbeth's alien condition more starkly revealed than at the moment of his wife's death in Scene v. As he and his followers doubtfully parade on stage with banners and prepare for the siege of Dunsinane, there comes a "cry of women" offstage. It is a hair-raising stroke of theater, worthy of the Greeks: at the death of the ambitious wife who would have unsexed herself to provoke her husband into forgetting his ties with humanity, the women of Dunsinane raise the immemorial voice of their sex in grief and sympathy, so long banished from Scotland. It is as if a spell is broken; all the deaths in the play are bewailed, those of the victims as well as that of the murderess—but so barren is Macbeth now of humane feeling that it takes Seyton to tell him that what he has heard is "the cry of women" (V.v.8-9), and when he learns it is his own wife who has died, he can only shrug wearily over what he cannot feel, and then lament a life devoid of all human meaning: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow. . ." (19). After a brutal career of striving "manfully" to impose his own consequentiality upon the future, Macbeth now foresees a future of mere repetitive subsequence—"time and the hour" do *not* "run through the roughest day" but are stuck fast in it (I.iii.146-7). The First Witch's curse against the Master of the *Tiger*, "I shall drain him dry as hay" (I.iii.18), has come true in Macbeth's soul.

Yet it is still a human soul, and in the last scene Shakespeare seems to take pains to enforce our unwilling rediscovery of that fact. Confronted at last by Macduff, Macbeth recoils momentarily with an unwonted remorse: "get thee back, my soul is too much charged/ With blood of thine already" (V.viii.5-6). And when he perceives that Macduff is the object of the witches' equivocation, the mortal man Fate has chosen to be its instrument against him, Macbeth gains the last and fullest fragment of tragic knowledge the dramatist grants him in this tragedy of limited and helpless knowledge. Though he confesses that Macduff's revelation "hath cowed my better part of man"—meaning the reckless, savage manhood he has embraced—the insight itself suggests a step back towards the common human condition and its "great bond."

> be these juggling fiends no more believed
> That palter with us in a double sense,
> That keep the word of promise to our ear
> And break it to our hope. I'll not fight with thee.
> (V.viii.19-22)

The plurality of these pronouns is more than royal: having already extrapolated from his own ruin to a nihilistic view of all human life in the "tomorrow" speech, Macbeth here generalizes validly for the human race at large. Fate is enigmatic to us all; it is, he realizes too late, one of the immutable common denominators of our condition; no career of rampant "manly" self-assertion can hope to circumvent or control it.

In this frame of mind, then, at least tenuously reawakened to the circumstances binding him to his race, Macbeth is roused by Macduff's threat that he will be exhibited "as our rarer monsters are" if captured alive, and hurls himself into single combat for the first time since he was "valor's minion." There is no more question of redemption than of escape, of course, as Macbeth himself knows: but who would deny a stirring of fellow-feeling at this spectacle of a single mortal man actively facing his mortality, "trying the last?" When Macduff reappears bearing Macbeth's severed head, and Malcolm triumphantly announces his succession to "this dead butcher and his fiendlike queen" (69), it seems impossible to deny the sense of a dramatic imbalance between the claims of justice and those of humaneness. We know Macbeth far better than do any of the Scottish worthies who celebrate his gruesome death; we have been privy to all the steps of his ruin: the tragic paradox in his nature is that the medium of his degeneration—his extraordinary imaginative susceptability—is also the medium of our never wholly suspended empathy with him. Such is the main thrust of these concluding scenes: they reveal Macbeth to us as a monster of degenerate "manliness"—but as a human monster for all that. The circle of human sympathy and *kind*ness, broken by Macbeth's career of regicide and slaughter, is re-formed: narrowly and vengefully, on-stage; broadly and with a heavy sense of man's undefinable limits and capabilities, in the audience.

To Macbeth's rhetorical question, "What's he/ That was not born of woman?" the tragedy replies again and again with its own unanswerable question, "What's he that *was*?"

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