

THE ART OF POLITICAL HEALING IN *MACBETH*

Carl C. Curtis

It has been many years since the BBC Shakespeare Plays produced *Macbeth* for the small screen, with Nicol Williamson and Jane Lapotaire as the leading couple. The ending of the production, therefore, comes back to me as a dream, with a curious setting of Malcolm's and the play's concluding lines:

We shall not spend a large expense of
time
Before we reckon with your several
loves,
And make us even with you. My thanes
and kinsmen,
Henceforth be earls, the first that ever
Scotland
In such an honor named. What's more
to do,
Which would be planted newly with
the time,
As calling home our exiled friends
abroad
That fled the snares of watchful
tyranny;

Producing forth the cruel ministers
Of this dead butcher and his fiend-like
queen,
Who, as 'tis thought, by self and violent
hands
Took off her life; this, and what needful
else
That calls upon us, by the grace of
Grace,
We will perform in measure, time and
place:
So, thanks to all at once and to each
one,
Whom we invite to see us crown'd at
Scone. (*Macbeth*, 5.8.60–77)¹

These stirring words are preceded by Macduff's and the lords' acclamation and fitting prelude to Malcolm's speech: "Hail, King of Scotland!" (5.8.59).

Strangely—and I find it very strange indeed—Jack Gold, director of the BBC production, follows Malcolm's speech with the camera panning from the face of one

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Scottish lord to another, but notably to Donalbain's, Malcolm's younger brother. What do we see? A grim, vindictive, perhaps vicious aspect, barely concealing bloody thoughts. The point, one may infer, is that Scotland had better get ready for the next Macbeth, the murderous qualities of the deceased tyrant being latent and ready to explode in one who happens to be the next in line to the throne after Malcolm, or in any and all the country's lords-become-earls. I have personally heard at least one professor argue that this presentation of the ending was exactly right.

But how persuasive is such an interpretation? If Shakespeare's point is that all men are so hopelessly corrupt that they cannot help surrendering to their wickedest ambitions, then no one can seriously complain that Macbeth himself does. But is that what an audience or reader finds? One might profitably begin answering that question through a quick examination of scenes in which other Scottish lords speak to the growing reality of Macbeth's tyranny and guilt. From the banquet scene forward, character after character (Lennox and the Lord in 3.6, Macduff and Malcolm in 4.3—not to forget Banquo in 3.1 before the banquet) testifies to the horror each has experienced under the reign of a butcher and to the sickness that reign has brought to Scotland.

Take Lennox in 3.6 as he speaks bitterly sarcastic words to a character simply and perhaps generically designated "another Lord":

My former speeches have but hit your
thoughts,
Which can interpret further: only, I say,
Things have been strangely borne. The
gracious Duncan
Was pitied of Macbeth: marry, he was
dead:

And the right-valiant Banquo walk'd
too late;
Whom, you may say, if't please you,
Fleance kill'd,
For Fleance fled: men must not walk
too late.
Who cannot want the thought how
monstrous
It was for Malcolm and for Donalbain
To kill their gracious father? damned
fact!
How it did grieve Macbeth! did he not
straight
In pious rage the two delinquents tear,
That were the slaves of drink and thralls
of sleep?
Was not that nobly done? Ay, and wisely
too;
For 'twould have anger'd any heart alive
To hear the men deny't. (1–16)

Lennox knows a hawk from a handsaw: any man who gets in Macbeth's way, any who knows too much, dies.

And Lennox is not finished. In his following words he touches on what Scotland really needs: "So that, I say, / He has borne all things well: and I do think / That had he Duncan's sons under his key—/ *As, an't please heaven, he shall not*—they should find / What 'twere to kill a father; so should Fleance" (16–20; italics mine). His words "an't please heaven, he shall not" are telling. The nation, fallen under such a shadow, needs divine aid—but not necessarily through miraculous intervention, although there have been incidents bordering on the supernatural more than once in the play.² The hope of Scotland lies in godly, vigorous men not merely praying for assistance but actively rising to the occasion and reestablishing right in a "swift blessing" (48).

There's no soliloquy here or anywhere else of a Scottish lord's planning his own version of Macbeth's tyranny, and no general feeling

that political murder is the way of the world.³ Instead Shakespeare gives us Macduff's impassioned "Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope / The Lord's anointed temple, and stole thence / The life o' the building!" (3.3.63–65) on discovering Duncan's body, and later "O Scotland, Scotland!" (4.3.101), a voice of moral and patriotic outrage despairing of the means to bring the nation back to its former health. Like Lennox, he wants healing that the ascent to the throne of the true, just, and legitimate monarch promises. The political emphasis in the last two acts of *Macbeth* is, then, on restoration of true and traditional order in the face of tyrannical and bloody innovation.

In these dire circumstances Malcolm becomes more than a minor figure. Before 4.3 we know little of him other than that he is the newly proclaimed Prince of Cumberland (1.4.39), who later with Donalbain has the sense to disappear after his father's murder (2.3.135). Act 4, scene 3 tells us much more. He reveals himself an even wiser, more careful man in his dealings with Macduff, largely because of the unnatural situation that has developed in the Scotland that Macduff laments. In a notable exchange, he falsely claims he is subject to a series of vices that so horrify Macduff that the latter must vent his hopelessness in the famous cry of 4.3.101. This moment is the payoff, for when Malcolm sees Macduff's sincere disgust at his "sins," as well as the lord's despair regarding Scotland's future, he knows he deals with a loyal son of Scotland. He then reveals that his "sins," lust and greed among others, are fabricated and that he is deeply moral, a paragon of princely conduct. All in all he is an admirable exemplar of both prudential and Christian behavior—and in his prudence, perhaps, as I think Shakespeare would have us see, superior to his slain father, because prudence is essential to good statecraft.

That Malcolm has already perceived his country's desperate state becomes apparent enough in his assurances that at Macduff's arrival he was wrapping up his preparations to sally forth with Old Siward, the Duke of Northumberland, and invade Scotland with ten thousand men (4.3.133–35). The strategy is not, however, a Machiavellian gesture, a mere power grab, but a therapeutic action. The metaphor of healing dominates the middle of the scene with the prominent discussion of the king's touch. Significantly, a doctor, one of two in the play, enters in advance of the King of England (historically, Edward the Confessor), who will soon visit "a crew of wretched souls / That stay his cure: their malady convinces / The great assay of art; but at his touch—/ Such sanctity hath heaven given his hand—/ They presently amend" (141–45).⁴ In response to Macduff's question, Malcolm explains the event, noting that the disease the doctor has mentioned is called "the evil" (147)—scrofula, as a matter of plain fact, but in the broader symbolism in the play, the poison that is Macbeth himself with Malcolm as antidote.

What the future Scottish king tells Macduff about the English king's strange ability applies as much to himself. This remedy is located in the "touch," as the doctor observes, and indicates something deeper about the one who does the touching. Malcolm reports that people "pitiful to the eye / The mere despair of surgery" (151–52) leave cured, a physic that involves "holy prayers" (154). As if that isn't enough, he relates that to "succeeding royalty he [the king] leaves / The healing benediction" (155–56). This phenomenon and its associated instances of healing "speak him full of grace" (159)—in anticipation of Malcolm's own "grace of Grace." The business is assuredly remarkable, and no reader should miss the recitation of phrase after phrase suggestive of blessing,

healing, and holiness specific to proper kingship. If we may think of Malcolm as having attended in England a school for monarchs, the English king has been his tutor by example. Interestingly, King Edward and the healing of the sick is not to be found in Shakespeare's chief source, *The Chronicles of England, Scotlande, and Ireland* by Raphael Holinshed. It is entirely of Shakespeare's own invention and, hence, even weightier.⁵

All this looks ahead to the great speech by Malcolm, the concluding lines of the play quoted at the beginning of this essay, when the healer ascends to the throne. This pattern of imagery undermines an interpretation that sees Donalbain, Macduff, or any of the present lords as potential Macbeths to Malcolm's Duncan, the adders beneath the flower, ready to bite (to use Lady Macbeth's language from 1.5.64–65). Scotland has longed for the healing of the body politic, which now stands within reach; in addition, Malcolm's words tell us of what that healing consists in pointed but easy-to-ignore language: "the grace of Grace" (5.8.74). There can be no doubt that the phrase signifies the "grace" that Christ, "Grace" Himself, alone can confer, placing it firmly within the Christian tradition of Western law. Yet it may have more behind it than that. Either by tradition, direct knowledge, or, most probably, like-mindedness, Shakespeare echoes ideas on law and grace that one may trace back at least to St. Thomas Aquinas's discussion of two types of grace that, in summary, apply to men individually and corporately, and in *Macbeth* provide medicine for the diseased condition of the land that tyranny has produced—and perhaps for any land, past or present, that has undergone such a harrowing experience.

Thomas distinguishes between these two kinds of grace in Question 111, part 1-2 of the *Summa Theologica*.⁶ The first, *gratia gra-*

tum faciens (variously translated "sanctifying," "habitual," or "justifying" grace), heals the *person* who receives it; Christ grants it, as He alone can, but the direct effects, though they may be broad by extension (of which more later), are aimed at that person; he is sanctified. Malcolm may be understood to have benefited from sanctifying grace in his revelation to Macduff of his true nature in 4.3 and his direct reference to "grace" in 5.8, the end of the play. The second variety, *gratia gratis data*—grace freely given or "gratuitous grace"—depends on *gratia gratum faciens* (in that no one would practice the second who did not have the first) and results in the in-graced or sanctified person's (that is, the beneficiary of sanctifying grace) blessing of others.

The ecclesiastical application of this second kind of grace is nearly impossible to miss, suggesting something more specifically corporate than sanctifying grace (*gratia gratum faciens*). As Thomas puts it, "gratuitously given grace is ordered toward one man's cooperating with others in order that they might be led back to God. But a man cannot accomplish this by effecting an interior movement in the others, since this belongs to God alone; rather, he can accomplish it only exteriorly, by teaching and persuading. And so gratuitously given graces include those which a man needs for instructing others in those divine matters that lie beyond reason" (*ST*, pt. 1–2, Q. 111, article 4). The application to the body of Christ is clear enough; however, the concern in *Macbeth* is the body politic. So why point to something apparently so restricted to theology as a form of political medicine?

The answer will become clear if we reflect on Macbeth's wickedness and the consequent corruption of Scotland, which has so sorely vexed the lords as his nature has steadily become clear. On three major occasions in

the play *Macbeth* expresses his full appreciation of the godlessness of his desires. The first is from act 1, scene 4, in his “Stars hide your fires” (50) speech, Macbeth’s aside following the investiture of Malcolm as Prince of Cumberland, an act that ratifies him as successor to his father Duncan. The word *stars*, as anyone might guess, points to the heavens, to God’s all-seeing eye; it also suggests the light that God places in men that helps them distinguish right from wrong. That Macbeth does not want God or the light that God puts in men to reveal to others or to himself the wickedness of his plan is spelled out in the rest of the speech: “Let not light see my black and deep desires: / The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be, / Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see” (51–53).

There is something peculiarly insane in the petition, rather like asking God to kindly stop existing or at least stop paying attention to His own creation. But ask Macbeth does. To this he will add three scenes later a shocking disregard for divine retribution in the lines “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, / We’d jump the life to come” (1.7.1–7), echoed later in the rather cavalier attitude toward his immortal soul, his “eternal jewel” that, we find, he doesn’t mind consigning to hell as long as he gets what he wants here and now (3.1.65–72).

Yet at this point, as bad as Macbeth is, he might be worse. The only thing that keeps him from becoming the consummate tyrant is fear, restricted, as the soliloquy in 1.7 indicates, to the fear of men. The word *fear*, or variants of it, is used over a dozen times in the play. Fear serves as a bulwark against the utterly careless exercise of self-centered power, restraining the hand that would

otherwise hasten to the bloodiest deeds and do so gleefully.⁷ Macbeth’s great worries are detection and a fruitless reign, two problems he briefly supposes he has solved with the murder of Banquo. When he finds this act has accomplished nothing, because Banquo’s son Fleance has escaped, he rushes to the weird sisters for prophecies of comfort, for the “grace” that they can give.

The three prophecies of 4.1 (actually four prophecies if we count the procession of Banquo’s progeny) are justly famous; however, it is not necessary to dwell at length on them here. It is enough to say that Macbeth thinks the second and third prophecies assure him of two things: he cannot be killed (“none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” [4.1.102–3]) and he will not lose the crown (“Macbeth shall never vanquish’d be until / Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him” [114–16]). With such guarantees—at least, as Macbeth receives them—he need never *fear* anything this life can hurl his way.

The episode is sufficiently remarkable for this, but also for the speech that concludes it and has gotten too little attention. As Macbeth departs he says, “from this moment / The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand” (168–170). Few words in literature carry such horrible force and give such a shock to the imagination. What kind of career would a man carve for himself whose first thoughts realized themselves in quickly executed deeds? How many people might he murder, rob, or spitefully maim? The prospect of such a trail of blood is too much to contemplate, but Macbeth’s mind freed from the burden of fear immediately leaps to the idea and realizes it with the murder of Macduff’s wife and children.

This sad state of affairs with its attendant crimes is not quite the tyranny Macduff and Malcolm discuss at the beginning of 4.3.

They lament the pass to which the country has come, but unknown to them, Scotland has been plunged into a reign of terror deeper than anything they have previously seen, the most immediate consequences of which will not become apparent until Ross enters with dreadful news of Macduff's family at the end of the scene. This much is clear: Macbeth has become one for whom the common restraints that ensure a decent existence mean nothing. His later "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" speech (5.5.17–29) will highlight a nihilistic view, largely in response to the news of Lady Macbeth's death; but the really chilling image of Macbeth, before and after he visits the sisters, is of a man who still believes there is a God but considers Him and His grace irrelevant. For such a man with so much power, first thoughts will, with a predictable and perverse logic, become first deeds as long as he need not fear man.

The Elizabethan and Jacobean stage knew all about horrible acts, but no one had stated better than Shakespeare the principle of tyranny with so sure a grasp of its fundamental nature, which is its practical and fundamental godlessness. What follows is a politics of personal whim, a road the fearless man does not hesitate to tread. Without a care for the transcendent, objective order that has provided the foundation for moral and positive law, and convinced that divine consequences are events of some hazy future (or, worse, the figments of a naïve imagination), he does whatever he wants.

This frame of mind that carries Scotland to the precipice is why the healing "grace of Grace" is so needful. An anti-theology has twisted the country in its grip; the remedy is discovered in theology—not a rule of

priests or pastors thumbing their Bibles, but the determined ascent of a godly king who knows that his power is founded on things higher than himself.

Malcolm is not a man to trumpet his godliness, but his behavior testifies to it and anticipates an era of proper rule, which he will inaugurate with consideration for "measure, time and place" (5.8.75). Those three things recognize the limits of human existence that Macbeth became convinced did not apply to himself and perhaps not to anyone. But contrary to his warped vision, the man who wears the crown or aspires to do so must assent to the boundaries of this life: of mortality (subject to *time*), of tradition (subject to *place*), and of reason (subject to *measure*). Macbeth forcefully shoved those considerations aside, disregarding God Himself and the laws he implanted in nature and men's souls, in effect making himself a god; as a consequence, Scotland bled. The invocation of "the grace of Grace," delivered by the sanctified, gracious king, as the specific remedy for Scotland is no accident: it is the very thing for which the lords of Scotland have been yearning. It may be true that *gratia gratum faciens* and *gratia gratis data* are properly ecclesiastic, but in a country rendered so godless by a black-hearted ruler such as Macbeth, Malcolm, the godly king, a political doctor filled with sanctifying grace, must administer the remedy that will set the edifice of the state on a foundation of bedrock. The forms of grace dedicated to the broader good are the vehicles that accomplish that end, directing an ailing Scotland on a path of hopeful recovery that may well be a pattern for all such states, now as well as then. †

- 1 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth, The Complete Pelican Shakespeare*, eds. Stephen Orgel and A. R. Braunmuller (New York: Penguin, 2002), 1622–50. All citations are in text.
- 2 I'm thinking of the instances taken as prodigies: the "dire combustion and confused events" (2.3.56) and the horses that eat each other (2.4.14–20), among other instances.
- 3 Banquo is as close as Shakespeare gets to creating a character who weighs the good and evil aspects of the Weird Sisters' prophecies—but unlike Macbeth, who prays, "Stars hide your fires" (1.4.50), Banquo prays, "merciful powers, / Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature / Gives way to in repose!" (2.1.8–10). Even his soliloquy at the opening of 3.1 ends with "But hush! no more!" (10). He will not give in to the temptations that engulf Macbeth.
- 4 The other doctor, appearing in 5.1 in connection with Lady Macbeth's mad sleepwalking, after he sees her, remarks, "More needs she the divine than the physician" (5.1.69). Like the doctor in 4.3, he attempts no act of healing.
- 5 See *Holinshed's Chronicle as Used in Shakespeare's Plays*, eds. Allardyce Nicholl and Josephine Nicholl, Everyman's Library (London: Dent and Dutton, 1927), 219–21.
- 6 I want to thank Professor Alfred J. Freddoso, University of Notre Dame, for his kindly permitting me to quote from unpublished sections of his translation of the *ST*, found online at <http://www3.nd.edu/~afreddos/summa-translation/TOC.htm>. I have also consulted *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 2 (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1962), 779–86.
- 7 Harry Jaffa, "The Unity of Tragedy, Comedy, and History: An Interpretation of the Shakespearean Universe," in *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, eds. John E. Alvis and Thomas G. West (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2000), 37–40, has pointed out that Richard III actually enjoys luring others to their destruction and largely for no identifiable end than his own pleasure. Macbeth, he argues, does not act in this manner, because he is still possessed of a conscience. I agree up to a point but find the argument breaks down for reasons I give in the next two paragraphs.

ARE JIHADISTS FIGHTING FOR A FICTION?

Islamic terrorists in France murder a dozen people and declare, "The Prophet is avenged" . . .

Jihadists in Syria announce, "This is the war Muhammad promised" . . .

ISIS murders Western journalists to restore the caliphate that Muhammad founded . . .

But what if Muhammad never existed?

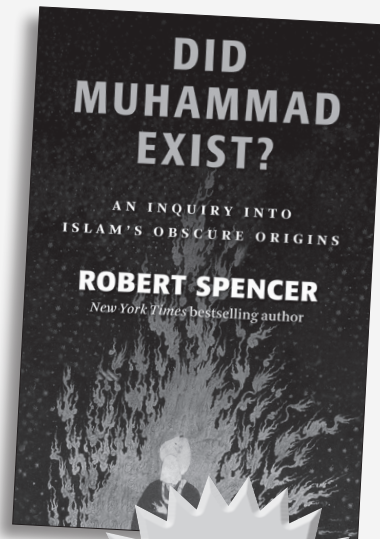
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