

Macbeth's conscience and moralizing imagination

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Abstract

Unlike Shakespeare's greatest villains such as Richard III and Iago, Macbeth is not really comfortable in his role as murderer and usurper thanks to his acute awareness that he is acting against the moral and political values which underpin the social fabric. The aim of this paper is to explore the ways in which Macbeth falls afoul of the commonly accepted ethical and political norms in the discourse of the Renaissance era and finds himself in the role of a would-be "Machiavel". He puts 'words' and his imagination into use to seize power and later to maintain his status as king of Scotland. Macbeth emerges as a great exemplar of how desire for political power silences the claims of conscience.

Keywords: Renaissance conscience; Classical conscience; Renaissance ethics; Machiavellian politics

1. Introduction

This paper will attempt to view Macbeth and his choices from the perspective of ethics and morality- both private and public. While viewing Macbeth's actions from the point of ethics, we will inevitably examine his choices from the perspective of his *ethos* (character). This will lead us to explore the frequently brought up proposition that his choices – at least his decision to murder king Duncan—are against his *conscience*. Therefore, this chapter will also be looking at the ways the notion of 'conscience' was understood and experienced during the Renaissance era and how Macbeth, while acting the part of a consummate hypocrite, is consumed by a sense of shameful exposure.

2. Macbeth's conscience and moralizing imagination

The way Macbeth's moralizing imagination pictures the aftermath of Duncan's murder is in line with the notion of 'conscience' that was current in the Renaissance. Exploring how early modern men viewed and experienced 'conscience' entails us to look at Roman authors who were influential in giving verbal form to conscience in early modern thought. Though conscience is often thought to be Christian in its origins, Latin *conscientia* was already a flourishing concept in Roman persuasive oratory and legal pleading well before the birth of Christ. The idea of conscience influential today actually owes much to our common pagan inheritance, among them, "to Roman authors, particularly Cicero and Seneca, in whose writings the term 'conscience' [*conscientia*] appears more often than in the corpuses of any other non-Christian author in antiquity (seventy-seven times in Cicero, forty-nine times in the younger Seneca)" (Ojakangas, 2013, p. 36). In *Pro Cluentio*, Cicero asserts that the conscience (*conscientia*) is "received from immortal gods, is implanted in the mind, is inalienable, and the best counsellor of all (*optimorum consiliorum*)"

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(as cited in Ojakangas, p. 36). In *De legibus* he maintains that the torments of conscience (*angore conscientiae*) bear witness to natural law (*lex naturalis*) and natural justice (*ius naturalis*). Analogously, Seneca holds that wrongdoers cannot escape punishment, because nature itself punishes them by the whip of conscience (*mala facinora conscientia flagellari*), whilst the fear of this same punishment is additional proof for the existence of natural law (as cited in Ojakangas, p. 36).

It was the Roman conception of 'conscience' that gave texture and imagery –in particular, judicial metaphors such as conscience as a standing court within us, witness to our behavior, prosecutor and judge, external arbiter – to later conceptions of conscience. "The foundation of classical conscience" Strohm (2011) says, "was public or social opinion. People at odds with public opinion or social consensus found themselves vulnerable to the accusations of conscience and to conscience's pangs" (p. 6). "Conscience", says Cicero in his *Pro Milo*, "is the principle theatre of virtue [*theatrum virtutu*], and one performs in that theatre for good or ill" (as cited in Strohm, 2011, p. 6).

Moreover, the role one's conscience plays in the public sphere is emphasized in the 'visible' traits of conscience such as blushing, stammering, growing pale or displaying uncertainty (Strohm, p. 7). Therefore, *conscientia* was a term that looked in two directions: Not only inward, that is, a private ethical discernment and inner quality which is inherent in the individual, but also outward: As in the Ciceronian understanding of *conscientia* –rather than being a 'hidden' faculty in man, whereby one derives the knowledge of a sense of right and wrong, but having to do with public opinion and shared values.

As opposed to the Christian understanding of conscience as the law of God written in the hearts of human beings and dictating us towards abstract moral law or conceived as something private to each soul, a form of self-knowledge that is shared only between God and the individual, classical writers understood 'conscience' as not only a form of self-knowledge, but also as a knowledge held together with another or others. "Conscience is knowledge of oneself", however, etymologically, conscience means *con + scientia*; "*scientia* as knowledge, but knowledge held *con*, or 'together with' or 'in common'" (Strohm, p. 10).

According to the classical view, *conscientia* was inevitably related to 'public expectation'. Hence, classical authors emphasized the importance of cultivating an 'external' scrutiny of one's soul. In this vein, 'conscience' was understood to be constituted as something "exterior to the self, an experience that is generated in conjunction with other men" (Tilmouth, 2011, p. 69). Seneca in his Eleventh Epistle, points out the importance of 'imagining' an exemplary and revered figure whose 'gaze' and authority will witness and question everything one does, thus keeping the soul on a virtuous path. Seneca bids Lucilius to "picture" someone as a positive moral pattern to follow so that he will feel his conduct is being evaluated:

Hear and take to heart this useful and wholesome motto: "Cherish some man of high character and, keep him ever before your eyes, living as if here were *watching* you and ordering all your actions as if he beheld them." Such my dear Lucilius, is the counsel of Epicurus; he has quite properly given us a guardian and an attendant. We can get rid of most sins, if we have a *witness* who stands near us when we are likely to go wrong. The soul should have someone whom it can respect,—one by whose authority it may make even its inner shrine more hallowed. (trans. 1925, p. 65 emphasis added)

“Since solicitude prompts us to do all kinds of evil”, Seneca claims in his Twenty-Fifth Epistle, it is good to imagine someone “whom you may regard as a witness to your thoughts” (p. 185). By living as “you would live under the eyes of some man, always at your side,” one can progress so far that “you may send away your attendant... Meantime, you are engaged in making of yourself the sort of person in whose company you would not dare to sin” (Seneca, trans. 1925, p. 185). Thus, imagining a person who scrutinizes and regulates our conduct assists one in turning his *own* self into that ideal image in whose presence one does not dare engage in offensive conduct. In other words, man will ultimately become his own watcher, one who shares his self-knowledge and encourages him to live up to that ‘externalized’ ideal of his own self.

As Christopher Tilmouth (2011) notes, Renaissance writers dealing with the question of conscience, like classical writers, advocated imagining an external judge of one’s actions as a means of keeping to a virtuous life (p. 6). Here, public display of ‘princely virtues’ can be considered to be analogous to the notion of conscience conceived as a phenomenon that is to be displayed in the public eye. Renaissance conduct literature, in particular, highlighted the importance of cultivating both the essence and the ‘appearance’ of virtue and majesty not just to enforce moral values but, “in a more reciprocal sense, to make themselves agreeable to their observers” (p. 6). Princes were not only encouraged to display their ‘virtues’ but also their ‘consciences’; therefore, they should cultivate their virtues and consciences both for themselves and for their ‘public display-value’. Likewise, humanist discussions on the relationship between the prince and his subjects also focus on the deliberate parading of royal ‘goodness’ as a means to win honour and praise from the public: When Thomas Elyot issues his instructions to the tutors of young noblemen at the start of Book I of *Book Named the Governor*, he advises them to “commend those virtues they wish to inculcate, and to point out what honour, what love, what commodity can be gained by these virtues” (as cited in Skinner, 1978, p. 234). One of the chief maxims Elyot enunciates is that “the most sure foundation of noble renown is a man of such virtues and qualities as he desires to be *openly published*” (as cited in Skinner, p. 235 emphasis added).

This encouragement, however, was not merely a strategy to dictate or inspire their subjects towards moral behavior or to make themselves more ‘agreeable’ to their subjects. It was an inevitable reality inasmuch as their very political standing ‘exposed’ them to the public eye. As Giovanni Pontano quotes from *Hamlet* in his “On the Prince”, a prince is “th’observ’d of all observers” (trans. 1997, p. 78).

The openness and exposure of royal ‘conscience’ that is in full view of everyone is also emphasized in James I’s writings. Citizens’ ‘penetrating gaze’ brings about the necessity of fashioning oneself outwardly and construing their inner moral judgment in accordance with public values and expectations. James I, in his *Basilikon Doron* (1599) that he wrote as a gift to his eldest son, points out the importance of fashioning a positive moral image inasmuch as “a king is as one set on a stage, whose smallest actions and gestures, all the people gazingly doe behold”:

Kings being publike persons, by reason of their office and authority, are as it were set (as it was said of old) vpon a publike stage, in the sight of all the people; where all the beholders eyes are attentiuely bent to looke and pry in the least circumstance of their secretest drifts: Which should make the Kings the more carefull not to harbour the secretest thoughts in their minde. (1996, p. 184)

In line with the mirror-for-princes genre, James I wrote *Basilikon Doron* to put forth a model, an external pattern for his son to follow. The mirror-for-princes (*principum specula*) tradition, to

put broadly, aimed at creating images of kings for imitation and avoidance, which is also in accordance with the classical notion that one should act as if s/he were being scrutinized by the gaze of an external eye. 'Imagining' an ideal figure whereby one could regulate one's behavior resonates with the notion that a king's 'virtues' are "openly published" and exposed to the public gaze. In the same vein, conscience, just like royal 'virtue' that needs to be displayed, was 'imagined' to be open and exposed to public view and inspection, rather than being a secret book whose details are legible only to God.

Accordingly, Shakespeare's presentation of conscience in *Macbeth* is very much in line with the Renaissance conceptions of conscience as an external arbiter that is to be internalized as the voice of conscience. Though he – or any other character in the play- never uses the word 'conscience', Macbeth strikes the reader as being acutely aware of both senses of the word –internal and external. Macbeth has a notion of conscience, not only 'outward' but also 'inward'. It seems that Macbeth, as we see in his soliloquies, has internalized the notion of conscience as put forth by classical thinkers and adapted by Renaissance writers. His mind is troubled with thoughts of the consequences of his wrong deeds. Macbeth is fully conscious of the consequences of his actions: Before he assassinates king Duncan, he mulls over the act and its consequences in a soliloquy which shows that in addition to weighing the possible practical consequences of his act, he is perfectly aware –in a way an evil man would not be- of the moral values involved. In this vein, he has a clear moral sense which has been shaped in accordance with the expectations of his society at large: His action violates the natural feelings of kindred, hospitality and gratitude. It is his conscience that compels him to verbalize to himself the negative and immoral effects of his acts.

Lady Macbeth, determined to "chastise" (1.5.27) everything in him that prevents him from being evil enough to kill in order to be king, verbally assaults his manhood and courage, accusing him of being a coward:

Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting "I dare not" wait upon "I would,"
Like the poor cat i' th' adage? (1.7.41-45)

Lady Macbeth accuses him of being a kind of man who can dream of wearing kingly robes only when he is drunk: "Was the hope drunk / Wherein you dress'd yourself? / Hath it slept since?" (1.7.35-36). Though he is a man who wants to attain what he "esteem'st the ornament of life", he is no better than "the poor cat i' th' adage" (1.7.45), who wants a fish, but does not want to get its feet wet. He wants the crown, but as Maurice Charney points out, "In Sartre's terms, he wants to have 'clean hands'" (1993, p. 277).

What seems to impede Macbeth, rather than cowardice or lack of manhood, which are the arguments Lady Macbeth uses to talk him into carrying out their plan, is his disabling conscience. Or rather, it is (to borrow from Hamlet) his conscience that makes him a 'coward'. It paralyzes him and keeps him from filling the gap between desire and action that is necessary to attain that desire. Provided that he lets the voice of his conscience win him over, he would be -in Lady Macbeth's words- letting "I dare not" wait upon "I would" (1.7.44). Macbeth's conscience is presented as deeply problematic: It is an impediment rather than a spur to action since the plan he

is to carry out requires him to engage in a violent act which troubles him with an uncomfortable awareness that he will be acting against the voice of his conscience. To Macbeth, following the path of desire and ambition –the very traits which Lady Macbeth equates with courage and manhood- means that he will be discarding what makes him not only a moral person but a human being since ‘to be daring’ is to excel in manliness, yet ‘daring too much’ may carry one outside the limits proper to human –or humane- activity: “I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none” (1.7.51-52). Unlike Lady Macbeth who cunningly chooses to ignore the question of ‘humanity’, Macbeth points to the immorality of the act. Yet, Lady Macbeth wins him over by taking the literal definition of ‘man’ and aligning masculinity with daring violence. He would be more of a man for going ahead with the murder:

What beast was't, then,
That made 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. (1.7.54-57)

Lady Macbeth's speech, full of violent imagery and impassioned urgency, brings Macbeth round to their plan to murder the king – a bloody action which, considering the set of ethical values embraced by both Macbeth and society at large, is deemed as yielding to intemperate desire.

Before he gives in to his desire to be king, Macbeth is perfectly conscious of the destructiveness of inordinate passion. His treachery and usurpation of the throne, for which he has no motivation other than “vaulting ambition” (1.7.27), and his later murders to maintain his power make him a man and a king who fails to embody moral and ethical ideals that apply in the personal and public spheres for the individual and for the common good.

Macbeth, both from his own and his public's perspective, is a gross violator of the moral paradigms current in the west since the classical era. He is regarded as the embodiment of the perversion of ‘virtue’, a significant social ideal that figured prominently in English Renaissance literature and culture and formed the center of Renaissance discourse on ethical behavior. In early modern culture, virtue was understood to be an outcome of self-government and rational disciplining of inordinate passions, grounded on ancient ethical thought. Macbeth, in betraying his king, Duncan, and turning into a “bloody tyrant”, deliberately discards with the four classical virtues of fortitude, temperance, righteousness and prudence, which Plato identifies with the classes of the city and faculties of man in Book IV of *Republic*. As the analogy between the faculties of man and social classes puts forth, in order for the individual soul to be virtuous, it should be hierarchal like the classes of a ‘just’ state. Disruption of the hierarchy that exists between the classes of the state brings about a state where injustice, disharmony and disorder prevail. If the person's soul is to be in harmony with itself, the hierarchy between reason and the appetitive part of the soul –which is the source of our passions and desires –should be maintained, which necessarily results in a moderate and virtuous soul. Provided that the appetites –the source of our impulses- are not kept under control by the dictates of reason, that is, the rational part of the soul, the outcome will be an individual torn between conflicted impulses that give rise to a soul experiencing chaos and disorder. Macbeth, finding it hard to keep his passions in control, feels that the thought of murdering the king causes a turmoil in his “single state of man”: “My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical, / Shakes so my single state of man that function / Is smother'd in surmise” (1.3.152-154).

The way in which the concepts of virtue and morality are articulated in the play is imbued with non-denominational religious language. Towards the end of his rule, Macbeth's name has become synonymous with that of the devil. As Macduff says, even in hell there cannot be a more wicked devil. Discussing with Malcolm the ever increasing tyranny and cruelty of Macbeth, Macduff claims: "Not in the legions/ Of horrid hell can come a devil more damned / In evils to top Macbeth" (4.3.55-57).

Macbeth was once thought to be an honest and trustworthy man who bravely served his country and king. Therefore, his treachery and tyranny destroy people's capacity for trust since they cannot rely on 'outward goodness' that does not necessarily mirror the inner goodness of men. It is one of the ironies of the play that Macbeth is outraged by the witches' equivocal predictions, "And be these juggling fiends no more believed / That palter with us in a double sense" (5.8.23-24), although he himself actually plays the part of a great equivocator by destroying the visible distinction between 'virtue' and 'vice'. His countrymen used to believe that he was a virtuous man worthy of honor until he proved otherwise, thus leading everybody to question each other's moral stance. Malcolm suspects that Macduff is Macbeth's agent sent to lure him to his destruction in Scotland. Malcolm describes Macbeth as an "angry god" who is to be appeased with sacrifice and as a tyrant who is so cruel that as soon as one mentions his name, that person's tongue gets scorched with blisters:

This tyrant, whose sole name blisters our tongues,
Was once thought honest: you have loved him well.
He hath not touch'd you yet. I am young, but something
You may deserve of him through me, and wisdom
To offer up a weak poor innocent lamb
T' appease an angry god. (4.3.14-20)

Ironically, Malcolm himself plays the part of an equivocator to protect himself from Macbeth's tricks and lures. Therefore, Malcolm devises a test of Macduff's integrity by 'deceiving' him and making him believe that he clearly lacks every one of the virtues and graces required of a good king. While listing Macbeth's vices as violence, lechery, greed - "smacking of very sin that has a name" (4.3.72) – Malcolm says that he himself is full of even more "confineless harms" (4.3.66), and that his "evil passions", "ill-composed affection" and "stanchless avarice" would inflict damage on all his countrymen. He gives a catalogue of "the king-becoming graces" such as "justice, verity, temp'rance, stableness, bounty, mercy, lowliness, devotion, patience, courage, fortitude", which, not only he himself, but by extension, Macbeth also lacks. Malcolm's account provides us with a juxtaposition of the ills of a state which is ruled by an evil tyrant and versus a fortunate country ruled by a true king. The vices of a tyrant like Macbeth are like a contagious disease that bears sway over the whole land which "weeps, bleeds, and each new day a gash / Is added to her wounds" (4.3.50-51). Malcolm and Macduff's words define Macbeth as a man who is the epitome of vice, the effects of whose misrule haunt the whole country.

Exploring Macbeth's moral sense and his conscience – which appears to be in line with the concept of conscience put forth by classical thinkers and adopted by the Renaissance- entails us to dwell upon his imagination which shows to him the immorality of his actions.

Macbeth's own perception of himself and his actions do not seem to be different from that of the people around him after Act 2. Macbeth, thanks to what Harold Bloom calls his "proleptic

imagination”, is able to anticipate the outcome of his deeds before he performs them. His imagination, being the genesis of his agency, is almost a kind of secular substitute for sacred or divine agency. Displacing divine agency and inspiration which was assumed to be the source from which everything derives, Macbeth's imagination has the power of anticipating and portraying the results of events in the most vivid manner possible. Macbeth goes in tandem with his imagination towards his deeds although his “horrible imaginings” at first seem to deter him from the course of action he is about to pursue. His power of fancy that is willing to yield to hallucination has a paradoxical function: By self-objectification, it seems to display in advance the results and effects of his actions as they will be reflected in the microcosm after they are performed. His imagination also brings forth an apocalyptic and nightmarish macrocosm. Macbeth is deeply aware of his criminality and his imagination portrays a world in which he is to be judged from an ethical perspective as a man who violates nature with a most ‘unnatural’ murder – it is almost as if the cosmos already judges him, producing a sense of self-loathing as he is about to perform his first murder.

Macbeth's imagination, is host to the genesis of his actions, literally leading the way to the chamber in which Duncan sleeps. Macbeth rightly says that it is the “bloody business” he is about to perform that causes this “false creation” on which suddenly blood appears. The dagger, a prophetic image created by his mind, ‘walks’ ahead of Macbeth to the chamber:

A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
 Proceeding from the heat-oppressèd brain?
 I see thee yet, in form as palpable
 As this which now I draw.
 Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going,
 And such an instrument I was to use.
 Mine eyes are made the fools o' th' other senses,
 Or else worth all the rest. I see thee still,
 And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,
 Which was not so before. There's no such thing.
 It is the bloody business which informs
 Thus to mine eyes. (2.1.50-61)

Macbeth willfully deceives himself by embracing a dark and gloomy view of the world and a distorted view of reality that will coalesce into his first act of violence. On the eve of the murder, Macbeth presents us with a dark image, an inverted version of the world that corresponds to the ‘unnatural deed’ he is about to perform:

Now o'er the one half-world
 Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
 The *curtained* sleep. Witchcraft celebrates
 Pale Hecate's offerings, and withered murder,
 Alarumed by his sentinel, the wolf,
 Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
 With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
 Moves like a ghost. (2.1.61-69 emphasis added)

An imagined world of 'darkness' prowled by wolves and withered murder provide a scene in which Duncan's death is a foregone conclusion. With the mention of Tarquin, the murder becomes a metaphorical rape of the realm.

The way in which Macbeth employs his imagination as a precursor to his actions strikes the eye as being considerably different from the imaginative power Hamlet possesses. In his essay "Macbeth: *Counter-Hamlet*", Calderwood (2010) examines *Macbeth* in light of concepts like time, action and mediation, and notes that Macbeth is like the photographic negative—not merely different but the total inverse—of Hamlet. One of the most striking differences between the two protagonists is the role their imagination plays in the radical actions they plan to take:

For Hamlet imagination is an impediment to action, even at times an end in itself, whereas for Macbeth it is the genesis and agency of action. Duncan's murder takes place in the mind before it occurs in the castle, and the route from the subjunctive "If it were done" to the indicative "I go, and it is done" is paved by murderous fancies [...] Actually Macbeth's imagination is something of a paradox, since it is both a get-between and a go-between for action. As a get-between it occupies the space between the desire to act and the act itself, and hence can even deter action, as in the Hamlet-like "If it were done" soliloquy... Macbeth is momentarily deterred from acting by considerations of justice, duty, and emotion, all arguing that he should get between Duncan and his murderer, "not bear the knife [himself]." On the other hand, as a go-between Macbeth's imagination envisages and conduces to action, most obviously in the "Is this a dagger that I see" soliloquy. (p. 10)

While Hamlet uses his imagination, language and 'staging' as instruments to widen the interim between the ghost's demand for revenge and his own action, Macbeth uses them to erase the gap between the witches' prophecy and the action; he is anxious to pass from illusion to reality. In order for him to get to the 'real' murder, perhaps he needs the illusion of a dagger. Macbeth is anxious to pass from the verbal stage to the action: "Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives" (2.1.74). Therefore, as his murderous career advances, his imagination becomes less and less of a get-between.

While Hamlet becomes more and more preoccupied with his power of fancy and language, that is, verbalization and staging as a means to delay action, the way in which Macbeth employs his imagination, language and 'staging' strikes us as being closely related to his acute awareness that his 'guilt' and 'shame-consciousness' will be visible in the public sphere. In other words, whenever we see Macbeth using his "get-between imagination", we realize that he is gripped with a sense that his 'unnatural' actions will be judged by both the imagined watcher and the public eye and that his crime and sense of guilt will be exposed. On the other hand, whenever he employs his "go-between imagination", we see Macbeth trying to alienate himself from his deeds: Since he is aware that his guilt will be a visible emblem of his crime, he tries to render his conscience and shame-consciousness invisible both to the world and to himself. Therefore, before turning into a mechanical murderer, Macbeth engages in a curious kind of hypocrisy: Not only does he try to project the 'image' of a 'virtuous' man to the outside world, but vainly tries to preserve that 'image' in his own eyes by means of self-deception.

Macbeth, while 'imagining' the aftermath of the murder, has a scene which stands as one of the most apt examples of his 'get-between' imagination: He seems to be deterred from committing the murder since he imagines his deed will be "judged" by the scrutinizing gaze of the cosmos.

By engaging in his self-objectifying imagination, Macbeth thinks that the whole cosmos will be 'sharing the knowledge of his deed' since "pity", personified as "a naked newborn babe" in all its innocence –vulnerable but immensely strong –will expose his deed that cannot possibly be 'covered up' or kept 'hidden' from people's eyes:

After his death, Duncan's virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And pity, like a naked newborn babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind. (1.7.18-25)

Macbeth's soliloquy is imbued with both subtly Christian –angels, trumpets, damnation, heaven's cherubim and a new born babe reminiscent of Christ- and also with judiciary language, which provides us with an imagery that has been recurrently used to delineate the experience of 'conscience' since Cicero: Duncan's virtues, just as they did during his lifetime, will display themselves majestically. More importantly, bearing witness to "the horrid deed", his "trumpet-tongued" virtues will loudly "plead against" Macbeth. Thus, his virtues will play the part of an 'accuser'. Revealing Macbeth's guilt, the whole cosmos will play the part of a prosecutor and a judge, finally pronouncing him guilty.

Indeed, king Duncan's murder is revealed 'loudly'. Lady Macbeth associates the manner in which the crime is revealed with the noise of "a hideous trumpet" which "calls to parley/ The sleepers of the house" (2.3.94-95). Macduff returns from king Duncan's chamber to announce his murder and urges the sleepers to bear witness to the event by drawing an analogy between the exposure of the hideous crime and the coming of the last judgment:

Awake, awake!
Ring the alarum bell. –Murder and treason!
Banquo, Donalbain, Malcolm, awake!
Shake off this downy sleep, death's counterfeit,
And look on death itself. Up, up, and see
The Great doom's image. Malcolm, Banquo,
As from your graves rise up and walk like sprites
To the countenance of this hour. – Ring the bell. (2.3.85-92)

Macduff, by using apocalyptic language, urges the sleepers to awake and bear witness to "the Great Doom's image". Just as such murder brings about an apocalyptic atmosphere, the revelation of the crime is in keeping with the original meaning of the word "apocalypse", which means to reveal something hidden. Macbeth has performed a deed of apocalyptic consequence and it will not remain hidden since everybody will 'share the knowledge' of his wrongdoing by rising from their metaphorical "graves" and walking "like sprites to the countenance of this hour". Macduff is trying to awake a guilty conscience which will inevitably stand 'naked' as if it is the Last Judgment.

Nevertheless, what Macbeth is more concerned with is the judgment that he will face on this earth. To him, the apocalypse, the revelation of his guilt, that is, his shame-consciousness, is not

'hereafter'. Rather, it is here, "upon this bank and shoal of time". He is aware that if only "this blow", the murder of Duncan, "might be the be-all and the end-all here", if only the moral consequences of his deed did not face him in this world, he would "jump the life to come". Then, the murder of Duncan would be the end of his action. However, Macbeth imagines the repercussions of the murder, which will be more dire *here*, that is, right in this world, than they would be in "the life to come":

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly. 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. But in these cases
We still have judgment here [.]. (1.7.1-8 emphasis added)

Macbeth claims to see no problem in the means that he will be employing to achieve this end; however, the moral consequences of the act of murder, in Thomas Elyot's words, will be "openly published" for everybody to see. It is not divine retribution that makes Macbeth waver. After all, he would be willing to risk damnation in the next world. His problem is that the moral repercussions of such a murder will manifest themselves in the form of retribution 'here and now'.

The principle of earthly retribution was one of the master-themes in *The Mirror for Magistrates*, the most significant exemplar of a long and vital tradition of historical non-dramatic poetry in the Elizabethan age. *The Mirror for Magistrates*, begun by William Baldwin as a continuation of John Lydgate's *Fall of Princes*, was first printed in 1559 (Ribner, 2005, p. 4). As Ribner suggests, it was a work which gave to many Elizabethans their first acquaintance with history, and which, naturally, was an important shaping force upon the history play. Moreover, the very word 'mirror' tells us that William Baldwin, in line with the typical attitudes of a Renaissance historian, meant his stories of unfortunate kings and statesmen to serve as lessons to the present, to teach those in power to avoid the tragic errors of the past (Ribner, p. 99). These exemplary stories, in the form of imaginary monologues by the ghosts of certain eminent British statesmen who came to unfortunate ends, were meant to educate the prince and teach him to shun vice. Macbeth, in referring to "these cases" – perhaps those recorded in the *Mirror* – is very much aware that he not only fails to 'imitate' and internalize the ideal figure put forth by the teachings of historical precedent – which classical authors deem a necessity for a clear conscience – but he also fails to project that 'image'.

In an attempt to evade "judgment here", Macbeth tries to hide his deeds so that his 'conscience' and his shame-consciousness will not be revealed: Neither his own eye nor an external eye should share the knowledge of his crime. Just as he cannot afford to lose "golden opinions" he "bought" from all sorts of people, "which would be *worn* now in their newest gloss" (1.7.35-37 emphasis added), his sense of guilt should be kept under a cloak: Signs of virtue, just like "golden opinions worn in their newest gloss", can be seen by other people inasmuch as they are encouraged to be majestically exhibited – though in Macbeth's case they serve to cloak the ugly truth underneath.

The only person with whom Macbeth shares the knowledge of his first crime is Lady Macbeth. Is it because having an accomplice will reduce his sense of guilt and shame, which can be considered an example of diffusion of responsibility? Provided that he is not alone in his crime, he will not be the only one who will bear all the guilt and suffer all the pangs of conscience. In addition, if the plan should end in failure, such failure will not be Macbeth's only. The role Macbeth will be playing in the acting out of the murder is explicitly assigned. Lady Macbeth will provide the plot, whereas Macbeth will be the one who will be the one who executes the plan. In the end, Lady Macbeth has to consummate the action by taking the daggers back to the chamber and "gilding" the faces of the grooms with Duncan's blood since Macbeth 'seems' to be too horrified to carry this final part of the project through. He is too afraid to think what he has done and he cannot go back to the chamber; he cannot even lay eyes on what his 'hands' have done: "Look on 't again I dare not." (2.2) He frantically talks about the 'voices' he has heard in the chamber:

Methought I heard a voice cry, "Sleep no more!
 Macbeth does murder sleep"—the innocent sleep,
 Sleep that knits up the raveled sleeve of care,
 The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath,
 Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
 Chief nourisher in life's feast.
 ...
 Still it cried, "Sleep no more!" to all the house.
 "Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor
 Shall sleep no more. Macbeth shall sleep no more. (2.2.47-57)

As the classical writers put forth, Macbeth here displays 'the visible traits of conscience'. Relying on 'words' has been –and will be– a strategy to hide his actions from his own self. Nevertheless, right after the murder, he finds that 'words' he made use of to delineate a world where night prevails unveil his deed. Perhaps it is the voice of his conscience that is heard at this moment of moral hysteria: Macbeth has tried to stifle the voice of his conscience by embracing a dark and gloomy view of the world so that neither the world nor himself would be privy to this atrocious murder. Yet, his conscience has witnessed the deed. By murdering Duncan, he has destroyed natural human relationships. He has also murdered "the innocent sleep" which, like the innocent "naked new born baby" that is vulnerable but immensely strong, is "chief nourisher in life's feast". "Macbeth shall sleep no more" and Lady Macbeth, who ironically blames Macbeth for being "infirm of purpose" for the words he utters, will not be able to sleep either.

Just as the displaying of virtues accounts for a 'virtuous' man, exposure of guilt and shame is evidence of 'wickedness'. It is one of the greatest ironies of the play that Lady Macbeth thinks that as long as no one bears witness to an outward evidence of their crime, they will be clear of any accusations. Provided that the blood, which serves as the 'witness' to their guilt, is removed from their hands, they will not be responsible for the crime:

Go get some water
 And wash this filthy witness from your hand--
 ...
 Give me the daggers. The sleeping and the dead
 Are but as pictures. 'Tis the eye of childhood
 That fears a painted devil. If he do bleed,

I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal
For it must seem their guilt. (2.2.60-73)

In contrast to his wife's practical words, Macbeth imagines that his hands have started plucking at his own eyes, so that they should not witness his shame:

What hands are here! Ha, they pluck out mine eyes.
Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red. (2.2.77-81)

Though Lady Macbeth is confident in that they will be clear of guilt and culpability by washing the "filthy witness" from their hands, later gone mad and guilt ridden, she will try to wash the metaphorical blood from her hands in Act 5—one of the great ironies of the play. Her conscience, just like the return of the suppressed that manifests itself through metaphors, disturbs her mental balance.

'Shame' is felt not only because one has fallen short of the ethical ideals upheld by one's community, but also for falling short of one's own ideal self-image formed in accordance with the values and expectations of that community. Therefore, in order to escape self-shame, Macbeth tries to detach himself from his crime, talking about it in abstract terms. It is as if his hands move to kill Duncan without his knowledge. He imagines himself moving like a ghost towards his design.

Macbeth's "go-between" imagination is marked by the images of 'disguise' and 'covering'. He thinks it is best for him to perform his evil deed when the gaze of the cosmos is curtained by sleep so that it will not witness his shame and share the knowledge of his crime.

Equivocation, speaking in double-terms (like the witches' famous "fair is foul, foul is fair") is another means Macbeth makes use of to escape culpability in his own mind. If only he could, he would make his eye "wink at his hand". Relying on the power of words, he equivocates with himself to suppress his conscience. What he asks for is impossible: He wants to be successful; he wants to see the result of the murder, yet he does not want to set eyes on his act. Then he could shut the self-objectified critical gaze witnessing the action of the 'hand' which makes him a 'contemptible' man who is not anywhere near the ideal figure his eyes would like to perceive: His crime is not something he wants to share with his better self:

Stars, hide your fires;
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. (1.4.57-60)

In stark contrast to Duncan's words "signs of nobleness, like stars, shall shine/On all deservers" (1.4.47-48), Macbeth wants the stars to "hide their fires" since what they illuminate will not be "signs of nobleness", but the shame that stems from having "black and deep desires" and execution of the murder inspired by them.

Like her husband, Lady Macbeth also shuns disclosure. While invoking evil spirits and commanding them to "stop up the access and passage to remorse" (1.5.51), Lady Macbeth employs

the imagery of “thick night” and “blanket of the dark” so that neither she nor heaven peeping through “the blanket of the dark” will share the knowledge of her guilt:

Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
To cry “Hold, hold!” (1.5.47-61)

So too Macbeth, walking towards his crime scene, asks the ground beneath his feet not to hear his steps and echo them, breaking the ghastly silence of the moment:

Thou sure and firm-set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts,
And take the present horror from the time,
Which now suits with it. (2.1.44-74)

Though Macbeth bids the stones not to “prate his whereabouts”, he will later admit that Stones have been known to move, and trees to speak Augures, and understood relations, have By magot-pies, and choughs, and rooks, brought forth The secret's man of blood. (3.4.152-155)

Macbeth's hopes that his crimes will not be discovered have already been replaced by his keen awareness that shameful exposure and the earthly judgment are imminent. Metaphorically, the stones that cover the bodies of the dead will move and bring about the discovery of the bodies, which will inevitably lead to the discovery of their murderer.

Macbeth stubbornly tries to avoid confronting his shame. He ‘imagines’ Banquo's ghost shaking its “gory locks” in ‘full view of the public,’ as if looking at him accusingly with its penetrating gaze. Macbeth vainly tells himself that the spectre does not look *into* him since it has no “speculation in those eyes”:

Avaunt! and quit my sight! let the earth hide thee!
Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold;
Thou hast no speculation in those eyes
Which thou dost glare with! (3.4.113-116)

However, even though Macbeth tries to find comfort in thinking that the ghost has no “speculation” in its eyes, he still cannot be secure. Those eyes are no comfort to him since the blankness of their gaze serves as a *speculum* (Latin for mirror), reflecting and exposing a ‘truthful’ image of himself and the guilt he has been trying to conceal from the world and himself.

Macbeth— before turning into a mechanical killer - uses his imagination and his words to project the ‘image’ of a virtuous man both to himself and to the outside world. He plays the part of a hypocrite in order to evade the penetrating gaze of the public. Not only does he try to evade experiencing his conscience as something open to public inspection and in full view of everyone, but vainly tries to hide his shame from himself by ‘self-equivocation’.

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