

Epicurean Time in *Macbeth*

Peter R. Moore

Macbeth may be described as a man advancing erratically toward power and then to destruction, blundering between indecision and impetuosity. His personal motivations appear to be his ambitions, his fears, and his submission to his wife's stronger character. However, Macbeth also contends with two abstract, intertwined forces: time and religion.

Regarding time, Shakespeare uses that word and its derivatives far more frequently in *Macbeth* than in any other play.¹ Time is indeed important in *Macbeth*, for example, Macbeth's letter to his wife reporting the witch's prediction that he would be King with "the coming on of time" (1.5.9-10), followed by her brutal response to his hesitance to act: "Nor time nor place, / Did then adhere, and yet you would make them both: / They have made themselves, and that their fitness now / Does unmake you" (1.7.51-4). But how does this differ from any other play with a well constructed plot? Does one event not set another in motion just as much in *Hamlet* or *Othello* as in *Macbeth*? Answering these questions – unfolding the role of time in *Macbeth* – is the purpose of this essay.

Regarding religion, Macbeth responds to the discovery of the truth of the witch's initial prediction of his advancement by asking Banquo: "Do you not *hope* your children shall be kings, / When those that gave the Thane of Cawdor to me / *Promis'd* no less to them?" (1.3.118-20).² The words "hope" and "promise" come from St. Paul, most notably in the Acts of the Apostles, where Paul tells King Agrippa of the resurrection of the dead: "And now I stand and am accused for the *hope* of the *promises* made of God vnto our fathers" (26:6).³ These two words appear also in Ephesians 2:12 and Titus 1:2, in affirmation of God's promise to Christians. Banquo unites the two words in his soliloquy at the start of Act 3: "Thou hast it now: King, Cawdor, Glamis, all, / As the weird women *promis'd* . . . Why . . . / May they not be my oracles as well, / And set me up in *hope*?" (3.1.1-10). Finally recognizing the full deception of

the prophecies, Macbeth denounces the “juggling fiends . . . / That keep the word of *promise* to our ear, / And break it to our *hope*” (5.8.19-22). In other words, Macbeth applies the concepts of his original Christianity to his newfound trust – for he has no allegiance – while Banquo struggles to resist the same temptation. As will be shown, Macbeth’s interweaving and replacement of doctrines and ideas applies not only to religion and time, but also to religion, superstition and philosophy.

Regarding the combination of religion and time, Macbeth provides an excellent example at the start of Act 1, scene 7, in his soliloquy on whether or not to murder Duncan. Macbeth opens with the consideration that if he could get away with the assassination “here, upon this bank and shoal of time” (1.7.6), he would risk the life to come. He continues by remarking that he would still have judgment here on earth, presumably referring to Genesis 9:6, “Whoso shedeth mans blood, by man shal his blood be shed,” reinforced by the fact that Duncan’s saintliness will draw heavenly hosts to denounce to all humanity so damnable a deed. Macbeth concludes that the risks are too great, but promptly tells his wife that he must not forfeit the popularity bought by his recent victories. The soliloquy’s opening is a web of evasion and ambiguity, requiring clarification from later lines and scenes, in which it typifies the play’s protagonist. To begin with, Macbeth could mean either that in return for success he would willingly risk the life to come, or that the life to come is a risk still to be counted, as indicated by his reference thirteen lines later to “the deep damnation” that would fall on the murderer. Moreover, Macbeth ought to be in no doubt that such a heinous crime would amount to forfeiting, not risking, the life to come, though his subsequent reference to damnation implies recognition of reality on this point. And then there is Macbeth’s chosen pronoun in “We’ld jump [i.e., risk or hazard] the life to come.” Is Macbeth prematurely assuming the royal plural, is he referring to both himself and Lady Macbeth, or is he simply unwilling to say “I”? In any event, he seems prepared to write off one of two divine punishments, as if time ended with his own death – a matter to which he returns later in the play.

The Concepts of Time and Eternity

The concept of time as understood by educated people in Shakespeare’s day came from classical philosophy. As no attempt will be made here to show that Shakespeare had personally studied the works in question,⁴ a synopsis relevant to the literature of his age will be offered instead. Aristotle taught that time measures motion or change, and would not exist without them; that sleep is outside of time, for no change of consciousness occurs; that certain things are eternal, meaning outside of time, such as mathematical truths; and, paradoxically, that the past and future do not exist, although they did and will, while the present is not part of time as it has no duration, therefore – apparently – time does not exist. Plotinus, expanding on Plato, defined eternity as a state outside of time, in which past and future unite with the present, or, in eternity all three tenses are simultaneous; otherwise, time is the life of the soul as it moves from one act or event to another. Responding to Aristotle’s paradox, Augustine asserts that there is “a present time of past things; a present

time of present things; and a present time of future things....The present time of past things is our memory; the present time of present things is our sight [*contuitus*, "perception"]; the present time of future things our expectation."⁵ Note the similarity of Augustine's explanation of the existence of time to Plotinus's definition of eternity, in that both unite past, present, and future. Finally, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* became the principal means of transmission of this knowledge through the Dark and Middle Ages; translated into English by Chaucer and then others, it was available in print in several sixteenth century editions.⁶

Tudor and Stuart writers counted on their readers' knowledge of the classical heritage on time and eternity. Perhaps the best known example on time and motion is Raleigh's: "tell time it metes but motion"; on eternity, perhaps Milton's: "Him God beholding from his prospect high, / Wherein past, present, future he beholds."⁸

Shakespeare's view of these essentials features most prominently in *As You Like It*, in the conversation between Rosalind and Orlando in the Forest of Arden. When the latter asks, "Who stays it [Time] still withal?", Rosalind's answer covers both the link of time to motion and the extra-chronological status of sleep: "With lawyers in the vacation; for they sleep between term and term, and then they perceive not how Time moves."⁹ The special status of sleep also occurs implicitly in *Winter's Tale*: "I turn my glass, and give my scene such growing / As you had slept between" (4.1.16-17). Shakespeare's most intriguing passage on eternity comes in *Merry Wives of Windsor*, when Mistress Ford, outraged by Falstaff's presumptuous love letter, remarks: "If I would but go to hell for an eternal moment or so, I could be knighted" (2.1.49-50). At first glance, her expression, "an eternal moment," seems a silly contradiction, though quite apt to the humor of the scene. However, on reflection, an eternal moment makes sense. Mrs. Ford's eyes could go blank for a moment or two from the point of view of an observer while she visited eternity – infernal or otherwise – where time does not exist, and where a moment and a century are indistinguishable.

Time in Acts 1-3 of *Macbeth*

The first three acts of *Macbeth* invoke Time in various ways, often returning to them later in the play, but each act also includes one or more critical decisions or events that foreshadow or shape the plot. Otherwise, Time seems a presence in the play – albeit offstage – that pulls or pushes the characters this way and that, or, to put it another way, Shakespeare seems to be exercising his audiences on the subject of time. Act 1 serves a threshold, as it were, Act 2 as the doorknob, and Act 3 as the hinges. Then, in Acts 4 and 5, Macbeth challenges Time: Act 4 is the door itself, while Act 5 leads to what lies beyond.

Time's first critical event in Act 1 is the witches' prediction that Macbeth shall be Thane of Cawdor and then King; the latter motivates the plot, while the former provides a preliminary verification of the witches' reliability. Satan presumably stands behind the witches' words, but the prediction and its resultant temptation operate in Time's framework. Time's second critical intervention is

Duncan's decision to spend a night at Macbeth's castle. The choice may be Duncan's, or it could be ascribed to fate, fortune, or chance, but it creates a situation – an opportunity for regicide and usurpation – controlled by the passage of Time.

Otherwise, Macbeth first responds to the witches by allowing his present to be overwhelmed by the future: "Present fears / Are less than horrible imaginings: / My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical, / Shakes so my single state of man that function / Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is / But what is not" (1.3.137-42). Then, quite sensibly, he returns to honesty or, to put things less favorably, lapses into passivity: "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me / Without my stir" (1.3.143-4); "Come what come may, / Time and the hour runs through the roughest day" (1.3.146-7); and, writing to his wife, that he shall be King, with "the coming on of time" (1.5.9). Lady Macbeth's first response, like her husband's, is to grasp for the future: "Thy letters have transported me beyond / This ignorant present, and I feel now / The future in the instant" (1.5.56-8). When he loses his nerve after the "bank and shoal of time" soliloquy, she reacts in terms of time: "From this time / Such I account thy love" (1.7.38-9). Then she quashes his protests by reminding him that he initiated the matter: "Nor time, nor place, / Did then adhere, and yet you would make them both: / They have made themselves, and that their fitness now / Does unmake you" (1.7.51-4).¹⁰

In Act 2, some unknown force responds to Duncan's murder by denying future sleep, humanity's refuge from Time, to Macbeth.

Methought I heard a voice cry, "Sleep no more! / Macbeth does murder sleep" . . . Still it cried, "Sleep no more!" to all the house; / Glamis hath murder'd sleep, and therefore Cawdor / Shall sleep no more – Macbeth shall sleep no more" (2.1.30-40).

The voice could arise from Macbeth's own conscience or from various external powers – we do not know which – but this immediate response to murder comes within the domain of Time. Two other time-related items in this Act deserve mention. First, when Macduff asks Macbeth why he slaughtered Duncan's sleeping grooms, Macbeth deftly answers: "Who can be wise, amaz'd, temp'rate, and furious / Loyal, and neutral, in a moment?" (2.3.108-09). This speech, which asks rhetorically, "Who can simultaneously be opposites?" parallels Plotinus's definition of eternity and Augustine's affirmation of the actuality of Time, both of which require the simultaneity of different tenses. Finally, Malcolm's question to his brother, "What should be spoken here, where our fate, / Hid in an auger-hole, may rush and seize us?" (2.3.121-2), is reminiscent of one of Augustine's puzzles about the past and future: "have they a being also; but such as proceeds out of some unknown secret, when out of the future, the present is made; and returns it into some secret again, when the past is made out of the present?"¹¹

In Act 3, at least five significant events happen with regard to time, each extending backward in the play as well as forward. Hence, as characterized above, Act 3 resembles a hinge, or, more precisely, a two-way hinge allowing motion in

either direction. The following brief descriptions of the five discuss only the backward movement, with the forward reserved for now.

After his meeting with Banquo, Macbeth launches a soliloquy on the threat posed by his former comrade, including: "For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind, / For them the gracious Duncan have I murder'd, / . . . / Only for them; and mine eternal jewel / Given to the common enemy of man, / To make them kings – the seeds of Banquo kings! / Rather than so, come fate into the list, / And champion me to th' utterance!" (3.1.64-71). The reference to giving his soul to Satan harks back to the "bank and shoal of time" soliloquy, which left in doubt the question of whether Macbeth accepted that his crimes implied damnation. It appears here that he does accept that he is damned, but simply regards it as a cost of getting his way here on earth.

Then, in conversation with his wife, we learn that the prophetic voice that assailed Macbeth after Duncan's murder has come true: "But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer, / Ere we will eat our meal in fear, and sleep / In the affliction of these terrible dreams / That shake us nightly. Better be with the dead, / Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace, / Than on the torture of the mind to lie / In restless ecstasy." (3.2.16-22). More on this topic, sleep and its relationship to time, lies ahead.

As a result of becoming unnerved by the appearance of Banquo's Ghost at the feast, Macbeth exclaims that: "Blood hath been shed ere now, i' th'olden time, / Ere humane statute purg'd the gentle weal; / Ay, and since too, murders have been perform'd / . . . the time has been, / That, when the brains were out, the man would die, / And there an end" (3.4.74-9). These words obviously look back to some distant past – the olden time – but they also foreshadow, or alert the audience to, the new belief that Macbeth partially adopts in Act 4: Epicureanism.

Then, after babbling about secret murderers being revealed by stones, trees, and birds, Macbeth suddenly rallies by asking, "What is the night?" (3.4.125). Very much in command of himself, Macbeth discourses on Macduff's absence from the feast, what his army of spies will tell him on that subject, and then: "I will to-morrow / (And betimes I will) to the weird sisters. / More shall they speak; . . . I am in blood / Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o'er. / Strange things I have in head, that will to hand; / Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd." (3.4.131-9). The image of stepping through blood¹² recalls the "bank and shoal of time" soliloquy in the sense of picturing time or life as flowing water, as well as in the ambiguities of both passages. Does Macbeth really believe that "returning" through his bloodshed would merely be tedious? And what would it mean to return: surely, as Claudius understood, repentance, confession, yielding the fruits of crime, and accepting both human and divine consequences? Macbeth's last two lines reverse his view from returning in time to upcoming events which must be acted ere they be scanned, which anticipates his planned visit to the witches.

Finally, Macbeth's response to his wife's call to sleep has implications that stretch in two directions: "Come, we'll to sleep. My strange and self-abuse / Is the initiate fear that wants hard use: / We are yet but young in deed." (3.4.140-3).

Somehow, perhaps again anticipating the power of the witches, Macbeth no longer worries about his sleep being destroyed by terrible dreams. Less obviously, Macbeth's reference to self-abuse, like his earlier remark on the olden time, points to the Epicureanism that lies ahead.

In sum, the multiple tentacles of Time extending across, before, and beyond Act 3 merit the classical term *epitasis*, "that part of a play when the plot thickens," or, as Ben Jonson put it, "the business of the play."¹³ The references or topics that Time points forward to include: damnation; the security of sleep; the olden times; pausing in a stream of blood; acting deeds before they may be scanned; and self-abuse.

Time in Acts 4-5 of *Macbeth*

In Act 4, Macbeth settles upon two courses of action regarding the problem of Time. First, he reveals himself to be a follower of some of the doctrines of the Greek philosopher Epicurus. These include disbelief in any afterlife; hence Macbeth's death will bring an end to Time. Next, he decides that he must keep up with, or travel as fast as Time, lest it leave him behind. These decisions carry over into Act 5, along with an unintended consequence: Lady Macbeth falls out of Time and into Eternity. The dramatic effectiveness of these three events depends not only on how the playwright stages them, but also on the audience's awareness of his intent.

Regarding Epicureanism, Shakespeare, as shown in some of his other plays, could rely on the audience's general knowledge, as well as on a scripted sermon that each member should have heard annually. Regarding the other two items, and assuming the audience's general knowledge of Time and Eternity, Shakespeare chose the difficult course of staging a truism and a paradox. On the one hand, Time moves at the same rate for all: sixty seconds per minute, sixty minutes per hour, for both the sluggard and the dynamo. How then does an actor run as fast as Time? On the other hand, how can one actor show past, present, and future all at once?

Epicureanism

Although strongly present earlier in the play, Epicureanism receives its formal introduction in Act 5, as Macbeth contemplates English invaders supported by rebellious Scottish nobles:

Bring me no more reports, let them fly all.
Till Birnam wood remove to Dunsinane
I cannot taint with fear. What's the boy Malcolm?
Was he not born of woman? The spirits that know
All mortal consequences have pronounc'd me thus:
"Fear not, Macbeth, no man that's born of woman
Shall e'er have power upon thee." Then fly, false thanes,
And mingle with the English epicures!

(5.3.1-8)

Macbeth's sneer at the English epicures has two meanings, which arise from both the philosophical and vulgar understandings of "epicure." First, while he openly proclaims himself to be protected by prophecies, the Epicureans scoffed at any sort of soothsaying or omens,¹⁴ and the willingness of the English to attack shows disbelief in Macbeth's prophecies – hence the English are epicures. Macbeth's second meaning results from his military experience, his plan for the coming campaign, and a national stereotype from Shakespeare's day.

In those times, it was held that, although the English were the most valiant of all nations on the battlefield, the English soldier needed plenty of beef and a warm, dry place to sleep, without which he would go home. Consequently, the way to defeat the English was not to confront them face-to-face, but to drag out the campaign into winter, while forcing them to conduct sieges. Contemporary examples of the stereotype are readily found.

In 1519 the Venetian ambassador observed that English soldiers "insist on being paid monthly, nor do they choose to suffer any hardship; but when they have their comforts [*commodita*], they will then do battle daily, with a courage, vigour, and valour, that defy exaggeration."¹⁵ Elis Gruffydd, a Welsh soldier in the Duke of Suffolk's expedition of 1523, recorded that the King of France "did not make much haste to turn back to drive the English from his kingdom since he was sufficiently familiar with them to know that . . . as soon as winter came it was sure that they would keep to their custom as they were used to do" and go home, which they did. In 1543, Gruffydd served at the siege of Montreuil, where the French commander responded to the Duke of Norfolk's demand for surrender by telling him to "take his pleasure in hunting with hawks and hounds about the country while the weather is fine and mild and by winter according to the old English custom you will go home to your kinsmen," as they did.¹⁶ A specific link of the vice to the nation comes in a 1614 item: "Poysoning to Italie, drunkennesses to Germanie, Epicureanism to England."¹⁷ English awareness of the stereotype also appears in *1 Henry VI*, where the Duke of Alençon remarks of the English besiegers of Orleans that:

They want their porridge and their fat bull-beeves:
 Either they must be dieted like mules
 And have their provender tied to their mouths,
 Or piteous they will look, like drowned mice.

(1.2.9-12)

Likewise, on the eve of Agincourt in *Henry V*, when Orleans remarks that the English are out of beef, the Constable replies, "Then we shall find tomorrow they have only stomachs to eat and none to fight" (3.7.152-4).¹⁸

As an able general, Macbeth takes his enemy's weakness into account as he waits for them in his fortress on Dunsinane Hill:

Our castle's strength
Will laugh a siege to scorn; here let them lie
Till famine and the ague eat them up.
Were they not forc'd with those that should be ours,
We might have met them dareful, beard to beard,
And beat them backward home.

(5.5.2-7)

The last three lines clearly show that Macbeth foresees the English, not the Scots rebels, as the victims of hunger and disease.

Analysis of Macbeth's slap at the English epicures presents two common views of Epicureanism in Shakespeare's age. On the one hand, an epicure was one who followed the teachings of the ancient philosopher Epicurus, which included the non-interest and non-interference of the gods in human affairs by either prophecy or direct intervention; the nonexistence of any afterlife, hence the simultaneous death of body and soul; avoidance of public affairs; and asceticism in one's personal life. Given his trust in prophecies as well as his royal ambitions, Macbeth obviously does not qualify as a full-fledged Epicurean. On the other hand, rival classical schools of philosophy, subsequently joined by Christianity, slandered epicures as nothing more than hedonists or voluptuaries – atheists who loved luxury. Again, Macbeth does not fit the mold. However, the theology of the Anglican Church offered a simpler picture of epicures.

Unless a church possessed a minister licensed to preach his own sermon once a month, ministers of the Church of England read their congregations the prescribed sermon from the *Book of Homilies* every Sunday and holy day, beginning anew each year, thus guaranteeing a high degree of common public knowledge, if not necessarily agreement. The homily for Rogation Week, "That all good things commeth from God," contains three parts, each read on a different day. The second part concerns those who looked elsewhere for help:

Epicures they bee that imagine that he [God] walketh about the coastes of the heauens, & hath no respect of these inferiour things, but that all these things should proceede either by chance or at aduventure, or else by disposition of fortune, and GOD to haue no stroke in them. What other thing is this to say, then as the foole supposeth in his heart, there is no GOD?

The fools in question had, however, a supernatural alternative:

I would to GOD (my friendes) that in our wants and necessities, we would goe to GOD . . . If wee did, wee should not seeke our want and necessitie of the deuill and his ministers so oft as wee doe, as dayly experience declareth it. For if wee stand in necessitie of corporall health, whither goe the common people, but to charmes, witchcraftes and other delusions of the Deuill? . . . If

the Merchaunt . . . knew that GOD is the giuer of riches, hee woulde content himselfe with so much as by iust meanes approued of GOD, . . . hee would neuer procure his gaine and aske his goods at the Deuils hand. GOD forbid ye will say, that any man should take his riches of the Deuill . . . And all they that giue themselues to such meanes, and have renounced the true meanes that GOD hath appoynted, haue forsaken him, and are become worshippers of the Deuill . . . They be such as kneele downe to the deuill at his bidding, and worship him: For he promiseth them for so doing, that he will giue them the world, and the goods therein. They cannot otherwise better serue the deuill, then to doe his pleasure and commandement.¹⁹

The fundamental Epicurean doctrine of God's indifference or impotence thus leads fools to forsake the divine for the infernal, a reasonable description of Macbeth's philosophy.

Otherwise, Epicureanism is specifically denounced in Acts of the Apostles 17:18, besides being attacked in marginal notes to I Corinthians 15:32 and II Peter 3:5 of the 1560 Geneva Bible,²⁰ as well as in notes to Luke 6:20, Acts 2:23, and II Peter 3:3 of the 1576 Tomson-Geneva New Testament.²¹ The burden of these notes is that Epicureanism is anti-Christian and atheistic, while, as a consequence of denying the afterlife, it promotes hedonism here on earth. Aside from *Macbeth*, Shakespeare stressed the sensualist side of Epicureanism in *Merry Wives* (2.2.287), *King Lear* (1.4.244) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (2.1.24), while referring to two of its philosophical aspects in *Julius Caesar* (5.1.76) and *Antony and Cleopatra* (2.7.52).

As discussed above, Macbeth makes a single remark on Epicureanism with a double meaning in Act 5, scene 3, but he clearly adopts part of the doctrines of Epicurus in Act 4, scene 1, having already mulled over the topic in Act 3, scene 4. After Banquo's Ghost disrupts the feast, Macbeth makes two comments agreeable to Epicureanism, although both may be commonplaces, along with one that is decidedly Epicurean. Marveling at the Ghost's appearance, Macbeth exclaims that if graves reject our corpses, "our monuments / Shall be the maws of kites" (3.4.71-2), in agreement with a similar remark in one of the most important statements of Epicurean doctrine, *De Rerum Natura*; however, as the Loeb editor notes, the concept was common to many classical and Renaissance authors.²² At the end of the scene, Macbeth dismisses the reality of the Ghost as a result of "self-abuse," meaning self-deception, which Shakespeare could easily have picked up as an Epicurean belief from Plutarch's "Life of Marcus Brutus," the primary source for *Julius Caesar*;²³ however, again, the belief cannot be confined to Epicurus and his followers. On the other hand, right after his complaint about the maws of kites, Macbeth observes that murders occurred "i' th' olden time, / Ere humane statute purg'd the gentle weal" (3.4.74-5), a puzzling bit of information for which *Macbeth's* editors offer no source.²⁴ Macbeth's historical knowledge does not come from the Bible, where divine statute, the Sixth Commandment, prohibits murder, nor does it arise from the classical progression of gold, silver, bronze, and iron ages, followed by the flood, as in the opening of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Macbeth's belief, however, coincides with human history as narrated

in Books V and VI of *De Rerum Natura*, wherein savage primitive humanity first created civilization and then purged it by establishing statutes against homicide.²⁵

Macbeth's announcement of his own partial adoption of the teachings of Epicurus comes in his second meeting with the witches, after the two prophecies assure him that he cannot be killed by man or be vanquished. He then exults that: "Our high-plac'd Macbeth / Shall live the lease of nature, pay his breath / To time and mortal custom" (4.1.98-100). This statement of satisfaction that he will live out old age and die a natural death is thoroughly Epicurean, and yet such sentiments can hardly be called exclusively Epicurean. For now, however, Macbeth's relief at his prophesied invincibility serves two further purposes. First, in keeping with Epicurus's doctrine, time ends with his own death. Second, Macbeth need no longer be concerned about damnation, as he was in his "bank and shoal of time" and "mine eternal jewel" soliloquies, because he has ceased to believe in the afterlife.

Yet, on being informed that his wife is dead, Macbeth finally rejects the Epicurean view of time.

She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word.
Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(5.5.17-28)

As Fast as Time

Immediately after meeting with the witches and learning the future, Macbeth discovers that Macduff, whom he intends to kill, has fled to England. He responds:

Time, thou anticipat'st my dread exploits:
The flighty purpose never is o'ertook
Unless the deed go with it. From this moment
The very firstlings of my heart shall be
The firstlings of my hand. And even now,
To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done:
The castle of Macduff I will surprise,
Seize upon Fife; give to th' edge o' th' sword
His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls

That trace him in his line. No boasting like a fool;
 This deed I'll do before this purpose cool.
 (4.1.144-54)

On one hand, Macbeth may be said to recognize his own indecisiveness, and to adopt the motto: he who hesitates is lost. On the other hand, Macbeth directly challenges Time, which he now regards as an adversary.

Lady Macbeth and Eternity

At the start of Act 1, scene 5, Lady Macbeth reads in her husband's letter that the witches hailed him as Thane of Cawdor and future king, and how he promptly learned that Duncan had granted him the former title. She then reflects on her husband's lack of ruthlessness, which must be made good by her own resolution. Next she learns that Duncan comes to stay for the night and that Macbeth's arrival is imminent, whereupon she appeals to diabolical spirits to fill her with total cruelty. Macbeth enters, Lady Macbeth greets him with his new title, then alludes to greater things to come, concluding, as noted above that she has been transported beyond the present into the future. Her assertion of feeling – not of anticipating or expecting, as Augustine puts it – the future in the present amounts to an implication of eternity, a collapsing of the future onto the present. Furthermore, Lady Macbeth's words do not exist in isolation, instead they anticipate her final appearance on stage.

By the time of her sleepwalking scene, Lady Macbeth lives in semi-darkness, as she requires light beside her night and day. Her waiting-gentlewoman and a doctor observe her walking with her candle, repeating or varying speeches uttered at the killings of Duncan, Banquo, and Lady Macduff, but jumbled together, out of their chronological order.

Lady Macbeth has manifestly lost the present tense, especially since she is asleep, in agreement with Aristotle, but she possesses the past – actually the past possesses her – and likewise with the future in hell, to which she refers. In other words, Lady Macbeth has slipped into that timeless eternity so jokingly alluded to by Mistress Ford.

That Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking lies outside of time may be verified by contrasting it to Augustine's definition of the present. He begins by noting that the past and future do not exist, but continues by arguing that "a present time of past things; a present time of present things; and a present time of future things" exist in our souls and nowhere else. Specifically (as noted above): "The present time of past things is our memory; the present time of present things is our sight; the present time of future things our expectation." Lady Macbeth cannot see or experience the present:

Doct. You see her eyes are open.
Gent. Ay, but their sense are shut.
 (5.1.24-5)

Lady Macbeth can, on the other hand, see, smell, and imagine the past: the spot of blood that will not be wiped away. She does not simply remember the past in her speeches and acts; instead she relives it. And her words, “Hell is murky” (5.1.36)²⁶ remind of the conclusion of her imprecation to diabolical spirits to fill her with cruelty:

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.

(1.5.50-3)

However, Lady Macbeth saw quite clearly on the night of Duncan’s murder, well enough to recognize the sleeping King’s resemblance to her own father (2.2.12-13). Thus, her “Hell is murky” in Act 5 is not simply a recollection of her words in Act 1, but is a response to her current condition. In her sleep, Lady Macbeth does not expect to go to murky hell; as indicated by her use of the present tense, she is already there.

Endnotes

- ¹ On this topic, see Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare’s Language* (New York, 2000), 201-16, to whom I am indebted. The relative frequency of “time,” “times,” etc. in *Macbeth* is 0.291, next comes *As You Like It* at 0.219, while the average for all of Shakespeare’s plays is 0.15, though for the Sonnets the count is 0.44; Marvin Spevack, *A Complete and Systematic Concordance to the Works of Shakespeare* (Hildesheim, 1968). See also A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London, 1991), note EE, 459-60; and A. R. Braunmuller, ed., *Macbeth* (Cambridge, 1997), 15-24.
- ² Unless otherwise noted, all Shakespeare quotations are from *The Riverside Shakespeare, Second Edition*, eds. G. Blakemore Evans and J. J. M. Tobin (Boston, 1997).
- ³ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from *The Geneva Bible, A facsimile of the 1560 edition*, ed. Lloyd E. Berry (Madison, Wisconsin, 1969).
- ⁴ Most notably: Plato, *Timaeus*; Aristotle, *Physics*; Plotinus, *Enneads*, 3.7.3,11.
- ⁵ *St. Augustine’s Confessions*, tr. William Watts (London, 1631) and W. H. D. Rouse (Loeb edition 1912), XI.xx. Other items: I, “Your Father knoweth what you have need of, before you ask” (Matt. 6:8); VI, counting time by syllables, also in XXII, XXVI, and XXVIII; XI, definitions of time and eternity; XIV, defines eternity; XVII, the present comes out of a secret place, then returns; XX, defines the three presents; XXVIII, the three tenses are in the mind. See also *The Teacher* on sleep, madness, the reliability of the senses, and the fact that mathematical truth remains even if the human race sleeps.
- ⁶ Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, 1525 (Walton trans.) 1532 (Chaucer). Defines both Time and Eternity.
- ⁷ *The Poems of Sir Walter Raleigh*, ed. Agnes C. Latham, “The Lie.” For other examples, see

The Poems of George Chapman, ed. Phyllis Brooks Bartlett, "Hero and Leander," p. 138, ll. 187-8, "Now (as swift as Time / Doth follow Motion)"; and *The Poems of Sir John Davies*, ed. Robert Krueger, "Orchestra": p. 97, st. 23, "Time the measure of all moving things is"; pp. 123-4, st. 126.

- ⁸ Milton on eternity *Paradise Lost*, 3.77-8. For other examples, see *Selected Poems of Fulke Greville*, ed. Thom Gunn, "Caelica," 86, ll. 22-4, p. 119, "To see itself in that eternal glass, / Where time doth end, and thoughts accuse the dead, / Where all to come, is one with all that was"; and Sir Thomas Browne, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1645), "For unto God a thousand years are no more than one moment . . . for all parts of time are alike unto him, unto whom none are referrible; and all things present, unto whom nothing is past or to come" (Bk. 7, Ch. 3, p. 493).
- ⁹ *As You Like It*, 3.2.330-3; see ll. 299-33 for the entire dialogue on time.
- ¹⁰ Cf. *Measure for Measure*: "Had time coher'd with place, or place with wishing" (2.1.11).
- ¹¹ Augustine, *Confessions* (Loeb), XI.xvii, vol. 2, p. 247.
- ¹² Cf. *Richard III*, 4.2.63-4: "But I am in / So far in blood that sin will pluck on sin."
- ¹³ Cuddon, J. A. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary terms and Literary Theory*, Third Edition (London, 1991); Ben Jonson, Argument to *The New Inn of the Light Heart*, *The Complete Plays of Ben Jonson*, intro. Felix E. Schelling (London, 1910).
- ¹⁴ As Cassius says to Messala at Philippi: "You know that I held Epicurus strong, / And his opinion; now I change my mind, / And partly credit things that do presage," going on to explain the omen of the appearance above their army of birds of carrion, in place of two eagles that had accompanied them on the march (*Julius Caesar*, 5.1.76-88).
- ¹⁵ Giustinian, Sebastian. *Four Years at the Court of Henry VIII*, tr. Rawdon Brown (London, 1854), 316.
- ¹⁶ Davies, M. B. "Suffolk's Expedition to Mondidier," *Fouad I University, Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts*, VII (July 1944), 38. Davies, "The 'Enterprises' of Paris and Boulogne," *Fouad I*, IX.I (May 1949), 55.
- ¹⁷ *OED*, Epicurism, 2.b.
- ¹⁸ In his footnote to this passage in the Second Arden *Henry V* (London, 1954), J. H. Walter offers several more examples of the stereotype.
- ¹⁹ *Certaine Sermons or Homilies, Appointed to be Read in Churches In the Time of Queen Elizabeth I (1547-1571)*, A facsimile reproduction of the edition of 1623, eds. Mary Ellen Rickey and Thomas B. Stroup (Gainesville, Florida, 1968), The Second Tome, 223, 225. See also Naseeb Shaheen, *Biblical References in Shakespeare's Plays* (Newark, Delaware, 1999), 51, 53, 55-8 on the Homilies, and Appendix C on Shakespeare's dramatic use of them.
- ²⁰ *The Geneva Bible, A facsimile of the 1560 edition*, ed. Lloyd E. Berry (Madison, Wisconsin, 1969).
- ²¹ *The Geneva Bible, The Annotated New Testament, 1602 Edition*, ed. Gerald T. Sheppard (Cleveland, Ohio, 1989).
- ²² Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, eds. W. H. D. Rouse and Martin Ferguson Smith (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1992), V.993-4, 454-5.
- ²³ *Julius Caesar*, ed. David Daniell (Walton-on-Thames, Surrey, 1998), Appendix, 351.
- ²⁴ Editors on the "olden time": Wilson (1947) defines "purge," "humane," "gentle"; Muir (1951) same as Wilson; Hunter (1967) general explanation, no source; Foakes (1968) same as Wilson; Brooke (1990) similar to Wilson, cites Empson; Braunmuller (1997) same as Wilson; Miola (2004) defines "weal."
- ²⁵ Lucretius, *De Rerum*, V.1136-50.

- ²⁶ Braunmuller, 1997: "she repeats words that the audience supposes Macbeth said." Hunter, 1967, quotes Wilson's "abyss at her feet" remark; Muir, 1951/72, cites Bradley, and "In I.vii Macbeth never appeals to moral principles, and he would jump the life to come"; Wilson, 1950/60, "A sudden glimpse into the abyss at her feet"; Miola, 2004/xiii, cites the McKellen/Dench Macbeth, who apparently returns to Christianity.