

CHAPTER 4

"I Could Not Say 'Amen': Prayer and Providence in *Macbeth*

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Though ancient playwrights believed in different deities and ethical systems, they too depicted human beings struggling with the gods, with fate and free will, crime and punishment, guilt and suffering. Sophocles (5th c. BC) portrays Oedipus, solver of the Sphinx's riddle and King of Thebes, who discovers that all along he has been fulfilling, not fleeing, the curse of Apollo and its dread predictions: "Lead me away, O friends, the utterly lost (*ton meg' olethrion*), most accursed (*ton kataratotaton*), and the one among mortals most hated (*exthrotaton*) by the gods!" (1341-43). In several plays that provided models for *Macbeth*, Seneca (d. 65 AD) presents men and women saying the unsayable, doing the unthinkable and suffering the unimaginable. The witch Medea slays her own children in a horrifying act of revenge. In contrast to Euripides' *Medea*, which ends in a choral affirmation of Zeus's justice and order, Seneca's play concludes with Medea's transformation into something inhuman: she leaves the scene of desolation in a chariot drawn by dragons, bearing witness, wherever she goes, that there are gods, *testare nullos esse, qua veheris, deos* (1027). Driven mad by the goddess Juno, Seneca's Hercules in *Hercules Furens* kills his children, then awakens to full recognition of his deed in suicidal grief and remorse. These tragic heroes struggle against the gods and themselves.

Such classical archetypes inform tragedy in the West, with Seneca especially shaping Elizabethan tragedy. *Medea* and *Hercules Furens* partly account for the child-killing so prominent in *Macbeth*. Of course,

Seneca here joins with native traditions of medieval drama, represented powerfully by Herod's massacre of holy innocents. Child-killing, as many have noted, appears both in the stage action of Shakespeare's play—the murder of Macduff's children, the bloody-child apparition—and in its language, Lady Macbeth's terrible hyperbole:

I have given suck, and know
 How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;
 I would, while it was smiling in my face,
 Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
 And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you
 Have done to this. (1.7.54-59)¹

Seneca may directly inspire Lady Macbeth herself.² Medea invokes the gods, asking them to "drive away feminine fears" (*pelle femineos metus*, 42) from her mind; alone, she rouses herself to a terrible deed of self-creation. In her famous soliloquy, Lady Macbeth asks the spirits (demons? the witches?) to "unsex" her, to "stop up th'access and passage to remorse," to take her "milk for gall" (1.5.36ff.). Of course, the differences between the two women loom large and important. Medea achieves a unique place in *scelus* ("crime"); altering the universe by transgressing the bounds of the natural, she becomes a supernatural creation who flies away like a god. Instead of such apotheosis, however, Lady Macbeth comes crashing down. Tormented by guilt and sleeplessness, she last appears in the sleepwalking scene (5.1), a ghost of her former self, haunted, frightened, broken. Perhaps the most celebrated actress in this role, Sarah Siddons (1755-1831) portrayed Lady Macbeth washing her hands vehemently; she imagined her character, "with wan and haggard countenance, her starry eyes glazed with the ever-burning fever of remorse, and on their lids the shadows of death."³ Medea transforms herself; Lady Macbeth dies offstage.

Macbeth also experiences a breathtaking rise and crashing fall. He appears first as a classical warrior hero, "valor's minion," the bridegroom of Bellona, Roman goddess of war (1.2.19, 55). At a crucial point in the action he justifies the decision to kill Banquo in Senecan fashion: "Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill" (3.2.57) echoes

Seneca's proverbial saying, *per scelera semper sceleribus tutum est iter* (*Agamemnon*, 115), "the safe way for crime is through more crimes." But there is no safe way for crimes in Macbeth's world; not even Bellona's bridegroom can carve out his passage with brandished steel and bloody execution. Dagger in bloodstained hand, Macbeth suffers like no classical hero at the very moment of his triumphant murder; he hears the sleeping guards awake:

Macbeth: One cried "God bless us!" and "Amen!" the other,
As they had seen me with these hangman's hands.
List'ning their fear, I could not say "Amen"

When they did say "God bless us!"

Lady Macbeth: Consider it not so deeply.

Macbeth: But wherefore could not I pronounce "Amen"?
I had most need of blessing, and "Amen"

Stuck in my throat (2.2.29-36)

In David Garrick's celebrated eighteenth-century performance of this scene the self-reproach ("these hangman's hands") widened into a "wonderful expression of heartfelt horror."⁴ Here that self-reproach accompanies an urgent need for God's blessing and the solace of prayer. Unable to say "Amen," Macbeth expresses a childlike incomprehension and astonishment at what he has done and become.

This extraordinary moment marks the differences between Macbeth and his classical predecessors, and from the cruel, remorseless tyrant Shakespeare found in Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587), the main source of the play. And this moment takes us into the heart of Macbeth's tragedy: he has most need of God's blessing and cannot say "Amen." Confessing his need for God's blessing, of course, Macbeth declares himself an imperfect man in a fallen world. As John Smith put it in a book published about the time of the play, *A Pattern of True Prayer* (1605), everyone needs to obtain "saving blessings" from God through prayer because only those blessing can remove the "secret poison" in the heart caused by original sin:

Hence it cometh that seeing wicked men do not and cannot pray therefore, though they have many blessings in show, yet in truth they are not so but rather curses, even the very poison and bane of their souls, means to hasten their damnation, and to drench the deeper in the pit of hell another day; whereas contrariwise, the godly asking blessings of god, He in mercy removeth this curse from the righteous man's goods, and makes his blessings saving blessings unto him. (sig. B2)⁵

This context makes precisely legible Macbeth's urgent need for blessing and his incapacity for prayer. Regarding this latter point, both Catholics and Protestants agree on the essential necessity of prayer and its nature. Urging the faithful to pray always, St. John Fisher defines prayer as a turning of the mind and heart toward God, with or without words, that results in the fervor of charity, sweetness of communion, and salvation. Protestant Thomas Becon agrees: prayer is a "lifting up of a pure mind to God, wherein we ask somewhat of him"; citing church fathers—Cyprian, Ambrose, Augustine, Jerome and Gregory—Becon continues: "prayer is not the work of the mouth but of the heart, not of the voice but of the thought, not of the lips but of the mind."⁶ Everyone condemned empty prayer, vain babble or mere "lip-labor" (sig. C4) in John Smith's phrase. (Though both sadly accused the other side of lip-labor, with Protestants pointing to the rosary, Office of the Blessed Virgin and Latin Mass; and Catholics to the state-mandated *Book of Common Prayer*, each successive edition prefaced by parliamentary decree.) Claudius in *Hamlet* would prove himself a perfectly unobjectionable theologian to both confessions: "My words fly up, my thoughts remain below. / Words without thoughts never to heaven go" (3.3.97-99). Macbeth cannot say "Amen," anyone could have told him, because he prays with his lips only and not with his heart.

Furthermore, the word "Amen" has a special valence in its cultural moment, having assumed a pivotal position in theological disputes of Reformation. The saying of "Amen" became a crucial point of controversy in the Harding-Jewel debates on the vernacular. Construing Paul (1 Cor 14), John Jewel argued that saying "Amen" only to things understood could constitute a prayer. Saying "Amen" to the eucharistic prayer

for Harding signified assent to the doctrine of transubstantiation; for Jewel no such thing, but "a thanksgiving unto God for our delivery by the death of Christ."⁷ A number of writers wrote on the significance of "Amen" at the end of the Lord's Prayer. In *The Pathway to Prayer and Piety* (1609), Robert Hill explained that the word "Amen" ("so be it") put a "seal" on a prayer; it is a Hebraism that through long use in Greek, Latin and English provides an appropriate conclusion, if used with earnest desire and full consent, "not in hypocrisy to God." Hill advises readers "not to use this word 'Amen' so unadvisedly as we do now, but to know what it is to which we say Amen,' lest by ignorance we seal a curse to ourselves and others."⁸ Macbeth's inability to say "Amen" testifies to his hypocrisy and sinfulness; but, more important, his desire to say "Amen" testifies to his goodness, to his deep and deeply denied need for grace and blessings.

Macbeth's abortive prayer thus illustrates the moral world of the play, the ethical universe in which he must live and die. And we must surely share, at first, in his momentary astonishment: why, after all, cannot the man who has just butchered his guest, kinsman, and king manage to mouth an "Amen," even if insincere? What stops him, what sticks the word in his throat—the involuntary reflex of a defeated conscience or some divine refusal to tolerate yet another transgression? The play affords no window through which to look this deeply into Macbeth's soul, but one thing is clear: Macbeth's inability to say "Amen" signals the futility of his crime. Human action and the will to power may prevail in Medea's world but not here, where nature itself gives witness to the immutable order of moral law. Macbeth fears that "the very stones" will prate of his whereabouts (2.1.58). The night of the King's murder is "unruly": chimneys fall, laments and strange screams of death fill the air, the owl clamors, the earth shakes (2.3.48-55). Afterward, an unnatural darkness strangles the sun, a mousing owl kills a falcon, and Duncan's horses eat each other. In the Globe performance of 1611, Simon Forman reports, the blood on Macbeth's hands "could not be washed off by any means, nor from his wife's hands."⁹ After Banquo's ghost rises, Macbeth says that stones move, trees speak and birds ("maggot-pies and choughs and rooks") reveal "the secret'st man of blood" (3.4.125-28).

The mix of legend, superstition, and mirabilia here points to divine order; herein the play echoes the popular providentialism Tessa Watt and Alexandra Walsham have well explored, the inscrutable theater of God's judgments made entirely, if fitfully, scrutable in the popular press.¹⁰ Cheap print frequently featured such cosmic disruptions as visible sermons, as signs of God's presence and disapproval. In many pamphlets and broadsides, as in the world of this play, the capricious pagan gods Apollo, Juno and Zeus, do not rule, but the just Judeo-Christian God, the God who will return at the last judgment, the day of the great doom, when the dead rise from their graves and walk like sprites (2.3.74-76).

This God, creator of nature and moral order, figures centrally in Holinshed's *Chronicles*: "almighty God showed himself thereby to be offended most highly for that wicked murder of King Duff, and, surely, unless the offenders were tried forth and punished for that deed, the realm should feel the just indignation of the divine judgment for omitting such punishment as was due for so grievous an offense."¹¹ And this God makes a surprising number of appearances (fifteen total) in the language of Shakespeare's dark, bloody play, rife with scenes of evil supernaturalism and murderous ambition.

Coleridge noted long ago that the witches "strike the keynote" of the play, but there is an insistent, if quieter, divine counterpoint.¹² Orson Welles heard and amplified this music in his 1948 film version, often employing the symbol of the cross amidst the gnarled trees and stones of his primitive Scotland, adding a Holy Father to conduct a service against Satan and oppose the rising evil. In Shakespeare's text Ross greets Duncan with unintentional irony, "God save the King!" (1.2.48). Immediately after the murder Banquo declares himself to stand "in the great hand of God" (2.3.129) against treasonous malice. Malcolm asks "God above" (4.3.121) to regulate the alliance with Macduff, echoing the lord who hoped that "Him above" (3.6.32) would ratify the rebellion against Macbeth. Witnessing Lady Macbeth sleepwalking, the Doctor does what Macbeth could not: he says a spontaneous prayer: "God, God, forgive us all" (5.1.66). In the opening scene the Captain compares the battle to Golgotha (1.2.40), place of the crucifixion; Mal-

colm later praises Siward as the best soldier in "Christendom" (4.3.193). Commissioning the murderers, Macbeth pointedly asks, "Are you so gospelled to pray for this good man and for his issue, whose heavy hand hath bowed you to the grave and beggared yours for ever?" (3.1.89-91). Whether or not he alludes specifically to Matthew 5:44 ("Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"), Macbeth here invokes the God whom he has disobeyed and the moral order he has violated. And once again, he adverts to prayer, this time thinking it the cowardly alternative to the manly action of murder.

King Macbeth's newfound contempt for the gospel and prayer marks his moral deterioration. "Had I but died an hour before this chance, / I had lived a blessed time" (2.3.88-89), he himself said earlier. But such blessing as he required and yearned for now lies out of reach and out of mind. Lennox, ironically, hopes that a "swift blessing" (3.6.48) in the form of divine aid and the English army will come to remove / The means that makes us strangers" (4.3.164). In purposeful contrast to King Macbeth, Edward the Confessor is a religious curer who gives "holy prayers" and the "healing benediction" to the afflicted, who has "a heavenly gift of prophecy" (4.3.155-58). "Sundry blessings hang about his throne" (4.3.159), while Macbeth becomes a "hand accursed" (3.6.50), receiving not love and honor but "curses, not loud but deep" (5.3.27).

In the Shakespeare play that most embodies the "principle of contrast" and moves "upon the verge of an abyss," to borrow Hazlitt's fine phrasing, there is a pointed antithesis between blessing and cursing.¹³ Cursed by his people, King Macbeth invokes the Prince of Darkness to curse his hapless servant: "The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon!" (5.3.11). He that had once most need of blessing now turns the other way for curses. Here Macbeth echoes his previous imprecation, hurled, illogically perhaps but effectively, at the Weird sisters: "Deny me this [the truth about Banquo's issue], / And an eternal curse fall upon you!" (4.1.104-5). They immediately obey and summon the apparitions. But what supernatural suasion, what purchase of divine or demonic wrath, can this sinning mortal possibly claim? In Welcome Msomi's brilliant retelling *uMabatha*, which transposes the play to Zulu Africa, the threat seems much more appropriate: "If you disobey

/ My warriors will tear out your hearts / And leave your flesh for jackal meat."¹⁴ In Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* deploys metaphysical rather than physical threat, his choice once again turning prayer into sinful self-assertion and malediction. Macbeth's last words constitute his final curse; instead of repenting, he takes it upon himself to redefine the very terms of salvation and damnation: "Before my body / I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff, / And damned be him that first cries, 'Hold, enough!'" (5.8.32-34). Identifying "he" as God by pointing toward the heavens, Derek Jacobi's *Macbeth* pointed the blasphemy by turning the curse against the deity.

Given the company he keeps, we should not be surprised, perhaps, that Macbeth's enemy, Hecate, leader of the witches, delivers the most telling commentary on his spiritual state:

He shall spurn fate, scorn death, and bear
His hopes 'bove wisdom, grace, and fear.
And you all know, security
Is mortals' chiefest enemy. (3.5.30-33)

Hecate here plays orthodox preacher, echoing numerous homilies and popular theology pamphlets ("you all know") on the dangers of "security," i.e. spiritual overconfidence and complacency, repose in the pleasures of this world. In 1584 John Stockwood published *A Very Fruitful and Necessary Sermon* "to the wakening and stirring up of all such as be lulled asleep in the cradle of security or carelessness."¹⁵ The title page of Johann Habermann's *The Enemy of Security*,¹⁶ exhorts the reader to watch and "pray continually." About the time of *Macbeth*, William Est preached in *The Scourge of Security* (1609)¹⁷ that neglect of prayer led to the return of the unclean spirit. About the same time Thomas Draxe explained that the substance of security is contained in the words "I sleep" (B1v) and the antidote in the phrase "I sleep but mine heart waketh."¹⁸ This homiletic fervor motivated John Downname's *A Treatise of Security* (1622), written "to rouse up" sinners "out of this sleep or rather lethargy of carnal security" (epistle dedicatory).¹⁹

Hecate's precise spiritual diagnosis, then, evokes a discrete, clearly outlined, and abundantly available complex of image and exhortation.

Shakespeare fully engages this familiar complex but reverses its basic logic: the sleepless Macbeth ever waketh in his cradle of security, not lulled, but racked "in the affliction of these terrible dreams / That shake us nightly" (3.2.20-21). The pervasive images of sleeplessness in the play have been well remarked, of course—the bewitched insomniac sailor who dwindles, peaks, and pines, to the mysterious cry, "Macbeth hath murdered sleep"; Macbeth's yearnings for "sleep that knits up the raveled sleeve of care, / The death of each day's life" (2.2.38-39), the sleepwalking Lady Macbeth. But to contemporary audiences they must have derived their force from Shakespeare's daring inversion of conventional rhetoric and moral formula. His Macbeth is agonizingly and unremittingly awake, stung by the agenbyte of inwit, in full tormenting consciousness of his sin.

As this insomnia indicates, Macbeth's gains are negligible and indistinct, his losses large and clearly articulated: "honor, love, obedience, troops of friends, / I must not look to have" (5.3.25-26). And, correspondingly, the earthly highlights of Scotland are never so precisely mapped as the spiritual landscapes Macbeth traverses. Some of the Scottish references, Saint Colme's Inch (or Inchcolm isle) and Colmekill, even point to the other world, where the real drama transpires: both localities pay nominal tribute to St. Columba (521-97), the abstemious missionary to northern Scotland who preached, worked miracles, and converted the pagan Picts and Druids to Christianity. Appropriately, Duncan's body is carried to the "sacred storehouse of his predecessors" (2.4.35) at Colmekill, the monastic "cell of Columba" in Iona, off the west of Scotland. The forces of Christianity thus align themselves in death as in life against the pagan barbarism of Scotland. Macbeth moves between these two opposed realms, as between blessings and curses, angels and devils, and, like one of Hamlet's crawling fellows, heaven and hell. Lady Macbeth wants the "dunniest smoke of hell" to beshroud the world so that heaven cannot "peep through the blanket of the dark / To cry 'Hold, hold'" (1.5.53-54). "The heavens, as troubled with man's act" (i.e. the murder), threaten "his bloody stage" (2.4.5-6) with natural disruptions and cosmic events. Macduff says that "new sorrows / Strike heaven on the face" (4.3.5-6). Heaven often

appears as a metonym for divine providence. Lennox hopes, if it "please heaven" (3.6.19), that Macbeth will not get his hands on Duncan's heirs. The messenger says to the doomed Lady Macduff, "heaven preserve you" (4.2.68); Macduff wonders that heaven looked on at the slaughter of his wife and children (4.3.223-24). Heaven grants the gifts of healing and prophecy to King Edward (4.3.150ff.). Most significantly, heaven appears in contrast to hell as the afterlife abode of the blessed and just, the place of peace and happiness. Again, Macbeth himself points out the moral before the murders of Duncan and Banquo: the ringing bell summons the king "to heaven or to hell" (2.1.64); and Banquo's soul "If it find heaven, must find it out tonight" (3.1.143). On the opposing side, the Porter imagines himself keeping the gate in hell and comments on the condemned residents. Though reviled by Elizabeth Montagu ("entirely absurd"), Samuel Taylor Coleridge ("disgusting") and others, this great serio-comic scene (2.3) appropriately gives the other place a local habitation and a name.²⁰

The Macbeths walk the broad and royal road to hell—in fact, they sometimes seem already to live there. Reliving her crimes over and over again, Lady Macbeth, one of the living dead, murmurs "Hell is murky" (5.1.31). Judi Dench turned this line into a discovery, "Hell *is* murky," before letting out a bloodcurdling scream as the abyss opens for her. Macduff calls Macbeth a "hell-kite" and a "hellhound" (4.3.220; 5.8.3), thus echoing his pronouncement, "Not in the legions / Of horrid hell can come a devil more damned / In his evils to top Macbeth" (4.3.56-58).

Damned in evils—*Macbeth* take us on a journey into the heart and soul of the damned. Enacting the morality-play sequence of temptation, sin and death, Shakespeare degrades repentance in this Everyman to a melancholy remorse, leaving both Macbeths to the consequences of their actions, to the "deep damnation of his [Duncan's] taking-off" (1.7.20). The resulting portraits of sin, punishment and damnation stand worthily next to those of Dante's *Inferno*: to Ezzelino the tyrant in Phlegethon, the boiling river of blood (canto 12); to Vanni Fucci, defiant and making an obscene gesture to God (canto 25); to Ugolino, who eats the bodies of his dead children (canto 33); to Fra Alberigo and Branca Doria, whose souls are already in hell though their bodies live

on earth (canto 33); to the traitors Judas, Brutus and Cassius, writhing from the mouths of Satan in the ice of Judeccza (canto 34). Such compelling, full-bodied figures all contrast with the sterilized wraiths of the native *de casibus* tradition, tediously moralizing their histories, reciting their faults, and preaching repentance. Dante and Shakespeare portray the sinners themselves, living human beings, groaning, sweating, suffering, cursing, excusing, regretting, all their faults and imperfections on their heads, their sins in full and flagrant blossom. And, like Macbeth, the damned souls throughout the nine circles of Dante's *Inferno* are capable of every kind of speech-noise, eloquence and remorse, save one: they cannot pray.

The play's focus on damnation inspired Derek Jacobi to summarize his conception of the lead role thus: "I tried to plot his journey from the golden boy of the opening to the burnt-out loser accepting his own damnation of the conclusion."²¹ This journey, we should remember, Shakespeare consciously constructs from numerous possibilities in Holinshed's account. In his notes for plays and poems, John Milton apparently envisioned a different kind of *Macbeth*; starting with the conference of Malcolm and Macduff (4.3) and including the ghost of Duncan, he imagined perhaps a political play in the form of a classical revenge tragedy. Shakespeare, by contrast, writes a drama of damnation that purposefully evokes and engages contemporary theology, particularly the disputes about divine foreknowledge, human responsibility, the nature of grace, and the freedom of the human will. These disputes occupied preachers in the pulpit as well as the best theological minds of the early modern period. The classic Catholic position, based on Aquinas, appears succinctly in Dante's *Purgatorio* (16): Marco Lombardo there argues that people tend "to assign / to heaven every cause, as if it were / the necessary source of every motion" (*ogne cagion recate / pur suso al cielo, pur come se tutto / movesse seco di necessitate*, 67-69); but if this were so, free will would be destroyed (*fora distrutto / libero arbitrio*) and there would be no justice (*non fora giustizia*, 70-71) in rewarding the good and punishing the wicked.²² Calvin dissented, of course, in well-known chapters of the *Institutes*, arguing that "it be wrought by the will of god that salvation is freely offered to some and

that other some be debarred from coming to it."²³ Asserting the total efficacy of God's foreknowledge and divine grace in his *Thirty-Sixth Article*, Martin Luther emphatically denied the existence of free will:

I misspoke when I said that free will came before grace in name only; rather I should have simply said "free will is a fiction among real things, a name with no reality" ... All things occur by absolute necessity.²⁴

Erasmus responded to Luther in *De libero arbitrio*, at one point in the voice of a reader of Scripture, speaking to God:

Why complain of my behavior, when all my actions, good or bad, are performed by you in me regardless of my will? Why reproach me, when I have no power to preserve the good you have given me, or keep out the evil you put into me? Why entreat me, when everything depends on you, and happens as it pleases you? Why bless me, as though I had done my duty, when whatever happens is your work? Why curse me, when I sinned through necessity? What is the purpose of such a vast number of commandments if not a single person has it all in his power to do what is commanded?²⁵

Contending that the doctrine of predestination invalidates God's commandments and renders absurd the concept of divine justice, Erasmus argues that free will elects not to cooperate with divine grace. The controversy provides an illuminating context for the depiction of witches, sin and punishment in *Macbeth*. First, it summarily disposes of the notion that the Weird sisters can, in any sense, possess or control *Macbeth*. Those early Protestants and Catholics who believe in such creatures never grant to them such power. The debate on free will centers not on witches or demons but on the nature of God's foreknowledge and providence. To many the play has seemed to reflect Protestant convictions about such matters, specifically portraying reprobation. In her classic essay "Milton's Satan and the Theme of Damnation in Elizabethan Tragedy" (1948), Helen Gardner argues that *Macbeth* is incapable of repentance or change. Later John Stachniewski provides Protestant chapter and verse in "Calvinist Psychology in *Macbeth*." Arthur Kinney perceives the doctrine of Calvinist "predestination" throughout the

action of the play. Peter Lake argues that Macbeth presents the "interiority of reprobation" and contrasts clearly with his alter-ego Banquo, one of the "elect."²⁶

Such astute critics certainly respond to the power of play and to the driving propulsion of the evil there represented. But Macbeth cannot be smoothly co-opted into Protestant predestination schematics. Whatever his personal convictions, Shakespeare here adopts a Catholic view of the action and theology of free will by emphasizing the initial inevitability of the crime, the sheer gratuitousness (as Augustine put it) of the evil freely chosen. He suppresses Holinshed's notice of Duncan's weakness and inefficiency and all notice of the conspiracy to kill the king, endowed instead with an aura of sanctity. Macbeth repeatedly adverts to the terror implicit in free will, in the awesome power to choose good or evil: "I dare do all that may become a man / Who dares do more is none" (1.7.46-47). He never contemplates the predispositions of fate or of the deity but thinks instead on the consequences of his choices and actions, consequences he would desperately evade and deny. Recalling the prophecy about Banquo, he emphasizes his own responsibility and autonomous agency:

If't be so,
 For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind,
 For them the gracious Duncan have I murdered,
 Put rancors in the vessel of my peace
 Only for them, and mine eternal jewel
 Given to the common enemy of man
 To make them kings, the seeds of Banquo kings! (3.1.66-72)

Macbeth has chosen evil, in his words, "given" his soul to the devil. To emphasize the point, Shakespeare again departs from Holinshed in his depiction of Banquo, who encourages him in jest to "purchase" the crown, and who knows in advance of the assassination.²⁷ But Shakespeare's Banquo freely and steadfastly resists temptation: Before going to sleep he, unlike Macbeth, prays, "Merciful powers, / Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature / Gives way to in repose" (2.1.7-9). Invoking the powers (the order of angels specifically charged with resisting demons),

Banquo here resists temptations, "cursed thoughts"; after prayer, he confronts Macbeth directly, asserting that he must lose no honor, must keep his "bosom franchised and allegiance clear" (2.1.26-28).

Shakespeare deploys the Catholic view of free will perhaps from theological conviction, but more certainly from theatrical necessity. For the doctrine of predestination renders human action essentially undramatic: when the end is known, preordained, and absolutely just, there can be no real choice, suspense, conflict or resolution. This conception of human action and divine providence renders pity an impertinence, terror a transgression and tragedy an impossibility. Consider the death of the reprobate, as described by the popular Calvinist William Perkins in *A Golden Chain, a Description of Theology containing the Order of the Causes of Salvation and Damnation* (1591):

The reprobates when they die become without sense and astonished like unto a stone; or else they are overwhelmed with a terrible horror of conscience, and despairing of their salvation, as it were, with the gulf of the sea overturning them.²⁸

Perkins illustrates the first option with the story of Nabal, who hears of God's judgment against him: "his heart died within him; he became like a stone. About ten days later the Lord struck Nabal, and he died" (1 Sam 25:37-38). He illustrates the second with the story of Judas, who hanged himself in despair (Matt 27:5). However these ends may bear comparison with the death of Lady Macbeth offstage, they contrast jarringly with Macbeth's final moments—the somber reflections ("Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow," 5.5.19ff.) and the moment of clear moral vision and remorse in the final meeting with Macduff:

Of all men else I have avoided thee.
But get thee back. My soul is too much charged
With blood of thine already! (5.8.4-6)

There is also the defiant resurgence of military valor:

Though Birnham Wood be come to Dunsinane,
And thou oppressed, being of no woman born,

Yet I will try the last. Before my body,
I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff.... (5.8.30-34)

The vitality and eloquence of Macbeth, here as throughout the play, distinguish him from the reprobate of the popular imagination, the heart-dead stone, Nabal, or the despairing, suicidal Judas. In need of salvation, Macbeth freely chooses "the sweet fruition of an earthly crown," and the spectacle of his sinning and suffering makes up the tragedy of the play.

Defined by unarticulated prayer and providential decree, the potent theology of this spectacle rarely survives translation or adaptation. In his popular seventeenth-century version, Davenant gave the dying Macbeth not a defiant snarl but a belated confession of folly, "Farewell vain world, and what's most vain in it, ambition."²⁹ That sort of pious bleating constitutes one sort of evasion; another can be witnessed in the final grunting and bellowing of Washizu in Kurosawa's brilliant 1957 film, *Throne of Blood, or The Castle of the Spider's Web*. Volleys of hissing arrows strike and stick in the Japanese Macbeth, staggering desperately on the wall of his castle. A final arrow pierces him in the throat (graphic testimony to what he did not and cannot say?). Despite Davenant's and Kurosawa's considerable achievements, neither represents the vitality and eloquence of Macbeth's final moments or the full terror of eternal damnation. Writing a travesty of Macbeth in the nineteenth century, Francis Talfourd shrewdly seized upon this latter point to turn the play topsy-turvy. In his version Duncan returns from the dead, as do Banquo and Lady Macbeth (with a parasol), arm-in-arm. The slain Macbeth rises from the ground and addresses the king:

I tender, sir, of course, my resignation,
Since all's in train for me to leave my station.
So at your feet I lay my regal diadem
Without regret, nor wish again that I had 'em.³⁰

There is no turning back for Shakespeare's Macbeth, of course, whose inability to say "Amen" stirred his audience's darkest desires and fears.