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The Accursed Tongue

In what turns out to be one of his last moments, right after learning from Macduff that the prophecy of the Weird Sisters is finally fulfilled, Macbeth curses the tongue. But why does he direct his anger towards “that” tongue, instead of “thy,” that is, Macduff’s tongue? And why does Macbeth curse the tongue *at all*, instead of Macduff himself? This six-line curse is an inventory of all of Macbeth’s misapprehensions. For his misfortune, he accuses the “juggling fiends” who “palter . . . in a double sense.” This paper is a study into how Macbeth’s *intentional misdeeds* and *mistakes in thinking* become evident in the formulation of his speeches. By examining Macbeth’s metaphors and sentence structures, the paper presents how Macbeth (with the help of his wife and the Weird Sisters) drives himself into more and more impenetrable paradoxes. The last of those being that his death is brought about by his recognising one of his misapprehensions: when he becomes aware of the performative force of words, that recognition kills him, in the form of Macduff’s *accursed tongue*.

1 Introduction

It is a frequent strategy to interpret Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* by way of asking who is responsible for all the horror that happens on the stage during the play. A number of analyses claim that there exists a Fate in *Macbeth*’s world that governs every action. However, where this fate originates from is a much-debated issue. The three most widespread answers are (1) that Fate is supernatural and unalterable, already existing before the action of the play begins, and that it is explicitly described by the Weird Sisters; (2) or that Lady Macbeth and her ambition to be queen push Macbeth to commit all the horrible deeds; (3) or, finally, that there are certain possibilities offered to Macbeth at the beginning of the play, and Macbeth chooses the option he prefers.

In this paper I will argue for the third interpretation. My main point will be that although both the prophecies and Lady Macbeth’s persuasive speeches play an important role in the actions that take place, the outcome in fact depends primarily on the decisions Macbeth makes in accordance with his often paradoxical and self-contradictory interpretations of the words and actions that constitute the world of the play. Macbeth struggles hard to alienate his deeds from himself as if they were

done by somebody else, or even by nobody, which has very characteristic marks in his language usage. The paper will examine how Macbeth's relation to his own (and to others') language is coded in his utterances throughout the play. Macbeth's interpretations will be seen as integral parts of a subtle system. It is assumed that every action is interpreted one way or another during a performance. This, in fact, involves three clearly distinct processes. Firstly, when someone says or does something on stage (that is, when any action takes place), it is interpreted by the other characters, who act according to their interpretations. Secondly, the actions are also understood somehow by the audience. Finally, the members of the audience can compare their interpretation to those of the characters and reflect on what agrees and what differs.

These three processes will be referred to throughout the analysis as providing a ground for the audience's judgment of the characters. "Judgment" (or any word below that is connected to it) is not understood in the moral sense but as an ability to determine whether a character's action is true or false (that is, intended to deceive someone). If the audience is acknowledged to know everything that takes place in the play then it is significant that none of the characters possesses the same amount of knowledge. For instance, in the scene when Duncan's murder is discovered, only the audience knows that the Macbeths are pretending. What makes this scene exciting for the audience is that Macduff and the other lords are deceived, and that the audience knows that they are deceived. This double insight is constantly present for the members of the audience during the time of the performance.

Of course, there are certain actions in the play that even the audience cannot judge as true or false. The most obvious of those is, naturally, the status of the prophecies. But, even though the members of the audience do not know whether the Weird Sisters tell the truth or lie, they are aware of this uncertainty. Consequently, they are able to compare their doubt to the decisions of, for example, Macbeth. In short, it is, on the one hand, *the gap between the knowledge of the audience and of the characters*, and on the other, *the audience's reflection on this gap* that provide the basis for the analysis of the play. The method pursued for identifying what is true and what is false, what action is right and what action is mistaken in the play, is to reflect on the *reflection of the audience*.

Finally, the word "character" needs a brief examination. Harold Bloom at one point of his essay on *Macbeth* claims that "Macbeth consistently says more than he knows, but he also imagines more than he says."¹ On the other hand, Fawcner in his

1. Harold Bloom, "Macbeth," in *Shakespeare: Invention of the Human* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1998), p. 528.

book argues that the conflict between Macbeth and Duncan is perceived by the spectators as a conflict between their language. The tension is “between language and language, rhetoric and rhetoric.”² More specifically, “Duncan’s language is normally boring and Macbeth’s language is usually not boring,”³ and “Macbeth’s character works to constitute itself by pushing language to its most daring poetic limits, and Duncan’s character works to constitute itself . . . by not, as it were, taking such conspicuous linguistic risks.”⁴ However, somewhat contradictorily, Fawkner also declares that “[t]he spectator . . . does not need to grope for any hidden self behind either Macbeth or Duncan to feel the tension between them. Indeed, the spectator does not even have to grasp them as characters in order to sense the tension of character between them.”⁵ This apparent contradiction can be resolved by taking the language of a character *as* the character itself. It will be thus maintained that there is no character as separate from its language, where language involves the verbal as well as the non-verbal expressions of the characters. It has to be added, though, that the aim of the paper is not to discuss what characters are like (that is, to present them as psychological entities), but to illustrate how their relation to *truth* – what they, and what the members of the audience consider true – mirrored in their language constitutes the dramatic action of the play. Therefore, to understand the mechanisms that drive the play, it is the language of certain characters that needs thorough investigation. To begin with, I will very briefly list some arguments why neither the Weird Sisters, nor Lady Macbeth may be taken as the author of Macbeth’s fate.

2 The Language of the Prophecies: Innocent Misinterpretation?

The future as related by the Weird Sisters is not entirely transparent:

MACBETH Speak, if you can: what are you?
 FIRST WITCH All hail Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Glamis.
 SECOND WITCH All hail Macbeth, hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor.
 THIRD WITCH All hail Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter.
 BANQUO Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear
 Things that do sound so fair? – I’th’ name of truth,

2. Harald William Fawkner, *Deconstructing Macbeth: The Hyperontological View* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1990), p. 131.

3. Fawkner, p. 132.

4. Fawkner, p. 133.

5. Fawkner, p. 131.

Are ye fantastical, or that indeed
 Which outwardly ye show? . . .
 Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear
 Your favours nor your hate. . . .
 THIRD WITCH Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none:
 So all hail Macbeth and Banquo.
 FIRST WITCH Banquo, and Macbeth, all hail. (I.iii.47–69)⁶

Banquo offers an interpretation of the Weird Sisters' words: what they said implied the *fact* that Macbeth is the Thane of Glamis, that he has become the Thane of Cawdor, and the *hope* of him becoming king (55–56). At this point of the play, there is an important gap between the knowledge of the two warriors on the stage and that of the audience, because the audience knows that Banquo's interpretation is correct (in the sense that it coincides with the inferences the spectators are able to make based on Scene ii). Note that so far it is only Duncan who had any impact on Macbeth's future, and specifically through his words that are thus perceived as acts: "go pronounce his death / And with his former title greet Macbeth" (I.ii.65–66), "He bade me, from him, to call thee Thane of Cawdor" (I.iii.105). All the verbs highlighted are performatives⁷ or perlocutionary acts,⁸ which means that the influence Duncan has on Macbeth's life is located in his words.

However, when the Sisters have finished their speech, Macbeth offers a slightly different interpretation: "to be king / Stands not within the prospect of belief, / No more than to be Cawdor" (I.iii.73–75). By this, Macbeth blurs the frontier between what so far seemed to be *fact* and what appeared as *prediction*. This is possible because he does not recognise the difference in the tenses of each part of the prophecy. The sentence "hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor" refers to the present, whereas "hail . . . that shalt be King hereafter" refers to the future, as "shalt" is most probably used here to indicate a marked future tense.⁹ He puts such things to the same ontological

6. All references are to this edition: Nicholas Brooke ed., *William Shakespeare: Macbeth* (Oxford: OUP, 1990).

7. See, for example, J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 6–7.

8. John Searle, *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), p. 25.

9. *Shall* developed into an auxiliary indicating the future in the Early Modern English period, but in some cases it retained its original meaning of "volition, obligation" (as opposed to *will*). As an auxiliary, *shall* was the marked case in the third person singular. Cf. Matti

level that in fact are on three different levels, which is obviously seen as a misinterpretation by the audience. The first level is the title of Glamis, which he had had since his father's death. The second is the title of Cawdor, which he has already gained, although he is not aware of it yet. Finally, the third level is becoming a king, which is mentioned in future tense by the Sisters, even emphasised by "hereafter." It is only a possibility, something that bears the potential to become a fact, that is, it has not yet become a fact, as opposed to the other two.

Somewhat later comes the confirmation: Ross and Angus announce that Duncan has declared Macbeth the Thane of Cawdor. Here, while Banquo tries to conceal¹⁰ from his "cousins" that Macbeth is "rapt," Macbeth tries to give his own interpretation of the prophecy to himself:

Two truths are told,¹¹
 As happy prologues to the swelling act
 Of the imperial theme. — I thank you, gentlemen —
 This supernatural soliciting
 Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,
 Why hath it given me earnest of success,
 Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor:
 If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
 Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
 And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
 Against the use of nature? 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.¹²

Rissanen, "Syntax," in *The Cambridge History of the English Language III, 1476–1726*, ed. Roger Lass (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 187–331, pp. 210–211.

10. Banquo here seems to be a silent accomplice to Macbeth's future deeds, just like when, according to Arthur F. Kinney, he remains silent about the witches and their prophecies despite his frightening presentiments (II.i.1–30). See Arthur F. Kinney, "Macbeth's Knowledge," in *Shakespeare Survey 57* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 11–26, p. 20.

11. If Brooke's note is accepted that this half line completes Banquo's "In deepest consequence" then the order of uttering Banquo's next line (128) and Macbeth's may not coincide with the order the lines are printed in a book.

If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me,
Without my stir. . . .

Come what come may,
Time and the hour runs through the roughest day. (I.iii.127/8–148)

At the beginning of the monologue he recognises that only his first two titles are facts. However, in line 131 he calls the prophecy “supernatural soliciting.” Brooke glosses *soliciting* as “incite, allure” which meanings are weaker than the present day usage of the word as “to urge sy to do sg, to persuade sy to some act of lawlessness, to draw on, to tempt” (*Oxford English Dictionary*), but still stronger than what actually happened. The Sisters told “truths” and “predictions,” but nothing they said so far had anything compelling, demanding or provoking in them: their words were only claims. But this is the starting point for the belief that Macbeth will stick to throughout the whole play: he begins to convince himself that anything he will do in the future is “incited” by the Weird Sisters, who are, in addition, “supernatural.” He persuades himself that what he foresees at this point is his Fate, and not his own actions.

From this point on, accordingly, Macbeth believes he is only a passive executor, “a walking shadow, a poor player.” It is only Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (I.v.29–30) who want to deceive themselves and the audience by supposing the existence of Fate. As Wilbour Sanders points out, the prophecies are in themselves powerless to fulfil what they predict, but Macbeth literally gives them a hand. Yet, his attitude is “equivocal” towards the prophecies: “in so far as he acts, he takes the future on his shoulders and undertakes to create it, thus becoming the accomplice, or even the master of his fate; yet he persists in regarding the future as pre-ordained and Fate as his master.”¹³

In one sense, though, Macbeth is right. The part of the sentence “chance may crown me, / Without my stir” can be a fairly exact paraphrase of the Weird Sisters’ “All hail Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter.” At this point he does not want to decide whether he has to do anything to become a king, or it will fall in his lap. How-

12. Kenneth Muir’s different lineations (William Shakespeare: *Macbeth*, The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare, ed. Kenneth Muir [London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1979]): “good: – / If ill, why. . .”; “state of man / That function is smother’d in surmise, / And nothing is, but what is not.”

13. Wilbour Sanders, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. 280–281; quoted in William O. Scott, “Macbeth’s – and Our – Self-Equivocations,” *Shakespeare Quarterly* 37.2 (Washington, 1986) 160–174, p. 172.

ever, there is yet another disturbing sentence: “Give me your favour: my dull brain was wrought / With things forgotten.” (I.iii.150–151). Many critics discussed whether Macbeth is simply lying here (as it was only minutes ago he got the prophecy), or whether he tells the very truth (that is, he has already thought about becoming king before the prophecy).¹⁴ From the point of view of the present analysis that question is irrelevant, because both of the possibilities lead to the same consequence. If he is lying, it means that he recognised a new ambition in himself, the thought of murdering the king (“My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical” probably refers to that), and the lie serves to hide this from the other characters. If he is telling the truth, on the other hand, it only means that he has had that ambition earlier as well. As Knight argues, “[t]his is the moment of the birth of evil in Macbeth – he may indeed have had ambitious thoughts before, may even have intended the murder, but now for the first time he feels its oncoming reality.”¹⁵ What shows an important insight in Knight’s sentence is “may”: whether he thought of it earlier or not, Macbeth reveals the inclination to kill Duncan to himself and to the audience at this point. The inclination comes to life here, simply by being uttered.

It should be added, though, that it is also an important information for the audience that Macbeth thinks his inclination originates from the Weird Sisters. Fawcner compares the Weird Sisters’ scene to a long distance telephone call, to make it clear how the murderous thoughts may be occasioned by the Weird Sisters *and* nevertheless be Macbeth’s responsibility.

The Weird Sisters have called Macbeth, called him up, and he has answered, saying (as we often do on the phone) “yes (?)” But by pronouncing this “yes,” which is at once an answer and *not* an answer (an absent answer, a mere recognition of attentiveness), Macbeth has already opened himself up to the risk of the call. To the calling. This calling that calls him through the call *connects* Macbeth to the call/calling, but also to what is absent in the call, what, already, is absence in it (for instance “Macbeth,” the word “Macbeth” as the Weird sisters sound it, speak it, call it).¹⁶

14. See, for instance, Muir’s note on line 151; S. T. Coleridge from *Remains*, in Jonathan Bate ed., *The Romantics on Shakespeare* (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 417; Kállay Géza, *Nem puszta kép* (Budapest: Liget, 2002), pp. 137–139.

15. G. Wilson Knight “*Macbeth* and the Metaphysic of Evil,” in *The Wheel of Fire* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 174. Cited by Muir in note on lines 130–131.

16. Fawcner, pp. 29–30.

István Géher lays more emphasis on the hero's part when he observes that Macbeth has neither ruler nor enemy, it is only him who exists in his world, and he hears and sees only *himself* in the Weird Sisters.¹⁷ As Harold Bloom very similarly concludes: the Weird Sisters “come to him because preternaturally they know him: he is not so much theirs as they are his. This is not to deny their reality apart from him, but only to indicate again that he has more explicit power over them than they manifest in regard to him.”¹⁸

3 The Language of Lady Macbeth: Lost in Rhetoric

Many critics go even as far as blaming Macbeth's deeds entirely on Lady Macbeth, arguing that it was her ambition that induced Macbeth to become a villain. Two very typical examples are August Wilhelm von Schlegel, who took Lady Macbeth for temptation embodied,¹⁹ and Booth who explained why the audience sympathises with Macbeth by interpreting the conversation in I.vii. as a proof for Macbeth still remaining “noble” while he is driven to the act by Lady Macbeth's eloquence that is “too much for him.”²⁰

At her first appearance, Lady Macbeth provides a dramatised version of the interpretative process which his husband is unwilling to perform. She is first seen reading Macbeth's letter relating the happy news to his “dearest partner of greatness” (I.v.1–30). She does not get confused with tenses, she does not mistake *promise* for *fact*, instead she outlines the situation clearly: “Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be / What thou art promised” (I.v.14–15). She even comprehends that Macbeth may have murder in his mind, that is why she says, a little startled, “and shalt be what thou art promised” instead of, say, “and shalt be King.”²¹ However, Lady Macbeth knows that his husband will need reinforcement (I.v.21–22), therefore, she decides to help him:

Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,

17. István Géher, *Shakespeare-olvasókönyv* (Budapest: Cserépfalvi Könyvkiadó – Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó, 1991), p. 239.

18. Bloom, p. 532

19. A. W. von Schlegel, “From Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature,” in Bate, p. 411.

20. Wayne Booth, “Shakespeare's Tragic Hero,” in *Shakespeare's Tragedies. An Anthology of Modern Criticism*, ed. Laurence Lerner (London, Penguin Books Ltd, 1968), pp. 182–183.

21. Cf. Muir's note on line I.v.15.

And chastise with the valour of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round. . . (I.v.24–27)

She is entirely aware of the power of her words. Unlike Macbeth, she knows that her spirits are linked to her utterances, and that she can affect Macbeth by her words. But what kind of spirits is she talking about? It takes only another fourteen lines for her to use the word again, this time in a curse-like invocation:

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty. . . .
Come to my woman's breasts
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers,
Wherever, in your sightless substances,
You wait on nature's mischief! (I.v.39–49)

She charms herself in preparation to charm her husband when he arrives at the castle. However, this is rather a self-curse, and, more importantly, this is the first sign of the brutal imagery that is so typical of Lady Macbeth's speeches. They are heavily metaphorical and paradoxical, which she will later use to raise the "illness" in Macbeth that according to her should accompany ambition.

The formulation of her paradoxes and oxymorons in Macbeth's description "[thou] wouldst not play false / And yet wouldst wrongly win" (I.v.20–21), "[thou'dst have] that which rather thou dost fear to do, / Than wishest should be undone" (I.v.23–24) resemble her arguments to Macbeth before murdering Duncan: "O never / Shall sun that morrow see" (I.v.59–60).

Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem.
.....
Nor time nor place
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both —
They have made themselves, and that their fitness now
Does unmake you. (I.vii.39–54)

She decides to give up her own womanhood to be able to help Macbeth (“unsex me . . . come to my woman’s breasts and take my milk for gall”). Her almost last argument before murdering Duncan is probably the wildest sentence in the whole play:

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. (I.vii.54–59)

This is the most obvious example for the way Lady Macbeth uses her speeches to persuade Macbeth: not through his intellect but his irrationality, exploiting the defect in Macbeth’s character that he sometimes acts without proper reflection.

Lady Macbeth’s overwhelming rhetoric succeeds:²² she at last manages to persuade her husband to kill Duncan and thus it is a plausible argument that she is an even greater temptation than the Weird Sisters. This, however, might turn out to be a hasty conclusion. Lady Macbeth uses her tongue to persuade her husband to kill Duncan, but she has no hand (or tongue) in the other murders – except for Duncan’s guards. Not even in the murder of Banquo: when for his husband’s newest concern she says that “in them [Banquo and Fleance] nature’s copy’s not eterne” (III.ii.41), Macbeth has already arranged for their murder. In the remaining part of the play, Lady Macbeth does not have to persuade her husband to do anything, because he acts on his own.

In judging Lady Macbeth’s role in Macbeth’s fate, it is important to determine how the concept “tragic fault” may be applied to *Macbeth*. In a traditional Aristotelian point of view, Macbeth commits an irrevocable mistake when he transgresses the moral laws and kills Duncan, and as a consequence he has to be punished in the end to restore moral order into the world. If the play is perceived that way, then Lady Macbeth bears the greatest responsibility for the tragic events, as she makes Macbeth do the deed through her rhetoric skill. However, as Mack argued, *Macbeth* in fact incorporates two plays. One play “is the familiar morality of crime and punishment; . . . [it] involves . . . an idealized order of kingship, embodied in Duncan, which is attacked and destroyed by the villain-hero.”²³ This is, however, the point of view of

22. Booth, p. 189.

23. Maynard Mack, Jr, “The Voice in the Sword,” in *Killing the King. Three Studies in Shakespeare’s Tragic Structure* (London: Yale University Press, 1973), 138–185, p. 149.

the “secondary males” of the play, who are “wrapped in common greyness,”²⁴ namely Duncan, Malcolm, Macduff and the rest of the lords. Their judgment does not necessarily coincide with that of the audience: “Macbeth is a tragedy only for the audience; for the surviving characters it seems to remain a history.”²⁵ The “dead butcher, and his fiend-like Queen” (V.vii.99), as Malcolm labels the Macbeths, seems to tell us more about the restorers of the moral order than about its disturbers – if there ever existed any. “This is their *Macbeth*; it is not quite ours,” declares Mack.²⁶

On the other hand it seems another plausible interpretation that the wrong decision (not in any moral sense though) was in fact to murder Banquo and to attempt the murder of Fleance. That decision, however, was entirely made by Macbeth alone. Cleanth Brooks argued that “his murder of Duncan, and the plan – as outlined by Lady Macbeth – has been relatively successful. The road turns to disaster only when Macbeth decides to murder Banquo.”²⁷ When Macbeth killed Duncan, he acted in accordance with one possible interpretation of the prophecy. It was promised to him that he will become king, and he only facilitated the fulfilment. But when he attacks Banquo and Fleance, he wants to alter the future against the prophecy.²⁸ As Carol Chillington Rutter formulated: “Macbeth wants both to possess the future – the one the Weird Sisters ‘gave’ him – and to destroy it – the one they ‘promised’ to Banquo.”²⁹ This is paradoxical since he regards the prophecies as *truths*, he believes that fate is already *written*, but he tries to alter it, and he does not even reflect on this contradiction. Though Lady Macbeth undeniably plays an important role in killing Duncan, it seems possible to acquit her, at least partly, of the charge that she is the fourth witch who drew Macbeth to the deed, as some argued, “against will and conscience.”³⁰

24. Bloom, p. 517.

25. Mack, p. 184.

26. Mack, p. 156.

27. Cleanth Brooks, “The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness,” in *The Well-Wrought Urn* (New York: Harper & Row, 1947), p. 32.

28. Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare’s Language* (London: Allen Lane & The Penguin Press, 2000), p. 203.

29. Carol Chillington Rutter, “Remind Me: How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth?” in *Shakespeare Survey* 57, pp. 38–53, p. 39.

30. Quiller-Couch, “Shakespeare’s Workmanship (Selected parts from Chapters I & II),” in Lerner, p. 178.

4 The Language of Macbeth — Self-deception

4.1 Inconsistency

As it was argued in the previous two chapters, neither Lady Macbeth's nor the Weird Sisters' power is sufficient to stage such a tragedy as *Macbeth*. It has to be Macbeth then who produces the monstrosity that almost every critic talks of as incomparable to anything.³¹ Therefore, the claim to be developed here is that Macbeth fails during the process of interpretation, and that this is observable by examining his language, that is, *what* he says and *how* he says it.

Macbeth attempts to interpret of the first prophecy. However, this he seems to do only because he notices his strange involuntary (bodily) behaviour,³² which means that the thought of murder is already there in him *before* the reflection (although perhaps *after* the prophecy). Nevertheless, he mentions not just one possible explanation of the prophecy: he doubts whether he has to fulfil it, or it will become true anyway. But by the time he meets his wife, he has already decided on the meaning – he should kill Duncan: “Stars hide your fires, / . . . let that be / Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see” (I.iv.51–54).

The next time he deals with the prophecy is when he orders the murder of Banquo and Fleance. Here, he does not recognise the paradoxical behaviour he gets himself into: even though, by now, he believes that three truths have been told by the Weird Sisters, that is, he thinks that everything the Weird Sisters said *is true* and *must come true*, he also thinks he can change the fourth “truth.” Nevertheless, the Sisters did not make such a distinction between the parts of the prophecy that would suggest that the last bit is “less true” than the others. As Palmer pointed it out: “Having murdered because of his faith in prophecy, it is hardly consistent of Macbeth to believe that another murder will undo prophecy.”³³ This “inconsistency” is the first step in making the play his own, instead of leaving it to be that of the Weird Sisters or Lady Macbeth. This was the first choice he has made entirely on his own.

31. Cf. “most terrifying of Shakespeare’s plays” (Bloom, p. 532), or “No words can quite describe the hard, sombre mood of the ending of this play” (Mack, p.184), and innumerable such instances.

32. D. J. Palmer, “The Self-Awareness of the Tragic Hero,” in *Shakespearean Tragedy: Stratford-upon-Avon Studies* 20 (1984) 129–157, p. 150.

33. Palmer, p. 154.

4.2 Prejudice

Macbeth employs some method to choose between the possible interpretations, but the audience does not see that. In fact, he chooses the interpretation that seems best for his advancement. When, however, he gets the second package of prophecies, the audience sees his process of interpretation at work directly, as this scene is built up of the alternating sequence of short pieces of prophecies and Macbeth's explanations of them.

The First Apparition is not in the least enigmatic: he warns Macbeth to be cautious with Macduff. This Macbeth understands immediately. Or does he, rather, interpret it according to some prejudice he already had in mind? It is clear, on the one hand, that the first apparition is aware of what Macbeth is thinking about: "He knows thy thought: / Hear his speech, but say thou nought" (IV.i.83–84). On the other hand, the line "Thou hast harped my fear aright" (IV.i.88) indicates that he wanted to get rid of Macduff anyway, just in case he had been up to something. So it seems he does not get the idea of eliminating Macduff from the prophecy, he is only reinforced by it. This will become even more obvious when looking at the Second Apparition's admonition and Macbeth's ensuing interpretation: "Be bloody, bold, and resolute: laugh to scorn / The power of man; for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth. . ." (IV.i.93–95).

This is the prophecy with which Macbeth confuses himself the most. His first reaction is relief: he does not have to be alarmed by Macduff; which means that he does not give a thought to the possibility that maybe Macduff is a "man" "not of woman born." If, however, the first two pieces of the prophecy are interpreted this way, there is a contradiction between them, which Macbeth does not recognise. Moreover, he then changes his mind: he will kill Macduff regardless of what the prophecy suggests. Consequently he will do what he wanted to do even before visiting the Weird Sisters.

Then, Macbeth's response to the prophecy of the Third Apparition comes again from his pre-set ideas: it "will never" happen that "Great Birnam Wood to Dunsin Hill" comes against him. Just like in the case of the difference between the First and the Second Apparition's prophecies, Macbeth disregards an alarming clue again: the branch in the Third Apparition's hand, which is a visual synecdoche³⁴ to warn Macbeth that what the apparition prophesies may become true.³⁵

34. Richard C. McCoy, "'The Grace of Grace' and Double-Talk in *Macbeth*," in *Shakespeare Survey* 57, 27–37, p. 32.

35. Mack, pp. 172–173.

The last piece of prophecy, the show of Banquo with his heirs, is provoked by Macbeth. When he has explained this prophecy to the audience, he asks Hecate if it is true. After Hecate's positive answer Macbeth curses the hour when he was told his future, instead of considering whether all he saw was true. If he had done so, and had come to the conclusion that he had to believe in the prophecy (that is, such a thing as prophecy might exist at all), then two possible inferences would have remained. One is that there is nothing he can do: what he saw and heard *is* his fate. The other possibility is to view the prophecy as being false, and to maintain he has a chance for some other future. It is only later, at the very end, when it turns out that he chose a third option: everything he saw and heard was true and should necessarily happen, nevertheless he will try to change the future.

4.3 Distancing

Macbeth's decisions and actions are not only (mis)guided by others who use language to influence him, but by himself as well. The consequence of mixing up future with present and promise with fact (concerning the first prophecy), or truth with goodness³⁶ is that he does not recognise how mechanisms work in the world of the play. He does not see, and does not *want* to see that things do not *happen to him* but *are done by him*. Many of his soliloquies and monologues are struggles to hide the truth from himself; as he puts it: "Let . . . / *The eye wink at the hand*" (I.iv.52–53). He wishes his hands could gain the crown without his intellect knowing about it. Macbeth's strategy to survive and to fulfil his desires is alienation: he creates a distance between his deeds and himself, between his deeds and his words.

Braunmuller³⁷ and Everett³⁸ alike talk about Macbeth's usage of language concerning the murders as *euphemistic*. Macbeth tends to apply impersonal and passive structures, and the definite article "the" instead of personal pronouns when he talks about himself, and he not only does so in the presence of others, but even when nobody else hears him; consequently these tactics do not serve for deceiving the other

36. Consider, for instance, the "traditional association of truth with good" (Scott, p. 163) in cases like "This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good" (I.iii.131–132).

37. A. R. Braunmuller, "What do you mean?": The Languages of *Macbeth*," in William Shakespeare: *Macbeth: an authoritative text, sources and contexts, criticism*, Norton Critical Edition, ed. Robert S. Miola (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 316–328, p. 322.

38. Barbara Everett, *Young Hamlet: Essays on Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 97–98.

characters, but himself. In one of the most famous soliloquies Macbeth, talking of the murder he considers to commit, uses a very typical language:

If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
 It were done quickly; if th'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 judgement here, that we but teach
 Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
 To plague th'inventor. This even-handed justice
 Commends th'ingredience of our poison'd chalice
 To our own lips. He's here in double trust:
 First, as I am his kinsman, and his subject,
 Strong both against the deed; then, as his host
 Who should against his murderer shut the door,
 Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
 Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
 So clear in his great office, that his virtues
 Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu'd, against
 The deep damnation of his taking-off;
 And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
 Striding the blast, or Heaven's cherubim, horsed
 Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
 Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye
 That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur
 To prick the sides of my intent, but only
 Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
 And falls on th'other —

(I.vii.1–28)

In lines 1–2 Macbeth uses a passive structure with the subject “it” which stands in fact for “murder,” referring to Macbeth’s future deed. In lines 2–4 the active sentence has “th’assassination” for subject which in fact is not just committed in general as “the” suggests, but committed by *him*. In lines 4–5, “this blow” stands for “the blow *I* will make [with *my* dagger].” From line 6 to 12, the subject is the First Person Plural “we” which might suggest that he is talking as if he were king already, or, in

another interpretation, these lines reveal his fears about the future. But by using “we” as a general subject (involving the audience as well) he implies that these things could happen to anyone in such a situation. Why he is wrong here is that most of the people (in the world of the play, and outside it, among the audience) do not get involved in such a situation he is considering here. This is, of course, also a recurring phenomenon throughout the play. As Everett puts it: “His magnificent reasonings never encounter the one simple fact why most human beings do not commit murder.”³⁹

From line 12, Macbeth describes Duncan’s situation: the subject becomes “he” (i.e. Duncan), which attracts “I” for the first time in the soliloquy (lines 13–14), “[me] as his host” (lines 14–16) and “myself” (line 16), as well as “his” (lines 13, 14, 15). The subject switches back to “Duncan” in line 16, which is followed in the subordinate clause by the abstract noun phrase “his virtues” as the subject (lines 18–20). In lines 21–22 the clause, which is co-ordinated either with the previous one (“that his virtues will”), or with “this Duncan,” has an even more abstract noun as subject: “pity.” While it was still possible to relate “virtue” to Duncan (the personal pronoun “his” also suggested that), “pity,” in Muir’s edition with a capital *P*, is at a significant distance even from Duncan, while it serves as a stepping stone to evoke “Heaven’s cherubim” in lines 22–23. But however apocalyptic that vision may sound, it is very far from the starting point “If it were done. . .” “Damnation” might be on the one hand terrifying to hear, but on the other hand it helps to forget about the present deed. Although the subject of the main clause of the sentence that ends the soliloquy is “I” again, the verb phrase is “have no spur” whose noun is complemented by a phrase with “my intent.” In line 26 the main clause is continued by a co-ordinating clause which has “ambition” corresponding to “spur.” “Ambition” is then extended with “o’erleaps *itself*” and “falls on *th’other*,” which has the consequence that the original subject “I” is practically forgotten. This soliloquy deserved to be quoted in full and analysed so thoroughly, because it clearly shows Macbeth’s tendency “to deceive not only heaven but himself,”⁴⁰ where heaven could stand for the audience. “The passive voice tries to make the nameless act of the hand as impersonal as a deed fated by prophecy,”⁴¹ in order that Macbeth could convince himself that he is *not* the main character, the hero of the play.

There is further evidence in the play that Macbeth would like to distance himself from his actions, as Mangan argues.⁴² Mangan mentions three examples for the dis-

39. Everett, p. 94.

40. Scott, p. 164.

41. Scott, p. 164.

42. Michael Mangan, “Macbeth,” in *A Preface to Shakespeare’s Tragedies* (London & New York: Longman, 1991), p. 201.

tancing. The first of them is “Let . . . / The eye wink at the hand” (I.iv.52–53), already quoted above. The second: “To know my deed, ’twere best not know myself” (II.ii.72). And, finally, that to Banquo’s ghost Macbeth says: “Thou canst not say I did it” (III.iv.50). However, there are other examples to be noted here. When Macbeth learns that he is really the new Thane of Cawdor, he reminds Banquo: “When those that gave the Thane of Cawdor to me / Promis’d no less to them [=Banquo’s children]” (I.iii.120–121). As it was argued above, Macbeth attributes the action by which he became the Thane of Cawdor to the Weird Sisters, whereas it was actually Duncan who appointed him. The Sisters only told him something that has taken place previously and that the audience has known already. However, not even this interpretation is exact. Neither the Weird Sisters nor Duncan did just give him the title out of benevolence, but actually he deserved it by fighting down the rebels. Thus, those two lines are other instances of Macbeth’s struggle to exclude himself from the events of the play.

Muir also talks about the gap between desire and performance, and as an example quotes a passage where “the bloodstained hand is no longer Macbeth’s but Night’s”:⁴³

Come, seeling night,
 Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day;
 And with thy bloody and invisible hand
 Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
 Which keeps me pale. (III.ii.49–53)

It comes as no surprise that Duncan’s murder is also preceded by Macbeth’s attempt to convince himself and the audience that the murder is not done by him but by supernatural forces. In this, his behaviour is very similar to the earlier one when he distanced his (then only future) deeds from himself by claiming that they were “solicited” with compelling force by the Weird Sisters. Thus, Duncan is, again, summoned to death by superhuman forces: “I go, and it is done: the bell invites me, / Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell / That summons thee to Heaven or to Hell” (II.i.63–65).

It is the distancing carried out by involving the bell in the murder that leads to the next point, the Dagger-monologue. Muir refers to Lawrence W. Hyman who in connection with the Dagger-monologue, in Muir’s words, claims that “Macbeth is

43. Kenneth Muir, “Image and Symbol in ‘Macbeth,’” in *Shakespeare Survey 19* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), p. 53.

able to do the murder only because of the deep division between his head and his hand.”⁴⁴ Despite the fact that, examining the Dagger-monologue from a different aspect, much debate has taken place to find out whether the dagger should or should not be present on the stage, and be visible to the audience,⁴⁵ this question will be disregarded, because from the following respect it has no relevance.

The focus of interest in the monologue is: “Thou marshall’st me the way that I was going, / And such an instrument I was to use.” (II.i.43–44). Macbeth here claims that the dagger knows *how* and *what* he wants to do, and that the dagger leads him exactly the right way to do it. This is clearly only *his* interpretation, something *he* attributes to the dagger. Fawkner claims: “the dagger shows Macbeth the way, but it is of course Macbeth who is showing Macbeth the way.” Fawkner is not only playing with words when he mentions two Macbeths: one of them is the fearless extrovert warrior who defeated the rebels, the other is the introvert “servant of metaphysical truth” made fearful by the Weird Sisters and domesticated by Lady Macbeth.⁴⁶ The latter is intimidated by the gap between the “truth” he sees and the “truth” that is told by the Weird Sister. This Macbeth is the one that decides on killing Duncan, because he hopes that through the physical horror of the murder, the metaphysical (“universal”) horror will disappear.⁴⁷ The Dagger-monologue is important in Fawkner’s analysis exactly from this aspect: it shows the two Macbeths coexisting, the one obsessed with finding “truth” showing the way to the other who lost it, but who might be able to regain it.⁴⁸ This somewhat psychological explanation is efficient in giving a suggestive picture of the inner paradoxes that govern Macbeth, but conceals the fact that there is only one Macbeth. The two sides of Macbeth, as Fawkner claims, cannot be interpreted or recognised without one another,⁴⁹ therefore the tension of the Dagger-monologue lies in their paradoxical coexistence in one body. Thus, the air-drawn dagger interpreted as one Macbeth leading the other, is rather seen as an attempt of Macbeth to create an accomplice for himself to remove at least part of the responsibility

44. Muir, “Image and Symbol,” p. 53. Muir paraphrases parts of Lawrence W. Hyman’s essay in *Tennessee Studies* (1960).

45. Brooke, Introduction, p. 4; Muir’s note on line II.i.33; Mangan, p. 202; Mack, pp. 143–144; Kállay, pp. 87–118; The latter gives a brief overview of the handling of this question in the secondary literature at pp. 89–91.

46. Fawkner, pp. 155–156.

47. Fawkner, p. 99.

48. Fawkner, pp. 96–97.

49. Fawkner, p. 176.

from his shoulders, which places this monologue as well in the group of the means of distancing.

As it has been shown, Macbeth needs the self-deceiving strategy that was called distancing so that he should not have to face the paradoxes he produces, and which he cannot avoid facing in the end. Fawkner, too, considers a strategy which partly coincides with distancing as one of the most important dramatic features in the play, but calls it “rationalization”:

Yet if we interpret all of Macbeth in terms of “power,” we risk creating precisely the kind of self-deception that Macbeth learns to develop in our play. Macbeth is from the outset not motivated by “power” at all . . . but he gradually learns to rationalize his dilemma using “power” as an explanation.⁵⁰

The first point in the drama when this “rationalization” or distancing is set into motion is, of course, when Macbeth calls the prophecy “soliciting.”

4.4 Cursing the Tongue

The pieces of evidence that have been quoted so far may already have been quite convincing in suggesting that it is Macbeth’s way of interpreting the surrounding world that creates the paradoxes governing his actions. However, the speech that makes this statement clear in the most striking way is his six-line exclamation at the end of the play (V.vii.47–52).⁵¹

The last steps leading up to this curse also bear some interesting traits. In Macbeth’s last speeches, there is a constant wavering in how he perceives the world around him. Before the siege he seems to regain his warrior self that he has lost at the first interaction with the Weird Sisters and which seemed to have expired in him during his “incarceration” by Lady Macbeth’s “domesticating power.”⁵² He returns to the stage after a long absence: during that time the audience has witnessed the murder of the Macduff family, represented as the cruellest among all done by Macbeth; they saw the longest scene of equivocation, between Malcolm and Macduff; and finally Lady Macbeth’s last mad appearance. Macbeth now “cannot taint with fear” (V.iii.3), the only thing that makes him outraged is when somebody wants to *tell* something to him. “Bring me no more reports,” he orders his servants (V.iii.1). But his energy seems to sink into despair in a second when the death of Lady Macbeth is

50. Fawkner, p. 40.

51. Muir’s note on V.viii.17–22.

52. Fawkner, p. 156.

announced. He is converted into “the spokesman of all despairs”⁵³ and seems to scorn life as value- and pointless:

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. (V.v.24–28)

This reminds the spectator of the former Thane of Cawdor's noble last minutes (I.iv.8–11).

However, to the sound of a new messenger he regains his power and fury, and he rightly anticipates that it has serious consequences when the servant comes “to use his tongue.” The prophecy appears in a new light for Macbeth:

I pull in resolution, and begin
To doubt th'equivocation of the fiend
That lies like truth. “Fear not, till Birnam wood
Do come to Dunsinan,” and now a wood
Comes toward Dunsinan. (V.v.42–46)

He recognises that there is no way out from the paradox of this situation (“There is nor flying hence, nor tarrying here” – V.v.48), but he tries to fight against his “Fate,” the “equivocation of the fiend / that lies like truth,” again. He is not afraid of anything anymore until he faces Macduff's sword. Indeed, it is not just any sword “Brandished by man that's of a woman born” (V.vii.17), it has the only thing in it that Macbeth has to be afraid of: “I have no words, / *My voice* is in my sword,” Macduff announces (V.vii.36–37).

This is how the audience and the characters arrive at Macbeth's last two speeches. As anticipated above, one key to understanding the play is Macbeth's immediate reaction to the fulfilment of what he would call his Fate:

Accursèd be that tongue that tells me so,
For it hath cowed my better part of man;
And be these juggling fiends no more believed,
That palter with us in a double sense,
That keep the word of promise to our ear
And break it to our hope. I'll not fight with thee. (V.vii.47–52)

53. Mack, p. 181.

It is probably not very surprising even at a superficial consideration that this should be the most dense and powerful passage of the tragedy: even Aristotle would be content with this speech, because this is exactly what he calls *anagnorisis*. The extreme power of the text here stems from the way misinterpretation, lack of reflection, paradoxical metaphors and thinking and distancing is concentrated into only six lines.

When Macbeth curses the tongue, he in fact curses the speeches that he feels were leading him on his way up to now. He seems to recognise that words can sometimes cause actions directly, something his wife was always conscious of, and that they can even be actions themselves. Macbeth is made Thane of Cawdor simply by Duncan's announcement, that is, the king's word worked as an action (as a perlocutionary act) at the same time.

There are further cases that demonstrate the power of words. Turning now to the instances where Macbeth's speeches are involved, one obvious example is that Banquo is murdered at Macbeth's *order*. Later, when Banquo's ghost appears at the supper, Macbeth desperately cries: "Thou canst not say, I did it" (III.iv.50). This is not just a simple lie (as it may appear at first glance), because obviously Macbeth did not kill Banquo with his own hands, but with his words; therefore the line is another example of distancing, by which Macbeth pretends that only physical action can be considered a "deed." Still in the banquet-scene, Banquo's ghost keeps appearing and disappearing. What is remarkable in this scene is the fact that the ghost always appears as soon as Macbeth mentions Banquo's name. As a consequence, the audience associates the ghost's entries with the name being uttered, like in an ancient invocation ceremony. However, the most striking illustration for the power of words is Macbeth's death. When Macduff says to Macbeth:

Despair thy charm;
And let the angel whom thou still hast served
Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother's womb
Untimely ripped. (V.vii.43–46)

Macbeth understands he has lost the battle. This information "brings Macbeth face to face with his assassin instead of the proclaimed loser."⁵⁴ It is exactly at this moment that he recognises the power of words, and when he finally decides to fight with Macduff, he is sure he will die. Therefore, it would be more accurate to say that

54. Iván Nyusztay, *Myth, Telos, Identity: The Tragic Schema in Greek and Shakespearean Drama* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 140–141.

Macbeth is dead from the time of Macduff's announcement. So, probably it is not even Macduff's sword that kills him, but his words. (Ironically, Macduff uses distancing and de-personalising in this speech in a similar way as Macbeth.)

This is, however, made possible by the fact that Macbeth does not understand every mechanism yet. As opposed to him, Lady Macbeth knows that words not only serve as actions, but as inducements to actions: "Hie thee hither, / That I may pour my spirits in thine ear, / And chastise with the valour of my tongue / All that impedes thee from the golden round. . ." (I.v.24–27). And, of course, the instrument is the *tongue*, or more exactly *her* tongue, because it is not at all by accident that she uses the possessive pronoun both before *spirits* and *tongue*, as opposed to Macbeth who does not curse "thy" (i.e. Macduff's) tongue, but "that" (i.e. "the") tongue. For Lady Macbeth, the connection between herself, her spirits, her tongue and the effect of the latter two is absolutely clear.

Macbeth seems to perceive this connection between the speaker and the speech only in V.vii.47. After cursing the tongue, he turns on the Weird Sisters: "And be these juggling fiends no more believed / That palter with us in a double sense," but in fact what he recognises here is still not the whole picture. Firstly, he is still using the passive voice and the general subject, although the Weird Sisters' "double sense" prophecy was given to him. Secondly, in fact, he is deceiving himself again, because "double sense" does not seem to be the best expression to describe the Sisters' prophecy. The Sisters sometimes use metaphors, in most of the cases visual ones like the bloody child or Birnam Forest, and promise him *a* future, of which nobody knows whether it is *the* future. However, the Weird Sisters never say that he has to do anything in order that the prophecies be fulfilled. Macbeth thinks he has to kill Duncan to become king, but maybe the Weird Sisters were not lying, and he could have become, rather than make himself, king.

This is exactly his way of thinking: he tries to blame the responsibility of his actions on the Weird Sisters. What Macbeth disregards here is that it is not the prophecies themselves that caused the death of Duncan and all the others, but he himself. He chose one possible interpretation of the prophecies, but did not consider that there may be other interpretations as well.⁵⁵ When it turns out that he was not careful enough, because he did not seek other meanings, he blames the Sisters for his failure. To use a somewhat remote metaphor, he commits the literary critic's "inten-

55. This makes it differ from the murder of Banquo: there the murderers got explicit orders, whereas Macbeth, as argued above, received statements about the future that he had the chance to interpret in one way or another.

tional fallacy”: in Macbeth’s mind, any utterance has only one meaning that is placed in it unequivocally by the speaker. Thus, for him, communication is a direct line: the unambiguous message that the speaker intended to communicate is passively received by the addressee.

However, it turns out that this concept is incorrect: an utterance has no one-to-one correspondence with the intention, and the addressee is not a passive recipient. Macbeth is still unaware of his equally important role as a recipient in interpreting the utterance. This is again typical of Macbeth: he thinks that the blunder was in the intentions of the speakers, or in the “meaning” of their utterance.

Paradoxically, in the next two lines he seemingly gives an almost perfect description of the situation: “[be those not believed] That keep the word of promise to our ear, / And break it to our hope” (V.vii.51–52). This is how he perceives the situation. One of the two mistakes in his picture is that the ear–hope distinction is not a real one, just like the alienation of his – and sometimes, others’ – actions from the performer by omitting the personal pronoun: he only heard what he had already hoped. The other inaccuracy is that he talks about “our” ear and hope, whereas there never appeared any “we” in the play, only “he,” Macbeth. The Weird Sisters did not break any promise: the one who tried to break anything was Macbeth. *He* tried to break the line of his Fate (a fate framed by himself for himself) and give it another direction. Nobody can be sure if Fate existed at all in this play, but he believed he had a certain fate, and that it had been revealed to him in the prophecies. But without even noticing it, at a certain point he wanted to “o’er-leap” that fate. He believed in Fate, he justified his initial deeds with it, but wanted to alter it partly: that is Macbeth’s paradox, and that is what he still does not notice.

He claims that the Weird Sisters cannot be believed anymore, and two lines later he says to Macduff: “I’ll not fight with thee.” These two statements of Macbeth are in unmistakable contradiction with each-other. The Sisters (or the Second Apparition) prophesied that Macbeth has to fear only someone who is not given birth by a woman. When Macbeth faces such a person, he says he no more believes the prophecy, because he thought “none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (IV.i.94–95) meant “fear nobody.” But if he does not believe anymore that “none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth,” then he thinks

- (1) *either* that *not even* someone who is not born by a woman can harm him,
- (2) *or* that *not only* someone who is not born by a woman can harm him, but anyone.

From (1) it would follow that he does not have to be afraid of Macduff. On the other hand, (2) implies that he has to be afraid of everybody, not just Macduff. If Macbeth means (1), then he could happily fight with Macduff who would have no chance at all. If, however, Macbeth thinks (2), then there is no-one better or worse to fight with than Macduff, because Macbeth will get killed either by Macduff, or by someone else, but will surely die. Then why should he exclude Macduff from the list of his duel opponents rather than anyone else? Macbeth has then the same chances against Macduff as against anyone else, so he could fight with Macduff, as he did with all the others. Thus, when Macbeth says “I’ll not fight with thee,” it contradicts both possibilities he could have thought of.

The paradox in Macbeth’s thinking is finally completed when he at last decides to fight with Macduff. If he does not believe the prophecies, why does he refer to them while drawing his sword? But if he does believe them, that is, he believes them to be unalterable facts, then how can he try to act against them, how can he suppose to change the unchangeable? Of course, this is exactly what he has been trying to do from the minute he decided on killing Banquo and Fleance. He believed the prophecies, and, at the same time, he wanted to alter the future they seemed to describe as a fate marked out for him. This is exactly the paradox Macbeth fails to notice throughout the whole play, and which is at the very end condensed into six lines.

5 Conclusion

Macbeth constantly tries to escape the responsibility of having to interpret the texts that surround him. It is this characteristic of his that provides for the existence of the Weird Sisters and Lady Macbeth who seem to betray him. The Weird Sisters are too metaphorical, too symbolic for him; his wife uses the “valour of her tongue” to confuse him in a way *she* thinks *he* would like to think. When he suspects he was wrong he chooses not to take it as a mistake of his own, but somebody else’s fault. In doing so he fails. But it is this that the spectators are interested in.

The audience has heard the same texts and has seen the same images as Macbeth. They may have their own interpretation, and most probably they would, in such situations, opt for other solutions than Macbeth. But nobody from the audience can be absolutely sure that Macbeth’s interpretation is wrong. In fact “hail that shalt be king hereafter” can equally mean that “chance will crown” Macbeth, and that he has to “do the deed.” So far as *semantics* is concerned. But what answer would *ethics* suggest? Whatever, Lady Macbeth’s charm-like speeches, together with Macbeth’s self-deceivingly ambiguous ones, sweep ethics away: in the dimension of spirits,

angels and Heaven's cherubim, the audience is bewildered, just like Macbeth. Language has mobilising power on Macbeth, and probably on the audience as well: they feel sympathy for the "dead butcher" in the end, although they know that this two-word description of Macbeth is in one sense quite accurate.

Does language rule the play, then? Duncan's tongue makes Macbeth the Thane of Cawdor. The "paltering" of the Weird Sisters awakens ambition in him. Lady Macbeth makes him "bloody, bold and resolute" by the "valour of her tongue." The messenger comes to "use his tongue" to say what cannot be said: what, one could think, is a "tale told by an idiot" about Birnam Wood approaching Dunsinane. And, finally, Macduff uses his tongue to defeat Macbeth. Then, probably Macbeth is right in cursing the tongue. What he, however, fails to understand is that language is not independent from its user. Furthermore, by correctly recognising that the tongue will kill him, he makes a mistake again: probably the tongue could not have had any power over him without that recognition. There is no way out of such paradoxes.

Macbeth had to choose between the (linguistic) dullness, like the life of Duncan, and his own death. What he chose interests the audience, and they know that his choice in such a paradoxical situation was right. But, again, this situation was produced by Macbeth himself. His lack of will for reflection resulted in biased interpretations of the speeches he heard. His tendency to alienate his actions from himself also leads to his not recognising that words not just exist with their meanings as separate from everything else: meaning is born during the interaction of the speaker's spirits, the words, and the addressee's spirits.

These faults are perceived if the audience is attentive enough to the extremely dense, metaphorical and ambiguous language of the play. Such an audience knows that Macbeth has to fall not because what he did is unethical, but because of the inner logic of the paradoxes he got himself into. However, Macbeth's choice to drive himself into these paradoxes was in a sense right: he affects the audience. But he has to fall. That is his choice. That is tragic. That is when the battle's lost. And won.