**Macbeth: history, ideology and intellectuals**

It is often said that Macbeth is about ‘evil’, but we might draw a more careful distinction: between the violence which the State considers legitimate and that which it does not. Macbeth, we may agree, is a dreadful murderer when he kills Duncan. But when he kills Macdonwald – ‘a rebel’ (I.ii.10) – he has Duncan’s approval:

For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish’d steel,
Which smok’d with bloody execution,
Like Valour’s minion, carv’d out his passage,
Till he fac’d the slave;
which ne’er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam’d him from the nave to th’ chops,
And fix’d his head upon our battlements.

*Duncan.* O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman! (I.ii.16–24)

Violence is good, in this view, when it is in the service of the prevailing dispositions of power; when it disrupts them it is evil. A claim to a monopoly of legitimate violence is fundamental in the development of the modern State; when that claim is successful, most citizens learn to regard State violence as qualitatively different from other violence and perhaps they don’t think of State violence as violence at all (consider the actions of police, army and judiciary as opposed to those of pickets, protesters, criminals and terrorists). *Macbeth* focusses major strategies by which the State asserted its claim at one conjuncture.

Generally in Europe in the sixteenth century the development was from Feudalism to the Absolutist State. Under Feudalism, the king held authority among his peers, his equals, and his power was often little more than nominal; authority was distributed also among overlapping non-national institutions such as the church, estates, assemblies, regions and towns. In the Absolutist State, power became centralised in the figure of the monarch, the exclusive source of legitimacy. The movement from one to the other was of course contested, not only by the aristocracy and the peasantry, whose traditional rights were threatened, but also by the gentry and urban bourgeoisie, who found new space for power and influence within more elaborate economic and governmental structures. Because of these latter factors especially, the Absolutist State was never fully established in England. Probably the peak of the monarch’s personal power was reached by Henry VIII; the attempt of Charles I to reassert that power led to the English Revolution. In between, Elizabeth and James I, and those who
believed their interests to lie in the same direction, sought to sustain royal power and to suppress dissidents. The latter category was broad; it comprised aristocrats like the Earls of Northumberland and Westmorland who led the Northern Rising of 1569 and the Duke of Norfolk who plotted to replace Elizabeth with Mary Queen of Scots in 1571, clergy who refused the State religion, gentry who supported them and who tried to raise awkward matters in Parliament, writers and printers who published criticism of State policy, the populace when it complained about food prices, enclosures, or anything.

The exercise of State violence against such dissidents depended upon the achievement of a degree of legitimation – upon the acceptance by many people that State power was, at least, the lesser of two evils. A principal means by which this was effected was the propagation of an ideology of Absolutism, which represented the English State as a pyramid, any disturbance of which would produce general disaster, and which insisted increasingly on the ‘divine right’ of the monarch. This system was said to be ‘natural’ and ordained by ‘God’; it was ‘good’ and disruptions of it ‘evil’. This is what some Shakespeareans have celebrated as a just and harmonious ‘world picture’. Compare Perry Anderson’s summary: ‘Absolutism was essentially just this: a redeployed and recharged apparatus of feudal domination, designed to clamp the peasant masses back into their traditional social position.’

The reason why the State needed violence and propaganda was that the system was subject to persistent structural difficulties. *Macbeth*, like very many plays of the period, handles anxieties about the violence exercised under the aegis of Absolutist ideology. Two main issues come into focus. The first is the threat of a split between legitimacy and actual power – when the monarch is not the strongest person in the State. Such a split was altogether likely during the transition from Feudalism to the Absolutist State; hence the infighting within the dominant group in most European countries. In England the matter was topical because of the Essex rebellion in 1599: it was easy for the charismatic earl, who had shown at Cadiz that Englishmen could defeat Spaniards, to suppose that he would make a better ruler than the aging and indecisive Elizabeth, for all her legitimacy. So Shakespeare’s Richard II warns Northumberland, the kingmaker, that he is bound, structurally, to disturb the rule of Bolingbroke:

\[
\text{thou shalt think,}
\]

\[
\text{Though he [Bolingbroke] divide the realm and give thee half,}
\]

\[
\text{It is too little, helping him to all.}^4
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Jonathan Dollimore and I have argued elsewhere that the potency of the myth of Henry V in Shakespeare’s play, written at the time of Essex’s ascendancy, derives from the striking combination in that monarch of legitimacy and actual power.\(^5\) At the start of *Macbeth* the manifest dependency of Duncan’s State
upon its best fighter sets up a dangerous instability (this is explicit in the sources). In the opening soliloquy of Act I scene vii Macbeth freely accords to Duncan entire legitimacy: he is Duncan's kinsman, subject and host, the king has been 'clear in his great office', and the idea of his deposition evokes religious imagery of angels, damnation and cherubins. But that is all the power the king has that does not depend upon Macbeth; against it is ranged 'Vaulting ambition', Macbeth's impetus to convert his actual power into full regal authority.

The split between legitimacy and actual power was always a potential malfunction in the developing Absolutist State. A second problem was less dramatic but more persistent. It was this: what is the difference between Absolutism and tyranny? - having in mind contemporary occurrences like the Massacre of St Bartholomew's in France in 1572, the arrest of more than a hundred witches and the torturing and killing of many of them in Scotland in 1590–91, and the suppression of the Irish by English armies. The immediate reference for questions of legitimate violence in relation to Macbeth is the Gunpowder Plot of 1605. This attempted violence against the State followed upon many years of State violence against Roman Catholics: the Absolutist State sought to draw religious institutions entirely within its control, and Catholics who actively refused were subjected to fines, imprisonment, torture and execution. Consider the sentence passed upon Jane Wiseman in 1598:

The sentence is that the said Jane Wiseman shall be led to the prison of the Marshalsea of the Queen's Bench, and there naked, except for a linen cloth about the lower part of her body, be laid upon the ground, lying directly on her back; and a hollow shall be made under her head and her head placed in the same; and upon her body in every part let there be placed as much of stones and iron as she can bear and more; and as long as she shall live, she shall have of the worst bread and water of the prison next her; and on the day she eats, she shall not drink, and on the day she drinks she shall not eat, so living until she die.6

This was for 'receiving, comforting, helping and maintaining priests', and refusing to reveal, under torture, who else was doing the same thing, and for refusing to plead. There is nothing abstract or theoretical about the State violence to which the present essay refers. Putting the issue succinctly in relation to Shakespeare's play, what is the difference between Macbeth's rule and that of contemporary European monarchs?

In Basilikon Doron (1599) King James tried to protect the Absolutist State from such pertinent questions by asserting an utter distinction between 'a lawfull good King' and 'an usurping Tyran':

The one acknowledgeth himselfe ordained for his people, having received from God a burthen of government, whereof he must be countable: the other thinketh his people ordained for him, a prey to his passions and inordinate appetites, as the fruitses of his magnanimitie: And therefore, as their ends are directly contrarie, so are their whole actions, as meanes, whereby they preasse to attaine to their endes.7
Evidently James means to deny that the Absolutist monarch has anything significant in common with someone like Macbeth. Three aspects of James's strategy in this passage are particularly revealing. First, he depends upon an utter polarisation between the two kinds of ruler. Such antitheses are characteristic of the ideology of Absolutism: they were called upon to tidy the uneven apparatus of Feudal power into a far neater structure of the monarch versus the rest, and Protestantism tended to see 'spiritual' identities in similarly polarised terms. James himself explained the function of demons like this: 'since the Devil is the verie contrarie opposite to God, there can be no better way to know God, then by the contrarie'. So it is with the two kinds of rulers: the badness of one seems to guarantee the goodness of the other. Second, by defining the lawful good king against the usurping tyrant, James refuses to admit the possibility that a ruler who has not usurped will be tyrannical. Thus he seems to cope with potential splits between legitimacy and actual power by insisting on the unique status of the lawful good king, and to head off questions about the violence committed by such a ruler by suggesting that all his actions will be uniquely legitimate. Third, we may notice that the whole distinction, as James develops it, is in terms not of the behaviour of the lawful good king and the usurping tyrant, respectively, but in terms of their motives. This seems to render vain any assessment of the actual manner of rule of the Absolute monarch. On these arguments, any disturbance of the current structure of power relations is against God and the people, and consequently any violence in the interest of the status quo is acceptable. Hence the legitimate killing of Jane Wiseman. (In fact, the distinction between lawful and tyrannical rule eventually breaks down even in James's analysis, as his commitment to the State leads him to justify even tyrannical behaviour in established monarchs.)

It is often assumed that Macbeth is engaged in the same project as King James: attempting to render coherent and persuasive the ideology of the Absolutist State. The grounds for a Jamesian reading are plain enough – to the point where it is often claimed that the play was designed specially for the king. At every opportunity Macbeth is disqualified ideologically and his opponents ratified. An entire antithetical apparatus of nature and supernature – the concepts through which a dominant ideology most commonly seeks to establish itself – is called upon to witness against him as usurping tyrant. 'Nature' protests against Macbeth (II.iv), Lady Macbeth welcomes 'Nature's mischief' (I.v.50) and Macbeth will have 'Nature's germens tumble all together, / Even till destruction sicken' (IV.i.59–60). Good and evil are personified absolutely by Edward the Confessor and the Witches, and the language of heaven and hell runs through the play; Lady Macbeth conjures up 'murth'ring ministers' (I.v.48) and Macbeth acknowledges 'The deep damnation of his [Duncan's] taking-off' (I.vii.20). It all seems organised to validate James's contention, that there is all the difference
in this world and the next between a usurping tyrant and a lawful good king. The whole strategy is epitomised in the account of Edward’s alleged curing of ‘the Evil’ – actually scrofula – ‘A most miraculous work in this good King’ (IV.iii.146-7). James himself knew that this was a superstitious practice, and he refused to undertake it until his advisers persuaded him that it would strengthen his claim to the throne in the public eye. As Francis Bacon observed, notions of the supernatural help to keep people acquiescent (e.g. the man in pursuit of power will do well to attribute his success ‘rather to divine Providence and felicity, than to his own virtue or policy’). Macbeth draws upon such notions more than any other play by Shakespeare. It all suggests that Macbeth is an extraordinary eruption in a good State – obscuring the thought that there might be any pronity to structural malfunctioning in the system. It suggests that Macbeth’s violence is wholly bad, whereas State violence committed by legitimate monarchs is quite different.

Such manoeuvres are even more necessary to a Jamesian reading of the play in respect of the deposition and killing of Macbeth. Absolutist ideology declared that even tyrannical monarchs must not be resisted, yet Macbeth could hardly be allowed to triumph. Here the play offers two moves. First, the fall of Macbeth seems to result more from (super)natural than human agency: it seems like an effect of the opposition of good and evil (‘Macbeth / Is ripe for shaking, and the Powers above / Put on their instruments’ – IV.iii.237-9). Most cunningly, although there are material explanations for the moving of Birnam Wood and the unusual birth of Macduff, the audience is allowed to believe, at the same time, that these are (super)natural effects (thus the play works upon us almost as the Witches work upon Macbeth). Second, in so far as Macbeth’s fall is accomplished by human agency, the play is careful to suggest that he is hardly in office before he is overthrown. The years of successful rule specified in the chronicles are erased and, as Paul points out, neither Macduff nor Malcolm has tendered any allegiance to Macbeth. The action rushes along, he is swept away as if he had never truly been king. Even so, the contradiction can hardly vanish altogether. For the Jamesian reading it is necessary for Macbeth to be a complete usurping tyrant in order that he shall set off the lawful good king, and also, at the same time, for him not to be a ruler at all in order that he may properly be deposed and killed. Macbeth kills two people at the start of the play: a rebel and the king, and these are apparently utterly different acts of violence. That is the ideology of Absolutism. Macduff also, killing Macbeth, is killing both a rebel and a king, but now the two are apparently the same person. The ultimate intractability of this kind of contradiction disturbs the Jamesian reading of the play.

Criticism has often supposed, all too easily, that the Jamesian reading of Macbeth
is necessary on historical grounds – that other views of State ideology were impossible for Shakespeare and his contemporaries. But this was far from being so: there was a well-developed theory allowing for resistance by the nobility, and the Gunpowder Plotters were manifestly unconvinced by the king’s arguments. Even more pertinent is the theory of the Scotsman George Buchanan, as we may deduce from the fact that James tried to suppress Buchanan’s writings in 1584 after his assumption of personal rule; in Basilikon Doron he advises his son to ‘use the Law upon the keepers’ of ‘such infamous invectives’ (p. 40). With any case so strenuously overstated and manipulative as James’s, we should ask what alternative position it is trying to put down. Arguments in favour of Absolutism constitute one part of Macbeth’s ideological field – the range of ideas and attitudes brought into play by the text; another main part may be represented by Buchanan’s De jure regni (1579) and History of Scotland (1582). In Buchanan’s view sovereignty derives from and remains with the people; the king who exercises power against their will is a tyrant and should be deposed. The problem in Scotland is not unruly subjects, but unruly monarchs: ‘Rebellions there spring less from the people than from the rulers, when they try to reduce a kingdom which from earliest times had always been ruled by law to an absolute and lawless despotism’. Buchanan’s theory is the virtual antithesis of James’s; it was used eventually to justify the deposition of James’s son.

Buchanan’s History of Scotland is usually reckoned to be one of the sources of Macbeth. It was written to illustrate his theory of sovereignty and to justify the overthrow of Mary Queen of Scots in 1567. In it the dichotomy of true lawful king and usurping tyrant collapses, for Mary is the lawful ruler and the tyrant, and her deposers are usurpers and yet lawful also. To her are attributed many of the traits of Macbeth: she is said to hate integrity in others, to appeal to the predictions of witches, to use foreign mercenaries, to place spies in the households of opponents and to threaten the lives of the nobility; after her surrender she is humiliated in the streets of Edinburgh as Macbeth fears to be. It is alleged that she would not have shrunk from the murder of her son if she could have reached him. This account of Mary as arch-tyrant embarrassed James, and that is perhaps why just eight kings are shown to Macbeth by the Witches (IV.i.119). Nevertheless, it was well established in protestant propaganda and in Spenser’s Faerie Queene, and the Gunpowder Plot would tend to revivify it. Any recollection of the alleged tyranny of Mary, the lawful ruler, prompts awareness of the contradictions in Absolutist ideology, disturbing the customary interpretation of Macbeth. Once we are alert to this disturbance, the Jamesian reading of the play begins to leak at every joint.

One set of difficulties is associated with the theology of good, evil and divine ordination which purports to discriminate Macbeth’s violence from that
legitimately deployed by the State. I have written elsewhere of the distinctive attempt of Reformation Christianity to cope with the paradoxical conjunction in one deity of total power and goodness, and will here only indicate the scope of the problem. *Macbeth*, in the manner of Absolutist ideology and Reformation Christianity, strongly polarises ‘good’ and ‘evil’, but, at the same time, also like the prevailing doctrine, it insists on complete divine control of all human events. This twin determination produces a deity that sponsors the ‘evil’ it condemns and punishes. Orthodox doctrine, which was Calvinist in general orientation, hardly flinched from this conclusion (for example, James said in his *Daemonologie* that fallen angels are ‘Gods hang-men, to execute such turnes as he employes them in’). Nevertheless, fictional reworkings of it often seem to point up its awkwardness, suggesting an unresolvable anxiety. Traditional criticism registers this factor in *Macbeth* in its inconclusive debates about how far the Witches make Macbeth more or less excusable or in charge of his own destiny. The projection of political issues onto supposedly (super)natural dimensions seems to ratify the Absolutist State but threatens also to open up another range of difficulties in contemporary ideology.

*Macbeth* also reveals a range of directly political problems to the reader rendered wary by Buchanan’s analysis. They tend to break down the antithesis, upon which James relied, between the usurping tyrant and the legitimately violent ruler. Many of them have been noted by critics, though most commonly with the idea of getting them to fit into a single, coherent reading of the play. For a start, Duncan’s status is in doubt: it is unclear how far his authority runs, he is imperceptive, and his State is in chaos well before Macbeth’s violence against it (G. K. Hunter in the introduction to his Penguin edition (1967) registers unease at the ‘violence and bloodthirstiness’ of Macbeth’s killing of Macdonwald (pp. 9–10)). Nor is Malcolm’s title altogether clear, since Duncan’s declaration of him as ‘Prince of Cumberland’ (I.iv.35–42) suggests what the chronicles indicate, namely that the succession was not necessarily hereditary; Macbeth seems to be elected by the thanes (II.iv.29–32).

I have suggested that *Macbeth* may be read as working to justify the overthrow of the usurping tyrant. Nevertheless, the awkwardness of the issue is brought to the surface by the uncertain behaviour of Banquo. In the sources he collaborates with Macbeth, but to allow that in the play would taint King James’s line and blur the idea of the one monstrous eruption. Shakespeare compromises and makes Banquo do nothing at all. He fears Macbeth played ‘most fouly for’t’ (III.i.3) but does not even communicate his knowledge of the Witches’ prophecies. Instead he wonders if they may ‘set me up in hope’ (III.i.10). If it is right for Malcolm and Macduff, eventually, to overthrow Macbeth, then it would surely be right for Banquo to take a clearer line.

Furthermore, the final position of Macduff appears quite disconcerting, once
we read it with Buchanan's more realistic, political analysis in mind: Macduff at the end stands in the same relation to Malcolm as Macbeth did to Duncan in the beginning. He is now the king-maker on whom the legitimate monarch depends, and the recurrence of the whole sequence may be anticipated (in production this might be suggested by a final meeting of Macduff and the Witches). For the Jamesian reading it is necessary to feel that Macbeth is a distinctively 'evil' eruption in a 'good' system; awareness of the role of Macduff in Malcolm's State alerts us to the fundamental instability of power relations during the transition to Absolutism, and consequently to the uncertain validity of the claim of the State to the legitimate use of violence. Certainly Macbeth is a murderer and an oppressive ruler, but he is one version of the Absolutist ruler, not the polar opposite.

Malcolm himself raises very relevant issues in the conversation in which he tests Macduff: specifically tyrannical qualities are invoked. At one point, according to Buchanan, the Scottish lords 'give the benefit of the doubt' to Mary and her husband, following the thought that 'more secret faults' may be tolerated 'so long as these do not involve a threat to the welfare of the state' (Tyrannous Reign, p. 88). Macduff is prepared to accept considerable threats to the welfare of Scotland:

Boundless intemperance
In nature is a tyranny; it hath been
Th' untimely emptying of the happy throne,
And fall of many kings. But fear not yet
To take upon you what is yours: you may
Convey your pleasures in a spacious plenty,
And yet seem cold – the time you may so hoodwink:
We have willing dames enough; there cannot be
That vulture in you, to devour so many
As will to greatness dedicate themselves,
Finding it so inclin'd. (IV.iii.66–76)

Tyranny in nature means disturbance in the metaphorical kingdom of a person's nature but, in the present context, one is likely to think of the effects of the monarch's intemperance on the literal kingdom. Macduff suggests that such behaviour has caused the fall not just of usurpers but of kings, occupants of 'the happy throne'. Despite this danger, he encourages Malcolm 'To take upon you what is yours' – a sinister way of putting it, implying either Malcolm's title to the State in general or his rights over the women he wants to seduce or assault. Fortunately the latter will not be necessary, there are 'willing dames enough': Macduff is ready to mortgage both the bodies and (within the ideology invoked in the play) the souls of women to the monster envisaged as lawful good king. It will be all right, apparently, because people can be hoodwinked: Macduff allows us to see that the virtues James tries to identify with the Absolutist
monarch are an ideological strategy, and that the illusion of them will probably be sufficient to keep the system going.

Nor is this the worst: Malcolm claims more faults, and according to Macduff 'avarice / Sticks deeper' (lines 84–5): Malcolm may corrupt not merely people but property relations. Yet this too is to be condoned. Of course, Malcolm is not actually like this, but the point is that he well could be, as Macduff says many kings have been, and that would all be acceptable. And even Malcolm's eventual protestation of innocence cannot get round the fact that he has been lying. He says 'my first false speaking / Was this upon myself' (lines 130–1) and that may indeed be true, but it nevertheless indicates the circumspection that will prove useful to the lawful good king, as much as to the tyrant. In Holinshed the culminating vice claimed by Malcolm is lying, but Shakespeare replaces it with a general and rather desperate evocation of utter tyranny (lines 91–100); was the original self-accusation perhaps too pointed? The whole conversation takes off from the specific and incomparable tyranny of Macbeth, but in the process succeeds in suggesting that there may be considerable overlap between the qualities of the tyrant and the true king.

Macbeth allows space for two quite different interpretive organizations: against a Jamesian illustration of the virtues of Absolutism we may produce a disturbance of that reading, illuminated by Buchanan. This latter makes visible the way religion is used to underpin State ideology, and undermines notions that established monarchs must not be challenged or removed and that State violence is utterly distinctive and legitimate. It is commonly assumed that the function of criticism is to resolve such questions of interpretation – to go through the text with an eye to sources, other plays, theatrical convention, historical context and so on, deciding on which side the play comes down and explaining away contrary evidence. However, this is neither an adequate programme nor an adequate account of what generally happens.

Let us suppose, to keep the argument moving along, that the Jamesian reading fits better with Macbeth and its Jacobean context, as we understand them at present. Two questions then present themselves: what is the status of the disturbance of that reading, which I have produced by bringing Buchanan into view? And what are the consequences of customary critical insistence upon the Jamesian reading?

On the first question, I would make three points. First, the Buchanan disturbance is in the play, and inevitably so. Even if we believe that Shakespeare was trying to smooth over difficulties in Absolutist ideology, to do this significantly he must deal with the issues which resist convenient inclusion. Those issues must be brought into visibility in order that they can be handled, and once exposed they are available for the reader or audience to seize and focus
upon, as an alternative to the more complacent reading. A position tends to suppose an opposition. Even James's writings are vulnerable to such analysis, for instance when he brings up the awkward fact that the prophet Samuel urgently warns the people of Israel against choosing a king because he will tyrannize over them. This prominent biblical instance could hardly be ignored, so James quotes it and says that Samuel was preparing the Israelites to be obedient and patient. Yet once James has brought Samuel's pronouncement into visibility, the reader is at liberty to doubt the king's tendentious interpretation of it. It is hardly possible to deny the reader this scope: even the most strenuous closure can be repudiated as inadequate. We are led to think of the text not as propounding a unitary and coherent meaning which is to be discovered, but as handling a range of issues (probably intractable issues, for they make the best stories), and as unable to control the development of radically divergent interpretations.

Second, the Buchanan disturbance has been activated, in the present essay, as a consequence of the writer's scepticism about Jamesian ideological strategies and his concern with current political issues. It is conceivable that many readers of *Macbeth* will come to share this outlook. Whether this happens or not, the theoretical implication may be taken: if such a situation should come about, the terms in which *Macbeth* is customarily discussed would shift, and eventually the Buchanan disturbance would come to seem an obvious, natural way to consider the play. That is how notions of appropriate approaches to a text get established. We may observe the process, briefly, in the career of the Witches. For many members of Jacobean audiences, Witches were a social and spiritual reality: they were as real as Edward the Confessor, perhaps more so. As belief in the physical manifestation of supernatural powers, and especially demonic powers, weakened, the Witches were turned into an operatic display, with new scenes, singing and dancing, fine costumes and flying machines. In an adaptation by Sir William Davenant, this was the only stage form of the play from 1674 to 1744, and even after Davenant's version was abandoned the Witches' divertissements were staged, until 1888. Latterly we have adopted other ways with the Witches – being still unable, of course, to contemplate them, as most of Shakespeare's audience probably did, as phenomena one might encounter on a heath. Kenneth Muir comments: 'with the fading of belief in the objective existence of devils, they and their operations can yet symbolize the workings of evil in the hearts of men' (*New Arden Macbeth*, p. lxx). Recent critical accounts and theatrical productions have developed all kinds of strategies to make the Witches 'work' for our time. These successive accommodations of one aspect of the play to prevailing attitudes are blatant, but they illustrate the extent to which critical orthodoxy is not the mere response to the text which it claims to be: it is *remaking* it within currently acceptable parameters.
Buchanan disturbance may not always remain a marginal gloss to the Jamesian reading.

Third, we may assume that the Buchanan disturbance was part of the response of some among the play’s initial audiences. It is in the nature of the matter that it is impossible to assess how many people inclined towards Buchanan’s analysis of royal power. That there were such may be supposed from the multifarious challenges to State authority — culminating, of course, in the Civil War. Macbeth was almost certainly read against James by some Jacobians. This destroys the claim to privilege of the Jamesian reading on the ground that it is historically valid: we must envisage diverse original audiences, activating diverse implications in the text. And we may demand comparable interpretive license for ourselves. Initially the play occupied a complex position in its ideological field, and we should expect no less today.

With these considerations about the status of the Buchanan disturbance in mind, the question about the customary insistence on the Jamesian reading appears as a question about the politics of criticism. Like other kinds of cultural production, literary criticism helps to influence the way people think about the world; that is why the present essay seeks to make space for an oppositional understanding of the text and the State. It is plain that most criticism has not only reproduced but endorsed Jamesian ideology, so discouraging scrutiny, which Macbeth can promote, of the legitimacy of State violence. That we are dealing with live issues is shown by the almost uncanny resemblances between the Gunpowder Plot and the 1984 Brighton Bombing, and in the comparable questions about State and other violence which they raise. My concluding thoughts are about the politics of the prevailing readings of Macbeth. I distinguish conservative and liberal positions; both tend to dignify their accounts with the honorific term ‘tragedy’.

The conservative position insists that the play is about ‘evil’. Kenneth Muir offers a string of quotations to this effect: it is ‘Shakespeare’s “most profound and mature vision of evil”; “the whole play may be writ down as a wrestling of destruction with creation”; it is “a statement of evil”; “it is a picture of a special battle in a universal war . . .”; and it “contains the decisive orientation of Shakespearean good and evil”’. This is little more than Jamesian ideology writ large: killing Macdonwald is ‘good’ and killing Duncan is ‘evil’, and the hierarchical society envisaged in Absolutist ideology is identified with the requirements of nature, supernature and the ‘human condition’. Often this view is elaborated as a socio-political programme, allegedly expounded by Shakespeare and implicitly endorsed by the critic. So Muir writes of ‘an orderly and closely-knit society, in contrast to the disorder consequent upon Macbeth’s initial crime [i.e. killing Duncan, not Macdonwald]. The naturalness of that order, and the unnaturalness of its violation by Macbeth, is emphasized . . .’
Irving Ribner says Fleance is 'symbolic of a future rooted in the acceptance of natural law, which inevitably must return to reassert God's harmonious order when evil has worked itself out'.

This conservative endorsement of Jamesian ideology is not intended to ratify the Modern State. Rather, like much twentieth-century literary criticism, it is backward-looking, appealing to an earlier and preferable supposed condition of society. Roger Scruton comments: 'If a conservative is also a restorationist, this is because he lives close to society, and feels in himself the sickness which infects the common order. How, then, can he fail to direct his eyes towards that state of health from which things have declined?' This quotation is close to the terms in which many critics write of Macbeth, and their evocation of the Jamesian order which is allegedly restored at the end of the play constitutes a wistful gesture towards what they would regard as a happy ending for our troubled society. However, because this conservative approach is based on an inadequate analysis of political and social process, it gains no purchase on the main determinants of State power.

A liberal position hesitates to endorse any State power so directly, finding some saving virtue in Macbeth: 'To the end he never totally loses our sympathy'; 'we must still not lose our sympathy for the criminal'. In this view there is a flaw in the State, it fails to accommodate the particular consciousness of the refined individual. Macbeth's imagination is set against the blandness of normative convention and for all his transgressions, perhaps because of them, Macbeth transcends the laws he breaks. In John Bayley's version: 'His superiority consists in a passionate sense for ordinary life, its seasons and priorities, a sense which his fellows in the play ignore in themselves or take for granted. Through the deed which tragedy requires of him he comes to know not only himself, but what life is all about.' I call this 'liberal' because it is anxious about a State, Absolutist or Modern, which can hardly take cognizance of the individual sensibility, and it is prepared to validate to some degree the recalcitrant individual. But it will not undertake the political analysis which would press the case. Hence there is always in such criticism a reservation about Macbeth's revolt and a sense of relief that it ends in defeat: nothing could have been done anyway, it was all inevitable, written in the human condition. This retreat from the possibility of political analysis and action leaves the State virtually unquestioned, almost as fully as the conservative interpretation.

Shakespeare, notoriously, has a way of anticipating all possibilities. The idea of literary intellectuals identifying their own deepest intuitions of the universe in the experience of the 'great' tragic hero who defies the limits of the human condition is surely a little absurd; we may sense delusions of grandeur. Macbeth includes much more likely models for its conservative and liberal critics in the characters of the two doctors. The English Doctor has just four and a half lines

(New Arden Macbeth, p. li).
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(IV.iii.141–5) in which he says King Edward is coming and that sick people whose malady conquers the greatest efforts of medical skill await him, expecting a heavenly cure for 'evil'. Malcolm, the king to be, says 'I thank you, Doctor'. This doctor is the equivalent of conservative intellectuals who encourage respect for mystificatory images of ideal hierarchy which have served the State in the past, and who invoke 'evil', 'tragedy' and 'the human condition' to produce, in effect, acquiescence in State power.

The Scottish Doctor, in V.i and V.iii, is actually invited to cure the sickness of the rulers and by implication the State: 'If thou couldst, Doctor, cast / The water of my land, find her disease . . .' (V.iii.50–1). But this doctor, like the liberal intellectual, hesitates to press an analysis. He says: 'This disease is beyond my practice' (V.i.56), 'I think, but dare not speak' (V.i.76), 'Therein the patient / Must minister to himself' (V.iii.45–6), 'Were I from Dunsinane away and clear, / Profit again should hardly draw me here' (V.iii.61–2). He wrings his hands at the evidence of State violence and protects his conscience with asides. This is like the liberal intellectual who knows there is something wrong at the heart of the system but will not envisage a radical alternative and, to ratify this attitude, discovers in Shakespeare's plays 'tragedy' and 'the human condition' as explanations of the supposedly inevitable defeat of the person who steps out of line.

By conventional standards, the present essay is perverse. But an oppositional criticism is bound to appear thus: its task is to work across the grain of customary assumptions and, if necessary, across the grain of the text, as it is customarily perceived. Of course, literary intellectuals don't have much influence over State violence, their therapeutic power is very limited. Nevertheless, writing, teaching, and other modes of communicating all contribute to the steady, long-term formation of opinion, to the establishment of legitimacy. This contribution King James himself did not neglect. An oppositional analysis of texts like Macbeth will read them to expose, rather than promote, State ideologies.

Notes


King James the First, Daemonologie (1597), Newes from Scotland (1591) (London: Bodley Head, 1924), p. 55.


The Tyrannous Reign of Mary Stewart, p. 49; see also p. 99.

The Tyrannous Reign of Mary Stewart, pp. 72, 86, 91, 111, 119, 145, 153; cf. Macbeth, III.i.48–56; V.vii.17–8; III.v.130–1; V.viii.27–9.

King James, Daemonologie, p. 20. See further Sinfield, Literature in Protestant England, specially chapters 2, 6.

However, as Jim McLaverty points out to me, the play has arranged that Macduff will not experience temptation from his wife. In the chronicles Malcolm's son is overthrown by Donalbain; in Polanski's film of Macbeth Donalbain is made to meet the Witches.


See further Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield, eds., Political Shakespeare (Manchester University Press, 1985), chs. 7, 9, 10.


23 Ribner, Patterns in Shakespearean Tragedy, p. 159.


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