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Shakespeare and the Boundaries of Human Kindness

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In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, ideas of predetermination and divine election constitute, especially in the gradual establishment of Puritan culture, the main frame of reference of the theology and ethics of evil, which, on principle, removes from the self any potential source of pleasure or seduction by excluding free will and, therefore, individual choice. Yet the experience of evildoing does not end in this closure of the subject within a fideistic perspective. Contemporary theatrical culture problematises the question by exploring in tragic play and participation in theatrical gameplay the limits and potential of freedom as an act of will recognisable in the assumption of guilt-as-doing as the foundation of one's being. Shakespeare explores a whole range of possibilities of doing evil as cases of conscience as well as in relation to the reactions to evil done (or being done), from fear to terror and horror. It has been noted that the experience of horror threatens not just individual human lives, but the very essence of what it means to be human – rooted in the singular vulnerability of each embodied person. This encompasses the full range of violence, from overt atrocities like massacres and torture to more subtle, insidious forms of harm. In this sense, violence on the body has been interpreted as a violation of the human condition. This article explores how Shakespeare probes the boundaries of the human condition through the experiences of horror in *Macbeth* – distinct from fear and terror – focusing on the psychological, ethical, and symbolic dimensions at the outer limits of tragic catharsis.

Keywords: Shakespeare, evil, horror, catharsis, *Macbeth*

> Strictly speaking, I do not know and cannot know what I would be today if I had not been in a concentration camp: no man knows his future, and here it would precisely be a matter of describing a future that never happened. It has some meaning to attempt predictions (which are always crude, after all) about the behaviour of a population, but it is very difficult, or impossible, to predict the behaviour of an individual, even on the scale of days.
> (Primo Levi, from 1976 "Appendix" to *If This is a Man* [1947])[1]

1 Levi 2014, 211. My translation.

> The great tragedy of the Jewish people is no Greek tragedy; it can rouse neither terror nor pity, for both of these arise only out of the fate which follows from the inevitable slip of a beautiful character; it can arouse horror alone. The fate of the Jewish people is the fate of Macbeth who stepped out of nature itself, clung to alien Beings, and so in their service had to trample and slay everything holy in human nature, had at last to be forsaken by his gods (since these were objects and he their slave) and be dashed to pieces on his faith itself.
> (Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, from *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate*, 1798)[2]

> After such knowledge, what forgiveness?
> (T. S. Eliot, *Gerontion*, 1920)

If This is a Man

When one reaches a crossroads, declining one path might seem to imply the simple choice of its opposite. But in reality, decisions rarely offer such clarity or symmetry. Every act of choice unfurls into a web of branching possibilities – some visible, many hidden. The trajectory of a life is not shaped solely by conscious will, but is also sculpted by external contingencies and internal ambivalences. Thus, both the shape of the future and the contours of any imagined past remain elusive – beyond prediction and ultimately beyond reconstruction. Yet the very act of choosing – of engaging with this irreducible complexity – defines something essential about being human. To decide is not merely to select an option, but to take responsibility for its consequences, including those that were never fully foreseeable. In this way, decision-making becomes not just a pragmatic function but an ethical burden, situating the human at the intersection of possibility, accountability, and vulnerability. To be human, then, is not simply to act, but to bear the weight of one's actions – especially when they entail harm, complicity, or the failure to choose otherwise.

The difficulty of imagining a different future from a changed past – or, more precisely, of envisioning an alternative present as the outcome of different choices – was powerfully expressed by Primo Levi when he was asked whether his life would have been different had he not endured the horrors of the concentration camp. His response was clear: no one

2 In Kottman 2009, 47.

can say what their past would have been "if" (2014, 211). For Levi, this impossibility of retroactive speculation touches something deeper than individual fate. It raises a fundamental question about what it means to be human – and, more urgently, how one may cease to be human in the face of radical dehumanisation as in Levi's experience. The ethical stakes of Levi's reflection are profound: to be human is to inhabit a space where the possibility of evil is internal, where responsibility endures even when agency breaks down. This tension – between vulnerability and responsibility, between dehumanisation and moral choice – finds a contemporary philosophical counterpart in positions that see humanity not anchored in biological survival or existential fragility, but in fidelity to an ethical truth that transcends instinct: "An animal whose resistance, unlike that of a horse, lies not in his fragile body", writes Alain Badiou, "but in his stubborn determination to remain what he is – that is to say, precisely something other than a victim, other than a being-for-death, and thus: something other than a mortal being" (2001, 11-12). Here, Badiou reframes ethics not as a reactive moralism or a system of prohibitions, but as an affirmative stance (2011, 16). It is this capacity – this ethical possibility in the face of contingency – that here appears as constitutive of the properly human.

Badiou's claim applies primarily to the victim. Yet what defines "the human", depending on different cultural and historical contexts as well as from the perspective of the agent, is far from self-evident. Is being human simply the possession of rights deemed inalienable by liberal modernity, such as the right to life, freedom from harm, and liberty of thought? More precisely, humanity might depend not only on recognising those rights in oneself but also in others as responsible agents. One might then ask to what extent a persecutor retains their own humanity while violating these rights. Does the failure to respect the humanity of others mean forfeiting one's own, or does a corrupted and distorted humanity persist even amid acts of atrocity? Moreover, atrocity and horror are not confined solely to physical violence; atrocious actions also belong to the spheres of psychology and emotion – in the violation of trust, the shattering of one's internal world, or the slow erosion of personhood through fear, coercion, or the shattering of memory. In this sense, horror extends beyond what is done to the body to encompass what is inflicted upon the self – upon memory, perception, and meaning.

While such questions and principles shape contemporary norms, they have received different responses contingent on historical periods, insufficient to account for the deeper ruptures Levi and Badiou point to: the moment when humanness itself is challenged or called into doubt by action – or inaction. Shakespeare's engagement with similar concerns about the human condition amid moral collapse is deeply rooted in the historical context of his time – a period marked by intense religious tensions and the profound influence of the Reformation in its various forms, including Anglicanism as well as more radical movements like Calvinism and Puritanism. These religious debates problematised the concept of guilt, elevating it to a central role in the understanding of sin, particularly original sin. This climate underpins Shakespeare's tragedies, where evil is portrayed not merely as the violation of rights or laws, but as a profound destabilisation of what it means to be human, opening a space for reflection on how we navigate knowledge, belief, and self-awareness. In his tragedies, evil may erupt in direct confrontation with the law, but it also manifests in subtler, more intimate ways. It forces us to reckon not only with the suffering endured but also with the transformations we undergo as both victims and perpetrators. To be human, in this tragic framework, is to stand exposed to the heights of moral greatness and the depths of moral collapse: to be both the agent of action and the one who must answer for it.

Macbeth is possibly the play that engages more extensively and deeply with an explicit interrogation of what being human means. "Human kindness" is the phrase Lady Macbeth uses in I.v, when musing upon her husband's too tender nature to infringe the law: "yet do I fear thy nature; / It is too full o' the milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way" (I.v.15-18)[3]. Lady Macbeth critiques her husband for being too compassionate to seize power through ruthless means; but at a deeper level, "kindness" resounds as something intrinsic to the human condition tout court, as essential and natural as milk itself for a baby. It suggests that compassion is not merely a personal trait, but a fundamental aspect of what it means to be human. In scorning this quality, Lady Macbeth rejects not just mercy, but humanity itself, marking the beginning of a moral unravelling that will run throughout the play.

3 All quotations are from Shakespeare 2015.

This is the point of departure for my inquiry into how similar questions are dramatised in *Macbeth*, and the response this play elicits at particular junctures. What is it that is fitting for a man? What are the boundaries that can be crossed? Macbeth's explicit questioning is famously embedded in a painful interrogation of human responsibility in choice, staging a peculiar experience of the horror inherent in murder in ways that affect the articulation of the tragic catharsis. This raises the question whether the interrelation between good and evil is incapable of resolving the unstable ethical terrain upon which human identity is formed. To what extent is the sense of the human tested by challenging the relation between freedom and guilt and the various ways in which the tragic event affects traditional concepts of emotional purgation? Does tragedy become not a resolution, but a lens through which the human is disclosed – both to itself and to its limits?

One could reply that Hegel's reflections on Shakespeare's tragedy, especially as developed by A. C. Bradley (esp. 1904), offer answers to similar questions from a perspective that valorises dialectical reconciliation and ethical closure – despite an inherent sense of final loss and waste, as Bradley notably emphasised ("There is no tragedy in its expulsion of evil: the tragedy is that this involves the waste of good"; 1965, 106)[4]. But the impression remains that, rooted in a historical moment when the sense of a singular overarching order was profoundly challenged, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* escapes such understanding insofar as the tragic moment often surpasses catharsis, preventing a genuine restoration of moral order. Hegel himself – towards the end of the first section of *The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate* – noted a shift from fear to horror in *Macbeth*, identifying a suggestive parallel with the fate of the Jewish people and a fundamental withholding of tragic purgation. However, this insight remained underdeveloped with regard to Shakespeare's play. Bradley, though he inherited much from Hegel, did not pursue what this substitution entailed.

4 Bradley further claimed: "What we feel corresponds quite as much to the idea that they [Shakespeare's tragic characters such as Hamlet or Macbeth] are *its* parts [of the moral system or order which shows itself omnipotent against individuals], expressions, products; that in their defect or evil *it* is untrue to its soul of goodness, and falls into conflict and collision with itself; that, in making them suffer and waste themselves, *it* suffers and wastes itself" (1965, 106).

One question that arises, therefore, is whether interpretative frameworks grounded in a Hegelian dialectic – which presuppose a morally coherent world in which tragedy unfolds as part of a meaningful order – can adequately account for the challenges Shakespeare's tragedies pose to the rational necessities of history and ethics (e.g., in the ethical life, *Sittlichkeit*). This becomes particularly pressing when the re-establishment of order at a play's end does not fully repair or reconcile the fractures it sought to mend. For Bradley, a sense of justice (not to be confused with poetic justice) would inhere in the spectacle that does not leave us rebellious or despairing because we sense – however faintly – that the tragedy arises not from blind fate, but from a moral force, one deeply connected to the very virtues we admire in the characters. But if this sense of justice is compatible with an idea of catharsis, how can we reconcile the experience of horror with the lack of both? In Hegel's passage from *The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate* mentioned above, Macbeth serves as the paradigm for a tragic figure whose fall evokes not fear and pity but horror – a response rooted in his radical estrangement from the moral order. Having severed himself from nature and aligned with alien powers (albeit deeply seated in himself), Macbeth becomes a slave to forces he cannot master, ultimately destroying everything sacred within and around him. This is the historical fate of the Jewish people, Hegel claims, whom he portrays as similarly alienated: bound to an abstract, external law, they respond to threats with a desperate, fanatical energy that mirrors Macbeth's impious fury. In both cases, the tragedy lies not in a noble flaw, in the conflict between two valid but opposing ethical principles as in Greek tragedy (notably Antigone *versus* Creon), but in a spiritual self-betrayal so extreme that it precludes pity or fear, leaving only the bleak clarity of horror. Following this logic, can Macbeth's total estrangement from moral order be resolved in his final punishment? Or, better said, is his punishment capable of re-establishing the moral system, although with a waste, in Bradley's terms?

The question this article raises is how we can explain the fragility of meaning articulated in this tragedy through an experience of evil presented as the tragic trespassing of the boundaries of human kindness, and how this experience evokes the evil-horror nexus in place of the traditional pity and fear. The human and its relation to

language and the symbolic order are central to this discussion. It is precisely this breakdown – of moral coherence and redemptive closure – that my approach seeks to address, exploring what Hegel has left unsaid. It will imply the question whether a post-Hegelian approach, cautious about resolutions inscribed in a dialectical dynamic, can foreground not only the historical and existential singularity of evil but also the fragility of meaning itself. It will also ask whether the interrogation of human kindness illustrates not merely a logical problem, but also what Paul Ricoeur referred to as the scandal of suffering and reason: a rupture that resists synthesis yet demands interpretation (1985; 2007). I will discuss a few central steps in Macbeth's encounter with evil outside and in himself, and how this horror appears to be the driving force from I.iii, through I.vii, II, iii, III.ii and V.v, and will consider the language that says and unsays the murder of Duncan and Banquo. My starting point is the beginning of Macbeth's tragic arc.

I.iii: The Seeds of Horror

Following his encounter with the witches in I.iii, Macbeth is rapt with the disquieting meaning of their mysterious prediction, which opens for him an insoluble problem: "[*aside*] If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me, / Without my stir" (I.iii.146-47). His conditional "if" raises profound interrogations about himself as an ethical subject within a universe that wavers between deterministic beliefs – according to which chance should crown him – and his own agency. Macbeth does not refer to God or heavenly forces, but instead uses the ambiguous term "chance" – a word that evokes a range of meanings from random accident to fortune or even divine providence. This ambiguity recalls the classical notion of *tyche*, the Greek concept of fortune, suggesting that outcomes may arise from forces beyond an individual's intention. "Chance" implies that seemingly random actions might still form part of a larger, perhaps divinely ordered, design – a view compatible with Christian ideas of providence. However, this remains deeply uncertain. Macbeth's use of "may" underscores this ambiguity: it implies that the nature of the event's origin – whether random, chaotic, or meaningful – is itself unknowable. There is no assurance of any particular interpretation.

This uncertainty contrasts sharply with the account found in *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1587), Shakespeare's primary historical source. There, Macbeth and Banquo show no such hesitation. They regard the three women as "some vaine fantasticall illusion", and jokingly address each other according to the witches' predictions – Macbeth as king, Banquo as father of kings (1973, 495). Once the prophecies begin to come true and "euerie thing came to passe as they had spoken", they fully credit the witches. Holinshed refers to them unequivocally as "weird sisters, that is (as ye would say) the goddesses of destinie", suggesting a clear link to a predetermined design beyond human control.

Shakespeare's Macbeth, by contrast, begins to question their nature almost immediately after their disappearance, introducing a scepticism that was absent in Holinshed. This marks a significant shift: from a narrative of fixed destiny to one riddled with doubt, ambiguity, and the unsettling possibility that no clear design governs human affairs. This represents a pivotal moment: Macbeth's suspension of thinking, waiting for "chance" to crown him, as he says, follows another famous aside where he interrogates the ethical value of the prophecy:

> 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 smothered in surmise,
> And nothing is but what is not. (I.iii.132-44; emphasis mine)

The negative form of Macbeth's reasoning ("Cannot … cannot"), in which he first attempts to reassure himself that the witches' prophecy is favourable ("Cannot be ill"), only immediately to reverse this assessment ("Cannot be good"), reveals his deep ambivalence and resistance to trusting the moral reliability of the witches' message.

He is already interpreting their words not as a neutral foretelling of Duncan's natural death, but as an implicit suggestion of murder. This is an appalling realisation – one that momentarily severs his connection to ordinary time and space. Notably, Macbeth is not afraid of the witches themselves; had he been, he might have fled. Nor is he yet afraid of the consequences of the murder. Instead, what truly unsettles him are the "horrid image" and the "horrible imaginings" that invade his mind. These words matter greatly: they mark the beginning of his psychological unravelling, as imagination – initially a source of horror – gradually becomes the driving force behind his moral descent and ultimate loss of self.

Opposite to trembling and agitation typical of fear, the experience of horror evokes stillness, paralysis, and a stunned astonishment that halts movement – manifesting in a rigid body and bristling hair, as captured in the word "horripilating", meaning "hair-raising" (from the Latin *horripilare*, composed of *horrere* (to bristle, to become stiff) and *pilus* (hair) = literally, "causing the hairs to stand on end"). Where terror is linked to the instinct for survival, horror arises from a visceral response of revulsion, often provoked by that which no longer appears recognisably human. This becomes especially acute in the traumatic experience of witnessing a human corpse – particularly that of a loved one – which forces a confrontation with the horrifying reality of mortality[5]. As Julia Kristeva puts it, "The corpse, perceived devoid of divine context and beyond scientific understanding, represents the pinnacle of abjection. It embodies death permeating life. Abject" (2024, 4). Horror is also what we feel in front of the degradation of the human form: the dismembered, tortured, or defiled body that resists recognition as a singular, vulnerable human being. In such moments, what is violated is not only the body but the very basis of our shared humanity, grounded in the irreducibility and exposure of each individual life (Cavarero 2008). We feel this kind of horror in a play like *Titus Andronicus*; but in *Macbeth*, this is not the case. The corpse itself will be occluded from view; no dismembered body is shown or commented on. Macbeth is imagining only. So what is it that makes Macbeth's hair unfix?

Macbeth's initial thinking in response to the witches' prophecy is blocked by contrary hypotheses, and this corresponds to the physical,

5 See Cavarero 2008, chap. 2.

uncontrolled reaction of paralysis and bristling. As A. D. Nuttall observes, the experience of horror produces a kind of emotional stoppage; it "is not carried through to its fully human condition, in pity and fear", and the response it provokes is "arrested" rather than fulfilled (1996, 78). In this sense, horror does not function like other emotions that belong within the human condition. Instead, it imposes a kind of paralysis – freezing the subject in a state that resembles death. This reaction distances the individual from fully human feeling (such as pity and fear), placing them in a space outside ordinary emotional experience. Macbeth's response to the witches' prophecy in I.iii exemplifies this distinction. His horrified reaction is an experience that is neither of fear nor of compassion for the imagined death of the King, nor is it one of elation for his own promised power. Rather, it is of horror. One may wonder why, considering that, after all, he is a seasoned warrior. In Ross's account of his remarkable courage in battle against Norway and the traitor, the Thane of Cawdor, he is referred to as "Bellona's bridegroom" (I.ii.55). And yet, the sisters' *unnamed* prospect of the murder of Duncan horrifies him. The horror of the prospect of such an unnamable act can only be expressed through a denial of language and rational reflection – a space where thinking is simultaneously omnipotent and unthinkable. The paradox of "nothing is / But what is not" encapsulates this duality, where "no-thing" and "not" hold together both the latent future act – already seeded in the present – and a foreclosure of coherent thought[6].

This collapse of certainty in thought and language begins to take shape around the figure of Duncan and the idea of murder, which initially appears only as a "fantastical" notion – something unreal, imagined, and yet increasingly potent. Duncan is not any man; he embodies the Symbolic, he is the living Name of the Father, the principle of the Law and the human bond that keeps Macbeth "pale", as he will say in III.ii.51. Killing Duncan signifies the crushing of what stands for the principle of *civil order* and *moral law* that makes man recognisably human within the community. "Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't" (II.ii.13-15), will say Lady Macbeth after the deed is done, conveying a shift to a personal

6 For a broader discussion of the topical uses of nothing/nothingness in this play and in Shakespeare's tragedies, see Bigliazzi 2005.

plane that makes the sense of the Symbolic as a presence inhabiting her own private sphere of family and memory deeply disturbing.

This intrusion of the Symbolic into the intimate and unconscious space of personal memory finds a parallel in Macbeth's own response to the witches. It is this deeper disturbance, this unmaking of the human as an ethical subject – both privately and publicly – that gives rise to the imaginative disorientation he experiences in I.iii. His rapt absorption after the encounter with the weird sisters articulates a particular kind of horror – one that arises not from fear of punishment or social consequence, nor from the degradation of the individual through the vision of a corpse or its vilification; it inheres in the possibility of radical self-determination inscribed through the radical effacement of the Symbolic. At this moment, Macbeth glimpses the potential to define and establish himself freely – not as a subject within the existing order, but as its replacement: its assassin and, potentially, the founder of a new order. Whether this new order ever materialises is uncertain, but the possibility itself marks a radical shift. What emerges here is a confrontation with freedom not as liberation from constraints, but as something inseparable from guilt – the guilt of violating the very structures that once defined him.

Paul Ricoeur (1989) has drawn a subtle but significant distinction between guilt and the doctrine of original sin that captures well the sense of the conundrum Macbeth is caught in, framing guilt as an expression of free will and personal accountability rather than a predetermined moral condition. In the theological climate shaped by debates between Luther and Calvin, this shift from sin to guilt takes on particular resonance. As Robert Miola observes, *Macbeth* radicalises this conception, transforming it into a meditation on tragic selfhood[7] – a fragmentation played out within the internal tribunal of conscience, where the self becomes both judge and accused. Within this inward space, Ricoeur claims, self-observation and self-accusation emerge as ethical acts that define the very coordinates of subjectivity. In doing so, guilt replaces sin as a broken relationship with the divine – a collective rupture – with a focus on *individual responsibility*, emphasising the subjective weight of a "burden that

7 See Miola's "Introduction", Shakespeare 2014, xvii-xix, and selected appendices on sources and contexts.

crushes" (1989, 428), and illustrating the grip of remorse – as will soon become apparent in Lady Macbeth.

If we return to Holinshed's account of Macbeth's apprehension of his future greatness, we begin to grasp the depth of Shakespeare's intervention at this point – an intervention shaped by the religious climate of his time. In contrast to Holinshed's straightforward acceptance of prophecy, Shakespeare's Macbeth hesitates, caught between predestination and moral agency. This tension reflects the influence of Calvinist ideas, dominant in Puritan thought, which emphasised divine predestination and human depravity. At the same time, the Renaissance revival of classical humanism had renewed faith in individual will and self-determination. Macbeth's crisis – his glimpse of freedom entangled with guilt – thus stages a collision between these theological and philosophical currents. What was, in Holinshed's chronicle, a straightforward episode of prophetic fulfilment is, in Shakespeare's hands, transformed into the beginning of a tragic experience that interrogates the very nature of the human subject in relation to the Symbolic order of communal law. The horror Macbeth experiences in this scene can be linked to a sense of sin, but only insofar as it involves guilt: the internalisation of a scrutinising gaze that "watches, judges, and condemns", giving rise to a divided conscience marked by "self-observation, self-accusation, and self-condemnation" (Ricoeur 1989, 429). In this condition, the subject becomes both judge and accused. Within such a framework, the Law functions not merely as a set of prohibitions – such as the absolute imperative "do not kill"– but also as the foundational demand to be and to act ethically. Evil, then, appears as a deliberate act of self-assertion in defiance of this ethical obligation. Transgression thus becomes the origin of remorse, understood as the lived tension between freedom and duty.

In I.iii, Macbeth approaches the very threshold of such transgression. The mere thought of evil-doing estranges him from his present reality, first suspending his human feeling, then casting him into radical doubt – all within the span of just a few lines. He is not thinking about the possibility of remorse yet – Lady Macbeth's tragic arc will demonstrate it vividly through a descent into guilt-ridden at a later stage. Her anguished line, "What's done cannot be undone" (V.i.65), will echo then John Wilkinson's 1547 English translation of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*: "that which is doen can not be vndooen" (*The Ethiques*, Of

prowesse, Ch. xxvii). This idea will go beyond simple regret – it reflects a deeper truth about the irreversibility of past actions, illustrating Aristotle's notion of moral choice as shaped by irrecoverable actions. But Macbeth's experience of guilt and freedom, while related, operates differently.

I.v.-I.vii: The Boundaries of Human Kindness

In I.v Lady Macbeth captures clearly the sense of evil that prevents his husband from acting, a conception deeply rooted in the *possibility* of free will as the capacity to disregard a just obligation (Ricoeur 1989, 434), the resulting responsibility of it, and the recognition, at some point, that one could have acted differently:

> […] What thou wouldst highly,
> That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
> And yet wouldst wrongly win. (I.v.18-20)

These famous lines convey Lady Macbeth's perception of the intersections of Macbeth's various impulses in relation to the Law, emotional knots which never explicitly mention either the crown or the murder of the king. This allusiveness suggests the symbolic enormity of the crime, which necessitates reticence even when expressed in private. It is noteworthy that, whether in each other's presence or in solitude, both Macbeth and his wife never refer to the crime by its name[8]. Lady Macbeth recognises that her husband displays bravery primarily when he serves the royal authority that validates his identity as a warrior and an agent of death. However, Macbeth struggles to defy the very Law that underpins his identity. Lady Macbeth is aware of this, and in I.vii will urge him to prove his masculinity not as a loyal warrior but as a bold transgressor of the foremost prohibition: the murder of the King, the country's symbolic father.

But before their confrontation, I.vii opens on Macbeth's famous soliloquy on the possibility of 'doing the deed', where he eventually entertains the fear (no longer the horror) of divine retribution and decides to abstain from doing. Macbeth fully engages with time at

8 For a more extensive discussion of the function of taboo in *Macbeth* see Bigliazzi 2018.

this point, and this is not coincidental: from the arrested moment of the initial horror, where all was stopped and the future contracted in the instant, now Macbeth weighs what *may* happen in time "if":

> 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 judgment here, that we but teach
> Bloody instructions, which being taught, return
> To plague th'inventor. This even-handed justice
> Commends th'ingredience of our poisoned chalice
> To our own lips […] (I.vii.1-12)

Cavell (2003, 233) has argued that Macbeth's fantasy of "deeds done in the doing, without consequence, when surcease is success" expresses a profound wish: a desire for the erasure of human action as we understand it – no separation between intention and consequence, no fulfilment of desire, no revelation of agency in what unfolds. It is, at its core, a yearning to escape a defining condition of the human – what Cavell has described as our "fatedness to significance" (233): the inescapable demand that our actions mean something, that we exist as subjects intelligible to ourselves and others. This existential condition, he further suggests, is precisely what Wittgenstein captures when he identifies the human form of life as inherently linguistic (233).

Clearly, Macbeth craves significance, and language, though a system of logic and meaning-making proves inadequate to fully contain what he experiences. It is precisely at this limit – where inherited language falters – that Macbeth reaches for new expression. His coinage of the phrase "the be-all and the end-all" (5) signals a desire to transcend language itself: an ontological rupture, a newly forged expression of a condition that should be impossible – to become the origin of Law rather than its subject. In contemplating Duncan's murder, Macbeth envisions a moment in which time is suspended, simultaneously annihilating the old order and giving birth to a new one. Seen in this light, Cavell's interpretation of "consequence" as the erasure of human action does not account for the fact that Macbeth

is not seeking to erase his own agency, nor is he thinking yet of escaping any *negative* consequences – no worldly punishment, no divine retribution; he only seeks the intended outcome. As Serpieri insightfully argued, the "trammel up" metaphor (*OED*, *v*.2: "to take [fish or birds] with a trammel-net") underscores this desire: Macbeth wants to ensnare the result (Shakespeare 1996, ad loc.). Shortly afterwards, he will think about not getting entangled in consequences. What he ultimately strives for is the erasure of judgment itself in a perfect coincidence of act and effect, one unburdened by aftermath, responsibility, or moral reckoning.

By the time we reach Macbeth's soliloquy in I.vii, the ambiguity he entertained in the possibility that "chance might crown [him] / Without [his] stir" (I.iii.141-42) – a scenario in which agency is relinquished and responsibility displaced – has sharpened into a more distinctly Christian anxiety about divine judgment ("this even-handed justice", 10): he is "his kinsman and his subject" (13) and Duncan is such a meek and just ruler that heaven itself would revolt at the "horrid deed" and would publish and blow it "in every eye" (24). Macbeth's graphic imagery of a Biblical exposure of his crime reveals a profound awareness of the moral and psychological consequences of Duncan's murder. He envisions his "virtues" (18) as "plead[ing] like angels, trumpet-tongued, against / The deep damnation of his taking-off" (19-20), invoking a spiritual and cosmic reckoning that goes beyond earthly justice. Duncan's goodness, far from protecting Macbeth from guilt, becomes the very force that will expose him. This sense of inevitable revelation culminates in the haunting image of "pity, like a naked new-born babe / Striding the blast", alongside "heaven's cherubim [… blowing] the horrid deed in every eye" (21-22; 24). Here, Macbeth fantasises about his crime as universally visible, emotionally resonant, and inescapably condemned – not only by divine justice but by the human capacity for empathy. His transgression will be amplified and broadcast, infecting the world with horror, and will be pity itself to do it.

This connects directly to his earlier reflection on the "even-handed justice" which "Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice / To our own lips" (10-12), suggesting that moral violation inevitably turns back on the violator. Macbeth's anxiety lies not simply in being caught, but in the deeper fear that guilt is self-revealing, that the

act itself will declare him guilty. Human actions, once committed, carry with them an intrinsic demand for meaning and moral consequence. And the consequence is precisely what Macbeth does not want to think of when he speaks of the "be-all" and the "end-all" (5): he wants to think about it as a deed done, finished, over – ontologically outside time. And yet, the Law remains – "there is still judgement here" (8). This is the Law by which he can think of himself as human.

I used the word *fear* at this point because Macbeth has begun to shift from horror – a state that denies both language and action – towards the possibility of doing. And it is precisely this potential for action that gives rise to fear rather than horror: *doing* implies agency and life, whereas horror, as we have seen, is a lifeless freeze-frame that shatters language. The image of the eyes he evokes is poignantly suggestive of the gaze of the Other. And it is at this juncture in his thinking that he decides to stop. He is no longer just privately aware of his wrongdoing; he imagines himself as seen, known, and ultimately, condemned. This is where the profound discomfort of visibility lies: in being transformed from a subject who knows into an object that is known – interpreted, measured, and condemned. This is also where shame arises. Different from guilt, which may be experienced in solitude, shame originates from the painful recognition of how one is seen and judged by others, and how that judgment reshapes the self. To be caught in a shameful act – or even to imagine being caught – fractures the image we hold of ourselves and imposes an unwanted identity.

What this stigmatising identity is for Macbeth will become apparent soon. But what is immediately clear from this horrible fantasy is that he feels fixed in place, paralysed, locked in a moral standoff with himself. This exposure is catastrophic: the act is not only morally wrong, but unbearably visible, echoing the biblical tradition in which wrongdoing cries out to be seen – and once seen, can never be unseen[9].

9 In the biblical narrative of Cain and Abel (Genesis 4:10), God declares that the blood of Abel "crieth out" from the ground, symbolising that wrongdoing, even when committed in secret, cannot remain hidden or silent. This powerful image conveys that sin possesses a voice of its own, demanding recognition and divine judgment. This theme of inevitable exposure is reinforced throughout Scripture by the belief in God's all-seeing nature. As Luke 8:17 states, "For nothing is secret, that shall not be evident: neither anything hid, that shall not be known, and come

Thus, the shift from I.iii to I.vii charts Macbeth's movement from a speculative fatalism – where "chance" might absolve him of responsibility – to a deepening confrontation with moral agency and guilt. This progression reflects Shakespeare's characteristic syncretism, blending classical and Christian motifs drawn from his historical sources. The merging of *tyche* (fortuitous occurrence) with Christian *providence* produces a psychic and theological dissonance: Macbeth vacillates between surrendering to fate and attempting to enact violence against something sacred – the Father, the Law, the name of a meek King that makes the deed unnamable.

The extraordinary opening of I.vii, where "metaphysical discomfort [becomes] explicit", as Garber notes (2008, 82), reveals Macbeth's fear of divine judgment. It is the voice of an internal crisis that cannot be reduced to ambition or fear, but is deeply bound up with the sense of violating a profound taboo – a crime that collapses the boundaries between regicide, parricide, and sacrilege within the Christian framework that gives it meaning. His tortured thoughts shift rapidly, subtly warping meaning and disrupting the clarity of his reasoning. This precedes his famous exchange with Lady Macbeth, which marks the logical next step in the moral questioning after Macbeth has resolved not to go through with the murder:

> Macbeth
> I dare do all that may become a man;
> Who dares do *more* is none.
> Lady Macbeth
> What *beast* was't, then,
> That made you break this enterprise to me?
> When you durst do it, then you were a man;
> And, to be *more* than what you were, you would
> Be so much *more* the man. […] (I.vii.46-51; emphasis mine)

Marjory Garber has interpreted this famous accusation of cowardice and emasculation through a post-Freudian lens, connecting it to the

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to light", emphasising that no sin, no matter how concealed from human eyes, escapes divine notice and will ultimately be revealed and accounted for, either in this life or beyond. Together, these passages highlight the profound biblical principle that guilt and wrongdoing inherently seek to be uncovered and judged (quotations are from the Geneva Bible).

figure of Medusa. For Garber, Medusa serves here as a symbol that simultaneously embodies both the feminine and the masculine, represented in the terrifying visage of the woman and her phallic serpent hair. This would reflect a disquieting aspect of gender fluidity within the ongoing construction and deconstruction of masculinity and femininity. In response to the question of what Macbeth's 'more than a man' entails ("Who dares do more, is none"), Garber counters with further questions, suggesting that it may be the experience of being a woman, or perhaps the continuous transgression of gender boundaries. This could be exemplified by Medusa's androgyny, precisely as the androgynous figures of the bearded witches or Lady Macbeth, who pictures herself as 'unsexed' by the spirits of the night (I.v.38-41; Garber 2008, 95). In turn, Cavell has read in this exchange an "anxiety about *human* identity" tout court, the "human craving for, and horror of, the inhuman of limitlessness of monstrousness" (2003, 229).

But apart from gender anxieties (that Cavell dismisses) and references to Lady Macbeth's concern about human identity in her "sexual taunt" (a concern I find hardly perceivable at this point), the question remains: what does become a man? For Lady Macbeth, it was Macbeth's "break[ing] that enterprise to [her]"; for Macbeth, it is not pursuing that enterprise. For her, it means keeping the promise made and refusing to betray her aroused desire for power; for him, it means stifling his own desire and abandoning any plan to breach the Law. This is not merely a matter of refraining from killing a particular individual – whether an enemy, an anonymous soldier, or a perceived threat – but of upholding the ontological foundation of human community: the bond that binds one human being to another. To violate it is to shatter the communal pact of cohabitation – either by regressing into a bestial state that knows no symbolic order, or by disowning it in a consciously transgressive, almost diabolical act.

This confrontation between husband and wife establishes a principle of uncertainty around what it means to "become a man": whether it lies in loyalty to one's word and intentions, even in defiance of the Law, or conversely, in betraying one's word out of respect for the Law. Lady Macbeth ultimately imposes her vision by 'unsexing' herself and invoking the horrendous image of infanticide as the

extreme expression of her radical fidelity to her word – a paradoxical image of assumed super-masculinity and (devilish) superhumanity. This mirroring confrontation, where each partner inverts the other's values, is underscored rhetorically by the figure of *antanaclasis*, in which the repetition of "more" oscillates between Macbeth's fear of becoming no-man – a beast or a devil – and Lady Macbeth's vision of becoming "more" of a man: that is, super-loyal and super-brave, even at the cost of becoming (diabolically) superhuman. In her claim that to be a man one must be more than a man, there is a clear paradox – a short circuit in meaning – where the 'fullest' sense of manhood coincides with the transcendence, or even the abandonment, of humanity itself. She becomes a mirror in which Macbeth sees the image of manhood as it 'should' be – if he chooses to enter the short circuit of her paradoxical logic – as eventually he does. "If we should fail" (I.vii.59), he asks her, then – and his "if" is the linguistic mark of a possibility which in fact implies an already broached futurity where the confrontation with the Symbolic suddenly becomes practical and calculative, and is weighed in terms of its risks and rewards. Fear now supersedes horror.

But what Lady Macbeth offers him is a mirror not of fear, but of what it would mean to act without fear, to become "more than a man" – a being beyond moral constraint. In this sense, she functions as a reverse Medusa: not one which petrifies through horror, but which unlocks action by covering up (while in fact reflecting back) a terrifying possibility: the annihilation of conscience, of human limits, of the symbolic law. Yet the cost is the same: just as Medusa's gaze kills, Lady Macbeth's reflection of monstrous will ultimately destroys Macbeth's humanity. He will act – but in doing so, he will become the very thing he fears to see.

II.iii: The Dead Body, Medusa's Face

The encounter with a Medusa figure will recur soon, when, in II.iii, still unknowingly, Macduff sees Macbeth's own horrifying face: the lifeless body of Duncan. It is a horror that is explicitly reminiscent of the Gorgon in Macduff's imaginary, and paralyses at the sight, serving as both a figure and embodiment of death, as well as a degradation of the sacred body of the King:

Macduff
Approach the chamber, and destroy your sight
With a new Gorgon. Do not bid me speak –
See, and then speak yourselves.
Exeunt Macbeth and Lennox
Awake, awake!
Ring the alarum-bell! Murder and treason.
Banquo and Donalbain, Malcolm, awake,
Shake off this downy sleep, death's counterfeit,
And look on death itself. Up, up, and see
The great doom's image! Malcolm, Banquo,
As from your graves rise up, and walk like sprites
To countenance this horror. Ring the bell! (II.iii.71-80)

This horrid experience does not reside within the phantasmagoria of a repressed desire suddenly awakened in Macbeth by the weird sisters; rather, it represents the experience of witnessing the event itself, the completed act that coincides with the annihilation of the Symbolic and the tangible, visible event represented by the lying body. The murdered king evokes the shattering of the Law, revealing its inherent fragility in Kristeva's sense[10]. The dead body of the King, significantly screened off from view, is displaced for Macduff onto the plane of the Real in a Lacanian perspective, resisting its symbolisation except through the annihilating image of the Gorgon; a mythical figure conjuring Ricoeur's notion of the scandal of evil recalled earlier: an experience that can be perceived only within a symbolic system of narratives and interpretation.

The lifeless body of the King is the figure of the disintegration of the culturalised construction of the human in its regulated order based on norm; it is a lifeless body that resists symbolisation and

10 "The traitor, the liar, the criminal with a good conscience, the shameless rapist, the killer who claims he is a savior […] Any crime, because it draws attention to the fragility of the law, is abject, but premeditated crime, cunning murder, hypocritical revenge are even more so because they heighten the display of such fragility. He who denies morality is not abject; there can be grandeur in amorality and even in crime that flaunts its disrespect for the law – rebellious, liberating, and suicidal crime. Abjection, on the other hand, is immoral, sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles, a passion that uses the body for barter instead of inflaming it, a debtor who sells you up, a friend who stabs you" (2024, 4).

takes on the horrifying face of the Gorgon; it arrests meaning and stands for the impossibility of expressing the shattering of the human through the crushing of the prime symbol of culture. The civil frame of human cohabitation has been annihilated in the disfigured and desemanticised body lying on the ground.

III.ii: The Great Bond

The question Macbeth poses to Lady Macbeth – "*If* we should fail?" (I.vii.59) – signals not only his fear of being exposed, but also a return to the practical realm of consequences and the ethical space of responsibility, after the suspensive and uncanny dimension of horror he has previously inhabited. This shared anxiety between them persists until III.i, when Macbeth resolves to have Banquo murdered – this time without consulting his wife. At this point, he begins a solitary descent, deeper into horror and further beyond the limits of what he once understood to define a "man" (I.vii.45).

And yet, it is striking that it is Banquo – not Duncan – who returns to haunt Macbeth, and that it is only now, after Banquo's murder, that Macbeth begins to reflect on the nature of the civil bond. Banquo is not a king; he is a friend and a fellow soldier. But he will also be, crucially, the father of kings – a bearer of futurity in ways Macbeth can never be. Where Duncan represented the past and present – legitimacy inherited and enacted – Banquo comes to embody the future: a future from which Macbeth is radically excluded. In this sense, Banquo's ghost signifies more than guilt; it marks the collapse of Macbeth's self-fashioned temporality – one that exists paradoxically outside time, severed from both a legitimate past (he is unrooted in descent) and a viable future (he is sterile). The bond Banquo silently embodies in III.ii – the "great bond" (III.ii.50) – is the civil pact, the shared humanity that binds generations and legitimises succession. It is this presence that makes Macbeth "pale": Banquo returns as the horrific manifestation of Macbeth's ontological vanity and estrangement from the human. In this way, Banquo comes to articulate what had been silently embedded in Duncan's royal presence: his function as the embodiment of Human Law. But unlike Duncan, whose authority could once be displaced, silenced, or repressed, Banquo becomes a Medusa-like figure, confronting

Macbeth with the unbearable truth of his own inhumanity – one from which he can no longer avert his gaze.

Revealingly, before committing the murder (which Macbeth calls a "deed of dreadful note", III.ii.45, significantly mirroring the "terrible feat" of Duncan's murder, I.vii.81) Macbeth invokes the "seeling night" to prepare himself to unsee the civil bond and to shatter his own fears which keep him "pale" (51).

> […] 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.47-51)

The term "bond" can signify what keeps Banquo alive (his life), as well as, especially, the civil and moral contract[11]. Interestingly, the word "deed", which aligns with a taboo logic and the prohibition against pronouncing the word 'murder', appears in the sources solely in relation to this particular homicide, rather than that of Duncan. This usage is found exclusively in Holinshed, whose narrative bears the closest resemblance to the plot of the tragedy ("certain murderers, whom he hired to execute that deed"; 1973, 498). The third central act is specifically dedicated to this "deed", not to the assassination of the King, which occurs relatively early in the drama, thereby granting Banquo an unexpected prominence:

> Blood hath been shed ere now, I' th'olden time,
> Ere humane statute purged the gentle weal;
> Ay, and since too, murders have been performed
> Too terrible for the ear. The times have been,
> That when the brains were out, the man would die,
> And there an end. But now they rise again
> With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,
> And push us from our stools. This is more strange
> Than such a murder is. (III.iv.73-81)

The codified law inscribed in what Macbeth calls the "great bond" (III.ii.50), and later referred to as the "gentle weal" (III.iv.74), establishes

11 See Bigliazzi 2018 and Wofford 2018.

the symbolic framework that underpins civil society. This framework defines the ethical limits of individual action within a community, instituting prohibitions – most fundamentally, against killing – that mark the threshold between barbarity and civility. Crucially, the taboo intensifies when the transgression involves the symbolic origin of that very prohibition: the sovereign, the father, the representative of the Law itself. The uncanny resurrection of the dead, as in Banquo's ghost, signals the return of what this symbolic repression cannot fully contain – a return that is both juridical and psychological.

Thus, Macbeth's second murder, unlike the first, unexpectedly marks a deeper rupture. It stages the symbolic passage from a primitive, mythic temporality – where death was absolute – to the historical time of civility, in which death is no longer final but haunted by law, guilt, and consequence. As Macbeth himself implies, in a world untouched by such a symbolic structure, the dead would stay dead. But the formation of a legal-moral order brings with it the internalisation of guilt, the persistence of remorse, and the spectral return of the violated Other. The concealment of Duncan's murder – the removal of the scene from view – is thus not merely tactical at the level of drama; it signals the beginning of Macbeth's descent into a solipsistic transgression, one that rejects the symbolic pact of human coexistence. This withdrawal from the shared order aligns with a return to a pre-symbolic state, where horror is experienced not as fear of punishment for a specific breach, but as a confrontation with absolute violation – violence against the Symbolic itself.

In targeting Banquo, Macbeth attempts to annihilate not just a threat to his reign, but the very possibility for a different future to replace his present that would render his kingship null and expose his ontological vacuity. Banquo's murder marks a turning point at the heart of the play: in accepting the full weight of his actions, Macbeth crosses into a mode of being that is no longer recognisably human. His invocation to the "sealing night" that may "scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day" (III.ii.47-48) initiates his descent into the *space of taboo* – into a realm where transgression is no longer measured by moral categories, but becomes indistinct, limitless. Here, horror no longer arises from guilt but from the dissolution of all boundaries: between law and lawlessness, man and monster, day and night. Macbeth's desire becomes superhuman insofar as it is also underhuman; it no

longer contemplates any communal sharing, it is entirely autarchic: it is a refusal of the human condition altogether. What he seeks is not power alone, but the paradoxical founding of a symbolic order that excludes all others – an order rooted in himself, secured through absolute negation.

V.v: Forgetfulness

It is precisely the end of meaning as a consequence of the "deed" and the horrors ensuing it that Macbeth expresses immediately before the announcement of his wife's death with the cry of the women in V.v:

> Macbeth
> I have almost forgot the taste of fears.
> The time has been, my senses would have cooled
> To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair
> Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir
> As life were in't. I have supped full with horrors;
> Direness familiar to my slaughterous thoughts
> Cannot once start me […] (V.v.9-15)

Macbeth refers to the "taste of fear" through a vivid oral metaphor that evokes an idea of terror rooted in the infancy of humanity; it reflects a developing human condition that draws from fears as dialectical counterparts to desires. These belong to a growing human being building on its own humanity. When Macbeth was still acquainted with fear, he imagined divine retribution and felt guilt and shame. But now he is beyond feeling and all that pertains to it. He fully inhabits the time of horror, which transforms the timeless paralysis experienced in the face of the imagined brutality of murder in I.iii, into the timelessness of "tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" following the news of his wife's death – a sequence that dissolves temporal boundaries into an entropy of meaning ("Signifying nothing", V.v.28).

The phrase "I have supped full with horrors" (V.v.13) employs a striking gustatory metaphor, evoking the image of Macbeth as one who has consumed horror to the point of saturation, as if filled with a noxious liquid. This image stands in stark contrast to the nourishing metaphor of the infant in I.v, where Lady Macbeth invoked her husband's "milk of human kindness" as a sign of his

innate humanity. As we have seen, at that point "kindness" carried a double resonance: both as moral goodness and as the essential quality of being human ("Yet do I fear thy nature; / It is too full o' the milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way," I.v.17-19). This opposition – between the consumed horrors of Act V and the rejected milk of Act I – frames the arc of Macbeth's moral unravelling: from an experience of horror to one of fears and remorse, finally to the shattering of fears and an irredeemable forgetfulness of what being human means in the erasure of both time and meaning.

By Way of Conclusion: Medusa

Recently, Allison P. Hobgood has revisited the long-discussed question of fear in this play, emphasising that the aesthetic dimension fails to contain and control it; rather, it renders fear virulent and contagious in its manifestation (2014, 59), and connects fear and hope as a reflection of what could also be found in a passage of Timothy Bright's 1586 *Treatise on Melancholy*: "The memory being thus fraught with perils past […] causeth fantasie out of such records, to forge new maters of sadness and feare […]: to these fansies the heart answering with like melancholic affection, turneth all hope into feare" (39). It is not difficult to perceive in this pairing the tragic experience of Macbeth and his wife.

And yet, I believe that there is more to it and that the question of *what a man is* challenging the definition of what it means to be a man, as presented by Macbeth in I.vii, cannot be limited to the dichotomy of fear and desire. As we have seen, a third element must be included as the stumbling block of the dialectic: the experience of horror, which, as I have argued, articulates the tragedy of Macbeth in ways that prompt a profound reflection on human kindness and its disintegration in relation to the foundation itself of the symbolic order, in a wavering balance between predestination and guilt. As Derrida noted about Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, "We fear and tremble before the inaccessible secret of a God who decides for us although we remain responsible, that is to say, free to decide, to work, to assume our life and our death" (2008, 68). Derrida's ethical responsibility possesses an inherently 'tragic' and 'guilty' character, highlighting the deadlock due to being bound to obligations that are

both impossibly burdensome and incommensurable – a deadlock that is intensified by any efforts to rationalise an ethical choice[12]. This is also Oedipus' question at Colonus, when he finally, at the threshold of death, raises the terrible question about how a man can inhabit guilt without being guilty:

> Tell me now: if, by the voice of an oracle, some divine doom was coming on my father, [970] that he should die by a son's hand, how could you justly reproach me with this, when I was then unborn, when no father had yet begotten me, no mother's womb conceived me? But if, having been born to misery – as I was born – I came to blows with my father and slew him, ignorant of what [975] I was doing and to whom, how could you reasonably blame the unwitting deed? (Sophocles 1889, 969-77)

Macbeth raises the same question at the beginning of his tragic parable – an issue that, however, he does not approach from Abraham's fideistic perspective but from a deeply inquisitive and challenging standpoint that interrogates the very meaning of humankind. Following the witches' soliciting, his question is likewise paradoxical: if fate or circumstance desires me to be king, then let fate crown me, he says; why should I take action myself?

In a post-Hegelian, Christian-existential perspective – which now appears to align more appropriately with the troubled transitions of the early modern period – the focus shifts from tragic necessity to ethical exposure. The human being, in this framework, is defined not by their role in the unfolding of Spirit or history, but by their response to the abyss of freedom. Macbeth's collapse is not the fulfilment of a metaphysical logic, but the enactment of a moral and ontological crisis: a rupture that refuses closure, and in doing so, redefines what it means to be human.

Medusa stands for fixity, arrest, the crystallisation of the moment of horror before an encounter with lifelessness and the blockage of passion as the natural component of what can be defined human: the capacity to "feel for" and to refrain from annihilating the other through the shattering of the symbolic order commanding not to murder, and the dissolution of the bond that makes us human

12 For a discussion of Derrida's position *vis-à-vis* Badiou's, see Peter Hallward's "Introduction", in Badiou 2001, xxv-xxvi.

through a sense of belongingness to a shared community. In the face of Medusa, nothing moves. In her presence, everything freezes; death becomes indistinguishable from life. The raging heartbeat of Macbeth at the fantastical prospect of shattering the gentle weal through the annihilation of the body of the King is a sign of the incipient conflict between fear and desire marking Macbeth's entrance into the space of radical choice: where good and evil are not circumstantial, although encountered circumstantially, but absolute insofar as they inhere the foundational principle of humankind itself – the cleansing of barbarity, the humane statute installing civility. It is also the space where language is silenced under the logic of taboo. The horror that Macbeth experiences before falling prey to a turmoil of passions, making for his humanity at the moment of his absolute choice of evil, is the precondition for his decision-making, negatively affecting his own freedom. The horror that the audience experiences through Macbeth is the same horror that we are left with by Iago's silence. He is, in many respects, the dark, inscrutable mirror to Macbeth's tormented soul[13]. To what extent catharsis may occur in *Macbeth* depends on the degree of psychological depth the audience is able – at least theoretically – to access, thereby enabling a form of negative empathy with him (Ercolino and Fusillo 2022, 88-89). Such empathy is scarcely imaginable in the case of Iago; but with, and through, Macbeth, we encounter the boundaries of the human, beginning with his first confrontation with the horror of gazing into the collapse of symbolisation itself. His horror at the violence he is about to inflict on the King transcends the physicality of Duncan's body: this is not just *any* body, but the embodiment of the abstract principle of the Law. Banquo's body, similarly, comes to represent the locus of origin for a new Law – one that refuses to align with Macbeth's autarchic temporality. In this regard, the horror Macbeth experiences belongs to both a pre-symbolic state and a post-symbolic state, to the under- and the super-human: it precedes the Law and outlives it. It is a horror at the very possibility of violating the essence of humanity – what is recognisable in the communal pact – and stepping beyond it. His tragedy is not that he fails to remain human, but that he no longer knows what that means.

13 See Bigliazzi, forthcoming.

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