Universiteit
Leiden
The Netherlands

Shakespeare, Renan and Weber: an interdisciplinary study of the violence paradigm and what it means to law and the nation-state

Brouwer, R.C.G.

Citation
Brouwer, R. C. G. (2026, January 20). *Shakespeare, Renan and Weber: an interdisciplinary study of the violence paradigm and what it means to law and the nation-state*. Retrieved from https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4289960

Version:	Publisher's Version
License:	Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden
Downloaded from:	https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4289960

Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

5 *The Tragedy of Macbeth*

5.1 INTRODUCTION

In *Macbeth,* we meet three autocratic warrior leaders. King Duncan is introduced early in the play, as is Macbeth, our tragic hero, who ousts[1] King Duncan. Macbeth becomes the next tribal leader[2] and is – in his turn – ousted by Malcolm, son of King Duncan. All three of them combine military command, administration and jurisdiction in their persons. We witness a society coming to grips with such leaders. In the play, in the first few acts, there is, as yet, no sign of a nation or a national consciousness; only at the end of the play is a new perspective towards these concepts opened by Malcolm. The way is being prepared by our tragic hero, Macbeth, who ends an important tribal custom: *sippenhaft*[3] or blood law. *Sippenhaft* is vicarious liability or "the principle of a family sharing the responsibility for a crime committed by one of its members."[4] In Northern Europe, it was mostly used in (Celtic and Germanic) communities where oral customary law was the norm.[5] The abolishment of this customary form of justice is an important step towards the founding of a nation as a unity. For as long as *sippenhaft* revenge exists, there can be no (will to form a) nation: when the danger of such a kill from some resentful tribe member might hang over one's head, a collective will to unity is out of the question. It also heralds the transition from (Celtic) tribal law to (Anglo-Norman)[6] monarchical law.[7]

---

1 In fact, Macbeth achieves this by killing king Duncan.

2 Shakespeare gives them the title king, but in fact – seen in the light of the timeframe in which the play is set – they are tribal leaders as I will explain further down in this chapter. See summary of the play for plot and characters.

3 For now, may the definition suffice. Of course this concept will be elaborated further down in this chapter.

4 Source: https://onelook.com/thesaurus/?s=sippenhaft&res=res_0&senseid=2056853858

5 A revival of this custom could be seen during the German occupation in WW II in both Germany and the occupied countries.

6 The Celtic Era in England (600 BCE to approximately 43 CE). After the Roman conquest of England of 43 BCE, the Celtic (cultural/social) sway over the country did not end abruptly. A mixed Celtic/Roman culture developed that continued until the invasion into England of William the Conqueror in 1066. The latter became the first Anglo-Norman king of England, heralding the Anglo-Norman culture. The *Anglo*-part of the word meaning: a continuation of the (ever waning) influence of the tribe of the Anglo-Saxons (originating from Denmark/Friesland – the other invaders of England: from 4th century to approx. 11th

Macbeth is an intriguing play for those who study violence. How does it operate in such a relatively unorganized society? How does violence evolve: into sheer barbarism or (the first rudimentary) signs of civilization? Does the Shakespearean violence paradigm play a role here, and if so, in what way? Other interesting and topical queries given the present thematic are whether – in any way – Renan's will might be related to the violence paradigm. Also, is Renan's stance towards religion and culture concerning nation forming[8] substantiated by Shakespeare's violence paradigm, or is it nullified? Are Renan and Nietzsche perhaps more related (through the Shakespearean violence paradigm) than both of them deem desirable or even in the slightest way plausible or possible?

In the following paragraphs, I will analyze the play, focusing on how tragic violence paradigm can unfold in societies in transition.

5.2 The background of the play

The play was first performed in 1606 at Hampton Court for James I and his brother-in-law Christian IV of Denmark.[9] The play was most probably written for this occasion.[10] The anachronistic appearance of Sweno (Sweyn Forkbeard of Denmark, Norway and England) and the many references to Nordic behavior and practices in the play just might be due to the presence of Christian. Shakespeare got the history of *Macbeth* from Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, published first in 1577. The historical Macbeth lived in the 11th century (Mac Bethad mac Findlaích or Macbeth son of Findlay, 1005 – 1057). Since we know that Shakespeare did not make an issue of historical correctness, we have to tap historical sources if we want to learn something about the actual Macbeth. Luckily, an 11th-century contemporary Gaelic poem survives: *The prophecy of Berchán* describing Macbeth's appearance: he had "flowing blond hair and a ruddy face." From other contemporary sources,[11] we know that he became Mormaer (a kind of warlord with absolute power over his domain) of Muray in the North of Scotland in 1032, when he murdered the previous Mormaer[12] and married the latter's widow, Gruoch.

century). The *Norman*-part of the word (not to be mixed up with *Nordic* with which Vikings are meant) being an allusion to the Duchy of Normandy in France where William was duke.

7 Early type of codified law – mostly by an autocratic king.

8 See chapter in Renan: the latter holds that these concepts play no role (or should play no role) in the forming of a nation.

9 Christian ascended the throne when he was only 11 years old. One of the regents who took over governmental power until Christian came of age was called Jörgen Rosenkrantz.

10 William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Sylvan Barnet, introduction p. xxii.

11 Among others: The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle and the Annals of Tigernach.

12 Not being king Duncan, but a the previous mormaer. Macbeth burnt him and his retinue alive.

This was quite customary in the Nordic/Celtic societies of the time. Remarkably, this historical custom occurs in *Hamlet* as the event around which the entire plot is built. I will come back to this in the chapter on the play.

In 1040, the king of Alba (Scotland), the Anglicized Duncan I, was killed in action by Macbeth's troops when the former tried to ransack and levy Macbeth's territory.[13] Macbeth succeeded Duncan and reigned in Scotland until 1057, when he was killed in battle. Macbeth protected the region against the regular Viking raids; therefore, the historical Macbeth in fact yields (state-controlled) violence in an exemplary way: the way Weber meant it: for the protection of his people. Macbeth's reign was mostly peaceful and he was known for his generosity.[14] After his death, Macbeth's stepson Lulach succeeded him, but shortly after, he was ousted by Duncan I's son, Malcolm III.[15] The historical Macbeth was never thane; he was the last of the Celtic[16] kings; with him, Celtic traditional law and governmental constructs faded into history; and therewith, Scotland entered the era of the Anglo-Saxon and Norman kings.

5.3 Macbeth and Hamlet: twin tragedies

Before I embark on a discussion of *Macbeth*,[17] I want to discuss a few similarities between *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* (discussed in the next chapter). Not only are they historically and plot-wise related, but their respective themes are also akin.

To begin with, both plays are set in the same era. Apart from the fact that we can ascertain the exact dates of the historical Macbeth, with which we can determine *Macbeth*, we can periodize both plays alike, because in both a shared kingship/alliance of England and Denmark is mentioned. In *Macbeth,* the king concerned is actually mentioned: King Sweyn or Sven or Sweno 'Forkbeard' (reigned: 986 – 1014). In *Hamlet,* such a joint leadership is implied.[18] Since this is the only period in which Denmark could dictate England[19] being united under one crown, it must be situated in the same era.

---

13 At first Macbeth was Mormaer (warlord) over Muray: the Northern part of Scotland. After he had slain Duncan, he became king over all of Scotland (or, as it was called, Alba).

14 Source: Royal Encyclopaedia, https://www.royal.uk/macbeth-r-1040-1057

15 Source: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xq75Cl_osxk,
Time line, World History Documentaries.

16 Of the Scoto-Celtic tradition.

17 I again refer to the appendix for a summary of all plays discussed.

18 The only period that such a joined leadership occurred was during Sweyn's reign. Shakespeare makes Claudius one such sovereign.

19 I will, of course, come back to Claudius' behavior, in dictating England, further down in this chapter. This happens during the second Viking Age: roughly the 11th century, under the leadership of Sweyn Forkbeard and Cnut the Great.

Moreover, we find similar Nordic customs and traditions in both plays (the marital customs among leaders were already mentioned above); I will come back to this issue at some length in this and the next chapter.

Furthermore, this period is marked by its big social, cultural and legislative transitions. Above, I already mentioned that Macbeth was the last of the Celtic warlords/tribal leaders; Scotland thereafter entered the Anglo-Norman period. The transitions take place through violent system clashes. In *Macbeth* we see the above-mentioned development (more specifically, the end of blood-law being replaced by the Anglicized rule of Malcom with his governmental innovations) and in *Hamlet* we see the tension between the old barbaric ways (as described by Hamlet in Act 1) and the views of the young Hamlet, freshly schooled in the values of Renaissance and *Neuzeit* at the university of Wittenberg.[20] I here come back to my remark in the previous chapter that tragedy as an art form especially tends to emerge in times of transition, for, of course, Hamlet's time as well as Shakespeare's time – the time when this tragedy was written – were times of unapparelled transitions (characterized by the accompanying insecurity and social turmoil).[21] Let us now have a look at the play.

5.4 Discussion of *Macbeth:* the setting of the scene

The play opens with a scene on the heath, thunder and lightning in the sky. Three witches enter. The conversation of the three women sets the tone: ominous and unsettling. The sinister atmosphere they create is reflected in the sky: a common medieval thematic (see also Shakespeare's England in the appendix, A biography of Shakespeare).

They reverse values: the battle will be lost as well as won – which, of course, is true, depending on what vantage point is chosen. Fair is foul and the other way around.

> First witch:
> When shall we three meet again?
> In thunder, lightning, or in rain?
> Second witch:
> When the hurly-burly's done,
> When the battle is lost and won.
> […]

20 Which is, of course, the anachronism of all anachronisms – and very Shakespearean, since the university of Wittenberg was founded in 1502. I will come back to this issue in the next chapter.

21 I cannot but add that our time witnesses unparalleled transitions as well. It would be wise to realize what transitions of that magnitude entail and bring with them; Shakespeare, like no one else, paints such a landscape for us.

All:
Fair is foul, and foul is fair,
Hover through the fog and filthy air[22]

The atmosphere is murky, dark and oppressive. It permeates the entire play and it addresses the subconscious layers of the human mind. A suggestion of the dark forces of evil is evoked, enhanced by a complete reversal of values.[23]

The three women vanish and the scene is changed and focused on King Duncan asking a captain how the battle[24] was fought. This is how the good captain answers him:

Doubtful it stood;
As two spent swimmers, that do cling together
And choke their art. The merciless Macdonald–
Worthy to be a rebel, for to that
The multiplying villanies of nature
Do swarm upon him–from the western isles
Of kerns and gallowglasses is supplied;
And fortune, on his damned quarrel smiling,
Show'd like a rebel's whore: but all's too weak:
For brave Macbeth–well he deserves that name–
Disdaining fortune, with his brandish'd steel,
Which smoked with bloody execution,
Like valour's minion carved out his passage till he faced the slave;
Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps,
And fix'd his head upon our battlements.[25]

The adjectives and adverbs Shakespeare uses do not seem to fit their nouns and verbs. The pairs look queer and seem to reverse or counter-balance each other: clinging swimmers, who by their clinging to each other do not rescue themselves or the other, but choke their ability to swim; Macdonald is merciless as well as worthy. Worthy, that is, to be a rebel, because the villainies of nature are multiple in him. Within the register of theatrical poetics, nature was usually associated with bounties or plenty. Fortune smiling upon someone usually has a positive connotation and the smiling is done upon a righteous person. In this account it is the reverse, for fortune is the rebel's whore and the mean-

22 *Macbeth*, act 1. I, ll. 1-11.
23 The medieval devil is traditionally presented as reversing values.
24 The battle was between the army of King Duncan, led by Macbeth, and the traitor Macdonald, thane of Cawdor, who, in alliance with the Norwegian king Sweno, had planned to take over Scotland.
25 *Macbeth*, act 1. II, ll. 8-23.

ing is negative. Macbeth is brave and disdains fortune, he becomes "valour's minion". *Minion* meaning *favorite*; it also has a slight connotation of weakling. However, weaklings are usually not described as brave or in the favor of valor.

Shakespeare deconstructs familiar images to unsettle their meaning and estrange the audience from commonly used metaphors. After thus having played havoc with the homely imagery with which we describe the world that is (now *was*) familiar to us, Shakespeare introduces the way Macbeth acts: out in the battlefield towards his enemies.

> [He] carved out his passage till he faced the slave;
> Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
> Till he unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps,
> And fix'd his head upon our battlements.[26]

The violence described is extremely bloody and cruel: the text does not tell us into what the carving is done, but the verb is usually associated with meat (in this instance, living bodies are obviously meant). The enemy is cut in half and beheaded. What is described reminds us of the cruel and merciless practices of the Vikings during their raids in England and Scotland. I want to call to mind that Harald Hardrada[27] and the historical Macbeth were contemporaries.

5.5 Oral tribal laws

The degree of violence and cruelty of the Vikings depended entirely on the mood and disposition of the leader-warrior; no codified laws of war or rights for prisoners or defeated existed within Nordic traditional law (the defeated were either slaughtered or used/sold as slaves). Traditional community legislation in the Viking age was passed down orally by 'law speakers' or cited in sagas and only applied to the indigenous Nordic communities. Outside these communities, customary laws did not apply. Therefore, Vikings on a raid had the liberty to do as they pleased. Only the later Middle Ages saw the development of codified law (in and outside the community).[28] For now, this description must suffice; at the end of this chapter I will come back to customs in law and succession in these days and Shakespeare's.

Back to the quote above. The only thing that seems inappropriate in this scene is the fact that no handshake or bidding farewell takes place at the

26 Ibid, ll. 20 – 23.

27 Harald Hardrada (1015 – 1066). Most famous contemporary: William the Conqueror. Harald was killed in the Battle of Stamford Bridge (1066) that took place just before William's invasion into Britain in the same year.

28 Source: Encyclopaedia Britannica: https://www.britannica.com/topic/Germanic-law/Rise-of-feudal-and-monarchial-states

proper moment. The above short description is permeated with violence. Everything in the scenery and the description of character, surrounding the execution of violence, is ambivalent and/or reversed. No sound ground, other than the quenching of a rebellion,[29] can be found for this extreme violence. The atmosphere is fear-driven. No security exists in this godforsaken universe. Violence rules[30]; there is no evidence of any rule of law.[31] But then the captain continues: he describes the rising of the sun (usually bringing comfort) bringing more disaster followed by a fresh assault:

> Mark, king of Scotland, mark:
> No sooner justice had with valour arm'd
> Compell'd these skipping kerns to trust their heels,
> But the Norweyan lord surveying vantage,
> With furbish'd arms and new supplies of men
> Began a fresh assault.[32]

Here we find the source of justice, of law (or rather law speaking, see above): indeed, Macbeth, the Thane of Glamis is meant; it is he that forces the kerns to trust their heels. Together with his friend and fellow thane Banquo, as we learn from the reaction of King Duncan.

The captain ends:

> Except they [Macbeth and Banquo] meant to bathe in reeking wounds,
> Or memorise another Golgotha,
> I cannot tell.[33]

The thane of Ross enters and he recounts the end of the battle: Bellona's[34] bridegroom, meaning Macbeth, has won the battle. Thus Macbeth, who is called: the belligerent, valiant and worthy, is the embodiment of rules; the (bloody) executioner of law (of war) and order.[35] What is described here is in fact, the heart and sinews of a feudal Nordic state where personal strength (either in cunning or physically) is decisive in the doling out and execution of justice.

---

29 To make a leap in time: in Shakespeare's days rebels were granted a trial (see the appendix A biography of Shakespeare: Shakespeare's England). The earl of Essex got a trial (of sorts) and was beheaded in the Tower. However, there were no large scale executions and many of his followers got away with a fine. Southampton was released by James I; Sir John Davies was set free.

30 As in fact it did in 11th century Scotland.

31 As it was understood in Shakespeare's time.

32 *Macbeth*, act 1, II, ll. 28-33.

33 *Macbeth*, act 1, II, ll. 39-42.

34 Bellona: Roman goddess of the art of war.

35 Again the resemblance between Macbeth and Harald Hardrada (see below) is striking. Hardrada (Old Norse) means: harsh counsel or severely judging and ruling.

However, it still is King Duncan who speaks the following words, ordering Cawdor's (Thane of Cawdor, in other words: the traitorous Macdonald) death, and promoting Macbeth to a higher status.

> No more that thane of Cawdor shall deceive
> Our bosom interest: go pronounce his present death,
> And with his former title greet Macbeth.[36]

Who really is in charge of justice? Here, Macbeth is presented as justice incarnate. However, Duncan can, without any trial or even council, order Cawdor's death. This is a strange combination. On the one hand, Macbeth impersonates the execution of "bloody execution", on the other hand, Duncan now seems to take in hand tribal law. These facts do not point towards any well-balanced and mature tradition of law or (legal) custom. The Thane of Ross also tells King Duncan that Sweno,[37] the Norwegian King, requests a parley. King Duncan completely ignores this petition of a fellow ruler, being on the same level of leadership. A king not taking this matter in hand seems strange, especially for a king having the power to, in a single breath, condemn Cawdor to death.

Duncan is also informed that the defeated king Sweno could bury his dead in sacred ground only after having paid a huge sum of money. As the king is new to this information, he initially had no hand in exacting the levy. In this kingdom, it is just the semblance of justice that prevails. Again, the question in whose hands (the execution of) justice lies, can be posed. How stable, how sound is the basis of this society? To paraphrase the captain's words: doubtful it stands as the story unfolds further. It is, however, crystal clear that there is no question of a stable community here, let alone of a nation-state under one law.

Justice and national stability seem to revolve around the person of Macbeth; because he fought bravely against rebels and saved Duncan's territory.

5.6 Who is Macbeth

We meet this tribal prize fighter in act 1 – scene III, when he encounters the three weird sisters on the heath. The ladies foretell that he will be thane of

36 *Macbeth*, act 1, II, ll. 63-65.

37 Sweyn Forkbeard (king of Denmark and Norway) is meant, who raided England on a regular basis between in 1002 and 1012. In 1013 he invaded England and became king from 1013 till 1014 when he died. He had ruled only a few weeks. It is impossible that the historical Macbeth could have been involved in these conflicts, since he was born in 1004. Therefore I conclude that Shakespeare here used poetic license to set the atmosphere of fear and murkiness of the play since the raiders were feared for their ruthless cruelty – see above.

Cawdor and King thereafter. Immediately, half the prediction proves true when the thane of Angus enters and announces that Duncan has rewarded Macbeth's war effort with the title of Cawdor.

Macbeth reflects upon this overwhelming news:

> This supernatural soliciting
> Cannot be ill, cannot be good: if ill,
> Why hath it given me earnest of success,
> Commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor:
> If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
> Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
> And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
> Against the use of nature? Present fears
> Are less than horrible imaginings:
> My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
> Shakes so my single state of man that function
> Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is
> But what is not.[38]

He goes on and concludes that he doesn't have to do anything, but wait until the second half of the prediction comes true.[39]

The three fortunetelling phantoms are able to excite his existential[40] *angst* and shake him out of his certainties. He doesn't know whether the prophecy is good or bad; as the quote indicates, he is not so much afraid of the prophecy itself, as he is of his own thoughts about murder. This is a telling insight. He seems to be calculating himself out of his fears and moral deadlock. However, the outcome of a chance-calculus cannot very well be the reference point for ethical good or bad. His strategy of suppressing *present* fear by comparing it with the horrors of what is *still to come* does not testify to great emotional stability or proven self-knowledge in that area of the psyche. This musing shows another striking trait in Macbeth. He does not seem to be plagued by ethical considerations but by existential ones; at this point, his existential apprehension for what is to come drives him, not his ethical values. This attitude is in sharp contrast with his behavior on the battlefield, where he was a brave and loyal fighter, for which he was profusely praised. There is, then, an odd imbalance in the character of Macbeth of which no one (including Macbeth himself) seems to be conscious. This oddity hardly makes him the

38 *Macbeth*, act 1. III, ll. 129-141.

39 In point of fact, it would not have been unreasonable. Kingship was traditionally elective and he who had the best track record in the field of military prowess would most probably win.

40 Tragic existentiality pertains to the quintessence of life and decease of the individual human being; this essence being devoid of normative hierarchy of whatever nature. I would call it the ultimate primeval emotion or need. It should be noted that this type of tragic existentiality is unrelated to whatever philosophical school or movement.

ideal hero to be entrusted with a community's (or nation's) safety or justice. This is how we find Macbeth in act 1. Let us now turn to his antagonists in the play.

5.7 Duncan, the Lady and the others in their interplay with Macbeth

Duncan is informed that Macdonald, the traitor, has been put to death. The king reacts by recalling his former absolute trust in Macdonald. In other words, Duncan had not noticed any conniving against him and was taken by surprise by the rebellion. Neither had he been aware, at an earlier stage, of the maneuvers of the army of the Norwegian king Sweno.[41]

By and by, an imbalance; a sense of pending danger, provoking fear, becomes apparent in the basis of Duncan's realm, gyrating around the person of Macbeth and the blindness of Duncan. Blinder still he becomes. For – in the next scene – Duncan doesn't see what it does to Macbeth when he appoints his son Malcolm as his heir-apparent and grants him the title of Prince of Cumberland.
Macbeth:

> The Prince of Cumberland! that is a step
> On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,
> For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires;
> Let not light see my black and deep desires:
> The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,
> Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.[42]

Macbeth's "black and deep desires" become more and more apparent and are overruling his better judgment. When Macbeth leaves, Duncan assesses his worthiness:

> […] he is full so valiant,
> And in his commendations I am fed;
> It is a banquet to me. […]
> It is a peerless kinsman.[43]

As Lady Macbeth learns about the predictions, one of which has already materialized, she fears her husband will not take the shortest route to the

41 To refresh the memory: King Sweno of Norway had, together with the traitorous Macdonald, thane of Cawdor, planned to invade Scotland. Thanks to Macbeth their combined army was slain (literally).
42 *Macbeth*, act 1. IV, ll. 48 – 53.
43 *Macbeth*, act 1. IV, ll. 54 – 58.

fulfillment of the second half for he is "too full o' th' milk of human kindness."[44]

Act 1, scene 7 is half soliloquy and half dialogue between Macbeth and his wife. It starts with Macbeth's famous soliloquy: he decides not to kill his king and kinsman.

> [T]hat but this blow
> Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
> But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
> We'ld 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 the inventor.
> […]
> I have no spur
> To prick the sides of my intent, but only
> Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
> And falls on the other.[45]

If only the horrid deed he is about to commit had no consequences in this world, he would be prepared to give up bliss in the hereafter. However, he is fully aware of the fact that the violence will have repercussions in the here and now.

Alexander Leggatt[46] has it that for Macbeth, the present horror and the horror of the final judgment become one. However, risking the one for the other would not automatically imply their fusion; in my opinion Macbeth stresses the horror of the first deed by comparing it to the ultimate terror yet to come (he used a similar strategy before: comparing present horrors with those further in the future. Now he tries trading them).

Here, Macbeth expresses the realization that the violence he is about to commit will have terrible and irreversible consequences. He also sees that the murder he is about to actualize will return to him "to plague the inventor." This is a realization, in so many words, of the workings of the violence paradigm. Because of this awareness of the ultimate outcome of violence he knowingly and responsibly comes to the conclusion that this course of action is unwise for every conceivable reason. He is even aware of his "dark thoughts" and imperfections. He decides, probing the self-knowledge he has at this particular moment, not to execute the plan any further. He will, in his vaulting ambition, overplay not only his hand, but himself and everything he stands for. This scene represents Macbeth as a free agent, consciously

44 *Macbeth*, act 1. V, ll. 16.
45 *Macbeth*, act 1. VII, ll. 6- 28.
46 Alexander Leggatt , *Shakespeare's Tragedies*, p. 178.

arguing his decisions. But more importantly, he is aware of the imperfections and flaws in his character.

Again, as we have seen above, these considerations are not ethical, but pragmatic. Again, he makes a chance calculus: what does it do to me and what will be its influence in future.

At this point, I would like to draw attention to the fact that, strictly speaking, Macbeth is on the brink of committing an act of so called regicide. However, since this is a tribal community that is kept afloat by the Nordic and oral customs of succession,[47] one can hardly speak of regicide as we understand it (such as in a nation-state in development – *Hamlet* – or a nation/state/empire as in *Julius Caesar*).

Lady Macbeth[48] enters and he tries to dissuade his lady from the plan. She, however, convinces him using the following arguments: you don't love me properly if you shy away now; you have promised, but now you recoil; you are unmanly if you daren't do it now. We cannot but succeed if we do it well. Macbeth is convinced: "I am settled, and bend up, /Each corporal agent to this terrible feat."[49]

Act two is the most intense act of the play. Since Macbeth, as I noted above, effectively personifies justice and the execution thereof, this could be seen as state-controlled violence. But, there is as yet no such thing as an organized state; his killing stems from oral tribal tradition. Therefore, we cannot speak of a typical characterization of violence as part of a systematized construct as yet,[50] just that it is erratic and stemming from legal primitivism. Moreover, it is a terrible violation of Nordic custom: the killing of a guest who is also kin is an unspeakable breach of tradition and to top this all, Duncan still seems to be the leader in charge.

Therefore, the violence committed: the murder of Duncan, is unspeakably horrific. It being (in summary):

- the killing of the king/tribal leader (bad, but more or less passable since it seems to be customary for a successor to succeed by killing the predecessor),
- the killing of a kinsman (worse, but known among Nordic *leaders*) and
- the murder of a guest whom one is supposed to protect (decidedly worst), all rolled into one horrendous act.[51]

47 See below for what these entail.

48 As pointed out above: the historical Lady was called Gruoch and according to Gaelic sources she was a generous woman, popular and well-liked by the populace.

49 *Macbeth*, act 1. VII, ll. 79 – 80.

50 The type two violence: state controlled.

51 As a matter of fact, Macbeth had used these argument in his soliloquy, so he is aware of them as being horrific.

In this scene, Shakespeare plays with the historical meaning of regicide and the opinions on the subject in his own time, anachronistically[52] situating the conception of his day in Nordic times. And, to be sure, a lot of king-killing took place just before Shakespeare's day (see: A Biography of Shakespeare in the appendices). Therefore, the subject was a topical one; debate among the University Wits[53] was ardent as to when regicide was permitted and when not. I will come back to this debate further down and in the next chapters.

The act of betrayal, then, to be detected in these scenes amounts to the following: the betrayal of kin and the lies to cover up the murder. In the scene leading up to the murder (act 2.I), Macbeth describes the mental process he goes through, using the image of a mind's dagger. He is marshalled by the dagger, yet it is a dagger coming from his own mind. In other words, Macbeth is giving in to his human imperfections that cannot but end in common horror.[54]

> […] Or art thou but
> A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
> Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
> I see thee yet, in form as palpable
> As this which now I draw.
> Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going;
> And such an instrument I was to use.
> […]
> Take the present horror from the time,
> Which now suits with it.[55]

Macbeth stabs Duncan offstage. Immediately, the impact of the horror is felt throughout. Lady Macbeth heard the owl scream and the crickets cry.[56] Macbeth hears a voice cry: "Sleep no more, […] Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor/Shall sleep no more, Macbeth shall sleep no more."[57] Macbeth has unleashed an act of violence upon the world. It is a vertical act of violence and the immediate effect of it is crystal clear: Macbeth will sleep no more.[58]

---

52 As we already concluded: Shakespeare was no stickler as far as historical correctness was concerned.

53 Playwrights/Intellectuals in the 16th century that had had a university (Oxfordian or Cambridgean) education.

54 In Grecian tragedy also called *hybris*. The difference here is that Macbeth is fully aware of his yielding to his desires and ambitions.

55 *Macbeth*, act 2. I, ll. 37 – 60.

56 *Macbeth*, act 2. II, l. 15.

57 *Macbeth*, act 2. II, ll. 33 – 41.

58 Also from instances further on in the play we may conclude that Shakespeare was very much aware of the effects of sleep deprivation on the human mind.

A.C. Bradley writes that blackness broods over this scene.[59] As it does over the whole tragedy, for that matter. He goes on: "The blackness of night is to the hero a thing of fear, even of horror; and that which he feels becomes the spirit of the play."[60]

5.8 The reaction of bystanders to the violence

Leggatt[61] emphasizes that the other characters in the play cannot find words for this awful act. Violence deprives us of suitable words to describe it:

> O horror, horror, horror! Tongue nor heart
> Cannot conceive nor name thee![62]

As Macduff shrieks out, after having found Duncan's body. When words are lacking, communication with our fellow humans stops. Macbeth claims to have killed Duncan's servants in a rage: "Th'expedition of my violent love/ Outran the pauser, reason."[63] He had refrained from consulting his fellow-thanes, who are amazed and taken aback. The bond of trust between the Thanes begins to fray: why has Macbeth done so? A vague uneasiness can be sensed on the part of Lennox and Macduff. They draw back. Banquo remains silent, keeping his thoughts to himself. Duncan's two sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, decide: they'll hold their tongues and flee.

> Malcolm (Aside to Donalbain):
> Why do we hold our tongues,
> That most may claim this argument for ours?
>
> Donalbain. (Aside to Malcolm):
> What should be spoken here,
> where our fate,
> Hid in an auger-hole, may rush, and seize us?
> Let 's away;
> Our tears are not yet brew'd.[64]

Failing words and faltering in trust, the community falls apart into dumb-founded individuals. Even life itself doesn't make sense anymore. Macbeth: "From this instant, there's nothing serious in mortality./ All is but toys.

59 A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 279.
60 Ibid.
61 Alexander Leggatt , *Shakespeare's Tragedies*, p. 179.
62 *Macbeth*, act 2. III, ll. 62-63.
63 *Macbeth*, act 2. III, ll. 110-111.
64 *Macbeth*, act 2. III, ll. 119 – 123.

Renown and grace is dead./ The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees/ Is left this vault to brag of."[65] Thus is the impact of violence on the community. No more words: trust and shared values vanish and are no longer articulated and consequently, the communal coherence falters and individuals become isolated.

5.9 The result of violence

However, this act of violence not only dumbfounds and mutes, it also dehumanizes. The most obvious way in which dehumanization takes place is the killing itself: the transformation of a human being into a corpse, as explained in the previous chapter. This act is ineradicable[66] and cannot be repaired. It irrevocably changes not only the victim but the inflictor as well: Macbeth has murdered his sleep as he cried out (see above) and therewith his peace of mind. The enormity of this realization is worded in the above quotation, where Macbeth reports the falling away of meaning, dignity and grace. He even wishes away the little self-knowledge he had reaped (see above): "To know my deed 'twere best not know myself."[67] Act 2 ends with the equivocal benediction of the old man:

> God's benison go with you; and with those
> That would make good of bad, and friends of foes![68]

5.10 How violence unfolds itself

In his new role as king, Macbeth tries to playact the good king and ruler: he invites the Thanes for a festive dinner. His attempts are, however, in vain, for he is not able to suppress the consequences of the initial violence with which he has acquired his throne. His peace of mind is gone: more and more, he becomes obsessed and paranoid (he indeed has lost that little self-knowledge he possessed), seeing Banquo as the main enemy.

> To be thus is nothing;
> But to be safely thus.–Our fears in Banquo
> Stick deep; and in his royalty of nature
> Reigns that which would be fear'd.[69]

---

65 *Macbeth*, act 2. III, ll. 91 – 95.
66 As we shall see later in the play Lady Macbeth is unable to wash off the deed from her hands.
67 *Macbeth*, act 2. III, l. 71.
68 *Macbeth*, act 2. III, ll. 41 – 42.
69 *Macbeth*, act 3. I, ll. 49 – 52.

Even though he is cordially invited to the banquet, Banquo has lost all trust in his king, however, he remains silent: "I fear/ Thou played'st most foully for't. […] But hush, no more."[70] Here, the effect of the violence committed can be felt to the full. There is no longer just a lack of words to express the horrific, or the hesitation to speak, but a total loss of communication, resulting in isolation and mutual distrust.[71] These processes seem to reinforce each other. Lady Macbeth also wants peace of mind:

> Nought's had, all's spent,
> Where our desire is got without content.
> 'Tis safer to be that which we destroy
> Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.[72]

Macbeth's state of mind is no better:

> But let the frame of things disjoint, both the
> worlds suffer,
> Ere we will eat our meal in fear and sleep
> In the affliction of these terrible dreams
> That shake us nightly. Better be with the dead,
> Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
> Than on the torture of the mind to lie
> In restless ecstasy.[73]

Both Macbeth and his lady lose humanity and humaneness and go under in the maelstrom of the unspeakable: "Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill."[74]

Violence not only spirals out of control, but its character changes. We may now speak of fully radical violence that is self-destructive and, as yet, without hope: radical non-tragic violence.

The plot pushes on, ever faster, towards Macbeth's collapse. Banquo's murder – commissioned by Macbeth – is executed and therefore the former is absent at the banquet. Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost at the banqueting table and breaks down: the thanes leave dumbstruck. Many of them flee to England, as we learn from a conversation between Lennox and another lord:

> The son of Duncan,
> From whom this tyrant holds the due of birth
> Lives in the English court, […]

70 *Macbeth*, act 3. I, ll. 2 – 10.
71 Wilson Knights also mentions the isolation that permeates the play as a result of violence. In this case the isolation of Macbeth himself. *The Wheel of Fire*, p. 154.
72 *Macbeth*, act 3. II, ll. 6 – 9.
73 *Macbeth*, act 3. II, ll. 18 – 24.
74 *Macbeth*, act 3. II, l. 56.

> thither Macduff
> Is gone to pray the holy king, [to help us so
> that] we may again
> Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights,
> Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives,
> Do faithful homage and receive free honours:
> All which we pine for now.[75]

Society starts to disintegrate. As already noticed in act 1, there was an odd imbalance in the basic structure of society to begin with.[76] In terms of the dramatic tragic format, this oddity can be translated as the fatal but inescapable human flaw from which all tragedy originates. Now this unnoticed imperfection seems to explode in the faces of those involved: no longer is sleep a matter of course, and fear of bloody knives has taken the place of peace and security. Macbeth casts aside all pretence. Indeed, he – having lost himself – *becomes* his violence and outrage:

> I am in blood
> Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
> Returning were as tedious as go o'er:
> Strange things I have in head, that will to hand;
> Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd.
> […]
> My strange and self-abuse
> Is the initiate fear that wants hard use:
> We are yet but young in deed.[77]

5.11 Crisis

His initial act of violence, which was no more than his sheer human weakness,[78] has grown into the main trait of his character.[79] Macbeth consults the witches again. He wants to be reassured, which means that he knows nothing for certain anymore. But then, at this point of the play, he doesn't function on the level of knowledge and ratio anymore: he solely acts on impulses and urges of the moment. The quote above shows his violence and

75 *Macbeth*, act 3. VI, ll. 24 – 37.
76 As there was an imbalance in the character of Macbeth. His bloody instructions not only "plague the inventor", but the entirety of the community.
77 *Macbeth*, act 3. IV, ll. 135 – 143.
78 Amounting to no more than excited ambition and pricked coveting as we have seen in act 1.
79 K. Muir, *Shakespeare's Tragic Sequence*, p. 155.

aggression. With the witches, he vents his fears and uncertainties: "Thou hast harped my fear aright."[80]

The apparitions address his subconscious level with ambiguous riddles: no man born of woman can harm thee; you will not be slain until Great Birnam Wood comes against Dunsinane Hill. They show him images that he takes to be the assumed future. It unsettles him even more, for he sees Banquo's descendants as kings and rulers. It has to be noted that none of the utterances give hard and fast future facts.[81] In this respect, they have a high Delphic quality, as the interpretations are the beholder's. This means that the explanation of these divinations is nothing but the projection of what is already present in the mind. Of course, the supernatural element remains in the sudden appearance and vanishing of the ladies. Also, their remarks about Birnam wood and a 'man unborn' cannot have lived in Macbeth's mind before these predictions.[82] However, not this strange prescience makes Macbeth tick, but the fact that it touches upon his innermost fears and *angst*.[83] As we saw above, his responses are on this subconscious level. In this sense, and this sense only, the ladies are no more than the incorporation of Macbeth's subliminal self.[84] Therefore we may conclude that Macbeth, even though he consults the three weird sisters, remains a free agent and is responsible for what he does.

5.12 Bloodlaw and revenge

After Macduff (Thane of Fife) has fled to England, Macbeth decides to kill Macduff's wife and children to satisfy his insulted anger. What we witness here is an orgiastic (even for these Nordic times) form of bloodlaw or *sippenhaft* revenge.

Let us now sidetrack for a bit and take the reader on a short tour of the diversity of revenge methods.

The eye-for-an-eye tradition is ancient. One of the oldest sources to be found is the bible, where this revenge tradition is voiced in the following texts:

80 *Macbeth*, Act 4. I, l. 89.
81 As Bradley had noted also, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 289.
82 Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 290.
83 He might as well have ignored them and dismissed them, as Banquo had.
84 As they had been on the previous occasions. In act 1 they function as provokers of his weaknesses: they are strange, fearful, but no existential threats. In act 5 they have grown in stature: they are threatening, darker, fiercer. But, more importantly, Macbeth is now dependent on them to avert his existential fears. But they just – and in this they haven't changed – incite.

Exodus 21, 23 -24,[85] Leviticus 24, 19 – 20,[86] Deuteronomy 19, 21.[87] The New Testament opposes these views: Matthew 5, 38-42.[88]

The *sippenhaft* principle[89] is a tribal Nordic[90] concept; it entailed that members of a family could be fined, punished, or executed for wrongs done by one of their kin; i.e., kin liability or the principle of collective punishment.[91] Both the eye-for-an-eye and the *sippenhaft* method placed great value on 'just' retribution and the regaining of honor.

The *honor revenge,* or *honor killing*. When a person is wronged or feels insulted by a breach of custom (or one of his immediate family has been mistreated thus) a prominent member of the family/tribe may retaliate against the culprit to restore the honor of the disgraced and/or his tribe (this might be classified as a specific form or subdivision of *sippenhaft*)

Psychological revenge: any form of psychological terror or threat as revenge (of which the silent treatment, defamation, or gaslighting are the more common ones). Ever since the use of social media, countless variations can be seen.

Indirect revenge: the voodoo doll method, mostly practiced privately and/or by self-proclaimed practitioners. These last two methods attach great importance to the calming of the mind, the channeling of frustration/aggression and the regaining of self-confidence in the victim.

It is obvious that here we are dealing with the oral tribal custom of blood-law or *sippenhaft*. Having arrived at the English court, Macduff tells Malcolm, Duncan's son, of the desolate state Scotland is in:

> […] Each new morn
> New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows
> Strike heaven on the face, that it resounds
> As if it felt with Scotland and yell'd out
> Like syllable of dolour.[92]

---

85 "And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot."

86 "And if a man cause a blemish in his neighbor; as he hath done, so shall it be done to him; breach for breach, eye for eye, Tooth for tooth: as he hath caused a blemish in a man, so shall it be done to him again."

87 "And thine eye shall not pity; but life shall go for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot."

88 "Ye have heard that it hath been said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say unto to you, That ye resist not evil : but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right check, turn to him the other also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away." King James Bible. Translation was commissioned in 1604 and published in 1611.

89 Source: H. Maihold, "Die Sippenhaft: Begründete Zweifel an einem Grundsatz des 'deutschen Rechts'" in *Mediaevistik*, Januar 2005, pp. 99 – 126.

90 Also to be found among other indigenous peoples of earth's continents. Kaius Taori (*Lawyers and Savages*, Routledge, 2015) calls this phenomenon legal primitivism.

91 This type of retribution was revived in Nazi Germany.

92 *Macbeth*, act 4. III, ll. 4 – 8.

Scotland is now in chaos. An army is gathered to ride against Macbeth. The latter will, in act 5, meet his death as a result of this battle. In fact, both the Macbeths will meet their deaths.

> "These two characters are fired by one and the same […] ambition; and to a considerable extent they are alike. The disposition of each is high, proud, and commanding. They are born to rule, if not to reign. […] They support and love one another. They suffer together. And if, as time goes on, they drift apart a little, they are not vulgar souls, to be alienated and recriminate each other when they experience the fruitlessness of their ambition. They remain to the end tragic, even grand."[93]

Thus reads the excellent and empathic description of Bradley of the couple. He describes them not as petty and vulgar, but true to their status as tragic heroes: larger-than-life. Within this realm of tragic grandness, there is no place for feelings like regret, self-pity, or guilt and – in fact – these are absent in Bradley's acute description. Both Macbeth and his Lady suffer by their violence, but do so in a different way. The lady retreats from the stage as well as from sanity; she slowly but surely fades away into madness. Her acknowledging the truth, her very culpability, breaks her. Her doctor and her lady-in-waiting[94] assess her state and they do so aptly.

> Gentlewoman: She has spoke what she should not, I am sure of
> that: heaven knows what she has known.
> […]
> Doctor: What a sigh is there! The heart is sorely charged.[95]

In desperation, she tries to reconnect with her husband, reminding him of their violence, committed jointly.

> To bed, to bed! there's knocking at the gate:
> come, come, come, come, give me your hand. What's
> done cannot be undone.–To bed, to bed, to bed![96]

Sadly enough, she is too far away from actual communication and community to see that her attempts are but specters of the mind, emphasizing her deplorable isolation. Macbeth is described by some thanes. He is as isolated as his wife. He is, however, not mad, but mad-like and full of fury. And he has lost all authority:

---

93 A.C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy*, p. 293.
94 Almost functioning as a Greek chorus here.
95 *Macbeth*, act 5. I, ll. 46 – 51.
96 *Macbeth*, act 5. I, ll. 63 – 65.

Some say he's mad; others that lesser hate him
Do call it valiant fury: but, for certain,
He cannot buckle his distemper'd cause
Within the belt of rule.
[…]
Those he commands move only in command,
Nothing in love: now does he feel his title
Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe
Upon a dwarfish thief.
[…]
His pester'd senses to recoil and start,
When all that is within him does condemn
Itself for being there?[97]

5.13 The process of the violence paradigm completed: forcing Macbeth to renewed self-definition – his rising above *sippenhaft*

In spite of all his passion and fury, Macbeth understands that he has to do without "love, obedience and troops of friends, […] but in their stead/ Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath/ Which the poor heart would fain deny and dare not."[98] Again, Macbeth realizes that his violence backfires on his position. The only person he still shows concern for is his wife; he asks the doctor to cure her.

He is full of pugnacity and belligerence and prepares for the fight. Even in his tyrannical aggression, he is grandiose. Macbeth hears cries inside the castle, but even midnight shrieks like these, he says, do not frighten him anymore. Then he learns that the shrieks are from his lady's women: his wife is dead. This overwhelming news triggers Macbeth. It shocks him into moments of clarity. Macbeth indeed goes through a monumental and shattering phase, there is no more trading, comparing, or bartering (as in act 1, scene III). Macbeth speaks in lucid absolutes:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle![99]

These sorrowful words of mourning are heartrendingly personal, yet they are not petty, self-piteous, or resentful. This famous soliloquy has become part

97 *Macbeth*, act 5. II, ll. 13 – 24.
98 *Macbeth*, act 5. III, ll. 27 – 30.
99 *Macbeth*, act 5. III, ll. 18 – 22.

of our cultural heritage because it is universally understood. They touch upon the quintessence of our existence and no human being can remain unmoved by its solemn sadness and magnificence.

In the second half of the speech, he evaluates life as a whole, but the last sentence amounts to an accurate description of his position at this point:

> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more: it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
> Signifying nothing.[100]

These words speak of the futility of the human lifespan, yet they are not in the least relativistic or nihilistic. *There is a fundamental difference between nihilistic despair and tragic despair.* The nihilistic approach to tragic crisis entails a *dissociation* from the situation because it is utterly inescapable, hopeless and temporal anyway. The tragic approach shows a vehement *engagement* with the tragic crisis because it is utterly inescapable, hopeless and temporal, full stop.[101] The tragic process gives the protagonist new acumen on which he acts with an altered attitude. He knows he can, for he has (going through his tragic crisis) affirmed his active share in the development of the crisis. Macbeth commits himself to the situation with the full fury of his character.

If we read the quote carefully, we understand that it emphasizes the temporal aspect of human strife. Set within de limitation of a timeframe, human endeavor comes to naught and becomes undone. This very temporariness is distinctive for the imperfection of the human attempt; time being the grim reaper not only of man but of all his artefacts.[102] Indeed, we are determined by transience and are without escape from it. This is *the* description of the tragic condition of man.

---

100 *Macbeth*, act 5. V, ll. 23 – 27.

101 Friedrich Nietzsche addresses nihilism at some length in his Lenzer Heide fragments of 1887 (K.S.A. 12, *Nachlass* 1887 – 1889, 12: 5[71]), ff. In these fragments he uneasily veers between these two types of nihilism*: das ewige Werden* combined with a type of almost Buddhistic disengagement which he sees as a Christian perversion and das *ewige Werden* in combination with *das Ja-sagen* which means an involvement with the situation at hand. I identify the latter type as tragic nihilism. This is another indication for Nietzsche's apperception as tragic thinker. I leave this interesting discussion as it is not the topic at hand.

102 Here is shown that humans as well as their constructs are temporal. Earlier I have already pointed to the fact that our reality constructs (see previous chapter) are all imperfect and it is these imperfections that boomerang back into the face of the inventor and will thus prove to be his undoing. Macbeth pondered upon this in his famous soliloquy at the end of act one: "we but teach/Bloody instructions, which being taught, return/To plague the inventor: this even-handed justice/Commends the ingredients of our poisoned chalice /To our own lips."Act 1.VII, ll. 8 – 12. This quote sketches the unspeakable as architect of our destruction.

Coinciding with the above tragic process, Macbeth's delusional self-confidence (based on the predictions) diminishes when he hears that the wood is walking towards the castle.[103] As a result of these two processes, his martial bravery and valor on the battlefield, for which he had been lavishly praised in act 1, are rekindled.

> I pall in resolution, and begin
> To doubt the equivocation of the fiend
> That lies like truth: 'Fear not, till Birnam wood
> Do come to Dunsinane:' and now a wood
> Comes toward Dunsinane.
> […]
> There is nor flying hence nor tarrying here.
> I gin to be aweary of the sun,
> And wish the estate o' the world were now undone.
> […]
> At least we'll die with harness on our back.[104]

He still trusts the second prediction: be wary of one not born of woman:

> They have tied me to a stake; I cannot fly,
> But, bear-like, I must fight the course. What's he
> That was not born of woman? Such a one
> Am I to fear, or none.[105]

When he meets Macduff in battle, he does not want to fight him. The text gives us two reasons: in the first instance, it is because "My soul is too much charged/with blood of thine already."[106] This is not cowardice, but a burden too heavy: fully charged and saturated with the blood on his hands. This is precisely the term the good doctor uses (see above) for Lady Macbeth: "her heart is sorely charged." In the end, their charge was the only thing they still had in common.

When Macbeth learns that Macduff was born through a Caesarian section, he refuses for a second time; he now feels completely betrayed and put down by "these juggling fiends."[107] This time also, no trace of cowardice. It would turn Macbeth into a deplorable and petty Mr. Average – for which there is no proof in the text. In addition, just moments before, he had realized that he would die in armor, which he had seen as an asset, given his situation (and the Nordic tradition). Finally, his innermost fears had, in the end, made him

103 Malcolm had told his troops to camouflage themselves with branches.
104 *Macbeth*, act 5. V, ll. 40 – 50.
105 *Macbeth*, act 5. VII, ll. 1 – 4.
106 *Macbeth*, act 5. X, ll. 5 – 6.
107 *Macbeth*, act 5. X, l. 19.

into a (fiercely) acting tyrant, not into a coward shying away. Therefore, a sudden stroke of cowardice at this point would be an illogical and implausible move for a tragic hero of his stature.

I suggest yet a third reason for his refusal. Macbeth has by now completed his tragic crisis (and therewith the process of the violence paradigm) and he fully acknowledges and affirms the enormity of his actions. It has to be noted that the affirmation of one's actions is in an altogether different register than pleading guilty. The first attitude is in the existential register, the second in the ethical register (in which register Macbeth is not). Macbeth acknowledges his actions, but he doesn't retreat into a role of contrite hangdog. To the contrary, his stature grows. "Here I am, fully conscious of what I have done. So be it." He seems to have risen above the level of guilt, crime and punishment. These are not his concerns: Macbeth lacks ethics; he had only used ethics as the basis of a chance calculus (act 1, III).

Macbeth bravely takes a stand vis-à-vis the course of events. Once this attitude is taken, the realization that the course of events can also be changed and influenced is not far.

This is precisely what Macbeth does: as he realizes he is fully "charged" and can have no more, he will, therefore, allow no more futile violence. Some scholars – following the more conventional interpretation involving crime, guilt and punishment – hold that this word indicates that Macbeth is guilt-ridden. I argue that it means being assaulted to the full. There is no guilt in Macbeth; there are existential worries and grief. His soliloquies do not indicate any sense of guilt; they convey, however, grief, passionate involvement and a weariness about being (and having) assaulted too much. All these are convincing instances for my position that *Macbeth*'s essential theme is lies in the existential sphere, not in the ethical.

5.14 The outcome

Up to that point, his entire course of action had been one of escalating radical violence, leaving destruction and loss in its wake. Moreover, as Macbeth realized, it had all been in vain. He wants it to stop. This tragic process is verbalized in the text by the following paraphrased quotes: act 3. IV, ll. 135 – 143: I am violence; act 5. III ll. 22 – 30: I have lived long enough, all violence has led to nothing and is therefore futile; act 5.V, ll. 47 – 50: I cannot but go on, but, in fact, I want it to stop); act 5.V, l. 48:

> "I am weary of the sun." He wishes the [old] estate [read: construct] of the world undone (l. 49). This expresses his desire to halt the old ways of violent action. He knows he will die: "at least we'll die with harness on our back" (l. 51).

At this point, the violence tilts into horizontality: Macbeth realizes he will be a victim in this last violent effort, nevertheless, he engages in it.

It is important to note that horizontality entails a recognition and acknowledgement of the universality and equality of man's existential needs. It is not an equality of the valuation of humans, which is in a different register.

His rethinking of his position and his resolution to act upon it are indicative of his new self-definition: he is able to assess and act. He is a free agent, seasoned by experience and having gone through tragic crisis. This is an important pivotal moment; it heralds the birth of the individual as an independent actor and therewith the embryonic beginning of the English Renaissance.[108]

Macduff,[109] for one, completely misses the crucial change in Macbeth; calls him a coward and provokes him. Macbeth answers him that he will not yield to a young man like Malcolm nor to the rabble. However, he will make a last, ultimate effort.

What do his words mean?

– First of all, he will not be humiliated. I hold that, at this point, he is above violence as well as above humiliation vis-à-vis just anybody.
– Furthermore, he will engage in battle with Macduff.

In other words, concerning Macduff, things are different. Macbeth decides to fight him. He even throws his shield away, after which he encourages Macduff to attack.[110] This means that Macduff fights a defenseless man (a shield[111] being a defensive utensil and not a weapon) and will almost certainly win. Why does Macbeth do this?

The conventional explanation is as follows: it no longer makes any difference what he does, all predictions have come true and he *has* and *is* lost anyway. This would mean that Macbeth is either a defeatist and predestined man or he has surrendered to evil, implying that, with regard to violence, nothing matters anymore. There is no evidence whatsoever in the text for either position.

Yet, he *is* disillusioned: by the prophecies, but also by his own course of action in response to them. He had, at a certain point in act 1, decided to

---

108 Shakespeare here, anachronistically, gears forward from 1057 to his own time in 1606 – the year of the conception of the play – being the period of the English Renaissance.

109 Macduff wants revenge.

110 *Macbeth*, act 5. X, ll. 32 – 33. "Before my body / I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff." This sentence is crucial and – as always in Shakespeare – ambiguous. In the theatrical rendering by the BBC (directed by Jack Gold) Macbeth indeed throws away his shield. In the Trevor Nunn rendition the sentence is left out, awkward and unfitting as it is to throw a shield (to defend oneself with and not to be thrown) and not a lance or spear. Or even a sword (which indeed can be thrust).

111 I refer to a similar situation in *Coriolanus* where Martius prepares for battle before the city of Corioles. Here Shakespeare uses the words: "Now put your shields before your hearts, and fight", act 1, IV, l. 25, which words are in no way prone to equivocal interpretation.

believe the witches because it suited his (and his lady's) plans nicely. Now that he realizes he has been left to his own devices, he bravely and courageously takes his position and acts to attain his new goal.[112]

I argue the following: Macbeth will give it his last, his all, or even more than he has, in a larger-than-life effort to rid himself of his charge.[113] He – in one last huge swoop – attempts to purify both himself and his community from violence. Ending *sippenhaft* and the revenge it entailed.[114]

We witness Macbeth's last fight. Macbeth acknowledges Macduff's earlier loss by allowing the latter to fight him and make it a sure victory for Macduff. Not only allowing, for he almost commands Macduff: "damned be him that first cries: "Hold, enough!"[115] In other words, he doesn't want to be spared. This battle is not fought out of defeatism, nor out of sheer aggression or pathological lust for blood. This battle is fought to stop further bloodshed and violence.[116] At this point, Macbeth's violence can be characterized as the type of violence (nation)states employ to protect their citizens from the harm of the radical non-tragic type: it is violence to stop further bloodshed. The stand Macbeth takes here bears undeniable similarity to the basic prerequisite on which Weber's definition of a state rests: the monopolization of violence by the state to end further violence and protect its citizens. Many steps still have to be taken to come to an ordered nation-state. Macbeth's approach towards the situation is, however, of such importance that it can hardly be overstated: he uses violence to stop further (radical non-tragic) violence.

---

112 See act 5, V, l.49: undo the old reality construct.

113 Jan Kott, (*Shakespeare our Contemporary*, p. 94), also has it that Macbeth has had enough. He, however, concludes from this, that Macbeth has grown indifferent and cannot but drag as many lives as possible with him. This is illogical – not in line with Macbeth's tragic stature and not in line with a Macbeth who lets Macduff win a crucial fight. This is not the course of action of a man weary and indifferent.
Kott quotes ll. 1 – 3 of act 5, X to prove Macbeth's bloodlust until the end. It reads: "Why should I play the Roman fool, and die/ On mine own sword? whiles I see lives, the gashes/ Do better upon them." Here Macbeth is comparing again. We have seen him doing this before, making chance-calculi. This, however, is no such chance-calculus but an informed choice, comparing suicide with death on the battlefield. He chooses the battle-field. That the words are not uttered out of sheer bloodlust is proven by his very next utterance where he refuses to fight Macduff. If he had been the murderous, indifferent and nihilistic hell-hound Kott takes him for in act 5, Macbeth would have immediately attacked, no matter what.

114 In summary I argue that my argument here is based on two aspects: firstly Macbeth's mental make-up as painted by Shakespeare which makes it unlikely to portray him as a defeatist and secondly linguistic evidence (the fact that Macbeth throws away his shield). While the latter may seem scanty evidence, I counter that 1) that it is a fast-moving and intense tragedy in which 2) Shakespeare manages to evoke a whole world (of associations) in just a few words. This, in fact, is embedded in the trade of a poet and it is the very hallmark of Shakespeare's genius.

115 *Macbeth*, act 5. X, l. 34.

116 Macbeth, being overcharged, will have no more.

In the wake of his finalized tragic crisis, Macbeth has outgrown the level at which scores are settled employing violence.[117] His actual death is of lesser importance than its message. A violent death to stop violence: a truly Shakespearean paradoxical double bind,[118] solved by Macbeth's death.

Violence does actually stop with his being slain. A new social balance is reached when Malcolm is crowned king. He proclaims peace and a newly structured community.

> My thanes and kinsmen,
> Henceforth be earls, the first that ever Scotland
> In such an honour named. What's more to do,
> Which would be planted newly with the time,
> As calling home our exiled friends abroad
> That fled the snares of watchful tyranny.[119]

Macduff solemnly declares that "Here comes newer comfort. […] The time is free",[120] suggesting that a new era will begin for this community; the commonwealth made gentler.[121] Malcolm's arrival heralds the end of the old Celtic rule and implicates a new monarchical rule and law.

5.15 Evaluation

A scholar who, in the last century, commented on the tragic process in this play is Walter Kaufmann. In his book *From Shakespeare to Existentialism,* he characterizes Shakespeare's work as follows:

> Shakespeare's poetry is the poetry of abundance. There is laughter in it and despair, but no resentment or self-pity. […] He knew the view that man is thrown into the world, abandoned to a life that ends in death, with nothing after that, but he also knew self-sufficiency. He had the strength to face reality without excuses and illusions and did not even seek comfort in the faith in immortality.

These remarks truly describe the majestic and existential quality of *Macbeth*.[122] Elsewhere in the same book,[123] he mentions its numinous quality. That is,

---

117 Macduff has not and he attacks in fury.

118 See also: Peter G. Platt: "*And that's true too"; Shakespeare and the Culture of Paradox.* Neill (in "Shakespeare's tragedies", p. 131 of *The new Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare*), also mentions Shakespeare's love for reversals and paradoxes.

119 *Macbeth*, act 5, X, ll. 28 – 33.

120 *Macbeth*, act 5, X, ll. 20 – 22.

121 G. Blakemore Evans and J.J.M. Tobin, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, p. 1355.

122 On p. 3. Both Kaufmann and Jan Kott (*Shakespeare, our Contemporary*, pp. 93, 94) acknowledge the existentialist quality of Shakespeare.

123 Ibid, p. 37.

numinous without being Christian, for that Shakespeare is not, as Kaufmann emphatically adds.[124] These words poignantly characterize the major issues in Shakespeare's work. Another quote:

> Shakespeare, like the Greeks before him and Nietzsche after him, believed neither in progress nor in original sin; he believed that most men merited contempt and that a very few were head and shoulders above the rest of mankind and that these few, more often than not, meet "with base infection" and do not herald progress. The prerogative of the few is tragedy. The tragic world view involves an ethic of character, not, like the Gospels, an ethic of otherworldly prudence.[125]

I am in agreement with Kaufmann as to the absence of the concept of original sin in Shakespeare. But here my acquiescence with this last quote ends. In my view, Shakespeare nowhere expressed contempt for man, moreover, Shakespeare points towards the possibility of a free choice, which might mean a way to progress. At the most, he described common human failings in a precise and apt way and with a well-nigh unparalleled perception of the human psyche. However, if Shakespeare's texts are approached with fixed prerequisites concerning the description and treatment of the lighthearted, the none-too-bright, or the less fortunate in our society,[126] his precise way of describing them could be characterized as merciless.[127] Indeed, Shakespeare's characterizations of the human act are very realistic; they have in no way lost topicality and are given without judgment; the author's personal opinion on his characters is unknown and irrelevant. However, in later centuries, Shakespeare's characters have undergone several interpretations and appropriations (the above example being a case in point).

---

124 He also stresses that what some Shakespeare scholars call the religious (read: Christian) quality of Shakespeare's work is indeed its numinous quality, it is : " an apt word for what is simultaneously majestic, awe inspiring, overpowering and fascinating – that is of the essence Shakespeare's great tragedies and gives them the depth and intensity of the religious experience[..]." Kaufmann, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, p. 37.

125 W. Kaufmann, *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, p. 13.

126 These prerequisites consisting of a cautious and favorable treatment of the subjects.

127 Apart from being merciless and contemptuous Shakespeare has been accused of being anti-democratic. These remarks belong within the 20th/21st democratic discourse. Democracy as it is functioning nowadays, was unknown in Shakespeare's time and therefore not present to be judged or commented upon. In his plays Shakespeare registers how rulers and dignitaries resist parting with power in favor of commoners. He subsequently registers what opinions these same rulers hold with regard to the general population. Shakespeare shows how the working population interacts and how they behave towards their leaders. As examples suffice it to mention the opening scene from *Julius Caesar* and the protagonist's speeches in *Coriolanus.*
Moreover, as I remark in Shakespeare's biography (see Appendixes): I cannot but note the other more practical reason for refraining from political and/or religious stands in Renaissance England. Every remark on these topics displeasing the monarch, was rewarded by an involuntary stay in the Tower, or worse.

Kaufmann describes the Shakespearean hero as larger-than-life. Yet in Kaufmann, the grandeur seems to come early in *Macbeth*, after which the hero's stature appears to diminish ("meeting with infection" as he does). Kaufmann doesn't mention an increase in tragic stature as a result of the tragic process. Nor does he mention the temporal (albeit precarious) balance as the outcome of the tragic crisis.

5.15.1 The violence paradigm, Renan's will and Nietzsche

My previous chapter on tragedy explains that the concept of normativity – and hence of guilt, Christian or otherwise – is introduced in tragedy from the Renaissance onwards, when tragedy became critical[128] and bourgeois.[129] In Shakespeare and especially in *Macbeth,* these concepts are absent. So are original sin, crime and punishment, or any other items from value systems. Macbeth is beyond god and beyond good and evil, as the text in several instances evidences. In his ultimate effort, Macbeth copes with violence, rising above it (act 5, V), putting an end to it by his death, thereby delivering both himself, Macduff and society. Macbeth's death counterbalances the absurdity of violence and its effects, thus finalizing the process of the violence paradigm, which we see at work here.

When perspectives tilt, protagonist as well as audience realize what violence does; this horrific realization results in an attitudinal change. It not only means the disappearance of old concepts and views (having partly facilitated the violence in the first place), but also a chance for new perspectives to arise. These moments only occur after deep tragic crises.

In this tragedy, Shakespeare shows us possibilities of how these self-cleansing mechanisms within a community might work. He, however, never points towards a perfect construct, just to possibilities for (re)construction. It is, therefore, my opinion that it is not perfection[130] that dictates the success of a certain construct: it is the commitment to it by those involved, the joint effort for this never to happen again (as Malcolm personifies and heralds). A free choice, made by free individuals, best guarantees this commitment; repression never does. This mindset is brought about solely by the effects of the violence paradigm on a group of people. Here also, Shakespeare is centuries ahead of his time.

Only in the 19th century, as voiced by Renan, we find an articulation of this mindset stemming from the same principle: the will of a group of people

128 I will come back to this thematic in the next chapter from a legal point of view: violence inside and outside the law.

129 In France between 1630 and 1690 we see a revival of tragedy; in Germany between 1790 and 1840.

130 Also because there is no such thing as perfection within whatever construct.

to form a community that is "positive in spirit and warm of heart". In other words, Renan's will finds its origin in the mental make-up of those who had just before survived a tragic crisis and the effects of the violence paradigm, as even Renan was forced to recognize: all nations are born from brutality. In these tragic moments of mournful dignity, Renan's will is most manifest, the will – and I note it is will as much as necessity – to curb radical non-tragic violence in their society. This can only be done if a community is united in will and purpose. The breakdown of the old ways during the tragic crisis has opened new perspectives; it was and is entirely up to man to take this in hand.

Renan renounced religion and culture as essential ingredients for nation forming. Since the tragic and violent process described here (viz. the violence paradigm) is both a-religious and pre-ethical but indispensable and vital for nation forming, by reason it follows that Renan's stand vis-à-vis both concepts is correct. Therefore I can, now for sure, confirm the query from the introduction above; the logical consequence of the vital role of the violence paradigm in nation forming is another confirmation – from quite a different angle – of Renan's presumption that both culture and religion play at most a subordinated role in a nation's genesis.

The violence sparking the change must have appealed to Renan's antipode, Nietzsche. He interprets violence as testifying to the vital energy necessary for what he calls *das ewige Werden* in the creative processes of constructing society and nation. In terms of violence's necessity herein, therefore, both thinkers agree, albeit with quite a few nuances: Renan acknowledges it reluctantly and Nietzsche radicalizes it with full conviction.

Moreover, both Renan and Nietzsche are in agreement as to the relationship between religion and nation formation. Hence, we see the second similarity between the two.

Both emphasize the will necessary for nation-building; with Nietzsche, that will[131] is a tragic (Dionysian) energy that destroys as well as rebuilds, with Renan, it is a rational choice, made with a warm heart, as I explained in a previous chapter.

These rather unexpected similarities between the two men come together in the tragic process that Macbeth undergoes. We can therefore say that this Shakespearean tragedy functions as an intermediary in the thought of both academics.

The character of Macbeth is very clearly a Shakespearean tragic hero, however, he may also be interpreted as either Nietzsche's *freie Geist*,[132] or his *Übermensch*.

131 Earlier I have pointed out that Nietzsche's will to power is in a different register altogether form this tragic will to (Dionysian) renewal.

132 Free from any religious dogmatism and normativity. Completely self-reliant. K.S.A. 3, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, § 347, p. 583.

First of all, some general comparisons. As pointed out above, Macbeth is beyond god, good and evil, which expressions are, of course, emblematic of Nietzschean philosophy. Macbeth acts with a furious energy comparable to Dionysian frenzy. The Nietzschean *Ja-sagen* in the face of eternal-return-of-the-same could be compared with Macbeth's engagement in the last scene of act 5.

There are, however, some difficulties in making the Macbeth/*Übermensch* comparison. The latter is sporadically mentioned throughout Nietzsche's work; only 39 times. He mentions the concept for the first time in his *Nachlass* of 1882, the last three quotations are in *Ecce Homo* (1889, a few days before his mental breakdown). The notion is vaguely defined, while all of Macbeth's actions can be followed at length, including all arguments and reflections. However, strength, energy and detachment from normativity coincide.[133]

Despite this detachment Macbeth cannot be called a *freie Geist* (see definition in note) since he is influenced by the weird sisters, his wife, his hopes and calculations and up to his tragic crisis by his paranoid fury, *angst* and aggression. Yet, he is depicted as a free agent acting with deliberation; by no means predestined. This, of course, is due to the genius Shakespeare, who can depict man affected and impacted by all life's events, influences and leverages and still being capable of deciding and evaluating what strategy to follow. It is, in short, not surprising that Nietzsche became fascinated by Shakespeare's tragic heroes.

Macbeth's final act of suffering lends him dignity and tragic stature. What we witness in the play is the self-cleansing mechanism of a country (through its leader) by the tragic violence paradigm. Ultimately, the result of this scheme is the opening of new perspectives, invitingly suggesting a reconstruction of society; it is the beginning of a new, more gentle rule (last speech of Malcolm: act 5, IX, ll. 27 – 42).[134] In short, we witness the birth of a nation.

5.15.2 The practice and theory of succession of kings within the Nordic tradition and in Shakespeare's time

To finalize this chapter and introduce the next, I will now give a concise overview of the succession issue. In *Hamlet,* the plot centers around precisely

133 To be compared with Nietzsche's first remark on the *Mensch*: K.S.A 10, *Nachlass November 1882 – Februar 1883*, 4 [75], p. 134: "Der Übermensch hat aus Überfülle des Lebens jene Erscheinungen der Opiumraucher und den Wahnsinn und den dionysischen Tanz". And his last remarks in K.S.A. 6, *Ecce Homo, Warum ich so gute Bücher schreibe*, § 1, p. 300: "Das Wort „Übermensch" zur Bezeichnung eines Typus höchster Wohlgerathenheit, im Gegensatz zu „modernen" Menschen, zu „guten" Menschen, zu Christen und andren Nihilisten…"; K.S.A. 6, *Ecce Homo, Warum ich ein Schiksal bin*, § 5, p. 370: "So fremd seid ihr dem Grossen mit eurer Seele, dass euch der Übermensch furchtbar sein würde in seiner Güte."

134 As always, a new balance cannot but be of a temporary basis, since all human endeavour is temporary. We will have to learn to cope with this ultimate truth, as tragedy shows us.

this and its crisis unfolds from succession gone wrong (and the ensuing clash in systems). Moreover, as mentioned above, *Hamlet* is set in the same period as *Macbeth*.

The plays themselves were performed for Tudor/Stuart audiences, having the corresponding Tudor/Stuart succession concerns.

Well then: the Northern part of Europe, in the mid-1000s: place and time of Macbeth of Muray. Military prowess and physical strength are much praised and it is therefore no surprise that Macbeth and all of his contemporary warrior-kings are richly blessed with these endowments. I have mentioned some of these fighter-heroes above: William the Conqueror of Normandy, Sweyn Forkbeard of Denmark, Norway and England (died in Macbeth's childhood: 963 – 1014) and Harald Hardrada of Norway. Other notorious examples are: the brothers Harold and Tostig Godwinson of Wessex, Harald Grenske of Norway[135] (slightly earlier: 960 – 995), and Harthacnut of Denmark.[136] These commanders/kings were all leaders of warrior societies, as was Macbeth. Even though the populations were 'Christianised', much of the old Nordic customs and culture remained.

Another characteristic was that these societies had – in the second half of the millennium – become increasingly militarized since the fall of the Roman Empire. More often than not, these kings died violently: either in battle, or as a result of war or siege.[137] A tribal king's prospects for longevity were overly bleak; in modern eyes, these aspects certainly would not invite holding such a position. For these chieftains, this was obviously different. First, it was generally seen as an honour to die in battle, especially when the opponent was 'worthy'[138] and second, once they won the battle, their territory would be enlarged by that of the vanquished and their power proportionately greater. Kingship was elective in Nordic cultures. Yet, looking at the above historical warrior/kings, they were more often deposed or killed by their successors.[139] We may conclude that being killed in or through battle was an accepted occupational hazard, with the odd chance that this happened at the hands of your successor. Although this was generally accepted, the killing (of either

135 He is mentioned because the way he was killed shows resemblance with Duncan's death. Harald was killed while asleep in his family's hall. His foster sister Sigrid Storrada killed him – he had wanted to marry her, because of her rich inheritance.

136 Source: Snorri Sturluson in the Olav Trygvasons saga. https://nbl.snl.no/Harald_Grenske and https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Heimskringla

137 Of those mentioned above, only Sweyn Forkbeard's death is unknown. Sweyn's honour (that remarkable notion that it was honourable to be killed by a worthy opponent) was saved by saga: it was whispered that St. Edmund himself rose from his grave to stab Sweyn in his sleep. The other kings died violently; Harold Grenske by kin: see previous note.

138 In general this worthiness consisted of the above mentioned physical and military accomplishments.

139 For instance Sweyn Forkbeard who combatted and deposed his father.

a relative or an acquaintance) within the community itself was barely accepted.[140] It was reprehensible, even in Macbeth's day.

While being praised within their societies (especially by their skalds[141]) for their steadfastness of rule and for the way they were able to keep their territories safe from raids and invasions, they were feared and hated by their enemies. Only when the former characteristics failed or faded, or their bloodthirsty barbarism extended to their people or allies, were they greeted with disdain and banishment. Now, how would the character of Macbeth be judged within such a society? Most probably, his initial act of assassinating Duncan would not have raised many eyebrows in Northern Scotland. After all (and quite apart from the fact that the community was used to this custom) Duncan was the initial offender because kingship was elective and Malcolm was chosen by his father, not elected by his peers.

The same offence can be pinpointed in *Hamlet* (since Claudius, by killing his brother, usurps the throne instead of being elected). This (start of a new) hereditary method, moreover implemented without prior approval or even consultation of peers, could well have been seen as an infringement on traditional law and therefore an affront to which Macbeth reacted. In my mind, it is plausible that not the killing itself, but the dishonourable way of doing it (while Duncan was asleep and lying about the cause of death afterwards) might have provoked repulsion. If the character Macbeth had stopped at this, he might have reigned steadily for the ensuing years, as did the historical Macbeth after he killed his predecessor.[142] However, our Macbeth acts otherwise: Duncan's death is the commencement of a killing spree throughout the realm.

The best comparison to be made here is with Tostig, Harold Godwinson's[143] brother. His malice and atrocities against members of the court and his population got him expelled from England. He fled to Flanders, but the Flemish also got rid of him after having witnessed his savagery. Upon that, he turned against his brother and was eventually killed in the Battle of Stamford Bridge in 1066. People committing Tostig's type of crime were called 'the berserkers':[144] those who go berserk, who fly into a maniacal rage, become infuriated or uncontrollably irate.[145]

---

140 The king was excluded from this rule; being killed by either kin or enemy was – as said – his occupational hazard.

141 Nordic court poet writing epic poetry about their heroes. Some Viking kings were accomplished skalds themselves as e.g. Harold Hardrada.

142 See introduction of this chapter.

143 Harold of Wessex.

144 Irrationally mad as a bear.

145 This behaviour could be the result of the working oneself into a frenzy, just before the battle. It could also be a manifestation of psychosis. Whatever the cause, the result was a company of daredevil and courageous warriors throwing themselves into battle.

What befell the uncanny Tostig, happened in *Macbeth*, when the play progresses and Macbeth's biography of violence unfolds. Macbeth, like Tostig, turned against his people. While his initial killing most probably would have been accepted, his subsequent behaviour most certainly would not. As Tostig was judged, so Macbeth would have been, by banishment and if that proved impossible, by being killed (in action), which, happened to Macbeth.

Now, how would Macbeth be evaluated in Shakespeare's time, had he lived then? The then-current academic debate was on when it was permitted to oust a king, either by deposition or assassination;[146] it was allowed if the king had come to power illegitimately, was obviously mad, bad, or brutal beyond reason.[147] Since Duncan was none of these things overtly, he certainly did not fit the bill. Therefore, and theoretically speaking,[148] it would have been a punishable crime. Yet, it was more a matter of power, influence and support (among nobility and/or the military) whether it would have been penalized as such: see the last note. Since Macbeth is, in the initial stage of act 1, a war hero and well able to lead men, the odds are that, at that point in his career, he might be able to remove/kill a king, suppress an uprising and rule steadily. Later on, he becomes the irate tyrant Shakespeare describes so colourfully, which brings us to a discussion of the deposition of tyrants.

What is a tyrant?

> In antiquity, the term referred to a ruler who came to power by usurpation, without constitutional warrant. In the works of Plato, Aristotle […] and others […], the term came to describe any evil ruler, anyone who governed by whim for personal gain instead of by law for the general welfare. Deriving mainly from Aristotle, long lists […] itemize the distinctive characteristics of tyrants and kings and contrasted their styles of government. Medieval and Renaissance theorists […] officially recognized both the earlier and later conceptions of tyrants, declaring that a man could prove himself a tyrant in entrance […] or in execution. [..] By Shakespeare's

146 Also see my discussion of Miola in the *Julius Caesar* chapter.

147 One of the academic debates was on how to define illegitimate. This in itself could be a slippery and dangerous debate, the degree of jeopardy heavily depending on the 'legitimacy' of the then sovereign. See note below.

148 Reality, as we know, was different. After Henry VIII's death his son, young Edward, came to the throne. In actual fact, since he was only 9 years old, the powerful court factions ruled through him. When he died 7 years later, he left the country torn by opposing parties. He was succeeded by Lady Jane Grey, pushed on the throne by the Duke of Northumberland; she ruled for only 9 days. She and most of her sympathizers were killed by supporters of Mary Tudor (yes, the bloody one). The latter reigned 5 years, steeping the country in misery and bloodshed. When she died in 1558 she was succeeded by her sister Elizabeth I. In this troubled period of various rule, it was not so much legislation and even less academic debate that determined the rules of succession, but rather the power and influence of the diverse court factions. I also bring to memory the many plots and uprisings that, at times, thwarted the reign of Elizabeth I.

> day, then, the term 'tyrant' could apply to any usurper of power by force as well as to any lawful ruler who governed viciously.[149]

Looking at this description and the fact that Macbeth murdered Duncan, I cannot help but conclude that Shakespeare's contemporaries (as in: fellow nobles and court parties) would have approached Macbeth, once on the throne, with great suspicion, carefully circumnavigating him. They most probably would have sounded how many (hidden) supporters were at his beck and call and plotted against him – cases in point being the Throckmorton plot (an attempt to oust Elisabeth I in favour of Mary, Queen of Scots) and the unsuccessful rebellion of Robert Devereux, Earl of Essex (during which Essex' followers asked The Globe theatre to perform Shakespeare's play *Richard II*, the deposition scene included).

Luckily for both Macbeth and Hamlet, these were not yet their concerns. Let us, therefore, proceed and see all that befell Hamlet in the next tragedy. In Macbeth, we have witnessed the end of old tribal (Celtic) law and *sippenhaft*. We now enter the era of the fledgling nation under monarchical law.

149 Robert S. Miola, " Julius Caesar Challenges the Renaissance Debate on Tyrannicide", in Social Issues in Literature, p. 96. Also partly quoted in my chapter on *Julius Caesar*.