

***Macbeth's* Likely Suspects: the Practical, Psychological, and Mystical Utility of the Three Murderers**

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The series of slayings that characterize *Macbeth* incites an intricate sequence of suspicions and allegations, engendering a leitmotif of culpability. The play's only killers to be identified, unequivocally, as such, arrive in Act 3 scene 1. The Murderers of *Macbeth* are interlopers; in a cast of opinionated participants, these seemingly emotionless, poorly differentiated desperados are engaged to accomplish a specific, circumscribed task. The object of surprisingly limited recent critical attention, Macbeth's nameless consociates effect one of the play's pivotal actions, Banquo's murder, while serving as figures onto whom Macbeth displaces his own considerable anxieties. Arrival of an enigmatic Third Murderer enlists the three accomplices in the play's tradition of mystic, fate-endorsing trios, including the Weird Sisters and the three apparitions. Addressing the question of why Macbeth involves the three surrogate Murderers, this essay appraises the practical, psychological, and mystical utility of the Murderers vis-à-vis the greater system of murder and murderous accusations at work in the drama.

In their Act 3 debut, the First and Second Murderers of *Macbeth* are presented as disenfranchised itinerants, alleging histories of insurmountable misfortune. Responding to Macbeth's unctuous denunciation of Banquo, the Second Murderer attests, "I am one, my liege, / Whom the vile blows and buffets of the world / Hath so incensed that I am reckless what / I do to spite the world" (3. 1. 121-124). Assuring Macbeth of comparable sentiments, the First Murderer continues, "And I another / So weary with disasters, tugged with fortune, / That I would set my life on any chance, / To mend it or be rid on't" (3. 1. 125-128). Though we are not informed how Macbeth "shark'd up" this particular complement of "lawless resolute," (*Hamlet* 1. 1. 112) one can envision their hiring taking place in a manner similar to that of *Romeo*

and *Juliet's* penurious Apothecary, another of Shakespeare's despairing conspirators. A distraught but crafty Romeo, capitalizing on the chemist's destitution, remarks, "'An if a man did need a poison now, / Whose sale is present death in Mantua, / Here lives a caitiff wretch would sell it him" (*Romeo and Juliet* 5. 1. 54-56). Macbeth similarly enjoins his two murderers, whose social plight (as each confirms in their first documented exchange) render them ready for any chance to repair their lives or "be rid on't" (3. 1. 128).

Macbeth's coercive diatribe validates the desperate state of these reckless and wearied ne'er do wells, commanding his hirelings to "Know / That it was he, in the times past, which held you / So under fortune, which you thought had been / Our innocent self" (3. 1. 83-86). Whether Banquo bears any legitimate responsibility for the Murderers' predicament remains unconfirmed, but Macbeth's accusations, if not entirely fabricated, are certainly embellished. Professing a personal animosity towards Banquo, Macbeth works to ally himself with the hired killers, emphasizing the putative threat posed by Banquo. "Know Banquo was your enemy," Macbeth intones. "So is he mine, and in such bloody distance / That every minute of his being thrusts / Against my near'st life" (3. 1. 129-133). The risk created by Banquo's survival is two-fold; Banquo has intimated suspicions of manslaughter, lamenting a fear that Macbeth has "playedst most foully" (3. 1. 3) for his newly conferred honorifics and, as a potential witness, presents a hazard to Macbeth. The Weird Sisters' prophesy of the Banquo line of kings serves as a second menace. Reinforcing his authority as King, Macbeth advises the Murderers that,

Though I could
With barefaced power sweep him from my sight
And bid my will avouch it, yet I must not,
For certain friends that are both his and mine,
Whose loves I may not drop, but wail his fall
Who I myself struck down. (3. 1. 134-139)

Macbeth could, of course, undertake Banquo's execution as a matter of kingly prerogative, and he's already proven himself capable of foul play. That a "barefaced" murder would incite rebellion seems probable. Despite the obsequious replies of the Murderers, who acknowledge their hierarchical inferiority by addressing appropriately brief replies to their "liege," their "Highness," and "lord," Macbeth has painted himself into a corner, his machinations dependent on the cooperation of two felonious subordinates.

The assassins of *Macbeth* are incited to acts of murder via appeals to their sense of masculinity, a tactic Macbeth insidiously employs to coerce his hired accomplices, and which James Greene explains as resulting from "a profound confusion over the roles of men and women in the nightmare world ruled by Macbeth and his Lady" (156). This *modus operandi* is pioneered by Lady Macbeth, who, addressing her husband's apprehensive ambivalence in Act 1, proclaims, "When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man" (1. 7. 56-58). Even the play's conclusive murder, Macduff's slaying of Macbeth, is instigated by Malcolm's challenge to Macduff to redress his family's slaughter by choosing to "dispute it like a man" (4. 3. 25). Masculinity, in *Macbeth*, is a diagnosis of exclusion; manliness is a conditional characteristic, consistently defined in opposition to other attributes. The malevolent Lady Macbeth offers an image of "manhood" entailing ambition and power; by killing Duncan, her husband will secure the title of king while manifesting an appropriately "manly" resolve. Lady Macbeth's influential tyranny evokes a man versus woman dichotomy. Macbeth's trepidation over Banquo's prophesied offspring reiterates the polarity of man versus child (a concept reinforced by the childlike apparition of Act 4, and which resumes with the ultimate enmity of Malcolm, Duncan's child). The notion of man as opposed to supernatural entity is later evinced by Macbeth's dealings with the Weird Sisters, his visitation by the apparitions, and Banquo's ghost. The drama's closing altercation emphasizes a climactic opposition of man versus one not "of woman born" (4. 1. 81).

In Act 3, however, Macbeth challenges the Murderers with a conditional form of manhood based on the dichotomy of man versus tyrannized subject. Adroitly vilifying Banquo, while subtly assessing the Murderers' allegiance, Macbeth asks, "Are you so gospelled / To pray for this good man and for his issue, / Whose heavy hand hath bowed you to the grave / And beggared yours forever?" (3. 1. 98-101). Casting Banquo as a "man," and the Murderers as his victims, Macbeth elicits from the First Murderer the ambiguous, yet compliant reply "We are men, my liege" (3. 1. 102). In this context, the phrase "we are men," is less an assertion of valor than an acknowledgement of human weakness; the Murderers are *only* men, unable, as Macbeth suggests, to endorse Banquo's "tyranny." The eponymous villain more explicitly contests their manhood by suggesting that if the Murderers "have a station in the file, / Not in th' worst rank of manhood, say 't. / And I will put that

business in your bosoms / Whose execution takes your enemy off" (3. 1. 113-116). Macbeth offers a challenge here, setting a prerequisite for the position of "murderer." To undertake the proposed task, which he meticulously designates both valorous and indispensable to the Murderers' fortune, the intended killers must assure Macbeth of their "manly" characters. Macbeth does not mandate integrity, but rather flatters the Murderers by suggesting that the righteous business of killing is better suited to those of superior, manly rank. But the species of manhood that the Murderers assert is one of vulnerability and susceptibility to those "vile blows and buffets" that afflict them, much like the "slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" that assail Hamlet (*Hamlet* 3. 1. 66). Macbeth capitalizes on the Murderer's conception of masculinity, acknowledging their misfortune by offering, as an empowering, "manly" alternative, the potential for liberation from an oppressor.

At the conclusion of Act 3, scene 1, Macbeth separates from the Murderers, promising that, "Within this hour at / most / I will advise you where to plant yourselves, / Acquaint you with the perfect spy o' the time" (3. 1. 146-149). Reiterating his desire to remain unassociated with the execution, Macbeth offers the hasty addendum that

(To leave no rubs nor botches in the works)
Fleance, his son, that keeps him company,
Whose absence is no less material to me
Than his father's, must embrace the fate
Of that dark hour. (3. 1. 153-157)

The latter directive is artfully understated, delineating the necessity of the deed, while de-emphasizing the increased challenge of a double slaying. Having been engaged by Macbeth the previous evening, the Murderers enter the exchange of Act 3 scene 1 already *au fait* of Macbeth's expectations. Macbeth instills his order for Fleance's assassination with deliberate off-handedness, his prompt departure leaving the Murderers without opportunity to object to the dual slaughter.

The First and Second Murderers, as I've established, are virtually indistinguishable, their dialogue limited to an introductory lament each and subsequent replies to Macbeth that are invariably brief, affirmative, and non-individuating. When next we encounter the two contracted killers, in scene 3 of the same act, they grant a cursory challenge to the unexpected appearance of a Third Murderer. "But who did bid thee join us?" the First Murderer demands with an easily assuaged suspicion (3. 3. 1). "Macbeth," the Third Murderer replies, whereupon the Second

Murderer suggests that their new confederate “needs not our mistrust, since he delivers / Our offices and what we have to do / To the direction just” (3. 3. 3-5). Macbeth’s departure from the Murderers is accompanied by a pledge to “come to you anon” (3. 2. 158). When the waiting killers are subsequently approached, not by Macbeth but by a stranger, it stands to reason that they would accept the third party as Macbeth’s emissary. Unlike the two malcontents introduced to royal scheming only the day before, the Third Murderer quickly evinces a familiarity with palace life that distinguishes him from the undifferentiated First and Second Murderers.

At the sound of approaching horses, the Second Murderer identifies Banquo by method of exclusion: “Then ‘tis he. The rest / That are within the note of expectation / Already are i’ the court” (3. 3. 13-15). Upon the First Murderer’s observation that “His [Banquo’s] horses go about,” the Third Murderer replies with authority, “Almost a mile; but he does usually / (So all men do) from hence to th’ palace gate / Make it their walk” (3. 3. 16-19). The mysterious Third demonstrates an acquaintance with Banquo’s routine. His hasty aside, “So all men do,” seems not a genuine reflection on the habits of palace horsemen so much as a hurried, extenuating generalization, aimed at obscuring his identity beyond anything but a hired hand in Macbeth’s planned slaughter. As Banquo approaches, his arrival is surmised by the Second Murderer by virtue of the light Banquo carries. The Third Murderer, however, gives the decisive declaration “‘Tis he,” suggesting that he actually *recognizes* the ill-fated Banquo. In the ensuing altercation, Fleance’s escape is acknowledged by the Third Murderer, who observes that “There’s but one down. The son is / fled” (3. 3. 29-30). That the enigmatic Third can distinguish between intended victims suggests that he is familiar with the appearance of both father and son, especially as he recognizes their features in the dark (his acknowledgement of Fleance’s escape preceded by the demand, “Who did strike out the light?” 3. 3. 27). Moreover, Banquo’s death cry, “O treachery!” suggests that he perceives himself a victim of betrayal at the hands of a *known* figure, rather than the random target of unknown and ill-intentioned loiterers (an attack from whom would not, of course, give Banquo cause to observe actual treachery, which connotes betrayal, versus a vicious but unprovoked attack).

The Third Murderer’s unforeseen arrival alters the dynamic of the chosen crew of killers, completing a shadowy trio that recalls the play’s opening lines, in which the Weird Sisters’ eerie chant commences, “When shall we three meet again?” (1. 1. 1). The mystic figures of *Macbeth*,

those beings who exert influence over fortune, appear in triads. From the Weird Sisters, greeting Macbeth with a trinity of new titles, to the three apparitions, the pursuit of fate in *Macbeth* is guided by occult threesomes. Consider the witches' chant of Act 1, scene 3: "Thrice to thine and thrice to mine / And thrice again to make up nine. / Peace, the charm's wound up" (1. 3. 36-38). We can identify this "charm" as nothing more than fortune itself, connoting, in this case, Macbeth's incipient regency. As Marjorie Garber reminds us, "Wyrd is the Old English word for 'fate,' and these are, in a way, classical witches as well as Scottish or Celtic ones" (697). To enact their "charm," the Weird Sisters, prescribers of fate, mandate the participation of nine figures, three of whom are the witches themselves. Another three members of the prophesied nine are the apparitions of Act 4, who, like the witches, advise Macbeth of his fate (however he misconstrues their predictions). The likely suspects for the final trio are the three murderers, whose aid effects Banquo's murder – a slaying regarded by Macbeth as indispensable to his own fortune.

Both the play's first and third murders (i.e., those of Duncan, and Macbeth himself) are instigated by otherworldly interventions, and it stands to reason that the mystifying position of Third Murderer (Banquo's executioner) would be assumed by a supernatural participant. That the idiosyncratic Third Murderer is someone other than an anonymous n'er-do-well (like his two confreres) is suggested by his tardy and inexplicable involvement in Banquo's murder, coupled with his eerily prescient knowledge of palace comings and goings and his ability to distinguish between Banquo and Fleance. In his psychoanalytic assessment of *Macbeth*, Harold Bloom inveighs that, "Murder is the characteristic action of *Macbeth*: not just King Duncan, Banquo, and Lady Macduff and her children are victims. By firm implication, every person in the play is a potential target for the Macbeths" (Bloom 524). I would extend this line of reasoning to argue that in *Macbeth*, not only are several of the play's participants victims (or prospective victims), but potential *suspects* in the drama's various deaths. My intention is not to enlist in the tired tradition of incriminating a *specific* suspect for Third Murderer (something that can never be decisively accomplished), but rather to identify the likely suspects, whose appearances are orchestrated in such a manner as to lend the drama a mysterious and occult ambiance, underscoring the ambiguity with which the play's murders are effected. I believe that Michael Saenger comes closest to the truth of the matter with his incisive suggestion that the Third Murderer is meant to represent a

demonic figure (Saenger 134). The recondite comings and goings of the mysterious Third certainly hint at a characteristically Jacobean image of spirits.

I've already discussed the challenges to gender that consistently bring about *Macbeth's* murderous actions, and I'd suggest that this trope of contested masculinity as prescriptive of murder enables the possibility of a female Third Murderer, the most probable candidates being Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters. *Agent provocateur* of Duncan's murder, Lady Macbeth condemns "feminine" weaknesses, inciting her husband to murder by appealing to his manhood. Divesting herself of what she perceives as vulnerable, womanly attributes, Lady Macbeth proclaims, "Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty" (1. 5. 46-57). Her conception of womanhood excludes the capacity for cruelty and murder; by demanding that she be "unsexed," the royal wife seeks what she perceives as a "male" capacity for evildoing. Acknowledging his wife's disposition, Macbeth exhorts her to "Bring forth men-children only, / For thy undaunted mettle should compose / Nothing but males" (1. 7. 83-85). Gender expectations would likely prescribe that killers be male, but Lady Macbeth is ascribed murderous characteristics that both she and her husband identify as masculine. Hinting at a complicity with the occult, Lady Macbeth seeks these attributes by summoning spiritual intervention.

As conductress of her husband's misdeeds, Lady Macbeth is guilty of murder long before Banquo is killed. She "lays the daggers ready" for Duncan's planned slaughter, beguiling the King's chamberlains with liquor, and later relieving Macbeth of the bloody daggers. The iniquitous Lady also reveals herself amenable to the physical act of killing, stating of Duncan's death that "Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done it" (2. 2. 14-16). Fearing her husband's questionable resolve, and, perhaps, capability, she settles for acting as architect of Duncan's demise, advising Macbeth to commit "This night's great business in my dispatch" and to "leave all the rest to me" (1. 5. 86). Greene perceptively suggests that "The weak, 'womanly' Macbeth (who in reality is clinging desperately to the last remnants of his moral courage) is no match for the mate who has reversed her culturally defined gender role and who now openly taunts him on his unmanly inability to act on his desires" (9). Having observed Macbeth's questionable competence, his "dearest partner in greatness" (1. 5. 11) might reasonably be tempted to see Banquo's murder completed properly herself, avoiding the incriminating

mishaps she anticipates in her husband's work.

The cause of Lady Macbeth's psycho-spiritual decline is ambiguous, possibly the mental consequence of her murderous machinations (though carried out by her husband), or perhaps a psychological reaction to the physical act of Banquo's murder. By Act 5, Lady Macbeth is traumatized. Demanding that a light be kept constantly her side, and lamenting an invisible, invincible stain, she alleges: "Here's the smell of the blood still. All / the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand" (5. 1. 53-55). The notion of murder leaving a physical stain recurs throughout *Macbeth*; upon his return from killing Duncan, Macbeth himself has bloody hands, as we know from Lady Macbeth's instructions to "Go get some water / And wash this filthy witness from your hand" (2. 2. 60-61). When the Murderer (his numerical identity as "First" or "Second" now reduced to the simple designation "Murderer") arrives at the banquet to apprise Macbeth of Banquo's execution, Macbeth's initial observation pertains to the blood on the Murderer's face. The gore on Lady Macbeth's hands could be figurative, her second-hand persecution of Duncan (and, probably, Banquo) having rendered her guilty as a murderer, or it could be literal – a delusional effort to wash from her hands the residue of the actual blood of a victim. Perhaps the most damning hint of Lady Macbeth's involvement is in the fevered remark she offers her attending gentlewoman and doctor: "Yet who would have thought the old man / to have had so much blood in him?" (5. 1. 41-42). The old man in question could, of course, be Duncan; similarly, the remark might refer to Banquo, whose murder Lady Macbeth almost certainly engineers, at least. Like her agitated hand-washing, Lady Macbeth's comment could arise from a visceral and destabilizing angst surrounding those murders she superintends, or it could serve as the incriminating acknowledgement of an actual, physical act of murder.

The Weird Sisters, or any one member of that numinous triad, are equally suspect, their involvement facilitating the possibility of a witch as possible Third. Like Lady Macbeth, the witches' "masculine" traits are hinted at, Banquo himself remarking, "You should be women, / And yet your beards forbid me to interpret / That you are so" (1. 3. 47-49). Immediately subsequent to the banquet at which Banquo's murder is revealed, Hecate reprimands the Weird Sisters, demanding, "How did you dare / To trade and traffic with Macbeth / In riddles and affairs of death?" (3. 5. 3-5). Though her censure seems to derive primarily from indignation at her own exclusion from the action, Hecate's accusations

are ambiguous. This executive witch could equally be referring to the Weird Sisters' prophecies, which precipitate Macbeth's murders, or to a witch's physical involvement in the most recent murder. The timing of Hecate's arrival, so closely following the banquet, suggests that the Weird Sisters' supposed transgression had been effected quite recently. We might also consider Macbeth's Act 4 greeting to the witches: "How now, you secret, black and midnight hags? What is't you do?" he inquires, whereupon the witches in unison offer the cryptic reply, "a deed without a name" (4. 1. 48-49). In the previous act, Macbeth, anticipating his next murder, fretfully laments, "Good things of day begin to droop and drowse, / Whiles night's black agents to their preys do / rouse" (3. 3. 58-60). It's apparent that these dark "agents" await Banquo's slaying, and certainly, the witches qualify as potential vectors of Macbeth's hostile pursuit of fortune.

In what was perhaps the most authoritative treatise of Renaissance "Sorcerie an Witch-craft in speciall" (51) King James, in his instructive guide *Daemonologie*, indulged his fixation with the occult by elucidating both the effects and the alarming prevalence of witchcraft. Of the witch's supernatural abilities, he reports, "They can make spirites either to follow and trouble persones, or haunt certaine houses. and affraie oftentimes the inhabitants: as hath bene knowen to be done by our witches at this time" (47). Macbeth himself is haunted, both literally and figuratively, by his ambivalence and guilt, as well as by spectres, apparitions, and the otherworldly prophesies that precipitate his murderous spiral. By Act 5 his wife is bedeviled by a vague, psycho-spiritual affliction, her doctor insightfully recognizing that, "More needs she the divine than the physician" (5. 2. 78). James I addresses the approach that "spirites" take in afflicting their followers, advising that witches,

At their thirde meeting, makes a shew to be carefull, to
performe his _____ promises, either by teaching them
waies howe to get themselues reuenged, _____ if they be of
that sort: Or els by teaching them lessons, how by moste vilde

and vnlawfull meanes, they may obtaine gaine, and worldlie
commoditie, _____ if they be of the other sorte. (34)

The notion of witch-like spirits prescribing attainment of "worldlie commoditie" echoes Macbeth's plight, in which a trio of witches offer prophecies that prompt Macbeth to pursue "unvlawfull meanes." This possibility is reinforced by Lady Macbeth, who, in Act 1, scene 5, describes her husband's kingship as an inevitability "Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem / To have thee crowned withal" (1. 5. 32-33).

It stands to reason that the Third Murderer, who serves as implement of Macbeth's worldly pursuit, results, in some mystical manner, from Macbeth's dealings with his occult advisors. Educated Renaissance theatre goers, those versed in the studies of their King, might recognize Macbeth's visions and delusions not as mental failings, but as afflictions wrought by the insidious work of witchcraft. In the tradition of Macbeth's three witches and apparitions, the Murderers, especially the enigmatic Third, might easily be identified as one of those "spirites" sent abroad to "follow and trouble persones" (47). In *English Society 1580-1680*, Keith Wrightson discusses the centrality of "the unpredictable whim of supernatural powers" to Jacobean culture (201). Wrightson notes of Renaissance socio-religious convictions that "Misfortune was attributed not so much to the judgments of God as to ill-luck at best, or at worst the malign practice of witchcraft. . . To tamper with magic could only be to sup with the devil" (202). Macbeth, of course, "tampers with magic" in the form of witchcraft, clinging absolutely to the prophecies of the Weird Sisters and the apparitions. Theatre goers would almost certainly recognize Macbeth's affliction as the inevitable result of supernatural dealings.

Another possible candidate for *Macbeth's* Third Murderer, oddly overlooked in the critical corpus, is the playacting Porter, who, by assuming the role of "devil-porter" at Hell's entrance, identifies himself as a nocturnal, vaguely preternatural agent -- or at least an aspiring one. Macbeth's unidentified Third Murderer evinces a telling knowledge of palace comings and goings, information with which the Porter, by virtue of his profession, would be extensively familiar.

Other contenders for a likely Third have included Ross, Macduff, and even Macbeth himself. The case against Ross is specious at best, though Roman Polanski's 1971 film adaptation compellingly casts a savage Ross as Third Murderer. His presence unverified by dialogue until after the appearance of Banquo's ghost, Ross is unaccounted for at the critical moment, and could, logistically (though entirely circumstantially), be arraigned as Third Murderer. I would argue, however, that Ross lacks the supernatural complicity to assume the mysterious position of Third Murderer. If we're to consider Ross as the third killer, we could just as reasonably include Lennox in our speculations, or the nameless Old Man, or even Macduff. *Macbeth* is orchestrated in such a way that several of the drama's players might reasonably be held on suspicion of murder. It's an enigma that lacks sufficient evidence to ever definitively indict any single party, but one

that reinforces the powerful ambiguity with which the play's murderous actions are effected.

The notion of Macbeth himself as the Third Murderer is evocative, shocking, and, logistically and thematically, quite improbable. Macbeth relies not only on the physical actions of his hired killers, but also on the fleeting psychological relief attained by displacing guilt for Banquo's death onto a third party. He is never at ease as a killer, his state of mind vacillating throughout the play between pathological anxiety and a bitter, almost paranoid sense of ambition. Long before any ghosts appear, Macbeth is haunted by his own incipient actions, and troubled by an ambivalence that is swayed only temporarily and incompletely by his wife's tactics of intimidation and micromanagement. As Duncan's murder approaches, Macbeth expresses his anxious ambivalence, asking himself, "Why do I yield to that suggestion / whose horrid image doth unfix my hair / And make my seated heart knock at my ribs?" (1. 2. 147-149). The Murderers' usefulness to Macbeth's psyche is perhaps best demonstrated in Act 3, scene 4 when an agitated Macbeth confronts Banquo's spectre, insisting that "Thou canst not say I did it. Never shake / Thy gory locks at me" (3. 4. 61-62). While Macbeth cannot divest himself of his distress, he is accurate in his assertion that he can never be legally implicated in Banquo's actual murder. Employing the Murderers affords Macbeth a measure of peace during the arrangement of Banquo's death, though he is ultimately overtaken by guilt and anxiety.

In his discussion of what he terms Macbeth's "proleptic imagination," Harold Bloom observes that Macbeth "scarcely is conscious of an ambition, desire, or wish before he sees himself on the other side or shore, already having performed the crime that equivocally fulfills ambition" (Bloom 517). Having endured unrest as an actual killer, and cognizant of his own fragile mental state and iffy competence as a clandestine slayer, Macbeth's use of the murderers allows him to bridge the chasm between the need for Banquo's eradication and the completed act of homicide. The designation "Murderer" is unequivocal. While Macbeth might lack the ability to carry out Banquo's murder, he places that task into the decisive hands of an employee engaged solely for that purpose. Banquo's death is thus assured; his future will not rest in the irresolute and possibly faulty hands of Macbeth, but in the decisive hands of a Murderer. Macbeth prefaces Duncan's execution with the lament, "I go, and it is done" (2. 1. 75). Though he undertakes Duncan's slaying with an anguished mind, Macbeth does so with the decisive realization that his plan, if he follows through on it, *will* spell the end for Duncan.

Ironically, the delegation of Banquo's murder, an act designed to guarantee the slaying, also introduces an element of uncertainty into the proceedings. Macbeth creates the possibility that the deed may not, in fact, be accomplished -- a potential that proves accurate when the Murderers allow Fleance to escape. This uncertainty of outcome echoes Macbeth's own ambivalence at the prospect of a double murder. Prior to Duncan's murder, for instance, Macbeth, destabilized by the very prospect of killing, reveals his recognition that

Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man
That function is smothered in surmise. (1. 3. 150-154)

His visceral, prodromal distress at the possibility of killing Duncan riles Macbeth's conscience as thoroughly as the deed itself. These still-unvoiced intentions are, Macbeth suggests, paradoxical; he acknowledges overt distress at the consideration of murder, but recognizes it as an action on which he will invariably follow through.

The Murderers' necessity, then, is threefold: Their participation assuages Macbeth's pathological guilt at the prospect (and indeed, actual act) of murder. They act as figures of practical utility, by carrying out one of the play's most prominent slayings, and perpetuate the motif of occult threes, those figures whose cryptic interactions guide the various fortunes at play in *Macbeth*. In Act 3, scene 1, Macbeth offers his Murderers an explanation of his need for their services. His claims, while valid (he would, after all, engender animosity by executing Banquo openly), are inadequate, designed to coerce the hired hands into assuming the position of Murderer, while concealing the pathological pursuit of fortune that prescribes Banquo's death. Addressing this in an Act 3 soliloquy, Macbeth reveals that "There is none but he / Whose being I fear" (3. 1. 59-60). It would not, of course, be either hierarchically appropriate or rhetorically effective for Macbeth to allow his disenfranchised inferiors to perceive his anxieties towards their intended target. Revelation of his motivating fear of Banquo, or of his allegiance to the prophecies of a trio of witches and to apparitions that he alone can see, are not likely to engage the Murderers' loyalties. His explanatory speech fails to reveal that the killers will not only be carrying out a task that will allegedly better their own futures, but one that will ensure Macbeth's own fate, thereby enabling him to displace the criminal, psychologically damning act of murder onto expendable itinerants.

In *Daemonologie*, King James I proclaims that witches "can make some to be possessed with spirits, & so to become verie Daemoniacques: and this last sortie is verie possible likewise to the Deuill their Master to do, since he may easilie send his owne angells to trouble in what form he pleases" (47). Written to indulge the occult interests of a patron monarch, *Macbeth* is a play "possessed with spirits," mystic figures in the form of witches, apparitions, and an enigmatic Third Murderer, all of whom exacerbate intricate psychological tensions with murderous results. "The Deuill" is indeed at work in *Macbeth*. In a play focused on murdering and murderers, Macbeth is the capital killer, a demon himself, inspired and abetted by "dark agents" to slay Duncan, while effecting the murders by proxy of Banquo and the Macduff family. But the identity of "murderer" in *Macbeth* is fluid and often nonspecific, with most of the drama's deaths occurring off-stage and obscured by peculiar circumstances. Lending form to the categorical designation of "murderer" are the First, Second, and Third Murderers, figures of material and psychological utility to Macbeth, and whose presence fulfills the "thrice again" prophesy of the Weird Sisters, assuring that "the charm's wound up," and clinching the tragic series of murders that fulfills Macbeth's fortune (1. 3. 36-37).

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