CHAPTER 2

MACBETH: AMBITION DRIVEN INTO DARKNESS

With Macbeth we move from Roman to Christian times, from a deep sense of honor and pride in noble acts to sin and remorse; from a debate between an Epicurean and a Stoic to a fight between dark forces of hell and angelic forces of heaven. The politics of eleventh-century Scotland seem very strange in comparison with what we have seen of high political life in Rome, and they are. But the human problems perdure. The changes that Christianity brings to political life are, as we will see, real and far-reaching, but they do not destroy the permanent political questions. We are shown in the rule of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth the peculiar tyranny of bad or half Christians, and the eventual curing of Scotland by Malcolm, who is in contrast to his father, the pious Duncan, decidedly non-Christian.

Act I

Under stormy skies, three hags open the play speaking in a baffling, eerily confounding manner. In the questions put by the first hag, “When shall we three meet again? / In thunder, lightning, or in rain?” (1.1.1–2), three forces found together in nature are treated as if they could somehow be split up. The second hag’s reply is equally perplexing in its equivocation: “When the hurly-burly’s done, / When the battle’s lost and won.” And despite the looming storm and what will soon be referred to as the “fog and filthy air,” the third hag speaks of “the set of sun.” The hags have some knowledge of the future: they know that Macbeth will win the coming battle (“Upon the heath / There to meet with Macbeth”). They also have each a pet spirit with an ugly name, whose summonses they alone hear and creepily obey. What strange and spooky world have we entered? The hags mention air, fire (lightning), and water (rain); they don’t mention earth; they are, as Banquo will say of them, unearthly creatures (cf. 1.3.41–42).
Their conclusion, uttered in unison, makes the deep confusion explicit and universal: “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (1.1.11). Shakespeare has taken characters from a late episode in Holinshed’s chronicle and used them to set the preternatural stage upon which the politics of a Christian Scotland will play themselves out.

But who is this Macbeth to whom the hags have referred? He is introduced, but only by report, in scene two, where we also learn more generally of the political and military situation of Scotland. The Sergeant who reports Macbeth’s deeds has come recently from battle, “bloody” (1.2.1), the military action he describes began as “doubtful” (1.2.7). He delivers his report to the king of Scotland—Duncan—and his son Malcolm, recently held captive by Macdonwald. The latter is in rebellion against the king. Scotland is a very unsettled monarchy, and Macbeth leads the fight against the rebels. The Sergeant tells of how, “disdaining Fortune,” Macbeth cut “the slave” Macdonwald in half, navel to chin, and then beheaded him. And we learn from the report of Rosse (who, intriguingly, has suffered no wounds) that when the king of Norway came to Macdonwald’s relief, Macbeth defeated him as well. Macbeth thus appears immediately as a fierce fighter, a lion or an eagle, “Bellona’s bridegroom.” Or as the Sergeant had described both him and Banquo, with a Christian metaphor, “Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds / Or memorize another Golgatha, I cannot tell.” Macbeth’s martial valor is said to arm justice (1.2.29), that is, Duncan’s monarchic rule. But does Macbeth, like these faithful Christian followers of Duncan, consider that rule good and hence worth defending, or does he fight for other reasons?

We aren’t told what motivates the rebels but are left to gather it from the speeches of Duncan and his partisans. Duncan is as delighted with Rosse’s report of Macbeth’s success ("Great happiness!" [1.2.58]) as he had been with the Sergeant’s, and declares Macbeth the new Thane of Cawdor, to replace the one who joined the rebels and whom Duncan now condemns to death. Duncan is fully confident that Macbeth deserves this title—remarkably so, given the betrayal he has just suffered from its former holder. He sees only that Macbeth has fought valiantly on his behalf; it does not occur to him that Macbeth might be engaged in martial deeds for his own glory. The sequel will show Duncan’s judgment to be mistaken: Macbeth, the new Thane of Cawdor, will turn out more treacherous than the old. Duncan is, then, a less than wise, even a naïve, king. And he is soft: he does not lead his men into battle but relies for his victories on tough men like Macbeth. Holinshed had traced the rebellion against Duncan to the fact that he was too soft in punishing criminals; the taunting Macdonwald, Holinshed reports, called Duncan “a milksop, more meet to govern a sort of idle monks in some cloister, than to have rule over such valiant and hardy men of war as the Scots were.”