IS THIS A DAGGER?
2017

notes taken from *READING SHAKESPEARE'S SOLILOQUIES*: NEIL CORCORAN; ARDEN SHAKESPEARE and other sources

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THE SOLILOQUY (2.1.33 - 64)

(2.1.33-65)

'Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressèd 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.
Mine eyes are made the fools o' th' other senses,
Or else worth all the rest. I see thee still,
And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,
Which was not so before. There's no such thing.
It is the bloody business which informs
Thus to mine eyes. Now o'er the one half-world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse T
he curtained sleep. Witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's offerings, and withered murder,
Alarumed by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost. Thou sure and firm-set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
Thy very stones prate of my whereabout,
And take the present horror from the time,
Which now suits with it. Whiles I threat, he lives.
Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.'

A bell rings.

I go, and it is done. The bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell

He exits

MACBETH'S ASIDES IN ACT 1, SCENE 3

(1.3.117 - 160)

MACBETH, *aside* Glamis and Thane of Cawdor!
The greatest is behind. *To Ross and Angus.* Thanks
for your pains.
Aside to Banquo. Do you not hope your children
shall be kings,
When those that gave the Thane of Cawdor to me
Promised no less to them?

BANQUO That, trusted home,
Might yet enkindle you unto the crown,
Besides the Thane of Cawdor. But 'tis strange.
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray 's
In deepest consequence.—
Cousins, a word, I pray you. *They step aside.*

MACBETH, *aside* Two truths are told
As happy prologues to the swelling act
Of the imperial theme.—I thank you, gentlemen.
Aside. This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success
Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man
That function is smothered in surmise,
And nothing is but what is not.

BANQUO Look how our partner's rapt.

MACBETH, *aside*
If chance will have me king, why, chance may
crown me
Without my stir.
BANQUO New honors come upon him,
Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mold
But with the aid of use.
MACBETH, *aside* Come what come may,
Time and the hour runs through the roughest day.
BANQUO
Worthy Macbeth, we stay upon your leisure.
MACBETH
Give me your favor. My dull brain was wrought
With things forgotten. Kind gentlemen, your pains
Are registered where every day I turn
The leaf to read them. Let us toward the King.
Aside to Banquo. Think upon what hath chanced,
and at more time,
The interim having weighed it, let us speak
Our free hearts each to other.
BANQUO Very gladly.
MACBETH Till then, enough.—Come, friends.

ASIDES (1.3): MACBETH'S THOUGHTS ABOUT THE WITCHES

The aside lets us know that he regards the terms of the witches' prophecy 'As happy prologues to the swelling act / Of the Imperial theme' (1.3.30)

- This is another example of metatheatre, perhaps preparing the audience for the heightened drama which is about to unfold
    - He believes they have set in motion the drama of his own progress towards the throne.

ASIDES (1.3): INTRODUCING MURDER

one of the asides also introduces both the word 'murder' itself making Macbeth the first character in the play to speak the word and the fact that he 'has horrible imaginings'.

- 'My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,' (1.3.141)
    - The complex expression suggests Macbeth's mental agitation.

        - He seems to mean that the image of murder, although still only a fantasy and not a reality, is nonetheless so powerful that his whole being is in a state of turmoil
            - The grammar of this line is disconcerting: first, the 'thought' is personified by being assigned the capacity to possess; second the murder is strangely distanced by being possessed – especially when it possessed by something we'd expect to be co-referential (he's thinking of murder, so murder *is* his thought)

ASIDES (1.3): MURDER AND INTERNAL CHAOS

Macbeth says 'murder' itself and the fact that he 'has horrible imaginings' bring about a state of mind in which 'nothing is, but what is not' (1.3.144)

- this phrasing pivoting around the dividing comma is a form of antimetabole, a rhetorical trope in which the same words are repeated in inverse order.
    - here it suggests a kind of internal chaos as if Macbeth's consciousness itself is being sucked into the void between the phrase 'nothing is' and 'what is not' disappearing into the comma's trail.
        - His language is also paltering, like the Witches

ASIDES (1.3): ISOLATION

In one aside Macbeth abstracts himself from the others on stage so noticeably that Banquo comments on it

- 'look how our partner's rapt' (1.3.145)
    - Banquo's adjective 'rapt' is ironic because Macbeth's mind is certainly engulfed in thoughts and the turmoil of regicide
        - Perhaps this is also an indication that Banquo has become suspicious of Macbeth, therefore the play begins working up the tension between Banquo and Macbeth which will necessitate Banquo's murder
            - Macbeth's actions here also appear to symbolize isolation; the 4 asides he speaks become characteristic of him separating himself from society in order to prepare himself to 'carve out his own passage' or destiny

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SOLILOQUY: 'IF IT WERE DONE' (1.7. 1 - 28)

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in the 'if it were done' soliloquy Macbeth contemplates Duncan's virtues and anxiously ponders the assassination and its potential consequence:

- 'the murder of may return to plague the inventor'. (1.7.10)
    - He also makes it clear that as his kinsman host and subject he is more than usually applied to protect Duncan.
        - This soliloquy ends with Macbeth's insistence that he has no 'spur' to Action other than his 'vaulting ambition' and that he has not yet decided what to do.

- But by the time of the dagger soliloquy we have heard Lady Macbeth making plane into soliloquies her intention to act as the 'spur' he requires and have then seen her applying this spur by insinuating that the murder will prove his masculinity

SOLILOQUIES AND ASIDES: PSYCHOLOGICAL PREPARATION

Even though these several soliloquies and asides prepare us relatively well for the feverish State of Mind exhibited by the 'dagger' soliloquy, it still takes us aback.

- Macbeth's 'horrible imaginings' now become a form of delusion or hallucination as a dagger he thinks he sees in front of him seems as palpable as the one he actually possesses which he will presumably use to kill The King.

THE DAGGER SOLILOQUY: FORESHADOWING THE BANQUET SCENE

the hallucination foreshadows the banquet scene (3.4) in which Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost although no one else on stage can.

- Lady Macbeth - both psychoanalyst and literary critic - herself draws attention to the equivalence in that scene when she tells her husband That banquo's Ghost is 'the very painting of your fear: / This is the air-drawn dagger which you said / Led you to Duncan' (3.4.58 - 60).
    - This lets us know too that Macbeth has by now confessed to her the terrors of his soliloquy which is rich testimony to the deep and deeply disquieting intimacy of this marriage and also to Shakespeare's exceptional powers of rendering the social and psychological density of human relationship in the briefest of touches and with what scenes and almost uncannily synoptic view of his text.

MURDER AND SEEING GHOSTS

Lady Macbeth's diagnosis marks a further stage in the increasingly hallucinatory solitude into which Macbeth is by then moving, and the dagger soliloquy presages the terrifying first scene of Act 4 , in which Macbeth's encounter with the witches culminates in his being visited by the three apparitions of armed head, bloody child and child crowned with a tree in his head.

- in the dagger soliloquy Macbeth says that murder moves towards his design 'like a ghost'
    - one consequence of his own act of murder is that he does indeed see ghosts.

ACTORS AND THE DAGGER

An actor's gestures will underline the effects of hallucination.

- in Orson Welles expressionist film version (1948), for instance, Macbeth Clutches at the air, his fingers snagging on nothing, the gesture carried over from stage performance but enhanced by voice over technique and lighting, which hits his face in close-up in the chiaroscuro of surrounding Darkness.

MACBETH'S HALLUCINATION: INTERNAL DEBATE (2.1.)

Macbeth's hallucination fluctuates as he concentrates his mind on his speech and the dagger appears to acquire 'gouts of blood' (2.1.46), as if the deed has already been done.

- yet he is fully aware of the potential unreality of what he 'sees', realising that this may be merely a function of his own consciousness, a delusion.
    - he is self-reflective even while in a state of emotional and psychological extremity.
        - Self-reflection is presented as a form of internal debate - in Macbeth's anguished questions to the object of hallucination about his own reality and in the Desperate rapidity of his self-correction.
            - 'I have thee not, and yet I see thee still
              Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
              To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but
              A dagger of the mind, false creation
              Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?'
                - There is also a distinct repetition of questions, continuing the interrogative mood set up by the Witches at the start of the play
                    - It helps to reinforce the internal debate Macbeth is having with himself

SELF-REFLECTION IN SHAKESPEARE'S SOLILOQUIES

the capacity for self-reflection is a characterstic of Shakespearean soliloquy.

- the tragic soliloquists register their own state of mind with subtle discernment even as they endure extreme distress or are trapped in and then gradually overwhelmed by the plugs that they themselves have set in motion or which have been maliciously or accidentally set in motion for them.

SOLILOQUIES, IRONY AND OUR MORAL JUDGMENT (2.1.42 - 51)

in their soliloquies Shakespeare's tragic heroes and heroines seem to be in the philosopher Hegel's phrase. 'free agents of themselves', but in reality, they are doomed by the dramatic plots in which they figure.

- the soliloquies tend therefore to be inherently ironic.
    - strung between freedom or the illusion of freedom and necessity, the tragic soliloquist stages the encounter between his or herself-conception and the plays conception of him or her.

- that discrepancy produces a moral judgement - we may well for instance choose to read self-conception as self-deception.
    - even so there are cases where it's plain that soliloquists can judge themselves more incisively than we ever can.
        - soliloquy is the site of both self-knowledge and self-delusion.
            - 'Thou marshal'st me the way I was going
              And such an instrument I was to use.
              Mine eyes are made the fools o'th' other senses
              Or else worth the rest. I see thee still,
              And, on thy blade and dudgeon, gouts of blood,
              Which was not so before. There's no such thing.
              It is the bloody business which informs
              Thus to mine eyes. Now o'er the one-half world
              Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
              The curtained sleep' (2.1.42 - 51)

MACBETH'S SOLILOQUY AS SELF-COMMUNION

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that Macbeth's soliloquy seems a form of self-communion is an impression conveyed partly by his prominent personal pronouns and possessive adjectives.

- His opening 3 lines alone contain in rapid succession…
    - I
    - Me
    - My
    - Me
    - I
    - I
        - …these are in emphatically reinforced by the grammar of vocative address;
            - to the imagined dagger;
            - to the earth itself;
            - and to the absent Duncan sleeping somewhere close by
                - the soliloquy proceeds therefore as a kind of imaginative summoning in which absent things are conjured into vivid aural presence by the rich intensity of the soliloquist's address.
                    - such an exclamatory address is known by the rhetorical term 'apostrophe'.
                        - frequent in Shakespearean soliloquy, even endemic to it, 'apostrophe' is usually an absent person or thing - but not always, as we shall see below in prince Hal's address to the Crown in Henry IV part 2.

SOLILOQUIES AND INHERENT DRAMATIC IRONY

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but the soliloquy is not merely self-communion

- because whether as readers or audience members, we are given access to it.
    - in the crucial paradox of soliloquy, we are part of this conversation that Macbeth is having with himself.
        - it's a kind of dramatic irony formally inherent in soliloquy that, while soliloquists may not realise that an audience is present to their self -communing, the actors of course always do.
            - a great deal as we shall see attaches to this.
                - in the case of The Dagger soliloquy, the consequence of Macbeth's self-debate is that we sympathize with him in the way Thomas de Quincey says we do in his essay 'on the knocking of the gate in Macbeth' (1823)
                    - with a ' sympathy of comprehension, a sympathy by which we enter into his feelings and are made to understand them, - not a sympathy of pity or approbation'.
                        - we experience Macbeth's agitated anxiety as he himself experiences it and at the same time.
                            - the soliloquy therefore appears to give us privileged access to this character in the insecure process of decision-making and self-invention.
                                - we are drawn to the vulnerability of his anguish even as we are repelled by the decision itself.

IMAGINING THE REALITY OF CONSEQUENCE

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this soliloquy also makes potential consequence almost as palpable as the hallucinatory dagger.

- when Macbeth says to the dagger 'thou marshall'st me the way I was going', he makes his own actions seem eerily compelled from without as well as initiated from within.
    - in this case, the dagger acts as the witches do, guiding Macbeth on the path he may well have taken anyway, and they are sometimes represented theatrically or cinematically as Macbeth hallucinations.
        - the Witches' language seems to penetrate this soliloquy when Macbeth's 'it is done' echoes the first Witches 'I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do' (1.3.10),
            - the words 'do', 'done' and 'deed' are pervasive in the play even to the extent of echoing in some of its proper names
                - 'Duncan'
                - 'Donalbain'
                - 'Dunsinane'
                    - htis makes Macbeth seem almost scripted by the Witches, driven by them in the very forms of his self-expression,
                        - his first line in the play, 'so foul and fair a day I have not seen' (1.3.38), has already echoed the Witches' chant 'fair is foul and foul is fair', which is also an example of antimetabole.
                            - as such it's one of the plays many figures of repetition, echo, eturn and refrain.

- these unnervingly contribute to the way the language of Macbeth seems almost impacted, horribly turned in upon itself, doubled and duplicitous, notably so in the Witches' prophecy that Macbeth disastrously understands: that 'none of woman born' can hill him.

'THE BLOODY BUSINESS': EUPHAMISTIC LANGUAGE

When Macbeth refers to the murder of Duncan as 'the bloody business', it's also a repetition, since his wife has earlier called it 'this night's great business' (1.5.68).

- Enter MACBETH

  Great Glamis! worthy Cawdor!
  Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter!
  Thy letters have transported me beyond
  This ignorant present, and I feel now
  The future in the instant.

  MACBETH
  My dearest love,
  Duncan comes here to-night.

  LADY MACBETH
  And when goes hence?

  MACBETH
  To-morrow, as he purposes.

  LADY MACBETH
  O, never
  Shall sun that morrow see!
  Your face, my thane, is as a book where men
  May read strange matters. To beguile the time,
  Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
  Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower,
  But be the serpent under't. He that's coming
  Must be provided for: and you shall put
  This night's **great business** into my dispatch;
  Which shall to all our nights and days to come
  Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom.
  MACBETH
  We will speak further.

  LADY MACBETH

Only look up clear;
To alter favour ever is to fear:
Leave all the rest to me.

- the hideous complicity of husband and wife seems an element of Macbeth's introspection itself.
    - it's as though Lady Macbeth is, like the Witches, whispering inside his head.
        - the phrases are euphemisms; both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth use other euphemistic phrases for murder too during the play.
            - Macbeth's euphemism is in fact less euphemistic than his wife's, since it at least acknowledges that the business is 'bloody' rather than 'great',
                - but their shared use of the word makes them partners in crime as well as marriage - 'business' partners, indeed, intent on upward social mobility.
                    - the euphemism also makes it seem that, in the same motion of mind, they withdraw from the crime even as they will it into being.
                        - It's 'consequence' therefore appears almost written into the language of its inception.
                            - when the euphemisms finally give way to the 'consequence' itself, Macbeth and his wife, Banquo and Macduff's wife and children are all violently dead, and the 'business' revealed as indeed both 'great' and extremely 'bloody'.
                                - it's apt therefore that words associated with the murder repeated throughout the play –
                                - 'time'
                                - 'hand'
                                - 'blood'
                                - 'ghost' - also figure prominently in the soliloquy.

THE 'HALF WORLD' AND MACBETH'S STATE OF MIND

The soliloquy's hallucinatory quality is intensified by the way Macbeth extracts himself from his immediate situation to identify the 'half-world' itself - the Hemisphere - as expressive of his own state of mind

- seeing it acted upon by the nightmare personifications of witchcraft and murder and the mythological and semi legendary figures of Hecate and Tarquin.
    - when the wolf that is Murder's sentinel is said to move with 'stealthy pace', the blank verse of Macbeth's lines itself moves with a stealthy, insinuating, alliterative pace, as six 'w' sounds closely follow one another:
        - 'withered murder, / Alarumed by his sentinel, the wolf, / Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace...'
            - this is the OED's first citation for the word 'stealthy';
                - And although the recent development of databases for early modern words and texts has taught us to be sceptical about such ascriptions of 'first usage', it may not be too fanciful to think that Shakespeare has here invented the word out of his own need for it, discovering it in his versification itself.

- in Rupert Goold's BBC film version of the play (2010), Macbeth (Patrick Stewart) howls out the word ' howl's' as if he is momentarily a wolf with terrifyingly appropriate affect.

MACBETH'S IMAGINATION AND SUPERNATURAL AGENCY

Hecate is the goddess of the Moon and also of sorcery, so the sense that Macbeth's imagination is subject to supernatural agency is reinforced;

- Hecate subsequently appears as a character on stage with the Witches in both Act 3 scene 5 - sometimes thought to have been written by Thomas Middleton - and in the tremendous first scene of Act 4.
    - these figures appeared therefore to move in Macbeth's mind and then out from it, like the paradigms of perverse behaviour, almost like Freudian archetypes.
        - although the Freudian concept of the unconscious was obviously unavailable to Shakespeare, he certainly understood it's workings and Freud's psychoanalytical paradigms were themselves deeply influenced by Shakespeare (especially Hamlet) as well as by the Greek myths from which he derived his terminology.
            - Shakespeare has himself been extensively read in relation to Freudian Theory, and I cite an example relating to Richard III in part 4.

MACBETH AND HUMAN DEPRAVITY

the Tarquin who moves with 'ravishing strides, towards his design' as an analogy for the Stealth of the Wolf is the Roman rapist whose story Shakespeare had told in his long poem The Rape of Lucrece (1593 - 4).

- the allusion is therefore self-referential (and would probably have been recognised as such by at least some of the place original audience) and so also a form of repetition.
    - it offers a classical instance of human depravity as a shadowy presence behind what Macbeth calls 'the present horror' of the soliloquy's moment, the final one before he commits his own depraved act.

THE RHYMING COUPLET CONCLUSION

This soliloquy ends the scene in which is spoken, as many Shakespearean soliloquies do, and, as many also do, it ends with a couplet, which is inherently more memorable, and more summative, than blank verse.

- when it ends as seen in this intensely memorable way, a soliloquy has an especially powerful kind of authority.
    - the pause preceding it impresses it on the readers or audiences mind more than is possible for a soliloquy embedded in dialogue,
        - and the stage picture of the soliloquist isolated and alone is framed more definitively.
            - Macbeth's soliloquy is unusual in ending in fact with two couplets, separated by an unrhymed line,

- or, as we might even say, in ending twice. In the first:
  - 'whiles I threat, he lives;
    Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives'
    - Macbeth chastises himself for the delay this very soliloquy, with its many 'words', represents, just as Hamlet chastises himself in a soliloquy for his delay in Killing Claudius.
      - then the bell sounds, interrupting the soliloquy, and in the following unrhyming line Macbeth notes it's urgent 'invitation' to him.
        - He then brings the soliloquy to what we might call a final end with his grim admonition to the absent King he's about to kill.
        - this makes clear his dreadful knowledge that, in the Christian dispensation apparently accepted by the play, this action will have metaphysical as well as physical consequences.

Macbeth fully understands that he may be eternally damning as well as murdering his victim:

- 'hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell / That summons thee to heaven or to hell.'
  - that this soliloquy should end twice may be read as one final instance in it of echo, repetition and inversion as well as the conclusion of its strategy of postponement.
    - it's as if Macbeth must work himself up to an ultimate verbal intensity at least once again before his very words themselves pitch him, persuaded at last by his own rhetoric, towards what has only now become inevitable action.

PSYCHOLOGY OF AMBITION

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-  /    - /  -   /     - /   -  /   -
Is this a dagger which I see before me,
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The opening line's feminine ending is a versified reinforcement of Macbeth's uncertainty at suddenly seeing the vision of a spectral dagger. Otherwise, the line scans normally. The dagger's appearance can be viewed ambiguously; is it an omen that Macbeth should proceed, or is it a final warning of his conscience? Macbeth's dismissal of the dagger later in the speech would suggest that he's trying to make himself believe that it's a good sign, but how would you interpret the appearance of a bloody dagger hovering before your eyes right before you were due to commit murder?

```
-   /  -   /      -  /     /     -   -  /      -
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
```

The trochaic inversion in the middle of this line is another verse technique that Shakespeare frequently employs following a caesura. The inversion sandwiches two stresses around the end of a sentence, and is useful in giving a greater emphasis to the beginning of the new thought (in this case, he wants to grasp it to see if it's real). Also, the ending scansion of a feminine ending on top of the end-stop of "Come, let me clutch thee" continues the weak ending tension mirroring Macbeth's doubt about this dagger (and what it may portend).

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- /    -    /    -   /   - /   -    /
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I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
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Straight iambic pentameter here. The unbroken rhythm of the verse works in conjunction with the end-stops of this line and the line above; this is not a throwaway line. The stresses also highlight the key words in the parallelism (have, not, yet, see, still). Macbeth now has to make sense of this paradox; he plainly sees the dagger, it's right there in front of him, and yet he cannot lay hands upon it. The starkness of the line helps to punctuate the subtle change in Macbeth's tone as he tries to puzzle through this vision in the next few lines. Note that at this point, he sees a dagger and nothing more.

```
-   -    /    / -   /  -    /  - /
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
```

Note here how the regularity of the iambic rhythm and the enjambment of the lines through "heat-oppressèd brain" work together to quicken the tempo from the heavier phrasing and punctuation in the beginning. In this context, **fatal** doesn't quite denote "deadly" (although that makes a ripe *double entendre*) than it does "foreboding mischief and death; ominous" or, arguably, "instrumental to destiny." (*Fatal* derives from Middle French via the Latin *fatum*, meaning prophecy or doom—literally, *what has been spoken.*) **Sensible** here denotes "perceptible, tangible" when viewed in its relation to the end of Macbeth's question.

```
-  /  -    /  -  /      -  /   -    /
To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but
```

Feeling in this line denotes "the sense of touch." The answer to Macbeth's rhetorical question is, of course, "no" since he's already tried to clutch the dagger and failed. However, the potent combination of language and Macbeth addressing this dagger as if it were a character onstage forces the audience to visualize that dagger hovering in front of him.

```
- /  -   /  -   /     - /     -  / -
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
```

"Dagger of the mind" can read in two ways. First, there's the literal contrast of tangible reality and Macbeth's imagination. Second, you have metaphor of Macbeth's guilt—and doubt—manifesting itself as a vision as he waits upon the signal from his wife. **False** in this context plays upon a number of meanings. While the primary reading is "unreal," shades of "deceitful, inconstant; not to be trusted" are equally applicable. Keep in mind that Macbeth is asking three questions in the first seven lines, which reflects the struggle that Macbeth is still undergoing in coming to terms with his intended crime.

```
-  /  -    /    -   /    -  /   -  /
Proceeding from the heat-oppressèd brain?
```

Macbeth acknowledges that the dagger that has appeared could be a trick of his imagination (in this case, perhaps induced by a fever). **Proceeding** is used in its meaning of "issuing or emanating," while **heat-oppressèd** is Shakespeare's poetic way of saying "fevered." The usage of fever is another simple but amazingly effective piece of imagery in this speech. Fever is a symptom of a disease in its literal meaning. As a metaphor, fever denotes a state of heightened or intense emotion or activity. The disease, in this instance, is ambition.

```
- /   -    /    -  /    -  /  - /
I see thee yet, in form as palpable
```

Macbeth acknowledges the dagger again. It's interesting how Shakespeare uses the repetition of "I see" throughout the early part of the soliloquy. It creates a rhetorical buildup of tension as Shakespeare creates a little more detail each time, then returns with "I see thee still" or "I see thee yet" as a refrain. **Palpable** (Middle English: from the Latin *palpare*, "to stroke, caress") denotes "capable of being touched or handled," with a possible secondary meaning of "easily perceived" in this context. And just in case the verbal imagery of the dagger hasn't been working for the audience, Macbeth draws his own dagger to create supporting visual imagery.

```
-  /    -     /   - /
As this which now I draw.
```

There are two points of interest here. First, the line is only three feet (or six syllables). This could point to a corruption in the text as it was transcribed prior to its First Folio edition. Although some lines throughout the canon are eight, six, or even four syllables, these are usually limited to two situations: the end of a speech or scene, or when Shakespeare is splitting the poetic line between two different speakers in a dialogue. Since this line represents neither scenario, the line may indeed have lost a foot or two between Shakespeare's writing of *Macbeth* and the first print edition of the text. Second, notice also how Shakespeare writes stage direction into this speech. It won't make much sense here if Macbeth doesn't draw his dagger somewhere around uttering the line.

```
-    /   -       /  -   /   -    / -   /  -
Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going;
```

In this line, Macbeth accepts the dagger as an omen. **Marshall** in this context means "to guide or usher," so that Macbeth is saying, "you seem to guide me where I was already headed." This reads both literally (i.e., the dagger is guiding him toward Duncan's chambers) and figuratively (i.e., the dagger is a call for him to stop debating). Incidentally, this usage of *marshall* as a verb derives from its origin denoting an official in charge of administration of cavalry; the etymology stems from Middle English via Old French *mareschal*, which seems to derive from the Old High Germanic *marahscalc* (where *marah* = "horse" and *scalc* = "servant"). Enough on *marshall* for now, lest we start beating a dead horse.

```
-   /    -  /   - -    - /   -  /
And such an instrument I was to use.
```

While the last two syllables of **instrument** (meaning "tool; agent or author") could technically scan as an iamb within the rhythm of the line, it seems a little sing-song here. Hence, I've scanned the third foot as a pyrrhic. Other than syllables and scansion, do you think there's a reason behind Shakespeare's choice of the word *instrument* in this line rather than *weapon* or *implement*?

```
-    /    -   /    -   /     -  -   /  -  /  -
Mine eyes are made the fools o' the other senses,
```

The twelve syllables of this line almost tempts the reader to scan it as an alexandrine, rather than pentameter. However, Shakespeare rarely employs twelve syllables at all in his works. In addition both stylistic analysis and critical consensus largely dismiss the idea that Shakespeare consciously employed the alexandrine line as a variant to his blank verse. Nor is it a particularly English tradition. When they are employed deliberately in English verse, alexandrine lines typically break at the midpoint with a caesura. There is no such syntactic parallelism in this line. It's just as easy to say (and as difficult to prove) that the line is a feminine ending in pentameter combined with a trisyllabic substitution in the fourth foot (rendering the line iamb/iamb/iamb/anapest/iamb, with an extra unstressed syllable). Semantics aside, it seems unlikely that Shakespeare said at any time, "I think I'll use an alexandrine here." By the by, Macbeth's observation in this line and the next is that "either my sight is being deceived or all my other senses are."

```
-  /    /     /   -   /     - /   -    /
Or else worth all the rest; I see thee still,
```

Scan "worth" as unstressed, if you like, which makes the line straight iambic pentameter. Both "else" and "worth" tend to take a similar relative stress to each other when the line is spoken, however, which leads me to scan the second foot as a spondee. Macbeth makes yet another address to the dagger, this time signifying the darker turn that the imagery of the speech will take. "I see thee still" is potent because of both its repetition and the forceful caesura following the third foot of the line.

```
-   /  -   /     -   /  -    /     -  /
And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,
```

Again, the straight iambic rhythm and mostly monosyllabic construction of the line helps to speed along the pace. You can imagine Macbeth's heartbeat quickening here as bloody flecks suddenly appear on the dagger. **Dudgeon** (Middle English *dogeon*, from Anglo-French *digeon*, originally denoting "a wood used especially for dagger hilts") refers to the handle of the dagger; **gouts** (Middle English *goute* via Old French *gout*, from Latin *gutta* or "drop") means "drops." The meaning derives from the fact that the disease that still bears this name resulted from drops of morbid humors. For a bit of Shakespearean trivia, this line is the only usage of the word **dudgeon** in the entire canon.

```
-     -   /   /  -  /    -       /  -    /
Which was not so before. There's no such thing:
```

The pyrrhic/spondee scansion at the beginning of this line is based on the phrasing and syntax. "Not so" pronounced with equal weight makes more sense than just punching the "not" in the phrase. The caesura is important because the statement "there's no such thing" is the turning point in the speech. Macbeth, who has seen the dagger and spent the first 14½ lines of this soliloquy waxing eloquent about its portent, takes a deep breath—and abruptly dismisses the vision in four terse syllables. It's my contention that this is when Macbeth finally resolves to kill Duncan. Whether or not he's bucking himself up with false courage is a moot point. Macbeth takes in the sight of blood appearing on the dagger and decides that he's seen enough.

```
-  -  -   /   -  /   -    /     - /
It is the bloody business which informs
```

Again, the scansion of the first foot as a pyrrhic is subjectively based on natural inflection rather than strict meter. Building on the sentiment of the previous line, Macbeth tells himself that his mind is playing tricks on his eyes because of stress and the nature of his intended crime. **Inform** in this line denotes "to form or shape; to manifest," although it reflects some of its more common meaning "to communicate or tell" at the same time.

```
/    -  -    /     /   -    -   /   -    /
Thus to mine eyes. Now o'er the one half world
```

This line represents not one, but two classic uses of trochaic inversion. Shakespeare is known to use a trochee at the beginning of a line in blank verse or coming out of a caesuraas a standard variant to the meter. Here we have both. The term **one half world** refers the division between night and day (in this case, Macbeth is referring to night).

```
/ -    -     /     -   /  -   /      - /
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
```

Ah, poetic reverie. Shakespeare will spend the next seven lines wrapping Macbeth's speech in dark imagery to set the mood. Although on a purely practical level the verse between "thus to mine eyes" and "thou sure and firm-set earth" might seem superfluous or merely embellishment, it is, after all, dramatic poetry. The verse in this part of the speech is all about tone, and the shift from emotional to rhetorical can be seen as signaling the change in Macbeth from trusted kinsman to murderer preparing himself for the deed. **Nature seems dead** refers to the effect of night and darkness, the silence of the night; metaphorically, Macbeth might also be referring to human nature. **Abuse** (Middle English *abusen*, from Old French *abus*, via the Latin past participle *abusus* meaning "to misuse") had a broader definition in Shakespeare's day; in this context, it either means "corrupt" or "deceive," depending upon the scholar and edition.

```
-   /  -      /      /    -     / -  /
The curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates
```

Here again we see a trochee following a caesura in a standard Shakespeare variation. **Curtain'd sleep** in this context is a *double entendre* that plays upon the literal meaning of bedcurtains and a more figurative meaning of "veiled" that suggests hidden from consciousness. **Celebrate** denotes the solemn performance of rites rather than its more festive connotations with which we associate its use.

```
/    /  -     /  - /     -   /  -     /  -
Pale Hecate's offerings, and wither'd Murder,
```

The reference to **Hecate** exhibits the Renaissance view of her as a goddess of night and witchcraft; **pale** reflects her association with the moon. The main image here is of witches performing sacrifices to Hecate during the night. This foreshadows Macbeth's encounter with the witches and Hecate in Act IV, sc. i. Macbeth then continues by evoking the image of **wither'd Murder**, in which Shakespeare employs personification to transform the general concept of murder into an ancient, spectral presence (**withered** = "gaunt, specter-like"), stalking the land for his victims.

```
-  / -   /  -   /  - /    -   /
Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,
```

Alarum'd denotes a call to arms. **Sentinel**, as it does today, means "one who keeps watch or stands guard." The syntax of this clause and the ones that follow it can sometimes give casual readers trouble. The subject is **Murder**, who has a wolf for a lookout. Metaphorically, the wolf alarms his master because Macbeth is ready to murder Duncan.

```
-     /      -   /      /    -    -   /    -   /
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
```

Again, lest there be pronoun confusion, it's the wolf's howl and Murder's stealthy pace. **Watch** denotes the scheduled watchword or cry—in this case, the howl of the wolf—that marks the passing of time for Murder. It also reinforces the notion that evil comes calling in the dark of night. Shakespeare is veritably laying on the haunted house imagery by this time. First, we had a bunch of witches performing horrible sacrifices to Hecate; now we have the Grim Reaper stalking the land as a wolf howls in the night. Shakespeare, of course, had neither stage lighting nor a sound system to help him, so he had to do much of this kind of mood-setting within his speeches.

```
-    /  -      /  - -    /        -       /   -  /
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
```

Shakespeare seems to substitute an anapest for the third foot in the line. That scansion certainly makes more sense than to argue that the end of the line scans pyrrhic/trochee/trochee with a masculine ending. More importantly in this

line, we have what may be the authorial equivalent of winking at the audience. Of course, Shakespeare wrote a fairly popular poem back in the day titled *The Rape of Lucrece*, which features an extended description of Tarquin creeping in the night toward Lucrece's bedchamber. Not only does this line evoke comparative imagery between poem and play, it serves as a wry nod to Shakespeare's own material. The irony would likely not have been missed by an Elizabethan audience.

```
/     -    - /      -    /    -   /    -   /
Moves like a ghost. Thou sure and firm-set earth,
```

After a trochaic inversion, Macbeth ends his poetic riff on Murder stalking like a ghost in the night. The interesting thing about the imagery following the caesura is the contrast between the supernatural that Macbeth has experienced or evoked within the speech and his plea to "thou sure and firm-set earth." It's another signpost within the verses; Macbeth's resolve builds steam as the time for action draws ever nearer.

```
/    /   -  /     -     /   -    /     -   /
Hear not my steps which way they walk, for fear
```

I've scanned the first foot as a spondee to give the equal emphasis to the first two syllables; it could technically scan as an iamb, but this scansion gives more punch to "hear" as the main verb of the sentence. Macbeth asks the earth to ignore him as he stalks toward Duncan's chamber.

```
-   / -  /      /     -  -  /    - /
Thy very stones prate of my whereabout
```

Prate literally means "to tattle." Although it's tempting to read **whereabout** as "location," it actually denotes "purpose." Macbeth is saying that if the earth actually hears his footsteps, the stones themselves might betray his intention. It hearkens to the notion that murdering the king is a crime against Nature itself.

```
-   /    -   /  -    /  -   /    -   /
And take the present horror from the time
```

The verse "And take...with it" gives even scholars some pause about its literal and/or figurative meaning. In the interest of simplicity, let's examine a few salient words. **Take** most literally denotes "remove" (as in "take away") in this context, while **present** denotes "immediate" and **horror** speaks for itself. **Time** has to be viewed within the context of its entire phrase; it refers both to the current time (night) and the implication that the situation is the right opportunity.

```
-     /   /     -    -   /      - /       -  /
Which now suits with it. Whiles I threat, he lives:
```

Finally, the troublesome sentence that started four lines ago ends with the phrase "which now suits with it." Hence, my reading of the latter part of this verse is "the stones give me away and make me lose this perfect opportunity." I've read a number of different interpretations on this line and its predecessor, and Occam's Razor is the best policy considering the amount of ink already spilled on the subject. I think the simpler reading in this instance is best. Moving on past the caesura in the line, Macbeth comes out of his reverie with the realization that his threats aren't equivalent to action.

```
/     -  -   /    -  /     -   /    /      /
Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.
```

The initial trochee puts emphasis on **words**, and the rest of the stresses emphasize the parallel contrast within the line. **Breath** seems to play as a metaphor for both words and life. Depending upon the interpretation here, Macbeth either says, "words are no match for deeds" or "words are the death of deeds." The choice of interpretation probably has much to do with whether one is arguing that Macbeth is at all on the fence at this point in the speech. Regardless, the tolling of the bell in the next line sounds doom for Duncan—Macbeth's ambition ultimately has won out.

POST-MURDER: MACBETH'S GUILT

- 2.2.52 - 4
  MACBETH
  I'll go no more
  I am afraid to think what I have done;
  Look on't again, I dare not
- 2.2.58 – 64
  Exit. Knock within
  MACBETH
  Whence is that knocking?
  How is't with me, when every noise appals me?
  What hands are here? Ha: they pluck out mine eyes.
  Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
  Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
  The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
  Making the green, one red.
    - 'knocking' may have been associated with the ominous knocking of plague-searchers
      - It is another way Shakespeare creates an acoustic of fear, like the 'thunder' that accompanies the witches
        - It is the first of many offstage knockings
          - Here conveying the sense of the outside world breaking in on the characters' inner space
            - It is a sign of guilt and a recognition of the real-world consequences of his actions
    - 'appal' means to alarm but in the etymological sense of the word, it means to make pale
    - 'multitudinous' was new to the period, first recorded in Jonson. B.
      - It would have been striking in its polysyllabic and Latinate conjunction with the rare word 'incarnadine'
    - 'incarnadine' means to redden, as with blood
    - 'the green, one red'
- 2.2.74 - 6
  MACBETH
  To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself.
  Wake Duncan with thy knocking. I would thou
  couldst
    - This appears to be Macbeth's recognition of his own self-alienation

- 'Know thyself' is an ancient injunction for achieving wisdom but Macbeth suggests to himself that 'twere best not know myself', which suggests in order to forget about his 'deed', he should alienate himself from himself.
    - Therefore, if knowing yourself is the path to wisdom, not knowing thyself is the past to foolishness and the creation of more deeds that will have dire consequences.