

# Shakespeare, Virgil and the Politics of Violence

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For I shall sing of Battels, Blood and Rage,  
Which haughty Princes, and their People did engage;  
Dryden's translation of Virgil's *Aeneid*, VII, 60

Blood hath been shed ere now, i' th' olden time,  
Ere humane statute purg'd the gentle weal;  
*Macbeth*, III.iv.74-5

For a play designed to compliment a self-proclaimed pacifist, *Macbeth* has something decidedly odd about it. While apparently celebrating such eirenic 'king-becoming graces' as 'Justice, Verity, Temperance, Stableness, Bounty, Perseverance, Mercy, Lowliness, Devotion, Patience, Courage, Fortitude' (IV.iii.91-4),<sup>1</sup> the play shows you men defending those virtues, not with reluctant resort to force, but with vengeance, rage, and savage violence. The former values are traditionally associated with the New Testament, the latter with heroic, pagan culture. Symptomatic of this confusion of values is the appeal - repeated throughout the play - to manhood. For Malcolm, as for Lady Macbeth, true manliness is synonymous with heroic *virtù*; for Macduff the warrior's valour must be tempered by the more 'civilised' virtues of feeling and compassion. I shall argue that this studied ambivalence on the question of manhood points to a larger ethical and political problem in *Macbeth*, namely, the use of violence in the pursuit of peaceful ends. This is not a problem that is confined to the world of bourgeois-capitalist individualism that Cultural-Materialist criticism of the play sees adumbrated in James I's 'absolutist' regime; it is one that has always concerned intellectuals at times of international upheaval or violent political change. It may be one reason why Virgil's *Aeneid* - another fictionalised poetic history involving manhood and warfare - seems to have spoken so directly to the early 17th century.

## BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS

Once Duncan has been assassinated, those who oppose Macbeth's tyrannical rule themselves become rebels against an anointed ruler. As if in confirmation of the anomaly, both groups justify their actions in terms of an heroic conception of manhood. Just as Lady Macbeth had appealed to her husband's masculinity in her attempt to persuade him to depose Duncan ('When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man, I.vii, 49-51), so the new rebels, in seeking to oust their barbaric ruler, also evoke ideas of heroic manhood. The man destined to kill Scotland's warrior-tyrant is Macduff. What provides Macduff with the personal motive for tyrannicide is the murder of his wife and children. But without Malcolm's incitement to vengeance it is doubtful whether this gentle and unwarlike noble would have had the

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations from Shakespeare are from *The Complete Works*, edited by Peter Alexander (London and Glasgow: Collins, 1951).

resolution to kill his country's enemy. When he learns of the slaughter of his family Macduff is at first too stunned to speak, so Malcolm urges him to give voice to his feelings:

Merciful Heaven! -

What, man! Ne'er pull your hat upon your brows:  
Give sorrow words; the grief, that does not speak,  
Whispers the o'er fraught heart, and bids it break. (IV.iii.207-10)

But Macduff can only whisper feebly, 'My children too? ... My wife kill'd too?'. When it is clear that there is no hope, Macduff is once more silent. So again Malcolm tries to stir him into action, urging him to turn grief to vengeance:

Be comforted:

Let's make us med'cines of our great revenge,  
To cure this deadly grief. (231-5)

Roused by Malcolm's words, Macduff curses the tyrant who has wiped out his family, but even as he does so his thoughts turn tearfully to his 'pretty chickens, and their dam' (218) all slaughtered by Macbeth's hired murderers. When Malcolm tells him to confront his grief 'like a man', Macduff replies that he must also 'feel it as a man'; with these words he sinks into maudlin self-pity, blaming himself for the deaths of his wife and children:

Sinful Macduff!

They were all struck for thee. Naught that I am,  
Not for their own demerits, but for mine,  
Fell slaughter on their souls: Heaven rest them now! (220-27)

Earlier in the scene Malcolm, mistrustful by now of all Scottish noblemen, had tested Macduff's integrity with an elaborate pretence of villainy, denying in effect all that he holds most dear: so great is the wickedness he feigns that he claims that in the pursuit of self interest he would not hesitate to turn universal peace into uproar and confound all unity on earth (99-100). Macduff is a natural appeaser, admitting that tyranny thrives on the desire for self-preservation ('Great tyranny ... goodness dare not check thee!', 32-3), but when he refuses to follow so egregious a tyrant, Malcolm confesses himself the modest and dutiful servant of his country (125ff.). But now, as he urges Macduff once more to avenge the murder of his family, the pacific virtues he had tacitly endorsed through his charade of denial are apparently forgotten: 'let grief / Convert to anger; blunt not the heart, enrage it', he tells Macduff. (228-9). Shamed by Malcolm's words, Macduff at last resolves to seek out the murderer of his family and engage him in personal combat:

Cut short all intermission; front to front,  
Bring thou this fiend of Scotland, and myself;  
Within my sword's length set him ... (232-4)

These are the kind of heroic words that Malcolm had wanted to hear: 'This tune goes manly', he tells Macduff (235).

Driven by Malcolm's violent words, Macduff seeks out Macbeth on the battlefield, like Aeneas searching for Turnus. In his final battle Macbeth fights with the same 'valiant fury' that had won him honour in his defeat of the rebel Macdonwald. But the enraged Macduff is his equal. Having defeated the usurper in personal combat, he presents Malcolm with the tyrant's severed head, crying 'the time is free' (V.ix.21). Malcolm answers him with a valedictory speech in which he speaks of the 'love', 'grace' and 'measure' that will be the keynotes of the new dispensation (27, 39-40). The contrast between the severed head, symbol of heroic violence, and Malcolm's pacific words echoes a similar contrast in the play's second scene. Duncan's response to the Captain's story of how Macbeth had sliced open Macdonwald's body 'from the navel to the chops' and fixed his head on the castle

battlements is to praise him, not as the epitome of heroic valour, but as a 'worthy *gentleman!*' (I.ii.24). The conventional honorific, invisible in normal use, is thrown into startling prominence by its incongruity. Like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* offers us a riddling confusion of mutually incompatible value systems.

#### SIMPLIFYING SHAKESPEARE'S AMBIVALENCE

Modern criticism has long been aware of Shakespeare's radically ambivalent treatment of ethical and political problems. Rejecting E.M.W. Tillyard's view of Shakespeare as the patriotic upholder of supposedly orthodox political opinion, a long line of critics from A.P. Rossiter in the 1950s through Norman Rabkin, Bernard McElroy, Robert Grudin and Emrys Jones in the 1960s and '70s to Graham Bradshaw (1987 and 1993) have recognised the fundamentally dialectical structure of Shakespeare's plays.<sup>2</sup> Writing in 1971, W.R. Elton described this structure as 'a dialectic of ironies and ambivalences, avoiding in its complex movement and multi-voiced dialogue the simplifications of direct statement and reductive resolution'.<sup>3</sup> As Rabkin argues, a recognition of the fundamentally dialectical nature of Shakespeare's vision puts the plays 'out of the reach of the narrow moralist, the special pleader for a particular ideology, the intellectual historian looking for a Shakespearean version of a Renaissance orthodoxy'.<sup>4</sup> However, the 1980s saw a return to a less complex way of seeing the plays: do they 'reinforce the dominant order, or do they resist it to the point of subversion?' - this is the question that Jonathan Dollimore suggests criticism should be asking about Shakespeare.<sup>5</sup> When Dollimore's question is applied to *Macbeth* the answers are perhaps predictable. Ignoring the whole body of critical work from Rabkin to Bradshaw, post-structuralist Marxism accuses 'traditional' criticism of naively assuming that the play is a straightforward endorsement of James I's character and policies; it then reverses the equation, reading the play instead as an implicit condemnation of that same character and those same policies.<sup>6</sup> For Terry Eagleton *Macbeth* exposes 'a reverence for hierarchical order for what it is, as the pious self-deception of a society based on routine oppression and incessant warfare';<sup>7</sup> for Kiernan Ryan it is 'an unrivalled arraignment of one of the mainsprings of modern Western society: the ideology and practice of individualism';<sup>8</sup> for Alan Sinfield it is about the way the state legitimised violence at a time of transition from feudalism to the absolutist state.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup> A. P. Rossiter, 'Angel with Horns: Fifteen Lectures on Shakespeare', edited by Graham Storey 1961; repr. with an introduction by Peter Holland (London and New York: Longman, 1989); Norman Rabkin, *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding* (1967; repr. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Bernard McElroy, *Shakespeare's Mature Tragedies* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973); Robert Grudin, *Mighty Opposites: Shakespeare and Renaissance Contrariety* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1979); Emrys Jones, *The Origins of Shakespeare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977); Graham Bradshaw, *Shakespeare's Scepticism* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1987); Bradshaw, *Misrepresentations: Shakespeare and the Materialists* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> W.R. Elton, 'Shakespeare and the Thought of his Age' in *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, ed. Stanley Wells (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.32.

<sup>4</sup> Rabkin, *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding*, p.12.

<sup>5</sup> Jonathan Dollimore, 'Critical Development: Cultural Materialism, Feminism and Gender Critique, and New Historicism' in *Shakespeare: a Bibliographical Guide*, ed. Stanley Wells (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p.414. The assumption that writers must be either attacking or supporting the government is anachronistic. In describing the fashion in late Elizabethan and early Jacobean England for Tacitean satire attacking political treachery and moral corruption, Malcolm Smuts argues that the real intellectual debates of the period were not between the court and its opponents, but between rival factions within the court, and that the source of disaffection was political life itself, rather than any particular system of government (Malcolm Smuts, 'Court-Centred Politics and the Uses of Roman Historians c.1590-1630' in *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England*, edited by Kevin Sharpe and Peter Lake (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1994), pp.21-43).

<sup>6</sup> Alan Sinfield, 'Macbeth: History, Ideology, and Intellectuals' in *Faultlines: Cultural Materialism and the Politics of Dissident Reading* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p.99.

<sup>7</sup> Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), p.2.

<sup>8</sup> Kiernan Ryan, *Shakespeare* (New York and London: Harvester, 1989), p.59.

<sup>9</sup> 'Macbeth: History, Ideology, and Intellectuals', p.95.

Because there are, according to Sinfield, certain ‘structural difficulties’ inherent in the absolutist state (which he defines as ‘the monarch versus the rest’),<sup>10</sup> tyrants must inevitably resort to force in order to suppress honest dissidents. Though Shakespeare’s play sets up a series of natural antinomies that serve to identify the legitimate monarch with nature, peace and goodness, and the tyrant with the unnatural eruption of evil in a harmonious world, in reality, says Sinfield, there is little to choose between the tyrant and an absolute monarch like James. Just as Macbeth employs ruthless measures to maintain himself in power, so James could only survive by executing those who dared resist his rule: ‘Macbeth is a murderer and oppressive ruler, but he is one version of [James] the absolutist ruler, not the polar opposite’.<sup>11</sup>

#### JAMES I AND VI: TYRANT OR PEACEMAKER?

In his brief discussion of James’s advice to his son in *Basilikon Doron* on the treatment of rebels, Sinfield remarks, ‘with any case so strenuously overstated and manipulative ... we should ask what alternative position it is trying to put down’.<sup>12</sup> In Sinfield’s own case the answer is clear enough: his essay on *Macbeth* is frankly and openly provocative; by reading ‘against the grain’ of Shakespeare’s text and by ignoring altogether what is arguably the most significant and representative body of mid-century Shakespeare criticism, it aims to shock liberal intellectuals out of their complacent acceptance of state violence. However, in practice his essay is less likely to shock the literary-critical establishment than professional historians, who may be surprised (or perhaps amused) to learn that, for all his pretensions as an international peacemaker, and despite his deeply rooted personal horror of violence (not to mention the fact that he didn’t murder his way to the throne), James was in truth no better than a medieval barbarian. In building up his picture of James the Macbeth-like tyrant, Sinfield represents the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 as the final act of desperation by patient dissidents who had suffered years of violent state oppression, the failed blow for freedom being followed by the kind of savage reprisals that are the stock-in-trade of absolutist regimes. What Sinfield omits in this ‘oppositional’ reading of contemporary events is any discussion of the evolution of James’ own political views, or his wrangles with Parliament over the treatment of Catholics (at a time when Catholics had for half a century been oppressed, dispossessed and disfranchised, James was, as Jenny Wormald notes, ‘unusually humane’).<sup>13</sup> Also omitted from his account of the period is any discussion of the rejection by revisionist historians of an outdated conflict model of early Jacobean politics.<sup>14</sup> In contrast to Sinfield’s picture of a society locked in struggle with an intransigent autocrat (‘the king versus the rest’), is the emphasis placed by early 17th-century constitutional theorists on consensus. Alan Smith writes, ‘in Jacobean England ... the dominant constitutional theory, accepted by king, Parliament and common lawyers alike, was of a balanced constitution which was founded on certain inalienable rights possessed by both Crown and subjects and safeguarded by the common law’.<sup>15</sup> James may have written like an absolute monarch, but he did not behave like one. This is not to say that he had no battles with Parliament. Indeed some of the most bitter disputes were occasioned by his pacifist inclinations; in 1624 the Commons did all it could to push him into a war with Spain that he had spent his whole reign trying to avoid.<sup>16</sup> Sinfield, like possibly a majority of modern UK citizens, does not care for monarchies. But 400 years ago even radicals like George Buchanan

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 98.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 100.

<sup>13</sup> Jenny Wormald, ‘Gunpowder, Treason, and Scots’, *Journal of British Studies*, 24 (1985), pp.141-68.

<sup>14</sup> J. P. Sommerville, ‘James I and the Divine Right of Kings: English Politics and Continental Theory’, in *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court*, ed. Linda Levy Peck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp. 55-70. See also R. Malcolm Smuts, *Court Culture and the Origins of a Royalist Tradition in Early Stuart England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1987); Glenn Burgess, *Absolute Monarchy and the Stuart Constitution* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996).

<sup>15</sup> Alan G. R. Smith, ‘Constitutional Ideas and Parliamentary Developments in England 1603-1625’ in *The Reign of James VI and I*, ed. Alan G.R. Smith (London: Macmillan, 1973), p.164.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

believed that monarchy was in a real sense part of natural law. In the *De Jure Regni* Buchanan writes, 'The government of kings is in accord with nature, that of tyrants contrary to it; a king rules willing subjects, the tyrant unwilling'.<sup>17</sup> At a time when the English had recently had cause for extreme anxiety over the problem of uncertain succession, James's direct descent from Banquo, unrivalled in length by any English dynasty, represented a hope of political stability

That James should have had a horror of violence is not surprising. Few public figures can have had such a terrible childhood. With his father murdered before he was a year old, probably with the connivance of his adulterous mother, James was effectively an orphan from the age of two. During a regency in which Scotland was at times close to anarchy, James was the subject of repeated kidnappings and plots against his life. These were not popular uprisings, but sectarian feuds between violent nobles. Little wonder that, despite the watering down of James's original plan for a perfect union of the two kingdoms,<sup>18</sup> the mood of the English Parliament was opposed to formal ties with what was perceived as a barbaric nation,<sup>19</sup> and that full union did not take place until 1707. Nor is it surprising that James was so deeply shocked when, in circumstances eerily similar to those in which his own father had died, yet another Catholic plot against his life was discovered in 1605. Having narrowly escaped so many plots both in childhood and maturity, it is understandable that he should have feared a repetition of his father's fate. In an age when typology was still a key to the understanding of history, it is perhaps inevitable that the parallels between his father's death and his own apparently providential escape from a similar fate should have convinced him that the powers of darkness were in league against him, and more importantly, that heaven was protecting him.

According to the official interpretation promoted by James and his advisors, the Gunpowder Plot was the work of Antichrist aimed at destroying the Reformation in England and averting a predestined union of kingdoms that had been foretold by ancient prophecy.<sup>20</sup> Like Elizabeth, James was assiduous in cultivating the British myth;<sup>21</sup> only when the ancient British line was restored would the country be united and Arthur's empire live again.<sup>22</sup> When James visited Oxford in 1605 Matthew Gwynne flattered the king's interest in his own genealogy with some Latin verses which reminded him of the legend that fate had foretold that Banquo's descendants would be the inheritors of an 'endless empire' (*imperium sine fine*).<sup>23</sup> Though Gwynne does not mention Macbeth, his reign was of particular interest to historians because it represented a turning point in Scottish history when the old anarchic tanistry system of elective succession gave way to a stable hereditary monarchy. By attempting to avert destiny Macbeth himself was ironically instrumental in ensuring that Merlin's prophecy of a united kingdom would be realised. In *Poly-Olbion* Drayton explains how, by murdering Banquo and causing Fleance (Fleance) to flee to Wales, where he married the daughter of

17. Quoted by Roger A. Mason, 'Rex Stoicus: George Buchanan, James VI and the Scottish Polity', *New Perspectives on the Politics and Culture of Early Modern Scotland*, edited by John Dwyer, Roger A. Mason and Alexander Murdoch (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1982), p. 21. Mason argues that, to interpret Buchanan's resistance theory in modern constitutional terms is to do violence to his thought. For Buchanan it is not the mass of the people, but the 'nobility, either in a council, an assembly, a public convention or a parliament, to whom the tyrant must account for his crimes' (p. 25).

18. See Brian P. Levack, *The Formation of the British State: England, Scotland, and the Union 1603-1707* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 8.

19. On the constitutional debate over the question of union see Levack, *The Formation of the British State*, pp. 31-4; Jenny Wormald, 'One king, two kingdoms' in *Uniting the Kingdom: the Making of British History*, edited by Alexander Grant and Keith J. Stringer (London and New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 123-32.

20. Garry Wills, *Witches and Jesuits: Shakespeare's 'Macbeth'* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 15-16; Lilian Winstanley, 'Macbeth', 'King Lear' and *Contemporary History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), p. 31.

21. See Graham Parry, *The Golden Age Restor'd: The Culture of the Stuart Court, 1603-42* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1981), pp. 1-39.

22. Winstanley quotes the Venetian State Papers for April 17 1603 on the subject of James's promulgation of the British myth: 'It is said that he is disposed to abandon the titles of England and Scotland, and to call himself King of Great Britain, and like that famous and ancient King Arthur to embrace under one name the whole circuit of one thousand seven hundred mile which includes the United Kingdom now possessed by His Majesty in that island' ('Macbeth', 'King Lear' and *Contemporary History*, p. 42).

23. Quoted by Henry N. Paul, *The Royal Play of 'Macbeth'* (1948; repr. New York: Octagon Books, 1971), p. 163.

the Llewellyn, Prince of Wales, Macbeth was indirectly responsible for bringing about a marriage that would unite the houses of Plantagenet and Tudor, for it was Fleanch's descendant, Henry VII who married Elizabethan of York, and their eldest daughter, Margaret, who married James IV.<sup>24</sup> James could thus claim both to unite the houses of York and Lancaster, and also to restore the ancient British line. In his 1603 panegyric on 'The Majesty of King James' Drayton praises England's new king as the fulfilment of Merlin's prophecy of a re-united Britain.

An ancient Prophet long agoe fore-told,  
 (Though fooles their sawes for vanities doe hold)  
 A King of Scotland, ages comming on,  
 Where it was found, be crown'd upon that stone,  
 Two famous Kingdoms separte thus long,  
 Within one Iland, and that speake one tongue,  
 Since Brute first raign'd, (if men of Brute alow)  
 Never before united untill now.<sup>25</sup>

By revealing the Gunpowder Plot and thwarting the Antichrist, providence had clearly signalled its protection of a prince predestined to bring peace to a warring world.<sup>26</sup>

#### AUGUSTUS REDIVIVUS

In representing himself in his coronation entry as a prince of peace,<sup>27</sup> and making the advantages of peace the subject of his first speech to Parliament, James was consciously rejecting the traditional image of the heroic prince promoted by the Elizabethan war party. In contrast to Essex, who in his *Apologie* of 1598 had evoked the warlike spirit of Henry V, comparing the unheroic present with 'those former gallant ages' when England did not hesitate to 'achieve great conquests in France',<sup>28</sup> James reminds Parliament in his first speech in March 1604 how 'at my comming here ... I found the State embarqued in a great and tedious warre, and onely by mine arrival here, and by the Peace in my Person, is now amitie kept, where warre was before'.<sup>29</sup> Though there was wide support for the 1604 settlement with Spain, the chivalric ideals espoused by Essex were by no means dead.<sup>30</sup> To win over opponents of his pacifist policies James drew, as Elizabeth's poets had done in support of hers, on the resources of myth and historical analogy. But where Spenser had celebrated England's imperial aspirations in the figure of a fully armed warrior-maiden, James turned not to medieval chivalry, but to the classical world for his image of the ideal prince.

The unifying theme of James's coronation entry was peace, symbolised by the goddess Eirene, with Mars at her feet, 'his armour scattered upon him in severall pieces, and sundrie sorts of weapons broken about him'.<sup>31</sup> But the historical figure with whom the new king himself was identified in the coronation pageantry was Augustus, or rather Augustus as portrayed by James's favourite poet, Virgil. In his collection of sonnets of 1584 James had immodestly compared himself with the author

24. *The Works of Michael Drayton*, 5 vols, edited by J. William Hebel (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1931-41), vol 4 (1933), p. 167.

25. 'To the Majesty of King James', 133-40, *The Works*, vol 1 (1931), p. 474.

26. Wills, *Witches and Jesuits: Shakespeare's 'Macbeth'*, p. 16.

27. Parry, *The Golden Age Restor'd*, p. 4.

28. Robert Devereux Earl of Essex., *An Apologie of the Earl of Essex* (London: , 1603), Sig. D3v.

29. *The Political Works of James I*, with an introduction by Charles Howard McIlwain (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965), p. 270.

30. Malcolm Smuts, 'Cultural Diversity and Cultural Change at the Court of James I' in *The Mental World of the Jacobean Court*, ed. Linda Levy Peck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 110. See also Norman Council, 'Ben Jonson, Inigo Jones, and the Transformation of Tudor Chivalry', *Journal of English Literary History*, 47 (1980), pp. 259-75.

31. 'Part of the Kings entertainment, in passing to his Coronation', *Ben Jonson*, 11 vols, edited by C.H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1925-52), vol 7 (1941), p. 97.

of the *Aeneid*; favour me with your blessing, he tells the Muses in the well worn epideictic formula, and my verse will record your praise: 'I shall your names from all oblivion bring. / I lofty *Virgill* shall to life restore'.<sup>32</sup> Now, in a coronation entry featuring mock-Roman triumphal arches, prophetic motifs from Virgil were a key element in the day's pageantry.<sup>33</sup> Writing during the peace that followed the civil wars that had plagued the last years of the Republic, Virgil represents his patron as a descendant of the gods, destined to pacify a warring world. In the great visionary speech in Book VI Anchises interprets for his son the significance of the long line of descendants passing before him, explaining, in an allusion to the famous prophetic lines of the fourth Eclogue, that the final figure in the procession is

*Caesar* himself, exalted in his Line;  
*Augustus*, promis'd oft, and long foretold,  
Sent to the realm that *Saturn* rul'd of old;  
Born to restore a better Age of Gold (VI.1078-81).<sup>34</sup>

Spenser had already firmly re-established the myth of Britain's Trojan origins in the national mind; what better way for James to confirm his own credentials as a peacemaker than to suggest typological parallels with Augustus, most illustrious descendant of the Trojan remnant that had also colonised Albion? In his notes for the coronation pageant, Jonson quotes the talismanic phrase, 'redeunt Saturnia regna', adding, 'out of *Virgil*, to shew that now those golden times were returned againe'.<sup>35</sup> Taking their cue from these public hints, court poets dutifully confirmed the parallel between Augustus and their own prince of peace. 'Renowned Prince,' writes Drayton in his panegyric to James,

when all these tumults cease,  
Even in the calme, and Musick of thy peace,  
If in thy grace thou deigne to favour us,  
And to the Muses be propitious,  
*Caesar* himselfe, Roomes glorious wits among,  
Was not so highly, nor divinely sung.<sup>36</sup>

Some years later, in *Prince Henry's Barriers* (1610), Jonson again evokes Virgilian parallels in his celebration of James's destiny:

Here are kingdoms mixed  
And nations joined, a strength of empire fixed  
Coterminate with heaven; the golden vein  
Of Saturn's age is here broke out again.  
Henry but joined the roses ensigned  
Particular families, but this hath joined  
The rose and thistle, and in them combined  
A union that shall never be declined.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>32</sup>. 'The Essayes of a Prentice' (1584), *The Poems of James VI of Scotland*, edited by James Craigie (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood, 1955), p. 14.

<sup>33</sup>. See Parry, *The Golden Age Restor'd*, p. 4.

<sup>34</sup>. Quotations from Virgil are from Dryden's translation of 1697, *The Works of John Dryden*, 20 vols, edited by Edward Niles Hooker, Alan Roper and H.T. Swedenborg, Jr. (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1956-89), 5-6 (edited by William Frost, 1987).

<sup>35</sup>. 'Part of the Kings entertainment', p. 100.

<sup>36</sup>. 'To the Majesty of King James', 159-60, p. 475.

The endlessly-repeated public message was clear: just as the god-like Augustus was the subject of ancient prophecy, destined by providence to bring Rome's internal wars to an end and restore the golden age, so James fulfils the ancient British prophecy of a king who would reconcile international conflicts and usher in an age of universal peace. The grand historical plan that began with Troy was about to be completed; 'redeunt Saturnia regna'.

#### VIRGIL'S AMBIVALENCE

It is easy to see why the *Aeneid* should have appealed so strongly to James. Here was a poem about his favourite themes: prophecy, empire, the predestined peacemaker, the return of a golden age. But though Rome's imperial destiny may be Virgil's grand theme, the *Aeneid* is a deeply ambivalent poem. At its centre is a conundrum. The *pax romana* - ultimate justification for the wars that took place so many centuries ago in Latium - is bought at a terrible cost. For Roman imperialists the justification of war is peace.<sup>38</sup> In the *De Officiis* Cicero argues that wars are to be undertaken for one reason alone, namely, 'that we may live in peace unharmed'.<sup>39</sup> Like Cicero, Virgil justifies war in terms of its results: from the conquest of Latium there will follow in the distant future a time when

dire Debate, and and impious War shall cease,  
And the stern Age be softned into Peace:  
Then banish'd Faith shall once again return,  
And Vestal Fires in hallow'd Temples burn; (I.396)

Virgil portrays Aeneas, not as a latter-day Homeric hero glorying in his martial skills, but as a reluctant warrior, disinclined to engage in battle, and piously accepting his role as the instrument of destiny. In complete contrast is Turnus, the very type of unreflecting *superbia* full of 'Revenge, and jealous Rage, and secret Spight' (XII.110).

However, one of the great ironies of the *Aeneid* is that, as his final encounter with Turnus draws near, Aeneas seems increasingly to take on the characteristics of his aggressive adversary. When, in violation of the league established with Latinus, fighting breaks out once more between Trojans and Rutulians, Aeneas appeals to his compatriots to 'cease / From impious arms, nor violate the Peace' (XII.473-4). This is the 'pious Aeneas' of medieval and Renaissance iconography, the epitome of wise and responsible leadership. But even while Aeneas is addressing his troops, he is hit by an arrow. The fragile truce is broken, and Turnus, like some terrible god of war, wreaks havoc on the battlefield. As Aeneas, his wound healed by Venus, seeks out his rival, there is now apparently little to choose between the two men: 'With like impetuous Rage the Prince appears ... nor less Destruction bears' (XII.671-2). But more atrocities are to be committed before they finally meet in battle. Incensed by what he sees as the treachery of the Rutulians, Aeneas resolves to raze their 'perjur'd City' (XII.837). While the battle continues to rage, the unprotected city is an easy target. 'Gaping, gazing Citizens' (XII.844) are killed in cold blood, and their houses set on fire. The destruction complete, Aeneas then appeals to the gods in an act of bizarre self-justification:

Advancing to the Front, the Heroe stands,  
And stretching out to Heav'n his Pious Hands;  
Attests the Gods, asserts his Innocence,  
Upbraids with breach of Faith th' Ausonian Prince:  
Declares the Royal Honour doubly stain'd,

<sup>37</sup> Ben Jonson, *The Complete Masques*, edited by Stephen Orgel (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1969), p. 155.

<sup>38</sup> R. O. A. M. Lyne, 'Vergil and the Politics of War' in *Oxford Readings in Vergil's 'Aeneid'*, ed. S. J. Harrison (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 316-8. See also Brooks Otis, *Virgil: A Study in Civilized Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), p.314.

<sup>39</sup> *De Officiis*, trans. Walter Miller (London and New York: Heinemann (London) and Macmillan (New York), 1913), I.xi, p. 37.



And twice the Rites of holy Peace profan'd. (XII.849-54).

As with *Henry V*, the contrast between the the reality of war and the pious sentiments that are used to justify it are too sharply and too shockingly juxtaposed to be ignored. Virgil does not comment on the irony, but sustains it unresolved to the very end of the poem.

The outcome of the contest with Turnus is decided by fate: Jupiter and Juno agree that, if Aeneas is allowed to win, the Latins will be permitted to keep their name, their customs and their language. For a time it looks as if our final view of Aeneas will be that of the humane military leader reasserting civilised values as the conflict is at last concluded. As he stands over his defeated enemy, he hesitates, torn between vengeance and mercy:

In deep Suspence the Trojan seem'd to stand;  
And just prepar'd to strike repress'd his Hand.  
He rowl'd his Eyes, and ev'ry Moment felt  
His manly Soul with more Compassion melt: (XII.1360-3)

But in the very act of sparing his rival in love and war, he happens, by another trick of fate, to catch sight of the belt that Turnus had earlier torn from Aeneas's dead friend Pallas on the battlefield. In a moment of blind rage Aeneas plunges his sword deep into Turnus's heart. The poem that had set out to celebrate Rome's imperial destiny and to honour the man who epitomised the superiority of eirenic values, thus ends with a vision, not of universal peace, but of primal savagery.

The *Aeneid* was of course left unfinished, and that brutal final scene is probably not how Virgil planned to end the poem. Nevertheless, the image of 'pious Aeneas' plunging his sword into the heart of a disarmed and helpless enemy is a fitting emblem for the whole poem. The *Aeneid* is not simply a celebration of 'the long Glories of Majestick Rome'; it is also about 'Arms, and the Man'. Cicero argues that true valour will never allow itself to be contaminated by frenzy, 'for there is no bravery that is devoid of reason'.<sup>40</sup> In an ideal world no doubt this is true. But for all the idealistic sentiments of the *Aeneid*'s most celebrated passages about Rome's imperial destiny, the military world that Virgil portrays is far from ideal. As he represents it, 'Arms' is inevitably a savage business, and the 'Man' who becomes involved in it, however unwillingly, is ineluctably contaminated by its brutality. Where imperial apologists like Cicero justify war in terms of its results, Virgil shows that you cannot employ violence in defence of peace without somehow compromising the values you are defending.

#### MACBETH AS ROYAL COMPLIMENT

How far James was aware of these anomalous elements in the *Aeneid* we cannot tell. We do know, however, that he was both a genuine pacifist whose dearest ambition was to see a Europe at peace, and also a realist who knew that a militaristic aristocracy must be controlled. Contrary to the impression that Sinfield, following a long line of Marxist critics, gives of a tyrant determined at whatever cost to hang on to power in the face of popular unrest, James actually enjoyed considerable popularity in the early part of his reign.<sup>41</sup> After the deep disaffection that characterised the final years of Elizabeth's reign with the inbred factionalism of the court and the aggressively militant nationalism fostered by the war party,<sup>42</sup> James's manifest desire to promote 'pietie, peace and learning'<sup>43</sup> was widely welcomed. In *Basilikon Doron* he characterises the wise ruler as one who

<sup>40</sup> *Tusculan Disputations*, trans. J.E. King (London and New York: Heinemann (London) and Putnam (New York), 1927), IV.xxii, p. 383.

<sup>41</sup> See Rowland Wymer, 'Jacobean Pageant or Elizabethan Fin de Siècle? The Political Context of Early Seventeenth-Century Tragedy', in *Jacobean Drama as Social Criticism*, ed. James Hogg (Lewiston, NY; Salzburg, Austria: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), pp. 45-58.

<sup>42</sup> See Joel Hurstfield, 'The Succession Struggle in late Elizabethan England' in *Freedom, Corruption and Government in Elizabethan England* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975), pp. 104-34

<sup>43</sup> *Basilikon Doron, The Political Works of James I*, with an introduction by Charles Howard McIlwain (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965), p. 24.

tempers justice with mercy, and who respects Parliament as ‘the honourablest and highest judgment in the land’.<sup>44</sup> At the same time he emphasises the importance of limiting the power of anarchic elements in the state. Having been a victim himself of the ‘rough wooing’ of Scotland during the Reformation, it is not surprising that he has little time for ‘the fierie spirited men in the ministrie [who] got such a guiding of the people at that time of confusion’.<sup>45</sup> But James is equally contemptuous of the nobility who justified violence as a legitimate way of defending personal and family honour. He writes:

The naturall sicknesse that I have perceived this estate subject to in my time, hath beene, a fectlesse arrogant conceit of their greatnesse and power; drinking in with their very nourish-milke, that their honor stood in committing three points of iniquitie: to thrall by oppression, the meaner sort that dwelleth neere them ... to maintaine their servants and dependers in any wrong ... and ... to bang it out bravely, hee and all his kinne, against him and all his [kin] ...<sup>46</sup>

Applied to questions of foreign policy, it was this same honour code that led Essex to propose the opening up of a potentially disastrous land war with Spain.<sup>47</sup> In *Basilikon Doron* James comes across as a pragmatic realist, naturally favouring peace, but recognising the need to curb the violence of aggressive aristocrats eager for war. It is these problems that Shakespeare turns into dialectical drama.

In presenting James with an ‘imperial theme’ featuring a history of his own ancestors, Shakespeare, like Virgil, makes use of prophecy and fate. Despite the allusion to Virgil in act I scene 3,<sup>48</sup> the *Aeneid* is not a source for *Macbeth* in the way that it clearly is for *Titus Andronicus*.<sup>49</sup> However, James was keenly interested in the poem’s epideictic possibilities, and Shakespeare puts them to use in his own dramatic compliment to a new monarch. As Virgil recreates the world of heroic epic from the perspective of a latter-day urban civilisation, so *Macbeth* looks back from the modern world to the founding moment of the present dynasty in a barbarous, heroic age. And as Virgil compliments Augustus by showing him a prophetic vision of himself, ‘promis’d oft, and long foretold’, so Shakespeare alludes to the Virgilian idea of a time of ‘universal peace’ (IV.iii.99), offering James oblique compliment in the form of a parade of kings that culminates in a vision of his own coronation. By causing Banquo’s son to escape into exile where, like Aeneas, he would marry a foreign princess, Macbeth is the unwitting agent of that destiny.

Recent historicist criticism of *Macbeth* has focused on the early-modern political debate on obedience and tyrannicide. David Norbrook and Alan Sinfield both read the play in the context of Buchanan’s resistance theory.<sup>50</sup> The debate on resistance is certainly central to Shakespeare’s only Scottish play, but unlike *Richard II* and *Henry IV*, where the problem is dramatised in such a way as

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., p. 19.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p. 23.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., pp. 24-5.

<sup>47</sup> *An Apologie*, passim.

<sup>48</sup> ‘Strange images of death’ (I.iii.97) echoes Virgil’s ‘plurima mortis imago’ (*Aeneid*, II.369).

<sup>49</sup> See Heather James, ‘Cultural disintegration in *Titus Andronicus*: mutilating Titus, Vergil and Rome’, *Themes in Drama*, 13 (Violence in Drama), (1991), pp. 123-40. For discussion of Shakespeare’s use of the *Aeneid* in *The Tempest*, see Donna B. Hamilton, *Virgil and ‘The Tempest’: the Politics of Imitation* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1990). See also J. M. Nosworthy, ‘The Narrative Sources for *The Tempest*’, *Review of English Studies*, 24 (1948), pp. 281-94; Jan Kott, ‘The *Aeneid* and *The Tempest*’, *Arion*, ns 3, 4 (1976), pp. 424-51; idem, ‘*The Tempest*, or Repetition’, *Shakespeare Today, Mosaic*, 10 (1977), ed. Ralph Berry, pp. 9-36; Gary S. Schmidgall, *Shakespeare and the Courtly Aesthetic* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1981); John Pitcher, ‘A Theatre of the Future: The *Aeneid* and *The Tempest*’, *Essays in Criticism*, 34 (1984), pp. 193-215; Barbara Bono, *Literary Transvaluations: from Vergilian Epic to Shakespearean Tragedy* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1984), pp. 220-4; Robert Miola, ‘Vergil in Shakespeare: from Allusion to Imitation’, *Vergil at 2000*, ed. John D. Bernard (New York: AMS Press, 1986), pp. 254-56; Robert Wiltenburg, ‘The *Aeneid* in *The Tempest*’, *Shakespeare Survey*, 39 (1987), pp. 159-68.

<sup>50</sup> David Norbrook, ‘Macbeth and the Politics of Historiography’ in *Politics of Discourse: The Literature and History of Seventeenth-Century England*, edited by Kevin Sharpe and Steven N. Zwicker (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 78-116; Sinfield, ‘Macbeth: History, Ideology, and Intellectuals’.

to admit of no easy solution, *Macbeth* presents it in more polarised form. For a playwright wanting to offer a defence of the right to resist tyranny, the Macbeth story that Shakespeare knew from Holinshed would be suitable material, but not ideal: a strong and successful ruler deposes an ineffectual one and is himself deposed when, many years after the usurpation, he becomes tyrannical. Shakespeare modifies his principal source in two important ways: first, he telescopes the usurper's reign, omitting altogether Holinshed's account of the way Macbeth restores justice and law to the country,<sup>51</sup> turning him instead into a stage villain - albeit a subtle and psychologically realistic one - linked with witches and all the gothic paraphernalia associated with them (in Holinshed they are described merely as 'three women ... resembling creatures of elder world');<sup>52</sup> second, he transforms Duncan from a weak and ineffectual ruler who showed 'overmuch slacknesse in punishing offenders',<sup>53</sup> into a saintly martyr. The effect of this rewriting of the story is both to intensify the horror of regicide, and also to show that a usurping tyrant must be removed. The first part of the play's political message is clearly in line with James's own ideas on kingship and obedience, the second a contradiction of them. In this respect *Macbeth* is like *Cymbeline* and *The Tempest*, both of which pay compliment to James while at the same time offering oblique, but pointed criticism.<sup>54</sup> The problematic aspect of *Macbeth* is not, as in the historical plays, its treatment of constitutional questions, but what it has to say about 'Arms, and the Man'.

## SHAKESPEAREAN

One of the many unanswered questions in *Macbeth* is the reason why Macduff fled to England without first telling his wife. 'You know not, / Whether it was his his wisdom, or his fear' Rosse tells Lady Macduff. She is incredulous: 'Wisdom!' she cries, 'to leave his wife, to leave his babes, / His mansion and his titles, in a place / From whence he himself does fly?' (IV.ii.4-8). She then appeals to nature. In act I scene vi Banquo had used the tranquil image of swifts nesting in the eaves of Macbeth's castle to evoke a sense of natural harmony. But now Lady Macduff uses the image of nesting birds to suggest that fighting too is natural:

He loves us not:  
He wants the natural touch; for the poor wren,  
The most diminutive of birds, will fight,  
Her young ones in her nest, against the owl.  
All is the fear, and nothing is the love;  
So little is the wisdom, where the flight  
So runs against the reason. (8-14)

After some banter between Lady Macduff and her son about the prevalence of evil-doers in the world - grotesque in its seeming flippancy - a messenger brings news that her life is also at risk. 'Whither should I fly?' she asks herself,

I have done no harm. But I remember now  
I am in this earthly world, where, to do harm  
Is often laudable; to do good, sometime  
Accounted dangerous folly. (72-6)

<sup>51</sup> *Holinshed's Chronicles*, revised edn. (1587) edited by John Vowell, 6 vols (London, 1807-8), 5 (1808), p. 266.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 268.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 265.

<sup>54</sup> See Peggy Muñoz Simonds, *Myth, Emblem, and Music in Shakespeare's 'Cymbeline': An Iconographic Reconstruction* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1992); Robin Headlam Wells, *Elizabethan Mythologies: Studies in Poetry, Drama and Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), chapter 3.

Lady Macduff has apparently been betrayed by a pusillanimous husband and now she and her son are about to be murdered by Macbeth's hired assassins. Her ironic words express a sense of the bleak futility of a world in which all values have been, as Nietzsche would say, transvalued. But there is a larger sense in which what she says is potentially true, not just of Macbeth's tyrannical rule, but of any society. When, after testing Macduff's allegiance, Malcolm assures him of his own integrity, he tells him that the Earl of Northumberland, with 'ten thousand warlike men', is already on his way to give England's support to the rebel cause: 'Now we'll together,' says Malcolm, 'and the chance of goodness / Be like our warranted quarrel' (IV.iii.134-7). For Lady Macduff the wren's right to fight the owl is indubitable; it is part of nature's law. But for Malcolm there are no certainties, only risks to be weighed in the balance: out of a bloody battle between thousands of 'warlike men' there is a chance that good will come; out of a 'warranted quarrel' with a tyrant - a warrant passionately denied by James - a better order may emerge. Not surprisingly, Macduff's response is puzzlement: 'Such welcome and unwelcome things at once, / 'Tis hard to reconcile' 138-9).

It is hard to reconcile because in the world of the play there are no certainties. There may be absolutes - 'Justice, Verity, Temperance, Stableness, Bounty, Perseverance, Mercy, Lowliness, Devotion, Patience' on the one side, and Macbeth's violence on the other - but these binary opposites are not as mutually exclusive as the play's apocalyptic imagery would seem to suggest. *Macbeth* may appear to offer a stark contrast between 'Good things of Day' and 'Night's black agents' (III.iii.52-3), but at a deeper level these antinomies each embody rival virtues and vices that are incommensurable. The result is a world in which 'to do harm / Is often laudable; to do good, sometime / Accounted dangerous folly'. This ambivalence concerning fundamental values can be seen most clearly in the way characters conceive of manhood.

Although Shakespeare's Duncan, unlike the 'feeble and slouthfull' king described by Holinshed,<sup>55</sup> is a saintly figure renowned for his piety, the play reminds us that this is an heroic age when Scotland was still at the mercy of warring nobles and Norse invaders. When they are under pressure, it is not Malcolm's 'king-becoming graces', but heroic manhood that is of paramount concern to the actors in this drama of usurpation and rebellion; for heroes and villains alike, manhood is a way of defining virtue and integrity. And to be a man means to be 'bloody, bold and resolute' (IV.i.79). Among the soldiers killed in the play's final battle is young Siward, the Earl of Northumberland's son. Informing Siward's father, Rosse consoles the general with the thought that his son died a hero's death:

Your son, my Lord, has paid a soldier's debt;  
He only liv'd till he was a man;  
The which no sooner had his prowess confirm'd,  
In the unshrinking station where he fought,  
But like a man he died (V.ix.5-9).

But Old Siward is not satisfied and, like a Roman father, asks Rosse how his son died: 'Had he his hurts before?' Rosse confirms that they were indeed 'on the front' (12-13). Content that his son's death was that of a true hero, Old Siward's mind is now at rest:

Why then, God's soldier be he!  
Had I as many sons as I have hairs,  
I would not wish them to a fairer death (12-14)

In the heroic world of *Macbeth* manhood is a kind of touchstone by which an individual's true worth can be measured. What defines and characterises this quality is above all prowess in battle; to die a hero's death is confirmation of manhood. Yet each time the term is used it generates more anomalies. On hearing of Macbeth's heroic exploits on a Golgotha-like battlefield, the saint-like

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<sup>55</sup>. *Holinshed's Chronicles*, p. 269.

Duncan praises him for his gentlemanly honour; yet Golgotha, the place of the skull, is renowned solely for the death of a famous pacifist. When Macbeth tests the resolve of his hired murderers, asking them if they are so patient, and so steeped in the Gospels, that they are afraid of violence, they boast, 'We are men' (III.i.90); yet Malcolm too urges Macduff not to shrink from violence. Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff both appeal to an heroic conception of manhood; yet one is urging the ultimate act of treachery, the other regretting her husband's failure to defend wife and children as nature commands.

*Macbeth* offers two mutually opposed conceptions of manhood. One is based on heroic epic, the other on the Gospels. But the play is not simply claiming the superiority of one set of values over the other; the closer you look, the less easy it is to separate them. It is not just that Duncan's piety would be helpless without Macbeth's ferocity, and Macbeth's *virtus* mere barbarism without Duncan's *civilitas*. Civilised values must be defended; but the use of barbaric means to do so seems inevitably to result in contamination of the very ideals that are being upheld. In this respect *Macbeth* is like the *Aeneid*. The contrast that Virgil makes between the heroic values of Homeric epic and the civilised values of the Roman world eventually breaks down, so that in his conduct on the battlefield Aeneas is virtually indistinguishable from Turnus. Shakespeare's heroes and villains are also sometimes hard to tell apart; at least, like Aeneas and Turnus, they fight according to the same rules. There is a world in which 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair'.

#### CULTURAL PLURALISM

Virgil's *Aeneid* provided a model for countless Renaissance poets who wanted to compliment a royal patron. But it was its agonistic vision, rather than its form, that seems to have spoken to Shakespeare's imagination. It is a vision perhaps best characterised by John Gray's term 'cultural pluralism'. In contrast to the Cultural Materialist, who posits a Manichaean world of 'true and false discourses' where writers must be judged according to whether they are for or against authority, the cultural pluralist believes that political and ethical problems are rarely reducible to a simple formula. In his book on Isaiah Berlin, Gray explains that cultural pluralism is not to be confused with moral relativism. The relativist holds that, however internally consistent particular value systems may be, they are always the product of a specific society and cannot be the object of rational adjudication.<sup>56</sup> However, Berlin insists that human value systems are, by their very nature, inherently conflictual. It is obvious that there is an unbridgeable gulf between the opposing views of humanity that you find in Homeric epic and the Sermon on the Mount. But Berlin argues, not just that it would be futile to attempt to adjudicate between them, but that *within* each of these value systems there will always be irresolvable conflict. 'The cornerstone of [Berlin's] thought,' writes Gray, 'is his rejection of monism in ethics - his insistence that fundamental human values are many, that they are often in conflict and rarely, if ever, necessarily harmonious, and that some, at least of these conflicts are among incommensurables - conflicts among values for which there is no single, common standard or arbitration.'<sup>57</sup> One of the most painful examples in recent history of the inherently conflictual nature of our most fundamental values is the war in the former Yugoslavia. Among the many letters in the national press on the subject of the UN's role in Eastern Europe was one from an English doctor who was treating victims of the Serb shelling of civilian food queues in 1995. 'Of course the use of arms is to be avoided as long as possible,' he wrote, 'I suspect, however, that had some of your correspondents worked in the hospitals of Sarajevo, as I have, they would have realised that the intense suffering of its citizens demanded urgent and effective action.'<sup>58</sup> These atrocities did not divide Western European politicians on party lines; within each major political party in Britain there were both pacifists arguing that UN moral authority would be compromised if it used the machinery of war to try to solve a political problem, and also those who, like the doctor in Sarajevo, urged the use of military force on humanitarian grounds. Sinfield writes bravely of a radical alternative to our

<sup>56</sup> John Gray, *Isaiah Berlin* (London: Harper Collins, 1995), p. 44.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>58</sup> Letter to the *Guardian*, 2 September 1995, p. 28.

present system of state-authorised violence,<sup>59</sup> though what form this alternative society would take, or how it would solve problems like Sarajevo he does not say. Unlike the Cultural Materialist, the cultural pluralist knows that there can be no absolute certainties in ethical and political questions, no overarching truth, no universal panacea.

It might be argued that a sense of human values as inherently conflictual is one of the characteristics of most great literature. What is distinctive about both Virgil and Shakespeare is the way this value pluralism becomes the most fundamental ordering principle of their writing. It is this aspect of the plays that Cultural Materialism has seized on and turned into its opposite. Shakespeare must now be made into the spokesman for an anti-humanist ideology so counter-intuitive and so isolated from any modern work on human nature in the biological and psychological sciences<sup>60</sup> that it can find reception only in academic presses. But here it reigns supreme, at least in some journals and text-book series. A recent correspondent in PMLA alleges there is currently a proven tendency among editors of America's most prestigious academic journal to judge articles, not in terms of their contribution to knowledge, or their ability to challenge conventional ways of thinking, but according to whether or not they conform to current notions of what is correct discourse.<sup>61</sup> Cultural Materialism's re-writing of history in the interest of social change may not be worth losing any sleep over, since no professional historian is likely to take it seriously. But the suppression of debate in the interests of correct discourse is a graver matter; it is ironically the first step towards the very absolutism that Cultural Materialism claims to deplore.

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<sup>59</sup>. 'Macbeth: History, Ideology, and Intellectuals', p. 108.

<sup>60</sup>. See Jerome H. Barkow, Leda Cosmides and John Tooby eds., *The Adapted Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and the Generation of Culture* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>61</sup>. Thomas F. Bertonneau, letter to PMLA, vol 112, January 1997, pp. 124-5.