

# **In Time Will Venom Breed**

**Control of *kaîros* in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth***

**Anjali Pai**

**May 31, 2007**

***When shall we three meet again / In thunder, lightning, or in rain? (I.i.1-2)***<sup>1</sup>

The opening lines of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* indicate that Time carries a great deal of importance to the play. The fact that the very first word, "when", is a question related to timing sets the play up to revolve around that element. In addition, the setting and nature of the question provide insight into the method in which time will be integrated into the scenes to come. That the witches pose the question lends a sense of mysticism and supernatural power to the element of time. Moreover, "when" not only describes time but also questions time itself, which sets the stage for temporal uncertainty throughout the rest of the play. The word "when" occurs three times in the first five lines of the play, once as a question and twice within the answer, demonstrating the relative significance of the element of time; in addition, related words such as "ere" and "anon" follow, all within the twelve lines of Act I scene i. The only other concern revealed by the witches is *where*, the other element related to setting.<sup>2</sup> While Shakespeare specifies location both in general ("upon the heath") and specifics (the countries of Scotland and England, the thanedoms of Fife, Glamis, and Cawdor, the town of Scone, etc.), time is largely arbitrary in mention, with the most notable exception being Macbeth's command that "every man be master of his time / Till seven at night" (III.i.40-1). This contrast of arbitrary with specific highlights a forced flexibility via manipulation of time created by the events of the play. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth seek to control their future; in effect, the driving force behind their actions is the desire to control time itself. As Lady Macbeth points out in I.vii, "Nor time, nor place / Did then adhere, and yet you would make both" (51-2). Macbeth focuses on finding "the right time" for things to take place (in this case, in an attempt to orchestrate regicide), and Lady Macbeth has no doubt that he would manipulate time in order to suit his purposes. The desire to

---

<sup>1</sup> Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir. London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Of the six question words - who, what, when, where, why, and how - who refers to character, and what, why, and how are elements of plot. When and where, the remaining questions, describe the setting.

locate and subsequently manage "the right time", or *kaîros*, manifests throughout the play, even in the specific language used by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in contrast to the other characters.

Upon examining temporal language used within the play, a notable pattern emerges. There are three separate categories described using temporal language: time of day, time as in era, and time as a concept. The macro version of time occurs in such statements as "[t]o beguile the time, / Look like the time", as Lady Macbeth attempts to school Macbeth in the art of deception (I.v.63-4). In this case, "time" refers to "in modern times", or perhaps more accurately, "this time period (and the people in it)". Conceptual time is presented in expressionistic manner, such as when Banquo wonders "[i]f you can look into the seeds of time" (I.iii.58), or when Macbeth speaks of "[t]ime and the hour run[ning] through the roughest day" (I.iii.148). The third sort of time, time of day, is more specific than either era-time or conceptual time, though it as well proves arbitrary in most cases. The most common address of time is in terms of "to-night", "to-morrow", "this afternoon", and so forth; in some cases, it is used to describe a length of time such as an hour, a minute, or two nights, for instance. These terms are used by all groups of characters, as they are functionally specific without being too strict. However, the temporal language of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth shows a distinct relation to both the language of the witches and the language of the royal characters. When the witches speak of time, they do so with definitiveness. While the introduction to the witches shows them setting up a meeting using relative time ("When the hurlyburly's done / When the battle's lost and won" (I.i.3-4)), their use of words such as "now" and "'tis time" imply a stronger connection to time as an absolute. Their anticipation of things to come, such as the meeting with Macbeth, also carries with it an authority lacking in the other characters, in that the language may be vague and even equivocal, but it defines an absolute

moment that all three witches understand and meet. Aside from Macbeth, only Fleance and Rosse mention absolute time, i.e. in relation to a clock, and in both cases, the clock has been unable to provide them with a more specific time (II.i.2-3 and II.iv.6, respectively).

On the other hand, the royal characters such as Duncan, Malcolm, and Siward speak of time in anticipation *without* ultimatum. The use of "yet" both implied and spoken outright is common among the royals, and also significantly lacking in the vocabularies of the other characters. When Duncan and Malcolm converse in I.iv regarding the execution of the previous Thane of Cawdor, the sense is of anticipating an event that is to take place without any sense of or real concern for when said event will actually occur. In II.iii, Malcolm and Donalbain speak of how their "tears are not yet brew'd / Nor [their] strong sorrow / Upon the foot of motion" (122-3), again indicating a future event without the impetus driving them toward it. This laid-back approach toward exact timing is only common among the characters in positions of leadership<sup>3</sup>, and is foiled to an extent both by Banquo (in his complete disregard for time, which will be discussed in greater detail shortly) and Macbeth (in his relentless pursuit of the future). While someone who already commands leadership may be satisfied to wait for the right time ("The time approaches" (Siward, V.iv.16)), Macbeth does not have the perceived security in which he can allow time to pass and events to occur as they will, and as such, he seeks to lasso the forward movement of time and bend it to his will.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Though Seyton informs Macbeth that his armour is "not needed yet" (V.iii.33), the use of "yet" in this case is an attempt to slow Macbeth's forward drive rather than a casual attitude toward time itself.

<sup>4</sup> An additional point to note: Hecate uses perhaps the most forceful temporal language in the play: in III.v, she commands the other witches to "make amends now" (14), and informs them that "[g]reat business must be wrought ere noon" (22), giving them much more specific guidelines as to when their amends must take place. She is also the character to discuss the false security of mankind, implying that Macbeth's attempt to control his fate (i.e. future, by taking control of time and manipulating its effects) will be his downfall. This sets up a direct contrast between the real power the witches wield over time and the power Macbeth attempts to harness. As the scene is debatably Shakespeare's work, however, this point remains a side note simply because of interest.

The mode in which Macbeth considers the future is notable in its impetus. Both he and Lady Macbeth express a definite forward movement when discussing the future. In Macbeth's letter to Lady Macbeth (I.v), he mentions how the Weird Sisters, "referr'd" him to "the coming on of time", and steers Lady Macbeth toward contemplation of the "greatness" which was "promis'd" to both of them (I.v.9-13). Lady Macbeth then feels she is "transported...beyond / This ignorant present" and feels "[t]he future in the instant" (I.v.56-8). As she begins to plan the assassination, soon to be joined by Macbeth, she contemplates the timing of Duncan's visit in an attempt to discern the right opportunity for the deed to be done. Both she and Macbeth devise the plan as a relative occurrence, with the events to take place "[w]hen Duncan is asleep" (I.vii.62) and "[w]hen [they] have mark'd with blood these sleepy two [guards]" (I.vii.76). The right time depends on the stage of drunkenness the guards reach by which hour, and also the state of sleep of the rest of the household; as these things cannot be controlled or planned for beforehand, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are forced to await the perfect moment in which to execute the plan. However, within the ambiguity of the plan, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth understand the timing required in order to be successful; this is reminiscent of the witches planning their next meeting using arbitrary language that regardless is unmistakable to those involved. In creating specifics out of relativity, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in effect create their own temporal language that allows them manipulative powers via the exclusion of others.

The attempt to exercise control over time is perhaps most significant in III.i when Macbeth and Banquo converse regarding Macbeth's state dinner that is to take place that evening. Macbeth tries desperately to organise the day to best meet his needs; speaking to Banquo, he demonstrates significant concern regarding the way Banquo intends to spend his time. In plotting Banquo's

assassination, timing is crucial to its completion, indicated by Macbeth's conversation with the murderers in which he promises to "Acquaint [them] with the perfect spy o'th'time, / The moment on't" (III.i.129-30).<sup>5</sup> By taking control of timing and planning events based on actual time rather than relative time, he attempts to ensure that the evening will go as smoothly as possible, so he can arrange for Banquo and Fleance's murders without his guests' awareness.

Banquo, however, is much less concerned with exact timing than relative timing, which is the key to the success of the assassination. Macbeth specifically requests the presence of his guests at "seven at night", but he waits to give the exact time until after Banquo has already left. When speaking to Banquo, he says only, "To-night we hold a solemn supper" without any indication of further detail (III.i.14). When Banquo responds, his attitude toward time is more casual, as he states his intention to ride "[a]s far, my Lord, as will fill up the time / 'Twixt this and supper" (III.i.24-5). He even stipulates that he may be an hour or two after dark if his horse "go[es] not...the better." The implication is that Banquo will plan to arrive at the castle before dark, and that most likely that will occur around dusk.<sup>6</sup> Presumably this is an understandable assumption on Banquo's part, as he promises Macbeth that he will not miss the feast, and Macbeth allows him to believe wrongly in regards to the time by saying "adieu, / Till you return at night" (III.i.34-5). Unless Macbeth were to give an exact time, Banquo would have no way of recognising his mistake; as he does not, he leaves without any concern for the vague nature of Macbeth's command. Since the play takes place in the summer, "seven at night" would most likely have occurred prior to sunset, which would explain why, when Banquo finally arrives at

---

<sup>5</sup> According to the *Arden* footnotes, these lines could also refer to a person being the "perfect spy", but in this paper, the lines are taken to mean the "exact intimation of precise time" or "the exact time most favourable to your purposes", as stated by Heath and Steevens, respectively.

<sup>6</sup> This is further suggested by the fact that the murderers note that "[t]he west yet glimmers with some streaks of day", indicating the latter part of sunset/twilight, but that the "traveller" is "lated" (III.iii.5-6).

the stables outside the castle, "the rest / That are within the note of expectation, / Already are i'th'court" (III.iii.9-11). Moreover, Banquo plans to walk "from hence to the palace gate", "almost a mile", which suggests that he is not worried about tardiness (III.iii.12-13). It is this misconception, caused by Macbeth's deliberately vague use of temporal language and Banquo's subsequent misinterpretation, that allows the murder to take place uninterrupted by the other guests, and consequently provides Macbeth with an alibi, as he is entertaining at the time the murder takes place.

In this scene, Macbeth implies (III.i.40-1) that come seven at night, every man will no longer be master of his time, as he will have handed over mastery to Macbeth, the host of the dinner and thus the one in control of the situation. This attempt at temporal puppetry is only one example of Macbeth's desire to take control over time itself. In fact, it is his inability to adhere to his temporary mantra of "[i]f Chance will have me King, why, Chance may crown me, / Without my stir" that gives rise to his plan to become king (I.iii.144-5). While Banquo seems unconcerned with the Witches' indication that his children will someday be kings, Macbeth is unable to handle the idea of waiting for time to carry out the Witches' prophesy. Though he suggests to Banquo that they allow the "Interim" to manage their passions, thus personifying time as an impartial voice of reason and allowing the passing of time to act as a balancing agent (I.iii.155), he changes his mind when he realises the "wing of recompense" will still not counter Duncan's decision to bestow the title of Prince of Cumberland on Malcolm (I.iv.17); in other words, time itself will not undo things that have already taken place. Once he acknowledges that he cannot rely on time to fulfil his fate, he decides to "be [him]self the harbinger", and thus takes on the role of fore-runner, or the individual with prescience of events to come. In doing so, he aligns

himself with the witches, the only other individuals with foresight in the play; as indicated by his eagerness (and perhaps desperation) to contact the witches in III.iv ("More shall they speak; for now I am bent to know" (133)), Macbeth trusts their authority above all, and seeks their counsel for his "own good", where before he took his cues from the king (especially as an officer in his army) and his wife. This suggests that he has greater respect for the authority of individuals who can see and moreover modify the future than for mere mortals. His subsequent attempt to secure his own authority as king using the foreknowledge provided to him by the witches and by means of his own actions (which are in turn based on said foreknowledge) demonstrates his desire to count himself among those who have that control over time.

As the play progresses and Macbeth's perceived control over time strengthens, his language becomes more definitive. While he begins with his own uncertainty regarding the actual time and timing of events ("If it were done when 'tis done..." (I.vii.6)), by III.i, he feels he has enough control to express time in exact language, giving both clock hours and specific times of day. His sense of urgency increases, as he tells Banquo's murderers that he will provide them with the necessary information "[w]ithin this hour, at most" (III.i.127), as it (the murder) "must be done to-night" (130). His language relaxes momentarily when he plays the part of King, as he speaks to his guests in terms of "in best time" (III.iv.5) and "anon" (11), but his lack of security within that realm of time manifests when the murderer arrives at the door, causing him to return to "now" (23) and "to-morrow" (30). Lady Macbeth further confirms this, as she commands the guests twice to leave "at once" (III.iv.117-119). As Macbeth decides to visit the witches "to-morrow" and "betimes" (III.iv.131-2), he takes hold of his time again, and claims that "[f]rom this moment," he will act upon his thoughts immediately rather than stopping to contemplate



them, as he was prone to do in the early scenes of the play (IV.i.146). This act of desperation regarding the immediacy of time follows on the heels of the prophesy that "Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be, until / Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him" (IV.i.92-4). It is interesting that the vague use of the word "until" should spawn Macbeth's sense that he has successfully taken control of his future, as he interprets this arbitrary time as the absolute "never" (94). He adheres to this misinterpretation of "until" through Act V, manifesting a different sort of anticipation: that of an event that will *never* take place. In contrast to the rest of the royals, Macbeth has moved from a desperate need to be one step ahead of the future to a false comfort brought about by his perceived taming of the future. Even when Malcolm and Siward speak of "the days...near at hand" (V.iv.1) and "the time approach[ing]" (V.iv.16), which implies more immediacy than the "yet" that accompanies most royal address of time, there is never that attempt to "o'erleap" the present to gain control of the future that Macbeth so often expresses, or a sense of absolute control over time; rather than seeking to create *kairos*, the royals anticipate it, waiting until it is "[n]ow, near enough" (V.vi.1) to act. Macbeth, on the other hand, clings to the "charm" that the right time for his death will be never, repeating the "until" as a kind of mantra as the imminent attack and invasion approaches.

In V.v, however, when Seyton informs Macbeth of Lady Macbeth's suicide, Macbeth comments, "She should have died hereafter: / There would have been a time for such a word" (V.v.17-18).

By this point, Macbeth has ceased to think he has control over time; the delusion has been replaced by a resignation that "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow, / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day, / To the last syllable of recorded time; / And all our yesterdays have lighted fools / The way to dusty death"; in other words, the world has become monotonous and

thus meaningless, and the things that have taken place in the past continue to recur, repeating themselves in the lives of every fool on his inexorable trek toward death. His bitter and/or acquiescent speech acts as the turning point; from V.v onward, Macbeth's faith in the arbitrary language of "until" fades as he begins to "doubt th'equivocation of the fiend, / That lies like truth" (V.v.43-4). Though he adheres to the prophecy that he has only to fear one not born of woman, his sense of time has been shattered. With his recognition of the falseness of his security, he resorts to his own will, letting go his perceived control of his fate and his future as he decides to "try the last" (V.viii.32), regardless of his written fate; in other words, he turns his back on the concept of time being under anyone's control, including that of the witches, and leaves behind the temporal authority he strove for since that first meeting with the witches.

With Macbeth's defeat and consequent beheading, "the time is free" (V.ix.21). Although Macduff's use of "time" here is most likely in reference to the era, the statement is no less true when considering time as a conceptual element. Macbeth's attempt to harness time and bend it to his will is the driving force behind the events of the play, and it is not until he releases his hold and becomes a man again that balance in the kingdom may be restored. With Malcolm soon to be crowned, the negative effects of Macbeth's manipulation will be "in measure, time, and place" undone (V.ix.39). It is perhaps notable that upon Macbeth's death and Malcolm's reclamation of his rightful position of leadership, Malcolm uses the word "time" repeatedly in his final speech, reminiscent of the witches' repetition of "when" and the associated control of a concept caused by repetition.<sup>7</sup> Whether this bodes ill for Scotland, however, is unfortunately uncertain.

---

<sup>7</sup> Macbeth especially makes use of this tendency; by repeating the prophecy about "Till Birnham wood remove to Dunsinane" (V.iii.2), he attempts to ground it in reality, thus making his conception of it as equivalent to "never" into truth, as discussed earlier. The intimation is of chanting, as the witches are the other characters to consistently repeat things, thus implying that repetition creates power over the thing being repeated.