

Brian Tomasik
Due: October 30, 2003
Interesting Aspect of *Macbeth*

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is replete with minor themes and subtle meanings, from the idea that sleep provides peace of mind to the concept that the face hides a person's true intent. The eye symbolizes conscience, and the hand, action, while disturbances in nature parallel contradictions of what is "right." One aspect that I found particularly interesting, however, was the play's references to action and motivation. Though I disapprove of the actions themselves, I largely agree with the ideas concerning when to act, the fleeting nature of impulse, and the conversion of emotion into action.

The rule about when to act is exhorted to Macbeth by his wife not long after Duncan's murder: "Things without all remedy / Should be without regard. What's done is done" (3.2.13-14). The seemingly emotionless Lady Macbeth explains that Macbeth's dolefulness should have died with those he killed. I disagree with Lady Macbeth's insistence that her husband immediately expunge all traces of emotion, for it *is* essential to the wellness of a person experiencing a loss to spend time in mournful contemplation. Nevertheless, the basic idea of her statement is one that I accept and even endeavor to follow in my own life. Once intense emotion has subsided and a person has had time to accept any kind of loss or setback, it is best to move on and avoid remaining mired in what cannot be changed. A person should dwell on the past only to the extent that it serves as a lesson and a motivator for future success. For example, whenever I do poorly on a test, I try not to dwell on the failure beyond the initial emotional reaction; after accepting that emotion, I strive to employ reason, firstly to analyze what was wrong and how to improve on the next test, and secondly, to convert my displeasure into motivation to improve the next time.

This process is directly related to another mention of action and motivation in *Macbeth*. In Act 4, Scene 3, after Ross informs Macduff of the murder of his wife and children, Malcolm urges Macduff to transform his grief into an ardent desire for revenge: "Be this the whetstone of your sword. Let grief / Convert to anger. Blunt not the heart; enrage it" (4.3.268-69). As before, I disapprove of the immediate meaning of the exhortation—this time, to take violent revenge—but

agree with the basic idea. I frequently hear people remark that news or information about politics is too depressing to read or hear. I, personally, cannot understand this perspective; whenever I hear a story about human suffering or environmental degradation, for example, I feel inspired to take some sort of action to alleviate the problem. Thus, I subconsciously transform my feelings of outrage into passion to effect change, in whatever small ways I am able (I believe that Ralph Nader has called this “the gift of outrage”). Now, when I hear people mention the depressing nature of news, I can cite this quotation in my response to them. As this and the previous example with tests demonstrate, emotion can be a powerful source for positive motivation and consequently, beneficial actions.

However, since it is common for this motivation to abate, it is important to somehow act while the emotion is present. Macbeth expresses this in Act 4, Scene 1, after he has heard the three apparitions: “The flighty purpose never is o’ertook / Unless the deed go with it” (4.1.165-66). After resolving to seize Macduff’s castle and dispatch his family, Macbeth commits to not “boasting like a fool; / This deed I’ll do before this purpose cool” (4.1.174-75). This idea of carrying out actions before motivation wanes was also prominent in *Hamlet*: I remember, for instance, that Claudius explicated it when he urged Laertes to expeditiously take revenge on Hamlet. However, often in real life, it isn’t possible to take immediate action, especially with larger endeavors. When this is the case, particularly with political issues, I attempt to remember the inspiration felt at one moment—such as after hearing a moving speech—in order to recall it later. Even if I do not feel energized at that later time, I remember the emotion experienced previously and use reason to impel myself to take the small action anyway. (Most of the time, recollecting the motivating experience elicits augmentative remnants of emotion, as well.)

Among the many themes contained within *Macbeth* is one relating to action and motivation. Sundry characters relate similar pieces of advice: Lady Macbeth exhorts her husband to move beyond the past, Malcolm urges Macduff to turn his sadness into vengeance, and Macbeth resolves to take action before the erosion of his motivation. Though the intentions of the characters are, in every case, baleful, the core ideas of the recommendations can be beneficially applied to everyday life.