

Part II

New Criticism



2	The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness <i>Cleanth Brooks</i>	19
3	“Honest” in <i>Othello</i> <i>William Empson</i>	35
4	“Introductory” Chapter About the Tragedies <i>Wolfgang Clemen</i>	50
5	The “New Criticism” and <i>King Lear</i> <i>William R. Keast</i>	63

New Criticism must be considered one of the most significant modes of interpretation produced in the twentieth century – and one of the most misunderstood. Observed from the vantage point of the twenty-first century, this mode of analysis is even more confusing than it was originally, the passage of time and the development of literary studies having distorted rather than clarified it. In the first place, the terminology is disorienting: “New Criticism” seems a misnomer, since it is no longer new, and has not been new since the 1940s. Apart from the adjective, the second obstacle to understanding the critical mode is, oddly enough, a function of its sovereignty in the academy for some three decades. The dominance of New Criticism in the field of literary studies from the end of World War II until about 1975 engendered a series of vigorous responses to it, reactions that tended to caricature its tenets, reduce their complexity, and thus make it more difficult for later readers to appreciate. Every generation of artists and critics exhibits a need to distinguish itself from that which has preceded it, and in the case of New Criticism its progeny attacked the parent with exceptional virulence and even scorn. Since this dispute was a fight for

New Criticism

control of the discipline of English, it is not surprising that Shakespeare's plays and poems often served as battlefields in the struggle.

The method began to emerge in the 1920s, gaining prominence especially in the United States, although I. A. Richards promoted a related kind of practical criticism in Britain. In 1941 John Crowe Ransom fixed the phrase by publishing a book called *The New Criticism*. In the early days the newness of the New Criticism owed something to the promotional skills of its early proponents: Ransom, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and others deliberately set out to transform literary scholarship, and they did so by setting themselves apart from, and declaring their new approach superior to, the prevailing historical–philological method. In other words, the excitement and controversy generated by the New Criticism consisted in its being seen as revolutionary; no one had looked at literature in quite this way before. The most striking innovation was the way the New Critics discarded as irrelevant to interpretation those linguistic, historical, and biographical contexts that had (more or less) always attended and even dominated the study and appreciation of literary works. By the time New Criticism was named, the principles on which the practice rested had already become familiar, especially with the publication in 1938 of Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren's influential anthology, *Understanding Poetry*. Those tenets had by then also become the subject of fierce controversy.

So much misrepresentation and counter-response has created an environment in which it is likely that no two people would summarize the doctrines of New Criticism in exactly the same way, but one might begin by describing it as a species of formalism, as a critical practice that concentrates attention on the *form* of the work and that identifies the meaning of the poem or play with the form in which it is inscribed. Structure and significance are inseparable. The work is organic. Put simply, the aim of the New Critic was to examine the poem as a poem, as an object. The term that has come to be applied to the method is *autotelic*, “having or being an end or purpose in itself” (*OED*). The goal of objectivity, however, made the practice unusually liable to disagreement and caricature: Terry Eagleton, for example, asserts that “what New Criticism did, in fact, was to convert the poem into a fetish.”¹

For the New Critic, the process of critical analysis was chiefly a search for unifying factors in the literary object. As Cleanth Brooks wrote in 1951, “the primary concern of criticism is with the problem of unity – the kind of whole which the literary work forms or fails to form, and the relation of the various parts to each other in building up this whole.”² From this focus on unity most of the principal New Critical goals and characteristics proceed. These include, among others, a reverence for irony, particularly in the form of paradox; a related delight in ambiguity; a veneration of metaphor, with a concomitant belief in the symbolic function of literary art; a conviction that form and content are inseparable. The charge that the New Critics were heedless of context, particularly historical circumstance or biographical data, is only partly true. All the original New Critics were well educated and entirely familiar with history and biography. As a reaction against a style of criticism that had emphasized context to the exclusion of almost anything else, however, their rhetoric seemed to ignore history and biography in favor of attention to the structure and the mechanics of the poem. On this point it is helpful to recall that many of the New Critics – Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and others – were themselves poets. Devoted as they were to a creative

New Criticism

discipline, they were attracted to the products of that discipline and the nature of those products, not to the surroundings of those products and not to their creators. Every critical decision requires a choice of focus, and thus every emphasis entails a corresponding passing over. Taking for granted knowledge of external information allowed the critic to devote undivided attention to the language of the poem, particularly to the “examination of metaphor – the structure most characteristic of concentrated poetry.”³

Shakespeare has been intertwined with New Criticism from its beginnings, not least because he supplied the promoters of the new school with an immediate authority. His texts also provided a hospitable laboratory for testing the main instruments of the method. It quickly became clear, even to most of the New Critics themselves, that their system produced its most impressive results in the study of the lyric poem – a relatively brief, obviously self-contained object, “a well-wrought urn,” in Brooks’s own metaphor borrowed from John Donne. Naturally such critics favored the dense, witty lyrics of the metaphysical poets, especially Donne and company. Herbert was in, Milton out: *Paradise Lost* was not the ideal testing ground for New Criticism. Shakespeare’s plays, their length and theatrical status notwithstanding, responded favorably to the search for imagery, wordplay, irony, ambiguity, coherence, and most of the other features that the New Critics prized. His work also supplied them with another feature that made it irresistible – an unflinching taste for antithesis. Helen Vendler, a celebrated close reader whose sophisticated formalism owes much to New Criticism, has remarked of Shakespeare that “his mind operates always by antithesis. As soon as he thinks of one thing, he thinks of something that is different from it.”⁴ The poetic dramatist’s fondness for antitheses of all kinds – thematic, scenic, metrical, tonal – makes his verse especially welcoming to the reader bent on recognizing contradiction. Shakespeare’s insistence that the audience entertain conflicting viewpoints is naturally consonant with the New Critical devotion to ambiguity.

Cleanth Brooks’s “The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness” is one of the cardinal texts of New Criticism, a vigorous articulation and celebration of the patterns of images and metaphors in *Macbeth*. The work of such critics as Caroline Spurgeon and Wolfgang Iser, while not precisely New Critical, was indispensable to the movement and quickly came to be identified, justly or not, with the New Critical program. William Empson represents something of a special case, first because he is British rather than American (New Criticism being chiefly an American phenomenon); and second because his work is so idiosyncratic that it conforms to no doctrine, not that of the New Critics or anybody else but himself. But New Criticism depended heavily on the skill of close reading, particularly the connection of textual minutiae with larger patterns and ideas, and since Empson is one of the closest of close readers, perhaps the most prodigious of all, his work was often and still is usually classified with New Criticism, often over Empson’s own objections. His particular gift, well displayed in the extended excerpt from *The Structure of Complex Words*, is his uncanny sensitivity to wordplay and his taste for multiple signification.

The final essay in this section, William Keast’s “The ‘New Criticism’ and *King Lear*,” is included for at least three reasons. In the first place, it demonstrates forcefully that New Criticism, while it may have dominated the academy in the 1950s, was not without foes. Writing from the perspective of the Chicago or neo-Aristotelian school, the approach associated especially with R. S. Crane and some of his Chicago colleagues,

New Criticism

Keast objects to Robert B. Heilman's reading of *King Lear* at every critical turn. Second, he lays into Heilman with a virulence so fierce that one seems to be witnessing an early skirmish in the theory wars of the 1980s. Ways of reading literature provoked exceptionally strong feeling, even in the supposedly placid 1950s. Third, the refutation is so specific and careful that the reader finds it easy to follow even without knowing the essay to which it responds.

What does not appear in this book is an example of the mechanical formal studies that descended from the work of Brooks, Empson, and others – the debased form of the New Criticism. In many of these narrow, tendentious readings characteristic of the 1950s and 1960s, the critic identifies a theme and assigns it a pattern of imagery, or vice versa; the cooperation of idea and technique is easily demonstrated, and the case is quickly closed. The totalizing dismissals of New Criticism routinely heard in late-twentieth-century critical discourse derive from this debased stereotype, and most readers will already be familiar with some examples.

Notes

- 1 *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), p. 49.
- 2 "The Formalist Critics," *Kenyon Review*, 13 (1951), p. xxx.
- 3 William K. Wimsatt, "The Structure of the Concrete Universal," from *The Verbal Icon* (University of Kentucky Press, 1954), p. 79.
- 4 *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), p. 35.

The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness



Cleanth Brooks

The debate about the proper limits of metaphor has perhaps never been carried on in so spirited a fashion as it has been within the last twenty-five years. The tendency has been to argue for a much wider extension of those limits than critics like Dr. Johnson, say, were willing to allow – one wider even than the Romantic poets were willing to allow. Indeed, some alarm has been expressed of late, in one quarter or another, lest John Donne’s characteristic treatment of metaphor be taken as the type and norm, measured against which other poets must, of necessity, come off badly. Yet, on the whole, I think that it must be conceded that the debate on metaphor has been stimulating and illuminating – and not least so with reference to those poets who lie quite outside the tradition of metaphysical wit.

Since the “new criticism,” so called, has tended to center around the rehabilitation of Donne, and the Donne tradition, the latter point, I believe, needs to be emphasized. Actually, it would be a poor rehabilitation which, if exalting Donne above all his fellow poets, in fact succeeded in leaving him quite as much isolated from the rest of them as he was before. What the new awareness of the importance of metaphor – if it is actually new, and if its character is really that of a freshened awareness – what this new awareness of metaphor results in when applied to poets other than Donne and his followers is therefore a matter of first importance. Shakespeare provides, of course, the supremely interesting case.

But there are some misapprehensions to be avoided at the outset. We tend to associate Donne with the self-conscious and witty figure – his comparison of the souls of the lovers to the two legs of the compass is the obvious example. Shakespeare’s extended figures are elaborated in another fashion. They are, we are inclined to feel, spontaneous comparisons struck out in the heat of composition, and not carefully articulated, self-conscious conceits at all. Indeed, for the average reader the connection between spontaneity and seriously imaginative poetry is so strong that he will probably reject as

preposterous any account of Shakespeare's poetry which sees an elaborate pattern in the imagery. He will reject it because to accept it means for him the assumption that the writer was not a fervent poet but a preternaturally cold and self-conscious monster.

Poems are certainly not made by formula and blueprint. One rightly holds suspect a critical interpretation that implies that they are. Shakespeare, we may be sure, was no such monster of calculation. But neither, for that matter, was Donne. Even in Donne's poetry, the elaborated and logically developed comparisons are outnumbered by the abrupt and succinct comparisons – by what T. S. Eliot has called the "telescoped conceits." Moreover, the extended comparisons themselves are frequently knit together in the sudden and apparently uncalculated fashion of the telescoped images; and if one examines the way in which the famous compass comparison is related to the rest of the poem in which it occurs, he may feel that even this elaborately "logical" figure was probably the result of a happy accident.

The truth of the matter is that we know very little of the various poets' methods of composition, and that what may seem to us the product of deliberate choice may well have been as "spontaneous" as anything else in the poem. Certainly, the general vigor of metaphor in the Elizabethan period – as testified to by pamphlets, sermons, and plays – should warn us against putting the literature of that period at the mercy of our own personal theories of poetic composition. In any case, we shall probably speculate to better advantage – if speculate we must – on the possible significant interrelations of image with image rather than on the possible amount of pen-biting which the interrelations may have cost the author.

I do not intend, however, to beg the case by oversimplifying the relation between Shakespeare's intricate figures and Donne's. There are most important differences; and, indeed, Shakespeare's very similarities to the witty poets will, for many readers, tell against the thesis proposed here. For those instances in which Shakespeare most obviously resembles the witty poets occur in the earlier plays or in *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece*; and these we are inclined to dismiss as early experiments – trial pieces from the Shakespearean workshop. We demand, quite properly, instances from the great style of the later plays.

Still, we will do well not to forget the witty examples in the poems and earlier plays. They indicate that Shakespeare is in the beginning not too far removed from Donne, and that, for certain effects at least, he was willing to play with the witty comparison. Dr. Johnson, in teasing the metaphysical poets for their fanciful conceits on the subject of tears, might well have added instances from Shakespeare. One remembers, for example, from *Venus and Adonis*:

O, how her eyes and tears did lend and borrow!
Her eyes seen in her tears, tears in her eye;
Both crystals, where they view'd each other's sorrow ...

Or, that more exquisite instance which Shakespeare, perhaps half-smiling, provided for the King in *Love's Labor's Lost*:

So sweet a kiss the golden sun gives not
To those fresh morning drops upon the rose,

The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness

As thy eye-beams, when their fresh rays have smote
The night of dew that on my cheeks down flows:
Nor shines the silver moon one half so bright
Through the transparent bosom of the deep,
As does thy face through tears of mine give light:
Thou shin'st in every tear that I do weep,
No drop but as a coach doth carry thee:
So ridest thou triumphing in my woe.
Do but behold the tears that swell in me,
And they thy glory through my grief will show:
But do not love thyself – then thou wilt keep
My tears for glasses, and still make me weep.

But Berowne, we know, at the end of the play, forswears all such

Taffeta phrases, silken terms precise,
Three-piled hyperboles, spruce affectation,
Figures pedantical ...

in favor of “russet yeas and honest kersey noes.” It is sometimes assumed that Shakespeare did the same thing in his later dramas, and certainly the epithet “taffeta phrases” does not describe the great style of *Macbeth* and *Lear*. Theirs is assuredly of a tougher fabric. But “russet” and “honest kersey” do not describe it either. The weaving was not so simple as that.

The weaving was very intricate indeed – if anything, *more* rather than *less* intricate than that of *Venus and Adonis*, though obviously the pattern was fashioned in accordance with other designs, and yielded other kinds of poetry. But in suggesting that there is a real continuity between the imagery of *Venus and Adonis*, say, and that of a play like *Macbeth*, I am glad to be able to avail myself of Coleridge’s support. I refer to the remarkable fifteenth chapter of the *Biographia*.

There Coleridge stresses not the beautiful tapestry-work – the purely visual effect – of the images, but quite another quality. He suggests that Shakespeare was prompted by a secret dramatic instinct to realize, in the imagery itself, that “constant intervention and running comment by tone, look and gesture” ordinarily provided by the actor, and that Shakespeare’s imagery becomes under this prompting “a series and never broken chain ... always vivid and, because unbroken, often minute ...” Coleridge goes on, a few sentences later, to emphasize further “the perpetual activity of attention required on the part of the reader, ... the rapid flow, the quick change, and the playful nature of the thoughts and images.”

These characteristics, Coleridge hastens to say, are not in themselves enough to make superlative poetry. “They become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion; or by associated thoughts or images awakened by that passion; or when they have the effect of reducing multitude to unity, or succession to an instant; or lastly, when a human and intellectual life is transferred to them from the poet’s own spirit.”

Of the intellectual vigor which Shakespeare possessed, Coleridge then proceeds to speak – perhaps extravagantly. But he goes on to say: “In Shakespeare’s *poems*, the

creative power and the intellectual energy wrestle as in a war embrace. Each in its excess of strength seems to threaten the extinction of the other.”

I am tempted to gloss Coleridge’s comment here, perhaps too heavily, with remarks taken from Chapter XIII where he discusses the distinction between the Imagination and the Fancy – the modifying and creative power, on the one hand, and on the other, that “mode of Memory” ... “blended with, and modified by ... Choice.” But if in *Venus and Adonis* and *The Rape of Lucrece* the powers grapple “in a war embrace,” Coleridge goes on to pronounce: “At length, in the *Drama* they were reconciled, and fought each with its shield before the breast of the other.”

It is a noble metaphor. I believe that it is also an accurate one, and that it comprises one of the most brilliant insights ever made into the nature of the dramatic poetry of Shakespeare’s mature style. If it is accurate, we shall expect to find, even in the mature poetry, the “never broken chain” of images, “always vivid and, because unbroken, often minute,” but we shall expect to find the individual images, not mechanically linked together in the mode of Fancy, but organically related, modified by “a predominant passion,” and mutually modifying each other.

T. S. Eliot has remarked that “The difference between imagination and fancy, in view of [the] poetry of wit, is a very narrow one.” If I have interpreted Coleridge correctly, he is saying that in Shakespeare’s greatest work, the distinction lapses altogether – or rather, that one is caught up and merged in the other. As his latest champion, I. A. Richards, observes: “Coleridge often insisted – and would have insisted still more often had he been a better judge of his reader’s capacity for misunderstanding – that Fancy and Imagination are not exclusive of, or inimical to, one another.”

I began by suggesting that our reading of Donne might contribute something to our reading of Shakespeare, though I tried to make plain the fact that I had no design of trying to turn Shakespeare into Donne, or – what I regard as nonsense – of trying to exalt Donne above Shakespeare. I have in mind specifically some such matter as this: that since the *Songs and Sonets* of Donne, no less than *Venus and Adonis*, requires a “perpetual activity of attention ... on the part of the reader from the rapid flow, the quick change, and the playful nature of the thoughts and images,” the discipline gained from reading Donne may allow us to see more clearly the survival of such qualities in the later style of Shakespeare. And, again, I have in mind some such matter as this: that if a reading of Donne has taught us that the “rapid flow, the quick change, and the playful nature of the thoughts and images” – qualities which we are all too prone to associate merely with the fancy – can, on occasion, take on imaginative power, we may, thus taught, better appreciate details in Shakespeare which we shall otherwise dismiss as merely fanciful, or, what is more likely, which we shall simply ignore altogether.

With Donne, of course, the chains of imagery, “always vivid” and “often minute” are perfectly evident. For many readers they are all too evident. The difficulty is not to prove that they exist, but that, on occasion, they may subserve a more imaginative unity. With Shakespeare, the difficulty may well be to prove that the chains exist at all. In general, we may say, Shakespeare has made it relatively easy for his admirers to choose what they like and neglect what they like. What he gives on one or another level is usually so magnificent that the reader finds it easy to ignore other levels.

Yet there are passages not easy to ignore and on which even critics with the conventional interests have been forced to comment. One of these passages occurs in

The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness

Macbeth, Act I, scene vii, where Macbeth compares the pity for his victim-to-be, Duncan, to

a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, hors'd
Upon the sightless couriers of the air ...

The comparison is odd, to say the least. Is the babe natural or supernatural – an ordinary, helpless baby, who, as newborn, could not, of course, even toddle, much less stride the blast? Or is it some infant Hercules, quite capable of striding the blast, but, since it is powerful and not helpless, hardly the typical pitiable object?

Shakespeare seems bent upon having it both ways – and, if we read on through the passage – bent upon having the best of both worlds; for he proceeds to give us the option: pity is like the babe “or heaven's cherubim” who quite appropriately, of course, do ride the blast. Yet, even if we waive the question of the legitimacy of the alternative (of which Shakespeare so promptly avails himself), is the cherubim comparison really any more successful than is the babe comparison? Would not one of the great warrior archangels be more appropriate to the scene than the cherub? Does Shakespeare mean for pity or for fear of retribution to be dominant in Macbeth's mind?

Or is it possible that Shakespeare could not make up his own mind? Was he merely writing hastily and loosely, and letting the word “pity” suggest the typically pitiable object, the babe naked in the blast, and then, stirred by the vague notion that some threat to Macbeth should be hinted, using “heaven's cherubim” – already suggested by “babe” – to convey the hint? Is the passage vague or precise? Loosely or tightly organized? Comments upon the passage have ranged all the way from one critic's calling it “pure rant, and intended to be so” to another's laudation: “Either like a mortal babe, terrible in helplessness; or like heaven's angel-children, mighty in love and compassion. This magnificent passage ...”

An even more interesting, and perhaps more disturbing passage in the play is that in which Macbeth describes his discovery of the murder:

Here lay Duncan,
His silver skin lac'd with his golden blood;
And his gash'd stabs, look'd like a breach in nature
For ruin's wasteful entrance: there, the murderers,
Steep'd in the colours of their trade, their daggers
Unmannerly breech'd with gore ...

It is amusing to watch the textual critics, particularly those of the eighteenth century, fight a stubborn rearguard action against the acceptance of “breech'd.” Warburton emended “breech'd” to “reech'd”; Johnson, to “drench'd”; Seward, to “hatch'd.” Other critics argued that the *breeches* implied were really the handles of the daggers, and that, accordingly, “breech'd” actually here meant “sheathed.” The *Variorum* page witnesses the desperate character of the defense, but the position has had to be yielded, after all. *The Shakespeare Glossary* defines “breech'd” as meaning “covered as with breeches,” and thus leaves the poet committed to a reading which must still shock the average reader as much as it shocked that nineteenth-century critic who pronounced upon it as

follows: "A metaphor must not be far-fetched nor dwell upon the details of a disgusting picture, as in these lines. There is little, and that far-fetched, similarity between *gold lace* and *blood*, or between *bloody daggers* and *breech'd legs*. The slightness of the similarity, recalling the greatness of the dissimilarity, disgusts us with the attempted comparison."

The two passages are not of the utmost importance, I dare say, though the speeches (of which each is a part) are put in Macbeth's mouth and come at moments of great dramatic tension in the play. Yet, in neither case is there any warrant for thinking that Shakespeare was not trying to write as well as he could. Moreover, whether we like it or not, the imagery is fairly typical of Shakespeare's mature style. Either passage ought to raise some qualms among those who retreat to Shakespeare's authority when they seek to urge the claims of "noble simplicity." They are hardly simple. Yet it is possible that such passages as these may illustrate another poetic resource, another type of imagery which, even in spite of its apparent violence and complication, Shakespeare could absorb into the total structure of his work.

Shakespeare, I repeat, is not Donne – is a much greater poet than Donne; yet the example of his typical handling of imagery will scarcely render support to the usual attacks on Donne's imagery – for, with regard to the two passages in question, the second one, at any rate, is about as strained as Donne is at his most extreme pitch.

Yet I think that Shakespeare's daggers attired in their bloody breeches can be defended as poetry, and as characteristically Shakespearean poetry. Furthermore, both this passage and that about the newborn babe, it seems to me, are far more than excrescences, mere extravagances of detail: each, it seems to me, contains a central symbol of the play, and symbols which we must understand if we are to understand either the detailed passage or the play as a whole.

If this be true, then more is at stake than the merit of the quoted lines taken as lines. (The lines as constituting mere details of a larger structure could, of course, be omitted in the acting of the play without seriously damaging the total effect of the tragedy – though this argument obviously cuts two ways. Whole scenes, and admittedly fine scenes, might also be omitted – have in fact *been* omitted – without quite destroying the massive structure of the tragedy.) What is at stake is the whole matter of the relation of Shakespeare's imagery to the total structures of the plays themselves.

I should like to use the passages as convenient points of entry into the larger symbols which dominate the play. They *are* convenient because, even if we judge them to be faulty, they demonstrate how obsessive for Shakespeare the symbols were – they demonstrate how far the conscious (or unconscious) symbolism could take him.

If we see how the passages are related to these symbols, and they to the tragedy as a whole, the main matter is achieved; and having seen this, if we still prefer "to wish the lines away," that, of course, is our privilege. In the meantime, we may have learned something about Shakespeare's methods – not merely of building metaphors – but of encompassing his larger meanings.

One of the most startling things which has come out of Miss Spurgeon's book on Shakespeare's imagery is her discovery of the "old clothes" imagery in *Macbeth*. As she points out: "The idea constantly recurs that Macbeth's new honours sit ill upon him, like a loose and badly fitting garment, belonging to someone else." And she goes on to quote passage after passage in which the idea is expressed. But, though we are all in

Cleanth Brooks

The Thane of Cawdor lives: why do you dress me
In borrow'd robes?

Macbeth at this point wants no honors that are not honestly his. Banquo says in Act I:

New honours come upon him,
Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mould,
But with the aid of use.

But Banquo's remark, one must observe, is not censorious. It is indeed a compliment to say of one that he wears new honors with some awkwardness. The observation becomes ironical only in terms of what is to occur later.

Macbeth says in Act I:

He hath honour'd me of late; and I have bought
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
Not cast aside so soon.

Macbeth here is proud of his new clothes: he is happy to wear what he has truly earned. It is the part of simple good husbandry not to throw aside these new garments and replace them with robes stolen from Duncan.

But Macbeth has already been wearing Duncan's garments in anticipation, as his wife implies in the metaphor with which she answers him:

Was the hope drunk,
Wherein you dress'd yourself?

(The metaphor may seem hopelessly mixed, and a full and accurate analysis of such mixed metaphors in terms of the premises of Shakespeare's style waits upon some critic who will have to consider not only this passage but many more like it in Shakespeare.) For our purposes here, however, one may observe that the psychological line, the line of the basic symbolism, runs on unbroken. A man dressed in a drunken hope is garbed in strange attire indeed – a ridiculous dress which accords thoroughly with the contemptuous picture that Lady Macbeth wishes to evoke. Macbeth's earlier dream of glory has been a drunken fantasy merely, if he flinches from action now.

But the series of garment metaphors which run through the play is paralleled by a series of masking or cloaking images which – if we free ourselves of Miss Spurgeon's rather mechanical scheme of classification – show themselves to be merely variants of the garments which hide none too well his disgraceful self. He is consciously hiding that self throughout the play.

"False face must hide what the false heart doth know," he counsels Lady Macbeth before the murder of Duncan; and later, just before the murder of Banquo, he invokes night to "Scarf up the eye of pitiful day."

One of the most powerful of these cloaking images is given to Lady Macbeth in the famous speech in Act I:

The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness

Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry, "Hold, Hold!"

I suppose that it is natural to conceive the "keen knife" here as held in her own hand. Lady Macbeth is capable of wielding it. And in this interpretation, the imagery is thoroughly significant. Night is to be doubly black so that not even her knife may see the wound it makes. But I think that there is good warrant for regarding her "keen knife" as Macbeth himself. She has just, a few lines above, given her analysis of Macbeth's character as one who would "not play false, / And yet [would] wrongly win." To bring him to the point of action, she will have to "chastise [him] with the valour of [her] tongue." There is good reason, then, for her to invoke night to become blacker still – to pall itself in the "dunnest smoke of hell." For night must not only screen the deed from the eye of heaven – conceal it at least until it is too late for heaven to call out to Macbeth "Hold, Hold!" Lady Macbeth would have night blanket the deed from the hesitant doer. The imagery thus repeats and reinforces the substance of Macbeth's anguished aside uttered in the preceding scene:

Let not light see my black and deep desires;
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.

I do not know whether "blanket" and "pall" qualify as garment metaphors in Miss Spurgeon's classification: yet one is the clothing of sleep, and the other, the clothing of death – they are the appropriate garments of night; and they carry on an important aspect of the general clothes imagery. It is not necessary to attempt to give here an exhaustive list of instances of the garment metaphor; but one should say a word about the remarkable passage in II, iii.

Here, after the discovery of Duncan's murder, Banquo says

And when we have our naked frailties hid,
That suffer in exposure, let us meet,
And question this most bloody piece of work –

that is, "When we have clothed ourselves against the chill morning air, let us meet to discuss this bloody piece of work." Macbeth answers, as if his subconscious mind were already taking Banquo's innocent phrase, "naked frailties," in a deeper, ironic sense:

Let's briefly put on manly readiness ...

It is ironic; for the "manly readiness" which he urges the other lords to put on, is, in his own case, a hypocrite's garment: he can only pretend to be the loyal, grief-stricken liege who is almost unstrung by the horror of Duncan's murder.

Cleanth Brooks

But the word “manly” carries still a further ironic implication: earlier, Macbeth had told Lady Macbeth that he dared

do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more is none.

Under the weight of her reproaches of cowardice, however, he *has* dared do more, and has become less than a man, a beast. He has already laid aside, therefore, one kind of “manly readiness” and has assumed another: he has garbed himself in a sterner composure than that which he counsels to his fellows – the hard and inhuman “manly readiness” of the resolved murderer.

The clothes imagery, used sometimes with emphasis on one aspect of it, sometimes, on another, does pervade the play. And it should be evident that the daggers “breach’d with gore” – though Miss Spurgeon does not include the passage in her examples of clothes imagery – represent one more variant of this general symbol. Consider the passage once more:

Here lay Duncan,
His silver skin lac’d with his golden blood;
And his gash’d stabs look’d like a breach in nature
For ruin’s wasteful entrance: there, the murderers,
Steep’d in the colours of their trade, their daggers
Unmannerly breach’d with gore ...

The clothes imagery runs throughout the passage; the body of the king is dressed in the most precious of garments, the blood royal itself; and the daggers too are dressed – in the same garment. The daggers, “naked” except for their lower parts which are reddened with blood, are like men in “unmannerly” dress – men, naked except for their red breeches, lying beside the red-handed grooms. The figure, though vivid, is fantastic; granted. But the basis for the comparison is *not* slight and adventitious. The metaphor fits the real situation on the deepest levels. As Macbeth and Lennox burst into the room, they find the daggers wearing, as Macbeth knows all too well, a horrible masquerade. They have been carefully “clothed” to play a part. They are not honest daggers, honorably naked in readiness to guard the king, or, “mannerly” clothed in their own sheaths. Yet the disguise which they wear will enable Macbeth to assume the robes of Duncan – robes to which he is no more entitled than are the daggers to the royal garments which they now wear, grotesquely.

The reader will, of course, make up his own mind as to the value of the passage. But the metaphor in question, in the light of the other garment imagery, cannot be dismissed as merely a strained ingenuity, irrelevant to the play. And the reader who *does* accept it as poetry will probably be that reader who knows the play best, not the reader who knows it slightly and regards Shakespeare’s poetry as a rhetoric more or less loosely draped over the “content” of the play.

And now what can be said of pity, the “naked newborn babe”? Though Miss Spurgeon does not note it (since the governing scheme of her book would have hardly allowed her to see it), there are, by the way, a great many references to babes in this

The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness

play – references which occur on a number of levels. The babe appears sometimes as a character, such as Macduff's child; sometimes as a symbol, like the crowned babe and the bloody babe which are raised by the witches on the occasion of Macbeth's visit to them; sometimes, in a metaphor, as in the passage under discussion. The number of such references can hardly be accidental; and the babe turns out to be, as a matter of fact, perhaps the most powerful symbol in the tragedy.

But to see this fully, it will be necessary to review the motivation of the play. The stimulus to Duncan's murder, as we know, was the prophecy of the Weird Sisters. But Macbeth's subsequent career of bloodshed stems from the same prophecy. Macbeth was to have the crown, but the crown was to pass to Banquo's children. The second part of the prophecy troubles Macbeth from the start. It does not oppress him, however, until the crown has been won. But from this point on, the effect of the prophecy is to hurry Macbeth into action and more action until he is finally precipitated into ruin.

We need not spend much time in speculating on whether Macbeth, had he been content with Duncan's murder, had he tempted fate no further, had he been willing to court the favor of his nobles, might not have died peaceably in bed. We are dealing, not with history, but with a play. Yet, even in history the usurper sometimes succeeds; and he sometimes succeeds on the stage. Shakespeare himself knew of, and wrote plays about, usurpers who successfully maintained possession of the crown. But, in any case, this much is plain: the train of murders into which Macbeth launches aggravates suspicions of his guilt and alienates the nobles.

Yet, a Macbeth who could act once, and then settle down to enjoy the fruits of this one attempt to meddle with the future would, of course, not be Macbeth. For it is not merely his great imagination and his warrior courage in defeat which redeem him for tragedy and place him beside the other great tragic protagonists: rather, it is his attempt to conquer the future, an attempt involving him, like Oedipus, in a desperate struggle with fate itself. It is this which holds our imaginative sympathy, even after he has degenerated into a bloody tyrant and has become the slayer of Macduff's wife and children.

To sum up, there can be no question that Macbeth stands at the height of his power after his murder of Duncan, and that the plan – as outlined by Lady Macbeth – has been relatively successful. The road turns toward disaster only when Macbeth decides to murder Banquo. Why does he make this decision? Shakespeare has pointed up the basic motivation very carefully:

Then prophet-like,
They hail'd him father to a line of kings.
Upon my head they plac'd a fruitless crown,
And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,
Thence to be wrench'd with an unlineal hand,
No son of mine succeeding. If't be so,
For Banquo's issue have I fil'd my mind;
For them the gracious Duncan have I murder'd;
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace
Only for them; and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common enemy of man,
To make them kings, the seed of Banquo kings!

Cleanth Brooks

Presumably, Macbeth had entered upon his course from sheer personal ambition. Ironically, it is the more human part of Macbeth – his desire to have more than a limited personal satisfaction, his desire to found a line, his wish to pass something on to later generations – which prompts him to dispose of Banquo. There is, of course, a resentment against Banquo, but that resentment is itself closely related to Macbeth's desire to found a dynasty. Banquo, who has risked nothing, who has remained upright, who has not defiled himself, will have kings for children; Macbeth, none. Again, ironically, the Weird Sisters who have given Macbeth, so he has thought, the priceless gift of knowledge of the future, have given the real future to Banquo.

So Banquo's murder is decided upon, and accomplished. But Banquo's son escapes, and once more, the future has eluded Macbeth. The murder of Banquo thus becomes almost meaningless. This general point may be obvious enough, but we shall do well to note some of the further ways in which Shakespeare has pointed up the significance of Macbeth's war with the future.

When Macbeth, at the beginning of Scene vii, Act I, contemplates Duncan's murder, it is the future over which he agonizes:

If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly; if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here ...

But the continuum of time cannot be partitioned off; the future is implicit in the present. There is no net strong enough to trammel up the consequence – not even in this world.

Lady Macbeth, of course, has fewer qualms. When Macbeth hesitates to repudiate the duties which he owes Duncan – duties which, by some accident of imagery perhaps – I hesitate to press the significance – he has earlier actually called “children” – Lady Macbeth cries out that she is willing to crush her own child in order to gain the crown:

I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this.

Robert Penn Warren has made the penetrating observation that all of Shakespeare's villains are rationalists. Lady Macbeth is certainly of their company. She knows what she wants; and she is ruthless in her consideration of means. She will always “catch the nearest way.” This is not to say that she ignores the problem of scruples, or that she is ready to oversimplify psychological complexities. But scruples are to be used to entangle one's enemies. One is not to become tangled in the mesh of scruples himself. Even though she loves her husband and though her ambition for herself is a part of her ambition for him, still she seems willing to consider even Macbeth at times as pure instrument, playing upon his hopes and fears and pride.

The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness

Her rationalism is quite sincere. She is apparently thoroughly honest in declaring that

The sleeping and the dead
Are but as pictures; 'tis the eye of childhood
That fears a painted devil. If he do bleed,
I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal,
For it must seem their guilt.

For her, there is no moral order: *guilt* is something like *gilt* – one can wash it off or paint it on. Her pun is not frivolous and it is deeply expressive.

Lady Macbeth abjures all pity; she is willing to unsex herself; and her continual taunt to Macbeth, when he falters, is that he is acting like a baby – not like a man. This “manhood” Macbeth tries to learn. He is a dogged pupil. For that reason he is almost pathetic when the shallow rationalism which his wife urges upon him fails. His tone is almost one of puzzled bewilderment at nature’s unfairness in failing to play the game according to the rules – the rules which have applied to other murders:

the time has been,
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end; but now they rise again ...

Yet, after the harrowing scene, Macbeth can say, with a sort of dogged weariness:

Come, we'll to sleep. My strange and self-abuse
Is the initiate fear that wants hard use:
We are yet but young in deed.

Ironically, Macbeth is still echoing the dominant metaphor of Lady Macbeth’s reproach. He has not yet attained to “manhood”; that *must* be the explanation. He has not yet succeeded in hardening himself into something inhuman.

Tempted by the Weird Sisters and urged on by his wife, Macbeth is thus caught between the irrational and the rational. There is a sense, of course, in which every man is caught between them. Man must try to predict and plan and control his destiny. That is man’s fate; and the struggle, if he is to realize himself as a man, cannot be avoided. The question, of course, which has always interested the tragic dramatist involves the terms on which the struggle is accepted and the protagonist’s attitude toward fate and toward himself. Macbeth in his general concern for the future is typical – is Every Man. He becomes the typical tragic protagonist when he yields to pride and *hybris*. The occasion for temptation is offered by the prophecy of the Weird Sisters. They offer him knowledge which cannot be arrived at rationally. They offer a key – if only a partial key – to what is otherwise unpredictable. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, by employing a ruthless clarity of perception, by discounting all emotional claims, offers him the promise of bringing about the course of events which he desires.

Now, in the middle of the play, though he has not lost confidence and though, as he himself says, there can be no turning back, doubts have begun to arise; and he returns to the Weird Sisters to secure unambiguous answers to his fears. But, pathetically and

ironically for Macbeth, in returning to the Weird Sisters, he is really trying to impose rationality on what sets itself forth plainly as irrational: that is, Macbeth would force a rigid control on a future which, by definition – by the very fact that the Weird Sisters already know it – stands beyond his manipulation.

It is because of his hopes for his own children and his fears of Banquo's that he has returned to the witches for counsel. It is altogether appropriate, therefore, that two of the apparitions by which their counsel is revealed should be babes, the crowned babe and the bloody babe.

For the babe signifies the future which Macbeth would control and cannot control. It is the unpredictable thing itself – as Yeats has put it magnificently, "The uncontrollable mystery on the bestial floor." It is the one thing that can justify, even in Macbeth's mind, the murders which he has committed. Earlier in the play, Macbeth had declared that if the deed could "trammel up the consequence," he would be willing to "jump the life to come." But he cannot jump the life to come. In his own terms he is betrayed. For it is idle to speak of jumping the life to come if one yearns to found a line of kings. It is the babe that betrays Macbeth – his own babes, most of all.

The logic of Macbeth's distraught mind, thus, forces him to make war on children, a war which in itself reflects his desperation and is a confession of weakness. Macbeth's ruffians, for example, break into Macduff's castle and kill his wife and children. The scene in which the innocent child prattles with his mother about his absent father, and then is murdered, is typical Shakespearean "fourth act" pathos. But the pathos is not adventitious; the scene ties into the inner symbolism of the play. For the child, in its helplessness, defies the murderers. Its defiance testifies to the force which threatens Macbeth and which Macbeth cannot destroy.

But we are not, of course, to placard the child as The Future in a rather stiff and mechanical allegory. *Macbeth* is no such allegory. Shakespeare's symbols are richer and more flexible than that. The babe signifies not only the future; it symbolizes all those enlarging purposes which make life meaningful, and it symbolizes, furthermore, all those emotional and – to Lady Macbeth – irrational ties which make man more than a machine – which render him human. It signifies preeminently the pity which Macbeth, under Lady Macbeth's tutelage, would wean himself of as something "unmanly." Lady Macbeth's great speeches early in the play become brilliantly ironical when we realize that Shakespeare is using the same symbol for the unpredictable future that he uses for human compassion. Lady Macbeth is willing to go to any length to grasp the future: she would willingly dash out the brains of her own child if it stood in her way to that future. But this is to repudiate the future, for the child is its symbol.

Shakespeare does not, of course, limit himself to the symbolism of the child: he makes use of other symbols of growth and development, notably that of the plant. And this plant symbolism patterns itself to reflect the development of the play. For example, Banquo says to the Weird Sisters, early in the play:

If you can look into the seeds of time,
And say which grain will grow and which will not,
Speak then to me ...

A little later, on welcoming Macbeth, Duncan says to him:

The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness

I have begun to plant thee, and will labour
To make thee full of growing.

After the murder of Duncan, Macbeth falls into the same metaphor when he comes to resolve on Banquo's death. The Weird Sisters, he reflects, had hailed Banquo as

... father to a line of kings.
Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown,
And put a barren sceptre in my gripe ...

Late in the play, Macbeth sees himself as the winter-stricken tree:

I have liv'd long enough: my way of life
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf ...

The plant symbolism, then, supplements the child symbolism. At points it merges with it, as when Macbeth ponders bitterly that he has damned himself.

To make them kings, the seed of Banquo kings!

And, in at least one brilliant example, the plant symbolism unites with the clothes symbolism. It is a crowning irony that one of the Weird Sisters' prophecies on which Macbeth has staked his hopes is fulfilled when Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane. For, in a sense, Macbeth is here hoist on his own petard. Macbeth, who has invoked night to "Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day," and who has, again and again, used the "false face" to "hide what the false heart doth know," here has the trick turned against him. But the garment which cloaks the avengers is the living green of nature itself, and nature seems, to the startled eyes of his sentinels, to be rising up against him.

But it is the babe, the child, that dominates the symbolism. Most fittingly, the last of the prophecies in which Macbeth has placed his confidence, concerns the child: and Macbeth comes to know the final worst when Macduff declares to him that he was not "born of woman" but was from his "mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd." The babe here has defied even the thing which one feels may reasonably be predicted of him – his time of birth. With Macduff's pronouncement, the unpredictable has broken through the last shred of the net of calculation. The future cannot be trammelled up. The naked babe confronts Macbeth to pronounce his doom.

The passage with which we began this essay, then, is an integral part of a larger context, and of a very rich context:

And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, hors'd
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.

Pity is like the naked babe, the most sensitive and helpless thing; yet, almost as soon as the comparison is announced, the symbol of weakness begins to turn into a symbol of

strength; for the babe, though newborn, is pictured as “Striding the blast” like an elemental force – like “heaven’s cherubim, hors’d / Upon the sightless couriers of the air.” We can give an answer to the question put earlier: is Pity like the human and helpless babe, or powerful as the angel that rides the winds? It is both; and it is strong because of its very weakness. The paradox is inherent in the situation itself; and it is the paradox that will destroy the overbrittle rationalism on which Macbeth founds his career.

For what will it avail Macbeth to cover the deed with the blanket of the dark if the elemental forces that ride the winds will blow the horrid deed in every eye? And what will it avail Macbeth to clothe himself in “manliness” – to become bloody, bold, and resolute, – if he is to find himself again and again, viewing his bloody work through the “eye of childhood / That fears a painted devil”? Certainly, the final and climactic appearance of the babe symbol merges all the contradictory elements of the symbol. For, with Macduff’s statement about his birth, the naked babe rises before Macbeth as not only the future that eludes calculation but as avenging angel as well.

The clothed daggers and the naked babe – mechanism and life – instrument and end – death and birth – that which should be left bare and clean and that which should be clothed and warmed – these are facets of two of the great symbols which run throughout the play. They are not the only symbols, to be sure; they are not the most obvious symbols: darkness and blood appear more often. But with a flexibility which must amaze the reader, the image of the garment and the image of the babe are so used as to encompass an astonishingly large area of the total situation. And between them – the naked babe, essential humanity, humanity stripped down to the naked thing itself, and yet as various as the future – and the various garbs which humanity assumes, the robes of honor, the hypocrite’s disguise, the inhuman “manliness” with which Macbeth endeavors to cover up his essential humanity – between them, they furnish Shakespeare with his most subtle and ironically telling instruments.