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The Limner's Art in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

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For all its Protestant mistrust of images, Elizabethan and Jacobean England was fascinated by the visual arts and, as Horst Bredekamp puts it, paradoxically “reinforce[d] what it reject[ed]” (2015, 169). While continental treatises like Giovanni Paolo Lomazzo’s *A tracte containing the artes of curious paintinge caruinge buildinge*, translated by Richard Haydock in 1598, “introduced the English-reading public to the theory of linear perspective” (Elam 2017, 9), the first original texts in English on the arts of drawing and painting began to circulate in print. A man of his time, Shakespeare could hardly ignore these new discourses on pictures, as his frequent and expert use of iconographic references and technical terms testifies (ibid., 10). It is with this context in mind that I intend to reassess the style and aesthetics of *Macbeth* in connection with early modern pictorial techniques.

“[W]hy do I yield to that suggestion / Whose horrid *image* doth unfix my hair [?]” (1.3.136-37, my emphasis),¹ Macbeth wonders after he has heard the predictions of the witches. Ghastly, albeit sophisticated, visual images abound in Shakespeare’s Scottish tragedy. Overwhelmed by the evil forces that they have unleashed and that are now crushing them, the Macbeths are ironically reduced to miniatures in the last act of the play. As the plot thickens, they are indeed gradually downsized and seem hopelessly dwarfed in the end: “Now does he feel his title / Hang loose about him, like a giant’s robe / Upon a dwarfish thief” (5.2.20-22), Angus says of the titular character.

How then should we understand the idea of “miniature” in the early modern period? The word was first used by Edward Norgate in connection with “limning” in a treatise written around 1627, *Miniatura or the art of limning*. Yet, limning originally referred to a technique rather than to a small size painting and it designated “the cleanly, discreet art of watercolour” (Coombs 2009, 78), an art that took up “neither undue space nor time” (ibid.). Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century painters could rely on a number of treatises to improve their practice. In *The arte of limming*, an anonymous treatise published in 1573² (and, it should be noted,

¹ All references to the play refer to Clark and Mason 2015. For other Shakespeare plays, I rely on Taylor, Jowett, Bourus and Egan 2016.

² It went through six editions between 1573 and 1605.

primarily concerned with heraldic texts and ornamental motifs rather than with portrait limning), limners are advised to first “draw [their] worke[s] with a pencell of blacke lead,” then to “ingrosse” their “gould and silver.” Once that stage is completed, limners can “lay [their] colours” and “purfle them about the sides with blacke inke.” Finally, they may “diaper them over with whyte coloure” before “vernish[ing] them over wyth good old glayre” (fol xjv).

In early modern England, “picturing” could take on different shapes and apply to several arts. Alexander Marr rightfully reminds us that a “picture” could designate a “miniature” as well as a “theatrical event,” and that Inigo Jones saw the masque as “nothing else but pictures with light and motion” (Marr 2016, 375). Similarly, I would like to suggest that *Macbeth* can be defined as a picture with light, colors and motion. In that perspective, the tragedy’s visual rhetoric may be linked to Shakespeare’s palette and the playwright’s method of composition compared to that of the limner.³

Step 1: “[D]raw thy worke with a pencell of black lead”

Critics who focus on the predominance of obscurity in the play have interpreted the tragedy as an intimist one or as a night piece⁴ which points to the dark inwardness of the Macbeth couple. This reading has led to successful stage productions by such eminent directors as Trevor Nunn (at The Other Place in 1976) and Gregory Doran (at the Swan in 1999), who both re-interpreted *Macbeth* as a chamber play.

In point of fact, as he drew/wrote his own piece, Shakespeare seems to have started by delineating the darkest lines of his plot. Anyone commenting on *Macbeth* unmistakably notes the somber character of his tragic universe and its subtle interplay of light and darkness.⁵ If for early modern painters, black “denot[ed] sadnesse, griefe” (Peacham 1612, 147), Shakespeare associates it with evil much more than with sadness in his play (“The devil damn thee black,” 5.3.11). “Stars, hide your fires, / Let not light see my black and deep desires” (1.4.50-51), Macbeth exclaims in the opening act. This not only foregrounds the importance of darkness in connection with Macbeth’s devilish intentions, but also functions as a metatheatrical reference to the Globe where the underside of the roof, which covered part of

³ Critics have already detected borrowings from the limner’s techniques in several of his plays, including *Twelfth Night* and *Hamlet* (Sokol 2018, 239, notes 28 and 29).

⁴ A “night piece” is first and foremost a “painting or picture representing a scene or landscape at night” (*OED*, 1.a).

⁵ On “the effects of darkness” in the play, see A.C. Bradley 2004, 51.

the stage, was studded with painted stars. Macbeth calls for a starless night in order to hatch his plot and bring about the prophecies of the weird sisters. Doing so, he threatens to darken the theatrical space in which his actions are staged.

This suggests a deliberate use of white and dark hues by the playwright, with particular emphasis on light in darkness. In a number of scenes, daylight is rapidly fading⁶ while, in others, night has already fallen. If/when performed inside, the nocturnal scenes would have looked perfectly suited to the general atmosphere of the playing space. Closed performing areas were lit by candlelight and “candles could be snuffed or removed” (Leggatt 2006, 89).⁷ On the contrary, when performed in full daylight at the Globe, the play’s darkness must have been “theatrically conjured rather than literally provided,” as John Mullan explains (2016, n.p.). This is corroborated by Macbeth’s “Out, out brief candle” speech in which light is openly associated with stage business (5.5.22-24).

As Emma Smith observes, “[t]he play’s plot, structural and ethical, is [...] encapsulated in the struggle between night and day” (2013, 144).⁸ The succession, and sometimes confusion, of day and night further suggests the intense internal struggle fought by the protagonists. Significantly, the tragedy begins with a storm (“*thunder and lightning*”), probably materialized onstage by fireworks generating a fetid smoke that made the audience immediately realize that the Scottish climate as depicted by Shakespeare was a deeply disturbed one.⁹ The three witches’ eerie refrain (“Fair is foul, and foul is fair,” 1.1.9)¹⁰ points to an upside down situation which is unwittingly echoed by Macbeth later on as he meets Banquo: “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (1.3.38). Night and day thus constantly seem to fight against each other, lending cosmic as well as biblical undertones to the tragedy. Armelle Sabatier reminds us that “[t]he conventional opposition between darkness and light stems from the opening lines of [...] Genesis when the world was created thanks to the coming of light over darkness” (2017, 71). Seen in this perspective, *Macbeth* presents us with

⁶ See 1.1.5; 1.6 where the use of “torches” suggests that night is falling; or 3.3.5.

⁷ The tragedy, composed around 1606, was obviously not written for the Blackfriars, since the King’s Men only acquired it in 1608. However, some critics think that the play was performed at the court of James I.

⁸ In connection with this, it may be worth noting that Shakespeare’s contemporaries, including the encyclopedist Stephen Batman, saw black and white as the two main dyes of the color spectrum (1582, fols. 388r and 389r).

⁹ In Raphael Holinshed’s *Chronicles* (1577), Shakespeare’s main source, the weather becomes dark and cloudy after Duncan’s murder (1978, 483-84). In Shakespeare’s tragedy, the terrible weather plaguing the “unruly” night described by Lennox (2.3.54) is concomitant with the murder, and the “*strange* screams of death” (2.3.56, my emphasis) he mentions suggest supernatural occurrences not unlike those depicted in Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* just before the assassination of the title character.

¹⁰ The “fair is foul” phrase can be found in an earlier poem by Giles Fletcher entitled “Galatea” (1593, 58). If Shakespeare knew Fletcher’s poem, he dramatized and re-contextualized the poetic formula of his predecessor.

a reversed Genesis, one in which darkness dims light and foreshadows the tragic events to come.

As a result, light is used as a means of underscoring the pictorial effects of the scenes and gives Shakespeare's playtext a peculiar dramatic intensity. Some limners, at the time, sought to create a contrast between their handling of light and the dark background of their pictures. If Nicholas Hilliard (1547-1619) strongly disapproved of vague, impure lines,¹¹ his pupil Isaac Oliver (1565-1617) did use the *chiaroscuro* technique (an effect borrowed from large scale oil paintings) in some of his works, thereby paving the way for a shift in taste at the turn of the century.¹² In his Jacobean tragedy, Shakespeare appears to be yet another precursor of the *chiaroscuro*, albeit not exactly the one used by Caravaggio.¹³ Later exponents of the Utrecht school such as Gerrit van Honthorst (1590-1656) or Hendrick Terbrugghen (c. 1588-1629) created night scenes in which artificial sources of light, such as torches or candles, illuminate part of the painting to make it stand out against the dark background. Act 5, scene 5 of *Macbeth*, which includes the "Out, out brief candle" speech and where tapers signal a night-time setting as much as the titular character's extinguishing life, contains similar effects.

Step 2: "[I]ngrosse [thy gould and silver] with a sharpe knife"

Most early modern treatises devoted to painting techniques point to the importance of gold and silver in the limning practice of the time. Henry Peacham's *The art of drawing with the pen, and limming in water colours* contains a chapter entitled "Of gilding or the ordering of gold and silver in water colors" (1606, 49). A painter and a jeweler obsessed with glittering light, Hilliard used gold and silver in his paintings, thus following in Holbein's footsteps (Jones and Stallybrass 2003, 41).¹⁴ Gold was for him a means of highlighting certain parts of the picture as well as of turning it into a jewel-like work.¹⁵ He used it as a metal rather than as a powdered pigment (Fumerton 1991, 78) and he painted gold and silver lines around the

¹¹ Rejecting the use of shadows and *chiaroscuro*, he "celebrate[d] the truth of the line as opposed to *sfumato*" (Costa de Beauregard 2015, paragraph 10).

¹² See for instance Isaac Oliver, "Unknown Woman, known as Frances Howard," c. 1596-1600. Watercolor on vellum (dia. 130 mm).

¹³ On Shakespeare's "Caravaggesque effect," see for instance Geraldo U. de Sousa's analysis in connection with *Othello* (2016, 96).

¹⁴ On gold and silver as essential to the limner's art, see Dulac 2015, especially paragraphs 6 and 7.

¹⁵ One may note, in connection with this, that *Macbeth* includes a cluster of images related to jewelry (2.1.15; 3.4.113; 5.9.22).

edges of his miniatures so as to give them lustre, a technique that, in all likelihood, did not go unnoticed to the playwright.¹⁶

Shakespeare himself relies on golden shades to highlight some of his scenes and to aestheticize the violence of his characters. Early on in the play, Lady Macbeth designates the much-coveted crown as a “golden round” (1.5.28) which will unleash the ambitious desires of the Macbeths and cause their downfall; then, during “the show of eight kings” (4.1.110 s.d.), Banquo’s crown “sears [Macbeth’s] eyeballs” (4.1.112). In the long opening scene of the play, Macbeth acknowledges his reluctance to kill Duncan in significant terms:

He hath honoured me of late, and I have bought
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
Which would be *worn* now in their newest *gloss*[.]
(1.7.32-34, my emphasis)

Macbeth values these golden opinions and would be loath to see them lose their lustre. It is thus particularly ironical that, in her preparation of the murder, his wife should take up the same clothing imagery and proceed to actualize (or un-metaphor) it.¹⁷ Indeed, as she prepares to smear the servants with blood to have them accused in the place of her husband, she announces that she will “gild” their faces during their sleep (2.2.57) with a quibble on “guild” and “guilt”:

[...] If he do bleed,
I’ll gild the face of the grooms withal,
For it must seem their guilt.
(2.2.56-58)

This passage will later on be echoed by the eerie description of “Duncan’s golden blood” (2.3.113); yet here, gold already seems transmuted into blood, a transformation facilitated by the fact that “old gold was red” (Clark and Mason 2015, note to 2.2.57-58, 182). Indeed, red components “were often ingredients in recipes to produce gold pigment” (Smith 2016, 40) at the time and the “correspondence between blood, red, and gold in the worldview of early modern metalworkers” in the sixteenth century is now well documented (ibid.).

¹⁶ See Beauregard 1991, 185, note 57; Kinney 1983, 85; and, more broadly, on Hilliard’s technique, Dulac 2015.

¹⁷ On the “unmetaphoring” technique, see Colie 1974, 145.

We should also remember that limning was narrowly correlated with the technique of blazoning arms (Coombs 2009, 80) where “gules” (the heraldic term for red) was often paired with gold, an association familiar to Elizabethan playgoers.¹⁸ Shakespeare himself took a strong interest in heraldic devices since he probably “devised the coat of arms for the Shakespeare family approved by the Garter King of Arms on 20 October 1596” (Elam 2017, 37).¹⁹ In *Macbeth*, red and gold are paired to become part and parcel of a form of tragic heraldry. Subsequently, the grooms are depicted by Lennox as “*badged with blood*” (2.3.103, my emphasis) and the image resurfaces when Macbeth hurriedly designates them as Duncan’s murderers: “there, the murderers, / Steeped in the *colours of their trade*, their daggers / Unmannerly breeched with gore” (2.3.115-17, my emphasis). If Holinshed insisted on the bloody sight of the murdered king, he did not allude to heraldic emblems as, in his *Chronicles*, Donwald (the counterpart of Shakespeare’s Macbeth) simply “break[s] into the chamber” and finds “cakes of bloud on the bed, and on the floore about the sides of it” (1978, 483). In Shakespeare’s tragedy, the same gruesome scene is rendered in highly visual terms by Lennox and Macbeth who coin a heraldry of blood strongly reminiscent of *Hamlet* and its description of Pyrrhus’s “complexion smeared / With heraldry more dismal” (2.2.360-61).²⁰ In both plays, heraldry lionizes and ritualizes pointless destruction and allows the speakers to describe offstage violence through powerful images.²¹

As already noted, this aestheticization of violence through golden hues resurfaces in the play when, in Macbeth’s description, Duncan’s “silver skin” and “golden blood” (2.3.113) add a preternatural touch to the scene while suggesting the hallucinations of the murderer:

[...] Here lay Duncan,
His silver skin laced with his golden blood,
And his gashed stabs looked like a breach in nature
For ruin’s wasteful entrance; [...]

¹⁸ See Goggin 2012, 30. Goggin explains that “[i]n English coats of arms, dating from the fifteenth century though today, red is the most common color used after gold and silver,” occurring in more than half of the arms.

¹⁹ It is worth noting here that Richard Burbage, the lead actor in Shakespeare’s company, was also known for his skill in painting crests. In 1614, Shakespeare collaborated with him “on the design of an *impresa* [...] for the sixth Earl of Rutland, Francis Manners [...]” (Salkeld 2018, 119). They were each paid forty-four shillings in gold by Thomas Screvin, Manners’s steward.

²⁰ See also *Hamlet* 2.2.362: “Now is he total gules,” 2.2.362.

²¹ As the play is about to close, Macduff enters Macbeth’s castle and turns the murderer into a circus freak: “We’ll have thee, as our rare monsters are, / Painted upon a pole [...]” (5.8.25-26). Once again, the passage is reminiscent of the player’s speech in *Hamlet* as the latter compares the vengeful Pyrrhus to “a painted tyrant” (2.2.384).

(2.3.112-15)²²

The “liquid gold” (Peacham 1606, 51) generally used by limners is here distilled in Duncan’s veins.²³ Farah Karim-Cooper and Lucy Munro suggest that “the candlelight shining in the blood would have created a glistening effect” which could have perfectly rendered Duncan’s “golden blood” (2006, 23). Others insist on the narrow links between gold and red to account for this scene: Stephen Deng, for instance, downplays the oddity of the passage and explains that it “partially relies on an early modern perception of gold as ‘red’ in color” (2011, 233). Yet, there is more to it than that as Macbeth’s hypotyposis points both to an extraordinary reality and to a distorted, abnormal perception of this reality. “[T]he killing of Duncan is an erotic event,” Ewan Fernie writes. “Silver skin laced with golden blood is seductive, luxurious, perversely iconic” (2015, 188). Given Macbeth’s fascination and his lavish, highly poetic description of the king’s corpse, there may be a touch of morbid homoeroticism here. An eerie mix of preciousness and refinement paradoxically emanates from the depiction of this ghastly scene which can also be interpreted in alchemical terms: death seems to have brought about the transmutation of Duncan’s vital fluid into gold and turned the king into a religious icon. If we accept this reading, the blood of the murdered king looks golden because, as W. Murray puts it, “it is already in the hand of God. It is part of the perfection of heaven” (1966, 42).

Step 3: “Then lay thy colours”

If perfection belongs to heaven in *Macbeth*, corruption and disease plague Scotland. “Infected minds / To their deaf pillows will discharge their secrets” (5.1.72-73) the doctor says of the sleepwalking Lady Macbeth. Interestingly, the word “infection” derives from the Latin root *inficere*, meaning “to stain” or “to taint,” an etymology which Shakespeare must have been aware of.²⁴ The whole play is structured around this sense of infection: the colors of the tragedy contaminate the spiritual world of the protagonists as Macbeth, in particular, is infected by bloody and gaudy hues.

In his paintings, Hilliard used bright and markedly distinct hues which he associated with gems. In *The Arte of Limning*, he explains that, “besides whittes and blacks, there are

²² On this passage, see also Lecercle 1987, 83.

²³ Henry Peacham explains how “To make liquid gold or silver” (1606, 51).

²⁴ See Sonnet 111, where the poet alludes to “the dyer’s hand” (l. 7) in close proximity to the word “infection” (l. 10).

but five other principall cullors” (Kinney 1983, 32). These pure, or unmixed, pigments are murrey,²⁵ red, blue, green, and yellow, and they happen to correspond to five precious stones, namely amethyst, ruby, sapphire, emerald, and topaz. While I’m not arguing here for a direct or specific influence of Hilliard on the playwright, the general impact of contemporary visual praxis on Shakespeare’s playtext should not be overlooked. Admittedly, the playwright makes a limited use of blue, green and yellow shades,²⁶ but murrey and red are given pride of place. The word “blood” and its cognates crop up no less than 41 times in the play, stage directions included. Recent studies on the subject have shown that, on the early modern stage, blood had a very realistic aspect, all the more so as animal blood (from calves, pigs or sheep) was used in performance.²⁷ In this regard, the mention of stinking blood in the last act of the play (5.1.50) may well be understood as a metadramatic comment on this particular stage practice, even though it can also be read as a reference to bad-smelling dyes.²⁸ Be that as it may, in such a context, the highly stylized and refined blood imagery analyzed above suggests that, in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare engages in something transcending this crudely realistic dimension by inviting his audience to imagine blood in stylistic and mystical terms.

The playwright thus relies on a camaieu of reds (i.e. on several tints of this single color) which, in terms of bodily humors, underscore the sanguine temperaments of the protagonists, presented as hot and active, heat being then thought to stimulate action. According to Henry Peacham’s *The gentlemen exercise*, red “signifieth a warlike disposition, a haughtie courage, dreadlesse of dangers” (1612, 151). Although this “warlike” disposition is emphasized at the beginning of the play (1.2), the martial values associated with red are gradually perverted by the Macbeths and, as the plot unfolds, Shakespeare’s red strokes are less used to highlight the characters’ “warlike dispositions” than as a means to depict ritualized scenes of horror in a play where the obscene (in the etymological sense of “off-scene”) gradually comes to the fore and becomes the norm. Duncan’s murder is not shown while Banquo’s murder is performed onstage (3.11.16 s.d.). Paradoxically, the evocative power of the description of the “sleepy grooms” (2.2.51) smeared with blood makes the unseen murder a more horrifying scene than

²⁵ “Murrey,” *OED*, A.1: “Chiefly *Heraldry*. A colour resembling that of the mulberry; a reddish purple or blood red. Also: cloth of this colour.”

²⁶ Blue may have been part and parcel of the play’s staging, for John Taylor, in *The pennyles pilgrimage* (1618), writes that the Scots were then known to wear “blue flat caps on their heads” (quoted in Braunmuller 2001, 260). Green is associated with the sea (2.2.64) metaphorically reddened by the bloody murders perpetrated by the two Macbeths. Finally, yellow hues are merely suggested when a desperate Macbeth reaches the end of his life and in the “yellow leaf” soliloquy evokes his barren life thanks to a seasonal imagery.

²⁷ See from instance Karim-Cooper and Nelson 2006, 3.

²⁸ On Nicholas Hilliard’s undesirable “ill smelling coullers” for example, see Kinney 1983, 79. These colors, such as “orpament, verdigres, verditer, pinck, lapgrene, litmousy,” were often toxic.

Banquo's visible death at the hands of his executioners, and it is Duncan's murder which give rise to Macbeth's lyrical descriptions:

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green, one red.
(2.2.61-64)

The hallucinatory quality of the speech, fraught with abstract, polysyllabic words on the one hand, and concrete, monosyllabic terms on the other, aptly conveys Macbeth's deranged mind and suggests that his own evil is about to contaminate the natural world.²⁹ According to W.A. Murray, the image of the reddened sea "rests upon a common alchemical concept, that of tincture." The critic points out that, "[a]fter the murder, [...] the audience would instantly take the point that Duncan's blood has become an alchemical tincture, [a] [...] strong colouring agent made of perfected matter, which has the power of transmuting substances" (1966, 41). While this interpretation certainly needs to be qualified, especially if we regard Duncan's blood more as an agent of pollution than of perfection, it deserves to be quoted because it underscores the special treatment of blood which, as a major visual object in *Macbeth*, can be said to perform "picture acts" and "interact[s] with and even substitute[s] the human subject" (Elam 2017, 31). Sometimes fluid, sometimes coagulated, sometimes sticky, blood saturates the play and belongs to "this poetic compulsion to repetition" analyzed by David L. Kranz (2003, 351): the same colors are bound to appear from one scene to another and, as a result, stage blood catches the spectator's eye at the risk of making us voyeuristic, if not complicit.³⁰

Step 4: "[T]hen purfle them about the sides with blacke inke"

If limners mainly painted in watercolor, they also resorted to ink, black ink in general—even though "inkes of sundry colours" could actually be obtained (Peacham 1606, 61)—in their miniatures. In *The arte of limming*, ink serves to highlight the colors already laid on the canvas and to delineate the lines.

²⁹ François Laroque sees in the reddening of the green ocean a process which is gradually inverted in the last two acts, where "green begins again to prevail over red [...]." See Laroque 1993, 155.

³⁰ In the early modern period, glasses of pig's blood were concealed onstage in order to imitate human blood (Gurr and Ichikawa 2002, 61).

Ink, in *Macbeth*, is discreetly used to characterize Lady Macbeth's line of action. As she sleepwalks, she is seen "tak[ing] forth paper, fold[ing] it, writ[ing] upon't it" (5.1.6-7). According to Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason, "[t]he Lady's mind may be reverting to the letter she received from Macbeth in 1.5" (2015, 270, n. to 5.1.7). Yet she does not simply rereads an already written text as the playtext makes it clear that she does write something, obsessed as she is with the power of ink and, ultimately, with the idea of writing one's own destiny.

One should remember here that she initially asks spirits to "take [her] milk for gall" (1.5.48)³¹ before calling for "the blanket of the dark" (1.5.53) "to blot out her action" (Jacobson 2015, 118). The proximity of "gall" and darkness in 1.5 turns night into an inky substance as "caustic and bitter galls" were then not only used in dyes but also in "the darkest printing and manuscript inks" (Jacobson 2015, 118).³² Therefore, in metaphorical terms, Lady Macbeth uses the inky, poisonous night to rewrite the nightmare of history.³³ Her husband's face is "as a book" (1.5.62), she says. Yet, rather than Macbeth himself, she is the one who is holding the pen: she will realize all too late that she has written a foul story which has stained her hands with red and black ink ("Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?" 2.2.61-62).

Realizing that his sleepless wife has broken down, Macbeth asks the doctor to "find her disease / And purge it to a sound and pristine health" (5.3.51-52). If "purgation" is first and foremost a medical term, it can also be applied to writing, especially in the early modern context which promoted the links between physicians and poets: the latter anatomized the soul while the former dissected the body.³⁴ In 1570, Roger Ascham wrote of the writer that he is "alwaies the best English Physition, that best can geue a purgation, that is, [...] to cut all ouer much away" (1570, fol. 45). By contrast, Lady Macbeth is a poor writer using too much ink—and, of course, too much blood—to put her story into words.

³¹ A different kind of gall ("gall of goat") is used by the weird sisters who put it in their cauldron (4.1.26).

³² Generally imported from Eastern Europe, oak gall was quite expensive at the time. Recipes for black ink generally included oak galls, iron sulphate and gum arabic (Beal 2008, 202).

³³ In the Nestor episode of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, Stephen Dedalus exclaims: "History is a nightmare from which I am trying to awake" (Joyce 1986, 28).

³⁴ In *The Arte of English Poesie* (1598), George Puttenham explains that the poet must "play also the Phisitian, and not onely applying a medicine to the ordinary sickness of mankind, but by making the very greef it selfe (in part) cure of the disease." As to Thomas Heywood, he asserts in *An Apology for Actors* (1612) that plays had a curative power and could "recreate such as of themselves are wholly devoted to Melancholly, which corrupts the bloud [...]" (quoted in Pollard 2005, 15).

Her famous ejaculation “Out, damned spot!” (5.1.33) refers to the inky blood (or bloody ink)³⁵ that she sees on her hands: having first railed against the “milk of human kindness” (1.5.17) which presumably weakened her husband’s virility, she now feels disgusted by her own impurity.³⁶ She is thus overwhelmed by the power of (blind) spots, or *macchie* (i.e. undetermined color patches).³⁷ The ghost scene (3.4) in which Macbeth sees what the others cannot see reinforces the impact of the invisible or the indistinct—Leonardo’s *cose infusate* (Pedretti 1964, 52, note 53)—in the play.³⁸ Macbeth’s “quit my sight!” (3.4.91) actually prefigures his wife’s “Out, damned spot!”: husband and wife are both victims of visual hallucinations triggered by their lavish use of red/blood. Their deadly work has proved poisonous and, instead of poisoning the viewers, it has intoxicated them³⁹: in *Macbeth*, it is therefore “th’inventor” who is “plague[d]” (1.7.10).

Step 5: “[T]hen mayst thou diaper them over with whyte coloure”

In *The arte of limning*, the addition of white hues is not compulsory (“if thou wilte”) but it clearly gives the painting its finishing touch. In Norgate’s *Miniatura or the art of limning*, touches of white serve to render the lower part of the sky in an accurate way: “The lowest part of your skie nearest the earth is exprest by masticot and white with a little fine yellow oker” (1919, 48-49). In Shakespeare’s play, this finishing touch is present but, instead of beautifying the play, it emphasizes its dismal aspect.

Gemma Bodinetz’s 2011 production of the play at Liverpool’s Everyman playhouse featured a drifting, whitish smoke hanging over the stage. Shakespeare’s alfresco scenes are indeed “diapered over” by the white fog of the Scottish heath, itself associated with the foul air of the place. In *The art of drawing with the pen, and limning in water colours*, Henry Peacham complained of the frequent “mistes” or “vapours” which, in the early seventeenth century,

³⁵ Peacham explains that, to get “The best red inke,” you must use “grind vermilion with the glaire of an egge, or stiffe gumme Arabeck water, putting hereto a little saffron, and so write with it out of a shell, if it be drie, you may soften it by adding a little more water” (1606, 61). Interestingly, he also gives advice on how to make “Sanguine Inke” (ibid., 62).

³⁶ On this see Chiari 2018, paragraphs 4 and 26.

³⁷ The word *macchia* was indeed “used by the Italian writers of the sixteenth century to indicate the blocking-out of the masses of light and shade.” On *macchie*, see Da Vinci’s “On Flesh Tones and Figures Distant from the Eye” in Pedretti 1964, 52. The quote is drawn from note 53 on the same page.

³⁸ If we are to believe Simon Forman’s testimony, the ghost was probably “visible from the earliest performances, but when Kemble reopened Drury Lane on 21 April 1794 with the young Edmund Kean, according to the legend, as one of the many goblins, Kemble omitted a visible Ghost of Banquo and thus initiated a long theatrical and critical debate” (Braunmuller 2001, 67).

³⁹ Many miniatures of the time were potentially dangerous for man’s health because the pigments used were often toxic ones. See Osborne and Tanner 2007, 128.

prevented painters from observing the landscape and which, he feared, would soon grow “so thicke” that no one would be able to see correctly the details of the surrounding landscape (1606, 31).

In an ironical twist, Shakespeare depicts mist rather than landscape in his play. As already remarked before, tropes of infection permeate a play whose Scottish climate “evokes miasmatic associations that make atmospheric, moral, and political corruption seem mutually constitutive” (Cole 2016, 37). In this context, Duncan’s repeated allusions to the pleasant atmosphere of Macbeth’s castle in Inverness (1.6.1-3) sound cruelly ironic and betray his lack of lucidity. A similar blindness and inability to look beyond appearances causes Banquo to think that the air is “delicate” (1.6.10) there.

Yet right from start, the foggy air (1.1.10) of the heath gives the play a fearful visual frame (Hobgood 2014, 42): “Fair is foul, and foul is fair, / Hover through the fog and filthy air” (1.1.9-10), the witches chant. For the spectators, this smoky landscape suggests potential horror (before being actualized) while making the staged events slightly unreal. More importantly, it conveys the characters’ limitations in their apprehension and understanding of the world around them. Indeed, in early modern plays and pageants, putrid exhalations were traditionally associated with error.⁴⁰

Shakespeare’s misty landscapes thus point to the erring actions of the titular characters. Macbeth’s ultimate remark about “th’equivocation of the fiend” (5.5.42) encapsulates the whole atmosphere of the play while reminding us that it was probably composed after the discovery of the Gunpowder plot of 5 November 1605.⁴¹ Focusing on the importance of smell rather than on the power of sight, Jonathan Gill Harris convincingly argues that the stinking smell of the stage fog, caused by sulphurous explosive squibs, offered the early modern playgoers an indirect parallel with the Gunpowder Plot (2009, 126).⁴² During the Globe performances, the references to fog could also work as extra-textual clues pointing to London’s polluted atmosphere.⁴³

⁴⁰ See for instance Middleton’s pageant *The Triumphs of Truth* (1613), in which London, symbolized by the “Mount Triumphant” (C2r), is overspread with the mist of error. This infectious fog must “vanish” (C2v) so that spectators may discover the power of Truth.

⁴¹ For further details, see Drakakis 2013, 4.

⁴² Harris notes that, in a sermon evoking the Gunpowder Plot and pronounced on November 5, 1605 before James I, Lancelot Andrewes thus described the plotters’ failure: “Be they *fair or foul*, glad or sad [...] the great *Diespater*, ‘the Father of days’ hath made them both” (my emphasis). He deduces that Shakespeare may have lifted the witches’ incantatory formula from this sermon (2009, 126).

⁴³ In the formulaic speeches of the three sisters, fog even becomes a linguistic clue for contamination as it is part and parcel of the fricatives in the “Fair is foul” couplet. See Clark and Mason 2015, 48.

When Lady Macbeth realizes at the end that “[h]ell” is “murky” (5.1.36), she acknowledges her own damnation. If “murky” is to be understood as obscure, dim and foggy,⁴⁴ it then describes hell on earth, an infernal locus which corresponds to the misty Scottish heath she inhabits. Her husband’s final moments are similarly colorless: whereas a dense red characterizes the murders he has committed with his wife, he is now doomed to a “dusty death” (5.5.22) without panache.

In light of these observations, I would thus like to argue that fog, in the tragedy, works as the dramatic equivalent of artistic grisaille. A “method of decorative painting in grey monochrome” (*OED* a), it was sometimes employed as a neutral, preliminary underpainting for a work that was subsequently overpainted with layers of color glaze, but it could also be used in a very controlled way for a finished painting (Judge and Toyne 1990, 194). Some early modern limners resorted to this technique in order to emphasize the sculptural shape of their subjects.⁴⁵ This attention to statue-like sitters is worth noting here, all the more so as sculptures can be contrasted with alive and kicking subjects. As Rosalie Colie explains, “[i]n paintings, [...] statues are generally distinguished from living people [...] by their grisaille, as opposed to the flesh-colored tints of those depicted as living” (1974, 280).

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare repeatedly calls attention to the petrification of his characters. They are either turned into stone when aghast with horror (“Approach the chamber, and destroy your sight / With a new Gorgon,” Macduff tells Lennox in 2.3.71-72) or compared to architectural monuments once they’re dead (Duncan’s body is compared to the “Lord’s anointed temple,” 2.3.68). This emphasis on material artifacts soon gives way to the play’s insistent concern with the insubstantial. Unable to purge her soul, the queen herself becomes a “walking shadow” (5.5.23), both “a poor actor” and a living dead.

If Lady Macbeth only loses her vigor at the end of the play, the unnatural lack of color in her husband’s face betrays his emotional distress and morbid state early on in the tragedy. In the first act, Lady Macbeth associates him with a personified Hope, drunk, dejected, and thereby turned “green and pale” (1.7.37). Sandra Clark and Pamela Mason contend that this image may ironically feminize Macbeth by associating him with the green sickness then affecting

⁴⁴ See “Murky,” *OED*, 2.a. “Of air, the atmosphere, etc.: obscured by mist or vapour; foggy, cloudy [...]” The first example noted by the *OED* dates back to 1667. Yet in the fifteenth century, the word “murk” already applied to foggy air (“murk,” *OED*, 1.†c.).

⁴⁵ See Isaac Oliver, “St. Jerome Reading” (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/365453>; date accessed: 8 February 2019) or “Madonna and Child” (<http://www.ellisonfineart.com/portrait-miniatures/d/madonna-and-child/258841>; date accessed: 8 February 2019).

young girls,⁴⁶ even though the pallor mentioned by Lady Macbeth may also be seen as a sign of cowardice. Indeed, in his 1582 *Batman vponn Bartholome*, Stephen Batman affirmed that

when hot humours doth cool, then red colour doth change to white or pale, and so of others it is to be understood. Also changing in the skin cometh of passions of the soul. The red waxeth pale for anguish or for dread [...]. (1582, 390r)

Lady Macbeth knows full well that her husband's monochrome complexion is indicative of his weakness. Her initial remark on Macbeth's pallor ties in with her rebuke for his cowardice (incidentally, "coward" is an anagram of "Cawdor," the first title acquired by the hero of the battle against the Norwegians) in the following act: "My hands are your colour, but I shame / To wear a heart so white. [...]" (2.2.65-66). Later on in the banquet scene, Macbeth will once again turn "blanched with fear" (3.4.114). This imagery develops the red/white color code borrowed from the Petrarchan idiom of love which is here applied to the language of horror and terror. Whether real or metaphorical, colors in the play function as markers of emotions and they provide an insight into the character's changing and complex feelings. As Allison P. Hobgood remarks, "pallor renders Macbeth's fear visible," all the more so as his countenance was "probably stark white in performance," showing his "body's predictable humoral response to fear" and "precipitat[ing] fear's risky contagiousness" (2013, 39). When, at the end, Macbeth upbraids a "cream-faced loon" (5.3.11) or "lily-livered boy" (5.3.15)—whose livid hue effeminizes him and corresponds to a specific pigment then used by limners, namely Venice ceruse⁴⁷—for being a coward, he resorts to the same color imagery as the one Lady Macbeth uses to his detriment. Faced with the reflection of his own dismay, he refuses to admit his dejection and tries in vain to "forg[et] the taste of fears" (5.5.9).

Conclusion: A "gentle" aesthetics of terror⁴⁸

⁴⁶ See Garrison 2009, 17. Girls then often "failed to get enough iron to keep up with the dual demands of growth and iron loss through menstruation." So, their "pale faces [...]" often had a greenish-yellow tint, leading to the popular term 'green sickness' [...]."

⁴⁷ See Peacham 1606, 55: "Your principall white is Ceruse [...]: it hath beene much used (as it is also now adaias) by women in painting their faces." A less pure white called "white Lead" (ibid.) was also used by limners.

⁴⁸ I refer here to Nicholas Hilliard's definition of limning as "a kind of gentle painting," quoted and analyzed by Coombs 2009, 77-84 (esp. 77).

By borrowing so much from the limner's sophisticated art, Shakespeare puts forward a gem-like technique that foregrounds the artifice of his play and, generally speaking, a high degree of stylization. Yet, at the same time, the playwright also makes his audience "behold, in what order Art match[es] with nature, and how the limning painter ha[s] almost exceeded nature" (Lodge 1596, n.p.) : he possesses a gift for expressing the intimate desires of his characters through small, delicate touches of light. This tension between "expressiveness" and "verisimilitude" (Sokol 2018, 43) was characteristic of Hilliard's miniatures, and Shakespeare certainly makes the most of it in *Macbeth*. In other words, limning techniques allow him to probe the private self: through artifice, he reveals the deepest feelings of the Macbeth couple. However, whereas Hilliard promoted the use of a "line without shadow" to conceal the "aging features" of Queen Elizabeth (Fumerton 1991, 80), Shakespeare never yields to idealization: in its pictorial manner, *Macbeth* illustrates the way the private self gets tainted and crushed by the *libido dominandi*.

In Shakespeare's Scottish tragedy, our vision is simultaneously stimulated and clouded, illuminated and obfuscated. Fashioned by the expression of the invisible, the play can be seen as an early example of expressionism.⁴⁹ If its garish colors are markers of excess and serve to underscore the cruelty of its title characters, the enveloping fog appears as a paralyzing presence that highlights the force of the preternatural and that threatens to erase the chromatic contrast created by the use of gaudy tints. Blurring Shakespeare's restricted yet sophisticated palette, it calls attention to the general blindness of the characters, whether it be Duncan's, who fails to notice the approaching evil, or Macbeth's, whose unbridled ambition, encouraged by his wife, can only lead to his spectacular and bloody downfall.

The various hues emphasized by Shakespeare are thus employed as catalysts for extreme and morbid emotions as much as vectors of pure beauty. In other words, through the limner's art, the playwright manages to ennoble the ignoble and to make his audience stare at unbearable acts of violence which, once polished and aestheticized, become the objects of voyeuristic fascination. The tension which gradually transforms "foul" into "fair" on page and stage produces a chromatic tragedy of evil which reconciles the precious and the repulsive. As a result, the play's color spectrum underpins an uncanny aesthetics of terror which, up to a point, may be regarded as foreshadowing Antonin Artaud's *théâtre de la cruauté* as, in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare already promoted "a theatre where violent physical images pulverise, mesmerise the audience's sensibilities" (Artaud 1993, 63).

⁴⁹ On expressionism as the artistic expression of "primary emotion[s]" and as a means of foregrounding "something visible, an inner meaning," see Wilde 1987, 33.

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