CHAPTER 35

PRAGMATISM

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This chapter addresses three questions: What is pragmatism? How is it related to theatre? How might it be helpful to think of Shakespeare as a pragmatist? While it returns to some arguments made in my book *Shakespearean Pragmatism* (1993), I focus on work on pragmatism, theatre, and Shakespeare that has been done since then. Having offered the caveat that pragmatism does not provide a distinctive method for literary critics or a reliable weapon in their disputes with one another, I close with a reading of *Macbeth* that aligns what might seem Shakespeare’s least pragmatic play with pragmatist thought.

WHAT IS PRAGMATISM?

Philosophy has always had therapeutic as well as constructive aims. It has aspired to provide discursive cures to deep sources of human unhappiness: the disaster-prone changefulness of social arrangements, the ways fairness is undermined by the self-serving opinions of other people, the instability of evaluation, the elusiveness of truth, even mortality itself and the progressive extinction of selfhood that appears to accompany decay and death. Pragmatism, a distinctively American contribution to the history of philosophy, is as therapeutic as other kinds of philosophy, but its aim is to cure us of some of these traditional philosophic aspirations, or at least to get us to accept that the cure is never going to be entirely different in kind from the ailment. Pragmatism teaches that we are stuck with social mutability, with ungrounded commitments to what is right and wrong, with evaluative instability, with truth that is an honorific term applied by communities to useful reliable beliefs, and with our own status as sentient but evanescent nodes in an ongoing exchange of words, things, genes, and commitments. As a critique of modern philosophy, it attacks the idea that the goal of philosophy and science is to provide true representations of nature, where ‘true’ means ‘independent of the position of the judge’, ‘getting at the real relations of things
to each other. Since, according to pragmatists, we cannot get outside human communities of discourse, truth cannot involve independence of them. Pragmatists propose instead the idea that the true is what has the best consequences in action, and they suggest that this has always already been the case.

From the viewpoint of contemporary theoretically-oriented students of Shakespeare, pragmatism cuts two ways. It points on the one hand toward an anti-foundational critique that pragmatism shares with a variety of loosely-grouped post-structuralist positions, and thus cuts against dominant realist positions among scientists and some philosophers. Literary critics are on the whole very comfortable with anti-foundationalism. But pragmatism also points toward the view that there has always been a working system for the emergence of truths. Assertions of philosophical crisis in, for instance, the way reference to objects does not fix the meanings of words, or of ethical crisis in the way the vocabulary of a given community can support and naturalize its wicked patterns of behaviour, are from a pragmatist viewpoint exaggerations of the way things have always been into a shocking discovery. If language is always already in some sense broken, it is also always already in some sense fixed, in that everyone is making it work for a variety of ends. Pragmatism offers a view of how we arrive at truths that resists the reification of language, or of ideology, as a constructor of consciousness, a view that sets itself, in Donald Davidson's famous phrase, against 'the very idea of a conceptual scheme'.\(^1\) Historically, it is optimistic about democracy and reluctant to embrace ideas that reduce the agency of ordinary people by suggesting that expert insight is needed to see through the mystifications that govern society. With this aspect of pragmatism—as an anti-realist position that questions the more exciting, and self-privileging, anti-realist claim that social power conditions subjectivity in such a way as to determine truth—contemporary literary critics are on the whole less comfortable.\(^2\)

Pragmatism proposed itself as a third way at the beginning of the twentieth century when the philosophical alternatives were realism and idealism. William James gives a much-quoted description of pragmatism that illustrates its substitution of quasi-Darwinian historical processes for Platonic or empiricist ones in accounting for truth:

That new idea is truer which performs most felicitously its function of satisfying our double urgency [for accommodation of new observations and consistency with accumulated beliefs]. It makes itself true, gets itself classed as true, by the way it works; grafting itself then upon the ancient body of truth, which thus grows much as a tree grows by the activity of a new layer of cambium. . . .

Purely objective truth . . . is nowhere to be found.
The trail of the human serpent is thus over everything.\(^3\)

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2. For a remarkable account of realism, pragmatism, and constructivism as the three options for justifying any assertion, and for readings of Shakespeare related to this idea, see Rob Carson, 'Digesting the Third: Reconfiguring Binaries in Shakespeare and Early Modern Thought' (Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2008).

James moves on to claim that ‘The true is the name of whatever proves itself to be good in the way of belief, and good, too, for definite, assignable reasons’. The ‘definite, assignable reasons’ here hark back to Charles Peirce, who, in an 1878 paper in Popular Science Monthly entitled ‘How to Make Our Ideas Clear’, defined a relation between conceptual clarity and action that James regards as crucial: ‘Consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object.’ Peirce’s maxim points toward the insistence on the inseparability of mind and experience, fact and value, which is the heart of pragmatism. Such an insistence does no harm to truth or to the quest to seek truths that are as solid as evidence and argument can make them. It does, however, undermine the idea that such a quest has as its aim incorrigible and thus extra-human truth, truth that has somehow escaped the history of human thought. Pragmatism does not propose new truth-seeking practices; it interrogates reigning theories about what truth-seeking is.

Pragmatism invites awareness (of what we would now call a ‘presentist’ kind) of the way claims of philosophic truth-seeking function in scholarship. As literary scholars who teach would-be scholar-critics, our writings perforce model and participate in a ceaseless struggle for rhetorical advantage in an ongoing conversation. The conversation itself needs to be mobile, because its mobility is the main sign of life for the discursive institution of literary or cultural studies, which cannot replicate itself without also changing itself. To launch a book or article with a gesture toward methodological superiority—by way of historical accuracy, or of philosophic rigour, or of a proper understanding of the special nature of art, to cite three ways of claiming rhetorical high ground that have been prominent in the past few generations of literary criticism—gives one’s piece a handle so that others can pick it up to use in their own rhetorical struggles. In preparing graduate students for future professional life, we need to be giving them such tools, and they may need to be, in effect, edged tools: sword/ploughshares that will both break new ground and take or defend contested territory. One of the virtues of presentist positions in the current presentist/historicist debate is that presentists acknowledge their participation in a struggle for rhetorical advantage in the here and now, and thus can seem less mystified about what they are doing than historicists. But historicist claims offer a huge research programme, backed by the ethical energy that comes with respect for the genuine difference of past from present.

Parenthetically henceforth. It is amusing to notice that ‘the trail of the serpent’, here a vivid condensation of the way pragmatists deny that we can get outside the ‘fallen’ world of human values, appears with an entirely different valence in The Varieties of Religious Experience (1902): ‘But surely the systematic theologians are the closet-naturalists of the deity... What is their deduction of these metaphysical attributes [of God] but a shuffling and matching of pedantic dictionary adjectives, aloof from morals, aloof from human needs... They have the trail of the serpent over them’ (Writings, 400–1).

4 William James, Writings, 520.

The pragmatist attack on both realist descriptions of objectivity and idealist descriptions of transcendence may seem a deflating or negative one. At the same time, however, pragmatist philosophers consistently present the abandonment of a quest for certainty as part of a broad acceptance of the openness of human futures. John Dewey and Richard Rorty both suggest, for instance, that the increase in the technical powers of science, and the partly consequent rise of a greatly enlarged group of educated people with reflective leisure who at least potentially participate in political life, may result in productive experiments in new and better forms of living that may lead eventually to better, more democratic, more thoughtful, more innovative lives for the people of the future. ‘What is needed’, as Dewey says, ‘is intelligent examination of the consequences that are actually effected by inherited institutions and customs, in order that there may be intelligent consideration of the ways in which they are to be intentionally modified in behalf of generation of different consequences.’ This is a very American way of looking at things. At the same time, both Dewey and Rorty caution that there is no extra human-factor—no abstract immutable distinction between good and evil—that can protect us from the development of bad social forms, no truth that will set us free.

There have been sporadic attempts to make use of pragmatism in literary criticism and theory. The main such attempt focuses on an aspect of pragmatism that Louis Menand articulates when discussing the legal theorizing of Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr: the idea that practice or experience precedes logic or theory, and that it is thus always a mistake to put theory before practice. According to Holmes, the decisions of a judge are not determined by the theory of the law the judge holds. ‘Holmes said that common law judges decided the result first and figured out a plausible account of how they got there afterward’ (p. 340). Holmes sums up this view in one sentence from The Common Law: ‘The life of the law has not been logic; it has been experience’ (p. 341). ‘Even people who think their thinking is guided by general principles, in other words, even people who think thought is deductive, actually think the way everyone else does—by the seat of their pants’ (p. 342). Menand goes on to argue attractively that this is the core of pragmatism. ‘Pragmatism is an account of the way people think—the way they come up with ideas, form beliefs, and reach decisions’ (p. 351). Pragmatists are Darwinists about truth, and Menand quotes James on how ‘all our thoughts are instrumental, and mental modes of adaptations to reality, rather than revelations’ (p. 358).

Pragmatism exalts what in contemporary administrative jargon are called ‘best practices’: if you want to do something right, do it according to what are the best-known practices for doing it. That means acquiring habits and entering into conversation with your betters, and mastering various vocabularies in which to describe your decisions; it does not (according to pragmatists) involve getting the nature of reality or language right so that the opinions of others will give way to a non-human truth. In

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recent culture wars this aspect of pragmatism has aroused the criticism that pragmatists do not believe in firm standards by which one activity can be judged to be better than another. Rorty replies to this criticism in a response to the realist philosopher John Searle. Since the issue is important, I quote at some length.

Here is an example of the kind of rhetoric which Searle quotes with relish as an illustration of the evil influence of views like mine: 'As the most powerful modern philosophies and theories have been demonstrating, claims of disinterest, objectivity, and universality are not to be trusted, and themselves tend to reflect local historical conditions.' I have to admit to Searle that the committee which produced that dreadful sentence included people who really do believe that the philosophical views I share with Kuhn and Derrida entail that the universities have no further use for notions like 'disinterest' and 'objectivity.'

But these people are wrong. What we deny is that these notions can be explained or defended by reference to the notion of 'correspondence to mind-independent reality.' Philosophers on my side of the argument think that we can only explain what we mean when we say that academic research should be disinterested and objective by pointing to the ways in which free universities actually function.8

Rorty makes clear that he believes that the best practices of the academy—practices involving fairness in evaluation, the need to back claims with evidence, and the right to make unpopular arguments—need to be defended, and that the view that the university is just a political power-centre like any other should be deplored. But he believes we should defend these practices, and a view of a university as a special kind of place where special kinds of conversation occur, out of intelligent loyalty to our own institutions, not because we think we know how to arrive at a special inhuman form of truth-seeking.

In the same way, on a pragmatist account, resistance to evil has to be undertaken in the name of desirable and undesirable practices, not the idea that one is on the side of truth against error or of God against the devil. Joseph Schumpeter comments on defending democracy in this frame of mind: 'to realize the relative validity of one's convictions and yet stand for them unflinchingly is what distinguishes a civilized man from a barbarian.'9

If action, including heroic self-sacrificial right action, precedes theory in this way, literature can be seen as a repository of human experience, less organized than the law, but arguably broader or deeper, that impinges on practical judgement and itself is an object of such judgement. Literature can both redescribe human relations to make us aware of cruelty that needs attention, and make us aware of new possibilities of social and mental life.10 Pace the claim occasionally made in the name of pragmatism by

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followers of Stanley Fish that theory should end,11 this is not a principled objection to the use of philosophic vocabularies by literary interpreters, but it is an objection to what they may think they are doing with philosophy: that is, applying a set of truths about the nature of language, or the relation of the subject to reality, to the experience of reading. Rorty caustically dismisses the possibility that pragmatism could serve as a ‘literary theory’.

When people got bored with New Criticism, they turned to other things. But the idea was always to, first, master a set of principles and then to apply them. This is a terrible way to be a critic, as people are now, perhaps, beginning to realize. This idea of ‘applying a theory’ would never have arisen if it weren’t for the need to give credentials to thousands of members of departments of English literature. But I think that now everybody is so sick of formulaic criticism that we don’t need to worry about literary theories anymore. In particular we don’t need to worry about whether pragmatism counts as one of them.12

Pragmatism can, however, be more than simply a twentieth-century therapy against essentialism: it can on the one hand be a mode or tendency of thought in an author—a tendency to see the realm of value and interest as extending beyond the marketplace and pervading the realms where transcendence claims are routinely made—and on the other it can point us toward kinds of crisis that emerge around issues of causation and predictive truth, tensions around the relations between system and experience that emerge when choices must be made. I myself believe, and will argue in the rest of this chapter, that drama’s general way of presenting experience is, in fact, illuminated by comparison to pragmatism’s account of theory–practice relations, and that Shakespeare is an author with pragmatic intellectual habits. I illustrate the first point by reference to a powerful recent redescriptions of drama, and the second by reference to Macbeth.

PRAGMATISM AND SHAKESPEARE’S THEATRE

Let me begin with yet another evocation of pragmatism in relation to philosophy, this one from Richard Rorty’s Consequences of Pragmatism. It is one of his many provocative thumbnail sketches of intellectual history:

[My preferred] …way of characterizing pragmatism… focus[es] on a fundamental choice which confronts the reflective mind: that between accepting the

contingent character of starting-points, and attempting to evade this contingency. To accept the contingency of starting-points is to accept our inheritance from, and our conversation with, our fellow-humans as our only source of guidance. To attempt to evade this contingency is to hope to become a properly-programmed machine. This was the hope which Plato thought might be fulfilled at the top of the divided line, when we passed beyond hypotheses. Christians have hoped it might be attained by becoming attuned to the voice of God in the heart, and Cartesians that it might be fulfilled by emptying the mind and seeking the indubitable. Since Kant, philosophers have hoped that it might be fulfilled by finding the a priori structure of any possible inquiry, or language, or form of social life. If we give up this hope, we shall lose what Nietzsche called ‘metaphysical comfort,’ but we may gain a renewed sense of community. Our identification with our community—our society, our political tradition, our intellectual heritage—is heightened when we see this community as ours rather than nature’s, shaped rather than found, one among many which men have made. In the end, the pragmatists tell us, what matters is our loyalty to other human beings clinging together against the dark, not our hope of getting things right. James, in arguing against realists and idealists that ‘the trail of the human serpent is over all,’ was reminding us that our glory is in our participation in fallible and transitory human projects, not in our obedience to permanent non-human constraints.\textsuperscript{13}

In one way, an emphasis on the contingency of starting points, alongside a goal of clinging together against (and maybe in) the dark, seems a good opening to a description of drama in general and of the way Shakespeare’s plays operate, from which it may be an easy step to a description of the way Shakespeare thinks in his plays. Contingent starting points, after all, are what the first acts of plays lay out, and plays are also relentlessly concerned with the consequences of choice and with the communality of experience. Rorty’s metaphor of ‘clinging together against the dark’ may well be connected with audience experiences at plays like King Lear or Macbeth, though he is equally likely to be thinking of Matthew Arnold’s ‘Dover Beach’ or Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot.

In another way, however, the invocation of distinguished theorists beginning with Plato and running implicitly through Augustine and Aquinas and then explicitly through Descartes, Kant, and modern analytic philosophy seems unpromising in relation to Shakespeare. Philosophic tradition does not seem to have interested Shakespeare much. The name ‘Plato’, for instance, never appears in the works of Shakespeare, nor do the words ‘republic’ and ‘symposium’ that might bespeak Shakespearean awareness of Platonic themes. Shakespeare shows relatively little interest in, or respect for, contemplative self-isolation as a means to wisdom or truth.\textsuperscript{14} And most of the figures Rorty cites as

\textsuperscript{13} Richard Rorty, Consequences of Pragmatism (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1980), 165–6.

\textsuperscript{14} For argument along these lines, see Jonathan Bate, Soul of the Age: A Biography of the Mind of Shakespeare (New York: Random House, 2009), 360–72, and Lars Engle, ‘Shame and Reflection in Montaigne and Shakespeare’, Shakespeare Survey 63 (2010), 244–61.
guides toward evading the contingency of starting-points postdate Shakespeare. So it may seem oddly anachronistic to invoke philosophic pragmatism in an attempt to describe how Shakespeare thinks.

Nonetheless, William James's book Pragmatism, the first large-scale introduction of the term, is subtitled 'A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking'. 'Some old ways of thinking' sounds simple and turns out to be subtle. Ways of thinking are not beliefs; they can be conscious methods or unconscious habits; as 'ways' rather than 'a way' they need not be entirely coherent; 'ways' may also be found, followed, or made, may be lost and rediscovered, and may need mapping or repair. To see pragmatism as 'some old ways of thinking' involves identifying it with traditions of thought that evaluate concepts by investigating their practical consequences.

Socratic interrogations, as James points out, involve pragmatic enquiry, but these evolve into Plato's vigorous indictments of sophistic rhetoric and, in related ways, of theatre and poetry, indictments that amount to the argument, basic to Platonism, that modes of discourse that merely follow the trail of the human serpent can never guide us in the direction of the truly good. Are theatre, poetry, and rhetoric, then, to be regarded as limbs of an implicit pragmatic doppelgänger shadowing philosophy from the start?

Paul Woodruff, in The Necessity of Theater, implicitly answers yes to this question. His book offers an impressively new theory of theatre that, without mentioning pragmatism, situates Shakespeare alongside Sophocles and Brecht and Beckett against Plato as offering a kind of wisdom or truth-seeking experience that is anti-Platonic in embracing contingent starting and ending points, but is nonetheless (as are James and Dewey and, less obviously, Rorty) reverent about the ideals of wisdom and right-living through reflective activity. Woodruff claims that theatrical experience, broadly seen as watching significant human action in a measured time and space, is central to well-lived life and is absent from no life that can be considered human. Though Woodruff does not mention Dewey, his account of the necessity of measure and significance resembles arguments made in Dewey's chapter 'Having an Experience' in Art as Experience. Thus theatre is 'necessary'. Woodruff has several examples from outside the realm of art theatre to which he returns repetitively, elaborating and deepening his account of them as he goes along: a wedding, a football game, a lynching, children demanding the attention of parents as they play, students and teachers in the theatrical activity of teaching and being taught. Woodruff sees watching and being watched as a sine qua non of human life, and he sees watching well and feeling worth watching by others as essential to good living:

15 See, James, Writings, 508, where James connotes Socrates, Aristotle, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume into the project 'to find out what definite difference it will make to you and me, at definite instants of our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one'.
Theater is the art of finding human action worth watching, and it mostly does this by finding human characters worth caring about. We need to practice that art, on both sides—to find people worth watching and, for ourselves, to make ourselves worth watching when we need to be watched (when we are getting married, for example). The grounds of this need are psychological (we dry up if we feel that no one is noticing us), social (a community comes apart if it attempts to secure justice in a forum that is not watched), and ethical (I cannot exercise human virtues unless I practice the art of watching). Willing or not, at one time or another, each of us will be among the watchers and the watched.\textsuperscript{18}

As he develops this argument, with much circling back and gradual complication of various key examples (Hamlet, Antigone, weddings), it becomes clearer that Woodruff is to some degree relocating truth from its ancient association with contemplation and transcendence toward a social location in a mixed experience of critique and solidarity through theatre. This is, however, a relocation he does not want to argue for or about explicitly:

Plato . . . was right about this: theater is no place to learn the truth about justice. But then neither is the world in which we live. Justice does not live here; it does not live even in heaven, according to Plato. \textit{(p. 214)}

This is gentler and more fondly evocative than Rorty’s comment on how Plato thought we could find proper programming at the top of the line, but it makes the same point. The project of finding non-contingent starting points such as the truth about justice has to take us out of this world, and, Rorty adds (while Woodruff holds his tongue) no one has succeeded yet in doing that. Woodruff continues, rather, by conceding philosophy its aspirations to transcendence but insisting that his expanded view of theatre is a necessary path to what is useful to us in the lives we actually live:

This earth is no place for the wisdom that would know the true nature of justice; I will not challenge Plato on that point. But this earth is the place for another kind of wisdom, and so is theater. \textit{(p. 214)}

Thus Woodruff’s exaltation of theatre asserts that theatre offers necessary wisdom in the realm in which the trail of the human serpent is over all. Moreover, as Woodruff points out, much of the initial power of philosophy comes from theatre: what Socrates provided for the bright young men of Athens was what he calls ‘direct theater’ or ‘extreme theater’, theatre in which we cross the line between watching and participating (p. 214). Woodruff makes theatre into a school of participation in community life that is philosophical in a very Deweyan way, not ‘in any sense whatever a form of knowledge’ but rather ‘a form of desire, of effort at action—a love, namely, of wisdom’.\textsuperscript{19} As Dewey comments toward the end of \textit{Art as Experience}, ‘works of art are the most intimate and energetic means of aiding individuals to share in the arts of

\textsuperscript{18} Woodruff, \textit{Necessity}, 18. Further page references are given parenthetically in the text.

living'. Woodruff shows how this rather banal-sounding observation of Dewey's has special application to theatre.

Woodruff's book on this description sounds very normative, as though comedy that affirms social cohesion were more basic than tragedy that exposes social faultlines. But the power of his claims can be seen when we look at the processes by which watching and being watched are just as central to the discursive establishment and propagation of new norm-altering practices, through, as he suggests, making us care for characters and simultaneously making us see that the realm of choices they inhabit is wrongly limited. The life lesson here involves stepping between being good at listening and watching and being good at talking and being watched:

Learning when to speak and when to listen is the hardest lesson for a language learner. Many of us never get it right, and none of us gets it right all the time.

So it is with theater, but it is even harder there, and less obvious that we must.... The performer must learn to watch, and the watcher must learn to perform.... How may this man become an agent of change, when he has so long been only a disaffected spectator? Or how may this colleague step back from the turbulence... and watch?

...[T]heater is most theater when it is not theater at all, when the arts of watching and being watched merge and give way to shared action, shared experience.21

That is, the meaning of theatre lies in its capacity for consequences, some subtle and reflective, others overt and public.

**Shakespearean Pragmatism in Macbeth**

What does it mean to suggest that Shakespeare was a pragmatist, as I did in a book published in the early 1990s?22 I focused on Shakespeare's frequent invocation of contingent evaluation systems like markets, and on his interest in the mutability of social forms over time. Shakespeare and other early modern thinkers were in no position to anticipate Darwin, but they were to varying degrees aware of economic processes that framed social forms and undergirded or undermined hierarchies; they also experienced the mutability of belief systems vividly because of the Reformation.

My suggestion was that in Shakespeare's dramas and poems, we find a pragmatic way of thinking about the way characters work toward understanding of the world, what I called a persistent tendency to redescribe fixed structures as mutable economies of value, and that the large-scale understanding of a social order in Shakespeare turned

out to be, in a way that was distinctive to Shakespeare, a recognition of complex interdependence of one value on another, and a persistent exposure of absolutist language to evidence of its functions in an economy of values that to some extent undermines any claim it has to give access to certainty. I should add here that if Shakespearean Pragmatism had any impact, it was in providing generalizations (including some tentative historical generalizations) useful to critics involved in a small movement to see Shakespeare as an economic thinker, not in establishing a practice of pragmatist reading among Shakespeareans.

Macbeth was a worry, not a topic, in that project. The Shakespearean play that seems least anticipatory of modern enlightened attitudes, it barely features the overt dialogue between scepticism and credulousness, or realism and idealism, so prominent in other plays of the second part of Shakespeare's career. In Macbeth, Shakespeare does not seem very concerned with markets, or with market-like processes of evaluation. Shakespeare seems aware that Macbeth looks back to medieval society, and accordingly emphasizes gift-exchange, yet Macbeth's treatment of Scottish feudalism does not think through the consequences of different political economies in the manner of Timon, Troilus, and the Roman plays. Nonetheless, I hope to show that Macbeth can be rewardingly redescribed in pragmatist terms, and specifically in terms suggested by Peirce, James, and Rorty.

Macbeth's supernaturalism and absolutism are aspects of what makes it the most clearly topical (and thus locally contingent) of Shakespeare's tragedies. Almost everything that happens in it can be brought into relation to the new reign of James I: into general relation to James's published opinions about sacred monarchy and about witchcraft and demonic agency and into more specific relation to James's survival of the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 and to the sermons and trials that were under way in late 1605 and 1606 as Shakespeare (we think) composed the play.23

While Macbeth may in some sense lie at the end of a causal chain that includes King James's writings, his coronation, and the plots against his rule, its relation to such a chain of causes remains a puzzle.24 In fact, the play is preoccupied with just such puzzles, which engage Macbeth himself as well as readers of the play, and some of them can be elucidated by reference to Peirce's maxim: 'Consider what effects, which might

23 For an imaginative historian's view of the play's topicality, see Garry Wills, Witches and Jesuits: Shakespeare's 'Macbeth' (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995); for an illustration of how a wealth of topicality can flow from the contextualization of a single line of Macbeth, see Arthur F. Kinney, 'Macbeth's Knowledge', Shakespeare Survey 57 (2004), 11-26. For an intelligent summary account illustrating that in Macbeth 'Shakespeare was by now well and truly the King’s Man’, see Jonathan Bate, Soul of the Age, 326.

conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object.'

_Macbeth_ offers a dramatic meditation on the relation among broader ideas of causal influence and on the future-oriented idea of meaning as practical consequence that is at the heart of pragmatism. The word 'consequence' is relatively rare in Shakespeare—_Hamlet_ is the only play where it occurs more often than in _Macbeth_, and then only because Polonius's near-senility causes a triple repetition of his phrase 'closes in the consequence' in his conversation with Reynaldo (_Hamlet_ 2.1.45–54). In _Macbeth_ the word occurs thrice, and each instance is crucial. Banquo cautions Macbeth that

> oftentimes to win us to our harm
> The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
> Win us with honest trifles to betray's
> In deepest consequence. (1.3.121–4)

_Macbeth_, in a soliloquy, postulates a conditional, 'If th'assassination | Could trammel up the consequence,... | We'd jump the life to come' (1.7.2–7). And as Macbeth prepares to meet the English invasion, he asserts that the witches have given him a way to trammel up consequences:

> What's the boy Malcolm?
> Was he not born of woman? The spirits that know
> All mortal consequences have pronounced me thus:
> 'Fear not, Macbeth. No man that's born of woman
> Shall e'er have power upon thee.' (5.3.3–7)

Thus _Macbeth_ raises, quite overtly, a question that pragmatists often face: if you confine truth and morality to this-worldly consequences of actions, how do you distinguish successful action in a bad social order from good action, or successful intellectual conformity in a lying social order from truth? Can you guarantee that it is possible in a range of social situations to be, by your own lights, good? Is it possible, for instance, to be good in the play's Scotland? For 'deepest consequence' here—by which Banquo means 'salvation' and 'damnation'—here has everything to do with works, not faith, with what characters do, not what they believe. This brings us to the question of what the play's contingent starting point actually is.

Few of Macbeth's actions in the play escape critical censure, but he is not often condemned for saving Duncan. By personally killing the rebel Macdonald on one battlefield and defeating the Norwegian king on another, Macbeth (with Banquo as a second) rescues Duncan's kingship. In Shakespeare's sources Duncan has been a poor king, incapable of maintaining order because of his meek gentleness. In this play, no reason whatsoever is given for the rebellion except Macdonald's 'villainies of nature'

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(1.2.11) and, arguably, the ‘Norwegian lord ... surveying vantage’ (1.2.31). Something about Scotland causes villainy to ‘swarm’ (1.2.12) and enemies to seek to take advantage of its weakness.

Thus Macbeth’s first line, ‘So foul and fair a day I have not seen’ (1.3.36), registers an ambivalence that may extend beyond the weather and his possible ambivalence about killing people, to attach also to what he, or he and Banquo, have just done in political terms: sustained with enormous risk and effort a king whom many want to overthrow, and thus committed Scotland to the likelihood of continued political disruption. Harry Berger has an influential and insightful account of the early scenes of the play that suggests some of this. He surveys the disorder Duncan presides over, and discerns also ‘that those who speak with Duncan respond to him with varying degrees of barely concealed constraint, irritability, perhaps condescension’.27

But even Berger, who sees Duncan’s speeches to Macbeth registering Duncan’s embarrassment in being the loser in a gift-exchange, does not quite capture the sheer administrative incompetence of Duncan’s well-intentioned behaviour toward Macbeth and Banquo. Having sent Ross and Angus to tell Macbeth that he is now Thane of Cawdor ‘for an earnest of a greater honour’ (1.3.102), Duncan greets Macbeth as ‘worthiest cousin’ (1.4.14), then reproaches Macbeth for doing so much (‘Would thou hadst less deserved’ [1.4.18]) and goes on to say that ‘“More is thy due than more than all can pay”’ (1.4.21). This forces Macbeth into an embarrassed civics lesson directed at someone who either proposes to abdicate in his favour (a plausible construal of the ‘all’ in Duncan’s ‘more than all’) or has temporarily lost sight of the central monarchical idea that kings are founts of honour:

Your highness’ part
Is to receive our duties, and our duties
Are to your throne and state children and servants
Which do but what they should by doing everything
Safe toward your love and honour. (1.4.23–7)

Duncan goes on immediately to tell Banquo that, despite the (accurate) description of Macbeth as ‘worthiest’, Banquo has ‘no less deserved, nor must be known | No less to have done so’ (1.4.30–1)—thus sowing doubt between Banquo and Macbeth about which of them deserves ‘more than all’, and rhetorically undercutting his recent evaluation of Macbeth. Finally, bursting into tears, and having failed, as Berger points out, to deliver Macbeth anything new and Banquo anything more than a hug, Duncan begins the big announcement he and his messenger led Macbeth and the audience to expect: ‘Sons, kinsmen, thanes, | And you whose places are the nearest’ (1.4.35–6)—the ‘you... nearest’ being Macbeth and Banquo—

know

We will establish our estate upon... (1.4.37-8)

Upon whom? It is important to recognize that, to someone seeing or reading Macbeth for the first time without knowing what is going to happen, the next line comes as a surprise: 'Our eldest, Malcolm, whom we name hereafter | The Prince of Cumberland' (1.4.38-9).

What a disappointment, after this build-up! And what a humiliation for Macbeth! Of course one can understand that Duncan feels the need to defend himself against his obligation to Macbeth and against Macbeth's superiority in battle to Malcolm, but surely he should not take this moment to assert a succession that cannot be automatic, since it has hitherto been unestablished. Moreover, having promised Macbeth something special beyond Cawdor's thaneship, Duncan should also not follow the gift of 'all' to Malcolm with vague never-realized offers of promotion to practically everyone without any specific individual reward for Macbeth:

... The Prince of Cumberland; which honour must
Not unaccompanied invest him only,
But signs of nobleness, like stars, shall shine
On all deservers. (1.4.39-42)

No wonder Macbeth mutters 'stars, hide your fires' (1.4.50) a few lines later. Duncan has made it a humiliation rather than a pleasure to have this sort of star shine on him.

Perhaps Duncan's well-intentioned awkwardness (which has an enduring quality: he makes everyone feel awful about their relations with him while wishing all of them the very best) arises partly from his grief over the first Thane of Cawdor's betrayal. This Cawdor is one of a series of alter egos to Macbeth himself (a man whose title and 'robes' Macbeth assumes before he does Duncan's). We know that Duncan regarded Cawdor highly: Duncan orders his abrupt, trial-free execution with the comment 'No more that Thane of Cawdor shall deceive | Our bosom interest. Go pronounce his present death, | And with his former title greet Macbeth' (1.2.63-5). Duncan greets Macbeth under the influence of regret and confusion, the immediate aftermath of betrayal by a 'bosom' friend, 'a gentleman on whom I built | An absolute trust' (1.4.14-16). The play sounds a note of disappointment in absolute commitments that reverberates later. It seems possible, moreover, that the Scottish succession, oddly suspended until its untimely announcement in Malcolm's favour, may have somehow been linked to Cawdor. Macbeth replies to the witches' hailing him as 'Thane of Cawdor' with the comment 'The Thane of Cawdor lives | A prosperous gentleman, and to be king | Stands not within the prospect of belief, | No more than to be Cawdor' (1.3.70-2). That Macbeth should link the incredibility of the two titles in this way suggests that Duncan's 'prosperous' intimate stands between Macbeth and the throne, a 'step | On which I must fall down or else o'erleap' (1.4.48-9), as Malcolm becomes after Duncan announces the succession.

Cawdor, it turns out, has sided with Norway against a king who favoured him more highly than any other thane. When that attempt fails, Cawdor makes the best he can of the consequences of his actions, and does so with considerable grace, as Malcolm reports:
Nothing in his life
Became him like the leaving it. He died
As one that had been studied in his death
To throw away the dearest thing he owed
As 'twere a careless trifle. (1.4.7–11)

This decorous action elevates Cawdor in our mind and deepens the pathos of his betrayal, but also makes betrayal by such a smooth performer more significant. Either Cawdor felt that Duncan was fated to fall, or he felt that Duncan ought to fall. Certainly the set of political conditions surrounding Duncan at the outset makes his fall seem likely, and we have seen in Duncan's reception of Macbeth's victories how self-undermining a king Duncan is when he is trying to confer favour on someone.

Given this, Macbeth must begin the play in doubt that he has done the right thing by saving Duncan (a similar doubt may contribute to the 'cursed thoughts | Nature gives way to in repose' [2.1.8–9] mentioned by Banquo). Such doubt may contribute to the complexity of Macbeth's thinking about murdering him—Macbeth both needs to reassure himself that Duncan is worth having saved—that he is 'meek' and 'clear' of abuse of power (1.7.17–18), and that it may be the effective, self-enhancing thing to murder him.

If, as pragmatists assert, moral truths are condensations of principles by which communities thrive, and communities are constantly evolving and developing new norms, then a moral choice will often be a choice between longer-term, more stable, less immediate community-oriented values and shorter-term, less stable, more immediate self-oriented values. Apparent absolutes, like 'thou shalt not kill', turn out to mean in most instances something like 'thou shalt not kill unless your community requires you to do so for its collective good (as, say, a soldier) or unless your community regards you as having an imperative justification of a kind it collectively accepts (defending your family or yourself against an assault with intent to kill). That is, it means something like 'thou shalt not kill well-behaved members of your community, and thou shalt check carefully before killing outsiders'.

'Thou shalt not commit regicide' in 1605–6 might seem to permit fewer qualifications, since God sends the monarch in theory to centre the community as a parent does a family, but a community-injuring monarch does much to thin the hedge of divinity that protects him, as sixteenth-century resistance theorists argued. The historical Macbeth was linked to justified resistance. Some surprisingly Machiavellian

28 See Rebecca Lemon, 'Scaffolds of Treason in Macbeth', Theatre Journal 54.1 (2002), 25–43, for an argument that Cawdor's scaffold confession should be seen as conventional and perhaps unreliably reported.
29 See Rorty, Contingency, 194–5.
comments made by Macduff to Malcolm in Act 4 suggest his awareness of both practice and theory of resistance. After Malcolm describes himself as a voluptuary, Macduff says ‘Boundless intemperance | In nature is a tyranny. It hath been | Th’untimely emptying of the happy throne, | And fall of many kings’ (4.3.67–70). But Macduff thinks Scotland has ‘willing dames enough’ to endure or exhaust such a king (4.3.74), and Macduff’s regime-change commentary might just be general analysis of the falls of princes. When Malcolm goes on to describe himself as full of avarice, Macduff brings his reflections on regicide home: ‘This avarice... hath been | The sword of our slain kings’ (4.3.88). In other words, Scotland routinely empties its thrones of misbehaving kings, often by murder. The ways Malcolm employs arts of deception similar to Macbeth’s and Cawdor’s has often been remarked, but Macduff’s frank confirmation of deposition and regicide as habitual consequences of royal error is more startling than Malcolm’s double-talk in a play sometimes thought to be absolutist.

Macbeth takes up short-term versus long-term consequences, and I-intentions versus we-intentions, more systematically and philosophically than any other Shakespeare play. A. C. Bradley writes that Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are linked in having a limited social conception of themselves:

> We observe in them no love of country, and no interest in the welfare of anyone outside their family. Their habitual thoughts and aims are, and, we imagine, long have been, all of station and power... Not that they are egoists, like Iago; or if they are egoists, theirs is an egoisme à deux.

As Bradley’s phrase suggests, it is hard in their case to separate dual intentions from individual ones, at least early in the play, but when it is possible to make this separation, the differences are fascinating. The ‘we’ of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth à deux in early scenes is far less prone to long-term thinking, and to recognition of patterns of communal health, than the ‘I’ or the free-floating ‘we’ of Macbeth’s soliloquies in 1.3 and 1.7. Indeed, what triggers Lady Macbeth’s extraordinary assault on her husband’s masculinity is a signal from Macbeth that he is thinking of a ‘we’ that is larger than the two of them:

**Macbeth:** Hath he asked for me?

**Lady Macbeth:** Know you not he has?


31 Machiavelli in ch. XVII of *The Prince* cautions that clemency is more dangerous in a prince than cruelty, because it is better to be feared than loved. But one must avoid being hated, which the prince can do as long as he abstains from the property of his citizens and subjects and from their women. "If [the Prince] must take someone’s life, he should do so when there is proper justification and manifest cause; but, above all, he should avoid the property of others; for men forget more quickly the death of their father than the loss of their patrimony." Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa (eds. and trans.), *The Portable Machiavelli* (New York: Penguin, 1979), 132.

32 For Malcolm’s resemblance to Macbeth and to Cawdor, see Lemon, ‘Scaffolds of Treason’.

MACBETH: We will proceed no further in this business. 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, Not cast aside so soon.

LADY MACBETH: Was the hope drunk Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since? And wakes it now to look so green and pale At what it did so freely? From this time Such I account thy love.

(1.7.30–9)

And she proceeds to her fantasia on the nursing child that does so much, as Janet Adelman and others have shown, to set masculinity in this play in opposition to any sort of fruitful social interdependence. Lady Macbeth’s cue is, however, Macbeth’s quite ordinary response to suddenly being well-thought-of by those who watch him: it endears his local community to him (doubtless a largely male community), and she violently brings him back to the limited and focused nuptial ‘we’ of claims like ‘But screw your courage to the sticking-place | And we’ll not fail’ (1.7.60–1).

As we have already seen, non-supernatural lines of causation of a Machiavellian kind meet in the death of Duncan. What lines of causation spread from it? How does Macbeth’s own sense of causality and existence in time focus on the killing? Insofar as Macbeth treats Macbeth’s consciousness as a central realm of investigation, what the play does is to unpack the practical consequences of an initial conception:

My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical, Shakes so my single state of man that function Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is But what is not. (1.3.138–41)

The first consequence is radical self-division, the shaking of Macbeth’s ‘single state of man’. A second imagined consequence is that Macbeth might recover a ‘single state of man’ by doing the deed, or by achieving the bright circular singular crown, ‘the golden round’ (1.5.27), ‘that | Which thou esteem’st the ornament of life’ (1.7.41–2).

This view is strongly urged by Lady Macbeth. Macbeth’s submission to her is also a resolution to unify himself: ‘I am settled, and bend up | Each corporal agent to this terrible feat’ (1.7.79–80). In other words, Macbeth seeks to end self-division by rallying all his internal forces to this one goal and achieving peace through what Lady Macbeth calls ‘our great quell’ (1.7.72). This ‘quell’ is referred to in causal and euphemistic terms as a quintessential transformative and unifying action by both of them: ‘the nearest way’ (1.5.17), ‘Th’effect’ (1.5.46), ‘This night’s great business... | Which shall to all our nights and days to come | Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom’ (1.5.67–9), ‘this

business' (1.7.31), 'the hope . . . | Wherein you dressed yourself’ (1.7.35–6), 'To be the same in thine own act and valour | As thou art in desire' (1.7.40–1), 'this enterprise' (1.7.48), 'to be more than what you were' (1.7.50), 'this' (1.7.59), 'What . . . you and I [can] perform' (1.7.69), 'it' (1.7.77), 'it' (1.7.77), 'the way that I was going' (2.1.42), 'the bloody business' (2.1.48), 'it' (2.1.62), 'He is about it' (2.2.4), 'it' (2.2.10), 'the deed' (2.2.10), 'it' (2.2.13), 'I have done the deed' (2.2.14). The maximal contraction to a repeated 'it' ('Will it not be received | . . . That they have done't'? [1.7.74–7], 'I am afraid . . . . . . 'tis not done' [2.2.9–10], 'Had he not resembled | My father as he slept, I had done't' [2.2.12–13]) offers a typographical registration of the way the Macbeths have reduced this action to a decisive transformative moment in which cause and effect join to satisfy desire and end frustration, encoding the unity of personal being, mutual happiness, and future security.

Or rather, this is what Macbeth does under the insistent pressure of Lady Macbeth's power to shame him. When he is alone, as we have already seen in his comment on how the thought of murder 'shakes . . . my single state of man', Macbeth has a considerably wider sense of the web of consequences that denies control of the meaning of an action to its actor. After all, Macbeth articulates both the hope and the near-impossibility that 'th'assassination | Could trammel up the consequence, and catch | With his sucease, success' (1.7.2–4). In this, Macbeth applies Peirce's maxim to his own aspirations: 'consider what effects, which might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive [the murder of Duncan | becoming King of Scotland] to have. Then, our conception of those effects is the whole of our conception of the object'. This sets the meaning of an act in the future, but offers a way of limiting the consequences to 'practical' ones. Macbeth first uses this maxim to cut off otherworldly judgement from consideration, at least as most interpreters understand his lines:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly. If th'assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his sucease success: that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all, here,
But here upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. (1.7.1–7)

The indefiniteness of both 'it' and 'we' creates an oscillation between the general situation of human action undertaken in the desire to cut off forking paths of consequence and the particular murder in question. We find the same sort of oscillation in Hamlet's 'To be, or not to be' (Hamlet 3.1.58–90), or Macbeth's later 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow' (5.5.18–27). Shakespearean philosophizing has this quality of circling mysteriously around the particular in generally suggestive ways. The 'we' might plausibly be Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, but if so it is a far less contracted and purposeful 'we' than the one Lady Macbeth enforces. The 'we' of 'we'd jump' reaches out to include the audience or reader in a general reflection on action amid uncertainty about
consequences. If 'jump' means 'hazard', as editors suggest, Macbeth anticipates the terms of Pascal's wager but refuses to accept its argument for longest-term thinking.

Returning to this-worldly considerations, Macbeth then reasons morally by exploring middle-term consequences of the murder of Duncan:

But in these cases
We still have judgement here, that we but teach
Bloody instructions which, being taught, return
To plague th'inventor. This even-handed justice
Commends th'ingredience of our poisoned chalice
To our own lips. (1.7.7–12)

Sounding like someone who has the final scene of Hamlet in mind ('purposes mistook | Fall'n on th'inventors' heads' [Hamlet 5.2.338–9], 'Drink off this potion' ([Hamlet 5.2.278] 'The King] is justly served. It is a poison tempered by himself' [Hamlet 5.2.279–80]) Macbeth recognizes that the middle-term social consequences of violent usurpation may threaten the usurper. He then begins to think in less exclusively political (but still, from a pragmatic viewpoint, practical) terms about the communal norms he will violate by killing Duncan:

He's here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued against
The deep damnation of his taking-off,
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubin, hosed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye
That tears shall drown the wind. (1.7.12–25)

All these disincentives are cast in terms of a metaphoric storm of social grief and reproach. Macbeth imagines himself assailed at both ear and eye by a set of regrets occasioned by the very characteristics in Duncan that seem to have made him ripe for usurpation: his meekness and his innocence. The 'angels' and 'cherubin' here are present in simile as hypostatized guardians of apolitical virtues, the areas of inhibition that protect the 'naked new-born babe' from harm. Lady Macbeth shows how well she knows her husband's imagination when she chastises him by slaughtering another hypothetical infant.

Two directions of consequentiality govern Macbeth's evolution in the play, and both are forecast in the early soliloquies and exchanges with his wife. The first is the diminution of meaningful action by the elimination of a meaningful community of fellow-humans, the 'watchers' whose moral centrality Paul Woodruff asserts. Lady
Macbeth sees such watchers as subject to the will of the strong, saying of her very sketchy plan to pin guilt for Duncan's murder on the guards: 'Who dares receive it other?' (1.7.77). Macbeth retains some sense of this community of watchers when he tells the murderers that he could 'With barefaced power sweep [Banquo] from my sight | And bid my will avouch it, yet I must not, | For certain friends that are both his and mine, | Whose loves I may not drop' (3.2.120–3). But by the time Macbeth revisits the witches and receives a second set of prophecies, he has rhetorically at least divested himself of communal concerns: 'For mine own good | All causes shall give way. I am in blood | Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, | Returning were as tedious as go o'er' (3.4.134–7). Macbeth fords this wide river of blood by himself because he has redescribed Lady Macbeth not as co-actor but as audience for the murder of Banquo: 'Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, | Till thou applaud the deed' (3.3.46–7). Tedium emerges as a problem because the vital contribution to meaning made by the watchers of one's actions is denied. The full-blown expression of this nihilistic view emerges when Lady Macbeth, the residual audience, dies, and Macbeth sees life as an entirely meaningless succession because a performance unworthy of being seriously watched:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (5.5.18–27)

One can agree with Tzachi Zamir that 'through Macbeth, Shakespeare captures an intellectual nihilism that emerges from a psychological and existential context'. But it is important to see also that another direction of consequentiality runs through Macbeth's own perspective on the action that enmeshes him. Macbeth himself has diagnosed the conditions for meaningful action in the play. When the witches assure Macbeth that he will reign until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane, Macbeth responds:

Sweet bodesments, good!
Rebellious dead, rise never till the wood
Of Birnam rise, and on's high place Macbeth
Shall live the lease of nature, pay his breath
To time and mortal custom. (4.1.112–16)

Thus time and mortal custom—the conditions of endurance through change by way of ingrained community habit—will carry Macbeth through. Even up to the end Macbeth keeps evoking harmonious communality wistfully as something he has forgone:

My way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have, but in their stead
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath
Which the poor heart would fain deny and dare not.

(5.3.24–30)

Macbeth invokes the community of watchers as here offering a meaningful response to his choices: they curse him subvocally while fearing him.

What could lead Macbeth to this point? He is repeatedly seduced, as a pragmatist would see it, by a quest for certainty. He imagines what he does to those he kills as supplying them a certainty he himself desires: the bell that sends him to Duncan's chamber is 'a knell | That summons thee to heaven or to hell' (2.1.63–4), and after sending out the murderers, he says ‘Banquo, thy soul's flight, | If it find heaven, must find it out tonight' (3.1.142–3). (There is no purgatory in Macbeth's imagination of death: it is an immediate up or down. Though Catholic in its orientation toward works rather than faith, Macbeth shows no nostalgia for Catholic afterlives.) Macbeth cannot rest in a kingship that does not somehow conquer the future: 'To be thus is nothing | But to be safely thus' (3.1.49–50). Having conferred certainty of status on others, he envies them his gift:

Better be with the dead,
Whom we to gain our peace have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
in restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave.
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.
Treason has done his worst. Nor steel nor poison,
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing
Can touch him further. (3.3.21–8)

Duncan's life was 'fitful' because of the uncertain and conflict-laden relation he had with his primary watchers, the thanes who revolted against him, allied themselves with foreign levies, and finally took steel to his body. The same uncertainty seizes Macbeth when he learns that the murderers have not killed Fleance:

Then comes my fit again; I had else been perfect,
Whole as the marble, founded as the rock,
As broad and general as the casing air,
But now I am cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in
To saucy doubts and fears. (3.4.20–4)
By the play's end, Macbeth has in effect emptied out the world to a point where his own action has no significance because a meaningful audience has been entirely alienated. Each recollection of meaningful living turns out to be a remembrance of a community of watchers; each complaint turns out to be a recognition of being bound in to a chain of consequences that is not worth watching.

I have argued in this chapter that pragmatism can offer plausible paradigms for how theatre engages philosophic issues, and that it is helpful and plausible to think of pragmatism as a description of how Shakespeare's thought achieves such power while evading the fixed starting points available to thinkers of his era. The effort to delineate the local historical processes in which a work of art from the past participated is thus a kind of pragmatism: many aspects of Macbeth can plausibly be seen as practical consequences of the accession of King James. Moreover, Macbeth can also be seen as a meditation on the ways that trying to exhibit 'pragmatism' in the ordinary-language sense of focusing on practical consequences and setting aside emotions or ideals to do so can be destructive for persons and for states.

More importantly, Macbeth also anticipates philosophic pragmatism's critique of certainty claims and of aspirations to certainty. The play focuses insistently on how attempts to close off the openness of the future lead to cruelty and to self-reduction. Indeed, the play offers something surprisingly close to a pragmatist moral: if you attempt to guarantee your own future security by foreclosing the future possibilities of others like you, the watchers who give your actions meaning, you may destroy yourself as well as them. You are social, not individual; mutable and fallible, not fixed and unerring; and your relation to your own future must acknowledge this and thus admit insecurity and rivalry. As a moral, this may seem banal. It is certainly an easy point for readers and playgoers to get, given that Middleton, the play's first interpreter, makes Hecate state something very like it: 'You all know security | Is mortal's greatest enemy' (3.5.32–3). But it is not banal. Attempts to negotiate between greater certainty and individual control, on one hand, and on the other, less certainty, more social participation, and the possibility of more harmony, constitute from a pragmatist viewpoint the centre of moral reasoning. Macbeth shows the tragic social and personal consequences of a quest for certainty.