BARGAINS WITH FATE: THE CASE OF MACBETH

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According to Horney, each of the interpersonal strategies of defense involves a "bargain with fate" in which if a person lives up to his shoulds, his claims are supposed to be honored. The bargain of the self-effacing individual is that if he is a good, loving, noble person who shuns pride and does not seek private gain or glory, he will be well-treated by fate and by other people. The narcissistic person feels that if he holds onto his dreams and to his exaggerated claims for himself, life is bound to give him what he wants. The perfectionistic person believes that his own rectitude will insure fair treatment from others; through the height of his standards, he compels fate. The bargain of the arrogant-vindictive person is essentially with himself. He does not count on the world to give him anything, but he is convinced that he can reach his ambitious goals if he remains true to his vision of life as a battle and does not allow himself to be seduced by his softer feelings or the traditional morality. The detached person believes that if he asks nothing of others, they will not bother him; that if he tries for nothing, he will not fail, and that if he expects little of life, he will not be disappointed.

I have found Horney's concept to be of great help in understanding Shakespeare's four major tragedies—Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth. Each of these plays deals with characters who are in a state of psychological crisis resulting from threats to their bargains with fate. The failure of the bargain calls their whole strategy for living into question and generates rage, anxiety, and self-hate; and each behaves in a way that is destructive to himself and others in the course of his attempts to restore his pride, repair his defenses, and hold onto his idealized image of himself. Hamlet and Desdemona have a self-effacing bargain; Othello's bargain is predominantly perfectionistic; Iago has an arrogant-vindictive bargain; and Lear's bargain is narcissistic. All of these characters have their bargains violated by other

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people, by external events. The case of Macbeth is somewhat different. At the beginning of the play, Macbeth is a perfectionistic person whose solution has been highly successful. He precipitates his own psychological crisis by violating his dominant set of shoulds in order to act out the arrogant-vindictive trends which are reinforced by his wife. Once he violates his own bargain, he is overwhelmed by fear and self-hate. He tries to cope with his crisis by wholeheartedly embracing the arrogant-vindictive solution, but he cannot really do so, and the result is despair.

In her soliloquy upon the receipt of Macbeth's letter, Lady Macbeth provides some excellent insights into her husband's conflicts.

Yet I do fear thy nature.
It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great;
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly,
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win. (I, i)

Macbeth is an ambitious man who wants more than he can legitimately have, but who is prevented from going after it by powerful compliant and perfectionistic tendencies. His compliance is indicated by the milk imagery which is consistently used by aggressive characters in Western literature to describe self-effacing behavior, and his perfectionism is indicated by his need for righteousness. Macbeth is a man who is deeply committed to the values of his society and who has invested his pride in living up to them. He has a powerful need to be great but an even more powerful need to be good. His solution to his inner conflict has been to search for glory in acceptable ways, through loyal service to the state. He is a man of honor who exults, like Othello, in "the big wars that make ambition virtue." As the play opens, he is receiving all of the recognition that he can reasonably expect. In I, ii alone, he is described as "brave Macbeth," "valour's minion," "valiant cousin," "justice . . . with valour armed," "Bellona's bridegroom," and "noble Macbeth." These are the "golden opinions" (I, vii) which mean so much to him. He is named Thane of Cawdor and is promised an even "greater honour" (I, iii). The problem is that, whetted by his success and by his encounter with the witches, Macbeth's ambition and his sense of his deserts cannot be satisfied by anything which Duncan can do for him. His need for greatness threatens to get out of control and to violate his need to be good.

Macbeth's inner conflict is evident in his reaction to the witches' prophecy. He starts and is "rapt" because the witches have brought to the surface a fantasy which he has been trying to repress. He wants to believe that the supernatural soliciting is good, but he is afraid that it is not: