

Macbeth — Two Notes

1. *The bank and school of time*

Modern editors of *Macbeth* usually adopt Theobald's substitution of "shoal" for the Folio's "Schoole" in I. vii. 6-7: "But heere, vpon this Banke and Schoole of time,/Wee'ld iumpe the life to come".¹ The reasons for accepting this substitution seem to be logical and linguistic: one may be upon a bank (in the sense of a bench) but hardly upon a school; "bank and shoal" appears to provide, in consequence, a necessary and inescapable elucidation of a difficult passage, especially with the listing in *OED* of "school" as a variant spelling of "shoal". The emendation has not been free, however, of problems. Initially, "iumpe" must have been taken to signify the act of leaping and therefore, by extension, of evading, for this sense is implied by Theobald's gloss on the passage: "This *Shallow*, this *narrow Ford* of humane Life, opposed to the *great Abyss* of Eternity".² But leaping or evading has not been found an entirely satisfactory meaning: consequently "iumpe" has been read as carrying the same implications as the Gaoler's use of the verb in *Cymbeline* V. iv. 178ff:

Your death has eyes in's head, then: I have not seene him so pictur'd: you must either bee directed by some that take vpon them to know, or to take vpon your selfe that which I am sure you do not know: or iump the after-enquiry on your own perill: and how you shall speed in your iourneys end, I'll think you'l never returne to tell one.

The two uses of the word are cited accordingly by *OED* (Jump v. 11) as meaning "to hazard". Modern readings of the image in *Macbeth* stress, therefore, the seafaring and mercantile metaphor allegedly standing behind the passage, even though Muir in his edition finds himself forced to preserve (in part) the sense of leaping, when he argues that Shakespeare's idiosyncratic spelling of "shoal" had prompted subconscious associations with teaching and the schoolroom in the imagery of "that we but teach/Bloody Instructions, which being taught, returne/To plague th'Inuenter."³

1 This and subsequent quotations from the Folio are taken from the Norton facsimile (ed. Charlton Hinman), New York 1968.

2 Cited in H. H. Furness jr (ed.), *A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare: Macbeth* 5th edn, New York 1903, p. 96.

3 Kenneth Muir (ed.), *Macbeth (The Arden Shakespeare)*, rev. edn, London 1972, pp. 38-39 (Note to I. vii. 6).

The implication of Macbeth's words seems thus to be that if the murder of Duncan could be a single, isolated event, he would hazard or risk the remainder of his life, just as seafaring merchants hazard their vessels in their attempts to find a passage through dangerous shoals and sandbanks.

Such a reading, it must be noted, adds little, if anything, to the sentiment stated at the beginning of the speech: "If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well/It were done quickly", especially since commentators, following Keightley,⁴ are agreed that "the life to come" refers to the remainder of earthly life, rather than to life after death. The substitution of "shoal" appears, therefore, to be based on no inescapable necessity; it cannot be regarded as the *mot just* either on linguistic or on logical grounds; it has been adopted, one suspects, not so much because the passage as it stands in the Folio fails to yield sense, but because in its original form it offends against criteria of tragic gravity. Dover Wilson's gloss in his text of *Macbeth* is particularly revealing in this respect:

Perhaps, after 'a babbled o' green fields', Theo.'s most brilliant elucidation. Accept it, and we see life as a 'narrow bank in the ocean of eternity' (J.), reject it, and the image shrinks to the limits of a dusty class-room with Macb. seated upon a 'bank' or bench.⁵

Such sentiments, for all their zeal to restore the grandeur of a great work of art, are nevertheless close to "improving Shakespeare".

More objective reasons are to be found to support the argument that "shoal" does not convey the sense Shakespeare intended in the passage, and that, on the contrary, the Folio's "Schoole" preserves the correct reading. Only one appearance of "shoal" is to be found in Shakespeare, in *Henry VIII* III. ii. 436: "Say *Wolsey*, that once trod the wayes of Glory/And sounded all the Depths and Shoales of Honour." The single occurrence of a word (even if it is to be found in a play of doubtful authorship) is not evidence enough to reject it as a possible emendation: Spevack's concordance lists an impressive number of words which appear once only in Shakespeare's works.⁶ We must exercise caution,

4 *Variorum*, p. 97.

5 J. Dover Wilson (ed.), *Macbeth (The New Cambridge Shakespeare)*, Cambridge 1947, p. 113 (note to I. vii. 6).

6 M. Spevack, *A Complete and Systematic Concordance to the Works of Shakespeare*, VI, Hildesheim 1970, pp. 4211-37 lists words with only one instance in the canon.

nevertheless, when substituting such a word for a much more commonly-encountered original in our attempt to restore the poet's true intentions. The need for caution is increased in this instance when we find that the meaning of "bank" implied by Theobald's emendation is not encountered elsewhere in Shakespeare. All the uses of the word and of its derived forms listed by Spevack,⁷ with one significant exception presently to be considered, refer either to a mound or to a river-bank or the sea-shore — the linguistic connection between "bank" and "sand-bank" seems to have been alien to Shakespeare. In other words, Theobald's alteration introduces into the Shakespeare canon a word unusual for this poet ("shoal") which depends, moreover, on an uncharacteristic usage of a frequently-encountered term ("bank"). For these reasons, it seems advisable to entertain the possibility that the Folio's "Schoole" preserves the authentic reading, no matter how much it may offend aesthetic sensibilities.

"Schoole" has not lacked defenders, but its defence has always been conducted in terms of its primary meaning.⁸ The word "iumpse" has provided, in these cases, its own crop of problems. The speech carries strong overtones which seem to require a meaning for the verb "to jump" as "to hazard, risk or venture"; but insistence on the imagery of the schoolroom makes such a meaning unavailable. To read the passage as implying merely that Macbeth is expressing readiness to leap away from the place of instruction, to evade, that is, the sense of morality and loyalty he has acquired, is not without pertinence, but it seems to add little to what had been said earlier with greater force. Both "school" and "bank" possess, however, other (and related) meanings; these, while lacking poetic grandeur, are notably appropriate to Macbeth's state of mind in this crucial scene, and they carry implications, moreover, for our view of the play as a whole. The use of the verb "to jump" as hazarding, risking or wagering provides an important clue. The sense of "school" as signifying "a party of persons met together for the purpose of gambling" is not recorded until 1812;⁹ yet at least one sixteenth-century pamphlet concerned with the evils and malpractices of gaming contains an instance of "school" meaning the place where dishonest gamblers are trained. *A manifest detection of the most vyle and detestable use of Diceplay, and other practises . . .*, usually attributed to

7 Spevack, *Concordance*, IV, Hildesheim 1969: BANK; BANK'D.

8 *Variorum*, pp. 96-97 contains an account of such defences.

9 Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of the Underworld*, London 1949, p. 598.

Gilbert Walker, and published, in all probability, in 1552, is a dialogue in which "M." instructs the young and inexperienced gallant "R." concerning the danger of consorting with professional gamblers. Describing the manner in which cardsharps lure young men to their establishments in order to enrol them in their fraternity, M. uses several "educational" images: "for euery one of them kepeth as great scoles in their own faculty, as y^e chetors do . . . the chetor for the most part neuer receyueth his scholler to whom he will discouer the secrets of hys arte, but such one as before he had from some welth and plenty of things, made so bare, and brought to such misery . . ."¹⁰ M.'s account of the career of a newly enrolled gambler uses terms that connect dishonest gambling with the concept of schooling and instruction: "for euen this new nurtured novis not with standing hee is receiued into the Colledge of these dubble dealers, & is become so good a scoller that he knoweth redily his flats and his barris, and hath bin snapper with y^e old cole. at ii. or. iii. deepe stroks."¹¹ In a later passage, we find mention of the "strange language" of dishonest gamblers which no one may understand "till he haue a good time of scoling".¹²

Further indications may be found in sixteenth-century material that suggest the possibility of a connection between "school" and gaming. Cooper's *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae & Britannicae* (1565), contains various entries under "Ludus" which give the usual meanings of a place of instruction and of recreation, as well as the following significant entries:

Ludere, cum abalatiuo. Terent. Ita vita est hominum, quasi quum ludas tesserit. As when one playeth at the dice.

Alea studiosissime lusit. Sueton. He was a greate player at dice¹³

OED also cites an interesting collocation in *The First Part of Jeronimo* (I. iii. 23) "From drinking schooles . . . From dicing houses" (School *sb.*¹ 3b).

Macbeth's "Schoole of time" may suggest therefore a place or a collection of persons where or by whom a game may be con-

10 *A manifest detection of the most vyle and detestable use of Diceplay* n.d. sig. Bii^v. (Cited from a microfilm of the Huntington copy held by the State Library of N.S.W.)

11 *A manifest detection*, sig. Ci^v.

12 *A manifest detection*, sig. Dii^v.

13 Thomas Cooper, *Thesaurus Linguae Romanae & Britannicae*, 1565, sig. CCcc2^r-CCcc2^v. (The Scholar Press facsimile, Menston 1969.)

ducted (honestly or, more probably, nefariously) for the highest stakes: "the life to come" is hazarded in order to win the greatest prize, the crown. The phrase, while possessing definite connotations of gambling and games of chance, also places "time" into a much more clearly defined opposition to "the life to come" than Theobald's substitution permits. Macbeth, though driven into adopting the terminology of shoddy crime (a world he is about to enter, no matter how high the stakes for which he plays), recognizes only too clearly that the wagering, the risking, the recklessness of his action may only be justified if there were only "time", the secular, everyday life. But placed against this image of the criminal *present*, there are the powerful emblems of "the life to come" and of those moral and religious qualities — like Pity — which are evoked and invoked so memorably at the climax of this speech.

"Banke" may also be regarded as having associations with the world of gambling. *OED* records no usage of "bank" as a sum of money forming the prize against which the gamester stakes his amount until c.1720 (Bank *sb.*³ 4) although a less specialized use of the word as a stock of money for speculative or charitable purposes (Bank *sb.*³ 5 and 6) is recorded in the seventeenth century. All these uses are derived, it seems, from Bank *sb.*³ 1 and 2, a money-dealer's (or lender's) table or establishment and Bank *sb.*³ 3, a stock of money: an example of the last of these senses is recorded by *OED* as early as 1515. A more specific combination of a derivative of "bank" and games of chance occurs in *King John* V. ii. 103 ff. where Lewis obviously uses an image drawn from card-playing:

Haue I not heard these Islanders shout out
Viue le Roy, as I haue bank'd their Townes?
 Haue I not heere the best Cards for the game
 To winne this easy match, plaid for a Crowne?

E. A. J. Honigman gives details of Mrs F. M. H. Bone's view that "I haue bank'd their Townes" is a reference to the card-game listed as "Banco fallito" by Florio in *World of Wordes* (1598), with further references in C. Cotton's *Compleat Gamester* (1674), as well as several fascinating allusions in T.M.'s *Blacke Booke* (1604) to "old *Bias*, *Alias*, *Humfrey Hollowbanke*" to whom is given "the lurching of all yong Nouices . . . that are hookt in by the winning of one Twelue-penny Game at first, lost vppon policy, to bee cheated of Twelue-pounds worth-a Bets afterward"; and to "Your cheating Bowler that will bancke

false of purpose . . ."¹⁴ There is sufficient evidence, therefore, to link Macbeth's "Banke" with card-playing and with the practices of dishonest bowlers. Whether the use of the term in *Macbeth* refers to a particular game or to a stock of money is not entirely clear, just as, in the present state of our knowledge of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century jargon and specialized vocabulary, it is impossible to tell whether "Banke and Schoole" carried a more specific significance for Shakespeare's audience than we realize. All we may say is that both points of the image possess implications of gaming terminology.

"Banke and Schoole of time" refers, therefore, to the world of gambling and to the environment in which the Elizabethan and Jacobean underworld, chronicled by the coney-catching pamphlets of the period, obtained its livelihood. The reference catches the risks, indeed hazards, of the undertaking Macbeth is contemplating in this agonized soliloquy. The murder of the King seems to him like a game of chance, where he stakes "the life to come" — surely the redemption of his soul, as in the Gaoler's words in *Cymbeline* — against the great prize. There is also the possibility that the phrase contains a nice ambiguity between the criminality of Macbeth's intentions and his fears that he might be "cheated" — that is, that the assassination will not trammel up the consequences and that the blow will not be the be-all and the end-all.

The Folio's "Schoole" should not, therefore, be discarded. It is one element in a number of references throughout the speech (and, perhaps, throughout the play) to the sordid "gaming" world of petty criminals and cheap murderers. This is a particularly appropriate strand of imagery at this stage of the play's development. *Macbeth* may examine the criminal-hero in elevated and possibly religious terms; but it does not relax at all its insistence that crime is shoddy, ugly and lacking that grandeur which later ages have attempted to impose on it. How close Macbeth and his wife are to the imagery of dishonest gamblers may also be glimpsed in the Lady's words in I. v. 17ff.

What thou would'st highly,
That would'st thou holily: would'st not play false,
And yet would'st wrongly winne.

A. P. RIEMER

14 E. A. J. Honigman (ed.), *King John (The Arden Shakespeare)*, rev. edn, London 1954, Appendix B (pp. 169-70).

2. *Thou sour and firm-set earth*

Modern editors follow Pope's reading of Act II.i.56 and replace "sowre" with "sure": "Thou sure and firm-set earth,/Hear not my steps".¹ There has been no attempt to explain "sowre", and Biblical references are cited as corollary or what one might call associative evidence for the substitution.² Yet "sour" is a term now commonly used in agriculture and possibly it was so used in at least some regions of England in Shakespeare's lifetime. Sour soils occur where there is excessive water (producing only "sour" growth like sedge) and need careful processing before they are useful for crops. Such soil is common in northern climates, though it is not found there exclusively, and a layer of peat or moss sometimes forms on the surface.³ Pope's emendation may have been unnecessary, for "sour" with this meaning makes good sense of "firm-set" — an epithet which seems always to have been overlooked. "Firm-set earth" may allude to the spongy but relatively firm mossy layer which forms on these soils, or to sour soil after it has been drained for cultivation. This is to understand "set" in the sense of something hardening after being softer, liquid, or molten, rather than "solidly placed".

To preserve "sowre" is not incompatible with the subsequent line in the text about stones prating of Macbeth's whereabouts. The stones may be those of uncultivated leas (rough land or land untilled for some time), whether turned and drained soil, or ground predominantly mossy. Sometimes "stones" are understood by editors as the cobblestones of an enclosed courtyard; but the specifying of scene locations (as K. Muir does in the Arden edition) is a licence which may limit the texture of the language — something much more highly prized by Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences than details of geographical consistency. Possibly, in light of the above, the Folio text for line 57 (Arden edn) does not contain a compositor's error as is usually supposed. "Hear not my steps, which they may walk, for feare/Thy very stones prate of my where-about" has been understood, since Rowe, to mean "Hear not my steps, which way they walk." In this emended version "which" refers to the direction the footsteps take and "walk" is intransitive. But "which" for "which thing"

1 K. Muir (ed.), *Macbeth (The Arden Shakespeare)*, London 1961, p. 51.

2 See for instance, J. Dover-Wilson (ed.), *Macbeth (New Cambridge Shakespeare)*, Cambridge 1947, p. 120).

3 See E. W. Hilgard, *Soils*, London 1906, p. 122, and E. J. Russell, *Soil Conditions and Plant Growth*, London 1937, p. 535 ff.

is often used parenthetically in Shakespeare⁴ and may here refer back to the sour earth which Macbeth's steps may walk upon or traverse en route to Duncan's chamber if his courage holds. "They may walk" signifies his continuing uncertainty — resolved only upon the ringing of the bell a little later. Of course "which" may just as easily refer to the "sure" earth, but perhaps the unpredictable path of uncultivated or unpaved land makes marginally better sense. It is much more difficult to control one's tread on rough, uneven ground than on smooth, firm cobblestones.

Unfortunately for the defence of "sowre", Master Fitzherbert's books on husbandry and surveying — two basic and widely-read manuals of farming published in the sixteenth century — do not use the term "sour" where one might expect to find it.⁵ But Thomas Tusser, an Essex man, writes in his advice for husbandry in January:

Some breaking up laie soweth otes to begin,
to suck out the moisture so *sower* therein.
Yet otes with hir sucking a peeler is found,
both ill to the maister and worse to som ground.⁶

Tusser's advice to farmers and "the good housewife" is a highly practical and homely guide, in rhymed verse for easier memorization. His first book of a hundred points was revised, reprinted and expanded many times, attesting to its popular appeal. Perhaps it better reflects the "jargon" of common usage.

Although he does not use the word "sour", Fitzherbert's discussion of land preparation contains an interesting — in view of Macbeth's observations about the earth prating — method of soil-testing. He stresses the need to plough leas in plenty of time and be sure to lay the mould flat so that the grass and moss will rot, for otherwise "the moss doth keep such wete in itself." Then, on the sowing of peas and beans in rank ground:

How shall ye know seasonable tyme? go upon the lande, that is
plowed, and if it synge or crye, or make any noise under thy fete,
than it is to wete to sowe: and if it make no noyse, and will beare
thy horses, thanne sow in the name of god.⁷

4 A. E. Abbott, *A Shakespearian Grammar*, Dover paperback, New York 1966, p. 271.

5 Sir Antony Fitzherbert, *The Book of Husbandry*, 1534, and *Surveying*, 1523.

6 Thomas Tusser, *Five Hundred Points of Good Husbandry*, 1580, English Dialect Society Reprint, London 1878, p. 84.

7 Fitzherbert, *The Book of Husbandry*, 1534, English Dialect Society Reprint, ed. W. W. Skeat, Vaduz 1965, pp. 17-19.

SYDNEY STUDIES

The *OED* cites two authors whose works were published long after Shakespeare's lifetime, but working on the assumption that words often have a popular currency long before they reach the printed page, the references are important since both inform us that "sour land" was to be found in Shakespeare's neighbouring Oxfordshire. Robert Plot wrote in 1677: "There is another sort of ground in this County which they call sour land." And in 1707 John Mortimer wrote that in Oxfordshire "they give their sour land a tilt, according to the state and condition of their lands."⁸

Gervase Markham, a prolific writer on agriculture and horse-breeding early in the seventeenth century, and known to have gathered a great deal of his information from others' writings, advises on how to fertilize with marl and "sweeten" pasture which in its natural state can only "carry a sowre Grasse."⁹

"Sure" makes interesting reading and certainly it is apposite for Macbeth to address the solid ground at this tense moment of dream-like unreality, of quivering, "dizzy" uncertainty. Yet, while the possible full details of an agricultural image are not explored, "sour earth" has its poetic integrity also. The cold, barren, unkempt, perhaps bleak associations of sour suit well with the atmosphere of primitive and elemental perversity, of witchcraft and howling wolves, and the plunder of human nature itself as Macbeth moves across the border of what it is to be human.

In the spirit of making reasonable sense of any word that appears in the First Folio, "sowre" need not be disregarded. As well as his properties in Stratford and London, Shakespeare owned a lot of farmland, "yard-lands" in and around Stratford and was involved — probably as counsellor rather than activist — with the fights over the enclosure movement there.¹⁰ Alongside the Biblical learning of the scholar and churchman should be placed a practical man's awareness of agriculture for whom "sowre earth" might have been a common enough term.

ANN PARKER

8 Robert Plot, *The Natural History of Oxfordshire*, Oxford 1677; John Mortimer, *The Whole Art of Husbandry*, London 1707; as cited by *OED* (sour A adj. I 3a).

9 Gervase Markham, *The Inrichment of The Weald of Kent*, London 1625, facsimile reprint, Amsterdam 1973, p. 16.

10 See S. Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life*, New York 1977, pp. 245 ff, 283.