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Expos 20.043

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Response Paper 2.2:
Text and Context

1. Before Shakespeare, the Weird Sisters were beautiful wonders in marvelous apparel, beings from another world: nymphs, fairies, or goddesses of destiny ("Weird Sisters"). But Shakespeare reupholstered the Weird Sisters in the iconography of witches, their appearance made "wither'd" (1.3.40) and "beard[ed]" (1.3.46) and their surroundings gloomy and grotesque. Why did Shakespeare turn the Weird Sisters' beauty to ugliness?

2. Macbeth mutilates and beheads Macdonwald (Shakespeare 1.2. 22-23) because that was the official punishment for treason in Shakespeare's time (Wiggins). That is also why Macduff beheads Macbeth (Shakespeare 5.8.55), although the parallel of these two beheadings – the one at the start of the play and the one at the end – leaves us with a bad taste in our mouths about Macduff. With this parallel, was Shakespeare suggesting that Macduff, while positioned as an agent of justice, is actually just as savage and deranged as Macbeth? Was Shakespeare suggesting that this practice of criminal justice was primitive by associating it with his representatives of crime and justice alike? At the very least, Shakespeare identified for us a remarkably violent and war-like aspect of criminal justice in civil society. Arguably that's what the whole play of *Macbeth* is about: what happens when warriors become governors.

3. Tragedy is an artistic version of capital punishment, aka "the death penalty." Our word *capital* comes from the Latin *capitalis*, "of the head" ("Capital Punishment"), as when Macbeth is beheaded at the end of Shakespeare's play (5.8.55). In a literary context, tragedy involves a protagonist whose *hamartia* (error, mistake, "missing the mark") results in catastrophe for himself and others, including his own death ("*Hamartia*"). In a legal context, capital punishment might be given to someone convicted of a serious crime, such as murder or treason, in part as retribution and in part as a deterrent to others who might be considering that crime. Some modern jurisdictions have abolished the death penalty, deeming it "cruel and unusual punishment, and others have established limitations: for example, the supreme court prohibits the execution of those deemed insane but not those with a more mild form of mental illness (Lasser). This provision offers a difficult challenge to our understanding of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, where both Lord and Lady Macbeth go mad before they receive their "death penalties" from Shakespeare (who is, in this case, judge, jury, and executioner). Lord Macbeth hallucinates a dagger (2.1.34) and a ghost (3.4.45-121) while Lady Macbeth hallucinates blood on her hands (5.1.26-40). Insofar as the analogy between tragedy and capital punishment can be upheld, the madness of the Macbeths presents an ethical problem for the genre of tragedy that deals death to the guilty.

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