

# Wilfred Owen and *Macbeth*

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## Abstract

In September 1911, Wilfred Owen attended a performance of *Macbeth* at His Majesty's Theatre, London. This event marked the beginning of a relationship with the play that was to color both his writing and the central concerns of his life. There has been much debate about the origins of Owen's distinctive poetic technique of pararhyme. This essay suggests that his earliest encounter with it may have been in this performance of *Macbeth* and argues the importance of the play for his development as a poet. The apocalyptic and doom-laden imagery of *Macbeth* nourished Owen's imagination long before he had any inkling of his destiny as a soldier. Later, the summoning of spirits in *Macbeth* would speak to Owen's own creative process. But the play affected him in ways that reached beyond language, becoming a touchstone for the emotional and spiritual crises in his life. The nocturnal horrors of shell-shock found a perfect mirror-image in Macbeth's nightmares and sleeplessness after the murder of Duncan. Macbeth's trajectory from valiant soldier engaged in legitimate slaughter to abject and cowardly murderer goes to the heart of Owen's tormented meditations on whether war is in fact murder. This essay reads Owen through his relation to *Macbeth*, but also suggests how *Macbeth* might be seen through Owen's eyes.

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On 17 September 1911, the eighteen-year-old Wilfred Owen, staying in London to take his matriculation exams in the hope of becoming an external student at the university, had to choose between two Shakespeare plays for evening entertainment: *Macbeth* at His Majesty's Theatre (with Beerbohm Tree and Violet Vanbrugh), and *Henry V* (with the famous Bensons) which, he told his mother: "I have read, learnt, and spouted these last two years" (Owen, *Collected Letters [CL]* 1967, no. 90, 82). He chose *Macbeth*, with mixed results, as there was standing room only and he had difficulty both hearing and seeing the play, with the consequence that "I never 'lost consciousness' in the sense that I should have liked to have done," although "two ladies close to me, also standing, lost consciousness in a very disagreeable way, and both dropped like logs simultaneously to earth." The witches were "marvellous" and "quite took the breath out of the audience" (*CL*, no. 91, 83).<sup>1</sup> Reviewers complained about the length of the production — more

than four hours despite considerable cuts — and its Pre-Raphaelite visual splendors, which clogged up the swiftness and intensity of Shakespeare's most fast-moving (and indeed, shortest) play.<sup>2</sup> But if in September 1911 the young Wilfred was disappointed by his own detachment, his ongoing relation to the play would be the reverse of detached.

Although many influences on Owen have been traced, his relation to Shakespeare, except in the case of the Sonnets, has been oddly underplayed.<sup>3</sup> Owen's genius was nurtured by his extreme literary sensibility, which fed on the work of other poets. A copy of the poet Edward Thomas's book on Keats is inscribed with Owen's monogram and dated "June 1916, Witley Camp," in which Thomas says of Keats: "Books had for him an intense reality, and sometimes gave him an 'overpowering idea' of the dead poets. He could not exist without poetry" (Thomas [1916], 14). This might equally have been said of Wilfred Owen, and it is strange that Owen and Thomas, who were both cadets in the Artists' Rifles, appear not to have known each other, even though Owen bought Thomas's book (Stallworthy 1974, 130).<sup>4</sup> But although Owen's devotion to Keats, and, to a lesser extent, Shelley, has been amply credited,<sup>5</sup> the ways in which Shakespeare's plays infuse his writing, both of poetry and of letters, have been left largely unexplored. In his letters and poems, no play recurs more frequently than *Macbeth*. It is not clear when he first read the play, though it sounds as if he had probably not read it when he attended Beerbohm's production in 1911, in contrast to *Henry V*. A 1904 single unmarked volume *Macbeth* (edited by George Brandes and published by Heinemann) is in his library (Shakespeare 1904).<sup>6</sup> But it is plain that within months of his seeing the production, the play had worked itself into Owen's imagination, and was to shape both his writing and his ongoing perception of his life.

### Pararhyme: Fear and Fair

Owen's acute sensitivity to language led him to an experiment with rhyme which was to become the hallmark of his poetry. He developed a distinctive technique now usually called "pararhyme," in which the vowel sounds change, but the initial and terminal consonants remain unchanged.<sup>7</sup> In an unpublished document entitled "Points to note about my Sonnets," his first point declares: "They are 'correct' as regards rime, but the system of rime is not necessarily classical."<sup>8</sup> Just when he started to develop this characteristic imprint, and what writings may have influenced him, has been a matter of considerable debate. Stallworthy suggests 1912 (during Owen's time in Dunsden) because Owen marked some examples of pararhyme in Shelley's *The Revolt of Islam*;<sup>9</sup> Hibberd proposes that Owen "seems not to have experimented with sound-effects, for example, until he met Tailhade in 1914" at Mérégnac, who introduced him to Decadent poetry in France (Hibberd 1986,

9; 2002, 138).<sup>10</sup> There may possibly have been an awareness of comparable rhyming devices in ancient Welsh poetry, first suggested by Robert Graves in a letter to Owen in mid-December 1917 (*CL*, Appendix C, 595).<sup>11</sup> Owen was certainly both conscious and proud of his Welsh heritage.<sup>12</sup> In the manuscript headed "Projects" and dated "May 5 1918, Ripon," he plans "[t]o write blank-verse plays on old Welsh themes. Models. Tennyson, Yeats" (OEFL ms no. 409). By 1917 he was writing confidently to his cousin Leslie Gunston about a friend and fellow-poet, Olwen Joergens, with whom they exchanged poems: "I do not find that the riming of the same word [is] at all upsetting; and, believe me, a wrong rime is often the right thing to do" (*CL*, no. 255, 250).<sup>13</sup> All of these possible precedents may have contributed to Owen's development of parahrime, but arguably the process began earlier and nearer home.

When, in September 1911, he attended *Macbeth* at His Majesty's Theatre, Owen would have heard Banquo's challenge to Macbeth after the witches' prophecy:

Good Sir, why do you start, and seem to fear  
Things that do sound so fair?<sup>14</sup>

The authentic parahrime of "fear" and "fair" performs the function for which Owen often used parahrime, of complicating the audience or reader's response by creating difference in the midst of likeness; the negative is implicit in the positive. Daniel W. Hipp suggests that "the modernist sensibility is characterized by the ability to believe in two contrary ideas at the same time" (Hipp 2005, 3). In Owen's case, parahrime provides a virtuoso method of expressing contrariety, but in *Macbeth* Shakespeare was there before him.

Six months after the performance of *Macbeth* at His Majesty's Theatre, in March 1912 Owen wrote to ask his mother to send his copy of Hans Andersen's *Fairy Tales*. He wanted to write a modern version of "Little Claus and Big Claus": "I really mean you to send by rly. the 'Andersen'; and if needs, to eke it out with any 'school' Shakespere's [*sic*] you find; and my Arabian Nights; also the MS. Book, I mentioned" (*CL*, no. 125, 121). Did the school Shakespeare *Macbeth* reach Dunsden in company with Hans Andersen? A few weeks later, on 15 May he wrote triumphantly: "I have finished a story from Andersen in Blank Verse" (*CL*, no. 138, 136). Little Claus is a consummate trickster who outwits Big Claus on every occasion, his ingenuity and ultimate mastery perhaps relished by Owen, who was patronized for his stature (he measured five foot five), even by Sassoon, who called him an "interesting little chap" and "my little friend" (Sassoon 1982, 58, 59).<sup>15</sup> Little Claus tells his host a Demon is "Cowering inside the oaken chest, all fear" (Owen, *Complete Poems* 1983 [*CP*], 1:20, line 118). His trick works, and his host "parted with his bag / For

a bushelful of money, measured fair" (l. 134; my emphases). The rhymes are sixteen lines apart, but Owen was not a poet to write anything by accident.

The combination appears again, five years later, in "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo," probably composed at Scarborough and dated in the manuscript "Nov. 1917": "I, too, have dropped off Fear" — (stanza 3, l. 9); "Faces . . . / Seraphic for an hour; though they were foul" (stanza 4, ll. 14, 16); "For love is not the binding of fair lips" (stanza 5, l. 19; *CP*, no. 123, 1:124-25, 2:279). In draft no. 279 held in the Oxford English Faculty Library, "fair" is originally "young."<sup>16</sup> The paradox of "fair" and "foul" in the opening scene of *Macbeth* describes the battle that gives Macbeth his first promotion, with such far-reaching and disastrous consequences. The barren heath where the witches meet Macbeth could well do duty for No Man's Land.

Lady Macbeth, reading her husband's letter describing the encounter, anticipates the difficulty of goading him to murder: "What thou wouldst highly / That wouldst thou holily" (1.5.19-20). The unusual adverb, "holily," the significant inner change of vowel from "highly," constitutes a genetic deviance in language, just as Macbeth must deviate from his duty to Duncan, turning aside from the role of "host / Who should against his murderer shut the door" (1.7.14). Macbeth conjures up an apocalyptic image of "Pity / Striding the blast, or heaven's Cherubins, hors'd / Upon the sightless couriers of the air" (1.7.21-23; my emphases). The criminal host is pursued by angelic horses, a host of avengers. The pararhymes in all three cases — fear / fair; highly / holily; host / hors'd — embrace contrariety at all levels: aesthetic, ethical, and spiritual.

"Little Claus and Big Klaus" is not Owen's only early experiment with pararhyme. On 18 September 1912, he completed a poem entitled "The Dread of Falling into Naught"— an echo of Keats's sonnet "When I have fears that I might cease to be" (Keats 1900-1901, 1:192).<sup>17</sup> The poem is about autumn, but the Keatsian model of mists and mellow fruitfulness becomes a bloody conflict between summer and winter.<sup>18</sup> In this poem, Owen tries out what was to become one of his favourite pararhymes:

I, only, mourn, because I cannot tell  
 What spring-renewing wakes the sleep of Men.  
 I do but know, (ah! this I know too well)  
 I shall not see the same sweet life again,  
 Nor the dear Sun, nor stars, nor tender moon. (*CP* 1:34, 2:204; my emphasis)

In 1917, the conjunction of mourn / moon is recapitulated in "Has your soul sipped":<sup>19</sup>

Passing the rays

Of the rubies of morning,  
 Or the soft rise  
 Of the moon; or the meaning  
 Known to the rose  
 Of her mystery and mourning.(CP, 1:90, 2:232; my emphasis)

The same rhyme-cluster appears again in "The Vision" (probably later retitled "The Show"), which Owen sent to Sassoon on 27 November 1917. The poet imagines nightmarish creatures eating each other:<sup>20</sup>

Whereat, in terror what that sight might mean,  
 . . .  
 And Death fell with me, like a deepening moan.  
 . . .  
 Showed me its feet, the feet of many men. ("The Show," CP, 1:155-56, 2:316-17)

Ten days later (on 6 December 1917), Owen sent Sassoon a draft entitled "Wild with all Regrets" (later to be published as "À Terre"), enquiring: "What do you think of my Vowel-rime stunt in this, and 'Vision?'" (CL, no. 568, 514). Owen was still experimenting with the m—n pararhyme again in one of his most famous poems, "Strange Meeting," probably drafted in the spring of 1918, which contains the lines:

And no guns thumped, or down the flues made moan.  
 "Strange friend," I said, "here is no cause to mourn." (CP, 1:148, 2:306-10)

Between these two lines in the manuscript draft is an intervening line that has been crossed out, which reads: "But all was sleep. And no voice called for men."<sup>21</sup> If the cancelled line had remained, the trinity of "moan / men / mourn" would still have been in place. Its first airing had been in "The Dread of Falling into Naught," composed at Dunsden in September 1912.

*Macbeth* may have suggested pararhyme to Owen, but the play also fed his imagination in other ways. Sometime between September 1911 and May 1912, Owen wrote a poem entitled "Supposed Confessions of a Secondrate Sensitive Mind in Dejection" (the ironic title cribbed from Tennyson), in which Despondency (or Despair) prevents sleep:

"Then why dost thou, O Curst, the long night steep  
 In bloodiness and stains of shadowy crimes?"  
 She hears my cry, and mutters yet,

"No rest, no rest for thee, O Slave of mine";  
 Till I do hate myself and would resign  
 My life to pay a murderer's awful debt. (*CP*, 1:14, 2:200)<sup>22</sup>

These lines may owe their origin to a more dramatic utterance than Tennyson's: "Methought, I heard a voice cry 'sleep no more, / Macbeth doth murder sleep'" (2.2.34-35). Banquo's Ghost also lurks in the background of this poem — "At feasts I see her shade" — and fills the writer with fears of suicide: "So that I may not handle a keen knife" (line 63). The knife is Lady Macbeth's:

Come, thick Night,  
 And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell,  
 That my keen knife see not the wound it makes. (1.5.51)

Santanus Das connects lines from the same poem with a bicycle accident in August 1912, which gave Owen nightmares: "I dreamt the night before last that a cat, a great fierce cat, had fixed upon my hand, and was driving tooth and claw deep into the very bone. I tried in vain to shake the brute off . . . I awoke to find myself waving my mangled fingers about" (*CL*, no. 152, 155; Das 2005, 172). His imagination, as many scholars have pointed out, was ready for the war long before it occurred, but his strange meeting with *Macbeth* was a powerful catalyst to its development.<sup>23</sup>

### Dunsden: Thunder and Lightning

In 1911, when Owen chose to see *Macbeth* rather than *Henry V*, his life was at a crossroads. The excursion to *Macbeth* preceded the disappointing news of "a mere Pass" (*CL*, no. 258, 254) in the London university matriculation exams, instead of the "first" [i.e., top quarter of candidates] he had hoped for (*CL*, no. 89, 80). Had he achieved the latter he could have applied "for a three years' course, which under 'the Scholarship,' will only cost £40 for the whole time" (*CL*, no. 95, 87). The pass allowed him to be an undergraduate of London University, taking an external degree; but without the scholarship, the Owen family could not afford the fees.<sup>24</sup> Instead, on 20 October 1912, Wilfred moved to Dunsden, near Reading, to take up his duties as the Vicar's assistant, a post which gave him board and lodging, minimal pay, and study time.

His experience there was very mixed. He was bored and alienated by life at the Vicarage and the person of the Vicar himself. He liked the activities into which he threw himself — taking Bible classes, visiting parishioners — which gave him new insight into a degree of poverty and sickness he had never encountered. He loved the children he taught, and he enjoyed both singing and playing the piano and church outings. But the religious interlude was to precipitate a crisis

in his life both painful and, ultimately, fruitful for his development as poet.<sup>25</sup> During this period, there is plenty of evidence that *Macbeth* provided a frame for his emotions and experiences, as Keats's poetry had done earlier. The references initially look light-hearted, as in his report of an outbreak of scarlet fever in Dunsden: "Yea, an 'twere well to s' *Macbeth* [*sic*], saying, "Is this a Cadger that I see before me? — a cadger of microbes, With the (h)air all full of the signs of Scarlet death" (*CL*, no. 101, 97). However, the number references and their significance deepen as his life becomes more unmanageable.

During his first few months at Dunsden, Owen became aware of the distance between himself and the evangelical creed he was required to embrace and propagate in a religious revival promoted by the Vicar in Dunsden parish. When he returned to the Vicarage in August 1912 after a summer break attending an evangelical camp at Keswick, followed by a brief visit to his family in Shrewsbury, his disorientation and homesickness were palpable. To express his feelings, as with many of his generation (Fussell 1975, 155-90), he quotes poetry. A letter to his mother, Susan Owen, headed *August 1912 (Alack the day!)*, *Dunsden Vicarage (Alas!)*, begins by quoting Tennyson: "Tears, idle tears, I know not what they mean" and ends by referring to his "inward wretchedness of spirit" (reflected almost bathetically in awful weather):

Lightning & thunder and rain fill the air. (Fearfully near)

"When shall we two meet again  
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?"

Ah when? Dunsden is already distressingly familiar; and all I love proportionately remote.  
(*CL*, no. 150, 152-53)

But what seems like an insouciant reminiscence of famous lines modulates into a different key. On 31 August, Owen wrote again to Susan (after a half-sheet which has tantalizingly gone missing)<sup>26</sup>: "I have no end of things to tell you in my head; but too many other things on my hands to allow it" (*CL*, no. 155, 158). *Macbeth* conceals his plan for Banquo's murder from his wife: "Strange things I have in head that will to hand, / Which must be acted ere they may be scanned" (3.4.139-40).

Owen's differences of faith from the Vicar, whose brooding presence, "symbolic of my stern Destiny, sat heavy on my soul the night" (*CL*, no. 172, 175), momentarily recalls an earlier Shakespeare play about a murderer, *Richard III*. The Ghosts who visit Shakespeare's Richard III before the battle of Bosworth chant the refrain, "Let me sit heavy on thy soul tomorrow" (5.3.119, 132, 140). Owen's revolt is couched in terms of murder: "Murder will out, and I have murdered my

false creed. If a true one exists, I shall find it." The mood is Macbeth's, recoiling from Banquo's ghost: "The time has been / That, when the brains were out, the man would die / And there an end" (3.4.77-79). In less vatic language, Owen tells Susan: "To leave Dunsden will mean a terrible bust-up; but I have no intention of sneaking away by smuggling my reasons down the back-stairs. I will vanish in thunder and lightning, if I go at all" (*CL*, no. 172, 175).

Shakespeare's *Weird Sisters* speak to another element in the crisis: Owen's emerging sense of his destiny as a poet. With the storms at Dunsden brewing, Owen in January 1913 enclosed for his mother a new sonnet, "On my Songs," about the consolation of hearing a poet give voice to one's own conflicts: "Many and many a sacred time / Poets have spok'n as if they knew my woe." In the revised version, probably dating from 1917, "sacred" has dropped out of the text; draft 271 in the Oxford English Faculty Library substitutes "lonely" for "sacred." The scene of Owen's dilemmas at Dunsden is a "lonely" as well as a "sacred" space. Poets have always provided relief; they "have answered," not "spok'n" (a revision in the printed version). But at length even the poets have no consolation for Owen: "No heart throbs my throbs / No brain yet knew the thing wherewith mine's fraught." The poet speaks of the "dim reveries of a motherless child." In the printed version, "dim reveries" has become "weird reveries," the dreams of someone who has encountered the wayward (weird) sisters, the spinners of destiny. The draft for Susan Owen ends:

Tonight, if Thou should'st lie in this same Room,  
Dreading the Dark thou know'st not how to illumine,  
Listen; my songs may haply give thee ease. (*CL*, no. 172, 175)<sup>27</sup>

Owen took a lot of care with this draft, identifying the rhyme scheme in the right-hand margin; the sestet rhymes idiosyncratically: efeffe. "On my Songs" was to be Owen's credo. He went back to the Front because he wanted to provide a voice for men unable to express their own suffering (*CL*, no. 578, 521; Hibberd 1986, 62).

The production of Shakespeare's tragedy at His Majesty's Theatre would have suggested to Owen connections between his own ambitions and Macbeth's because of the way in which Beerbohm Tree perceived the hero. His production was influenced by the two lectures on *Macbeth* in A. C. Bradley's *Shakespearean Tragedy* (published in 1904), which Tree quoted in his programme note. Bradley ascribes to Macbeth "the imagination of a poet." The drama critic of *The Times*, reviewing the production, claimed that Tree "'brought out the poet'" in the hero: "In the lyrical passages on sleep he became almost the virtuoso, pausing to enjoy the poetry, to turn it over on his tongue — it was Macbeth as the exponent of *l'art pour l'art*" (September 6, 1911; Bartholomeusz 1969, 215-16). In an interview with the *Daily Chronicle* on 2 September 1911,

Beerbohm Tree told Raymond Blathwayt: "What appeals to me most in the wonderful character of Macbeth is his power of imagination, his imagination which, still informing his shattered spirit, lit up the ruin of his life."<sup>28</sup> For Owen, the presentation of Macbeth as a man of heightened imagination must have struck a resonant chord.

As Owen contemplated his breach with Dunsden, he summoned poets to authenticate his revolt (although he denigrated his own poem, "On My Songs," as "scribbling"):

One of the occult Powers that Be may have overheard the ancient desire of my heart to be like the immortals, the immortals of earthly Fame, I mean, and is now on a fair way to granting it. This flight of mine from overbearing elders, if it comes off, will only be my version of running away from College (Shelley, Coleridge). (*CL*, no. 172, 175)

A month later his plan is almost complete:

The thought of leaving Dunsden weighs upon me terribly. Though Dunsden will contain little to attract me, if I become a religious devotee:

". . . All my pretty ones?  
Did you say all? . . . All?  
What all my pretty chickens  
At one fell swoop?"

And my verse-making? O hard condition! The evidence of increasing powers of late (such as they are) is too tantalising. (*CL*, no. 177, 181)

The agonized question — "All my pretty ones?" — comes from Macduff (4.3.216), learning of Macbeth's murder of his wife and children. A report in the programme for *Macbeth* at His Majesty's Theatre, dated 9 November 1911, commends Macduff's performance: "In the scene where he is told of his wife and children being slaughtered he brought the house down, and it was really finely done."<sup>29</sup> Macduff's grief at the loss of his children seemed capable of mirroring the tremendous wrench Owen anticipated at parting with the Dunsden children.<sup>30</sup> Just five days before quoting Macduff, Owen wrote to his mother: "Children are not meant to be studied, but enjoyed. Only by studying to be pleased do we understand them." The Vicar may have told him that his lack of religious belief might damage the children in his pastoral care, hence his outburst: "Nay, I should feel the (possibility of) the millstone tightening round my neck, and the bitter waters of the

sea pouring in at my lips, if I essayed to recommend my persuasions on another" (*CL*, no. 176, 179-80).<sup>31</sup>

Contemporary with this letter about children (January 1913) is the poem "Impromptu," a piece with both Keatsian and Wordsworthian echoes. The poet's life is consecrated and affirmed by the child's memory: "And when thy memory fail, to surcease, too" (*CP*, 1:62, 2:209). The archaic "surcease"<sup>32</sup> conjures up Macbeth: "If th'assassination / Could trammel up the consequence, and catch / With his surcease success" (1.7.2-4). Owen had used the word in "Whither is passed the softly-vanished day?" probably written shortly after he had seen *Macbeth*, which ends with the phrase "fragrance unsurceased" (*CP*, 1:112, 2:266). Macbeth's juxtaposition of "surcease" and "success" would have been particularly evocative for Owen, not only because of the parahrime, but also because of the way in which extinction ("surcease") is linked to ambition ("success").

In "Impromptu," the poet foresees the time when the child may no longer remember him, which will constitute a kind of death: "surcease" (*CP*, 1:62). His earlier "hopes of heaven" (*CP*, 1:61) have failed him, as have Macbeth's dreams of present and future power. For Macbeth success becomes inseparable from the concept of inheritance, not only what "succeeds," but also what is "unsurceased." Without heirs, Macbeth has no stake in the future. The witches have "put a barren sceptre" in his hand: "No son of mine succeeding" (3.1.61, 64). Owen wrote of his youngest brother, Colin, seven years his junior: "If I should ever beget me a Child, he could not be more adored than was Colin in those days . . . In those days when I taught him the colours, showing him the Wall, the Floor, & the Carpet, exactly as I do at this day — to a very different type of toddler! When I begin to think how changed is Myself, I just . . . stop thinking" (*CL*, no. 226, 222, ellipses in original). Loss of thought recalls "The Dread of Falling into Naught," becoming almost prophetic of Owen's own early "surcease" without heirs.

For Owen, "All my pretty ones" expands to fill a metaphysical frame of reference. Plato maintained that "there are some whose creative desire is of the soul, and who conceive spiritually, not physically. . . . All poets . . . may be said to be begetters" (*Symposium*, Plato 1962, 90). Despite the boredom of the Vicarage and the rigidity of the Vicar's religious creed, Owen had sensed his poetic gift growing and developing, and dreaded returning home to Shrewsbury with no money and no employment. He knew that if he left Dunsden, his prospects were nil. In fact, the move had ultimately happy consequences, for after a taxing spell as a language instructor in a Berlitz language school in Bordeaux, Owen became a private tutor, first to the young Nanette Léger at Mégnac, and then to the four La Touche boys.<sup>33</sup> The first year of the 1914-1918 war gave him more leisure, more culture, more congenial companions than he had ever known, and children whom he loved.

At Méridnac Owen recognized a turning-point: "My hopes rose on a tide of enthusiasm . . . Should it be the Tide that leads to Fortune, miserable me if I take it not at the flood! Shall Poverty leave me unlaunched? Shall my Timidity bar me? Shall my Indolence moor me to the mud?" (*CL*, no. 330, 326). Brutus's famous speech before the Battle of Philippi (*Julius Caesar*, 4.3.217-18) partners, in his mind, the witches' prophecy from *Macbeth*. He is, in a sense, a poet in waiting: "In measure as I am in darkness, I keep open my ears for the Voice, should it speak. Think not I have stopped my ears to a call, dear Mother!"<sup>34</sup> The almost rueful allusion to "a call" admonishes Susan Owen that it is not an evangelical call for which her son waits.

On 25 September 1911, a week after his attendance at *Macbeth*, Owen saw the Bensons in a performance of *The Tempest*, which he described as "a pure delight" (*CL*, no. 93, 85). On 11 October 1912, he took part in a family reading of the play at his cousin, Leslie Gunstan's, house near Reading and was to act in it again at Craiglockhart (*CL*, no. 536, 479). He has marked in his copy the speeches of Sebastian (Antonio's accomplice in plotting to kill Prospero), Stephano (the drunken butler), and Francisco (a lord).<sup>35</sup> Helen Luke relates the figure of Ariel, Prospero's "aery spirit," to the emergence of the creative self, the discovery of "one's own Ariel — that gift which we recognize as inborn and not learned" (Luke 1987, 49). "My charms crack not; my spirits obey," says Prospero (*The Tempest*, 5.1.2). But Prospero also must acknowledge a different spirit embodied in Caliban: "this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine" (5.1.275-76). By 1912 Owen knew that his creativity flourished in darkness and chaos, which would have given Beerbohm Tree's *Macbeth* a special resonance. A permanent marker in Owen's copy of Milton has stained the page of Milton's invocation to the Muse at the opening of Book III, where the poet both laments and celebrates the enforced, but creative, night of his blindness.<sup>36</sup> In April 1911, Owen recommended Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" to his mother, who had heard a nightingale sing near Reading (*CL*, no. 78, 68). Owen could himself have written Keats's words: "Darkling I listen."

In 1914, the war did not immediately impinge deeply on Owen's consciousness. He brushed it aside in the early days, as not part of his destiny. But by March 1915 he was obliged to consider how his plans to be a poet might affect his decisions about his future, writing to Susan:

There is one title I prize, one clear call audible, one Sphere where I may influence for Truth, one workshop whence I may send forth Beauty, one mode of living entirely congenial to me. In proof, I swear I cannot appreciate any other dignity: Headmaster of Eton; Archbishop of Canterbury; King of the English Race. My ambitions are lesser than Macbeth's and greater, not so happy, but much happier. (*CL*, no. 330, 325-26)

He now identifies himself with Banquo, whose heirs will succeed, and whom the witches declare to be "Lesser than Macbeth, and greater, / Not so happy, yet much happier" (1.3.62-63; Blunden 1931, 11). Owen is nonetheless consumed by frustration: "The Crux is this — that to be able to write as I know how to, study is necessary: a period of study, then of intercourse with kindred spirits, then of isolation. My heart is ready, but my brain unprepared, and my hand untrained. And all, — untested. I quite envisage the possibility of non-success." In this context, "non-success" is not only failure, but the "surcease" of hope. He fears that the readiness will engender no ripeness. These needs, so clearly articulated, were to be dramatically met — at a tremendous price — both by the war and by his time at Craiglockhart, the hospital for shell-shocked officers where he met Siegfried Sassoon.

### Craiglockhart: Summoning Spirits

An earlier critical opinion held that Owen emerged as an outstanding poet only after his encounter with Sassoon,<sup>37</sup> a view challenged to some extent by Sassoon himself (Sassoon 1945, 1982, 60-61). There can be no doubt of the stimulus that the environment of Craiglockhart and the friendship of Sassoon, and to a lesser degree, Robert Graves, provided for Owen. They formed, along with the group associated with the Poetry Bookshop (Harold Monro, Robert Ross, Scott Moncrieff, Edith and Osbert Sitwell), a community of poets that caused Owen wonder and delight. He revelled in this new experience. His exclamation, "O world you are making for me, Sassoon" (*CL*, no. 565, 511), echoes his own poem of 1912, "O world of many worlds," where he contemplates his own destiny as a poet, at once fearful and exhilarating, imagining himself "to be a meteor, fast, eccentric, lone," and demanding whether: "Blackness of darkness is my meed for ever?" (*CP*, 1:71, 2:213).

Owen would have had to read only two pages of A. C. Bradley's first Lecture on *Macbeth* in *Shakespearean Tragedy* to come across: "Darkness, we may even say blackness, broods over this tragedy" (Bradley 1957, 279).<sup>38</sup> Bradley continues: "It is as if the poet saw the whole story through an ensanguined mist, and as if it stained the very blackness of the night" (281), a description that would not be inappropriate for Owen's poetry. Despite his exhilaration at his companionship with the Georgian poets, Owen resisted being colonized by his new associates, writing almost tetchily after his first meeting with Graves: "It seems Graves was mightily impressed [by 'Disabled'], and considers me a kind of Find! No thanks, Captain Graves! I'll find myself in due time" (*CL*, no. 551, 499). In his last extant letter to Sassoon, he wrote: "And you have fixed my Life — however short. You did not light me: I was always a mad comet; but you have fixed me. I spun round you a satellite for a month, but I shall swing out soon, a dark star in the orbit where you will blaze" (*CL*, no. 557,

505).<sup>39</sup> The curious fact remains that despite Owen's devoted homage to Sassoon and admiration of his poetry, his copy of *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems*, inscribed "To W. E. S. Owen from Siegfried Sassoon, Craiglockhart August 1917," contains a number of uncut pages. No doubt Owen had more than one copy, but the one in his library has not been read from cover to cover, by him or anyone else. Did he perhaps deliberately safeguard his own voice by not immersing himself in Sassoon's poems?

Owen was diagnosed with neurasthenia (shell-shock) in April 1917 and wrote to his mother that he expected to be put on "Base Duty": "I shall now try and make my French of some avail . . . having satisfied myself that, though in Action I bear a charmed life, and none of woman born can hurt me, as regards flesh and bone, yet my nerves have not come out without a scratch" (*CL*, no. 506, 453). Macbeth's bravado in battle provides a language for this new crisis: "I bear a charmed life; which must not yield / To one of woman born" (5.8.12-13). Owen and Susan no doubt both knew that his confidence was as specious as the usurper's boast, and that the quotation masked reality. Shell-shock, in Owen's case, was the consequence of an experience on the front at Savy Wood near St. Quentin in France, when he found himself stranded in a hole in a railway cutting for a couple of days with the remains of a fellow officer, 2/Lt Gaukroger, around him.<sup>40</sup> In the last week of June 1917, Owen arrived at Craiglockhart.

In his new life at Craiglockhart, *Macbeth* again provided Owen with a key text. Macbeth's "restless ecstasy" was the condition of neurasthenia, with its terrifying symptoms of nocturnal activity: insomnia, sleep-walking, screaming. In the November 1917 issue of *Hydra*, the Craiglockhart magazine, a picture facing page 16 is called "Shell Shock" and shows two ghosts and someone screaming in bed.<sup>41</sup> Macbeth speaks of "the affliction of these terrible dreams, / That shake us nightly" (3.2.21-22), envying the dead king his quiet slumbers: "Duncan is in his grave; / After life's fitful fever he sleeps well" (22-23), while his murderer suffers "a torture of the mind" (3.2.21). The horrors of trench warfare were re-enacted at night. Owen wrote in August 1917 that "I am a sick man in hospital by night" (*CL*, no. 538, 480), but by September he recorded: "I still have disastrous dreams, but they are taking on a more civilian character, motor accidents and so on" (*CL*, no. 545, 490). In June 1918, he wrote to his mother from his tent in Scarborough, shortly before his return to France: "War dreams have begun again; but that is because of the flapping of the canvas all night in the high winds; or else the hideous faces of the Advancing Revolver Targets I fired at last week" (*CL*, no. 632, 560). The final speech of the enemy poet in "Strange Meeting" and the final line of the poem, ending in ellipsis, is: "Let us sleep now . . ." (*CP*, 1:148, 2:306).<sup>42</sup>

Many of Owen's poems address the invasive power of the nightmares accompanying shell-shock. Here again *Macbeth* haunts the poet's consciousness. "The Peril of Love" may have been written before Owen arrived at the hospital and was probably revised there:

As men who call on spirits get response  
And woo successfully the coy Unseen,  
Deeming the thing amusement for the nonce,  
But later, when dark spirits intervene,  
Uncalled, perceive how an invading mind,  
Not to be shaken off, compels them serve  
Mad promptings; poisons love of life and kind;  
Drains force; clogs brain; and flusters nerve. (*CP*, 1:110, 2:265)

The first summoner of spirits in this poem invokes Shakespeare's Glendower, who assures Hotspur that "I can call spirits from the vasty deep," only to receive the irreverent: "Why so can I, or so can any man / But will they come when you do call for them?" (*I Henry IV*, 3.1.50-52). The second, the dark invasive spirit, conjures up a more menacing memory:

Come, you Spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full  
Of direst cruelty! (*Macbeth* 1.5.39-42)

Lady Macbeth, contemplating her husband's wish to do "highly" but also "holily," rehearses her first meeting with him after his encounter with the witches:

Hie thee hither,  
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear;  
And chastise with the valour of my tongue  
All that impedes thee from the golden round  
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem  
To have thee crown'd withal. (1.5.24-29)

In 1918, while training in the army camp at Ripon, Owen rented a room in Borrage Lane to serve as a retreat for writing poetry, where he forced himself to re-encounter the dark "phantoms of the mind" (Hibberd 2002, 309) that were indispensable to his creative vision.

In "Strange Meeting," probably drafted in late 1917 or early 1918, the enemy poet encountered in hell reflects on the poems that the narrator-poet, his murderer, has prevented him from writing:

I would have poured my spirit without stint,  
 But not through wounds; not on the cess of war.  
 Foreheads of men have bled where no wounds were. (*CP*, 1:148-50, 2:306-307)

The image draws to itself recollections of Macbeth's stolen crown, the laurel crown of the laureate poet, and Christ's crown of thorns. The two voices — of the poet as murderer and the murdered enemy poet — merge into one: "The English war poet maims and murders other war poets, idealists and youths" (Das 2005, 171). Owen himself becomes the murdered enemy poet, who addresses his murderer as "friend" and speaks of "the truth untold, / The pity of war, the pity war distilled." His draft Preface for "a collection of poems he hoped to publish in 1919" states: "My subject is War, and the pity of War. / The Poetry is in the pity . . . That is why the true Poets must be truthful" (my ellipses; Day Lewis 1963, 31).<sup>43</sup> The wasted talents of the enemy poet are Owen's wasted talents. The distinction that in *Macbeth* appears to be sharply drawn between murder and the sanctioned killing of men in war no longer holds water. A reading of *Macbeth* through Owen's eyes might suggest that Shakespeare himself wanted to complicate the relation between lawful killing and murder.

The play opens with the captain's report of Macbeth's bravery. He is "Valour's Minion," who has "carv'd out his passage" until he "unseam'd" his victim "from the nave to th'chops" and "fix'd his head upon our battlements" (1.2.19-23), as his own may be fixed at the end of the play, the final nemesis meted out to the "dead butcher" (5.9.35). At the end of *Henry V* — the play Owen *almost* saw in 1911 — the Duke of Burgundy laments the degradation of war, which causes citizens and children "to grow like savages, as soldiers will / That nothing do but meditate on blood" (5.2.58-60). In the autumn of 1917, stationed at Scarborough, Owen wrote in "Apologia Pro Poemate Meo": "For power was on us as we slashed bones bare / Not to feel sickness or remorse of murder" (*CP*, 1:124, 2:278). "Spring Offensive," probably Owen's last complete poem, drafted in Scarborough in July 1918 and sent to Sassoon on 22 September 1918, just six weeks before Owen was killed, describes the "superhuman inhumanities" of "[t]he few who rushed in the body to enter hell":

And crawling slowly back, have by degrees  
 Regained cool peaceful air in wonder —  
 Why speak not they of comrades that went under? (*CP*, 1:193, 2:376-79)

The Colonel of the Artists' 2nd Battalion, in which Owen enrolled as a cadet in 1915, lectured the young men on "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori," the Horace tag Owen was to satirize so savagely in "Dulce et Decorum est," and urged the cadets to stay alive if they could: "Losing your

own life unnecessarily was suicide, losing your men's was murder" (Hibberd 2002, 172). Owen had talked of murdering his false creed at Dunsden. After his experiences at the Front, he asked himself whether war was murder.

An answer to the question might be provided by the poem "Inspection," probably dating from August 1917, in which the officer/narrator reprimands a private "For being 'dirty on parade'":

He told me, afterwards, the damnèd spot  
Was blood, his own. "Well, blood is dirt," I said. (*CP*, 1:95, 2:240)

"Out, damned spot!" mutters Lady Macbeth, compulsively washing her hands: "What, will these hands ne'er be clean?" (5.1.36, 44). She had castigated Macbeth for shrinking from the blood on his hands: "Go, get some water, / And wash this filthy witness from your hand" (2.2.45-46). Line 10 of "Inspection" reads: "The world is washing out its stains, he said," but in the early draft the final line of the poem is "And soon they'll wash-out Us — like stains," I said" (OEFL ms no. 244), which seems even closer to Lady Macbeth's compulsive washing away of blood. The dramatic irony of "A little water rids us of this deed" (2.2.66) looks forward to the despairing "Here's the smell of the blood still" (5.1.51) of the sleep-walking scene.

In "Insensibility," another poem drafted at Craiglockhart in the autumn of 1917, Owen declares: "Happy are these who lose imagination" (*CP*, 1:145, 2:301). Macbeth recognizes that slaughter has blunted his sensibility:

The time has been, my senses would have cool'd  
To hear a night-shriek; and my fell of hair  
Would at a dismal treatise rouse, and stir.  
As life were in't. I have supp'd full with horrors:  
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts  
Cannot once start me. (5.5.10-16)

This is the man who started with fear at a prophecy that sounded fair. The hair standing on end finds its place in Owen's "Mental Cases":

Memory fingers in their hair of murders  
Multitudinous murders they once witnessed.

There again is the *Macbeth* word:

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood

Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather  
 The multitudinous seas incarnadine,  
 Making the green one red. (5.2.59-62)<sup>44</sup>

Banquo's Ghost makes another appearance in "Mental Cases":

— Thus their heads wear this hilarious, hideous,  
 Awful falseness of set-smiling corpses.

Banquo gestures to the little kings who will deny Macbeth any succession: "For the blood-bolter'd Banquo smiles upon me, / And points at them for his" (4.1.123-24). In "Apologia pro Poemate Meo," Owen wrote: "I, too, have dropped off Fear" (*CP*, 1:124, 2:178), echoing Macbeth's "I have almost forgot the taste of fears" (5.5.9), hence Owen's "*too*." He too has forgot the taste of fear.<sup>45</sup> He was to experience his own numbing of the senses after the engagement in April 1917, for which he received the Military Cross, writing to Sassoon: "The Batt. had a sheer time last week. I can find no better epithet: because I cannot say I suffered anything; having let my brain grow dull . . . It is a strange truth: that your *Counter-Attack* frightened me much more than the real one" (*CL*, no. 664, 581-82). Macbeth had said that merely *reading* had caused him a terror that actual horrors now have dulled. "I shall feel again as soon as I dare," wrote Owen.

When he described the same event to his mother, Owen adopted an almost jaunty tone: "I only shot one man with my revolver (at about 30 yards!); the rest I took with a smile," following it with the boast: "My Nerves are in perfect order." But almost immediately his mood changes:

I came out in order to help these boys — directly by leading them as well as an officer can; indirectly, by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can. I have done the first.

Of whose blood lies yet crimson on my shoulder where his head was — and where so lately yours was — I must not now write.

He signs the letter "Wilfred and more than Wilfred" (*CL*, no. 662, 580). There are two men here. The first is the man who dare not write about his feelings; the second is the soldier with the Military Cross who shot a man at thirty yards and does not take the cigarette out of his mouth when he writes "Deceased" on letters to dead men's relatives. When Lady Macbeth taunts her husband with lack of manhood, he retorts:

Pr'ythee, peace.

I dare do all that may become a man;  
Who dares do more is none.

But she is quick to counter his protest: "What beast was't then, / That made you break this enterprise to me?"

When you durst do it, then you were a man;  
And, to be more than what you were, you would  
Be so much more the man. (1.7.45-51)

Addressing the hired murderers of Banquo, Macbeth scoffs at their claim to be men: "Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men" (3.1.90-94). In "Strange Meeting," the enemy poet confronts his murderer, who has "jabbed and killed": "I am the enemy you killed, my friend" (*CP*, 1:49, 2:306). Is the man who has shot a man at a distance of thirty yards more, or less, than Wilfred?

Owen wrote to his cousin Leslie Gunston on the night of 24 October 1918, less than two weeks before he was killed, that he was reading Swinburne (*CL*, no. 671, 589). It was an old love, fostered by Dr. M. M. C. Rayner (Lecturer in Botany at University College, Reading), whose classes Owen attended and who encouraged his reading of poetry: "She read Swinburne to us," he wrote to Susan on 5 July 1912 (*CL*, no. 147, 149). On the inside cover of Owen's copy of Swinburne's poems, signed with his name and dated August 1918, Susan Owen wrote: "This came back with his things from France." The book, carefully preserved in cardboard covers, still smells of cigarette smoke. One of Owens's companions remembers him reading it in France in the last days before he was killed. Only one stanza of one poem, "A Ballad of Burdens," is marked with a heavy line in the margin:

The burden of dead faces. Out of sight  
And out of love, beyond the reach of hands,  
Changed in the changing of the dark and light,  
They walk and weep about the barren lands  
Where is no seed nor any garner stands. (Swinburne 1917, 127)

The empty garner and the barren harvest again recall Macbeth:

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. (5.3.22-26)

In his final letter to his mother, written on 31 October 1918, Owen sketched a picture of the 2nd Manchester Regiment in his cellar. He calls it "a great life" and assures Susan that "There is no danger down here, or if any, it will be well over before you read these lines." The letter probably arrived after the news of his death reached Shrewsbury on Armistice Day, 11 November 1918, as the bells of the Abbey, a quarter of a mile from the family house in Monkmoor, began pealing for victory, as ominous a toll for Susan Owen as the bell that rings in *Macbeth* before the murder of Duncan. Her son's last words to her affirmed: "Of this I am certain you could not be visited by a band of friends half so fine as surround me here" (*CL*, no. 673, 591). Unlike Macbeth, Wilfred Owen was at the last surrounded by "troops of friends."

The tragedy of *Macbeth* spoke continually to Wilfred Owen on many different levels: linguistic, ethical, spiritual, personal. He believed that poetry should give the reader ease through a process of recognition. In *Macbeth* he found not only a language, but also the shape of the things to come, which would grow and change as he himself grew into a poet.

### Notes

1. The germ of this essay came from a pre-production talk on *Macbeth* given in May 2010 in the "Setting the Scene" programme at Shakespeare's Globe.
2. *The Star*, 6/9/11, held in the Victoria and Albert Theatre and Performance Archive, *Macbeth* (September 1911). The play was presented in four acts and considerably cut. See also Bartholomeusz 1969, 216-17.
3. As, for example, in Kerr 1993, 236: "Shakespeare is not an important visible presence in Owen, however deeply interfused in the rhythmic bloodstream of the English iambic line which Owen favoured."
4. They may have met, but without knowing of each other's poetry (Hollis 2011, 250-53).
5. Although the case has been made convincingly for Shelley's influence on Owen, Sassoon described Keats as "his supreme exemplar" (Sassoon 1982, 59).
6. Owen has underlined and ticked in his copy of Edward Dowden's *Shakespere*, inscribed "W. E. Owen / June 1913," the Shakespeare plays he had read, which included *Macbeth*, listed under "Group 10 Later Tragedies" (Dowden 1907, 56-57). His library also contains an anthology entitled *The Hundred Best Blank Verse Passages in the English Language*, selected by Adam L. Gowans (*The Hundred Best* 1905), which includes eighty-seven entries from Shakespeare, seven from *Macbeth*. All of these are passages quoted or echoed by Owen in his letters and poems.

7. In his *Athenaeum* review (19 February 1921) of the 1920 volume of Owen's poems, Middleton Murray declared that the "assonant endings are indeed the discovery of a genius . . . You cannot imagine them used for any other purpose save Owen's, or by any other hand save his" (quoted in Welland 1960, 118-19).
8. Owen Collection in the Oxford English Faculty Library [OEFL] ms no. 405. Manuscripts, published letters, and poems of Wilfred Owen, together with material from his library held in the Oxford English Faculty Library, are quoted by kind permission of the Trustees of the Owen Estate. I am particularly grateful to Susan Usher, curator of the Owen collection, for her generous help.
9. For the first sustained discussion of this device, see Welland 1960, 104-24. The pairs of words marked by Owen in Shelley are "*tomb:home, thou:below, spirit:inherit*" (Stallworthy 1974, 70), which are not, strictly speaking, examples of pararhyme. Bäckman (1979, 173) must be right in believing that the marks were made later because this volume of Shelley was a twenty-first birthday present from Mary, Harold, and Colin Owen in March 1914, when Owen would already have been in Bordeaux.
10. Hibberd adds, in a gracious note: "It would be pleasing to prove us all wrong by finding that his pararhymes originated as a solution to a literary competition, as 'The Imbecile' did" (Hibberd 1986, 34). "The Imbecile" was composed as an unfinished entry to a poetry competition in the *Saturday Westminster Gazette* (Hibberd 1980, 233).
11. Bäckman suggests that Wilfred's interest in archaeology might have led to his acquaintance with early Welsh poetry, which uses "a whole system of alliterative devices . . . two of which — *cynghanedd draws* and *cynghanedd groes* — are based exclusively on consonance and thus remindful of pararhymes" (Bäckman 1979, 194, n. 45). Owen spent a holiday in 1905 with his Birkenhead friends the Patons and their Welsh-speaking cousins in Clan Clwyd, Rhewl, Denbighshire, and wrote to his mother: "I can count up to 10 in Welsh, and have learnt a few expressions" (*CL*, no. 13, 27, also no. 3, 22, to Mary Owen, misdated 1903: "I am trying to learn Welsh"; see Stallworthy 1974, 33).
12. See Owen's description to Susan in October 1918 of the action that resulted in the award of the Military Cross: "Remembering my own duty, and remembering also my forefathers the agile Welshmen of the Mountains I scrambled out myself & felt an exhilaration in baffling the Machine Guns by quick bounds from cover to cover. After the shells we had been through, and the gas, bullets were like the gentle rain from heaven" (*CL*, no. 663, 581). Owen had taken part in a production of *The Merchant of Venice* at Craiglockhart, and it is typical of him that Portia's apostrophe to Mercy — "It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven" (4.1.183) — should be

- transposed to describe a shower of bullets. (Earlier, during a reading at Alpenrose, his cousin Leslie Gunston's house, he recalled: "P. must have had a cold; positively saying — 'It droppeth as the ged-tle raid frob heaved upud the place beddeath'" [*CL*, no. 132, 130]).
13. Owen refers to an untraceable poem by Olwen Joergens called "Fate" (Stallworthy 1974, 211 n.). Stallworthy points out that this letter is misdated "[? *late May 1914*]" in *CL* and assigns it to August 1917, which might suggest that Joergens had been influenced by Owen rather than the other way round. In Joergens's *The Sage and Other Poems* (1916), pararhyme is only used twice, once in the title poem: "dreamed/droned," and once in the anti-war poem "1915" — "dawn/driven" (Joergens 1916, 9, 22).
  14. *Macbeth*, edited by Kenneth Muir, *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works* (Shakespeare 1998), 1.3.51-52. Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from Shakespeare's plays are from this edition.
  15. Owen totally lacked, however, the compensating aggression sometimes associated with shortness. Robert Graves urged him in October 1917: "Puff out your chest a little, Owen, & be big — for you've more right than most of us" (*CL*, Appendix C, 595).
  16. BL Add. MS 43721 has "young" (folio 65); BL Add. MS 43720 has "fair" (folio 7). The final fair copy is in BL Add. MS 43720, folio 8. All quotations from BL Add. MSS 43720 and 43721 are by kind permission of the British Library and the Trustees of the Owen Estate. The manuscripts (now bound in two volumes) were used by Siegfried Sassoon for his 1920 edition of Owen's poems, and again (with other additions) by Edmund Blunden for his 1931 edition.
  17. Owen's poem is a companion piece to a fragment, "On seeing a lock of Keats's hair," also an echo of Keats's (much shorter) "On seeing a lock of Milton's hair."
  18. As in the lines: "Fresh bloodstains every misty morn may see, / Spilt from her veins by Winter's lance, and conflict-strewn" (*CP*, 1:34, 2:204; OEFL ms no. 67, v).
  19. In his "Memoir of Owen" prefaced to the 1931 volume of poetry, Edmund Blunden identifies "Has your soul sipped," composed at Craiglockhart in July-August 1917, as probably the poet's first sustained use of the device (Blunden 1960, 28). In his pioneering study of Owen's use of pararhyme, Dennis Welland pointed to "From My Diary, July 1914" as an earlier example (Welland 1960, 112-13), a view endorsed by C. Day Lewis in his introduction to the *Collected Poems* (Day Lewis 1963, 25). But Jon Stallworthy's scrupulous examination of Owen's manuscripts in the light of his use of paper, watermarks, ink, pencil, and handwriting has led to the re-dating of many of his poems, and "From My Diary, July 1914" is now assigned to 1917-1918, which "radically alters the received view of Owen's development of pararhyme" (*CP*, 1:xxii).

20. Welland 1960, 116 points to this cluster of pararhyme, but probably had no access to the manuscripts of the as yet unprinted "The Dread of Falling into Naught," which would have shown Owen's earlier use of it.
21. *CP*, 2:307, line 13a; BL Additional Manuscript 43721, folio 3; the cancellation (but not the rhyme cluster) is also noted in Day Lewis 1963, 36.
22. Hibberd, untypically, deserts his own principle, admirably applied in his research into "The Imbecile," that the roots of Owen's early poetry are literary, and suggests instead that these lines are excursions into "sado-masochistic 'fantasies'" (Hibberd, 1986, 18; see also Hibberd 2002, 67-68).
23. Alexander Nemerov analyzes the way in which a production of *Macbeth*, seen by Lincoln in Washington in 1863, shaped perceptions of Lincoln's assassination and of the progress of the Civil War: "The play that night, I began to discover, wanted to create a uniform space, a vast level field of ideological purpose, but the war inevitably worked to splinter that space into a great disarray of bones and bullets, a heterodox field in which every death, no matter how honored in the name of a cause, became a bloody spot, a single place, resisting all grandiosities of national explanation" (Nemerov 2010, 6).
24. Hibberd argues that the pass entitled him to be a student and that the acute disappointment reported by Harold Owen relates to Owen's failing the scholarship exams to Reading in June 1913 (Hibberd 2002, 60, 388, n. 37), but the impassioned letter which Owen later wrote about the matriculation exams (*CL*, no. 258, 254) and his relative coolness about Reading (*CL*, no. 188, 188; no. 191, 189; no. 193, 101) does not support this view.
25. Bäckman 1979, 68-69; Hibberd 1986, 13. The fullest and most illuminating account of the Owen family's religion, and Wilfred's own attitude to it, is to be found in Simcox 1987, 29-76.
26. Harold Owen did an extensive job of cutting and excising portions of his brother's letters, which, together with the inaccurate and misleading narrative of his three-volume biography of Wilfred, *Journey from Obscurity* (Oxford University Press, 1963-65), has proved frustrating to scholars (see Hibberd 1986, Appendix A: 7, 199-201; also Hibberd 1982, for various corrections to the *Collected Letters*). This article makes no use of the biography, on the grounds that Owen is more authentically and reliably represented by his own writings.
27. See *CP*, 1:110, 2:266. The printed version of the last three lines is as follows:

One night, if thou should'st lie in this Sick Room,  
 Dreading the Dark thou darest not illumine,  
 Listen; my voice may haply lend thee ease.

The editors of Owen's poetry suggest that the revisions were made "either at Craiglockhart in October-November 1917, or at Scarborough between November 1917 and January 1918."

28. V & A Theatre and Performance Archive, *Macbeth* 1911 (programmes and theatre reviews).
29. V & A Theatre and Performance Archive, *Macbeth* 1911.
30. He admits to having favorites: "When I live amongst a village of children, one claims seventy-times-seven-fold more affection than the others." The two he loved best were Vivien Rampton and Milly Montague. After a lonely first Christmas in Bordeaux in 1913, Owen noted sadly: "I sent cards to both my protégés in the village (M. M. & V. R.) but had nothing from them at Christmas" (*CL*, no. 232, 229; cf. Hibberd 1986, 23).
31. See Matthew 18.6: "But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Authorized Version [1611]).
32. The last usage recorded in the *OED* (surcease, n. 1a) is in Buchan's *History of War* (1916), where it is used to describe military action: "It was continued in all weathers, with no surcease of keenness" (xciii.XIII.53).
33. Three years later, he was to write from Scotland: "What I most miss in Edinburgh (not Craiglockhart) is the conviviality of the Four Boys (*L. vivere* — to live)" (*CL*, no. 557, 506).
34. The postscript to this letter is worth noting: "I like to think you'll keep this letter; as indeed all, not, of course megalomaniac's reason; but just because I keep no Diary; and the landmarks of one's Thoughts fade away still quicker than Events" (*CL*, no. 330, 326). His reading of Keats's letters made him aware of how valuable the record of thoughts can be. But the postscript is also significant for his relation with his own father: "You will impart my messages to Father. I never begin 'Dear Mother and Father' because I have the feeling of addressing an audience." The letter was an answer to one from Tom Owen in which he suggested to Wilfred that the usefulness of study would be "to make a comfortable future."
35. Owen's copy of *The Tempest* used for this reading is held in the OEFL. When Owen described enlisting as a cadet in 1915, he recalls: "Three of us had to read the Oath together; the others were horribly nervous! and read the wrong Paragraph until the Captain stopped them! 'Kiss the Book!' says Captain. One gives it a tender little kiss; the other a loud smacking one" (*CL*, no. 383, 360). Owen no doubt remembered uttering Stephano's repeated command to Caliban to "kiss the book" (*The Tempest*, 2.2.128, 140) when presenting him, of course, with a bottle of sack. He may have particularly relished the role because of the temperance Susan Owen (haunted by the disaster of her own alcoholic brother) urged on her sons.

36. See Milton 1896, 156-57. Bäckman notes Owen's reading of "Lycidas" and of "L'Allegro" and "Il Penseroso" at Dunsden, but does not mention his marking of *Paradise Lost*. "W. E. Owen" is inscribed on the fly-leaf.
37. See Day Lewis 1963, 11-12. Later scholars have stressed the continuities between Owen's early experiences and writing — particularly his religious crisis at Dunsden Vicarage in 1913 — and his mature poetry (Welland 1960, Bäckman 1969, Stallworthy 1974, Hibberd 1986, Kerr 1993).
38. Owen quotes the phrase "blackness-of-darkness-for ever" from the Epistle of Jude, v. 13, in a letter to Susan Owen, 26 April 1913 (*CL*, no. 185, 187; see *CP*, 1:72). But its congruence with Bradley's essay on *Macbeth* may also have struck him.
39. Owen marked the last four lines of *Adonais*, Shelley's elegy on Keats:

I am borne darkly, fearfully afar,  
 Whilst, burning through the inmost veil of heaven,  
 The soul of Adonais, like a star  
 Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are. (Shelley n.d., 63)

He owned the single volume edition in the University Tutorial Series, Books for examinations of the University of London, including Special subjects, 1911 and 1912, and probably studied the poem for his matriculation examination in September 1911.

40. Graphically described in two letters: To Mary Owen, 8 May 1917, *13th Casualty Clearing Station* (*CL*, no. 508, 455), and To Susan Owen, 25 April 1917, *A Coy., My Cellar* (*CL*, no. 505, 452).
41. *Hydra* was edited by Owen July-September 1917; he left Craiglockhart at the end of October, before this issue.
42. Owen had suffered from what he called "the horrors" after he left Dunsden and was ill at Shrewsbury for several weeks. The early poem "The Dread of Falling into Naught" contains the line "Let me but sleep . . ." (*CP*, 1:36, 2:204).
43. See *CP*, 2:535, Appendix A, for Owen's manuscript draft. He wrote to Susan in October 1917 that when he had pointed out to Sassoon "a quotation from Shakespere [*sic*] that I intended for my Frontispiece, he collared it by main force, & copied it out for himself!" (*CL*, no. 551, 499).
44. See *CP*, 1:170, 2:342-43.
45. But cf. *CP*, 1:125, for Welland's suggestion that "too" alludes to Graves's poem "Two Fusiliers."

### Permissions

*Figure 1.* Photo of Wilfred Owen, 1916. This item is from The First World War Poetry Digital Archive, University of Oxford ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit)); © English Faculty Library, The

University of Oxford / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate. URL ref: <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/5026>.

*Figure 2.* Herbert Beerbohm Tree as Macbeth, His Majesty's Theatre, 1911; © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

*Figure 3.* The witches in *Macbeth*, directed by Herbert Beerbohm Tree, His Majesty's Theatre, 1911; © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

*Figure 4.* Her Majesty's Theatre (Haymarket), opened in 1897 by Herbert Beerbohm Tree, renamed 'His' Majesty's Theatre after the coronation of Edward VII in 1911; © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

*Figure 5.* Manuscript of "Strange Meeting," January 1918-March 1918, collection ID Add 43720: Poems of Wilfred Owen f.3. This item is from The First World War Poetry Digital Archive, University of Oxford ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit)); © The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate. URL ref: <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/collections/document/5202/4576>.

*Figure 6.* Manuscript of "On My Songs," 4 January 1913, collection ID P.f270r. This item is from The First World War Poetry Digital Archive, University of Oxford ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit)); © English Faculty Library, The University of Oxford / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate. URL ref: <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/4920>.

*Figure 7.* *The Hydra*: 21 July 1917, edited by Wilfred Owen, and inscribed by him, with Craiglockhart Hospital on the cover. This item is from The First World War Poetry Digital Archive, University of Oxford ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit)); © English Faculty Library, The University of Oxford / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate. URL ref: <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/3133/1904>.

*Figure 8.* Letter to Susan Owen (page 2) [no. 622], 25 May 1918: Owen's acceptance by the Georgian poets. This item is from The First World War Poetry Digital Archive ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit)); © The Harry Ransom Center / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate. URL ref: <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/collections/document/5259/4838>.

*Figure 9.* Letter to Susan Owen (page 1) [no. 506], 2 May 1917 "a charmed life" (*Macbeth*). This item is from The First World War Poetry Digital Archive ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit)); © The Harry Ransom Center / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate. URL ref: <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5245/4775>.

*Figure 10.* Letter to Susan Owen (page 2) [no. 505], 25 April 1917, events causing Shell Shock. This item is from The First World War Poetry Digital Archive ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit)); © The Harry Ransom Center / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate. URL ref: <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5244/4772>.

*Figure 11.* "Shell Shock," from *The Hydra*, journal of Craiglockhart, Scotland, December 1917, page 17. This item is from The First World War Poetry Digital Archive, University of Oxford ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit)); © English Faculty Library, The University of Oxford / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate. URL ref: <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5627/5323>.

*Figure 12.* Wilfred Owen's Preface. This item is from The First World War Poetry Digital Archive, University of Oxford ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit)); © The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate. URL ref: <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/collections/item/4547>.

*Figure 13.* Letter [552] to Susan Owen (page 2) [no. 552], 16 October 1917, about the poem "Dulce et Decorum est." This item is from The First World War Poetry Digital Archive ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit)); © The Harry Ransom Center / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate. URL ref: <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/collections/document/5257/4830>.

*Figure 14.* Final letter to Susan Owen (page 4) [no. 673], 31 October 1918. This item is from The First World War Poetry Digital Archive, University of Oxford ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit)); © The Harry Ransom Center / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate. URL ref: <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/collections/document/5262/4850>.

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