Forum

Members of the Association are invited to submit letters, typed and double-spaced, commenting on articles published in *PMLA* or on matters of general scholarly or critical interest. Footnotes are discouraged, and letters of more than one thousand words will not be considered. Decision to publish and the right to edit are reserved to the Editor, and the authors of the articles discussed will be invited to reply.

Seeing through *Macbeth*

To the Editor:

Stephen Leo Carr and Peggy A. Knapp, in "Seeing through *Macbeth*" (*PMLA*, 96 [1981], 837–47), discredit their wonderfully eclectic method by applying it unconvincingly. Their argument that Zoffany's illustration of *Macbeth* II.ii is a parody of "The Choice of Hercules" is based on an untenable postulate, that the audience of the play is the missing third figure (Vice, or Idleness) in the traditional emblem. If the emblem tradition were still viable enough for the observer to see the "covert" allusion to Hercules' choice, he or she would have brought to the painting customary expectations about the genre. The idea that the viewer is meant to recognize him- or herself as an essential part of the emblem's imagery is so radically unconventional as to be almost unthinkable. Ronald Paulson mentions no such innovation in *Emblem and Expression*, to which the authors refer us for an account of Zoffany's "learned yet subversive playfulness" (p. 847, n. 8). If viewers were to see themselves as part of the imagery, it is still extremely unlikely that they would identify themselves with something as unflattering as Vice or Idleness, even if they would go on to realize that the initial iconographic scheme is Lady Macbeth's, not the painter's. In his emblematic series "Industry and Idleness," Hogarth clearly expects the observer to identify consistently with Industry (the Good Apprentice).

The supposed gap in Zoffany's painting results from Carr and Knapp's seeing through the work before having seen it. They overlook the key to the painter's meaning: the curious disparity between the modern costuming of the Macbeths and the medieval setting. The painter is not attempting a full-scale translation of the story to the idiom of his own time. Macbeth, taken out of his historical element, seems, in an odd way, to be both the medieval protagonist and an eighteenth-century viewer who recognizes the cultural distance between himself and the Gothic nature of the play. (The Gothic Revival was, of course, already under way by 1766, the date of the Garrick production.)

The Gothic motif is evident in the carved doors at the entrance to Duncan's chamber, from which Macbeth has just emerged. The carvings depict armed warriors in heroic poses, with conventional heraldic trappings such as banners, armor, and symbolic animals much in evidence. The most prominently visible figure is the crowned, kilted man in the bottom panel of the door on the viewer's left. He faces the Macbeths and carries a shield on his left arm and a large, drawn dagger, or thrusting sword, in his right hand. The carved warriors contrast sharply with Macbeth in dress and demeanor. They wear armor; he wears the relatively effete costume of an eighteenth-century gentleman. Their stance is resolute; he is off-balance and, with his bloodied palms upraised, passive. Contrary to one's expectations from Shakespeare's text, his facial expression reveals not psychological distress so much as an inward recognition of some profound and disturbing truth.

The Gothic motif is carried out in the architecture and decorations of the room, which the viewer must place in Macbeth's ancestral manor. After the elaborately carved window on the right, which balances the doors, the next most prominent feature is the heraldic grouping of helmet, bow, sheaf of arrows, and shield that is positioned on the rear wall so as to appear directly over Macbeth's head. The close physical association of the armor with Macbeth helps to set off his unheroic appearance.

Lady Macbeth poses in a commanding stance, like the figures on the doors. She is thematically associated with the carved warriors not only because she points toward the doors, urging Macbeth to return, but also because she holds bare daggers, like the crowned man facing her. If one recollects that Macbeth is "Bellona's bridegroom" (I.ii.54), everything falls into place.

Zoffany has imagined Macbeth as an eighteenth-century gentleman of high rank who has inherited with his ancestral estate a family history of heroic deeds. (The arms on the wall are surely those of an illustrious forebear.) Emblematically, in passing through the doors, Macbeth has striven to live up to the heroic imperative represented by the carvings, the armor, and Lady Macbeth/Bellona. He has killed in the hope of gaining the reward of heroes—glory—symbolized by the light streaming through the doors. But once he has killed, his civilized nature revolts and he realizes that the military heroism of the days of "fabl'd Knights / In Battles feign'd" is for him only barbarism. He now resists Bellona's urgings and the spell of the Gothic, and he cannot complete the task he has begun.

Zoffany is not interpreting *Macbeth*. He draws on the play for imagery through which to restate emblematically the view of authors from Milton to Richardson that a heroism based on killing cannot ennoble and does not befit a modern, civilized, Christian age. His exploitation of the play to gratify contemporary interests is so alien to Carr and Knapp's view of criticism as "filling gaps" in the text that it is not a critical response at all. Thus his painting cannot be a "bridge" between the text of *Macbeth* and the twentieth-century viewer.

Robert L. Kelly
University of North Carolina, Greensboro

Mr. Carr and Ms. Knapp reply:

Robert Kelly expresses an all too common view of visual images that denies or downplays their complex interaction with individual texts and larger cultural systems of signification. He finds it "unthinkable," for example, that viewers could imagine themselves as part of an emblem. Yet painters have traditionally used mirrors, pictures within pictures, and outward gazes to involve spectators in an often uneasy complicity with the production of pictorial meaning. Velasquez' "Las Meninas" is a brilliant example. And in Reynolds' "Garrick between Tragedy and Comedy" (based on "The Choice of Hercules"), Comedy—or Vice—looks out knowingly at viewers, inviting a recognition that our comic pleasure at Reynolds' conceit has already implicated us as unwitting participants in the decision being made. Such paintings demonstrate that topoi do not simply determine a static meaning for an image, one readily available through "customary expectations." Spectators must always interpret emblematic structures and revise their prior expectations in order to discover exactly how topoi relate to the entire range of pictorial detail. Mid-eighteenth-century art particularly required this effort, for its emblematic structures had become increasingly convoluted, fanciful, and difficult to read after several centuries of elaboration and extension. Standard topological meanings were further complicated, moreover, by their use in depicting new subject matter, like the lives of apprentices. In Hogarth's "Industry and Idleness," the simple identification with Industry and against Idleness (which "Hogarth clearly expects") becomes unthinkable when we try to apply it in any detail: can we, for example, applaud the self-serving blindness that prevents Alderman Goodchild, the Industrious 'Prentice, from noticing bribery and perjury in court (see Pl. 10)? By presenting *Macbeth*, and doing so through an emblem, Zoffany sets up a still more complicated field, because he involves us in two complex "texts" between which there is no predetermined relation.

Kelly proposes an allegedly more accessible opposition between "Gothic" violence and eighteenth-century civility. In the broadest terms, his interpretation runs parallel to ours and points toward a similar social judgment. Close attention to the details of picture and text, however, undermines his assertion. Kelly claims, for example, that the Macbeth of the painting is aware of the disparity between his modern self and "the Gothic nature of the play," a view we find confusing. First, *Macbeth* is hardly a "Gothic" work, since "Gothic" is an eighteenth-century notion. Further, Kelly fails to distinguish between military valor and the act for which Macbeth suffers remorse—killing a sleeping king and guest. Such an act would not in any era have reaped "the reward of heroes—glory" or identified Macbeth's unarmed figure with the surrounding emblems of warfare. Macbeth *was* "Bellona's bridegroom," when he was serving Duncan in a war against foreign invasion and treachery. By failing to note that Lady Macbeth is merely posing as a heroic figure, Kelly reduces Zoffany's painting to a bald contrast between Gothic "barbarism" and genteel conduct. He thereby denies subtlety to both play and painting and forecloses the possibility that the image offers any significant insight into *Macbeth*.

We find several further claims by Kelly unconvincing. Can we assume that a contemporary audience would have regarded the clothing of eighteenth-century gentlemen as effete? What is gained by labeling Macbeth's expression "inward recognition" rather than "psychological distress"? How could we distinguish these reactions from each other in a painting? But rather than discuss these particular problems, we propose to address the implications of our fundamental disagreement—the status of paintings as significant textual interpretations. The most surprising thing about Kelly's reading is his insistence that Zoffany's painting "is not a critical response at all," by which he must mean to disassociate the painting from further contact with the text. Calling Lady Macbeth Bellona most certainly uses the text of the play as evidence