**The Dagger Scene in Macbeth**

In addition to the obvious connotations surrounding a floating dagger (both the Gothic supernaturalism of the appearance and the symbolism of clandestine violence accompanying the dagger itself), Macbeth’s soliloquy here revels in Gothicism. The most discernible trait of this speech is the pervasive ambiguity. Within the narrative, Macbeth is unsure over whether or not the dagger is a vision, whether his eyes are “made fools o’ th’ other senses / or else worth all the rest”. This lingering obfuscation reflects the protagonist’s own equivocation over his plan to murder Duncan. Equally, however, there exists ambiguity not just for Macbeth, but for the audience, in interpretation; with regards to symbolism, the dagger can be read as representing differing concepts. The most obvious would be the dagger directly represents the act of killing the King. Personally I consider the scene to relate to the broader context of the story – what the dagger most significantly represents is his future. Combing with the dagger’s symbolism as a weapon, his discussion of the dagger could well apply to his future as King:

“Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?.” (II.i.34-40)

If we were to interpret the dagger as representing his future, his destiny, then this speech is in fact a dire warning of things to come. Macbeth is here wondering whether the vision is tangible – whether his aspirations of power are ‘sensible to feeling as to sight’. Each line above aptly functions as a comment on his hopes of Kingship. The ‘handle toward [his] hand’ refers to his conception that he is fated to take his own destiny (through murder) – equally, that this sentiment is phrased as a question, implying doubt, perhaps interpretable as Shakespeare foreshadowing the seeming inevitability of his fate (meaning ‘the handle’ – control over his own fortune – was never truly his). Lines 38-40 are particularly poignant, given Macbeth’s eventual downfall. His dream, this apparition of his destiny is here speculated to be a ‘dagger of the mind, a false creation’. It is true. The success and power he conceives of here in the form of a fantastical dagger is nothing but his own poisoned ambition, seeing opportunities for power where they are not (Macbeth does become King, but I think his reign is sufficiently brief, and his downfall sufficiently striking, so as to consider it unsuccessful in fulfilling his ambitions). The phrase ‘false creation’ is also significant in its ambiguity. It can be read as referring to Macbeth’s own mind giving rise to his ambition, but it could alternatively be seen as referring to the witches – his destiny, or his phantom dagger perception of his own destiny, is arguably the result of the witches’ influence: their ‘false creation’. I think the final point to mention, pertaining to the interpretation of the dagger as representing Macbeth’s perception of his future, is the importance of the dagger as a violent symbol. That his destiny is shown as a dagger both alludes to his methods of becoming King (murdering Duncan), his violent rule (murdering MacDuff’s family), and his violent downfall. The concept of destiny is common in the Gothic, and the notion of a character seeing his future in an ambiguously supernatural vision is explored in many Gothic works, perhaps earliest in ‘The Castle of Otranto’, when Frederick receives instruction from several visions, including a giant dagger. Comparisons with ‘Macbeth’ are apt, with the ‘instructive dagger’ possibly taking direct influence from Shakespeare for use in the Gothic genre.

**How does act IV, scene iii show Malcolm to be the rightful heir to the throne?**

Taken as a whole, the obvious parallel to this scene (particularly the first half duologue) would be act I, scene vii. Both involve a confidant – MacDuff and Lady Macbeth respectively – talking the prospective kings – Macbeth and Malcolm – into the assumption of their duties. The key parallel here lies in the persuasion at the heart of each of the scenes, and indeed the morality of said persuasion. Fundamentally, Lady Macbeth is manipulating her husband into an act intrinsically evil, while MacDuff would appear to be talking Duncan’s son into assuming his father’s throne in an act of good, or more accurately, the prevention of evil. That act IV scene iii relates to act I in this way could suggest several things; one would be that the parallel is Shakespeare’s foreshadowing – as Macbeth took the throne following his wife’s encouragement, so will Malcolm take the throne following Macduff’s. Equally, the parallelism here could indicate something of the nature of Malcolm’s future reign: that his scene is mirrored with Macbeth’s is a factor perhaps implying some inherent evil in his future rule, evil detailed explicitly by himself in this scene

(“Nay, had I power, I should

 Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell,

Uproot the universal peace, confound

All unity on earth”)

only to be discounted and dismissed by MacDuff, ironically. Anyway, the key sentiment to be drawn from the parallel is that it exists. All other meaning can be extrapolated from this fact. The parallel exists, suggesting Malcolm is the inevitably rightful heir, given that Macbeth went on to take the throne. Alternatively the parallel exists, suggesting that Malcolm is not the rightful heir, given that Macbeth assumed the throne through ill means, or suggesting both men assumed the throne under influence of others, negating their entitlement to the throne. Read any way, it is important to see MacDuff’s manipulation of Malcolm as an echo of Lady Macbeth’s manipulation of Macbeth himself; it is deliberately ambiguous whether Malcolm and Macbeth are established in this scene as opposites or mirrors, hence obfuscating the certainty with which one can deem Malcolm a ‘rightful heir’.