



The patient must minister to himself

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Macbeth:

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff'd bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?

Doctor:

Therein the patient
Must minister to himself.

Macbeth:

Throw physic to the dogs, I'll none of it.

[Macbeth Act 5, scene 3, 40–47](#)

A doctor has been called in to treat the sleepwalking Lady Macbeth, queen of Scotland [see [OUT, DAMNED SPOT](#)]. Macbeth, recognizing his wife's severe case of guilty conscience, asks the doctor whether he can't do something about it. As the doctor well knows, but Macbeth and his wife have trouble acknowledging, a physician cannot treat one's conscience with the same medicine he uses to heal the body. "Therein," says the doctor, "the patient/ Must minister to himself"—in other words, "that's your own problem." With characteristically brutal abandon, Macbeth scorns all "physic" (medicine)—it's sour grapes to him. Self-ministration of the spiritual variety is hardly his style. Macbeth will suit up in his armor and put the sword to his enemies, treating them as if they were his disease, and as if routing them were the cure for his guilt.

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