Shakespeare's Use of Apostrophe in Macbeth's "Dagger" Speech

A character's state of mind can be effectively conveyed through the author's rhetorical choices. This (perhaps too-obvious) truth is shown in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* in Act II, Scene i—Macbeth's "dagger" speech—in which Shakespeare uses potent diction along with death-washed imagery and allusions to depict the nightmare that swirls about Macbeth's mind. But more subtle and striking in this monologue is the playwright's selective use of apostrophe to suggest Macbeth's ambivalence—that is, both his intense desire and grave misgivings—over his plan to kill Duncan.

Shakespeare's use of apostrophe, as in line 49, for example—"Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going," in which Macbeth addresses the illusive and elusive dagger—gives the impression that Macbeth feels he is being led, even as an unquestioning soldier might be led by his commander, into an action for which he is not obliged to accept responsibility. By this means, he seeks to evade guilt or self-recrimination, for it appears that by addressing a second entity, he may be able to draw into his lonely and terrifying sphere an accomplice—someone or something to share the burden of guilt. Additionally, apostrophe allows Macbeth to put himself at a distance from his own horrific deed—to see it at a remove, as something from which he can retreat, as opposed to something that inhabits him or that he is the owner of. By the simple linguistic gesture of apostrophe, Macbeth seems to blame not himself but the dagger and seems to deny any knowledge of wrongdoing. This impression is countered, however, by the later lines "There's no such thing: / It is the bloody business which informs / Thus to mine eyes." Here we see Macbeth's recognition that it is merely his existing decision to murder Duncan that has caused him to see the dagger, suggesting of course that he is torn between his guilt and his desire to become king. More importantly, though, these lines reveal that Macbeth's conscience, however he might wish to subdue it, is fully engaged, for he has definitely asserted ownership of the hallucination, and he has said, quite sanely, that it is only that: a hallucination. This is no specter that has come unbidden and forced itself on him. Rather, it is the product of his own mind, stirred by circumstances that he alone—regardless of his wife's urgings—has generated. The idea here is consistent with Shakespeare's general theme that though one may be tempted to act on evil impulses, the responsibility for evil lies with the actor of it.

Shakespeare also plants apostrophe in Macbeth's language to suit with the motif established in earlier speeches both by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth—namely their calling on nature to conspire with them in keeping their intentions and actions hidden from the common view and even from themselves (e.g. Macbeth's "Stars, hide your fires" and "The eye wink at the hand"; Lady Macbeth's "Come, thick night . . . that my keen knife see not the wound it makes"). In lines 63-67, Macbeth pleads with nature in the form of the ground on which he stealthily "strides"—an action that is almost tantamount to comedy, for he seems, as it were, to be telling his secret to the whole world. He speaks almost as though he were the standard killer-on-compulsion, the criminal who deliberately leaves the clues that will lead to his discovery because he wishes to be discovered and punished:

Thou sure and firm-set earth,
Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
Thy very stones prate of my whereabout,
And take the present horror from the time,
Which now suits with it.

Indeed, Macbeth might as well be saying, *Please, good stones, tell everyone where I've gone and what I've done.* This passage—along with Macbeth's idea that if the "bloody business" can be conducted in total silence, it can be made to seem less horrific than it is—strongly reinforces our sense of him as the killer with a conscience. This is no remorseless, coolly calculating psychopath but a highly imaginative, deadly ambitious man with a "heat-oppressed brain" who knows he is about to commit the greatest crime a man can commit.
An unconscious desire to be caught notwithstanding, Macbeth still has steeled his resolve to go on with the murder, and Shakespeare caps—or, as it turns out, *almost* caps—his assassin's impulse to act with a forcefully punctuating rhymed couplet:

> While I threat, he lives:
> Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives.

With the self-mocking phrase "While I threat," Macbeth chides himself for nattering idly to that which cannot hear him or take any part in an action that is his alone. He declares, appropriately to no one but himself, that mere talking comes dangerously close to cooling his ardor for the crown. And yet, for all that, Macbeth has not done with trying to dislocate himself from his own action. What might have been his battle cry (however whispered)—"Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives"—is followed by the ringing of his wife's signal bell, the sign that all is clear for him to enter Duncan's chamber. And again Macbeth speaks in apostrophe—this time to his victim and, ironically, with something like tenderness—in effect, once more drawing a second entity into the deed and drawing himself out of it:

> I go, and it is done; the bell invites me.
> Hear it not, Duncan, for it is a knell
> That summons thee to heaven, or to hell.

These lines end the scene with Macbeth's preferred sense that the bell—not he of the "palpable" dagger—is responsible for summoning Duncan inexorably to death.