2 Macbeth

Macbeth, which represents in more ways than one a crucial stage in the development of Shakespeare's art, exhibits the conflict between reason and passion—the constant theme of the great tragedies—under aspects notably different in kind and implications from any he had hitherto attempted. The play deals this time with the overthrow of harmony, not merely in an individual tragic hero (such as Othello) but in an ordered society: and the conflict is worked out in terms that are more clearly and unequivocally moral than in any of the preceding plays. The plot, reflecting this modification of purpose, turns upon a clear contrast between two completely opposed orders. Duncan and Malcolm, who both suffer at the hands of a usurper, are not bound, as Othello had been, by egoism or weakness to the evil which aims at their overthrow; rather do they stand over against Macbeth less as characters in the generally accepted sense than as 'symbols' of order, loyalty, and goodness. Macbeth is, in the first place and above all, a play about the murder of a king; and there is a very real sense in which the centre, the focal point of the conception is to be found neither in the criminal usurper nor in the wife who initially urges him to crime, but in the figure, too easily neglected in its central, normative function, of Duncan.

To say this is clearly to depart in some degree from the conceptions of dramatic character which have inspired so much past study of the play. The significance of Duncan, however we may choose to conceive it, clearly cannot depend upon a character study carried out on conventional lines; some critics, starting from the method of analysis often associated with the name of Bradley, have even found him weak and ineffectual, which was certainly no primary part of Shakespeare's intention. Duncan's function in the play emerges rather, as we shall shortly see, from the images of light and fertility which surround his person and confer substance and consistency upon the 'symbolic' value of his rule. The universal implications of this value, again, are only fully appreciated after due weight has been given to the short initial appearance of the Witches, which establishes the climate, moral as much as merely physical, within which the action is to be conducted. The Witches, as a prelude to the human tragedy, introduce us to a situation in which 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' (I. i. 11); through the calculated ambiguity of their utterance and through the elemental commotion which surrounds them, they prepare the way for the entry of evil and disintegration into a state which has been, under Duncan, positive, natural, and orderly. When the evil obscurely present in Macbeth's mind is stirred to conceive and execute the murder of Duncan, he introduces both into the Scottish realm and into his own nature a disrupting evil which must work itself out through the process it has initiated. The play, thus conceived as a harmonious dramatic construction, deals with the overthrow of the balance of royalty by Macbeth's crime, with the full development of the malignity which that overthrow implies, and, finally, with the restoration of natural order under the gracious successor of the murdered king.

Macbeth's murder of Duncan is, accordingly, in the first place a crime against the natural foundations of social and moral harmony; it is at the same time an attack by the destructive elements contemplated in Shakespeare's experience upon those which make for unity and untrammeled maturity. As we have already suggested, the positive values of the tragedy are concentrated on the 'symbolic' function of Duncan's royalty and upon the poetry in which it finds expression. As king, Duncan is the head of a 'single state of man' (we shall see later the full implications of this phrase of Macbeth's), whose members are bound into unity by the accepted ties of loyalty. By virtue of this position he is the source of all the benefits which flow from his person to those who surround him; receiving the free homage of his subjects, he dispenses to them all the riches and graces which are the mark of true kingship, so that the quality of his poetry is above all life-giving, fertile. The early, light-drenched scenes of the tragedy are dominated by this rich, vital relationship between service spontaneously given and abundant royal bounty. Macbeth himself, still speaking as the loyal general who has saved his country from the consequences of internal rebellion and foreign invasion, describes the subject's duty in repeated protestations of devotion that only in the light of his own later behaviour become ironic 12; in his expression of them his poetry attains, though fugitively and imperfectly, a breadth, a completeness of emotional content, that it will never recover. Duncan, in turn, replies to these professions of loyalty with an overflowing bounty expressed in terms of harvest fullness:

I have begun to plant thee, and will labour
To make thee full of growing,
to which the devoted Banquo replies by taking up the same image—

There if I grow,
The harvest is your own—

and receives from his king a final expression of abounding joy:

\[
\text{My plenteous joys,}
\text{Wanton in fulness, seek to hide themselves}
\text{In drops of sorrow. (I. iv. 28)}
\]

Duncan and his subjects, in short, vie with one another in the celebration of a relationship that is not one of mastery or subjection, but essentially free, expansive, life-giving. It is in accordance with the spirit of his kingship that Duncan’s brief appearances before his murder are invariably invested with images of light and fertility to which are joined, at his moments of deepest feeling, the religious associations of worship in a magnificent, comprehensive impression of overflowing grace.

This impression, which is at this stage new in Shakespeare (we shall see something similar, expressed in a different context in the conception of Cordelia in King Lear), from now on acquires growing significance in his work. It is perhaps most finely conveyed in this play at the moment in which Duncan and Banquo, when the former makes his last living appearance, pause before they enter Macbeth’s castle at Inverness. The exchange between them is more than decorative in its effect:

\[
\text{Duncan: This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air}
\text{Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself}
\text{Unto our gentle senses.}
\]
\[
\text{Banquo: This guest of summer,}
\text{The temple-haunting martlet, does approve}
\text{By his loved mansionry that heaven’s breath}
\text{Smells woosingly here: no juty, frieze,}
\text{Butress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird}
\text{Hath made his pendant bed and procreant cradle:}
\text{Where they most breed and haunt, I have observed}
\text{The air is delicate. (I. vi. 1)}
\]

The combination of natural sweetness and supernatural ‘grace’ is here achieved in an amplitude of reference that gathers its component images into a single triumphant effect. The ‘martlet’ that builds on the castle walls its ‘pendant bed and procreant cradle’ (note the sense of weight, of life concentrating itself naturally in the process of birth, reflected in the sound and meaning of the adjectives) is ‘temple-haunting’, a dweller in the shadow of sanctity; and the ‘loved mansionry’ of its home, ‘loved’ both as an auspicious presence and as itself the home of love, is attracted to spots where the breath of heaven ‘smells woosingly’ with a sense of fulfilment that is the prelude to generation. The combination of spring with the delicate air which so ‘nimbly and sweetly’ lends itself to senses described as ‘gentle’, purged of all grossness and yet intensely, naturally alive, is an achievement so richly and finely compacted as to be new in Shakespeare. It marks a fresh stage in the dramatic ordering of his experience, and in the resulting liberation of its full possibilities for life and harmony. The ‘canker’ of frustration which was still eating into Othello’s love is now fully mastered, artistically worked out in the evil of Macbeth; and all the vitality and goodness so freed finds expression in a new intuition of life as fertile and sanctified.

In accordance with this conception there is between Duncan and the loyal Macbeth of these early scenes a relationship rich in honour and fertile in royal bounty. As Duncan’s instrument in war, Macbeth wins two arduous battles and becomes Thane of Cawdor. No sooner has he heard the prophecy of the Witches, however, than a new quality enters his meditations, expressing itself in verse of a very different kind. The verse of Macbeth, apart from that associated with the loyal personages of the play, is, often, at a first reading, so abrupt and disjointed that some critics have felt themselves driven to look for gaps in the text. Yet the difficult passages do not look in the least like the result of omissions; they are demonstrably necessary to the feeling of the tragedy. In practically every one of Macbeth’s speeches there is a keen sense of discontinuity, a continual jolting of the sensibility into disorder and anarchy. Macbeth, from the time when the thought of murder first forces its way into his consciousness, moves almost continuously in a remarkable state of nervous tension, a state in which a very palpable obscurity is suddenly and unexpectedly shot through by strange revelations and terrifying illuminations of feeling. This state is fully significant only as an inversion of the rich, ordered poetry of Duncan; it is the natural consequence of his murder, a reflection of the entry of evil both into the individual and the state. The quality of this disturbance, which changes with the various stages of Macbeth’s own situation, should be closely considered.
Immediately after his first meeting with the Witches, when the thought of his crime first claims his attention, Macbeth, standing for a moment aside from his companions, speaks with typical disjointed intensity:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill, cannot be good: if ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in truth? I am thane of Cawdor;
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings:
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not. (I. iii. 130)

Nothing quite like this following of thought in the very process of conscious formulation can be found in Shakespeare's early work; it is another development new to Macbeth. There is nothing accidental about the telescoping of the syntax in the last few lines; the strange juxtaposition of 'thought' and 'murder' conveys perfectly the actual birth of the unnatural project in the tangled chaos of ideas. Taken with the rest of the speech it conveys even more. It anticipates the whole disturbance of natural 'function', of the 'single state of man', which the very thought of such a crime implies; it expresses with unsurpassed nervous directness the shaking to its foundations of what has been a harmonious personality. The speech, indeed, is much more than a mere statement of the ambiguity and tenion present in Macbeth's mind. It is a physical apprehension of ambiguity, a disordered experience expressing itself in terms of a dislocated functioning. There is a tremendous sense of heightened animal feeling about the unfixed hair and the hammering of the heart. And yet (and it is here that the moral judgment which the whole play will be concerned to enforce is implicitly revealed), keen as it is in its operation, this almost bestial sensibility is quite meaningless. It introduces unreality even into the thought of murder, in a way which the following scenes will make apparent. When Lady Macbeth, immediately after the killing of Duncan, tries to rouse her husband to a fuller awareness of himself, she says:

The terms in which this attempt to encourage the bemused Macbeth is couched themselves incorporate it into the spirit of unreality, of hideous mockery, which dominates this part of the action. Divorced from its proper place in the 'use of nature', the most intense feeling has only a quality of hallucination—that is the full force of 'horrible imaginings' and 'fantastical'. Feeling is 'smothered in surmise', and the same keen senses which so effectively seconded the gracious gentleness of Duncan are directed only to a muffled fumbling among uncertainties.

The full meaning of Macbeth's first aside should now be clear. The fertile poetry of Duncan, based upon so delicate and so complete an organization of the 'gentle' senses, depends upon a right ordering of the 'single state of man'. Harmony in the individual is balanced by harmony in the Scottish state under its lawful king. Macbeth's poetry, however, reflects the growth into consciousness within his mind of a wilful determination to break down this 'single state'; and, by means of it, Shakespeare identifies the evil of his play with the disrupting of a most harmonious experience. The result in psychological terms is presented with rare immediacy in Macbeth's early meditations upon his future course of action. It produces in him a discontinuity between the senses and the mind, between the mind and the conscience (note how the speech already quoted opens with a vain fumbling at the meaning of 'good' and 'ill'), and, between these gaps, nothing but an intense awareness of their existence. Considered in this way, Macbeth can be related to the whole line of development traced in the earlier plays. Its subject is still the 'degree' theme of Troilus and Cressida, but now immeasurably enriched by a firmer grasp of personality and by a new, more mature organization of feeling. By the side of this contrast between Duncan and Macbeth, the conception behind Ulysses' discourse on 'degree' must strike us as sluggish and, dramatically speaking, unrealized. Here, unlike the earlier play, there is no gap between the statement of the argument and its apprehension in terms of immediate experience. Ulysses, on the whole, tells us about the breakdown of 'degree' in abstract terms, whereas here we feel the personality in dissolution, striving vainly to attain, on the basis of its own illusory desires, an impression of coherence. To the gain in poetic immediacy corresponds an advance in dramatic presentation. The 'single state of
man", a state which depends for both the individual and the social organism on the due observance of ordered loyalty, is here replaced by a cleavage in the innermost fabric of the mind, an uncertain groping in the bottomless pit of psychological and spiritual darkness, in the first obscure glimpses of a state where fundamental values are inverted, and where 'nothing is But what is not'.

Darkness, indeed, is from now on Macbeth's native element. From the decisive moment in which his crime is conceived he is excluded from the light which radiates from the royal figure of Duncan, so that it is no surprise when, in the very next scene, we meet with his exclamation:

Stars, hide your fires;
Let not light see my black and deep desires:
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see. (I. iv. 50)

In point of fact, Macbeth himself, already involved in obscurity, is not at this moment clear as to the true nature of these desires. The decisive part in clarifying his still confused thoughts is played by Lady Macbeth, whose first significant utterance, on receiving her husband's letters with an account of his meeting with the Witches, turns upon two closely associated ideas. The first is the recognition of his lack of clarity, expressed in her own concise definition of him as one who

wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win. (I. v. 23)

The second is her determination to oppose to this contradiction in his nature the conviction (which she, in her own way, shares with all the great Shakespearean 'villains': Iago, Edmund, Antonio) that success in action implies, as a necessary condition, the abolition of any gap in the mind of the agent between the act itself and the will whose decision alone makes action possible. It is the elimination of this gap, the equivalent on an avowedly moral level of Hamlet's rooted disinclination to carry out the duty imposed upon him, that she is determined to produce in her vacillating husband; for, as she says:

that which rather thou dost fear to do
Than wishest should be undone. (I. v. 23)

By introducing this element of logic, spurious though it be, into Macbeth's uncertainty, she makes the crime possible. The relationship

between the two characters, in the course of which one of them takes the initiative in bringing to the surface elements obscurely present in the mind of the other, is a characteristic feature of Shakespeare's dramatic constructions. We have already seen it in operation in the disintegration, by Iago, of Othello's heroic nobility: applied here in a different context, and to a very different purpose, it confers upon the plot a dynamic element, a sense of development essential to the complete effect.

The connection between Macbeth and Shakespeare's previous work becomes still clearer once it is seen that the murder of Duncan is the result of a movement of the 'blood', of the deeper sources of passion exercising their potent influence upon the will. The nature of the relationship that unites husband and wife is worth careful consideration. It is implied in the words in which Lady Macbeth, having read her husband's letter, greets him upon his arrival:

Thy letters have transported me beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant. (I. v. 57)

and in the ecstatic quality of his response: 'My dearest love!' It is precisely this intensity of passion which, diverted from its natural channels, is turned into a craving for power and issues in murder. To follow the common line of interpretation and call this craving 'ambition' is not enough, for ambition is an abstraction and this is something that comes, as we have seen, from the 'blood', from the hidden instinctive foundations of the personality. Lady Macbeth's attitude, indeed, logical though it be once its premises are granted, involves a passionate distortion of normal humanity which balances that which the herself helps to produce in her husband. Born of a reversal of nature, its expression is consistently unnatural. Her first prayer, as her purpose takes shape, is 'Unsex me here!' Her second—prefaced by the significant apostrophe, 'Come, thick night!'—is an appeal to the darkness that makes possible the exclusion of reason and pity. From this to the expressions of forced, unnatural determination which follow—the declared willingness to kill her own child rather than fail in the course of action which her 'blood'-impelled craving for power has dictated, the final conquest of her feeling that the sleeping Duncan resembled her own father—the passage is as easy as it is monstrous, inhuman. The whole crime is, in the words of Ross, from the moment of its concep-
tion to that of its final execution, 'against nature still' (II. iv. 27). The overthrow of the royal symbol of order and fruitful unity is the result of a preceding disturbance of the balance between impulse and conscience, instinctive 'blood' and reasonable will; and this, in turn, naturally produces a dissociation of bodily function, an anarchy in which animal feeling works in an isolation divorced from all control, and so void of continuity and significance.

After this, the actual murder of Duncan comes as the grotesque climax of a process that has involved from the first an inversion of every natural bond and feeling. Macbeth moves towards it in a state of hallucination, still invoking the darkness in which evil thoughts have at least the illusion of free play. 'Each corporal agent in him is bent up' (I. vii. 80), as by a conscious, strained effort, to the deed that awaits him. Even at this stage, however, more is involved than a statement, conveyed with the greatest linguistic immediacy, of psychological disorder. The supernatural sanctions against which Macbeth has rebelled in conceiving the murder of his king make themselves felt, in a broken form indeed, because they are reflected in a mind already irretrievably shattered, but with the power to impose their validity in his own despite. The speech in which Macbeth pauses in a final attempt to take stock of his situation is at once a ruthless revelation of character and a contribution to the dominant spiritual theme:

If it were done when 'tis done then 'twere well
It were done quickly; if the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come. (I. vii. 1)

Macbeth is trying to persuade himself that the only valid reason for hanging back from the murder he is about to commit is one of expediency, the fear of rousing to retribution the public opinion which an attack on Duncan must inevitably outrage. From the first, however, the expression of his position is anything but dispassionate or clear. The succession of uneasy suppositions with which his reflections open, and the very avoidance, through the repeated use of 'it', of all direct reference to the absorbing object of his meditations, show that even his efforts at logical expression are caught up in the incoherence, the broken continuity, which has dominated his thought ever since he first considered the revelation of the Witches. The breathless confounding, so superbly echoed in the sound of his words, of 'assassination' with 'consequence', 'surcease' with 'success', reflects a mind involved in the incoherent flow of its own ideas, while the force of 'trammel' and 'catch', each stressing with its direct impact a break in the rhythm of the phrase, conveys perfectly the peculiar disorganized intensity which Macbeth will bear with him to the final extinction of feeling.

Disorganization and incoherence, however, are not the only aspects of Macbeth’s condition revealed by the speech. Beneath them, rising to take possession of his mind in a swelling flood of emotion, is a tide of feeling which, while reflected through the speaker’s own state, derives ultimately from the outraged spiritual values of the play. The true sources of the murderer’s fear are not what he declares them to be. Self-ignorance and self-deception are essential parts of his nature, and as his words bring them to light, they are seen to be connected, in his own despite, with the supernatural terrors which he has just declared his readiness to ‘jump’:

Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven’s cherubin, horse’d
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind. (I. vii. 10)

To discuss the logic of this passage in terms of mixed metaphor would clearly be to miss the whole point of the speech, dramatic not less than poetic (and how, indeed, shall we separate one aspect of the total effect from another?). Macbeth’s emotion grows in the course of its expression, and in a way which involves the presence of the whole in each of its stages. It passes from a consideration of the inexpediency of murdering Duncan to embrace a sense of supernatural terror which is at once, in itself, a sign of hysterical weakness, and, in the general design of the play, a reflection of the positive sanctions that dominate the entire action. His first impulse is to contrast the brutality of his projected deed with the ‘meekness’ of his victim, the guilt he feels in himself with the ‘clarity’ of the king he is about to kill. ‘Meekness’ and ‘clari-
wickedness of his behavior, and also to bring him to marriage. Both she and
Silvia have taught or shamed them into common sense by means of their
own steadfastness, initiative, and even trickery. This is the moral center of
the play: that marriage under the tutelage of such intelligent and faithful women
who take risks for love will bring these immature poseurs to an appreciation of
love's mutuality.

SECTION 3

The Merchant of Venice—Portia, the Friendly Adversary

The tone of The Merchant of Venice differs markedly from that of The Two
Gentlemen of Verona. Whereas the early play is comically exaggerated,
detached, at times broadly humorous, and in its conclusion hard to take
seriously, the later one is infinitely more emotional, more erotic, drawing its
audience into the action both through its near tragedy and basic romanticism.
The true themes of this play have recently been blurred as a result of the
Holocaust of the 1940s, and it has been made to bear the burden of inter-
pretations which would not have occurred to a majority of Elizabethans.
Shylock, in actuality the blocking figure of a romantic comedy, has taken con-
trol of the play as the ultimate spokesman for a victimized people, and the
themes of friendship, love, and the nature of love's commitment are sometimes
alighted. Stage history, particularly in the nineteenth century, began this
trend, even to the extent of concluding the play with the trial scene, with
Shylock stabbing himself on stage (Richard Mansfield, 1893). Henry Irving,
in interpolating a scene in which Shylock, carrying a lantern, knocks on
the door of his empty house achieved an extraordinary visual effect by echo-
ing that famous Pre-Raphaelite painting, Christ, the Light of the World,
"Behold, I stand at the door and knock."[14]

Structurally the play is a romantic comedy with Shylock as a blocking
figure, and an admixture of the folkloric in the matter of the three caskets.
Throughout, the audience must suspend its disbelief and avoid raising such
practical matters as Antonio's inexplicable failure to buy marine insurance
(which was available at the time), or the nature of Portia's legal "cram course"
which makes her an instant expert in contracts and permits a rescue almost
comparable with that of The Two Gentlemen of Verona.

Love, then, is the important element of the play, and its treatment is a
logical development from The Two Gentlemen. The central characters must
again weigh the competing demands of love and friendship, with the resolution
of the play coming only when Bassanio is brought to see where his first loyalties
are due, and when Antonio recognizes that friendship has more than one
dimension. This moral advance is made through the tutelage of Portia, partly
in her masculine disguise, but more fully, in her own, feminine attire. She is
the moral and educative center of the play as she brings both her lover and his
friend to an apprehension of the truth of love and an ideal matrimonial
relationship based on the ethical imperative of equity, "the spirit and habit of
fairness, justness, and right dealing which would regulate the intercourse of
men with men,—the rule of doing to all others as we desire them to do to us,"[15]
and more than this, without counting the cost.

The first important emotional commitment to be treated in the play is
that of friendship, and a number of critics have suggested that "the main action
of the play is centered on the struggle between Portia and Antonio for
Bassanio's love."[16] Hugh M. Richmond speaks of "The self-deceptions of
emotional commitment not only in sexual but also in social and legal term,
while John Russell Brown speaks of the triumph of love's generosity and the
amplitude of love's wealth which it demonstrates."[17] Leggett neatly resolves
the problem of divided affections by commenting "It is the capacity to love that
matters, and love can extend itself beyond a single person,"[18] and this is one of
the major lessons Portia teaches in a tripartite educational enterprise conduc-
ted both in male disguise and in her own person.

Antonio's deep melancholy opens the play; he must play a sad part in the
world since he is faced with the imminent loss of Bassanio's friendship if the
young man marries. He is discovering himself an outsider, but by the play's
end will learn how to relinquish a friend and be reintegrated into a new
society in which the claims of friendship coexist with matrimony. Bassanio seems
rather inconsiderate of the consequences this new relationship will have for his
friend as he answers Antonio's questions about the lady with an immediate
request for another loan in addition to what he has already borrowed and
squandered. Only when Antonio agrees to lend once more to him, out of the
generosity of friendship, does Bassanio speak of the wealthy lady he wishes to
woo. But already one can see an element of selfishness in this friendship; to be
sure, Antonio's generosity is limitless, but that can also be another face of
selfishness, of obligation, of possessiveness. Antonio's later action in sending
a letter requesting Bassanio's presence at his death reinforces this doubt.