

"Doers of Deeds"

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Criticism about: *Macbeth*

[(essay date 1989) *In the following essay, Long evaluates Macbeth as an archetypal man of action and analyzes his crimes in relation to other literary depictions of primal destruction and Christian redemption.*]

Bloody Execution

Shakespeare often begins a tragedy with somebody's description of the protagonist before he comes on stage. We hear of Marcius as 'chief enemy to the people' before he bursts in full of fury. We hear of the 'good and gracious' Timon before he sweeps on distributing largesse. We hear of Antony falling into 'dotage' and then the great lover strolls on in leisured magnificence. We hear whispers of Lear's odd shifts of favour and then he comes on in state to express his 'darker purpose'. And we are told that Othello is a vainglorious soldier full of 'bombast circumstance', as well as a lascivious, black lover who has stolen a white women, before the man himself appears as if to answer these nasty charges. The simple technique creates expectation. It also tells an audience whom to watch, and why.

Macbeth's introduction comes from the wounded Sergeant in I.ii. The Sergeant is a fine, epic soldier with a bent for vivid rhetoric, and the picture he paints is memorable. He evokes the rebel Macdonwald with the 'multiplying villanies of nature' swarming on him like flies on a carcass surrounded by an equally swarming horde of 'kerns and gallowglasses' drummed up for his cause in the Western Isles, and then he describes the tremendous irruption of Macbeth into these swirls of movement, cutting his way to the centre of things to dominate them with his deeds and his presence:

brave Macbeth--well he deserves that name--

Disdaining fortune, with his brandish'd steel

Which smok'd with bloody execution,

Like valour's minion, carv'd out his passage

Till he fac'd the slave;

Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,

Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th' chaps,

And fix'd his head upon our battlements.

This 'bloody execution' sounds brutal; but the epic rhetoric also makes it sound magnificent.

The Macbeth we later meet does not disappoint the expectations raised by this dramatic opening account of him. He is brutal, but he has his epic magnificence too, and one of his chief roles is to be the sort of decisive doer, intervener or irruptive agent whom the Sergeant describes. The Sergeant makes us think about violent action, but also about action in itself, as he pictures Macbeth's terrible, thrilling intervention into things and his ruthless domination of the field. This will be a play about a man who does, and about the momentous deed that he does. It will be a play about doing, and about that spectacular, frightening spirit of 'bloody execution'.

Macbeth cannot lie passive like Duncan 'shut up in measureless content', nor stand like Banquo 'in the great hand of God', waiting patiently for the unravelling of destiny. They may live in tranquillity at the slow pace of unfolding events, as the martlets do, suspended in their airy bed where 'the heaven's breath / Smells wooingly', but the restless Macbeth must be up and doing. Early on he hopes that chance may crown him, 'without my stir', but he soon realises that it will not. He must stir, and act, and thus confront the fatality of individual deeds.

Shakespeare makes this sense of the existential fatality of action resonate powerfully in the play, and his principal method for doing so is extraordinarily simple. *Macbeth* activates every possible resonance of the verb 'to do'. 'Do', 'did', 'done', and the cognate noun 'deed', are words stirred into vivid life by an imagination dwelling profoundly on the fatal business of 'bloody execution', or indeed any kind of execution. They carry the play's cogent exploration of what it is to be a separate, acting individual rather than an unperturbed particle of social acquiescence or of the breath of nature's quiet.

They are aided in this by another word, almost as simple, and allied both conceptually and onomatopoeically with 'do' and 'deed'. This is the verb 'to dare', upon which the play also dwells to wonderful effect. Macbeth does. Macbeth dares to do. These simple words are made to yield every gram of their poetic and philosophical potential.

Act I: 'If It Were Done When 'Tis Done'

In I.iii Macbeth entertains his hope that things might happen 'without my stir'. But in the next scene Duncan names Malcolm as his heir, Macbeth's fond hopes die, and his imagination turns to the mechanisms whereby desires become deeds. He will have to stir, to 'o'erleap' the obstacle in his path, and he will have to act, hidden guiltily from the lights of the natural world:

Stars, hide your fires;

Let not light see my black and deep desires.

(I.iv. 50-1)

Banquo and the king stand before him talking pleurably and easefully. They are still in the old, quiet world, but Macbeth has moved to another realm. This is the start of his career as an existential agent, and the start of the formidable poetic career of the verb 'to do':

that be
let

Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.

(I.iv. 52-3)

In the next scene, when his wife receives his letter and the witches' poison starts to course through her veins, the keywords sound again in juggling conjuration:

Thou'dst have, great Glamis, that which cries

'Thus thou must do' if thou have it;

And that which rather thou dost fear to do

Than wishest should be undone.

(I.v. 19-22)

Lady Macbeth conceives of herself as a natural doer, made for 'business' and 'dispatch', but we shall see how the stresses of the interventionist role will be too much for her. Macbeth's greater trepidation is well placed. It is more appropriate to the terrors attendant upon the business of doing, and to the explosive powers which lie within these fascinating words.

In the last scene of Act I the keywords come thick and fast. Macbeth wrestles with his fears and desires, and the keywords flicker hypnotically before his captivated eyes:

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well

It were done quickly.

(I.vii. 1-2)

They draw him on with the idea of decisive, 'be-all and end-all' action. Then comes a counter-movement, equally strong, where he remembers the great taboos which speak 'against the deed' and shrinks in anticipation of the outrage which will be felt when 'the horrid deed' is revealed.

Then his wife chides him for his doubter's sense of 'I dare not', and he seizes on that word too and squeezes it tightly:

I dare do all that may become a man;

Who dares do more is none.

(I.vii. 46-7)

The word 'man' has joined the wrestling knot of words, and Lady Macbeth keeps it there to shame him into action:

When you durst do it, then you were a man.

(I.vii. 49)

By the end of the scene Macbeth is resolved, and a dark, subdued hymn to doing sounds beneath the couple's dialogue. Lady Macbeth talks horribly of an outrageous licence to do what one will:

What cannot you and I perform upon

Th' unguarded Duncan?

(I.vii. 69-70)

Macbeth hits on the clever idea of incriminating the grooms so that people will think 'they have don't', and Lady Macbeth chimes excitedly back that there will be none who 'dares receive it other'. They chant together, work up their courage, and bring Macbeth to readiness for 'this terrible feat'.

Act II: 'I Have Done the Deed'

As Act II opens, the incantations stop while Banquo evokes the magically profound 'pleasure' and 'content' of Duncan's soul, but after this beautiful linguistic interlude the phantom dagger appears. It lures on the 'heat-oppressed brain' of Macbeth, rekindles 'the heat of deeds' and renews the fatal drive to action: 'I go, and it is done.'

In II.ii the awesome words are whispered in terror in the dark. Lady Macbeth fears the attempt has been bungled ('tis not done'), and dwells on the awful irony whereby they might be confounded not by doing 'the deed' but by failing to do it. She too is now more alert to the scale of what is involved, increasing the weight on the key verb by using it in another momentous context:

Had he not resembled

My father as he slept, I had done't.

(II.ii. 12-13)

By the time the crime is accomplished, the collocation of verb and noun is enough to sound the depths of irrevocability: 'I have done the deed.'

The now appalling noun 'deed(s)' shudders in their minds three more times in the scene ('these deeds', 'this deed', 'my deed'); and in the midst of them Macbeth finds another memorable collocation, linking doing with daring in an expression of the utmost horror:

I am afraid to think what I have done;

Look on't again I dare not.

(II.ii. 51-2)

Such simple words will never be simple again.

After this great scene Shakespeare lets the words go for a while, before bringing them back to close the act. In II.iv, with the Old Man's talk of 'the deed that's done', Ross's reference to 'this more than bloody deed' and Macduff's mention simply of 'the deed', we hear uneasy speakers probe the keywords suspiciously. They keep what has happened at arm's length by referring to it darkly as 'the deed', as if they wanted to keep their eyes

averted from some abomination or their persons out of striking distance of it.

The atmosphere of their talk makes Macbeth's deed of destruction seem like the deed of Adam and Eve. All nature has fallen into darkness and savagery as a result of it. Macduff already knows that Ross will not see things 'well done' at Macbeth's coronation. From such catastrophe recovery cannot be so quick, for Macbeth has made 'a breach in nature' with his tremendous intervention into the settled state of things, and these three are now living amidst the 'ruin' which, as in Eden, gained its 'wasteful entrance' when that breach was made.

Act III: 'A Deed of Dreadful Note'

But deeds lead to deeds and in Act III the words return, with the Second Murderer 'reckless what I do' and Macbeth determined that his new deed, the killing of Banquo, 'must be done tonight'. In III.ii Lady Macbeth tries to kill the words off with the finality of her statement that 'what's done is done', but it will be a long time yet before the terrible energy of these words has run down. Macbeth, better apprised than his wife of the enormity of what they have unloosed, promises to keep up with the race of things:

there shall be done

A deed of dreadful note,

(III.ii. 43-4)

while his bewildered wife asks him 'what's to be done?'; but he, as if sensing her inability to stay the course on which they are now set, decides to keep his doings to himself:

Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,

Till thou applaud the deed.

(III.ii. 45-6)

There is now a hardening in Macbeth. The fateful words no longer frighten him so much. He begins to use them with perceptible relish, sensing their menace and less awed than he was. That 'dearest chuck' is gross and sinister in a way that is new; and also new are some tellingly banal uses of the keywords in the next two scenes. In III.iii the murderers banalise the words with shop-talk about 'what we have to do' and the report they will deliver on 'how much is done', and in III.iv there is a thuggery in their professional talk of cutting throats ('that I did for him'). Macbeth seems to catch this thuggish note from them like a contagion, hoping that they not only cut Banquo's throat but also 'did the like' for Fleance, and calling one of them a 'nonpareil' among men 'if thou didst it'. At some level he seems to be enjoying this new brashness, as if it were man's talk for which his 'dearest chuck' is unfitted.

But he loses his swagger when the ghost appears to shake his 'gory locks' at him. The keywords are now used to cry helplessly 'which of you have done this?' and to disavow the role of agent altogether: 'thou can'st not say I did it.' To fight back this terror he will need the talismanic verb 'to dare'. He will need to claim that he

dare look on that

Which might appal the devil

(III.iv. 58-9)

and to face down the charge of cowardice with cries of 'what man dare, I dare' and 'dare me to the desert'. These are cries that come swirling out of a mind in panic, until at last he regains some shreds of composure, enabling him to return to things that 'must be acted', and to the accent of menace: 'we are yet but young in deed'.

Act IV: 'A Deed without a Name'

To make himself less 'young in deed' in Act IV he returns to the witches, who were the original inspiration for the impulse to do. As he sets foot in their den he cries out with the verb: 'what is't you do?', and they chant back the noun as if in ritual response: 'a deed without a name'.

While Duncan's court lived at the pace of acquiescence and unassertiveness, this den is the holy place of a religion of deeds. It is where Macbeth goes for inspiration when his heart 'throbs to know' and when, unable to wait upon the quiet rhythms of nature's evolutions, he is prepared to see

the

treasure

Of nature's germens tumble all together,
Even till destruction sicken

(IV.i. 58-60)

to satisfy his restless desire. He gets his inspiration. He emerges from the ordeal nerved again, resolved to kill for a third time and with the keywords on his lips:

The flighty purpose never is o'ertook
Unless the deed go with it ...

And even now,

To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done ...

No boasting like a fool:

This deed I'll do.

Act V: 'Little Is to Do'

The deed he does is the killing of Macduff's wife and children, and after it Shakespeare leaves the idea of doing alone, as if, after such an outrage, it could now have no further moral or poetic content. The remainder of Macbeth's life is led in Act V within the fortress of Dunsinane, where, incapable of any more doing, he paces out the long, halting soliloquy of his despair, interspersed with outbursts of rage against puny people like servants, unwilling followers, a messenger and 'the boy Malcolm'. It is the nadir of the great doer, hemmed in and frustrated in every desire.

Here, as his way of life falls into the sere, there is no further activation of 'do' and 'deed', and the idea of daring

takes on a desperate, last-ditch quality. He is tied to the stake, with only growls of defiance as evidence of his former courage and nerve. We have seen enough of deeds and doers. Doing has turned out merely to be butchery and the compelling rhythms of the keywords have run down.

As the rhythms of doing fade, a different rhythm, not felt since Duncan was alive, brings time round in its cycle again to make the autumnal Macbeth 'ripe for shaking'. His fall does not feel like an act performed by men, attributable to human agency. It happens when the time is ripe, in accordance with some internal logic in events which is not subject to will and intervention. We wait until the long night of his deed-filled tyranny at last 'finds the day' and then we find the fortified castle being 'gently rendered' to beautifully unurgent men.

In harmony with the ease and gentleness of that phrase come two magnificent usages of the keywords which help slow the play to a less cruel pace. The first comes from Macduff, who has no quarrel with anybody except Macbeth and who, rather than fight against men innocently embroiled in the tyrant's career, would prefer to leave his sword 'undecided'. The second comes from Old Siward, inviting Malcolm simply to walk into the castle of Dunsinane, crossing its threshold effortlessly since, miraculously, 'little is to do'. The tenor of these phrases is relievingly unassertive, as if what were occurring involved no more than acquiescence in the eternal cycles of things.

The human world comes back into contact with an inner, pre-conscious rhythm. Green branches bring the forest's silence and fertility back into human society and the young king promises that 'what's more to do' will, as if in response to the forest's presence, be 'planted newly with the time'. Things will be done according to the old, quiet rhythm of things, 'in measure, time, and place', with no doing, daring, 'bloody execution' or 'dispatch' disrupting the free-flowing 'grace of Grace'. We have not heard such sustained sounds of leisure and peace since Duncan was alive, or since Macbeth started to conjure the turbulent life out of dangerous words, or since the witches wound up the infernal plot with that frantic cry which has proved to be so laden with import:

I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do.

(I.iii.10)

Primordial Criminals

In one realm *Macbeth*, deploying these keywords, shows us a great, criminal deed and then a chain of consequential deeds, each as horrible as the last and all leading to destruction. To that extent it contains a simple but extremely powerful moral vision according to which Macbeth is a damned and self-damned creature, 'black Macbeth' as Malcolm calls him, the 'butcher' with a 'fiendlike queen' at whose fall, in Johnson's words, 'every reader rejoices'.

But there is another realm to the play, and another effect produced by its concentration on doing and daring. In this realm the keywords make us think not of these particular deeds but of deeds and doing in general, and here there is something about Macbeth which is beyond the range of the judgmental certitude expressed alike by Malcolm and Dr Johnson. In this metaphysically complex part of the play there is something fatal, doomed, but heroic about Macbeth, and something which makes him not the disruptive outsider of whom the world is well rid but the representative outsider, the outsider such as we all are, the archetypal representative of the fact that, as conscious, acting individuals, not trees of the forest, we cannot simply stand 'in the hand of the great God' but are fated to be involved in deeds.

In this respect the play echoes the Christian myth of the Fall. Macbeth and his wife re-enact the deed of Adam and his wife, and they also embody some aspects of Satan. There is a sacred play in *Macbeth*, dealing with the

primal fact of doing and the primal offence of being a doer. But, as is often the way with attempts to tell the Christian story of the Fall, the apparent moral does not entirely survive the story's telling. The images of the story are apt to speak for themselves, and not always to the same effect as the moral, so that tales of Satan, Adam and Eve in revolt against God tend to be knotty. We are apt to see inalienable aspects of ourselves in these original sinners, and their fate represents to us tragic things about an imperfect world rather than simple, revelatory things about disobedience. We take to some extent the criminals' part, so that Malcolm's simple words are not quite enough to sum up what we feel about their careers.

In this sacred play of the primordial crime the hero's deeds are not only criminal. The doer, with his interventionist audacity, is a much more widely representative man, gifted and cursed with the human attributes of agency and consciousness. He has courage, individual consciousness, and will-power, and in his inability to acquiesce patiently in the primal order of things we sense a strong, restless energy which is compelling. He is still a terrifying criminal who spreads death and destruction about him. But there are aspects of his being to which we respond because, for better or for worse, they seem intrinsic to the business of being human. In the disturbing, tragic figure of the primordial criminal there is something which draws our empathy, something which Wilbur Sanders, in his powerful, Nietzschean reading of the play, calls a 'compelling energy of defiance'. This elevates him above butchery, and takes him metaphysically out of range of simple verdicts.

Milton's Satan

This is why Milton's Satan, creator of the first breach in the Christian cosmos, owes so much to Macbeth. Milton once considered tackling Macbeth as a dramatic subject, and in a sense he did tackle it when he created the Satan of *Paradise Lost*. For Milton's Satan shares with Macbeth the paradoxical mixture of criminality and greatness, and this mixture makes them complex and difficult in similar ways. They both exhibit heroic nerve and unnerved despair. They both seem full of power and, almost at the same time, quite powerless. They can seem huge and menacing or pitifully puny. Sometimes they seem noble, sometimes contemptible.

As we read *Paradise Lost* we are often reminded of Macbeth and, as with Shakespeare's hero, we are often drawn in sympathy to Satan's side as he fights his doomed, ridiculous, magnificent battles with God. Both heroes arouse the same contradictory feelings about a destructive criminality which none the less compels some sort of admiration, and both arouse, very strongly, the same kind of pity. Macbeth looks at himself and his derelict life and decides that honour, love and friendship are things 'I must not look to have', while Satan looks at Eden or the unfallen Eve and, in the great soliloquies of his misery, thinks of everything he has lost and everything he has become:

Ay me, they little know

How dearly I abide that boast so vain,

Under what torments inwardly I groan;

While they adore me on the throne of hell,

With diadem and sceptre high advanced

The lower still I fall, only supreme

In misery.

The notes struck are very similar and the intense sympathy called up by each character is not to be denied. It tells us how far the living stories and characters take us from any simple judgement.

Milton is not, in Blake's words, 'of the Devil's party without knowing it', but he is notoriously restless with his myth, and the restlessness is creative. The author of *Macbeth* cannot be called restless, for the drama is of such limpidity that one cannot imagine a critic thinking its creator was of any party 'without knowing it'. But the complexities and tensions in *Macbeth* do none the less serve to draw the play away from its powerful status as an account of evil and destruction and towards the concerns of a different, later world, less Christian and less assured, where, in a different metaphysic, the doing of deeds is fascinatingly problematic. *Macbeth* has its Christian, traditional and even archaic side, but within its traditional frame and alongside its traditional content, there also lie other intuitions, modern and intractable, which give it life as a forward-looking rather than a backward-looking text. Alongside the radiant, Christian assurance and optimism of the play, there are endlessly dark, pessimistic intuitions of the criminal but heroic nature of all human doing or agency; and in the world of Romanticism, which this part of *Macbeth* foreshadows, fully foregrounded contemplation of the heroic criminal became one of the mainstays of tragic thought.

Excursus 1: From *Macbeth* Forward--Romantic Sinners

A brief, introductory book like this should perhaps not digress too far into the difficult, speculative and slightly remote contexts of later art which contemplation of *Macbeth* none the less calls up to a modern reader; but a work of literature so immense in import cannot but stretch the mind that tries to comprehend it, so that forays and excursions beyond the boundaries of the play itself are sponsored by it, just as legitimately as close, exclusive scrutiny of its own details. Such forays into later art might set one thinking about Macbeth in relation to figures like Prometheus and Faust, by whose audacity as doers of deeds Romantic artists were repeatedly fascinated. They might set one thinking about him in relation to Melville's Captain Ahab, in *Moby-Dick*, whose black, destructive rage against a natural world he cannot subdue is as compelling as it is horrible and as daring as it is pointless. They might set one thinking about Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, as doomed by a single deed of murder as Macbeth, as criminally embroiled in violations of the inviolable, and as obscurely magnificent in his journey to the abysses of nowhere, where even the all-present God of Coleridge's Christianity is blasphemously absent.

In this later world, the greatest drama is not however to be found in Faust plays or Prometheus plays. The great drama of the world towards which *Macbeth's* modern subtexts draw us is the music drama. Even in comedy, such music drama, in the shape of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, gave life to a figure whose compellingly unconditional energy, self-sponsored and unratifiable by any imaginable human morality, leagues him with the violators and extremists of what is normally a tragic vision; but for the greatest tragic exploration of audacious, criminal and wanton violation, committed at the extreme edge of the possible, we must turn to Wagner, to find, in *The Ring of the Nibelung*, primordial offences against the sacred quiet of the world which relate fascinatingly to the 'deed' of Macbeth that put 'a breach in nature'.

There are two breakers of the primal quiet in *The Ring*. The first is Wotan who, as the Norns narrate in the Prelude to the last of the cycle's four operas, *Götterdämmerung*, set going the long chain of fatal deeds and offences with which *The Ring* is concerned. In the quiet of the primeval earth he stood out as 'ein kühner Gott', 'a bold god', and in his temerity he was ready to pay the required price of mutilation of his physical-spiritual self in order to get the power for which he lusted. He was ready to sacrifice one of his eyes, savaging himself as he savaged nature by tearing a branch from the great ash tree and leaving the sources of life to wither.

The second bold disrupter is Alberich. In a kind of reenactment of Wotan's original deed, further down the line of

pollution in the dramatic present of *The Ring* rather than its narrated past, Alberich too acts boldly: 'Alberich zauderte nicht', 'Alberich did not hesitate'. He too is ready to pay in a different kind of self-mutilation, by forswearing love, and he too savages nature by tearing the gold from the rocks of the Rhine and plunging its waters into darkness.

They are both, like Macbeth, bold doers and interveners. They are immensely powerful in will, doggedly resourceful in pursuit of their aims, and capable of sustaining the resulting loneliness. Wotan may be the Alberich of light, 'Licht-Alberich', whose despotism is more or less benevolent and who believes in law, while Alberich is the Alberich of blackness, 'Schwarz-Alberich', who is utterly malevolent and who believes in slave-driving and humiliation. There is an opposition between 'Schwarz' and 'Licht'; but both text and music stress the parallels and connections between the two as well as the combat, and thus concentrate attention on the similarities of all beings, of whatever kind and colour, who disrupt the quiet.

Wotan and Alberich, like Macbeth, tear something from the primeval fabric of things and cut into its wholeness. They seek power in separation of themselves from what Wagner wonderfully evokes in the music of the forest and the spring, the music of unpolluted water and streaming light, the music of the vast, effortless, radiant quiet which precedes the interventions of his two fatal Alberichs. In the beginning was not the Word. In the beginning was the forest, with the great ash tree in it, and the Rhine flowing through it lit with gold. These things were then desecrated and polluted by the doers, caused to wither and darken as the lonely quest for power began. *The Ring* follows the consequences of that quest down the weary but grandiose logic of its unfolding. It contains a great vision of light; and then it contains another, terrible vision of the light seized, and then bent and compacted into the fatal ring of gold while the rest of the world falls into darkness.

That Wotan's mutilation of himself involves the loss of an eye is deeply symbolic, for the brightness of the eye is central to *The Ring's* evocation of the radiant world of light while the loss of the eye's brightness is a key image of the world's darkening. *The Ring* is about the loss of the light, and through it runs an imagery of eyes that shine and then darken, linking verbally all the great light passages in Wagner's music.

Wagner's sunlit world of bright rivers, forests and eyes is akin to *Macbeth's* innocent world of the martlets, the 'delicate' air and the green boughs of Birnam wood. The darkness into which it declines is akin to the murk and perversion of *Macbeth's* 'fog and filthy air'. His profound, sombre vision of how the human mind and will ineluctably wound and pollute the world is in close congruence with that part of *Macbeth* which probes the keywords of 'do' 'deed' and 'dare' in its exploration of the nature of human agency. In both works the primal crime is the interventionist deed of a great and reckless creature. In *The Ring* that deed puts out all sorts of beautiful lights. In *Macbeth* it palls things in 'the dunkest smoke of hell'. In both works it is a matter of stabbing at the beautiful, intricate pattern of things and making thereby 'a breach in nature'.

In Wagner's operas, the primal crime is, as primal crimes are apt to be, of irreversible consequence, for *Götterdämmerung*, the last of the operas, does not sound like a work in which the world is saved. *The Ring* is thus sombre in the extreme, charting the irreversible logic of pollution, the unavailing efforts of Wotan to devise a means of recovery and the heart-breaking failure of Siegfried in the impossible task of redeemer assigned to him by the reckless god.

There is an equal sombreness in *Macbeth*, and an equal, tragic weight in its exploration of the fatality of deeds. It may end in the light, as *The Ring* does not; but while its closing light is radiant and the redemption it brings unforced and believable, our memory of the play includes the dark, uncancelled. In so far as it does, we derive from the play, or from a powerful subtext of it, something like the Wagnerian sense of an irremediable tragedy in the very fabric of things caused by the fact that deeds are endemic to the business of being alive and conscious, and yet at the same time are ruinous in their effects.

Excursus 2: From *Macbeth* Backwards--The Christian Epic

But if *Macbeth's* subtext prefigures a later world in this way, its main text is still traditional and Christian. 'Romantic' element is there, but tracing it involves comparing foregrounded, visible themes from the later works with material from, so to say, the hinterlands and substrata of *Macbeth*. Macbeth is, like Wotan, the bold creature who commits the primal crime, but unlike Wotan he is also a treacherous 'butcher', ugly and black-hearted where Wotan is always capable of creating beauty and splendour, even in the midst of his ignominy and his reckless selfishness. To pursue such a comparison for too long would thus distort and glamorise a character who, back in Shakespeare's own world, tends much more to be regarded without glamour as a traitor and killer.

Shakespeare's world is, as ever, poised on the threshold between the medieval and the modern, and it is time, after this first excursus, to come back to the play's older, traditional side. In many ways this is one of the most conservative of Shakespeare's plays. Its sacred aspects, and particularly its sacred conception of kingship, give it an ancient, tribal quality, with long roots reaching far back into medieval tradition. We must examine these roots to restore the balance between ancient and modern which the play maintains.

Contrary to widespread belief, Shakespeare is normally sceptical about sacred kingship, and the naïve side of *Macbeth* which reveres it is a rarity, if not unique, in his work. In the history plays, Richard II and Henry VI are the two kings most apt to claim divine sanction, but it does them little good. The plays in which they appear are more worldly and less innocent than *Macbeth*. The real problematics of power are to the fore and no symbolic faith in sacred sanctions and taboos is enough to make anyone look or sound like a king, let alone make the kingdom work.

Richard aspires to be regarded as a sacred object, the 'anointed king', with his 'anointed body'; but while Duncan's subjects are sure that their king's body is 'the Lord's anointed temple', so that plunging a dagger into it is sacrilege as well as murder, Richard does not enjoy such unproblematic faith. He lives in a tough world of real politics where Bolingbroke, the secular, hard-headed usurper, is not so much a violator of the sacred as a potent, alternative image of what real power consists in, and the play looks calmly at him, biding its time as to what judgement might be made about the fascinating intrusion of the secular into sacred politics. In the unproblematic, naïve world of *Macbeth*, Duncan is never subjected to the mining doubts about the king's anointed body which are constantly present in *Richard II*.

Henry VI is a much finer and more profoundly religious man than the self-regarding Richard. He is gentle, innocent and pious, the 'holy Harry' of popular tradition, moved to tears by the sufferings of his subjects, while Richard is more taken by the sunset spectacle of his own misfortunes. But that, alas, does not underwrite holy Harry as king; indeed rather the opposite, for such otherworldliness makes him a liability as monarch, and peculiarly inept as a warrior-monarch in time of war. At his best he sounds almost like an early Hamlet, burdened with tormenting insights which more efficient men are spared, and through him Shakespeare begins to explore the *Hamlet*-like intuition that the real world is endemically inhospitable to men of profoundly reflective consciousness.

But *Macbeth* is different. It alone is not concerned with the problematics of real power. It alone defers to the sacred-royal imagery and sets upon the stage a living example of the divinity of kingship without subjecting him to sceptical analysis. 'The royal play of *Macbeth*', as H.N. Paul's study calls it, chooses to eschew Shakespeare's normal ironies about the anointed king. It remakes the old fiction and gives unique life to its traditional images. It asks no tormenting questions about the pragmatic efficacy of such a king but uses him instead as a symbol, an inalienable centre of solidarities and loyalties so basic that no questions or problematics arise. Murdering him is like striking at one of the elements of life itself. It is like murdering sleep, chief nourisher at life's feast.

No other Shakespearian king has this sort of status, more like a Prince of God than a leader of men. *King Lear*, as usual, shares something of this *Macbeth* quality; but, again as usual, it mingles it with other things and thus complicates what in *Macbeth* is simple. There is a moment in *King Lear* when the loyal, traditionally-minded Gloucester is horrified to think that Goneril will 'rash boarish fangs' in Lear's 'anointed flesh'. It is a very *Macbeth*-like image, with the same sense of sacrilegious savagery as attaches to the 'gash'd stabs' in Duncan's body. But even in *King Lear* the image of the king as divine is far less fundamental than it is in *Macbeth*, and plenty of problematic questions are asked about the highly fallible individual who is by no means always given sacred overtones.

Macbeth alone guards its naïvety, its visionary simplicity and its radiant perception of a noble, heightened world, utterly distinct from the blackness which Macbeth's crime brings. One fumbles for words, but there is something of what Nietzsche called the 'Apollonian' about it, with a constant breath of the eternal in its images of nature, order and pleasure.

In this sense *Macbeth* is the least modern of all Shakespeare's political plays. Far from sending us forward to Wotan, Alberich, Prometheus, Faust or Giovanni, where a later world gave so much of its imagination to the solitary disrupter, it sends us back to an earlier art and an earlier world, where one of the literatures of the Christian Middle Ages regarded solitary disrupters as criminal deviants and gave its imagination almost exclusively to the settled world they betrayed. There is another, ancient side to *Macbeth* which relates closely to the primitive epic of the *chanson de gestes*, the 'song of deeds', that wonderfully naïve, epic literature of kingship and soldiering which knows nothing of problematics or irony and gives heart-whole commitment to bravery, loyalty, and Christian orthodoxy, all embodied in bright pictures of men who are the warriors of God and his King.

In many ways Duncan's nearest literary relative is the emperor Charlemagne from *The Song of Roland*, which was written down in twelfth-century France but dates from much earlier. The hieratic, venerable Charlemagne, white-bearded ('blanche ad la barbe') and hoary-headed ('tut flurit le chef'), is Duncan to the life. He is the symbol of all Christendom, and hence, as far as his poet is concerned, of all that is true, beautiful and humane. His warriors serve him, as Banquo and Macbeth serve Duncan in the early scenes of *Macbeth*, with unquestioning, high-hearted valour. Their world is without hesitation, their poetry without shadows. Bright, tapestry colours sing the deeds of a king and his small, mobile court of warriors. All are untroubled by doubt, as ready as the unpolluted Macbeth to 'unseam' a battle opponent 'from the nave to th' chaps' and guaranteed like him to be called 'valiant cousin' and 'worthy gentleman' for so doing.

In literature like this the verse gives its heart entirely to the collective, with their solidarity and loyalty in defence of Christianity and 'la douz France'. The poetry gives itself without doubt or irony to those who live loyally 'in the hand of the great God', and traitors to this world merit no regard at all. Ganelon, the poem's Macbeth-like criminal, is simply the black antitype to the fineness of Charlemagne's court. Little time is wasted exploring his possible motives, or the psychology of his treachery. He is just 'Ganelon, who committed treason', 'Guenelun, ki traisun ad faite'.

The part of *Macbeth* which is painted in the earlier scenes, when Duncan is alive, has this bedrock sense of loyalty to tribe, brought to life in the poetry of grace and decorum which surrounds the king, and in the unsophisticated, drums-and-trumpets magnanimity of the wounded Sergeant's epic verse. So has the play's ending, when simple, uncomplicatedly loyal men like the Siwards fight with the aid of 'the powers above'. To this part of the play the tragic hero is simply 'devilish Macbeth', and when his bleeding head is brought in against a background of green boughs we witness a scene similar to that at the end of *The Song of Roland*, where the blood of Ganelon is splashed on the green grass, 'sur l'erbe verte ... espant', as the infamous renegade, the 'fel recreant', is torn to pieces by Charlemagne's horses.

This part of *Macbeth* is primitive, assured, and unshadowed. Its tenor could hardly be more remote from those elements in the play which, giving their exploratory, problematic regard to the great solitary rather than the group, send us forward to the lonely sinners of Romantic mythology. Not favourably inclined towards the mighty damned of Romantic tragedy and having no truck with the likes of Mozart's glamorous and brilliant nuisance, it brings the straying modernist to heel by celebrating the ordinary daylight with flawless conviction. This is the rugged, epic part of the play, stronger here than anywhere else in Shakespearian drama, and much stronger than anywhere else in the tragedies. It takes unqualified pleasure in the restoration of things to 'measure, time, and place'.

Back to *Macbeth*--Ancient and Modern

But the truly astonishing thing about *Macbeth* is that both parts of it exist and hang perfectly together, making many long centuries seem to turn on it as on a hinge. It embodies a vision of destruction on the Wagnerian scale and engages a sense of the fatality of deeds which need concede nothing to the great pessimists of the nineteenth century. It gives profound attention to the doomed, the destructive and the solitary, and with that attention goes an emotional regard which is fully aware of their status and greatness. It thus gives the world a hero such as Melville might have tracked to hell, Coleridge followed to the extremities of death in life, or Wagner pursued down the relentless logic of his and his world's undoing.

Yet at the same time it does not break faith with the Duncan simplicities, ending with the beautiful, unforced optimism of its daylight recovery. After all that blackness and blood, all that unstinted engagement with vain striving and doomed heroism, it finds at the end a nearly miraculous sense of liberation and renewal, created with an unemphatic elegance and lightness all its own.

Perhaps only Mozart's *Don Giovanni* has so capacious a double regard, both for the extraordinary solitary who flouts the world and for the more ordinary, flouted people who must live with him and endure his violating presence. *Don Giovanni* is in some ways like *Macbeth*'s comic twin, the supreme comedy of the night's disruptive mischief to match *Macbeth*'s tragedy of its horrors. The two works tell of a passage through the night, the one brilliantly comic for all that a tragic shadow stalks its story at every turn, the other a horrifying tragedy whose story none the less follows the festive-comic pattern of eventual release into the daylight; and the wonderful thing about them both is the apparent effortlessness with which they achieve this balance.

As far as *Macbeth* is concerned, this effortless balance has everything to do with its double allegiance. It belongs equally to an ancient, secure, sacred world and to a modern, problematic one. Its wide embrace is thus given to something very much like the sombre pessimism of the Romantics; and then it turns back to its old, sacred traditions, lifted out of the dark by the Christian-sacred imagery of redemption and, even more, by a pagan-sacred vision of the woods' eternal re-greening.

Source: Michael Long, "Doers of Deeds." In *Twayne's New Critical Introductions to Shakespeare: Macbeth*, pp. 30-53. Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989.

Source Database: Literature Resource Center