

Macbeth

Critic: William Hazlitt

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Criticism about: William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

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[Hazlitt is considered a leading Shakespearean critic of the English Romantic movement. A prolific essayist and critic on a wide range of subjects. Hazlitt remarked in the preface to his *Characters of Shakespear's Plays*, first published in 1817, that he was inspired by the German critic August Wilhelm Schlegel, and was determined to supplant what he considered the pernicious influence of Samuel Johnson's Shakespearean criticism. Hazlitt's criticism is typically Romantic in its emphasis on character studies. His experience as a drama critic was an important factor in shaping his descriptive, as opposed to analytical, interpretations of Shakespeare. In his comments on *Macbeth*, Hazlitt states that the play contains "violent antitheses of style," juxtaposes conflicting and contradictory elements, and follows "every passion" with "its fellow-contrary," an observation that anticipates a number of twentieth-century critics' comments on the play's style, including A . C. Bradley and Brents Stirling . Hazlitt compares Macbeth to "a vessel drifting before a storm," tossed by the "violence of his fate," declaring that he "is equal to the struggle with fate and conscience." In Lady Macbeth he describes a "masculine firmness" and a "strong-nerved ambition." She is, he states, "a great bad woman, whom we hate, but whom we fear more than we hate." Hazlitt also notes that Lady Macbeth and the Weird Sisters are "equally instrumental" in inciting Macbeth's actions.]

Shakespear excelled in the openings of his plays: that of *Macbeth* is the most striking of any. The wildness of the scenery, the sudden shifting of the situations and characters, the bustle, the expectations excited, are equally extraordinary. From the first entrance of the Witches and the description of them when they meet Macbeth,

What are these

So wither'd and so wild in their attire,

That look not like the inhabitants of th' earth

And yet are on't?

[I. iii. 39-42] the mind is prepared for all that follows.

This tragedy is alike distinguished for the lofty imagination it displays, and for the tumultuous vehemence of

the action; and the one is made the moving principle of the other. The overwhelming pressure of preternatural agency urges on the tide of human passion with redoubled force. Macbeth himself appears driven along by the violence of his fate like a vessel drifting before a storm: he reels to and fro like a drunken man; he staggers under the weight of his own purposes and the suggestions of others; he stands at bay with his situation; and from the superstitious awe and breathless suspense into which the communications of the Weïrd Sisters throw him, is hurried on with daring impatience to verify their predictions, and with impious and bloody hand to tear aside the veil which hides the uncertainty of the future. He is not equal to the struggle with fate and conscience. He now "bends up each corporal instrument to the terrible feat" [I. vii. 79-80]; at other times his heart misgives him, and he is cowed and abashed by his success. "The deed, no less than the attempt, confounds him" [II. ii. 10-11]. His mind is assailed by the stings of remorse, and full of "preternatural solicitings" [I. iii. 130]. His speeches and soliloquies are dark riddles on human life, baffling solution, and entangling him in their labyrinths. In thought he is absent and perplexed, sudden and desperate in act, from a distrust of his own resolution. His energy springs from the anxiety and agitation of his mind. His blindly rushing forward on the objects of his ambition and revenge, or his recoiling from them, equally betrays the harassed state of his feelings.--This part of his character is admirably set off by being brought in connection with that of Lady Macbeth, whose obdurate strength of will and masculine firmness give her the ascendancy over her husband's faltering virtue. She at once seizes on the opportunity that offers for the accomplishment of all their wished-for greatness, and never flinches from her object till all is over. The magnitude of her resolution almost covers the magnitude of her guilt. She is a great bad woman, whom we hate, but whom we fear more than we hate. She does not excite our loathing and abhorrence like Regan and Gonerill. She is only wicked to gain a great end; and is perhaps more distinguished by her commanding presence of mind and inexorable self-will, which do not suffer her to be diverted from a bad purpose, when once formed, by weak and womanly regrets, than by the hardness of her heart or want of natural affections. The impression which her lofty determination of character makes on the mind of Macbeth is well described where he exclaims.

Bring forth men children only;

For thy undaunted mettle should compose

Nothing but males!

[I. vii. 72-4]

Nor do the pains she is at to "screw his courage to the sticking-place," the reproach to him, not to be "lost so poorly in himself," the assurance that "a little water clears them of this deed," shew any thing but her greater consistency in depravity [I. vii. 60, II. ii. 68-9, 64]. Her strong-nerved ambition furnishes ribs of steel to "the sides of his intent" [I. vii. 26]; and she is herself wound up to the execution of her baneful project with the same unshrinking fortitude in crime, that in other circumstances she would probably have shewn patience in suffering. The deliberate sacrifice of all other considerations to the gaining "for the future days and nights sole sovereign sway and masterdom," by the murder of Duncan, is gorgeously expressed in her invocation on hearing of "his fatal entrance under her battlements."... [I. v. 69-70, 39-40] When she first hears that "Duncan comes there to sleep" she is so overcome by the news, which is beyond her utmost expectations, that she answers the messenger, "Thou'rt mad to say it" [I. v. 32]; and on receiving her husband's account of the predictions of the Witches, conscious of his instability of purpose, and that her presence is necessary to goad him on to the consummation of his promised greatness she exclaims --

Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,
And chastise with the valour of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round,
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crowned withal.

[I. v. 25-30]

This swelling exultation and keen spirit of triumph, this uncontrollable eagerness of anticipation, which seems to dilate her form and take possession of all her faculties, this solid, substantial flesh and blood display of passion, exhibit a striking contrast to the cold, abstracted, gratuitous, servile malignity of the Witches, who are equally instrumental in urging Macbeth to his fate for the mere love of mischief, and from a disinterested delight in deformity and cruelty. They are hags of mischief, obscene panders to iniquity, malicious from their impotence of enjoyment, enamoured of destruction, because they are themselves unreal, abortive, half-existences--who become sublime from their exemption from all human sympathies and contempt for all human affairs, as Lady Macbeth does by the force of passion! Her fault seems to have been an excess of that strong principle of self-interest and family aggrandisement, not amenable to the common feelings of compassion and justice, which is so marked a feature in barbarous nations and times. A passing reflection of this kind, on the resemblance of the sleeping king to her father, alone prevents her from slaying Duncan with her own hand. (pp. 11-14)

Macbeth (generally speaking) is done upon a stronger and more systematic principle of contrast than any other of Shakespear's plays. It moves upon the verge of an abyss, and is a constant struggle between life and death. The action is desperate and the reaction is dreadful. It is a huddling together of fierce extremes, a war of opposite natures which of them shall destroy the other. There is nothing but what has a violent end or violent beginnings. The lights and shades are laid on with a determined hand; the transitions from triumph to despair, from the height of terror to the repose of death, are sudden and startling; every passion brings in its fellow-contrary, and the thoughts pitch and jostle against each other as in the dark. The whole play is an unruly chaos of strange and forbidden things, where the ground rocks under our feet. Shakespear's genius here took its full swing, and trod upon the farthest bounds of nature and passion. This circumstance will account for the abruptness and violent antitheses of the style, the throes and labour which run through the expression, and from defects will turn them into beauties. "So fair and foul a day I have not seen," &c. "Such welcome and unwelcome news together." "Men's lives are like the flowers in their caps, dying ere they sicken." "Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under it" [I. iii. 38, IV. iii. 138, IV. iii. 171-73, I. v. 65-6]. The scene before the castle-gate follows the appearance of the Witches on the heath, and is followed by a midnight murder. Duncan is cut off betimes by treason leagued with witchcraft, and Macduff is ripped untimely from his mother's womb to avenge his death. Macbeth, after the death of Banquo, wishes for his presence in extravagant terms, "To him and all we thirst," and when his ghost appears, cries out, "Avaunt and quit my sight," and being gone, he is "himself again" [III. iv. 90, 92, 107]. Macbeth resolves to get rid of Macduff, that "he may sleep in spite of thunder" [IV. i. 86]; and cheers his wife on the doubtful intelligence

of Banquo's taking-off with the encouragement-- "Then be thou jocund: ere the bat has flown his cloistered flight; ere to black Hecate's summons the shard-born beetle has rung night's yawning peel, there shall be done --a deed of dreadful note" [III. ii. 40-4]. In Lady Macbeth's speech "Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done't " [II. ii. 12-13], there is murder and filial piety together; and in urging him to fulfil his vengeance against the defenceless king, her thoughts spare the blood neither of infants nor old age. The description of the Witches is full of the same contradictory principle; they "rejoice when good kings bleed," they are neither of the earth nor the air, but both; "they should be women, but their beards forbid it" [I. iii. 45-6]; they take all the pains possible to lead Macbeth on to the height of his ambition, only to betray him "in deeper consequence" [I. iii. 126], and after shewing him all the pomp of their art, discover their malignant delight in his disappointed hopes, by that bitter taunt, "Why stands Macbeth thus amazedly?" [IV. i. 125-26]. We might multiply such instances every where. (pp. 15-16)

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