Introduction to *The Language of Deception in*

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Criticism about: *Macbeth*

[(essay date 1990) *In the following essay, Kaluza summarizes pervasive patterns of hypocrisy, deception, and equivocation in* Macbeth.]

Macbeth is a tragedy with a criminal as tragic hero. For such a tragedy to achieve the right tragic effect, the evil must be balanced by other elements. In *Macbeth* some of the balancing factors are to be found in the very quality of the language of the play. Thus in Acts I and II Macbeth's evil-doing is contrasted with his anguished introspective language, and later, when he becomes a hardened criminal, the horror of his crimes is, paradoxically, both accentuated and alleviated by the magnificence of his language. It is this 'language of compensation' that is generally thought of as the 'language of *Macbeth*.'

But in point of fact there exists also in this tragedy a more muted language associated with double-dealing, hypocrisy and deception. It is used to camouflage evil. It is often characterized by utter simplicity of form and an ability to communicate different meanings by one and the same utterance, depending on the person of the Hearer and the context of situation. As an example, take the following exchange:

Macb.

Fail not our feast.

Banquo.

My Lord, I will not.[1]

III i 27-8

Usually it has been Banquo's answer that commanded attention of the commentators (e.g. Bradley 1958:284) because of its later ironic realization when Banquo's Ghost appears at the banquet to terrify Macbeth. But the same 'cataphoric' method of interpretation (i.e. one working backwards by inference from what follows) yields interesting results also when applied to Macbeth's words. At the time of speaking, Macbeth's utterance communicates to Banquo and to the Audience or Readers of the play no more than a repetition of the invitation to the state banquet to be held that night. None of the recipients, within or outside the play, questions Macbeth's sincerity. Only as the play progresses does the Audience/Reader gradually discover the full import of Macbeth's words: they are meant to deceive Banquo and the attending lords and to indemnify Macbeth against a future accusation of instigating Banquo's death. The Reader infers this--when re-reading the text--from the immediately following soliloquy:

Macb.

> To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus:
>
> Our fears in Banquo
>
> Stick deep, and in his royalty of nature
>
> Reigns that which would be fear'd ...

<div align="right">III i 47 ff</div>

and from the next movement of the same scene in which Macbeth persuades the Murderers to kill Banquo (III i 73-141).

We may observe, incidentally, that the application of cataphoric interpretation may lead to the discovery of new Hidden Meanings, each time we read *Macbeth*. Moreover, an accumulation of certain Hidden Meanings may lead to an intuitive recognition of an undercurrent of hypocrisy and double-dealing.

As another instance of the language that camouflages evil may serve any of the frequent euphemisms by means of which Macbeth and his Lady delude themselves as to the true nature of their thoughts and deeds. "He is about it" (II ii 4) she says innocently, shunning to name 'murder' by its appropriate name. Again the Audience/Reader must infer what she means from the context, and this time it can be done instantaneously, without resorting to a cataphoric interpretation.

Finally, the Witches' prophecies, by means of which these "Instruments of Darkness" deceive the Macbeths, belong most obviously to the language that camouflages evil. As is generally known, the enigmatic prophecies in IV i also need context and cataphoric interpretation to unravel the double meanings they carry.

What all these instances of the 'language of deception' have in common, i.e. the presence of Hidden Meaning, and the Intention to Deceive, may also serve to describe one type of a rhetorical device traditionally associated with *Macbeth,* that of 'equivocation' (cf 2.5). *Macbeth* has in fact been called a 'tragedy of equivocation' (for instance, by Mahood 1957:130) and this kind of locution appears to characterize the play in some unique way, just as, according to Doran (1976:32, 154-82), hyperbole--both as a figure and mode of thought--is typical of *Antony and Cleopatra,* and paradox and dilemma--of *Coriolanus.* It is worth remembering that at the time when Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth,* equivocation or more precisely 'Jesuitical equivocation' was regarded in England as a damnable instrument of political struggle, connected in the popular mind with treason and regicide.

Indeed the studies that have been devoted entirely to equivocation in *Macbeth* are concerned mostly with historical or topical reference (the heading under which they are discussed by Hunter 1966:2-3), though they also offer remarks on the linguistic make-up and the role of equivocation in the play. Huntley (1964) deals precisely with '*Macbeth* and the background of Jesuitical equivocation', but Rogers (*Double Profit in '*Macbeth*'*, 1964), for all his interest in topical matters, views the play itself as riddled with equivocations which create an aura of hypocrisy, duplicity, and double-dealing. His study suggests that equivocation is more fundamental to the design of *Macbeth* than has been so far shown.

Beyond doubt, equivocation in *Macbeth* deserves a comprehensive study that will analyse its linguistic form

and pragmatic function, and its manifestations on other levels of dramatic structure (which, in some measure, are also controlled by language) such as plot, character, imagery, visual representation, stage business, etc. Only with the help of such micro-studies can we appraise the macrocosm of the equivocation-oriented total design of the tragedy with a criminal as hero.

Such matters go well beyond the 'language of deception' and it has not been my task to discuss them here. However, I should like to point out some examples of what may be called 'extended equivocation' which, together with the 'linguistic equivocation' underlies the Construction Principle of *Macbeth*.

The most readily observed is the fact that the Witches' equivocal prophecies meet with the protagonists' responses that shape the plot.

As instances of equivocal imagery, consider "Pity like a naked new-born babe, / Striding the blast" (I vii 21-2) and the Birnam wood coming towards Dunsinane (V iv, V v).

Then there are sound and sight equivocations which are non-verbal. As an instance of the former, take the sound which is a realization of the Stage Direction *Knocking within* (II ii). It occurs after Duncan had been murdered and Lady Macbeth has left to carry the daggers back to Duncan's chamber. The SD *Knock* is then repeated twice in the same scene at strategic points. It also opens the next scene, II iii (the Porter scene), and is repeated just before the Porter opens the gate to Macduff and Lenox. From the fact that the sound is repeated in various contexts it may already be inferred that it carries multivocal or uncertain meaning (cf 2.5). It is only in II iii 23 that the Audience finds that the *Knocking* was executed by Macduff and Lenox as an ordinary means of waking up the household and the porter in accordance with the King's command of last night. In contrast to this 'realistic' reading, the characters (and the Audience) who hear the sound of knocking much earlier, in II ii, are conscious mainly of its Hidden Meaning. Macbeth hears this sound, ominous to him, for the first time when he is alone, without the support of his wife. His reaction is one of metaphysical fear, mingled perhaps with suspicion that it is another of his hallucinations, as was the case with the bloody dagger in II i (a visual equivocation, by the way):

Macb.

Whence is that knocking?

How is't with me, when every noise appals me?

What hands are here? Ha! they pluck out mine eyes.

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood

Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather

The multitudinous seas incarnadine,

Making the green one red.

II ii 56-62

Thus the fear aroused by the sound of knocking leads Macbeth again (after the "Macbeth does murther Sleep" speech) to the recognition of the irrevocability of his crime.

In contrast to this, Lady Macbeth's reaction when she hears the Knocking for the first time after returning from Duncan's chamber, is sober, practical and untinged with remorse. She even localizes the place where the sound comes from:

Lady M.

I hear a knocking

At the south entry:--retire we to our chamber.

A little water clears us of this deed:

How easy is it then!

II ii 64-7

The third *dramatis persona* who reacts to the knocking is the drunken Porter who imagines himself to be Porter of Hell Gate and in this capacity interprets the sound he hears to be the sound of sinners' knocking at Hell Gate. But at the same time he goes to open the gate of Macbeth's castle to ordinary earthly human callers. So his own reaction is intrinsically ambivalent.

Finally, let us consider briefly the interpretation the Audience or the Reader of the play may put on the sound of knocking. Similarly to Macbeth himself, the Audience in the theatre are startled by the first sound of knocking, the more so that it comes after a moment of silence when Macbeth is alone on the stage. The Naive Spectator may read it as a signal that the retribution for the Macbeths' evil-doing is at hand. On the other end of the hidden-meaning scale is De Quincey's famous pronouncement that the knocking marks the re-establishment of life after the crime:

> ... when the deed is done, when the work of darkness is perfect, then the world of darkness passes away ... the knocking at the gate is heard; and makes known audibly that the reaction has commenced; the human has made its reflux upon the fiendish; the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the re-establishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them.

> De Quincey, 'On the Knocking on the Gate in *Macbeth*', 1823. Quoted after Wain, ed. 1975:93.

A superb example of visual (or situational) equivocation is the stage business of Lady Macbeth sleep-walking in V i. It is based on antithetical contrast which may also characterize an equivocation. In her somnambulic state Lady Macbeth is seen by the Audience as neither properly asleep nor properly awake. She has a burning taper with her, because she is terrified of the dark, but she cannot see the light or any physical object of her environment. She rubs her hands trying to remove the "damned spot" which she sees all the time, but which cannot be seen by others because it is not physically there. Her abnormal condition is apprehended by the Audience mainly from the stage business, but her repetitions of "Yet here's a spot" and "Out, damned spot!" make it easier for them to grasp the hidden import of her equivocal behaviour: the change that has occurred in her since her saying "A little water clears us of this deed" in II ii. The observations made by the Doctor and the Gentlewoman, on the other hand, merely explain verbally what the Audience sees presented on the stage:

Doct.

A great perturbation in nature, to receive at once the benefit of sleep, and do the effects of watching!

<div align="right">V i 9-10</div>

<div align="center">.....</div>

Gent.

    ... here she comes ... and, upon my life, fast asleep.

    ... she has light by her continually; ...

Doct.

    You see, her eyes are open.

Gent.

    Ay, but their sense are shut.

Doct.

    ... Look, how she rubs her hands.

<div align="right">V i 18-26</div>

Such explanations belong to old theatrical tradition. Today one is tempted, while reading the play, to 'translate' the stage representation of the type "her eyes are open" but "their sense are shut" into the terms of a cinematic close up, thus placing the equivocal contrast on a strictly visual level.

A measure of proof that *Macbeth* invites thinking in visual equivocations is provided by the stage managers and film directors who introduce visual equivocations of their own, not to be found in the text of the play. As an example I should like to mention Claude d'Ana's film version of Verdi's opera based on *Macbeth* (1987). Verdi's music is not congenial to Shakespeare's tragedy and the following two sequences must have been inspired by Shakespeare's original rather than by the music of the opera. The first sequence shows a closed litter brought to Macbeth's castle. When Macbeth approaches the litter to greet the occupant, only a hand is thrust out for Macbeth to kiss it. The Audience guesses that it is Duncan who in this way has made entrance to Macbeth's castle. The second sequence occurs after Duncan has been murdered and the nobles are leaving the castle. The closed litter appears again in the second sequence and again Macbeth approaches it, in a gesture of leave taking. At this very moment the hand pops out once more from under the curtain. Macbeth and the Audience alike experience a shock: the hand acts as if it were alive. Only on second thoughts is it possible to realize that the lifeless hand was exposed by a sudden swaying movement of the litter. The 'extended' equivocation resides in the second sequence and is of antithetical character; but the first, the 'normal' sequence is necessary to build the contrast between the living and the lifeless hand. Since this is a director's (and not the author's) equivocation, the Hidden Meaning cannot be externalized with direct help of the text as was the case with the sound of *Knocking within* and the spectacle of *sleep-walking*. In my interpretation the display of the lifeless/living hand demonstrates to Macbeth (and to the Audience) not only

the horror but also the futility of his crime.

Finally, let us consider how 'extended' equivocation is used in the creating of character. Without joining the voluminous dispute on the protagonist as a *dramatis persona* (summarized, for instance, in Hunter 1966:9), I want only to point out that Macbeth himself is an 'equivocal character.' Such a statement can be supported by a careful consideration of Macbeth's idiolect, for instance by contrasting his 'language of deception' with his 'language of compensation'. Another method would consist in contrasting other characters' opinions about him. For instance, in I v Lady Macbeth thinks him to be "too full o' th' milk of human kindness," while Lenox (in III vi 22) and Macduff (in V vii 14) call him "tyrant." Both methods, however, would require much space and would take us too far away from our main considerations. I have therefore decided to resort to a shortout of a literary critic's pronouncement. Robert B. Heilman in his paper 'The Criminal as Tragic Hero: Dramatic Methods' (Heilman 1966:12-13) writes:

> The difficulties presented by the character of Macbeth--the criminal as tragic hero--have led some critics to charge Shakespeare with *inconsistency,* others to seek consistency by viewing the initial Macbeth as in some way morally defective, and still others to normalize the hero by viewing the final Macbeth as in some way morally triumphant ... [Even] if intemperateness of *eulogy* or *condemnation* is exceptional, the *opposing impulses* are not altogether reconciled ... [This] disturbing *sense of discrepancy* [is] not evoked, for instance, by Shakespeare's other tragic heroes.

And in conclusion Heilman complains that

> Shakespeare first chooses a protagonist who in action is *worse* than the other main tragic heroes, and then tends to make him *better* than other tragic heroes. ... He ... follows, in Macbeth, the movement of what I have called a contracting personality. This is not the best that tragedy can offer.

(pp. 22-3)

I have underlined those of Heilman's phrases which point to what in my terminology amounts to extended equivocation, first in the process of the creation of Macbeth (Shakespeare makes him *worse/better* than other tragic heroes) and then in the process of reception by critics (*eulogy/condemnation, opposing impulses, sense of discrepancy*). Furthermore, my suggestion is that the *discrepancy* in Macbeth's character need no longer be considered a disadvantage and will become a merit of the play if we look at it from the point of view of the total dramatic design of a tragedy with criminal as hero rather than from the point of view of the individual psychology of a protagonist.

Consider, for instance, the following two tendencies in Shakespeare's presentation of Macbeth, the one opposing the other, and therefore resulting in equivocalness. The first refers to Shakespeare's blackening of Macbeth's character in relation to Holinshed's presentation. When Shakespeare makes Macbeth kill a Duncan who is old, weak, trustful and generous, asleep and defenceless at the time of murder, he changes the facts that he found in Holinshed's *Chronicles of Scotland.*[2] Duncan was in fact a feeble ruler, much younger than Shakespeare's Duncan (of Muir, ed. 1983, reporting Holinshed in *Introduction,* p. xxxvii). But the effect--in dramatic terms--of assassinating such a colourless Duncan would have been 'less terrible, less truly tragic' (Stoll 1963: 187). So, if Shakespeare's alterations do blacken Macbeth's character, their main function is dramatic, not psychological.

The second tendency is to elevate and ennoble Macbeth. This is, executed, among others, through what generations of critics have called 'a poet that is in Macbeth.'[3] Thus Bradley writes that Macbeth has 'the imagination of a poet' (Bradley 1958:295), and Evans calls him 'the most poetical of [Shakespeare's] characters' (Evans 1966:160). Of course, from the point of view of the design of the tragedy, Macbeth can be held no more a good poet than Hamlet a poor poet on the account of being "ill at these numbers" as he himself says (*Hamlet* II ii 119). The poetry spoken by protagonists in *poetic drama* is an element of the whole design of the drama. Macbeth's introspective guilt-ridden poetry is not only a manifestation of his individual human psyche. It is a compensatory dramatic device by means of which Shakespeare makes it possible for a criminal whose character he has intentionally blackened to be a tragic hero of appropriate grandeur. In this way, protagonist and drama are integrated in their dependence on the 'extended' equivocation, which they share.

Notes

1. All quotations of the text of *Macbeth* come from Kenneth Muir's Arden edition of the play, 1983, first published in 1962.

2. The *Reading List* attached to G. B. Harrison's edition of Shakespeare's *Complete Works* (1952: 1664) gives the following bibliographic data. Holinshed, Raphael, *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland,* 2 vols., London 1577; 2nd edition 1587. Copious extracts of the passages Shakespeare used are given in *Shakespeare's Holinshed,* ed. by W. G. Boswell-Stone, London, 1896, and in *Holinshed's Chronicles used in Shakespeare's Plays,* ed. by A. and J. Nicoll, Dutton (Everyman), 1927.

3. 'This view, thus generally stated, is not original, but I cannot say who first stated it', Bradley 1958:295, note 1.

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