

"The Many Faces of *Macbeth*"

Critic: Maynard Mack

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Criticism about: *Macbeth*

[(essay date 1981) *In the following essay, originally published in 1981, Mack examines many of the central thematic concerns of Macbeth, including usurpation, witchcraft, pride, crime, the blurring of the real and unreal, the collapse of community, and final judgment.*]

1

After *Lear*, *Macbeth* seems at first glance a simple play. Seen in one light, it simply tells the brutal story of a Scottish usurper whom Shakespeare had read about in one of his favorite source-books, Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*. Holinshed's Macbeth is an arresting figure, not so much because of his murderous career, which seems to have been only a little in excess of the habits of his time, as because he is said during his first ten years of rule to have "set his whole intention to mainteine justice," and during his last seven years to have begun to "shew what he was, instead of equitie practising crueltie."

Shakespeare, though no historian, knew that no man wears a mask of virtue for ten years, only to reveal that he was "really" a butcher all along. This oddity in Holinshed's conception may have challenged him to speculations that ended in a conception of his own: that of an heroic and essentially noble human being who, by visible stages, deteriorates into a butcher. The great crimes of literature, it has been well said, are mostly committed by persons who would ordinarily be thought incapable of performing them like Othello, like Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, like Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. The hero that Shakespeare draws in *Macbeth* is no exception. At the beginning of the play, even the thought of murder stands his hair on end, makes his heart knock at his ribs (1.3.135). By the end, he is too numb to care. His wife's death scarcely stirs him, and the wild cry of her women in their grief only reminds him of what he can no longer feel:

The time has been my senses would have cooled

To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair

Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir

As life were in't. I have supped full with horrors.

Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,

Cannot once start me.

(5.5.10)

Coming at the play from another angle, we realize that its medieval story of the rise and fall of a usurper has been colored by, and also in some sense mirrors, a number of contemporary interests and events. In 1605, for instance, just a year before the probable date of the play's composition and first performance, came the revelation of the Gunpowder Plot, a plan to blow up King, Lords, and Commons in Parliament as they convened for the new session of that year on the fifth of November. The plot was made known through an anonymous letter only ten days before the intended massacre, and the climate of shock and suspicion that prevailed throughout England, especially London, immediately thereafter has almost certainly left its mark in the play's haunted atmosphere of blood, darkness, stealth, treachery, and in the vividness with which it communicates the feeling that a whole community based on loyalty and trust has been thrown into terror by mysterious agencies (both unnatural and natural) working through it like a black yeast. Several of the conspirators were from Warwick, Shakespeare's own county, and may have been known to him. If so, there was no doubt personal as well as dramatic relevance in such observations of the play as Duncan's "There's no art To find the mind's construction in the face" (1.4.12), or Macbeth's "False face must hide what the false heart doth know" (1.7.82). At the very least, such statements, however they were meant by their author, would have held an exceptional charge of meaning for the play's first audiences in 1606.

Witchcraft, too, is among the contemporary interests that the play draws into its murderous web. Witchcraft was a live issue at all times in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but it loomed especially large in the public mind after the Scottish James I came to power, following the great Elizabeth, in 1603. James considered himself an authority on witches, had published a book on demonology in 1599 affirming their existence and their baleful influence in human affairs, and, in 1604, a year after his accession to the throne, inaugurated new statutes against them. Thus, the whole topic was accentuated at just about the time of the writing of the play.

Except in one phrase (1.3.6) and in the stage directions, the play always refers to the witches as *weyard*--or *weyward*--*sisters*. Both spellings are variations of *weird*, which in Shakespeare's time did not mean "freakish," but "fateful"--having to do with the determination of destinies. Shakespeare had met with such creatures in *Holinshed*, who regularly refers to the supernatural agents with whom Macbeth has dealings as "the three sisters," or "the three weird sisters," i.e., the three Fates. The witches in the play, however, are by no means so unambiguously defined. They have considerable power of insight and suggestion, we gather, but they do not determine a man's will, and Macbeth never blames them for influencing what he has done, only for tricking him into a false security. They are presented to us, moreover, in a climate of suggestion that is fully as demeaning as it is aggrandizing. If they belong with one part of their nature to an extra-human world of thunder, lightning, rain, and demonic powers (1.1), and, as Banquo says, "look not like th' inhabitants o' th' earth" (1.3.41), they have nevertheless some of the attributes of defeminized old women; their familiar demons assume shapes no more terrible than those of cat and toad; and the actions with which they identify themselves--killing swine, wheedling chestnuts, and persecuting the "rump-fed ronyon's" (1.3.6) sea-going husband--show a pettishness and spite that seem perhaps more human than diabolical.

On the other hand, the weyard sisters are obviously more impressive than the ordinary garden variety of seventeenth-century witch, the village crone or hallucinated girl, and their collusion with such dire agents as Lady Macbeth calls upon (1.5.45) and Macbeth invokes (4.1.50) seems unmistakable. The obscurity with which Shakespeare envelops their nature and powers is very probably deliberate, since he seems to intend them to body forth, in a physical presence on stage, precisely the mystery, the ambiguity, the question mark

(psychological as well as metaphysical) that lies at the root of human wrong-doing, which is always both local and explicable, universal and inexplicable, like these very figures. In their relations with Macbeth, they are obviously objective "real" beings with whom he talks. Yet they are also in some sense representative of potentialities within him and within the scheme of things of which he is a part.

What is emphatically to be noticed is that the weyrd sisters do not suggest Duncan's murder; they simply make a prediction, and Macbeth himself takes the matter from there. The prediction they make, moreover, is entirely congenial to the situation, requires no special insight. Having made himself in this last battle more than ever the great warrior-hero of the kingdom and its chief defender, what more natural than that the ambitious man should be moved in the flush of victory to look ahead, hope, imagine? Hence, while recognizing the objectivity of the sisters as diabolical agents, we may also look on them as representing the potentialities for evil that lurk in every success, agents of a nemesis that seems to attend always on the more extreme dilations of the human ego.

Besides the lore of witchcraft, in which he was intensely interested, and the great Plot which threatened to destroy him together with his Parliament, James's own tenure of the English throne seems to be celebrated, at least obliquely, in Shakespeare's play. His family, the Stuarts, claimed descent from Banquo, and it is perhaps on this account that Shakespeare departs from Holinshed, in whose narrative Banquo is Macbeth's accomplice in the assassination of Duncan, to insist on his "royalty of nature" and the "dauntless temper of his mind" (3.1.50). Many critics see a notable compliment to James in the dumb show of kings descending from Banquo ("What, will the line stretch out to th' crack of doom?" (4.1.117) which so appalls Macbeth at the cave of the weyrd sisters. Some commentators, influenced by its Scottish background and its use of a story involving one of James's reputed ancestors, go so far as to suppose that the play was actually composed for a royal occasion and conceivably by royal command. What is certain, in any case, is that the playwright has effectively transformed a remote and primitive story--which at first looks simple--into a theatrical event tense with contemporary relevance. The almost routine assassination of a weak, good-natured king in Holinshed becomes, in Shakespeare's hands, a sensitive and terrifying exposition of the abyss a man may open in himself and in the entire sum of things by a naked act of self-will.

3

This brings us to the third face of *Macbeth*, its character as parable, as myth. For all its medieval plot and its framework of Jacobean feeling, the play has a universal theme: the consuming nature of pride, the rebellion it incites to, the destruction it brings. In some ways Shakespeare's story resembles the story of the Fall of Satan. Macbeth has imperial longings, as Satan has; he is started on the road to revolt partly by the circumstance that another is placed above him; he attempts to bend the universe to his will, warring against all the bonds that relate men to each other--reverence, loyalty, obedience, truth, justice, mercy, and love. But again, as in Satan's case, to no avail. The principles his actions violate prove in the event stronger than he, knit up the wounds he has made in them, and combine to plunge him into an isolation, or alienation, that reveals itself (not only in social and political but in psychological terms) to be a kind of Hell. As Milton's Satan was to put it later in *Paradise Lost*: "Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell."

In other ways, the story Shakespeare tells may remind us of the folktale of which Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* is one version: a man sells his soul to the Devil in return for superhuman powers only to find in the end that his gains are illusory, his losses unbearable. It is true, of course, that Shakespeare's hero is attracted by the Scottish throne, not by magic or by power in general; and it is likewise true that he signs no formal contract like his predecessor. Still, the resemblances remain. Macbeth does open his mind to diabolical promptings:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a 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?

(1.3.130)

He imagines himself, moreover, to have received immunities of a superhuman sort:

I will not be afraid of death and bane
Till Birnam Forest come to Dunsinane.
But swords I smile at, weapons laugh to scorn,
Brandished by man that's of a woman born.

And he finds in the end, like Faustus, that his gains amount to nothing:

I have lived long enough. My way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
Curses not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.

(5.3.22)

The very immunities he thought had been guaranteed him prove deceptive, for Birnam Wood comes to high Dunsinane after all, and so does an antagonist not born of woman in the usual sense. In the end, Macbeth knows that what he had begun to fear after Duncan's murder, in the course of meditating Banquo's, is true: he

has given his soul to the Devil to make the descendants of Banquo, not his own descendants, kings. All his plans have become instrumental to a larger plan that is not his:

They hailed him father to a line of kings.
Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown
And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,
Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand,
No son of mine succeeding. If't be so,
For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind;
For them the gracious Duncan have I murdered,
Put rancors in the vessel of my peace
Only for them, and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common enemy of man
To make them kings--the seeds of Banquo kings.

(3.1.60)

4

As Freud noticed long ago, the two Macbeths complement each other in their reactions to the crime. Her fall is instantaneous, even eager, like Eve's in *Paradise Lost*; his is gradual and reluctant, like Adam's. She needs only her husband's letter about the weyward sisters' prophecy to precipitate her resolve to kill Duncan. Within an instant she is inviting murderous spirits to unsex her, fill her with cruelty, thicken her blood, convert her mother's milk to gall, and darken the world "That my keen knife see not the wound it makes" (1.5.50). Macbeth, in contrast, vacillates. The images of the deed that possess him simultaneously repel him (1.3.130, 1.7.1). When she proposes Duncan's murder, he temporizes: "We will speak further" (1.5.69).

Later, withdrawing from the supper they have laid for Duncan to consider the matter alone, he very nearly decides not to proceed. It takes all her intensity, all her scorn of what she wrongly chooses to call unmanliness, to steel him to the deed. Throughout this first crime, we notice, it is she who assumes the initiative and devises what is to be done (1.5.64, 1.7.60). Yet we would certainly be wrong to see her as monster or fiend. On the contrary, she is perhaps more than usually feminine. She is conscious of her woman's breasts, her mother's milk (1.5.45); knows "How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me" (1.7.55); and, when she thinks to carry out the murder herself, fails because the sleeping King too much reminds her of her father (2.2.12). We may infer from this that she is no strapping Amazon; Macbeth calls her his dearest "chuck" (3.2.45), and she speaks, when sleep-walking, of her "little hand" (5.1.48). Thus such evidence as there is suggests that we are to think of her as a womanly woman, capable of great natural tenderness, but one who, for the sake of her husband's advancement and probably her own, has now wound up her will

almost to the breaking point.

An equally important contrast between the two Macbeths appears sharply in the scene following the murder, one of the most powerful scenes that Shakespeare ever wrote. Their difference of response at this point is striking--not only because he is shaken to the core and cannot conceal it, whereas she shows an iron discipline throughout, but also because his imagination continues as in the past to be attuned to a world of experience that is closed to her. That world is visionary and even hallucinatory, we can readily see, but at the same time, it is the mark of a keener moral sense, a fuller consciousness of the implications of what they have done, than she possesses.

The difference between his and her responses is related to a form of double vision that extends throughout the play. Shakespeare establishes for us from the beginning one perspective on his story that is symbolic and mythical, a perspective that includes both the objective weyward sisters, on the one hand, and the subjective images of horror and retribution that rise like smoke from Macbeth's protesting imagination, on the other. The play also establishes, as a second perspective, the ordinary historical world of Scotland, where Duncan is king, Macbeth becomes king, Malcolm will be king, and the witches are skinny old women with beards. In general, Macbeth enacts his crimes in the historical world, experiences them in the symbolic world, and out of this experience, new crimes arise to be enacted in the former. To put it in different terms, a force that seems to come from outside the time-world of history impinges on history, converting history into an experience for Macbeth that is timeless and mythical. We are asked to sense that his crime is not simply a misdeed in the secular political society of a given time and place, but simultaneously a rupture in some dimly apprehended ultimate scheme of things where our material world of evil *versus* good and virtue *versus* vice gives way to a spiritual world of sin *versus* grace and hell *versus* heaven.

5

The suggestiveness of Shakespeare's play in this larger sense is inexhaustible. Every element contains lives with a double life, one physical, one metaphysical. Consider night, for instance. Night settles down halfway through the first act and stays there through much of the rest of the play: 1.6-7, 2.1-4, 3.2-5, 4.1, and 5.1 are night scenes, and several more, undetermined in the text, could be effectively presented as such, e.g., 1.5 and 4.2-3. All this is ordinary nighttime, of course, but it is obviously much more. "Thick," "murky," full of "fog and filthy air," it "entombs" the face of earth (2.4.9), blots out the stars and the moon, "strangles" even the sun (2.4.7). Duncan rides into it to his death, as does Banquo. Lady Macbeth evokes it (1.5.48) and then finds herself its prisoner, endlessly sleepwalking through the thick night of a darkened mind. Macbeth succumbs to its embrace so completely that, in the end, even a "night-shriek" cannot stir him.

Or again, consider blood. "What bloody man is that?" are the play's first words, following the first weyward sisters' scene. Like the night, blood is both ordinary and special. It sticks like real blood: "His secret murders sticking on his hands," says Angus of Macbeth (5.2.17). It smells as real blood smells: "Here's the smell of the blood still," says Lady Macbeth (5.1.47) hopelessly washing. Yet it finally covers everything Macbeth has touched, in ways both qualitative and quantitative that real blood could not. The sleeping grooms are "all badged" with it, their daggers "Unmannerly breeched with gore." Duncan's silver skin is "laced" with it (2.3.108), Banquo's murderer has it on his face (3.4.14), Banquo's hair is "boltered" with it (4.1.123), and Macbeth's feet are soaked in it (3.4.136). Perhaps the two most bloodcurdling lines in the play, when expressively spoken, are Macbeth's lines after the ghost of Banquo is gone: "It will have blood, they say: blood will have blood" (3.4.122) and Lady Macbeth's moaning cry as she washes and washes: "Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" (5.1.35).

Macbeth's style of speech in the play has something of this same double character. The startling thing about much of it is its inwardness, as if it were spoken not with the voice at all, but somewhere deep in the arteries and veins, communing with remote strange powers.

Light thickens, and the crow

Makes wing to th' rooky wood;

Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,

Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse.

(3.2.50)

Between the two battles that open and close the play, Macbeth's language seems frequently to lean away from the historical world of Scotland toward the registering of such experience as rises, timeless and spaceless, both from within his mind and beyond it. Thence come thronging those images that "unfix my hair" (1.3.135), the presences that will "blow the horrid deed in every eye" (1.7.24), the voices that cry "Sleep no more!" (2.2.34), the ghost that returns from the dead to mock him for what he has failed to achieve, and the apparitions that are called with great effort from some nether (but also inner) world only to offer him the very counsels that he most wants to hear.

These continuous blurrings of the "real" with the "unreal," intrusions of what is past and supposedly finished into the present (Banquo's ghost, 3.4) and even into the theoretically still formless future (Banquo's descendants, 4.1), provide an appropriate sort of environment for Macbeth and his wife. Lady Macbeth is easily "transported," we learn from her first words to her husband, "beyond This ignorant present" to feel "The future in the instant" (1.5.54). In a similar way, Macbeth's imagination leaps constantly from what is now to what is to come, from the weyrd sisters' prophecy to Duncan's murder, from being "thus" to being "safely thus" (3.1.48), from the menace of Banquo to the menace of Macduff, and from a today that is known to an unknown "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow" (5.5.19). Shakespeare vividly records in these ways the restlessness of the Macbeths' ambition and at the same time the problem that ambition, like every other natural urge to self-realization, poses for human beings and their relationships to each other.

6

To understand this problem in the dramatic and poetic terms Shakespeare gives it, it is helpful to look at two of the play's most often noticed features. One is feasting. Macbeth withdraws from the supper he has laid for Duncan to weigh the arguments for killing him (1.7). The entertainment, which he has himself ordered, marks his adherence to the community of mutual service that we find implied in the scene at Duncan's court (1.4). Here is a society, we realize, that depends on thane cherishing king--"The service and the loyalty I owe," Macbeth tells Duncan, "In doing it pays itself"--and on king cherishing thane: "I have begun to plant thee," Duncan assures Macbeth, "and will labor To make thee full of growing" (1.4.28). When Macbeth withdraws, therefore, we see him retreating from the shared community of the supper that he has provided for Duncan and the other thanes into the isolation that his intended crime against that community implies. Once he has withdrawn and his withdrawal is sealed by murder, he can never rejoin the community he has ruptured. This he discovers at the feast in 3.4, when the ghost of Banquo preempts his place. The only community left him after this is the community of dark powers we see him appealing to in 4.1, where the weyrd sisters dance

about a hell-broth (also a feast?) of dislocated fragments. After 3.4, we never see Macbeth in the company of more than one or two other persons, usually servants, and in the last act his forces ebb inexorably away till there is only himself. Similarly, and with similar implications, after 3.4 we never see Macbeth and his wife together. Instead of being united by the crime, they are increasingly separated by it, she gradually lost in the inner hell that she finds so "murky" in the sleepwalking scene, he always busier in the outer hell that he has made Scotland into.

The other much commented on feature is children. Four children have roles in the play: Donalbain, Malcolm, Fleance, and the son of Macduff. Two children are among the apparitions raised by the weyward sisters in 4.1: "a Bloody Child" and "a Child Crowned, with a tree in his hand." Allusions to children occur often. We hear of the child or children Lady Macbeth must have sometime had (1.7.54), of the son Macbeth wishes he had now to succeed him (3.1.64), and of pity, who comes "like a naked new-born babe Striding the blast" to trumpet forth Macbeth's murderous act till "tears shall drown the wind" (1.7.21). Plainly, in some measure, all these "children" relate to what the play is telling us about time. Macbeth, in his Scottish world (though not in his demonic one), belongs like the rest of us to a world of time: he has been Glamis, he is Cawdor, and he shall be (so the weyward sisters predict) "King hereafter" (1.3.50). The crux, of course, is *hereafter*. Macbeth and his wife seek to make hereafter now, to wrench the future into the present by main force, to master time. But this option, the play seems to be saying, is always disastrous for human beings. The only way human beings can constructively master time is Banquo's way, letting it grow and unfold from the present as the Stuart line of kings is to grow and unfold from Fleance. The more Macbeth seeks to control the future, the more it counters and defeats him (in Fleance, Donalbain, Malcolm, the bloody child, the crowned child) and the more he is himself cut off from its creative unfolding processes--having *had* children we are told, but having now only a "fruitless" crown, a "barren" scepter. "No son of mine succeeding" (3.1.64).

Toward the play's end, Malcolm and his soldiers move in on Dunsinane with their "leavy screens" (5.6.1), and very soon after this Macduff, the man who "was from his mother's womb Untimely ripped," meets Macbeth (5.8), slays him, then reappears with his head fixed on a pike. What did Shakespeare intend us to make of this? All that can be said for certain is that the situation on stage in these scenes has some sort of allusive relation to the three apparitions that were summoned at Macbeth's wish by the weyward sisters. The first was an armed head--matched here at the play's end, apparently, by Macbeth's armed head on a pike. The second was a bloody child, who told him that none of woman born could harm him. This child is evidently to be associated with Macduff. The third apparition was a crowned child holding a tree--an allusion, we may suppose, to Malcolm, child of Duncan, who is soon to be crowned King, who is part of the future that Macbeth has tried in vain to control, and who now with his men, holding the green branches of Birnam Wood, seems calculated to remind us of the way in which Nature, green, fertile, "full of growing," (1.4.29) moves inexorably to "overgrow" a man who has more and more identified himself with death and all such destructive uses of power as the armed head suggests.

If these speculations are at all well founded, what takes place in the final scenes is that a kind of Living Death, a figure who has alienated himself from all the growing processes, goes out to war encased in an armor that he believes to be invulnerable on the ground that nothing in the scheme of nature, nothing born of woman, can conquer Death. But he is wrong. Death can always be conquered by the bloody child, who, being ripped from the womb as his mother lay dying, is indicative of the life that in Nature's scheme of things (like the green leaves in Birnam Wood) is always being reborn from death.

To leave the play on this abstract and allegorical plane, however, is to do it wrong. What comes home most sharply to us as we watch these last scenes performed is the twistings and turnings of a ruined but fascinating human being, a human being capable of profound even if disbalanced insights, probing the boundaries of our common nature ever more deeply in frantically changing accesses of arrogance and despair, defiance and cowardice, lethargy and exhilaration, folly and wisdom. Underscoring this, we have the succession of abrupt changes from place to place, group to group, and speaker to speaker that marks scenes 2 to 8 in Act 5, an unsettling discontinuity which does much to dramatize our sense of a kingdom coming apart at the seams. In the background, too, we hear the gradually swelling underbeat of the allied drums, called for by the stage directions in 5.2, 4, 6, and 8, and audible elsewhere if the director desires. This gives a sensory dimension to the increasing prosperity of Malcolm's cause, and can be made particularly dramatic and significant in 5.5. Here, following the scene's opening, we hear Macbeth's drums for the only time in the play. Then comes the famous soliloquy, where he assures us that life is an empty fraud, a "tale told by an idiot." If, at the close of this, when the door to Dunsinane opens to admit the messenger bearing the news of Birnam Wood, we hear again in the distance the steady beat of the allied drums signifying the existence of a very different point of view about the value of life, the impact is powerful.

Perhaps the most telling sensory effect in these final scenes is the call of trumpets. We hear them first on the appearance of Macduff, whose command may remind us of Macbeth's earlier prognostication about "heaven's cherubin" riding the winds and blowing the fame--or infamy--of the murder of Duncan through the whole world:

Make all our trumpets speak, give them all breath,

Those clamorous harbingers of blood and death.

(5.6.9)

We then hear their alarums with the next entry of Macduff, who is now searching for Macbeth, and again with the exit of Malcolm; alarums once more when Macduff and Macbeth begin to fight and when they go fighting off stage; and finally, three massed flourishes of trumpets, one as Malcolm enters after the sounding of retreat, a second as Macduff and the other thanes hail Malcolm king, and a third as all go out, Macbeth's head waving somberly on Macduff's spear (5.8.35). The former age has been wiped away and the new age inaugurated, fittingly, to the sound of the trumpets of a Judgment.

All this, we understand, is as it must be. Alike as ruler and man, Macbeth has been tried and found wanting. Yet we realize, as we hear Malcolm speak of "this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen" (5.8.69)--and we realize it all the more because of these last scenes, in which a great man goes down fighting, bayed around by enemies external and internal, natural and even supernatural, committed to the Father of Lies but taking the consequences like a man--how much there is that judgment does not know, and how much there is that, through Shakespeare's genius, we do.

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