"Macbeth and the Moral Scale of Tragedy"

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[(essay date 1964) *In the following essay, Zitner comments on Shakespeare's ability to present the numerous evil acts perpetrated by Macbeth without letting his tragedy degrade to the level of melodrama.*]

The nemesis of tragic drama is not comedy--which also rests on a doubt of human powers--but melodrama. Melodrama reduces our sinful excellence to an unmixed, therefore untestable and unalterable, criminality or virtue. And its "happy" outcome arouses, not fear or pity--which comedy parries only with lucky blunders--but recklessness and self-approval, for melodrama assumes that men can act wholly outside evil, and so triumph over it without a self-defeat. Melodrama is what happens when tragic writing tires of common humanity.

The "story" of *Macbeth* conspicuously invites such a fatigue. Its murders are gross and frequent, and, though realized or alluded to in passionate language, they are not humanized by the passional. But the "story" is not a given against which Shakespeare had to contend. As Arthur Quiller-Couch pointed out, "instead of extenuating Macbeth's criminality [which the sources of the story gave him warrant to do] Shakespeare doubles and redoubles it." He omits almost every event Holinshed's *Chronicle* suggests for pardoning Macbeth, and grasps much that imagination can provide to damn him. Yet the play is tragedy, not melodrama; we are never thoroughly alienated from its protagonist. How Shakespeare went about preventing this alienation is the particular form of the play: its representation of some events, its narration of others; its use in some scenes of agents rather than the protagonist himself; its evocation of witchcraft and prophecy to magnify the power of evil; its suggestion of passional motives through Macbeth's relation to his wife. Above all, in maintaining what has been called Macbeth's "unrealistic" sensitivity--his "normal" reactions--to crimes that "should" harden him, Shakespeare joins his protagonist to common humanity. But this has been pointed out before, and it is useless to ballast arguments that already sink under agreement. Rather one ought to ask why Shakespeare chose to work so much at odds with himself, to pile up the very difficulties he would have to overcome.

One partial answer is that this is the essential strategy of art. But *Oedipus Rex* is no less an achievement because Sophocles places the crimes of his protagonist outside the dramatic time of the play. Another partial answer is that *Macbeth* is a virtuoso-piece. But this is more description than explanation. One must account for the choice of materials, and the butcheries of a Scottish tyrant hardly suggest themselves as inevitable matter for a *jeu d'esprit*. The primary answer lies elsewhere, specifically in one of Shakespeare's tactics for keeping Macbeth inside the pale of humanity. At significant points in the play he lowers the horizon of behavior against which Macbeth's crimes are to be judged.

There are at least two scenes which have this alteration of scale as their primary function: the Porter's scene, and the interview between Malcolm and Macduff. The Porter's scene puts before us the pervasive criminality

of men. It occurs immediately after the murder of Duncan (benefactor, guest, King), when Macbeth seems most divorced from common humanity. The Porter's lurching and delay remind us that no Lady Macbeth, no conspiring evil, is needed to transform "memory, the warder of the brain," into a "fume," disarming duty. Man's nature, "uncultivated," is a ready accessory to the fact of evil. But this is not the most relevant point of the scene. "If a man were porter of hell gate [says the Porter] he should have old turning of the key," "old" here meaning tiresomely frequent, and with such a frequency as to call up the final adjective that describes the mortal career. Both Macbeth and his wife have found their way to Hell by extraordinary crimes, but the Porter insists on how many more death will undo. His "Have napkins enow about you; here you'll sweat for it," reduces to the commonplace and domestic a damnation we have been viewing as spectacularly outside ordinary experience. The Porter tells us that he had "thought to let in some of all professions ..." and, concluding the scene, he says, now speaking to us directly: "I pray you remember the porter." We are to applaud him as actor, to tip him as Porter on our own ways to Hell, and to refrain from the self-indulgence of imagining ourselves wholly outside the frame of the play, only observers at a spectacle.

Similar inferences may be drawn from the interview between Malcolm and Macduff. The scene is subtitled in commentary "the testing of Macduff." But the course of the fable does not necessitate this testing. Malcolm does not yet know of the murder of Macduff's children (nor does Macduff), nor does Malcolm know of the development of Macduff's opposition to the tyrant. But what should control the decision to present scenes in drama is not what the characters, but what the audience must know. The marshalling of forces against Macbeth might well have proceeded without the testing scene, though it occurs in Holinshed. To us the motives for an alliance between Malcolm and Macduff are clear enough. So the function of the scene must lie not so much in furthering what must occur, as in specifying how we are to look at it. The testing of Macduff and the manner and extent of that testing prompt us to see Macbeth's crimes against a lowered horizon of human behavior.

Malcolm's first speech:

> Let us seek out some desolate shade, and there
>
> Weep our sad bosoms empty.

has the precise accent of moral enervation we associate with Richard II at the moments he is least capable of rule. (The scene is also a testing of Malcolm as future ruler.) And Macduff's reply, urging action when

> Each new morn
>
> New widows howl, new orphans cry. ...

forces us to raise again the question of Macduff's responsibility in exposing the lives of his wife and children. These lines do not permit us to grant him the extenuation of a lack of foresight. Further, Malcolm's distrust of Macduff exemplifies that general and well-grounded suspicion of men toward one another, a suspicion whose pathology in Macbeth is a matter of degee, not kind. When Malcolm goes on to say that:

> A good and virtuous nature may recoil
>
> In an imperial charge,

he points to a pervasive human weakness. But the richness of the last phrase and especially the ambiguity of

the preposition, allow us to connect this weakness with Macbeth's own fall under the pressure of the idea of power.

The passages following are full of Malcolm's self-accusations. Beside him, he states, "black Macbeth / Will seem as pure as snow." Malcolm's catalogue of vices is significant in what it specifies (a state of mind to be inferred also from Hamlet's similar self-accusations as he "tests" Ophelia in III, i, 121 ff.) but even more significant in its premises as a mode of testing Macduff. Ultimately Macduff "passes" the test; that is, he rejects Malcolm, the self-invented monster, as unfit to rule. Yet we are made to observe how many evils a man of more than ordinary goodness--active, not merely docile, goodness--will tolerate and connive at before he stands fast. Is Malcolm a very "cistern" of lust? Why, then, Macduff responds, he may "convey (his) pleasures in a spacious plenty," covering them with hypocrisy, for Scotland "has willing dames enough." Is Malcolm avaricious, would he destroy his nobles for their lands, set thane against thane for the spoils of confiscation? Why, then, Macduff answers, "Scotland hath foisons to fill up" the desires of such a man.

Just as important as Macduff's willingness to accept Malcolm's vices is the tone of bland hypocrisy this acceptance entails. He quotes copybook maxims at Malcolm: "Boundless intemperance / In nature is a tyranny." "This avarice / Sticks deeper, grows with more pernicious root / Than summer-seeming lust." His stance is that of Macbeth at the outset of the play. The exchange between Macduff and Malcolm goes on so long that it has seemed to some to disrupt the moral alignments of the fable. Many acted versions of the play omit the scene as an embarrassment to the melodramatic sweep of the concluding action. So it is. For what emerges from it is Malcolm's premise (not only his suspicion, but his certainty, of how far "good" men will go in accepting and conniving at evil), and a justification of that premise (how far Macduff actually does go). The scene precisely fixes the behavioral scale of the play, and it does so only shortly before we are to make our final evaluation of Macbeth.

In addition to these particular scenes, there are other means by which Shakespeare lowers the behavioral horizon in *Macbeth*. The stage is almost continually dark; evil spreads, as in the single medium of a pool, from protagonist to agent, from agent to event. The "good" characters in the play (with perhaps one exception), are specifically tainted, and the taint in several well-known passages is generalized to include all mankind. It would be superfluous to say more of Macduff or to do more than allude to the understandable, and perhaps barely pardonable, flight of Malcolm, which finds an ironic echo of the enervated opening speech of the "testing" scene. More crucial are the cases of Banquo and Duncan.

Banquo's initial reaction to the murder is the speech which ends:

> In the great hand of God I stand, and thence
>
> Against the undivulg'd pretence I fight
>
> Of treasonous malice.

But his second reaction, incorporating the near-certainty of Macbeth's guilt, is that if the wiches told the truth to Macbeth,

> (As upon thee, Macbeth, their speeches shine),
>
> Why, by the verities on thee made good,

May they not be my oracles as well

And set me up in hope?

One must first observe here Banquo's confusion of "fair" and "foul" in the verb "shine." But he ventures not only this slight movement into the inverted imagery of evil; he also expresses, as Bradley pointed out, an attitude similar to that of Macbeth in Act I, and a willingness to profit from evil. This last is apparent in the "mouth-honour," of his next speech to Macbeth:

Let your Highness

Command upon me, to the which my duties

Are with a most indissoluble tie

For ever knit.

Though unintentional on Banquo's part, there is a suggestiveness in a later speech that can be no accident of the poet's hand in a play whose imagery of light and dark is so consistently wrought. Banquo has indeed become "a borrower of the night." That Banquo is an active danger to Macbeth is something we do not learn from the man himself. By neither word nor deed does Banquo express clear opposition, though he fears Macbeth's guilt. After the murder his virtue is all in the mouths of others.

Further, though he states more clearly and emphatically than Macbeth the evil possibilities in the witches' predictions, though he warns Macbeth that he intends to keep

My bosom franchis'd and allegiance clear,

before the murder he is not proof against awful images, those "cursed thoughts" he calls on "merciful powers" to restrain. He is not proof against them because these are the thoughts that human "nature gives way to in repose." Moreover, with Macbeth, he shares the mixed impression made on us by the Sergeant's speech in I, ii. Like Macbeth, he has defended the crown in the defeat of the traitor Macdonwald. But like Macbeth's, his eager violence moves the Sergeant to describe him as apparently intending "to bathe in reeking wounds, / Or memorize another Golgotha." We must see him, therefore, not only as a good man whose active nature sometimes resists evil, sometimes not, but as the human being whose nature "in repose" is full of latent evil, and whose activity, even in a just cause, can be morally ambiguous.

If there is a representation of some polar good in the play it is Duncan. That he is murdered at the outset of *Macbeth,* that Cordelia survives until the last act of *Lear,* and that Edgar, Kent, and the Fool function throughout it, are summaries of the difference in the structures and themes of the plays. But Duncan's presence as a behavioral standard is brief indeed, and he has no surrogate. Malcolm is not wholly his successor, nor his equal in spirituality. The testing of Macduff raises doubts about the plausibility of Malcolm's character. Shakespeare tries to keep these doubts from diverting our attention by putting them into the mouth of Macduff.

Such welcome and unwelcome things at once

'Tis hard to reconcile.

But though this speech makes the *scene* appear more plausible, it does not satisfy our questions about Malcolm. The subsequent dialogue on the cure of King's Evil through the royal "touch" only avoids, it does not still, these doubts. The purpose of this passage on the King's Evil is, I think, primarily to convey the tactful compliment to James I that scholars have seen in it. Such a compliment might well have been thought necessary after the peculiar light in which the "testing" scene had placed the character of James' predecessor on the Scottish throne. But to argue that the passage on the King's Evil implies a moral coherence in Malcolm's character is, I think, to miss the effect of its introduction of the idea of transcendental sources of power. Insofar as such power is accorded royalty, it is to be seen as distinct from the human weakness Malcolm exhibits. It is the Malcolm the man in whom we find perfect chastity and truth "difficult to reconcile" with his flight, with the premises of his self-accusation, and with the "testing" of Macduff. And this "testing"--"tempting" is an equally good word--it is no great distortion to describe, inverting Malcolm's words of self-justification, as something like an attempt to "betray / The devil to his fellow." But if one sees imperfect humanity in Malcolm, perhaps one sees it also in Duncan.

Shakespeare has not wholly transformed the politician of the *Chronicle* into the holy image of royalty embedded in so much of the imagery associated with Duncan. Holinshed's inept King shows behind the behavior and language of grace, however faintly. Duncan's speech to Macbeth:

> O worthiest cousin!
>
> The sin of my ingratitude even now
>
> Was heavy on me.

contains not only the dramatic irony Walker points out. It is also inappropriate in the light of the rewards already given Macbeth; its language is far too strong. However, immediately after the praises of Macbeth and the promise of still further honors for him, Duncan "establishes" his estate on Malcolm. The question of elective succession to the throne is not emphasized (for this would tend to justify Macbeth's claim to the throne and thus in some slight measure extenuate his guilt). Yet it is clear that Duncan has chosen *this* particular moment to insure Malcolm's ascendancy. Kittredge calls the choice "an irony of fate." Yet, to quote Kittredge further, Duncan takes occasion to signalize his joy over Macbeth's victories by nominating Malcolm. Is this only "fate" in a play where supernatural agency is so carefully controlled, or is it some slight memory of the ineptness described in the *Chronicles*? Or does the choice of this moment to elevate Malcolm, coupled with the excessive feeling of "sin" and "ingratitude," suggest, however faintly, a moral defensiveness? If this last possibility is going too far, it is not too much to assert that there is a secular dimension in Duncan and that in this he exhibits some imperfection that exposes men to Fortune. Whatever may be said of this aspect of Duncan's behavior, the fact is that the behavioral scale of the play is not set by him, and that against the pervasive scale of behavior, Macbeth, though "black Macbeth," is not wholly alienated from his fellows. The "mouth-honour" of the courtiers, the desperate sadism of the murderers, the "ambition" of his wife, and the minor advantage-seeking of underlings show how much Macbeth partakes of the play's other characters and they of him. What he looms blackest against is the light of his own conscience--a light often feeble in others. So much has been made of the meaning of the "delays" in *Hamlet,* that one must struggle to recall that in *Macbeth,* too, a King's foul murder is long unpaid for.

The behavioral scale of the play is also lowered by "chance" remarks. Most of these, like some already cited, suggest the sinfulness of man's "nature in repose." (A major irony of the play is that for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, once their crimes have begun, it is the active mind which seeks evil; the mind in repose--in dream or rapt inwardness--gropes toward the good of remorse. So do guilt and pity indeed stride the blast of sin.)

But, crucially, before the murder of Macduff's children we learn from a babe's mouth that in this world

> the liars and swearers are fools; for there are liars and swearers enow to beat the honest men and hang up them.

And, brooding over his crimes, Macbeth tells us how "Blood hath been shed ere now ... and since too," and that what distinguishes his offense is that in his case ("now"), the bleeding ghosts return. The whole strategy we have been discussing is summarized in this speech. Macbeth's criminality is not shown as a special horror that alienates him from historical man. His story is unusual because of what unites him with moral man--the anguish of conscience. In part, through this strategy, which required some "graying" of common humanity, some "whitening" of Macbeth, Shakespeare managed to prevent a tragedy from lapsing into melodrama.

But the strategy was not employed merely for the sake of the dramatic problem it solved. Rather, I think, Shakespeare undertook the dramatic problem for the sake of the strategy. Though it insists on the painfulness of Lear's evolution and Edgar's, even *Lear* deals in polarities--in an apparent, fixed good (Cordelia, Kent) and an apparent, fixed evil (Goneril, Regan). We can distinguish clearly the Sanely Vile from the Impractically or Madly Good. In *Lear* we are provided with as many of the comforts of melodrama as a great tragedy may safely contain. And we want such comforts, for the reduction of men to melodrama's mere "forces" mitigates the hard necessities of self-consciousness and choice, which the fable urges. In one respect, therefore, *Macbeth* is more "painful" than *Lear,* despite all Lear's suffering, for in *Macbeth* there are no polar moral figures. Duncan dies almost at once; Macduff's children are mere counters. The play plunges us almost entirely into a world without the narcotic of melodrama; it continually connects the common with the worst, and embodies in that worst our best sensitivities. The crisis of conscience, which in *Lear* was embodied in ethically "mixed" figures, is shown to be operative in the most extreme of men. The play allows us no vileness in which we cannot recognize the force of our aspirations, and no "common" humanity free of what we believe is monstrous. Thus *Macbeth* represents a further journey into the natural abyss explored by the earlier tragedy. Its formula, "fair is foul and foul is fair," refers not only to the deceptiveness of appearances, but to a moral ambivalence that is made to seem permanent. At a time when Bonn, Jerusalem, and Washington alike seek in an Eichmann self-absolving images, it is possibly useful to recall that Shakespeare, conjuring up the visage of Macbeth, saw in it something of Everyman.

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