

16. *Macbeth*

No-one has ever doubted that *Macbeth* is a tragedy and not a history play. Yet a mere summary of the plot could make it sound very like a Scottish *Richard III*. Macbeth and Richard both stop at nothing to get the crown; each wades in the blood of the innocent, including 'friends' and children; each becomes a merciless tyrant; each is described in imagery of the subhuman, the bestial; each is visited by the ghosts of his victims; each is butchered on the field of battle by a pure 'minister of chastisement'. Yet though we never doubt that Richard *is* subhuman, a ravening boar, and welcome his death as we do that of Claudius or Edmund, the fate of Macbeth concerns us in quite a different way. Richard is subhuman because he chooses, like Iago, to stand completely outside the world of moral and spiritual values (which seem absurd to him), and therefore, as he is fully aware, outside humanity:

I have no brother. I am like no brother.
And that word 'love' that greybeards call divine
Be resident in men like other men
And not in me. I am myself alone.

Evil, for him, is an expression of his real and total and permanent nature. Evil, for Macbeth, is something which possesses him, almost from the outside. His tragic fault is that he has insufficient resistance to evil when it presents itself to him as ambition apparently guaranteed by 'supernatural solicitings'. There are 'black and deep desires' those outside forces, in the form of Lady Macbeth and the witches, can work on. Every tragic hero has his tragic flaw, but no other is put under such pressure as Macbeth to allow himself to be utterly driven by that flaw and taken over by the forces of darkness which exploit it. All the toil and trouble of the play arises from Macbeth's doubleness. He is, like fallen man, both foul and fair.

Macbeth has already, before the play begins, coupled hell by marrying Lady Macbeth. Marriage, which should be a creative and procreative bond, is, for Macbeth, his alliance with evil. Specifically, it represents his choice to reject the claims of love, pity and humanity, in favour of reputation, a reputation for valour which requires him to be as bloodthirsty as Pyrrhus:

For 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' chops,
And fix't his head upon our battlements. [I ii 16-22]

Macdonwald is described as

Worthy to be a rebel, for to that
The multiplying villainies of nature
Do swarm upon him. [I ii 10-12]

Macbeth himself is soon to learn what villainies multiply once mercy has been cast out. What Macbeth tries to stifle in himself is no less than his humanity (his humankindness), his soul, the essential feminine component in his psyche. And that violated component turns ugly and sits on his shoulder like an ape. It is Lady Macbeth. It is also Hecate in her ugliest guise, as Queen of Night and Hell. When Lady Macbeth invokes the 'murth'ring ministers' she is simply translating into an extreme form, ritualized as witchcraft, the unnatural values by which Macbeth already lives:

And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty! make thick my blood,
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse;
That no compunctious visitings of Nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th'effect and it! [I v 42-7]

In the language of Duncan and Banquo natural values are expressed in a natural imagery conspicuously absent from Macbeth's speeches. Dunsinane itself is fair:

This guest of summer,
The temple-haunting martlet, does approve,
By his loved mansionry, that the heaven's breath
Smells wooingly here [I vi 3-6]

and is associated by Duncan and Banquo with all things natural and creative:

no juttie, frieze,
Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird
Hath made his pendent bed, and procreant cradle.[I vi 6-8]

But this fair is turned foul by Lady Macbeth:

The raven himself is hoarse,
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
Under my battlements. [I v 38-40]

Hamlet will not step in blood without much scanning of the metaphysical dangers: 'And shall I couple hell?'. Macbeth, the bloody soldier, does not lack resolution, but has the opposite imbalance:

Strange things I have in head, that will to hand,
Which must be acted, ere they may be scann'd. [III iv 138-9]

Yet Macbeth has almost as many soliloquies as Hamlet. He does scan his situation, including the moral and metaphysical implications. Though, unlike Hamlet, he is willing to 'jump the life to come', he could hardly take the act of murder (to Richard always something of a joke) more seriously:

He's here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,

Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath born his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And Pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's Cherubins, hors'd
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.

That he should capitalize Pity implies that he recognizes it (being not deficient in the milk of human kindness) as a moral absolute. That he should then personify it as a naked new-born babe therefore implies that he recognizes also the sanctity of the innocence and vulnerability of children. The main interest of the play lies, it seems to me, in how Macbeth brings himself, or is brought, from this level of moral and spiritual awareness to the state in which he can not only murder Duncan but give to the edge of the sword Macduff's wife and babes.

Macbeth's ambition is not simply to wear the golden round himself, but to defeat time by founding a dynasty, an infinite succession of future kings. To do this, he must, of course, have a child; but in terms of the controlling symbolism of the play, their potential child is exactly what the Macbeths have killed. In dedicating herself to evil, Lady Macbeth calls the spirits to unsex her and take her milk for gall. Both the Macbeths associate pity with 'a naked new-born babe', Lady Macbeth with her own babe, which she would cheerfully pluck from her breast and dash the brains out. However many children she may have had, she is, poetically, barren. And this imagery is later to erupt into the plot with the slaughter of all Macduff's pretty ones.

In his doubleness Macbeth is fully aware of what is happening to him, of his possession by the Queen of Hell. He lives in full ghastly awareness of what he is doing, and what he is about to destroy: which is not only a good man, his guest, kinsman and king, but also, through the symbolism of the crown, his own soul. Evil in Macbeth goes hand in hand with illumination. It is in the very act of giving away his 'eternal jewel' that he realizes the full worth of it. When his knife enters Duncan, Macbeth makes indeed a 'breach in nature', severing a triple bond, the bond of kinsman, subject and host. The unnatural act troubles the whole natural world, as though 'Night's black agents' had flooded through the breach, overthrowing all natural law:

And Duncan's horses (a thing most strange and certain)
Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race,
Turn'd wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,
Contending 'gainst obedience, as they would make
War with mankind.

'Tis said, they eat each other.

[II iv 14-18]

But even more important is the bond of common humanity:

Come, seeling Night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful Day,
And, with thy bloody and invisible hand,

Cancel, and tear to pieces, that great bond
Which keeps me pale! [III ii 46-9]

Like Goneril, Macbeth disbranches himself from his material sap, and consequently withers: 'my way of life / Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf'. This is exactly what the witches had set out to do: to drain him of the 'milk of human kindness':

I'll drain him dry as hay:
Sleep shall neither night nor day
Hang upon his penthouse lid
He shall live a man forbid. [I iii 18-21]

The more giant-like his tyranny, the more dwarfish his spirit.

Though Macbeth says, with Richard of Gloucester 'evil be thou my good', unlike Richard, he retains a clear sense of the distinction, of the value of the 'Good things of Day' to which he must relinquish his claim:

And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have. [V iii 24-6]

Grace itself is defined in similar homely terms:

by the help of these (with Him above
To ratify the work), we may again
Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights,
Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives,
Do faithful homage, and receive free honours,
All which we pine for now. [III vi 32-7]

Macbeth is fully aware of the destructive potential of the forces he conjures up to serve his ambition, of the risks he is taking with the whole future of the world:

though the treasure
Of Nature's germens tumble all together,
Even till destruction sicken, answer me. [IV i 58-60]

But what makes him a tragic figure as Richard is not is that word 'treasure', a word from the vocabulary of Cordelia, not Lady Macbeth. It is no mere butcher who is so fully aware of the price he is paying: 'and mine eternal jewel / Given to the common enemy of man'.

Far from defeating time, Macbeth has given himself as hostage to it:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps on this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time. [V v 19-21]

and the child he has ripped from the womb returns in the form of Macduff to put the rabid boar out of its misery.

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