

"At least we'll die with harness on our back"

Triumph of the Will in Macbeth

by

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Macbeth¹ is the shortest of Shakespeare's four great tragedies and dramatically the most compressed.² Its hero represents an attainment of human mental and physical balance which the other heroes do not — the ancient one of **mens sana in corpore sano**. Unlike the protagonists of the three earlier tragedies of maturity Macbeth is to a far greater extent able to maintain an apparent control over external influence and pressures, and if this control is illusory the fact that he does not know it maintains his integrity as he moves towards his ending, achieving a perfect compromise between mind and body at the instant of death. What he wishes to do, Macbeth is always able to do. Not for him are Hamlet's obsessions with logic, Othello's with honour or Lear's with empty ceremonial. He sweeps interference aside.

Those props, essential for the posturings of Hamlet, the role-playing of Othello and the authority of the earlier Lear, are not needed to sustain Macbeth, who throughout the action of the play remains at the summit of his intellectual and physical powers. At first he values them — a feudal general with dormant ambitions to further ennoblement, which Shakespeare shows Macbeth to have been possessed of even before the audience's first encounter with him on the heath, is clearly a man accustomed to respect and desirous of getting more, even to the point of becoming revered as King of Scotland, an undreamed-of prospect at the time. Already Thane of Glamis, to be Thane of Cawdor and "king hereafter" is a promise which draws him inexorably along the path selected for him by the fateful forces represented by the Weird Sisters, and from the start he reveals himself as ready to accept responsibility for his own actions. The bleeding Sergeant talks of Macbeth as "disdaining fortune"³ in his battle with the rebels (I, ii, 17) and his **sang-froid** when confronted by the supernatural testifies to this view of him as in essence self-contained.

For example, his meetings with the Witches are each marked by his attentive questionings. When he is told his own future (I, iii), he cries out :

Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more,
(70)

but to his dismay they vanish into thin air. He has little time to ponder over what they have said because the news of his first honour as Thane of Cawdor follows hard upon the arrival of Ross and Malcolm. When he again encounters the sisters (IV, i), he demands to know what they are doing and will brook no refusal. When the First Witch asks him "if thou'dst rather hear it from our mouths/Or from our masters'?" Macbeth retorts with bravado :

Call 'em : let me see 'em

and when the three Apparitions present themselves one after the other he tries at every opportunity to interrogate them or to comment upon what has been said to him, finding solace in their second and third assurances :⁴

Sec. App. Be bloody, bold, and resolute ; laugh to scorn
The power of man, for none of woman born
Shall harm Macbeth.

(79-81)

Third App. Be lion-mettled, proud, and take no care
Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are :
Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until
Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane hill
Shall come against him.

(90-3)

First App. Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth!
beware Macduff ;
Beware the Thane of Fife.

(71-2)

Ironically, he lacks sufficient information to interpret the second, although the First Apparition's warning which preceded gave him the clue: a man whom

he fears already. He never makes the necessary connections between the first and second admonitions nor comprehends the symbolism of the bloody Child, delivered by Caesarian section, let alone that of the armed Head, which is his own, to be cut off by this very Thane of Fife. As for the third, he is sure of its absurdity :

That will never be :
Who can impress the forest, bid the tree
Unfix his earth-bound root? Sweet bodements! good!

(94-6)

but he still wants to know what the Witches' reference to Banquo's children may mean. They, Hecate and the Apparitions, respond in unison with one further admonition :

Seek to know no more

but Macbeth persists with his questionings — he will let nothing alone :

I will be satisfied : deny me this,
And an eternal curse fall on you ! Let me know.
Why sinks that cauldron ? and what noise is this ?

(104-6)

He is referring to the sound of hautboys or oboes, heralding the showing of the Eight Kings. He keeps up a running commentary on their revelations which convince him — the Witches are surprised that he "stands . . . thus amazedly". After they vanish with Hecate, he interrogates Lennox, rapid-fire :

Macbeth. Saw you the weird sisters ?
Lennox. No, my lord.
Macbeth. Came they not by you ?
No indeed, my lord.

(*idem.*, 135-8)

but the evidence of his own eyes is good enough for Macbeth. He immediately goes on to demand confirmation of the evidence of his own ears, since he has

heard "the galloping of horse" and when he learns that these noises herald the advent of messengers with the word that Macduff has fled to England he plans his next move without hesitation. Macduff's family must die — unlike Hamlet's, Macbeth's actions are the direct products of his reasoning :

The flighty purpose never is o'ertook
Unless the deed go with it ; from this moment
The very firstlings of my heart shall be
The firstlings of my hand. And even now,
To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done :
... No boasting like a fool ;
This deed I'll do before my purpose cool

(145-9; 153-4)

he tells himself. He does not leap into the kill nor does he try to whip his passions into a frenzy by making bloodthirsty threats. He straightway issues his orders to have primitive retribution exacted upon Lady Macduff, her children and surviving blood relatives. What he does is to blot out imaginative thought, lest he lose momentum.

This shortness of interval between resolution and dispatch is one of **Macbeth's** outstanding dramatic qualities. Macbeth is never shown as lagging in the race between Fate and his own existence. It is true that the audience is able, more or less, to predict what is coming before Macbeth gets to it but as soon as he has worked out a probable outcome, he makes his move. The audience soon begins to realise, certainly not later than III, i, that the newly-invested King is moving inexorably towards an appointment in Samarra and that by trying to outwit Fate he is actually propelling himself along the marked-out path to death. All the while, his strategy narrows and his personality shrinks. With the murder of Macduff's family he pledges himself to carry on a campaign of naked violence ; Banquo's murder was carefully worked out as a necessary adjunct to self-preservation, as the soliloquy of III, i⁵ makes clear :

To be thus is nothing : But to be safely thus.

(48)

He believes that he has the odds neatly calculated, with nothing left to chance or unexplained to his own satisfaction. The fact that he fails to cover all possible eventualities is not the fault of his reasoning powers; he overlooks none of the data with which his intelligence supplies him — he simply does not interpret it fully and accurately. He is not guilty of drawing premature conclusions, nor of perpetrating the kind of errors which Othello and Lear make when they misjudge people's motives and are misled by appearances. Macbeth believes what he is told only after he has had confirmation — his impatient questions expect answers by return, related to hard evidence. When Ross tells him that he has been dubbed Thane of Cawdor Macbeth flashes back :

The Thane of Cawdor lives : why do you dress me
In borrow'd robes ?

(I, iii, 108-9)

and he accepts the statement as being reliable only when he has heard Angus's corroborative account. In the asides which follow he recapitulates the facts in a rigorous logical sequence and concludes that at this stage no action is called for

As he appears to be thus meditating, Banquo looks at him and observes :

Look, how our partner's rapt —————

a word which he has used before — but his observation is less than accurate. "Rapt" here does not imply that Macbeth has been transported to some seventh heaven of ecstasy by this swift bearing-out of the Witches 'prophecy.'⁶ On the contrary, his feet are firmly on the ground and he is calculating the odds :

(Aside) If chance will have me king,
why, chance may crown me,
Without my stir —————

(143-4)

in other words, can he afford to "disdain" fortune or not ?
He decides to wait and see.

Come what come may
Time and the hour runs through the roughest day

(idem. 146-7)

he remarks, optimistically. No urgency is present in his mood, so far. When Banquo breaks in on his thoughts he is less than frank :

Give me your favour : my dull brain was wrought
With things forgotten

(149-50)

though there is an irony here, since his ambition is known already.

Again, his letter to Lady Macbeth in I, v, reporting his first meeting with the Witches, is literally no more and no less than a statement of what in his sight actually occurred⁷ — he calls it “the perfect’st report” and repeats Banquo’s word **rapt** — “rapt in the wonder of it” is what he says but here he can only be recalling one element of his emotions since his transport and calculation could not both exist together at one and the same time. Hamlet undertook investigations to find out if the Ghost spoke truth or not and it took him a long time to reach a satisfactory conclusion. Not until III, ii of the play is he sure in his own mind that Claudius murdered his father. Macbeth judges on the facts in hand and on the evidence of his own senses and, like Hamlet, he has company when the Witches materialise so that the audience is not left in doubt as to the fact of their presence. What is in doubt is his exact reaction — the mind behind the outward mask, which Banquo cannot interpret at this early stage, though by III, i he is certain of Macbeth’s guilt.

Thou hast it now : King, Cawdor, Glamis, all,
As the weird women promis’d; and, I fear,
Thou play’dst most foully for’t

(1-3)

he observes, but by this time Banquo has realised that he also has a motive based on personal gain and decides to leave it to chance and hope for the promised benefits without attracting danger to himself. He keeps his views hidden but in the same scene Macbeth, judging his former partner’s character shrewdly, resolves to have him removed.

Banquo’s murderers, ready to swallow Macbeth’s characterization of him as their enemy, need no further encouragement to go out and kill him. At the close of the scene Macbeth is certain that his problems are solved because he cannot anticipate any further obstacles to his continued rule :

It is concluded : Banquo, thy soul's flight,
If it find heaven, must find it out to-night

(141-2)

which argues that, feeling a greater reluctance, he held a slightly more optimistic view of his victim's posthumous future than he revealed when he was nerving himself up to kill Duncan. Regarding this first crime, he comes to tell Lady Macbeth that

Duncan is in his grave :
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well :
Treason has done its worst : nor steel, nor poison,
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing
Can touch him further —————

(III, ii, 22-6)

a list of earth-bound worries from which the former king has been released by courtesy of Macbeth. His moral scruples, never pronounced, have greatly diminished. Not even his wife is fully in his confidence since he has not told her that he has ordered the murders of Banquo and Fleance.

Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,
Till thou applaud the deed

(*ibid.*, 45-6)

is his response to her request for information about "what's to be done?"⁸ On the "need-to-know" principle, he with-holds his confidence and in the banquet scene that follows, she placates the guests who are astonished at his behaviour when he sees Banquo's Ghost. Like the Ghost in the closet-scene in **Hamlet**, it remains invisible to all but the hero but in **Macbeth** the gory-locked apparition fulfils an entirely different function; it is a kind of "play-within-the-play", but instead of catching a conscience it denotes the absence of one. Its implied threat enrages Macbeth who conquers his fear, shows his courage, and commands the spectre to vanish :

Hence, horrible shadow !
Unreal mockery, hence !

(Ghost vanishes)

Why so; being gone,
I am a man again.

(106-8)

Lady Macbeth eventually learns of her husband's subsequent villainies; she disappears from the action and does not return until the sleep-walking scene of Act V, by which time she has ceased to influence him — beleaguered in the castle at Dunsinane, Macbeth scarcely reacts to the news of her death:

She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word

(*sc. cit.* 17-8)

moving straight into his speech about the pointlessness of human existence and of man's role in things — combining the metaphor of the world as a stage with an existential view of man's contingent existence:

Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more; it is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(*idem* 24-8)

Macbeth is now sure that he understands the positive value of "nothing", an entity which does have significance for him since he is alive to his own being. In **Hamlet** Shakespeare makes skilful use of the concept, for example:

Hamlet The king is a thing
Guildenstern A thing, my lord!
Hamlet Of nothing

(IV, ii, 29-31)

and Lear's reception of Cordelia's answer of "Nothing, my lord" to his question regarding the extent of her love for him shows his total lack of comprehension. This is part of the old king's tragedy, just as it is not part of Macbeth's — in fact, it is rather the source of Macbeth's triumph, which is a dramatic triumph, a victory of role-playing, not a triumph of existence. He chooses, (or rather he thinks he chooses, because by then all he has left is the illusion of choice), to fight to the death and so abandon one form of nothing to be another. His fatal choice was made long before.

What was it then? What is Macbeth's tragedy? It may be simply stated as being his confidence that he can beat the Devil — this was also the basis of the tragedy of Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, though there it had specifically doctrinal implications. Macbeth cannot win but the arrogance of his reason tells him that he ought to be able to deal with any material opposition. His challenge is to Fate but he does not realise at first what he is up against. He asks the Witches on the heath to state the source of their information about him; when he does not get what he wants he brings his own reason to bear on the facts, looks into his own mind, admits his ambition to himself and goes straight to the heart of the matter. Ironically, his seeming ally is fate or chance itself. In the opening soliloquy of I, vii he weighs up the moral problems which the proposed murder of Duncan involve — the claims of tribal or family obligations, the loyalty which compels a subject's allegiance to his lord and the duty of a host to protect his guest each forbid such a murder. Furthermore, Duncan's own kingly qualities would make it unusually hard for a murderer owning a conscience to kill him and in the event such an act would arouse public pity. Macbeth's reign would be short-lived.⁹

His analysis of public morality is sandwiched in between his private regrets — "if it were done when 'tis done..." in other words, is a murder ever finished with, in this world or the next? If he can do it, can he get away with it? He has not yet begun to dismiss Being and non-Being as equally meaningless. Here is Hamlet's mystery, but Macbeth only hints at it. He is saying that if only he

could be sure that the act would be complete with the striking of the blow he would take a chance on the consequences — he does not realise that he will never get rid of the blood — its image remains with him throughout the play. But, before the murder of Duncan, he can say:

... that but¹⁰ this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come

(I, vii, 4-7)

and concludes that his motives are not really complex — he reduces them to pride, avarice and envy, summed up in one image :

Vaulting ambition, which o'er-leaps itself
And falls on the other.

(*idem* 27-8)

The familiar association of the “leap”,¹¹ so prominent in **Hamlet**, is found here too, but it is invariably a calculated spring, lacking the impetus of passion which propels Hamlet. Macbeth's self-analysis leaves him stripped bare to himself and to his audience. His nearest counterpart is Claudius, who shows himself to be aware of his own shortcomings, trapped in his own machinations and similarly quick-witted when countering Hamlet's moves. More crudely, Marlowe exposes the predicament and moral fluctuations of Faustus in the starker terms of the morality play. Neither Claudius nor Faustus repents though both accept the probability of divine punishment. Macbeth does not conceive of escape by means of repentance and his “life to come” must surely refer to the life to come **here**, in this world, for nowhere does he seriously consider any other form of existence. His allusions to divine forces are always vague and he never mentions either God or the Devil — about to enter the chamber to kill Duncan, he murmurs:

... the bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell —————

(62-4)

a harsh judgment, apparently, on a human being whose qualities as a king and a man are never doubted in the play, particularly not by Macbeth himself, who has been generously treated by his lord and says in the latter's defence

... this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels trumpet-tongu'd against
The deep damnation of his taking-off.

(I, vii, 16-20)

Moments later he has decided not to go through with his murderous plan and explains his decision to his wife :

We will proceed no further in this business :
He hath honour'd me of late; and I have bought
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
Which would be worn now in the their newest gloss,
Not cast aside so soon —————

(*idem*, 31-4)

a statement which indicates a fall of moral standards other than those grounded in self-interest. When she upbraids him for changing his mind his only rejoinder is to muse — “If we should fail” — whereupon she assumes, or pretends to assume, that her husband needs to screw up his courage. Courage is a quality which the audience knows Macbeth possesses in great measure — the bleeding Sergeant, Ross and Duncan all praise him for his valour. The highest opinions of Macbeth are uttered by the very man whom he murders and until II, ii, when Malcolm and Donalbain decide to leave the country for their own safety, Macbeth's lofty public reputation is unassailed. Lady Macbeth's taunts are unnecessary ; her husband's decisions are not made in the furious heat of personal provocation.

His determination is to succeed and to survive through powerful action, into which he is driven by an equally strong will. Resolve and courage are balanced, as in Hamlet they are not ; Macbeth's logic is a help to him, not an impediment. He never feels that he is Fate's pawn but almost to the end that he has control and must win through. There is no way out for him but he does not recognise this until the last but one of the Witches' prophecies have been fulfilled and Birnam Wood has in fact come to Dunsinane.¹² Even then he fortifies himself by clinging to one last illusion :

They have tied me to a stake ; I cannot fly,
But bear-like I must fight the course. What's he
That was not born of woman ? Such a one
Am I to fear, or none

(V, vii, 1-4)

and in the fight with Young Siward which follows, he wins easily and this victory
buoys up his spirits — the Weird Sisters are still being proved right :

Thou wast born of woman :
But swords I smile at, weapons laugh to scorn,
Brandish'd by man that's of a woman born.

(*idem*, 11-13)

Even when the defence of the castle has almost been broken and his own
men have gone over to the enemy, leaving him alone, Macbeth refuses to
capitulate :¹³

Why should I play the Roman fool, and die
On mine own sword? while I see lives, the gashes
Do better upon them

(*idem*, 30-1)

and, confronted by Macduff, he understands at last that he has been tricked by
the ambiguity of language :¹⁴

... be these juggling fiends no more believ'd,
That palter with us in a double sense ;
That keep the word of promise to our ear,
And break it to our hope, I'll not fight with thee

(48-51)

but his reason soon works out the alternative for him — to be dubbed coward,
turned into a public spectacle and humbled before Malcolm, the new King of
Scotland.¹⁵

Like Hamlet, he has nowhere to go, but for Macbeth the rest is not silence. To the last he is immersed in the here and now, completely sensitive to his own Being in all its revealed brutality and loyal to the code which requires the warrior to meet death at the highest point of his life. All he has left is faith in his own strengths, physical and mental together, though his mental strength is no longer essential to the continuance of his Being. His last exercise is self-assertive :

Lay on Macduff,
And damn'd be him that first cries, 'Hold, enough !'

(62-3)

is an absolute rejection of cowardice and a total confrontation with his Doom, the **wyrd** of the Germanic warrior.

So he goes out, fighting¹⁶ His death usually occurs offstage. Soon the audience is shown his "cursed" head, a tribal symbol of his non-Being. Malcolm abuses his memory, calling him "this dead butcher", an ironic change from the complimentary epithets of Act I. The audience knows that Macbeth lost all human support even before Birnam Wood came to Dunsinane and hears him regretting that he must forgo

... that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not —————

(V, iii, 24-8)

though the future holds far worse calamity for him than he can expect, clinging as he is doing to the favourable truth of those of the Witches' forecasts which thus far remain unfulfilled. The fact that he confronts death naked, with everything in the world he once valued vanished or eroded is a triumph of the will. Macbeth is no dodger of consequences, takes no refuge behind academic theories, nor does he adopt pretences — morally he moves beyond the pale but because he is always fully aware of what is happening to him and never falters, he is the strongest of Shakespeare's heroes.¹⁷

Of the major tragedies **Macbeth** is the most acutely perceptive of what it feels like to be dragged along by an inexorable Fate towards a prize which turns out to be not really attainable — he is never “to be safely thus”. Realising that from the start he has been the object of mockery he returns to his first role as the battling hero who fixed the merciless Macdonwald’s head on the battlements in the pre-dramatic action, not because he believes that he has any chance left but because to adopt a posture of resistance, shut off his reasoning power deliberately and fight to the death is all he has left to denote his Being.

Malcolm, given to superficial judgments, tried to claim that he himself was to be the instrument of Fate :

Macbeth
Is ripe for shaking, and the powers above
Put on their instruments

(236-8)

he tells Macduff at the end of IV, iii. But in Macbeth’s case the ripeness was not yet at the full; nor does he become, like Lear, over-ripe. He shakes himself and “the powers above”; it is Macbeth who earns the dramatic victory even as he falls to Macduff’s blade.¹⁸

NOTES

1. The text used is the New Arden edition, ed. K. Muir (London 1964).
2. The play shows signs of drastic cutting and its brevity may not have been entirely the responsibility of the author. Act I seems to have suffered considerably in this respect. It is generally believed that **Macbeth** was adapted for performance in the presence of the Kings of England and Denmark in the summer of 1606 — this makes it the last of the four great tragedies.
3. He “disdains” it again in the final scene when he confronts Macduff.
4. The riddling oracle had many precedents in Greek myth and in fact the fateful movement of natural objects was several times predicted as the prelude to an unlikely victory; for example, Polyainos tells the story of the movement of the sea over a distance of five miles and to a higher altitude, prophesied as the sign of the capture of Crisa by the Amphictions during the First Sacred War (**Strategemata**, III, 5).
5. Hamlet’s “To be or not to be” soliloquy occurs in the same scene of that play. Macbeth’s passion is now concentrated on his own worldly predicament, whereas Hamlet’s talk was of suicide and life after death.
6. **rapt**: OED gives trance, ecstasy, rapture, power of carrying forcibly away into a certain state, out of oneself, transported into some emotion. Shakespeare uses it elsewhere, e.g. **Timon of Athens**, I, i, 19; V, i, 67; **Coriolanus**, IV, v, 122, **Tempest**, I, ii, 77; cf. also Spenser, **Faerie Queene**, IV, ix, 6.
7. The importance of the letter is to establish the type of reaction elicited from Lady Macbeth, since the audience already knows what has happened — the individual acting techniques are of prime significance here (see Marvin Rosenberg, **The Masks of Macbeth** (University of California Press 1978), 207f).
8. This marks a turning-point in her career since the question is clearly asked fearfully, a token of the start of her breakdown. Macbeth’s refusal to enlighten her indicates that he has some inkling of this change.
9. Delivery of this speech is very much an individual actor’s reading, and most performances show emotion, underlining inner conflict. A cold cynicism would, however, seem to catch Macbeth’s conscience better, even though he is still technically “innocent”.

10. **That but** — so that only.
11. This Kierkegaardian analogy is less appropriate here than in **Hamlet**.
12. His immediate reaction is to call for his armour, although there is no prospect of immediate hand-to-hand combat.
13. Again, compare this brief moment with Hamlet's long-drawn-out inner debate on suicide; Macbeth thinks of killing himself, then thinks of his remaining enemies and immediately rejects the idea.
14. **cf. Oedipus the King**: Oedipus is contemptuous of the oracles, saying that on existing evidence they are worth nothing; when all is revealed, he wails: "All brought to pass — all true!" and accepts moral responsibility.
15. His first reaction is that his predicament is "not fair" but he soon realizes that he is betraying his code by refusing a challenge. Macduff's tauntings drag Macbeth back to face reality and he assumes his true warrior-self with his feelings changed. His only hope is to win a victory over Macduff — everything else becomes irrelevant.
16. Though the First Folio directions say: "Exeunt fighting. Alarums. Enter fighting, and Macbeth slain" suggesting that the combatants re-entered, though the act of decapitation must have been concealed in some way. (cf. Rosenberg, **op. cit.**, 646-9). Note that Macbeth is never actually seen fighting until the very end of the play's action. (Cf. Martin Holmes, **Shakespeare and the Players** (London 1972), 147-9).
17. He is his own judge and originates the action against him which causes his doom (cf. M. C. Bradbrook, **Shakespeare: the Poet in His World** (London 1978), 185).
18. See my article "Is Ripeness all? Shakespeare's Tragic Vision in **King Lear**" in Volume 2 of this **Bulletin** (1980), 1-18.