

MACBETH AND ME

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is as much poem as play. The essence of the drama is not in the action but in the words and in the unfolding of metaphor.

It begins with the Witches, a brief scene which serves to open up for future use the idea of nature as both good and evil.

Fair is foul and foul is fair:

Hover through the fog and filthy air.

Two-sided nature is the theme of the Sergeant's speech in the next scene, when Duncan and Malcolm ask him to report on the state of the battle. Of 'merciless Macdonwald' he says -

The multiplying villainies of nature

Do swarm upon him.

Nature is as likely to be villainous as virtuous. Hardly surprising that fortune makes no distinction between the good and the bad.

And fortune, on his damn'd quarrel smiling,

Show'd like a rebel's whore.

The first mention of Macbeth comes in the Sergeant's next line.

... brave Macbeth, — well he deserves that name, —

The idea that the phrase 'brave Macbeth' might be another case of 'fair is foul and foul is fair' emerges, not from the action, but from the poetry. Macbeth himself, entering after the Witches have 'wound up' their charm, repeats their words.

So foul and fair a day I have not seen.

When the Witches make their predictions, Banquo says it again.

Good sir, why do you start; and seem to fear

Things that do sound so fair?

And when he asks the Witches what fate has in store for him, the contradictions continue.

Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear

Your favours nor your hate.

The charm is indeed wound up. All that follows flows from the charm, the spell, the words, not from the action. Or to put it another way, the Witches have planted an idea in Macbeth's mind and from that idea flow his future actions. The Witches are a metaphor. They are, as Macbeth calls them, 'imperfect speakers'. Their words are ambiguous, both foul and fair in what they portend for Macbeth.

Shakespeare's dramatic poem is not about overweening ambition or ruthless greed, it is about words and actions. If words, as the expression of thoughts and ideas, are ambiguous and ephemeral, so are the actions they give rise to. Macbeth's most famous lines, the most important lines in the play, which are spoken when he receives the news of his wife's death, are all about words.

She should have died hereafter;

There would have been a time for such a word.—

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,

Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,

To the last syllable of recorded time;

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools

The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!

Like'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.*

The event which follows this bald statement of the futility of all human actions, is the coming to pass of another impossibility, as reported to Macbeth by the Messenger.

*As I did stand my watch upon the hill,
I lookt toward Birnam, and anon, methought,
The wood began to move.*

The reporting of action - battles, deaths - rather than their enactment on stage, makes *Macbeth* more like Greek tragedy than Elizabethan. The action is in the poetry. Only Banquo suffers the indignity of being murdered onstage and that, after all, is not his last appearance. It was another futile action, which has its consequence in Banquo's ghost, a figment of Macbeth's imagination, an illusion.

*Hence, horrible shadow!
Unreal mockery, hence!*

Lady Macbeth sees it as another manifestation of Macbeth's weak grip on reality.

*This is the very painting of your fear:
This is the air-drawn dagger which, you said,
Led you to Duncan.*

Lady Macbeth has become the Witches' principal agent. Their 'fair is foul and foul is fair' becomes her abuse of her own nature.

*I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums,
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this.*

In their fragmented dialogue after the murder, she says -

*These deeds must not be thought
After these ways; so, it will make us mad.*

And he says -

*Methought I heard a voice cry 'Sleep no more!
Macbeth doth murder sleep,'—*

She says -

*Why did you bring these daggers from the place?
They must lie there: go carry them, and smear
The sleepy grooms with blood.*

He says -

*I'll go no more:
I am afraid to think what I have done;
Look on't again I dare not.*

The worst consequence of his deed, for Macbeth, is in his state of mind, his thoughts, from which there is no escape. Escape though is what he seeks from now on and he soon comes to the point of no return, thought demanding more deeds by which to be understood.

I am in blood

*Stept in so far, that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er:
Strange things I have in head, that will to hand;
Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd.*

Another meeting with the Witches convinces him that whatever strange things come into his head from now on must be turned to action.

*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.*

When, in the last scene, he accepts that his death is inevitable, he achieves a kind of dignity by fighting to the end -

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

Even so, he is, a few minutes later, in Malcolm's words, merely 'this dead butcher' and to all intents and purposes forgotten.

*So, thanks to all at once and to each one,
Whom we invite to see us crown'd at Scone.*

Productions of *Macbeth* that focus on the narrative rather than the poetry, the reality rather than the metaphor, directors who see it as a treatise on tyranny and try to bring it up to date by replacing swords with guns and turning Macbeth into Robert Mugabe, miss the point completely. There is more to it than that. When the Witches wind up their charm, his fate is sealed. They are in his head and there is nothing he can do to get them out.

Macbeth would have been forgotten by now if it was about a Scottish tyrant. It is about you and me. It is poetry.

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