

## ***Macbeth: A Modern Perspective***

**by Susan Snyder**

Coleridge pronounced *Macbeth* to be “wholly tragic.” Rejecting the drunken Porter of II.iii as “an interpolation of the actors,” and perceiving no wordplay in the rest of the text (he was wrong on both counts), he declared that the play had no comic admixture at all. More acutely, though still in support of this sense of the play as unadulterated tragedy, he noted the absence in *Macbeth* of a process characteristic of other Shakespearean tragedies, the “reasonings of equivocal morality.”

Indeed, as Macbeth ponders his decisive tragic act of killing the king, he is not deceived about its moral nature. To kill anyone to whom he is tied by obligations of social and political loyalty as well as kinship is, he knows, deeply wrong: “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” (I.vii 12-16). And to kill Duncan, who has been “so clear in his great office” (that is, so free from corruption as a ruler), is to compound the iniquity. In adapting the story of Macbeth from Holinshed’s *Chronicles of Scotland*, Shakespeare created a stark black-white moral opposition by omitting from his story Duncan’s weakness as a monarch while retaining his gentle, virtuous nature. Unlike his prototype in Holinshed’s history, Macbeth kills not an ineffective leader, but a saint whose benevolent presence blesses Scotland. In the same vein of polarized morality, Shakespeare departs from the Holinshed account in which Macbeth is joined in regicide by Banquo and others; instead, he has Macbeth act alone against Duncan. While it might be good politics to distance Banquo from guilt (he was an ancestor of James I, the current king of England, and patron of Shakespeare’s acting company), excluding the other thanes as well suggests that the playwright had decided to focus on private, purely moral issues uncomplicated by the gray shades of political expediency.

Duncan has done nothing, then, to deserve violent death. Unlike such tragic heroes as Brutus and Othello who are enmeshed in “equivocal morality,” Macbeth cannot justify his actions by the perceived misdeeds of this victim. “I have no spur,” he admits, “To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition” (I.vii 25-27). This ambition is portrayed indirectly rather than directly. But it is surely no accident that the Weïrd Sisters accost him and crystallize his secret thoughts of the crown into objective possibility just when he has hit new heights of success captaining Duncan’s armies and defeating Duncan’s enemies. The element of displacement and substitution here – Macbeth leading the fight for Scotland while the titular leader waits behind the lines for the outcome – reinforces our sense that, whatever mysterious timetable the Sisters work by, this is the psychologically right moment to confront Macbeth with their predictions of greatness. Hailed as thane of Glamis, thane of Cawdor, and king, he is initially curious and disbelieving. Though his first fearful reaction (I.iii 54) is left unexplained, for us to fill in as we will, surely one way to read his fear is that the word “king” touches a buried nerve of desire. When Ross and Angus immediately arrive to announce that Macbeth is now Cawdor as well Glamis, the balance of skepticism tilts precipitously toward belief. The never vibrates intensely. Two-thirds of the prophecy is already accomplished. The remaining prediction, “king hereafter,” is suddenly isolated and highlighted; and because of the Sisters’ now proven powers of foreknowledge, it seems to call out for its parallel, inevitable fulfillment.

The Weird Sisters present nouns rather than verbs. They put titles on Macbeth without telling what actions he must carry out to attain those titles. It is Lady Macbeth who supplies the verbs. Understanding that her husband is torn between the now-articulated object of desire and the fearful deed that must achieve it (“wouldst not play false / And yet wouldst wrongly win,” I.v 22-23), and she persuades him by harping relentlessly on manly *action*. That very gap between noun and verb becomes a way of taunting him as a coward: “Art thou afeard / To be the same in thine own act and valor / As thou art in desire?” (I.vii 43-45). A man is one who closes this gap by strong action, by taking what he wants; whatever inhibits that action is unmanly fear. And a man is one who does what he has sown to do, no matter what. We never see Macbeth vow to kill Duncan, but in Lady Macbeth’s mind just his broaching the subject has become a commitment. With graphic horror she fantasizes how she would tear her nursing baby from her breast and dash its brains out if she had sworn as she says her husband did. She would, that is, violate her deepest nature as a woman, and sever violently the closest tie of kinship and dependence. ‘Till now, Macbeth has resisted such violation, clinging to a more humane definition of “man” that accepts fidelity and obligation as necessary limits on his prowess. Now, in danger of being bested by his wife in this contest of fierce determinations, he accepts her simpler, more primitive equation of manhood with killing: he commits himself to destroying Duncan. It is significant for the lack of “equivocal morality” that even Lady Macbeth in this crucial scene of persuasion doesn’t try to manipulate or blur the polarized moral scheme. Adopting instead a warrior ethic apart from social morality, she presents the murder not as good but as heroic.

Moral clarity informs not only the decisions and actions of *Macbeth* but the stage of nature on which they are played out. The natural universe revealed in the play is essentially attuned to the good, so that it reacts to the unambiguously evil act of killing Duncan with disruptions that are equally easy to read. There are wild winds, an earthquake, “strange screams of death” (II.iii 61-69). And beyond such general upheaval there is a series of unnatural acts that distortedly mirror Macbeth’s. Duncan’s horses overthrow natural order and devour each other, like Macbeth turning on his king and cousin. “A falcon, tow’ring in her pride of place” – the monarch of birds at its highest pitch – is killed by a mousing owl, a lesser bird who ordinarily preys on insignificant creatures (II.iv 15-16). Most ominous of all, on the morning following the king’s death, is the absence of the sun: like the falcon a symbol of monarchy, but expanding that to suggest the source of all life. In a general sense, the sunless day shows the heavens “troubled with man’s act” (II.iv 7), but the following grim metaphor points to a close and more sinister connection: “dark night strangles the traveling lamp” (II.iv 9). The daylight has been murdered like Duncan. Scotland’s moral darkness lasts till the end of Macbeth’s reign. The major scenes take place at night or in the atmosphere of the “black, and midnight hags” (IV.i 48), and there is no mention of light or sunshine except in England (IV.iii 1).

Later in the play, nature finds equally fitting forms for its revenge against Macbeth. Despite his violations of natural order, he nevertheless expects the laws of nature to work for him in the usual way. But the next victim, Banquo, through his murderer has left him “safe in a ditch” (III.iv 28), refuses to stay safely still and out of sight. In Macbeth’s horrified response to this restless corpse, we may hear not only panic but outrage at the breakdown of the laws of motion: “The time has been / That, when the brains were out, the man would die, / And there an end, But now they rise again / With twenty mortal murders on their crowns / And push us from our stools. This is more strange / Than such a murder is” (III.iv 94-99). His word choice is odd: “*they* rise,” a plural where we would expect “he rises,” and the loaded word “crowns” for heads. Macbeth seems to be haunted by his last

victim, King Duncan, as well as the present one. And by his outraged comparison at the end – the violent death and the ghostly appearance compete in strangeness – Macbeth suggests, without consciously intending that Banquo’s walking in death answers to, or even is caused by, the murder that cut him off so prematurely. The unnatural murder generates unnatural movement in the dead. Lady Macbeth, too, walks when she should be immobile in sleep, “a great perturbation in nature” (V.i 10)

It is through this same ironic trust in natural law that Macbeth draws strength from the Sisters’ later prophecy: if he is safe until Birnam Wood come to Dunsinane, he must be safe forever. “Who can impress the forest, bid the tree / Unfix his earthbound root? Sweet bodements, good! / Rebellious dead, rise never till the wood / Of Birnam rise...” (IV.i 109-12). His security is ironic because for Macbeth, of all people, there can be no dependence on predictable natural processes. The “rebellious dead” have already unnaturally risen once: fixed trees can move against him as well. And so, in time, they do. Outraged nature keeps matching the Macbeths’ transgressions, undoing and expelling their perversities with its own.

In tragedies where right and wrong are rendered problematic, the dramatic focus is likely to be on the complications of choice. *Macbeth*, on the contrary, is preoccupied less with the protagonist’s initial choice of a relatively unambiguous wrong action than with the moral decline that follows. H. B. Charlton noted that one could see in *Richard III* as well as *Macbeth* the biblical axiom that “the wages of sin is death”; but where the history play *assumes* the principle, *Macbeth* demonstrates why it has to be that way. The necessity is not so much theological as psychological: we watch in Macbeth the hardening and distortion that follows on self-violation. The need to suppress part of himself in order to kill Duncan becomes a refusal to acknowledge his deed (“I am afraid to think what I have done. / Look on ‘t again I dare not”: II.ii 66-67). His later murders are all done by proxy, in an attempt to create still more distance between the destruction he wills and full psychic awareness of his responsibility. At the same time, murder becomes a necessary activity, the verb now a compulsion almost without regard to the object: plotted after he has seen the Weïrd Sisters’ apparitions, Macbeth’s attack on Macduff’s “line” (IV.i 174) is an insane double displacement, of fear of Macduff himself and fury at the vision of the line of kings fathered by Banquo.

Yet the moral universe of *Macbeth* is not as uncomplicated as some critics have imagined. To see in the play’s human and physical nature only a straightforward pattern of sin and punishment is to gloss over the questions it raises obliquely, the moral complexities and mysteries it opens up. The Weïrd Sisters, for example, remain undefined. Where do they come from? Where do they go when they disappear from the action in Act IV? What is their place in a moral universe that ostensibly recoils against sin and punishes it? Are they human witches or supernatural beings? Labeling them “evil” seems not so much incorrect as inadequate. Do they cause men to commit crimes or do they only present the possibility to them? Macbeth responds to his prophecy by killing his king, but Banquo after hearing the one directed at him is not impelled to act at all. Do we take this difference as demonstrating that the Sisters have in themselves no power beyond suggestion? Or should we rather find it sinister later on when Banquo, ancestor of James I or not, sees reason in Macbeth’s success to look forward to his own – yet feels it necessary to conceal his hopes (III.i 1-10)?

Even what we most take for granted becomes problematic when scrutinized. Does Macbeth really desire to be king? Lady Macbeth says he does, but what comes through in I.v and I.vii is more

her desire than his. Apart from one brief reference to ambition when he is ruling out other motives to kill Duncan, Macbeth himself is strangely silent about any longing for royal power and position. Instead of an obsession that fills his personal horizon, we find in Macbeth something of a motivational void. Why does he feel obligated, or compelled, to bring about an advance in station that the prophecy seems to render invisible anyway? A.C. Bradley put his finger on this absence of positive desire when he observed that Macbeth commits his crime as if it were “an appalling duty.”

Recent lines of critical inquiry also call old certainties into question. Duncan’s saintly status would seem assured, yet sociological critics are disquieted by the way we are introduced to him, as he receives news of the battle in I.ii. On the one hand, we hear reports of horrifying savagery in the fighting, savagery in which the loyal thanes participate as much as the rebels and invaders – more so, in fact, when Macbeth and Banquo are likened to the crucifiers of Christ (“or memorize another Golgotha,” I.ii 44). In response we see Duncan exulting not only in the victory but in the bloodshed, equating honor with wounds. It is not that he bears any particular guilt. Yet the mild paternal king is nevertheless implicated here in his society’s violent warrior ethic, its predicating of manly worth on prowess of killing. But isn’t this just what we condemn in Lady Macbeth? Cultural analysis tends to blur the sharp demarcations, even between two such figures apparently totally opposed, and to draw them together as participants in and products of the same constellation of social values.

Lady Macbeth and Duncan meet in a more particular war, positioned as they are on the same side of Scotland’s basic division between warriors and those protected by warriors. The king is too old and fragile to fight; the lady is neither, but she is barred from battle by traditional gender conventions that assign her instead the functions of following her husband’s commands and nurturing her young. In fact, of course, Lady Macbeth’s actions and outlook thoroughly subvert this ideology, as she forcefully takes the lead in planning the murder and shames her husband into joining her by her willingness to slaughter her own nurseling. It is easy to call Lady Macbeth “evil,” but the label tends to close down analysis exactly where we ought to probe more deeply. Macbeth’s wife is restless in a social role that in spite of her formidable courage and energy offers no chance of independent action and heroic achievement. It is almost inevitable that she turn to achievement at second hand, through and for her husband. Standing perforce on the sidelines, like Duncan once again, she promotes and cheers the killing.

Other situations, too, may be more complex than at first they seem. Lady Macduff, unlike Lady Macbeth, accepts her womanly function of caring for her children and her nonwarrior status of being protected. But she is not protected. The ideology of gender seems just as destructive from the submissive side as from the rebellious, when Macduff deserts her in order to pursue his political cause against Macbeth in England and there is no husband to stand in the way of the murderers sent by Macbeth. The obedient wife dies, with her cherished son, just as the rebellious, murderous lady will die who consigned her own nursing baby to death. The moral universe of *Macbeth* has room for massive injustice. Traditional critics find Lady Macbeth “unnatural,” and even those who do not accept the equation of gender ideology with nature can agree with the condemnation in view of her determined suppression of all bonds of human sympathy. Clear enough. But we get more blurring and crossovers when Macduff’s wife calls *him* unnatural. In leaving his family defenseless in Macbeth’s dangerous Scotland, he too seems to discount human bonds. His own wife complains bitterly that “he wants the natural touch”; where even the tiny wren will fight for her young against the owl, his flight seems to signify fear rather than natural love (IV.ii 8-16). Ross’s reply, “cruel are the

time,” while it doesn’t console Lady Macduff and certainly doesn’t save her, strives to relocate the moral ambiguity of Macduff’s conduct in the situation created by Macbeth’s tyrannical rule. The very political crisis that pulls Macduff away from his family on public business puts his private life in jeopardy through the same act of desertion. But while acknowledging the peculiar tensions raised by a tyrant-king, we may also see in the Macduff family’s disaster a tragic version of a more familiar conflict: the contest between public and private commitments that can rack conventional marriages, with the wife confined to a private role while the husband is supposed to balance obligations in both spheres.

Malcolm is allied with Duncan by lineage and with Macduff by their shared role of redemptive champion in the final movement of the play. He, too, is not allowed to travel through the action unsullied. After a long absence from the scene following the murder of Duncan, he reappears in England to be sought by Macduff in the crusade against Macbeth. Malcolm is cautious and reserved, and when he does start speaking more freely, what we hear is an astonishing catalogue of self-accusations. He calls himself lustful, avaricious, guilty of every crime and totally lacking in kingly virtues: “Nay, had I power, I should / Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell, / Uproar the universal peace, confound / All unity on earth” (IV.iii 13-16). Before people became so familiar with Shakespeare’s play, I suspect many audiences believed what Malcolm says of himself. Students on first reading still do. Why shouldn’t they? He has been absent from the stage for some time, and his only significant action in the early part of the play was to run away after his father’s murder. When this essentially unknown prince lists his vices in lengthy speeches of self-loathing, there is no indication – except an exaggeration easily ascribable to his youth – that he is not sincere. And if we do believe, we cannot help joining in Macduff’s distress. Malcolm, the last hope for redeeming Scotland from the tyrant, has let us down. Duncan’s son is more corrupt than Macbeth. He even sounds like Macbeth, whose own milk of human kindness (I.v 17) was curdled by his wife; who threatened to destroy the whole natural order, “though the treasure / Of nature’s germens tumble all together / Even ‘till destruction sicken” (IV.i 60-63). In due course, Malcolm takes it all back; but his words once spoken cannot simply be canceled, erased as if they were on paper. We have already, on hearing them, mentally and emotionally processed the false “facts,” absorbed them experientially. Perhaps they continue to color indirectly our sense of the next king of Scotland.

Viewed through various lenses, then, the black and white of Macbeth may fade toward shades of gray. The play is an open system, offering some fixed markers with which to take one’s basic bearings but also, in closer scrutiny, offering provocative questions and moral ambiguities.