

Original Paper

A Study of Fate and Man's Choice in *Macbeth* --- by the Irony of Fate

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Abstract

A universal form of tragedy is the specially noble experience of elite individuals who create their own doom within an overarching framework of mysterious inevitability. *Macbeth* is a tragedy of a man whose ambition leads him to pursue a path by fulfilling the prophecy, only to result in his destruction. There is a conflict between supernatural and natural modes of explanation in this absurd world. The supernatural knowledge possessed by the eerie creatures destabilizes Macbeth even as it spurs him to action. Through the chosen action rather than inevitable destiny, he is driven to his calamity. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, who is wracked by guilt over the murder, are both on the wheel of fate and they cannot possibly get off. This can be the far-reaching consequences of trying to control destiny.

I

Macbeth, the briefest and the most linguistically dense tragedy of William Shakespeare is said to be written in late 1606 or early 1607. After the death of Queen Elizabeth in 1603, James I (James VI of Scotland), who was interested in witchcraft, came to the throne of England and became Shakespeare's new patron. And because of its Scottish taste, the play is sometimes said to have been written for, and perhaps debuted for, King James. At that time witchcraft was very much in the air; James I had himself written a treatise on the subject, in which he had a deep and overwhelming belief. In the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605, treason too was topical. A play which combined a Scottish king, treason and witchcraft all in one plot reflects the conditions of Shakespeare and the society at that time.

The play itself tells the story of a man who, foretold the future by prophecy and urged by his wife, commits regicide in order to gain power. At the conclusion of this drama, we accept without demur, that Macbeth is a butcher. And yet as Marilyn French pointed out, at the end he is no more a butcher than he is at the beginning. He is praised and rewarded for being a murderer in war, and then it turns out that he is in keen anguish because of his ambition to gain power. He is burdened with the crime of failing "to make the distinction his culture expects among the objects of his slaughter" (French 376). Within this gap, this drama develops. Throughout the play, power is the highest value in Scotland, and besides in Scottish culture, power is military prowess.

Booth says that in real life, outside of the theater, "tragedy... is a category for things that should not have happened but been expected under the given conditions" (84) He continues:

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We use the word tragedy when we are confronted with a sudden invasion of our finite consciousness by the fact of infinite possibility---when our minds are sites for a domestic collision of understanding and the fact of infinity. Tragedy is the word by which the mind designates (and thus in part denies) its helplessness before a concrete, particular, and thus undeniable demonstration of the limits of human understanding. (85)

Known as “The Scottish Play”, Shakespeare’s dark, grim tragedy begins with Three Witches in Scotland, deciding to meet again after a battle being fought nearby. Thunder, storms and the desolate heath paint a gloomy picture, setting the tone of this play and defining an imagery of nature at war with itself, a recurring theme in this play. In the first scene, we can seize the aspects of witches: they have a connection with disorder in nature, not only thunder and lightning but also ‘fog and filthy air’ (I. i. 2); ‘Graymalkin’ (I. i. 8) and ‘Paddock’ (I. i. 9), which are the common companions of English witches, are their familiars; they have specific functions --- ‘hover’ (I. i. 12), ‘melted’ (I. iii. 81) , ‘vanished’ (I. v. 5); they incarnate ambiguity, that is, reverse moral values --- “ Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (I. i. 10); they can assumably foresee the future, as the third witch says that battle will be over by sunset --- “That will be ere the set of sun” (I. i. 5). As with the description of English ‘witches’ by Reginald Scot --- ‘commonly old, lame, bleare-eied, pale, fowle, and full of wrinkles’ (1), we have further descriptions. They have features of the typical English village ‘witch’, being old women, ‘wither’d’ (I. iii. 32) and with ‘choppy fingers’ (I. iii. 44) and ‘skinny lips’ (I. iii. 45). Furthermore, the first witch declares a petty vendetta for chestnuts. Their sense of values as well as their appearance is far from what we have. Of the Witches, Banquo says:

What are these
So wither’d and so wild in their attire,
That look not like th’inhabitants o’ th’ earth,
(I. iii. 39-41)

You should be women,
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret
That you are so.
(I. iii. 45-7)

The very look of the witches suggests their strong tie to the supernatural. They not only appear to be supernatural, they also control the supernatural by using spells and prophecies. The witches, integral characters, incite action by prophesying to Macbeth. Their persons, their activities and their song serve to link to moral ambiguity and indicate that they live in the world of absurdity. This absurdity, the moral confusion of the universe is their value. We are prepared by Shakespeare to enter into a world of confusion, where what appears to be happening has great difference from what is really happening. We are thrown into the world where an ordered world becomes a disordered world.

The brief conversation among the three “weird sisters” (I. iii. 32) opens the play with its 11-line first scene, using repeated patterns of threes.

When shall we meet again?
In thunder, lighting, or in rain? (I. i. 1-2)

As the three Christian Virtues are Faith, Hope and Charity, a threefold literary pattern means that

things are orderly or stable in good harmony. Just as there are heaven, earth and hell, ruled over by just, righteous and good God, it is the number of divine order in the world. But in this scene the words ---'thunder' 'lighting' and 'rain', these threes are threefold, but explain the stormy condition. As a matter of fact, the three is really one, there are no other choices. They will meet again, when all the signs of foreboding and danger come together. And their words continue:

When the hurlyburly's done,
 When the battle's lost and won.
 That will be ere the set of sun.
 (I. i. 3-5)

We are informed that when the hurly-burly of war is over they will meet. And the result of war has nothing to do with them. They don't side with anyone. All three have spoken, each in turn, giving three separate answers to the questions posed. In the strict meaning, their conversation will not engage and they argue on different planes. Instead of upholding the order of the universe, they turn it upside down. With their comments "the battle's lost and won" and "Fair is foul and foul is fair", we are prepared for the equivocal uneasiness that pervades the entire work. We are drawn into the world where there is the conflict between supernatural and natural modes of explanation and thus, the framework of this drama has established.

II

When Macbeth (who is the Thane of Glamis) and Banquo first come onto the stage, we hear the Macbeth's first line remarking on the weather and their victory: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen. (I. iii. 38)". "Foul" and "fair" reminds us of the same echo of the previous lines of the Witches. This line indicates that Macbeth has a strange connection to the Witches, because he is mimicking the very words of the drama's key note: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." Then the two come across the Weird Sisters, who have been waiting for Macbeth, and greet them with prophecies. Even though it is Banquo who first challenges them, they address Macbeth. The first hails Macbeth as "Thane of Glamis (I. iii. 48)"---that is his present title, the second as "Thane of Cawdor (I. iii. 49)", and the third proclaims that he shall "be King hereafter (I. iii. 50)". Macbeth appears stunned into silence by these pronouncements that he will be Scotland's next ruler. It is Banquo, not Macbeth himself who challenges them again to ask if there is any more to their premonition. They talk in riddles, telling him not about Macbeth, but about Banquo this time:

Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.
 Not so happy, yet much happier.
 Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none:
 So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo!
 Banquo and Macbeth, all hail!
 (I. iii. 65-9)

The Witches vanish, and another Thane, Ross, a messenger from the King, soon arrives and informs Macbeth of his newly bestowed title --- Thane of Cawdor. The first prophecy is thus fulfilled. Macbeth begins to harbor ambitions and cannot help but focus on their other greater prediction that he will be king. Macbeth says in an aside:

If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me,
Without my stir.

(I. iii. 143-44)

At this moment Macbeth demonstrates a belief in the controlling force of fate. He indicates that if this is truly meant to be it will happen without his efforts. He, however, almost immediately turns around and begins to take matters into his own hands as he communicates with his wife and begins to plot the murder of Duncan. Now fate which destabilizes Macbeth spurs him to action.

The solicitings of supernatural beings, the weird sisters, are not the direct causes of Macbeth's calamities, but, as he says of the dagger in the vision:

Thou marshall'st me the way that I was going. (II. i.42)

Macbeth commits regicide. He has no means to return away longer and anymore. He says:

I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er;

(III. v. 136-138)

The knocking at the south entrance grows louder and more frequent. A porter walks slowly to open the doors, pondering what it would be like to be the door-keeper of hell. M. French says:

Once the deed is done, Shakespeare suggests that the entire character of the world is changed. When the texture of the inner circle is identical to that of the outer one, the connection between means and ends is broken. Instead of procreation and felicity, the end of power becomes more power alone, consolidation and extension of power: thus, life becomes hell. The porter announces the change, knowing he is in hell even though the place is too cold for it. (379)

By the sound of knocking, we are given the notification that Macbeth has stepped into the conflict between supernatural and natural modes of explanation.

In the course of time, Macbeth goes to see the witches again to learn his fate. Amidst crashes of thunder, three apparitions appear. They tell him to "beware Macduff" (IV. i. 71) and that Macbeth will not be killed by someone born of a woman: "for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" (IV. i. 80-81). This gives him great confidence: "Then live Macduff: what need I fear of thee?" (IV. i. 81). The third prophecy is that "Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until / Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him" (IV. i. 92-94). He will not be defeated until Birnam wood moves to Dunsinane; and Macbeth takes all of these signs to mean that he is invincible.

That will never be:

Who can impress the forest, bid the tree
Unfix his earth-bound root? Sweet bodements! good!
Rebellion's head, rise never till the wood
Of Birnam rise, and our high-placed Macbeth

Shall live the lease of nature, pay his breath
To time and moral custom.

(IV. i. 940-100)

Macbeth's confidence is restored, but one question remains: "shall Banquo's issue ever / Reign in this kingdom?" (IV. i. 102-3). In response they summon a vision of eight kings. The kings pass over the stage in order; the last holding a glass. Banquo's ghost follows behind them. The very existence of Fleance who has the possibility to inherit the kingdom prevents Macbeth from feeling secure. Fleance is not literally a threat to Macbeth, but his being makes Macbeth, as a childless king, anxious about his future. Macbeth's concern is

psychologically profound: he flails wildly, trying to secure the ends for which power is supposed to exist --- which for him at this point have shrunk to the ability to sleep at night.
(French 341)

In England Macduff and Malcolm, the rightful heir, ban together to fight Macbeth. When Macbeth learns of Macduff's treachery, he sends murderers to Macduff's home to kill his wife and children instead of killing Macduff himself. The play reaches its moral climax in IV. ii, and this is also its moral turning point. When Macduff hears of this, his resolve to kill Macbeth grows even stronger.

With ten thousand English troops they go to fight Macbeth. Macbeth is unafraid until he learns that the troops have camouflaged themselves with tree limbs from the Birnam forest and are moving toward Dunsinane. Thus, the Witches' third prophecy is fulfilled. At the confrontation with Macduff, he learns that Macduff was "from his mother's womb / untimely ripped" (V. viii.15-6), that is, born by Cesarean section --- and was therefore not "of woman born" (IV. i. 80). The last prophecy comes to pass and the course of events is as in the witches' prophecy. Macduff kills Macbeth and Malcolm is returned to the throne and order is restored.

III

It is sometimes explained, for instance, that Macbeth kills because of the 'passion' of ambition, which overcomes his 'reason'. If passion means emotion, feeling, it is Macbeth's 'passion', in so far as we see it, that makes him dread the murder. However, he does not kill out of passion but out of reason, just fulfilling the prophecy. Not in a fit of passion but with a quick calculation on success he believes in, he carries out his attempts to justify his actions to himself. He fluctuates between a belief in the predictions of the witches and a qualm that everything will be undone. In this suffering, he blindly tries to fulfill only the positive predictions about himself while attempting to prevent the fulfilling of the ones about Banquo. Ultimately, what happens to Macbeth, long before the final battle with Macduff, is that he loses all reason for living. He has cut himself off from everything that makes life worth living: "honour, love, obedience, troops of friends" (V. iii. 25), all life's felicities. Even his wife's death barely touched Macbeth, just saying "She should have died hereafter;" (V. v. 17). They are both on the wheel of fate and they cannot possibly get off. Once they have stepped into that circle there is no going back. Accordingly, by leading to his doom, he reaches the final stage of resignation:

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 yesterday have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. 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.

(V. v. 19-28)

Willy Russell says:

Macbeth is flawed by his ambition – yes?...it's that flaw which forces him to take the inevitable steps towards his own doom. You see?...the sort of things you read in the paper as being tragic, 'Man Killed By Falling Tree', is not a tragedy....Tragedy in dramatic terms is inevitable, pre-ordained.... You see [Macbeth] goes blindly on and on and with every step he's spinning one more piece of thread which will eventually make up the network of his own tragedy. (40-41)

And A.C. Bradley, who denies that witches make Macbeth do anything, concludes:

The words of the Witches are fatal to the hero only because there is in him something which leaps into light at the sound of them; but they are at the same time the witness of forces which never cease to work in the world around him, and, on the instant of his surrender to them, entangle him inextricably in the web of Fate. (349)

Tom F. Driver says that "The moral order of Macbeth is expressed by Shakespeare in terms of a time against which Macbeth rebels" (149). In the order of providential time Macbeth will become king, only to yield to Banquo's line, who will be kings to the crack of doom. Macbeth would like to cancel the second part of the providential time scheme. Driver writes,

In Macbeth there are three kinds of time: (1) time measured by clock, calendar, and the movement of sun, moon, and stars, which for sake of convenience we may call "chronological time"; (2) an order of time which overarches the action of the entire play and which may be called "providential time"; and (3) a time scheme, or an understanding of time, belonging to Macbeth, which may be called "Macbeth's time." (143-44)

In the very layers of time, Macbeth must face decline and death, but he can now face his reality squarely. He

would "let the frame of things disjoint" (III.ii.16); he would "jump the life to come" (I.vii.6); he murders sleep, that daily symbol of man's finitude in time; he destroys the meaning of tomorrow and tomorrow, the ironic consequence of his attempt to control the future. (Driver 153)

Of course Macbeth cannot control the future, and providential time marches on. Through chosen actions rather than inevitable destiny, Macbeth's moral decay and Lady Macbeth's descent into insanity, Shakespeare shows what can happen to ordinary people faced with temptation and the far-reaching consequences of trying to control destiny.

The story ends in some ambiguity. When peace returns to Scotland at Macbeth's death, King Duncan's younger son, Donalbain has still not returned from exile, and, before anything else, the prophecy of a royal future for Banquo's descendants has still not been fulfilled. But in the Shakespeare's time, for the audience in the theater, the witches' prophecy concerning Manquo, "Thou shalt get kings" (I. ii. 67), turned out to be true. People in those days supposedly regarded James I of England as a descendant of Banquo. Although Malcolm is placed on the throne and not Fleance, Banquo's son who has escaped from Macbeth, it can be said that the prophecy was confirmed by history.

Goldman sums up:

The movement of the play in performance should be a flight from horror into horror, always a little faster than we expect, a flight like Macbeth's own flight from and toward the horror in his mind. Macbeth can never escape the weight of that instigation in his head, and his language, properly performed, performed as Shakespeare has designed it to be performed, allows us to share his experience of an evil which he discovers unaccountably present, a sudden deposit, and condensation at once natural and unnatural, inside him. For this ultimately is what holds Macbeth rapt through the entire play: the fact that the evil the grapples with is his. (110-111)

Macbeth is on the wheel of fate and cannot possibly get off on account of the very permanent and unchanging human nature. He eventually gets the far-reaching consequences of trying to control destiny. And we are left with an awed sense of the overwhelming potency, maybe we can call it fate, feeling the sense of affirmation and despair, in which we submit ourselves to an unknown fear.

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