

Macbeth and the Metaphysics of Evil

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Knight is one of the most influential Shakespearean critics of the twentieth century: he helped shape a new interpretive approach to Shakespeare's work and promoted a greater appreciation of many of the plays. In his studies *The Wheel of Fire* (1930) and *The Shakespearian Tempest* (1932), Knight rejected criticism which emphasizes sources, character analysis, psychology, and ethics and outlined his principles of interpretation which, he claimed, would "replace that chaos by drawing attention to the true Shakespearean unity." Knight argued that this unity lay in Shakespeare's poetic use of images and symbols—particularly in the opposition of "tempests" and "music." He also maintained that a play's spatial aspects, or "atmosphere," should be as closely considered as the temporal elements of the plot if one is "to see the whole play in space as well as time." Knight argues in the following excerpt from *The Wheel of Fire* that *Macbeth* presents an experience of absolute evil. In his analysis of the play's imagery he observes, as did A. C. Bradley (1904), an abysmal darkness that is nonetheless "shot through and streaked with vivid colour." He also notes that the characters exhibit an overriding sense of doubt and uncertainty and he points out the frequent references to "strange and hideous creatures" and abnormalities of nature. These and other images, argues Knight, combine to suggest a predominant emotion of fear—"Everyone is afraid"—and *Macbeth's* impact is "thus exactly analogous to nightmare." Like Hermann Ulrici (1839) and Denton J. Snider (1887), Knight states that all of the characters are to some extent guilty of yielding to evil and are "paralyzed by fear." He concludes that, as the play draws to a close, Macbeth, no longer in conflict with himself, "faces the world fearless" and allows balance and harmony to replace the disorder of evil.

Macbeth is Shakespeare's most profound and mature vision of evil. In the ghost and death themes of *Hamlet* we have something of the same quality; in the Brutus-theme of *Julius Caesar* we have an exactly analogous rhythm of spiritual experience; in *Richard III* we have a parallel history of an individual's crime. In *Macbeth* all this, and the many other isolated poetic units of similar quality throughout Shakespeare, receive a final, perfected form. Therefore analysis of *Macbeth* is of profound value: but it is not easy. Much of *Hamlet*, and the *Troilus-Othello-Lears* succession culminating in *Timon of Athens*, can be regarded as representations of the 'hate-theme'. We are there faced by man's aspiring nature, unsatiated of its desire among the frailties and inconsistencies of its world. They thus point us to good, not evil, and their very gloom of denial is the shadow of a great assertion. They thus lend themselves to interpretation in terms of human thought, and their evil can be regarded as a negation of man's positive longing. In *Macbeth* we find not gloom, but blackness: the evil is not relative, but absolute. In point of imaginative profundity *Macbeth* is comparable alone to *Antony and Cleopatra*. There we have a fiery vision of a paradisaical consciousness; here the murk and nightmare torment of a conscious hell. This evil, being absolute and therefore alien to man, is in essence shown as inhuman and supernatural, and is thus most difficult of location in any philosophical scheme. *Macbeth* is fantastical and imaginative beyond other tragedies. Difficulty is increased by that implicit blurring of effects, that palling darkness, that overcasts plot, technique, style. The persons of the play are themselves groping. Yet we are left with an overpowering knowledge of suffocating, conquering evil, and fixed by the basilisk eye of a nameless terror. . . .

Macbeth is a desolate and dark universe where all is befogged, baffled, constricted by the evil. Probably in no play of Shakespeare are so many questions asked. It opens with 'When shall we three meet again?' and 'Where the place?' [I. i. 1, 6]. The second scene starts with, 'What bloody man is that?' [I. ii. 1], and throughout it questions are asked of the Sergeant and Ross. This is followed by:

First Witch. Where hast thou been, sister?

Second Witch. Killing swine.

First Witch. Sister, where thou?

[I. iii. 1-3]

And Banquo's first words on entering are: 'How far is't called to Forres? What are these . . .?' [I. iii. 39]. Questions succeed each other quickly throughout this scene. Amazement and mystery are in the play from the start, and are reflected in continual questions—there are those of Duncan to Malcolm in I. iv., and of Lady Macbeth to the Messenger and then to her lord in I. v. They continue throughout the play. In I. vii., they are tense and powerful:

Macbeth. How now! What news?

L. Macbeth. He has almost supp'd: why have you left the chamber?

Macbeth. Hath he asked for me?

L. Macbeth. Know you not he has?

[I. vii. 28-30]

This scene bristles with them. At the climax of the murder they come again, short stabs of fear: 'Didst thou not hear a noise?— Did not you speak?—When?—Now.—As I descended? . . .' [II. ii. 16]. Some of the finest and most heart-rending passages are in the form of questions: 'But wherefore could I not pronounce Amen?' and, 'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?' [II. ii. 28, 57-8]. The scene of the murder and that of its discovery form a series of questions. To continue the list in detail would be more tedious than difficult. . . .

These questions are threads in the fabric of mystery and doubt which haunts us in *Macbeth*. All the persons are in doubt, baffled. Duncan is baffled at the treachery of a man he trusted [I. iv. 11-14]. Newcomers strike amaze:

What a haste looks through his eyes! So should he look

That seems to speak things strange.

[I. ii. 46-7]

Surprise is continual. Macbeth does not understand how he can be Thane of Cawdor [I. iii. 108-109]. Lady Macbeth is startled at the news of Duncan's visit [I. v. 33]; Duncan at the fact of Macbeth's arrival before himself [I. vi. 20-24]. There is the general amazement at the murder; of Lennox, Ross, and the Old Man at the strange happenings in earth and heaven on the night of the murder [II. iii. 54-61, II. iv. 1-20]. Banquo and Fleance are unsure of the hour [II. i. 1-3]. No one is sure of Macduff's mysterious movements. Lady Macbeth is baffled by

Macbeth's enigmatic hints as to the 'deed of dreadful note' [III. ii. 44]. The two murderers are not certain as to who has wronged them, Macbeth or Banquo [III. i. 75-8]; they do not understand the advent of the 'third murderer' [III. iii. 1]. Ross and Lady Macduff are at a loss as to Macduff's flight, and warning is brought to Lady Macduff by a mysterious messenger who 'is not to her known' [IV. ii. 65]. Malcolm suspects Macduff, and there is a long dialogue due to his 'doubts' (IV. iii); and in the same Malcolm recognizes Ross as his countryman yet strangely 'knows him not' [IV. iii. 160]. As the atmosphere brightens at the end of the play, the contrast is aptly marked by reference to the stroke of action which will finally dispel the fog of insecurity:

The time approaches

That will with due decision make us know

What we shall say we have and what we owe.

Thoughts speculative their unsure hopes relate,

But certain issues strokes must arbitrate.

[V. iv. 16-20]

This blurring and lack of certainty is increased by the heavy proportion of second-hand or vague knowledge reported during the play's progress. . . . The persons of the drama can say truly, with Ross, 'we . . . do not know ourselves' [IV. ii. 19]. We too, who read, are in doubt often. Action here is illogical. Why does Macbeth not know of Cawdor's treachery? Why does Lady Macbeth faint? Why do the King's sons flee to different countries when a whole nation is ready in their support? Why does Macduff move so darkly mysterious in the background and leave his family to certain death? Who is the Third Murderer? And, finally, why does Macbeth murder Duncan? All this builds a strong sense of mystery and irrationality within us. We, too, grope in the stifling dark, and suffer from doubt and insecurity.

Darkness permeates the play. The greater part of the action takes place in the murk of the night. . . . Now this world of doubts and darkness gives birth to strange and hideous creatures. Vivid animal disorder-symbolism is recurrent in the play and the animals mentioned are for the most part of fierce, ugly, or ill-omened significance. We hear of 'the Hyrcan tiger' and the 'armed rhinoceros' [III. iv. 100], the 'rugged Russian bear' [III. iv. 99]; the wolf, 'whose howl's his watch' [II. i. 54]; the raven who croaks the entrance of Duncan under Lady Macbeth's battlements [I. v. 39]; the owl, 'fatal bellman who gives the stern's goodnight' [III. ii. 3]. There are 'maggot-pies and choughs and rooks' [III. iv. 124], and

. . . hounds and greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs,

Shoughs, water-rugs, and demi-wolves . . .

[III. i. 92-3]

We have the bat and his 'cloistered fight', the 'shard-borne beetle', the crow making wing to the 'rooky wood';

'night's black agents' rouse to their preys; Macbeth has 'scotch'd the snake, not killed it'; his mind is full of 'scorpions' [III. ii. 13-53]. All this suggests life threatening, ill-omened, hideous: and it culminates in the holocaust of filth prepared by the Weird Sisters in the Cauldron scene. But not only are animals of unpleasant suggestion here present: we have animals, like men, irrational and amazing in their acts. A falcon is attacked and killed by a 'mousing owl', and Duncan's horses eat each other [II. iv. 11-18]. There is a prodigious and ghastly tempest, with 'screams of death' the owl clamoured through the night, the earth itself shook [II. iii. 54-61]. We are thus aware of a hideous abnormality in this world; and again we feel its irrationality and mystery. In proportion as we let ourselves be receptive to the impact of all these suggestions we shall be strongly aware of the essential fearsomeness of this universe.

We are confronted by mystery, darkness, abnormality, hideousness: and therefore by fear. The word 'fear' is ubiquitous. All may be unified as symbols of this emotion. Fear is predominant. Everyone is afraid. There is scarcely a person in the play who does not feel and voice at some time a sickening, nameless terror. The impact of the play is thus exactly analogous to nightmare, to which state there are many references. . . . There is no nearer equivalent, in the experience of a normal mind, to the poetic quality of Macbeth than the consciousness of nightmare or delirium. That is why life is here a 'tale told by an idiot' [V. v. 26-7], a 'fitful fever' after which the dead 'sleep well' [III. ii. 23]; why the earth itself is 'feverous' [II. iii. 61]. The Weird Sisters are nightmare actualized; Macbeth's crime nightmare projected into action. Therefore this world is unknowable, hideous, disorderly, and irrational. The very style of the play has a mesmeric, nightmare quality, for in that dream-consciousness, hateful though it be, there is a nervous tension, a vivid sense of profound significance, an exceptionally rich apprehension of reality electrifying the mind: one is in touch with absolute evil, which, being absolute, has a satanic beauty, a hideous, serpent-like grace and attraction, drawing, paralysing. This quality is in the poetic style: the language is tense, nervous, insubstantial, without anything of the visual clarity of *Othello*, or the massive solemnity of *Timon of Athens*. The poetic effect of the whole, though black with an inhuman abyss of darkness, is yet shot through and streaked with vivid colour, with horrors that hold a mesmeric attraction even while they repel; and things of brightness that intensify the enveloping murk. There is constant reference to blood. . . . But though blood-imagery is rich, there is no brilliance in it; rather a sickly smear. Yet there is brilliance in the fire-imagery: the thunder and lightning which accompanies the Weird Sisters; the fire of the cauldron; the green glint of the spectral dagger; the glaring eyes which hold 'no speculation' of Banquo's Ghost, the insubstantial sheen of the three Apparitions, the ghastly pageant of kings unborn.

Macbeth has the poetry of intensity: intense darkness shot with the varied intensity of pure light or pure colour. In the same way the moral darkness is shot with imagery of bright purity and virtue. There is 'the temple-haunting martlet' [I. vi. 4] to contrast with evil creatures. We have the early personation of the sainted Duncan, whose body is 'the Lord's anointed temple' [II. iii. 68], the bright limping of his virtues by Macbeth [I. vii. 16-20], and Macduff [IV. iii. 108-109]; the latter's lovely words on Malcolm's mother who 'oftener upon her knees than on her feet, died every day she lived' [IV. iii. 110-111]; the prayer of Lennox for 'some holy angel' [III. vi. 45] to fly to England's court for saving help; Macbeth's agonized vision of a starry good, of 'Heaven's cherubim' horsed in air, and Pity like a babe; those who pray that God may bless them in their fevered dream; above all, Malcolm's description of England's holy King [IV. iii.], health-giver and God-elect who, unlike Macbeth, has power over 'the evil', in whose court Malcolm borrows 'grace' to combat the nightmare evil of his own land. . . . This description is spoken just before Ross enters with the shattering narration of Macbeth's most dastardly and ruinous crime. The contrast at this instant is vivid and pregnant. The King of England is thus full of supernatural 'grace'. In *Macbeth* this supernatural grace is set beside the supernatural evil. Against such grace Macbeth first struck the blow of evil. Duncan was 'gracious' [III. i. 65]; at his death 'renown and grace is dead' [II. iii. 94]. By the grace of Grace' [V. ix. 38] alone Malcolm will restore health to Scotland. The murk, indeed, thins towards the end. Bright daylight dawns and the green leaves of Birnam come against Macbeth. A world climbs out of its darkness, and in the dawn that panorama below is a thing of nightmare delusion. The 'sovereign flower' [V. ii. 30] is bright-dewed in the bright dawn, and the murk melts into the mists of morning: the Child is crowned, the Tree of Life in his hand.

I have indicated something of the imaginative atmosphere of this play. It is a world shaken by 'fears and scruples' [II. iii. 129]. It is a world where 'nothing is but what is not' [I. iii. 141-42], where 'fair is foul and foul is fair' [I. i. 11]. I have emphasized two complementary elements: (i) the doubts, uncertainties, irrationalities; (ii) the horrors, the dark, the abnormalities. These two elements repel respectively the intellect and the heart of man. And, since the contemplating mind is thus powerfully unified in its immediate antagonism, our reaction holds the positive and tense fear that succeeds nightmare, wherein there is an experience of something at once insubstantial and unreal to the understanding and appallingly horrible to the feelings: this is the evil of *Macbeth*. In this equal repulsion of the dual attributes of the mind a state of singleness and harmony is induced in the recipient, and it is in respect of this that *Macbeth* forces us to a consciousness more exquisitely unified and sensitive than any of the great tragedies but its polar opposite, *Antony and Cleopatra*. This is how the *Macbeth* universe presents to us an experience of absolute evil. Now, these two peculiarities of the whole play will be found also in the purely human element. The two main characteristics of Macbeth's temptation are (i) ignorance of his own motive, and (ii) horror of the deed to which he is being driven. Fear is the primary emotion of the *Macbeth* universe: fear is at the root of Macbeth's crime. . . .

Many minor persons are definitely related to evil: the two—or three—Murderers, the traitors, Cawdor and Macdonald, the drunken porter, doing duty at the gate of Hell. But the major ones too, who are conceived partly as contrasts to Macbeth and his wife, nevertheless succumb to the evil down-pressing on the *Macbeth* universe. Banquo is early involved. Returning with Macbeth from a bloody war, he meets the three Weird Sisters. We may imagine that the latter are related to the bloodshed of battle, and that they have waited until after 'the hurly-burly's done' [I. i. 3] to instigate a continuance of blood-lust in the two generals. We must observe that the two generals' feats of arms are described as acts of unprecedented ferocity:

Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds,

Or memorize another Golgotha, I cannot tell.

[I. ii. 39-41]

This campaign strikes amaze into men. War is here a thing of blood, not romance. Ross addresses Macbeth:

Nothing afeared of what thyself did make,

Strange images of death.

[I. iii. 96-7]

Macbeth's sword 'smoked with bloody execution' [I. ii. 18]. The emphasis is important. The late wine of blood-destruction focuses the inward eyes of these two to the reality of the sisters of blood and evil, and they in turn urge Macbeth to add to those 'strange images of death' the 'great doom's image' [II. iii. 78] of a murdered and sainted king. This knowledge of evil implicit in his meeting with the three Weird Sisters Banquo keeps to himself, and it is a bond of evil between him and Macbeth. It is this that troubles him on the night of the murder, planting a nightmare of unrest in his mind: 'the cursed thoughts that nature gives way to in repose.' He feels the

typical *Macbeth* guilt: 'a heavy summons lies like lead' upon him [il. i. 6]. He is enmeshed in Macbeth's horror, and, after the coronation, keeps the guilty secret, and lays to his heart a guilty hope. Banquo is thus involved. So also is Macduff. His cruel desertion of his family is emphasized:

L. Macduff. His flight was madness; when our actions do not,

Our fears do make us traitors.

Ross. You know not

Whether it was his wisdom or his fear.

L. Macduff. Wisdom! to leave his wife, to leave his babes,

His mansion and his titles in a place

From whence himself does flee?

[IV. ii. 3-8]

For this, or for some nameless reason, Macduff knows he bears some responsibility for his dear ones' death:

Sinful Macduff,

They were all struck for thee! Naught that I am,

Not for their own demerits, but for mine,

Fell slaughter on their souls. Heaven rest them now!

[IV. iii. 224-27]

All the persons seem to share some guilt of the down-pressing enveloping evil. Even Malcolm is forced to repeat crimes on himself. He catalogues every possible sin, and accuses himself of all. Whatever be his reasons, his doing so yet remains part of the integral humanism of this play. The pressure of evil is not relaxed till the end. Not that the persons are 'bad characters'. They are not 'characters' at all, in the proper use of the word. They are but vaguely individualized, and more remarkable for similarity than difference. All the persons are primarily just this: men paralysed by fear and a sense of evil in and outside themselves. They lack will-power: that concept finds no place here. Neither we, nor they, know of what exactly they are guilty: yet they feel guilt.

So, too, with Lady Macbeth. She is not merely a woman of strong will: she is a woman possessed—possessed of

evil passion. . . . To interpret the figure of Lady Macbeth in terms of 'ambition' and 'will' is, indeed, a futile commentary. The scope and sweep of her evil passion is a thing tremendous, irresistible, ultimate. She is an embodiment—for one mighty hour—of evil absolute and extreme.

The central human theme—the temptation and crime of Macbeth—is, however, more easy of analysis. The crucial speech runs as follows:

Why do I yield to that suggestion,

Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,

And makes my seated heart knock at my ribs

Against the use of nature? Present fears

Are less than horrible imaginings.

My thought whose murder yet is but fantastical

Shakes so my single state of man that function

Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is

But what is not.

[I. iii. 134-42]

These lines, spoken when Macbeth first feels the impending evil, expresses again all those elements I have noticed in the mass-effect of the play: questioning doubt, horror, fear of some unknown power; horrible imaginings of the supernatural and 'fantastical'; an abyss of unreality; disorder on the plane of physical life. This speech is a microcosm of the *Macbeth* vision: it contains the germ of the whole. . . . In this speech we have a swift interpenetration of idea with idea, from fear and disorder, through sickly imaginings, to abysmal darkness, nothingness. 'Nothing is but what is not': that is the text of the play. Reality and unreality change places. We must see that Macbeth, like the whole universe of this play, is paralysed, mesmerized, as though in a dream. This is not merely 'ambition'—it is fear, a nameless fear which yet fixes itself to a horrid image. He is helpless as a man in a nightmare: and this helplessness is integral to the conception—the will—concept is absent. Macbeth may struggle, but he cannot fight: he can no more resist than a rabbit resists a weasel's teeth fastened in its neck, or a bird the serpent's transfixing eye. Now this evil in Macbeth propels him to act absolutely evil. . . . Whilst Macbeth lives in conflict with himself there is misery, evil, fear: when, at the end, he and others have openly identified himself with evil, he faces the world fearless: nor does he appear evil any longer. The worst element of his suffering has been that secrecy and hypocrisy so often referred to throughout the play. . . . Dark secrecy and night are in Shakespeare ever the badges of crime. But at the end Macbeth has no need of secrecy. He is no longer 'cabin'd, cribb'd, confined, bound in to saucy doubts and fears' [III. iv. 23]. He has won through by

excessive crime to an harmonious and honest relation with his surroundings. He has successfully symbolized the disorder of his lonely guilt-stricken soul by disorder in the world, and thus restores balance and harmonious contact. The mighty principle of good planted in the nature of things then asserts itself, condemns him openly, brings him peace. Daylight is brought to Macbeth, as to Scotland, by the accusing armies of Malcolm. . . .

- [The Witches Cast a Spell \(IV. i. 1-38\)](#)

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