

Macbeth: The Torture of the Mind

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Mc Elroy argues that the tragedy of *Macbeth* lies in the discrepancy between Macbeth's evil actions and his abhorrence of evil. He notes that *Macbeth* is the most internal of Shakespeare's tragedies and that the protagonist is "his own most formidable adversary." Mc Elroy asserts that Macbeth is revolted by the act of killing Duncan but tantalized by the daring of it. Mc Elroy maintains that Macbeth is "fully aware of the enormity of his transgressions"; because of this, the critic calls the play a tragedy of self-loathing and self-horror, "the tragedy of a man who comes to condemn all that is in him for being there." Mc Elroy contends, against such critics as Robert Pack (1956), that Macbeth retains his humanity throughout the play because he retains an awareness of the magnitude of his crimes.

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare focuses his attention fully upon a problem he had dealt with peripherally in *Hamlet* and *Measure for Measure*: that of the criminal who is deeply aware of his own criminality, is repulsed by it, but is driven by internal and external pressures ever further into crime. What differentiates such villains as Claudius, Angelo, and Macbeth from Richard III, Iago, and Edmund is that the former fully admit the validity and worth of the moral laws they violate, while the latter dismiss the ethical standards of the world as so much folly and delusion. The latter three relish their superiority over their victims, while the former judge themselves from the same ethical perspectives as their victims. The descendants of the Vice believe in what they do, while the conscience-stricken criminals are in the agonizing position of being committed by their actions to one set of values while committed by their beliefs to quite another. Macbeth dramatizes this predicament as experienced by a man who possesses the fundamental qualities of the Shakespearean tragic hero.

For all its emphasis upon blood and violence, *Macbeth* is the most completely internal of all Shakespeare's tragedies. It presents us with a man who has a clear conception of the universe and his own proper place in it. But, when confronted with the possibility of committing a daring though criminal act, he wilfully deceives himself for a short time and embraces an opposite view of the world. In the aftermath of an irrevocable act, he finds himself irrevocably committed to a world-view in which he does not believe. The key to his savagery, and, even more, to the soul-sickness that elevates him to tragedy, is that he must proceed as if the self-delusion were true, when in his mind and heart he knows that it is not. This constant lying to himself, and the discrepancy between his beliefs and the world that he has chosen for himself, produce the self-loathing and the numbing sense of loss that are the essence of his tragedy....

The world Macbeth sees corresponds in striking detail to the world that the play presents us. Indeed, when the Thane describes his microcosm on the eve of the murder, he presents us with a most haunting delineation of the macrocosm, the world of the play:

Now o'er the one half-world

Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse

The curtained sleep. Witchcraft celebrates

Pale Hecate's offerings; and withered murder,

Alarumed by his sentinel, the wolf,

Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,

With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design

Moves like a ghost.

[II. i. 49-56]

Because of this coalescence between the macrocosm and the microcosm, Macbeth's own words provide us with the most useful index to the salient qualities of the **Macbeth**-world. . . .

Perhaps the most extraordinary thing about the **Macbeth**-world is that it contains a strong, effective principle of retributive justice in operation throughout the play. This is not something which our experience with the worlds of Shakespeare's tragedies would lead us to expect. In **Hamlet**, to be sure, there is a heavenly inclination toward justice, but, like all things in the **Hamlet**-world, it works in obscure and devious ways. In **Othello**, there is only that justice which the characters can make for themselves—too late. In **King Lear**, tragedy occurs finally because there is no justice, no way to make ethics and experience congruent. But in **Macbeth**, the title character describes a verifiable phenomenon when he observes:

But in these cases

We still have judgment here, that we but teach

Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return

To plague th' inventor. This even-handed justice

Commends th' ingredience of our poisoned chalice

To our own lips.

[I. vii. 7-12]

Paradoxically, it is the presence rather than the absence of justice in the **Macbeth**-world that gives the tragedy its particularly grim and futile outlook. The forces of conventional good triumph completely, but their triumph is strangely hollow, almost devoid of any power to mitigate the reality of evil or reconcile humanity to its condition. Justice in the **Macbeth**-world gives the impression of being less real and significant than the problems it successfully confronts. That evil exists is the essential fact in the world of the play; that, in the face of its existence, there is nothing to do but punish it is the essential futility. It is at the moment of justice's complete

triumph that the most famous statement of futility echoes sepulchrally from the depths of Macbeth's world and from the *Macbeth*-world itself. It will not do to say that "tomorrow and tomorrow" are the embittered words of a man who has lost his humanity, for they carry far more weight within the context of the play than does anything spoken by the lackluster defenders of right. Justice is necessary, and we greet its reestablishment with a sigh of relief; but to say that justice is necessary is not the same as to say it is meaningful. When Macbeth commits his crime, he seems to embody a dimension of mankind left quite untouched by Macduff's and Malcolm's vengeance upon the individual man. It is almost as if Shakespeare were taking the most optimistic theological explanation of the operation of divine justice and demonstrating that it, too, contains the seeds of tragedy.

No other Shakespearean hero faces so pallid an array of antagonists. . . .

By pitting Macbeth against a combination of forces whose sum total is so much less compelling than himself, Shakespeare emphasizes that in this play, the protagonist is his own most formidable adversary. As I say, *Macbeth* is the most private and internal of Shakespeare's tragedies, and the tragic suffering that occurs is the torture of the mind that goes on within the hero and heroine. But, further, the comparatively pallid nature of the hero's opponents is essential to the complementary tension of the play, a tension that accounts for the deep ambivalence of feeling which the tragedy prompts toward its title character. The central question to which almost all critics have addressed themselves is, 'How can anyone who does what Macbeth does command not only our interest but our awe and empathy throughout the play? How can a man who violates his humanity tell us so much about what humanity is?' There is no doubt that Macbeth is wrong, but in his mammoth wrongness he completely overshadows the pint-size rightness of Malcolm and is much closer to realizing the outer limits of human potential than the even-handed characters who remain cautiously in the center. Like many tragic protagonists from Oedipus and Orestes to Kurtz and Raskolnikov, he is a lone voyager into the forbidden, who severs his ties with the comfort and security of the community. Such mythic figures do not merely circumvent conventional moral judgment; they pass through and beyond it. Throughout the play, Macbeth is surrounded by men who accept the limitations imposed upon them by the world, and he, too, initially considers his extraordinary powers to be "children and servants" to his king. He transgresses all the bounds that others accept, and in doing so he becomes evil and must be destroyed. But at the same time, in transgressing fully aware of the enormity of his transgression, he assumes awe-inspiring dimensions quite beyond Duncan, Malcolm, Banquo, and Macduff. Humanity as Macbeth is terrible, but humanity as Malcolm is merely insipid. . . .

No other Shakespearean hero has so firm and correct a sense of self-knowledge, nor so fully developed a concept of the universe and his place in it. Macbeth has a unique ability to foresee both the practical and the ethical outcome of his actions. Lear, in contrast, starts off with a completely mistaken notion of who he is and what the world is like; he blindly pulls down tragedy upon his own head and is shocked and outraged when disaster strikes. Othello, because of his predisposition, convinces himself of a falsehood upon virtually no evidence. Hamlet, for all his mercurial brilliance, is hopelessly inept at foreseeing the logical outcome of his actions. But Macbeth suffers from none of these perceptual shortcomings. The most terrible thing about his tragedy is that he goes to it with his eyes wide open, his vision unclouded, his moral judgment still in perfect working order. He wilfully disregards his own best perceptions and intuitions, but he is never rid of them. More than any other Shakespearean hero, he has a perfectly clear concept of who he is and where he stands—and it is exactly this perception that torments and spiritually destroys him.

In the opening scenes, Macbeth's mind is already under that kind of tension which we have seen to be so characteristic of mature Shakespearean tragedy, the tension that precedes the collapse of the personal world. The opposites are basic and the opposition is total. Macbeth is the most honored peer in the realm, but his honor is based upon incongruous and irreconcilable qualities; on the one hand, he is able and willing to dare anything and fear nothing, but, on the other, he accepts limits and boundaries which cannot under any circumstances be transgressed. Gory descriptions of his individual fearless deeds alternate with praise of him as a loyal subject

who curbs the lavish spirits of those who dare to rise against their king. The tension of Macbeth's position in the macrocosm is reflected by a corresponding tension in the microcosm, the tension between a deeply moral intellect and an utterly amoral will. . . .

In many respects, Macbeth is, right from the beginning, a poor candidate for the job of political assassin. For one thing, he is not really ambitious in the usual sense of the word. In the scenes leading up to the murder, he scarcely mentions the crown; he has none of his wife's sanguine anticipation of a golden round or nights and days of solely sovereign sway and masterdom. Unlike Tamburlane, he does not find kingship a sort of apotheosis of the human condition, and unlike Richard of Gloucester, he is not driven by a compulsive need to command, to check, and to o'erbear such as are of better person than himself. In conventionally ambitious men, anticipation of the fruits of crime blunts the sensibilities to the crime itself. But Macbeth is just the opposite of this; he scarcely gives a thought to the spoils that will proceed from the act and keeps his attention unwaveringly upon the act itself; and his attitude toward the object of his fixation is mixed attraction and repulsion. His repulsion springs from the deeply moral side of his nature. No other character is so acutely aware of himself as living in the eye of heaven. When he looks into himself and finds there inclinations that are anything but celestial, he is frightened and revolted, and he extends his abhorrence of his own instinct to heaven nature:

Stars, hide your fires;

Let not light see my black and deep desires.

The eye wink at the hand.

[I. iv. 50-2]

Yet on the heels of this can come a reassertion of the impulse to terrible and forbidden action: "yet let that be / Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see" [I. iv. 52-3]. It is the very fearfulness of the deed that seems to exert the strongest attraction for him, since it calls for a degree of resolution and daring quite beyond the slaying of rebels. For Macbeth, action is self-definition; he is revolted by the act, but tantalized by the possibility of doing exactly that which is most expressly forbidden by all laws, sacred and humane. He dares to kill his king not so much to become king himself as to become the man who dared to do it. . . .

Macbeth and his lady have the makings of one murderer between them. She is capable of contemplating the crime with something that borders upon exaltation, but is not, it turns out, capable of dealing the fatal stroke herself. He is quite capable of doing that, but cannot even think of the moral quality of the act without horror and aversion. He would, no doubt, be capable of resisting the temptation to strike were it not for the devastating attack she launches against the foundation of his world-view, his concept of what it means to be a man. Thus, the great confrontation between them in Act 1, scene vii, presents the disconcerting picture of two people inciting each other to crime, for the presence of each makes crime possible for the other.

Macbeth's soliloquy at the opening of the scene gives us our first full view of the hero's subjective world; it is a world in which action is a continuum, an ongoing process of cause and effect, act and consequence, a world in which retributive justice is not merely possible but certain. It is also a world of relatedness, a world in which duties and obligations are well defined and divinely sanctioned. In such a world, vaulting ambition, far from being heroic self-assertion, is unconscionable overreaching, a violation of the sacrosanct bonds that define one's humanity. By the end of the soliloquy, Macbeth has decided to abandon all thoughts of regicide, for in such a

world, to proceed would be not only appalling, but positively suicidal. When he announces his decision to his wife, the reason he gives, the "golden opinions" his valor has just won from all sorts of people, is an evasion. He cannot explain his real reasons—retribution from heaven, the sacred bonds of obligation—because she simply would not comprehend them, would, in fact, heap scorn upon them. But his stated reason is a significant and characteristic evasion; the golden opinions epitomize his position as a valorous subject who is content to accept the status of subject and live as an honored member of the community.

Lady Macbeth is able to undermine his resolution so quickly not simply because she calls his virility into question, and not simply because she exerts enormous personal power over their relationship; Macbeth is quite capable of withstanding such pressures. She finally achieves her purposes by suggesting to him that his whole apprehension of reality is mistaken, that action is not an open-ended continuum, but is final and conclusive, and that the essence of humanity is not living within the limits of an assigned place, but daring to do anything. Her attack on Macbeth is the same as Goneril's attack upon Albany; because he is moral, he is a coward and a fool who deceives himself about the way the world really operates. But her arguments are far more effective than Goneril's because she is not telling her husband anything new, but reiterating things he had already told himself. Like Hamlet and Othello, Macbeth has a divided mind about some of the most fundamental issues of existence; Lady Macbeth is the voice of one side of it. . . .

She undermines his confidence in the vision of the soliloquy by pointing out that he does not fully believe in it himself. At one time he had been more than willing to kill the king if only the opportunity would present itself. "If we should fail?" [I. vii. 59]. This, Macbeth's last attempt at resistance, has been widely misunderstood. As the soliloquy showed, he is not in the least worried about the practical possibility of executing the murder: if that were all there were to it, he would proceed at once. But the failure Macbeth fears is the long-range failure in a world of relatedness, where action is a continuum and justice is certain—to be cut off forever from the rest of humanity, to be hated and cursed by all men, and finally to be hounded down by inexorable retribution. It is the long-range failure he had pictured in harrowing detail, and it is, in fact, exactly what happens.... Macbeth accepts the notion that action is final and conclusive, that accomplishment of the deed is tantamount to success, that the consequences of an action may be circumvented:

Will it not be received,

When we have marked with blood those sleepy two

Of his own chamber and used their very daggers,

That they have done's?

[I. vii. 74-7]

Like Othello's "And yet, how nature erring from itself—" [*Othello*, III. iii. 227], it is the point of no return, for it signals not simply a change of mind, but a movement from one worldview to another. The seeds of Macbeth's tragedy are planted here, not only because he dedicates himself to the first of many brutal crimes, but even more because he does not really *believe* in a world in which a man may dare anything, in which action is final and conclusive. He wants to believe in it, for such a world poses no impediments to action. His ruthless will scores a temporary victory over his own best perceptions. But the shallowness and patent self-deception of this speech contrast sharply with the intense and passionate conviction of the soliloquy. From this point on, Macbeth is in the

position of having to insist with all the vigor of his will upon the truth of something which, in his own mind, he does not really believe. His method of insistence will be action, and the result will be tragedy. . . .

For the remainder of the play, Macbeth sees himself as being in fundamental conflict with the world itself, with his indomitable will pitted against its moral order, its communal obligations, its immutable and inescapable ethical laws. Like all the Shakespearean tragic heroes, he sees his own actions in cosmic terms; but after the dreadful finality of "I am resolved," he is positively obsessed by the notion of being at the center of a universe which is fundamentally opposed to what he is doing. Like Hamlet, he declares total, all-out war upon the world of the play, but his attack is not against duplicity and corruption, but against humane feeling and divine justice. . . .

The self-delusion that action is final and conclusive crumbles before the realization that the consequences of his deed will last as long as his life: "Macbeth shall sleep no more" [II. ii. 50]. He is fully aware that he can never by any means get back to the bank and shoal of time from which he has so precipitously leaped; nothing can change or mitigate the consequences of his act:

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood

Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather

The multitudinous seas incarnadine,

Making the green one red.

But most of all, his crime destroys his capacity to respect or even to tolerate himself. For the remainder of the play, the vantage point from which he judges himself is the world-view from which he is hopelessly estranged. His own hands are unrecognizable to him, savage, hangman's hands that would pluck out his eyes. But, in fact, they do not obliterate his vision; he must continue staring at them and at the self they epitomize. The primary purpose of his act had been to define his manhood. Ironically, it does, but the definition is one he cannot contemplate without horror and revulsion: "To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself" [II. ii. 70]. This line sets the tone for the remainder of the tragedy. He is his deed in his own eyes, and in his own eyes his deed is appalling. Hence, he faces the characteristic problem of the Shakespearean tragic hero, how to endure what is, for him, simply unendurable. I do not read *Macbeth* as a tragedy of ambition, nor as a tragedy of fear. It is above all a tragedy of self-loathing of self-horror that leads to spiritual paralysis, the tragedy of a man who comes to condemn all that is in him for being there. Macbeth is indeed terror-stricken in this scene, but what strikes him full of terror is not the deed itself, and still less the fear of being caught, but rather a full realization of what his action has done to him. He has cut himself off from the world he believes in and has committed himself to its antithesis, a world in which man is a predatory animal. The commitment is irrevocable, and all he can do is follow it remorselessly to its conclusion. It is as if by insisting vehemently enough on such a world-view, Macbeth believes he can validate it, can establish its reality by sheer force of will. It is the desperate need to validate the world-view to which he is committed, his determination to win a battle of wills with the macrocosm itself, that plunges him into steadily deepening cruelty in Acts III and IV....

In assuming that the murder of Banquo and Fleance would set his mind at rest, Macbeth was once again wilfully deluding himself, pretending that, if he insisted vehemently enough upon something, and put that insistence into act, then the thing would be true. But even if Fleance had shared his father's fate, it would be difficult to imagine a Macbeth who was not cabined cribbed, and confined; his prison, his torture chamber, is not the macrocosm but

the microcosm, and the death of one man or of thousands is incapable of setting things to rights there. But the escape of Fleance once again makes him see that the murder of Duncan was not a final or definitive act. It will go on through a continuum of cause and effect to produce consequences completely beyond his control. When he confronts the shade of Banquo (or the evil spirit sent by the witches in Banquo's shape, or the product of his own haunted imagination—there is no way of telling which, and no need to tell) he gives voice, even in his hysteria, to the basic rift in his own subjective world. On the one hand there is the world of infinite daring, but on the other there is the world of swift and terrible justice, in which dead victims rise again to push murderers from their stools....

In the aftermath of his great feast, Macbeth is more convinced than ever that he is living in a macrocosm which implacably requires his destruction:

It will have blood, they say: blood will have blood.

Stones have been known to move and trees to speak

Augures and understood relations have

By maggot-pies and choughs and rooks brought forth

The secret'st man of blood.

[III. iv. 121-25]

Yet, far from impeding him from further action, his conviction only impels him to ever more ruthless action; his insistence upon the world to which he is committed is now fired by desperation. In the face of his implacable will, all causes shall give way. His image of himself is not simply of a man with bloody, hangman's hands, but of a man inundated in blood, bathed in it from head to foot, literally into it over his head. But the total estrangement from all his previous values confers upon Macbeth, as it has upon other Shakespearean heroes, a terrible, lonely freedom. The man who has lost positively everything he cherishes is the freest of all possible men; he has nothing further to lose and nothing to worry about salvaging.

By the time he reaches the witches' abode, the naked force of his will has reached apocalyptic proportions reminiscent of the third act of *King Lear*. Macbeth thinks he has come to learn by the worst means the worst, for to know the worst is to lose a large part of fear of the worst. But the witches *want* Macbeth to struggle and hope, for they know that struggle is futile and hope groundless, and therefore torture. Thus, they tell him what appears to be better news than he had expected to hear. . . .

By far the most usual interpretation of the last act is that Macbeth has completely lost his humanity, has become the monster he set out to be, and though we continue to have grudging admiration for his animal courage, we rejoice with the followers of Malcolm when the tyrant and his fiend-like queen are overthrown. Rather, it seems to me that we are so absorbed in Macbeth's private conflict that his death and the triumph of unimpressive right is almost incidental to the tragedy. Moreover, Macbeth does not lose his humanity because he *cannot* lose his humanity no matter how hard he tries; that is exactly what makes him a tragic hero. His case is in one way analogous to Othello's: the Moor repeatedly resolves to cast away all love for Desdemona, but he simply cannot

do it. His love remains, coexistent with his belief she has betrayed him, and the result is excruciating inner torture. Macbeth's humanity is vested in that world-view he unfolded in his first major soliloquy, and, though his most vigorous efforts throughout the play have been to rid himself of that vision, he has never even come close to doing so. It remains as a vantage point from which he must assess all that he has done, all that he has lost, all that he has become: "I am sick at heart, / When I behold—" [V. iii. 19-20]. The thought is left uncompleted, but clearly what Macbeth beholds all through these scenes is himself:

I have lived long enough. My way of life

Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf,

And that which should accompany old age,

As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,

I must not look to have.

[V. iii. 22-6]

Honor, love, obedience, and troops of friends are the values of the limited, structured world he had abandoned; in the predatory world he embraced, they should have no importance whatsoever. "To be tender-minded / Does not become a sword," Edmund had observed [*King Lear*, V. iii. 31-2]. But those values are terribly important to Macbeth, and only his loss of them has made him realize how important they are. Alfred Harbage has observed that "no voice in literature has sounded with greater sadness" than Macbeth's in the above speech. To have a passionately held, demonstrably valid vision of the world, and yet to be cut off from it by one's own actions, to be hated and cursed by all humanity, to have to struggle against one's own most deeply felt emotions, and to be *aware* of all this with perfect, unblinking clarity, is surely the most harrowing vision of human isolation that has ever been realized in drama. It is perhaps the degree of his self-awareness that most differentiates him from other Shakespearean malefactors: he sees his own situation unflinchingly and refuses either to soften it or to be sentimental about himself. He drains the ingredients of his poisoned chalice to the last bitter dregs.

Self-awareness is one of the hallmarks of the Shakespearean tragic hero, and in Macbeth's case, it is the very essence of his tragedy. Also, like the other three, he has a desperate need to have his actions in consonance with a broader scheme of reality, including the rest of humanity and the metaphysical order. But, as Macbeth fully realizes, such consonance is impossible for him because he is so utterly cut off from the only world he believes in or values. In self-recognition and self-horror he realizes he has lost even the capacity to feel fear, and a moment later he cannot feel normal human grief at the death of his wife. Above all he realizes he has committed himself to action and yet he believes action to be futile, full of sound and fury, but signifying nothing.

That the vision of life offered in Macbeth's final soliloquy is not Shakespeare's ultimate or only significant pronouncement upon the human condition we need only our experience with the canon, including the other tragedies, to attest. Besides, *Macbeth* does not "make a statement" any more than *Lear* did. What Shakespeare was dramatizing was a potentiality of the human condition, in this case a most grim potentiality, but as true in its context as any other embodied in his dramas. It is realized with exceptional conviction and power, and to shrug it off as the observation of a man who has lost his humanity may make the play easier to live with, but undermines its imaginative vigor and ruthless integrity. Macbeth's pronouncement is the only pronouncement on life in the *Macbeth*-world; nothing of comparable weight is there to counterbalance it, and it draws its power not only from

the greatness of the verse but also from its dramatic context. And here, I think, is the center of the problem, for is not its context a world which finally is moral, surely the most thoroughly just world Shakespeare created for a tragedy? The *Macbeth*-world is a moral world founded upon a moral incongruity, for while evil seems to issue spontaneously and irrepressibly from its very core, its most basic law is that evil is evil and must be destroyed. The same incongruity is repeated in the microcosm; Macbeth is strongly impelled to evil, but he is no less strongly impelled to abhor evil. Hence, he comes to abhor himself. If the world is basically inclined to evil, as the *Macbeth*-world is, then justice becomes little more than a tragic necessity. Its pyrrhic victory is retributive but not redemptive.

The play, then, explores dialectically the complementary tension between proneness to evil and abhorrence of evil in both the macrocosm and the microcosm. Macbeth is not a tragic hero *in spite* of his criminality but *because* of his criminality. Had he been able to resist his own inclinations and the promptings of his wife, he would be of no more interest than any other successful general. Had he been able to kill without compunction, he would be simply one of our rarer monsters. But he is caught in the tension between his action and his reaction, the primary tension of the *Macbeth*-world, and in his struggle and his failure to reconcile irreconcilable conflicts, he assumes tragic dimensions. . . .

- [Macbeth Prepares for Murder \(II. i. 33-64\)](#)
- [Macbeth Sees a Dagger \(II. i. 33-64\)](#)
- [Macbeth Hesitates; Lady Macbeth Persuades \(I. vii. 1-83\)](#)
- [The Witches Cast a Spell \(IV. i. 1-38\)](#)
- [Macbeth Talks of Death \(V. v. 15-28\)](#)

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