

# SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY BY

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## LECTURE I

### THE SUBSTANCE OF SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

A Shakespearean tragedy as so far considered may be called a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man in high estate. But it is clearly much more than this, and we have now to regard it from another side. No amount of calamity which merely befell a man, descending from the clouds like lightning, or stealing from the darkness like pestilence, could alone provide the substance of its story. Job was the greatest of all the children of the east, and his afflictions were well-nigh more than he could bear; but even if we imagined them wearing him to death, that would not make his story tragic. Nor yet would it become so, in the Shakespearean sense, if the fire, and the great wind from the wilderness, and the torments of his flesh were conceived as sent by a supernatural power, whether just or malignant. The calamities of tragedy do not simply happen, nor are they sent; they proceed mainly from actions, and those the actions of men.

We see a number of human beings placed in certain circumstances; and we see, arising from the co-operation of their characters in these circumstances, certain actions. These actions beget others, and these others beget others again, until this series of inter-connected deeds leads by an apparently inevitable sequence to a catastrophe. The effect of such a series on imagination is to make us regard the sufferings which accompany it, and the catastrophe in which it ends, not only or chiefly as something which happens to the persons concerned, but equally as something which is caused<sup>[12]</sup> by them. This at least may be said of the principal persons, and, among them, of the hero, who always contributes in some measure to the disaster in which he perishes.

This second aspect of tragedy evidently differs greatly from the first. Men, from this point of view, appear to us primarily as agents, 'themselves the authors of their proper woe'; and our fear and pity, though they will not cease or diminish, will be modified accordingly. We are now to consider this second aspect, remembering that it too is only one aspect, and additional to the first, not a substitute for it.

The 'story' or 'action' of a Shakespearean tragedy does not consist, of course, solely of human actions or deeds; but the deeds are the predominant factor. And these deeds are, for the most part, actions in the full sense of the word; not things done "tween asleep and wake," but acts or omissions thoroughly expressive of the doer,—characteristic deeds. The centre of the tragedy, therefore, may be said with equal truth to lie in action issuing from character, or in character issuing in action.

Shakespeare's main interest lay here. To say that it lay in *mere* character, or was a psychological interest, would be a great mistake, for he was dramatic to the tips of his fingers. It is possible to find places where he has given a certain indulgence to his love of poetry, and even to his turn for general reflections; but it would be very difficult, and in his later tragedies perhaps impossible, to detect passages where he has allowed such freedom to the interest in character apart from action. But for the opposite extreme, for the abstraction of mere 'plot' (which is a very different thing from the tragic 'action'), for the kind of interest which predominates in a novel like *The Woman in White*, it is clear that he <sup>[13]</sup>cared even less. I do not mean that this interest is absent from his dramas; but it is subordinate to others, and is so interwoven with them that we are rarely conscious of it apart, and rarely feel in any great strength the half-intellectual, half-nervous excitement of following an ingenious complication. What we do feel strongly, as a tragedy advances to its close, is that the calamities and catastrophe follow inevitably from the deeds of men, and that the main source of these deeds is character. The dictum that, with Shakespeare, 'character is destiny' is no doubt an exaggeration, and one that may mislead (for many of his tragic personages, if they had not met with peculiar circumstances, would have escaped a tragic end, and might even have lived fairly untroubled lives); but it is the exaggeration of a vital truth.

This truth, with some of its qualifications, will appear more clearly if we now go on to ask what elements are to be found in the 'story' or 'action,' occasionally or frequently, beside the characteristic deeds, and the sufferings and circumstances, of the persons. I will refer to three of these additional factors.

(a) Shakespeare, occasionally and for reasons which need not be discussed here, represents abnormal conditions of mind; insanity, for example, somnambulism, hallucinations. And deeds issuing from these are certainly not what we called deeds in the fullest sense, deeds expressive of character. No; but these abnormal conditions are never introduced as the origin of deeds of any dramatic moment. Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking has no influence whatever on the events that follow it. Macbeth did not murder Duncan because he saw a dagger in the air: he saw the dagger because he was about to murder Duncan.

(b) Shakespeare also introduces the supernatural into some of his tragedies; he introduces ghosts, and witches who have supernatural knowledge. This supernatural element certainly cannot in most cases, if in any, be explained away as an illusion in the mind of one of the characters. And further, it does contribute to the action, and is in more than one instance an indispensable part of it: so that to describe human character, with circumstances, as always the *sole* motive force in this action would be a serious error. But the supernatural is always placed in the closest relation with character. It gives a confirmation and a distinct form to inward movements already present and exerting an influence; to the sense of failure in Brutus, to the stifled workings of conscience in Richard, to the half-formed thought or the horrified memory of guilt in Macbeth, to suspicion in Hamlet. Moreover, its influence is never of a compulsive kind. It forms no more than an element, however important, in the problem which the hero has to face; and we are never allowed to feel that it has removed his capacity or responsibility for dealing with this problem. So far indeed are we from feeling this, that many readers run to the opposite extreme, and openly or privately regard the supernatural as having nothing to do with the real interest of the play.

(c) Shakespeare, lastly, in most of his tragedies allows to 'chance' or 'accident' an appreciable influence at some point in the action. Chance or accident here will be found, I think, to mean any occurrence (not supernatural, of course) which <sup>[15]</sup>enters the dramatic sequence neither from the agency of a character, nor from the obvious surrounding circumstances.<sup>[3]</sup> It may be called an accident, in this sense, that Romeo never got the Friar's message about the potion, and that Juliet did not awake from her long sleep a minute sooner; an accident that Edgar arrived at the prison just too late to save Cordelia's life; an accident that Desdemona dropped her handkerchief at the most fatal of moments; an accident that the pirate ship attacked Hamlet's ship, so that he was able to return forthwith to Denmark. Now this operation of accident is a fact, and a prominent fact, of human life. To exclude it *wholly* from tragedy, therefore, would be, we may say, to fail in truth. And, besides, it is not merely a fact. That men may start a course of events but can neither calculate nor control it, is a *tragic* fact. The dramatist may use accident so as to make us feel this; and there are also other dramatic uses to which it may be put. Shakespeare accordingly admits it. On the other hand, any *large* admission of chance into the tragic sequence<sup>[4]</sup> would certainly weaken, and might destroy, the sense of the causal connection of character, deed, and catastrophe. And Shakespeare really uses it very sparingly. We seldom find ourselves exclaiming, 'What an unlucky accident!' I believe most readers would have to search painfully for instances. It is, further, frequently easy to see the dramatic intention of an accident; and some things which look like accidents have really a connection with character, and are therefore not in the full sense accidents. Finally, I believe it <sup>[16]</sup>will be found that almost all the prominent

accidents occur when the action is well advanced and the impression of the causal sequence is too firmly fixed to be impaired.

Thus it appears that these three elements in the 'action' are subordinate, while the dominant factor consists in deeds which issue from character. So that, by way of summary, we may now alter our first statement, 'A tragedy is a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man in high estate,' and we may say instead (what in its turn is one-sided, though less so), that the story is one of human actions producing exceptional calamity and ending in the death of such a man.<sup>[5]</sup>

#### FOOTNOTES:

[1]*Julius Caesar* is not an exception to this rule. Caesar, whose murder comes in the Third Act, is in a sense the dominating figure in the story, but Brutus is the 'hero.'

[2]*Timon of Athens*, we have seen, was probably not designed by Shakespeare, but even *Timon* is no exception to the rule. The sub-plot is concerned with Alcibiades and his army, and Timon himself is treated by the Senate as a man of great importance. *Arden of Feversham* and *A Yorkshire Tragedy* would certainly be exceptions to the rule; but I assume that neither of them is Shakespeare's; and if either is, it belongs to a different species from his admitted tragedies. See, on this species, Symonds, *Shakspeare's Predecessors*, ch. xi.

[3]Even a deed would, I think, be counted an 'accident,' if it were the deed of a very minor person whose character had not been indicated; because such a deed would not issue from the little world to which the dramatist had confined our attention.

[4]Comedy stands in a different position. The tricks played by chance often form a principal part of the comic action.

[5]It may be observed that the influence of the three elements just considered is to strengthen the tendency, produced by the sufferings considered first, to regard the tragic persons as passive rather than as agents.

## Structure and Form

As a Shakespearean tragedy represents a conflict which terminates in a catastrophe, any such tragedy may roughly be divided into three parts. The first of these sets forth or expounds the situation,<sup>[17]</sup> or state of affairs, out of which the conflict arises; and it may, therefore, be called the Exposition. The second deals with the definite beginning, the growth and the vicissitudes of the conflict. It forms accordingly the bulk of the play, comprising the Second, Third and Fourth Acts, and usually a part of the First and a part of the Fifth. The final section of the tragedy shows the issue of the conflict in a catastrophe.

The main business of the Exposition, which we will consider first, is to introduce us into a little world of persons; to show us their positions in life, their circumstances, their relations to one another, and perhaps something of their characters; and to leave us keenly interested in the question what will come out of this condition of things. We are left thus expectant, not merely because some of the persons interest us at once, but also because their situation in regard to one another points to difficulties in the future. This situation is not one of conflict but it threatens conflict. For example, we see first the hatred of the Montagues and Capulets; and then we see Romeo ready to fall violently in love; and then we hear talk of a marriage between Juliet and Paris; but the exposition is not complete, and the conflict has not definitely begun to arise,

When Shakespeare begins his exposition thus he generally at first makes people talk about the hero, but keeps the hero himself for some time out of sight, so that we await his entrance with curiosity, and sometimes with anxiety. We come now to the conflict itself. And here one or two preliminary remarks are necessary. In the first place, it must be remembered that our point of view in examining the construction of a play will not always coincide with that which we occupy in thinking of its whole dramatic effect. For example, that struggle in the hero's soul which sometimes accompanies the outward struggle is of the highest importance for the total effect of a tragedy.

With these warnings, I turn to the question whether we can trace any distinct method or methods by which Shakespeare represents the rise and development of the conflict. Macbeth, hurrying, in spite of much inward resistance, to the murder of Duncan, attains the crown, the upward movement being extraordinarily rapid, and the crisis arriving early: his cause then turns slowly downward, and soon hastens to ruin. In both these tragedies the simplicity of the constructional effect, it should be noticed, depends in part on the fact that the contending forces may quite naturally be identified with certain persons, and partly again on the fact that the defeat of one side is the victory of the other. Octavius and Antony, Malcolm and Macduff, are left standing over the bodies of their foes.

To regard Macbeth as a play, like the love-tragedies Romeo and Juliet and Antony and Cleopatra, in which there are two central characters of equal importance, is certainly a mistake. But Shakespeare himself is in a measure responsible for it, because the first half of Macbeth is greater than the second, and in the first half Lady Macbeth not only appears more than in the second but exerts the ultimate deciding influence on the action. And, in the opening Act at least, Lady Macbeth is the most commanding and perhaps the most awe-inspiring figure that Shakespeare drew. Sharing, as we have seen, certain traits with her husband, she is at once clearly distinguished from him by an inflexibility of will, which appears to hold imagination, feeling, and conscience completely in check. To her the prophecy of things that will be becomes instantaneously the determination that they shall be:

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be  
That thou art promised.

She knows her husband's weakness, how he scruples 'to catch the nearest way' to the object he desires; and she sets herself without a trace of doubt or conflict to counteract this weakness. To her there [367] is no separation between will and deed; and, as the deed falls in part to her, she is sure it will be done:

The raven himself is hoarse  
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan  
Under my battlements.

On the moment of Macbeth's rejoining her, after braving infinite dangers and winning infinite praise, without a syllable on these subjects or a word of affection, she goes straight to her purpose and permits him to speak of nothing else. She takes the superior position and assumes the direction of affairs,—appears to assume it even more than she really can, that she may spur him on. She animates him by picturing the deed as heroic, 'this night's great business,' or 'our great quell,' while she ignores its cruelty and faithlessness. She bears down his faint resistance by presenting him with a prepared scheme which may remove from him the terror and danger of deliberation. She rouses him with a taunt no man can bear, and least of all a soldier,—the word 'coward.' She appeals even to his love for her:

from this time  
Such I account thy love;

—such, that is, as the protestations of a drunkard. Her reasonings are mere sophisms; they could persuade no man. It is not by them, it is by personal appeals, through the admiration she extorts from him, and through sheer force of will, that she impels him to the deed. Her eyes are fixed upon the crown and the means to it; she does not attend to the consequences. Her plan of laying the guilt upon the chamberlains is invented on the spur of the moment, and simply to satisfy her husband. Her true mind is heard in the ringing cry

with which she answers his question, 'Will it not be received ... that they have done it?'

Who dares receive it other?

and this is repeated in the sleep-walking scene: 'What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?' Her passionate courage sweeps him off his feet. His decision is taken in a moment of enthusiasm:

Bring forth men-children only;  
For thy undaunted mettle should compose  
Nothing but males.

And even when passion has quite died away her will remains supreme. In presence of overwhelming horror and danger, in the murder scene and the banquet scene, her self-control is perfect. When the truth of what she has done dawns on her, no word of complaint, scarcely a word of her own suffering, not a single word of her own as apart from his, escapes her when others are by. She helps him, but never asks his help. She leans on nothing but herself. And from the beginning to the end—though she makes once or twice a slip in acting her part—her will never fails her. Its grasp upon her nature may destroy her, but it is never relaxed. We are sure that she never betrayed her husband or herself by a word or even a look, save in sleep. However appalling she may be, she is sublime.

In the earlier scenes of the play this aspect of Lady Macbeth's character is far the most prominent. And if she seems invincible she seems also inhuman. We find no trace of pity for the kind old king; no consciousness of the treachery and baseness of the murder; no sense of the value of the lives of the wretched men on whom the guilt is to be laid; no shrinking even from the condemnation or hatred of the world. Yet if the Lady Macbeth of these scenes were really utterly inhuman, or a 'fiend-like queen,' as Malcolm calls her, the Lady Macbeth of the sleep-walking scene would be an impossibility. The one woman could never become the other. And in fact, if we look [369]below the surface, there is evidence enough in the earlier scenes of preparation for the later. I do not mean that Lady Macbeth was naturally humane. There is nothing in the play to show this, and several passages subsequent to the murder-scene supply proof to the contrary. One is that where she exclaims, on being informed of Duncan's murder,

Woe, alas!

What, in our house?

This mistake in acting shows that she does not even know what the natural feeling in such circumstances would be; and Banquo's curt answer, 'Too cruel anywhere,' is almost a reproof of her insensibility. But, admitting this, we have in the first place to remember, in imagining the opening scenes, that she

is deliberately bent on counteracting the 'human kindness' of her husband, and also that she is evidently not merely inflexibly determined but in a condition of abnormal excitability. That exaltation in the project which is so entirely lacking in Macbeth is strongly marked in her. When she tries to help him by representing their enterprise as heroic, she is deceiving herself as much as him. Their attainment of the crown presents itself to her, perhaps has long presented itself, as something so glorious, and she has fixed her will upon it so completely, that for the time she sees the enterprise in no other light than that of its greatness. When she soliloquises,

Yet do I fear thy nature:

It is too full o' the milk of human kindness

To catch the nearest way: thou wouldst be great;

Art not without ambition, but without

The illness should attend it; what thou wouldst highly,

That wouldst thou holily,

one sees that 'ambition' and 'great' and 'highly' and even 'illness' are to her simply terms of praise, [370]and 'holily' and 'human kindness' simply terms of blame. Moral distinctions do not in this exaltation exist for her; or rather they are inverted: 'good' means to her the crown and whatever is required to obtain it, 'evil' whatever stands in the way of its attainment. This attitude of mind is evident even when she is alone, though it becomes still more pronounced when she has to work upon her husband. And it persists until her end is attained. But, without being exactly forced, it betrays a strain which could not long endure.

Besides this, in these earlier scenes the traces of feminine weakness and human feeling, which account for her later failure, are not absent. Her will, it is clear, was exerted to overpower not only her husband's resistance but some resistance in herself. Imagine Goneril uttering the famous words,

Had he not resembled

My father as he slept, I had done 't.

They are spoken, I think, without any sentiment—impatiently, as though she regretted her weakness: but it was there. And in reality, quite apart from this recollection of her father, she could never have done the murder if her husband had failed. She had to nerve herself with wine to give her 'boldness' enough to go through her minor part. That appalling invocation to the spirits of evil, to unsex her and fill her from the crown to the toe topfull of direst cruelty, tells the same tale of determination to crush the inward protest. Goneril had no need of such a prayer. In the utterance of the frightful lines,

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 pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,  
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you  
Have done to this,

her voice should doubtless rise until it reaches, in 'dash'd the brains out,' an almost hysterical scream.[227] These lines show unmistakably that strained exaltation which, as soon as the end is reached, vanishes, never to return.

The greatness of Lady Macbeth lies almost wholly in courage and force of will. It is an error to regard her as remarkable on the intellectual side. In acting a part she shows immense self-control, but not much skill. Whatever may be thought of the plan of attributing the murder of Duncan to the chamberlains, to lay their bloody daggers on their pillows, as if they were determined to advertise their guilt, was a mistake which can be accounted for only by the excitement of the moment. But the limitations of her mind appear most in the point where she is most strongly contrasted with Macbeth,—in her comparative dulness of imagination. I say 'comparative,' for she sometimes uses highly poetic language, as indeed does everyone in Shakespeare who has any greatness of soul. Nor is she perhaps less imaginative than the majority of his heroines. But as compared with her husband she has little imagination. It is not simply that she suppresses what she has. To her, things remain at the most terrible moment precisely what they were at the calmest, plain facts which stand in a given relation to a certain deed, not visions which tremble and flicker in the light of other worlds. The probability that the old king will sleep soundly after his long journey to Inverness is to her simply a fortunate circumstance; but one can fancy the shoot of horror across Macbeth's face as she mentions it. She uses familiar and prosaic illustrations, like

Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would,'  
Like the poor cat i' the adage,  
(the cat who wanted fish but did not like to wet her feet); or,

We fail?  
But screw your courage to the sticking-place,  
And we'll not fail;  
or,

Was the hope drunk  
Wherein you dress'd yourself? hath it slept since?  
And wakes it now, to look so green and pale  
At what it did so freely?

The Witches are practically nothing to her. She feels no sympathy in Nature with her guilty purpose, and would never bid the earth not hear her steps, which way they walk. The noises before the murder, and during it, are heard

by her as simple facts, and are referred to their true sources. The knocking has no mystery for her: it comes from 'the south entry.' She calculates on the drunkenness of the grooms, compares the different effects of wine on herself and on them, and listens to their snoring. To her the blood upon her husband's hands suggests only the taunt,

My hands are of your colour, but I shame  
To wear a heart so white;  
and the blood to her is merely 'this filthy witness,'—words impossible to her husband, to whom it suggested something quite other than sensuous disgust or practical danger. The literalism of her mind appears fully in two contemptuous speeches where she dismisses his imaginings; in the murder scene:

Infirmary of purpose!  
Give me the daggers! The sleeping and the dead  
Are but as pictures: 'tis the eye of childhood  
That fears a painted devil;  
and in the banquet scene:

O these flaws and starts,  
Impostors to true fear, would well become  
A woman's story at a winter's fire,  
Authorised by her grandam. Shame itself!  
Why do you make such faces? When all's done,  
You look but on a stool.

Even in the awful scene where her imagination breaks loose in sleep she uses no such images as Macbeth's. It is the direct appeal of the facts to sense that has fastened on her memory. The ghastly realism of 'Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?' or 'Here's the smell of the blood still,' is wholly unlike him. Her most poetical words, 'All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand,' are equally unlike his words about great Neptune's ocean. Hers, like some of her other speeches, are the more moving, from their greater simplicity and because they seem to tell of that self-restraint in suffering which is so totally lacking in him; but there is in them comparatively little of imagination. If we consider most of the passages to which I have referred, we shall find that the quality which moves our admiration is courage or force of will.

This want of imagination, though it helps to make Lady Macbeth strong for immediate action, is fatal to her. If she does not feel beforehand the cruelty of Duncan's murder, this is mainly because she hardly imagines the act, or at most imagines its outward show, 'the motion of a muscle this way or that.' Nor does she in the least foresee those inward consequences which reveal

themselves immediately in her husband, and less quickly in herself. It is often said that she understands him well. Had she done so, she never would have urged him on. She knows that he is given to strange fancies; but, not realising what they spring from, she has no idea [374]either that they may gain such power as to ruin the scheme, or that, while they mean present weakness, they mean also perception of the future. At one point in the murder scene the force of his imagination impresses her, and for a moment she is startled; a light threatens to break on her:

These deeds must not be thought  
After these ways: so, it will make us mad,  
she says, with a sudden and great seriousness. And when he goes panting on, 'Methought I heard a voice cry, "Sleep no more," ... she breaks in, 'What do you mean?' half-doubting whether this was not a real voice that he heard. Then, almost directly, she recovers herself, convinced of the vanity of his fancy. Nor does she understand herself any better than him. She never suspects that these deeds must be thought after these ways; that her facile realism,

A little water clears us of this deed,  
will one day be answered by herself, 'Will these hands ne'er be clean?' or that the fatal commonplace, 'What's done is done,' will make way for her last despairing sentence, 'What's done cannot be undone.'

Hence the development of her character—perhaps it would be more strictly accurate to say, the change in her state of mind—is both inevitable, and the opposite of the development we traced in Macbeth. When the murder has been done, the discovery of its hideousness, first reflected in the faces of her guests, comes to Lady Macbeth with the shock of a sudden disclosure, and at once her nature begins to sink. The first intimation of the change is given when, in the scene of the discovery, she faints.[229] When next we see her, Queen of Scotland, the glory of her dream has faded. She enters, [375]disillusioned, and weary with want of sleep: she has thrown away everything and gained nothing:

Nought's had, all's spent,  
Where our desire is got without content:  
'Tis safer to be that which we destroy  
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.  
Henceforth she has no initiative: the stem of her being seems to be cut through. Her husband, physically the stronger, maddened by pangs he had foreseen, but still flaming with life, comes into the foreground, and she retires. Her will remains, and she does her best to help him; but he rarely needs her help. Her chief anxiety appears to be that he should not betray his misery. He

plans the murder of Banquo without her knowledge (not in order to spare her, I think, for he never shows love of this quality, but merely because he does not need her now); and even when she is told vaguely of his intention she appears but little interested. In the sudden emergency of the banquet scene she makes a prodigious and magnificent effort; her strength, and with it her ascendancy, returns, and she saves her husband at least from an open disclosure. But after this she takes no part whatever in the action. We only know from her shuddering words in the sleep-walking scene, 'The Thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now?' that she has even learned of her husband's worst crime; and in all the horrors of his tyranny over Scotland she has, so far as we hear, no part. Disillusionment and despair prey upon her more and more. That she should seek any relief in speech, or should ask for sympathy, would seem to her mere weakness, and would be to Macbeth's defiant fury an irritation. Thinking of the change in him, we imagine the bond between them slackened, and Lady Macbeth left much alone. She sinks slowly downward. She cannot bear darkness, and has [376]light by her continually: 'tis her command. At last her nature, not her will, gives way. The secrets of the past find vent in a disorder of sleep, the beginning perhaps of madness. What the doctor fears is clear. He reports to her husband no great physical mischief, but bids her attendant to remove from her all means by which she could harm herself, and to keep eyes on her constantly. It is in vain. Her death is announced by a cry from her women so sudden and direful that it would thrill her husband with horror if he were any longer capable of fear. In the last words of the play Malcolm tells us it is believed in the hostile army that she died by her own hand. And (not to speak of the indications just referred to) it is in accordance with her character that even in her weakest hour she should cut short by one determined stroke the agony of her life.

The sinking of Lady Macbeth's nature, and the marked change in her demeanour to her husband, are most strikingly shown in the conclusion of the banquet scene; and from this point pathos is mingled with awe. The guests are gone. She is completely exhausted, and answers Macbeth in listless, submissive words which seem to come with difficulty. How strange sounds the reply 'Did you send to him, sir?' to his imperious question about Macduff! And when he goes on, 'waxing desperate in imagination,' to speak of new deeds of blood, she seems to sicken at the thought, and there is a deep pathos in that answer which tells at once of her care for him and of the misery she herself has silently endured,

You lack the season of all natures, sleep.

We begin to think of her now less as the awful instigator of murder than as a woman with much that is grand in her, and much that is piteous. Strange and almost ludicrous as the statement may [377]sound,[230] she is, up to her light, a perfect wife. She gives her husband the best she has; and the fact that she

never uses to him the terms of affection which, up to this point in the play, he employs to her, is certainly no indication of want of love. She urges, appeals, reproaches, for a practical end, but she never recriminates. The harshness of her taunts is free from mere personal feeling, and also from any deep or more than momentary contempt. She despises what she thinks the weakness which stands in the way of her husband's ambition; but she does not despise him. She evidently admires him and thinks him a great man, for whom the throne is the proper place. Her commanding attitude in the moments of his hesitation or fear is probably confined to them. If we consider the peculiar circumstances of the earlier scenes and the banquet scene, and if we examine the language of the wife and husband at other times, we shall come, I think, to the conclusion that their habitual relations are better represented by the later scenes than by the earlier, though naturally they are not truly represented by either. Her ambition for her husband and herself (there was no distinction to her mind) proved fatal to him, far more so than the prophecies of the Witches; but even when she pushed him into murder she believed she was helping him to do what he merely lacked the nerve to attempt; and her part in the crime was so much less open-eyed than his, that, if the impossible and undramatic task of estimating degrees of culpability were forced on us, we should surely have to assign the larger share to Macbeth.

'Lady Macbeth,' says Dr. Johnson, 'is merely detested'; and for a long time critics generally spoke of her as though she were Malcolm's 'fiend-like queen.' In natural reaction we tend to insist, as I have been doing, on the other and less obvious [378]side; and in the criticism of the last century there is even a tendency to sentimentalise the character. But it can hardly be doubted that Shakespeare meant the predominant impression to be one of awe, grandeur, and horror, and that he never meant this impression to be lost, however it might be modified, as Lady Macbeth's activity diminishes and her misery increases. I cannot believe that, when she said of Banquo and Fleance,

But in them nature's copy's not eterne,  
she meant only that they would some day die; or that she felt any surprise when Macbeth replied,

There's comfort yet: they are assailable;  
though I am sure no light came into her eyes when he added those dreadful words, 'Then be thou jocund.' She was listless. She herself would not have moved a finger against Banquo. But she thought his death, and his son's death, might ease her husband's mind, and she suggested the murders indifferently and without remorse. The sleep-walking scene, again, inspires pity, but its main effect is one of awe. There is great horror in the references to blood, but it cannot be said that there is more than horror; and Campbell was surely right when, in alluding to Mrs. Jameson's analysis, he insisted that in Lady

Macbeth's misery there is no trace of contrition.[231] Doubtless she would have given the world to undo what she had done; and the thought of it killed her; but, regarding her from the tragic point of view, we may truly say she was too great to repent.

The main interest of the character of Banquo arises from the changes that take place in him, and from the influence of the Witches upon him. And it is curious that Shakespeare's intention here is so frequently missed. Banquo being at first strongly contrasted with Macbeth, as an innocent man with a guilty, it seems to be supposed that this contrast must be continued to his death; while, in reality, though it is never removed, it is gradually diminished. Banquo in fact may be described much more truly than Macbeth as the victim [380]of the Witches. If we follow his story this will be evident.

He bore a part only less distinguished than Macbeth's in the battles against Sweno and Macdonwald. He and Macbeth are called 'our captains,' and when they meet the Witches they are traversing the 'blasted heath'[233] alone together. Banquo accosts the strange shapes without the slightest fear. They lay their fingers on their lips, as if to signify that they will not, or must not, speak to him. To Macbeth's brief appeal, 'Speak, if you can: what are you?' they at once reply, not by saying what they are, but by hailing him Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and King hereafter. Banquo is greatly surprised that his partner should start as if in fear, and observes that he is at once 'rapt'; and he bids the Witches, if they know the future, to prophesy to him, who neither begs their favour nor fears their hate. Macbeth, looking back at a later time, remembers Banquo's daring, and how

he chid the sisters,  
When first they put the name of king upon me,  
And bade them speak to him.

'Chid' is an exaggeration; but Banquo is evidently a bold man, probably an ambitious one, and certainly has no lurking guilt in his ambition. On hearing the predictions concerning himself and his descendants he makes no answer, and when the Witches are about to vanish he shows none of Macbeth's feverish anxiety to know more. On their vanishing he is simply amazed, wonders if they were anything but hallucinations, makes no reference to the predictions till Macbeth mentions them, and then answers lightly.

When Ross and Angus, entering, announce to Macbeth that he has been made Thane of Cawdor, [381]Banquo exclaims, aside, to himself or Macbeth, 'What! can the devil speak true?' He now believes that the Witches were real beings and the 'instruments of darkness.' When Macbeth, turning to him, whispers,

Do you not hope your children shall be kings,  
When those that gave the Thane of Cawdor to me  
Promised no less to them?  
he draws with the boldness of innocence the inference which is really  
occupying Macbeth, and answers,

That, trusted home,  
Might yet enkindle you unto the crown  
Besides the thane of Cawdor.  
Here he still speaks, I think, in a free, off-hand, even jesting,[234] manner  
(‘enkindle’ meaning merely ‘excite you to hope for’). But then, possibly from  
noticing something in Macbeth’s face, he becomes graver, and goes on, with  
a significant ‘but,’

But ‘tis strange:  
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,  
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,  
Win us with honest trifles, to betray’s  
In deepest consequence.

He afterwards observes for the second time that his partner is ‘rapt’; but he  
explains his abstraction naturally and sincerely by referring to the surprise of  
his new honours; and at the close of the scene, when Macbeth proposes that  
they shall discuss the predictions together at some later time, he answers in  
the cheerful, rather bluff manner, which he has used almost throughout, ‘Very  
gladly.’ Nor was there any reason why Macbeth’s rejoinder, ‘Till then,  
enough,’ should excite misgivings in him, though it implied a request for  
silence, and though the [382]whole behaviour of his partner during the scene  
must have looked very suspicious to him when the prediction of the crown  
was made good through the murder of Duncan.

In the next scene Macbeth and Banquo join the King, who welcomes them  
both with the kindest expressions of gratitude and with promises of favours  
to come. Macbeth has indeed already received a noble reward. Banquo, who  
is said by the King to have ‘no less deserved,’ receives as yet mere thanks. His  
brief and frank acknowledgment is contrasted with Macbeth’s laboured  
rhetoric; and, as Macbeth goes out, Banquo turns with hearty praises of him  
to the King.

And when next we see him, approaching Macbeth’s castle in company with  
Duncan, there is still no sign of change. Indeed he gains on us. It is he who  
speaks the beautiful lines,

This guest of summer,  
The temple-haunting martlet, does approve,

By his loved mansionry, that the heaven's breath  
Smells wooingly here: no jutting, frieze,  
Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird  
Hath made his pendent bed and procreant cradle:  
Where they most breed and haunt, I have observed,  
The air is delicate;  
—lines which tell of that freedom of heart, and that sympathetic sense of  
peace and beauty, which the Macbeth of the tragedy could never feel.

But now Banquo's sky begins to darken. At the opening of the Second Act we  
see him with Fleance crossing the court of the castle on his way to bed. The  
blackness of the moonless, starless night seems to oppress him. And he is  
oppressed by something else.

A heavy summons lies like lead upon me,  
And yet I would not sleep: merciful powers,  
Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature  
Gives way to in repose!

[383]On Macbeth's entrance we know what Banquo means: he says to  
Macbeth—and it is the first time he refers to the subject unprovoked,

I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters.  
His will is still untouched: he would repel the 'cursed thoughts'; and they are  
mere thoughts, not intentions. But still they are 'thoughts,' something more,  
probably, than mere recollections; and they bring with them an undefined  
sense of guilt. The poison has begun to work.

The passage that follows Banquo's words to Macbeth is difficult to interpret:

I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters:  
To you they have show'd some truth.  
Macb. I think not of them:  
Yet, when we can entreat an hour to serve,  
We would spend it in some words upon that business,  
If you would grant the time.  
Ban. At your kind'st leisure.  
Macb. If you shall cleave to my consent, when 'tis,  
It shall make honour for you.  
Ban. So I lose none  
In seeking to augment it, but still keep  
My bosom franchised and allegiance clear,  
I shall be counsell'd.  
Macb. Good repose the while!  
Ban. Thanks, sir: the like to you!

Macbeth's first idea is, apparently, simply to free himself from any suspicion which the discovery of the murder might suggest, by showing himself, just before it, quite indifferent to the predictions, and merely looking forward to a conversation about them at some future time. But why does he go on, 'If you shall cleave,' etc.? Perhaps he foresees that, on the discovery, Banquo cannot fail to suspect him, and thinks it safest to prepare the way at once for an understanding with him (in the original story he makes Banquo his accomplice before the murder). Banquo's answer shows three things,—that he fears a treasonable proposal, that he has no idea of [384]accepting it, and that he has no fear of Macbeth to restrain him from showing what is in his mind.

Duncan is murdered. In the scene of discovery Banquo of course appears, and his behaviour is significant. When he enters, and Macduff cries out to him,

O Banquo, Banquo,  
Our royal master's murdered,  
and Lady Macbeth, who has entered a moment before, exclaims,

Woe, alas!  
What, in our house?  
his answer,

Too cruel anywhere,  
shows, as I have pointed out, repulsion, and we may be pretty sure that he suspects the truth at once. After a few words to Macduff he remains absolutely silent while the scene is continued for nearly forty lines. He is watching Macbeth and listening as he tells how he put the chamberlains to death in a frenzy of loyal rage. At last Banquo appears to have made up his mind. On Lady Macbeth's fainting he proposes that they shall all retire, and that they shall afterwards meet,

And question this most bloody piece of work  
To know it further. Fears and scruples[235] shake us:  
In the great hand of God I stand, and thence  
Against the undivulged pretence[236] I fight  
Of treasonous malice.

His solemn language here reminds us of his grave words about 'the instruments of darkness,' and of his later prayer to the 'merciful powers.' He is profoundly shocked, full of indignation, and determined to play the part of a brave and honest man.

But he plays no such part. When next we see him, on the last day of his life, we find that he has [385]yielded to evil. The Witches and his own ambition

have conquered him. He alone of the lords knew of the prophecies, but he has said nothing of them. He has acquiesced in Macbeth's accession, and in the official theory that Duncan's sons had suborned the chamberlains to murder him. Doubtless, unlike Macduff, he was present at Scone to see the new king invested. He has, not formally but in effect, 'cloven to' Macbeth's 'consent'; he is knit to him by 'a most indissoluble tie'; his advice in council has been 'most grave and prosperous'; he is to be the 'chief guest' at that night's supper. And his soliloquy tells us why:

Thou hast it now: king, Cawdor, Glamis, all,  
As the weird women promised, and, I fear,  
Thou play'dst most foully for't: yet it was said  
It should not stand in thy posterity,  
But that myself should be the root and father  
Of many kings. If there come truth from them—  
As upon thee, Macbeth, their speeches shine—  
Why, by the verities on thee made good,  
May they not be my oracles as well,  
And set me up in hope? But hush! no more.

This 'hush! no more' is not the dismissal of 'cursed thoughts': it only means that he hears the trumpets announcing the entrance of the King and Queen.

His punishment comes swiftly, much more swiftly than Macbeth's, and saves him from any further fall. He is a very fearless man, and still so far honourable that he has no thought of acting to bring about the fulfilment of the prophecy which has beguiled him. And therefore he has no fear of Macbeth. But he little understands him. To Macbeth's tormented mind Banquo's conduct appears highly suspicious. Why has this bold and circumspect[237] man kept his secret and become his [386]chief adviser? In order to make good his part of the predictions after Macbeth's own precedent. Banquo, he is sure, will suddenly and secretly attack him. It is not the far-off accession of Banquo's descendants that he fears; it is (so he tells himself) swift murder; not that the 'barren sceptre' will some day droop from his dying hand, but that it will be 'wrenched' away now (iii. i. 62).[238] So he kills Banquo. But the Banquo he kills is not the innocent soldier who met the Witches and daffed their prophecies aside, nor the man who prayed to be delivered from the temptation of his dreams.

Macbeth leaves on most readers a profound impression of the misery of a guilty conscience and the retribution of crime. And the strength of this impression is one of the reasons why the tragedy is admired by readers who shrink from Othello and are made unhappy by Lear. But what Shakespeare perhaps felt even more deeply, when he wrote this play, was the incalculability of evil,—that in meddling with it human beings do they know

not what. The soul, he seems to feel, is a thing of such inconceivable depth, complexity, and delicacy, that when you introduce into it, or suffer to develop in it, any change, and particularly the change called evil, you can form only the vaguest idea of the reaction you will provoke. All you can be sure of is that it will not be what you expected, and that you cannot possibly escape it. Banquo's story, if truly apprehended, produces this impression quite as strongly as the more terrific stories of the chief characters, and perhaps even more clearly, inasmuch [387]as he is nearer to average human nature, has obviously at first a quiet conscience, and uses with evident sincerity the language of religion.

3

Apart from his story Banquo's character is not very interesting, nor is it, I think, perfectly individual. And this holds good of the rest of the minor characters. They are sketched lightly, and are seldom developed further than the strict purposes of the action required. From this point of view they are inferior to several of the less important figures in each of the other three tragedies. The scene in which Lady Macduff and her child appear, and the passage where their slaughter is reported to Macduff, have much dramatic value, but in neither case is the effect due to any great extent to the special characters of the persons concerned. Neither they, nor Duncan, nor Malcolm, nor even Banquo himself, have been imagined intensely, and therefore they do not produce that sense of unique personality which Shakespeare could convey in a much smaller number of lines than he gives to most of them.[239] And this is of course even more the case with persons like Ross, Angus, and Lennox, though each of these has distinguishable features. I doubt if any other great play of Shakespeare's contains so many speeches which a student of the play, if they were quoted to him, would be puzzled to assign to the speakers. Let the reader turn, for instance, to the second scene of the Fifth Act, and ask himself why the names of the persons should not be interchanged in all the ways mathematically possible. Can he find, again, any signs of character by which to distinguish the speeches of Ross and Angus in Act i. scenes ii. and iii., or to determine that [388]Malcolm must have spoken i. iv. 2-11? Most of this writing, we may almost say, is simply Shakespeare's writing, not that of Shakespeare become another person. And can anything like the same proportion of such writing be found in Hamlet, Othello, or King Lear?

Is it possible to guess the reason of this characteristic of Macbeth? I cannot believe it is due to the presence of a second hand. The writing, mangled by the printer and perhaps by 'the players,' seems to be sometimes obviously Shakespeare's, sometimes sufficiently Shakespearean to repel any attack not based on external evidence. It may be, as the shortness of the play has suggested to some, that Shakespeare was hurried, and, throwing all his weight

on the principal characters, did not exert himself in dealing with the rest. But there is another possibility which may be worth considering. Macbeth is distinguished by its simplicity,—by grandeur in simplicity, no doubt, but still by simplicity. The two great figures indeed can hardly be called simple, except in comparison with such characters as Hamlet and Iago; but in almost every other respect the tragedy has this quality. Its plot is quite plain. It has very little intermixture of humour. It has little pathos except of the sternest kind. The style, for Shakespeare, has not much variety, being generally kept at a higher pitch than in the other three tragedies; and there is much less than usual of the interchange of verse and prose.[240] All this makes for simplicity of effect. And, this being so, is it not possible that Shakespeare instinctively felt, or consciously feared, that to give much individuality or attraction to the subordinate figures would diminish this effect, and so, like a good artist, sacrificed a part to the whole? [389]And was he wrong? He has certainly avoided the overloading which distresses us in King Lear, and has produced a tragedy utterly unlike it, not much less great as a dramatic poem, and as a drama superior.

I would add, though without much confidence, another suggestion. The simplicity of Macbeth is one of the reasons why many readers feel that, in spite of its being intensely 'romantic,' it is less unlike a classical tragedy than Hamlet or Othello or King Lear. And it is possible that this effect is, in a sense, the result of design.

I do not mean that Shakespeare intended to imitate a classical tragedy; I mean only that he may have seen in the bloody story of Macbeth a subject suitable for treatment in a manner somewhat nearer to that of Seneca, or of the English Senecan plays familiar to him in his youth, than was the manner of his own mature tragedies. The Witches doubtless are 'romantic,' but so is the witchcraft in Seneca's *Medea* and *Hercules Oetaeus*; indeed it is difficult to read the account of Medea's preparations without being reminded of the incantations in Macbeth. Banquo's Ghost again is 'romantic,' but so are Seneca's ghosts. For the swelling of the style in some of the great passages—however immeasurably superior these may be to anything in Seneca—and certainly for the turgid bombast which occasionally appears in Macbeth, and which seems to have horrified Jonson, Shakespeare might easily have found a model in Seneca. Did he not think that this was the high Roman manner? Does not the Sergeant's speech, as Coleridge observed, recall the style of the 'passionate speech' of the Player in Hamlet,—a speech, be it observed, on a Roman subject?[241] And is it entirely an accident [390]that parallels between Seneca and Shakespeare seem to be more frequent in Macbeth than in any other of his undoubtedly genuine works except perhaps *Richard III.*, a tragedy unquestionably influenced either by Seneca or by English Senecan plays?[242] If there is anything in these suggestions, and if we suppose that Shakespeare meant to give to his play a certain classical tinge, he might

naturally carry out this idea in respect to the characters, as well as in other respects, by concentrating almost the whole interest on the important figures and leaving the others comparatively shadowy.

4

Macbeth being more simple than the other tragedies, and broader and more massive in effect, three passages in it are of great importance as securing variety in tone, and also as affording relief from the feelings excited by the Witch-scenes and the principal characters. They are the passage where the Porter appears, the conversation between Lady Macduff and her little boy, and the passage where Macduff receives the news of the slaughter of his wife and babes. Yet the first of these, we are told even by Coleridge, is unworthy of Shakespeare and is not his; and the second, with the rest of the scene which contains it, appears to be usually omitted in stage representations of Macbeth.

I question if either this scene or the exhibition of Macduff's grief is required to heighten our abhorrence of Macbeth's cruelty. They have a technical value in helping to give the last stage of the action the form of a conflict between Macbeth and Macduff. But their chief function is of another kind. It is to touch the heart with a sense of beauty and pathos, to open the springs of love and of tears. Shakespeare is loved for the sweetness of his humanity, and because he makes this kind of appeal with such irresistible persuasion; and the reason why Macbeth, though admired as much as any work of his, is scarcely loved, is that the characters who predominate cannot make this kind of appeal, and at no point are able to inspire unmingled sympathy. The two passages in question supply this want in such measure as Shakespeare thought advisable in Macbeth, and the play would suffer greatly from their excision. The second, on the stage, is extremely moving, and Macbeth's reception of the news of his wife's death may be intended to recall it by way of contrast. The first brings a relief [392]even greater, because here the element of beauty is more marked, and because humour is mingled with pathos. In both we escape from the oppression of huge sins and sufferings into the presence of the wholesome affections of unambitious hearts; and, though both scenes are painful and one dreadful, our sympathies can flow unchecked.[243]

Lady Macduff is a simple wife and mother, who has no thought for anything beyond her home. Her love for her children shows her at once that her husband's flight exposes them to terrible danger. She is in an agony of fear for them, and full of indignation against him. It does not even occur to her that he has acted from public spirit, or that there is such a thing.

What had he done to make him fly the land?

He must have been mad to do it. He fled for fear. He does not love his wife and children. He is a traitor. The poor soul is almost beside herself—and with too good reason. But when the murderer bursts in with the question 'Where is your husband?' she becomes in a moment the wife, and the great noble's wife:

I hope, in no place so unsanctified  
Where such as thou may'st find him.

What did Shakespeare mean us to think of Macduff's flight, for which Macduff has been much blamed by others beside his wife? Certainly not that fear for himself, or want of love for his family, had anything to do with it. His love for his country, so strongly marked in the scene with Malcolm, is evidently his one motive.

He is noble, wise, judicious, and best knows  
The fits o' the season,

says Ross. That his flight was 'noble' is beyond doubt. That it was not wise or judicious in the [393]interest of his family is no less clear. But that does not show that it was wrong; and, even if it were, to represent its consequences as a judgment on him for his want of due consideration is equally monstrous and ludicrous.[244] The further question whether he did fail in due consideration, or whether for his country's sake he deliberately risked a danger which he fully realised, would in Shakespeare's theatre have been answered at once by Macduff's expression and demeanour on hearing Malcolm's words,

Why in that rawness left you wife and child,  
Those precious motives, those strong knots of love,  
Without leave-taking?

It cannot be decided with certainty from the mere text; but, without going into the considerations on each side, I may express the opinion that Macduff knew well what he was doing, and that he fled without leave-taking for fear his purpose should give way. Perhaps he said to himself, with Coriolanus,

Not of a woman's tenderness to be,  
Requires nor child nor woman's face to see.

Little Macduff suggests a few words on Shakespeare's boys (there are scarcely any little girls). It is somewhat curious that nearly all of them appear in tragic or semi-tragic dramas. I remember but two exceptions: little William Page, who said [394]his Hic, haec, hoc to Sir Hugh Evans; and the page before whom Falstaff walked like a sow that hath overwhelmed all her litter but one; and it is to be feared that even this page, if he is the Boy of Henry V., came to an ill end, being killed with the luggage.

So wise so young, they say, do ne'er live long,

as Richard observed of the little Prince of Wales. Of too many of these children (some of the 'boys,' e.g. those in Cymbeline, are lads, not children) the saying comes true. They are pathetic figures, the more so because they so often appear in company with their unhappy mothers, and can never be thought of apart from them. Perhaps Arthur is even the first creation in which Shakespeare's power of pathos showed itself mature;[245] and the last of his children, Mamillius, assuredly proves that it never decayed. They are almost all of them noble figures, too,—affectionate, frank, brave, high-spirited, 'of an open and free nature' like Shakespeare's best men. And almost all of them, again, are amusing and charming as well as pathetic; comical in their mingled acuteness and naïveté, charming in their confidence in themselves and the world, and in the seriousness with which they receive the jocosity of their elders, who commonly address them as strong men, great warriors, or profound politicians.

Little Macduff exemplifies most of these remarks. There is nothing in the scene of a transcendent kind, like the passage about Mamillius' never-finished 'Winter's Tale' of the man who dwelt by a churchyard, or the passage about his death, or that about little Marcius and the butterfly, or the audacity which introduces him, at the supreme [395]moment of the tragedy, outdoing the appeals of Volumnia and Virgilia by the statement,

'A shall not tread on me:

I'll run away till I'm bigger, but then I'll fight.

Still one does not easily forget little Macduff's delightful and well-justified confidence in his ability to defeat his mother in argument; or the deep impression she made on him when she spoke of his father as a 'traitor'; or his immediate response when he heard the murderer call his father by the same name,—

Thou liest, thou shag-haired villain.

Nor am I sure that, if the son of Coriolanus had been murdered, his last words to his mother would have been, 'Run away, I pray you.'

## Macbeth

### CONTEXTS: AO4

#### 1. LITERARY

#### INFLUENCE OF CLASSICAL FORM OF TRAGEDY

- **Strong sense of fate** ordained by the gods
- **Tragic hero** of elevated social status/ strongly hierarchical society
- **Tragic hero** doomed to suffering and death
- **Fatal flaw** (Macbeth's ambition) The prophecies which were told by the witches were one of the factors which contributed to the degeneration of his character
- Hubris

## Writer's Presentation of Ideas Themes and Settings AO2

### DIFFERENCE

- **Shakespeare dispenses with the 3 'Unities' of action, time and setting**

### 2. RELIGIOUS AND SOCIAL

- **'Divine Right of Kings': kings were thought of as God's agents**
- 'Great Chain of Being'
- structured, hierarchical society perceived as part of the natural order: Macbeth refuses to accept his place in the order of nature
- idea of honour

### THEMES

- Justice
- Influence of the gods
- Abuse of power ( the Assistance of his wife provided a scheme which caused Macbeth to assassinate King Duncan)
- . After Macbeth had killed King Duncan, he later regrets on his wrong doing. At the point of this play the audience can note the change in Macbeth's character. (Catharsis)
- Gender issues ( Lady Macbeth - :UNSEX ME HERE)
- Kingship and authority
- Loyalty, courage, cruelty

### Terminology

**Anagnorisis** is the moment of recognition. The protagonist (see below, but, basically, main character) of a tragedy recognizes that his trouble is his own fault.

**The antagonist** was the character against whom the protagonist struggled. Today the antagonist is usually the villain and the protagonist, the hero.