CHAPTER 3

Shakespeare's Technique and Craft

READINGS ON MACBETH

Macbeth: An Atypical Tragedy

Clifford Davidson

Clifford Davidson discusses *Macbeth* as tragedy, not according to Aristotle's definition, but according to the cultural and religious beliefs of Shakespeare's time. Davidson argues that hypocrisy is Macbeth's sin, which deprives him of sensitivity and makes him a tyrant guilty of great wrongs. Rather than feeling pity and goodwill for the protagonist at the end, the alienated audience judges Macbeth and regrets only that he has lost all goodness. Clifford Davidson has taught at Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo. He is the author of a collection of poems, *The Thirsting Seer,* editor of *Universitas: A Journal of Religion and the University,* and frequent contributor to the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* and other scholarly journals.

The road which Macbeth travels "to dusty death" involves him in hypocrisy and deception, which are confirmed by the treason he commits. He is unable to appear in public without the mask which he is forced to wear in order that he might conceal the malice of his heart. He appears to Duncan as an angel of light; inwardly, he is a ravening wolf in the service of darkness." Duncan, "a most Sainted-King" (IV, iii, 125), is deceived by Macbeth's show of holiness but, once the initial crime is completed, the usurper's nature becomes progressively known through his acts. As the Bible (*Matthew* vii, 10) and the *Homilies*[1] proclaim, men must be judged "by their fruits." Immediately after the murder of the king, Macduff and Banquo suspect, but in III, vi Lennox and another lord know more exactly the nature of Macbeth's cunning. Hypocrisy is not able to cover itself entirely with pretended sanctity. . . .

1. Two Books of Homilies, first published in 1547 and 1563, were appointed to be read from the pulpits of the Church of England.

The final devilish state of Macbeth's soul is not to be judged from his beginning, which appears to be good, but from his end. Once caught by the devil's bait, only at the end is he able to express his inward state openly in outward appearance. By Act V, Macbeth has become a stereotyped stage tyrant who is unashamedly malicious. . . .

Faced with the judgment which Malcolm's soldiers will work against him, Macbeth has little choice except to fight: "Bear-like I must fight the course" (V, vii, 4). His hypocritical behavior has reduced him to the level of bestiality, and now he must die like a beast. Edward Philips[2] admonishes his auditory: "learn . . . what an abominable thing sin is, and among the rest hypocrisy, that it is able to transform men into beasts, as resembling them in their qualities." Sin does change Macbeth strangely so that all his former nobility is destroyed or changed into something sub-human. In V, viii, 6, Macduff appropriately calls Macbeth a "hell-hound." . . .

Macbeth Makes a Mockery of the Crown and the Kingly Robes

Macbeth's hope and desire to gain the coveted symbol of kingship similarly turn out to be a mockery. If he must sell his eternal jewel to gain an earthly crown, he thereby is frustrating any hope his soul might have of gaining a heavenly crown. And because of the position of the king in the hierarchy, the wearing of the earthly crown by Macbeth can only be a mockery. Only one who shares heavenly hope has the right to reach for the symbolic crown.

Like the crown, the kingly robes which Macbeth wears after the completion of Act II are symbols of kingly authority and position. As symbols, they appear to participate in the sanctity of the office which they represent. . . . The outward sign is abused when it is not consistent with the inner reality. In this case, the sign—Macbeth's royal robes—are symbolic of authority and dominion which do not in fact exist. The clothing of the hypocrite is of much greater value than his own worth.

The clothes imagery in *Macbeth* therefore ought to be seen as underlining the theme of hypocrisy in the play. In I, iii, Ross's announcement of Macbeth's new honor and position as Thane of Cawdor is greeted with a question: "Why do you

2. rector of Saint Saviors in Southwark, published *Certain Godly and Learned Ser.* in 1604

dress me in borrowed robes?" Soon, however, Macbeth will attempt to dress himself in the hope of wearing the crown and kingly robes which rightly belong to Duncan. As things turn out, the Macbeth who dons those kingly garments demonstrates that he is only "a dwarfish thief"; the title of king hangs "loose about him, like a giant's robe" (V, ii, 26–28). . . .

The authority of the chief of Scottish magistrates is represented in *Macbeth* by the garment or cloak of office. When the garment is worn by Duncan, it is a garment of virtue. For Macbeth, the garment functions as sheep's clothing to disguise his wolfish nature. As a symbol, however, the garment of rule ought to be associated with a further level of meaning. Protestant theologians in England had emphasized the symbolism of clothes in their sermons and treatises: God has clothed his elect "with the garments of salvation, and . . . with the robe of righteousness." (*Isaiah* lxi, 10). . . .

Macbeth's Hypocrisy Leads to Despair

Hypocrisy is also the theme which finds illustration in *Macbeth* through the imagery of the stage, which is very closely linked with the clothes imagery. In Act V, the hypocritical Macbeth has come to the desperate conclusion that "Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,/ That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,/ And then is heard no more" (V, v, 28–30). Life for him is emptied of all meaning, and the outward appearance has become for him all that there is. Thus Macbeth has destroyed all moral distinctions and indeed all values. For him, a counterfeit coin would seem to be worth as much as the "golden stamp" which Edward the Confessor[3] hangs about the necks of those whom he touches for the king's evil. The audience, however, should know enough not to believe Macbeth's words in V, v: the "tomorrow" speech is directly opposed to the orthodox views which we may believe Shakespeare accepted. Contemporary sermons make the commonplace connections which are necessary for a right understanding of the stage imagery. [In *Foure Sermons*] Thomas Carew says:

> An hypocrite, is as much to say, as a counterfeit or dissembler; the word is borrowed from stage players, who put on them the persons and apparel of other men, as some put on the robes, and play the part of kings; and so liers, being no such, but in counterfeit show.

3. king of England, 1042–1066

. . . The criminal and hypocrite, who plays the part of an innocent man, is nevertheless by his art not able to escape from morality and natural law. As George Downame notes [in his *Lectures*], "the hypocrite . . . by reason of his bad conscience is overtaken with fear. . . ." Fear certainly is a pervasive factor in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, as [critic] Lily Campbell has shown so convincingly [in] *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes*. Macbeth's conscience continues to condemn the malice within him until he has managed to kill conscience. Macbeth succeeds in throwing off the rulership of his conscience, and in the end his rebellion is in this sense complete. By V, v, when he hears the cry of the women at the death of his wife, Macbeth with appalling indifference can say:

> I have almost forgot the taste of fears:
> The time has been, my senses would have cooled
> To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair
> Would at a dismal Treatise rouse, and stir
> As life were in't.
>
> (V, v, 13–17)

Macbeth suffers from an infinite weariness of soul, yet this is also rant which discloses how hardened his soul now is. . . .

Ultimately, the path leads "to despair and death." Macbeth, having first falsely dressed himself in the robes and crown in his imagination, commits himself to the hopeless cause of crime which will lead him deeply into the wood of error. There he will find it to be "a forest of distrust and fear" through which he will pass to the deepest despair.

Macbeth does despair, since in I, vii he gives up all hope of "the life of the world to come." Led by the cunning of the evil sisters, he is cozened into trading heavenly hope for an earthly crown. When the murder of Duncan is discovered, he himself recognizes that had he "died an hour before this chance,/ I had lived a blessed time" (II, iii, 112–113). Macbeth's desperation is conventional: It is a sin through which he "dispaireth utterly, and is past all hope of the good will of God, verily thinking that his naughtiness, or sins, excel the mercies and goodness of God. . . ."[4] Like Judas and Faustus,[5] Macbeth believes that his crime is too great to be forgiven.

The despair which Macbeth feels is deepened when he realizes that the crown he wears is "fruitless" and the scepter he carries is "barren." Seeing himself cut off from truth and life, Macbeth can neither receive nor can he pass life on. . . .

4. according to Willymat's *Physicke, to Cure the Most Dangerous Disease of Desperation*
5. Judas betrayed Jesus; Faustus sold his soul to the devil.

Lady Macbeth's Self-Accusation and Despair

In III, ii, 8–11, Lady Macbeth reveals the despair which has come into her soul. During Acts I and II, she had brazenly urged her husband on to do destruction upon the life of Duncan. Now she realizes that

> Naught'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.

To think of her condition in this way will shortly make her mad. Being on the side of destruction, she has helped to destroy the chains of God's love and mercy and goodness which bind the social and political order into its natural wholeness. So in her own mind she has given way to the worst kind of terrors, signs of disorder in the breast of one whose soul is out of harmony with the divine order. At night, she walks in her sleep and speaks "what she should not" (V, i, 49). . . .

Lady Macbeth does not repent. Her anguish stems from self-accusation which finds no outlet in penitence. Thus she suffers pangs which are like those experienced by the damned at the day of doom. In Sackville's "Induction," an allegorical "Remorse of conscience" sits inside the jaws of hell:

> So was her mind continually in fear,
> Tossed and tormented with the tedious thought
> Of those detested crimes which she had wrought.

She wishes "for death, and yet she could not die."[6] Lady Macbeth also must remember the horror of the night Duncan was killed—"who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?" (V, i, 39–41). Her mind cannot forget the crimes which she and her husband have committed, but she is unable to ease the burden which rests upon her heart. . . .

Macbeth Becomes a Tyrant

Macbeth's despair progresses in a different direction, though in the end he also, being weary of life, wishes for death. Macbeth's heart becomes hardened as did Pharaoh's and

6. Thomas Sackville (1536–1608) is a contributor to *Mirror for Magistrates*, an anthology recounting the downfall of illustrious English people.

Herod's.[7] Unlike his wife, who gains progressive understanding of her sin and thus is overcome by her despair, Macbeth successfully does stop up the passages which lead to remorse. He becomes a callous thug, a criminal who, once he has crept into credit, proceeds to use the most ruthless methods of tyranny. Macbeth's apostacy[8] deprives him of all sensitivity and intelligence; he is thus utterly "deprived of heavenly light and life" (*Homilies*, p. 71). It is not that Fate has entered the lists to fight against the protagonist. . . .

Macbeth is the story of the making of a tyrant, but typically Macbeth's raging and boasting in Act V is not so simple as it might at first seem. Scenes of brashness and bragging are alternated with scenes which show all the emptiness and deadness of Macbeth's position. The famous "tomorrow" speech (V, v, 23–32) emphatically does not demonstrate anything like Shakespeare's own "philosophical incoherence," but it does point out that *for Macbeth himself*, all coherence is gone. Time seems to him to creep on from day to day without any sense of direction or purpose, while at that very moment the hand of God is actually at work directing his forces, which are assembled under Malcolm, so that his will may be executed in history. Macbeth is the fool who will be lighted to his death, which is symbolized by the extinguishing of the "brief Candle." [Critic] R.M. Frye notes that pastors of the English Church commonly compared human life to "a candlelight which is soon blown out." For the protagonist of Act V, life is but "a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury/ Signifying nothing." This is indeed a terrifying vision of human existence. Macbeth has killed reason within himself. He can no longer apprehend the order of the universe which impressed itself upon him in earlier scenes. The "tomorrow" speech gives us life utterly without hope. The full force of Macbeth's despair is brought home to the audience. . . .

Transgressing the natural laws which any rightful king would have held inviolate, the tyrant in Act V does not so much reign as rage. His subjects do not voluntarily obey his behests, but are moved only by fear of his power. He is isolated from humanity. No honor, love, or friendship is offered

7. The Pharaoh was a tyrant king of ancient Egypt; Herod was king of Judea, 40–4 B.C., who, according to the New Testament, tried to kill the child Jesus by having all children under age two in Bethlehem put to death. 8. abandonment of one's religious faith, political party, or principles

to him, nor does he look to have them. Instead, his people curse him and reluctantly give him "mouth-honor" (V, iii, 31–33). The noble Macbeth's glory has all passed away. In Act V, he goes forth alone to the battlefield accompanied by his "slaughterous thoughts." The last act of butchery which we see on stage is the killing of young Siward. Of Macbeth's name, young Siward cries: "The devil himself could not pronounce a title/ More hateful to mine ear" (V, vii, 13–14).

Though in V, vii, 20 he can smile at swords and "Weapons laugh to scorn," Macbeth will shortly meet with sudden death at the hands of Macduff. His men desert to join the instruments of good; he apparently knows that the battle is lost. The struggle between vice and virtue has already been settled in favor of the latter. Yet in his pride Macbeth refuses to go the way of his wife, but instead means to extend further the destruction upon the forces of good. When first confronted with Macduff, however, he falters, though he still believes that his antagonist will not be able to make him bleed. Macbeth shortly discovers that Macduff represents the flood of God's destruction which will overcome the life of the hardened tyrant.

To Macbeth, the day of doom has come. It is indeed a dismal day for him when his hollow world collapses. He has been "a-weary of the sun," even wishing that "the estate of the world were now undone" (V, v, 56–57). Utter "wrack" does come to him, and he is ignominiously beheaded by the Thane of Fife whom he had wronged. True, he has a chance to live for a while yet, but in his weariness he has no wish to be exhibited "as our rarer monsters are" in the triumph which shall follow Malcolm's victory. He "will not yield" (V, viii, 34) but must meet his end this day. It is the final act of tragic self-annihilation which stems from his early tragic yielding to demonic temptation. In the final analysis, Macbeth must be judged guilty of great folly. He is representative of the tragic waste which evil is able to achieve "in this earthly world."