The Power of Unseen Events

An audience can be made as conscious of not seeing something of dramatic importance as it is of what it actually witnesses, and in this respect *Macbeth* is as remarkable for its unstaged events as for its many sensational sights. . . .

The deaths of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are both offstage events. The Sleep-walking Scene prepares us for the end of Lady Macbeth: she concludes her part on the stage, as she began it, alone, despite the presence of the Doctor and the Gentlewoman. By not staging her death, Shakespeare makes it a reported event to which Macbeth reacts with a speech of sombre gravity but without any sense of personal loss or grief; since we do not see it, we are also open to Malcolm's suggestion at the end of the play that she took her own life. Macbeth's own death is also obscured from our view, despite the stage-direction of the Folio, 'Enter Fighting, and *Macbeth* slaine.' This stage-direction might be taken to indicate that Macbeth is seen to receive a fatal wound in his fight with Macduff, but he does not die on the stage. . . . Our last image of Macbeth alive is appropriately that of a man fighting against the odds, and the sight of Macbeth's head brought in by Macduff is a fitting conclusion to the play's visual horrors.

The Role of the Porter

Marvin Rosenberg

Marvin Rosenberg analyzes the Porter's role, detailing the dress, movements, and interruptions required of an actor who must stall and give Macbeth and Lady Macbeth sufficient time to clean up after the murder of Duncan. Rosenberg also elaborates on two characters that enter the Porter's imaginary hell, the significance of an opened door, and the meaning of time. Marvin Rosenberg teaches drama at the University of California at Berkeley and is the author of *The Masks of Othello, The Masks of King Lear, The Masks of Macbeth,* and *The Adventures of a Shakespeare Scholar.*

Enter a Porter. Knocking within.

The man shambling across the stage is going to open the great castle door, sometimes apparent at the far end of the great courtyard—in the Globe, perhaps at one of the wing entrances—but he must move slowly to do it. As Capell[1] long ago recognized, Macbeth must have time to change and wash his hands. . . . The Porter interlude serves importantly, also, to stretch the felt time between the preceding murder scene and what is to come by mocking the actual clock-time with fairest show; but of this more later.

Shakespeare makes a blessing of the necessity of hiatus: using the sound of knocking for a bridge, he begins to bring some faint light into the dark castle, to break for a moment the terrible grip of the murder scene. The knocking signals the awakening of the outer world, as De Quincey sensed; but the outside is allowed in only by a marvelously contrived intermediacy: this sleepy, drunken Porter. At once visually, and in his succeeding language and action, he exploits central motifs in the play. . . .

1. Rosenberg, the author of this essay, refers to a variety of critics, directors, and actors by last name only.

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The Porter's character easily authenticates his delay in opening his doors. He has taken full advantage of the great celebration the night before. Like the king, he has been in unusual pleasure. Granville-Barker takes some pains to rescue the Porter from candidacy in an "inebriates home"—but this door keeper has certainly drunk his fill. He sometimes hiccups or belches when he speaks. He stumbles on, nursing his hangover, perhaps trying even now to cure it with more of what gave it to him. . . .

The Porter bridges us from one moment of tragedy to another, never letting us escape the implications of a murderous world he inhabits, yet dressing them in the rough, humorous language and action of inspired earthy foolery. The actor who played the part for Shakespeare may not have said more than was set down for him—though part of that might have been at his suggestion; he almost certainly "played" more than the Folio sets down, as his comic physical invention thrived; and so have succeeding Porters. . . .

His very appearance is a kind of joke: his below-stairs dress—or undress; his earthiness—he is of the earth, as the Sisters are of the air; his functional, sometimes coarse, movement. He has been played as an old, old retainer; as a sinister, toad-like cripple; as a pure Clown figure; as a kind of comic devil who rises from the trap; but he serves best as a "common man," enclosing a choral voice on the follies of mankind in a dramatic identity too distinctive to be quite Anyman's.

The Porter Fills Time and Creates Humor

His jesting does not stand by itself; it accompanies his fuddled attempts to get to that door, and open it. The action line must not suffer: a murder has been committed, and may momentarily be exposed. . . .

He must get onto the stage first of all. Craig had him rolling out in his sack bed. From such an obstacle he has to struggle; he can comment on the knocking as he does so. Or he stumbles out, half-blind with sleep and drink, half-dressed, and must throw his clothes on. He tries to move while arranging a kilt, or pulling up his trousers—an immemorial comic action. He may never quite get them right. . . .

Then he has to orient himself. He staggers, groping in the dark. If a fire burns in the courtyard, as with Tree, he must try to kick it up, warm himself. He will need a lantern. He must find it; perhaps even light it, if it is not hanging lit. He may be too drunk to find at once the wall where the door is, and feel for it.

Against the wall, his back to us, he may pause to urinate. This seems a universal device for delay: it has been used by Porters in Japan, in Czechoslovakia, in the Polanski film.

After the lantern, he may have to find a key. This is likely to be a large key, and may elude his search for a good part of a speech, until he finds it—perhaps tied around his neck or waist. Having found the key, he must still locate the door. If instead of a keyed door he must turn a winch to lift a gate, he can expend a good deal of his imaginary dialogue finding the mechanism, fitting the handle, and pulling at it. Meanwhile, the knocking may hurt his hungover head, even seem to sound inside it; he may put his hands over his ears, wincing at each rap; may shush the sound.

The Porter Plays Hell's Gatekeeper, Ushering in Candidates

These are typical large movements. They help provide a spine for his progress to the door, but must never interfere with his dialogue, which comes when his efforts to advance, or get the door open, are interrupted by the knocking. His first lines, usually from across the stage as he starts his sleepy, yawning, long journey to the door, tell his grumbling, ironic mood.

> Here's a knocking indeed: if a man
> were Porter of Hell-gate, he should
> have old turning the key—
>
> (4–6)

so many come in.

Shakespeare excels at blur and irony. The Porter is a player, like his betters; talks to imaginary figures, like his betters; fits his behavior to a cosmic frame, like his betters. Murder has been committed in a castle where "Heaven's breath smells wooingly." The place where gentle birds procreate is a scene of violent death. God will be called upon, and keep silence. They who knock at the door have their own faults—the two live thanes, and the Porter's imaginary visitors. It is a complex world.

The Porter's hell-guests belong to the times. The farmer's suicide from producing too much may reflect the steep drop in English prices in 1605–1606. Typical topical porno-

graphic allusions have been scented in all the Porter says, beginning with "sweat" in *you'll sweat for't.* Harcourt relates this to the sweat-tub therapy for venereal disease. . . .

Porters have had various ways of ushering their candidates into hell. One mock-bows them in, one beckons with a finger, another makes a grand, courtly, Osric-type sweep; another kicks their backsides as they are imagined entering, another prods with a handy pitchfork, real or mimed. One Porter spoke to little bugs he held up after discovering them on the door, as he tried to fit his key to the lock. . . .

The Equivocator and Robber Are Significant to the Play

The Porter hardly gets one "guest" in when the knocking, always louder, more insistent, nudges him toward opening the door—and sometimes toward fortifying himself again from a bottle. He mimics the knock sound, often with a kind of resentful good humor; this is part of the play he is acting. Bernard Dukore remembers one who played with the word itself: "ka-nock, ka-nock."

Now the Equivocator is passed in (and the Porter may, by juggling hands as if balancing weights, image the play's ticklish equilibriums):

> that could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven: oh come in, Equivocator.
>
> (11-14)

The implication for the character of Macbeth and for the action of the play needs no explication. The play begins and ends with treason: "bad" treason, and good. For the Jacobeans, this Equivocator was also, apparently a Jesuitical figure who could evade, in the name of his religion, a truthful answer to a political question. Danks argues that resentment was directed against Equivocators generally (he cites the horrible mutilation and execution of the first Jesuit martyr in England); as Muir and others have observed from the evidence, Shakespeare seems to have meant specifically the Father Garnet who was involved in the "Gunpowder Plot" to blow up parliament and the king. . . .

Such deliberate misleading is only one of the kinds of equivocation in *Macbeth.* Macbeth and Lady Macbeth will say and act one thing when they mean another; so will others: thus Lenox to the Lord in III, vi and Malcolm to Macduff in IV, i. The Sisters,

Hell's Gatekeeper

Though stage directions in act 2, scene 2 say simply, "Enter a Porter," he enters with an array of comic gestures and a monologue with himself as the imaginary porter to hell's gate.

Enter a PORTER. *Knocking within.*

PORTER. Here's a knocking indeed! If a man were porter of hell gate, he should have old[1] turning the key. [*Knock.*] Knock, knock, knock! Who's there, i' th' name of Belzebub? Here's a farmer that hang'd himself on th' expectation of plenty.[2] Come in time! Have napkins[3] enow about you; here you'll sweat for't. [*Knock.*] Knock, knock! Who's there, in the' other devil's name? Faith, here's an equivocator,[4] that could swear in both the scales against either scale; who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven. O, come in, equivocator! [*Knock.*] Knock, knock, knock! Who's there? Faith, here's an English tailor come hither for stealing out of a French hose.[5] Come in tailor. Here you may roast your goose.[6] [*Knock.*] Knock, knock! Never at quiet! What are you? But this place is too cold for hell. I'll devil-porter it no further. I had thought to have let in some of all professions that go the primrose way to th'everlasting bonfire. [*Knock.*] Anon, anon! [*Opens the gate.*] I pray you remember the porter.

1. **old:** slang for "any amount of" 2. **farmer . . . plenty:** Farmers hoarded in times of plenty hoping for high prices in times of shortage. One farmer hanged himself when he failed to profit. When his neighbors cut him down, he abuses them for not untying the rope. 3. **napkins:** towels 4. **equivocator:** a reference to the trial and execution of Father Garnet for being an accessory to the Gunpowder Plot. 5. **English . . . hose:** a double theft: he stole the fashion and some cloth, for French hose were full and baggy 6. **goose:** a pun on goose, the tailor's pressing iron

as we have seen, practice equivocation more ambiguously: they mean more than they say to Macbeth, but we must wonder if it is they, or Hecate, or their masters, or life itself, or any of its mysterious forces, finally responsible for paltering with him in a double sense. Shakespeare, the creator of all this uncertainty, is himself the Great Equivocator, punning, doubling images and ideas, shifting perspectives on characters and motifs, pointing action in a direction it does not go. Aptly, the playwright uses only in *Macbeth* the words *equivocate, equivocates,* and *equivocator*; the play shares with *Hamlet* alone *equivocation.*

The Porter scene reflects—almost, with this second hell-bound figure, stipulates—the motif of equivocation weaving through the play: the doubling of voices, attitudes, images in opposition, or—in Stirling's words—in contradiction. This

style and substance validates the scene as Shakespeare's, Muir observes:

> It possesses the antithetical characteristics of the verse, transposed for semi-comic purposes. The whole scene is linked so closely with the rest of the play, in content as well as style. . . . The antithetical style is a powerful means of suggesting the paradox and enigma of the nature of man.

The Porter's next guest is a robber—and possibly here, too, Macbeth the throne-thief is faintly paralleled.

> Faith here's an English Tailor come hither,
> for stealing out of a French hose.
>
> (15-16)

This seems to be a joke against the English for the English to laugh at, like the Gravedigger's joke about a mad Hamlet not being noticed in a land full of English madmen. . . .

The Porter Opens the Door to Two Thanes and More

The Porter dissolves his illusion of hell. The bonfire is as imaginary as the guests, the place is too cold; and he has reached the door, turned the key, slid the bolt, winched the gate, whatever—and the knocking is now peremptory. *Anon, anon.* He had thought to let in some of all professions, he says—often pausing to look significantly at the audience. He does, at last, open to the two thanes—with a gesture, overt or behind their backs, that repeats his ushering of his imaginary guests. But in this real world he remembers to say, with open palm or proffered cap:

> I pray you remember the Porter.
>
> (22)

Hall's sardonic devil-porter let his gaze swing to include the audience, and the line was said more meaningfully to the house than to the other actors. All, all were guests in his hell.

The great door, opening, lets in the two men, and more. The sodden atmosphere emanating from the Porter, following on the nightmare climate of the murder scene, has thickened and soiled the air. It freshens with the entrance of two brisk thanes, the sense of the outside world they bring with them, and perhaps a breeze—the Porter's lantern has been seen blown out in modern productions, and may have been at the Globe. Or there the signs of dawn could have been understood when the complaint was made of the Porter's late lying, and he put his torch out; controlled lighting in later productions specifies it.

The opening of doors on a closed, secret place, and the letting in of light and fresh men, impart a symbolic as well as realistic effect. New life has the chance to enter—as, in other circumstances, given silence and outer darkness, death may be associated with an open portal. A psychologist suggests that the knocking to enter symbolizes the awakening of the self-preserving conscious part of the mind to relief from the murderous demands of the id. The passing of the night itself brings an archetypal relief.

Shakespeare, daring to charge his Porter with lying late, again whirls us through time by his compressive art. Various kinds of time serve him. First is measured time, with its varieties: the given time of night and day of the play, and the references to the actual clock time taken by the play's incidents. Sometimes opposed to this is the time *felt* as passing by the spectator. Our sense of clock time is generally suspended with our disbelief, as long as it is not challenged by absurdity. Shakespeare risks the limits: Banquo has said goodnight to Macbeth about midnight, Macbeth goes swiftly to murder Duncan, Lady Macbeth comes urgently to extricate him from the sequel, and at once a knocking is heard heralding, in performance time, the morn. In the murder and post-murder scenes the *felt* passage of time is unmeasured: we experience an agony that stretches out toward doom. This experience dissolves into the Porter's scene; and, as suggested above, one important function of that scene is to hoodwink the time, to cushion our return to the intrusion—in performance time hours later—of the outside world.

Another kind of time we are exposed to is experienced as abstract, measureless: it is the now, or, alternatively, it is eternity—the two concepts of time that had to be considered in Macbeth's I, vii soliloquy. As we are absorbed in the sequence of nows, on momentary banks and shoals of time, we can be transported from one to the other without questioning—as long as the playwright's art strings them into a linear flow that sustains illusion. Often the now in *Macbeth* takes place in the shadow of eternity; the Porter, as immediate as earth, yet involves us in awareness of the life beyond life, in his comic way; as Macbeth has involved us in the universe of time and space in his sterner introspections—those contextual moments when action is temporarily subordinated to an exploration of the human condition.