The Supernatural Highlights the Play's Themes

Roy Walker

Roy Walker's close analysis of the two early scenes with the Witches establishes them as representatives of an independent supernatural element in the play. His explication of their lines and those of Macbeth and Banquo supports the notion that Macbeth, unlike Banquo, is susceptible to their temptations and will fulfill their riddling prophecy. Shakespearean critic Roy Walker is the author of *The Time Is out of Joint: A Study of* Hamlet.

Macbeth begins with an elemental convulsion. Thunder, Lightning, Rain. Only Shakespeare can convey the fury and significance of the Shakespearean tempest, as he did in *King Lear*, the tragedy that preceded *Macbeth:*

> Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! rage! blow!
> You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
> Till you have drench'd our steeples, drown'd the cocks!
> You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,
> Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,
> Singe my white head! And thou, all-shaking thunder;
> Strike flat the thick rotundity o' the world!
> Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once
> That make ingrateful man!
>
> (*Lear*, III.ii.1–9)

At the beginning of *Macbeth* there is no human voice to interpret the meaning of the storm. Dimly we know that chaos wars against light. Hecate is creating an infernal trinity. Thunder, Lightning, Rain. From this vortex she whirls into existence Hecate's three hideous heads, three bodies, a triple curse upon humanity; sends her three phantoms to the world to dwell near blood of murdered men. . . . Flat white faces, withered and lifeless as the moon, black rags of chaos wildly blowing—

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> When shall we three meet again
> In Thunder, Lightning or in Rain?
>
> (I.i.1–2)

The Witches Establish Their Identity and Purpose

The Witches' questions to each other and the answers Hecate whispers to these three selves are crabbed and crooked, as treacherously ambiguous as their own prophecies to men.

> When the hurlyburly's done,
> When the battle's lost and won,
> That will be ere the set of sun.
>
> (I.i.3–5)

They will dissolve back into the evil mystery when the storm sinks. The end of the tempest is the end of the battle, lost and won ere set of sun, lost by darkness and won by the god of day. Hecate's battle is always lost, but not before blood has flowed, confusion poured into the world through men whose nature lies open to the storm of evil. Lost—and won. The words have some such sinister meaning besides their parallel reference to the Witches' task upon the earth.[1] There a rebellion is bloodily repressed, invaders bloodily defeated, and the victorious hero who bathed in reeking wounds has yet unsatiated thoughts of blood. His battle too must be lost and won ere set of sun; the battle of his own soul.

> Where the place?
> Upon the heath.
> There to meet with Macbeth.
>
> (I.i.6–7)

The Witches go to find a man who boasts he dares do all that may become a man. An old prophetic saying [Jeremiah XVII, 5–6] stirs in the mind: 'cursed be the man that trusteth in man, and maketh flesh his arm, and whose heart departeth from the Lord. For he shall be like the heath in the desert, and shall not see when good cometh; but shall inhabit the parched places in the wilderness, in a salt land and not inhabited.' It is the road to dusty death.

> I come, Graymalkin.
> Paddock calls anon: Fair is foul and foul is fair

1. 'It is worth remembering that "Hurley-burley" implies more than "the tumult of sedition or insurrection." Both it and "when the Battaile's lost, and wonne" suggest the kind of metaphysical pitch-and-toss that is about to be played with good and evil.'—L.C. Knight's *Explorations*, p. 18.

Speak if you can: what are you?

(I.iii.47)

To him they answer, hailing him Glamis—Cawdor—King hereafter. (The Hail of the past, of the present, of the future, Dowden observes.) At this last utterance Macbeth starts back in horror, knowing from his own black thoughts how foul this seeming fair prediction is. Banquo, who has fought by his side all day and never seen him blench, is amazed; but his incredulous cry,

Good sir, why do you start; and seem to fear
Things that do sound so fair?

(I.iii.51–52)

strikes on deaf ears. Macbeth is in a trance of horror, half formed thoughts of murder rising from the depths of his soul. What sounds fair to Banquo is foul to Macbeth, murder most foul.

There is another moment of ominous silence, and then Banquo turns again upon the Witches. Their words have bewitched Macbeth and he 'seems rapt withal.' What dare they speak to him? They speak—but speak to Macbeth, although addressing themselves to Banquo, appeal to Macbeth's jealousy as subtly as they have just tempted his ambition. Macbeth's senses are violently restored by what he hears. Banquo's sons shall be kings, though he be none! What can that mean? Already the weird sisters are disappearing into the gloom. For his very life he must know more; whether or not Banquo hears it too he cannot pause to consider. The opportunity may not come again:

Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more. . . .
Say, from whence
Upon this blasted heath you stop our way
With such prophetic greeting?—Speak, I charge you.

(I.iii.70–78)

But they are gone. Banquo is amazed, but no more. He made no attempt to ask further questions of the Witches or hinder their departure. Yet though they spoke to Banquo, Macbeth cried, 'Tell me more,' and now they are gone he mutters anxiously, 'Would they had stayed!' Already his resolve is half-made to throw in his lot with the instruments of darkness. Banquo, whose soul is free, seeks to sever the strand woven between Macbeth and the Witches. Perhaps, he says, it was nothing but illusion after all:

Were such things here, as we do speak about,
Or have we eaten on the insane root,
That takes the reason prisoner?

(I.iii.83–85)

Macbeth makes short work of that. They have both the same recollection of what was said. Can two men have the same illusion in the same words at the same moment? He will not entertain the thought that he has been deceived. Macbeth believes in the Witches and is sorely troubled by the disparity between their prophecies to him and to his companion. His own evil thoughts already bind him to the Witches.

The Messengers Spur Macbeth's Imagination Further

Before they can say more, Ross and Angus enter. Our attention is focused on Macbeth's reception of their news, which we already know. The speeches of Ross and Angus in this scene are almost as though heard through Macbeth's ears. '*Macbeth* is remarkable beyond any other of Shakespeare's plays for the frequency and power of its tragic "irony,"' says A.W. Verity, and defines 'irony' as 'the difference between the facts as known to the audience and as imagined by the characters of the play or by some of them.' The double-meanings of the Witches' riddling prophecies have their counterpart in the undertones often momentarily audible in the speeches of many of the human characters. Scene two has had its share of this echoing and re-echoing undertone, as we shall see.

Macbeth's mind is still full of murderous thoughts against King Duncan and busy with the prophecy which seems to show that such a crime is preordained. Ross's first words are of the King's gratitude for Macbeth's victories, but before his heart can respond, he hears:

Thy personal venture in the rebels' fight,
His wonders and his praises do contend,
Which should be thine or his. Silenc'd with that. . . .

(I.iii.91–93)

Which should be thine or his, which Duncan's, which Macbeth's? In Macbeth's rebel heart that is the very question, and the answer is one that may well silence Duncan for ever. Dare Macbeth decide it for himself? At once Ross's words comment upon the thought:

Nothing afeared of what thyself didst make,
Strange images of death.

(I.iii.96–97)

Macbeth is not afraid to make strange images of death—must he now let conscience make a coward of him, and betray his own high destiny by being 'afeared'? Angus has taken up the tale for a moment:

Hover through the fog and filthy air.

(I.i.8–11)

The Witches are guided by the things of darkness. Gray malkin, the night-seeing cat, the nameless toad under the cold stone, whisper to the weird sisters perversion of the natural order: fair is foul, destroy it; foul is fair, nurture it. Hover through the fog and filthy air, how sweet it is when foul is fair! To the heath, sisters, to meet Macbeth who shall be like the heath and not see when good comes—or evil. In him already foul and fair conflict.

When they meet again upon the heath, heralded by thunder, the Witches have become practised in their black arts. Macbeth will hear a voice cry, 'Sleep no more,' and Lady Macbeth will rise in sleep to walk the night. Sleep, the Witches' enemy, is great nature's second course. They have power to disturb sleep:

Sleep shall neither night nor day
Hang upon his pent-house lid;
He shall live a man forbid.
Weary se'en-nights nine times nine,
Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine:

(I.iii.19–23)

They can disturb the elements:

I'll give thee a wind.
Th' art kind.
And I another.
I myself have all the other.

(I.iii.11–14)

But though they can harass and disturb the sailor and raise the elements against him, they cannot themselves work his destruction. (As Juno loosed the tempests upon Aeneas[2] but could not destroy him as she wished.)

Though his bark cannot be lost
Yet it shall be tempest-tost.

(I.iii.24–25)

Nevertheless, ship and sailor may be both destroyed by storm, even if it is not in the Witches' power to doom them. Not only a sailor but a pilot may be killed (as Aeneas' pilot, Palinurus, was):

Here I have a pilot's thumb,
Wrack'd, as homeward he did come.

(I.iii.29–30)

2. Juno is the principal goddess of the Pantheon, the wife of Jupiter; Aeneas is the Trojan hero of Virgil's epic *Aeneid*.

Macbeth Arrives, Ironically Echoing the Witches' Words

No sooner are the words uttered than the echoing and re-echoing sound of the drum is heard. Macbeth is approaching! Great ships and their unsuspecting pilots may be wrecked on the homeward voyage, not by the unaided enchantments of the Witches, but by their working upon susceptible human souls. The great pilot Duncan will be wrecked as he comes homeward. Macbeth, tempted by the Witches, will wreck him, and the ship of state will drift upon the shoal. Macbeth himself will become the great pilot, to be wrecked by the Witches as he comes homeward. But he is wrecked, essentially, by the evil within him and his wife, which exposes them, and through them Scotland, to the evil enchantment. The Witches 'lead evil minds from evil to evil,' says Coleridge,[3] 'and have the power of tempting those who have been the tempters of themselves.' Macbeth's first words are:

So foul and fair a day I have not seen.

(I.iii.38)

Fair is foul, and foul is fair. Fair victory has bred foul thoughts, though the victory was a foul enough bloodbath to make such thoughts seem fair. Macbeth has destroyed Duncan's enemies at home and abroad. Should not the victor have the spoils? Macbeth has become what he fought; Duncan's enemy. Fair is foul. He dare not admit it, even to himself. Foul must show fair as yet. 'Shakespeare intimates by this,' says Dowden,[4] 'that although Macbeth has not yet set eyes upon these hags, the connection is already established between his soul and them. Their spells have already wrought upon his blood.'

The Witches Affect Macbeth, But Not Banquo

Macbeth and Banquo see the Witches in the same moment. Macbeth is struck dumb by this shadowing forth of his own sinister and half-acknowledged thoughts. Foul as the Witches are they fascinate him. Banquo, his conscience untroubled, speaks at once and boldly, seeing foul as foul. The Witches will not speak to him at first. They are not powerful enough to tempt him. Banquo's words go whistling down the wind and the Witches stand ominously silent until Macbeth with difficulty gets out:

3. Samuel Taylor, in *Lectures and Notes on Shakespere* 4. Edward, in *A Critical Study of His Mind and Art*

We are sent,
To give thee from our royal master thanks;
Only to herald thee into his sight,
Not pay thee.

(I.iii.100–103)

No! There is nothing that their royal master Duncan can give that would pay Macbeth for his day's work. Nothing . . . but his own royalty. Well may he stand in doubt which should be his and which Macbeth's! But Ross at once adds:

And, for *an earnest of a greater honour*,
He bade me, from him, call thee thane of Cawdor:
In which addition, *hail*, most worthy thane.

(I.iii.104–106)

The double blow is stupefying. 'Hail, most worthy thane' starts in his mind and ours the fateful echo:

1 *Witch:* All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Glamis!
2 *Witch:* All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Cawdor!
3 *Witch:* All hail, Macbeth! that shalt be king hereafter!

(I.iii.48–50)

Now he has not only the instant confirmation of the prophecy that he will be thane of Cawdor, but he is given the title *'for an earnest of a greater honour'!* Ross has become an oracle, repeating the greatest promise of the Witches. (Ross is given no message from Duncan that would justify the promise of a greater honour! Shakespeare is careful to make it good in general terms in the following scene, but Ross's line has been written to play upon the prophecy, not simply to report the previous scene.)

Banquo's aside—'What! can the devil speak true?'—emphasizes that he has not hesitated in his hostility to the Witches, despite their fair promises to him; he is invulnerable to their temptations. Macbeth is only eager for confirmation of their infallibility. But he scarcely hears more than the first few words of Angus's answer about Cawdor's treachery. What Angus says has ominous meaning, too, if Macbeth would mark it. Duncan bade his messengers greet Macbeth as 'thane of Cawdor,' and they have just done so. Now Angus finishes with the news that the 'thane of Cawdor's'

. . . *treason's capital*, confess'd and prov'd,
Have overthrown him.

(I.iii.115–16)

So, too, the new thane of Cawdor will be overthrown. Macbeth misses the omen. The 'earnest of a greater honour' still burns in his brain—

Glamis, and thane of Cawdor!
The greatest is behind.

(I.iii.116–17)

Banquo Suspects Macbeth's Thoughts and Tries to Warn Him to No Avail

Now he feels Banquo's eyes fastened accusingly upon him. Why has Macbeth not greeted his new title with some exclamation to Ross and Angus about the prophecy which has just been made to him?—even if he thought it right to suppress the further prophecy that he should be king hereafter. He has said nothing in answer but the flat and forced, 'Thanks for your pains.' Now Macbeth mutters half-defiantly to Banquo, does he not hope his children shall be kings? Banquo's retort is unerring; he has read something of what is passing in Macbeth's mind and warns him against ambition for the crown.

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.

(I.iii.122–26)

Macbeth will not be warned. He turns away from Banquo without a word, tragically quick to believe what he wishes to believe, whatever feeds ambition. The honest trifles, he tells himself, are but happy prologues to the imperial theme!

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill;

(I.iii.130–31)

But the thought runs straight to murder. Macbeth has willed the end but not yet the means. If this soliciting is good:

why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature?

(I.iii.134–37)

Yet Macbeth was 'Nothing afeard of what thyself didst *make*, Strange images of death.' The images of death that now strike his heart with unaccustomed fear, are strange, perhaps, only because they are not made but thought upon. To act against the use of nature might not be so dreadful after all: 'Present fears are less than horrible imaginings.' (I.iii.137-38)

His mind is still desperately seeking for a possible escape from the crime. As his wife contemptuously says, he would not play false and yet would wrongly win. 'He seems rapt withal,' (I.iii.57) Banquo had said when Macbeth first heard the Witches' prophesy, and now he says again, 'Look, how our partner's rapt.' (I.iii.142) The same evil thoughts have returned. For the moment the decision, as Coleridge says, is 'still in Macbeth's moral will.' He makes one last weak effort to break out of the spell by interpreting the prophecy fatalistically. If he is predestined to be King, chance may crown him without his stir. He need not take upon himself the burden of regicide. But as he says it he knows that if it is his fate to be King, it is his destiny to make his own way to the throne. Is he not man enough to throw off the consequences? When horrible imaginings have become present fears, present will soon become past:

> Come what come may,
> Time and the hour runs through the roughest day.
> (I.iii.146–47)

To his companions he says, after some belated compliments and thanks:

> Let us toward the King.

To dispel Banquo's suspicions he briefly promises 'at more time' (I.iii.152) they shall speak 'Our free hearts each to other.' The time will never come. Macbeth's heart is no longer free.

Macbeth Is All Middle

Stephen Booth

Stephen Booth argues that *Macbeth* is all middle because no element—events, factual knowledge, time, characters—has a clear beginning, ending, limit, or definition. He argues that the audience reacts to this limitless, nebulous quality by identifying with Macbeth and experiencing the play with him even though from an objective distance they would condemn him. Booth calls *Macbeth* a great tragedy because its limitlessness prompts the audience to experience terror along with the title character. Stephen Booth has taught English at the University of California at Berkeley. He has edited a collection of Shakespeare's sonnets and is the author of *An Essay on Shakespeare's Sonnets.*

It is easy enough to see that in the tragedies we value, the *imitation* (the play) is complete, has a beginning, a middle, and an end. That is not often true of the actions imitated; it is notably untrue in *Macbeth.*

It is true that *Macbeth* very definitely begins—more definitely than *King Lear* or *Othello* or *Hamlet,* which open on continuing situations. In *Macbeth* the witches come out and plan future action ("When shall we three meet again?") and promise an immediate relationship to the title character ("There to meet with Macbeth"—I.i.7). *Macbeth* also ends. Macduff enters with the head of Macbeth; everyone hails Malcolm king, and, in the last speech of the play, Malcolm ties off all the loose threads of Scottish politics. . . .

The End Has No Clear End

On the other hand, it would also be true to say that *Macbeth* is all middle. For instance, the eminently final speech of Malcolm's is curiously reminiscent of Duncan's speeches when the earlier hurly-burly was done, when the earlier