

Agreeing with Dr. Johnson

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IN contemplating the murder of Banquo, Macbeth introduces a sudden allusion to classical history:

There is none but he
Whose being I do fear: and, under him,
My Genius is rebuk'd; as it is said,
Mark Antony's was by Caesar.

(III. i. 54-7)¹

Dr. Johnson's objection to these lines has never, as far as I can discover, been answered:

Though I would not often assume the critic's privilege of being confident where certainty cannot be obtained, nor indulge myself too far in departing from the established reading, yet I cannot but propose the rejection of this passage, which I believe was an insertion of some player, that, having so much learning as to discover to what Shakespeare alluded, was not willing that his audience should be less knowing than himself and has therefore weakened the author's sense by the intrusion of a remote and useless image into a speech bursting from a man wholly possessed with his own present condition and therefore not at leisure to explain his own allusion to himself.²

Perhaps one reason why Johnson's assertion has gone unchallenged is that he himself amended it in 1773, saying that Macbeth's words "may still be genuine, and added by the author in his revision."³ Another possible reason is that Johnson seems to be correct, particularly in the psychology of what he says. While Macbeth can detach himself from his hallucinations and fantasies, as attested by his apostrophe to the dagger, he is not characterized as well-read, as are, say, Berowne and Henry V, nor is he shown as reading, as are Brutus and Hamlet. Indeed, the hypothetical player whom Johnson indicts, in actuality Richard Burbage, is known to have founded a college.

One could defend Macbeth's line on the grounds that Shakespeare's creative impulse was anticipating *Antony and*

Cleopatra even as he wrote *Macbeth*. Shakespeare seems to have been re-reading Plutarch, in which the Egyptian astronomer warns Antony: "For thy demon . . . (that is to say, the angell and spirit that keepeth thee), is afraid of his: and being couragious and high when he is alone, becometh fearfull and timorous when he cometh neare unto the other."⁴ Shakespeare's version in *Antony and Cleopatra* is more clearly indebted to Plutarch than are the lines of *Macbeth*. Shakespeare's Soothsayer says,

Thy demon, that's thy spirit which keeps thee, is
Noble, courageous, high, unmatchable,
Where Caesar's is not; but, near him, thy angel
Becomes a fear, as being o'erpow'r'd: therefore
Make space enough between you.

(II. iii. 19-23)

While Shakespeare's apparently photographic memory has already been exposed to Plutarch, the evidence suggests that he was re-reading North's translation as he wrote *Macbeth*. Antony's starving troopers, Plutarch tells us, "were compelled to live off herbs and roots . . . that were never eaten before. For he that had once eaten of it, his memory was gone from him, and he knew no manner of thing . . ."⁵ This passage emerges in Banquo's question: "Or have we eaten on the insane root/That takes the reason prisoner?" (I. iii. 84-5).

While we have scented Actium in the winds, in the brief dispute between Antony and Octavius before Philippi, and while the worlds of *Macbeth* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, so different in atmosphere and dimension, verbal tonality and religious orientation, seem indisputably to shine forth from different facets of Shakespeare's genius, it seems also that in the depth-structure of his consideration Shakespeare was mulling issues in many ways similar, even though two very different plays would emerge from the process.

The allusion to classical history in the mouth of a Scottish tyrant extracted from the Eleventh Century via Holinshed seems less out-of-context, perhaps, if we remember the unusual treatment *Macbeth* has been accorded earlier, in the wounded Captain's account. The Captain summons the full

epic machinery — the beginning *in media res*, the heroic simile, a mighty foe in “the merciless Macdonwald” favored by the personified goddess, Fortuna, the epic hero who represents more than himself (he is “Valour’s minion” and “Bellona’s bridegroom”) and a final confrontation and feat of arms. Shakespeare provides us with a dimension against which the *tragic* hero’s fall can be charted. Macbeth tumbles from symbolic heroism to existential villainy until it is *his* head, not Macdonwald’s, which is fixed on the Scottish battlements. He plunges downward in the Christian world as well, where the issue is his soul, not the pagan virtue of reputation. The Captain’s narrative expresses the greatness Macbeth has achieved before he aspires to greatness again in a Christian context that renders his greatness damnable because he wills himself *for* himself, rather than aligning his will with a more comprehensive value like loyalty to king, country, and God. Antony, of course, is not hurled headlong from any Christian hope for redemption, but he does suffer the vivid degradation described by Philo, Pompey, Enobarbus, and Octavius:

Let us grant, it is not
 Amiss to tumble on the bed of Ptolemy;
 To give a kingdom for a mirth; to sit
 And keep the turn of tippling with a slave;
 To reel the streets at noon, and stand the buffet
 With knaves that smell of sweat; say this becomes him. . . .
 (I. iv. 16-21)

Macbeth and Antony are among Shakespeare’s great warriors, and each falls from the heroic context Shakespeare provides. Each is pursued by a nemesis. Antony’s is Octavius, Macbeth’s is Banquo, then Macduff, who temporarily crows Macbeth’s “better part of man.” Macbeth and Antony, alone among Shakespeare’s tragic heroes, are tracked down by armies responding to the political (and moral) defections of the hero. Brutus comes close to this configuration, if we substitute sheer ineptitude for tragic stature.

Macbeth and Antony are the two tragic heroes who possess the clearest knowledge of what is happening to them as their tragedies progress. Macbeth expresses completely the issues of murdering Duncan *before* the murder — the “life to come”

and its "deep damnation," temporal "judgement," and the question of "subject," "kinsman," and "host." Macbeth's poetry is not merely hyperbolic; it is true:

heaven's cherubim, hors'd
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.

(I. vii. 22-5)

His knowledge of evil is still theoretical, like that of Milton's Adam and Eve, but he is close to the experiential level here, even before his act. He expresses the experience from the positive side of nature in his great image of the mounted cherubim. His later expressions will emerge from a deeply negative context — his inability to pronounce "Amen", the sights he sees, the poisoned ingredients of the cauldron into which he leaps, the instant redness spreading from his touch:

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.

(II.ii.60-63)

Macbeth expresses the absolute sea-change his merest touch will create.

Antony, too, has a full knowledge of what is happening to him. In Egypt he says, "These strong Egyptian fetters I must break/Or lose myself in dotage" (I ii. 120-21); and in Rome, "though I make this marriage for my peace,/I' th' east my pleasure lies" (II. iii. 39-40). He knows that whatever efforts he makes, his heart is bound to Cleopatra's rudders. Both Macbeth and Antony are maneuvered by their women to act in conscious defiance of the rules of the world, however Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra may be unconscious of the premises underlying their mens' careers. No other Shakespearian tragedies explore as profoundly as these the tragic cooperation between male and female. In the defiance encouraged by the women lies the tragic greatness of the men. Other tragic heroes — obviously — act in defiance of their worlds and in despite of the ground of their own beings. But they do so more blindly than either Macbeth or Antony. For Macbeth and Antony, the prize — crown or Cleopatra —

seems worth the risks they take with open eyes. Richard III sneers at the potentiality of conscience within him, yet it discovers him nonetheless. Richard II myopically refutes the premises on which both *de jure* and *de facto* kingship rest. Brutus confuses himself with his own rationalization of the stoicism he has supposedly embraced. Hamlet's actions and inactions reflect his bafflement before the problematical nature of reality. Othello is wooed from Desdemona's pre-eminent virtue, from a perfection he glimpses only after he has quenched it. Lear is the slave of a royal plurality that has but slenderly known any distinction between body natural and body politic. Coriolanus behaves as if man were author of himself, only to find before the gates of Rome that he is too much i' th' son. Enobarbus, granted a full tragic patterning, thinks he can desert Antony, but only shatters his own heart in the process of leave-taking. Claudius, a tragic figure within another's tragedy, is ruthlessly trapped by an error in judgment he comes to see clearly even as he admits that he cannot give up his crown or, like Antony, surrender his enchanting queen. Claudius had felt that a lot of rhetoric would clear him of the deed, but finds, like Lady Macbeth, that guilt erodes "solely sovereign sway and masterdom."

Lady Macbeth would deny her "kindness", her link with humanity. She would be "unsexed", denatured like the Weird Sisters, but her intrinsic humanity, the very sexuality she has employed to whet Macbeth to the deed, the essence she would deny at her own convenience, rebels, at once destroying her and confirming her humanity. Tragic irony: she might have listened to herself:

Give me the daggers: the sleeping and the dead
 Are but as pictures: 'tis the eye of childhood
 That fears a painted devil.

(II. ii. 53-5)

She has looked with "kindness", indeed with the eye of childhood, only moments before: "Had he not resembled/My father as he slept, I had done it." (II. ii. 13-14). No other plays, I think, allow an actress to project as much sexual energy as the roles of Lady Macbeth and Cleopatra seem charged with in the inherited scripts.

While Antony and Macbeth act compulsively, particularly as their self-dictated fatalities close in on them, they express more knowledge of the world they challenge than other Shakespearean heroes. They require no *anagnorisis*. Rather they articulate their falls. Antony knows that the moon's eclipse "portends alone/The fall of Antony" (III. xiii. 154-55), and Macbeth can say: "Banquo, they soul's flight/If it find heaven, must find it out tonight"(III. i. 141-42). He knows well the nature of the universe he inhabits, even as he knows that his own soul will go to hell. Both Antony and Macbeth express consistently the positive values of their different worlds, even as they isolate themselves through deviations from those values.

While the equation between Macbeth and Antony seems hardly random, the worlds the two inhabit are radically dissimilar. Antony and Cleopatra image the glory of a pagan afterlife, souls couching on flowers, kisses which it is heaven to have, Cleopatra's movement back through time "again for Cydnus,/ To meet Mark Antony" (V. ii. 228-29). Their vision is independent of any structure their world provides, indeed the only god of the play, Hercules, deserts Antony along the chords of subterranean music. Their vision is a product of conviction, and *Antony and Cleopatra* is really a superb work of Romantic literature, expressing in advance the new heaven and new earth of *Wuthering Heights* and "The Eve of St. Agnes," the super-worldly status captured by Keats in one of his letters to Benjamin Bailey: "we shall enjoy ourselves here after by having what we called happiness on Earth repeated in a finer tone and so repeated — And yet such a fate can only befall those who delight in sensation rather than hunger as you do after Truth."⁶ The words of Antony and Cleopatra, at least, suggest that the characters merge with a magnificent extension of their mortal pleasures. The futurity towards which the poetry reaches contrasts sharply with the probable "deep damnation" yawning open before Lady Macbeth and Macbeth, who dare all and lose within a different dispensation. If the world of *Antony and Cleopatra* operates on a principle of soaring possibility, possibility bounded only by

human imagination and therefore unbounded, *Macbeth* shows its two great characters pulled downward by the pre-existing gravity of a Christian universe. While the world of *Macbeth* reaches out to touch the further mysteries of the universe — usually negatively — it also clenches in towards the solitary individual — two solitary individuals in Act V. The world of *Macbeth* is at once centrifugal and centripetal. The world of *Antony and Cleopatra* — already huge at the outset — flexes beyond itself as its two great characters find its dimensions too narrow for their aspirations. Unlike *Macbeth*, *Antony and Cleopatra* challenges the limits of what is possible.

The pleasant game of compare and contrast could go on, but I hope to have outlined some affinities between these two great plays not previously suggested. Dr. Johnson is correct to question the reference to Roman antiquity in the mouth of Macbeth, but the lines, when pursued, illuminate aspects of Macbeth as character and of *Macbeth* as play which might otherwise remain dim. Perhaps I have demonstrated only that almost any line of Shakespeare's — particularly any line of *Macbeth* — is capable of a fission that releases enormous energy. That Shakespeare's own imagination was brooding over the limits of possibility during the year or two which produced these plays and that he suggests that what is possible is a function of the world into which aspiration is born seems all too easy to say. Regardless of vaulting ambition or dolphin-like delights, political order is restored at the end of each play. No other tragedy shows order as convincingly re-established as does either *Macbeth* or *Antony and Cleopatra*. Fortinbras asserts his "rights of memory" easily enough, but over the visibly extirpated royal line of Denmark. Cassio, subject of an unnoticed comedy, takes over in Cyprus. Who rules at the end of *King Lear* is debatable and possibly irrelevant, depending on what a particular production may have shown us. The question of who is in charge now seems entirely beside the point once the energy of Coriolanus has been cut off. The point seems to be that *he* does not rule. But Octavius — who had the final commanding lines of *Julius Caesar* — gives order for yet

another funeral at the end of *Antony and Cleopatra*. And history tells us that this Caesar would rule for a long time, in spite of Christ's ironic intrusion into his reign. That blend of Erasmian and Machiavellian princely qualities, Malcolm, King of Scotland, reads a convincing lecture to his thanes and kinsmen at the end of *Macbeth*. In each play the disorder created by great warriors who would defy the premises of the worlds they inhabit is firmly replaced by a realistic politics. Such a system is less fascinating than the dark discoveries of Macbeth and his dearest partner in infamy, and less enticing than the splendid leaps of Antony and Cleopatra along the vectors of their poetry, but such a politics seems dictated by the world *we* inhabit, a world this side of both paradise and of tragedy. That we *are* in this world — whatever we take its premises to be or not to be — seems to be one thing Shakespeare is saying to us at the end of plays which have taken us figuratively out of this world. We are left, after all, to ferry ourselves back across the river to London from the great globe itself.

NOTES

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¹Quotations accord with *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*, ed. Hardin Craig and David Bevington (Glenview, Illinois: Scott, Foresman, 1973).

²*Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare*, ed. W. K. Wimsatt, Jr. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1960), p. 104.

³*Samuel Johnson on Shakespeare*, p. 104.

⁴*Shakespeare's Plutarch*, ed. T. J. B. Spencer (London: Peregrine, 1964), pp. 215-16.

⁵*Shakespeare's Plutarch*, p. 233.

⁶Letter of 22 November, 1817, *Keats: Poems and Selected Letters*, ed. Carlos Baker (New York: Bantam, 1962), pp. 403-404.