

# The Ironic Catastrophe in "Macbeth"

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WHEN the final scenes of Shakespeare's tragedies are properly understood, they invariably leave the audience with a sense of uneasiness about the adequacy of the plays' final actions and statements. When this uneasiness arises, as it must, it stems not from suspicions about the adequacy of the dramatist's design but from our discerning a notable gap in judgement between our own response to the shape of events and the response articulated by the society within the play, and from our need to assess the function of this disparity. We feel sure that our understanding of the significance of the tragic action is broader and deeper, more comprehensive altogether, than that arrived at by those who have participated in a spectacle of suffering that we have merely witnessed as an aesthetic construct. Detecting a certain incompleteness, even a certain hollowness, in what might appear to be the play's conclusive statements about itself, we ought to reflect that the society upon the stage is, in its own terms, not upon the stage but in life and that that society, responding as it does to terrible events in life, is only capable of surveying them in the mirror of the very recent past and, at best, of discovering thereby moral and prudential guidelines for the future. It should follow that that society is, properly, so aware of these events as *life* and not at all as *art*, that a coincidence of its judgement with the judgement of the society in the theatre (which has witnessed not *life* but *history as tragedy*) would be both illogical and indecorous. Such a reflection may, to some extent, qualify our sense of uneasiness, but it does not by any means eliminate it. What does eliminate it is the recognition that the concluding scenes

do more than establish a dichotomy between our final judgement and that of the play's ultimate spokesmen: these scenes may be said to *insist* that the society of the play cannot arrive at anything like our understanding of the tragic action and, what is more important, should not.

The question to be asked is this: why does Shakespeare in the last scenes of his tragedies put before us characters who, addressing and representing their contemporaries, fail to see what in the action and in the protagonist transcends the limitations of mere history and, necessarily, undermines the adequacy of any moral that can be drawn from the whole? The answer may be that his establishing for the society of the play a norm of insufficient insight and inadequate utterance is an irony designed to emphasize the need for the audience to complete the work of art by recognizing what is most typically human and most typically timeless in its suggestive spectacle. Such an answer may help us to assess how Shakespeare's tragedies achieve catharsis and to define the kind of catharsis they achieve. The failure of the society of the play to gain the insight which we as audience possess (ideally, at least) emphasizes the universality of the tragic potential which realized itself as fact in this very society. They acknowledge the completion of what we might call a tragic fact, and they are satisfied that it is complete. In their satisfaction with the completeness of the fact they cannot see that the potential is in no way diminished by its having been realized in a particular case. Indeed, their very concentration on the special case of the protagonist as that of an individual whom they have known, whom they have deemed unique, and whom they have seen die blinds them to the reality of what they shared and still share with him. This blindness lies in their failure to understand what in him and in them led to the disaster they have witnessed and shared in. In a sense they have learned nothing: at least, they have not learned enough; hence they are scarcely better prepared to prevent a recurrence of the tragic than they were at the outset. We have failed to understand the tragedy fully if we do not recognize that this is as it should be.

Already, a few concessions may be in order. First of all, it is undoubtedly misleading to speak, as I have done, of the need for the audience to complete the work of art by acts of recognition or reflection. This suggests active participation, where in reality audiences are passive — acted upon, not acting. The effect of a tragedy upon an audience is a function of the form of the tragedy. The play is complete in itself, containing and revealing all that has to be explained and understood, presenting itself to us in its wholeness, achieving its clarification<sup>1</sup> by answering all the demands of its own necessities and probabilities; for us, in so far as we can be purely audience, it is all we know and all we need to know. But this brings us to a second concession: to speak, as I have done, of the insight which we as audience possess is to take far too much for granted. As audience, we are required to do no more than witness what acts upon us; but we are required to bring to this witnessing what might be called an intelligent passivity. We must bring to the play the kind of discrimination that responds to its wholeness, recognizing what is implicit as well as explicit in any unit of action that unfolds before us — and it matters not whether this unfolding takes place on the stage or on the page. To respond to a unit of action in terms of its immediate and obvious suggestiveness, without responding to its significance as an aspect of the structure of the whole is, potentially at least, to miss revealing ironies. This is an especial problem for an audience as it witnesses the catastrophe of a Shakespearian tragedy, where, normally, final spokesmen make or, in some cases, promise statements which are adequate only as partial reactions to the complexities of the dreadful experience now at its culmination, but statements which, because they are so final and because they are not gain-said, may win from us, if we are not ironically alert, both assent and approval. Thereby, they provoke in us a tendency to disregard the fulness of our experience as audience and to deny the insight provided by the only adequate statement that is uttered to us, the statement that is the whole dramatic poem. To find these statements totally convincing is, of course, to be free of that essential uneasiness which I discussed at the outset. It is

also to miss the full meaning of the play. It is to evade *catharsis*, because it is to be content with the understanding or clarification arrived at by characters who have not witnessed and can never know the whole of what we have witnessed and should know.

In a very real sense, any Shakespearian tragedy may be said to represent a closed system. In so far as it is an action dramatizing the crucial events in the life and death of the protagonist and the way in which these events affect those who surround him, it achieves the conclusive revelation of its internal coherence in the catastrophe, which is the appropriate and necessary conclusion of all that has preceded it.<sup>2</sup> All that has to be revealed is revealed; of the action, understood in terms of what happened, nothing more need be said. The question, what happened to Othello, or Hamlet, or Lear, and why? has its complete answer. So whole and so final a revelation of event and of cause and effect puts the audience in total possession of the facts and, hence, in a position that Sidney's historian could scarcely dare hope for in this brazen world.<sup>3</sup> Yet we are left with the limitations of Sidney's historian's particular account of things if we go no further than the coming to terms with event as event, that is, if we fail to rise above the discovery of the fulness of sequence to a perception of the universal significance of what is revealed in that sequence. The achievement of this "golden" perception depends upon what might be called the refusal of tragedy to remain a closed system or, to put it another way, upon tragedy's insistence on opening out into life through strategies of inconclusiveness. The why and the wherefore of what happened to Othello and to those whose lives he touched still remains important; but the arrival at the recognition of an answer to the question of how all of that constitutes a revelation of some essential truth of the human condition is of a higher order of importance. By achieving such a recognition we become, like the perfect reader of the compositions of Sidney's peerless poet, capable of perceiving universal truths — though what tragedy reveals may not teach the kind of thing that Sidney had in mind. But how, it might be asked, do we achieve the recognition in

question? I suggest that we achieve it if, whether rationally or intuitively, tragic character represents an exploration of some timeless aspects of what is human, that tragic plot represents a mere account of events in time involving the fortunes of particular humans — that plot partakes of the timely and so of the finite, character of the timeless and, in this sense, of the infinite. Out of the dynamic tensions between plot and character, between conclusive and inconclusive systems of coherence, comes the possibility of tragic insight.

The tensions between strategies of conclusiveness and inconclusiveness, between the finality of closed plot and the open-ended potential for a recurrence of the tragic as revealed through character are particularly impressive in *Macbeth*,<sup>4</sup> and particularly subtle too. Indeed they are so subtle that it is hardly surprising that one might succumb to the tendency not to detect or, more commonly, not to recognize with the necessary clarity the illuminating ironies provided in the catastrophe. The possibility of myopic error in our response is greater here than in the rest of Shakespeare's mature tragedies, Bradley's big four, because in *Macbeth* the evil emanating from the villain hero urgently demands his destruction, because the hero's deliberate choice of that evil and his determined adherence to its consequences urgently demand retribution — that poetic justice which is the more or less adequate reflection of ideal justice here upon the bank and shoal of time<sup>5</sup> — and because the dramatic satisfying of these demands is accompanied by an insistent and desirable celebration of renewal.

The play's thrust towards resolution comprises two major counterpointed movements, the one dramatizing the terrible and proper discomfiture of the tyrant hero, the other dramatizing the reassuring and prosperous march towards victory of the forces of righteousness. The first of these movements may be said to be negative, the second positive; both are very explicit, so explicit, in fact, as to be unproblematical and, hence, in need of no discussion here. Yet something of the obvious will be discussed so as to illustrate the importance of a third movement, as much implicit as explicit, which develops within the second and which, by undercutting it, by ironically qualifying its positive-

ness, constitutes the universalizing principle. This principle is unheeded by Malcolm and his triumphant friends as they respond to the meaning of Macbeth-the-villain-king and learn from the history they have shared with him the moral lessons and the practical wisdom that are to shape the life of restored Scotland.

One of the principal reasons why the audience of *Macbeth* is prone to myopic perception in the end is that the positive movement of the falling action, that of effective restoration and triumphant justice, is so apt and seems so comprehensive.<sup>6</sup> The promise of a solution to the Macbeth problem is a confident one. To perceive here (as we do in all the major tragedies) that the hero's problem is to some extent as much one of context as of character, arising as it does from a world of romance simplicity (in this case the Duncan world), is to expect that restoration, if it is to be that at all, must also be progression. Discovering signs of progress, we find satisfying the manner in which the forces of restoration overcome the limitations of assumption and expectation that characterized the naive and destroyed world that is both source of, and background to, the problem of the protagonist.

The Duncan world reveals itself to us in its awesome simplicity in the threatened society of I.ii., which as it experiences the release of victory seems incapable of understanding the reality of disloyalty and unaware of the nature of the linguistic confusions that characterize the witches' chorus we have heard in I.i. United in admiration for captains whose martial prowess is the epitome of loyalty, this society celebrates heroic irascibility as solely the expression of honour and worth; operates on the principle that the ideal of loyalty is the norm of the subject's behaviour, and responds to the perfidy of Macdonwald and Cawdor as an aberration from which there is nothing to learn. This society is similarly absolute in its expectation that utterance bears a one-to-one relationship with truth and, just as its assumptions are validated with respect to the virtue of its champions, they are also upheld by the reliability of its news-bearers. The Duncan world is a world of absolutists, a world

notoriously unprepared for the threat of the relativistic; a world which, though for the moment secure, is safe only if its foremost soldiers, its most able defenders, respond as Banquo does — but as Macbeth does not — to the encounter with relativism. It is safe if they reassert in will and deed the superiority of the ideals and truths essential to the order centred on Duncan when the rough beast of selfishness and dissimulation slouches towards its disordered Bethlehem to be born.

The story of Macbeth is the story of the release of martial deeds from their sanctions of loyalty and just cause, a release paralleled and made possible by the wilful divorce of language from its associations with absolute values and transcendent reality and by an imprisoning of it within the univocal confines of egocentric relativism. Once loyalty can be interpreted solely as the deprivation of greatness, and greatness solely as the fulfilment of ambition; once murder is defined not as the moralist's horrid deed but as the machiavellian's feat; once manliness is dissociated totally from the values of the humanist, then the accustomed act of life-taking is possible in an unaccustomed context and should assure desired success. The refusal of language and values and reality to confine themselves to the dimensions of Macbeth's choosing is crucial to Macbeth's tragic experience, and crucial too is the perverse heroism of his perseverance to the commitment he makes. But that has to do with the private agony of the hero, the essential retribution of a world that is as moral and as complex as he knew from the beginning and more moral and more complex than is appropriate to his chosen necessities. Such retribution transcends the concerns of a society experiencing the chaos and terror that are the outward signs of its king's inner turmoil. The retribution possible for that society has to do with the phenomenal accidents of Macbeth's failure, not with its metaphysical essentials; yet, for us who see all this as the development of a dramatic poem, the process of retribution must somehow address the essentials if it is to satisfy.

If there is to be a restoration to life of an order antithetical to the Macbeth chaos, that order must involve (1) a reaffirmation

of the values and a strengthening of the wisdom that Macbeth has eschewed, (2) a reintegration of soldiership with ethical principle and (3) a restoration of language to the complexity that allows words to echo the wholeness of the reality to which man relates. The function of IV.iii, the scene at the English court, is to lay the foundation for this threefold restoration. It does so by establishing Malcolm as successor and contrary to Macbeth and also as heir and contrary to Duncan, as one with an awareness of the Duncan vision and a knowledge of the Macbeth fact. It does so too by focusing on Macduff as the principle and person that persuasively counters Macbeth's dissociation of *virtus heroica* from moral virtue and gives the nay to Macbeth's restriction of language to those meanings only that reflect the necessities of his will. Thereby it promises a confounding of those errors in government, both social and personal, that made possible the evil of Macbeth.

The destructibility of the Duncan order and the tragic threat to the chief defender of that order, Macbeth, lay in the unpreparedness of the absolutist adequately to defend himself and his reality against the artifice that divorces mind's construction from facial expression and destroys the coherence of truth and verbal expression. The too-simple wisdom of the Duncan world, which lay in the ethically approvable action of the imitator of ideals had no bulwarks against Macbeth's relativistic perversion of the doctrine that defines "all that may become a man" (I.vii.46). The assertion that is IV.iii assures us that the night of what follows from that perversion will unfailingly find its day. The scene provides a dramatic analogue of Donne's suggestion in "The First Anniversary" that memory of the old and better world remains as a "glimmering light" that "creates a new world" which, whatever the threats to its sufficiency, "may be safer, being told/The dangers and diseases of the old." IV.iii presents us with a Malcolm whose practical knowledge of what is coupled with the ethical idealism of what was or what might be constitutes prudence, a prudence which, realized in ethical behaviour, will be the wisdom that informs the restoration of Scottish life.



Malcolm's prudence and the manner in which it supersedes and, still, complements the absolutism of his father's day are immediately focused upon in the beginning of the scene. Confronted with the appealing sincerity of Macduff, Duncan's son shows his awareness of how to detect the mind's construction whatever face or word affect, declaring immediately his scepticism (which he variously labels his "doubts" [1.25] and "jealousies" [1.29]), in words which define his freedom from the absolutist's norm of simple faith:

What I believe, I'll wail,  
What know, believe; and what I can redress,  
As I shall find the time to friend, I will.

(IV.iii. 8-10)

This scepticism in no way denies the validity of the absolutist's truth, but it affirms the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of attaining to truth. Therefore Malcolm's philosophic position resembles that of the relativist. Yet he acknowledges that Macduff's words may, "perchance," perfectly embody truth (1. 11). Therefore, his "modest wisdom" (1. 119) is free of the destructive expediency of realists of the Lady Macbeth sort and, equally, of the defenceless credulity (1. 120) of idealists such as Duncan. He is prepared for treachery's wearing the vizard of honesty, but, on the other hand, he confesses that his bias of thought cannot "transpose" the reality of Macduff's disposition (1. 21): therefore his relativism is not pessimistic cynicism: fair is still fair, however successfully "foul" may play its deceptive role (11. 23-24). His assertion, "Angels are bright still, though the brightest fell" (1. 22) reminds us not only of Satan, but of Macbeth; for this reason, we can interpret Malcolm's apology for his cautiousness —

Let not my jealousies be your dishonours,  
But mine own safeties. *You may be rightly just*  
*Whatever I shall think —*

(IV.iii. 29-31, emphasis added)

as a form of relativistic freedom which contrasts with and, as it were, counteracts the limited relativism of Macbeth, whose

reliance on the prophecies of the witch-conjured apparitions of IV.i is typical of his insistence that reality conform unambiguously to his own mode of thought.

Malcolm shows that his wisdom is not only knowledge of what should be and what is in the fallen world but also ethical commitment to active virtue in its private and public aspects.<sup>8</sup> This is evident when he probes Macduff's intention. First he imputes to himself the absence of active virtue,

Yet my poor country  
Shall have more vices than it had before,  
More suffer, and more sundry ways than ever,  
By him that shall succeed.

(IV.iii.46-9)

Then, when Macduff declares the unfitness for monarchy and even for life (11. 102-103) of one so vicious, Malcolm unspeaks his own "detraction" and abjures the "taints and blames" he has laid upon himself (11. 123-24). This self-denigration is an ironic revelation of his knowledge of the "king-becoming graces" (1. 91) and of his judgement upon the graceless kingship of Macbeth. But knowledge alone is not wisdom, and Malcolm, when he switches from the craft of ironic utterance to the guilelessness of direct statement, commits himself to a programme of action that accords with the ethical integrity (1. 116) of the good man's will; he restates his earlier declaration of readiness to redress known evil (11. 8-10): "What I am truly/Is thine, and my poor country's to command" (11. 131-32).

The definition of wisdom as active virtue is but one basic principle established in this scene as antithesis to Macbeth's departure from that wisdom in the decision to perform his "terrible feat" (I.vii.80). If the promise of complete restoration is to be fully dramatized as solution to the Macbeth problem, Malcolm must, as I have said, show a commitment to the restoration of language to its moral function and of soldierliness to virtuous wholeness.

Malcolm's discussion of the "king-becoming graces" may be as disconcerting for us as it is for the despairing Macduff, but it

manifests a camouflage calculated to elicit, not to distort, truth. It is similar in kind to the tactic of translating the branches of Birnam later on, a tactic which demonstrates how guile, harnessed to the will to restore an order of honesty, is necessary if the integrity of guileless men is once again to thrive.

It is Macduff who represents the guileless man. His role is primarily that of truth-teller, here as elsewhere in the play. It is as the voice of truth that he approaches circumspect Malcolm: his account of the state of Scotland in the opening lines —

Each new morn  
New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows  
Strike heaven on the face, that it resounds  
As if it felt with Scotland, and yell'd out  
Like syllable of dolor —

(IV.iii.5-8)

has a status as truth that is only too sadly supported by our having seen the murder of his family just moments before. Later, when Rosse proves a too-discreet bearer of the news of this dire event, Macduff's demand, "Be not niggard of your speech; how goes 't?" (1. 180) shows an intolerance of veiled truths, however terrible their nakedness may be. He wins Rosse to the language of uncompromising honesty, getting him to speak of Macbeth's achievements in "words/That should be howl'd out in the desert air" (11. 193-95), just as, earlier in the scene, he had won the prudently suspicious Malcolm to reflect in unambiguous language the truth of Siward's setting forth, "with ten thousand warlike men" (1. 134), to try the "chance of goodness" (1. 136) in a kingdom where each flower deceptively masks a serpent. Macduff, the unveiler of truth, Macduff who proclaimed the death of Duncan not as terrible "feat" but as ineffable "horror," as "sacrilegious murder," as confusion's "masterpiece" (III.iii.64-69) is here affirmed as the proper agent to dispel Macbeth's linguistic confusion; as the honest voice that will unmask the "double sense" in the word "born" (V.viii.13-20) and win from the suppressor of unwanted truths the unintended compliment,

Accursed be that tongue that tells me so,  
For it hath cow'd my better part of man!

(V.viii.17-18)

The third major function of IV.iii is to establish the redemption of martial worth from the state to which it had fallen when Macbeth committed himself to the soldiery appropriate to the "legions/Of horrid hell" (IV.iii.55-56). This it does by showing Malcolm restoring valour and honour to the status of virtue they enjoyed when Banquo chose fidelity to his own integrity rather than the honours attendant on his cleaving to Macbeth's will (II.i.25-29). Malcolm's aptness for the task is shown in his promise to cleave to the will of honest Macduff, "child of integrity" (IV.iii.115) and in his attempt to convert his followers' knowledge of rampant crime into the moral action of nature's justicers.

As energizer of the forces of retribution, Malcolm teaches bereaved Macduff to express his silent grief in the rhetoric of martial action: "Dispute it like a man. . . . Be this the whetstone to your sword" (IV.iii.220, 228). Macduff responds positively, recognizing that the enraged heart is in harmony with heaven's will, and that the language of the sword is the appropriate expression of righteous indignation: the revenge which is, in Malcolm's language, a "medicine" (IV.iii.214) is to be in its context analogous to the healing touch of the saintly Edward, whose hand Heaven sanctifies (1. 144); it is, furthermore, blessed by the same Edward, who furnishes an army to aid the cause of a future king whom Birnam-bound Caithness will call "the med'cine of the sickly weal" (V.ii.27).

In the light of all of this, it would seem and, I suggest, it is, proper to see Malcolm's cause and his success (and also his final promises to plant new honours and "by the grace of Grace" to perform "in measure, time and place" (V.ix.38-39) all that is appropriate to the responsibilities of a good king) — it is proper, I say, to see all this in terms of the idea of the Heavenly powers putting on their instruments to overcome one who has become an instrument of darkness and who, thereby, in deepest con-

sequence betrayed himself to the very heart of loss.

But our response to so positive an ending should not frustrate our Donatan awareness that, for more than the dead hero, tragedies end badly, and that here, as elsewhere, Shakespeare is rather insistent on this point. Though the restorers of truth and wisdom, honour and loyalty have indeed solved the historical problem of Macbeth, they have not solved — they have not even recognized — the essential problem. Shakespeare mitigates our satisfaction with the triumph of light by making three ironic suggestions that the anagnorisis of the triumphant society upon the state is very human in its limitations: the dramatic statement that Macbeth's tragic error is not his alone is found in the handling 1) of the report of Young Siward's death, 2) of Macduff's appearing with Macbeth's decollated head, and 3) of Malcolm's definitive posthumous description of the tyrants of Dunsinane.

For old Siward as he accepts news of his son's destruction, as for Malcolm when he guided Macduff's moral soldiery in the scene at the English court and for Macduff both when he confronts and kills the tyrant and when he appears before us with his gory trophy to announce that at last "The time is free" (V.ix.21), the assumptions that make the soldier's irascibility virtue are buttressed morally by certainty of the justice of their cause. Virtue is unequivocally virtue; *but is this so only because the context is right?* Perhaps, because there is surely something questionable about the awareness of those involved. Analyzed without reference to its well-established moral context, Malcolm's encouragement to Macduff in IV.iii, "Dispute it like a man" and "This tune goes manly" (11. 220, 235), can be seen to be dangerously similar in tenor to Lady Macbeth's advocacy (in 1.vii) of destructive manliness. Shakespeare is careful to de-emphasize Malcolm's own Hamletian role as avenger of a murdered king-father in order to make him primarily the wise guide of Macduff's moral and martial energies and the symbol of moral authority; still, he insures that some of this wise guide's expressions, such as "let grief/Convert to anger; blunt not the heart, enrage it" (1. 229), may be disturbing in their unrecog-

nized implications. We know that Malcolm is rightly encouraging Macduff to convert his sorrow to righteous indignation, that he is advocating a virtuous combination of passion (anger) with right reason; but we must surely note, nonetheless, or discover in retrospect, that the words in themselves are not distant from "for mine own good/All causes shall give way" (III.iv.134-35). What justifies Malcolm is his conviction that he and Macduff and the other soldiers must use martial wrath to fulfil their function as instruments of the Powers above. In this immediate situation, soldierly irascibility and its spontaneous deeds are good because they are allied to goodness. But, while we can approve the conscious intention of Malcolm, we can also recognize how an attitude such as his has within it the potential for a confusion of absolute with relative good: in other circumstances, potentially at least, personal vindictiveness may usurp the place of that revenge which is justice. Macbeth has involved himself in such confusion; and his egoism led him oft to speak of various medicines needed to purge his Scotland of the evil which contradicts his good. Hence, there is a buried irony in "Let's make med'cines of our great revenge/To cure this deadly grief" (Macduff's personal loss) (11. 214-15), which should alert us to the universality of Macbeth's tragic potential.

The Macduff who stands before us with the severed head is also a questionable image: he is now what Macbeth was in I.ii, "virtue with valour armed", but he is also Bellona's bridegroom; he is the performer of an unparalleled manly feat, having as effectively curbed the spirit of his adversary as Macbeth did that of a Thane of Cawdor whose title and whose role he so worthily inherited. And the society that, rejoicing, proclaims the freedom of the time with a choric "Hail, King of Scotland" (V.ix.25) is no more critical of prowess per se — of its centrifugal possibilities — than it was in its earlier stage of awareness in I.ii. To point out that the unquestioned certainties of that early scene of victory were soon to be followed by the witches' "All Hail" (I.iii.69) litany may seem too ingenious — and probably is. Yet, there are curious silences in the play, and these have their own suggestive ironies. Many among Shakespeare's original

audience would not have learned from Holinshed that the reign of Malcolm Canmore was rather long than happy, nor known the time, cause and agent of his violent death.<sup>9</sup> They too, like us, may have wondered how and when and why Banquo's issue would achieve the golden round. Donalbain and Fleance are in the wings of the future; how they will enter the stage of history is not important really; how they might do so is important — because the Macduff whose vengeance is justice is a Macduff whose vengeance might well have been autonomous, and the vindication of his will is a precedent whose single state of virtue deserves scrutiny.

The news of Young Siward's death reveals too society's inclination to assume an equation of virtue and *virtus heroica*. Siward, who we were told is the best of soldiers in Christendom (IV.iii.191-92), learns that his son has "paid a soldier's debt" and (V.ix.5) that the boy-become-man died "like a man" (1. 9). In this, unlike us, who know that there are other views of man than Pico della Mirandola's, he finds total reassurance:

*Siward.* Had he his hurts before?  
*Rosse.* Ay, on the front.  
*Siward.* Why then, God's soldier be he!  
 Had I as many sons as I have hairs,  
 I would not wish them to a fairer death.

(V.viii.12-15)

Old Siward is right: his son died as brave man and as God's soldier. We have witnessed that. But the logic of the old soldier's conclusion has recognizably within it the potential for unwarranted identification of the manly and the godly, of *brave* with *good*. In this questionable logic, heroic will demonstrates its fascinating self-sufficiency and self-regarding simplicity. That the conqueror of the boy may have been brave, but not good, does not enter into the reckoning. So, it is only the "grace of Grace" (V.ix.38) that Siward's "why then" leads to a true conclusion, just as it is only by the harmony of Macduff's cause with Providence that the beheading of Macbeth is not "horror". Soldierly virtue secure in its own rightness is moral virtue when it

is an exercise of justice — that is, when courage and conscience give wholeness to manliness. It is only while that equilibrium is maintained that the time is truly free. Men like Siward and Macduff are evidence that the Macbeth error is an universal potential. The only certainty we are left with is that if, and when, men like these “yield to . . . suggestion” (I.iii.134) they are not likely to see so clearly and feelingly what Macbeth has seen and felt.

*What Macbeth has seen and felt* brings us to the third of these ironies. The Malcolm who announces his intention to bring to justice the cruel ministers “Of this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen” (V.ix.35) could learn from us to amend his speech a little. A certain Doctor of physic and a certain Waiting Gentlewoman could, we know (V.i), tell that prayers to the spirits of murder can amazingly go unanswered. But who would listen! And what of “dead butcher”? How truly does this epitomize the life of one who lived the truth of his lie, “Had I but died an hour before this chance, I had liv’d a blessed time”? (II.iii.91-92) How truly does it synthesize the awful, inescapable experience of life as failure: the haunting mockery of “Sleep no more” (II.ii) and of Banquo’s silent ghost (III.iv); the desperate futile will to escape from feeling thought (III.iv.138-39); the ruthless honesty of the “Yellow leaf” and the “Tomorrow” meditations on an existence that is nothing (V.iii and V.v.)? Where here is any shadow of the most painful reality of the agonized experience of guilt, the living hell of guilt-without-remorse? What can Malcolm say of the “dead butcher’s” dreadfully human and terrifyingly nihilistic *anagnorisis*? Nothing? Certainly he says far from enough.

In this he differs, and must differ, from us. We, the society within the theatre (or study), have been granted that perfection which is the gift of omniscience. Our experience transcends the private story of Macbeth and the private illumination that is his, as well as the public story of Macbeth and the significance that affords to those affected — and in their way illuminated — by it. Ours is a godlike possession of the significance of the tragic poem. Ours is a *claritas* arrived at by curiously creaturely



means: affected by the pity and terror and the awe that are in and are aroused by the play, we witness and respond to its revealing wholeness, and, thus, are purged of the uncertainties that are the ironies of incompleteness. We see, in the distinct realities and in the shared realities of protagonist and survivor, the shape of the timely history that has ended and the essence of the timeless fallibility that cannot end and, thus, achieve the purification of understanding that tragic art provides. This, I think, is the *catharsis* that Shakespeare's tragedies effect and this, I think, is their mode of effecting it.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>See Leon Golden, "Catharsis," *Transactions of the American Philological Association*, 93 (1962), 51-60.
- <sup>2</sup>See Harold Jenkins' discussion of "Closing Rituals" in *The Catastrophe in Shakespearean Tragedy* (Edinburgh: The University Press, 1967), pp. 14 ff.
- <sup>3</sup>Sir Philip Sidney, *An Apology for Poetry*, in *Elizabethan Critical Essays*, ed. G. Gregory Smith, Vol. I.
- <sup>4</sup>The source of all quotations from and references to Shakespeare is *The Riverside Shakespeare*, textual ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974).
- <sup>5</sup>See O. B. Hardison's discussion of "Religious" Catharsis, in "Three Types of Renaissance Catharsis," *Renaissance Drama*, n. s. 2 (1969), pp. 10-14.
- <sup>6</sup>Jenkins is typical: "With Macbeth's death the 'estate o' th' world' is not undone but renewed," he says (p. 12); he does not dwell on any ironies implicit in the play's final "glances towards futurity." Hardison seems similarly insensitive to the final ironies of *Hamlet* when he implies that Horatio's apologia for the dead protagonist will enable the courtiers to replace the "disturbing and frightening singulars of history" (p. 19) by something like the universals of poetry. Horatio does not promise more than an account of external events to an audience (led by the impulsive non-thinker, Fortinbras) which seems singularly incapable of understanding the internal agony of Hamlet. Of this agony, Horatio's knowledge is at best only partial. Hence the catharsis of the society within the play can hardly be said to approximate meaningfully that of the theatre audience.
- <sup>7</sup>"An anatomie of the World," 11. 70-88, *John Donne's Poetical Works*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson, Vol. 1, pp. 233-34.
- <sup>8</sup>See Eugene F. Rice, Jr., *The Renaissance Idea of Wisdom* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), Chapters 6 and 7.
- <sup>9</sup>The historical Malcolm was killed Nov. 13, 1092, "in the 36 yeere of his reigne," lanced through the eye by the devious first Earl of Northumberland, Percy (= "perse eie"), during the siege of "the Castell of Anwike": *Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (London, 1808; rpt. New York: AMS Press Inc., 1965), Vol. 5, pp. 281-83.