# *Macbeth**

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If we ask ourselves: what is the distinction of *Macbeth* among Shakespeare's plays? and, in particular: what quality differentiates it most remarkably from the other great tragedies? surely we must answer: the extreme rapidity of its *tempo*. Its unusual brevity assists, but does not mainly account for, this effect. *Macbeth* exceeds by a mere two hundred lines or so the shortest of all Shakespeare's plays, *The Comedy of Errors*; the longest of them, *Antony and Cleopatra*, is nearly twice its length. We are tempted at times (as Professor J. W. Mackail has recently pointed out) to confuse difference of length with difference of rate, and to assume, when we are off our guard, that because a play is long it must be slow, and because it is brief it must be fast. Anyone who visits the films will not need to be told that a very short play—a play far shorter than may ordinarily be seen on the stage—can seem intolerably sluggish in its movement. As for Shakespeare, he was too skilful a dramatist to permit any play, even the longest, to drag. Thus, *Hamlet* is a very long play, but its action, for the most part, is very rapid. And yet, when we compare *Hamlet*—to take what is perhaps the extreme instance—with *Macbeth*, we observe a real difference. The action of *Hamlet* is rapid—for the most part. It is not rapid all the time. The long soliloquies, though so essential for the meaning, slightly retard, while they are being spoken, the pace of this drama. Again, in such scenes as those which present Hamlet's meeting with the players, his colloquy with the gravediggers, his teasing of Osric, the forward movement of the play has become very slow; that is not to say that these scenes in themselves are not very interesting. Once more, the lines in which Polonius enunciates his wise counsels involve, momentarily, the virtual suspension of the action: the drama, as it were, pauses for these few seconds while Polonius delivers himself of his accumulated wisdom.

Let us contrast *Macbeth*. At one part of the play the action is noticeably delayed; this is in the fourth act, where Malcolm and Macduff converse at inordinate length and where the royal cure of the "evil" is described; here the drama lags a little. But how exceptional, how uncharacteristic this passage is! For the

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rest, if we try to imagine scenes in *Macbeth* that might have corresponded to the talk between Hamlet and the players, we feel at once how impossible in this tragedy such excursions would have been. There is a quality of leisure in *Hamlet* that has no place here, for, indeed, no other play of Shakespeare's is so swift, so furious in its movement.

It is interesting to observe how closely this quite extraordinary vehemence in the action of *Macbeth* is matched by the style. The language of the play is full of splendour, but it is a splendour with little of calm in it. The style, of all the varied dramatic styles of Shakespeare, is the tensest, the most excited. The breathless interchanges of question and answer are to a certain degree responsible for this effect:

> Did not you speak?
> When?
> Now.
> As I descended?
> Ay.
> Hark!

The passages of self-communion are in a vein as different as possible from Hamlet's "To be or not to be"; in general, the soliloquies and the asides are nervous or distraught. So, as Macbeth ponders what the witches have told him, his hair rises at his horrible imaginings; later, as he consults the sisters for the second time, his heart "throbs" as he prepares to put his question. Again, the occasional violence of phrase ("smoked with bloody execution", "unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps"), the wild magnificence of much of the imagery ("pity . . . striding the blast", "the sightless couriers of the air"), the constant allusion to the portentous, as if the frame of things were indeed becoming disjointed—all these add to our impressions of terror. And even when the pitch of the dialogue is lower, the quietness is often unnatural, the kind of quietness that may mask a rising hysteria. So, after the ghost of Banquo has withdrawn, Macbeth comments:

> the time has been
> That, when the brains were out, the man would die:

the remark suggests feelings barely under command, likely to burst forth at any moment in shouts of uncontrolled laughter. And there is much the same note, but more terribly subdued, in Lady Macbeth's dreamy reminiscence—the calmness now near that of insanity: "Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?"

Indeed, the emotional tension of the play is so great, its crises so hectic, that it can only remind one in its course of a fever. Life itself comes to seem like that to Macbeth, and he envies Duncan, sleeping well after all the fitful unrest of existence. Many of the details of the play are like alarms of nightmare: the voice that cried "Sleep no more!" to Macbeth; the restlessness and fright of the slumbering grooms; the dreams that come to Macbeth and his wife and shake them nightly in terror; the hallucination of the dagger; the sleep-walking. And is there not, at the finish, a suggestion of the apathy, the languor, that is left by a long delirium? Macbeth has plunged on and on, wasting in crime his reserves of energy, sacrificing all hopes and destroying for ever the peace of his spirit. At the end an infinite fatigue descends upon him, the despair of emotional exhaustion:

> Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day . . .

and

> I 'gin to be aweary of the sun,
> And wish the estate o' the world were now undone.

There is one other agency in the play that enhances still further this impression as of a fevered nightmare: the lurid colouring. The play is vividly pictorial and seems designed in red and black. The red, needless to say, is the red of blood: the blood into which Macbeth steps so far that it is as tedious to return as to go o'er; the blood that to his overwrought imagination might incarnadine the ocean; the blood that "bolters" Banquo, the blood with which Lady Macbeth gilds the faces of the grooms, that is the "filthy witness" on her husband's hands, that, at the last, is not to be cleansed from her own by all the perfumes of Arabia. The play is "laced" with blood.

The black is the darkness; a darkness not, like that of *King Lear*, reaching to heaven, rent with hurricanes and split with cataracts. The darkness here, for all the "unruliness" of the elements, is of a different quality—brooding, dense, oppressive.

> Light thickens, and the crow
> Makes wing to the rooky wood;
> Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,
> Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse.

That is the atmosphere of this play. So Lady Macbeth invokes "thick night", palled in "the dunnest smoke of hell", to hide as if by a "blanket" her deed from heaven. This night is "seeling", it "scarfs up the tender eye of pitiful day", and, encroaching upon the hours of light, "strangles the travelling lamp" and

"entombs" the face of earth. In such darkness nature itself seems "dead", and it is under the cloak of it—the very stars hiding their fires, that light may not see into the depths of Macbeth's heart—that the crucial scenes of the drama run their course.

The play, indeed, opens in murk—the "fog and filthy air" in which the weird sisters are holding their colloquy—and at once a mysterious harmony is established between these "midnight hags"—creatures of darkness—and the obscure unconfessed impulses in Macbeth's soul. There is even (as has often been observed) a verbal link, an ironic hint of the connection.

> Fair is foul, and foul is fair,

the witches sing as they vanish. Macbeth, entering soon afterwards, innocently echoes the phrase in his own first remark:

> So foul and fair a day I have not seen.

It is as if the pass-word of the evil beings has been secretly whispered in his ear; and his next utterance, as he challenges the weird women and bids them tell him what they are, is the last in the play that he speaks with a clear and untroubled mind. A moment later they begin their "all hail's" and disturbance has come into his soul.

The processes in this "temptation" of Macbeth (if, for want of a better word, we may still call it that) are shown with wonderful mastery and persuasive power, so that each step affects us as inevitable. We are made to see very clearly, in the first place, that he responds too readily—and with a strange, unnatural readiness—to the salutations, as if deep-hidden thoughts, long resident in his mind and perhaps sternly repressed, have suddenly sprung to life at these mysterious greetings.

> All hail, Macbeth! that shalt be king hereafter!

It is this address especially that produces the change in him, a change so striking that Banquo's attention is withdrawn for a moment from the speakers while he regards with astonishment the altered demeanour of his friend: and Macbeth has not yet said a word. Banquo questions him:

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

Banquo's own response is perfectly normal. He is interested and curious, and a little disappointed that he himself has not figured in such glorious predictions, but not in the least disturbed; to him the words sound only "fair". They are not fair-sounding to Macbeth (or if they are, sinister undertones accompany them),

for they suddenly formulate—this is the shock he has received —secret and guilty aspirations within his own breast. So he stands "rapt", plunged in frowning reverie. A little later Banquo draws the attention of Ross and Angus to their "partner", still "rapt", his mind seething with the conflicting thoughts that the encounter has provoked; and later still, it is the word he uses in his own letter to his wife narrating the marvel: "Whiles I stood rapt in the wonder of it." The prophecies of the witches, it is evident, have set in motion ideas that are stirring his very being.

But, of course, it is the immediate confirmation of the second greeting that makes, so naturally, the profoundest impression on him, for it seems to lend a terrible validity to the utterances of these creatures. Who could have doubted, after this, that they had "more in them than mortal knowledge"? The witches, as we know, have hailed him with three titles, Glamis, Cawdor, King-to-be. It is fortune-telling on a superlative scale, and we may gauge easily, by the effects this art can exert on our own feelings when we let ourselves be swayed, the state of Macbeth's mind. The first part of the triple salutation is recognized by him as already a truth: he knows he is thane of Glamis. This is like a guarantee of good faith and would have been sufficient, by itself, to win attention. A few moments later, as he is left burning with curiosity concerning the other titles, Ross and Angus come on the scene, and Ross hails him by the second—thane of Cawdor. We can measure the terrible emotion that this greeting sends through him by the exclamation of the level-headed Banquo. A minute or two previously Banquo was calmly interested in the prophecies; now he shows real amazement:

> What, can the devil speak true?

As for Macbeth, his confused feelings come to us in four successive asides, and we are made to follow with poignant sympathy and suspense the movements of his mind. He struggles between exultation and dread. He can no longer doubt that destiny is shaping events towards a certain end, and the recognition of what the goal is brings an overmastering thrill:

> Two truths are told,
> As happy prologues to the swelling act
> Of the imperial theme:

"the imperial theme": his excitement breathes in the glorious phrasing. The second part of the same aside discloses the lurking terror behind the thrill. It is significant that he speaks of the prophecies as "supernatural soliciting": the word "soliciting" is

ominous, for the witches have merely announced events, and two have already come to pass without his lifting a finger. If he feels that the third will demand intervention from himself it can only be because he is permitting his own guilty impulses to come to light, and the sight of them is terrifying to his better soul. It is true that in his next aside he makes to this better part of his nature a formal declaration of the stand he means to take:

> If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me
> Without my stir.

That is right and admirable, but the words do not carry conviction; we imagine that their real function is to quieten, momentarily, his conscience; he is acting to himself. The aside which follows is more genuine, and shows a mind full of trouble:

> Come what come may,
> Time and the hour runs through the roughest day.

But the tone of this is very different and his own position left more dubious. "Come what come may"; but what comes may be through his action; he is not now committing himself. Our impression is increasingly of his helplessness to resist an awful fascination; he is being steadily drawn towards some dark deed, attracted by the regal vision that the witches have shown him. Presently a slight obstruction appears to raise itself: Malcolm is appointed Prince of Cumberland: and now, at this threat to what he was beginning to accept as determined by the fates, the strength of his desires is for the first time fully revealed to himself. He admits that they are black and deep, but at the same time consciously wills that to be

> Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.

Yet, though he has already become involved—perhaps beyond escape—the way is still far from simple for Macbeth. How different is his wife! From the moment that she receives the letter all is clear, no qualm disturbs her; her only concern is of ways and means. Macbeth has nothing of this single-heartedness. Despite the avowal of his last aside, he arrives at the castle moody and harassed, his face, says Lady Macbeth, a book

> where men
> May read strange matters.

She takes the future for granted and assumes that their only problem is to plan the when and the how of the murder. But Macbeth is markedly withdrawn, temporizes, will not confess that he perceives the sinister double meaning in her words.

"Duncan comes here to-night," he announces, and to his wife's pregnant query: "And when goes hence?" answers tamely: "To-morrow, as he purposes." It is left to her to draw the obvious moral, but he steadily refuses to be enticed into discussion, putting the whole matter off with "We will speak further." It is as if his abhorrence has conquered his ambition, as if the whole grim project has become finally repulsive to him.

We learn much of his nature from this hesitancy. "Fear" is an easy word, and Lady Macbeth, with a practical end in view, finds the taunt effective. His last feeble objection: "If we should fail?" gives her the chance to overwhelm him with her scorn. But it is clear that the material risks of the enterprise are among the least of his anxieties. Lady Macbeth comes closer to the sources of his trouble when she speaks of his wish to act "holily", a wish, as she interprets it, that springs from mere unmanly timidity. He is, she thinks, too soft,

> too full o' the milk of human kindness
> To catch the nearest way.

And it is true that he has his share of common weaknesses and scruples. He is so far a normal man that he enjoys possessing the "golden opinions" of people and hates the idea of losing them. Nor can he face without a shudder the spiritual isolation that he knows (whatever be the practical issue) will come from violating the code of his race. The social instincts are strong in him. With all his pride and egoism, and despite the vein of hardness that must always have been in his nature, he has a deep craving to be at one with his fellow man. At the end, much of his despair arises from the thought that he has forfeited for ever the trust and goodwill of his kind:

> I have lived long enough: my way of life
> Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf,
> And that which should accompany old age,
> As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
> I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
> Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath
> Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.

It is strange to hear the word "love" from the lips of this murderer; and yet the sanctities of life have never been meaningless to Macbeth, as they were, for example, to the Edmund of *King Lear*: the duty of the host to the guest, of the kinsman to his senior, of the subject to his king. He feels these ties, and the ties of gratitude as well, and has never been able to say—as Richard III could—"I am myself alone."

But we know that a still deeper reluctance is withholding him and that it comes from his own conscience. He confesses to himself that the deed he contemplates is without excuse or justification, that he has no spur to prick the sides of his intent, but only vaulting ambition, that the taking-off is a deep damnation, that the horror of the act will give the virtues of Duncan trumpet-tongued voices, that pity will ride on the air and tears drown the wind. It would seem that none of the implications of what he intends is hidden from him and that he sees clearly that he is about to ruin his soul.

And yet, is it a true lucidity? If it were, his persistence in what he knows to be so vile would be less intelligible. But Macbeth's mind works in a special way. It is not remarkable for its grip or its clarity; it is remarkable for its vivid gleams of intuition and for the emotional excitement with which it can inflame his being. It is not a reflective mind, and indeed from the beginning of the play we notice in him a certain inaptitude for, or impatience of, deliberation. He can never coolly think. Rather, his half-formed purposes writhe in a murky confusion, and he is content that they should, for he is afraid to inspect them:

> Stars, hide your fires;
> Let not light see my black and deep desires:
> The eye wink at the hand . . .

Even the debate with his wife, when certain matters must be acknowledged between them, hardly clarifies for himself what he really desires, so that it is, as it were, with a mind still but half made up that he enters Duncan's chamber. All through these critical moments the artificiality of his mood can be felt. From his flat "We will proceed no further in this business," he has screwed himself, under his wife's tauntings, to the resolve:

> I am settled, and bend up
> Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.

But it is an unnatural, an inflamed resolve. The vision of the dagger is an indication of the brain "heat-oppressed", and the whole soliloquy shows his overwrought state. One aspect of this soliloquy seems especially interesting. We have heard how a soldier in a time of approaching crisis—such as the "zero" moment for an attack—will often observe in himself a quite unwonted mental activity, as if all his faculties had suddenly received stimulation. Is it not rather like that with Macbeth, as he waits? His imagination is always quick, we know, but at

such times it acquires an almost preternatural intensity. During these last seconds before the deed he becomes vividly aware, not only of the necessities immediately ahead of him, but of details that have, in a practical sense, no relevance to the act he intends. His awareness is indeed for the time being that of a poet, and he *appreciates* with a curious exhilaration the artistic rightness of the role he is about to play, for it seems to his heightened fancy to be required by the hour and the place. Just as, at a later point in the drama, he feels the "thickening light"—with the crow making wing to the rooky wood and good things of day beginning to droop and drowse—as united in a sinister harmony with the doom he has prepared for Banquo, so now the silence of the castle, the "curtain'd sleep" abused by "wicked dreams", the dark, the witchcraft abroad—all seem waiting for his act, and the bell that suddenly sounds in the stillness comes to his imagination as the summons. In this exalted mood he is nerved for the crime.

But the reaction is fearful. His words as he re-enters after the murder have lost their excited ring; instead, a terrible flatness has come into them. He looks half stupidly at his blood-stained hands: "This is a sorry sight": and perplexes himself with the problem why he could not say "Amen" when the two who had been roused from their sleep cried "God bless us!" Shakespeare's inventive powers are at their very height all through this scene and are nowhere more marvellously exhibited than in these two or three lines. What fatuity it is for Macbeth to stand—at such a moment—studying a question like that! He will not give it up, but gnaws and gnaws upon it:

> But *wherefore* could not I pronounce Amen?

It is idiotic and—to his wife—exasperating, yet even she, for all her impatience, catches a glimmer of some dreadful import behind this futile harping on a word, and is momentarily dismayed. His nerve, too, is now so completely gone that he cannot return to the room with the daggers; and disillusionment is already flooding in:

> Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!

Between the last two scenes of the second act, and between that act and the third, some time elapses, and the change after the interval in both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth is very marked. The alteration in Macbeth (now King of Scotland) is chiefly that he has hardened. How little, after all, his wife understood of

the tremendous strength in her husband, how she miscalculated the forces in his nature that she was unlocking! Her own vitality is already at the ebb, but he has revived his powers and is fresh in resolution. It is partly that he cannot rest. Thoughts of Banquo and of possible frustration from this quarter fill his mind with "scorpions", and he is determined, now that he is committed beyond any chance of retreat to his evil path, to follow it to whatever finish it may have. Rather than see Banquo (or Banquo's issue) get the better of him,

> come fate into the list,
> And champion me to the utterance!

"To the utterance!" He will go to the bitter end. The second murder is left half accomplished, for the son escapes, and "rancours" still remain in the vessel of Macbeth's peace. But there is no thought now of relinquishing his objective; such checks are but a spur to renewed effort. Even his lapse at the banquet he can explain, after his aberration is past, as merely "the *initiate* fear that wants hard use." Lady Macbeth must have felt the irony in such words. He encourages her: "We are yet but young in deed." "Young!"—to this worn-out woman, already a shadow of her former self. But it is true of him; he is only now, in his desperation, beginning to draw on his reserves of strength, and they seem inexhaustible.

For by this time a new vein has come into his conduct, that of recklessness. We understand the development easily: it is, in part, that he has nothing further to lose. What in his heart of hearts he always valued most, though he has tried not to acknowledge the truth to himself, was the eternal jewel of his good conscience, and this he has lost for ever. As for further calamities, can anything that may come be worse than the terrible dreams that inflict nightly torment? Better be with the dead than continue in such a life. Besides, he is now so deep in blood that it is as easy to go on as to stand still or to return. Violence, and yet more violence, seems his only course: at the least, it is an outlet for the fever within him, does something to still the terrible restlessness of his spirit. So he inaugurates with the slaughter of Macduff's wife and children his new policy of utter savagery; each cruel impulse is now to be gratified with instant performance: he has done with "scanning" for ever.

In the last act he has changed still further and signs of the final disintegration are evident. His nerves are now nearly out of control; we feel, as we watch him irritably receiving the mess-

engers, that his doom is near, that he is indeed (as Malcolm puts it) "ripe for shaking". He is preoccupied with omens, seems more than ever under the dominion of the prophecies: he rests his confidence now in Birnam wood which, in the way of nature, cannot remove to Dunsinane. He obstinately insists that he be clad in his armour, though Seyton assures him "'tis not needed yet", and we see that his attendants have a difficult time equipping him. He is plainly near the breaking point. The cry of women, the news that his wife is dead, have not the power at the moment to affect him; he must postpone his grief, for now all but the crucial fight ahead is an irrelevance. Yet even in these frenzied minutes of preparation, with half his mind he can survey in retrospect the course of his life, taking in its meaning and estimating, once and for all, the vanity of the deed by which he had thought to glorify it:

> Out, out, brief candle!
> Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more: it is a tale
> Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
> Signifying nothing.

He has really, whatever be the issue of the approaching test, no hope left, but—it is a touch of the tragic greatness in him—he will go to his destruction fighting. It is now that the messenger enters with the news that Birnam wood is on the move; if the report is true, then all is over; but the probability only increases his recklessness:

> Blow, wind! Come, wrack!
> At least we'll die with harness on our back.

With this defiant shout he goes forth to his fate.

The combat with Macduff does a little more than provide the formal conclusion to the story: it illuminates once again, and finally, the essential nature of the man. When Lady Macbeth taunted her husband with cowardice, she took a ready way to cure him of his "infirmity of purpose", but her accusation was unfair. His courage, for all earthly situations, is beyond every question:

> What man dare, I dare:
> Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,
> The arm'd rhinoceros, or the Hyrcan tiger;
> Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
> Shall never tremble.

But, compact of imagination as he is, this man (whose senses

would cool at a night-shriek, whose fell of hair would rise at a dismal treatise) cannot maintain his staunchness in face of horrors that seem outside nature: his mind is too excitable and intense, too vivid in its workings, for that kind of courage. So it is that for a moment or two again in this last fight with Macduff (as before when the ghost of Banquo appeared) his valour deserts him. At the beginning of the encounter he is admirable, and, in the compunction he shows, reveals a little (we may imagine) of the soldierly magnanimity of better days. Believing that his antagonist has no chance against him, and feeling an impulse of contrition for what is past, he warns him away:

> Of all men else I have avoided thee:
> But get thee back; my soul is too much charg'd
> With blood of thine already:

and, as Macduff refuses to retreat, explains that his life is charmed against all of women born. Then he is undeceived—Macduff is the very man he has to fear—and for an instant, as this last assurance gives way and the fiends themselves seem to be jeering at him, his courage ebbs: "I'll not fight with thee," he declares. But the weakness is quickly over. Macduff, calling him coward, draws a picture of the shame of captivity, and these few scornful words, for Macbeth's vivid apprehension, are enough. In a flash he has taken in the vision—of himself "baited with the rabble's curse", "the show and gaze o' the time"—and has turned from the disgraceful sight: better death:

> Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane,
> And thou opposed, being of no woman born,
> Yet I will try the last.

So his imagination, which for the moment again played him false, at the end (in a fashion) saves him.

"Lady Macbeth is merely detested," remarked Dr Johnson. That judgement leaves much unsaid. It is true that her nature must always have been abnormally insensitive, if not callous. Apart from her share in the crime, two incidents show this clearly. The first is her reception of the discovery of the murder. She can hardly have left herself unprepared for this moment, though even if she has, her behaviour is still revealing. She will be obliged to say something when this crisis comes: what shall she say? It is a little problem in acting for her; she succeeds in part, in part fails. Her first speech is absolutely right. At the ringing of the bell she enters and in a tone a little vexed, a little anxious, somewhat peremptory (as befits the lady of the castle),

demands the reason for the disturbance at so unusual an hour:

> What's the business,
> That such a hideous trumpet calls to parley
> The sleepers of the house? Speak, speak!

So far so good. But her next, and far more important speech, is absolutely wrong. She is told—or rather she hears—what is the matter, and exclaims:

> Woe, alas!
> What, in our house?

The note is false and immediately draws a gruff retort from Banquo:

> Too cruel anywhere.

If Lady Macbeth has rehearsed the speech, it means that she has not been able to imagine the feelings that would be natural in such a situation, has not been able to realize that one thinks (or is supposed to think) at such a moment only of the man who is dead. Thoughts of "our house" come later, not just then. If the words were spontaneous, they are hardly less tell-tale.

It is noteworthy, again, that she needs to be taught what murder is. She took back the daggers to the room and looked on the slaughtered Duncan with her own eyes, but that was not enough. She has to learn from the feelings of other people, has to have the horror reflected to her, as it were, from other minds. It is not until she stands in the group listening to Macbeth's description of what he found—and he is not sparing in his details—and catches the appalled look on the faces of the guests, that she begins to feel the true awfulness of what has happened.

Still, no one is merely detestable who is endowed with will and courage such as hers: she must always inspire awe. She inspires pity, too, in the end, and this can only be because there lurk in the secret places of her heart some traits of womanliness which not even her inhuman resolution can quite destroy. Thus, it is clear that throughout the first two acts she is subjecting herself to an unnatural strain. It is by exertion of the will that she unsexes herself, makes thick her blood, stops up the access and passage to remorse. Again, her actual part in the crime fell rather short of her initial purpose. Her first exalted words after she had received Macbeth's letter, seemed to picture herself as the agent of the murder:

> Come, thick night,
> And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
> That my keen knife see not the wound it makes.

Even if we do not press the words in their absolutely literal sense, it is clear that she did for a moment, as she was going about the preparations, have an impulse to finish the dread work with her own hands, but found herself, when it came to the point, unable:

> Had he not resembled
> My father as he slept, I had done't.

It was a weakness in herself that she seems to find curious. It means that she has not, after all, perfectly estimated her strength of will and can be trapped by feelings she did not know she possessed. Significantly, too, she took the precaution of fortifying herself even for her subordinate part in the enterprise:

> That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold.

She is firmer in resolution than her husband, and her purposes are more concentrated, but it is clear, even from the early scenes, that she has a mere fraction of his staying power: her endurance is limited, her resources, whether of mind or body, are being unnaturally taxed.

Besides—and this is at once her strength and her weakness —she is comparatively unintelligent. She is efficient and practical, but her range of vision is restricted, and there are realities in life of which she has not yet suspected the existence. Macbeth is full of repressed fear because he foresees, even if in confused glimpses, what lies ahead: the mental agony, the spiritual defeat. Her mind is bent on the immediate issues and she refuses to recognize that there are others which will some day have to be met. To her blood is just blood, a dead man's face merely a face—an object like any other object; the deed, she affirms, can be cleared with a little water. So later, in the banquet scene, when Macbeth is gazing with fascinated horror at his chair and what he thinks he sees in it, she tries to shake sense into him:

> When all's done,
> You look but on a stool.

The remark (though in the circumstances we know she could have said nothing else) is exactly symbolical of her attitude. Such commonsense helps her to keep her self-control, as we see in the same scene where it is she who rises to the occasion and does what she can to avert the suspicions of the guests. But she pays the penalty. It is not possible for her to remain for ever blind to the true nature of what they have done, and when at last she does begin to comprehend that a little water will not clear their minds of the deed, whatever it may do to their hands, she finds

the hideous revelation too much for her. It is Macbeth's behaviour immediately after the crime that at first seriously takes her aback: she interjects, with a sudden fear in her voice:

> These deeds must not be thought
> After these ways: so, it will make us mad.

She begins to understand what it may feel like to be a murderer, a murderess: the point had not occurred to her before. At the moment she summons her energies to face the practical task, and persuades herself that her old diagnosis of her husband was correct:

> My hands are of your colour; but I shame
> To wear a heart so white.

But in the scene of the discovery, what with physical reaction and the horrifying force of Macbeth's words, she breaks down, and when we see her again, after the coronation, she is a different person. She is old. It is the very accent of weary disillusionment that we hear in her first utterance:

> Nought's had, all's spent,
> Where our desire is got without content.

From now on she says little. Macbeth never consults her:

> Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,
> Till thou applaud the deed.

How strange the note of condescension sounds! Once they argued together as equals. Wading resolutely into the blood, he needs bolder counsels than she would be ready to give: indeed, she seems too tired to think. All her fire has gone, except when, at moments of especial need, she can recover her dominance to help him. But for the most part she is apathetic, and sinks gradually. Two aspects of her nature, however, in this later phase, are brought into relief, and appeal to our admiration as well as to our sympathy. Whatever she may say in her dream life, in her waking she utters no word of reproach or complaint. It is, indeed, a certain greatness in both that in their time of defeat and anguish, we hear no word of recrimination. Macbeth can find a vent for his suffering in feverish activity, but for his wife there is not this means of forgetfulness, and her despair seems the more poignant that it is voiceless. But then, while her strength lasts, she finds opportunities to cherish this husband, through whose mistake and (still more) her own they have come to this pass. It is clear that she was not personally ambitious, at least that it was for his glory that she chiefly strove. Her contempt

and castigation were for the ignoble scruples that seemed to be keeping him from the "golden round", his due. And now that her mistake is revealed she makes what reparation is possible by care and concern and the support of her own invincible will when unearthly terrors sap his, a true helpmate, according to her vision, to the end.

It remains to say a word of Banquo, whose story furnishes a subordinate, ironical counterpart to that of Macbeth himself. At the beginning no one could have seemed more secure than he. He is a man (as Macbeth tells us) at once courageous and prudent, a man whose decent and dauntless nature has something of "royalty" in it, a man to be respected, and, if his opposition should be aroused, to be feared. His conduct when we first meet him illustrates, in part, this tribute. The witches disturb him not a whit; indeed, his bearing was so fearless, his challenge so bold, that Macbeth (when he recalls the scene) says that he "chid the sisters". It is plain, at least, that they produced no slightest feeling of awe in him, and, as for being "solicited" by their words, no trace of such a thought entered his mind.

And yet we may discern in this early scene, if we look closely, the beginning of the end, the scarcely visible speck that will later corrupt his being. He is a little vexed that the sisters have not included him in their predictions: "to me you speak not"; perhaps vexed is too strong a term: it is a whimsical pretence of jealousy, or less, and is followed by words that have in them a genuinely "royal" ring:

> Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear
> Your favours nor your hate.

Nevertheless, he has drawn the comparison, however lightly; a thought has lodged in his mind that was never there before. He continues, through the scene, to treat the matter carelessly, and when Macbeth asks him, as if the possibility really deserved consideration: "Do you not hope your children shall be kings?" seems to chaff his friend for the undue seriousness with which he is taking the prophecies:

> That, trusted home,
> Might yet enkindle you unto the crown
> Beside the thane of Cawdor.

Yet he confesses in his next words that such events do sometimes have a weightier import:

> 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.

The history of Banquo (like that of so many an interesting minor character in Shakespeare) has perforce to be given intermittently. When we see him again, at the beginning of the second act, there has been a leap in his progress; he is much changed, ill at ease and depressed:

> A heavy summons lies like lead upon me,
> And yet I would not sleep:

for sleep itself, because of "cursed thoughts", can yield him no rest. What has happened to the tranquil-minded, self-possessed Banquo of the first act? We learn presently, when without introduction he says to Macbeth:

> I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters,

adding,

> To you they have show'd some truth.

That last remark is very significant: it is clear that long trains of thought lie behind it. Banquo has been brooding over the strange encounter, speculating on what meaning it may have, wondering (despite his initial disdain and incredulity) how he himself may be involved. The little speck has begun to spread: Banquo's clear mind is darkening.

His reply, when Macbeth proceeds to make the ambiguous overture to him, is as dauntless as ever, for he is not at all the kind of man to be intimidated into adopting a line of policy of which he disapproves; and in any case, whatever be the part intended for him by destiny, it can hardly require much immediate action: his must necessarily be the waiting game. Still, his choice is not the less definite for that. The murder takes place, and he has so much of the evidence in his hands that in a flash he must have assigned the guilt. He says hardly anything during the scene of the discovery, but before it finishes makes one notable speech:

> In the great hand of God I stand, and thence
> Against the undivulg'd pretence I fight
> Of treasonous malice.

It is a declaration with a threat in it—has the ring indeed of an ultimatum—and we may imagine that while he uttered it his gaze was directed at the thane of Cawdor. Banquo is still fearless, still to be reckoned with.

But the sequel disappoints our expectations. We find that, after all, he took no stand, but was content to drift; or even, that he assisted the current of events. His duties are knit to his new sovereign "with a most indissoluble tie", and yet he is persuaded that this sovereign is the murderer of Duncan. The reason of his silence he almost avows. So the temptation has proved too much for Banquo. We may guess that if one positive act of evil had been demanded of him he would not have performed it; but his way was made too easy: he had simply to acquiesce in the evil deeds of another.

The fates of the two men are ironically contrasted. Macbeth risked everything on his great throw, and at his finish is not deprived of a certain sublimity. Banquo, though no coward, has played safely, and receives his ignoble reward:

> *safe* in a ditch he bides,
> With twenty trenched gashes on his head.