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SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY

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SHAKESPEAREAN
TRAGEDY

LECTURES ON
HAMLET, OTHELLO, KING LEAR
MACBETH

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To my Students

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PREFACE

These lectures are based on a selection from materials used in teaching at Liverpool, Glasgow, and Oxford; and I have for the most part preserved the lecture form. The point of view

taken in them is explained in the Introduction. I should, of course, wish them to be read in their order, and a knowledge of the first two is assumed in the remainder; but readers who may prefer to enter at once on the discussion of the several plays can do so by beginning at page 89.

Any one who writes on Shakespeare must owe much to his predecessors. Where I was conscious of a particular obligation, I have acknowledged it; but most of my reading of Shakespearean criticism was done many years ago, and I can only hope that I have not often reproduced as my own what belongs to another.

Many of the Notes will be of interest only to scholars, who may find, I hope, something new in them.

I have quoted, as a rule, from the Globe edition, and have referred always to its numeration of acts, scenes, and lines.

November, 1904.

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LECTURE IX

MACBETH

Macbeth, it is probable, was the last-written of the four great tragedies, and immediately preceded *Antony and Cleopatra*./1 In that play Shakespeare's final style appears for the first time completely formed, and the transition to this style is much more decidedly visible in *Macbeth* than in *King Lear*. Yet in certain respects *Macbeth* recalls *Hamlet* rather than *Othello* or *King Lear*. In the heroes of both plays the passage from thought to a critical resolution and action is difficult, and excites the keenest interest. In neither play, as in *Othello* and *King Lear*, is painful pathos one of the main effects. Evil, again, though it shows in

Macbeth a prodigious energy, is not the icy or stony inhumanity of Iago or Goneril; and, as in *Hamlet*, it is pursued by remorse. Finally, Shakespeare no longer restricts the action to purely human agencies, as in the two preceding tragedies; portents once more fill the heavens, ghosts rise from their graves, an unearthly light flickers about the head of the doomed man. The special popularity of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* is due in part to some of these common characteristics, notably to the fascination of the supernatural, the absence of the spectacle of extreme undeserved suffering, the

/1 See note BB.

absence of characters which horrify and repel and yet are destitute of grandeur. The reader who looks unwillingly at Iago gazes at Lady Macbeth in awe, because though she is dreadful she is also sublime. The whole tragedy is sublime.

In this, however, and in other respects, *Macbeth* makes an impression quite different from that of *Hamlet*. The dimensions of the principal characters, the rate of movement in the action, the supernatural effect, the style, the versification, are all changed; and they are all changed in much the same manner. In many parts of *Macbeth* there is in the language a peculiar compression, pregnancy, energy, even violence; the harmonious grace and even flow, often conspicuous in *Hamlet*, have almost disappeared. The chief characters, built on a scale at least as large as that of *Othello*, seem to attain at times an almost superhuman stature. The diction has in places a huge and rugged grandeur, which degenerates here and there into tumidity. The solemn majesty of the royal Ghost in *Hamlet*, appearing in armour and standing silent in the moonlight, is exchanged for shapes of horror, dimly seen in the murky air or revealed by the glare of the caldron fire in a dark cavern, or for the ghastly face of Banquo badged with blood and staring with blank eyes. The other three tragedies all open with conversations which lead into the action: here the action bursts into wild life amidst the sounds of a thunderstorm and the echoes of a distant battle. It hurries through seven very brief scenes of mounting suspense to a terrible crisis, which is reached, in the

murder of Duncan, at the beginning of the Second Act. Pausing a moment and changing its shape, it hastes again with scarcely diminished speed to fresh horrors. And even when the speed of the outward action is slackened, the same effect is continued in another form: we are shown a soul

tortured by an agony which admits not a moment's repose, and rushing in frenzy towards its doom. *Macbeth* is very much shorter than the other three tragedies, but our experience in traversing it is so crowded and intense that it leaves an impression not of brevity but of speed. It is the most vehement, the most concentrated, perhaps we may say the most tremendous, of the tragedies.

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A Shakespearean tragedy, as a rule, has a special tone or atmosphere of its own, quite perceptible, however difficult to describe. The effect of this atmosphere is marked with unusual strength in *Macbeth*. It is due to a variety of influences which combine with those just noticed, so that, acting and reacting, they form a whole; and the desolation of the blasted heath, the design of the Witches, the guilt in the hero's soul, the darkness of the night, seem to emanate from one and the same source. This effect is strengthened by a multitude of small touches, which at the moment may be little noticed but still leave their mark on the imagination. We may approach the consideration of the characters and the action by distinguishing some of the ingredients of this general effect.

Darkness, we may even say blackness, broods over this tragedy. It is remarkable that almost all the scenes which at once recur to memory take place either at night or in some dark spot. The vision of the dagger, the murder of Duncan, the murder of Banquo, the sleep-walking of Lady Macbeth, all come in night-scenes. The Witches dance in the thick air of a storm, or, 'black and midnight hags,' receive Macbeth in a cavern. The blackness of night is to the hero a thing of fear, even of horror; and that which he feels becomes the spirit of the play. The faint glimmerings of the

western sky at twilight are here menacing: it is the hour when the traveller hastens to reach safety in his inn, and when Banquo rides homeward to meet his assassins; the hour when 'light thickens,' when 'night's black agents to their prey do rouse,' when the wolf begins to howl, and the owl to scream, and withered murder steals forth to his work. Macbeth bids the stars hide their fires that his 'black' desires may be concealed; Lady Macbeth calls on thick night to come, palled in the dunnest smoke of hell. The moon is down and no stars shine when Banquo, dreading the dreams of the coming night, goes unwillingly to bed, and leaves Macbeth to wait for the summons of the little bell. When the next day should dawn, its light is 'strangled,' and 'darkness does the face of earth entomb.' In the whole drama the sun seems to shine only twice: first, in the beautiful but ironical passage where Duncan sees the swallows flitting round the castle of death; and, afterwards, when at the close the avenging army gathers to rid the earth of its shame. Of the many slighter touches which deepen this effect I notice only one. The failure of nature in Lady Macbeth is marked by her fear of darkness; 'she has light by her continually.' And in the one phrase of fear that escapes her lips even in sleep, it is of the darkness of the place of torment that she speaks./1

The atmosphere of *Macbeth*, however, is not that of unrelieved blackness. On the contrary, as compared with *King Lear* and its cold dim gloom, *Macbeth* leaves a decided impression of colour; it is really the impression of a black night broken by flashes of light and colour, sometimes vivid and even glaring. They are the lights and colours of the thunder-storm in the first scene; of the dagger

/1 'Hell is murky' (V. i. 35). This, surely, is not meant for a scornful repetition of something said long ago by Macbeth. He would hardly in those days have used an argument or expressed a fear that could provoke nothing but contempt.

hanging before Macbeth's eyes and glittering alone in the midnight air; of the torch borne by the servant when he and his lord come upon Banquo crossing the castle-court to his room; of the torch, again,

which Fleance carried to light his father to death, and which was dashed out by one of the murderers; of the torches that flared in the hall on the face of the Ghost and the blanched cheeks of Macbeth; of the flames beneath the boiling caldron from which the apparitions in the cavern rose; of the taper which showed to the Doctor and Gentlewoman the wasted face and blank eyes of Lady Macbeth. And, above all, the colour is the colour of blood. It cannet be an accident that the image of blood is forced upon us continually, not merely by the events themselves, but by full descriptions, and even by reiteration of the word in unlikely parts of the dialogue. The Witches, after their first wild appearance, have hardly quitted the stage when there staggers onto it a 'bloody man,' gashed with wounds. His tale is of a hero whose 'brandished steel smoked with bloody execution,' 'carved out a passage' to his enemy, and 'unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps.' And then he tells of a second battle so bloody that the combatants seemed as if they 'meant to bathe in reeking wounds.' What metaphors! What a dreadful image is that with which Lady Macbeth greets us almost as she enters, when she prays the spirits of cruelty so to thicken her blood that pity cannot flow along her veins! What pictures are those of the murderer appearing at the door of the banquet-room with Banquo's 'blood upon his face'; of Banquo himself 'with twenty trenched gashes on his head,' or 'blood-bolter'd' and smiling in derision at his murderer; of Macbeth, gazing at his hand, and watching it dye the whole green ocean red; of Lady Macbeth, gazing at hers, and stretching it away from her face to escape the smell of blood that all the

perfumes of Arabia will not subdue! The most horrible lines in the whole tragedy are those of her shuddering cry, 'Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?' And it is not only at such moments that these images occur. Even in the quiet conversation of Malcolm and Macduff, Macbeth is imagined as holding a bloody sceptre, and Scotland as a country bleeding and receiving every day a new gash added to her wounds. It is as if the poet saw the whole story through an ensanguined

mist, and as if it stained the very blackness of the night. When Macbeth, before Banquo's murder, invokes night to scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day, and to tear in pieces the great bond that keeps him pale, even the invisible hand that is to tear the bond is imagined as covered with blood.

Let us observe another point. The vividness, magnitude, and violence of the imagery in some of these passages are characteristic of *Macbeth* almost throughout; and their influence contributes to form its atmosphere. Images like those of the babe torn smiling from the breast and dashed to death; of pouring the sweet milk of concord into hell; of the earth shaking in fever; of the frame of things disjointed; of sorrows striking heaven on the face, so that it resounds and yells out like syllables of dolour; of the mind lying in restless ecstasy on a rack; of the mind full of scorpions; of the tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury; — all keep the imagination moving on a 'wild and violent sea,' while it is scarcely for a moment permitted to dwell on thoughts of peace and beauty. In its language, as in its action, the drama is full of tumult and storm. Whenever the Witches are present we see and hear a thunder-storm: when they are absent we hear of ship-wrecking storms and direful thunders; of tempests that blow down trees and churches, castles,

palaces and pyramids; of the frightful hurricane of the night when Duncan was murdered; of the blast on which pity rides like a new-born babe, or on which Heaven's cherubim are horsed. There is thus something magnificently appropriate in the cry 'Blow, wind! Come, wrack!' with which Macbeth, turning from the sight of the moving wood of Birnam, bursts from his castle. He was borne to his throne on a whirlwind, and the fate he goes to meet comes on the wings of storm.

Now all these agencies — darkness, the lights and colours that illuminate it, the storm that rushes through it, the violent and gigantic images — conspire with the appearances of the Witches and the Ghost to awaken horror, and in some degree also a supernatural dread. And to this effect other influences contribute. The pictures called up by the mere words of the Witches stir the same feelings, — those,

for example, of the spell-bound sailor driven tempest-tost for nine times nine weary weeks, and never visited by sleep night or day; of the drop of poisonous foam that forms on the moon, and, falling to earth, is collected for pernicious ends; of the sweltering venom of the toad, the finger of the babe killed at its birth by its own mother, the tricklings from the murderer's gibbet. In Nature, again, something is felt to be at work, sympathetic with human guilt and supernatural malice. She labours with portents.

> Lamentings heard in the air, strange screams of death,
> And prophesying with accents terrible,

burst from her. The owl clamours all through the night; Duncan's horses devour each other in frenzy; the dawn comes, but no light with it. Common sights and sounds, the crying of crickets, the croak of the raven, the light thickening after sunset, the home-coming of the rooks, are all ominous. Then, as if to deepen these impressions, Shakespeare has

concentrated attention on the obscurer regions of man's being, on phenomena which make it seem that he is in the power of secret forces lurking below, and independent of his consciousness and will: such as the relapse of Macbeth from conversation into a reverie, during which he gazes fascinated at the image of murder drawing closer and closer; the writing on his face of strange things he never meant to show; the pressure of imagination heightening into illusion, like the vision of a dagger in the air, at first bright, then suddenly splashed with blood, or the sound of a voice that cried 'Sleep no more' and would not be silenced./1 To these are added other, and constant, allusions to sleep, man's strange half-conscious life; to the misery of its withholding; to the terrible dreams of remorse; to the cursed thoughts from which Banquo is free by day, but which tempt him in his sleep: and again to abnormal disturbances of sleep; in the two men, of whom one during the murder of Duncan laughed in his sleep, and the other raised a cry of murder; and in Lady Macbeth, who rises to re-enact in somnambulism those scenes the memory of which is pushing her on to madness or suicide. All this has one effect, to excite supernatural alarm and, even

more, a dread of the presence of evil not only in its recognised seat but all through and around our mysterious nature. Perhaps there is no other work equal to *Macbeth* in the production of this effect./2

It is enhanced — to take a last point — by the use of a literary expedient. Not even in *Richard III.*, which in this, as in other respects, has resemblances to *Macbeth*, is there so much of Irony. I do not refer to irony in the ordinary sense; to speeches, for example, where the speaker is intentionally

/1 Whether Banquo's ghost is a mere illusion, like the dagger, is discussed in Note FF.

/2 In parts of this paragraph I am indebted to Hunter's *Illustrations of Shakespeare*.

ironical, like that of Lennox in III. vi. I refer to irony on the part of the author himself, to ironical juxtapositions of persons and events, and especially to the 'Sophoclean irony' by which a speaker is made to use words bearing to the audience, in addition to his own meaning, a further and ominous sense, hidden from himself and, usually, from the other persons on the stage. The very first words uttered by Macbeth,

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

are an example to which attention has often been drawn; for they startle the reader by recalling the words of the Witches in the first scene,

> Fair is foul, and foul is fair.

When Macbeth, emerging from his murderous reverie, turns to the nobles saying, 'Let us toward the King,' his words are innocent, but to the reader have a double meaning. Duncan's comment on the treachery of Cawdor,

> There's no art
> To find the mind's construction in the face:
> He was a gentleman on whom I built
> An absolute trust,

is interrupted /1 by the entrance of the traitor Macbeth, who is greeted with effusive gratitude and a like 'absolute trust.' I have already referred to the ironical effect of the beautiful lines in which

Duncan and Banquo describe the castle they are about to enter. To the reader Lady Macbeth's light words,

> A little water clears us of this deed:
> How easy is it then,

summon up the picture of the sleep-walking scene. The idea of the Porter's speech, in which he imagines himself the keeper of hell-gate, shows the same irony. So does the contrast between the obvious and the hidden meanings of the

/1 The line is a foot short.

apparitions of the armed head, the bloody child, and the child with the tree in his hand. It would be easy to add further examples. Perhaps the most striking is the answer which Banquo, as he rides away, never to return alive, gives to Macbeth's reminder, 'Fail not our feast.' 'My lord, I will not,' he replies, and he keeps his promise. It cannot be by accident that Shakespeare so frequently in this play uses a device which contributes to excite the vague fear of hidden forces operating on minds unconscious of their influence./1

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But of course he had for this purpose an agency more potent than any yet considered. It would be almost an impertinence to attempt to describe anew the influence of the Witch-scenes on the imagination of the reader./2 Nor do I believe that among different readers this influence differs greatly except in degree. But when critics begin to analyse the imaginative effect, and still more when, going behind it, they try to determine the truth which lay for Shakespeare or lies for us in these creations, they too often offer us results which, either through perversion or through inadequacy, fail to correspond with that effect. This happens in opposite ways. On the one hand the Witches, whose contribution to the 'atmosphere' of *Macbeth* can hardly be exaggerated, are credited with far too great an influence upon the action; sometimes they are described as goddesses, or

even as fates, whom Macbeth is powerless to

/1 It should be observed that in some cases the irony would escape an audience ignorant of the story and watching the play for the first time, — another indication that Shakespeare did not write solely for immediate stage purposes.

/2 Their influence on spectators is, I believe, very inferior. These scenes, like the Storm-scenes in *King Lear*, belong properly to the world of imagination.

resist. And this is perversion. On the other hand, we are told that, great as is their influence on the action, it is so because they are merely symbolic representations of the unconscious or half-conscious guilt in Macbeth himself. And this is inadequate. The few remarks I have to make may take the form of a criticism on these views.

(1) As to the former, Shakespeare took, as material for his purposes, the ideas about witch-craft that he found existing in people around him and in books like Reginald Scot's *Discovery* (1584). And he used these ideas without changing their substance at all. He selected and improved, avoiding the merely ridiculous, dismissing (unlike Middleton) the sexually loathsome or stimulating, rehandling and heightening whatever could touch the imagination with fear, horror, and mysterious attraction. The Witches, that is to say, are not goddesses, or fates, or, in any way whatever, supernatural beings. They are old women, poor and ragged, skinny and hideous, full of vulgar spite, occupied in killing their neighbours' swine or revenging themselves on sailors' wives who have refused them chestnuts. If Banquo considers their beards a proof that they are not women, that only shows his ignorance: Sir Hugh Evans would have known better./1 There is not a syllable in *Macbeth* to imply that they are anything but women. But, again in accordance with the popular ideas, they have received from evil spirits certain supernatural powers. They can 'raise haile, tempests, and hurtfull weather; as lightening, thunder etc.' They can 'passe from place to place in the aire invisible.' They can 'keepe divels and spirits in the likenesse of todes and cats,' Paddock or Gray-malkin. They can 'transferre corne in the blade from one place to another.' They can 'manifest unto others things hidden and lost, and foreshew

/1 'By yea and no, I think the 'oman is a witch indeed: I like not

when a 'oman has a great peard' (*Merry Wives*, IV. ii. 202).

things to come, and see them as though they were present.' The reader will apply these phrases and sentences at once to passages in *Macbeth*. They are all taken from Scot's first chapter, where he is retailing the current superstitions of his time; and, in regard to the Witches, Shakespeare mentions scarcely anything, if anything, that was not to be found, of course in a more prosaic shape, either in Scot or in some other easily accessible authority./1 He read, to be sure, in Holinshed, his main source for the story of Macbeth, that, according to the common opinion, the 'women' who met Macbeth 'were eyther the weird sisters, that is (as ye would say) y/e Goddesses of destinee, or els some Nimphes or Feiries.' But what does that matter? What he read in his authority was absolutely nothing to his audience, and remains nothing to us, unless he used what he read. And he did not use this idea. He used nothing but the phrase 'weird sisters,' which certainly no more suggested to a London audience the Parcae of one mythology or the Norns of another than it does to-day. His Witches owe all their power to the spirits; they are 'instruments of darkness'; the spirits are their 'masters' (IV. i. 63). Fancy the fates having masters! Even if the passages where Hecate appears are Shakespeare's,/3 that will not help the

/1 Even the metaphor in the lines (II. iii. 127),

> What should be spoken here, where our fate,
> Hid in an auger-hole, may rush and seize us?

was probably suggested by the words in Scot's first chapter, 'They can go in and out at awger-holes.'

/2 Once, 'weird women.' Whether Shakespeare knew that 'weird' signified 'fate' we cannot tell, but it is probable that he did. The word occurs six times in *Macbeth* (it does not occur elsewhere in Shakespeare). The first three times it is spelt in the Folio *weyward*, the last three *weyard*. This may suggest a miswriting or misprinting of *wayward*; but, as that word is always spelt in the Folio either rightly or *waiward*, it is more likely that the *weyward* and *weyard* of *Macbeth* are the copyist's or printer's misreading of Shakespeare's *weird* or *weyrd*.

/3 The doubt as to these passages (see Note Z) does not arise from the mere appearance of this figure. The idea of Hecate's connection with

Witches; for they are subject to Hecate, who is herself a goddess, not a fate./1

Next, while the influence of the Witches' prophecies on Macbeth is very great, it is quite clearly shown to be an influence and nothing more. There is no sign whatever in the play that Shakespeare meant the actions of Macbeth to be forced on him by an external power, whether that of the Witches, or of their 'masters,' or of Hecate. It is needless therefore to insist that such a conception would be in contradiction with his whole tragic practice. The prophecies of the Witches are presented simply as dangerous circumstances with which Macbeth has to deal; they are dramatically on the same level as the story of the Ghost in *Hamlet*, or the falsehoods told by Iago to Othello. Macbeth is, in the ordinary sense, perfectly free in regard to them: and if we speak of degrees of freedom, he is even more free than Hamlet, who was crippled by melancholy when the Ghost appeared to him. That the influence of the first prophecies upon him came as much from himself as from them, is made abundantly clear by the obviously intentional contrast between him and Banquo. Banquo, ambitious but perfectly honest, is scarcely even startled

witches appears also at II. i. 52, and she is mentioned again at III. ii. 41 (cf. *Mid. Night's Dream*, V. i. 391, for her connection with fairies). It is part of the common traditional notion of the heathen gods being now devils. Scot refers to it several times. See the notes in the Clarendon Press edition on III. v. i, or those in Furness's Variorum.

Of course in the popular notion the witch's spirits are devils or servants of Satan. If Shakespeare openly introduces this idea only in Banquo's phrases 'the instruments of darkness' and 'what! can the devil speak true?' the reason is probably his unwillingness to give too much prominence to distinctively religious ideas.

/1 If this paragraph is true, some of the statements even of Lamb and of Coleridge about the Witches are, taken literally, incorrect. What these critics, and notably the former, describe so well is the poetic aspect abstracted from the remainder; and in describing this they attribute to the Witches themselves what belongs really to the complex of Witches, Spirits, and Hecate. For the purposes of imagination, no doubt, this inaccuracy is of small consequence; and it is these purposes that matter.

by them, and he remains throughout the scene indifferent to them. But when Macbeth heard them he was not an innocent man. Precisely how far his mind was guilty may be a question; but no innocent

man would have started, as he did, with a start of fear at the mere prophecy of a crown, or have conceived thereupon immediately the thought of murder. Either this thought was not new to him,/1 or he had cherished at least some vaguer dishonourable dream, the instantaneous recurrence of which, at the moment of his hearing the prophecy, revealed to him an inward and terrifying guilt. In either case not only was he free to accept or resist the temptation, but the temptation was already within him. We are admitting too much, therefore, when we compare him with Othello, for Othello's mind was perfectly free from suspicion when his temptation came to him. And we are admitting, again, too much when we use the word 'temptation' in reference to the first prophecies of the Witches. Speaking strictly we must affirm that he was tempted only by himself. He speaks indeed of their 'supernatural soliciting'; but in fact they did not solicit. They merely announced events: they hailed him as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and King hereafter. No connection of these announcements with any action of his was even hinted by them. For all that appears, the natural death of an old man might have fulfilled the prophecy any day./2 In any case, the idea of fulfilling it by murder was entirely his own./3

/1 See Note CC.

/2 The proclamation of Malcolm as Duncan's successor (I. iv.) changes the position, but the design of murder is prior to this.

/3 Schlegel's assertion that the first thought of the murder comes from the Witches is thus in flat contradiction with the text. (The sentence in which he asserts this is, I may observe, badly mistranslated in the English version, which, wherever I have consulted the original, shows itself untrustworthy. It ought to be revised, for Schlegel is well worth reading.)

When Macbeth sees the Witches again, after the murders of Duncan and Banquo, we observe, however, a striking change. They no longer need to go and meet him; he seeks them out. He has committed himself to his course of evil. Now accordingly they do 'solicit.' They prophesy, but they also give advice: they bid him be bloody, bold, and secure. We have no hope that he will reject their advice; but so far are they from having, even now, any power to compel him to accept it, that they make careful preparations to deceive him

into doing so. And, almost as though to intimate how entirely the responsibility for his deeds still lies with Macbeth, Shakespeare makes his first act after this interview one for which his tempters gave him not a hint — the slaughter of Macduff's wife and children.

To all this we must add that Macbeth himself nowhere betrays a suspicion that his action is, or has been, thrust on him by an external power. He curses the Witches for deceiving him, but he never attempts to shift to them the burden of his guilt. Neither has Shakespeare placed in the mouth of any other character in this play such fatalistic expressions as may be found in *King Lear* and occasionally elsewhere. He appears actually to have taken pains to make the natural psychological genesis of Macbeth's crimes perfectly clear, and it was a most unfortunate notion of Schlegel's that the Witches were required because natural agencies would have seemed too weak to drive such a man as Macbeth to his first murder.

'Still,' it may be said, 'the Witches did foreknow Macbeth's future; and what is foreknown is fixed; and how can a man be responsible when his future is fixed?' With this question, as a speculative one, we have no concern here; but, in so far as it relates to the play, I answer, first, that not one of the things foreknown is an action. This is

just as true of the later prophecies as of the first. That Macbeth will be harmed by none of woman born, and will never be vanquished till Birnam Wood shall come against him, involves (so far as we are informed) no action of his. It may be doubted, indeed, whether Shakespeare would have introduced prophecies of Macbeth's deeds, even if it had been convenient to do so; he would probably have felt that to do so would interfere with the interest of the inward struggle and suffering. And, in the second place, *Macbeth* was not written for students of metaphysics or theology, but for people at large; and, however it may be with prophecies of actions, prophecies of mere events do not suggest to people at large any sort of difficulty about responsibility. Many people, perhaps most, habitually think of their 'future' as something fixed, and of themselves as 'free.' The Witches nowadays

take a room in Bond Street and charge a guinea; and when the victim enters they hail him the possessor of £1000 a year, or prophesy to him of journeys, wives, and children. But though he is struck dumb by their prescience, it does not even cross his mind that he is going to lose his glorious 'freedom' — not though journeys and marriages imply much more agency on his part than anything foretold to Macbeth. This whole difficulty is undramatic; and I may add that Shakespeare nowhere shows, like Chaucer, any interest in problems concerning foreknowledge, predestination and freedom.

(2) We may deal more briefly with the opposite interpretation. According to it the Witches and their prophecies are to be taken merely as symbolical representations of thoughts and desires which have slumbered in Macbeth's breast and now rise into consciousness and confront him. With this idea, which springs from the wish to get rid of a mere external supernaturalism, and to find a psycho-

logical and spiritual meaning in that which the groundlings probably received as hard facts, one may feel sympathy. But it is evident that it is rather a 'philosophy' of the Witches than an immediate dramatic apprehension of them; and even so it will be found both incomplete and, in other respects, inadequate.

It is incomplete because it cannot possibly be applied to all the facts. Let us grant that it will apply to the most important prophecy, that of the crown; and that the later warning which Macbeth receives, to beware of Macduff, also answers to something in his own breast and 'harps his fear aright.' But there we have to stop. Macbeth had evidently no suspicion of that treachery in Cawdor through which he himself became Thane; and who will suggest that he had any idea, however subconscious, about Birnam Wood or the man not born of woman? It may be held — and rightly, I think — that the prophecies which answer to nothing inward, the prophecies which are merely supernatural, produce, now at any rate, much less imaginative effect than the others, — even that they are in *Macbeth* an element which was of an age and not for all time; but still they are there, and they are

essential to the plot./1 And as the theory under consideration will not apply to them at all, it is not likely that it gives an adequate account even of those prophecies to which it can in some measure be applied.

It is inadequate here chiefly because it is much too narrow. The Witches and their prophecies, if they are to be rationalised or taken symbolically,

/1 It is noticeable that Dr. Forman, who saw the play in 1610 and wrote a sketch of it in his journal, says nothing about the later prophecies. Perhaps he despised them as mere stuff for the groundlings. The reader will find, I think, that the great poetic effect of Act IV. Sc. i. depends much more on the 'charm' which precedes Macbeth's entrance, and on Macbeth himself, than on the predictions.

must represent not only the evil slumbering in the hero's soul, but all those obscurer influences of the evil around him in the world which aid his own ambition and the incitements of his wife. Such influences, even if we put aside all belief in evil 'spirits,' are as certain, momentous, and terrifying facts as the presence of inchoate evil in the soul itself; and if we exclude all reference to these facts from our idea of the Witches, it will be greatly impoverished and will certainly fail to correspond with the imaginative effect. The union of the outward and inward here may be compared with something of the same kind in Greek poetry./1 In the first Book of the *Iliad* we are told that, when Agamemnon threatened to take Briseis from Achilles, 'grief came upon Peleus' son, and his heart within his shaggy breast was divided in counsel, whether to draw his keen blade from his thigh and set the company aside and so slay Atreides, or to assuage his anger and curb his soul. While yet he doubted thereof in heart and soul, and was drawing his great sword from his sheath, Athene came to him from heaven, sent forth of the white-armed goddess Hera, whose heart loved both alike and had care for them. She stood behind Peleus' son and caught him by his golden hair, to him only visible, and of the rest no man beheld her.' And at her bidding he mastered his wrath, 'and stayed his heavy hand on the silver hilt, and thrust the great sword back into the sheath, and was not disobedient to the

saying of Athene.'/2 The succour of the goddess here only strengthens an inward movement in the mind of Achilles, but we should lose something besides a poetic effect if for that reason we struck her out of the account. We should lose the idea

/1 This comparison was suggested by a passage in Hegel's *Aesthetik*, i. 291 ff.
/2 *Il.* i. 188 ff. (Leaf's translation).

that the inward powers of the soul answer in their essence to vaster powers without, which support them and assure the effect of their exertion. So it is in *Macbeth*./1 The words of the Witches are fatal to the hero only because there is in him something which leaps into light at the sound of them; but they are at the same time the witness of forces which never cease to work in the world around him, and, on the instant of his surrender to them, entangle him inextricably in the web of Fate. If the inward connection is once realised (and Shakespeare has left us no excuse for missing it), we need not fear, and indeed shall scarcely be able, to exaggerate the effect of the Witch-scenes in heightening and deepening the sense of fear, horror, and mystery which pervades the atmosphere of the tragedy.

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From this murky background stand out the two great terrible figures, who dwarf all the remaining characters of the drama. Both are sublime, and both inspire, far more than the other tragic heroes, the feeling of awe. They are never detached in imagination from the atmosphere which surrounds them and adds to their grandeur and terror. It is, as it were, continued into their souls. For within them is all that we felt without — the darkness of night, lit with the flame of tempest and the hues of blood, and haunted by wild and direful shapes, 'murdering ministers,' spirits of remorse, and maddening visions of peace lost and judgment to come. The way to be untrue to Shakespeare here, as always, is to relax the tension of imagination, to conventionalise, to conceive Macbeth, for

/1 The supernaturalism of the modern poet, indeed, is more 'ex-

ternal' than that of the ancient. We have already had evidence of this, and shall find more when we come to the character of Banquo.

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example, as a half-hearted cowardly criminal, and Lady Macbeth as a whole-hearted fiend.

These two characters are fired by one and the same passion of ambition; and to a considerable extent they are alike. The disposition of each is high, proud, and commanding. They are born to rule, if not to reign. They are peremptory or contemptuous to their inferiors. They are not children of light, like Brutus and Hamlet; they are of the world. We observe in them no love of country, and no interest in the welfare of anyone outside their family. Their habitual thoughts and aims are, and, we imagine, long have been, all of station and power. And though in both there is something, and in one much, of what is higher — honour, conscience, humanity — they do not live consciously in the light of these things or speak their language. Not that they are egoists, like Iago; or, if they are egoists, theirs is an *egoïsme à deux*. They have no separate ambitions./1 They support and love one another. They suffer together. And if, as time goes on, they drift a little apart, they are not vulgar souls, to be alienated and recriminate when they experience the fruitlessness of their ambition. They remain to the end tragic, even grand.

So far there is much likeness between them. Otherwise they are contrasted, and the action is built upon this contrast. Their attitudes towards the projected murder of Duncan are quite different; and it produces in them equally different effects. In consequence, they appear in the earlier part of the play as of equal importance, if indeed Lady Macbeth does not overshadow her husband; but afterwards she retires more and more into the background, and he becomes unmistakably the

/1 The assertion that Lady Macbeth sought a crown for herself, or sought anything for herself, apart from her husband, is absolutely unjustified by anything in the play. It is based on a sentence of Holinshed's which Shakespeare did <u>not</u> use.

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leading figure. His is indeed far the more complex character: and I will speak of it first.

Macbeth, the cousin of a King mild, just, and beloved, but now too old to lead his army, is introduced to us as a general of extraordinary prowess, who has covered himself with glory in putting down a rebellion and repelling the invasion of a foreign army. In these conflicts he showed great personal courage, a quality which he continues to display throughout the drama in regard to all plain dangers. It is difficult to be sure of his customary demeanour, for in the play we see him either in what appears to be an exceptional relation to his wife, or else in the throes of remorse and desperation; but from his behaviour during his journey home after the war, from his later conversations with Lady Macbeth, and from his language to the murderers of Banquo and to others, we imagine him as a great warrior, somewhat masterful, rough, and abrupt, a man to inspire some fear and much admiration. He was thought 'honest,' or honourable; he was trusted, apparently, by everyone; Macduff, a man of the highest integrity, 'loved him well.' And there was, in fact, much good in him. We have no warrant, I think, for describing him, with many writers, as of a 'noble' nature, like Hamlet or Othello;/1 but he had a keen sense both of honour and of the worth of a good name. The phrase, again, 'too much of the milk of human kindness,' is applied to him in impatience by his wife, who did not fully understand him; but certainly he was far from devoid of humanity and pity.

At the same time he was exceedingly ambitious. He must have been so by temper. The tendency must have been greatly strengthened by his marriage. When we see him, it has been further

/1 The word is used of him (I. ii. 67), but not in a way that decides this question or even bears on it.

stimulated by his remarkable success and by the consciousness of exceptional powers and merit. It becomes a passion. The course of action suggested by it is extremely perilous: it sets his good name, his position, and even his life on the hazard. It is also abhorrent to his better feelings. Their defeat in the struggle with ambition leaves him

utterly wretched, and would have kept him so, however complete had been his outward success and security. On the other hand, his passion for power and his instinct of self-assertion are so vehement that no inward misery could persuade him to relinquish the fruits of crime, or to advance from remorse to repentance.

In the character as so far sketched there is nothing very peculiar, though the strength of the forces contending in it is unusual. But there is in Macbeth one marked peculiarity, the true apprehension of which is the key to Shakespeare's conception./1 This bold ambitious man of action has, within certain limits, the imagination of a poet, — an imagination on the one hand extremely sensitive to impressions of a certain kind, and, on the other, productive of violent disturbance both of mind and body. Through it he is kept in contact with supernatural impressions and is liable to supernatural fears. And through it, especially, come to him the intimations of conscience and honour. Macbeth's better nature — to put the matter for clearness' sake too broadly — instead of speaking to him in the overt language of moral ideas, commands, and prohibitions, incorporates itself in images which alarm and horrify. His imagination is thus the best of him, something usually deeper and higher than his conscious thoughts; and if he had obeyed it he would have been safe. But his wife quite misunderstands it, and he himself understands it only in part. The

/1 This view, thus generally stated, is not original, but I cannot say who first stated it.

terrifying images which deter him from crime and follow its commission, and which are really the protest of his deepest self, seem to his wife the creations of mere nervous fear, and are sometimes referred by himself to the dread of vengeance or the restlessness of insecurity./1 His conscious or reflective mind, that is, moves chiefly among considerations of outward success and failure, while his inner being is convulsed by conscience. And his inability to understand himself is repeated and exaggerated in the interpretations of actors and critics, who represent him as a coward, cold-blooded, calculating, and pitiless, who shrinks from crime simply because it is dangerous, and suffers

afterwards simply because he is not safe. In reality his courage is frightful. He strides from crime to crime, though his soul never ceases to bar his advance with shapes of terror, or to clamour in his ears that he is murdering his peace and casting away his 'eternal jewel.'

It is of the first importance to realise the strength, and also (what has not been so clearly recognised) the limits, of Macbeth's imagination. It is not the universal meditative imagination of Hamlet. He came to see in man, as Hamlet sometimes did, the 'quintessence of dust'; but he must always have been incapable of Hamlet's reflections on man's noble reason and infinite faculty, or of seeing with Hamlet's eyes 'this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire.' Nor could he feel, like Othello, the romance of war or the infinity of love. He shows no sign of any unusual sensitiveness to the glory or beauty in the world or the soul; and it is partly for this reason that we have no inclination to love him, and that we regard him with more of awe than of pity. His imagination is excitable and intense, but

/1 The latter, and more important, point was put quite clearly by Coleridge.

narrow. That which stimulates it is, almost solely, that which thrills with sudden, startling, and often supernatural fear./1 There is a famous passage late in the play (V. v. 10) which is here very significant, because it refers to a time before his conscience was burdened, and so shows his native disposition:

> The time has been, my senses would have cool'd
> To hear a night-shriek; and my fell of hair
> Would at a dismal treatise rise and stir
> As life were in't.

This 'time' must have been in his youth, or at least before we see him. And, in the drama, everything which terrifies him is of this character, only it has now a deeper and a moral significance. Palpable dangers leave him unmoved or fill him with fire. He does himself mere justice when he asserts he 'dare do all that may become a man,' or when he exclaims to Banquo's ghost,

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.

What appals him is always the image of his own guilty heart or bloody deed, or some image which derives from them its terror or gloom. These, when they arise, hold him spell-bound and possess him wholly, like a hypnotic trance which is at the same time the ecstasy of a poet. As the first 'horrid image' of Duncan's murder — of himself murdering Duncan — rises from unconsciousness and confronts him, his hair stands on end and the outward scene vanishes from his eyes. Why? For fear of 'consequences'? The idea is ridiculous. Or because the deed is bloody? The man who with his 'smoking' steel 'carved out his passage' to the

/1 It is the consequent insistence on the idea of fear, and the frequent repetition of the word, that have principally led to misinterpretation.

rebel leader, and 'unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps,' would hardly be frightened by blood. How could fear of consequences make the dagger he is to use hang suddenly glittering before him in the air, and then as suddenly dash it with gouts of blood? Even when he talks of consequences, and declares that if he were safe against them he would 'jump the life to come,' his imagination bears witness against him, and shows us that what really holds him back is the hideous vileness of the deed:

He's here in double trust;
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door.
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And pity, like a naked new-born babe.
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.

It may be said that he is here thinking of the horror

that others will feel at the deed — thinking therefore of consequences. Yes, but could he realise thus how horrible the deed would look to others if it were not equally horrible to himself?

It is the same when the murder is done. He is well-nigh mad with horror, but it is not the horror of detection. It is not he who thinks of washing his hands or getting his nightgown on. He has brought away the daggers he should have left on the pillows of the grooms, but what does he care for that? What he thinks of is that, when he heard one of the men awaked from sleep say 'God bless us,' he could not say 'Amen'; for his imagination presents to him the parching of his throat as an immediate judgment from heaven. His wife heard the owl scream and the crickets cry; but what

he heard was the voice that first cried 'Macbeth doth murder sleep,' and then, a minute later, with a change of tense, denounced on him, as if his three names gave him three personalities to suffer in, the doom of sleeplessness:

> Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor
> Shall sleep no more, Macbeth shall sleep no more.

There comes a sound of knocking. It should be perfectly familiar to him; but he knows not whence, or from what world, it comes. He looks down at his hands, and starts violently: 'What hands are here?' For they seem alive, they move, they mean to pluck out his eyes. He looks at one of them again; it does not move; but the blood upon it is enough to dye the whole ocean red. What has all this to do with fear of 'consequences'? It is his soul speaking in the only shape in which it can speak freely, that of imagination.

So long as Macbeth's imagination is active, we watch him fascinated; we feel suspense, horror, awe; in which are latent, also, admiration and sympathy. But so soon as it is quiescent these feelings vanish. He is no longer 'infirm of purpose': he becomes domineering, even brutal, or he becomes a cool pitiless hypocrite. He is generally said to be a very bad actor, but this is not wholly true. Whenever his imagination stirs, he acts badly. It so possesses him, and is so much stronger than his reason, that his face betrays him, and his voice

utters the most improbable untruths /1 or the most artificial rhetoric./2 But when it is asleep he is firm, self-controlled and practical, as in the conversation where he skilfully elicits from Banquo that

/1 E.g. I. iii. 149, where he excuses his abstraction by saying that his 'dull brain was wrought with things forgotten,' when nothing could be more natural than that he should be thinking of his new honour.

/2 E.g. in I. iv. This is so also in II. iii. 114 ff., though here there is some real imaginative excitement mingled with the rhetorical antitheses and balanced clauses and forced bombast.

information about his movements which is required for the successful arrangement of his murder./1 Here he is hateful; and so he is in the conversation with the murderers, who are not professional cut-throats but old soldiers, and whom, without a vestige of remorse, he beguiles with calumnies against Banquo and with such appeals as his wife had used to him./2 On the other hand, we feel much pity as well as anxiety in the scene (I. vii.) where she overcomes his opposition to the murder; and we feel it (though his imagination is not specially active) because this scene shows us how little he understands himself. This is his great misfortune here. Not that he fails to realise in reflection the baseness of the deed (the soliloquy with which the scene opens shows that he does not). But he has never, to put it pedantically, accepted as the principle of his conduct the morality which takes shape in his imaginative fears. Had he done so, and said plainly to his wife, 'The thing is vile, and, however much I have sworn to do it, I will not,' she would have been helpless; for all her

/1 III. i. Lady Macbeth herself could not more naturally have introduced at intervals the questions 'Ride you this afternoon?' (l. 19), 'Is't far you ride?' (l. 24), 'Goes Fleance with you?' (l. 36).

/2 We feel here, however, an underlying subdued frenzy which awakes some sympathy. There is an almost unendurable impatience expressed even in the rhythm of many of the lines; e.g.:

> Well then, now
> Have you consider'd of my speeches? Know
> That it was he in the times past which held you
> So under fortune, which you thought had been
> Our innocent self: this I made good to you
> In our last conference, pass'd in probation with you,
> How you were borne in hand, how cross'd, the instruments.
> Who wrought with them, and all things else that might
> To half a soul and to a notion crazed

Say, 'Thus did Banquo.'

This effect is heard to the end of the play in Macbeth's less poetic speeches, and leaves the same impression of burning energy, though not of imaginative exaltation, as his great speeches. In these we find either violent, huge, sublime imagery, or a torrent of figurative expressions (as in the famous lines about 'the innocent sleep'). Our impressions as to the diction of the play are largely derived from these speeches of the hero, but not wholly so. The writing almost throughout leaves an impression of intense, almost feverish, activity.

arguments proceed on the assumption that there is for them no such point of view. Macbeth does approach this position once, when, resenting the accusation of cowardice, he answers,

I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more is none.

She feels in an instant that everything is at stake, and, ignoring the point, overwhelms him with indignant and contemptuous personal reproach. But he yields to it because he is himself half-ashamed of that answer of his, and because, for want of habit, the simple idea which it expresses has no hold on him comparable to the force it acquires when it becomes incarnate in visionary fears and warnings.

Yet these were so insistent, and they offered to his ambition a resistance so strong, that it is impossible to regard him as falling through the blindness or delusion of passion. On the contrary, he himself feels with such intensity the enormity of his purpose that, it seems clear, neither his ambition nor yet the prophecy of the Witches would ever without the aid of Lady Macbeth have overcome this feeling. As it is, the deed is done in horror and without the faintest desire or sense of glory, — done, one may almost say, as if it were an appalling duty; and, the instant it is finished, its futility is revealed to Macbeth as clearly as its vileness had been revealed beforehand. As he staggers from the scene he mutters in despair.

Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou could'st.

When, half an hour later, he returns with Lennox from the room of the murder, he breaks out:

> Had I but died an hour before this chance,
> I had lived a blessed time; for from this instant
> There's nothing serious in mortality:
> All is but toys: renown and grace is dead;
> The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
> Is left this vault to brag of.

This is no mere acting. The language here has none of the false rhetoric of his merely hypocritical speeches. It is meant to deceive, but it utters at the same time his profoundest feeling. And this he can henceforth never hide from himself for long. However he may try to drown it in further enormities, he hears it murmuring,

> Duncan is in his grave:
> After life's fitful fever he sleeps well:

or,

> better be with the dead:

or,

> I have lived long enough:

and it speaks its last words on the last day of his life:

> 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.

How strange that this judgment on life, the despair of a man who had knowingly made mortal war on his own soul, should be frequently quoted as Shakespeare's own judgment, and should even be adduced, in serious criticism, as a proof of his pessimism!

It remains to look a little more fully at the history of Macbeth after the murder of Duncan. Unlike his first struggle this history excites little suspense or anxiety on his account: we have now no hope for him. But it is an engrossing spectacle, and psychologically it is perhaps the most remarkable exhibition of the development of a character to be found in Shakespeare's tragedies.

That heart-sickness which comes from Macbeth's

perception of the futility of his crime, and which never leaves him for long, is not, however, his habitual state. It could not be so, for two reasons. In the first place the consciousness of guilt is

stronger in him than the consciousness of failure; and it keeps him in a perpetual agony of restlessness, and forbids him simply to droop and pine. His mind is 'full of scorpions.' He cannot sleep. He 'keeps alone,' moody and savage. 'All that is within him does condemn itself for being there.' There is a fever in his blood which urges him to ceaseless action in the search for oblivion. And, in the second place, ambition, the love of power, the instinct of self-assertion, are much too potent in Macbeth to permit him to resign, even in spirit, the prize for which he has put rancours in the vessel of his peace. The 'will to live' is mighty in him. The forces which impelled him to aim at the crown re-assert themselves. He faces the world, and his own conscience, desperate, but never dreaming of acknowledging defeat. He will see 'the frame of things disjoint' first. He challenges fate into the lists.

The result is frightful. He speaks no more, as before Duncan's murder, of honour or pity. That sleepless torture, he tells himself, is nothing but the sense of insecurity and the fear of retaliation. If only he were safe, it would vanish. And he looks about for the cause of his fear; and his eye falls on Banquo. Banquo, who cannot fail to suspect him, has not fled or turned against him: Banquo has become his chief counsellor. Why? Because, he answers, the kingdom was promised to Banquo's children. Banquo, then, is waiting to attack him, to make a way for them. The 'bloody instructions' he himself taught when he murdered Duncan, are about to return, as he said they would, to plague the inventor. <u>This</u> then, he tells himself, is the fear that will not let him sleep; and it will die with Banquo. There is no hesitation now, and no remorse: he has nearly learned his lesson. He hastens feverishly, not to murder Banquo, but to procure his murder: some strange idea is in his

mind that the thought of the dead man will not haunt him, like the memory of Duncan, if the deed is done by other hands./1 The deed is done: but, instead of peace descending on him, from the depths of his nature his half-murdered conscience rises; his deed confronts him in the apparition of Banquo's Ghost, and the horror of the night of his first murder returns. But, alas, it has less power, and he has more will. Agonised and trembling, he still faces this rebel image, and it yields:

> Why, so: being gone,
> I am a man again.

Yes, but his secret is in the hands of the assembled lords. And, worse, this deed is as futile as the first. For, though Banquo is dead and even his Ghost is conquered, that inner torture is unassuaged. But he will not bear it. His guests have hardly left him when he turns roughly to his wife:

> How say'st thou, that Macduff denies his person
> At our great bidding?

Macduff it is that spoils his sleep. He shall perish, — he and aught else that bars the road to peace.

> For mine own good
> All causes shall give way: I am in blood
> Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
> Returning were as tedious as go o'er:
> Strange things I have in head that will to hand,
> Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd.

She answers, sick at heart,

> You lack the season of all natures, sleep.

No doubt: but he has found the way to it now:

> Come, we'll to sleep. My strange and self abuse
> Is the initiate fear that wants hard use:
> We are yet but young in deed.

What a change from the man who thought of Duncan's virtues, and of pity like a naked new-born

/1 See his first words to the Ghost: 'Thou canst not say I did it.'

babe! What a frightful clearness of self-consciousness in this descent to hell, and yet what a furious force in the instinct of life and self-assertion that drives him on!

He goes to seek the Witches. He will know, by the worst means, the worst. He has no longer any awe of them.

> How now, you secret, black and midnight hags!

— so he greets them, and at once he demands and threatens. They tell him he is right to fear Macduff. They tell him to fear nothing, for none of woman born can harm him. He feels that the two statements are at variance; infatuated, suspects no double meaning; but, that he may 'sleep in spite of thunder,' determines not to spare Macduff. But his heart throbs to know one thing, and he forces from the Witches the vision of Banquo's children crowned. The old intolerable thought returns, 'for Banquo's issue have I filed my mind'; and with it, for all the absolute security apparently promised him, there returns that inward fever. Will nothing quiet it? Nothing but destruction. Macduff, one comes to tell him, has escaped him; but that does not matter: he can still destroy:/1

> And even now,
> To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done:
> The castle of Macduff I will surprise;
> Seize upon Fife; give to the edge o' the sword
> His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls
> That trace him in's line. No boasting like a fool;
> This deed I'll do before this purpose cool.
> But no more sights!

/1 For only in destroying I find ease
To my relentless thoughts. — *Paradise Lost*, ix. 129.

Milton's portrait of Satan's misery here, and at the beginning of Book IV., might well have been suggested by *Macbeth*. Coleridge, after quoting Duncan's speech, I. iv. 35 ff., says: 'It is a fancy; but I can never read this, and the following speeches of Macbeth, without involuntarily thinking of the Miltonic Messiah and Satan.' I doubt if it was a mere fancy. (It will be remembered that Milton thought at one time of writing a tragedy on Macbeth.)

No, he need fear no more 'sights.' The Witches have done their work, and after this purposeless butchery his own imagination will trouble him no

more./1 He has dealt his last blow at the conscience and pity which spoke through it.

The whole flood of evil in his nature is now let loose. He becomes an open tyrant, dreaded by everyone about him, and a terror to his country. She 'sinks beneath the yoke.'

> Each new morn
> New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows
> Strike heaven on the face.

She weeps, she bleeds, 'and each new day a gash is added to her wounds.' She is not the mother of her children, but their grave;

> where nothing,
> But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile:
> Where sighs and groans and shrieks that rend the air
> Are made, not mark'd.

For this wild rage and furious cruelty we are prepared; but vices of another kind start up as he plunges on his downward way.

> I grant him bloody,
> Luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful.
> Sudden, malicious,

says Malcolm; and two of these epithets surprise us. Who would have expected avarice or lechery /2 in Macbeth? His ruin seems complete.

/1 The immediate reference in 'But no more sights' is doubtless to the visions called up by the Witches; but one of these, the 'blood-bolter'd Banquo,' recalls to him the vision of the preceding night, of which he had said,

> You make me strange
> Even to the disposition that I owe,
> When now I think you can behold such sights,
> And keep the natural ruby of your cheeks,
> When mine is blanch'd with fear.

/2 'Luxurious' and 'luxury' are used by Shakespeare only in this older sense. It must be remembered that these lines are spoken by Malcolm, but it seems likely that they are meant to be taken as true throughout.

Yet it is never complete. To the end he never totally loses our sympathy; we never feel towards him as we do to those who appear the born children

of darkness. There remains something sublime in the defiance with which, even when cheated of his last hope, he faces earth and hell and heaven. Nor would any soul to whom evil was congenial be capable of that heart-sickness which overcomes him when he thinks of the 'honour, love, obedience, troops of friends' which 'he must not look to have' (and which Iago would never have cared to have), and contrasts with them

> Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
> Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not,

(and which Iago would have accepted with indifference). Neither can I agree with those who find in his reception of the news of his wife's death proof of alienation or utter carelessness. There is no proof of these in the words,

> She should have died hereafter;
> There would have been a time for such a word,

spoken as they are by a man already in some measure prepared for such news, and now transported by the frenzy of his last fight for life. He has no time now to feel./1 Only, as he thinks of the morrow when time to feel will come — if anything comes, the vanity of all hopes and forward-

/1 I do not at all suggest that his love for his wife remains what it was when he greeted her with the words 'My dearest love, Duncan comes here to-night.' He has greatly changed; she has ceased to help him, sunk in her own despair; and there is no intensity of anxiety in the questions he puts to the doctor about her. But his love for her was probably never unselfish, never the love of Brutus, who, in somewhat similar circumstances, uses, on the death of Cassius, words which remind us of Macbeth's:

> I shall find time, Cassius, I shall find time.

For the opposite strain of feeling cf. Sonnet 90:

> Then hate me if thou wilt; if ever, now,
> Now while the world is bent my deeds to cross.

lookings sinks deep into his soul with an infinite weariness, and he murmurs,

> To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
> Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
> To the last syllable of recorded time,

> And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
> The way to dusty death.

In the very depths a gleam of his native love of goodness, and with it a touch of tragic grandeur, rests upon him. The evil he has desperately embraced continues to madden or to wither his inmost heart. No experience in the world could bring him to glory in it or make his peace with it, or to forget what he once was and Iago and Goneril never were.

LECTURE X

MACBETH

1

To regard *Macbeth* as a play, like the love-tragedies *Romeo and Juliet* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, in which there are two central characters of equal importance, is certainly a mistake. But Shakespeare himself is in a measure responsible for it, because the first half of *Macbeth* is greater than the second, and in the first half Lady Macbeth not only appears more than in the second but exerts the ultimate deciding influence on the action. And, in the opening Act at least, Lady Macbeth is the most commanding and perhaps the most awe-inspiring figure that Shakespeare drew. Sharing, as we have seen, certain traits with her husband, she is at once clearly distinguished from him by an inflexibility of will, which appears to hold imagination, feeling, and conscience completely in check. To her the prophecy of things that will be becomes instantaneously the determination that they shall be:

> Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be
> That thou art promised.

She knows her husband's weakness, how he scruples 'to catch the nearest way' to the object he desires; and she sets herself without a trace of doubt or conflict to counteract this weakness. To her there

is no separation between will and deed; and, as the

deed falls in part to her, she is sure it will be done:

> The raven himself is hoarse
> That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
> Under my battlements.

On the moment of Macbeth's rejoining her, after braving infinite dangers and winning infinite praise, without a syllable on these subjects or a word of affection, she goes straight to her purpose and permits him to speak of nothing else. She takes the superior position and assumes the direction of affairs, — appears to assume it even more than she really can, that she may spur him on. She animates him by picturing the deed as heroic, 'this night's great business,' or 'our great quell,' while she ignores its cruelty and faithlessness. She bears down his faint resistance by presenting him with a prepared scheme which may remove from him the terror and danger of deliberation. She rouses him with a taunt no man can bear, and least of all a soldier, — the word 'coward.' She appeals even to his love for her:

> from this time
> Such I account thy love;

— such, that is, as the protestations of a drunkard. Her reasonings are mere sophisms; they could persuade no man. It is not by them, it is by personal appeals, through the admiration she extorts from him, and through sheer force of will, that she impels him to the deed. Her eyes are fixed upon the crown and the means to it; she does not attend to the consequences. Her plan of laying the guilt upon the chamberlains is invented on the spur of the moment, and simply to satisfy her husband. Her true mind is heard in the ringing cry with which she answers his question, 'Will it not be received . . . that they have done it?'

> Who dares receive it other?

And this is repeated in the sleep-walking scene: 'What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?' Her passionate courage sweeps him off his feet. His decision is taken in a moment of enthusiasm:

Bring forth men-children only;
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males.

And even when passion has quite died away her will remains supreme. In presence of overwhelming horror and danger, in the murder scene and the banquet scene, her self-control is perfect. When the truth of what she has done dawns on her, no word of complaint, scarcely a word of her own suffering, not a single word of her own as apart from his, escapes her when others are by. She helps him, but never asks his help. She leans on nothing but herself. And from the beginning to the end — though she makes once or twice a slip in acting her part — her will never fails her. Its grasp upon her nature may destroy her, but it is never relaxed. We are sure that she never betrayed her husband or herself by a word or even a look, save in sleep. However appalling she may be, she is sublime.

In the earlier scenes of the play this aspect of Lady Macbeth's character is far the most prominent. And if she seems invincible she seems also inhuman. We find no trace of pity for the kind old king; no consciousness of the treachery and baseness of the murder; no sense of the value of the lives of the wretched men on whom the guilt is to be laid; no shrinking even from the condemnation or hatred of the world. Yet if the Lady Macbeth of these scenes were really utterly inhuman, or a 'fiend-like queen,' as Malcolm calls her, the Lady Macbeth of the sleep-walking scene would be an impossibility. The one woman could never become the other. And in fact, if we look

below the surface, there is evidence enough in the earlier scenes of preparation for the later. I do not mean that Lady Macbeth was naturally humane. There is nothing in the play to show this, and several passages subsequent to the murder-scene supply proof to the contrary. One is that where she exclaims, on being informed of Duncan's murder,

Woe, alas!
What, in our house?

This mistake in acting shows that she does not even know what the natural feeling in such circumstances would be; and Banquo's curt answer, 'Too cruel anywhere,' is almost a reproof of her insensibility. But, admitting this, we have in the first place to remember, in imagining the opening scenes, that she is deliberately bent on counteracting the 'human kindness' of her husband, and also that she is evidently not merely inflexibly determined but in a condition of abnormal excitability. That exaltation in the project which is so entirely lacking in Macbeth is strongly marked in her. When she tries to help him by representing their enterprise as heroic, she is deceiving herself as much as him. Their attainment of the crown presents itself to her, perhaps has long presented itself, as something so glorious, and she has fixed her will upon it so completely, that for the time she sees the enterprise in no other light than that of its greatness. When she soliloquises,

> Yet do I fear thy nature:
> It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
> To catch the nearest way: thou wouldst be great;
> Art not without ambition, but without
> The illness should attend it; what thou wouldst highly,
> That wouldst thou holily,

one sees that 'ambition' and 'great' and 'highly' and even 'illness' are to her simply terms of praise,

and 'holily' and 'human kindness' simply terms of blame. Moral distinctions do not in this exaltation exist for her; or rather they are inverted: 'good' means to her the crown and whatever is required to obtain it, 'evil' whatever stands in the way of its attainment. This attitude of mind is evident even when she is alone, though it becomes still more pronounced when she has to work upon her husband. And it persists until her end is attained. But, without being exactly forced, it betrays a strain which could not long endure.

Besides this, in these earlier scenes the traces of feminine weakness and human feeling, which account for her later failure, are not absent. Her will, it is clear, was exerted to overpower not only her husband's resistance but some resistance

in herself. Imagine Goneril uttering the famous words,

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

They are spoken, I think, without any sentiment — impatiently, as though she regretted her weakness: but it was there. And in reality, quite apart from this recollection of her father, she could never have done the murder if her husband had failed. She had to nerve herself with wine to give her 'boldness' enough to go through her minor part. That appalling invocation to the spirits of evil, to unsex her and fill her from the crown to the toe topfull of direst cruelty, tells the same tale of determination to crush the inward protest. Goneril had no need of such a prayer. In the utterance of the frightful lines,

> I have given suck, and know
> How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:
> I would, while it was smiling in my face,
> Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,
> And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you
> Have done to this,

her voice should doubtless rise until it reaches, in 'dash'd the brains out,' an almost hysterical scream./1 These lines show unmistakably that strained exaltation which, as soon as the end is reached, vanishes, never to return.

The greatness of Lady Macbeth lies almost wholly in courage and force of will. It is an error to regard her as remarkable on the intellectual side. In acting a part she shows immense self-control, but not much skill. Whatever may be thought of the plan of attributing the murder of Duncan to the chamberlains, to lay their bloody daggers on their pillows, as if they were determined to advertise their guilt, was a mistake which can be accounted for only by the excitement of the moment. But the limitations of her mind appear most in the point where she is most strongly contrasted with Macbeth, — in her comparative dulness of imagination. I say 'comparative,' for she sometimes uses highly poetic language, as indeed does everyone in Shakespeare who has any greatness of soul. Nor is she perhaps less imagina-

tive than the majority of his heroines. But as compared with her husband she has little imagination. It is not simply that she suppresses what she has. To her, things remain at the most terrible moment precisely what they were at the calmest, plain facts which stand in a given relation to a certain deed, not visions which tremble and flicker in the light of other worlds. The probability that the old king, will sleep soundly after his long journey to Inverness is to her simply a fortunate circumstance; but one can fancy the shoot of horror across Macbeth's face as she mentions it. She uses familiar and prosaic illustrations, like

> Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would,'
> Like the poor cat i' the adage,

/1 So Mrs. Siddons is said to have given the passage.

(the cat who wanted fish but did not like to wet her feet); or,

> We fail?
> But screw your courage to the sticking-place,
> And we'll not fail;/1

or,

> Was the hope drunk
> Wherein you dress'd yourself? hath it slept since?
> And wakes it now, to look so green and pale
> At what it did so freely?

The Witches are practically nothing to her. She feels no sympathy in Nature with her guilty purpose, and would never bid the earth not hear her steps, which way they walk. The noises before the murder, and during it, are heard by her as simple facts, and are referred to their true sources. The knocking has no mystery for her: it comes from 'the south entry.' She calculates on the drunkenness of the grooms, compares the different effects of wine on herself and on them, and listens to their snoring. To her the blood upon her husband's hands suggests only the taunt,

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

and the blood to her is merely 'this filthy witness,' — words impossible to her husband, to whom it suggested something quite other than sensuous disgust or practical danger. The literalism of her mind appears fully in two contemptuous speeches where she dismisses his imaginings; in the murder scene:

> Infirm of purpose!
> Give me the daggers! The sleeping and the dead
> Are but as pictures: 'tis the eye of childhood
> That fears a painted devil;

/1 Surely the usual interpretation of 'We fail?' as a question of contemptuous astonishment, is right. 'We fail!' gives practically the same sense, but alters the punctuation of the first two Folios. In either case, 'But,' I think, means 'Only.' On the other hand the proposal to read 'We fail.' with a full stop, as expressive of sublime acceptance of the possibility, seems to me, however attractive at first sight, quite out of harmony with Lady Macbeth's mood throughout these scenes.

and in the banquet scene:

> O these flaws and starts,
> Impostors to true fear, would well become
> A woman's story at a winter's fire,
> Authorised by her grandam. Shame itself!
> Why do you make such faces? When all's done,
> You look but on a stool.

Even in the awful scene where her imagination breaks loose in sleep she uses no such images as Macbeth's. It is the direct appeal of the facts to sense that has fastened on her memory. The ghastly realism of 'Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?' or 'Here's the smell of the blood still,' is wholly unlike him. Her most poetical words, 'All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand,' are equally unlike his words about great Neptune's ocean. Hers, like some of her other speeches, are the more moving, from their greater simplicity and because they seem to tell of that self-restraint in suffering which is so totally lacking in him; but there is in them comparatively little of imagination. If we consider most of the passages to which I have referred, we shall find that the quality which moves our admiration is courage or force of will.

This want of imagination, though it helps to

make Lady Macbeth strong for immediate action, is fatal to her. If she does not feel beforehand the cruelty of Duncan's murder, this is mainly because she hardly imagines the act, or at most imagines its outward show, 'the motion of a muscle this way or that.' Nor does she in the least foresee those inward consequences which reveal themselves immediately in her husband, and less quickly in herself. It is often said that she understands him well. Had she done so, she never would have urged him on. She knows that he is given to strange fancies; but, not realising what they spring from, she has no idea

either that they may gain such power as to ruin the scheme, or that, while they mean present weakness, they mean also perception of the future. At one point in the murder scene the force of his imagination impresses her, and for a moment she is startled; a light threatens to break on her:

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

she says, with a sudden and great seriousness. And when he goes panting on, 'Methought I heard a voice cry, " Sleep no more,"' . . . she breaks in, 'What do you mean?' half-doubting whether this was not a real voice that he heard. Then, almost directly, she recovers herself, convinced of the vanity of his fancy. Nor does she understand herself any better than him. She never suspects that these deeds must be thought after these ways; that her facile realism,

> A little water clears us of this deed,

will one day be answered by herself, 'Will these hands ne'er be clean?' or that the fatal commonplace, 'What's done is done,' will make way for her last despairing sentence, 'What's done cannot be undone.'

Hence the development of her character — perhaps it would be more strictly accurate to say, the change in her state of mind — is both inevitable, and the opposite of the development we traced in Macbeth. When the murder has been done, the discovery of its hideousness, first reflected in the faces of her guests, comes to Lady Macbeth with the shock of

a sudden disclosure, and at once her nature begins to sink. The first intimation of the change is given when, in the scene of the discovery, she faints./1 When next we see her, Queen of Scotland, the glory of her dream has faded. She enters, dis-

/1 See Note DD.

illusioned, and weary with want of sleep: she has thrown away everything and gained nothing:

> Nought's had, all's spent,
> Where our desire is got without content:
> 'Tis safer to be that which we destroy
> Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.

Henceforth she has no initiative: the stem of her being seems to be cut through. Her husband, physically the stronger, maddened by pangs he had foreseen, but still flaming with life, comes into the foreground, and she retires. Her will remains, and she does her best to help him; but he rarely needs her help. Her chief anxiety appears to be that he should not betray his misery. He plans the murder of Banquo without her knowledge (not in order to spare her, I think, for he never shows love of this quality, but merely because he does not need her now); and even when she is told vaguely of his intention she appears but little interested. In the sudden emergency of the banquet scene she makes a prodigious and magnificent effort; her strength, and with it her ascendancy, returns, and she saves her husband at least from an open disclosure. But after this she takes no part whatever in the action. We only know from her shuddering words in the sleep-walking scene, 'The Thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now?' that she has even learned of her husband's worst crime; and in all the horrors of his tyranny over Scotland she has, so far as we hear, no part. Disillusionment and despair prey upon her more and more. That she should seek any relief in speech, or should ask for sympathy, would seem to her mere weakness, and would be to Macbeth's defiant fury an irritation. Thinking of the change in him, we imagine the bond between them slackened, and Lady Macbeth left much alone. She sinks slowly downward. She cannot bear darkness, and has

light by her continually: 'tis her command. At last her nature, not her will, gives way. The secrets of the past find vent in a disorder of sleep, the beginning perhaps of madness. What the doctor fears is clear. He reports to her husband no great physical mischief, but bids her attendant to remove from her all means by which she could harm herself, and to keep eyes on her constantly. It is in vain. Her death is announced by a cry from her women so sudden and direful that it would thrill her husband with horror if he were any longer capable of fear. In the last words of the play Malcolm tells us it is believed in the hostile army that she died by her own hand. And (not to speak of the indications just referred to) it is in accordance with her character that even in her weakest hour she should cut short by one determined stroke the agony of her life.

The sinking of Lady Macbeth's nature, and the marked change in her demeanour to her husband, are most strikingly shown in the conclusion of the banquet scene; and from this point pathos is mingled with awe. The guests are gone. She is completely exhausted, and answers Macbeth in listless, submissive words which seem to come with difficulty. How strange sounds the reply 'Did you send to him, sir?' to his imperious question about Macduff! And when he goes on, 'waxing desperate in imagination,' to speak of new deeds of blood, she seems to sicken at the thought, and there is a deep pathos in that answer which tells at once of her care for him and of the misery she herself has silently endured.

> You lack the season of all natures, sleep.

We begin to think of her now less as the awful instigator of murder than as a woman with much that is grand in her, and much that is piteous. Strange and almost ludicrous as the statement may

sound,/1 she is, up to her light, a perfect wife. She gives her husband the best she has; and the fact that she never uses to him the terms of affection which, up to this point in the play, he employs to

her, is certainly no indication of want of love. She urges, appeals, reproaches, for a practical end, but she never recriminates. The harshness of her taunts is free from mere personal feeling, and also from any deep or more than momentary contempt. She despises what she thinks the weakness which stands in the way of her husband's ambition; but she does not despise him. She evidently admires him and thinks him a great man, for whom the throne is the proper place. Her commanding attitude in the moments of his hesitation or fear is probably confined to them. If we consider the peculiar circumstances of the earlier scenes and the banquet scene, and if we examine the language of the wife and husband at other times, we shall come, I think, to the conclusion that their habitual relations are better represented by the later scenes than by the earlier, though naturally they are not truly represented by either. Her ambition for her husband and herself (there was no distinction to her mind) proved fatal to him, far more so than the prophecies of the Witches; but even when she pushed him into murder she believed she was helping him to do what he merely lacked the nerve to attempt; and her part in the crime was so much less open-eyed than his, that, if the impossible and undramatic task of estimating degrees of culpability were forced on us, we should surely have to assign the larger share to Macbeth.

'Lady Macbeth,' says Dr. Johnson, 'is merely detested'; and for a long time critics generally spoke of her as though she were Malcolm's 'fiend-like queen.' In natural reaction we tend to insist, as I have been doing, on the other and less obvious

/1 It is not new.

side; and in the criticism of the last century there is even a tendency to sentimentalise the character. But it can hardly be doubted that Shakespeare meant the predominant impression to be one of awe, grandeur, and horror, and that he never meant this impression to be lost, however it might be modified, as Lady Macbeth's activity diminishes and her misery increases. I cannot believe that, when she said of Banquo and Fleance,

But in them nature's copy's not eterne,

she meant only that they would some day die; or that she felt any surprise when Macbeth replied,

There's comfort yet: they are assailable;

though I am sure no light came into her eyes when he added those dreadful words, 'Then be thou jocund.' She was listless. She herself would not have moved a finger against Banquo. But she thought his death, and his son's death, might ease her husband's mind, and she suggested the murders indifferently and without remorse. The sleep-walking scene, again, inspires pity, but its main effect is one of awe. There is great horror in the references to blood, but it cannot be said that there is more than horror; and Campbell was surely right when, in alluding to Mrs. Jameson's analysis, he insisted that in Lady Macbeth's misery there is no trace of contrition./1 Doubtless she would have given the world to undo what she had done; and the thought of it killed her; but, regarding her

/1 The words about Lady Macduff are of course significant of natural human feeling, and may have been introduced expressly to mark it, but they do not, I think, show any fundamental change in Lady Macbeth, for at no time would she have suggested or approved a purposeless atrocity. It is perhaps characteristic that this human feeling should show itself most clearly in reference to an act for which she was not directly responsible, and in regard to which therefore she does not feel the instinct of self-assertion.

from the tragic point of view, we may truly say she was too great to repent./1

2

The main interest of the character of Banquo arises from the changes that take place in him, and from the influence of the Witches upon him. And it is curious that Shakespeare's intention here is so frequently missed. Banquo being at first strongly contrasted with Macbeth, as an innocent man with a guilty, it seems to be supposed that this contrast must be continued to his death; while, in reality, though it is never removed, it is gradually diminished. Banquo in fact may be described much more truly than Macbeth as the victim

/1 The tendency to sentimentalise Lady Macbeth is partly due to Mrs. Siddons's fancy that she was a small, fair, blue-eyed woman, 'perhaps even fragile.' Dr. Bucknill, who was unaquainted with this fancy, independently determined that she was 'beautiful and delicate,' 'unoppressed by weight of flesh,' 'probably small,' but 'a tawny or brown blonde,' with grey eyes: and Brandes affirms that she was lean, slight, and hard. They know much more than Shakespeare, who tells us absolutely nothing on these subjects. That Lady Macbeth, after taking part in a murder, was so exhausted as to faint, will hardly demonstrate her fragility. That she must have been blue-eyed, fair, or red-haired, because she was a Celt, is a bold inference, and it is an idle dream that Shakespeare had any idea of making her or her husband characteristically Celtic. The only evidence ever offered to prove that she was small is the sentence, 'All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand'; and Goliath might have called his hand 'little' in contrast with all the perfumes of Arabia. One might as well propose to prove that Othello was a small man by quoting,

> I have seen the day,
> That, with this little arm and this good sword,
> I have made my way through more impediments
> Than twenty times your stop.

The reader is at liberty to imagine Lady Macbeth's person in the way that pleases him best, or to leave it, as Shakespeare very likely did, unimagined.

Perhaps it may be well to add that there is not the faintest trace in the play of the idea occasionally met with, and to some extent embodied in Madame Bernhardt's impersonation of Lady Macbeth, that her hold upon her husband lay in seductive attractions deliberately exercised. Shakespeare was not unskilled or squeamish in indicating such ideas.

of the Witches. If we follow his story this will be evident.

He bore a part only less distinguished than Macbeth's in the battles against Sweno and Macdonwald. He and Macbeth are called 'our captains,' and when they meet the Witches they are traversing the 'blasted heath'/1 alone together. Banquo accosts the strange shapes without the slightest fear. They lay their fingers on their lips, as if to signify that they will not, or must not, speak to <u>him</u>. To Macbeth's brief appeal, 'Speak, if you can: what are you?' they at once reply, not by saying what they are, but by hailing him Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and King hereafter. Banquo is greatly surprised that his partner should start as if in fear, and observes that he is at once 'rapt'; and he bids the Witches, if they know the future, to prophesy to

him, who neither begs their favour nor fears their hate. Macbeth, looking back at a later time, remembers Banquo's daring, and how

> he chid the sisters,
> When first they put the name of king upon me,
> And bade them speak to him.

'Chid' is an exaggeration; but Banquo is evidently a bold man, probably an ambitious one, and certainly has no lurking guilt in his ambition. On hearing the predictions concerning himself and his descendants he makes no answer, and when the Witches are about to vanish he shows none of Macbeth's feverish anxiety to know more. On their vanishing he is simply amazed, wonders if they were anything but hallucinations, makes no reference to the predictions till Macbeth mentions them, and then answers lightly.

When Ross and Angus, entering, announce to Macbeth that he has been made Thane of Cawdor,

/1 That it is Macbeth who feels the harmony between the desolation of the heath and the figures who appear on it is a characteristic touch.

Banquo exclaims, aside, to himself or Macbeth, 'What! can the devil speak true?' He now believes that the Witches were real beings and the 'instruments of darkness.' When Macbeth, turning to him, whispers,

> Do you not hope your children shall be kings,
> When those that gave the Thane of Cawdor to me
> Promised no less to them?

he draws with the boldness of innocence the inference which is really occupying Macbeth, and answers,

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

Here he still speaks, I think, in a free, off-hand, even jesting,/1 manner ('enkindle' meaning merely 'excite you to hope for'). But then, possibly from noticing something in Macbeth's face, he becomes graver, and goes on, with a significant 'but,'

> 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.

He afterwards observes for the second time that his partner is 'rapt'; but he explains his abstraction naturally and sincerely by referring to the surprise of his new honours; and at the close of the scene, when Macbeth proposes that they shall discuss the predictions together at some later time, he answers in the cheerful, rather bluff manner, which he has used almost throughout, 'Very gladly.' Nor was there any reason why Macbeth's rejoinder, 'Till then, enough,' should excite misgivings in him, though it implied a request for silence, and though the

/1 So, in Holinshed, 'Banquho jested with him and sayde, now Makbeth thou haste obtayned those things which the twoo former sisters prophesied, there remayneth onely for thee to purchase that which the third sayd should come to passe.'

whole behaviour of his partner during the scene must have looked very suspicious to him when the prediction of the crown was made good through the murder of Duncan.

In the next scene Macbeth and Banquo join the King, who welcomes them both with the kindest expressions of gratitude and with promises of favours to come. Macbeth has indeed already received a noble reward. Banquo, who is said by the King to have 'no less deserved,' receives as yet mere thanks. His brief and frank acknowledgment is contrasted with Macbeth's laboured rhetoric; and, as Macbeth goes out, Banquo turns with hearty praises of him to the King.

And when next we see him, approaching Macbeth's castle in company with Duncan, there is still no sign of change. Indeed he gains on us. It is he who speaks the beautiful lines,

This guest of summer,
The temple-haunting martlet, does approve,
By his loved mansionry, that the heaven's breath
Smells wooingly here: no jutty, frieze,
Buttress, nor coign of vantage, but this bird
Hath made his pendent bed and procreant cradle:
Where they most breed and haunt, I have observed,
The air is delicate;

— lines which tell of that freedom of heart, and that sympathetic sense of peace and beauty, which the Macbeth of the tragedy could never feel.

But now Banquo's sky begins to darken. At the opening of the Second Act we see him with Fleance crossing the court of the castle on his way to bed. The blackness of the moonless, starless night seems to oppress him. And he is oppressed by something else.

> A heavy summons lies like lead upon me,
> And yet I would not sleep: merciful powers,
> Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature
> Gives way to in repose!

On Macbeth's entrance we know what Banquo means: he says to Macbeth — and it is the first time he refers to the subject unprovoked,

> I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters.

His will is still untouched: he would repel the 'cursed thoughts'; and they are mere thoughts, not intentions. But still they are 'thoughts,' something more, probably, than mere recollections; and they bring with them an undefined sense of guilt. The poison has begun to work.

The passage that follows Banquo's words to Macbeth is difficult to interpret:

> I dreamt last night of the three weird sisters:
> To you they have show'd some truth.
> Macb. I think not of them:
> Yet, when we can entreat an hour to serve,
> We would spend it in some words upon that business,
> If you would grant the time.
> Ban. At your kind'st leisure.
> Macb. If you shall cleave to my consent, when 'tis,
> It shall make honour for you.
> Ban. So I lose none
> In seeking to augment it, but still keep
> My bosom franchised and allegiance clear,
> I shall be counsell'd.
> Macb. Good repose the while!
> Ban. Thanks, sir: the like to you!

Macbeth's first idea is, apparently, simply to free himself from any suspicion which the discovery of the murder might suggest, by showing himself, just before it, quite indifferent to the predictions, and

merely looking forward to a conversation about them at some future time. But why does he go on, 'If you shall cleave,' etc.? Perhaps he foresees that, on the discovery, Banquo cannot fail to suspect him, and thinks it safest to prepare the way at once for an understanding with him (in the original story he makes Banquo his accomplice before the murder). Banquo's answer shows three things, — that he fears a treasonable proposal, that he has no idea of

accepting it, and that he has no fear of Macbeth to restrain him from showing what is in his mind.

Duncan is murdered. In the scene of discovery Banquo of course appears, and his behaviour is significant. When he enters, and Macduff cries out to him,

> O Banquo, Banquo,
> Our royal master's murdered,

and Lady Macbeth, who has entered a moment before, exclaims,

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

his answer,

> Too cruel anywhere,

shows, as I have pointed out, repulsion, and we may be pretty sure that he suspects the truth at once. After a few words to Macduff he remains absolutely silent while the scene is continued for nearly forty lines. He is watching Macbeth and listening as he tells how he put the chamberlains to death in a frenzy of loyal rage. At last Banquo appears to have made up his mind. On Lady Macbeth's fainting he proposes that they shall all retire, and that they shall afterwards meet,

> And question this most bloody piece of work
> To know it further. Fears and scruples /1 shake us:
> In the great hand of God I stand, and thence
> Against the undivulged pretence /2 I fight
> Of treasonous malice.

His solemn language here reminds us of his grave words about 'the instruments of darkness,' and of

his later prayer to the 'merciful powers.' He is profoundly shocked, full of indignation, and determined to play the part of a brave and honest man.

But he plays no such part. When next we see him, on the last day of his life, we find that he has

/1 = doubts. /2 = design.

yielded to evil. The Witches and his own ambition have conquered him. He alone of the lords knew of the prophecies, but he has said nothing of them. He has acquiesced in Macbeth's accession, and in the official theory that Duncan's sons had suborned the chamberlains to murder him. Doubtless, unlike Macduff, he was present at Scone to see the new king invested. He has, not formally but in effect, 'cloven to' Macbeth's 'consent'; he is knit to him by 'a most indissoluble tie'; his advice in council has been 'most grave and prosperous'; he is to be the 'chief guest' at that night's supper. And his soliloquy tells us why:

> Thou hast it now: king, Cawdor, Glamis, all,
> As the weird women promised, and, I fear,
> Thou play'dst most foully for't: yet it was said
> It should not stand in thy posterity,
> But that myself should be the root and father
> Of many kings. If there come truth from them —
> As upon thee, Macbeth, their speeches shine —
> Why, by the verities on thee made good.
> May they not be my oracles as well,
> And set me up in hope? But hush! no more.

This 'hush! no more' is not the dismissal of 'cursed thoughts': it only means that he hears the trumpets announcing the entrance of the King and Queen.

His punishment comes swiftly, much more swiftly than Macbeth's, and saves him from any further fall. He is a very fearless man, and still so far honourable that he has no thought of <u>acting</u> to bring about the fulfilment of the prophecy which has beguiled him. And therefore he has no fear of Macbeth. But he little understands him. To Macbeth's tormented mind Banquo's conduct appears highly suspicious. <u>Why</u> has this bold and circumspect /1 man kept his secret and become his

/1 'tis much he dares,

And, to that dauntless temper of his mind,
He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour
To act in safety.

chief adviser? In order to make good his part of the predictions after Macbeth's own precedent. Banquo, he is sure, will suddenly and secretly attack him. It is not the far-off accession of Banquo's descendants that he fears; it is (so he tells himself) swift murder; not that the 'barren sceptre' will some day droop from his dying hand, but that it will be 'wrenched' away now (III. i. 62)./1 So he kills Banquo. But the Banquo he kills is not the innocent soldier who met the Witches and daffed their prophecies aside, nor the man who prayed to be delivered from the temptation of his dreams.

Macbeth leaves on most readers a profound impression of the misery of a guilty conscience and the retribution of crime. And the strength of this impression is one of the reasons why the tragedy is admired by readers who shrink from *Othello* and are made unhappy by *Lear*. But what Shakespeare perhaps felt even more deeply, when he wrote this play, was the incalculability of evil, — that in meddling with it human beings do they know not what. The soul, he seems to feel, is a thing of such inconceivable depth, complexity, and delicacy, that when you introduce into it, or suffer to develop in it, any change, and particularly the change called evil, you can form only the vaguest idea of the reaction you will provoke. All you can be sure of is that it will not be what you expected, and that you cannot possibly escape it. Banquo's story, if truly apprehended, produces this impression quite as strongly as the more terrific stories of the chief characters, and perhaps even more clearly, inas-

/1 So when he hears that Fleance has escaped he is not much troubled (III. iv. 29):

the worm that's fled
Hath nature that in time will venom breed,
No teeth for the present.

I have repeated above what I have said before, because the meaning of Macbeth's soliloquy is frequently misconceived.

much as he is nearer to average human nature, has obviously at first a quiet conscience, and uses with evident sincerity the language of religion.

3

Apart from his story Banquo's character is not very interesting, nor is it, I think, perfectly individual. And this holds good of the rest of the minor characters. They are sketched lightly, and are seldom developed further than the strict purposes of the action required. From this point of view they are inferior to several of the less important figures in each of the other three tragedies. The scene in which Lady Macduff and her child appear, and the passage where their slaughter is reported to Macduff, have much dramatic value, but in neither case is the effect due to any great extent to the special characters of the persons concerned. Neither they, nor Duncan, nor Malcolm, nor even Banquo himself, have been imagined intensely, and therefore they do not produce that sense of unique personality which Shakespeare could convey in a much smaller number of lines than he gives to most of them./1 And this is of course even more the case with persons like Ross, Angus, and Lennox, though each of these has distinguishable features. I doubt if any other great play of Shakespeare's contains so many speeches which a student of the play, if they were quoted to him, would be puzzled to assign to the speakers. Let the reader turn, for instance, to the second scene of the Fifth Act, and ask himself why the names of the persons should not be interchanged in all the ways mathematically possible. Can he find, again, any signs of character by which to distinguish the speeches of Ross and Angus in Act I. scenes ii and iii, or to determine that

/1 Virgilia in *Coriolanus* is a famous example. She speaks about thirty-five lines.

Malcolm must have spoken I. iv. 2-11? Most of this writing, we may almost say, is simply Shakespeare's writing, not that of Shakespeare become another person. And can anything like the same proportion of such writing be found in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, or *King Lear*?

Is it possible to guess the reason of this characteristic of *Macbeth*? I cannot believe it is due to the presence of a second hand. The writing, mangled by the printer and perhaps by 'the players,' seems to be sometimes obviously Shakespeare's, sometimes sufficiently Shakespearean to repel any attack not based on external evidence. It may be, as the shortness of the play has suggested to some, that Shakespeare was hurried, and, throwing all his weight on the principal characters, did not exert himself in dealing with the rest. But there is another possibility which may be worth considering. *Macbeth* is distinguished by its simplicity, — by grandeur in simplicity, no doubt, but still by simplicity. The two great figures indeed can hardly be called simple, except in comparison with such characters as Hamlet and Iago; but in almost every other respect the tragedy has this quality. Its plot is quite plain. It has very little intermixture of humour. It has little pathos except of the sternest kind. The style, for Shakespeare, has not much variety, being generally kept at a higher pitch than in the other three tragedies; and there is much less than usual of the interchange of verse and prose./1 All this makes for simplicity of effect. And, this being so, is it not possible that Shakespeare instinctively felt, or consciously feared, that to give much individuality or attraction to the subordinate figures would diminish this effect, and so, like a good artist, sacrificed a part to the whole?

/1 The percentage of prose is, roughly, in *Hamlet* 30⅔, in *Othello* 16⅓, in *King Lear* 27⅓, in *Macbeth* 8½.

And was he wrong? He has certainly avoided the overloading which distresses us in *King Lear*, and has produced a tragedy utterly unlike it, not much less great as a dramatic poem, and as a drama superior.

I would add, though without much confidence, another suggestion. The simplicity of *Macbeth* is one of the reasons why many readers feel that, in spite of its being intensely 'romantic,' it is less unlike a classical tragedy than *Hamlet* or *Othello* or *King Lear*. And it is possible that this effect is, in a sense, the result of design. I do not mean that Shakespeare intended to imitate a classical

tragedy; I mean only that he may have seen in the bloody story of Macbeth a subject suitable for treatment in a manner somewhat nearer to that of Seneca, or of the English Senecan plays familiar to him in his youth, than was the manner of his own mature tragedies. The Witches doubtless are 'romantic,' but so is the witch-craft in Seneca's *Medea* and *Hercules Oetaeus*; indeed it is difficult to read the account of Medea's preparations (670-739) without being reminded of the incantations in *Macbeth*. Banquo's Ghost again is 'romantic,' but so are Seneca's ghosts. For the swelling of the style in some of the great passages — however immeasurably superior these may be to anything in Seneca — and certainly for the turgid bombast which occasionally appears in *Macbeth*, and which seems to have horrified Jonson, Shakespeare might easily have found a model in Seneca. Did he not think that this was the high Roman manner? Does not the Sergeant's speech, as Coleridge observed, recall the style of the 'passionate speech' of the Player in *Hamlet*, — a speech, be it observed, on a Roman subject?/1 And is it entirely an accident

/1 Cf. Note F. There are also in *Macbeth* several shorter passages which recall the Player's speech. Cf. 'Fortune . . . showed like a rebel's whore' (I. ii. 14) with 'Out! out! thou strumpet Fortune!'

that parallels between Seneca and Shakespeare seem to be more frequent in *Macbeth* than in any-other of his undoubtedly genuine works except perhaps *Richard III.*, a tragedy unquestionably influenced either by Seneca or by English Senecan plays?/1 If there is anything in these suggestions, and if we suppose that Shakespeare meant to give to his play a certain classical tinge, he might naturally carry out this idea in respect to the characters, as well as in other respects, by con-centrating almost the whole interest on the important figures and leaving the others com-paratively shadowy.

The form 'eterne' occurs in Shakespeare only in *Macbeth*, III. ii. 38, and in the 'proof eterne' of the Player's speech. Cf. 'So, as a painted tyrant, Pyrrhus stood,' with *Macbeth*, V. viii. 26; 'the rugged Pyrrhus, like the Hyrcanian beast,' with 'the rugged Russian bear . . . or the Hyrcan tiger' (*Macbeth*, III. iv. 100); 'like a neutral to his will and matter' with *Macbeth*, I. v. 47. The words 'Till he unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps,' in the Serjeant's speech, recall the words

'Then from the navel to the throat at once He ript old Priam,' in Dido Queen of Carthage, where these words follow those others, about Priam falling with the mere wind of Pyrrhus' sword, which seem to have suggested 'the whiff and wind of his fell sword' in the Player's speech.

/1 See Cunliffe, *The Influence of Seneca on Elizabethan Tragedy*. The most famous of these parallels is that between 'Will all great Neptune's Ocean,' etc., and the following passages:

> Quis eluet me Tanais? aut quae barbaris
> Maeotis undis Pontico incumbens mari?
> Non ipse toto magnus Oceano pater
> Tantum expiarit sceleris. (*Hipp.* 715.)

> Quis Tanais, aut quis Nilus, aut quis Persica
> Violentus unda Tigris, aut Rhenus ferox,
> Tagusve Ibera turbidus gaza fluens,
> Abluere dextram poterit? Arctoum licet
> Maeotis in me gelida transfundat mare,
> Et tota Tethys per meas currat manus,
> Haerebit altum facinus. (*Herc. Furens*, 1323.)

(The reader will remember Othello's 'Pontic sea' with its 'violent pace.') Medea's incantation in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, vii. 197 ff., which certainly suggested Prospero's speech, *Tempest*, V. i. 33 ff., should be compared with Seneca, Herc. Oct., 452 ff., 'Artibus magicis,' etc. It is of course highly probable that Shakespeare read some Seneca at school. I may add that in the *Hippolytus*, beside the passage quoted above, there are others which might have furnished him with suggestions. Cf for instance *Hipp.*, 30 ff., with the lines about the Spartan hounds in *Mids. Night's Dream,* IV. i. 117 ff., and Hippolytus' speech, beginning 483, with the Duke's speech in *As you Like It*, II. i.

4

Macbeth being more simple than the other tragedies, and broader and more massive in effect, three passages in it are of great importance as securing variety in tone, and also as affording relief from the feelings excited by the Witch-scenes and the principal characters. They are the passage where the Porter appears, the conversation between Lady Macduff and her little boy, and the passage where Macduff receives the news of the slaughter of his wife and babes. Yet the first of these, we are told even by Coleridge, is unworthy of Shakespeare and is not his; and the second, with the rest of the scene which contains it, appears to be usually omitted in stage representations of *Macbeth*.

I question if either this scene or the exhibition of Macduff's grief is required to heighten our abhor-

rence of Macbeth's cruelty. They have a technical value in helping to give the last stage of the action the form of a conflict between Macbeth and Macduff. But their chief function is of another kind. It is to touch the heart with a sense of beauty and pathos, to open the springs of love and of tears. Shakespeare is loved for the sweetness of his humanity, and because he makes this kind of appeal with such irresistible persuasion; and the reason why *Macbeth*, though admired as much as any work of his, is scarcely loved, is that the characters who predominate cannot make this kind of appeal, and at no point are able to inspire unmingled sympathy. The two passages in question supply this want in such measure as Shakespeare thought advisable in *Macbeth*, and the play would suffer greatly from their excision. The second, on the stage, is extremely moving, and Macbeth's reception of the news of his wife's death may be intended to recall it by way of contrast. The first brings a relief

even greater, because here the element of beauty is more marked, and because humour is mingled with pathos. In both we escape from the oppression of huge sins and sufferings into the presence of the wholesome affections of unambitious hearts; and, though both scenes are painful and one dreadful, our sympathies can flow unchecked./1

Lady Macduff is a simple wife and mother, who has no thought for anything beyond her home. Her love for her children shows her at once that her husband's flight exposes them to terrible danger. She is in an agony of fear for them, and full of indignation against him. It does not even occur to her that he has acted from public spirit, or that there is such a thing.

> What had he done to make him fly the land?

He must have been mad to do it. He fled for fear. He does not love his wife and children. He is a traitor. The poor soul is almost beside herself — and with too good reason. But when the murderer bursts in with the question 'Where is your husband?' she becomes in a moment the wife, and the great noble's wife:

> I hope, in no place so unsanctified

Where such as thou may'st find him.

What did Shakespeare mean us to think of Macduff's flight, for which Macduff has been much blamed by others beside his wife? Certainly not that fear for himself, or want of love for his family, had anything to do with it. His love for his country, so strongly marked in the scene with Malcolm, is evidently his one motive.

He is noble, wise, judicious, and best knows
The fits o' the season,

says Ross. That his flight was 'noble' is beyond doubt. That it was not wise or judicious in the

/1 Cf. Coleridge's note on the Lady Macduff scene.

interest of his family is no less clear. But that does not show that it was wrong; and, even if it were, to represent its consequences as a judgment on him for his want of due consideration is equally monstrous and ludicrous./1 The further question whether he did fail in due consideration, or whether for his country's sake he deliberately risked a danger which he fully realised, would in Shakespeare's theatre have been answered at once by Macduff's expression and demeanour on hearing Malcolm's words,

Why in that rawness left you wife and child,
Those precious motives, those strong knots of love,
Without leave-taking?

It cannot be decided with certainty from the mere text; but, without going into the considerations on each side, I may express the opinion that Macduff knew well what he was doing, and that he fled without leave-taking for fear his purpose should give way. Perhaps he said to himself, with Coriolanus,

Not of a woman's tenderness to be,
Requires nor child nor woman's face to see.

Little Macduff suggests a few words on Shakespeare's boys (there are scarcely any little girls). It is somewhat curious that nearly all of them appear in tragic or semi-tragic dramas. I remember but two exceptions: little William Page, who said

/1 It is nothing to the purpose that Macduff himself says,

> Sinful Macduff,
> They were all struck for thee! naught that I am,
> Not for their own demerits, but for mine,
> Fell slaughter on their souls.

There is no reason to suppose that the sin and demerit he speaks of is that of leaving his home. And even if it were, it is Macduff that speaks, not Shakespeare, any more than Shakespeare speaks in the preceding sentence,

> Did heaven look on,
> And would not take their part?

And yet Brandes (ii. 104) hears in these words 'the voice of revolt . . . that sounds later through the despairing philosophy of *King Lear*.' It sounds a good deal earlier too; e.g. in *Tit. And.*, IV. i. 81, and *2 Henry VI.*, II. i. 154. The idea is a commonplace of Elizabethan tragedy.

his *Hic, haec, hoc* to Sir Hugh Evans; and the page before whom Falstaff walked like a sow that hath overwhelmed all her litter but one; and it is to be feared that even this page, if he is the Boy of *Henry V.*, came to an ill end, being killed with the luggage.

> So wise so young, they say, do ne'er live long,

as Richard observed of the little Prince of Wales. Of too many of these children (some of the 'boys,' e.g. those in *Cymbeline*, are lads, not children) the saying comes true. They are pathetic figures, the more so because they so often appear in company with their unhappy mothers, and can never be thought of apart from them. Perhaps Arthur is even the first creation in which Shakespeare's power of pathos showed itself mature;/1 and the last of his children, Mamillius, assuredly proves that it never decayed. They are almost all of them noble figures, too, — affectionate, frank, brave, high-spirited, 'of an open and free nature' like Shakespeare's best men. And almost all of them, again, are amusing and charming as well as pathetic; comical in their mingled acuteness and *naïveté*, charming in their confidence in themselves and the world, and in the seriousness with which they receive the jocosity of their elders, who commonly address them as strong

men, great warriors, or profound politicians.
Little Macduff exemplifies most of these remarks. There is nothing in the scene of a transcendent kind, like the passage about Mamillius' never-finished 'Winter's Tale' of the man who dwelt by a churchyard, or the passage about his death, or that about little Marcius and the butterfly, or the audacity which introduces him, at the supreme

/1 And the idea that it was the death of his son Hamnet, aged eleven, that brought this power to maturity is one of the more plausible attempts to find in his dramas a reflection of his private history. It implies however as late a date as 1596 for *King John*.

moment of the tragedy, outdoing the appeals of Volumnia and Virgilia by the statement,

> 'A shall not tread on me:
> I'll run away till I'm bigger, but then I'll fight.

Still one does not easily forget little Macduff's delightful and well-justified confidence in his ability to defeat his mother in argument; or the deep impression she made on him when she spoke of his father as a 'traitor'; or his immediate response when he heard the murderer call his father by the same name, —

> Thou liest, thou shag-haired villain.

Nor am I sure that, if the son of Coriolanus had been murdered, his last words to his mother would have been, 'Run away, I pray you.'
I may add two remarks. The presence of this child is one of the things in which *Macbeth* reminds us of *Richard III*. And he is perhaps the only person in the tragedy who provokes a smile. I say 'perhaps,' for though the anxiety of the Doctor to escape from the company of his patient's husband makes one smile, I am not sure that it was meant to.

5

The Porter does not make me smile: the moment is too terrific. He is grotesque; no doubt the contrast he affords is humorous as well as ghastly; I dare say the groundlings roared with laughter at his coarsest remarks. But they are not comic enough to allow

one to forget for a moment what has preceded and what must follow. And I am far from complaining of this. I believe that it is what Shakespeare intended, and that he despised the groundlings if they laughed. Of course he could have written without the least difficulty speeches five times as humorous; but he knew better. The Grave-diggers make us laugh: the old Countryman who brings the

asps to Cleopatra makes us smile at least. But the Grave-digger scene does not come at a moment of extreme tension; and it is long. Our distress for Ophelia is not so absorbing that we refuse to be interested in the man who digs her grave, or even continue throughout the long conversation to remember always with pain that the grave is hers. It is fitting, therefore, that he should be made decidedly humorous. The passage in *Antony and Cleopatra* is much nearer to the passage in *Macbeth*, and seems to have been forgotten by those who say that there is nothing in Shakespeare resembling that passage./1 The old Countryman comes at a moment of tragic exaltation, and the dialogue is appropriately brief. But the moment, though tragic, is emphatically one of exaltation. We have not been feeling horror, nor are we feeling a dreadful suspense. We are going to see Cleopatra die, but she is to die gloriously and to triumph over Octavius. And therefore our amusement at the old Countryman and the contrast he affords to these high passions, is untroubled, and it was right to make him really comic. But the Porter's case is quite different. We cannot forget how the knocking that makes him grumble sounded to Macbeth, or that within a few minutes of his opening the gate Duncan will be discovered in his blood; nor can we help feeling that in pretending to be porter of hell-gate he is terribly near the truth. To give him language so humorous that it would ask us almost to lose the sense of these things would have been a fatal mistake, — the kind of mistake that means want of dramatic imagination. And that was not the sort of error into which Shakespeare fell.

To doubt the genuineness of the passage, then, on the ground that it is not humorous enough for Shakespeare, seems to me to show this want. It

/1 Even if this were true, the retort is obvious that neither is there

anything resembhng the murder-scene in *Macbeth*.

is to judge the passage as though it were a separate composition, instead of conceiving it in the fulness of its relations to its surroundings in a stage-play. Taken by itself, I admit, it would bear no indubitable mark of Shakespeare's authorship, not even in the phrase 'the primrose way to the everlasting bonfire,' which Coleridge thought Shakespeare might have added to an interpolation of 'the players.' And if there were reason (as in my judgment there is not) to suppose that Shakespeare thus permitted an interpolation, or that he collaborated with another author, I could believe that he left 'the players' or his collaborator to write the words of the passage. But that anyone except the author of the scene of Duncan's murder conceived the passage, is incredible./1

The speeches of the Porter, a low comic character, are in prose. So is the letter of Macbeth to

/1 I have confined myself to the single aspect of this question on which I had what seemed something new to say. Professor Hales's defence of the passage on fuller grounds, in the admirable paper reprinted in his *Notes and Essays on Shakespeare*, seems to me quite conclusive. I may add two notes. (1) The references in the Porter's speeches to 'equivocation,' which have naturally, and probably rightly, been taken as allusions to the Jesuit Garnet's appeal to the doctrine of equivocation in defence of his perjury when on trial for participation in the Gunpowder Plot, do not stand alone in *Macbeth*. The later prophecies of the Witches Macbeth calls 'the equivocation of the fiend That lies like truth' (V. v. 43); and the Porter's remarks about the equivocator who 'could swear in both the scales against either scale, who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven,' may be compared with the following dialogue (IV. ii. 45):

> Son. What is a traitor?
> Lady Macduff. Why, one that swears and lies.
> Son. And be all traitors that do so?
> Lady Macduff. Everyone that does so is a traitor, and must be hanged.

Garnet, as a matter of fact, was hanged in May, 1606; and it is to be feared that the audience applauded this passage.

(2) The Porter's soliloquy on the different applicants for admittance has, in idea and manner, a marked resemblance to Pompey's soliloquy on the inhabitants of the prison, in *Measure for Measure*, IV. iii. 1 ff.; and the dialogue between him and Abhorson on the 'mystery' of hanging (IV. ii. 22 ff.) is of just the same kind as the Porter's dialogue with Macduff about drink.

his wife. In both these cases Shakespeare follows his general rule or custom. The only other prose-speeches occur in the sleep-walking scene, and here the use of prose may seem strange. For in great tragic scenes we expect the more poetic medium of expression, and this is one of the most famous of such scenes. Besides, unless I mistake, Lady Macbeth is the only one of Shakespeare's great tragic characters who on a last appearance is denied the dignity of verse.

Yet in this scene also he adheres to his custom. Somnambulism is an abnormal condition, and it is his general rule to assign prose to persons whose state of mind is abnormal. Thus, to illustrate from these four plays, Hamlet when playing the madman speaks prose, but in soliloquy, in talking with Horatio, and in pleading with his mother, he speaks verse./1 Ophelia in her madness either sings snatches of songs or speaks prose. Almost all Lear's speeches, after he has become definitely insane, are in prose: where he wakes from sleep recovered, the verse returns. The prose enters with that speech which closes with his trying to tear off his clothes; but he speaks in verse — some of it very irregular — in the Timon-like speeches where his intellect suddenly in his madness seems to regain the force of his best days (IV. vi.). Othello, in IV. i., speaks in verse till the moment when Iago tells him that Cassio has confessed.

/1 In the last Act, however, he speaks in verse even in the quarrel with Laertes at Ophelia's grave. It would be plausible to explain this either from his imitating what he thinks the rant of Laertes, or by supposing that his 'towering passion' made him forget to act the madman. But in the final scene also he speaks in verse in the presence of all. This again might be accounted for by saying that he is supposed to be in a lucid interval, as indeed his own language at 239 ff. implies. But the probability is that Shakespeare's real reason for breaking his rule here was simply that he did not choose to deprive Hamlet of verse on his last appearance. I wonder the disuse of prose in these two scenes has not been observed, and used as an argument, by those who think that Hamlet, with the commission in his pocket, is now resolute.

There follow ten lines of prose — exclamations and mutterings of bewildered horror — and he falls to the ground unconscious.

The idea underlying this custom of Shakespeare's evidently is that the regular rhythm of verse would be inappropriate where the mind is supposed to have lost its balance and to be at the mercy of chance impressions coming from without (as sometimes with Lear), or of ideas emerging from its unconscious depths and pursuing one another across its passive surface. The somnambulism of Lady Macbeth is such a condition. There is no rational connection in the sequence of images and ideas. The sight of blood on her hand, the sound of the clock striking the hour for Duncan's murder, the hesitation of her husband before that hour came, the vision of the old man in his blood, the idea of the murdered wife of Macduff, the sight of the hand again, Macbeth's 'flaws and starts' at the sight of Banquo's ghost, the smell on her hand, the washing of hands after Duncan's murder again, her husband's fear of the buried Banquo, the sound of the knocking at the gate — these possess her, one after another, in this chance order. It is not much less accidental than the order of Ophelia's ideas; the great difference is that with Ophelia total insanity has effaced or greatly weakened the emotional force of the ideas, whereas to Lady Macbeth each new image or perception comes laden with anguish. There is, again, scarcely a sign of the exaltation of disordered imagination; we are conscious rather of an intense suffering which forces its way into light against resistance, and speaks a language for the most part strikingly bare in its diction and simple in its construction. This language stands in strong contrast with that of Macbeth in the surrounding scenes, full of a feverish and almost furious excitement, and seems to express a far more desolating misery.

The effect is extraordinarily impressive. The soaring pride and power of Lady Macbeth's first speeches return on our memory, and the change is felt with a breathless awe. Any attempt, even by Shakespeare, to draw out the moral enfolded in this awe, would but weaken it. For the moment, too, all the language of poetry — even of Macbeth's poetry — seems to be touched with unreality, and these brief toneless sentences seem the only voice of truth./1

/1 The verse-speech of the Doctor, which closes this scene, lowers the tension towards that of the next scene. His introductory conversation with the Gentlewoman is written in prose (sometimes very near verse), partly, perhaps, from its familiar character, but chiefly because Lady Macbeth is to speak in prose.