

Macbeth: The Dark Side

A lecture given in the series “Going It Alone,” Christ Church Cathedral, Hartford
October 24, 2000

by

Humphrey Tonkin

University of Hartford

© Humphrey Tonkin 2003

The decline in civil society, beginning point for these lectures, is no new subject. Shakespeare depicted such a change in the England of his day in the two sons of Gloucester in *King Lear*, Edgar and Edmund. Edgar remains loyal to his father even when his father repudiates him on the basis of fabricated charges put about by Edmund. He is willing to go into hiding in order to be close to Gloucester, and, at the end, to protect him. Edgar is contrasted with Edmund, the new man, the opportunist, who, almost to the last, is willing to sell his father for his own advancement and to stand aloof as barbarous cruelties are inflicted on the aged courtier. Of Lear’s three daughters, only Cordelia believes in the old values: her sisters will do anything, trample on anyone, to obtain power. Of course, having repudiated the old values, they deserve to end up as they do: friendless rivals for Edmund’s lustful affections. By the play’s end the old consensus has collapsed completely. Only Lear’s hope, deluded yet powerful, offers the possibility of a return to community, though we should note that it is his befuddled decision to divide the kingdom and to give up all but the trappings of kingship that starts this process of destruction on its course. Expediency, the story applies, is ever the enemy of virtue.

I mention *Lear* to emphasize the fact that all four of the major tragedies of Shakespeare – *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* – deal in their various ways with the collapse of civility and the isolation of the individual. When trust is undermined, as it is in all of these works, community disintegrates. While it is true that isolation is ever the stuff of tragedy, Shakespeare explores its implications with a thoroughness and completeness that suggests an abiding interest in the dynamics of community and exclusion, an interest reflected in almost all of his works.

The precursor to *Macbeth*, the other half of its story as it were, is *Hamlet*. “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,” says Marcellus memorably (1.4.90). During his reign, the old King Hamlet had brought his arch-enemy Norway to subjection, slaying the old king Fortinbras in single combat and ushering in a period during which his authority went unquestioned. But this period is brought to an end when his brother Claudius, an ambitious, oversexed, unscrupulous man, apparently poisons him when he is sleeping in his orchard. Now Claudius finds himself preparing war to deal once again with a Norwegian threat.

The malaise that Marcellus speaks of causes spirits to rise up from the grave, as they did once before at the time of Julius Caesar’s assassination. Says Horatio (1.1.113-116):

In the most high and palmy state of Rome,
 A little ere the mightiest Julius fell,
 The graves stood tenantless and the sheeted dead
 Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets.

The spirit in question, the ghost of the late king, Prince Hamlet's father, walks the earth because of his own "foul and most unnatural murder."

With the death of King Hamlet nothing will ever be the same again. The old world, of companionship and trust and chivalry, is gone forever, to be replaced by a world diseased, decayed, and constantly threatening. Hamlet, a young man of an intellectual turn of mind who seems to have carried on an agreeable and studious life at Wittenberg surrounded by congenial company, is plunged in Elsinore into a different environment altogether – an environment in which no one trusts anyone else: Polonius sends a spy to check on his son Laertes, a proto-gumshoe named Reynaldo; he spies on Ophelia with Hamlet; and he himself is stabbed by Hamlet through an arras behind which he has been hiding to observe the prince's conversation with his mother. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are pressed into service to check on Hamlet, ultimately getting their comeuppance when Hamlet outsmarts them on their voyage to England. The old order passes and a new and wary regime replaces it: no one can trust anyone.

Hamlet, a product of the Renaissance, in love with the learning he has imbibed at Wittenberg, is a rationalist suddenly plunged into the atavism of blood feuds and revenge. I have always been skeptical of Freudian readings of this play that make the relationship of Gertrude and Hamlet its guiding force. The visitation inflicted upon Hamlet concerns not a mother-son relationship but a father-son relationship: old Hamlet rises from the grave to impose on Hamlet an obligation out of the past, an anti-rational, all-encompassing obligation that no conscientious son can possibly put aside. Fathers are forever imposing their wills on hapless sons, but most do not rise from the dead to do so. But that is precisely what old Hamlet does: the wrong that has been done to him is too great to pass into oblivion. *Hamlet* is a play that concerns the past, concerns the re-writing and re-righting of history.

As *Hamlet* is concerned with the past and the supernatural, *Macbeth* is concerned with the future. Both plays start with questions. While *Hamlet* is famous for the number and frequency of its questions, *Macbeth* is not far behind. "What bloody man is that?" asks Duncan as the second scene begins with the narrative of the bloody Captain. "Who comes here?" he asks as the Captain is carried off and Rosse appears to continue the story. But it is the weird sisters, the witches, who actually start the questioning. "When shall we three meet again?" they ask as the first words of the play.

These are curious words indeed. Fixing the date of the next meeting is not the way most meetings begin. The witches' arrival here at the very beginning is really simply to register their presence, and to frame the narratives of the Captain and of Rosse – for two reasons: first because we are to understand the Captain's account of the exploits of Macbeth in the context of these strange women, the evil geniuses of our hero, and,

second, for the altogether mundane reason of avoiding starting the play with a long narrative. *Macbeth* resembles *The Tempest*: in the latter play we start with action before we move into Prospero's extended narrative of the past, relegated to scene 2. This contrasts with, say, an early play like *The Comedy of Errors*, which seems to grow out of the extended and problematically static narrative with which the play opens. The scene with the Captain and Rosse is a backgrounder, as the press would say – a device for getting a great deal of information over to the audience *before the main action begins*. Macbeth, loyal subject and brave warrior, reasserts the rule of Duncan by driving the Norwegians back where they belong and defeating the rebels of the Western Isles. The news of this happy outcome establishes the *status quo ante* and represents the admirable functioning of the powerful state – Macbeth and Banquo, courageous soldiers, serving their king, Duncan. Thus the old order is re-established.

But the presence of the witches, already registered, changes the picture. The upshot of their first appearance is to tell us that they will become relevant in just a minute – “when the hurly-burly's done, when the battle's lost and won,” “ere the set of sun.” So a battle is raging, and these three old women, like a version of the three Fates, await its outcome. The Captain's and Rosse's narrative that follows, rich in description and elaborate in its presentation of the heroic Macbeth, is in sharp contrast to the reappearance of the three hags, who, following the requisite questioning, answer the query “How was your day?” with a vivid description of the persecution of the master of the ship the *Tiger*, whose wife has had the temerity to deny one of the old women “chestnuts in her lap.” “I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do,” cries the witch vindictively, though it is unclear how this passion for action will turn out, given that the captain's “bark cannot be lost.” As with Faustus and fiends in Marlowe's play, the horrors that the witches represent seem altogether tame in the execution.

Macbeth was written probably in 1606, shortly after the Gunpowder Plot of the previous November, at a time when the English court was gripped with a kind of paranoia, vividly described for us in Garry Wills's book *Witches and Jesuits* (1995). Of all Shakespeare's plays, it is perhaps the most topical. James's subjects, and indeed James himself, saw in the dramatic arrest of the conspirator Guy Fawkes, amid his barrels of gunpowder poised to blow up Westminster Hall on November 5, when both houses of parliament and the King and his court were all to be assembled for a speech from the throne, a miraculous deliverance from the superstitious and treasonous devilry of rampant Catholicism, whose sinister intentions were masked behind all manner of disguises and all kinds of equivocation. The unmasking of the conspiracy immediately entered Jacobean iconography and mythography, a part of a new mythos for a new reign.

Such a mythos, as I call it, was needed. It is hard to imagine, at this distance, how wrenching a cultural change the ruling classes in England underwent with the death of the old queen in March 1603 and the arrival from Scotland of a new king, already king of Scotland, whose mother was none other than Mary Stuart, whom Elizabeth had executed a scant sixteen years before. The ironies aside, this new king brought to an end a court mythology based on the notion of Elizabeth as culmination of the Tudor line – a true end of history if ever there was one. Elizabeth had maintained much of her power and

mystique by the creation of a kind of make-believe atmosphere in her court, ranging from the nicknames she used to address her courtiers to the trappings of imperial pomp that the Tudors appropriated from the Kings of France and the Holy Roman Emperors. She was Astraea and she was Judith. She was the Virgin Queen and she was Diana.

Shortly after James ascended the throne in 1603, he took over patronage of what had previously been the acting company known as the Lord Chamberlain's Men, of which Shakespeare was a shareholder, renaming them the King's Men. As James VI of Scotland, he had already shown a lively interest in the theatre, inviting the English actor Lawrence Fletcher, who was visiting Scotland, to establish an acting company associated with the Scottish court. Acting and actors, as James knew well, are, in Hamlet's words "the abstracts and brief chronicles of the time," an important part of the process of creating an image, a cultural context, for a new regime. Already in the 1590s Shakespeare had written history plays that, ambiguous though they might be, followed the Tudor party line. *Macbeth* was more than a play intended to fit in with the vogue for things Scottish: it was part of the creation of a new historical legitimacy for James and his court. After all, as James did not tire of pointing out, as Henry VII united two roses – the rose of York and the rose of Lancaster – he, James, united two kingdoms: "*Henricus rosas regna Jacobus.*" In accordance with the temper of the times, much given to typology, the creation of Great Britain (James's term, by the way) was the fulfillment, in a new royal dispensation, of the creation of a unified England under the Tudors.

As for Shakespeare, the shareholders of the newly named King's Men each received 4 ½ yards of scarlet cloth from which to make robes for James's coronation procession. They had become, definitively, part of the establishment.

James's theatrical interest was matched by his concern, already well-established, for the rooting out of witchcraft, a subject on which he wrote several learned works, notably his *Demonologie* of 1597. When James visited Oxford in 1605, he entered the city from the north, along the Woodstock road. His party halted outside St. John's College, just outside the city's North Gate, where the learned Dr. Gwinne provided a Latin dialogue, performed by the boys of St. John's College, entitled *Tres Sibyllae*, in which three Sibyls greeted the king as the descendant of Banquo, predicting for him a glorious future and hailing him. Arthur Kinney (1991) quotes a passage in translation:

Hail thou who rulest Scotland.
 Hail thou who rulest England.
 Hail thou who rulest Ireland.
 Hail thou to whom France gives titles whilst the others give lands.
 Hail thou whom Britain, now united though formerly divided, cherishes.
 Hail thou supreme British, Irish, Gallic Monarch.

Dr. Gwinne, linking James with prophesying witches, has one eye on such histories as that told by Holinshed, in his *Chronicles*, one of the principal sources of Shakespeare's play. Holinshed writes of three witches who meet Macbeth and Banquo in the "woods and fields." They resemble, says Holinshed, "creatures of elder world," fairies, and, as

in Shakespeare, they hail Macbeth, each in turn, as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and King hereafter (Bullough 1973: 494-95).

The play that Shakespeare wrote, this Scottish play, is among his most admired and also among his most difficult – difficult, first, because of the sheer complexity of the language; difficult, second, because of the stripped-down nature of its argument and development; difficult, third, because of the power with which the murder of Duncan is conveyed. These triple challenges, and others besides, make it all too easy for the play to topple over into incoherence: the stage history of this play is littered with well-intentioned productions that somehow go astray. Because there is so little redundancy, so little that relaxes the tension or offers an opportunity for spectacle, there is little chance to develop the play’s lesser characters beyond the status of ciphers or to set the play in a larger context: all is focused on Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and, to a lesser extent, Banquo. Knowing so little about Malcolm or Macduff, we have difficulty in engaging with them in Act 4, when Malcolm, in what ought to be a scene of high drama but is so often a rather wooden dialogue between two people we barely know, tests Macduff’s loyalty before invading Scotland to regain his throne. Touching though the death of Lady Macduff’s son may be – one of Shakespeare’s procession of marked and parlous boys – it would be helped if we had met Lady Macduff before, or knew something of the agony that she and her husband had undergone, leading Macduff to abandon her in Scotland and make the treasonous journey to England.

Compare this with the more spacious and expansive *Hamlet*, where there is room for Polonius and Ophelia to bid goodbye to Laertes, room for Polonius to send Reynaldo off to France to spy on his son, room for Laertes to return to Denmark vowing revenge for the death of his father, room for us even to gain some acquaintance with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, even if, like Gertrude herself, we have some difficulty in telling the one from the other. There is also room for Hamlet to engage in banter with Horatio or Polonius, thereby heightening and setting apart the high-flown rhetoric and powerful poetry of the great soliloquies. In *Macbeth* all this is missing: we have the bare bones of a play, all center and no circumference.

It was Shakespeare’s particular gift to recount history through the medium of historical exemplars. The reign of Richard III becomes the person of Richard III, the reign of Henry V the person of Henry V. *Macbeth* is an account of an occasion in Scottish history that almost derails the historical destiny leading to the succession of James I and VI. It tells the story of an incident in which a usurper is put down and order restored. This story is told in simple and logical fashion: a first act describes the way in which the usurper decides on the act of regicide that is then duly carried out in Act 2. In the third act we witness the consequences of violent succession: the initial act of murder leads inevitably to others within the court, epitomized in the murder of Banquo. As Holinshed puts it, “At length he found such sweetness by putting his nobles thus to death, that his earnest thirst after blood ... might in no wise be satisfied” (Bullough 499). In the fourth act the horror eddies outwards, engulfing the entire nation, represented in the murder of Macduff’s “pretty babes” at his castle in Fife, and generating the counter-force of united

opposition. Then in Act 5 comes the return of the rightful king, the defeat of the usurper and the restoration of right rule.

It is all very neat and carefully constructed: (1) preparation for regicide, (2) regicide, (3) the effects on the court, (4) the effects on the country, (5) defeat of the usurper. The problem, however, with this simple and logical political argument is that its representative nature is overwhelmed by the unique power of its particular events. What makes the play powerful is not Macbeth's connection with the history of Scotland unfolding before us, but Macbeth's ambition: the first half of the play takes on such power that it causes the audience to switch context and example. This turns much of the latter half of the play into an afterthought, or at least as the inevitable denouement of a circumstance already clearly established. Only if Macbeth himself is of compelling interest as a historical personage, and his downfall is of compelling interest, will the latter half of the play sustain itself and our undivided attention. Only if we can successfully rebuild a sense of community in the final stages of the play, over against the isolation of Macbeth, can the dynamics of the play be maintained.

The director, then, takes this play on at his or her peril. Nothing will rescue the play from a wavering Macbeth: for every Antony Sher (in the recent RSC production) or Ian McKellen (with his brilliant video version of *Macbeth*), there are many Kelsy Grammers (whose *Macbeth* flopped so spectacularly this year on Broadway).

The play turns, then, on isolation and suspicion. It turns also on deception and misprision. These themes confront us almost from the beginning. Who are the witches? We may have our answers, but of course ultimately there is no answer: they are demonic forces, breaking through into our world from the parallel world where the levers of history are pulled ("The earth hath bubbles, as the water has, / And these are of them," says Banquo 1.3.79-80); they are the voices of ambition; they are the objective confirmations, or apparent objective confirmations, of those thoughts that we all harbor, but suppress unless they are confirmed by others or by events. One need not be a psychologist (nor even a politician, for whom such matters are stock in trade) to understand that prejudice manifests itself when the thoughts of the prejudiced hear answering voices (and we are all in our various ways prejudiced). The witches, who speak in riddles, give Macbeth and Banquo just enough truth to push these warriors into action. Indeed, they drive a kind of wedge between conscience on the one hand and action on the other: Macbeth's ruminations on the possible assassination of Duncan, restraining though they may be, are never answered, but rather put aside ultimately unexamined. Macbeth, as many critics have pointed out, is endowed with an imagination of unlimited fertility. Says Banquo,

Were such things here, as we do speak about,
Or have we eaten on the insane root,
That takes the reason prisoner? (1.3.83-85)

Hamlet, we remember, faces similar dilemmas.

Deceptions and misprisions begin with the witches and move on from there. “Why do you dress me / In borrow’d robes?” asks Macbeth, only to discover that he has indeed been named Thane of Cawdor. But he can barely listen to Rosse and Angus, who meet him and Banquo following the departure of the witches. He is off in the world of his thoughts:

Two truths are told,
As happy prologues to the swelling act
Of the imperial theme....
This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill; cannot be good:--
If ill, who hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor:
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair,
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
Against the use of nature? Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murth’er yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man,
That function is smother’d in surmise,
And nothing is, but what is not. (1.3.127-142)

The words of the witches, “Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor ... that shalt be King hereafter,” are not (and we must emphasize this point) an invitation to murder: they are a prophecy. It is Macbeth who chooses to force the pace, to bend time to his will, by his decision, man of action ever, to take the life of the king:

I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself
And falls on th’other. (1.7.25-8)

“There’s no art / To find the mind’s construction in the face: / He was a gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust,” says Duncan in 1.4. of the subversive Thane of Cawdor. It is almost as though the Thane’s borrowed robes corrupt the wearer. This fourth scene, in which Duncan laments the treason of the Thane and embraces the newly arrived Macbeth, gives us an inkling of what is to come. We have the impression from Macbeth’s ruminations in the third scene that the witches actually only confirm his darkest thoughts – that he has already contemplated the course of action that he now embarks upon with just a little more confidence. Such an interpretation is reinforced when Duncan names Malcolm Prince of Cumberland, his heir apparent. “That is a step / On which I must fall down, or else o’erleap,” says Macbeth, “For in my way it lies.”

So the harmonious collective of Duncan’s court is already being undermined by Macbeth’s ambitions – ambitions confirmed in scene 5 when Lady Macbeth, reading her

husband's letter, also seems to find in it a kind of validation of the ambition that her own dark thoughts have already given birth to. "Come you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here," she cries, launching herself into a speech that makes her the Stepford Wife of Inverness, taken over by the worst aspect of those witches who, as we realize more and more, hang between the benign and the evil, merely waiting to be interpreted by the humans who receive their visitations.

The sixth scene, in which Duncan arrives at the "pleasant seat" of Glamis, gives us a glimpse of a harmonious community that, hemmed in by irony as it is, is about to be destroyed forever. What follows is a seventh scene, the last one in the act, in which Macbeth moves from doubt to action, from weighing the consequences to setting them aside, as Lady Macbeth dislodges his thinking by appeals to his own self-image. Note how full of questions the scene is, and how we move from Macbeth's declaration "We will proceed no further in this business" to his angry retort to Lady Macbeth that he dares "do all that may become a man," to questions about the possibility of failure, to his declaration,

I am settled, and bend up
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.
Away, and mock the time with fairest show:
False face must hide what the false heart doth know. (1.7.80-83)

So now, we might say, there are two: Macbeth and Lady Macbeth face the world alone, and under cover of darkness.

And as they do so, the clock, quite literally is ticking. Macbeth would leap over time, would seek to have results without their attendant consequences – but time moves on inexorably. Arguably, there are few things more important for a director to attend to in this play than the cruel passing of time, measured, deliberate, unhalting – and marked by bells.

Macbeth sees a dagger, or thinks he sees it ("It is the bloody business which informs / Thus to my eyes," he suggests), and we move steadily, with all the Gothick power that makes these scenes work, to the murder itself. Even as we achieve it, Lady Macbeth seems to weaken. By the end of the act it is Macbeth, wholly isolated, acting alone, who organizes the murder of Banquo. He does so for two reasons: first because Banquo cannot be trusted (Macbeth says on more than one occasion that he wants to talk with Banquo, but that never quite happens) and second because Macbeth feels he must find a way to undo the prophecy of the witches: if Banquo and Fleance can be eliminated, they will leave the world for him to bustle in (to quote the altogether more sunny Richard III...).

The witches, then, have been left behind. Macbeth chose, even at first, to turn their prophecy into a plan of action. Now he is defying not only the entire established order but the witches themselves. In his isolation, he even provides a third murderer to check up on the other two ("But who bid thee join with us?" asks the first murderer; "Macbeth"

is the reply; “He needs not our mistrust,” rejoins the first murderer). Banquo eliminated, but not Fleance, Macbeth in his frustration is haunted by the ghost of Banquo, or tormented perhaps by the witches, much as they tormented the captain of the *Tiger* (drained dry as hay; dwindling and pining for lack of sleep):

I'll drain him dry as hay:
 Sleep shall neither night nor day
 Hang upon his penthouse lid;
 He shall live a man forbid.
 Weary sev'n nights nine times nine,
 Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine. (1.3.18-23)

Is the ghost real, or merely a figment of Macbeth's image-filled conscience? The question is never fully resolved, and different directors handle the scene in different ways. As the bloody Captain tells of Macbeth's heroic butchery on the battlefield, so Banquo, shaking his gory locks, attests to his own murder.

Recovering his composure after the disaster of the banquet, Macbeth declares,

I am in blood
 Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more,
 Returning were as tedious as go o'er. (3.4.135-137)

His return to the witches at the beginning of Act 4 only confirms the ineluctable movement of history: Banquo's line culminates in the person of James I, and the forces of history reassert themselves in the latter portion of the play. James pointed out to his followers that he was descended not only from Banquo but also from the saintly Edward the Confessor, whose King's Touch, as we learn in 4.3, could heal the sick. England's intervention in Scottish affairs on behalf of Malcolm seems a kind of prophecy and validation of the union of the two kingdoms, and the happy present is assured by the ordering of the past. As such historical events happened then, so, in the fullness of time, James I, ushering in a New Dispensation, now confirms the rightness of history.

We might note, however, that one character in the play is not on stage in Act 5 – Donalbain, who, as Holinshed tells us, later returns to assassinate Malcolm and seize the throne. If Macbeth's fatal overreaching is brought to an end, there will be other overreachers still to come before the line of Banquo is established in Scotland. Michael Wilson's rewriting, in the recent Hartford Stage production, of Rosse as the unprincipled survivor, sharing in the victory at the end, is, if un-Shakespearean, none the less inspired.

The story, then, is a story of blinding ambition overcome. This ambition is put down by a Malcolm whose modesty is emphasized and re-emphasized in the scene in Act 4 with Macduff (that is one of the principal reasons for its presence), and put down even by the rightness of the prophecies of the three weird sisters. Perhaps, in all of this, there remains a message of some hope: history has a way of healing old rifts. Or perhaps it is that the crises of the present – the collapse of civil society, or the decline in moral

standards – are themselves the jaundiced imaginings of humans who choose to structure their moral worlds in these terms.

And this brings me back to the subject of this lecture series. Has something profound, unsettling and alienating happened to civil society in recent years? Has civil society undergone a significant decline? Or is it simply that we choose to hear the messages and the prophecies in a particular way, forgetting that, underneath it all, we are free agents, able to choose good over evil, able to assert ourselves on behalf of our fellows, able to reject our darkest thoughts in favor of a belief in the collective? Years ago, in a highly influential book, *The Country and the City* (1973), Raymond Williams pointed out that the notion that things were once so much better than they are now is itself a literary topos, a literary device. It turns up in every age – in the Greek Theocritus, the Roman Virgil, and so on down to our own day. It may or may not be true: at best it is true only selectively. Let us not fall into the way of thinking of Macbeth, who selects among history those truths that he wishes to pursue, to the exclusion of all else, and who allows his imaginings to reshape both past and future. No witches tell us how to act (or, if they do, their messages may not be what we imagine them to be): we are free agents and will be judged in such terms. And society, as Malcolm reminds us in the play's final lines, will move on, for good or ill. It is up to us to choose the former over the latter.

REFERENCES

Bullough, Geoffrey. 1973. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*. Vol. 7. London: Routledge.

Kinney, Arthur F. 1991. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and the Question of Nationalism. In Vincent Newey and Ann Thompson, ed. *Literature and Nationalism*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press: 56-75.

Williams, Raymond. 1973. *The Country and the City*. London: Chatto & Windus.

Wills, Garry. 1995. *Witches and Jesuits: Shakespeare's Macbeth*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.