

The Character of Macbeth

Author(s): O. W. Firkins

Source: *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Oct., 1910), pp. 414-430

Published by: The Johns Hopkins University Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27532402>

Accessed: 07-04-2020 14:25 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

The Johns Hopkins University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Sewanee Review*

THE CHARACTER OF MACBETH

Mr. Barrett Wendell in his book on Shakespeare emphasizes the interesting suggestion that there are gaps or omissions in our present version of *Macbeth* corresponding to the lost or unwritten parts of a larger and more varied play than that embodied in the current text. There may or may not be lacunæ in the play: what is more certain and not less interesting is the presence of lacunæ in the delineation of Macbeth. We feel that that delineation, vivid as it is, leaves many questions unanswered; whole tracts, great provinces, of his life and activity remain untouched in the representation. He is shown to us in a series of situations that are at once very extraordinary and somewhat monotonous. Action in the form of crime and retribution in the form of self-torture make up the bulk, almost the total, of his recorded experience. To see Kean was to read Shakespeare by flashes of lightning; it might be said that to read *Macbeth* is to observe the hero by lightning-flashes. Kean's auditors may sometimes have wished for a ray or two of commonplace daylight; and the students of Macbeth's character would have liked to see him from time to time as he ate and drank, talked and trafficked, counseled and wrought, in the daily round of life.

I am far from asserting that the character is incoherent or incongruous; nothing more can be said than that Shakespeare is uncommunicative with respect to sundry parts of Macbeth's nature; a point is reached in the delineation where "the rest is silence." This no more implies a rupture or disjunction in the fabric of the man himself than the obscuration by fog of certain sections of a mountain-slope implies a break in the cohesion of the ridge. Whether the hiatus in our conception represents a hiatus in Shakespeare's is a point not easy to determine. With us, as with Macbeth in the first encounter with the witches, revelation ends before curiosity is satisfied; the same cry which Macbeth utters to the Weird Women,—

Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more —

we could almost repeat to Shakespeare. But are we sure that the witches knew more than they disclosed? And we are quite certain that Shakespeare knew much more of Macbeth than he has chosen to reveal to us. Would it not have been highly characteristic, highly Shakespearean, for the great dramatist, after choosing the events and situations to be portrayed, to vivify or vitalize in his inner vision the moral traits bearing on those events and situations, and to leave the rest in total obscurity or doubtful twilight? Was he not just the type of man to use the torch he carried no further than it threw light upon its path?

The study of Macbeth's character is hampered in another way by the comparative meagreness of his self-expression. Many readers would doubtless be surprised to learn how little Macbeth actually says. In the long and important third scene of the first act he speaks only thirteen times; in his first talk with his wife he speaks three times and utters fifteen words; in the hesitation scene that closes the first act, he speaks seven times, once at great length; in the dagger scene he speaks six times; in the courtyard after the murder, a scene which expands in our excited minds to epical or cosmical dimensions, he speaks thirteen times; in the entire fifth act there are only twenty-six speeches.

It is obvious that a delineation on this scale, however ample for the imagination, is inadequate for purposes of analysis. It follows that the analytic faculty is obliged to husband its resources, to search out and utilize every shred and scrap of available material. Shakespearean scholarship, to make any progress at all with these meagre materials, must proceed on the hypothesis that everything is a datum, that every word or movement, however minute, is a part of the testimony. In physical science such an hypothesis would be perfectly sound; there is no ascertainable fact about a stone or animal which may not, and should not, form a part of a perfect conception of that stone or animal. But in the study of Shakespeare a liberal mind becomes more and more convinced of the unsoundness of the presumption which attributes to every utterance of every character the maximum of intention and significance, while at the same time it perceives that under any other supposition progress in the un-

raveling of the more difficult characters is impossible. In Shakespeare men speak for many other ends than that of self-revelation; there are plots to carry forward, poetry to declaim, aphorisms to enunciate; they must enlighten audiences, amuse groundlings, and compliment kings. Even this leaves out of account the wide scope for accident and negligence in a mind prone, as we can hardly doubt, to take a liberal and lenient view of its own obligations and shortcomings. One can readily fancy Shakespeare as acting on the principle, which is in many ways a sound and sagacious principle, that all kinds of men do all sorts of things, and, where a given thing was to be done or said, assigning it without too much scruple to the actor occupying for the moment the centre of the stage.

The character of Macbeth furnishes a good illustration of the difficulty in question. The evidence for many traits in the nature of Macbeth is confined to single passages, occasionally to brief suggestions. The imputation of avarice to the usurper in his decadence rests upon one word in one speech in the mouth of an enemy (Malcolm, in the third scene of the fourth act). The imputation of profligacy rests upon exactly the same basis. A single inconclusive speech in the fifth act is our warrant for concluding that his affection for his wife has materially declined. A single exclamation of four words "I would thou couldst!" is the sum of the evidence we possess that he repented even momentarily of any one of his murders. One speech and one only, "I dare do all that may become a man," breathes a clear note of manly rectitude. A sympathetic and reverential attitude toward virtue is displayed just once in the reference to the meek and angel-like virtues of the unhappy Duncan. In a single scene, the third of the fifth act, he rails and curses in a fashion to which there is no parallel and no near approach in the remainder of the play. The evidence of concern for his own soul is clear-cut, but very meagre. The evidence of tact and efficiency in the conduct of affairs which may be cited from the first part of the third act is small in amount and dubious in character. How much weight should be given to such meagre and casual indications? It is hard to say. It seems unlikely that Shakespeare could mean that any trait should stand out

strongly in our conceptions, or rather in the conceptions of his audience, unless it figured largely in the delineation. He did not draw men in cipher or cryptogram; he drew them largely, plainly, boldly, for the common untrained eye. On the other hand, if we assume that nothing is authentic which is not prominent, that nothing is discoverable which is not obvious, advance is barred and scholarship in this field becomes abortive.

My own view of the character of Macbeth is not revolutionary. I subscribe to most of the current opinions, and shall rather aim to insert my judgments in the clefts or interstices of the accepted notions than to overturn or displace them. I am prepared to admit that Macbeth's physical courage was unquestionable, that he was ambitious and unprincipled, that he probably entertained the thought of murder before the meeting with the witches, that his character rapidly degenerates in the last acts, that his love for his wife, at first of singular tenderness and intensity, is latterly somewhat impaired, that his chief point of distinction from the vulgar usurper and assassin is a vivid, poetical, masterful imagination.

The last point, however, deserves a somewhat fuller investigation. In respect to the gloomy and restricted nature of the imagination of Macbeth I should say that I was in entire accord with the ablest of recent scholars, if agreement itself were not a species of presumption in relation to a critic of the stamp of Dr. Bradley. Two points, however, have scarcely received the attention which they merit,—the cosmic or boundless quality of this imagination, and its unrivaled fixity and tenacity. Macbeth sees things in their breadth or infinity. His thoughts are "broad and general as the casing air," and to be cribbed or confined is the type of unbearable torture. The whole "half-world" with its aggregated misdeeds rises before his vision as he waits in the courtyard for the bell that summons him to the murder. The whole sea is present to his imagination when he looks despairingly at the hands that all Neptune's ocean cannot wash clean. His fancy sees the lines of Banquo's descendants stretching out to the "crack of doom," and the succession of blank to-morrows reaching to "the last syllable of recorded time."

He views the commotions of the elements less from the station of the petty mundane beholder than from the point of vantage of a superhuman observer commanding the entire breadth of the planet.

But the concentration of this picture-making power is hardly less remarkable than its sweep. If I had to express the truth in metaphor, I should say that his imagination had talons. There is a grip, a clutch, an insistence, a tenacity, in his mental processes, which suggests the idea of possession. An image conquers, masters, enslaves, engrosses him; he is in its leash; he obeys and cringes. Sight has for him the power of touch: the crown sears his eyeballs; the bloody hands pluck out his eyes. He cannot rid himself of a visual image; the imaginary dagger side by side with the real one which he has drawn to disprove its existence retains its actuality. If the murderer had merely told him that Banquo was dead, Macbeth would have seen no ghost at the supper. It was the addition of the picturesque adjuncts:—

Safe in a ditch he bides,
With twenty trenched gashes on his head —

that wrought the mischief. The murderer spoke of twenty gashes: Macbeth speaks of "twenty mortal murders on their crown:" a clear proof that the phantom is only the materialization of the terrible image which the murderer's words had etched upon that receptive and tenacious brain. The importunity, the inveteracy, of certain sense-impressions is one of the memorable points in his constitution. The first prophecy of the witches, the imaginary voice calling, "Sleep no more," the thought of Birnam wood and the immunity from all born of women, infix and imbed themselves in the tissues of his fantasy to an extent which makes him forgetful of his surroundings and insensible to the gravest perils.

His imagination is penal and retributive, as every reader at once perceives; but it is not a source of unmixed pain. There is an awe not unmixed with charm in the solemn and mysterious relation which the crimes of Macbeth establish between his own soul and the great material and moral forces in the cosmos, earth, the stars, night, heaven, and hell; and Macbeth was the

man of all others to feel and value that awe. It is hard to believe that he could have pronounced the famous passage describing the descent of night, "ere the bat hath flown his cloister'd flight," etc., perhaps the finest lines of their kind in literature, without sharing in the profound and melancholy pleasure with which Shakespeare wrote, and every reader reads, these lines. There is a passage in the dagger scene which brings out this trait with extraordinary clearness. Macbeth entreats the earth to muffle his steps. Now there is a very obvious and weighty reason why an assassin should value silence, and we are so much under the yoke of this idea that we can read the passage more than once without noticing that Macbeth has given his own reason for his wish and that that reason is entirely different from the one in our minds. Macbeth fears that the sounds

will take the present horror from the time
Which now suits with it.

In other words, he feels an artistic and dramatic propriety in the silence, the removal of which would interfere with the æsthetic enjoyment of the situation. The retention of any care for poetical and artistic fitness in that crucial and appalling moment is the mark of what we might almost call the epicure in crime. It might have furnished De Quincey with a point for his "Murder as one of the Fine Arts." That this pleasure is in any degree commensurate or even comparable with the suffering which it accompanies, no man in his senses would assert; but its mere existence is noteworthy and enlightening.

Another trait which it is impossible to overlook and yet easy to undervalue is Macbeth's inclination to brooding, abstraction, profound reverie, bordering upon trance. In the first scene with the witches, the word "rapt" is twice applied to Macbeth, the first occasion arising only eight lines below the point at which the third witch has uttered the momentous and fatal ascription. In the latter part of the scene he remains so long engrossed in thought that even his respectful companions are obliged to waive their deference far enough to remind him of the need of expedition. In the dagger scene he is again submerged in his own reflections; in the courtyard scene with Lady Macbeth,

where the motives to action and speed are peremptory, his words carry with them a sense of distance and solitude as if they rose from the depths of a well or the gratings of a stronghold. More remarkable still, perhaps, is the drop from the fiery vehemence of his challenge and defiance to the spirit of Banquo to the mood of tranquil and dream-like reverie suggested in the words:—

Can such things be,
And overcome us like a summer's cloud,
Without our special wonder?

lines almost mimetic of the "tranced summer calm" of the still white cloud in the peaceful heavens. The third scene of the fifth act is highly suggestive in its picture of the sudden transition from moods of frantic violence to the calmness of deep and melancholy abstraction. We are somewhat blinded to the frequency and significance of episodes like these by the fact that Macbeth is a warrior and a sovereign, and that his reveries are interspaced by sudden, drastic, and decisive actions.

We might expect that Macbeth's reflections would be confined to the state of his own mind and fortunes. We are surprised, however, to find in this brawny Scotch thane with his soldierly prowess and his political ambition a tendency to generalize, to reason from himself to mankind, and from his own experience to life in the aggregate. Macbeth is fond of the impersonal 'we,' the 'we' that stands for the race, or a large section of humanity. "We still have judgment here," "we but teach bloody instructions," "can such things be, and overcome us," "all our yesterdays have lighted fools." He coins aphorisms: "present fears are less than horrible imaginings," "the labour we delight in physics pain," "bloody instructions . . . return to plague the inventor," "vaulting ambition . . . o'erleaps itself," "the flighty purpose never is o'ertook unless the deed go with it," "life's but a walking shadow," "who dares do more is none." He can generalize about sleep in a moment of anguish; Banquo's ghost has been gone but half a second before he has so far mastered his frenzy as to be able to draw a distinction between present and past times in the matter of the reappearance of dead bodies. Even in the last act when his egotism is un-

trammelled, when his self-engrossment has reached a point where it begins to encroach on the one great unselfish passion of his soul, his love for his wife, he is still capable of throwing his thoughts into form which makes their compass as wide as the race. It is the life of all men which he likens to the poor player and the idiot's tale.

Another feature of these reflective passages is the ingenuity and dexterity of the expression, the trimness and expertness both of the logical and the literary form. Macbeth's thoughts on the witches' salutation embody themselves in the following shapely and pointed dilemma and antithesis:—

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill; cannot be good: if ill,
Why hath it given me earnest of success,
Commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor:
If good—[etc.].

A French stylist could not have turned the phrases more deftly. And this is done under what circumstances? When, as Macbeth tells us, with a calm method in itself suggestive, his hair is standing on end and his seated heart is knocking at his ribs. To all of which he has equanimity enough to add the remark that these proceedings are against the uses of nature.

Observe, again, the perfect order, the luminous distinctions, in the strenuous soliloquy that opens the seventh scene of the first act. He makes a supposition contrary to fact, that murder has no earthly penalties, discusses and rejects it, then reverts to the opposite and authentic supposition. He goes on to state the case against the murder with a deftness and precision worthy of David Hume or Adam Smith:—

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—[etc.].

In the first scene of the third act the separation of Banquo's qualities into two groups or planes, and the superposition of one of these groups or planes upon the other (lines 49-54) are accomplished with equal dexterity. Another instance of this mastery of form is the unbending terseness of the famous:—

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

It is hardly safe to lay much stress on the cases of hyperbole and of aggregated and, as it were, aggravated metaphor, although their employment at a moment when Macbeth's earnestness is terrible, to wit, in the picture of the blessings of sleep, is sufficiently noteworthy. But this kind of rhetoric was so highly prized by Shakespeare for its own sake that its appearance in the mouth of any speaker hardly establishes its claim to a place in the roll of that speaker's characteristics. If the first speeches of Macduff after the discovery of the murder of Duncan had been assigned to Macbeth I should certainly have held them up as a signal and admirable example of the fustian originating in hypocrisy, just as if Macbeth's lying speech, "the labour we delight in physics pain," had been put into the mouth of Banquo, I should have regarded it as a clear case of the directness and conciseness which sincerity imparts to candid utterance. Nevertheless, it is impossible to look upon the turgid rhetoric into which Macbeth is impelled by the stringencies of deceit as wholly devoid of significance. A man to whom such rhetoric was uncongenial would have contrived another screen: our choice of disguises is controlled by our real nature.

An interesting question meets us at this point. The three traits last noted, the brooding, the generalizing, the literary and logical form, carry with them a certain presumption of want of executive force, of relative inefficiency in action. On the other hand, Macbeth's success in arms, his kingship, and his prompt attainment of his leading object induce the opposite presumption. Which of these inferences is correct? Is Macbeth a real man of affairs, or is he a thinker and dreamer drifted out of his proper element?

The only traces I can find of intelligent and efficient action on the part of Macbeth occur in the first part of the third act, and are slight or equivocal. He may be dexterous, as Professor Bradley says, in extracting from Banquo the needful information with respect to his ride and his company; but surely one may overrate the amount of tact required for asking questions on the part of one who unites the claims of an old friend with a posi-

tion which makes every inquiry a favor. He appears also to have carefully designed the murder of Banquo; but half his design, the removal of Fleance, entirely miscarries. Everywhere else he either hesitates or blunders. He lacks the moral and facial self-control indispensable to a strategist. His wife's ceaseless vigilance is required to prevent his absence of mind or absence of body on occasions where his presence in both modes is imperative. The company of his leading nobles at a state banquet is no check on an outburst of frenzy.

Again, Macbeth almost never shows the instincts or capacities of leadership. He is pushed into the murder of Duncan by a combination of fate, chance, and woman. After the discovery of the crime, the amazement and helplessness of the spectators and the demand for instant action should have served as a summons to whatever powers of initiative and kingship lay dormant in his untested nature. Macbeth cannot respond to the summons. It is true that after a time he offers the suggestion that the lords shall arm themselves and meet in the hall; but this is only in reply to a suggestion of Banquo to whom he has passively abandoned the advantage of the initial step. This can hardly be attributed to consternation; for he has just braced himself to the incredible hardihood of guiding Macduff to Duncan's chamber, and of waiting at the threshold, chatting with Lenox about the night, until Macduff shall reappear with his fearful tidings. His wife faints, and he leaves the care of her to Macduff and Banquo.

The objects of his attack are chosen with singular ineptness. He permits the escape of Malcolm, who is a real and serious menace to his safety, while he marshals all his power and cunning against Banquo who is apparently tolerant of the *status quo*. He allows Macduff to find an asylum in England and then indemnifies himself by the insensate and motiveless slaughter of his family. In the critical juncture in the fifth act he is without policy and without resource, except that of hugging to his soul the flattering unction of his delusive and beguiling oracles. In details he is equally impolitic. The choice of his own castle as the place for the slaughter of one antagonist is rivaled by the choice of his own park as the spot for the assassi-

nation of another. He appoints two men to commit a crime, and is then childish enough to add a third at the last moment without forewarning the original agents.

I am well aware that in matters of this kind it is possible to reason too hastily from the facts to intentions. Shakespeare's plotters are among his masterly portraits, yet the plotting itself is seldom masterly, and the acts of his villains sometimes fall far short of the craft and address implicit in their speech and bearing. The poet's standards of strategy were not high, and acts that are clearly impolitic may sometimes be assigned to perpetrators who were meant to be sagacious. Still, after all deductions, it is hard to picture Macbeth as the typical or even the competent man of action. It is true that he is neither idle nor irresolute. He does much, or at all events he is very busy; and, except in the case of Duncan, he decides promptly, and adheres to his decision. But in the true tests of executive force, the wise choice of ends and means, Macbeth is altogether deficient. The choice of wise ends is so far from being numbered among his faculties that he may scarcely be said in any proper sense to choose his ends at all. He is a man who waits for guidance, one of that large class, who, in the words of another Shakespearean conspirator and assassin, take suggestion as a cat laps milk. The whole plot turns upon his wife's urgency. Throughout the first three acts he is engaged in carrying out the hints of the witches, and when by the accomplishment of the death of Banquo, the stock of intimations is virtually exhausted, he resorts forthwith to the Weird Women for a new installment of suggestions. Nor does his action appear to better advantage if tested by the choice of means. His efforts are wanting in that adjustment of deeds to perceptions which discriminates conduct from mere action. His deeds are the lurches and plunges of the distempered spirit, not the gallop but the rearing of the horse, under the spur; they are reliefs and distractions, anæsthetics if you please, the endeavor of the racked nerves to find in action a sedative for thought. He resorts to murder as other men to opium; remorse or fear is slaked for the time being by the very drug which eventually renews it; and the second debauch is sought as an escape from the penalties

of the first. These are truths old enough and clear enough to form part, as it were, of the patrimony of criticism.

What, then, was the nature of Macbeth's aspiration toward kingship? Was it a form of that powerful and often beneficial instinct which urges the man who can handle an oar or a rifle or a chisel to seek out a position that affords him the command of these implements? Richard III and Edmund are sovereigns by nature, and their conduct, diabolical as it is, may be viewed in one way as nature's effort to adjust situation to character. But it is the ownership rather than the exercise of power that captivates the fancy of Macbeth; if indeed we ought not to go still farther and affirm that for him the regalia are the kingship. His ambition is not the strong man's craving for more scope and better tools, but the child's wish for the moon, the vague longing for the remote splendor. The very small extent to which this ambition is really pictured in the play is a remarkable rather than a significant circumstance. The drama cannot be called a portrayal of the struggle between ambition and conscience or ambition and fear, for the simple reason that the ambition, though present and operative, is not portrayed. It is assumed, pre-supposed, if you will; but depicted it is not. The representation of Macbeth's desire for kingship in his own words is confined to three sentences, all in the first act: the "happy prologue to the swelling act of the imperial theme," the brief but mighty phrase, "the greatest is behind," and one sentence in the letter to Lady Macbeth on the "dues of rejoicing" and the promised greatness. That is the compass of Macbeth's own portrayal of his ambition. It is noteworthy that most of the ringing and glowing phrases in reference to kingship in the latter half of the first act are assigned to Lady Macbeth. It is she who speaks of "the golden round," who terms kingship "the ornament of life;" and it is she who enunciates that massive and herculean phrase, the "solely sovereign sway and masterdom." It is worth noting, also, that her arguments in the hesitation scene are appeals not to ambition but to pride; the pride of the resolute and fearless man. As a result of these facts, the portrayal of the incentives to the crime is so slight and incidental, and the portrayal of the

deterrents is so appallingly vigorous and vivid that the reader scarcely sees how the thing ever got itself done. In addition to this, not one moment of exultation in the successful completion of the deed, not one throb of satisfaction in the possession of the dearly-bought kingship, is vouchsafed to either of the conspirators. Had a monk written this play instead of Shakespeare, it could not have been mor e austere or inflexible in its denial of happiness to the wicked.

The foregoing remarks are not meant to disprove the reality or the strength of Macbeth's ambition, but merely to point out its subordination in the scale of literary emphasis.

There are certain analogies between the characters of Macbeth and Hamlet which are not unimportant for those who keep clearly in mind the limits of their scope and importance. They are akin in the tendency to brooding and abstraction, in the generalizing impulse, in the feeling for rhetorical and literary form, in the dependence on suggestion, in the absence of true executive faculty, in the reckless suddenness and precipitation of certain actions. The proportions of thought and action in the two natures are, indeed, reversed; thought with Macbeth is as occasional and transient as action with Hamlet. For Hamlet thought is the staple of existence; and action is rarer and more difficult than with Macbeth, though, when once aroused, it is hardly less headlong and instinctive. Under ordinary circumstances they would not have understood each other; Macbeth would have called Hamlet a driveler, and Hamlet would have dubbed Macbeth a savage. But one can conceive of their meeting in special moods upon rare occasions when their hearts might have flowed together in the coalescence of an absolute sympathy. A trifling incident from my own experience may serve to illustrate the affinity of certain moods and tones of the two characters. While this essay was in my mind, I chanced to find myself one evening at a performance of an inferior play by a stock company. Some obscure train of association or mere wandering of mind diverted my thoughts to the closing scenes of Macbeth. Amid the distractions of the representation, I tried to recall the words of the "to-morrow and to-morrow" passage, and found myself gliding insensibly from the "life's

but a walking shadow" of *Macbeth* to the "'tis an unweeded garden" of the first soliloquy in *Hamlet*. Macbeth ends on the note of cynicism and disillusion on which Hamlet commences. Usually, though perhaps not in the above instance, Hamlet's thought is saner and more moral than Macbeth's. The latter sees the world, as it were, by the light of conflagration in the sombre radiance of the flame kindled by his own destructive energies: Hamlet sees it in what is essentially common daylight, though clouded more or less by the vapors arising from his own restless and perplexed spirit.

The moral character of Macbeth is, in most points, tolerably clear. He is a very bad man, but is not quite so bad as his acts. His first crime is committed under external pressure: all the others under the goad of self-torture: hardly one is the deliberate outcome of his unclouded will and judgment. He is the weak man made bad through weakness; and the agony which a worse man would not have felt drives him forward into excesses which a worse man might have avoided. It follows that he is both more criminal and less depraved than the ordinary unthinking and unfeeling villain. The actual manifestations of goodness are decidedly fewer than the author might have introduced, had he so pleased, without loss to the interest or reality of the character. Except in relation to his wife, I cannot remember that Macbeth utters one word of absolutely unequivocal kindness to any human being. This deficiency is the more remarkable, as by a curious inversion of what might have seemed historically probable and dramatically appropriate, Sheakspeare has made the moral standards of the Scottish court surprisingly high. With the exception of Macbeth and his wife, the witches and the murderers, nearly every person in the play is marked by generosity and honor. The very lay figures are unmistakable gentlemen; and episodes like the gallantry of Young Siward and the magnanimity of his father are flung into the play with an unconcern which suggests a time when heroism was too common to be memorable. All this is in impressive contrast with the brutal and barbaric environment of King Lear and the thinly veiled baseness and hypocrisy which is the moral atmosphere of the court in *Hamlet*.

The nature of Macbeth's scruples and the cause of his self-torture are capable of more than one interpretation. At the first glance, conscience seems to be but slightly concerned with either: the scruples appear to spring from expediency and the self-torture from fear. But Professor Bradley's idea that his conscience, inarticulate in its proper form, finds a voice or spokesman in his imagination, has a nobility and subtilty which dispose one to instant assent. There is beauty as well as inspiration in the thought that the moral sense, like Kent in *King Lear*, returns in a new form to watch over the interests of the soul from which in its proper shape it has been summarily ejected. If one hesitates a little, nevertheless, the misgiving appears less as a bar to assent than as a hindrance to comprehension. Conscience itself, especially in crude minds, is the disguise for so many motives that we are a little perplexed when we are asked to conceive of another sensation as the disguise of conscience. And is not imaginative horror, usually and normally, a composite sensation of which conscience is an ingredient? Does it not consist of a psychical recoil to which many elements, the fear of hell, the fear of law, the fear of shame, and sympathy for the victim contribute in various degrees, typifying and embodying itself in the fearful external signs and tokens of sanguinary crime,—the darkness, the silence, the blood, the death-struggle, the pallor and fixity of the dead body? To my mind the ideas of conscience and imaginative horror are both complex, and cover in part the same ground; and a difficulty rather conceptual than logical presents itself in the attempt to picture one as the substitute or spokesman for the other.

A view of this kind enables us to lighten a very little our condemnation of Macbeth, and it is significant that the reader welcomes the possibility. There are things, however, that are harder to forgive than wickedness, and I am afraid that Macbeth cannot be acquitted of these more odious, if less heinous, attributes. Our efforts to respect him are continually foiled by the outcrop of a vein of meanness and littleness, bordering upon sheer vulgarity. If he ever was a gentleman, that part of him died on the night when he murdered Duncan. After that event

the depravation of his character is hardly more rapid or more manifest than the cheapening and coarsening which accompanies the moral decline. In his speech with the nobles in his court, there is to my ear a distinct note of what in vulgar American parlance is called 'palaver,' or, in an American parlance still more vulgar, 'dope.' He was far more kingly before he attained the crown. In his dialogue with the two murderers, there is a mixture of familiarity and vehemence, of bonhomie and solicitude, suggestive both of an unkingly eagerness and of the ready fraternization of the crowned cut-throat with his humbler brethren of the guild. When the witches at his own request show him pictures which excite his alarm, he reviles them in the dialect of a crossing-sweeper. An attendant brings him bad news and he lashes him with scurrilities and maledictions. It is a far cry from the chieftain who said to Ross and Angus:—

Kind gentlemen, your pains
Are register'd where every day I turn
The leaf to read them—

to the ruffian who bawls to his unoffending servant :

The devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon!

and though in this case we must allow for variation of mood as well as for degeneration of character, no allowance can rob the change of its impressiveness.

There are other things of perhaps an even more trenchant significance. Treachery is a normal adjunct of murder, and it would be as vain to expect truth as humanity from "the smyler with the knyf under the cloke." But Macbeth is perfectly at home among all the ignominies which his situation suggests or enforces. He can stoop to the incredible meanness of reproaching Banquo with unkindness for an absence, the true cause of which is at that very moment disturbing his guilty heart. A still more aggravated case is his stirring appeal to Lady Macbeth:—

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

The reader who forgets the context naturally supposes that this is the reply to some peculiarly daring and heroic utterance on the part of the lady. It is with a shock that, on turning to the book, he discovers the actual nature of the proposition to

which this outburst of enthusiasm is the reply. That proposition is the revolting and despicable suggestion that the faces of the grooms in the sleeping-chamber shall be smeared with blood, and the crime laid at the door of these luckless menials. This is what strikes Macbeth as "undaunted mettle." There is a baseness in these things that transcends the baseness inherent in the very nature of assassination. We cannot discern in the guilty Macbeth the features of that darkened and ruined archangel whom Milton likened to the thunder-stricken oak on the "blasted heath;" he appears to us rather in the likeness of the later embodiments of that versatile spirit, creeping like the serpent or squat like the toad.

Macbeth shows a selfish and common nature driven by circumstances and urgency to the perpetration of a deed which he was neither strong enough nor bad enough to have committed without prompting, and the weight of which, once committed, he is not strong enough or bad enough to sustain. He becomes, in Middleton's vivid characterization of another murderer, "the deed's creature," he cannot escape from its yoke or its shadow. He is worse than wicked; he is small; yet at his worst and smallest he is capable of regaining for the moment our sympathy, almost our respect, by the awe-struck earnestness, the solemnity, of the regard which he turns upon himself and destiny. At the crisis of his fate, when the crown and the head under it are both at stake, he arraigns life on the ground, not that it is cruel or terrible, but that it is petty and meaningless. Could crime have made life stale or tedious to any mind not by nature predisposed to find its substance and its interest in virtue? We divine the latency of high possibilities; we feel that his spiritual ear is laid close to the inmost shrine of far deeper oracles than those which have tantalized and beguiled him; we suspect that a nature that could make its way through crime to wisdom or at least to thought might, under happier auspices, have retraced the path from contemplation back to virtue. The light, it is true, is dim and transitory, less valuable in itself than for the glimpse it affords of a profound seriousness, which asserts, even from the crime and meanness of the embruted spirit in which it has made its transient house, its inalienable fellowship with virtue and greatness.

O. W. FIRKINS.

University of Minnesota.