

MACBETH

Macbeth is presented as a mature man of definitely established character, successful in certain fields of activity and enjoying an enviable reputation. We must not conclude, there, that all his volitions and actions are predictable; Macbeth's character, like any other man's at a given moment, is what is being made out of potentialities plus environment, and no one, not even Macbeth himself, can know all his inordinate self-love whose actions are discovered to be—and no doubt have been for a long time—determined mainly by an inordinate desire for some temporal or mutable good.

Macbeth is actuated in his conduct mainly by an inordinate desire for worldly honors; his delight lies primarily in buying golden opinions from all sorts of people. But we must not, therefore, deny him an entirely human complexity of motives. For example, his fighting in Duncan's service is magnificent and courageous, and his evident joy in it is traceable in part to the natural pleasure which accompanies the explosive expenditure of prodigious physical energy and the euphoria which follows. He also rejoices no doubt in the success which crowns his efforts in battle - and so on. He may even have conceived of the proper motive which should energize back of his great deed:

The service and the loyalty I owe,  
In doing it, pays itself.

But while he destroys the king's enemies, such motives work but dimly at best and are obscured in his consciousness by more vigorous urges. In the main, as we have said, his nature violently demands rewards: he fights valiantly in order that he may be reported in such terms a "valour's minion" and "Bellona's bridegroom" he values success because it brings spectacular fame and new titles and royal favor heaped upon him in public. Now so long as these mutable goods are at all commensurate with his inordinate desires - and such is the case, up until he covets the kingship - Macbeth remains an honorable gentleman. He is not a criminal; he has no criminal tendencies. But once permit his self-love to demand a satisfaction which cannot be honorably attained, and he is likely to grasp any dishonorable means to that end which may be safely employed. In other words, Macbeth has much of natural good in him unimpaired; environment has conspired with his nature to make him upright in all his dealings with those about him. But moral goodness in him is undeveloped and indeed still rudimentary, for his voluntary acts are scarcely brought into harmony with ultimate end. As he returns from victorious battle, puffed up with self-love which demands ever-increasing recognition of his greatness, the demonic forces of evil—symbolized by the Weird Sisters—suggest to his inordinate

imagination the splendid prospect of attaining now the greatest mutable good he has ever desired. These demons in the guise of witches cannot read his inmost thoughts, but from observation of facial expression and other bodily manifestations they surmise with

comparative accuracy what passions drive him and what dark desires await their fostering. Realizing that he wishes the kingdom, they prophesy that he shall be king.

They cannot thus compel his will to evil; but they do arouse his passions and stir up a

vehement and inordinate apprehension of the imagination, which so perverts the judgment of reason that it leads his will toward choosing means to the desired temporal

good. Indeed his imagination and passions are so vivid under this evil impulse from without that "nothing is but what is not"; and his reason is so impeded that he judges,

"These solicitings cannot be evil, cannot be good." Still, he is provided with so much

natural good that he is able to control the apprehensions of his inordinate imagination

and decides to take no step involving crime. His autonomous decision not to commit murder, however, is not in any sense based upon moral grounds. No doubt he normally shrinks from the unnaturalness of regicide; but he so far ignores ultimate ends that, if he

could perform the deed and escape its consequences here upon this bank and shoal of time, he'd jump the life to come. Without denying him still a complexity of motives - as

kinsman and subject he may possibly experience some slight shade of unmixed loyalty to

the King under his roof-we may even say that the consequences which he fears are not at

all inward and spiritual, It is to be doubted whether he has ever so far considered the

possible effects of crime and evil upon the human soul-his later discovery of horrible

ravages produced by evil in his own spirit constitutes part of the tragedy. He is mainly

concerned, as we might expect, with consequences involving the loss of mutable goods

which he already possesses and values highly.

After the murder of Duncan, the natural good in him compels the acknowledgment that, in committing the unnatural act, he has filed his mind and has given his eternal

jewel, the soul, into the possession of those demonic forces which are the enemy of mankind. He recognizes that the acts of conscience which torture him are really expressions of that outraged natural law, which inevitably reduced him as individual to

the essentially human. This is the inescapable bond that keeps him pale, and this is the

law of his own nature from whose exactions of devastating penalties he seeks release:

Come, seeling night...

And with thy bloody and invisible hand

Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond

Which keeps me pale.

He conceives that quick escape from the accusations of conscience may possibly be

effected by utter extirpation of the precepts of natural law deposited in his nature. And he imagines that the execution of more bloody deeds will serve his purpose. Accordingly, then, in the interest of personal safety and in order to destroy the essential humanity in himself, he instigates the murder of Banquo.

But he gains no satisfying peace because his conscience still obliges him to recognize the negative quality of evil and the barren results of wicked action. The individual who once prized mutable goods in the form of respect and admiration from those about him, now discovers that even such evanescent satisfactions are denied him:

And that which should accompany old age,  
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,  
I must not look to have; but, in their stead,  
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,  
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.

But the man is conscious of a profound abstraction of something far more precious than temporal goods. His being has shrunk to such little measure that he has lost his former sensitiveness to good and evil; he has supped so full with horrors and the disposition of evil is so fixed in him that nothing can start him. His conscience is numbed so that he escapes the domination of fears, and such a consummation may indeed be called a sort of peace. But it is not entirely what expected or desired. Back of his tragic volitions is the ineradicable urge toward that supreme contentment which accompanies and rewards fully actuated being; the peace which he attains is psychologically a callousness to pain and spiritually a partial insensibility to the evidences of diminished being. His peace is the doubtful calm of utter negativity, where nothing matters.

This spectacle of spiritual deterioration carried to the point of imminent dissolution arouses in us, however, a curious feeling of exaltation. For even after the external and internal forces of evil have done their worst, Macbeth remains essentially human and his conscience continues to witness the diminution of his being. That is to say, there is still left necessarily some natural good in him; sin cannot completely deprive him of his rational nature, which is the root of his inescapable inclination to virtue. We do not need Hecate to tell us that he is but a wayward son, spiteful and wrathful, who, as other do, loves for his own ends. This is apparent throughout the drama; he never sins because, like the Weird Sisters, he loves evil for its own sake; and whatever he does is inevitably in pursuance of some apparent good, even though that apparent good is only temporal of nothing more than escape from a present evil. At the end, in spite of shattered nerves and

extreme distraction of mind, the individual passes out still adhering admirably to his code of personal courage, and the man's conscience still clearly admonishes that he has done evil.

Moreover, he never quite loses completely the liberty of free choice, which is the supreme bonum naturae of mankind. But since a wholly free act is one in accordance with reason, in proportion as his reason is more and more blinded by inordinate apprehension of the imagination and passions of the sensitive appetite, his volitions become less and less free. And this accounts for our feeling, toward the end of the drama, that his actions are almost entirely determined and that some fatality is compelling him to his doom. This compulsion is in no sense from without—though theologians may at will interpret it so—as if some god, like Zeus in Greek tragedy, were dealing out punishment for the breaking of divine law. It is generated rather from within, and it is not merely a psychological phenomenon. Precepts of the natural law—imprints of the eternal law—deposited in his nature have been violated, irrational acts have established habits tending to further irrationality, and one of the penalties exacted is dire impairment of the liberty of free choice. Thus the Fate which broods over Macbeth may be identified with that disposition inherent in created things, in this case the fundamental motive principle of human action, by which providence knits all things in their proper order. Macbeth cannot escape entirely from his proper order; he must inevitably remain essentially human.

The substance of Macbeth's personality is that out of which tragic heroes are fashioned; it is endowed by the dramatist with an astonishing abundance and variety of potentialities. And it is upon the development of these potentialities that the artist lavishes the full energies of his creative powers. Under the influence of swiftly altering environment which continually furnishes or elicits new experiences and under the impact of passions constantly shifting and mounting in intensity, the dramatic individual grows, expands, develops to the point where, at the end of the drama, he looms upon the mind as a titanic personality infinitely richer than at the beginning. This dramatic personality in its manifold stages of actuation in an artistic creation. In essence Macbeth, like all other men, is inevitably bound to his humanity; the reason of order, as we have seen, determines his inescapable relationship to the natural and eternal law, compels inclination toward his proper act and end but provides him with a will capable of free choice, and obliges his discernment of good and evil.

