

Introduction

SHAKESPEARE'S SCOTTISH TRAGEDY was written early in the reign of James I, the Scottish king who succeeded Queen Elizabeth on the English throne in 1603. It is impossible to date the play precisely, but certain allusions – especially to the Gunpowder Plot, the Jesuit attempt to blow up Parliament in 1605, and the subsequent trial of the conspirators – suggest a date in 1606. The impulse to write a Scottish play must have been in the broadest sense political: the king who had, as one of his first official acts, taken Shakespeare's company under his patronage, so that the Lord Chamberlain's Men became the King's Men, traced his ancestry back to Banquo. But there is little about the play to suggest that Shakespeare's purpose was to celebrate his patron's lineage, just as there is nothing straightforward about the history Shakespeare chose to dramatize.

The play, moreover, comes to us not as it would have appeared from Shakespeare's pen in 1606, but in a version that is demonstrably a revision; and the reviser was certainly not Shakespeare. It includes songs for the witches that are given in the text only with their opening words ("Come away, come away, etc."; "Black spirits, etc."). These are songs from Thomas Middleton's play *The Witch*, written between 1610 and 1615, where they constitute little divertissements, sung dialogues with dances. The manuscript of Sir William Davenant's version of *Macbeth*, prepared around 1664, includes the whole text of the witches' songs from Middleton, and since *The Witch* remained unpublished until 1778, Davenant would have taken his text not from Middleton, but directly from the King's Men's performing text of *Macbeth*, to which Davenant had acquired the rights. This, then, is the earliest version of the play to which we have access, the play as the King's Men

were performing it shortly after Shakespeare's death – for whatever reason, they chose not to return to Shakespeare's original text when they published the 1623 First Folio. The present edition includes the whole of the two witch scenes – what is implied in the folio's "etc."

The play as it stands in the folio is anomalous in a number of other respects as well. Textually it is very unusual: by far the shortest of the tragedies (half the length of *Hamlet*, a third shorter than the average), shorter, too, than all the comedies except *The Comedy of Errors*. It looks, moreover, as if the version we have has not only been augmented with witches' business, but also cut and rearranged, producing some real muddles in the narrative: for example, the scene between Lennox and the lord, III.6, reporting action that has not happened yet, or the notorious syntactic puzzles of the account of the battle in the opening scenes, or the confusion of the final battle, in which Macbeth is slain onstage, and twenty lines later Macduff reenters with his head. Revision and cutting were, of course, standard and necessary procedures in a theater where the normal playing time was two hours; but if theatrical cuts are to explain the peculiarities of this text, why was it cut so peculiarly, not to say ineptly? Arguments that make the muddles not the result of cutting but an experiment in surreal and expressionistic dramaturgy only produce more questions, rendering the play a total anomaly, both in Shakespeare's work and in the drama of the period.

The elaboration of the witches' roles could have taken place anywhere up to about fifteen years after the play was first performed, but the presence of the Middleton songs suggests that Shakespeare was no longer around to do the revising, which presumes a date after 1614. Why, only a decade after the play was written, would augmenting the witches' roles have seemed a good idea? To begin with, by 1610 or so witchcraft, magic, and the diabolical were good theater business. Ben Jonson's *Masque of Queens*, performed at court in 1609, opens on a witches' coven with infernal music and dance, and inaugurated a decade of sorcery

plays and masques, of which the most famous are *The Tempest*, *The Alchemist*, and the revived and rewritten *Doctor Faustus*.

The ubiquitousness of theatrical magic is perhaps sufficient reason for the elaboration of the witches in *Macbeth*, but it does not seem to account for everything. When Macbeth, after the murder of Banquo, goes to consult the witches, and they show him a terrifying vision of Banquo's heirs, the chief witch Hecate proposes a little entertainment to cheer him up:

I'll charm the air to give a sound
While you perform your antic round,
That this great king may kindly say,
Our duties did his welcome pay.

(IV.1.151–54)

The tone of the scene here changes significantly: the witches are not professional and peremptory anymore; they are lighthearted, gracious, and deferential. We may choose to treat this as a moment of heavy irony, though Macbeth does not seem to respond to it as such; but if it is not ironic, the change of tone suggests that the "great king" addressed in this passage is not the king onstage, but instead a real king in the audience, Banquo's descendant and the king of both Scotland and England. If this is correct, then the version of the play preserved in the folio is one prepared for a performance at court.

Though there is no record of a court performance, King James surely must have wanted to see a play that included both witches and his ancestors. Indeed, whether or not King James was in the audience, the fact that it is the witches who provide the royal entertainment can hardly be accidental. The king was intensely interested in witchcraft. He attended witch trials whenever he could, and considered himself an expert on the theory and practice of sorcery. His dialogue on the subject, *Daemonology*, first published in Edinburgh in 1597, was reissued (three times)

upon his accession to the English throne in 1603. This and the *Basilikon Doron*, his philosophy of kingship, were the two works through which he chose to introduce himself to his English subjects: witchcraft and kingship have an intimate relationship in the Jacobean royal ideology.

The presence of the witches is another unusual, if not quite anomalous, feature of the play. Shakespeare makes use of the supernatural from time to time – ghosts in *Richard III*, in *Julius Caesar*, and most notably in *Hamlet*; fairies and their magic in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; Prospero's sorcery in *The Tempest*; Joan of Arc's and Marjory Jordan's in the *Henry VI* plays; and Rosalind's claim to be a magician at the end of *As You Like It* – but there is no other play in which witches and witchcraft are such an integral element of the plot. This is a culture in which the supernatural and witchcraft, even for skeptics, are as much a part of reality as religious truth is. Like the ghost in *Hamlet*, the reality of the witches in *Macbeth* is not in question; the question, as in *Hamlet*, is why they are present and how far to believe them.

Like the ghost, too, the witches are quintessential theatrical devices: they dance and sing, perform wonders, appear and disappear, fly, produce visions – do, in short, all the things that, historically, we have gone to the theater to see. They open the play and set the tone for it. On Shakespeare's stage they would simply have materialized through a trapdoor, but Shakespeare's audience believed in magic already. Our rationalistic theater requires something more theatrically elaborate – not necessarily machinery, but some serious mystification. For Shakespeare's audience, the mystification is built into their physical appearance, which defies the categories: they look like men and are women. The indeterminacy of their gender is the first thing Banquo calls attention to. This is a defining element of their nature, a paradox that identifies them as witches: a specifically female propensity to evil – being a witch – is defined by its apparent masculinity. This also is, of course, one of the central charges leveled at Shakespeare's theater itself, the ambiguity of its gender roles,

the fact that on Shakespeare's stage the women are really male. But the gender ambiguity relates as well to roles within the play: Lady Macbeth unsexes herself, and accuses her husband of being afraid to act like a man. What constitutes acting like a man in this play? The answer would seem to be, only killing. Lady Macbeth unsexing herself, after all, renders herself, unexpectedly, not a man but a child, and thus incapable of murder: "Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't" (II.2.12–13). Indeed, the definitive relation between murder and manhood applies to heroes as well as villains. When Macduff is told of the murder of his wife and children and is urged to "Dispute it like a man," he replies that he must first "feel it as a man" (IV.3.220–21). Whatever this says about his sensitivity and family feeling, it also says that murder is what makes you feel like a man.

The unsettling quality of the witches goes beyond gender. Their language is paradoxical – fair is foul and foul is fair; when the battle's lost and won. One way of looking at this is to say that it constitutes no paradox at all: any battle that is lost has also been won, but by somebody else. The person who describes a battle as lost and won is either on both sides or on neither; what is fair for one side is bound to be foul for the other. The witches' riddles and prophecies mislead Macbeth, but in an important sense, these double-talking creatures are also telling the truth about the world of the play – that there really are no ethical standards in it, no right and wrong sides. Duncan certainly starts out sounding like a good king: the rhetoric of his monarchy is full of claims about its sacredness, the deference that is due to it, how it is part of a natural hierarchy descending from God, how the king is divinely anointed, and so forth. But in fact none of this is borne out by the play. Duncan's rule is utterly chaotic, and maintaining it depends on constant warfare – the battle that opens the play, after all, is not an invasion, but a rebellion. Duncan's rule has never commanded the deference it claims for itself – deference is not natural to it. In upsetting that sense of the deference Macbeth feels he owes to Duncan,

perhaps the witches are releasing into the play something the play both overtly denies and implicitly articulates: that there is no basis whatever for the values asserted on Duncan's behalf; that the primary characteristic of his rule, perhaps of any rule in the world of the play, is not order but rebellion.

Whether or not this is correct, it must be to the point that women are the ones who prompt this dangerous realization in Macbeth. The witches live outside the social order, but they embody its contradictions: beneath the woman's exterior is also a man, just as beneath the man's exterior is also a woman; nature is anarchic, full of competing claims, not ordered and hierarchical. To acknowledge our divided selves and the anarchy of nature is also to acknowledge the reality and force and validity of the individual will – to acknowledge that all of us have claims that conflict with the claims about natural order, deference, and hierarchy. This is the same recognition that Edmund brings into *King Lear* when he invokes Nature as his goddess. It is a Nature that is not the image of divine order, but one in which the strongest and craftiest survive – and when they survive, they then go on to devise claims about Nature that justify their success, claims about hierarchies, natural law and order, the divine right of kings. Edmund is a villain, but if he were ultimately successful, he would be indistinguishable from the Duncans and Malcolms (and James I's) of Shakespeare's world.

The complexities and ambiguities of Shakespeare's story are firmly based on history. The real Macbeth was, like Richard III, the victim of a gigantic and very effective publicity campaign. Historically, Duncan was the usurper – that is what the rebellion at the beginning of the play is about, though there is no way of knowing it from Shakespeare. Macbeth had a claim to the throne (Duncan at one point in the play refers to him as "cousin" [I.4.14] – they were first cousins, both grandsons of King Malcolm II). Macbeth's murder of Duncan was a political assassination, and Macbeth was a popular hero because

of it. The legitimate heir to the throne, whose rights had been displaced by the usurping Duncan, was Lady Macbeth. When Macbeth ascended the throne, he was ruling as Protector or Regent until Lady Macbeth's son came of age (she did have children – it is Shakespeare who deprives her and Macbeth of those heirs). Macbeth's defeat at the end of the play, by Malcolm, Macduff, and Siward, the Earl of Northumberland, constituted essentially an English invasion – the long-term fight was between native Scottish Celts and Anglo-Norman invaders, with continental allies (such as the Norwegian king) on both sides. One way of looking at the action is to say that it is about the enforced anglicization of Scotland, which Macbeth is resisting.

Shakespeare knows some of this. In Holinshed's *Chronicles*, from which Shakespeare took his history, Macbeth not only has a claim to the throne, he also has a legitimate grievance against Duncan. Moreover, in Holinshed, Banquo is fully Macbeth's accomplice, and the murder of Duncan has a good deal of political justification. All this would be very touchy for Shakespeare precisely because Banquo is King James's ancestor, and if Duncan is a saint, then Banquo is a real problem, the ancestor one wants to forget. In fact, Banquo's connection with the Scottish royal line materializes only two centuries after the events of the play, when one of his descendants, a steward in the royal household, married into the royal family – hence King James's family name, Stewart or Stuart. Shakespeare's way of handling Banquo fudges a lot of issues. Should he not, as a loyal thane, be pressing the claim of Malcolm, the designated heir, after the murder? Should he remain loyal to Macbeth as long as he does?

This is precisely the sort of question that shows how close the play is to *Hamlet*: in both plays, the issue of legitimacy remains crucially ambiguous. Nobody in *Macbeth* presses the claim of Malcolm until Malcolm reappears with an army to support him, any more than anyone in *Hamlet* presses the claim of Hamlet. In both plays, there is deep uncertainty

about the relation between power and legitimacy – about whether legitimacy constitutes anything more than the rhetoric of power backed by the size of its army. Duncan tries to legitimize his son's succession by creating Malcolm Prince of Cumberland on the analogy of the Prince of Wales, thus declaring him heir to the throne. But this is not the way the succession works in Scotland: Cumberland is an *English* county, which was briefly ceded to the Scottish crown, and Malcolm's new title is the thin edge of the English invasion. Analogously, Malcolm confirms his victory at the end of the play by transforming his Scottish thanes into English earls, "the first that ever Scotland / In such an honor named" (V.8.63–64) – heredity requires a great deal of ceremonial apparatus to make it appear a natural mode of succession. James I himself became king of England not because he was the legitimate heir (he was one of a number of people with a distant claim to the throne), but because he was *designated* the successor by Queen Elizabeth; or at least several attendants at her death claimed that he was, and the people in control supported him. This is much closer to the situation in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* than it is to any system of hereditary succession. And Macbeth is, even in the play, a fully legitimate king, as legitimate as Duncan: like Hamlet's Denmark, this is not a hereditary monarchy. Macbeth is *elected* king by the thanes, and duly anointed. The fact that he turns out to be a bad king does not make him any less the king, any more than the rebellion that opens the play casts doubt on Duncan's right to the throne.

The play is less about legitimacy and usurpation than about the divided self, and like *Hamlet*, it focuses to an unprecedented extent on the mind of the hero. Suppose we try to imagine a *Hamlet* written from Claudius's point of view, in the way that *Macbeth* is written from Macbeth's. The murder Claudius commits is the perfect crime; but the hero-villain quickly finds that his actions have unimagined implications, and that the political world is not all he has to contend with. As it stands, *Hamlet* is a very political play, and does not really need the ghost at

all. Hamlet has his suspicions already; Claudius tries to buy him off by promising him the succession, but this is not good enough. It turns out that the problem is not really conscience or revenge, it is Hamlet's own ambitions. He wanted to succeed his father on the throne; Claudius, Hamlet says, "Popped in between th' election and my hopes." The ghost is merely a *deus ex machina*. But in a *Hamlet* that did not center on Hamlet, Claudius's guilty conscience, which is not much in evidence in the play, would have a great deal more work to do. So would the ghost – who should, after all, logically be haunting Claudius, not Hamlet. This play would be not about politics but about how the dead do not disappear; they return to embody our crimes, so that we have to keep repeating them – just as in *Macbeth*. In this version of *Hamlet*, Hamlet is hardly necessary, any more than in *Macbeth*, Malcolm and Macduff are necessary. The drama of *Macbeth* is really a matter between Macbeth and his ambition, Macbeth and the witches and his wife and his hallucinations and his own tortured soul, the drama of prophecies and riddles, and how he understands them, and what he decides to do about them, and how they, in themselves, constitute retribution.

What, then, about the riddles, those verbal incarnations of the imperfect speakers the witches? Macbeth is told that he will never be conquered till Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane; and that no man of woman born will harm him. Are these paradoxical impossibilities realized? Not at all, really: the Birnam Wood prophecy does not come true, it just appears to Macbeth that it does – the wood is not moving, it merely looks as if it is. Or alternatively, we could say that "Birnam Wood" is a quibble: Macbeth assumes it means the forest, but it could mean merely wood from the forest, the branches the soldiers are using for camouflage – the prophecy comes true merely as a stage device. As for no man of woman born, maybe the problem is that Macbeth is not a close enough reader: he takes the operative word to be "woman" – "No man of *woman* born shall

harm Macbeth" – but the key word turns out to be "born" – "No man of woman *born* shall harm Macbeth." If this is right, we must go on to consider the implications of the assumption that a cesarean section does not constitute birth. This is really, historically, quite significant: a vaginal birth would have been handled by women – the midwife, maids, attendants – with no men present. But surgery was a male prerogative – the surgeon was always a man; midwives were not allowed to use surgical instruments – and the surgical birth thus means, in Renaissance terms, that Macduff was brought to life by men, not women: carried by a woman, but made viable only through masculine intervention. Such a birth, all but invariably, involved the mother's death.

Macbeth himself sees it this way, when he defies Macduff and says,

Though Birnam Wood be come to Dunsinane,
And thou opposed, being of no woman born,
(V.8.30–31)

where logically it should be "being not of woman born": the key concept is not "no woman," but "not born." But Shakespeare seems to be conceiving of a masculine equivalent to the Immaculate Conception, a birth uncontaminated by women, as the Virgin Mary's was uncontaminated by man.

So this riddle bears on the whole issue of the place of women in the play's world, and especially on how very disruptive they seem to be, even when, like Lady Macduff, they are loving and nurturing. Why is it so important, for example, at the end of the play, that Malcolm is a virgin? Malcolm insists to Macduff that he is utterly pure, "yet / Unknown to woman" (IV.3.125–26), uncontaminated by heterosexuality – this is offered as the first of his qualifications for displacing and succeeding Macbeth. Perhaps this bears too on the really big unanswered question about Macduff: why he left his family unprotected when he went

to seek Malcolm in England – this is what makes Malcolm mistrust him so deeply. Why would you leave your wife and children unprotected, to face the tyrant's rage, unless you knew they were really in no danger?

But somehow the question goes unanswered, does not need to be answered, perhaps because Lady Macduff in some way is the problem, just as, more obviously, Lady Macbeth and the witches are. Those claims on Macduff that tie him to his wife and children, that would keep him at home, that purport to be higher than the claims of masculine solidarity, are in fact rejected quite decisively by the play. In Holinshed, Macduff flees only *after* his wife and children have been murdered, and therefore for the best of reasons. Macduff's desertion of his family is Shakespeare's addition to the story. Maybe, the play keeps saying, if it weren't for all those women? The play is very much a masculinist, even misogynistic, fantasy, especially at the end, when there are simply no women left, not even the witches, and the restored commonwealth is a world of heroic soldiers.

So, to return to the increasingly elaborate witches' scenes, the first thing they do for this claustrophobic play is to open up a space for women; and it is a subversive and paradoxical space. This is a play in which paradoxes abound, and for Shakespeare's audience, Lady Macbeth would have embodied those paradoxes as powerfully as the witches do: in her proclaimed ability to "unsex" herself, in her willingness to dash her own infant's brains out, but most of all, in the kind of control she exercises over her husband. The marriage at the center of the play is one of the most frightening things about it, but it is worth observing that, as Shakespearean marriages go, this is a good one: intense, intimate, loving. The notion that your wife is your friend and your comfort is not a Shakespearean one. The relaxed, easygoing, happy times men and women have together in Shakespeare all take place before marriage, as part of the wooing process – this is the subject of comedy. What happens after marriage is the subject of tragedy – King Lear's wicked daughters

Goneril and Regan are only extreme versions of perfectly normative Shakespearean wives. The only Shakespearean marriage of any duration that is represented as specifically sexually happy is the marriage of Claudius and Gertrude, a murderer and an adulteress; and it is probably to the point that even they stop sleeping together after only four months – not, to be sure, by choice.

In this context, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are really quite well matched. They care for each other and understand each other deeply, exhibiting a genuine intimacy and trust of a sort one does not find, for example, in the marriage of the Capulets, or in Iago and Emilia (to say nothing of Othello and Desdemona), or in Coriolanus and Virgilia, or in Cymbeline and his villainous queen (who is not even provided with a name), or in Leontes and Hermione. The prospects for life after marriage in Shakespeare are pretty grim. And in this respect, probably the most frightening thing in the play is the genuine power of Lady Macbeth's mind, her powers of both analysis and persuasion, and even more her intimate apprehension of her husband's deepest desires, her perfect understanding of what combination of arguments will prove irresistible to the masculine ego: "Be a man," and "If you really loved me you'd do it."

But can the play's action really be accounted for simply by the addition of yet another witch? Macbeth's marriage is a version of the Adam and Eve story, the woman persuading the man to commit the primal sin against the father. But the case is loaded: surely Lady Macbeth is not the culprit, any more than Eve is – or than the witches are. What she does is give voice to Macbeth's inner life, release in him the same forbidden desire that the witches have called forth. To act on this desire is what it means in the play to be a man. But having evoked her husband's murderous ambition, having dared him to stop being a child, she suddenly finds that when he *is* a man, she is powerless. Her own power was only her power over the

child, the child she was willing to destroy to gain the power of a man.

Performers and revisers from the late seventeenth century on have never been happy with the way Lady Macbeth simply fades out, and Macbeth is perfunctorily killed. The play does not even provide its hero with a final speech, let alone a eulogy for Shakespeare's most complex and brilliant studies in villainy. Malcolm dismisses the pair succinctly as "this dead butcher and his fiendlike queen." Sir William Davenant, refurbishing the play for Restoration audiences, added a rather awkward dying line for Macbeth ("Farewell, vain world, and what's most vain in it, ambition"), and tastefully resolved the problem of Macbeth's double death by leaving the body onstage and having Macduff reenter with Macbeth's sword, instead of his head. By the mid-eighteenth century, David Garrick – who was claiming to be performing the play "as written by Shakespeare" – had inserted an extended death speech for the hero:

'Tis done! The scene of life will quickly close.
Ambition's vain, delusive dreams are fled,
And now I wake to darkness, guilt and horror;
I cannot bear it! Let me shake it off –
'Twill not be; my soul is clogged with blood –
I cannot rise! I dare not ask for mercy –
It is too late, hell drags me down; I sink,
I sink – Oh! – my soul is lost forever!
Oh!

This Faustian peroration went on being used until well into the nineteenth century.

The one element that has always proved satisfying in Shakespeare's ending is the clear and unambiguous triumph of good over evil. But there is a puzzling aspect to the conclusion, which is less symmetrical and more open-ended than this suggests. Why, in a play so clearly organized around

ideas of good and evil, is it not Malcolm who defeats Macbeth – the incarnation of virtue, the man who has never told a lie or slept with a woman, overcoming the monster of vice? In fact, historically, this is what happened: Macbeth was killed in battle by Malcolm, not Macduff. Shakespeare is following Holinshed here, but why, especially in a play that revises so much else in its source material? Davenant recognizes this as a problem, and, followed by Garrick, gives Macduff a few lines of justification as he kills Macbeth:

This for thy Royal master Duncan,
This for my dearest friend my wife,
This for those pledges of our loves my children . . .
I'll as a trophy bear away his sword
To witness my revenge.

The addition is significant, and revealing: in Shakespeare, Macduff, fulfilling the prophecy, is simply acting as Malcolm's agent, the man not born of woman acting for the king uncontaminated by women. But why does virtue need an agent, while vice can act for itself? And what about the agent: does the unanswered question about Macduff abandoning his family not linger in the back of our minds? Does his willingness to condone the vices Malcolm invents for himself not say something disturbing about the quality of Macduff as a hero? Is he not, in fact, the pragmatic soldier who does what needs to be done so that the saintly king can stay clear of the complexities and paradoxes of politics and war? And what happens next, with a saintly king of Scotland, and an ambitious soldier as his right-hand man, and those threatening offspring, the heirs of Banquo, still waiting in the wings?

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