

"ALL OUR YESTERDAYS": TIME AS PROTAGONIST IN MACBETH

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From the initial prophecy of the witches to the hectic preparation for the final push of the opposing forces, it goes without saying that Time clearly plays a major, "behind the scenes", role in the development of the action of *Macbeth*. It is not our intention in this paper to trace something as obvious as this but rather to isolate one moment in which Time appears "onstage" demanding recognition and homage.

No longer does Lady Macbeth hold centre-stage claiming that a few drops of water could wash away a mortal sin. Over is that moment when, haunted by those "compunctuous visitings of nature" (I. v. 45), so confidently rejected in her state of inexperience she is driven with lighted candle down along palace corridors in a private hell of remorse. Over too is the brief moment of Macbeth's own protagonism when he still believed in the possibility of killing the Snake of Insecurity.

Time steps forward and assumes control in that moment when Macbeth could cry with Milton's Satan:

Which way shall I fly
Infinite wrath and infinite despair ?
Which way I fly is Hell; myself am Hell.
(*Paradise Lost*, Book IV, 73-75).

It is his wife's decline and death that serve as reminders to Macbeth of his own mortality, his recognition of the omnipotence of Time. It is this recognition, occurring in Act V, that will concern us now.

In this vital Act there are two major soliloquies of Macbeth and both are closely connected with reports concerning the declining state of health of Lady Macbeth. The more famous comes as a result of Seyton's report that the Queen has died. It merits quoting in full:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
 To the last syllable of recorded time;
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
 Life s but a walking shadow; a poor player,
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
 And then is heard no more: it is a tale
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
 Signifying nothing.

(V. v. 19 -28).

What is not generally recognised is that this soliloquy is really the continuation of the other important Macbeth soliloquy of Act V which begins "This push will cheer me ever, or disseat me now" (V. iii. 20 -21). What is significant here is that this "interrupted" soliloquy is followed by Macbeth's enquiry of the doctor regarding the state of health of the Queen. That Shakespeare intended us to see in the soliloquy a direct connection with the conversation with the doctor is supported by words and thoughts common to both soliloquy and conversation. Basically, the meaning of Macbeth's comment is clear: The English force gathered outside the castle will bring matters to a head. The attack will produce either a Macbeth secure in office or a tyrant will be deposed. Muir in the "Arden" text follows Steevens in opting for the word "Disseal". Apparently the word does not appear elsewhere in Shakespeare and, consequently, has led to a series of suggestions on the part of the critics, including the "Dis-Ease" of Furness and the "Disease" of F 2, 3 and 4 . As is so often the case, here we have an example of a word being chosen by the poet on purely phonetic grounds. Whatever word Shakespeare originally wrote, it was intended to suggest through a "verbal echo" the word "Disease". Consequently, we should not be too surprised to find only a few lines later Macbeth enquiring of the doctor: "Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased?" (V. iii. 40).

The decline of Lady Macbeth finds its "thought" parallel in Macbeth's own distaste for Life: "I have lived long enough; my way of life/ Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf. (V. iii. 22- 23).

Shakespeare intends us to see the decline in the fortunes of Macbeth as having its parallel in the physical collapse of his wife. His inability to hold on to the crown finds its echo in Lady Macbeth's inability to retain her sanity. The poison that she had given her husband had finally worked her own downfall. As Macbeth had said:

This even-handed Justice
Commends th'ingredience of our poison'd chalice
To our own lips.

(I. vii. 10-12).

As early as Act III, Scene i, Macbeth, in soliloquy, had said:

For Banquo's issue have I fil'd my mind;
For them the gracious Duncan have I murther'd;
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace,
Only for them; and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common enemy of man,
To make them kings, the seed of Banquo kings!

(Lines 64-9).

His immortal soul, an "eternal jewel", had been rejected in favour of a crown -the "ornament of life" (I. vii. 42). We do not feel in this speech, however, any real fear of death. What is predominant here is the feeling of jealousy; Banquo's heirs will inherit although the sacrifice has been made by Macbeth. In other words, Macbeth at this point only feels Intellectually the great sacrifice he has made. Supported by the witches' words of seeming promise, Macbeth is unable to think of his ultimate dissolution even with Malcom's army at his gates. His mortality comes home to him fully only when he learns that a part of himself is on the verge of death. What was recognised as a certainty but never felt as such is now experienced in all its horror. In his wife's impending death he sees his own as something imminent and unavoidable. However steeled he has been for the death of his immortal soul, Macbeth has still to prepare himself for the death an corruption of his mortal body. The death of his "partner", the one half of his identity, brutally reminds him that he too cannot escape "Dusty death" (V. v. 23). For the Christian,

death can never be the end, signifying as it does the end of only the physical man. Macbeth, like Faustus, becomes aware of his spiritual loss only through an increased awareness of what will happen to his "body left without a soul", a total extinction as if he had never lived. Throughout the play Macbeth's nightmare thought has been, "To be thus is nothing" (III. i. 1).

Each murder has been an attempt to forestall a possible threat to his security. In contrast, as he prepares for what must be an ultimate battle, a clash between Chaos and the forces of Order, he lives purely in the Now. His castle under siege has become a symbol of his predicament, the Chaos that must result when Order has been so ruthlessly overturned. The situation is that encountered at the very commencement of the play, only now it is Macbeth who fights to retain his crumbling world whereas before he fought to ensure the continuity of the order established by Duncan.

"The Queen, my lord, is dead," Seyton says, and the word "dead" can have no meaning for Macbeth at this moment in the heat of preparations for war. Living as he is for the first time in the play in the *now*, the word "dead" is incomprehensible. Death implies finality, the end of all endeavour. Lady Macbeth no longer exists either in the *now* or in some vague future lying somewhere after the battle. She is no longer part of this world of yesterdays, todays and tomorrows. If Lady Macbeth is removed now from the world of cause and effect, her husband remains in his Hades, forever "scotching" the immortal Snake of Insecurity. She has become one of the dead for whom the laws of time are now meaningless. In contrast, Macbeth is still time's prisoner, a prisoner of the now just as before he had been prisoner of "tomorrow". Consequently, he finds himself totally unable to give adequate response when faced with his wife's death. He has just claimed that the element of fear has virtually ceased to exist for him (V. v. 9). Fear is instinctive; grief is a sophistication of fear. Occupied with the *now* Macbeth is unable to feel the grief that he would like to experience; grief would be a catharsis. For the word "dead" to have any meaning for him now there would need to be a lull, a brief moment of respite and inactivity. As a result, his immediate reaction is to look away from the *now* to a vague "hereafter" when there will be a time for expressions of grief, for the recognition of the loss of a loved one, for the acceptance of aspects of character that have been rejected at so great a cost.

This is John Middleton Murry's interpretation of Macbeth's much debated. (*Shakespeare*, 1936, p., 335). She should have died hereafter (V. v.

17), and it is far more acceptable than that of John Dover Wilson who sees here a callous, preoccupied Macbeth who shrugs off his wife's death as an unfortunate but necessary consequence of Life. While it is true that Macbeth is here emphasizing the inevitability of death surely, from all that has been said before, it is more likely that the words are spoken in a tone of pity, pity for the fate of the wife, self-pity for the husband himself, pity for the fate of everyman. This interpretation is supported by the prevalent mood found in the famous "Tomorrow and Tomorrow" soliloquy that follows hard on the heels of news of his wife's death. Rather than concentrate on the emotional echoes of the word "hereafter", perhaps it would be more worthwhile to find verbal ones. The words "She should have died hereafter" find their parallel in the original prophecy of the witches: "All hail, Macbeth! that shalt be king Hereafter". (I. iii. 50).

The murder of Duncan had been committed to ensure the Inevitability of an otherwise vague promise, to ensure that a nebulous "hereafter" should have a definite date. Macbeth now sees that as human beings, victims of time, we can have no real control over or knowledge of the future. This has been the lesson Macbeth has been forced to learn as the play has progressed: we can no more control the future than we can have control over the life and death of someone we love. The Machiavel who tries to reshape the world to fit his own scheme does not find himself a rung higher on the ladder, he finds himself ultimately completely isolated from the world of his fellow men.

"Hereafter", no matter how vague it may be, is still twin of that "tomorrow" that has dogged Macbeth throughout the play from the first prophecy of the witches. Having uttered the word, Macbeth pulls himself up short, ruefully realising that once again he has fallen into the trap of living for Tomorrow. "I have lived long enough", he says in the interrupted soliloquy of Act V Scene iii. Now the news of the death of his wife has borne out the truth of his words. There never is a time for the perfect realization of one's plans; there never would be a time when the crown would sit permanently secure on his head, never a time when his "dear partner" would be able to receive fitting homage for the dead. Tomorrow is as much an illusion as one's dreams of security and lasting happiness. There is only *now*, forever unresolved, forever chaotic in its imperfection, an eternal mirror of Hell itself.

Time, then, is the true protagonist of *Macbeth*. Before the murder of King Duncan we hear the terrible death knell of the king in the repeated word

"Done" in: "If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well/ It were done quickly. (I. vii. 1-2). We hear the ticking of the clock in the apical stops of "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" (V. v. 19). It is there again in that same speech in the words Day to Day (line 20), just as it can also be heard in the labial stops of "petty pace".

In this great soliloquy it should be noted that Shakespeare balances "Tomorrow" (line 19) against "All our yesterdays" (line 22). There is the horror of lost opportunities in the word "All", and in the plural of "Yesterdays". Our "yesterdays" never prepare us to meet our "tomorrows".

What then are the lessons of the past? The Elizabethans, on their great wave of Humanism, full of boundless optimism in man and progress, would have answered that we move ever upwards, from lower forms to higher. Man is the Microcosm, the little world, made in the image of God. In act II scene ii of *Hamlet* the protagonist cries:

How Noble in Reason! how infinite in faculty!
In apprehension how like a God!

Hamlet, a Jacobean in his pessimism found himself opposed to this easy philosophy: "and yet to me, what is this quintessence of dust?".

Macbeth, a mature Jacobean where Hamlet had been ahead of his time, found himself and all men walking in the "murky" darkness of misunderstanding, lit only by the feeble light of wisdom that is in man. "Out, out, brief candle!" he cries in anguish in line 23 and clearly we are intended to parallel this exclamation with Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking cry of "Out, damned spot!" (V. i. 34). Life is short and God's gift of eternal life, an immortal soul, so easily overlooked and thrown away. Duncan's body had held so much blood, so much eternal life. Macbeth and his wife, like the sailor had been drained "dry as hay" by the witches (I. iii. 18), and a tiny spot of Duncan's life-blood, the mark of Cain, the first murderer, had been enough to damn them both. Macbeth's cry of grief has personal reference, then, to his dead wife doomed, as he is, to the perpetual darkness of Hell. It has, however, reference also to all human life. All lives are but brief candles, doomed to extinction at their commencement except for the Grace of God.