Macbeth : One of Us?

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Macbeth comes to a tragic end as a result of a flaw in his character. The main responsibility is, and must be, his. In his Jekyll and Hyde struggle, Macbeth portrays any one of us to ourselves. At the core of his being is the factor that we all have to contend with and educate ourselves to overcome: contempt for others, for the world outside, and thus for himself.

In Macbeth we have the meeting of the known world, as perceived by the ordinary human senses, with the unknown world, that not normally perceived by ordinary flesh and blood. We all have something in us that is aware of something unknown, something threatening. In this play we have a meeting between opposites such as happiness and unhappiness, present and future, the latter seen, as it were, through a glass, darkly, but through a cracked glass. In short, it is a meeting between the agendas of life and death.

We also have here people who react in opposing ways to the offer of a gamble on their future. Some take to the thrill and the dangers, others do not wish to get involved. Banquo is not so keen on believing in future power for his descendants when the thought is voiced by the witches. The atmosphere from the start is foul; something is blocking the spiritual sewers. He notes that they are not quite the sort of women that he would like to deal with. He prefers unbearded women. Aficionados of Shakespeare plays would discern a joke here, since all roles would originally have been played by the bearded (if clean-shaven) gender, but the point is a serious one.

For Macbeth, there is nothing to laugh at, but plenty to rejoice over in the witches’ predictions of what he interprets as good fortune. He may play along with Banquo and laugh it off, but his thoughts, in soliloquy, give the lie to that act. He prizes the message, no matter how unappealing the messengers. He has brought certain dark thoughts to the encounter that...
mix with their predictions.

The three witches who open Shakespeare’s Scottish play are planning to meet Macbeth. He knows nothing of this meeting. For him it will be a chance encounter, but this very ‘fortunate’ aspect will work to the witches’ advantage in Macbeth’s mind. He is ripe for ‘good fortune’, but they have scented corruption in his character. This is their opportunity to turn ‘good’ into ‘bad’.

The witches are not a very savoury threesome. Why are they then concerned to tell Macbeth news that should be good, yet which turns out so bad? Why do they choose to surprise him, along with Banquo, in such a place, at such a time and in such appalling weather? How can they predict such things? On what authority do they base their predictions of kingship for Macbeth (with the spicy hors d’oeuvre that he is already Thane of Cawdor) and a royal dynasty starting with Banquo’s son? Are they working for someone? They are not working for Macbeth. Indeed, he gets something for nothing. Are they then good Christians?

As these things take place, the important thing on stage is the reaction of each man. Banquo dismisses the witches as something to be suspicious of, the kind of spirits that work for evil. He does not like this ‘fortune’, or perhaps he does not like the bearers. If it were true that his son were to be the father of a line of kings, he would surely not be displeased. Macbeth thinks so. In the play they appear to Macbeth alone, except for this initial meeting. The witches are quite deliberately allowing him to be a witness. His mind is able to take subliminal ‘snapshots’ of Macbeth’s behaviour following the meeting on the heath in that memorably foul weather. As with such ‘snapshots’, they are filed away somewhere in the mind, until some later event happens that triggers a connection. Banquo will put two and two together and suspect Macbeth of involvement in the murder of Duncan. Unfortunately for Banquo, Macbeth will also sense his suspicion, as also that of Macduff. This is a play that is characterised, not only by the copious letting of blood, but also by smell, the scenting of intentions (or, as with Duncan, the complete dulling of one’s scenting or ‘reading’ of the most dangerous people).

From the outset Macbeth seems in two minds. When he encounters the witches, it is obvious that he does not know them. The witches have not been introduced to Macbeth before, but they seem to think that they know him. It turns out that they are basing what they say on a reading of Macbeth’s heart and mind. On stage, before that fateful first meeting with the witches, we hear him fulsomely praised by his peers as a fearsome soldier, loyal to his king. Unconcerned for his own safety, he does not flinch from the thick of battle, the most vicious close combat, hand-to-hand fighting. He has won a fearsome reputation, and the King is so impressed at the reports he hears that he adds a further noble title to Macbeth’s honours: that of Thane of Cawdor.

The spirit powers, however, have another sense of Macbeth’s character, and three spirit agents—spiritual freelancers—decide to try him at his weak spots. Some in the audience might not like the kind of man who works himself up into such a fury that he “unseam(s)...from the nave to the chaps” a man he has killed in battle. Is this evidence of a lack of moderation and
balance? It is certainly not seen so at first, and it raises Macbeth’s profile and his standing among his military colleagues. When Macbeth sees Banquo’s ghost and loses self-control, however, his Queen tells the guests that he is occasionally prone to such temporary fits, having been born that way. Is she lying, to cover up? On an earlier occasion, when Duncan’s murder had been discovered and Macbeth had admitted to killing the bodyguards in a fit of anger, she had fainted—or did she merely feint, in order to distract attention from Macbeth and his strange action in killing the bodyguards before they could be tried? Or is Macbeth actually prone to fits of passion and rage? He did not seem to be too calm before and immediately after the regicide. He is, as we have seen, a wild man when unleashed in battle. He is also given to marvellous bursts of speech that show great insight into the nature of life. Are these moments also examples of some kind of ‘seizure’? Why does so much energy build up, only to either stall him or else to be released with extraordinary power? Should we wonder whether Macbeth always faces his enemies when he kills them and then occasionally “unseam(s)” them?

Speaking thus, I show that I have never been in the position of close combat to the death. When it is a matter of my life or that of a man who is about to strike me with a broadsword or an axe, would my self-control and upbringing not themselves be “unseamed”? Yet, when Harold Bloom writes of how Macbeth the tyrant and murderer is actually each of us, it is a matter, not so much of ‘affect’ as of calculation in Macbeth and thus, if the parallel holds, in each of us, too (Bloom 1998: pp. 516ff.). In each of us, it is an effect of Shakespeare’s portrayal of a human being’s proleptic imagination. Each of us has such an imagination to one degree or another, and in Macbeth it is particularly strong. He speaks a third of the lines in the play, and his imagination alternates between a firm intention to attain a particular outcome and the fear of opposing results. Hyde ends up overruling Jekyll, and Macbeth opts for believing that the end justifies the means.

Among the stage characters, there is a strong sense of this understanding that others have a deeper and unpalatable side, either actually or potentially. As in any human society, there will certainly be lots of ‘snapshot’ memories and impressions of Macbeth’s actions and quirks filed away in people’s minds over the course of time, small things that may not be consciously felt or thought further of, until doubts surface, such as those that connect with the regicide and with King Macbeth’s signs of increasing tyranny and spite. Banquo and Macduff are quick to distance themselves. They smell a rat, and Macbeth is quick to sense their suspicions. Then, as little snapshots pop up increasingly the more that people murmur, adding to rumour and gossip, he rapidly loses public favour. The atmosphere of war has come from the battlefields outside and is now about to rage in the hearts and minds of the people at large. The gravedigger in Hamlet says that Possession is the greatest cooler; cooling ardour and interest. Macbeth, having procured power by evil, feels dissatisfied, feels insecure, and he needs to blow on the flames, to fan his ardour, in effect, to become more evil and more determined—and independently now of Lady Macbeth. There is a sense that he is hoisted on his own petard, and that, far from controlling events, he is now being driven by them. For the good and the wicked alike, there is no peace, no rest in this realm. Truly, Macbeth has murdered sleep. This is the
wider aim of those spoilers, the evil spirit forces. They cannot overrule the mind of any human, however. That decision is only his, or hers, along with the responsibility.

“I Am Not Prince Hamlet”, Nor King Lear, But I Am Macbeth

Macbeth is not a cartoon-like personification of evil. There is good in him, too. A major decision has to be made, however, pitting part of Macbeth against another part. Bloom describes this struggle going on in Macbeth as our own latent or actual Jekyll and Hyde struggle, too. Each of us is potentially in Macbeth, and he in us, be we mighty or lowly. It is to this potential affinity between Macbeth and us that Bloom attributes the power of the tragedy to move us. Germaine Greer (1986) brings to our attention that “theatre” in Shakespeare’s time was defined more broadly, not as the particular actions of particular people in particular locations, but rather as a conspectus, a compendious view of human life in toto. She also informs us that the audience at a Shakespearean tragedy would not be expected to sit paralysed by pity and terror, awaiting the passive catharsis of potentially noxious feelings; now, as then, when connecting with the play, they are actively involved in understanding, interpreting, judging the characters on stage, even going from commiseration to condemnation, identification with, say, Macbeth, and rejection of him. Shakespeare obviously intends certain reactions to his plays, but it really is a case of the audience having room to, and being expected to, make up their own minds about what he leaves open to interpretation. "Shakespeare," writes Greer, "unlike his better-educated competitors, flourished no whips and administered no pills." (Greer 1986: 27) This should guide our teaching and studying of Shakespeare. The deeper, all-encompassing general truths, the connection with reality, all this is strong enough to handle initial misunderstanding, since living and growing experience helps us to see that Shakespeare does, indeed, mirror us more than we reflect him. Bloom puts it thus:

Shakespeare's plays are the wheel of all our lives, and teach us
whether we are the fools of time or of love, or of fortune, or of our
parents, or of ourselves.

(Bloom 1998: 735)

Surely it is the last that predominates in Macbeth's foolishness. Whereas we could agree with Bloom that Hamlet is such a powerful intellect as to be somewhat beyond us, and Lear is somewhat more than human in his depths of suffering, the role of Macbeth is more easily amenable to ordinary members of the audience, even those who have not murdered. Bloom writes that Macbeth exceeds us in energy and in torment, but he also represents us, and we discover him more vividly within us the more deeply we delve (Bloom 1998: 545). Factors linking us inextricably to a Macbeth are: volition; contempt; the sense of right and wrong. We might not produce the actions and convincing speech of Macbeth, but we can discern a shared
Granville-Barker wrote that Shakespeare possessed the "dramatist's necessary power of bringing thought and vague emotion to the terms of action and convincing speech." He also praised Shakespeare's peculiar gift of bringing into contribution the common-place traffic of life. However wide the spoken word may range, there must be the actor, anchored to the stage. However high, then, with Shakespeare, the thought or emotion may soar, we shall always find the transcendental set in the familiar.

(Granville-Barker 1993: 24)

Sensed by the Spirit / Senses? / The Indispensable Role of Human Volition

There are expressions in English that liken human victims to food for inimical forces, whether animal, human, or diabolic. X preys on Y; M makes a meal of N; N is a dog's dinner. It could be this brutality that Banquo scents when the witches appear. Mortals, too, can scent good and evil. Something interferes with Macbeth's senses, however. This is all the more unfortunate, since Macbeth is the witches' immediate prey, crucial to their wider design. The wider prey is humanity in general. Those witches have probably had Macbeth in mind for tempting, for spicing up, mainly with his own ambition, a festering sore inside him. Such spirits have a nose for timely opportunities to spoil human life. They can show themselves or not to the human eye. They are able to eavesdrop, hearing Macbeth so highly praised by his peers, and then by a king whose gifts of intuition, of reading the human heart, are lacking. King Duncan is keen to trust people wholeheartedly, which is a dangerous thing to do in a Shakespearean royal court. This King is lacking in true vigilance. He depends all the more for his survival on the good offices of his vassals. The former Thane of Cawdor was a traitor who had seemed totally trustworthy; the new one is also now totally trustworthy in the King's sight.

Or is the King perhaps not somewhat cautious? A Shakespeare play leaves the audience, and especially the reader, room for a range of reactions and interpretations. When naming his successor as king, Duncan could have chosen anyone; in those days, succession following a king's blood line was not the usual practice that it became. He decides, however, to keep the crown in the family. His elder son, Malcolm, is not shown in such a good light in the few scenes where he speaks. He is concerned more to save his own skin from the "daggers in men's smiles", rather than bewailing his father's murder. Events cannot be controlled by the witches, but they can be manipulated, when they are known, or guessed at, in advance. The witches' manipulations depend on the free will of each human being for their efficacy. The weird sisters, too, have to resort to gambling that their human prey will swallow the bait. With the King's decision on precisely that occasion to nominate Malcolm as the next king, Macbeth, fired up by the witches' prediction of his own succession, reacts with fury—but not in public. He acts the part of a loyal servant in front of the King and his peers.
I Am / You Are Macbeth

It is this capacity in people to act, to put on masks, theatrical or figurative, that links the Shakespearean stage and everyday life, in all countries, at all times. 'Being' Macbeth, in this sense, does not say that we are actually murderers. Shakespeare had a 'capacity to taste without swallowing, to dally with the tempter until he is intimately acquainted with him, only in the end to resist the temptation' (H. Goddard, quoted in Bloom 1998:135). Actors, too, need that capacity. All the world is a stage, and each of us an actor; some of us are better dissimulators, some better revealers than others. Some actors develop in the part; thus Macbeth. He can then dispense with the support of his wife behind the scenes. This play shows us the good, the bad and the ugly in human life, and the ugly in the world of evil spirits. We see a maniac tyrant whose own blood is added to all that he has shed and caused to be shed. He comes to manipulate Banquo's eventual murderers, men who are rendered utterly desperate because of the revenge that Macbeth, a tempter himself, whips up in them, so that they willingly go beyond the pale of civilised life.

Macbeth is urged on at the critical moment by a woman who is ambitious but quite content to bask in her husband's glory. Shakespeare here shows us a woman who thinks she knows her husband, but who is going to find out, when she is sidelined, that she does not know him as well as she thought. Her tidy definition of 'a man' proves to be insufficient, limited and limiting. She does not know people as well as Shakespeare does. This is probably the main thing that undoes her, ripping away the shield behind which she has hidden from the glare of just how evil their deeds have been, and she realises how they are both prisoners of their actions, how their deeds are now controlling them. For Macbeth is constrained to follow the logical progression of a life of deceit, murder, intrigue and the loss of true security, the trust of others and his self-respect, or else he has to cease and repent, relinquishing all he has gained and probably being executed. The rejection of these promptings requires a mammoth effort of will—of ill-will and contempt towards others.

We have to remember that Macbeth is backing a losing strategy that his initial act of murder will not beget more murder, that it might be 'the be-all and the end-all' but the blame for his wrong gamble rests fairly and squarely with him. He is no more, and no less, subject to temptation than any other human being. Jan Kott (1974:90ff.) claims that the act of killing changes Macbeth to a man who feels he must murder more. The act of murdering has opened his eyes to imminent and long-term dangers: committing murder has been an act of cognition. His friend, Banquo, and Banquo's son, Fleance, are serious threats now. He pays assassins to remove the threats posed by the two. Given the prophecy that Macbeth is relying on, this is an odd oversight by Macbeth. The boy is said to be destined to take over a crown and be the first in a dynasty. Why does Macbeth accept the prophecy that has been proved partly true in his case, but not the part that predicts Fleance's assumption of a crown? Who says it must be Macbeth's crown that Fleance would assume? There is an outside chance, perhaps, that Macbeth would die childless, and that the crown would pass thus. Of course, a
mind set on contempt for others, on self-aggrandisement at the expense of others, is distorted and unable to handle any possibilities other than those of defeating or falling victim to someone whose mindset is assumed to be similar, that is, out for himself, whatever the cost to others. In effect, Macbeth becomes hooked on the drug of power achieved in such a way. The mass-murder of Macduff’s family is an act of revenge. Macduff was the one to kill, not his family. As all tyrants throughout history, Macbeth tries to be an original: to set a new pattern, a unique one, superseding the acquired wisdom of mankind throughout the ages, which urges him not to put his evil plans into operation, because the triumph of evil, no matter how long it lasts, is temporary. We could refer to this wisdom as either Christianity, Macbeth being a figure from 11th-century Scotland, written up in 17th-century England, or, more broadly, borrowing from C. S. Lewis (1978), as the Tao. The relationship between the Tao and the Bible, the Torah or the Koran, is perhaps as phonemic is to phonetic.

We need to explain the sense of Tao as it is used here, with its bearing on Macbeth’s responsibility. Perhaps we should also first look at what Macbeth’s contempt might be. Repeated mention has been made of contempt. This offers us one way of connecting the mind of a Macbeth, a stage character, with the mind of any actual person throughout time.

Macbeth’s “Contempt”

The American poet and educator, Eli Siegel (1902–78), defined the source of human woe as the “contempt” that a person feels for others and thus, unavoidably, deep down, for himself. This contempt consists of making less of others in order to make oneself more. In the Macbeths it stokes their ambition. Pride in oneself, along with kindness and justice towards others, is necessary for every conscious human being. It is a source, too, of beauty in life. The opposite is “contempt”, which is a source of ugliness and sickness. This sort of contempt has many degrees. Sometimes Lady Macbeth nags her husband and ridicules him for being unmanly when he is aware of doing wrong and when he remembers society’s education, that doing wrong will always ultimately end in defeat for the wrong-doer, if not at the hands of man, then at the hands of God. Does she love him? It seems at first that they are deeply in love, but it becomes clear that they were both aiming high with their marriage. Lady Macbeth says that she has breast-fed a child, which hints that Macbeth is not her first husband. There is no child now, but Macbeth is planning to raise sons. It seems that they had been thinking of higher social roles even before his meeting with the witches and then with the King, meetings that resulted in a very excited Macbeth sending a letter to his wife in their castle, a letter that fires her to unusual and fearsome heights of passion and determination to strike while the iron is hot.

Although the Macbeths plot regicide and carry it out, each is still like any ordinary person in so many ways. A fundamental characteristic is the constant need in all humans since time began: to like the world and to be well-thought of. To truly satisfy this basic need, it is not enough to be liked by a hoodwinked world. The reasons for liking and being liked must be
adequate or legitimate. From the beginning of the play, Macbeth has been feeling a discrepancy concerning these twin needs. Macbeth's stock, his reputation, has been very high. Before the play starts, however, it would seem that ambition has been stirring in this Scottish Achilles, rattling around his chest like an old cough. No medicine has yet removed that rattle. Betokened by Fate, nothing could render the mythical Achilles' heel invulnerable. The difference is that Achilles was a victim of his mother's oversight; Macbeth's rattling cough is a result of self-exposure. It follows that, while one is full of contempt for the world, one is deeply dissatisfied and unsettled. The approbation by others simply stokes the contempt. Is it not so that, when he hears the compliments and receives the veneration of his peers, and of his superiors, while harbouring such opposing thoughts, he waxes at the thought of his prowess in battle and meets with contempt the unwitting praise of his stalwart loyalty?

Shakespeare's use of dramatic irony helps illustrate what is going on behind Macbeth's eyes. Duncan has a knack for saying how he has been wrong in his judgements and fulsome praise of people such as the previous Thane of Cawdor, and then Macbeth immediately comes before him and is rewarded with parallel fulsome praise and trust, also as the Thane of Cawdor. We could be forgiven for seeing the ironic workings of Fate here. This Fate, however, needs input from Macbeth's own volition, a movement of his spirit which sets the Wheel of Fate in motion, wind driving the sails of the windmill.

Macbeth's contempt must also work on his love and respect for his wife. When she nags and chides him for his lack of manliness, as she perceives it, he knows deep down that she is getting him wrong. He expresses his thanks to her for her fortitude before the regicide, but she finds out soon that things are more complicated than her tidy little plan had allowed for. She is troubled that their life as King and Queen has led to a distancing between them, instead of enabling them to be even closer. Macbeth's lines in III.2 are similar to his wife's invocation to evil in I.5, and must chill her, because she realises that he no longer needs her to reach those depths of determination. She is sidelined; things are being planned, murders are happening, her husband is more and more possessed by spirits outside her control, outside her ken, and their marital life is sidelined by his growing political cares. She is the one who cracks, as the fundamentals of life, our need to do right, to respect the outside world, and thus ourselves, bubble up and take the form of the bloodstains that will not disappear, that remind her of her evil deeds and her failure to attain the happiness she thought would flow abundantly. The indelible bloodstains are obviously restored by her conscience, and they help to drive her into troubled sleep, isolation, insanity, and finally suicide.

Macbeth, however, holds on to his contempt and intensifies it. Accordingly, his ranting and raving also become intensified. He has but two choices: to repent sincerely, with a whole heart, and submit himself to the consequences, or to push on to the bitter end, without apology, with obvious hatred for all others, even for himself. This is what Bloom describes as his Jekyll and Hyde struggle. He continues to have, and to suppress, moments when he realises the futility of all he has unleashed.

For Bloom (1998: 534), whereas Hamlet is beyond us in intellect and Lear's madness and
suffering is almost more than human, Macbeth is all too human. The role is open to the audience: we can perceive that he is violating the human nature we share, his consciousness has our contours. In energy and in torment Macbeth exceeds most of us, but he also represents us. The more deeply we delve into ourselves, the more vividly we discover Macbeth within us (p. 545).

Jonathan Bate describes Shakespeare as “wantonly insincere”: this intriguing expression is not meant as a negative aspect of Shakespeare, but is an admiring tribute to his sincerity and lasting power as an artist who does not “project himself into his heroes. That is why so much room remains for his spectators and readers to project themselves into the world of the plays” (Bate 1997a:17). Even that fierce critic of King Lear, Tolstoy, praises Shakespeare for his representation of the play of emotion, of states of mind, of developments or changes of feeling in the characters he represents. This is precisely the point that makes Shakespeare so effective: Shakespeare makes his characters “the embodiments of the fluidity, of the play of action”, rather than the fixed entities of his sources.

Shakespeare does not need to have killed or framed others or planned assassinations in order to portray a powerfully convincing Macbeth; neither does the spectator or reader need to have done those things in order to be convinced that he or she is also capable of them.

Shakespeare, the Protean and the *Tao*

One thing that audiences share with the Macbeths is the insecurity of being mere mortal flesh. Another important factor in common is the capacity to dream of and even play-act at making one’s situation different and more favourable. The dream of immortality comes with the human mind. So does the need to deal with the competing drives of contempt (as defined above) and acceptance of the *Tao*.

What is Macbeth doing in trusting to the predictions of these witches without being required to make a Faustian sacrifice (of his soul, or some other meaningful sacrifice)? It strikes our modern world as nonsense. If we take the play out of its framework of magic, post-medieval mumbo-jumbo, and connect with what is at work in it, we need to put logic to one side, as millions of humans have done, and continue to do, throughout time, across all cultures. Perhaps the secret of existence, writes Gerhardie (1974), is outside logic. Tested by logic, life makes nonsense. Logic cannot explain the truth to its own logical satisfaction, and it stays aloof from a spiritual sense of truth. Living involves a "gradation of consciousness in a universe at once static and transitory" (Gerhardie 1974:28). It is transitory in that the experience of life is determined by change, and it is static in that our consciousness seems independent of change, "as if we were sitting still in a moving vehicle" (p. 28). Living does not take place in the twinkling of an eye. Logic is a rule-of-thumb affair, inaccurately precise when confronted by transcendent values. Bate (1997b) alludes to similar thinking by Jose Luis Borges, who wrote that fundamental identity is one of existing, dreaming and acting. These three would seem to be dissolving into one another. "No-one," wrote Borges, "has ever been so
many men as this man (Shakespeare), who like the Egyptian Proteus could exhaust all the
guises of reality” (Bate, 1997a: 33). This is in an allegory that shows Shakespeare being lauded
by God Himself, from a Job-like whirlwind. In defending Shakespeare against Tolstoy’s claim
that there is an absence of understandable motivation and thus of sincerity in his plays,
especially in King Lear, Bate lauds Shakespeare’s very art, his craft, his artifice:

The genius of King Lear is that it was written by a man who was
totally unlike his creation. The poetry of a teenager in love is sincere:
that is what makes it bad. The key to dramatic art is Insincerity, i.e.
that the author should only pretend keenly to feel what he expresses.
That way, he can pretend equally keenly to feel the opposite things
which he also expresses. He can infect the spectator with the feeling
of what it is like to be Goneril as well as that of what it is like to be
Lear.

(Bate 1997a: 15; Bate 1997b: 150)

The use of “sincerity” and “insincerity” could be troublesome. The point to aim at is that
Shakespeare, like any great artist, is not trapped by his “sincerity”, when it exists, but can
keep it at a healthy distance, feel it to a degree that does not stifle. Shakespeare was wide-
ranging while checked by wisdom. As far as we know, he was not a murderer, although many
of his characters are. Just how religious he was we can also not tell. I am not so sure about
Bate’s (and Bloom’s) assertion that Macbeth, as many other Shakespeare plays, is lacking in
religious sentiment, is not clearly Christian, but has pagan qualities, and does not invoke God.
God does not have to be clearly invoked in order to be present. There are aspects of ‘God’ in
the form of what C. S. Lewis in 1943 called “the Tao” (Lewis 1978: 14ff., 49-59). This
conception is the body of collected wisdom common to all societies and ages, whether ancient
Jewish, Greek, Hindu, Chinese, Aboriginal, Islamic, Christian, and not seriously challenged until
modern times. For the Chinese, the Tao was

the reality beyond all predicates...Nature...the Road...the Way in which
the universe goes on, the Way in which things everlastingly emerge,
stilly and tranquilly, into space and time. It is also the Way which
every man should tread in imitation of that cosmic and supercosmic
progression, conforming all activities to that great exemplar. ‘In
ritual,’ say the Analects <of Confucius>, ‘it is harmony with nature
that is being prized.’ The ancient Jews likewise praise the Law as
being ‘true’.

(Lewis 1978: 15-16)
I think that there is room for both the Japanese director, Akira Kurosawa, to apply a ruthless Japanese samurai stamp on Shakespeare’s play in his *Kumo no suijoh* (*Castle of the Spider’s Web*), re-establishing a kind of *wa*, and also for a Christian to see Christian principles as implicit.

The heart can never take the place of the head, but it can and should obey it. In Kurosawa’s film as in a Christian interpretation, the usurper and murderer has to pay the price of infringing the *Tao* without repentance. This penalty is not just death, but total misery beforehand. Wherever and whenever he lives, he has been taught from the *Tao* (until modern times, perhaps). At the core of the *Tao* are absolute truths, based on the understanding that all successful living prepares for inevitable death by learning, practising and teaching the need for kindness towards others, the need to feel at one with reality, to be able to overcome “contempt” for others, for the rest of the outside world, and to thus be able to have self-respect. This is the way to handle an existence in which there are so many oppositions. This, the promptings of conscience, the awareness of right and wrong as components of a system of absolute beliefs, may be considered outdated by the modern *Zeitgeist*, which recommends a pick’n’mix approach to the *Tao*, attending to whatever bits appeal to an individual’s tastes and ignoring the rest, but it is the source of Macbeth’s hesitations, his discomfort and his regrets:

To know my deed, 'twere best not to know myself.

..............................

Wake Duncan with thy knocking: I would thou couldst.

(End of II.2)

The witches have failed to penetrate Banquo’s defences, but they have penetrated Macbeth’s guard, established in accordance with the *Tao*, and he makes several references to this penetration. However, they made no mention of murdering the King in order to win the crown. Macbeth is the one who lets his guard down, possibly having already been thinking of seizing power. In I.3, he makes mention, in an aside, of his “horrible imaginings”. He is yielding to “that suggestion, / Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair / And make my seated heart knock at my ribs / Against the use of nature...”. The thought of murder shakes him to the core, because he feels how “function / Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is, / But what is not.” Instead of repenting, despite repeated expressions of regret, Macbeth digs himself deeper into a hole. His bestial behaviour relies on his animal instincts, raging more and more at the trap that holds him; his human side, in part aware of the downside of infringing the *Tao*, places all reliance on the sure bet of the witches, on their prediction that no mortal man can ever defeat him, and that their predictions are dressed up in some quaint imagery, things as impossible as the appearance of a walking forest if he is ever to lose his throne. Macbeth’s understanding is undone by twists of language, by the workings of speaker’s meaning and listener’s interpretation. The spirits he consults play with him, as a cat with a mouse. The first apparition whets his fear by telling him something he already feels: twice he is told to
beware Macduff, but the apparition refuses to be questioned. Having hooked Macbeth, the spirits send word by the second apparition that Macbeth need have no fear and that he should

Be bloody, bold and resolute; laugh to scorn
The power of man, for none of woman born
Shall harm Macbeth.

(IV.1)

This smacks of a life insurance policy offered by a shady company to people who want the shortest cut to the maximum benefit. Macbeth neither sees nor looks for the small print, the clauses or phrases that they do not mention: a key omission is that he is vulnerable to a man born by Caesarean section. What the witches deliberately do not say, as in the earlier meetings, is the crucial bit. They leave out qualifications such as “born in a normal delivery, without forceps”. In fact, he decides, as it were, to take out a second insurance policy, by killing Macduff. His confidence is not total: he is gambling, and his stress continues. The discomfort originating in his contempt is inevitable. Once the witches have disappeared, Macbeth finds out from Lennox that they have not appeared to him. His head is the source of the utterance:

Infected be the air on which they ride,
And damned all those that trust them.

(IV.1)

As he reverts to the bestial, the Hyde in his character, Macbeth does choose to trust them, and fights like a lion, unafraid, until the moment he finds out how Macduff was born. At this, he realises that the last line quoted is exact: he is damned, and he has trusted them instead of rejecting them and repenting sincerely. The promptings he has overruled, the shadowy insecurity, the doubts in the credibility of the witches, burst forth in his mind from where he buried them. Although, consequentially, he rallies and determines to go down fighting, his heart is no longer as stout as before, and the head that should have helped him overcome the wrong temptations is hacked off.

Macbeth dominates the play, and almost all other characters are not allowed by Shakespeare to compete with him. Malcolm is not shown conclusively, but one is left wondering whether Malcolm’s reign will be good, peaceful, or even long, and just how Banquo’s son will found a dynasty.

Just How Doomed Is Macbeth?

A Christian view of Macbeth would not feel that he is being overruled by evil spirit forces. The role of his free will is paramount to fully understanding his tragedy. There is a chance for Macbeth to extract himself, at any stage, from total perdition. As we have seen, things do not
go fully according to the Macbeths' plan, because of their fractured reading of the witches' predictions. In fact, things go from bad to worse, and the Macbeths themselves are split apart.

It could be argued things actually go fully in accordance with the Way of the World as designed. Throughout history, lightning strikes again and again. William Gerhardie (1981) wrote of a process, constant throughout time, as inexorable as death, a factor built-in to life, whereby mankind's greatest and most desired and worked out plans always ultimately come to nothing if they are not in accordance with the way of God's plan, programmed into history. This repeated, unfailing undoing of man's attempts to overrule God Gerhardie called "God's fifth column", which undermines man's plans from within man himself, operating as a spiritual agent in the gate of matter. This is stated in a different way by Eli Siegel in his ideas about "Aesthetic Realism". Siegel worked out a seemingly simple formula that human beings need to follow, of their own free wills, in order to achieve satisfaction rather than frustration. What the self is essentially going after is not necessarily what is designed to produce the maximum good for the individual, others and the world outside in totality. The self is constructed to feel at ease with what is good and by exerting its free will for good. "Good" here means anything on the scale from love to kindness as applied to others, with no demand for reward, and no resentment if reward or even the barest acknowledgement does not result. On the whole, it always does result from genuine goodwill and kindness, if not at a time and intensity within our power. Siegel wrote:

The greatest fight man is concerned with, is the fight between respect for reality and contempt for reality ... The large fight...in every mind, every mind of once, every mind of now, is between seeing the world or reality as having meaning, aesthetic order, and some friendliness, a world which one can truly like; or seeing the world as disorderly, causeless, uncaring, something one cannot truly like.

(Siegel 1976)

Beckerman (1978) describes Macbeth's resistance to evil as "bankrupt". The witches are in the audience's focal vision on just three occasions. Aspects of what they say, do and show are in Macbeth's mind all the time, but this is because they are allied to what was already there: his sense of his own worth, his desire to be supreme, and his willingness to fill in the blanks that the witches do not fill in for him with his own desired outcome. This is perfect for the witches, whose plans depend for their success on the motive power of mortals. What Macbeth does not wish to believe he pushes to the outer, peripheral parts of his mind; what he prefers to believe is in his central vision. However, when he undergoes a crisis or reflects more deeply, he is discomfited by the presence of these unwanted possibilities. He has to deal with them by pushing them back to the periphery of his mind. In the early part of the play, Lady Macbeth is crucial for steeling him. Later, he relies on himself and his understanding of the guarantees he deduces from the information given by the witches. Like a hooked gambler anywhere, he
takes the partial returns as evidence that it is worth his while to gamble further. He is on to a certain gain. The first confirmation comes with the news that Macbeth is Thane of Cawdor. One has to wonder whether the witches heard the King say this, and then intercepted Macbeth and Banquo on the heath, even though the chronological order of scenes suggests that they are aware of the news in advance, by some magic or similar non-mortal power.

The Porter Scene: A Fitting Comic Interlude

With all the demonic plotting, the assassination and the rigging of evidence within its walls, Macbeth’s castle is indeed a hellish place. We can see that the Macbeths are giving themselves over to appalling evil, but there are still plenty of “ordinary” people who are not evil to that degree, although it is a potential in all of us. The comical Porter says things he understands on a simple level, but which resonate with deeper significance beyond his awareness. His crass words about the adverse effects of too much alcohol on sexual desire and performance—over-inflating desire and deflating performance—parallel Macbeth’s over-indulgence of the ‘drug’ of ambition, with subsequent damage to his ‘performance’ as a husband and as a ruler. As early as I.3 already, Macbeth was aware that “Function is covered in surmise”.

The Porter’s performance here only goes to remind us that ordinary folk concentrate, not on power-politics and intrigue, but on the physical needs of everyday survival, sex, carousing and the purveying of gossip and funny stories to offset the cares of life. Evil does not need to operate from within all people to the same intensity. Its agents are content to seek out those in strategic positions in life and who are seething with contempt. The Porter, however, is also full of contempt towards others, especially now those who have disturbed his sleep, and so he does not make any attempt to hurry to the door to allow the entry of travellers who are weary and as cold as he is. With his tongue he lashes them, to himself but in our hearing, not theirs. This could also be an expression of what Chesterton (1935:263) discerned in Dickens’s characters from the lowest social milieux: a way for the powerless and downtrodden to get back at their superiors by means of humour at their expense (in Dickens, in a specifically English context, this is usually heard by these superiors, who do feel brought down somewhat). Upwardly mobile Macbeths, beware of the wit of the lowest multitudes!

Let each of us also beware of the crossover between the figurative and the literal. George Mikes quipped that the aim of a person who is a wit is murder (Mikes 1970:15). The contempt of Macbeth’s porter sheds no physical blood, but his contempt, expressed in words, is yet on the continuum of contempt in humans that can end in physical murder. This murder cannot be undone in the way that murderous wit can, whether written or spoken, or “merely” thought. Where do we stand on this continuum, and how do we alter our position on it?

There is a problem in our day in understanding tragedy. Shakespeare and his original audiences will have had less difficulty with the claim of Pfister (1991) that it has been impossible to have ‘tragedy’ in Europe since the 19th century. Friedrich Duerrenmatt in 1976
stated that

(t)ragedy assumes guilt, trouble, moderation, range of vision, responsibility. In the routine muddle of our century, in this last dance of the white race, there are no longer any guilty people, nor any responsible ones either...Only comedy can still get at us.

(Duerrenmatt, quoted in Pfister, 1991: 35)

Duerrenmatt’s comments sound final, but they are born of the frustration of seeing major criminals throughout the 20th century escaping justice, even when the authorities know who and where they are, and even becoming authorities themselves. They are often in the archives of Press and TV, sometimes in the full glare of the media. I do not feel that tragedy has been removed from human consciousness, but it does find itself in a state of chronic desensitisation. When teaching and studying such plays, we need to cope with this, which is not so much a result of ‘dumbing down’ as of ‘numbing down’. Nowadays, thinking people seem to need to handle tragedy as inseparable from comedy, each shot through with the other. Either can cope with Bloom’s assertion of a deeper issue we would benefit from touching on with our numbed-down moral sense of responsibility: that human action is frequently antithetical to human words. We need to avoid the cut-and-dried approach of so much Hollywood and those others out for the quickest and biggest profit. Macbeth is not a born devil, feigning goodness and honourable conduct while all along intending to seize the best of all for himself. Cartoons do not sensitise us to the wrenching and the acidic decay going on in the very guts of the evildoer. Macbeth, as we see, ends up uncomfortable in himself, unable fully to still his conscience, his consciousness of what is right and wrong. The Tao will not be denied (although we may be tempted to remove it from the visible aspect in our modern culture, deciding it does not fit our home-grown, idiolectal assertions of reality). But as Macbeth rises in esteem, latent insecurity in his utterances turns to open contempt. Lady Macbeth too falls victim to this. Macbeth moves on away from those he once relied on, those he used as steps to use in his rise to power. Once at the top, who needs the steps? They are no longer of use, and he does not intend to use them again: for to use them again would be to descend.

We need not depair at the state of tragedy in the modern consciousness. In any case, as C. S. Lewis informs us (1936: 58), history shows us differing views of the essence of moral life. For modern people, the essence of moral life is the victory over temptation. For Aristotle, the really good man is not tempted at all, and has no need to overcome temptation. For Aristotle, it sounds as if the division between good and bad people is virtually unbridgeable. This is a recipe for despair, a recommendation against education, seeing life as a learning process. And yet, in other aspects, the Tao unites even those with such disparate views.

Through comedy, Calhoun Wilson writes (1973: 150, 180), we are shown the truth unflinchingly: it is a part of attaining freedom. The porter is one of those “inorganic” comic characters: unlike Lear’s Fool, who is enmeshed in the tragedy and aware of it, the Porter is
unaware and only touches for a few moments, unwittingly, the hideous reality that Macbeth’s
castle is a place of Hell.

The Porter scene, inseparable from the deep tragedy gathering force, is a fitting, if jarring
and chilling, comic interlude; it derives from the horrific tragedy going on in Macbeth, on the
stage or the page, and in the world around; it also serves as an end to these musings.

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