

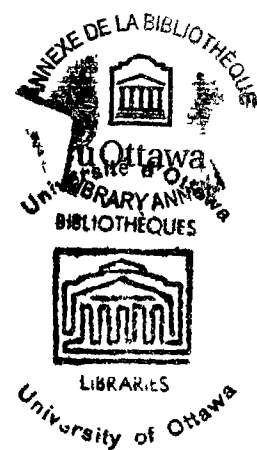
IRONY IN MACBETH

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Ours

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INTRODUCTION

The problem presented here places itself in the line of the more recent interpretations of either the imagery or motives or characters in Shakespeare's dramas. Like many of those modern theories, our views may seem at times to be tainted with the fancy of personal conviction.

Yet in bringing together the occasional and scattered statements of authorized critics about the irony in Macbeth and applying the principles exposed in learned studies on irony to that particular play we found that the subject was worth investigating.

After a brief survey of the various meanings gathered by the word irony throughout the centuries it was necessary to assert its presence in Macbeth, the way it was worked into the pattern of the play and into the language, and, finally, its use for emphasis in character portrayal. Our study deals with a trait deeply reflected in the temperament and literature of the Greeks. Instead of recalling constantly to memory the principles of classical drama and how Shakespeare's differed from it or conformed to it, a method of illustrative parallels was favored whenever useful.

It will be noticed that we have avoided reporting on many subjects of discussions and quarrels. Those features of drama only that are directly or indirectly connected with irony were given consideration.

CHAPTER I

IRONY, ITS ASPECTS, ITS HISTORY

In its Greek origin, irony was the characteristic of a certain kind of man, the dissembler. He said less than he knew, unlike the truthful man and of course still more unlike his opposite the boaster who exaggerated what he knew. The ironical man was aware of the dangers to which one is exposed in life from envious men and even from envious gods and therefore played safe and kept quiet tempting neither providence nor his fellowmen.

Such was the attitude of most of Homer's characters in the face of the evils of life. They showed a manly endurance but they nevertheless relied on their frank recognition of the power of the supernatural beings who ruled over them. It produced a fear or even distrust of the gods and a cautious attitude of moderation. Even if the form of it varies, that thought penetrates and pervades Greek literature: tempt not the gods or fate; be quiet, obscure life is the safest and happiest.

If one could be certain that such precautions are useful, how happy life would be. Yet there remains the dark inscrutability of Fate. Some evils come from our own folly, others from the fancy of the gods and we can seldom draw the line clearly between the two sources of evil. Here is

matter for tragedy; and when the mood is less of sympathy than of intellectual apprehension, for irony. We all know to what glorious extent both themes have been exploited by the Greek dramatists.

If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me.

Without my stir, 1, says Macbeth. He shows by these words a spirit of caution that resembles that of the early Greek ironical man. His subsequent deliberations do state the profound reasons of his abstention:

.....that but this blow
 Might be the be-all and the end-all here,
 But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
 We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases
 We still have judgment here; that we but teach
 Bloody instruction, which being taught return
 To plague the inventor: this even-handed justice
 Commends the ingredients of our poison'd chalice
 To our own lips. 2

It is the hesitation of a troubled soul in the presence of a choice, the search for security, that suggests here similar Greek attitudes.

1 Macbeth, Act 1, scene 3, line 143.
 2 Ibidem, Act 1, scene 6, line 3-12.

But since irony is the most universal and characteristic trait of Greek temperament and style its use takes various forms. It lends itself particularly to dialogue in which one speaker deliberately practices dissimulation, either feigning ignorance in order to provoke or confound an antagonist, or feigning respectful agreement with his views as a preliminary to demolishing them. Such is the famous Socratic irony. Socrates doubted many things and confuted many traditional views often by an admirable naïveté; but he knew more than he would let his interlocutor suspect.

That simulated ignorance of Socrates may therefore contain the germ of all the newer interpretations which have so afflicted the literature of the Romantic period. One shape of it would be that of understatement which consists in saying less than one thinks or means. Nearer to that by shades of meaning only, comes the definition of irony given by the New English Dictionary, 1, a figure of speech "in which the intended meaning is the opposite of that expressed in the words used". Irony is then considered in its rhetorical connotations. Such a speech has a literal connection which is contradicted by the manner or the tone of the speaker. It may be gentle and humorous and is then easily distinguished from sarcasm which is bitter; it may

1 N.E.D., New English Dictionary, by Sir J.A.H. Murray, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1888-1933, Vol. 5, p. 484.

be cutting and intended to strike and reform without using the formality of satire; it may even imply mockery or delusion without the gross exaggeration of hyperbole. At the very source of it stands the pleasure of a sharp contrast between appearance and reality.

When applied to tragic effects obtained by the contrast between varying states of knowledge in a drama, the term irony has yet a wider and more particular sense. Bishop Thirlwall was perhaps the first to use the word in that connection and by his studies of Sophoclean drama was driven to coin the expression Sophoclean irony as best suited to express the discrepancy between one aspect and another of a double situation.¹ Different causes may produce that effect.

One character may innocently say something which another character takes in another sense than what was intended. Or he may deliberately by equivocal utterances mislead another as the ambiguous oracles of Delphi or the prophecies of the Witches which Macbeth learned too late to despise because "they palter with us in a double sense".² But a deeper irony is to be found where all the characters fail to perceive the significance of a saying, or the

¹ Thirlwall, Bishop, On the Irony of Sophocles, in the Philological Museum, 1833, Vol. II.

² Macbeth, Act V, scene 8, line 20.

inevitable outcome of a course of action which is apparent to the spectators, who share the privileged position of the dramatist and the supernatural force that are both responsible for the character's destiny. The spectators moreover are always conscious of the essentials: influences engaged and actions resulting from them.

The stage being a room with the fourth wall down, the spectator is able to gaze through that opening at reconstructed scenes about the lives of particular men. Nothing of their characters, actions, relations and motives must escape notice. The onlooker participates in the overseeing power of Providence that rules over mankind and of the dramatist whose imagination creates characters and circumstances. All are allowed to control in different ways the fate of men or women whose problems are gradually brought to light. The spectator's position has in it something of the awkwardness and slyness of one who spies or snoops for the mere fun of the trick. He cannot interfere with what goes on on the stage. He must keep a detached attitude and his entire interest therefore appears ironic like the show of a borrowed and momentary superiority. That situation has justly been qualified by Sedgewick as general irony.¹

¹ Sedgewick, G.G., Of Irony Especially in Drama, Chapter II, p. 31-33.

What distinguishes it from a more specific kind is that sometimes at the sight of certain actions that happen on the stage, at the sound of certain words uttered, the spectator's position emerges more sharply into his consciousness. His general situation, forgotten or unconsciously dismissed is renewed in a more thrilling effect due to an enlarged experience by which parallels, contrasts, relations are perceived. He feels then that real dramatic irony: a sense of contradiction at the sight of a character acting in ignorance of his condition or of his own good. Three distinct elements all of which are important and essential, bring that feeling about, namely, a conflict of forces, the ignorance of his situation on the part of at least one of the opposing forces and the awareness of the spectator who sees, knows and judges the contradiction between what is and what should be.

It may be the place to settle here the case of that "irony of fate". Fowler tries so hard to banish from modern usage. ¹ That juxtaposition of words has indeed become hackneyed and devoid of sense for having been used and abused. But the phrase which sounded like a discovery among the Romantics designated nothing else than one of the constituent elements of irony just mentioned above.

¹ Fowler, H.W., Dictionary of Modern English Usage, Oxford, at the Clarendon Press, 1926, p. 296.

If one thinks of that state of superior knowledge or power to which the tragic character's ignorance is opposed as something objective, as fate or fortune or perhaps as a personal force that deliberately works out his ruin, then one is led to speak of "irony of fate". The mere contrast between the apparent situation and the actuality, however, need not imply malice on the part of any superior power. Very few of the Greek tragedians (not excluding Aeschylus nor Sophocles) believed in the jealousy of the gods destroying mankind by simple amusement and watching with a malicious grin the efforts of a doomed hero to escape his sentence. They believed in just gods who avenge wrong-doing, whether deliberate or involuntary. They too could not entirely forget the audience for whom their dramas were composed and performed. No artist is free to follow the only fancy of his inclinations. His genius is the fruit of a culture that blends in admirable unity the tastes, beliefs, customs and ideals of a race. To those, he must in some way conform if he wished to be understood or to represent his times.

What is more, the spectator of a Greek tragedy could not view with detached calm such spectacles as that of Agamemnon or of Oedipus unwittingly marching to their destruction. The spectator feels pity for the victim of circumstance and fear of the power that trips him, together with some tendency to guess how far the fall was deserved.

He, moreover, knowing in advance the outcome, could enjoy the suspense maintained by linguistic subtleties, while he watches the action that moves on.

For these reasons, Lewis Campbell suggests that a more appropriate term than "irony" - a term at once too comprehensive and too narrow to be exact - would be "pathetic contrast".¹ "Irony", says Campbell, "injures the profound pathos of Greek tragedy by suggesting the suspicion of an "arrière-pensée" of the poet's face behind the mask, surveying his own creations with a sardonic smile". There is nothing sardonic in the above-mentioned authors. There is neither in Shakespeare anything akin to - let us say - Hardy's manner. Hardy for one, pulls the strings in his novels and pretends that it is Fate. He delights in inventing God "in order to prove how unnecessary (and undesirable) He is", says Chesterton.²

Philosophers have also recently shown much concern for eliciting the concept of irony.³ To them it appears not so much as an attitude towards life as an inclination of the writer's mind to stress the discrepancy between dreamed of

1 Campbell, Lewis, Sophocles, London, Oxford University Press, 1871, Vol. 1, p. 112.

2 Chesterton, G.K., The Victorian Age in Literature, London, Oxford University Press, 1913, p. 89.

3 Chevalier, H.A., The Ironic Temper, Oxford, 1932, p.p. 11-12, 220. This book has a valuable bibliographic note on the History and Evolution of Irony.

absolutes and unexpected frustrating contingencies. In both cases their learned opinion is less related to literature than linked to the far-reaching scrutiny of psychological investigations in matters of human conduct and its morality.

When one starts to apply to Shakespeare some of the findings of such surveys, he must proceed with caution. Doctor Buck's theory in that respect is most sound and reliable. He considers Shakespeare's entire work as The Ironic Reply to Montaigne's "universal doubt" expressed in his laconic question: Que Sais-Je?¹ The dramatist's observation of the topsy-turvy like form of man's life leads him to seek for a pattern that would explain its peculiarities. The only answer that lurks around the corner is irony, since according to Montaigne: "Man is a creature wondrous vain, diverse and fleeting. It is difficult to establish a constant and uniform judgment concerning him."² For his presentation of man's various moods and foibles, the multiple aspects of his greatness and baseness alike, in the manner of one who does not set forth to solve the overwhelming question of his ultimate destiny, Shakespeare may deserve being called "the ironic, the master of irony".³

1 Buck, P.M., jr., The Ironic Reply, a chapter in The Golden Thread, New York, Macmillan, 1950, pp. 368-402.

2 Montaigne, Francis, Essays, quoted by Buck (cf. supra) p. 337.

3 cf. supra, note no. 11.

Nevertheless, if one tries to establish a theory concerning an author's philosophy of life or of the universe, he must avoid what Moulton calls "fallacy of quotations".¹ It is not the dialogue, not the words put into the mouths of the characters on the scene that contain a dramatist's philosophy but the construction of the plot. One can hardly deduce any suitable conclusions when quoting for instance a Jaque's or a Hamlet's melancholic views, an Othello's yellow-tinted reflections, etc. Those are mere puppets answering blindly the impulses or touches of the dramatist's hand, however great may his sympathies in them be. What remains essentially revealing is the agency of the parts brought together and the general pattern is the only true picture of an author's originality and better self.

¹ Moulton, Richard G., Shakespeare as a Dramatic Thinker, New York, Macmillan, 1907, Introduction.

CHAPTER II

IRONY AND THE STRUCTURE OF MACBETH

Tragic irony is a direct heritage from the classical drama of the Greeks. Its appearance in Macbeth and other of Shakespeare's plays shows once more his mastery of all structural devices. Yet his use of dramatic techniques that have certain relations to the Greek manner does not suggest that he knew his Sophocles or Aeschylus or that he might have been influenced by them. He read and studied one of the later Latin classics, Seneca; through him by the force of his talent or genius, he discovered the theories that were founded in a true sense of the theatre.

Irony is one of the prominent forms of dramatic interest. It is cultivated and exploited by Shakespeare mostly to emphasize the elementary trick of mistaken identity, the failure of cherished hopes or the unablensness of a character to face the call of duty. Some of those themes produce an effect of tragi-comedy. Some belong to the grim and terrible realm of tragedy where suffering is always found in one form or another. Romeo and Juliet, Othello, Lear, provide instances of ironical sayings and situations truly pathetic. But Macbeth has the most striking and pervasive irony of them all.

"It approaches nearest to the spirit of antiquity", says Richard G. Moulton, "and its action rests upon the same oracular mysteries which the Attic tragedians loved, the same spirit of irony underlies the movement of its story".¹

Two points are clearly stated here. First, the idea of irony being present throughout the play. The whole theme, the relationship of Macbeth with the Witches are ironical. The first alarm of his sensitive conscience makes Macbeth discover that a net is being drawn around him. The problem of an inner conflict aroused by the meeting of these two forces is well established from the opening of the play:

This supernatural soliciting

Cannot be ill; cannot be good....²

The very ambiguity of a speech, the awkwardness of a situation having no middle exit but only two extreme alternatives, both of which to be considered as traps, is in the true nature of Greek irony.

The second point is a matter of values. One may object to a parallel between the oracular mysteries of the ancients and the common predictions of soothsayers and

¹ Moulton, Richard G., Shakespeare as a Dramatic Thinker, New York, Macmillan, 1907, p. 225.

² Macbeth, Act 1, Scene 3, l. 130.

wizards as used by Shakespeare. Greek tragedy was in fact based on religious grounds and reached an exposé of the cosmic order between God, man and nature; the prophecies were uttered by a consecrated being, priest or priestess and carried with them an atmosphere of dignity, respect and awed submission. Despite the oddity of their appearance and attire, the Witches in Macbeth deliver also a message. It creates an effect of doubt and terror of the unknown concerning all human destinies. And far from lessening our interest, those sayings of old women, "of midnight hags", do puzzle our minds more since we suspect these "instruments of darkness" to report more than they really are conscious of or to be the voice of superhuman powers talking through their mouths.

In his superb study of Macbeth, Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch has a statement that stresses the presence of irony and indicates where to look for it. He writes:

"Through its working of vengeance by agents who are carefully kept as were puppets in the hand of Heaven, Macbeth bears a resemblance unique among Shakespeare's writings to Greek tragedy, nor can it, by accident, be full of that irony in which the Greek tragedians - say Sophocles - delighted".¹

¹ Quiller-Couch, Sir Arthur, The Workmanship in Macbeth, in Essays and Belles-Lettres, London, Everyman, 1943, p. 176.

The witches are obviously agents of vengeance, but their initial role was one of temptation. They act like the devil of Christian morality who attracts someone towards evil doing and rejoices thereafter in punishing him for it. The result is, for the play, to bear some basic relation to the theme of Nemesis. Yet it cannot be classified as a drama of vengeance alone. It appears rather on the whole, less a domestic tragedy of passion with the rise and fall of an ambitious character than a nocturne of despair. Its general atmosphere and the source from which it springs are well summed up in these words:

Macbeth's world is wholly given up to supernatural fraud which works in the shadow.... There is not a line without its symbolical meaning, not an image that does not cause a shudder, not an ambiguity that does not conceal a menace in its irony.¹

In it as in other tragedies, Shakespeare informed the old material with the problem of the human will. He made the most he could with the historical source that inspired him and that hinted at the hero's being driven by fate or some forces beyond his control. He united with marvelous dramatic tact the destiny tragedy of the Greeks

¹ Huchère, Henri, Shakespeare, transl. by Guy Hamilton, London, Longmans, 1953, p. 59.

and the villain tragedy of the Elizabethan. In that sense, therefore, the play may be considered related to the remoter themes of the Greek theatre. The tragedy is the fulfilling, struggle though the individual may, of a blind fate. Does not the whole drama depend upon the fact that the messages of the witches fulfil themselves relentlessly in spite of all the scheming and the crime which Macbeth tries, either to thwart them or to force on them his own interpretation?

Shakespeare makes us feel in a refined manner that sense of fate throughout Macbeth. It may be chance that made Duncan come to Macbeth's castle. Chance is vaguely connected in one's mind with the existence of an outer-power governing man's actions. Lady Macbeth refers directly to fate and her assumption is that a conscious or unconscious supernatural agent is guiding or shaping our actions. She promises to rid her husband of all that "impedes" him from "the golden round":

Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem

To have thee crown'd withal.¹

Blind chance and the order decreed by a conscious supernatural power stand as two extremes. Even if Shakespeare stated in Hamlet that "There's a divinity that

¹ Macbeth, Act 1, scene 5, l. 31.

shapes our ends....,1 he uses more often for dramatic purposes the idea of fate governing man's life and leading him by pure fancy. He pities Romeo and Juliet for having been "ill-starred" from the beginning of their love; in King Lear he places in Edmund's mouth these words:

This is the excellent foppery of the world that when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeit of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars.2

The influence of heavenly bodies upon human actions is something different from the interest of some kind of invisible actor playing above the stage a principal part, cheating, deceiving, betraying, watching with a grim smile the blundering behaviour of a character.

That device which is rich in ironical implications could be used but sparingly by Shakespeare. It demanded the assumption of a conscious fatal power in the universe which as a Christian he was not prepared to admit. He therefore adopts an illusive attitude toward that matter and as for the exact nature of the Witches with which that problem is connected he once more shows a genial alternative. The very doubt and ambiguity with which he treats them is effective and a sign of quality of his workmanship.

1 Hamlet, Act V, scene 2, l. 10.

2 King Lear, Act I, scene 2, l. 30.

"The soul of horror lies in the vague, the impalpable", says Quiller-Couch, and "nothing in the world or out of it can so daunt and cow us as the dread of we know not what".¹ The more an object of fear is fleeting or inconsistent, the more it worries us. Can we not see that vagueness operating in Macbeth? Can we not feel how irritating and puzzling is deliberate imprecision in matters of consequence?

The German Romantics may be excused for mistaking the Witches for imagined forms of Macbeth's evil thoughts. They are real even if

They look not like the inhabitants o' the earth
 And yet are on 't. Live you? or are you ought
 That man may question?²

Banquo's doubt lingers on in our minds after his question:

Were such things here as we do speak about?
 Or have we eaten on the insane root
 That takes the reason prisoner?³

That same uncertainty prevails where it is entertained as an effect of hypnotic transe. Throughout the dagger scene reality seems sacrificed in favor of

1 Quiller-Couch, Arthur, The Workmanship in Macbeth, in Essays and Belles-Lettres, London, Everyman, 1943, p. 161.
 2 Macbeth, Act I, scene 3, l. 41.
 3 Macbeth, Act I, scene 3, l. 83.

hallucination. "There's no such thing: it is the bloody business which informs thus to mine eyes",¹ says Macbeth.

The upsetting of natural conditions of the world is also depicted in like manner. Nobody seems absolutely sure where he stands; time seems to be suspended and reports about the state of things are based on hear-say.

"Hours dreadful and strange" are expected when
"by the clock 'tis day

And yet dark night strangles the traveling lamp."²
 "'Tis also said" that after Duncan's murder his horses did eat each other.

The use of vagueness as a device to create atmosphere produces various effects according to the various dispositions of the listeners. Everyone of Shakespeare's plays arouses different comprehensive feelings from the various levels of spectators. This universality of appeal to the more learned or to the lesser "habitués" could be placed into a parallel to challenge the common definition of the term classical. Because a play deals with themes that are deeply rooted in man's interest, because it is appreciated from one century to another, it lives on as a work of art, as a monument of an author's genius.

¹ Macbeth, Act II, scene 1, l. 38-48.

² Macbeth, Act II, scene 4, l. 3, Act II, scene 4, l. 6.

Considering the true nature of the Witches, for instance, Allardyce Nicoll notes:

There are two distant points of view from which we may regard the Witches. We can see in them evil ministers tempting Macbeth to destruction or we can look on them merely as embodiments of ambitious thoughts which had already moved Macbeth and his wife to murderous imaginings. The peculiar thing to note is that through Shakespeare's subtle and suggestive art we do not regard these two points of view as mutually antagonistic.¹

Who could hesitate to recognize the virtue of a principle as the one just exposed? The difference in knowledge, emotional capacity or credulity of the spectators may change the scope of the problem involved and determine various interpretation of it. One could extend to the many aspects of ironical vagueness and ambiguity in Macbeth the following statement:

Shakespeare meant the judicious to take the ghost of Banquo for an hallucination, but knew that the bulk of the audience would take it for a reality.²

¹ Nicoll, Allardyce, Studies in Shakespeare, 1928, p. 123, quoted by Paul, Henry N., in The Royal Play of Macbeth, New York, Macmillan, 1950, p. 63.

² Bradley, A.C., Shakespearean Tragedy, London, Macmillan, 1941, p. 493.

Because of its importance that position gains being supported by the opinions of other critics.

The language and the imagery which he (Shakespeare) employed in Macbeth were such that each hearer could interpret according to his condition or temperament...1 To his own generation one of the most amazing things about Shakespeare must have been his power to appeal to the generalty and the judicious at one and the same time...2

Irony has been defined previously as standing midway between appearance and reality. What is real to a character on the stage is known not to be so by some spectators in the audience; and vice versa, the spectators suspect some elements of truth in what the unhappy actor takes for a picture of unreality.

From the very first lines of the play Macbeth, Shakespeare induces an ironic attitude in the spectators by letting them know at the outset the ominous role of the Witches. Their expectation of calamity colors their observation of all subsequent scenes. They see things tending inevitably, it seems, in one direction.

1 & 2 Lucy, Margaret, Shakespeare and the Supernatural (no other datas) and Dover Wilson, Introduction to the 1929 edition of Lavater, p. 27 as quoted by Paul, Henry N., in The Royal Play of Macbeth, New York, Macmillan, 1950, p. 63.

"Fair is foul and foul is fair".¹ Like all powers of evil the Witches enjoy a general upsetting of values and their saying here echoes a century later in Milton's Satan professing his: "Evil be thou my good!"² The presentation of such bewildering belief is essential to the opening of the play. It takes the appearance of a game that consists in showing to poor, unsuspecting mortals glimpses of their fate, which they fail to interpret properly out of naïveté or blindness. The images of the future they present are veiled and so combined as to hide as much as to reveal what is to be. The assurance which they give against fatal possibilities is managed in such a way as to bear a double meaning - a classical element of ancient oracles.

But the Witches serve a greater purpose than informing the spectator and deceiving Macbeth. They give the play an element of unity. Through their intervention the whole tragedy is not felt so much as a series of events occurring one by one in the course of time, but as one solid mass, as the reflection in this world of relations directed from another world. No atmosphere could be more favorable for the development of a keen sense of irony in the spectator.

¹ Macbeth, Act I, scene 1, l. 11.

² Milton John, Paradise Lost.

He becomes conscious of the agency of something very different from mere chance; he suspects connections between motives and actions not clearly explained by our laws of cause and effect.

When we hear the First Witch expose her plan of personal vengeance against the sailor's wife (who refused to give her chestnuts) we cannot help associating in our minds the picture of Macbeth with that of the individual she proposes to expose and to attack. If she trusts her power enough to expect terrifying effects from it, what tortures can she not practise on Macbeth himself?

I will drain him dry as hay:
 Sleep shall neither night nor day
 Hang upon his pent-house lid;
 He shall live a man forbid:
 Weary se'n nights nine times nine
 Shall he dwindle, peak and pine:
 Though his back cannot be lost
 Yet it shall be tempest toss'd.¹

It happens that Macbeth, for having "murdered sleep"² later "lack(s) the season of all natures, sleep".³ He finds himself "a man forbid" and confesses the agony of his loneliness:

1 Macbeth, Act I, scene 3, l. 18-26.
 2 Macbeth, Act II, scene 1, l. 42.
 3 Macbeth, Act III, scene 4, l. 141.

And that which should accompany old age
 As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends
 I must not look to have.....1

The antagonistic force calling itself "heaven-sent"² walks against Macbeth, finding him "ripe for shaking".³ The castle in which the latter had entrenched is not really lost or destroyed but becomes useless since at the last moment there is no siege to it and Macbeth has to meet his enemies outside its walls. Such a disaster comes at the height of his success like the sailor:

"Wrecked as homeward he did come", that is, at a time he should least have expected it.

The connection just established implies that the Witches wished to destroy Macbeth. Shakespeare did not give any other reasons for that fact than those contained in the text itself. He could assume that his audience knew that evil witches are always on the side of the rebels and therefore side with the "merciless Macdonwald" in his fight against the King of Scotland. When the play opens, Macbeth has just slaughtered the traitor. The Witches therefore, may be expected to seek revenge against him for that. They promise to meet again,

1 Macbeth, Act V, scene 3, l. 22.

2 Macbeth, Act V, scene 8, l. 72.

3 Macbeth, Act IV, scene 3, l. 238.

When the hurly burly's done

When the battle's lost, and won.¹

Two fights are involved in the day's hurly burly. From the Witches' point of view the first has been lost, when Macdonwald was slain by Macbeth. The second is the fight against the foreign invaders, and this will be won when they are driven into the sea later on the same day. The meaning of these lines has been lost because too many texts remove the emphasizing antithetical comma which Shakespeare put after the word lost. Restore the folio text and the meaning becomes sufficiently evident.

Another highly ironical effect is achieved through the intervention of the Witches. The audience has another hint of impending misfortune which escapes Macbeth's notice when Hecate waiting for her visitor tells her attendants:

He shall spurn fate, scorn death and bear

His hopes 'bove wisdom, grace and fear:

And you all know security.

Is mortals' chiefest enemy.²

The word had been heard from Macbeth's mouth already,

"To be thus is nothing

But to be safely thus",³ and had been the motive of

1 Macbeth, Act I, scene 1, l. 3.

2 Macbeth, Act III, scene 5, l. 36.

3 Macbeth, Act III, scene 1, l. 48.

Banquo's murder. One is never too cautious. It is better to exaggerate in matters of security than risk a single flaw.

with him (Banquo)

To leave no rubs nor butches in the work
 Fleance his son, that keeps him company
 Whose absence is no less material to me
 Than his father's, must embrace the fate
 Of that dark hour.¹

Macbeth realizes the extent of his defeat and we, the irony in it, when he learns that Fleance escaped.

Then comes my fit again: I had else been perfect
 Whole as the marble, founded as the rock
 As broad and general as the casing air:
 But now I am cabin'd, cribb'd, confined, bound
 To saucy doubts and fears.²

Those fears necessitated a new consultation of the Witches. But the interview in the cavern is not over and we hear again:

.....what need I fear of thee (Macduff)
 But yet I'll make assurance doubly sure.³

¹ Macbeth, Act III, scene 1, l. 133.
² Macbeth, Act III, scene 4, l. 21.
³ Macbeth, Act IV, scene 1, l. 82.

Macbeth may be inclined to proceed with caution and assure a firmer basis to his conquered throne, yet something unprecise sets our minds wondering about the usefulness of these efforts and troubles. We are anxious to hear and see more. Our expectation is entertained in such examples as quoted above, with the word "security" echoing through various scenes.

That means of reaching a result of projection towards what comes next is not the only one. Anticipation is also produced in the words of provocation that introduce new developments of real importance which bring in fact a turning point in the play. When Macduff is being informed of the slaughter of his loved ones, Malcolm advises him.

Be this the whetstone of your sword: let grief

Convert to anger; blunt not the heart, enrage it.¹

Macduff's answer promises mischief for Macbeth.

....front to front

Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself;

Within my sword's length set him; if he 'scape,

Heaven forgive him too!²

Those solemn sayings create curiosity and tense expectation. It seems hard to reconcile their presence

1 Macbeth, Act IV, scene 3, l. 228.

2 Macbeth, Act IV, scene 3, l. 232.

here and there in Macbeth, with Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch's statement that

The irony in Macbeth is rather retrospective than prophetic.¹

When such phrases or words as those quoted above are uttered, the spectator, even if he has no knowledge of the story beforehand, is hearing in them an ominous sound. He does not need nor asks for more details or clearer affirmation. Suspicion hovers above any other feeling of a captivated mind. The songs of the chorus in Greek tragedies lamenting the general conditions of mankind or the destiny of a particular hero, proceeded in no other manner. Their content was nothing else than hints, suggestions, guesses about the way fate would turn out. Their function was to anticipate and announce the terrible catastrophe that hung over some guilty soul or character marked for disaster. The actors were men but the voice that spoke through them was the voice of distant gods.

A very particular form of irony of anticipation is felt throughout the Porter scene.² If the audience is inclined to laugh at the drunken porter's talk and to find a moment of relief from the tension of the preceding scene,

1 Quiller-Couch, Arthur, The Workmanship in Macbeth, in Essays and Belles-Lettres, London, Everyman, 1943, p. 176.

2 Macbeth, Act II, scene 3, l. 1-26.

they soon realize that the knocking resounds more and more profoundly and quizzingly in their minds. That knocking at the gate takes the form of a summons, of a challenge from the outer world. The impression created is one of nervous excitement. The noise seems to come from no fixed place, it has no apparent cause except the tragic tension which demands it, stimulates the imagination almost beyond endurance and heightens the tension that it appears to relieve. How can some critics interpret that complex situation of contrasting sentiments to which it gives rise as one of relief? How can the spectator be said to enjoy such a scene as comical? Most people rather maintain an attitude of mental reservation as towards something inconvenient. Coleridge dismissed the whole scene as "disgusting" and "an interpolation of the actors".¹

The only excuse for the down-to-life effect of the Porter's' scene is one with what Sir R.W. Livingstone discusses about a passage of The Exodus of Oedipus Tyrannus.² Upon the words of the Chorus: "Count no man happy before his final day is seen to be without calamity", he writes:

1 Coleridge, Samuel, Essays and Lectures on Shakespeare.

2 Livingstone, R.W., Greek Poetry and Life, London, Oxford University Press, 1936, p. 163.

The words of the chorus, conventional and familiar recall us from the remote and tragic happenings to the world of everyday.... That undoubtedly is the artistic effect of these words which seem and are platitudinous and inadequate to tragedy.

We look more vividly then to the return of the true problem involved in the murder of Duncan just performed in Macbeth's castle in such shocking circumstances that it may well be called hell. Shakespeare, it seems, wants to disquiet us beyond the common daily happenings of life in showing us that a return to it cannot solve any problem, not even by a laughter or a forgetting.

De Quincey's Knocking at the Door in Macbeth has become the classical interpretation of that passage.¹

The sudden reassertion of the normal world after the momentary triumph of a 'fiendish one', the pulses of life are beginning to beat again; and the reestablishment of the goings-on of the world in which we live, first makes us profoundly sensible of the awful parenthesis that had suspended them.

A power that had been forgotten, left out, now comes back severe, insistent, irresistible: the law of retribution, a doom heard in the symbolical knocking of a

¹ De Quincey, On the Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth.

vaguely personified fate which is no other than that of the Greek tragedy.

That irony of anticipation,¹ is not only present here, it is necessary to the structure of the play. Shakespeare alone could produce a play in which the interest and suspense are kept to the very end, even if the determining incident of most of the action in the play (the killing of Duncan) happens as a climax at the end of the second act. For three more acts, incidents full of emotion and successful dramatic effects focus the attention on one villain hero and by the rapidity of changes, keep the audience breathless to the end. Once more, such cumulation and heaping of multiple incidents recalls the Greek manner by contrast, since the underlying purpose of the different methods is similar. Different means brings them the same results.

One of the essential differences in structure between old classical drama and that of the Elizabethans was the question of unities. The Attic stage saw beauty in rigorously excluding and reducing to singleness; while the Elizabethan stage indulged in a multiplicity of matter and interest. Both needed the use of progression, of

¹ The division of irony into irony of anticipation and of reminiscence or recognition is borrowed from Sedgewick, G.G., Of Irony Especially in Drama, Toronto, 1948, XII-127 pages.

climax in the shaping of their plays. The method of Aeschylus for instance is to keep things, the expected things as long as possible from happening. The method of Sophocles is to make them happen from the very beginning of the play, one thing leading inevitably to another, slowly at first, but gradually increasing speed, like a river coming to a waterfall. Aeschylus hangs a sword by a hair; when it falls, it destroys at a stroke. Sophocles keeps smiting with increasing force blow upon blow. But the sword is the same for both. It is the sword of irony.

That second manner is undoubtedly that of Shakespeare. And the workings of events, contrary to Macbeth's expectation, create a clash of wills and events which result in a series of ironical and tragic situations.

The presence of the Ghost at the Banquet scene does not only fulfil a promise. "Fail not our feast", Macbeth had said. And Banquo had answered: "My Lord, I will not".¹ But since nature had been wronged in that traitorous murder, uncommon results come out of evil deeds. Macbeth himself recognizes the fact:

.....the time has been

That, when the brains were out, the man would die

And there an end; but now they rise again,

¹ Macbeth, Act II, scene 1, l.l. 28-29.

With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,
And push us from our stools:.....1

The tender and humorous scene of Lady Macduff and her son serves the same end. It becomes touching and thrilling under the menace of the impending danger known to the audience. It follows the scene in which Macbeth's dire cruelty appears to have reached its climax.

The castle of Macduff I will surprise
Seize upon Fife; give to the edge o' the sword
His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls
That trace him in his line.2

A cheerful family scene like that depicted in Act IV, Scene 2, has beauty in it that contrasts with the grim march of events we have up to now witnessed. The verbal subtleties which accompany the picture bring out more effectively a parallel between savageness, wasteful and cruel, against the delicacy of fine and confident natures. Twice the danger was announced and the insecurity of her position exposed to Lady Macduff but she has but one answer:

Whither should I fly?
I have done no harm....3

1 Macbeth, Act III, scene 4, l.l. 78-80.
2 Macbeth, Act IV, scene 2, l.l. 150-155.
3 Macbeth, Act IV, scene 2, l.l. 73-74.

A last parallel between two other Ladies and their predicament may illustrate that point of anticipation more clearly and stress the way irony is worked into it. In one circumstance, in Macbeth, a character is made to comment on some incidents. The doctor's prescription at the end of the Sleep-walking Scene should lose none of its implications and suggestions. He tells the Gentlewoman:

.....Look after her;

Remove from her the means of all annoyance

And still keep eyes upon her.¹

His insistence on the need of a close watch over Lady Macbeth's actions makes us fear the worst. Some spectators may even think that in a fit of madness she might for the sake of Nemesis kill her own husband. The doctor's words are repeated to point out a danger and a menace. "Look after her", "Remove" things "from her" and "still keep eyes upon her".

Now let us look at a scene from Oedipus-Rex where the chorus comments on the state of mind of the unfortunate Jocasta. She is the first to discover the fatal outcome of the mystery that has been unfolding from the very beginning of the play. She alone sees the terrible truth and the secret is too heavy for her to bear very long. The moment

¹ Macbeth, Act V, scene 1, l.l. 83 and fol.

of suspense when she leaves for her quarters is much more pathetic than even the return from it of her son and husband, Oedipus.

Jocasta: O lost and damned!

This is my last and only word to you

For ever! (Exit)

Chorus: Why has the Queen, sir, left us in such deep passion?

I fear some vile catastrophe will out

From what she dare not tell.¹

These comments on the part of the Doctor or on the part of the Chorus create a feeling of dread and expectation at the same time. Even if not always incorporated in the manner of the Greek oracles, there are real prophetic effects of anticipation throughout the play of Macbeth. Every incident announced, foreseen and accomplished brings an ever-changing scene, adds new developments and links to the profound theme of Macbeth's fate. And because the outcome of the events as witnessed by the spectator is different from what the hero villain expects, a sense of irony accompanies all his acts.

¹ Sophocles, Oedipus-Rex, in The Theban Plays, Penguin Classics, 1947, p. 55.

CHAPTER III

IRONY AND LANGUAGE IN MACBETH

Much more felt and enjoyed, though less specific irony in itself is that kind said to be of reminiscence or of recognition.

It occurs when all ignorance of conflict or situation has departed from everyone on the stage and both actor and spectator are looking back together upon the past,¹
says Sedgewick.

It may be produced by language, by words echoing through space or time and carrying in them meaning or emphasis which has escaped notice at their first utterance. It may be produced through language answering the profound question involved in the case exposed on the stage. A tragic reversal of fortune brings in its train a recognition, an awakening. The villain or the hero discovers what has always been obvious to the spectator. He acquires that insight into the long train of past actions and of tragic error, the effects of which are like flashes of memory that bring the impression of reconquered knowledge.

Macbeth pronounced upon himself a solemn curse when almost out of his mind with rage at the show of eight kings, the posterity of Banquo:

¹ Sedgewick, G.G., Of Irony, Especially in Drama, opus citatum, p. 50.

Let this pernicious hour
 Stand eye accursed in the calendar,¹
 and added angrily
 Infected be the air whereon they ride
 And damn'd all those that trust them!²

when he learned that he was the only one to see the Witches.

That damnation, we feel, has already begun for Macbeth who still considers what he thinks favorable to his future in their saying. His diabolical determination cannot be forgotten.

I am in blood
 Stepped in so far that should I wade no more,
 Returning were as tedious as go o'er.³

But the pouring out of these thoughts does more than indicate rage and loss of self-control. It indicates a point or level from where Macbeth will turn and hence it prepares a better appreciation on our part of the discovery near at hand. A time comes when Macbeth finally sees the futility of his resistance to fate and acknowledges his defeat. That acceptance, on his part, prevents our turning away from him as from a monster in whom we would refuse to recognize the normal inclinations or impulses of our human nature. Tragic

1 Macbeth, Act IV, scene 1, l. 133.
 2 Macbeth, Act IV, scene 1, l. 137.
 3 Macbeth, Act III, scene 4, l. 136.

emotion has always been defined to be a face looking two ways, towards terror and towards pity, both of which are phases of it. Once our terror has subsided we are made to sympathize with Macbeth from the moment he says:

And be these juggling fiends no more believed
 That palter with us in a double sense;
 That keep the word of promise to our ear
 And break it to our hope!¹

We can no longer forget the man in him, the lost brother coming back to act like one of us and now engaged in a greater struggle than all those he has previously sustained, the fight against despair.

In a tragedy, when the hero realizes that he has been cheated, or that his faults have caused his ruin, the attitude he adopts comes as a relief to the audience. If he revolts against his lot he remains true to his character and a certain greatness accompanies him to the end. If he confesses his guilt and atones for it he shows such moral strength as deserves forgiveness of past errors.

Macbeth's last moments show signs of both manners. For being "weary of the sun" and of life that signifies nothing, he is not a coward. It is no motive of fear that leads him to refuse Macduff's challenge.

¹ Macbeth, Act V, scene 8, l. 19.

I have avoided thee:

My soul is too much charged

With blood of thine already.¹ And while he exposes the pretext he finds for not fighting Macduff, one cannot but remember the reasons he had considered not to kill Duncan.

He's here in double trust:

First as I am his kinsman and his subject

Strong both against the deed; then as his host,

Who should against his murder shut the door

Not bear the knife myself. Besides this Duncan

Hath borne his faculties so meek.....

.....I have no spur

To prick the sides of my intent.²

The reversal of fortune brings this time a change of intentions. Yet it is interesting to note a parallel between those two situations. Macbeth will fight without much fervor. Any idea of suicide is abandoned as a weakness:

Why should I play the Roman fool and die

On mine own sword? While I see lives, the gashes

Do better on them.³

One reason for hope remains. Birnam wood had walked against Dunsinane. Young Siward had been easily overcome. What

¹ Macbeth, Act V, scene 8, l. 4.

² Macbeth, Act I, scene 7, l. 13.

³ Macbeth, Act V, scene 8, l. 1.

man, not of woman born, shall now present himself? When Macduff faces Macbeth a quick decision not to fight ensues.

My soul is too much charged

With the blood of thine already....1

and as if he would give Macduff a chance

Let fall thy blade on vulnerable crest;

I hear a charmed life....2 The answer given him thereon crows his "better part of man" and the words "Beware Macduff" now come to bear a new and definite meaning. In a flash, the terrible truth is revealed and all hopes of escape from fate or doom crumble. One consideration remains to "prick the sides of (his) intent"

I will not yield to kiss the ground before young

Malcolm's feet.3

That awakening of a tragic hero to the light of his real situation happens but once in a play. The spectator on the other hand is aware of the coming of it every time new developments in the plot are introduced. While the tragic tension is building up and the perspective of the hero is narrowing down, false hopes, faults and faltering courage are viewed with a knowledge of their causes and effects. In the case of oracles being fulfilled one by one

1, 2 & 3 Macbeth, Act V, scene 8.

contrary to the hero's expectation the spectator foresees alone the fatal outcome.

In view of that perduring situation the irony resulting from it may be sustained or occasional.

Greek drama in a way resembles the epic. In both forms, the problem or theme is taken "in medias res" and unfolded from that point to a climax or solution. When the subject was based on oracles concerning a character, to the very end of the play, till his final day, he was subjected to circumstances that played against his will. At every turn of event the spectator becomes conscious of a double play which may be termed sustained irony.

Thompson insists on that character of a Greek play. Against those who would see only a succession of events or circumstances determined by no such underlying principle he writes:

There is a thing traditionally called Sophoclean irony. It is the device, often strikingly effective, which puts in the mouth of a character, language whose significance is not perceived by himself but only by his hearers who know, as he does not, the doom that awaits him. There are scholars who write as if, in mentioning this verbal form of Irony, they had exhausted the subject. Why, a Greek

tragedy is all Ironical; it is Ironical in its very nature.¹

Chapter I has already established that those last lines may justly be applied to Macbeth.² It may prove useful to recall the presence of general irony here to distinguish in it sustained and occasional irony. The first kind depends on factors that are rather implied than clearly stated. It arises slowly and is felt in various degrees by the audience.

More apparent and lively is that kind we call occasional or direct, because even if it remains in keeping with the general trend of events, with the setting and atmosphere, it does not depend on them alone for effectiveness. Some situations are ironical by themselves. They speak without words. A mere agency of acts and implications produce an ironical discordance. Such a collocation brings about the fatalistic moral of King Lear:

Albany: The gods defend her! (Cordelia)

Enter Lear with Cordelia dead in his arms.³

No words are needed here to express disappointment and that profound surrender to an order of things where man has no claim to consideration. A similar example, though more diffuse may be found in Macbeth.

1 Thompson, J.A.K., Irony, An Historical Introduction, p. 35.
 2 Chapter I, page 14.
 3 Lear, Act V, scene 2.

"God bless thee, poor monkey", says Lady Macduff to her son. In a matter of minutes yet, the inevitable happens and after joking about "a good sign that I should quickly have a new father", the boy is being stabbed and cries: "He has killed me, mother...."¹

During the performance of a play or film we sometimes hear more candid spectators let out a spontaneous cry: "No!" or "Don't!" The appearance of a character, one of his actions, surely to spell mischief may produce that reaction.

The commonly quoted scene of Duncan's naive remark about Macbeth's castle is one of those moments.

This castle hath a pleasant seat; the air
Nimbly and sweetly recommends itself
Unto our gentle senses.²

Such pleasant remark of joyfulness and trust follows too closely the demonic utterances of Lady Macbeth

"The raven himself is hoarse
That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan

Under my battlements",³ to miss producing the uneasiness which blends fear and terror and a sympathetic desire for the good old king to escape.

¹ Macbeth, Act IV, scene 2.

² Macbeth, Act I, scene 6, l.1.

³ Macbeth, Act I, scene 5, l. 40.

Twice the gracious Duncan praises Macbeth. Twice his interruptions ring strangely to our ears. A captain's valor may indeed be praiseworthy; and the bleeding sergeant's report is loud in stating Macbeth's unusual courage and strength. His words even contain a certain dreadful exaggeration:

....brave Macbeth....

Disdaining fortune, with brandished steel
Which smoked with bloody execution,
Like valor's minion carved out his passage
Till he faced the slave;
Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,
Till he unseamed him from the nave to the chaps
And fix'd his head upon our battlements.¹

Why should Duncan choose those very details as most rejoicing? He cannot help expressing his enthusiasm:

"O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman!", he exclaims, and coming from him at that moment these words contrast with his later mood of sweet, delicate images with which he flowers his speech.

The second interruption is occasioned by Macbeth's arrival at the palace in Forres. The king has just discussed the case of the execution of Cawdor with his

¹ Macbeth, Act I, scene 2, l. 16.

attendants and concludes:

There's no art

To find the mind's construction in the face:

He was a gentleman on whom I built

An absolute trust.¹

Then as Macbeth steps on the stage, the king, overcome with gratitude, exclaims: "O worthiest cousin!". In the light of what the audience knows of Macbeth's intentions, these words are heavy with irony. Yet that irony depends more on the presence of a presumed traitor that replaces the one just executed, than on the language itself.

When the same effect is due to clear language alone the words and phrases strike the audience as having been heard before, as establishing links or parallels of brighter and richer significance.

Such echoing line as:

"So fair and foul a day I have not seen"...²

in Macbeth's mouth points out to a communion of ideas with those of the Witches, who are to become his tormentors.

A scene of provocation is rendered by words similar in sound or meaning and uttered by two antagonists of a fatal destiny.

¹ Macbeth, Act I, scene 4, l. 11.

² Macbeth, Act I, scene 3, l. 38.

Front to front

Bring thou this fiend of Scotland and myself,¹ says
Macduff. And while he waits for the appointed hour,
Macbeth expresses also his contempt.

We might have met them dareful, beard to beard,
And beat them backward home....²

Imagery is closely connected with irony. One cannot argue against deliberate intention on the dramatist's part when covered or clothed imagery produces sharp contrasts and adds new and unescapable light. Would the writer's aim be only to carry on with the image as to extract from it all virtues or possibilities, then his final effect would still be a stroke of genius.

Duncan's "plenteous joys" drive him to movements of generosity:

"Signs of nobleness like stars, shall shine
On all deservers",³ he promises. Macbeth answers, paying his respects, but comments to himself:

(Aside) The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step
On which I must fall down or else o'erlap,
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires;
Let not light see my black and deep desires:⁴

1 Macbeth, Act IV, scene 3, l. 232.

2 Macbeth, Act V, scene 5, l. 6.

3 & 4 Macbeth, Act I, scene 4, l.l. 40-51.

That same scene contains another image which is carried to the next scene again in a distorted manner which opposes two attitudes and two characters.

"I have begun to plant thee and will labor

To make thee full of growing",¹ says Duncan to Macbeth.

That idea of a plant growing in favorable soil is an appropriate one to express comprehension and a raise in noble rank. But Lady Macbeth has other plans for her husband, quicker means to a higher office:

".....look like the innocent flower

But be the serpent under 't",² she counsels.

Coleridge's Notes on Macbeth would seem to contradict those views on irony. Yet a careful reading of the passage quoted below will show in him a different stand quite understandable and characteristic of his age. He writes:

...there is not, to the best of my remembrance, a single pun or play on words in the whole drame. I have previously given an answer to the thousand times repeated charge against Shakespeare upon the subject of his punning, and I merely mention the fact of the absence of any pun in Macbeth, as justifying a candid doubt at least, whether even in these figures of speech and fanciful modifica-

¹ Macbeth, Act I, scene 4, l. 28.

² Macbeth, Act I, scene 5, l. 67.

tions of language, Shakespeare may not have followed rules and principles that merit and would stand the test of philosophical examination. And hence, also, there is an entire absence of comedy, nay, even of irony and philosophic contemplation in Macbeth - the play being wholly and purely tragic.¹

The main concern of Coleridge seems to defend Shakespeare on that question of his punning. A reaction on that account may have been felt as necessary at that time. Samuel Johnson had indeed made much of it as a marked defect.² An extensive exposé of the above quarrel would overlap the scope of our present study. Let us examine the conclusion of the paragraph just quoted.

That absence of comedy is obvious in the Porter scene. Chapter II has, we hope, established that point.³ There remains two other divisions in Coleridge's statement that must not be accepted in their absolute sense, namely the entire absence of "pun or play on words" and "of irony - the play being wholly tragic".

Have our modern minds become more analytical than in the 18th century? In parallel with the opinions of

1 Coleridge, Samuel, Notes on Macbeth in Essays and Lectures on Shakespeare, London, Dent, p. 156.

2 Johnson, Samuel, Preface to Shakespeare.

3 Chapter II, page 28.

authorized recent critics, Coleridge's views appear somewhat an oversimplification of the problem of irony. Quiller-Couch, already quoted, states that Macbeth "bears a resemblance unique among Shakespeare's writings to Greek tragedy; nor can it, by accident, be full of that irony in which the Greek tragedians - say Sophocles - delighted". After quoting a few examples he adds: "The whole play, as it were a corridor of dark Inverness Castle, resounds with such echoes: and I know no other tragedy that so teems with these peculiar whispers (as I will call them) of reminiscent irony".¹

We have become accustomed in our days to look on irony as one of the more common figures of rhetoric by which a word is given a sense different from what the listener thinks it is. A few examples here can illustrate better than the definitions (already given) what is for us to-day a conscious or unconscious play on words.

Ross comes to Macduff bringing him news that must not be announced too suddenly. Note the cautious approach on Ross's part and the equivocal use of the word peace.

¹ Quiller-Couch, Arthur, Macbeth, in Essays and Belles-Lettres, Cambridge Lectures. London, Dent, p. 177.
cf. also Bradley, Shakesperian Tragedy, London, Macmillan, 1941, p. 340.

It cannot be by accident that Shakespeare so frequently in this play uses a device (irony) which contributes to excite the vague fear of hidden forces operating on minds unconscious of their influence.

Macduff: The tyrant has not batter'd at their peace?

Ross: No; they were well at peace when I did

leave 'em.¹

The intention is but one of delay since Ross afterwards adds:

Your castle is surprised; your wife and babes

Savagely slaughter'd....²

Since the audience was aware of that fact, the terms "well at peace" sounded as a true R.I.P.

Another instance of the same play-like effect in a word can be brought forward. It is not one of those common puns we find in the comedies and yet when placed in its proper atmosphere, it is difficult not to accept a certain association between two words that are similar in sound though different in meaning.

The good king is overflowing with joy. A man in such a mood sometimes lets out simple and innocent jokes. Speaking to Banquo, Duncan says:

True, worthy Banquo; he is full so valiant

And in his commendations I am fed;

It is a banquet to me.³

¹ Macbeth, Act IV, scene 3, l. 178.

² Macbeth, Act IV, scene 3, l. 204.

³ Macbeth, Act I, scene 4, l. 54.

Here is an example in which the surprise and suspense that result from it are due to something that is not expressed. The murder of Duncan has just been discovered. Lady Macbeth rushes to the scene to be informed of the "bloody deed". Hypocritically she exclaims:

What, in our trouse?

Too cruel anywhere, answers Banquo.¹

Those last three words testify to Banquo's presence of mind. They moreover sound as a reproach to Lady Macbeth's revolting personal interest at that moment of common calamity. And in the series of warnings, suspicions, and discovery of Macbeth's guilty conscience, these words in their simplicity are most revealing of Banquo's ironical attitude from the moment he says:

"Look, how our partner's rapt", onward.

Lennox was not so quick in grasping the significance of doubtful acts or suspicious events, but a time comes when he also can no longer hide his true feelings. His speech, in Act III, scene 6, is a long subtle address in which nothing is stated directly but much implied and revealed most effectively. The hidden cause of various similar murders, the insistence on Macbeth's wise scheming and pretenses, etc., all his findings bear in their implications a destructive effect akin to sarcasm.

¹ Macbeth, Act II, scene 3, l. 98.

The gracious Duncan

Was pitied by Macbeth: marry, he was dead:
 And the right - valiant Banquo walked too late;
 Whom, you may say, if't please you, Fleance kill'd,
 For Fleance fled: men must not walk too late.
 Who cannot want the thought, how monstrous
 It was for Malcolm and for Donalbain
 To kill their gracious father? damned fact!
 How it did grieve Macbeth! did he not straight
 In pious rage, the two delinquents tear,
 That were the slaves of drink and thralls of sleep?
 Was not that nobly done? Aye, and wisely too;
 For t'would have anger'd any heart alive
 To hear the men deny 't. So that, I say.
 He has borne all things well: and I do think
 That, had he Duncan's sons under his key -
 As, an't please heaven, he shall not - they
 should find

What 'twere to kill a father; so should Fleance.

Under the shade of insinuation, nothing remains unexplained. Macbeth is unmasked and the clever Lennox is well prepared for that task. Was he not the last of the hosts to leave the banquet scene and to comment on Macbeth's fit at the sight of the Ghost saying:

Good night; and better health attend his majesty! 1
But here, the reduction to simple formulas - "men must not walk too late", "how it did grieve Macbeth", "was not that nobly done", adds more strength to each accusation. We have already stressed the effectiveness of deliberate vagueness in matters of consequence. We have the opposite here working in the same manner: the narrowing down of grave problems to proportions almost too simple to be exact. And the passage is justly considered by critics as a model of irony of rhetoric. It nevertheless lacks the scope and suggestive power of Mark Anthony's oration.

1 Macbeth, Act III, scene 4, l. 120.

CHAPTER IV

IRONY AND CHARACTERS IN MACBETH

The examples of irony of rhetoric just brought forth have more in them than the use of fine words and tricks to disguise one's secret motives or thoughts. They add picturesque details that individualize the characters concerned.

After his charge against Macbeth, we almost expect Lennox to change his allegiance and join the opposing group, that of the true patriots. Yet, he still accompanies Macbeth to the Witches' cavern. But from then on we hear no more of him. He does not participate in the final triumph. His political attitude of favor rendered to the more powerful even if less deserving, may have played against him.

Banquo's caution towards the prophecies of the Witches develops into a guilty delaying and procrastination when it comes to deal with Macbeth's suspicious deeds. His knowledge calls for quick action and the audience is confident that it will come when they hear:

Thou hast it now: king, Cawdor, Glamis, all,
As the weird women promised, and I fear
Thou play'dst most foully for it.....
..... But hush, no more. 1

1 Macbeth, Act III, scene 1, l.1.

to evil against his will should we rather say that these women work with him? In fact, the witches act from the outside suggesting, prompting, granting honors and equivocal prophecies that stir a vivid imagination and a weak mind. Lady Macbeth works on her husband's will urging him on, enchanting him, as it were, by words that carry the force of magic and enslaving him to the accomplishment of "the deed".

The party of righteousness opposing Macbeth, the villain, is composed of wise, reasonable and generous men: Malcolm, Banquo, Macduff, Old Siward and indirectly the saintly King Edward.¹

That parallel about the grouping of the characters and their part in the play brings to mind the nature of the conflict in the hero-villain himself. What Lady Macbeth succeeded in doing was to change Macbeth's concern for morality and conscience, an inner conflict to an outer

¹ Jean Paris is inclined to detect some traces of Rosicrucian philosophy in Shakespeare. The opposing groups here described he identifies to the two principles at work in the shaping and government of the universe. He writes: "Dieu surgi du néant, se révèle à soi-même et, partant, sépare les deux principes qui décrivent les religions: la voluntas principe actif, lumineux, masculin, la voluntas principe passif, ténébreux, féminin."
Paris, Jean, Shakespeare par lui-même, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1954, p. 94.

conflict. From the moment he has overcome his fear of guilt for murder he no longer considers the state of his conscience and is driven not to question his wild and desperate motives. By the law of retributive justice which proves in that case supremely ironical that outer conflict started by Lady Macbeth turns for her into the inner disquietness and madness of the sleep-walking scene.

She who called on night to come and hasten the murder of Duncan becomes unable to stand darkness and has a light continually by her. She who advised her husband:

These deeds must not be thought

After these ways; so it will make us mad....1

was the one to become insane. She, the stronghold of secrecy and machination, spills all her secrets in a scene more real than real life, since with her mask that falls, all disguises drop away and that which confronts the spectator is a naked soul. The irony of her character desintegrating to the point of seeking annihilation in suicide stands in sharp contrast with that of her husband which grows stronger, more active and destructive.2

1 Macbeth, Act II, scene 2, l. 32.

2 In his essay, Joseph L. Tynan seems to overstress the role of Lady Macbeth in making her a victim of nature, unfit for the work assigned her by the Life Force and responsible for the ultimate catastrophe.

Tynan, Joseph L., The Woman in the Case, in "The Shakespeare Association Bulletin", 1925, Vol. 1, no. 2, p. 3-6.

Such a contrast harbours a kind of irony which is reflex. Another kind, more direct and more easily caught, clashes in dialogues where by speaking one's mind, one character uncovers as much about others as about himself.

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood

Clean from my hands? No; this my hand will rather

The multitudinous seas incarnadine, l, says Macbeth.

Against this flow of fine words, the absence of emotion in his wife stands as a rock and she echoes in a matter of fact manner:

A little water clears us of this deed.²

Macduff who had knocked impatiently at the gate asks: "Is the king stirring". No question at that moment could create more suspense and uneasiness in the audience.

Macbeth meets it with assurance: "Not yet", he answers.

He should know!.... And he volunteers to direct Macduff to the King's chamber with pleasure for

The labour we delight in physics pain.³

The two scenes just referred to, exemplify two different attitudes in Macbeth. Sometimes he is overwhelmed with sentiments, sometimes he shows a surprising presence of mind. His temper reproduces the two aspects of dramatic

1 Macbeth, Act II, scene 2, l. 60.

2 Macbeth, Act II, scene 2, l. 67.

3 Macbeth, Act II, scene 3, l. 60.

irony, that of anticipation and that of reminiscence, defined and illustrated in the first two chapters.

It is the prospective and retrospective representation of Macbeth's remorse that constitutes the element of horror in the play, says Alphonse de Lamartine.¹

That prospective imagination cannot stand by itself; it would "mar all with this starting". A master mind comes to the rescue every time it is on the verge of a collapse. Lady Macbeth for some time substitutes her strong intellect and will for her husband's weakness but she herself cannot cheat nature to the end. Her conscience becomes retrospective and in the measure it has been abused in that same measure its burden crushes and upsets the brain.

Macbeth may, on the other hand, seem to remain lucid but he also is lost in a transe of wonder. He never wakes entirely to the real significance of his situation. John S. Smart was thinking of him when he described thus the state of a tragic hero:

The stricken individual marvels why his lot should be so different from that of others; what is his position among men; and what is the position of man

¹ de Lamartine, Alphonse-Marie Louis, Shakespeare et son Oeuvre, 1865, quoted by Charles Wells Moulton, in The Library of Literary Criticism, New York, Moulton Publishing Co., 1901, Vol. 1, p. 518.

in the universe. Vistas open up around him, far stretching, leading to the stars and beyond the stars. The significance of human life itself comes into contemplation; the question whether it has any place of value in the cosmos and the ultimate scheme of things, whether there is any such scheme of things.¹

It is a part of Macbeth's greatness to have been judged worthy of opposing the supernatural in him and around him. It is not a play where justice strikes and where justice is restored to the edification of the spectators. It is the picture of desintegrating personality under the pressure of unnatural passion.

Shakespeare developed his theme in a manner far richer than the musings on fate of a melancholic character in the manner of Hardy. He even ventured beyond the narrow circle of the safe limitations of humanity which invited the malice and jealousy of the gods in the manner of the Greeks. His Macbeth shows that only the great can enter the list against the unknown. It is the revelation of humanity put to the edge, brought to a supreme test and revealing itself in magnificent failure.

¹ Smart, John S., Tragedy in "Essays and Studies by The English Association", Oxford, 1922, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 9.

The depths of human nature and its heights concentrated in one presentation where the hero and villain is excused because a victim of suffering, bafflement and irony.

CONCLUSION

The presence of irony in Macbeth points to Shakespeare's mastery of all dramatic devices. Here is a play in the manner of Greek tragedy and in which the entire universe is brought to contribution in a clash of wills and circumstances. The hero, the common man, the agents of fate, nature are all participating forces. The moving back and forth of comprehension and incomprehension on the part of those forces on one hand and of understanding and sympathy on the part of the spectators on the other, is like a game of hide and seek; irony lurks playfully at every corner.

But it would be a mistake to concentrate on one aspect of drama to the expense of the various other features of interest that constitutes its greatness. Much has been said and written in the past about language, lyricism, imagery, characters or supernatural implications in Macbeth. It seems nevertheless the favor of irony to sustain and emphasize each of those, like a pervasive mood that links them together and creates a particular effect of unity throughout the play.

That artifice never becomes tiresome, it is lively and effective. By its virtue immediately or generally felt, the mind of the spectator moves easily forward and backward. It gives him a sense of control which is the peculiar pleasure of the stage.

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