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From "Shakespeare and the 'New' Critics"

One of the sanest of recent applications of the new critical method to a Shakespearean play is an essay on *Macbeth*, entitled "The Naked Babe and the Cloak of Manliness."¹ The article illustrates the virtues of the method but also exemplifies its dangers, even though it be applied by a critic of unusual sensitivity and insight. Mr. Brooks, discovering two principal chains of imagery in *Macbeth*, one composed of garments or "old clothes," the other of babes, undertakes to prove that each chain subserves a deep imaginative unity. Since he realizes that what is at stake in his investigation is the whole matter of the relation of Shakespeare's imagery to the structure of the play, he proceeds with caution and (if his premises be granted) with adequate logic.

Miss Spurgeon, in her study of the images in *Macbeth*, pointed out that "the idea constantly recurs that Macbeth's new honors sit ill upon him, like a loose and badly fitting garment belonging to someone else."² And she illustrates the point by showing how many times Shakespeare repeats and varies the clothes image in order to

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¹ This essay appears in Cleanth Brooks' *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947), pp. 21-46.

² *Shakespeare's Imagery*, p. 324.

keep before our minds "this imaginative picture of a small ignoble man encumbered and degraded by garments unsuited to him." The poet's manipulation of this image, as described by Miss Spurgeon, is the reverse of metaphysical; it is direct and simple. The imaginative significance of Banquo's remark as he observes Macbeth ruminating over the "supernatural soliciting" of the witches—

New honors come upon him,
Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mold
But with the aid of use (I.iii.144-46)—

is easily grasped without the intervention of a new critic. So is Angus's comment upon Macbeth's conduct after his accession to power:

Now does he feel his title
Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe
Upon a dwarfish thief.

These two passages are typical of Shakespeare's use of the clothes metaphor as a descriptive tag to pin upon Macbeth.

Mr. Brooks, however, finds such simple employment of the figure merely an adumbration of its more subtle manifestations. After glancing with approval at Miss Spurgeon's analysis, he asserts that these undisguised appearances of the metaphor are paralleled by a series of cloaking or masking images, variants of garment figures. The purpose of those figures is to suggest that throughout the play *Macbeth* is seeking to hide his "disgraceful self" from his own eyes as well as from the eyes of others. Mr. Brooks seeks to prove that the cloaking images form a chain, in the manner of the metaphysicals new and old, to keep alive the ironical contrast between the wretched creature that Macbeth really is and the pompous disguises he assumes to conceal the fact.

In attempting to build a structure out of the clothes images Mr. Brooks is forced to distort the meaning of

more than one passage. This is evident in the variant interpretation he offers for Lady Macbeth's

Come, thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
That my keen knife sees not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark
To cry, Hold, Hold!

Mr. Brooks admits that it is natural to think of the "keen knife" as in Lady Macbeth's hand and that she is begging the night to be so dark that even her knife, much less herself, may not see the wound it makes. The interpretation is more than natural, considering the fact that the image comes at the end of a speech in which she seeks to suppress her woman's nature so that she can be capable of the horrid deed.

But since the figure thus interpreted cannot serve as a link in the chain the critic is forging, Mr. Brooks offers the over-ingenious suggestion that the "keen knife" may be Macbeth himself. Thus interpreted, the figure can be forced to serve as one more indication of the efforts of the two murderers to hide from themselves what they are and what they do. Lady Macbeth would then be invoking the pall, the clothing of death, to blanket the horrid deed from the reluctant doer. But such an interpretation seems to this writer to be strained beyond the limits of credulity.

It is obvious that *Macbeth* contains much clothes imagery, but it is equally undeniable that Shakespeare used it in his own characteristic fashion. Once having employed the figure as a swift and startling method of characterizing his villain hero, the poet found the image and the word so securely lodged in his mind that it arose repeatedly while he was at work on his drama. And instead of discarding it every time it demanded expression, he subtly varied its form and employed it on many occasions to intensify crucial moments in the action. A striking example of putting the figure to an original use occurs when, at the end of a highly mannered passage,

Macbeth describes the murderers' daggers as "unmannerly breeched with gore." Mr. Brooks properly characterizes this image as vivid and fantastic. But his efforts to make it play a part in developing the disguise motif seems as fantastic as the metaphor. The daggers, naked except for their red breeches, are not only "unmannerly" but have also been clothed, or so he believes, in a horrible masquerade in order to play in this disguise a villainous role. For their natural guise was honorable nakedness, the form in which they could have guarded the King. This interpretation quite ignores the value of the metaphor for the speech in which it occurs. There it flashes a sudden light upon Macbeth's state of mind at the moment when he utters it. Shakespeare has designed the series of extravagant images—of which the daggers "unmannerly breeched with gore" is the last—as a means of revealing Macbeth's neurotic embarrassment, which is here on the verge of betraying his guilt to Macduff, Malcolm, and Donalbain. In other words, the figure epitomizes the murderer's state of mind and nerves at one of the play's high emotional moments. Mr. Brooks' analysis of the various clothes images does not establish the facts he desires. But it has the unconscious merit of throwing into sharp relief the difference between Shakespeare's habitual use of figurative language and the methods of the metaphysical poets, which the new critics falsely assume Shakespeare to have adopted.

Mr. Brooks' analysis of Shakespeare's employment of the image of the babe is less free of bias than his treatment of the clothes figure and leads to a less valid conclusion. He begins with a brilliant interpretation of some lines which many commentators have stigmatized as pure fustian:

And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, hors'd
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind. (I.vii.21)

The poet means, so says Mr. Brooks, that the nature of pity is paradoxical. When first aroused it seems to be as helpless as a newborn babe. Yet when it is blown into the hearts and minds of multitudes of men, it becomes stronger than the blasts of tempestuous wind. That is, its strength lies in its very weakness.

Mr. Brooks' close attention to this passage has led him to note many other references to babes in *Macbeth*. "Sometimes," he writes, "it is a character such as Macduff's child" (who is not a babe at all); "sometimes a symbol, like the crowned babe and the bloody babe which are raised by the witches; . . . sometimes in a metaphor." This babe, the critic arbitrarily decides, "signifies the future which Macbeth would control and cannot control." Mr. Brooks makes this identification in spite of the fact that in the passage he has just analyzed the babe is a symbol of something quite different. But not satisfied with this concrete use of the symbol Mr. Brooks explains that "the babe signifies not only the future; it symbolizes all those enlarging purposes which make life meaningful, and it symbolizes, furthermore, all those emotional and—to Lady Macbeth—irrational ties which make man more than a machine—which render him human." By this time the hard concrete core of the symbol has developed so amorphous an aura that its "burning center" has been almost completely obscured. By interpreting the babe as a recurrent symbol of the future Mr. Brooks is able to discover that Macbeth's tragedy is that of man making futile efforts to control the future. But this erratic, neo-Hegelian judgment reduces the rich complexity of Macbeth's human nature to a bare general proposition. His tragedy lies not in a failure of his efforts to impose his will upon the future but in the multitudinous fears and superstitions that form the psychological punishment for his crime. Whatever the value of imagery as an objective correlative of emotion, it obviously must not be interpreted in such a way as to contradict directly the clear meaning of the plot.

If Mr. Brooks' conclusions be false, it is important to discover at what points his method has been at fault.

In general his errors of judgment result from efforts to force all the references to babes into one connected system of imagery to form a structural principle for the drama. For example, Macbeth's famous soliloquy ending

If th' assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease, success; 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 (I.vii.2-7)

to Mr. Brooks means that Macbeth is agonizing over the future. But Macbeth's case is hopeless, he proceeds, because "the continuum of time cannot be partitioned off, the future is implicit in the present." Such recourse to a philosophical generality is perverse. Macbeth, like all murderers in Elizabethan plays, is afraid, not of his inability to control the future, but of the knife in the hands of a human avenger. This fear he expresses in the lines:

We but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague the inventor.

This expectation of inevitable revenge is the reason why his fears in Banquo stick deep—why, in spite of the witches' assurance that he need fear no man of woman born, he fears Macduff so greatly that he orders his death.

One reason for Mr. Brooks' misunderstanding of the above passage is his misinterpretation of the phrase "the life to come." In its context it clearly refers to life after death and not, as Mr. Brooks thinks, to the future of Macbeth and his line in this world. Can it be that the critic has taken "jump" to mean "leap over"—that is, "skip"—instead of the correct "risk"? His following statement suggests this as a distinct possibility. "It is idle," he says,

"to speak of jumping the life to come if one yearns to found a line of kings."

Mr. Brooks forces other passages into distorted shapes in his valiant effort to forge a chain of imagery out of materials extracted from the poetry. For example, he gives a sophistical interpretation to one of Lady Macbeth's most revealing exclamations—her scornful cry that she would rather have torn her baby from her breast and dashed out its brains than be so cowardly as to fail to kill Duncan, as her husband had sworn to do. This, says the critic, means that she is willing to go to any lengths to grasp the future. But her cry, Mr. Brooks continues, is extremely ironical because "she will grasp the future by repudiating the future of which the child is the symbol." This over-ingenious reading obscures and enfeebles the stark simplicity of Lady Macbeth's utterance. What she says to her husband is this: Rather than be such an irresolute coward as you now are, I had rather be guilty of the most fiendishly unnatural deed of which a mother is capable.

More than once Brooks forces upon an image an interpretation which, by the wildest stretch of the imagination, it cannot be made to bear. For example, he insists that when Macduff's little boy defies the murderers the child, whom he persists in calling a babe, testifies to the strength of the future, the force that threatens Macbeth and which he cannot destroy. The child, whose real dramatic function, besides the evocation of pity, is to show the wild killer that Macbeth has become in his efforts to kill fear itself, in Mr. Brooks' view "ties into the inner symbolism of the play." The truth is that Shakespeare has not used the image of the babe any more in the manner of a metaphysical poet than he did that of the clothes image. The word and the image reappeared in the poet's mind, but each time he used it for an immediate imaginative purpose relevant only to a specific situation.