

A. C. Bradley

From *Shakespearean Tragedy*

From this murky background stand out the two great terrible figures who dwarf all the remaining characters of the drama. Both are sublime, and both inspire, more than the other tragic heroes, the feeling of awe. They are never detached in imagination from the atmosphere which surrounds them and adds to their grandeur and terror. It is, as it were, continued into their souls. For within them is all that we felt without—the darkness of night, lit with the flame of tempest and the cries of blood, and haunted by wild and direful shapes, "murdering ministers," spirits of remorse, and maddening visions of peace lost and judgment to come. The way to be untrue to Shakespeare here, as always, is to relax the tension of imagination, to conventionalize, to conceive Macbeth, for example, as a halfhearted cowardly criminal, and Lady Macbeth as a wholehearted fiend.

These two characters are fired by one and the same passion of ambition; and to a considerable extent they are alike. The disposition of each is high, proud, and commanding. They are born to rule, if not to reign. They are peremptory or contemptuous to their inferiors. They are not children of light, like Brutus and Hamlet; they are of the world. We observe in them no love of country, and no interest in the welfare of anyone outside their fam-

ily. Their habitual thoughts and aims are, and, we imagine, long have been, all of station and power. And though in both there is something, and in one much, of what is higher—honor, conscience, humanity—they do not live consciously in the light of these things or speak their language. Not that they are egoists, like Iago; or, if they are egoists, theirs is an *egoïsme à deux*. They have no separate ambitions.¹ They support and love one another. They suffer together. And if, as time goes on, they drift a little apart, they are not vulgar souls, to be alienated and recriminate when they experience the fruitlessness of their ambition. They remain to the end tragic, even grand.

So far there is much likeness between them. Otherwise they are contrasted, and the action is built upon this contrast. Their attitudes towards the projected murder of Duncan are quite different; and it produces in them equally different effects. In consequence, they appear in the earlier part of the play as of equal importance, if indeed Lady Macbeth does not overshadow her husband; but afterwards she retires more and more into the background, and he becomes unmistakably the leading figure. His is indeed far the more complex character: and I will speak of it first.

Macbeth, the cousin of a King mild, just, and beloved, but now too old to lead his army, is introduced to us as a general of extraordinary prowess, who has covered himself with glory in putting down a rebellion and repelling the invasion of a foreign army. In these conflicts he showed great personal courage, a quality which he continues to display throughout the drama in regard to all plain dangers. It is difficult to be sure of his customary demeanor, for in the play we see him either in what appears to be an exceptional relation to his wife, or else in the throes of remorse and desperation; but from his behavior during his journey home after the war, from his

¹ The assertion that Lady Macbeth sought a crown for herself, or sought anything for herself, apart from her husband, is absolutely unjustified by anything in the play. It is based on a sentence of Holinshed's which Shakespeare did not use.

last conversations with Lady Macbeth, and from his language to the murderers of Banquo and to others, we imagine him as a great warrior, somewhat masterful, rough, and abrupt, a man to inspire some fear and much admiration. He was thought "honest," or honorable; he was trusted, apparently, by everyone; Macduff, a man of the highest integrity, "loved him well." And there was, in fact, much good in him. We have no warrant, I think, for describing him, with many writers, as of a "noble" nature, like Hamlet or Othello;² but he had a keen sense both of honor and of the worth of a good name. The phrase, again, "too full of the milk of human kindness," is applied to him in impatience by his wife, who did not fully understand him; but certainly he was far from devoid of humanity and pity.

At the same time he was exceedingly ambitious. He must have been so by temper. The tendency must have been greatly strengthened by his marriage. When we see him, it has been further stimulated by his remarkable success and by the consciousness of exceptional powers and merit. It becomes a passion. The course of action suggested by it is extremely perilous: it sets his good name, his position, and even his life on the hazard. It is also abhorrent to his better feelings. Their defeat in the struggle with ambition leaves him utterly wretched, and would have kept him so, however complete had been his outward success and security. On the other hand, his passion for power and his instinct of self-assertion are so vehement that no inward misery could persuade him to relinquish the fruits of crime, or to advance from remorse to repentance.

In the character as so far sketched there is nothing very peculiar, though the strength of the forces contending in it is unusual. But there is in Macbeth one marked peculiarity, the true apprehension of which is the key to Shakespeare's conception.³ This bold ambitious man of

² The word is used of him (I.H.67), but not in a way that decides this question or even bears on it.

³ This view, thus generally stated, is not original, but I cannot say who first stated it.

the imagination of a poet is extremely sensitive to impressions from without; and, on the other, productive of violent disturbance both of mind and body. Though he is kept in contact with supernatural impressions and is liable to supernatural fears. And through it, especially, come to him the intimations of conscience and honor. Macbeth's better nature—to put the matter for clearness' sake too broadly—instead of speaking to him in the overt language of moral ideas, commands, and prohibitions, incorporates itself in images which alarm and horrify. His imagination is thus the best of him, something usually deeper and higher than his conscious thoughts; and if he had obeyed it he would have been safe. But his wife quite misunderstands it, and he himself understands it only in part. The terrifying images which deter him from crime and follow its commission, and which are really the protest of his deepest self, seem to his wife the creations of mere nervous fear, and are sometimes referred by himself to the dread of vengeance or the restlessness of insecurity.⁴ His conscious or reflective mind, that is, moves chiefly among considerations of outward success and failure, while his inner being is convulsed by conscience. And his inability to understand himself is repeated and exaggerated in the interpretations of actors and critics, who represent him as a coward, cold-blooded, calculating, and pitiless, who shrinks from crime simply because it is dangerous, and suffers afterwards simply because he is not safe. In reality his courage is rightful. He strides from crime to crime, though his soul never ceases to bar his advance with shapes of terror, or to clamor in his ears that he is murdering his peace and casting away his "eternal jewel."

It is of the first importance to realize the strength, and also (what has not been so clearly recognized) the limits, of Macbeth's imagination. It is not the universal meditative imagination of Hamlet. He came to see in man, as

Hamlet sometimes did, the "quintessence of dust"; but he must always have been incapable of Hamlet's reflections on man's noble reason and infinite faculty, or of seeing with Hamlet's eyes "this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestic roof fretted with golden fire." Nor could he feel, like Othello, the romance of war or the infinity of love. He shows no sign of any unusual sensitiveness to the glory or beauty in the world or the soul; and it is partly for this reason that we have no inclination to love him, and that we regard him with more of awe than of pity. His imagination is excitable and intense, but narrow. That which stimulates it is, almost solely, that which thrills with sudden, startling, and often supernatural fear.⁵ There is a famous passage late in the play (V.v.10) which is here very significant, because it refers to a time before his conscience was burdened, and so shows his native disposition:

The time has been, my senses would have cool'd
To hear a night-shriek; and my fell of hair
Would at a dismal treatise rise and stir
As life were in't.

This "time" must have been in his youth, or at least before we see him. And, in the drama, everything which terrifies him is of this character, only it has now a deeper and a moral significance. Palpable dangers leave him unmoved or fill him with fire. He does himself mere justice when he asserts he "dare do all that may become a man," or when he exclaims to Banquo's ghost,

What man dare, I dare:
Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,
The arm'd rhinoceros, or the Hyrcan tiger;
Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
Shall never tremble.

⁴ It is the consequent insistence on the idea of fear, and the frequent repetition of the word, that have principally led to misinterpretation.

What appalls him is always the image of his own guilty heart or bloody deed, or some image which derives from them its terror or gloom. These, when they arise, hold him spellbound and possess him wholly, like a hypnotic trance which is at the same time the ecstasy of a poet. As the first "horrid image" of Duncan's murder—of himself murdering Duncan—rises from unconsciousness and confronts him, his hair stands on end and the outward scene vanishes from his eyes. Why? For fear of "consequences"? The idea is ridiculous. Or because the deed is bloody? The man who with his "smoking" steel "carved out his passage" to the rebel leader, and "unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps," would hardly be frightened by blood. How could fear of consequences make the dagger he is to use hang suddenly glittering before him in the air, and then as suddenly dash it with gouts of blood? Even when he talks of consequences, and declares that if he were safe against them he would "jump the life to come," his imagination bears witness against him, and shows us that what really holds him back is the hideous vileness of the deed:

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 murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's cherubim, horsed
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind.

It may be said that he is here thinking of the horror that others will feel at the deed—thinking therefore of consequences. Yes, but could he realize thus how horrible

⁵ The latter, and more important, point was put quite clearly by Coleridge.

the dead would look to others if it were not equally horrible to himself?

It is the same when the murder is done. He is well-nigh mad with horror, but it is not the horror of detection. It is not he who thinks of washing his hands or getting his nightgown on. He has brought away the daggers he should have left on the pillows of the grooms, but what does he care for that? What *he* thinks of is that, when he heard one of the men awaked from sleep say "God bless us," he could not say "Amen"; for his imagination presents to him the parching of his throat as an immediate judgment from heaven. His wife heard the owl scream and the crickets cry; but what *he* heard was the voice that first cried "Macbeth doth murder sleep," and then, a minute later, with a change of tense, denounced on him, as if his three names gave him three personalities to suffer in, the doom of sleeplessness:

Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor
Shall sleep no more, Macbeth shall sleep no more.

There comes a sound of knocking. It should be perfectly familiar to him; but he knows not whence, or from what world, it comes. He looks down at his hands, and starts violently: "What hands are here?" For they seem alive, they move, they mean to pluck out his eyes. He looks at one of them again; it does not move; but the blood upon it is enough to dye the whole ocean red. What has all this to do with fear of "consequences"? It is his soul speaking in the only shape in which it can speak freely, that of imagination.

So long as Macbeth's imagination is active, we watch him fascinated; we feel suspense, horror, awe; in which are latent, also, admiration and sympathy. But so soon as it is quiescent these feelings vanish. He is no longer "infirm of purpose": he becomes domineering, even brutal, or he becomes a cool pitiless hypocrite. He is generally said to be a very bad actor, but this is not wholly true. Whenever his imagination stirs, he acts badly. It

so possesses him, and is so much stronger than his reason, that his face betrays him, and his voice utters the most improbable untruths⁶ or the most artificial rhetoric.⁷ But when it is asleep he is firm, self-controlled and practical, as in the conversation where he skillfully elicits from Banquo that information about his movements which is required for the successful arrangement of his murder.⁸ Here he is hateful; and so he is in the conversation with the murderers, who are not professional cutthroats but old soldiers, and whom, without a vestige of remorse, he beguiles with calumnies against Banquo and with such appeals as his wife had used to him.⁹ On the other hand, we feel much pity as well as anxiety in the scene (I.vii) where she overcomes his op-

⁶ E.g., I.iii.149, where he excuses his abstraction by saying that his "dull brain was wrought with things forgotten," when nothing could be more natural than that he should be thinking of his new honor.

⁷ E.g., in I.iv. This is so also in II.iii. 110 ff., though here there is some real imaginative excitement mingled with the rhetorical antitheses and balanced clauses and forced bombast.

⁸ III.i. Lady Macbeth herself could not more naturally have introduced at intervals the questions "Ride you this afternoon?" (I. 19), "Is't far you ride?" (I. 23), "Goes Fleance with you?" (I. 35).

⁹ We feel here, however, an underlying subdued frenzy which awakes some sympathy. There is an almost unendurable impatience expressed even in the rhythm of many of the lines; e.g.:

Well then, now
Have you consider'd of my speeches? Know
That it was he in the times past which held you
So under fortune, which you thought had been
Our innocent self: this I made good to you
In our last conference, pass'd in probation with you,
How you were borne in hand, how cross'd, the instruments,
Who wrought with them, and all things else that might
To half a soul and to a notion crazed
Say, "Thus did Banquo."

This effect is heard to the end of the play in Macbeth's less poetic speeches, and leaves the same impression of burning energy, though not of imaginative exaltation, as his great speeches. In these we find either violent, huge, sublime imagery, or a torrent of figurative expressions (as in the famous lines about "the innocent sleep"). Our impressions as to the diction of the play are largely derived from these speeches of the hero, but not wholly so. The writing almost throughout leaves an impression of intense, almost feverish, activity.

position to the murder; and we feel it (though his imagination is not specially active) because this scene shows us how little he understands himself. This is his great misfortune here. Not that he fails to realize in reflection the baseness of the deed (the soliloquy with which the scene opens shows that he does not). But he has never, to put it pedantically, accepted as the principle of his conduct the morality which takes shape in his imaginative fears. Had he done so, and said plainly to his wife, "The thing is vile, and, however much I have sworn to do it, I will not," she would have been helpless; for all her arguments proceed on the assumption that there is for them no such point of view. Macbeth does approach this position once, when, resenting the accusation of cowardice, he answers,

I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more is none.

She feels in an instant that everything is at stake, and, ignoring the point, overwhelms him with indignant and contemptuous personal reproach. But he yields to it because he is himself half-ashamed of that answer of his, and because, for want of habit, the simple idea which it expresses has no hold on him comparable to the force it acquires when it becomes incarnate in visionary fears and warnings.

Yet these were so insistent, and they offered to his ambition a resistance so strong, that it is impossible to regard him as falling through the blindness or delusion of passion. On the contrary, he himself feels with such intensity the enormity of his purpose that, it seems clear, neither his ambition nor yet the prophecy of the Witches would ever without the aid of Lady Macbeth have overcome this feeling. As it is, the deed is done in horror and without the faintest desire or sense of glory—done, one may almost say, as if it were an appalling duty; and, the instant it is finished, its futility is revealed to Macbeth as clearly as its vileness had been revealed be-

forehand. As he staggers from the scene he mutters in despair,

Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou could'st.

When, half an hour later, he returns with Lennox from the room of the murder, he breaks out:

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
I had lived a blessed time; for from this instant
There's nothing serious in mortality:
All is but toys: renown and grace is dead;
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of.

This is no mere acting. The language here has none of the false rhetoric of his merely hypocritical speeches. It is meant to deceive, but it utters at the same time his profoundest feeling. And this he can henceforth never hide from himself for long. However he may try to drown it in further enormities, he hears it murmuring,

Duncan is in his grave:
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well:

or,

better be with the dead:

or,

I have lived long enough:

and it speaks its last words on the last day of his life:

Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more: it is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

How strange that this judgment on life, the despair of a man who had knowingly made mortal war on his own soul, should be frequently quoted as Shakespeare's own judgment, and should even be adduced, in serious criticism, as a proof of his pessimism!

It remains to look a little more fully at the history of Macbeth after the murder of Duncan. Unlike his first struggle this history excites little suspense or anxiety on his account: we have now no hope for him. But it is an engrossing spectacle, and psychologically it is perhaps the most remarkable exhibition of the *development* of a character to be found in Shakespeare's tragedies.

That heartsickness which comes from Macbeth's perception of the futility of his crime, and which never leaves him for long, is not, however, his habitual state. It could not be so, for two reasons. In the first place the consciousness of guilt is stronger in him than the consciousness of failure; and it keeps him in a perpetual agony of restlessness, and forbids him simply to droop and pine. His mind is "full of scorpions." He cannot sleep. He "keeps alone," moody and savage. "All that is within him does condemn itself for being there." There is a fever in his blood which urges him to ceaseless action in the search for oblivion. And, in the second place, ambition, the love of power, the instinct of self-assertion, are much too potent in Macbeth to permit him to resign, even in spirit, the prize for which he has put rancors in the vessel of his peace. The "will to live" is mighty in him. The forces which impelled him to aim at the crown reassert themselves. He faces the world, and his own conscience, desperate, but never dreaming of acknowledging defeat. He will see "the frame of things disjoint" first. He challenges fate into the lists.

The result is frightful. He speaks no more, as before Duncan's murder, of honor or pity. That sleepless torture, he tells himself, is nothing but the sense of insecurity and the fear of retaliation. If only he were safe,

it would vanish. And he looks about for the cause of his fear; and his eye falls on Banquo. Banquo, who cannot fail to suspect him, has not fled or turned against him: Banquo has become his chief counselor. Why? Because, he answers, the kingdom was promised to Banquo's children. Banquo, then, is waiting to attack him, to make a way for them. The "bloody instructions" he himself taught when he murdered Duncan, are about to return, as he said they would, to plague the inventor. *This* then, he tells himself, is the fear that will not let him sleep; and it will die with Banquo. There is no hesitation now, and no remorse: he has nearly learned his lesson. He hastens feverishly, not to murder Banquo, but to procure his murder: some strange idea is in his mind that the thought of the dead man will not haunt him, like the memory of Duncan, if the deed is done by other hands.¹⁰ The deed is done: but, instead of peace descending on him, from the depths of his nature his half-murdered conscience rises; his deed confronts him in the apparition of Banquo's Ghost, and the horror of the night of his first murder returns. But, alas, *it* has less power, and *he* has more will. Agonized and trembling, he still faces this rebel image, and it yields:

Why, so: being gone,
I am a man again.

Yes, but his secret is in the hands of the assembled lords. And, worse, this deed is as futile as the first. For, though Banquo is dead and even his Ghost is conquered, that inner torture is unassuaged. But he will not bear it. His guests have hardly left him when he turns roughly to his wife:

How say'st thou, that Macduff denies his person
At our great bidding?

¹⁰ See his first words to the Ghost: "Thou canst not say I did it."

Macbeth: it is that spoils his sleep. He shall perish,—he and night also that bars the road to peace.

For mine own good

All causes shall give way: I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er:
Strange things I have in head that will to hand,
Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd.

She answers, sick at heart,

You lack the season of all natures, sleep.

No doubt: but he has found the way to it now:

Come, we'll to sleep. My strange and self abuse
Is the initiate fear that wants hard use:
We are yet but young in deed.

What a change from the man who thought of Duncan's virtues, and of pity like a naked newborn babe! What a frightful clearness of self-consciousness in this descent to hell, and yet what a furious force in the instinct of life and self-assertion that drives him on!

He goes to seek the Witches. He will know, by the worst means, the worst. He has no longer any awe of them.

How now, you secret, black and midnight hags!

—so he greets them, and at once he demands and threatens. They tell him he is right to fear Macduff. They tell him to fear nothing, for none of woman born can harm him. He feels that the two statements are at variance; infatuated, suspects no double meaning; but, that he may "sleep in spite of thunder," determines not to spare Macduff. But his heart throbs to know one thing, and he forces from the Witches the vision of Banquo's children

crowned. The old intolerable thought returns, "for Banquo's issue have I filed my mind"; and with it, for all the absolute security apparently promised him, there returns that inward fever. Will nothing quiet it? Nothing but destruction. Macduff, one comes to tell him, has escaped him; but that does not matter: he can still destroy:¹¹

And even now,

To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done:

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's line. No boasting like a fool;
This deed I'll do before this purpose cool.
But no more sights!

No, he need fear no more "sights." The Witches have done their work, and after this purposeless butchery his own imagination will trouble him no more.¹² He has dealt his last blow at the conscience and pity which spoke through it.

The whole flood of evil in his nature is now let loose.

¹¹ For only in destroying I find ease
To my relentless thoughts.—*Paradise Lost*, IX. 129.

Milton's portrait of Satan's misery here, and at the beginning of Book IV., might well have been suggested by *Macbeth*. Coleridge, after quoting Duncan's speech, I. iv. 35 ff., says: "It is a fancy; but I can never read this, and the following speeches of Macbeth, without involuntarily thinking of the Miltonic Messiah and Satan." I doubt if it was a mere fancy. (It will be remembered that Milton thought at one time of writing a tragedy on Macbeth.)

¹² The immediate reference in "But no more sights" is doubtless to the visions called up by the Witches; but one of these, the "blood-bolter'd Banquo," recalls to him the vision of the preceding night, of which he had said,

You make me strange
Even to the disposition that I owe,
When now I think you can behold such sights,
And keep the natural ruby of your cheeks,
When mine is blanch'd with fear.

He becomes an open tyrant, dreaded by everyone about him, and a terror to his country. She "sinks beneath the yoke."

Each new morn

New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows
Strike heaven on the face.

She weeps, she bleeds, "and each new day a gash is added to her wounds." She is not the mother of her children, but their grave;

where nothing,

But who knows nothing, is once seen to smile:
Where sighs and groans and shrieks that rend the air
Are made, not mark'd.

For this wild rage and furious cruelty we are prepared; but vices of another kind start up as he plunges on his downward way.

I grant him bloody,

Luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful,
Sudden, malicious,

says Malcolm; and two of these epithets surprise us. Who would have expected avarice or lechery¹³ in Macbeth? His ruin seems complete.

Yet it is never complete. To the end he never totally loses our sympathy; we never feel towards him as we do to those who appear the born children of darkness. There remains something sublime in the defiance with which, even when cheated of his last hope, he faces earth and hell and heaven. Nor would any soul to whom evil was congenial be capable of that heartsickness which over-

¹³ "Luxurious" and "luxury" are used by Shakespeare only in this older sense. It must be remembered that these lines are spoken by Malcolm, but it seems likely that they are meant to be taken as true throughout.

comes him when he thinks of the "honor, love, obedience, troops of friends" which "he must not look to have" (and which Iago would never have cared to have), and contrasts with them

Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not,

(and which Iago would have accepted with indifference). Neither can I agree with those who find in his reception of the news of his wife's death proof of alienation or utter carelessness. There is no proof of these in the words,

She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word,

spoken as they are by a man already in some measure prepared for such news, and now transported by the frenzy of his last fight for life. He has no time now to feel.¹⁴ Only, as he thinks of the morrow when time to feel will come—if anything comes, the vanity of all hopes and forward-lookings sinks deep into his soul with an infinite weariness, and he murmurs,

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death.

¹⁴ I do not at all suggest that his love for his wife remains what it was when he greeted her with the words "My dearest love, Duncan comes here tonight." He has greatly changed; she has ceased to help him, sunk in her own despair; and there is no intensity of anxiety in the questions he puts to the doctor about her. But his love for her was probably never unselfish, never the love of Brutus, who, in somewhat similar circumstances, uses, on the death of Cassius, words which remind us of Macbeth's:

I shall find time, Cassius, I shall find time.

For the opposite strain of feeling cf. Sonnet 90:

Then hate me if thou wilt; if ever, now,
Now while the world is bent my deeds to cross.

In the very depths a gleam of his native love of goodness, and with it a touch of tragic grandeur, rests upon him. The evil he has desperately embraced continues to madden or to wither his inmost heart. No experience in the world could bring him to glory in it or make his peace with it, or to forget what he once was and Iago and Goneril never were.