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[Quiller-Couch was editor with J. Dover Wilson of the New Cambridge edition of Shakespeare's works. In his study *Shakespeare's Workmanship*, and in his Cambridge lectures on Shakespeare, Quiller-Couch based his interpretations on the assumption that Shakespeare was mainly a craftsman attempting, with the tools and materials at hand, to solve particular problems central to his plays. In the excerpt below, Quiller-Couch discusses the problem of retaining the sympathy of the audience for an evil hero like Macbeth, an issue also treated by Wayne Booth, Robert B. Heilman, and Bertrand Evans. Quiller-Couch argues that Shakespeare preserves the audience's sympathy for Macbeth because the murder of Duncan proceeds from a "fatal hallucination," a "dreadful mistake." He further states that the vagueness of the witches' influence on Macbeth and of his acceptance of the hallucination contributes to the sympathy he receives. Quiller-Couch also notes a similarity between Shakespeare's Macbeth and Milton's Satan, an observation first suggested by Samuel Taylor Coleridge in a brief note in his marginalia and later made by Roy W. Battenhouse, Robert Pack, and Herbert R. Coursen, Jr.]

[The story of Macbeth from] the *Chronicle* has one fatal defect as a theme of tragedy. For tragedy demands some sympathy with the fortunes of its hero: but where is there room for sympathy in the fortunes of a disloyal, self-seeking murderer?

Just there lay Shakespeare's capital difficulty. (p. 28)

Aristotle says this concerning the hero, or protagonist, of tragic drama, and Shakespeare's practice at every point supports him:—

- (1) A Tragedy must not be the spectacle of a perfectly good man brought to adversity. For this merely shocks us.
- (2) Nor, of course, must it be that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity: for that is not tragedy at all, but the perversion of tragedy, and revolts the moral sense.
- (3) Nor, again, should it exhibit the downfall of an utter villain: since pity is aroused by undeserved misfortunes, terror by misfortunes befalling a man like ourselves.
- (4) There remains, then, as the only proper subject for Tragedy, the spectacle of a man not absolutely or eminently good or wise, who is brought to disaster not by sheer depravity but by some error or frailty.
- (5) Lastly, this man must be highly renowned and prosperous—an Oedipus, a Thyestes, or some other illustrious person.

Before dealing with others, let us get this last rule out of the way; for, to begin with, it presents no difficulty in *Macbeth*, since in the original—in Holinshed's *Chronicles*—Macbeth is an illustrious warrior who makes himself a king; and moreover the rule is patently a secondary one, of artistic expediency rather than of artistic right or wrong. It amounts but to this, that the more eminent we make our persons in Tragedy, the more evident we make the disaster—the dizzier the height, the longer way to fall, and the greater shock on our audience's mind. (pp. 30-1)

But, touching the other and more essential rules laid down by Aristotle, let me—very fearfully, knowing how temerarious it is, how imprudent to offer to condense so great and close a thinker—suggest that, after all, they work down into one:—that a hero of Tragic Drama must, whatever else he miss, engage our sympathy; that, however gross his error or grievous his frailty, it must not exclude our feeling that he is a man like ourselves; that, sitting in the audience, we must know in our hearts that what is befalling him might conceivably in the circumstances have befallen us, and say in our hearts, "There, but for the grace of God, go I."

I think, anticipating a little, I can drive this point home by a single illustration. When the ghost of Banquo seats itself at that dreadful supper, who sees it? Not the company. Not even Lady Macbeth. Whom does it accuse? Not the company, and, again, not even Lady Macbeth. Those who see it are Macbeth and you and I. Those into whom it strikes terror are Macbeth and you and I. Those whom it accuses are Macbeth and you and I. And what it accuses is what, of Macbeth, you and I are hiding in our own breasts.

So, if this be granted, I come back upon the capital difficulty that faced Shakespeare as an artist.

- (1) It was not to make Macbeth a grandiose or a conspicuous figure. He was already that in the *Chronicle*.
- (2) It was not to clothe him in something to illude us with the appearance of real greatness. Shakespeare, with his command of majestic poetical speech, had that in his work-bag surely enough, and knew it. When a writer can make an imaginary person talk

like this:—

She should have died hereafter;
 There would have been a time for such a word.
 To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
 To the last syllable of recorded time;
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death—
 [V. v. 17-23]

I say, when a man knows he can make his Macbeth talk like that, he needs not distrust his power to drape his Macbeth in an illusion of greatness. Moreover, Shakespeare—artist that he was—had other tricks up his sleeve to convince us of Macbeth's greatness. (pp. 32-4)

But (here lies the crux) how could he make us sympathise with him—make us, sitting or standing in the Globe Theatre some time (say) in the year 1610, feel that Macbeth was even such a man as you or I? He was a murderer, and a murderer for his private profit—a combination which does not appeal to most of us, to unlock the flood-gates of sympathy or (I hope) as striking home upon any private and pardonable frailty. The *Chronicles* does, indeed, allow just one loop-hole for pardon. It hints that Duncan, nominating his boy to succeed him, thereby cut off Macbeth from a reasonable hope of the crown, which he thereupon (and not until then) by process of murder usurped, “having,” says Holinshed, “a juste quarrell so to do (as he took the mater).”

Did Shakespeare use that one hint, enlarge that loop-hole? He did not.

The more we study Shakespeare as an artist, the more we must worship the splendid audacity of what he did, just here, in this play of *Macbeth*.

Instead of using a paltry chance to condone Macbeth's guilt, he seized on it and plunged it threefold deeper, so that it might verily

the multitudinous seas incarnadine ...
 [II. ii. 59]

Think of it:—

He made this man, a sworn soldier, murder Duncan, his liegelord.

He made this man, a host, murder Duncan, a guest within his gates.

He made this man, strong and hale, murder Duncan, old, weak, asleep and defenceless.

He made this man commit murder for nothing but his own advancement.

He made this man murder Duncan, who had steadily advanced him hitherto, who had never been aught but trustful, and who (that no detail of reproach might be wanting) had that very night, as he retired, sent, in most kindly thought, the gift of a diamond to his hostess.

To sum up: instead of extenuating Macbeth's criminality, Shakespeare doubles and redoubles it. Deliberately this magnificent artist locks every door on condonation, plunges the guilt deep as hell, and then—tucks up his sleeves.

There was once another man, called John Milton, a Cambridge man of Christ's College; and, as most of us know, he once thought of rewriting this very story of Macbeth. The evidence that he thought of it—the entry in Milton's handwriting—may be examined in the library of Trinity College, Cambridge.

Milton did not eventually write a play on the story of Macbeth. Eventually he preferred to write an epic upon the Fall of Man, and of that poem critics have been found to say that Satan, “enemy of mankind,” is in fact the hero and the personage that most claims our sympathy.

Now (still bearing in mind how the subject of Macbeth attracted Milton) let us open *Paradise Lost* at Book IV. upon the soliloquy of Satan, which between lines 32-113 admittedly holds the *clou* [main point] of the poem:

O! thou that, with surpassing glory crown'd—

Still thinking of Shakespeare and of Milton—of Satan and of Macbeth—let us ponder every line: but especially these:—

Lifted up so high,
 I 'sdain'd subjection, and thought one step higher
 Would set me highest, and in a moment quit
 The debt immense of endless gratitude,

So burdensome, still paying, still to owe:
 Forgetful what from him I still receiv'd;
 And understood not that a grateful mind
 By owing owes not, but still pays at once
 Indebted and discharg'd....

And yet more especially this:—

Farewell, remorse! All good to me is lost:
Evil, be thou my good.

(pp. 34-6)

How could it lie within the compass even of Shakespeare, master-workman though he was and lord of all noble persuasive language, to make a tragic hero of this Macbeth—traitor to his king, murderer of his sleeping guest, breaker of most sacred trust, ingrate, self-seeker, false kinsman, perjured soldier? Why, it is sin of this quality that in *Hamlet*, for example, outlaws the guilty wretch beyond range of pardon—our pardon, if not God's.

Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole....
 [*Hamlet*, I. v. 61]

Why, so did Macbeth upon Duncan's.... How could Shakespeare make his audience feel pity or terror for such a man? Not for the deed, not for Duncan; but for Macbeth, doer of the deed; how make them sympathise, saying inwardly, "There, but for the grace of God, might you go, or I"?

He could, by majesty of diction, make them feel that Macbeth was somehow a great man: and this he did. He could conciliate their sympathy at the start by presenting Macbeth as a brave and victorious soldier: and this he did. He could show him drawn to the deed, against will and conscience, by persuasion of another, a woman: and this—though it is extremely dangerous, since all submission of will forfeits something of manliness, lying apparently on the side of cowardice, and ever so little of cowardice forfeits sympathy—this, too, Shakespeare did. He could trace the desperate act to ambition, "last infirmity of noble minds": and this again he did. All these artifices, and more, Shakespeare used. But yet are they artifices and little more. They do not begin—they do not pretend—to surmount the main difficulty which I have indicated, How of such a criminal to make a hero?

Shakespeare did it: *solutum est agendo* [the explanation is in the plan]. How?

There is (I suppose) only one possible way. It is to make our hero—supposed great, supposed brave, supposed of certain winning natural gifts—proceed to his crime *under some fatal hallucination*. It must not be an hallucination of mere madness: for that merely revolts.... No: the hallucination, the dreadful mistake, must be one that can seize on a mind yet powerful and lead it logically to a doom that we, seated in the audience, understand, awfully forebode, yet cannot arrest—unless by breaking through the whole illusion heroically, as did a young woman of my acquaintance who, on her second or third visit to the theatre, arose from her seat in the gallery and shouted to Othello, "Oh, you great black fool! Can't you see?"

Further, such an hallucination once established upon a strong mind, the more forcibly that mind reasons the more desperate will be the conclusion of its error; the more powerful is the will, or combination of wills, the more irreparable will be the deed to which it drives, as with the more anguish we shall follow the once-noble soul step by step to its ruin.

Now, of all forms of human error, which is the most fatal? Surely that of exchanging Moral Order, Righteousness, the Will of God (call it what we will) for something directly opposed to it: in other words, of assigning the soul to Satan's terrible resolve, "Evil, be thou my good."

By a great soul such a resolve cannot be taken save under hallucination. But if Shakespeare could fix that hallucination upon Macbeth and plausibly establish him in it, he held the key to unlock his difficulty. I have no doubt at all where he found it, or how he grasped it.

Suppose that Shakespeare as a workman had never improved on what Marlowe taught. Suppose, having to make Macbeth choose evil for good, he had introduced Satan, definite, incarnate, as Marlowe did. Suppose he had made the man assign his soul, by deed or gift, on a piece of parchment and sign it with his blood, as Marlowe made Faustus do. What sort of play would *Macbeth* be?

But we know, and Shakespeare has helped to teach us, that the very soul of horror lies in the vague, the impalpable: that nothing in the world or out of it can so daunt and cow us as the dread of *we know not what*. Of darkness, again—of such darkness as this tragedy is cast in—we know that its menace lies in *suggestion* of the hooded eye watching us, the hand feeling to clutch us by the hair. No; Shakespeare knew what he was about when he left his witches vague. (pp. 50-1)

Let us pause here, on the brink of the deed, and summarise:

- (1) Shakespeare, as artificer of this play, meant the Witches, with their suggestions, to be of capital importance.

- (2) Shakespeare, as a workman, purposely left vague the extent of their influence; purposely left vague the proportions of their influence and Macbeth's own guilty promptings, his own acceptance of the hallucination, contribute to persuade him; vague as the penumbra about him in which—for he is a man of imagination—he sees that visionary dagger. For (let us remember) it is not on Macbeth alone that this horrible dubiety has to be produced; but on us also, seated in the audience. We see what he does not see, and yearn to warn him; but we also see what he sees—the dagger, Banquo's ghost—and understand why he doubts.
- (3) As witchcraft implies a direct reversal of the moral order, so the sight and remembrance of the witches, with the strange fulfilment of the Second Witch's prophecy, constantly impose the hallucination upon him—“Fair is foul, and foul is fair” [I. i. 11]. “Evil, be thou my good.” (pp. 52-3)

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