

Coleridge 1836      S. T. Coleridge, 'Notes on Macbeth', in H. N. Coleridge (ed.), *The literary remains of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, vol. 2 (London, 1836), 235--50.

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NOTES ON MACBETH.

Macbeth stands in contrast throughout with Hamlet; in the manner of opening more especially. In the latter, there is a gradual ascent from the simplest forms of conversation to the language of impassioned intellect, -- yet the intellect still remaining the seat of passion: in the former, the invocation is at once made to the imagination and the emotions connected therewith. Hence the movement throughout is the most rapid of all Shakspeare's plays; and hence also, with the exception of the disgusting passage of the Porter (Act ii. sc. 3.), which I dare pledge myself to demonstrate to be an interpolation of the actors, there is not, to the best of my remembrance, a single pun or play on words in the whole drama. I have previously given an answer to the thousand times repeated charge against Shakspeare upon the subject of his punning, and I here merely mention the fact of the absence of any puns in Macbeth, as justifying a candid doubt at least, whether even in these figures of speech and fanciful modifications of language, Shakspeare may not have followed rules and principles that merit and would stand the test of philosophic examination. And hence, also, there is an entire absence of comedy, nay, even of irony and philosophic contemplation in Mac-

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beth, -- the play being wholly and purely tragic. For the same cause, there are no reasonings of equivocal morality, which would have required a more leisurely state and a consequently greater activity of mind; -- no sophistry of self-delusion, -- except only that previously to the dreadful act, Macbeth mistranslates the recoilings and ominous whispers of conscience into prudential and selfish reasonings, and,

after the deed done, the terrors of remorse into fear from external dangers, -- like delirious men who run away from the phantoms of their own brains, or, raised by terror to rage, stab the real object that is within their reach: -- whilst Lady Macbeth merely endeavours to reconcile his and her own sinkings of heart by anticipations of the worst, and an affected bravado in confronting them. In all the rest, Macbeth's language is the grave utterance of the very heart, conscience-sick, even to the last faintings of moral death. It is the same in all the other characters. The variety arises from rage, caused ever and anon by disruption of anxious thought, and the quick transition of fear into it.

In Hamlet and Macbeth the scene opens with superstition; but, in each it is not merely different, but opposite. In the first it is connected with the best and holiest feelings; in the second with the shadowy, turbulent, and unsanctified cravings of the individual will. Nor is the purpose the same; in the one the object

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is to excite, whilst in the other it is to mark a mind already excited. Superstition, of one sort or another, is natural to victorious generals; the instances are too notorious to need mentioning. There is so much of chance in warfare, and such vast events are connected with the acts of a single individual, -- the representative, in truth, of the efforts of myriads, and yet to the public and, doubtless, to his own feelings, the aggregate of all, -- that the proper temperament for generating or receiving superstitious impressions is naturally produced. Hope, the master element of a commanding genius, meeting with an active and combining intellect, and an imagination of just that degree of vividness which disquiets and impels the soul to try to realize its images, greatly increases the creative power of the mind; and hence the images become a satisfying world of themselves, as is the case in every poet and original philosopher: -- but hope fully gratified, and yet the elementary basis of the passion remaining, becomes fear; and, indeed, the

general, who must often feel, even though he may hide it from his own consciousness, how large a share chance had in his successes, may very naturally be irresolute in a new scene, where he knows that all will depend on his own act and election.

The Wierd Sisters are as true a creation of Shakspeare's, as his Ariel and Caliban, -- fates, furies, and materializing witches being the ele-

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ments. They are wholly different from any representation of witches in the contemporary writers, and yet presented a sufficient external resemblance to the creatures of vulgar prejudice to act immediately on the audience. Their character consists in the imaginative disconnected from the good; they are the shadowy obscure and fearfully anomalous of physical nature, the lawless of human nature, -- elemental avengers without sex or kin:

Fair is foul, and foul is fair;  
Hover thro' the fog and filthy air.

How much it were to be wished in playing Macbeth, that an attempt should be made to introduce the flexile character-mask of the ancient pantomime; -- that Flaxman would contribute his genius to the embodying and making sensuously perceptible that of Shakspeare!

The style and rhythm of the Captain's speeches in the second scene should be illustrated by reference to the interlude in Hamlet, in which the epic is substituted for the tragic, in order to make the latter be felt as the real-life diction. In Macbeth, the poet's object was to raise the mind at once to the high tragic tone, that the audience might be ready for the precipitate consummation of guilt in the early part of the play. The true reason for the first appearance of the Witches is to strike the key-note of the character of the whole drama, as is proved by their re-appear-

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ance in the third scene, after such an order of the king's as establishes their supernatural pow-

er of information. I say information, -- for so it only is as to Glamis and Cawdor; the 'king hereafter' was still contingent, -- still in Macbeth's moral will; although, if he should yield to the temptation, and thus forfeit his free agency, the link of cause and effect *more physico* would then commence. I need not say, that the general idea is all that can be required from the poet, -- not a scholastic logical consistency in all the parts so as to meet metaphysical objectors. But O! how truly Shakspearian is the opening of Macbeth's character given in the *unpossessedness* of Banquo's mind, wholly present to the present object, -- an unsullied, unscarified mirror! -- And how strictly true to nature it is, that Banquo, and not Macbeth himself, directs our notice to the effect produced on Macbeth's mind, rendered temptible by previous dalliance of the fancy with ambitious thoughts:

Good Sir, why do you start; and seem to fear  
Things that do sound so fair?

And then, again, still unintroitive, addresses the Witches: --

I' the name of truth,  
Are ye fantastical, or that indeed  
Which outwardly ye show?

Banquo's questions are those of natural curiosity, -- such as a girl would put after hearing a

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gipsy tell her schoolfellow's fortune; -- all perfectly general, or rather planless. But Macbeth, lost in thought, raises himself to speech only by the Witches being about to depart: --

Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more: --

and all that follows is reasoning on a problem already discussed in his mind, -- on a hope which he welcomes, and the doubts concerning the attainment of which he wishes to have cleared up. Compare his eagerness, -- the keen eye with which he has pursued the Witches' evanishing --

Speak, I charge you!

with the easily satisfied mind of the self-uninterested Banquo: --

The air hath bubbles, as the water has,  
And these are of them: -- Whither are they vanish'd?

and then Macbeth's earnest reply, --

Into the air; and what seem'd corporal, melted  
As breath into the wind. -- *'Would they had staid!*

Is it too minute to notice the appropriateness  
of the simile 'as breath,' &c. in a cold climate?  
Still again Banquo goes on wondering like  
any common spectator:

Were such things here as we do speak about?

whilst Macbeth persists in recurring to the  
self-concerning: --

Your children shall be kings.  
*Ban.* You shall be king.  
*Macb.* And thane of Cawdor too: went it not so?

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So surely is the guilt in its germ anterior to the  
supposed cause, and immediate temptation!  
Before he can cool, the confirmation of the  
tempting half of the prophecy arrives, and the  
concatenating tendency of the imagination is  
fostered by the sudden coincidence: --

Glamis, and thane of Cawdor:  
The greatest is behind.

Oppose this to Banquo's simple surprise: --

What, can the devil speak true?

*Ib.* Banquo's speech: --

That, trusted home,  
Might yet enkindle you unto the crown,  
Besides the thane of Cawdor.

I doubt whether 'enkindle' has not another  
sense than that of 'stimulating;' I mean of

'kind' and 'kin,' as when rabbits are said to  
'kindle.' However Macbeth no longer hears  
any thing *ab extra*: --

Two truths are told,  
As happy prologues to the swelling act  
Of the imperial theme.

Then in the necessity of recollecting himself --

I thank you, gentlemen.

Then he relapses into himself again, and every  
word of his soliloquy shows the early birth-  
date of his guilt. He is all-powerful without  
strength; he wishes the end, but is irresolute  
as to the means; conscience distinctly warns  
him, and he lulls it imperfectly: --

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If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me  
Without my stir.

Lost in the prospective of his guilt, he turns  
round alarmed lest others may suspect what  
is passing in his own mind, and instantly  
vents the lie of ambition:

My dull brain was wrought  
With things *forgotten*; --

And immediately after pours forth the pro-  
mising courtesies of a usurper in intention:--

Kind gentlemen, your pains  
Are register'd where every day I turn  
The leaf to read them.

Ib. Macbeth's speech:

Present *fears*  
Are less than horrible imaginings.

Warburton's note, and substitution of 'feats'  
for 'fears.'

Mercy on this most wilful ingenuity of  
blundering, which, nevertheless, was the very  
Warburton of Warburton -- his inmost being!  
'Fears,' here, are present fear-striking ob-  
jects, *terribilia adstantia*.

Ib. sc. 4. O! the affecting beauty of the death of Cawdor, and the presentimental speech of the king:

There's no art  
To find the mind's construction in the face:  
He was a gentleman on whom I built  
An absolute trust --

Interrupted by --

O worthiest cousin!

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on the entrance of the deeper traitor for whom Cawdor had made way! And here in contrast with Duncan's 'plenteous joys,' Macbeth has nothing but the common-places of loyalty, in which he hides himself with 'our duties.' Note the exceeding effort of Macbeth's addresses to the king, his reasoning on his allegiance, and then especially when a new difficulty, the designation of a successor, suggests a new crime. This, however, seems the first distinct notion, as to the plan of realizing his wishes; and here, therefore, with great propriety, Macbeth's cowardice of his own conscience discloses itself. I always think there is something especially Shakspearian in Duncan's speeches throughout this scene, such pourings forth, such abandonments, compared with the language of vulgar dramatists, whose characters seem to have made their speeches as the actors learn them.

Ib. Duncan's speech: --

Sons, kinsmen, thanes,  
And you whose places are the nearest, know,  
We will establish our estate upon  
Our eldest Malcolm, whom we name hereafter  
The Prince of Cumberland: which honour must  
Not unaccompanied, invest him only;  
But signs of nobleness, like stars, shall shine  
On all deservers.

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.

Ib. sc. 5. Macbeth is described by Lady Macbeth so as at the same time to reveal her own character. Could he have everything he wanted, he would rather have it innocently; -- ignorant, as alas! how many of us are, that he who wishes a temporal end for itself, does in truth will the means; and hence the danger of indulging fancies. Lady Macbeth, like all in Shakspeare, is a class individualized: -- of high rank, left much alone, and feeding herself with day-dreams of ambition, she mistakes the courage of fantasy for the power of bearing the consequences of the realities of guilt. Hers is the mock fortitude of a mind deluded by ambition; she shames her husband with a superhuman audacity of fancy which she cannot support, but sinks in the season of remorse, and dies in suicidal agony. Her speech:

Come, all you spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, &c.

is that of one who had habitually familiarized her imagination to dreadful conceptions, and was trying to do so still more. Her invocations and requisitions are all the false efforts of a mind accustomed only hitherto to the shadows of the imagination, vivid enough to throw the every-day substances of life into shadow, but never as yet brought into direct contact with their own correspondent realities. She evinces no womanly life, no wifely joy, at the return of her husband, no pleased terror at the thought

of his past dangers; whilst Macbeth bursts forth naturally --

My dearest love --

and shrinks from the boldness with which she presents his own thoughts to him. With consummate art she at first uses as incentives the very circumstances, Duncan's coming to their house, &c. which Macbeth's conscience would most probably have adduced to her as motives of abhorrence or repulsion. Yet Macbeth is



not prepared:

We will speak further.

Ib. sc. 6. The lyrical movement with which this scene opens, and the free and unengaged mind of Banquo, loving nature, and rewarded in the love itself, form a highly dramatic contrast with the laboured rhythm and hypocritical over-much of Lady Macbeth's welcome, in which you cannot detect a ray of personal feeling, but all is thrown upon the 'dignities,' the general duty.

Ib. sc. 7. Macbeth's speech:

We will proceed no further in this business:  
He hath honor'd me of late; and I have bought  
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,  
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,  
Not cast aside so soon.

Note the inward pangs and warnings of conscience interpreted into prudential reasonings.

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Act ii. sc. 1. Banquo's speech:

A heavy summons lies like lead upon me,  
And yet I would not sleep. Merciful powers!  
Restrain in me the cursed thoughts, that nature  
Gives way to in repose.

The disturbance of an innocent soul by painful suspicions of another's guilty intentions and wishes, and fear of the cursed thoughts of sensual nature.

Ib. sc. 2. Now that the deed is done or doing -- now that the first reality commences, Lady Macbeth shrinks. The most simple sound strikes terror, the most natural consequences are horrible, whilst previously every thing, however awful, appeared a mere trifle; conscience, which before had been hidden to Macbeth in selfish and prudential fears, now rushes in upon him in her own veritable person:

Methought I heard a voice cry -- Sleep no more!  
I could not say Amen,  
When they did say, God bless us!

And see the novelty given to the most familiar images by a new state of feeling.

Ib. sc. 3. This low soliloquy of the Porter and his few speeches afterwards, I believe to have been written for the mob by some other hand, perhaps with Shakspeare's consent; and that finding it take, he with the remaining ink of a pen otherwise employed, just interpolated the words --

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I'll devil-porter it no further: I had thought to have let in some of all professions, that go the primrose way to th' everlasting bonfire.

Of the rest not one syllable has the ever-present being of Shakspeare.

Act iii. sc. 1. Compare Macbeth's mode of working on the murderers in this place with Schiller's mistaken scene between Butler, Devereux, and Macdonald in Wallenstein. (Part II. act iv. sc. 2.) The comic was wholly out of season. Shakspeare never introduces it, but when it may react on the tragedy by harmonious contrast.

Ib. sc. 2. Macbeth's speech:

But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer,  
Ere we will eat our meal in fear, and sleep  
In the affliction of these terrible dreams  
That shake us nightly.

Ever and ever mistaking the anguish of conscience for fears of selfishness, and thus as a punishment of that selfishness, plunging still deeper in guilt and ruin.

Ib. Macbeth's speech:

Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,  
Till thou applaud the deed.

This is Macbeth's sympathy with his own feelings, and his mistaking his wife's opposite state.

Ib. sc. 4.

*Macb.* It will have blood, they say; blood will have blood:  
Stones have been known to move, and trees to speak;  
Augurs, and understood relations, have

By magot-pies, and choughs, and rooks, brought forth  
The secret'st man of blood.

The deed is done; but Macbeth receives no comfort, -- no additional security. He has by guilt torn himself live-asunder from nature, and is, therefore, himself in a preter-natural state: no wonder, then, that he is inclined to superstition, and faith in the unknown of signs and tokens, and super-human agencies.

Act iv. sc. 1.

*Len.* 'Tis two or three, my lord, that bring you word,  
Macduff is fled to England.

*Macb.* Fled to England?

The acme of the avenging conscience.

*Ib.* sc. 2. This scene, dreadful as it is, is still a relief, because a variety, because domestic, and therefore soothing, as associated with the only real pleasures of life. The conversation between Lady Macduff and her child heightens the pathos, and is preparatory for the deep tragedy of their assassination. Shakspeare's fondness for children is every where shown; -- in Prince Arthur, in King John; in the sweet scene in the Winter's Tale between Hermione and her son; nay, even in honest Evans's examination of Mrs. Page's schoolboy. To the objection that Shakspeare wounds the moral sense by the unsubdued, undisguised description of the most hateful atrocity -- that he tears the feelings without mercy, and even outrages the eye itself with scenes of insupportable horror -- I, omitting Titus Andronicus,

as not genuine, and excepting the scene of Gloster's blinding in Lear, answer boldly in the name of Shakspeare, not guilty.

*Ib.* sc. 3. Malcolm's speech:

Better Macbeth,  
Than such a one to reign.

The moral is -- the dreadful effects even on the best minds of the soul-sickening sense of

insecurity.

Ib. How admirably Macduff's grief is in harmony with the whole play! It rends, not dissolves, the heart. 'The tune of it goes manly.' Thus is Shakspeare always master of himself and of his subject, -- a genuine Proteus: -- we see all things in him, as images in a calm lake, most distinct, most accurate, -- only more splendid, more glorified. This is correctness in the only philosophical sense. But he requires your sympathy and your submission; you must have that recipiency of moral impression without which the purposes and ends of the drama would be frustrated, and the absence of which demonstrates an utter want of all imagination, a deadness to that necessary pleasure of being innocently -- shall I say, deluded? -- or rather, drawn away from ourselves to the music of noblest thought in harmonious sounds. Happy he, who not only in the public theatre, but in the labours of a profession, and round the light of his own hearth, still carries a heart so pleasure-fraught!

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Alas for Macbeth! Now all is inward with him; he has no more prudential prospective reasonings. His wife, the only being who could have had any seat in his affections, dies; he puts on despondency, the final heart-armour of the wretched, and would fain think every thing shadowy and unsubstantial, as indeed all things are to those who cannot regard them as symbols of goodness: --

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.