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SHAKSPERE:
A CRITICAL STUDY OF
HIS MIND AND ART.

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II.

There is a line in the play of *Macbeth*, uttered as the evening shadows begin to gather on the day of Banquo's murder, which we may repeat to ourselves as a motto of the entire tragedy, "Good things of day begin to droop and drowse." It is the tragedy of the twilight and the setting-in of thick darkness upon a human soul. We assist at the spectacle of a terrible sunset in folded clouds of blood. To the last, however, one thin hand's-breadth of melancholy light remains -- the sadness of the day without its strength. *Macbeth* is the prey of a profound world-weariness. And while a huge *ennui* pursues crime, the criminal is not yet in utter blackness of night. When the play opens, the sun is already dropping below the verge. And as at sunset strange winds arise, and gather the clouds to westward with mysterious pause and stir, so the play of *Macbeth* opens with movement of mysterious, spiritual powers, which are auxiliary of that awful shadow which first creeps, and then strides across the moral horizon.

It need hardly be once more repeated that the Witches of Macbeth are not the broom-stick witches of vulgar,

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popular tradition./* If they are grotesque, they are also sublime. The weird sisters of our dramatist may take their place beside the terrible old women of Michael Angelo, who spin the destinies of man. Shakspeare is no more afraid than Michael Angelo of being vulgar. It is the feeble, sentimental-ideal artist who is nervous about the dignity of his conceptions, and who, in aiming at the great, attains only the grandiose; he thins away all that

/* The theory of Messrs Clark and Wright (Clarendon Press edition of Macbeth) that the play is an alteration by Middleton of a tragedy of Shakspeare, is accepted by Mr Fleay, and carried farther into detail (Transactions of the New Shakspeare Society). Mr Fleay is of opinion that the witches around the caldron, Act IV., Scene 1, are creations of Shakspeare; but he believes that they are entirely distinct from the three "weird sisters," the Nornae of Act I., Scene 3. He writes: "In Holinshed we find that 'Macbeth and Banquo were met by iij women in straunge and ferly apparell resembling creatures of an elder world;' that they vanished; that at first by Macbeth and Banquo 'they were reputed but some wayne fantastical illusion,' but afterwards the common opinion was that they were 'eyther the weird sisters -- that is, *ye Goddesses of destinie* -- or else some Nimphes or Feiries endowed with knowledge of prophesie by their Nicromanticall science'" (Act II., Scene 2). But in the part corresponding to IV. 1, Macbeth is warned to take heed of Macduff by 'certain wysardes;' but he does not kill him, because 'a certain witch whom he had in great trust' had given him the two other equivocal predictions. Now, it is to me incredible that Shakspeare, who in the parts of the play not rejected by the Cambridge editors never uses the word, or alludes to witches in any way, should have degraded '*ye Goddesses of destinie*' to three old women, who are called by Paddock and Grimalkin, . . . sail in sieves, kill swine, serve Hecate, and deal in all the common charms, illusions, and incantations of vulgar witches. The three, who 'look not like the inhabitants o' th' earth, and yet are on't;' they who 'can look into the seeds of time and say which grain will grow;' they who 'seem corporal,' but 'melt into the air' like 'bubbles of the earth;' 'the weyward sisters,' who 'make themselves air,' and have 'more than mortal knowledge,' are not beings of this stamp." Mr Fleay's difficulty is that in III. iv. 133, and IV. i. 136, Macbeth calls the witches of IV. i. 'the weird sisters,' and he acknowledges that he cannot at present solve this difficulty. It is hardly perhaps a sound method of criticism to invent a hypothesis which creates an insoluble difficulty.

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is positive and material, in the hope of discovering some novelty of shadowy horror. But the great ideal artists -- Michael Angelo, Dante, Blake, Beethoven -- see things far more dreadful than the vague horrors of the romantic-

ist; they are perfectly fearless in their use of the material, the definite, the gross, the so-called vulgar. And thus Shakspeare fearlessly showed us his weird sisters, "the goddesses of destinie" brewing infernal charms in their wicked cauldron. We cannot quite dispense in this life with ritualism, and the ritualism of evil is foul and ugly; the hell-broth which the Witches are cooking bubbles up with no refined, spiritual poison; the quintessence of mischief is being brewed out of foul things, which can be enumerated; thick and slab the gruel must be made. Yet these weird sisters remain terrible and sublime. They tingle in every fibre with evil energy, as the tempest does with the electric current; their malignity is inexhaustible; they are wells of sin springing up into everlasting death; they have their raptures and ecstasies in crime; they snatch with delight at the relics of impiety and foul disease; they are the awful inspirers of murder, insanity, suicide.

The weird sisters, says Gervinus, "are simply the embodiment of inward temptation." They are surely much more than this. If we must regard the entire universe as a manifestation of an unknown somewhat which lies behind it, we are compelled to admit that there is an apocalypse of power auxiliary to vice, as really as there is a manifestation of virtuous energy. All venerable mythologies admit this fact. The Mephistopheles of Goethe remains as the testimony of our scientific nineteenth

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century upon the matter. The history of the race, and the social medium in which we live and breathe, have created forces of good and evil which are independent of the will of each individual man and woman. The sins of past centuries taint the atmosphere of to-day. We move through the world subject to accumulated forces of evil and of good outside ourselves. We are caught up at times upon a stream of virtuous force, a beneficent current which bears us onward towards an abiding-place of joy, of purity, and of sacrifice; or a counter-current drifts us towards darkness, and cold, and death. And therefore no great realist in art has hesitated to admit the existence of what theologians name divine grace, and of what theologians name Satanic temptation. There is, in truth, no such thing as "naked manhood." The attempt to divorce ourselves from the large impersonal life of the world, and to erect ourselves into independent wills, is the dream of the idealist. And between the evil within and the evil without subsists a terrible sym-

accepts certain of the facts of old superstitions, accepts them and explains them. We slighter and smaller natures can deprive ourselves altogether of the sense for such phenomena; we can elevate ourselves into a rare atmosphere of intellectuality and incredulity. The wider and richer natures of creative artists have received too large an inheritance from the race, and have too fully absorbed all the influences of their environment for this to be possible in their case. While dim recollections and forefeelings haunt their blood they cannot enclose themselves in a little pinfold of demonstrable knowledge, and call it the universe.

"The true reason for the first appearance of the Witches," Coleridge has said, "is to strike the keynote of the character of the whole drama." They appear in a desert place, with thunder and lightning; it is the barren and blasted place where evil has obtained the mastery of things. Observe that the last words of the witches, in the opening scene of the play, are the first words which Macbeth himself utters.

Fair is foul and foul is fair
Hover through the fog and filthy air./*

Macbeth. "So foul and fair a day I have not seen." Shakspeare intimates by this that although Macbeth has not yet set eyes upon these hags, the connection is already established between his soul and them. Their spells have already wrought upon his blood. When the three sisters meet Macbeth and Banquo upon the heath, it is Banquo to whom they are first visible in the grey,

/* Words uttered by all three witches, after each has singly spoken thrice.

northern air. To Banquo they are objective -- they are outside himself, and he can observe and describe their strange aspect, their wild attire, and their mysterious gesture. Macbeth is rapt in silence, and then with eager longing demands, "Speak if you can: what are you?" When they have given him the three Hails, as Glamis, as Cawdor, and as King, the Hail of the past, of the present, of the future, Macbeth starts. "It is a full revelation of his criminal aptitudes," Mr Hudson has well said, "that so startles and surprises

him into a rapture of meditation." And besides this, Macbeth is startled to find that there is a terrible correspondence established between the baser instincts of his own heart and certain awful external agencies of evil.

Shakspeare does not believe in any sudden transformation of a noble and loyal soul into that of a traitor and murderer. At the outset Macbeth possesses no real fidelity to things that are true, honest, just, pure, lovely. He is simply not yet in alliance with the powers of evil. He has aptitudes for goodness, and aptitudes for crime. Shakspeare felt profoundly that this careless attitude of suspense or indifference between virtue and vice cannot continue long. The kingdom of heaven suffers violence, and the violent take it by force. Those who lack energy of goodness, and drop into a languid neutrality between the antagonist spiritual forces of the world must serve the devil as slaves, if they will not decide to serve God as freemen.

But beside the vague yet mastering inspiration of crime received from the witches, there is the more

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definite inspiration received from his wife. Macbeth is excitably imaginative, and his imagination alternately stimulates, and enfeebles him. The facts in their clear-cut outline disappear in the dim atmosphere of surmise, desire, fear, hope, which the spirit of Macbeth effuses around the fact. But his wife sees things in the clearest and most definite outline. Her delicate frame is filled with high-strung nervous energy./* With her to perceive is forthwith to decide, to decide is to act. Having resolved upon her end a practical logic convinces her that the means are implied and determined. Macbeth resolves, and falters back from action; now he is restrained by his imagination, now by his fears, now by lingering velleities towards a loyal and honourable existence. He is unable to keep in check or put under restraint any one of the various incoherent powers of his nature, which impede and embarrass each the action of the other. Lady Macbeth gains, for the time, sufficient strength by throwing herself passionately into a single purpose, and by resolutely repressing all that is inconsistent with that purpose. Into the service of evil she carries some of the intensity and energy of asceticism, -- she cuts off from herself her better nature, she yields to

/* "According to my notion," Mrs Siddons wrote, "[Lady Macbeth's beauty] is of that character which I believe is generally allowed to be

most captivating to the other sex -- fair, feminine, nay, perhaps, even fragile." Dr Bucknill (before he was aware that Mrs Siddons held a similar opinion) wrote, "Lady Macbeth was a lady beautiful and delicate, whose one vivid passion proves that her organisation was instinct with nerve-force, unoppressed by weight of flesh. Probably she was small; for it is the smaller sort of woman whose emotional fire is the most fierce, and she herself bears unconscious testimony to the fact that her hand was little." -- *Mad Folk of Shakespeare*, p. 46. She is Macbeth's "dearest chuck."

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no weak paltering with conscience. "I have given suck," she exclaims, "and know how tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;" she is unable to stab Duncan because he resembles her father in his sleep; she is appalled by the copious blood in which the old man lies, and the horror of the sight clings to her memory; the smell of the blood is hateful to her and almost insupportable; she had not been without apprehension that her feminine nature might fail to carry her through the terrible ordeal, through which she yet resolved that it should be compelled to pass. She must not waste an atom of her strength of will, which has to serve for two murderers, -- for her husband as well as for herself. She puts into requisition with the aid of wine and of stimulant words the reserve of nervous force which lay unused. No witches have given her "Hail;" no airy dagger marshals her the way that she is going; nor is she afterwards haunted by the terrible vision of Banquo's gory head. As long as her will remains her own she can throw herself upon external facts and maintain herself in relation with the definite, actual surroundings; it is in her sleep, when the will is incapable of action, that she is persecuted by the past which perpetually renews itself, not in ghostly shapes, but by the imagined recurrence of real and terrible incidents.

The fears of Lady Macbeth upon the night of Duncan's murder are the definite ones, that the murderers may be detected, that some omission in the pre-arranged plan may occur, that she or her husband may be summoned to appear before the traces of their crime have been removed. More awful considerations

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would press in upon her and overwhelm her sanity, but that she forcibly repels them for the time:

These deeds must not be thought
After these ways; so, it will make us mad.

To her the sight of Duncan dead is as terrible as to Macbeth; but she takes the dagger from her husband; and with a forced jest, hideous in the self-violence which it implies, she steps forth into the dark corridor:

If he do bleed
I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal
For it must seem their guilt.

"A play of fancy here is like a gleam of ghastly sunshine striking across a stormy landscape."/* The knocking at the gate clashes upon her overstrained nerves and thrills her; but she has determination and energy to direct the actions of Macbeth, and rouse him from the mood of abject depression which succeeded his crime. A white flame of resolution glows through her delicate organisation, like light through an alabaster lamp:

Infirm of purpose!
Give me the daggers: the sleeping and the dead
Are but as pictures: 'tis the eye of childhood
That fears a painted devil

If the hold which she possesses over her own faculties should relax for a moment all would be lost. For dreadful deeds anticipated and resolved upon, she has strength, but the surprise of a novel horror, on which she has not counted, deprives her suddenly of consciousness; when Macbeth announces his butchery of Duncan's

/* Macbeth, Clarendon Press Edition, p. 108.

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grooms the lady swoons, -- not in feigning but in fact, -- and is borne away insensible.

Macbeth wastes himself in vague, imaginative remorse:

Will not great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.

Thus his imagination serves to dissipate the impression of his conscience. What is the worth of this vague, imaginative remorse? Macbeth retained enough of goodness to make him a haggard, miserable criminal; never enough to restrain him from a crime. His hand

soon became subdued to what it worked in, -- the blood in which it paddled and plashed. And yet the loose incoherent faculties ever becoming more and more disorganised and disintegrated somehow held together till the end. "My hands are of your colour," exclaims Lady Macbeth; "but I shame to wear a heart so white. A little water clears us of this deed." Yet it is she who has uttered no large words about "the multitudinous seas," who will rise in slumbery agitation, and with her accustomed action eagerly essay to remove from her little hand its ineffaceable stain, and with her delicate sense sicken at the smell of blood upon it, which "all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten;" and last, will loosen the terrible constriction of her heart with a sigh that longs to be perpetual. It is the queen, and not her husband who is slain by conscience.

Yet the soul of Macbeth never quite disappears into the blackness of darkness. He is a cloud without water car-

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ried about of winds; a tree whose fruit withers, but not even to the last quite plucked up by the roots. For the dull ferocity of Macbeth is joyless. All his life has gone irretrievably astray, and he is aware of this. His suspicion becomes uncontrollable; his reign is a reign of terror; and as he drops deeper and deeper into the solitude and the gloom, his sense of error and misfortune, futile and unproductive as that sense is, increases. He moves under a dreary cloud, and all things look gray and cold. He has lived long enough, yet he clings to life; that which should accompany old age "as honour, love, obedience, troops of friends," he may not look to have. Finally his sensibility has grown so dull that even the intelligence of his wife's death, -- the death of her who had been bound to him by such close communion in crime, -- hardly touches him, and seems little more than one additional incident in the weary, meaningless tale of human life:

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. 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.

This world-weariness, which has not the energy of Timon's despair, is yet less remote from the joy and glory of true living than is the worm-like vivacity of

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Iago. Macbeth remembers that he once knew there was such a thing as human goodness. He stands a haggard shadow against the handsbreadth of pale sky which yields us sufficient light to see him. But Iago rises compact with fiend-like energy, seen brightly in the godless glare of hell. The end of Macbeth is savage, and almost brutal -- a death without honour or loveliness. He fights now not like "Bellona's bridegroom lapp'd in proof," but with a wild and animal clinging to life:

They have tied me to a stake; I cannot fly,
But, bear-like, I must fight the course.

His followers desert him; he feels himself taken in a trap. The powers of evil in which he had trusted turn against him and betray him. His courage becomes a desperate rage. We are in pain until the horrible necessity is accomplished.

Shakspeare pursues Macbeth no farther. He does not follow him with yearning conjecture, as Mr Browning follows the murderer of his poem, "The Ring and the Book,"

Into that sad obscure sequestered state,
Where God unmakes but to re-make the soul
He else made first in vain.

Our feet remain on solid Scottish earth. But a new and better era of history dawns. Macbeth and Seyton's son lie dead; but the world goes on. The tragic deeds take up their place in the large life of a country. We suffer no dejection; "the time is free." Sane and strong, we expect the day when Malcolm will be crowned at Scone.