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macbeth and the tyrannical man

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MACBETH AND THE TYRANNICAL MAN

HOWARD B. WHITE

That *Macbeth* is the Shakespearean play about tyranny will perhaps not be widely challenged, though a case can be made for *Richard III*. *Macbeth* is also the Shakespearean play about mental illness and guilt, and about time. These subjects have some relation to one another, and my goal is to understand tyranny a little bit better by understanding that relation a little bit better. Macbeth is not called a "tyrant" nor is his regime called "tyranny" before the Third Act. This may be simply because of ignorance of his crimes. Yet even when Banquo says:

I fear
Thou play'd most falsely for it.
(III, i, 2-3)

Banquo does not call Macbeth a tyrant. There is certainly not perfect clarity as to the identification of a tyrant, or even the distinction between the modern and the pre-modern tyrant.

In identifying Macbeth as a tyrant, Shakespeare seems not to consider a tyrant a usurper of royal authority, in the sense that Xenophon considered Hiero a tyrant.¹ Tyranny seems rather to rest in the quality of rule, or, if you prefer modern terminology, the use or abuse of power. Consider the charge of Isabella in *Measure for Measure*:

O! it is excellent
To have giant's strength, but it is tyrannous
To use it like a giant.
(I, ii, 107-109)

For one brief moment of delegated and ununsurped power, Angelo is a tyrant. Or consider what Pericles says of Antiochus:

I knew him tyrannous; and tyrants' fears
Decrease not but grow faster than the years.
(*Pericles* I, ii, 84-85.)

Yet we do not know that Antiochus is an usurper. The family name for the rulers of Antioch makes it unlikely. There are a number of cases of

¹ See Leo Strauss: *On Tyranny* (which includes a translation of the *Hiero* by Marvin Kendrick) Ch. IV "The Teaching concerning Tyranny", especially p. 126, fn. 7 and citations therein. (Cornell, 1963, 1970).

usurpation in Shakespeare: John (the more in Shakespeare than in Holinshed), Henry IV, and how many subsequent rulers depends upon prescription. If one agrees with Warwick:

You tell a pedigree
Of threescore and two years, a silly time
To make prescription for a kingdom's worth.
(*III Henry VI*, III, iii, 92-94)

then none of the contestants were usurpers. They were all fighting for a title which, one day perhaps, prescription might establish. Yet whether their claims were equal or unequal, they hardly helped the common people who had to submit to a century of civil war.

Tyranny, certainly tyranny in Shakespeare, is something else again. No one calls John a tyrant or his regime tyranny. There are two conspicuous tyrants in Shakespeare: Richard III and Macbeth. There are others, like Antiochus, who are not the central figures in the plays in which they appear. It is true that usurped authority and despotic power make the exercise of tyrannical rule easier, or, more precisely, more urgent. The failure of present-day political science to understand tyranny has been shown by Leo Strauss:

“Not much observation and reflection is needed to realize that there is an essential difference between the tyranny analyzed by the classics and that of our age. In contradistinction to classical tyranny, present-day tyranny has at its disposal ‘technology’ as well as ‘ideologies’; more generally expressed, it presupposes the existence of ‘science’, i.e., of a particular interpretation or kind of science . . .”

“It is no accident that present-day political science has failed to grasp tyranny as what it really is. Our political science is haunted by the belief that ‘value judgments’ are inadmissible in scientific considerations and to call a regime tyrannical clearly amounts to pronouncing a value judgment.”²

Yet there are links, as Strauss shows, between modern and pre-modern tyranny. Sometimes, though not always, the use of a common nomenclature may furnish a clue. Let me add parenthetically that the teaching regarding tyranny, even the definition, is by no means uniform among Greek classics. Aristotle’s complete tyrant is not only irresponsible and despotic. He rules for his own advantage rather than for the good of the people.³ Hiero, on the other hand, is a tyrant simply because of the way to power. Here we distinguish usurper, despot, and tyrant as three distinct persons, though often related, and sometimes united in one.

What is particularly important to us is the fact that we speak of the

² *Ibid.* p. 22.

³ *Politics* 1295 a 22 ff.

“tyrannical soul” or the “tyrannical man”, a man who may not have, who may never acquire the power that real tyranny demands. There are, in particular, two pictures of the tyrannical man: the Ninth Book of Plato’s *Republic* and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*.

The tyrant is the antithesis of the statesman, the statesman who, in fact knows how to rule, whether he rules or no.⁴ The way in which the tyrannical man comes about is described by Socrates in the *Republic*.

“This leader of the soul takes madness for its armed guard and is stung to frenzy. And if it finds in the man any opinions or desires accounted good and still admitting of shame, it slays them and pushes them out of him until it purges him of moderation and fills him with madness brought in from abroad.”⁵ Later he adds, “A man becomes tyrannic in the precise sense when, either by his nature or by his practices or both, he has become drunken, erotic, and melancholic.”⁶

The tyrannic man, certainly Plato’s tyrannic man, may exist in almost any walk of life. He may not have the opportunity to become a tyrant in practice. Plato’s tyrant, as we have seen above, is a man afflicted by many passions. The modern tyrant, beginning perhaps with *Macbeth*, is a man afflicted with, fundamentally, only one passion, the lust for power, and the security that is supposed to go with power. Perhaps he also has one great vice, the vice the Greeks called *hubris*. Petty vices, private vices, he treats with scorn, even almost to the end:

Then fly, false Thanes,
And mingle with the English epicures.
(V, iii, 7-8)

Macbeth is not an “epicure”. For entirely different reasons, he might say, as *Hamlet* does:

Yea, from the table of my memory
I’ll wipe away all trivial fond records.
(*Hamlet* I, v, 98-99)

Even *Macbeth*’s love, strong as it is, is surprisingly void of tenderness. Brutus says to his Portia:

You are my true and honorable wife,
As dear to me as are the ruddy drops
That visit my sad heart.
(*Julius Caesar* II, i. 288-290)

⁴ Plato: *Statesman* 259 a - b.

⁵ *Republic* 573 b (Allan Bloom tr., New York, 1968).

⁶ *Ibid.* 573 c.

Even Hotspur's wife is "gentle Kate," and their love scenes are touching. Brutus and Hotspur are embarked on dangerous, doubtful courses, but their marriages are not "trivial fond records." When Macbeth, on the contrary, writes to his wife about the prophecies of the witches, he refers to her as "my dearest partner in greatness." All trivial fond records, and some which those in love might not consider trivial.

To the modern tyrant, private vice, as well as private virtue, is a luxury. It impedes the singleness of tyrannic purpose. Would to God that Hitler had been a drunkard and a sodomist. With Macbeth, the beginning of tyranny is somehow in the beginning of disease. To Plato, too, the beginning of tyranny, in the desire to have no master, is a disease.⁷ Long before tyranny itself, before the murder and the usurpation that followed it, Lady Macbeth knew that she and her husband even required disease:

Thou would be great
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it.
(I, v, 18-20)

If even ambition must be attended with illness, what shall we say of tyranny?

The problem of when a tyranny really becomes a tyranny is an important political problem. When Macduff flees to England, leaving his wife and children in Fyfe, he thinks he knows that Macbeth is a tyrant. He does not know, however, the extent of Macbeth's irrationality. Therefore he makes the mistake, which political men sometimes make, when dealing with tyrants, the mistake of supposing that tyrants are still guided by political considerations, rather than by irrational and enraged passions. Perhaps it is fair to say that Macduff's error in dealing with Macbeth was comparable to Chamberlain's error in dealing with the Nazis. Chamberlain assumed that Hitler still retained some antique notion of German need and German interest.

We return to the problem of the development of Macbeth's tyranny. Even before the murder of Duncan, though we cannot be sure that this is before the consideration of that murder, Macbeth gives his views of kingship:

The service and the loyalty I owe,
In doing it, pays itself. Your Highness' part
Is to receive our duties: and our duties
Are to throne and state, children and servants;
Which do but what they should, by doing everything
Safe toward your love and honour.
(I, iv, 22-27)

⁷ *Ibid.* 563 e.

As a theory of kingship, that the throne and state⁸ owe nothing to the people, and the people owe all to the throne and state, this passes all bounds of reason. It may be said that Macbeth is flattering Duncan. But I have learned to take what tyrants say seriously. No really serious apologist for monarchy, and there have been serious apologists for monarchy, like Thomas Hobbes, would ever have made a speech like this one. It out-Filmers Filmer.

When Macbeth kills Duncan, he has the impulses of the tyrant, but not the reality of tyranny. The reality of tyranny begins with the murder of Banquo. Macbeth has such power that he says he could

With bare-fac'd power sweep him from my sight . . .
(III, i, 118)

He uses secret murder as a substitute for the cruel and arbitrary but open use of despotic power. Yet the element in tyranny at which Lady Macbeth hints, has not yet shown clear symptoms. The restless course, and the meaningless course of tyrannical rule, is seen in the murder of Lady Macduff and her children. The other murders are criminal enough, but they are "Machiavellian." In some sense they are political. The ultimate in Macbeth's tyranny is his irrationality in crime. In this he comes closer to the pre-modern tyrant. Yet the will to power and the insecurity of his own power still guide him, not the raging of little passions, like the "English epicures."

We can see Macbeth's development into the tyrannical man perhaps if we explore Macbeth's one virtue, courage, or manliness, and the development of his manliness. Unfortunately, the English language does not have two words for man, as Greek does. We could distinguish *anthropos*, a man belonging to humanity from *aner*, a man of manliness, a he-man. When Macbeth speaks the well-known lines:

I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more, is none.
(I, vi, 46-47)

he is referring to his common humanity. He is calling himself a man in the sense that Antony so refers to Brutus: "This was a man." Two acts later, terrified by Banquo's ghost and his own guilt, Macbeth says almost the same thing, but he means something quite different:

What man dare, I dare:
Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,
The arm'd rhinoceros, or th'Hyrcean tiger;

⁸ Note the use of the word "state", of which Elizabeth disapproved. Compare Francis D. Wormuth: *The Royal Prerogative* (New York, 1939) p. 11.

Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
Shall never tremble.

(III, iv, 98-102)

What he says is probably true, but he is no longer testifying to his humanity. He has one virtue left, that of manliness, and he brags about it, even in terror.

From the beginning, Macbeth's manliness is unquestioned. Rosse refers to him as "Bellona's bridegroom", in other words, the bridegroom of the bride of Mars. Strangely enough, the valor of Lady Macbeth is supposed to be masculine valor. "Unsex me," she cries. (I, v, 41) And Macbeth pleads:

Bring forth men children only!
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males.

(I, vii, 73-74)

Manhood moves from humanity to manliness, but, apparently before that, even womanhood, if it ever was humanity, becomes manliness.

If courage or manliness is indeed a virtue, even that virtue wanes in Macbeth before the end of the play. It wanes under the influence of the unearthly, whether superhuman or subhuman. It is not possible here to explore the significance of the unearthly in Shakespeare, but the experience of contact with the weird, the unearthly, the not fully comprehensible differs with different characters. We can forget Oberon. He is not human and can hardly be overwhelmed by powers he can control. We can forget Bottom. His experience as the paramour of Titania is at once too elevated and too degraded for him to understand. Horatio, however, could face a ghost. He seems to have required none of the corroborative evidence Hamlet required. Prospero accepted spirits and monsters and, in fact, ruled them. I submit that the difficulty with Hamlet is similar to the difficulty of Macbeth. They are not sure whether they believe or not.

Part of the doubt that comes to Hamlet and Macbeth is religious. One must recall that historical inversions are by no means rare in Shakespeare. King John uses Protestant arguments long before there were any Protestants. The drunken porter talks about an "equivocator," often a Protestant synonym for a Jesuit,⁹ and, as everyone knows, there were no Protestants in the Eleventh Century in Inverness or anywhere else. As for Hamlet, he only half believes in the ghost and turns the play into a test. Had Macbeth truly believed, he would have acted on his own solicitation:

⁹ See Act II, Scene III, Kenneth Muir ed. Arden, p. 61, fn. 9 and citations.

If Chance will have me King, why Chance may crown me,
Without my stir.

(I, iii, 144-145)

Had he gone that way, there would have been no tyranny. But Bellona's bridegroom, the man who can face the Hyrcanian tiger, is unnerved by what he does not understand.

To say this is not for a moment to suggest that Shakespeare believed in superstition. Nor am I sure that superstition would have been salutary to Macbeth. Indeed there is some evidence that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth had considered ways, presumably criminal ways, of achieving his ambition before the weird sisters appeared on the scene. What is really at stake is that valor is not enough. It does not bring the resources which other virtues, like wisdom, justice and moderation, might bring. Unnerved by the uncanny, Macbeth has become mentally ill, in the sense that Plato and Shakespeare saw tyranny as mentally ill.

It may be said that Richard III is a more complete tyrannical man than Macbeth, because he is untroubled by the uncanny, the unearthly. I submit that Richard III is the same kind of tyrannical man that Macbeth is, but the species is less fully developed in the earlier play. There are no witches in Richard III, but there are ghosts, the ghosts of those whom the king has murdered. Even before the ghosts appear, however, Queen Anne complains:

For never yet one hour in his bed
Did I enjoy the golden dew of sleep
But with his timorous dreams was still awaked.
(IV, i, 82ff)

The ghosts who appear are but in dreams, perhaps, yet Richard says:

Cold, fearful drops stand on my trembling flesh.
(V, iii, 182)

and he adds

By the apostle Paul, shadows tonight
Have struck more terror to the soul of Richard
Than can the substance of ten thousand soldiers.
(V, iii, 217-219)

Let us return to a passage already quoted, returning to Macbeth:

Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it.
(I, v, 19-20)

It is difficult to know whether Shakespeare means by illness just what the Twentieth Century psychiatrist means by it. Murder is a crime, but there is a moral pathology related to that crime. And, while Lady Macbeth speaks of it first, it is Macbeth who is most tormented by it. I know that the mad scenes of Lady Macbeth raise a question about that statement, but I shall return to those scenes. Consider a few passages. Fearing that no son of his may succeed him, Macbeth says:

If't be so,
 For Banquo's issue have I fil'd my mind;
 For them the gracious Duncan have I murder'd;
 Put rancours in the vessel of my peace . . .
 (III, i, 63-66)

The fact that Macbeth refers to rancours rather than guilt suggests malignancy. To the potential murderers of Banquo, in the same scene, Macbeth refers to "us"

Who wear our health but sickly in his life,
 Which in his death were perfect.
 (III, i, 106-107)

Macbeth wants to eliminate three things: the insecurity which compels him to continue tyrannical practices, the pathology which this power has brought, and tomorrow. The terrible improbability of succeeding in the first two is clear when he says to his wife:

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.
 (III, ii, 16-19)

For the moment, at least, Macbeth has given up his chance of peace of mind and sees that Duncan's state is preferable to his own. Persistently he dwells on the witches' prophecy that Banquo's heirs shall reign. It is the last thing he asks the witches at their final meeting. And when they refuse to answer, he curses them. (IV, i, 105) But why? According to Macduff, Macbeth has no children, even though Lady Macbeth claims to have given suck. (Compare IV, iii, 216 with I, vii, 54-55.) Yet there is a diseased fear of the succession of Banquo's line.

There are other instances of mental illness. When Cathness tells the other thanes what Macbeth has done, he adds:

Some say he's mad; others that lesser hate him
Do call it valiant fury.
(V, ii, 13-14)

Later in the same scene, Cathness refers to the "sickly weal" (line 27).

Before we can see the most decisive evidence of the diseased mind, we must note that Lady Macbeth, an accomplice to the murder of Duncan, is an accomplice (at least, before the fact) to no other crimes, as far as we have knowledge. That does not make her a very nice woman, but it makes her a "Machiavellian" prince, not a diseased, pathological agent of massacre. Of Banquo's murder she has perhaps a hint:

Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,
Till thou applaud the deed.
(III, iii, 44-45)

Of the most unholy murders of all, those of Lady Macduff and her children, Macbeth makes it quite clear that he will seek no counsel:

From this moment,
The very firstlings of my heart shall be
The firstlings of my hand.
(IV, i, 146-148)

Lady Macbeth has a conscience, with a shame for what she has done, and horror for what her husband has done. Together they make her mad. When she says:

The Thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now?
What, will these hands ne'er be clean?
(V, i, 41-42)

she refers first to her husband's guilt, then to her own.

That brings us to what may well be the most important discussion of mental illness in Shakespeare, the question Macbeth asks the doctor:

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseas'd,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?
(V, iii, 40-45)

and the doctor's answer:

Therein the patient
Must minister to himself.
(*ibid.* 45-46)

That many a doctor would answer differently today is interesting, and one should not discount the possibility that Shakespeare believed that that might become so. However, we have no proof. What we do have is an imperfect analogy.¹⁰ When Malcolm and Macduff meet in the palace of the English king, varying between alliance and animosity, they are accosted by an English doctor. Dramatic reasons have been employed to explain this scene, yet the strangeness of the scene remains. Malcolm asks about the king, and the doctor replies that the king continues to heal the sick. The king is Edward the Confessor. Malcolm says:

The mere despair of surgery he cures.
(IV, iii, 152)

That a king can cure what a surgeon cannot cure suggests that rule has healing powers. Now let us go back to the Scottish doctor's answer to Macbeth.

The doctor has no healing powers for the mind. Or, to be more specific, the Scottish doctor has, in his situation, no more healing powers for the mind than the English doctor has, in his situation, healing powers for the body. But Edward the Confessor does have healing powers for the body, and the logical inference is that Macbeth should have healing powers for the mind. Let me quote Macbeth's response to the doctor's answer given above:

Throw physic to the dogs; I'll none of it. –
Come put mine armor on; give me my staff. –
Seyton, send out – Doctor, the Thanes fly from me. –
Come sir, despatch. If thou couldst, Doctor, cast
The water of my land, find her disease,
And purge it to a sound and pristine health,
I would applaud thee to the very echo,
That should applaud again.
(V, iii, 47-55)

Macbeth is no longer sure who the patient is. He wants the doctor to cure Lady Macbeth, whose mind is more diseased than his own only in that she is more aware of it. Perhaps that makes her less diseased. But here Macbeth, after discarding "physic" because it cannot cure Lady Macbeth, turns to his readiness for battle, and then finds another disease, Scotland. Can the doctor cure Scotland? But what is Scotland's disease? The Doctor

¹⁰ This analogy was pointed out to me by Irene Scheuer.

should cast the water of the land, which is clearly impossible. But to what goal? Macbeth speaks of purging the land to a pristine health. He later speaks of a purgative drug to "scour the English hence" (*ibid.* lines 55-56). But everyone knows that "scouring the English hence" will not purge the land. The pristine health is not the realm of Macbeth but the realm of Duncan. Macbeth, however, no longer knows the difference between health and disease.

The Thanes are deserting; the English are arriving. The inference is not difficult. The English doctor cannot cure the body; the Scottish doctor cannot cure the mind. The English monarch can cure the body. The Scottish tyrant cannot cure the mind. The analogy is imperfect because Macbeth is a tyrant. Could Duncan have ministered to the mind of Scotland, as Edward ministered to the body of England?

Shakespeare's concern with time, showing "intense intellectual application" has been the source of critical concern, and the reader is referred specifically to Frank Kermode's essay, "On Shakespeare's Learning."¹¹ What Shakespeare got from Augustine's *Confessions* which is here at issue is that, should the present always be present, it would not be time but eternity.¹² This very problem runs throughout *Macbeth*. I agree with Kermode that "If it were done when 'tis done . . ." is a "wish that a moment in time should have no succession – that is, be eternity."¹³ The following lines make this fairly certain:

. . .
But here upon this bank and shoal of time,
We'd jump the life to come . . .
(I, vii, 6-7)

Why does Macbeth imagine that he can make today eternal, and do away with tomorrow, I should add, to make the one chosen day eternal? The evidence is tenuous. Yet one should look at the famous dagger speech and note that it has thirty-two lines. (II, 1, 33-61) Thirty-two is one less than the years of Jesus and probably represents the anti-Christ. This may seem far-fetched, but I have elsewhere tried to show something of the common significance of soliloquies of thirty-three lines.¹⁴ Another thing which one should notice in the dagger soliloquy is the well-known beginning:

¹¹ Center for Advanced Studies, Wesleyan University, Monday Evening Papers: Number 2, pp. 7-11.

¹² Augustine: *Confessions* XI, xi praesens autem si semper esset praesens nec in praeteritum transiret, non iam esset tempus, sed aeternitas.; Kermode *ibid.*, p. 11.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.

¹⁴ *Copp'd Hills towards Heaven: Shakespeare and the Classical Polity* (Nijhoff, Hague, 1970) pp. 75-76, 100.

Is this a dagger which I see before me,
 The handle toward my hand?
 (*Ibid.* 33-34)

But if the dagger is placed with the handle before Macbeth's hand, the dagger is an inverted cross. And, if it is not an inverted cross, why speak of the position of the handle? Macbeth may be the anti-Christ, and he admits some similar role when he speaks of "giving" his "eternal jewell" to the common enemy of man (III, i, 67-68). Apart from the divine, who could convert tomorrow into eternity save the anti-divine?

Macbeth, however, renounces that goal. He knows, in the most famous speech on time, that he, at least, cannot convert either today or tomorrow into eternity:

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. 19-23)

The passage seems too well-known to quote, but there is one line which raises a particular curiosity:

To the last syllable of recorded time.

The philosophers and writers of early modernity were very much concerned with the first syllable of recorded time. Bacon, and Boccaccio before him, saw the old myths as the veil between the unknown origins and recorded history. If there was a first syllable of recorded time, why not a last? Macbeth has apparently given up the idea that he can make the present eternal. But he takes comfort in man's folly, for some day recorded time will be no more, and the new barbarism will take its place. He was saying, much more eloquently, what Hitler said, "If we go down, we shall take the whole world with us."

The Macbeth tyrant is closer to the modern tyrant than to the pre-modern tyrant. Yet he does not have the techniques which modern technology has devised. Nor does Macbeth have what is popularly called "ideology," a word susceptible of several interpretations. Let us say rather that the modern tyrant has a cause. For a moment Macbeth imagines that he has a cause: the pristine health of Scotland. Like Macbeth the modern tyrant does not recognize the difference between his cause and his will to power. He too has a point where history stops. He too has a day when there is no tomorrow, when today is eternity. And that day justifies his ruthlessness.

That there is no such day in this-worldly history, most reasonable men

will believe. To believe in other-worldly eternity is a matter of faith, as it is with Augustine. To believe what Macbeth and his followers have believed is an arrogance of human history, an arrogance of left and right, crippling and maiming the reasonable and political center.

In one sense the tyrant is the political man par excellence, and so he was seen in antiquity. In another sense, the modern tyrant is the least political man. He is incapable of understanding the give and take, the ebb and flow. A peace treaty that will last for fifty years, such as Churchill hoped would come out of World War II, is meaningless to him. He has only one goal, apart from his own power: the secularization of Augustinian time, the creation of a tomorrow which will have no tomorrow, the elimination of the future tense in the day of eternity. To that goal all means are subordinate. The love of learning, the protection of procedural justice, the inviolability of human life, the sanctity of personal confidence, the very language of love, the glory of hospitality, the grace of life – all these shall pass, waiting for the last syllable of recorded time.