

October 24. Lecture on "Meta-drama in *Macbeth*" for Angel Foundation

Of the "four great tragedies" defined by AC Bradley

only two are real tragedies – *Othello* and *Macbeth*

as keeping their "compulsive course" straight forwards without subplot,
whereas *Hamlet* no tragedy but problem play, belonging to Elizabethan age,

King Lear at once saddest of sad tragedies

and happiest of happy comedies (to be explained next time).

But basic difference between *Othello* and *Macbeth*

O a bright play set in Mediterranean, Morality play of Salvation (last time)

M a dark play set in early medieval Scotland, Morality play of Damnation.

In *O* a clear contrast of Iago as devil, Othello as everyman, Desdemona as angel

M both seeming hero and heroine *M* and Lady as villain, where sin abounding,

contrasted with three kings, Duncan, Edward and Malcolm, in terms of grace

- "gracious Duncan", Edward "full of grace", Malcolm "by the grace of Grace".

Similarity with *Hamlet* overshadowed by ghost appearing twice in Act I,

M overshadowed by three witches appearing twice to *M* and *B* in Act I

whereas in *O* no such supernatural being, but Iago appearing as Judas/ Satan,

-serving to make human tragedy credible, as with Adam and Eve in Eden.

Every play of Sh is unique, and so *M* may be called uniquely unique,

in standing apart from "four great tragedies", first of another four Jacobean plays,

after first four with ideal heroines, Desdemona and Cordelia, Isabella and Helena

second four no such heroines, Lady *M*, Cleopatra, Volumnia, no heroine in *T Athens*,

preceding four more plays with ideal heroines, Marina, Imogen, Perdita, Miranda.

Another unique characteristic of *M* as tragedy, all collapsed into first two Acts,

Act I. Temptation of Macbeth, a) in hailing of three witches,

"This supernatural soliciting/ cannot be ill, cannot be good."

b) as arousing envy of Malcolm, when proclaimed Prince of Cumberland,

"Stars, hide you fires!/ Let not light see my black and deep desires."

c) as urged by Lady Macbeth, "Come, you spirits, Come to my woman's breasts...

Come, think night... nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark."

Act II. Deed of murder, against Duncan

Already in end of Act I, leaving Duncan at his last supper with thanes,

"If it were done when tis done/ Then twere well it were done quickly."

echoing words of Jesus to Judas, "That thou doest, do quickly."

Now in beginning of Act II, climbing steps to Duncan's bedchamber

both before and after the deed, but not showing the deed itself

"Is this a dagger that I see before me,/ The handle toward my hand? Come,
let me clutch thee!/ I have thee not, and yet I see thee still./ Art thou not,
fatal vision, sensible/ To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but/ A dagger of the
mind, a false creation/ Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?.../ I see
thee still;/ And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood/ Which was not so."
(from Fr. *gouttes*, Lat. *Guttae sanguinis*. Cf. Luke xxii.44, Agony in Garden)

The deed shown before as M ascends steps/ after as he returns to Lady M
in his horrified imagination, more vivid than if showing the deed itself.

Followed by the Knocking at the Gate, as if at the gate of M's conscience,
really by M's future nemesis Macduff, to be at the awakening of Duncan,
but as witness of the murder, returning with impressive exclamation,
"Confusion now hath made his masterpiece!/ Most sacrilegious murder
hath broke ope/ The Lord's anointed temple, and stole thence/ The life of
the building!"

Pointing to further meta-drama of Henry VIII's spoliation of the monasteries.

Thereafter Acts III and IV cover-up, as Sh "whodunit" (similar to *H*)

by successive murders of Banquo, who suspects M, reappears as ghost,
and of Macduff's wife and children, as M hardened in crime.

But meta-drama looking back to Elizabethan age in two scenes,

When Lennox speaks about M with anonymous Lord, afraid to say too much,
When Macduff comes to Malcolm at English court, but similar fear

Revival of interest in Act V

With return of Lady M (after absence) in sleep-walking scene, washing hands,

With resolution of M in face of approach of enemies to Dunsinane Castle,

With interjected speech on hearing of the suicide of Lady M.

"She should have died hereafter./ There would have been a time for such a
word./ Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,/ Creeps in this petty pace
from day to day/ Till the last syllable of recorded time,/ And all our yester-
days 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 in heard no more. It is a tale/ Told by an idiot,
full of sound and fury,/ Signifying nothing."

But M fights to the end, till killed by Macduff (also off-stage)

And so abounding Sin is overcome by abounding Grace (Paul, Romans v)

And so tragedy for M is happy ending for Scotland under Malcolm.