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The Realms of Macbeth

"I am afraid to think what I have done."

The three key words "done," "afraid" and "think" make reference to the three realms of activity in the play: the physical or natural, in which deeds are "done"; the supernatural, for it is heavenly rather than mortal wrath that cradles those fears which Macbeth dares not even entertain; and the psychological, where we see equivocation—the eye not seeing what the hand does— attempting to keep the physical and supernatural realms separate.¹

The Supernatural Realm

Perhaps the most intriguing realm in *Macbeth* is the supernatural. The initial problem we face is to understand what properly belongs to that realm. The witches, for example, might be considered as belonging to any of the three realms: as the supernatural "Goddesses of destiny"; as a dramatic device designed to externalise the manner of Macbeth's mind; as mortal agents of the supernatural. The confusion though might be resolved when we examine their role in context with the whole play. As "goddesses of Fate," they would render Macbeth a mere puppet who is forced to dance a delusive dance to which every

¹I realise this is an unusual approach, and probably not what was envisioned when the quotation was selected. However, an ounce of originality is worth, etc.

successive step has been previously choreographed. The *human* tragedy would be lost and the aspect of free will, central to the Christian concept of evil and indeed the play itself, destroyed. Indeed, the weird sisters initially suggest only an end, leaving the means entirely undetermined, and are in no respects aspects of that all inclusive Fate. We should next dismiss the idea that the witches are merely a manifestation of Macbeth's mind. Though we could cite various proofs of this, their possession of information outside Macbeth's jurisdiction, the moving of Birnam wood for example, seems evidence enough. The only remaining possibility is that they are of mortal make, yet privy to certain information which comes from the dark side of the supernatural realm. What we see then, by the presence of the witches, is a world in which the supernatural realm is an *integral* part, and something that cannot be ignored.

Something rather more problematical is the appearance of the floating dagger in act II scene I. Macbeth himself believes, since it is "sensible" to sight alone, that it is "A dagger of the mind."(59) Lady Macbeth likens the ghost of Banquo to the dagger, insisting they both belong properly to the psychological realm: "This is the very painting of your fear./This is the air-drawn dagger . . ."(86) Of course, Lady Macbeth, so out of touch with moral obligation, the sense of which comes from outside the mere physical realm, can hardly be cited as an unbiased authority. And since her entrenchment in the here and now is shown to be a major failing, we might even suggest that her interpretations, here and elsewhere, are the antithesis of the

true state. Even if we decide the dagger comes sent from the supernatural realm, is it sent from heaven or hell? Does it encourage or discourage the deed? Does the blood it bears seek to appall or enthrall? The text, it seems, provides no definitive answer, and from this we are probably to feel the same duality, the same uncertainty, as *Macbeth*.

We must recall that though *Macbeth* is set in the eleventh century, it portrays the contemporary Elizabethan world view. The position of the King is not therefore one ordained only by blood and politics, but by God also. When a trespass is made against the King, it is viewed essentially as a trespass against the Divine Order which he represents. It comes as no surprise then that the night of Duncan's death was one in which the air and the earth were in protest. The "feverous"(67) earth and the raging sky should not be seen only as metaphorical activities which describe the nature of the evil deed, but as an *actual* heavenly fever which thunders into the physical realm. We have already seen *Macbeth's* "heat-oppressed brain,"(60) as he struggled with the phantasmagoric dagger, and so the fevers now occupy all three realms. Again, the important thing to note is that the supernatural realm is not something vague and distant, but an integral part of reality which touches and might at any moment enter the physical realm.

There is a tremendous darkness to *Macbeth*. Deadly deeds—the murder of King Duncan and Banquo—are committed to the secrecy of darkness. The air itself is thick; Lady *Macbeth* finally keeps a candle constantly burning against the dark. *Macbeth's* inaugural

words, "So foul and fair a day I have not seen,"(42) clearly establish his connection with the dark side of the supernatural sphere, for they are a repetition of the unisonal, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" of the three witches who are later described as "Black and midnight hags."(96) Just as diction is used to establish the link between Macbeth and the dark world, as shown above, the chain is continued to his wife, who we find contemplating the murder of Duncan:

Come, thick night,
 And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
 That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
 Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
 To cry "Hold, hold!"(51)

This, in echoing Macbeth's "Stars, hide your fires;/Let not light see my black and deep desires"(49) not only continues that chain with which the doomed couple shackle themselves to eternal damnation, but also firmly establishes that darkness—thus associated with evil—is not simply an absence of light but the black bleeding of influence from the supernatural sphere into the physical.

The Psychological Realm

When the prophesy of Macbeth becoming King is first expressed, Banquo notices his friend's reaction and asks: "Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear/Things that do sound so fair?"(43) Clearly, since there is nothing *not* "fair" in the prophesy, Macbeth's discomfort comes not from something they have said, but something *he* has thought. In a soliloquy shortly after,

Macbeth alludes to what that thought actually was:

This supernatural soliciting
Cannot be ill, cannot be good . . .
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair(46)

We know then that the thought is manifest as a horrid image. The use of the word "murder," in the same soliloquy, adds further clarification. And when Macbeth later admits, ". . . My dull brain was wrought/With things forgotten,"(46-47) the state of affairs is made apparent: Macbeth, long before the appearance of the weird sisters—indeed, so long ago as to be forgotten, at the very least imagined winning the crown by regicide. The weird sisters provide Macbeth with prophesy which nurtures a seed already planted, that grows into evil deed. In a sense they tempt Macbeth with Macbeth: he is his own worst enemy, and it is for this reason that he utters "To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself."(64) Macbeth can know deeds only as deeds, and dare not face the morality tied to those deeds. It seems even a fair comment to suggest that Macbeth spends much of his time trying not to know himself.

Lady Macbeth's mind is narrower in its field of vision; and if she reveals a more limited imagination, she does nevertheless demonstrate a keen understanding of what make Macbeth tick, cajoling him to again take up the briefly renounced plan to murder Duncan. In a sense, her insensitivity to morality renders her roll somewhat similar to the witches—though more active and insistent—for though the murder was not her idea, she takes up

the temptation fostered by the witches and encourages it to grow in Macbeth's mind. Like Macbeth she is a victim of herself, and the darkness she desires is the darkness that finally torments her.

The Physical Realm

If we can see from the psychological sphere the ambition that fuelled Macbeth's turning to evil, there is, in the physical sphere, evidence which shows Macbeth's desire for the throne was not entirely without rational: Firstly, King Duncan is shown wanting political *savoir faire*: he greets Macbeth, after the opening battle in which Macbeth's nobility and honour are established, by saying, "More is thy due than more than all can pay." (48) This helps Macbeth rationalise the appropriateness—for want of a better word—of "the deed," for it shows, in a sense, that his valiant actions in battle describe an honour so elevated as to be beyond even the King's ability to reward. To reduce this somewhat convoluted idea, we may simply say that Macbeth believes—or at least pretends to believe—himself more worthy of the throne than the King. Secondly, Duncan allows himself to be lectured by Macbeth—here with no small degree of irony—upon the nature of Kingship and service to the throne.

The service and the loyalty I owe,
In doing it, pays itself. Your highness' part
Is to receive our duties (48)

Not only, Macbeth conjures, is his nobility superior to Duncan's, but his wisdom also. King Duncan shows himself, in the deliberately squinting eyes of Macbeth, unqualified for his

position, and thus provides a practical justification for his "dispossession." But there is yet greater reason for Macbeth to feel his deadly plan warranted, for there is an indication that perhaps Duncan had previously indicated that Macbeth would succeed him. King Duncan, in a preamble to his announcing Malcolm Prince of Cumberland and thus heir to throne—the pivotal deed upon which the whole plot turns and finds its veritable direction—says:

My plenteous joys,
Wanton in fullness, seek to hide themselves
In drops of sorrow . . . (48)

What precisely is the source of this sudden sorrow? It certainly seems a peculiar introduction to the proclamation that his eldest son shall one day assume the throne—unless other promises had previously been indicated and the new announcement is also a *renouncement* of those promises. In that case the sorrow seems understandable. We should note in support of this reading that the King's sorrow is indeed juxtaposed with the rewarding of Macbeth, suggesting that Duncan realises these rewards are less than expected. These subtle examples of actions in the physical world show Macbeth's motivations to be complex and not reducible to a simplistic "ambition" unbound.

If th' assassination
Could trammel up the consequences, and catch,
With his surcease, success; that but this blow
Might be the be-all and end-all—here,
But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,

We'd jump the life to come. But in these cases,
 We still have judgement here . . .(55)

In this somewhat difficult passage, on the eve of the assassination, we see Macbeth clearly concerned with the here after of the crime, not the here after of life. It is the worldly consequences which he juggles, demonstrating at this poignant moment an affirmation of the disassociation of the natural and supernatural realms: that heavenly retribution cannot find effect in this life. The precise meaning of "jump the life to come," seems particularly problematical, though it may imply Macbeth's rationalisation that a place in heaven is by definition life after death, and sinners are not so much punished in Hell as denied that life to come. In this light Macbeth feels he is exchanging one life for another: his life here and now for his life in the here after; as well as the King's life for the King's life.²

But political intrigue, though playing a part in the delineation of the crime's motivation, is not the most notable aspect of the physical realm. It is the overall darkness of the world that we most notice. Since we have already examined darkness as a component of the supernatural sphere, it seems that the world of Macbeth is a world of his own making. The reality of the darkness as an actual quality of the physical world—for example after the murder of Duncan, when dawn does not bring light—lends authenticity to the supernatural realm which

²In the sense of, "The King is dead, long live the King."

is depicted by the chain of metaphorical imagery. The darkness, by being so characteristic of the physical and supernatural realms is a vital element in *Macbeth*, for it serves to unify the realms, describing with great subtlety the intimacy of their relationship, and the impossibility of Macbeth's efforts to keep them apart.

Conclusion

Lady Macbeth, it must be admitted, is unable to grasp the connections between the physical, psychological and supernatural realms. Macbeth is the possessor of an imagination that suggests those connections, and it must therefore be bound and gagged. It is immediately after the murder of Duncan that Macbeth's mind, momentarily freed by the horror of the deed, speaks most honestly, and his words are heavy with the moral religious implications: "prayers"(62) and "God bless us"(62) and "Amen"(62) are introduced by virtue of the whispering from the next room. More interesting than Macbeth being unable to utter the word "Amen" is his inability to understand *why*—showing that though he is aware of the "sacrilegious"(67) nature of the deed, he is not *fully* aware. Macbeth knows instinctively that his wife's advice is sound: "Consider it not so deeply."(62) "These deeds must not be thought/After these ways; so it will make us mad."³(62) Unfortunately this is easier said than done. Macbeth tries to avoid thinking of the moral consequences but is only partly successful, as if avoiding the thought of the problem

³Ironically, it is Lady Macbeth who suffers and dies from madness.

will avoid the problem itself. This then is Macbeth's form of equivocation: rather than doing one thing and thinking another, he does one thing and tries to avoid the thought entirely. It is for this reason that the fear in: "I am afraid to think what I have done" makes reference to the supernatural realm, for it is the fear of damnation, of being unable to say "Amen" that he must avoid—by *not* thinking. But of course, at this emotional moment when true feelings are free from their bonds, he fails and finally wonders:

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No; this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine . . . (63-64)

This is perhaps the moment when, in contrast to Lady Macbeth who shallowly decides "A little water clears us of the deed," (64) Macbeth is most in touch with the three realms and understands their close association and "interconnectivity."