

ANOTHER FRENCH VIEW: MACBETH AND HAMLET



Sir Herbert Tree as Macbeth
Each "The Story of a Moral Poisoning," Says Taine

From Taine's "History of English Literature."

IF the life of Coriolanus is the history of a mood, that of Macbeth is the history of a monomania. The witches' prophecy was buried in his heart instantaneously, like a fixed idea. Gradually this idea corrupts the rest and transforms the man. He is haunted; he forgets the thanes who surround him and "who stay upon his leisure"; he already sees in the future an indistinct chaos of images of blood:

Why do I yield to that suggestion
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs?
My thought whose murder yet is but fantastical
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not.

This is the language of hallucination. Macbeth's hallucination becomes complete when his wife has resolved on the assassination of the King. He sees in the air a blood-stained dagger, "in form as palpable as this which now I draw." His whole brain is filled with grand and terrible phantasms, which the mind of a common murderer would never have conceived; the poetry of which indicates a generous heart, enslaved to an idea of fate, and capable of remorse:

Now o'er the one half world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain'd sleep; witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's offerings, and wither'd murder
Alarum'd his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost. . . . (A bell rings.)
I go, and it is done; the bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell.

He has done the deed and returns tottering, haggard, like a drunken man. He is horrified at his bloody hands, "these hangman's hands." Nothing now can cleanse them. The whole ocean might sweep over them, but they would keep the hue of murder. "What hands are here? Ha, they pluck out mine eyes!" He is disturbed by a word which the sleeping chamberlain uttered:

One cried, "God bless us!" and "Amen,"
The other:
As they had seen me with these hangman's hands
Listening their fear, I could not say
"Amen."
When they did say, "God bless us!"
But wherefore could not I pronounce
"Amen?"
I had most need of blessing, and "Amen"
Stuck in my throat.

Then comes a strange dream; a frightful vision of punishment descends upon him. Above the beating of his heart, the tingling of the blood which boils in his brain, he had heard them cry:

"Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murder sleep," the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second chief nourisher in life's feast.

And the voice, like an angel's trumpet, calls him by all his titles:

Glamis hath murder'd sleep, and therefore Cawdor
Shall sleep no more; Macbeth shall sleep no more!

This mad idea, incessantly repeated, beats in his brain with monotonous and hard-pressing strokes, like the tongue of a bell. Insanity begins; all the force of his mind is occupied by keeping before him, in spite of himself, the image of the man whom he has murdered in his sleep:

To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself.
Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!

Thenceforth, in the rare intervals in which the fever of his mind is assuaged, he is like a man worn out by a long malady. It is the sad prostration of maniacs worn out by their fits of rage:

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
I had liv'd a blessed time; for, from this instant
There's nothing serious in mortality;
All is but toys; renown and grace is dead;
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of.

When rest has restored some force to the human machine the fixed idea shakes him again and drives him onward, like a pitiless horseman, who has left his panting horse only for a moment, to leap again into the saddle and spur him over precipices. The more he has done the more he must do:

I am in blood
Steep'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

He kills in order to preserve the fruit of his murders. The fatal circle of gold attracts him like a magic jewel, and he beats down, from a sort of blind instinct, the heads which he sees between the crown and him.

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; better with the dead
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave;
After life's fitful fever he sleeps well;
Treason has done his worst; nor steel, nor poison,
Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing,
Can touch him further.

Macbeth has Banquo murdered, and in the midst of a great feast he is informed of the success of his plan. He smiles and proposes Banquo's health. Suddenly, conscience smitten, he sees the ghost of the murdered man; for this phantom, which Shakespeare summons, is not a mere stage-trick; we feel that here the supernatural is unnecessary and that Macbeth would create it, even if hell would not send it.



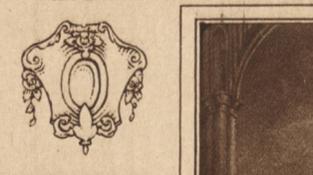
John Philip Kemble as Hamlet
at the Grave of Yorick
(Painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds)

With stiffened muscles, dilated eyes, his mouth half open with deadly terror, he sees it shake its bloody head and cries with that hoarse voice which is only to be heard in maniacs' cells:

Prithce, see there! Behold! look! lo! how say you!
Why, what care I? If thou canst nod, speak too!
If charnel-houses and our graves must send those that we bury, back our monuments
Shall be the maws of kites. . . .
Ay, and since, too, murders have been perform'd
Too terrible for the ear; the times have been that, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end; but now they rise again.

With twenty mortal murders on their crowns
And push us from our stools: . . .
Avant! and quit my sight! let the earth hide thee!
Thy bones are marrowless, thy blood is cold;
Thou hast no speculation in those eyes
Which thou dost glare with!

His body trembling like that of an epileptic, his teeth clenched, foaming at the mouth, he sinks on the ground, his limbs beat against the floor, shaken with convulsive quiverings, while a dull sob swells his panting breast and dies in his swollen throat. What joy can remain for a man beset by such visions? The wide dark country, which he surveys from his towering castle, is but a field of death, haunted by deadly apparitions; Scotland, which he is depopulating, a cemetery:
Where . . . the dead man's knell
Is there scarce ask'd for who; and good men's lives



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.

There remains for him the hardening of the heart in crime, the fixed belief in destiny. Hunted down by his enemies, "bear-like, tied to a stake," he fights, troubled only by the prediction of the witches, sure of being invulnerable so long as the man whom they have pointed at does not appear. His thoughts inhabit a supernatural world and to the last he walks with his eyes fixed on the dream, which has possessed him from the first.

The history of Hamlet, like that of Macbeth, is the story of a moral poisoning. Hamlet's is a delicate soul, an impassioned



Mrs. Siddons as Lady Macbeth
entering with the letter
Act I. Scene V

Imagination, like that of Shakespeare. He has lived hitherto, occupied in noble studies, apt in bodily and mental exercises, with a taste for art, loved by the noblest father, enamored of the purest and most charming girl, confiding, generous, not yet having perceived, from the height of the throne to which he was born, aught but the beauty, happiness, grandeur of nature and humanity.

On this soul, which character and training make more sensitive than others, misfortune suddenly falls, extreme, overwhelming, of the very kind to destroy all faith and every spring of action; with one look he has seen all the villainess of humanity, and this insight is given him in his mother. His mind is yet intact; but judge from the violence of his style, the crudity of his exact details, the terrible tension of the whole nervous machine, whether he has not already one foot on the verge of madness:

O that this too too solid flesh would melt,
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God!
O God!
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable
Seem to me all the uses of this world!
Fie on't! O fie! 'tis an unweeded garden,
That grows to seed; things rank and gross
In nature

Possess it merely. That it should come to this!
But two months dead!—nay, not so much, not two;
So excellent a king, . . . so loyally to my mother,
That he might not betem the winds of heaven,
Visit her face too roughly. Heaven and earth!

And yet, within a month—let me not think on't!—Frailty, thy name is woman!
A little month, or ere those shoes were old
With which she follow'd my poor father's body,
Ere yet the salt of most unrighteous tears
Had left the flushing in her galled eyes,
She married. O, most wicked speed,
To post
With such dexterity to incestuous sheets!
It is not, nor it cannot come to good;
But break my heart; for I must hold my tongue!

Here already are contortions of thought, earnest of hallucination, the symptoms of what is to come after. In the middle of a conversation the image of his father rises before his mind. He thinks he sees him. How, then, will it be when the "canonized bones have burst their cerements," "the sepulchre hath opened his ponderous and marble jaws," and when the ghost comes in the night upon a high "platform" of land to hint to him of the tortures of his prison fire, and to tell him of the fratricide who has driven him thither? Hamlet grows faint, but grief strengthens him, and he has a cause for living:

Hold, hold, my heart;
But bear me stiffly up! Remember thee!
Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat
In this distracted globe—Remember thee!
Yes, from the table of my memory
I'll wipe away all trivial fond records,
All saws of books, all forms, all pressures past,
And thy commandments all alone shall live,
O villain, villain, smiling, damned villain!
My tables—meet it is I set it down,
That one may smile, and smile, and be a villain;
At least I'm sure it may be so in Denmark:
So, uncle, there you are. (Writing.)

This convulsive outburst, this fevered writing hand, this frenzy of intemperance, prelude the approach of a monomania. When his friends come up he treats them with the speeches of a child or an idiot. He is no longer master of his words; hollow phrases whirl in his brain and fall from his mouth as in a dream. They call him; he answers by imitating the cry of a sportsman whistling to his falcon: "Hillo, ho, ho, boy! Come, bird, come." While he is in the act of swearing them to secrecy the ghost below repeats "Swear." Hamlet cries with a nervous excitement and a fitful gaiety:

Ah ha, boy! say'st thou so? Art thou there, trunpney?
Come on—you hear this fellow in the cellarage
Consent to swear. . . .
Ghost (beneath)—Swear.
Hamlet—Hie to 'ubique? Then we'll shift our ground.
Come hither, gentlemen. . . . Swear by my sword.
Ghost (beneath)—Swear.
Hamlet—Well said, old mole! Canst work i' the earth so fast?
A worthy pioner!

Understand that as he says this his teeth chatter, "pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other." Intense anguish ends with a burst of laughter, which is nothing else than a spasm. Thenceforth Hamlet speaks as though he had a continuous nervous attack. His madness is feigned, I admit; but his mind, as a door whose hinges are twisted, swings and bangs to every wind with a mad precipitance and with a discordant noise. He has no need to search for the strange ideas, apparent incoherences, exaggerations the deluge of sarcasms which he accumulates. He finds them within him; he does himself no violence; he simply gives himself up to them.

When he has the piece played which is to unmask his uncle, he raises himself, lounges on the floor, would lay his head in Ophelia's lap; he addresses the actors, and comments on the piece to the spectators; his nerves are strung, his excited



Irving as Hamlet
(From a drawing by V. W. Bromley)

thought is like a waving and crackling flame, and cannot find fuel enough in the multitude of objects surrounding it, upon all of which it seizes. When the King rises unmasked and troubled, Hamlet sings, and says: "Would not this, Sir, and a forest of feathers—if the rest of my fortunes turn Turk with me—with two Provincial roses on my razed shoes, get me a fellowship in a cry of players, Sir?" And he laughs terribly, for he is resolved on murder. It is clear that this state is a disease, and that the man will not survive it.

In a soul so ardent of thought and so mighty of feeling, what is left but disgust and despair? We mingle all nature with the color of our thoughts; we shape the world according to our own ideas; when our soul is sick we see nothing but sickness in the universe:

This godly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory; this most excellent canopy, the air, look you, this brave o'erhanging firmament, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire, why it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapors. What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason! How infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel! In apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world! The paragon of animals! And yet, to me, what is this quintessence of dust? Man delights not me; no, nor woman neither.

Henceforth his thought tarnishes whatever it touches. He rails bitterly before Ophelia against marriage and love. Beauty! Innocence! Beauty is but a means of prostituting innocence:

Get thee to a nunnery; why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners? . . . What should such fellows as I do crawling between earth and heaven? We are arrant knaves, all; believe none of us!

When he has killed Polonius by accident he hardly repents it; it is one fool less. He fears lugubriously:

King—Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?
Hamlet—At supper.
K.—Where?
H.—Not where he eats, but where he is eaten; a certain Convocation of politic worms are e'en at him.

And he repeats in five or six fashions these graverdigger jests. His thoughts already inhabit a churchyard; to this hopeless philosophy your true man is a corpse. Duties, honors, passions, pleasures, projects, science—all this is but a borrowed mask, which death removes, that we may see ourselves what we are, an evil-smelling and grinning skull. It is this sight he goes to see by Ophelia's grave. He counts the skulls which the graverdigger turns out; this was a lawyer's, that a courtier's. What salutations, intrigues, pretensions, arrogance! And here, now, a clown knocking it about with his spade and playing "at loggats with 'em." Caesar and Alexander have turned to clay and make the earth fat; the masters of the world have served to "patch a wall." "Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come; make her laugh at that." When one has come to this there is nothing left but to die.

This heated imagination, which explains Hamlet's nervous disease and his moral poisoning, explains also his conduct. If he hesitates to kill his uncle it is not from horror of blood or from our modern scruples. He belongs to the sixteenth century. On board ship he wrote the order to behead Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and to do so without giving them "shriving time." He killed Polonius, he caused Ophelia's death, and has no great remorse for it. If for once he spared his uncle, it was because he found him praying and was afraid of sending him to heaven. He thought he was killing him when he killed Polonius.

What his imagination robs him of is the coolness and strength to go quietly and with premeditation to plunge a sword into a breast. He can only do the thing on a sudden suggestion; he must have a moment of enthusiasm; he must think the King is behind the arras, or else, seeing that he himself is poisoned, he must find his victim under his foil's point. He is not master of his acts; occasion dictates them; he cannot play a murder, but must improvise it. A too lively imagination exhausts energy by the accumulation of images and by the fury of intemperance which absorbs it.

You recognize in him a poet's soul, made not to act, but to dream, which is lost in contemplating the phantasms of its creation, which sees the imaginary world too clearly to play a part in the real world; an artist whose evil chance has made a Prince, whose worse chance has made an avenger of crime, and who, destined by nature for genius, is condemned by fortune to madness and unhappiness. Hamlet is Shakespeare, and, at the close of this gallery of portraits which have all some features of his own, Shakespeare has painted himself in the most striking of all.

If Racine or Corneille had framed a psychology, they would have said, with Descartes: Man is an incorporeal soul, served by organs, endowed with reason and will, living in palaces or porticos, made for conversation and society, whose harmonious and ideal action is developed by discourse and replies, in a world constructed by logic beyond the realm of time and space. If Shakespeare had framed a psychology, he would have said, with Esquirol: Man is a nervous machine, governed by a mood, disposed to hallucinations, transported by unbridled passions, essentially unreasoning, a mixture of animal and poet, having no rapture but mind, no sensibility but virtue, imagination for prompter and guide, and led at random, by the most determinate and complex circumstances, to pain, crime, madness, and death.