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Macbeth and the Meaning of Tragedy*

Joseph A. Bryant, Jr.

For years the one tragedy that almost all Americans read, or at least encountered, was Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. High schools regularly included it in the curriculum for the senior year, perhaps preferring it to the other major tragedies of Shakespeare because of its brevity, its simple plot line, and its melodramatic appeal. Among professional critics, however, enthusiasm for the play has never been high. Robert P. Heilman in a 1966 essay, revealingly entitled "The Criminal as Tragic Hero," set forth the principal reason for that.[1] Tragedy, he argued, echoing centuries-old opinion, presents a "noble enterprise," one of uncommon dignity and ethical sophistication, which fails, not because the protagonist is wicked or malicious but because he is afflicted by some recognizable human frailty that causes him or her to err. The reasoning has usually been that we who participate vicariously in that enterprise contemplate the protagonist's downfall with pity and terror but in the process achieve emancipation from the crippling effects which those emotions normally produce.

This, according to Heilman, is where the problem with the play *Macbeth* lies. After Act II the hero is an habituated criminal who in the end is destined to meet an appropriate punishment. Thus we cannot comfortably participate with Macbeth throughout his enterprise. At some point after Act II moral revulsion compels us to detach ourselves from his action and sit in judgment on it; and at that point our sympathies necessarily shift from Macbeth to Macbeth's victims. Even if we do not switch allegiances entirely, we look thereafter at the spectacle as if it were a melodrama (the alternative, by the way, that Roman Polanski exploited in his movie version) or at best a morality play. "This," Heilman concluded, "is not the best that tragedy can offer"; and in view of the ontological and ethical assumptions that most of us, knowingly

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or unknowingly, have inherited from Greek philosophy and our Judaeo-Christian religion, we can hardly afford to disagree. In any case, today's scholar-critics, presumably in an effort to redeem for tragedy Shakespeare's most conspicuous hero-villains, have increasingly tended to look favorably on the view that Macbeth and his spouse were demonically possessed and therefore to some extent themselves victims.[2] Following a similar line of reasoning, they have excused Hamlet for committing himself to an unholy and unethical vengeance by arguing that he was misled by a demon disguised as his father's ghost.[3] Such evasions as these may preserve temporarily the principle that many modern readers mistakenly identify with tragedy, but they distort our perception of Shakespeare's text and confirm the repudiation of tragic vision that began when our ancient forebears abandoned Heraclitus in favor of Parmenides.

Genuine tragedy is a Western phenomenon, and since the time of Euripides it has been relatively rare. True comedy is much more common; for comedy is the appropriate literary mode for expressing that view of the universe which we in the West, whether Christian, Jew, or agnostic, seem to prefer. Most of the things that have gone by the name of tragedy, at least from Seneca to Arthur Miller, have been pale substitutes, sometimes more comic in essence than tragic: heroic plays, sentimental domestic fables, problem plays, moralities, or melodramas. Had it not been for the haven provided by the novel during the past two centuries, tragedy might have vanished altogether.

The seeds for genuine comedy and tragedy were both present in the perceptions of primitive man, who saw, first, that some things in this world recur and, second, that some things do not. As hunter first and later as agriculturalist he recognized that a regular recurrence of the seasons and their attendant phenomena was necessary to his survival; and as time went on, he developed gestures designed to signify, support, and perhaps even precipitate such recurrence. These gestures, we are told, hardened into ritual, and ritual gave rise to literary forms as we know them, all celebrating in various fashions the happy mystery of recurrence and renewal. The second perception of primitive man was less happy, since among the things that do not recur he inescapably saw himself and his wife and children. Moreover in time it prompted the reflection that annihilation is the destiny of all individuals in the universe, whether animal, vegetable, or mineral.

In some quarters of the globe, advancing mankind took that soberer perception and developed compelling expressions of it in symbolic ritual and corresponding art forms. In others, including our own, the fear of individual death prevailed over acceptance; and in these quarters men placed their faith, as I have already noted, in recurrence. More important, they placed it in the dream of permanence that an uncritical faith in recurrence engenders. The attitude we in the West call tragic appears whenever that faith, for whatever reason, ceases to be strong enought to obscure the perception of irreversible change that our senses will never let us absolutely deny.

By the time of Plato, however, faith in permanence had come to seem almost unchallengeable. Change or flux had become the mischievous illusion which human beings were enjoined to avoid either by exercising rational discipline or by expressing their confidence in some remote god of permanence. After Plato, the Stoicism which dominated much of Roman thought and then went on to achieve a second currency in Renaissance humanism reaffirmed for generations of intellectuals the view that "the eternal course of the universe is cyclical . . . [and] all change is imminent in [an unchanging] God."[4] Formal comedy automatically found support in such views, as did political and ecclesiastical establishments; and so long as nothing happened to shake popular confidence in the institutions that counseled people about eternal verities, writers who might be inclined to explore alternative views could do little. The pragmatic Machiavelli was vilified soon after his treatise on practical politics appeared, and the voice of a skeptical Montaigne went largely unheeded except by a handful of intelligentsia.

Of these Shakespeare was surely one. Near the end of his last play, he put what was most likely his own conviction about humanity's involvement in eternal change into the mouth of an aging and disillusioned but still unembittered Prospero. The old gentleman, having just dismissed abruptly the spirits who had been performing a pre-nuptial masque for his daughter and her spouse-to-be, dismissed the young people's disappointment with an unforgettable speech:

> These our actors
> (As I foretold you) were all spirits, and
> Are melted into air, into thin air,

And like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself.
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And like this insubstantial pageant faded
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.
(*The Tempest*, IV.1.148-58)[5]

Heraclitus could not have put it better, but nothing could have been more inconsonant with the implications of the presumably formal comedy in which those words appeared. What Shakespeare had done in this play was to unite the two fundamental perceptions of primitive man in a single comprehensive view, thereby transcending the limitations of comedy and bringing that genre into harmony with the vision of his major tragedies, *Hamlet*, *Lear*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*. In these masterpieces of midcareer he had emulated his predecessor Euripides by dramatizing for his countrymen situations which discredited their confidence in a stable universe, moral or otherwise, and made plain the reality of perpetual change for all but the most naive to see.

Changing attitudes rather than naiveté have tended to obscure Shakespeare's presentation of that perception in the play *Macbeth*. Obsessed by dreams of order, we resist the vision of flux that is fundamental to tragedy and, when confronted by a character like Macbeth, look for causes, external or internal, to explain the changes that time alone is responsible for bringing to him. Macbeth to Shakespeare's audiences was not necessarily the criminal that modern sensibility often makes him out to be. We in the twentieth century need to be reminded that seventeenth-century Englishmen—the presence of a Scottish Stuart on their throne notwithstanding—habitually thought of their cousins to the north as uncivilized barbarians and so were prepared to see Macbeth's savagery as an example of cultural labeling and not as evidence of latent criminality. They could not forget that James's mother was supposed to have conspired with her lover to dispatch James's father by means of a well-placed charge of gunpowder; and Sir Christopher Piggott, member of Parliament from Buckinghamshire, who made a public allusion to what he believed to be the general Scottish practice of removing sovereigns by assassination, spent

time in the Tower for his indiscretion.[6] Shakespeare in dealing with Scottish material tactfully dramatized a subject set six hundred years in the past, when most peoples in that part of the world, English as well as Scots, were to some extent barbaric, and assassination was fairly common as a mode of achieving succession. For all that, however, Shakespeare's Macbeth was a Scot and, in English eyes, behaved like one.

The attempt to salvage something of Macbeth's character by declaring him demonically possessed derives from a similar aversion to a view of the universe indifferent to our notions of order. It usually involves interpreting the women on the heath as either devils or the devils' agents and thus the primary motives for Macbeth's behavior—a view that Shakespeare's contemporaries might have considered questionable, to say the least. Shakespeare found the three hags in Holinshed, and his retention of them in the play may have been prompted in part by a wish to flatter the King. James, it is said, liked to trace his ancestry to the murdered Banquo, who, those same hags had promised, should be father to a line of kings. We note that Shakespeare included in Act IV a reference to Edward the Confessor's practice of touching for the scrofula, something James had revived, reportedly with fair success; and this royal sanction of what amounted to faith healing had probably reinforced the popular belief, dubious but still prevalent, that James also believed in witches.[7] Yet Holinshed himself never characterized the women as devils or witches. Initially he referred to them simply as "three women in strange and wild apparell, resembling creatures of an elder world"[8] and then, after explaining that no one at first took their prophecies seriously, went on to say:

> Afterwards the common opinion was, that these women were either the weird sisters, that is (as ye would say; the goddesses of destiny, or else some nymphs or feiries, indued with knowledge or prophesie by their necromanticall science, bicause everie thing came to passe as they has spoken.[9]

He referred to them once more, in passing, as "the three fairies or weird sisters"; but the important point is that Holinshed, who adapted the story from a source of his own (specifically the account by Hector Boece) avoided responsibility for saying that they were supernatural in any sense. He merely allowed "the

common opinion was" that the hags were supernatural and let it stand that they were "three women in strange and wild apparell, resembling creatures of an elder world." Kenneth Muir, a current student of Shakespeare's sources, is willing to let it stand there too;[10] and thus Muir joins the company of A.C. Bradley, who, regardless of what one may think of his criticism, was one of the closest readers Shakespeare has ever had. Bradley had written of these creatures:

> The Witches . . . are not goddesses or fates, or, in any way whatever, supernatural beings. They are old women, poor and ragged, skinny and hideous, full of vulgar spite, occupied in killing their neighbours' swine or revenging themselves on sailors' wives who have refused them chestnuts. If Banquo considers their beards a proof that they are not women, that only shows his ignorance. . . . There is not a syllable in *Macbeth* to imply they are anything but women.[11]

Bradley has more to say on this score, but this is the general drift of his argument. He notes that Shakespeare culled from books like Reginald Scot's enlightened *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584) (writing today Scot probably would have called his book *The Exposure of Witchcraft*) popular notions that might serve as atmospheric enhancement, but he gave his hags no power to influence the action.

Ironically the one undeniably metaphysical detail in the play is probably not of Shakespeare's doing. This is the unexpected appearance of Hecate, the Greek goddess of sorcery and witchcraft, at two points in the play (III.v. and IV.i). Scholars, virtually without exception, agree that her language and meter are incompatible with the rest of the play; and, noting that the two songs she calls for appear in full in Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* (1614), assume that Middleton, who continued to write plays for the company after Shakespeare left it, was the interpolator. The point of interest here, however, is the probability that someone in Shakespeare's company recognized a need to provide supernatural reinforcement for three characters who otherwise would have come across to Jacobean audiences as they did later to A.C. Bradley: that is, as nothing more than skinny hags who fortuitously provided material for the superstitious minds of two ambitious

Scottish warriors to feed upon. As Shakespeare originally wrote the play, Macbeth's initial encounter with those creatures was nothing more mysterious than encounters modern travellers have had in some third-world countries, where pathetic beggars still emerge from ditches or the underbrush to demand gifts in return for fortunes.

Thus the prophecies of Macbeth's hags were beggars' clichés, directed at the bounty of their famous hero, Macbeth, Thane of Glamis, who had crossed their path on his return to the King's palace, to hear that he was already Thane of Cawdor and would someday be king (I.iii.49-50). Their prophecy to the less well-known Banquo was also a cliché, second best perhaps but the best they could do under the circumstances (Macbeth having already received their prize promises). Like scavengers on battlefields the world over they were in a position to see things that would escape the notice of those preoccupied with fighting, and they could easily have known, as obviously Macbeth did not, of the defection and disgrace of the Thane of Cawdor. Hence, they promised Macbeth a prize which, knowing of its availability, he might have reached for on his own initiative, without any prompting. As for the crown, Macbeth was now clearly the strong man in the realm, regardless of his title; and this realm, after all, was Scotland. Thus kingship for Scotsman Macbeth was not beyond the expectation of a trio of beggars any more than it was beyond the expectation of Macbeth himself.

With all his valor, strength, and accompanying ambition, however, Shakespeare's Macbeth, as we have already noted, was superstitious—to Englishmen, simply another predictable Scottish characteristic. He was prepared, as sophisticated Englishmen would not have been, to see signs of the supernatural in old hags with fortunes on their lips. As they begin to slip away, he bids them stay; and when minutes later word of Cawdor's treachery reaches him, he immediately thinks of the second prophecy ("the swelling act / Of the imperial theme") and confidently expects confirmation of that as well. Admittedly he pauses momentarily to reflect, "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me / Without my stir" (I.iii.143-44); but even here he is already assuming that some divine, or diabolical, intelligence has determined to make him King of Scotland. Thus when Duncan back in his comfortable palace at Forres names young Malcolm immediate heir to the throne, Macbeth automatically begins to think of ways to remove

what he takes to be a patent impediment to destiny. Of course, destiny, as ambitious Macbeth is prone to understand it, has nothing to do with any of these events, though with his first assumption to the contrary, the possibility of a tragic action begins to emerge. Macbeth's real destiny is simply the combination of ambition, superstition, and a hand accustomed to letting blood, all of which have now coalesced to direct his course.

What we see in the first act of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, in short, is the inchoate tragic hero, the man who suddenly is able to believe that he has reached through the mists of circumstance to touch the hard rock of reality and for the moment does not dream that he can err seriously in feeling his way forward along what he takes to be a reliable surface. Macbeth's epiphany will come when he realizes that his solid rock is only one more illusion, when he begins to understand that there is no hidden agenda for him, perhaps no such agenda for anyone, that nothing on earth is determined, that in the end crowns go either to the strong or to the lucky, and that killing, however glorious the cause, is never anything more or less than simple killing.

Some may argue that the later prophecies in the play must surely be meant to suggest that a supernatural design of some sort lies behind that joke that the three hags play upon the gullible Scot. Actually Shakespeare gives no hint of such a design. The apparitions that deliver the prophecies on Macbeth's second visit are, like the dagger and the Ghost of Banquo, seen only by Macbeth. Unlike the ghost in *Hamlet* they are not confirmed by a second viewer, and they tell him nothing that he could not have known already. He hardly needed witches to tell him to beware of Macduff, who even on the night of Duncan's Scottish style murder was clearly the one who would in time go after Macbeth. Unknown to him the second prophecy, that "none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth," also points to Macduff; but it makes use of information that would have been common knowledge among old wives in the countryside. It is the kind of gossip that a warrior chieftain would not have been likely to recall even if he had ever possessed it. Thus Macbeth took a midwife's conundrum for prophecy and went on to swallow a third pseudo-prediction, the meaning of which should have been clear to anyone whose sense of strategy had not been beclouded by a morbid concern for signs and portents:

> Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until
> Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill
> Shall come against him.
>
> (IV.i.92-94)

Dunsinane, supposedly an impregnable fortress built on the highest hill in the region, provided an elevation well above the tree line and thus gave the possessor an advantage over any enemy who might seek to approach. The obvious strategy for such an enemy was to take advantage of the resources of the wooded flatlands below in precisely the way that even the inexperienced Malcolm thinks of and proceeds to implement with great success. Thus the wood moves, as it had to do, and Macbeth quickly falls before the superior forces of England, Northumberland, and such Scottish defectors as Macduff and Malcolm between them have managed to muster. In the end he is a victim of nothing more mysterious than a retribution that he himself has provoked in his repeated attempt to implement a force of destiny that exists only in his own superstitious (and Jacobean viewers might have added) Scottish mind.

Removing the possibility that the fate of Shakespeare's Macbeth is determined in some way should make it possible for most readers to consider the play a tragedy. The widespread objection about the protagonist's villainy will probably remain for those who find it difficult to see the play in its original context, but even that presents no real impediment. Aristotle expressed a preference for a hero who is "highly renowned and prosperous" and who, though not "eminently good and just," meets his reversal because of some error or simple frailty rather than because of "vice or depravity"; but this should not be taken as evidence that the essence of tragedy resides in its ethical implications. Tragedy in the last analysis deals primarily with Western humanity's recurring need to be reassured that eventually a manifestation of universal order will somehow remove, at least for men of good will, the threat of indiscriminate annihilation. The characters that Shakespeare sets before us in his tragedies all seek in varying ways to satisfy that need. Like Samuel Beckett's clowns they tolerate the absurdity of their lives in the expectation that in time a Godot or his equivalent will appear and fit the pieces together; and the prelude to any enlightenment that Shakespeare may give them is

the realization that the resolution they anticipate will never come—that, in fact, such a resolution may never have even been possible.

A character who experiences this dispiriting prelude and never goes beyond it is Lady Macbeth, who near the beginning of her last scene (V.i) declares chillingly, "Hell is murky!" Custom has often interpreted what follows as the presentation of a guilty soul morbidly contemplating its own damnation, but what Lady Macbeth is really contemplating is the involvement she shares with all humanity in the interminable process of existence, the Heraclitean flux, which simply goes on without reference to any pattern or plan that human beings may ascribe to it and like the rain in the Gospel (Matt. 5:45) affects just and unjust alike. The terror that makes chaos of her final moments is something she derives from her recognition that time is a continuum and refuses to divide into meaningful discrete units, a nightmare in which the dead king will never stop bleeding and the stained hand never return to sweetness, in which all the subsequent murderous activities can never, for her, entirely pass away, and in which friend Banquo and the innocent Lady Macduff must abide as perpetual memories, conditioning her every thought and action for the rest of her time on earth.

Macbeth, we may recall, contemplated briefly in Act I the possibility that a similar nightmare might be his, but he thrust the spectre of that aside to initiate a course which he hoped would enable him to escape into a future secure from the troubled past he was on the brink of creating for himself:

> If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
> It were done quickly. If th' assassination
> Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
> With his surcease success; that but this blow
> Might be the be-all and the end-all—here,
> But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,
> We'ld jump the life to come.
>
> (I.vii.1-7)

The expectation which temporarily deflects Macbeth's thinking at this point, as we later learn, consists of the "honor, love, obedience, and troops of friends" that he will wistfully speak of in Act V as blessings that have eluded him (V.iii.25). Here at the

outset of his course he can easily imagine that such things as these are the normal consequence of the kingship that he thinks is destined to be his: once the crown is securely on his head, he believes, he will be able to live indefinitely in his hard-won comedy, "jumping," at least for the time being, the thought of death and whatever else may follow. To do Macbeth credit, one must acknowledge that he has also begun to contemplate the unsavory consequences of his intended action when Lady Macbeth intervenes to redirect him to the murder; but he never quite recognizes that taking the crown, by whatever means, must involve living for a time in the fear of his friend Banquo's ambition, then, Banquo dead, in the fear of Banquo's children, and thereafter in the fear of challenger after challenger, until at last he will have no choice but to accept the joyless, sleepless existence awaiting a death he has spent the best part of his life avoiding. When at last Macbeth begins to realize that this is what kingship really means, he will cry out in a weariness that approaches despair:

> I am in blood
> Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
> Returning were as tedious as go o'er.
> (III.iv.135-37)

What Macbeth wishes for desperately here at midcourse is a place to stop, and that is what he seeks and thinks he has found after his second visit to the old women.

Even at the beginning of Act V Macbeth still clings to his dream of a universe of absolutes inhabited by supernatural powers which can, and on occasion may, make those absolutes known. When told that his thanes have begun to defect, he reviews the latest prophecies for all within hearing concluding with the boast, "The mind I sway by, and the heart I bear, / Shall never sag with doubt, nor shake with fear" (V.iii.9-10). Yet the fear that Macbeth still cannot acknowledge has already stolen away any lingering taste of sweetness that life may have had for him. When an unidentifiable shriek within the castle proves to have signalled the death of his wife, that fear emerges in the twelve lines critics have sometimes read as marking the nadir from which Macbeth will recover triumphantly in his final moments:

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.

(V.v.17-28)

The nadir, however, is bedrock; and the fear that brings Macbeth to it becomes the agent of his salvation. The vision he confronts in these lines that have sometimes terrified western audiences is nothing more than the long view which for many people of older cultures is the beginning of wisdom. Macbeth has put his faith in a veil of dreams, partly his heritage and partly fabric of his own devising. What saves him when circumstances rip that veil from his eyes is his ability to resist averting his gaze from a world that makes no promises and gives no guarantees and to accept, in the last minutes of his life, that world at face value.

Two details in the play, one early and one late, prepare us to see the conclusion of *Macbeth* in this light. In Act I Shakespeare goes out of his way to have young Malcolm report the last moments of the first Thane of Cawdor, who, like Macbeth, had betrayed King Duncan and was to pay for that defection with his life:

Nothing in his life
Became him like the leaving it. He died
As one that had been studied in his death.
To throw away the dearest thing he ow'd,
As 'twere a careless trifle.

(I.iv.7-11)

This is the model of spiritual courage which Macbeth, whose physical courage had already proved itself in his confrontation with the "merciless Macdonwald," will eventually be called upon

to emulate. In addition to courage, however, tragic stature will require also achievement of that indifferent death which negates anxiety and can come only as the result of seeing that the human life by which we set so much store has all the glitter and all the transitoriness of a bubble in a stream.

To reinforce this brief image of a tragic Cawdor Shakespeare in the closing moments of the play gives us a compelling reminder. In Act V, Scene vii, Macbeth meets young Siward, son of the Earl of Northumberland, exults that the boy was born of woman, and promptly kills him. Later, in Scene ix, after the battle is over and Macbeth has been killed, the old man receives the news that his son is among the slain. At first he seems incredulous. "Then is he dead?" he asks; and the answer comes from nobleman Ross, a steadfast opponent of tyranny: "Ay, and brought off the field. Your cause of sorrow / Must not be measur'd by his worth, for then / It hath no end." "Had he his hurts before?" old Siward asks; and Ross's answer comes, "Ay, on the front." "Why then," says Siward, "God's soldier be he! / Had I as many sons as I have hairs, / I would not wish them to a fairer death. / And so, his knell is knoll'd." Malcolm, still the callous youth, interrupts: "He's worth more sorrow, / And that I'll spend for him." But Siward quietly continues, "he's worth no more; / They say he parted well, and paid his score, / And so, God be with him!" Undoubtedly for Siward and Cawdor, as for Macbeth, the universe remains a mystery, and Macbeth's comprehension of it at the end, is still best characterized as "a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing," words that the play never contradicts. The death that he has feared and avoided for so long has turned out to be nothing more than the dusty conclusion to what must eventually become, for all human beings, a wearisome parade of tomorrows. The question that remains for those of us who watch this spectable is this: Can one ever hope to achieve, much less retain, something resembling dignity in a universe that requires us to live and act in the face of certain dissolution but gives no unequivocal signs of controlling deities or of moral or even natural law to provide meaning either for our lives as a whole or for the single activities within it?

Tragedy's answer to this question (and tragedy is not required to give more than an implicit answer) has always been a qualified affirmative. From the beginning it has enjoined its Western audiences to emulate those millions in the Eastern half of the world, to say nothing of humbler sentient creatures worldwide,

and accept gracefully the dissolution that was never the nightmarish annihilation we imagine it to be but simply part of the necessary accommodation of all life to existence in an unlimited continuum. To paraphrase an American author of this century, it has advised us to touch vicariously the great death and learn that it is, after all, only the great death.

Moreover, tragedy continually reminds all who see or read that human beings, whether they know it or not, whether they be saints or sinners, monks with begging bowl or world conquerors, achieve meaning for their lives existentially. This is true, tragedy says, whether one takes sword in hand or simply bows to the inevitable. What matters is the exercise of the will. Thus Macbeth, rising to tragic stature moments before the avenging Macduff kills him, abandons his delusion about a providence that would determine his course—whether diabolical or divine is not important—and lays down his life in awareness, for him newly achieved, that no life is more than a passing incident in the cosmic process:

> I will not yield
> To kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet
> And to be baited with the rabble's curse.
> Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane,
> And thou oppos'd, being of no woman born,
> Yet I will try the last. Before my body
> I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff,
> And damn'd be him that first cries, "Hold, enough!"
> (V.viii.27-34)

So saying, Macbeth stands as a knowledgeable human being, fully if only briefly master of his destiny because he has at last recognized the nature of that destiny and accepted it. In this gesture he joins not only Cawdor and young Siward but Hamlet before him and Cleopatra and Coriolanus, who will come after in the succession of Shakespeare's tragedies. We Westerners who tend to stand in fear and embarrassment before the prospect of dissolution in the indifferent universe that gave us our fragile identities may still ask whether this is the best that tragedy has to offer. One must answer that if it offered better, it would be less than tragedy. In any case, this is what all the best tragedies have offered since tragedy was first invented to enlighten, console, and

strengthen human beings frustrated at the collapse of their attempts to maintain a spurious dream of immortality. For those of us who have been led to think of the good death of tragedy as being contingent upon the elevated status of the protagonist and the nobility of his enterprise, it may be at least mildly comforting to think that that good death has never been a respecter of persons and that the epiphany that tragedy brings, in poetry and in life, is available to all alike, young and old, woman as well as man, the unjust as well as the just.

NOTES

[1]In *Shakespeare Survey*, ed. Kenneth Muir, 19 (1966):12-24.

[2]The best statement of this view is that by W.C. Curry, *Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns*, 2d ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959), 53-93.

[3]For example, Roy Battenhouse, *Shakespearean Tragedy, Its Art and Its Christian Premises* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1971) and Eleanor Prosser, *Hamlet and Revenge*, 2d ed. (Palo Alto, California: Stanford University Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1971).

[4]Philip Hallie, "Stoicism," *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 8:21.

[5]Quotations from Shakespeare are from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

[6]See Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; New York: Columbia University Press, 1973), 7:428-29.

[7]For an account of James's changing attitude on witchcraft see Henry N. Paul, *The Royal Play of "Macbeth"* (New York: Macmillan, 1950), 90-130.

[8]Bullough, 494-95.

[9]Bullough, 495.

[10]"Folklore and Shakespeare," in *Shakespeare, Contrasts and Controversies* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985), 39, 47-49.

[11]*Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmillan, 1905), 341.