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MACBETH AS TRAGIC HERO

Wayne C. Booth

PUT even in its simplest terms, the problem Shakespeare gave himself in *Macbeth* was a tremendous one. Take a good man, a noble man, a man admired by all who know him—and destroy him, not only physically and emotionally, as the Greeks destroyed their heroes, but also morally and intellectually. As if this were not difficult enough as a dramatic hurdle, while transforming him into one of the most despicable mortals conceivable, maintain him as a tragic hero—that is, keep him so sympathetic that, when he comes to his death, the audience will pity rather than detest him and will be relieved to see him out of his misery rather than pleased to see him destroyed. Put in Shakespeare's own terms: take a "noble" man, full of "conscience" and "the milk of human kindness," and make of him a "dead butcher," yet keep him an object of pity rather than hatred. If we thus artificially reconstruct the problem as it might have existed before the play was written, we see that, in choosing these "terminal points" and these terminal intentions, Shakespeare makes almost impossible demands on his dramatic skill, although at the same time he insures that, if he succeeds at all, he will succeed magnificently. If the trick can be turned, it will inevitably be a great one.

One need only consider the many relative failures in attempts at similar "plots" and effects to realize the difficulties involved. When dramatists or novelists attempt the sympathetic-degenerative plot, almost always one or another of the following failures or transformations occurs: (1) The feeling of abhorrence for the

protagonist becomes so strong that all sympathy is lost, and the play or novel becomes "punitive"—that is, the reader's or spectator's chief pleasure depends on his satisfaction in revenge or punishment. (2) The protagonist is never really made very wicked, after all; he only *seems* wicked by conventional (and, by implication, unsound) standards and is really a highly admirable reform-candidate. (3) The protagonist reforms in the end and avoids his proper punishment. (4) The book or play itself becomes a "wicked" work; that is, either deliberately or unconsciously the artist makes us side with his degenerated hero against "morality." If it is deliberate, we have propaganda works of one kind or another, often resembling the second type above; if it is unconscious, we get works whose immorality (as in pornographic or sadistic treatments of the good-girl-turned-whore, thief, or murderess) makes them unenjoyable as literature unless the reader or spectator temporarily or permanently relaxes his own standards of moral judgment. Any of these failures or transformations can be found in conjunction with the most frequent failure of all: the degeneration remains finally unexplained, unmotivated; the forces employed to destroy the noble man are found pitifully inadequate to make his fall seem credible.

Even in works which are somewhat successful, there is almost always some shrinking from a fully responsible engagement with the inherent difficulties. For example, in *Tender Is the Night*, which is in many ways strikingly similar to *Macbeth*, Fitzgerald waters down the effect in several ways. Dick Diver, Fitzgerald's "noble" man, is destroyed, but he is destroyed only to helplessness—to unpopu-

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larity and drunkenness and poverty; he becomes a "failure." The signs of his destruction are never grotesque acts of cruelty or wickedness of the kind committed by Macbeth or of a kind which for the modern reader would be analogous in their unsympathetic quality. Rather, he speaks more sharply to people than he used to; he is no longer charming. This is indeed pitiful enough, in its own way, but it is easy enough, too, especially when the artist chooses, as Fitzgerald does, to report the final demoralization of the hero only vaguely and from a great distance: one never *sees* Dick Diver's final horrible moments as one sees Macbeth's. So that, at the end of his downward path, Diver has been more sinned against than sinning, and we have no obstacles to our pity. But, on the other hand, since the fall has not been nearly so great, our pity that the fall should have occurred at all is attenuated, compared with the awfulness of the last hours of Macbeth. Other attenuations follow from this one. If the fall is not a very great one, the forces needed to produce it need not be great (although one might argue that even in *Tender Is the Night* they should have been greater, for credibility). Nicole and a general atmosphere of gloom and decay are made to do a job which in *Macbeth* requires some of the richest degenerative forces ever employed. If, then, comparison on these structural points is just, in spite of the strong differences between the works, it indicates that in point of difficulties faced—or, one should say, created—Shakespeare in *Macbeth* has it all over Fitzgerald, as he has it all over anyone else I know of who has attempted this form.¹

I

A complete study of how *Macbeth* is made to succeed in spite of—or rather be-

¹ It should go without saying that in other tragedies Shakespeare faced totally different problems. But the willingness to face big ones rather than little ones is always there (see n. 2, below).

cause of—the difficulties is perhaps beyond the capacities of any one reader. It is certainly impossible here. But the major devices employed—one never knows how "consciously"—by Shakespeare can be enumerated and discussed quite simply.

The first step in convincing us that Macbeth's fall is a genuinely tragic occurrence is to convince us that there was, in reality, a fall: we must believe that Macbeth was once a man whom we could admire, a man with great potentialities. One way to convince us would have been to show him, as Fitzgerald shows Dick Diver, in action as an admirable man. But, although this is possible in a leisurely novel, it would, in a play, have wasted time needed for the important events, which begin only with Macbeth's great temptation at the conclusion of the opening battle. Thus the superior choice in this case (although it would not necessarily always be so) is to begin your representation of the action with the first real temptation to the fall and to use testimony by other characters to establish your protagonist's prior goodness. We are thus given, from the beginning, sign after sign that Macbeth's greatest nobility was reached at a point just prior to the opening of the play. When the play begins, he has already coveted the crown, as is shown by his excessively nervous reaction to the witches' prophecy; it is indeed likely that he has already considered foul means of obtaining it. But, in spite of this wickedness already present to his mind as a possibility, we have ample reason to think Macbeth a man worthy of our admiration. He is "brave" and "valiant," a "worthy gentleman"; Duncan calls him "noble Macbeth." These epithets have an ironic quality only in retrospect; when they are first applied, one has no reason to doubt them. Indeed, they are true epithets, or they would have been true if applied, say, only a few days or months earlier.

Of course, this testimony to his prior

virtue given by his friends in the midst of other business would not carry the spectators for long with any sympathy for Macbeth if it were not continued in several other forms. We have the testimony of Lady Macbeth (the unimpeachable testimony of a "bad" person castigating the goodness of a "good" person):

Yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. What thou
wouldst highly,
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play
false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win.

No verbal evidence would be enough, however, if we did not see in Macbeth himself signs of its validity, since we have already seen many signs that he is *not* the good man that the witnesses seem to believe. Thus the best evidence we have of his essential goodness is his vacillation before the murder. Just as Raskolnikov is tormented and just as we ourselves—virtuous theater viewers—would be tormented, so Macbeth is tormented before the prospect of his own crime. Indeed, much as he wants the kingship, he decides in Scene 3 against the murder:

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

And when he first meets Lady Macbeth he is resolved not to murder Duncan. In fact, as powerful a rhetorician as she is, she has all she can do to get him back on the course of murder.²

In addition, Macbeth's ensuing soliloquy not only weighs the possible bad practical consequences of his act but shows him perfectly aware, in a way an evil man would not be, of the moral values involved:

He's here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,

Strong both against the deed; then, as his
host,
Who should against his murderer shut the
door,
Not bear the knife myself. Besides, this
Duncan
Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
So clear in his great office, that his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued,
against
The deep damnation of his taking-off. . . .

In this speech we see again, as we saw in the opening of the play, Shakespeare's wonderful economy: the very speech which shows Macbeth to best advantage is the one which shows the audience how very bad his contemplated act is, since Duncan is blameless. One need only think of the same speech if it were dealing with a king who *deserves* to be assassinated or if it were given by another character commenting on Macbeth's action, to see how right it is as it stands.

After this soliloquy Macbeth announces again to Lady Macbeth that he will not go on ("We will proceed no further in this business"), but her eloquence is too much for him. Under her jibes at his "unmanliness," he progresses from a kind of petulant, but still honorable, boasting

² This scene illustrates again what I am saying about the importance of Shakespeare's willingness to give himself difficulties that are worth surmounting. Give yourself a man who has no real objections to an act, and then throw somebody at him to persuade him to that act: the conflict is insignificant, the tension slight, the drama weak. Give yourself an extremely good man and set someone to persuade him to do the most horrible of deeds; inevitably, if you rise to the occasion, you must create a true giant of a rhetorician to accomplish the almost impossible persuasive task: you must create Lady Macbeth. Or, again, suppose you want to write a domestic tragedy, the tragedy of a man who strangles his wife in a jealous rage. You create a man given to jealous rages and a woman who is known to be inclined to infidelity; sure enough, she is unfaithful, and he murders her. Contrast that with Othello, a man *not* inclined to jealousy, married to Desdemona, a woman of spotless reputation, beyond all scandal, and you see that Shakespeare has forced himself, as it were, into big things: primarily Iago.

("I dare do all that may become a man;/ Who dares do more is none"), through a state of amoral consideration of mere expediency ("If I should fail?"), to complete resolution, but still with a full understanding of the wickedness of his act ("I am settled . . . this terrible feat"). There is never any doubt, first, that he is bludgeoned into the deed by Lady Macbeth's superior rhetoric and force of character and by the pressure of unfamiliar circumstances (including the witches) and, second, that even in the final decision to go through with it he is extremely troubled by a guilty conscience ("False face must hide what the false heart doth know"). In the entire dagger soliloquy he is clearly suffering from the realization of the horror of the "bloody business" ahead. He sees fully and painfully the wickedness of the course he has chosen, but not until after the deed, when the knocking has commenced, do we realize how terrifyingly alive his conscience is: "To know my deed, 't were best not know myself./ Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!" This is the wish of a "good" man who, though he has become a "bad" man, still thinks and feels as a good man would.

To cite one last example of Shakespeare's pains in this matter, we have the testimony to Macbeth's character offered by Hecate (III, 5):

And which is worse, all you have done
Hath been but for a wayward son,
Spiteful and wrathful, who, as others do,
Loves for his own ends, not for you.

This reaffirmation that Macbeth is not a true son of evil comes, interestingly enough, immediately after the murder of Banquo, at a time when the audience needs a reminder of Macbeth's fundamental nobility.

The evil of his acts is thus built upon the knowledge that he is not a naturally evil man but a man who has every potentiality for goodness. This potentiality and its frustration are the chief ingredi-

ents of the tragedy of Macbeth. Macbeth is a man whose progressive external misfortunes seem to produce, and at the same time seem to be produced by, his parallel progression from great goodness to great wickedness. Our emotional involvement (which perhaps should not be simplified under the term "pity" or "pity and fear") is thus a combination of two kinds of regret: (1) We regret that any potentially good man should come to such a bad end: "What a pity that things should have gone this way, that things should *be* this way!" (2) We regret even more the destruction of this particular man, a man who is not only morally sympathetic but also intellectually and emotionally interesting. In eliciting both these kinds of regret to such a high degree, Shakespeare goes beyond his predecessors and establishes trends which are still working themselves out in literature. The first kind—never used at all by classical dramatists, who never employed a genuinely degenerative plot—has been attempted again and again by modern novelists. Their difficulty has usually been that they have relied too completely on a general humane response in the reader and too little on a realized prior height or potentiality from which to fall. The protagonists are shown succumbing to their environment—or, as in so many "sociological" novels, already succumbed—and the reader is left to himself to infer that something worth bothering about has gone to waste, that things might have been otherwise, that there is any real reason to react emotionally to the final destruction. The second kind—almost unknown to classical dramatists, whose characters are never "original" or "fresh" in the modern sense—has been attempted in ever greater extremes since Shakespeare, until one finds many works in which mere *interest* in particular characteristics completely supplants emotional response to *events* involving men with interesting characteristics. The pathos of Bloom, for example, is an attenuated pathos, just as

the comedy of Bloom is an attenuated comedy; one is not primarily moved to laughter or tears by events involving great characters, as in *Macbeth*, but rather one is primarily interested in details about characters. It can be argued whether this is a gain or a loss to literature, when considered in general. Certainly, one would rather read a modern novel like *Ulysses*, with all its faults on its head, than many of the older dramas or epics involving "great" characters in "great" events. But it can hardly be denied that one of Shakespeare's triumphs is his success in doing many things at once which lesser writers have since done only one at a time. He has all the generalized effect of classical tragedy. We lament the "bad fortune" of a great man who has known good fortune. To this he adds the much more poignant (at least to us) pity one feels in observing the moral destruction of a great man who has once known goodness. And yet with all this he combines the pity one feels when one observes a highly characterized individual—whom one knows intimately, as it were, in whom one is *interested*—going to destruction. One difference between watching Macbeth go to destruction and watching the typical modern hero, whether in the drama (say, Willy Loman) or in the novel (say, Jake or any other of Hemingway's heroes), is that in *Macbeth* there is some "going." Willy Loman doesn't have very far to fall; he begins the play on the verge of suicide, and at the end of the play he has committed suicide. Even if we assume that the "beginning" is the time covered in the earliest of the flashbacks, we have not "far to go" from there to Willy's destruction. It is true that our contemporary willingness to exalt the potentialities of the average man makes Willy's fall seem to us a greater one than it really is, dramatically. But the reliance on convention will, of course, sooner or later dictate a decline in the play's effectiveness. *Macbeth* continues to be effective at least in part because everything

necessary for a complete response to a complete action is given to us. A highly individualized, noble man is sent to complete moral, intellectual, and physical destruction.

II

But no matter how carefully the terminal points of the drama are selected and impressed on the spectator's mind, the major problem of how to represent such a "plot" still remains. Shakespeare has the tremendous task of trying to keep two contradictory dynamic streams moving simultaneously: the stream of events showing Macbeth's growing wickedness and the stream of circumstances producing and maintaining our sympathy for him. In effect, each succeeding atrocity, marking another step toward complete depravity, must be so surrounded by contradictory circumstances as to make us feel that, in spite of the evidence before our eyes, Macbeth is still somehow admirable.

The first instance of this is the method of treating Duncan's murder. The chief point here is Shakespeare's care in avoiding any "rendering" or representation of the murder itself. It is, in fact, not even narrated. We *hear* only the details of how the guards reacted and how Macbeth reacted to their cries. We *see* nothing. There is nothing about the actual dagger strokes; there is no report of the dying cries of the good old king. We have only Macbeth's conscience-stricken lament for having committed the deed. Thus what would be an intolerable act if depicted with any vividness becomes relatively bearable when seen only afterward in the light of Macbeth's suffering and remorse. This may seem ordinary enough; it is always convenient to have murders take place offstage. But if one compares the handling of this scene, where the perpetrator must remain sympathetic, with the handling of the blinding of Gloucester, where the perpetrators must be hated, one can see how important such a detail can be. The blinding

of Gloucester is not so wicked an act, in itself, as murder. If we had seen, say, a properly motivated Goneril come in from offstage wringing her hands and crying, "Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more.' Goneril does put out the eyes of sleep... I am afraid to think what I have done," and on thus for nearly a full scene, our reaction to the whole episode would, needless to say, be exactly contrary to what it now is.

A second precaution is the highly general portrayal of Duncan before his murder. It is necessary only that he be known as a "good king," the murder of whom will be a wicked act. He must be the *type* of benevolent monarch. But more particular characteristics are carefully kept from him. There is nothing for us to love, nothing for us to "want further existence for," within the play. We hear of his goodness; we do not see it. We know practically no details about him, and we have little, if any, personal interest in him at the time of his death. All the personal interest is reserved for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. So, again, the wickedness is played up in the narration but played down in the representation. We must identify Macbeth with the murder of a blameless king, but only intellectually; emotionally we should be concerned as far as is possible only with the *effects on Macbeth*. We *know* that he has done the deed, but we *feel* primarily only his own suffering.

Banquo is considerably more "particularized" than was Duncan. Not only is he also a good man, but we have seen him acting as a good man, and we know quite a lot about him. We saw his reaction to the witches, and we know that he has resisted temptations similar to those of Macbeth. We have seen him in conversation with Macbeth. We have heard him in soliloquy. We know him to be very much like Macbeth, both in valor and in being the subject of prophecy. He thus has our lively sympathy; his death is a personal, rather than a general, loss. Perhaps more important, his

murder is actually shown on the stage. His dying words are spoken in our presence, and they are unselfishly directed to saving his son. We are forced to the proper, though illogical, inference: it is more wicked to kill Banquo than to have killed Duncan.

But we must still not lose our sympathy for Macbeth. This is partially provided for by the fact that the deed is much more necessary than the previous murder; Banquo is a real political danger. But the important thing is again the choice of what is represented. The murder is done by accomplices, so that Macbeth is never *shown* in any real act of wickedness. When we see him, he is suffering the torments of the banquet table. Our incorrect emotional inference: the self-torture has already expiated the guilt of the crime.

The same devices work in the murder of Lady Macduff and her children, the third and last atrocity explicitly shown in the play (except for the killing of young Siward, which, being military, is hardly an atrocity in this sense). Lady Macduff is more vividly portrayed even than Banquo, although she appears on the stage for a much briefer time. Her complaints against the absence of her husband, her loving banter with her son, and her stand against the murderers make her as admirable as the little boy himself, who dies in defense of his father's name. The murder of women and children of such quality is wicked indeed, the audience is made to feel. And when we move to England and see the effect of the atrocity on Macduff, our active pity for Macbeth's victims is at the high point of the play. For the first time, perhaps, pity for Macbeth's victims really wars with pity for him, and our desire for his downfall, to protect others and to protect himself from his own further misdeeds, begins to mount in consequence.

Yet even here Macbeth is kept as little "to blame" as possible. He does not do the deed himself, and we can believe

that he would have been unable to, had he seen the wife and child as we have seen them. (The Orson Welles movie version contains many grotesque errors of reading, but none worse than showing Macbeth actively engaged on the scene of this crime.) He is much further removed from them than from his other victims; as far as we know, he has never seen them. They are as remote and impersonal to him as they are immediate and personal to the audience, and personal blame against him is thus attenuated. More important, however, immediately after Macduff's tears we shift to Lady Macbeth's scene—the effect being again to impress on us the fact that the punishment for these crimes is always as great as, or greater than, the crimes themselves. Thus all three crimes are followed immediately by scenes of suffering and self-torture. Shakespeare works almost as if he were following a master-rulebook: By your choice of what to represent from the materials provided in your story, insure that each step in your protagonist's degeneration will be counteracted by mounting pity for him.

All this would certainly suffice to keep Macbeth at the center of our interest and sympathy, even with all our mounting concern for his victims. But it is reinforced by qualities in his character separate and distinct from his moral qualities. Perhaps the most important of these is his gift (indirectly Shakespeare's gift, it is true, but we should remember that in his maturer work Shakespeare does not bestow it indiscriminately on all his characters) of expressing himself in great poetry. We naturally tend to feel with the character who speaks the best poetry of the play, no matter what his deeds (Iago would never be misplayed as protagonist if his poetry did not rival, and sometimes surpass, Othello's). When we add to this poetic gift an extremely rich and concrete set of characteristics, over and above his moral qualities, we have a character which is in its own way more sympathetic than

any character portrayed in only moral colors could be. Even the powers of virtue gathering about his castle to destroy him seem petty compared with his mammoth sensitivity, his rich despair. When he says:

my way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have,

we feel that he wants these things quite as honestly and a good deal more passionately than even the most virtuous man could want them. And we regret deeply the truth of his conclusion that he "must not look to have" them.

III

If Macbeth's initial nobility, the manner of representation of his atrocities, and his rich poetic gift are all calculated to create and sustain our sympathy for him throughout his movement toward destruction, the kind of mistake he makes in initiating his own destruction is equally well calculated to heighten our willingness to forgive while deploring. On one level it could, of course, be said that he errs simply in being overambitious and underscrupulous. But this is only partly true. What allows him to sacrifice his moral beliefs to his ambition is a mistake of another kind—of a kind which is, at least to modern spectators, more probable or credible than any conventional tragic flaw or any traditional tragic error such as mistaking the identity of a brother or not knowing that one's wife is one's mother. Macbeth knows what he is doing, yet he does not know. He knows the immorality of the act, but he has no conception of the effects of the act on himself or on his surroundings. Accustomed to murder of a "moral" sort, in battle, and having valorously and successfully "carv'd out his passage" with "bloody execution" many times previously, he misunder-

stands completely what will be the devastating effect on his own character if he tries to carve out his passage in civil life. The murder of Duncan on one level resembles closely the kind of thing Macbeth has done professionally, and he lacks the insight to see the great difference between the two kinds of murder. He cannot foresee that success in the first murder will only lead to the speech "to be thus is nothing; But to be safely thus," and to ever increasing degradation and suffering for himself and for those around him. Even though he has a kind of double premonition of the effects of the deed both on his own conscience and on Duncan's subjects ("If it were done when 't is done, then 't were well . . ."), he does not really understand. If he did understand, he could not do the deed.

This ignorance is made more convincing by being extended to a misunderstanding of the forces leading him to the murder. Macbeth does not really understand that he has two spurs "to prick the sides" of his intent, besides his own vaulting ambition. The first of these is, of course, the witches and their prophecy. A good deal of nonsense has been written about these witches, some in the direction of making them totally responsible for the action of Macbeth and some making them merely a fantastical representation of Macbeth's mental state. Yet they are quite clearly real and objective, since they say and do things which Macbeth could know nothing about—such as their presentation of the ambiguous facts of Macduff's birth and the Birnam wood trick. And equally they are not "fate," alone responsible for what happens to Macbeth. He deliberately chooses from what they have to say only those things which he wishes to hear; and he has already felt the ambition to be king and even possibly to become king through regicide. Dramatically they seem to be here both as a needed additional goad to his ambition and as a concrete instance of Macbeth's tragic misunderstanding.

His deliberate and consistent mistaking of what they have to say objectifies for us his misunderstanding of everything about his situation. He should realize that, if they are true oracles, *both* parts of their prophecy *must* be fulfilled. He makes the mistake of acting criminally to bring about the first part of the prophecy, and then acting criminally to prevent the fulfilment of the second part, concerning Banquo. But only if they were not true oracles would the slaying of Duncan be necessary or the slaying of Banquo be of any use. Macbeth tries to pick and choose from their promises, and they thus aid him in his self-destruction.

The second force which Macbeth does not understand, and without which he would find himself incapable of the murder, is Lady Macbeth. She, of course, fills several functions in the play, besides her inherent interest as a character, which is great indeed. But her chief function, as the textbook commonplace quite rightly has it, is to incite Macbeth to the murder of Duncan. Shakespeare has realized the best possible form for this incitation. She does not urge Macbeth with pictures of the pleasures of rewarded ambition; she does not allow his thoughts to remain on the moral aspects of the problem, as they would if he were left to himself. Rather, she shifts the whole ground of the consideration to questions of Macbeth's valor. She twits him for cowardice, plays upon the word "man," making it seem that he becomes more a man by doing the manly deed. She exaggerates her own courage (although significantly she does not offer to do the murder herself), to make him fear to seem cowardly by comparison. Macbeth's whole reputation for bravery seems at last to be at stake, and even questions of success and failure are made to hang on his courage: "But screw your courage to the sticking-place/And we'll not fail." So that the whole of his past achievement seems to depend for its meaning on his capacity to go ahead with the contemplated act. He performs

the act, and from that point his final destruction is certain.

His tragic error, then, is at least threefold: he does not understand the forces working upon him to make him commit the deed, neither his wife nor the weird sisters; he does not understand the differences between "bloody execution" in civilian life and in his past military life; and he does not understand his own character—he does not know what will be the effects of the evil act on his own future happiness. Only one of these—the misunderstanding of the witches' prophecy—can be considered similar to, say, Iphigenia's ignorance of her brother's identity. Shakespeare has realized that simple ignorance of that sort will not do for the richly complex degenerative plot. The hero here must be really aware of the wickedness of his act, in advance. The more aware he can be—and still commit the act convincingly—the greater the regret felt by the reader or spectator. Being thus aware, he must act under a special kind of misunderstanding: it must be a misunderstanding caused by such powerful forces that even a good man might credibly be deceived by them into

"knowingly" performing an atrocious deed.

All these points are illustrated powerfully in the contrast between the final words of Malcolm concerning Macbeth—"This dead butcher and his fiendlike queen"—and the spectator's own feelings toward Macbeth at the same point. One judges Macbeth, as Shakespeare intends, not merely for his wicked acts but in the light of the total impression of all the incidents of the play. Malcolm and Macduff do not know Macbeth and the forces that have worked on him; the spectator does know him and, knowing him, can feel great pity that a man with so much potentiality for greatness should have fallen so low. The pity is that everything was not otherwise, since it so easily could have been otherwise. Macbeth's whole life, from the time of the first visitation of the witches, is felt to be itself a tragic error, one big pitiful mistake. And the conclusion brings a flood of relief that the awful blunder has played itself out, that Macbeth has at last been able to die, still valiant, and is forced no longer to go on enduring the knowledge of the consequences of his own misdeeds.