

# 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 phantoms, 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  
Alarm'd by his sentinel, the wolf,  
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his  
stealthy pace,  
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his  
dear  
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 chamberlains 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;  
That knits up the ravel'd sleeve of  
care,  
The death of each day's life, sore labor's  
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second  
course,  
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  
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.  
Hear that, knock!  
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  
Stepp'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 circlet 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 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:

Prithee, see there! Behold! look! lo! how  
say you!  
Why, what care I? If thou canst nod, speak  
too.  
If chameil-houses and our graves must send  
Those that we bury, back our monuments  
Shall be the maws of kites.  
Blood hath been shed ere now, i' th' olden  
time,  
Ay, and since, too, murders have been per-  
form'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



1800 BY GIBBIE & CO.  
Mrs. Siddons as Lady Macbeth  
entering with the letter  
Act I, Scene V



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

Possess it merely. That it should come to this:  
But two months dead!—nay, not so much, not two;  
So excellent a king, \* \* \* so loving to my mother,  
That he might not beteem 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 cements," "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;  
And you my sinews, grow not instant old;  
Hold me, my sinews, grow not instant old;  
Ay, thou poor ghost, while memory holds a seat  
In this distracted globe—Remember thee!  
Yea, 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 of 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 gait:

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

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—will two Provincial roses on my rased 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 tinge 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? I do not know that yet, thou shouldst follow 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 jeers lugubriously:

King—Now, Hamlet, where's Polonius?  
Hamlet—At supper.  
K.—At supper? 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 gravedigger 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 in this sight he goes to see by Ophelia's grave. He counts the skulls which the gravedigger turns out; this was a lawyer's, that a courtier's. What salutations, intrigues, pretensions, arrogance! And here, now, is 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 foot'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 phantoms of its creation, which sees the imaginary world too clearly to play a part in the real world; an artist whom evil chance has made a Prince, whom 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.