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IRVING WASSERMAN

Fair Is Fair, and Foul Is Foul

Rereading Macbeth, and seeing it in a recent performance by the Royal Shakespeare company, I have been struck with the starkly straightforward way Shakespeare confronts the question of relativism, the stance that is the ethical assumption of many beginning students. It is a stance capable of sophisticated elaboration, of course — witness the currently fashionable movement of deconstruction. Shakespeare, instead, forces us to look in the other direction: at the madness that ensues in the human mind, and in a country driven to chaos, when reason — the power to see what is real and say what is true — is perverted.

This theme of equivocation (in its root meaning, an equal voice, or equal sound — hence sound without meaning) is introduced in Macbeth after only nine lines in the unforgettable chant of the witches: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair." This riddling line, which seems to assert that nothing is what it appears to be, also asserts that nothing really is anything certain — nothing is really fair, or really foul. Even worse, it may mean that nothing is distinguishable from its opposite. But a further irony lies in the fact that this line is spoken by those whose business it is to equivocate, to speak with practiced deceit ("... these juggling fiends / That palter with us in a double sense," Macbeth says when the scales fall from his eyes, V.viii.19-20). In other words, what is equally true, and what even the witches know, is that fair is fair, and foul is foul; good is good, and evil, evil. The witches know the difference; otherwise they would be mad or idiots, and they are far from that. What makes them witches is that they prefer the foul. They are exceedingly sensitive to the foul, and they are especially adept in discerning its shape and power in the human soul and strengthening it there. In the case of Macbeth, they do not originate the evil in his soul (nor do they ever tell him to do a single thing), but are expert in exploiting that evil and making it grow. The witches serve the power of darkness; in order to entangle a human, they seek to deprive reason of its power to distinguish fair from foul — that is, they seek to make the victim mad. Lady Macbeth, who at the opening of the play already seems unable to make the distinction, soon becomes literally mad. And Mac-
beth, too, in the course of the action comes to see life as a “tale told by an idiot.” For if “Fair is foul, and foul is fair,” then life is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing” (V.v.29). What Macbeth expresses here is utter nihilism or “nothingism” (for nihil means “nothing”). There is no truth; one cannot say anything that is really so. One finally is no longer saying, but only ranting; there is no longer intelligibility, but only “sound and fury.” One is no longer rational, but mad, an “idiot.” “Out, out, brief candle!” is another way of indicating this extinction of sanity, or of the light of reason. We cannot help but see that being rational and being human are inseparable. We come to this same conclusion by noticing that the play presents the gradual transformation of a man into a “hell-hound” (that “beast” Lady Macbeth perversely accuses her husband of being when he does have scruples) through the loss of reason, the loss of the ability to distinguish fair from foul.

The “light” of reason appears, more discursively, as the gap between desire and act — the space in which debate over moral considerations (the struggle between light and darkness) takes place. Gradually, Macbeth closes that gap, and at times succeeds in closing it entirely, but not conclusively — cracks of light come through to the very end. The tragedy of Macbeth — and even of Lady Macbeth, I believe — rests ultimately on the fact that they never quite succeed in obliterating their knowledge of the good. What they ask for — at least at first — is a temporary loss of reason, or temporary obscurity, as if they need bracing for just one tremendous act: “Stars, hide your fires! / Let not light see my black and deep desires” (l.iv.51-52), Macbeth pleads, when, even before he reaches home and Lady Macbeth, he thinks immediately of disposing of the new Prince of Cumberland. And Lady Macbeth, still expecting his arrival, prays:

Come, thick Night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry, ‘Hold, hold!’ (l.iv.48-53)

We would have to say that both Macbeths at the outset know right from wrong and the meaning and significance of their acts; they need relief from reason to act out their desires — to quell reasoned hesitation. As the play soon reveals, Lady Macbeth’s prayer is fully answered; we see her bully Macbeth as he struggles to decide whether Duncan should be killed. This occurs in the well-known soliloquy, “If it were done, when ’tis done “ (l.vii.1-28). If it were done (or finished, without consequences or future repercussions) when it is done (perpetrated) — but there’s the rub; that is im-
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possible. Macbeth clearly sees that he cannot "trammel up the consequence"; the assassination cannot be "the be-all and the end-all — here"; he cannot "jump the life to come," either here "upon this bank and shoal of time," or in the hereafter. Not only will the bloody deed "return to plague the inventor," but the violation of his trust as a kinsman, subject, and host, not to mention Duncan's spotless character, "will plead like angels trumpet-tongued," and "pity, like a naked newborn babe... 

/ Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye." Macbeth is well aware that the only way to avoid the consequences of his deed is to master the future, to conquer fate. This speech, in fear of the future, is an ominous premonition of the last meditation of the doomed Macbeth: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day" (V.v.20-28). For how can he surely determine the future except by obliterating it? And isn't this what happens to his future when he attempts to force fate? How can he be sure of all future consequences except by encapsulating all time into an endless today, an everlasting "Now"? In "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" there is no longer any future; no next day, no tomorrow, is distinguishable from any other tomorrow. There is only one dreadfully tedious, insipid, meaningless today. When Macbeth and his Lady begged for darkness, they thought that leaving out the crack of light would give them life — the will and the determination to perpetrate the deed that would take them to the summit of their ambition. Now we know that begging for darkness means begging for death, that their former speeches equal "Out, out, brief candle!" The terminus for Macbeth is the living death of "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow," and that of Lady Macbeth the living death of insanity — followed speedily in each case by actual death, or extinction.

Earlier Lady Macbeth prayed that "no compunctious visitings of Nature / Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between / Th' effect and it!" (I.v.45-46). As we noted before, her prayer is answered, and she begins to equate moral debate with moral weakness: "Art thou afraid / To be the same in thine own act and valour, / As thou are in desire?" Now a voice for equivocation, she urges, "When you durst do it, then you were a man." Inverting the definition of man as the rational animal (known to every Elizabethan), she calls his well-articulated reasons for rejecting murder unmanly — in fact worthy of a beast. The sign of a man is that he matches words with deeds; there is no discrepancy between wanting and doing, desire and action. Her specious wisdom prevails, and the two embark on the murder of Duncan. Macbeth joins the forces of equivocation and vows to "mock the time with fairest show" (I.vii.83). He has a momentary return of clarity after the deed, when he foresees that "from this instant, / There's nothing serious in mortality" (II.iii.93-94), but ironically his hearers
may interpret his bleak words as a grieved response to the death of his king. Macbeth now is an equivocator, even when he speaks honestly.

After the murder of Duncan, Macbeth plans by himself (the middle action of the play). He seeks to conquer the future, to make himself like a god — knowing and controlling the future — but he becomes more like a beast. His first intended victims are Banquo and Fleance, so as to nullify the prophecies of the weird sisters to Banquo. Foiled by the escape of Fleance and by the reappearance of Banquo (“time has been, / That, when the brains were out, the man would die” IV.iv.76-77), Macbeth seeks out the witches. He is going to force truth from them: it is a measure of how far he is gone in his irrationality that he now expects truth and reassurance from these forces of darkness (“for now I am bent to know, / By the worst means, the worst. For mine own good, / All causes shall give way” (III.iv.133-35). He now believes that through sheer force of will he can forge his own future on this “bank and shoal of time.” He has closed the gap wherein reason and scruple can operate: “Strange things I have in head, that will to hand, / Which must be acted ere they may be scanned” (III.iv.138-39).

The very hopelessness and futility of Macbeth's mad ambition is signified by the focus on babes and children in the visions that he sees in the cave of the witches: children are the future, and they cannot be controlled (we are reminded of the “naked babe” in Macbeth’s vision of the consequences of murder). Now Macbeth sees the bloody child, signifying the babe not directly born of woman; the child crowned with a tree, signifying the branches of Birnam Wood cut and moving. But Macbeth hears only the promises of invulnerability as “Sweet bodements! good!” He looks forward to his long life: “and our high-plac'd Macbeth / Shall live the lease of Nature, pay his breath / To time, and mortal custom” (IV.i.97-100). With these false assurances, Macbeth ceases to think: “From this moment, / The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand” (IV.i.146-48). He has closed the gap. He will conquer the future. He will act like a man. What he orders is the meaningless killings of Macduff’s wife and children. Through slaughter of these agencies of the future (wife and children) he will punish Macduff.

It was suggested earlier that the tragedy of the Macbeths is that they never quite succeed in quetting, completely, the voice of reason or sense of consequences. To Lady Macbeth, the voice of conscience is almost inaudible: it speaks only when she is asleep. Nevertheless she demands light about her always, even though (because her eyes of sense are closed) she cannot see it, and her babbling words reveal knowledge of all the murders, including the killing of Lady Macduff, and all her pretenses. In the re-
cent performance by the Royal Shakespeare Company, Lady Macbeth smears a red cosmetic over her mouth in the sleepwalking scene, making her resemble the witch who, in the opening scene, says she has been “killing swine,” and who turns a blood-stained face to the audience. The effect is to let us see that Lady Macbeth “witchifies” herself in choosing the foul, or beastly way. Macbeth, too, when his kingdom is collapsing around him, remains bleakly aware: how could he have expected anything but “mouth honour?” Yet he remains conscious of what might accompany age — not only “the lease of Nature,” but “honour, love, obedience, troops of friends” (V.iii.25). One might almost be amused that he, practiced in equivocation, is now the receiver of “mouth honour,” barely concealed curses. He seems even to want the best for his kingdom (for the first time): “If thou couldst, Doctor, cast / The water of my land, find her disease, / And purge it to a sound and pristine health, / I would applaud thee to the very echo” (V.iii.50-53). Most significantly and indeed, somewhat to our surprise he hesitates to confront Macduff in combat from a dim qualm of conscience. Though his wife is dead, though his future is a long sequence of tomorrows, he is nevertheless reluctant to add Macduff to his list of victims because “my soul is too much charg’d / With blood of thine already” (V.viii.78-8). In other words, though he believes himself the sure winner (“I bear a charmed life” [V.viii.12]) and could join wish to act in the instant, some vestige of light, or scruple, remains.

Finally, we may say that Macbeth was better off when he was vacillating, when he did hesitate. The less he debates with himself, the more monstrous he becomes; his most “sure,” his most unequivocal act is the murder of Macduff’s wife and children. But, put this way, we seem to be in trouble regarding decisive action. Are we suggesting that it is better to be indecisive rather than decisive? No, that can’t be so. It’s not that it’s better to vacillate as such, or that it’s better to be decisive as such, but that, when one is decisive, one is decisive in choosing the good rather than the bad. The unavoidable fundamental reality is the distinction between the “fair” and the “foul.” But can we leave it at acting decisively for the good? We need only recall Duncan, who seemed to always act unequivocally for the good: all his actions were ingenuous, open, generous, well-intentioned, noble — all becoming of a good king. In fact, he seems to be the perfect foil to the Macbeths. But we cannot forget the results: his ugly murder, plus the terrible convulsions in the political realm. It looks as if Duncan did not pay sufficient attention to the darkness.

If we ask what the play teaches us, we can say that there is a realm of light and a realm of darkness: there really is what is fair, and there really is what is foul. Let the light in! Let all the light in that we can, but never forget the darkness. That was
Duncan's mistake: he didn't pay sufficient attention to the darkness. Duncan and the Macbeths appear to be at the opposite extremes of light and darkness. The better, the workable, way seems to be Malcolm's, who shows his awareness of the powers of darkness in the extraordinary scene where he tests Macduff by claiming to be what he is not, a person of cruel appetites. Here equivocation is used for a good purpose, to determine Macduff's motives before accepting him as a follower: perhaps Macduff doesn't really care about the kingdom or, even worse, is an agent of Macbeth. Malcolm seems to have learned from both his father and Macbeth. There is good reason to believe that foul Scotland will be more fair.

Among life's unique persons, our personality is most likely, individual.

Students of mystery, that it is to savor, by taking in traits—we have.

Long before well-worn plots, novel readers Steichen's "The Family of Man," The Family of Man, the curator was "What was drawn from the subject's own ego?"

I was drawn to a person from the self, contempory making this possible?"

portraiture behind evade the meaning.