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Englisch

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MACBETH

Shakespeare's

Last

Great

Tragedy

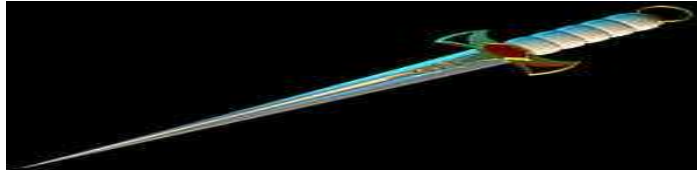
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1 Foreword



Four hundred years ago a playwright, unique in the human history of literature, was in his prime. Well acknowledged at his time, legendary today, William Shakespeare is probably amongst the most read, most quoted and, quite certainly, the most written about authors of all time. Even the most common person totally unacquainted with literature is likely to have at least once heard of Hamlet, and is perhaps even able to associate him and his cryptic, most quoted, immortal starting words of the suicide-soliloquy “To be or not to be” – although probably being quite ignorant of the fact that this phrase has anything to do with contemplating to kill oneself – with the name of Shakespeare.

There are, of course, multitudinous reasons why one single man, son of a probably illiterate tradesman, born in the midst of sixteenth century Elizabethan England, was by the mere means of his plume, his mind and little theatre-ensemble able to establish for himself this immortal fame. Shakespeare must have been a person of extraordinary talent and creative power, but there was more. One might say that he had many faces – in the meaning of versatility. The variety in his work ranges from pure comedy over historical accounts and heart-rending romance to deadly-sadly-dark tragedy. Many critics and ordinary readers still startle at the astounding fact that *A Midsummernight’s Dream*, *Othello*, *The Tempest*, *Romeo and Juliet* and others whose difference could not be greater, are actually off-springs of the same mind. This diversity of Shakespeare’s creation is just another reason for his success.

In here, I will focus on the latter of the above mentioned categories – comedies, histories, romances and tragedies – in which the great playwright’s work is classified. Having thus cut down the immense number of Shakespearean dramas to a mere eleven, I have to carry out another distinction. In the tragic forest where pines like *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Coriolanus* and *Romeo and Juliet* grow, four great oaks tower above all the other trees, letting these appear to be nothing more than shrubbery. Ancient, gnarled and deeply rooted this quartet of giants seems to be, and out of its wood the mighty rump of Shakespeare’s tragic work is built.

These are the so-called “Four Great Tragedies”, being *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*. Originally I intended to focus on every single one of them, but soon this plan revealed itself to be too farfetched since the dimension of this study must be limited. Had I carried out my initial plan and still kept to the necessary limitations of length, I just would

have been able to sketch the coastline of each tragedy without ever really setting firm foot on the fertile earth beyond. But since I always wanted to climb those secret mountains hiding behind the coastal fog of the island a Shakespearean Tragedy consists of, I could not proceed on this fatal path. Thus, I was forced to narrow my field of work. Hence, I decided to credit only one of the Great Four with closer observation. My choice fell on the tragedy of Macbeth, to which the greater part of this study is devoted to.

Along with preparing for this task I gradually came to the conviction that writing an interpretation on a Shakespearean Tragedy is much harder than I thought at first. Not because there is little to write about, not at all. There are whole books to fill with thoughts on Macbeth and the other tragedies. The problem is of a quite different nature: These books have already been written. For almost four-hundred years Shakespeare's descendants have had time to think and write about his works and there have been many to do so. There is not really much that has not been said yet. Thus, the interpreter of today cannot do much but repeat, quote and compare the thoughts of his predecessors of yore, unless he stumbles over some totally new ideas. But even then – like it happened to me with the unfinished ending theory I am going to discuss in 3.2.4 – as he is doing further study, he will see that there was someone a hundred years ago who had the same thoughts before.

Therefore, many of the ideas present in this study here may resemble those of other “students of Shakespeare” that went before me and whose works are listed in the bibliography. But apart from this, I still hope to have stated some new ideas in here which have not yet been written.

Enough of this. The time has come to set forth into the matter itself. My study opens with a chapter on the Four Great Tragedies, comparing them and explaining their singular position amongst Shakespeare's works. Then in Chapter Three I will concentrate fully on Macbeth, bringing light into its darkest spots. Neither do I intend to include all the features that are thought to be characteristic for a classical interpretation, nor do I want to mention everything that seems to be essential. The borders these definitions have, are not stable and move to and fro. What I am trying to do is simply to say everything that is interesting and appears worthy to be mentioned, which is enough. In Chapter Four I will discuss the matter whether Macbeth really is the last of the Four Great Tragedies. Finally a Conclusion will be drawn.

Before I begin, one point has yet to be stated. It does not make much sense to examine the following if the reader is not acquainted with Shakespeare's play to a certain extent. If he has never read Macbeth before, or there have been whole decades passing by since he last

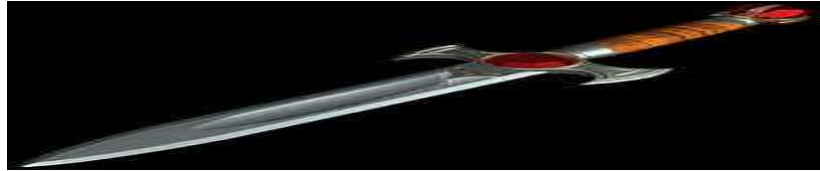
did, not much understanding will be derived from this study. In every word I write, I anticipate that the reader is familiar with the tragedy. Of course I could have written a study which is intelligible to everyone, but that would just be like composing a scientific essay about the Earth's atmosphere and saying within that the sky is blue and sometimes full of clouds that can let it rain when the weather is bad. The reader of this study is supposed to be well-acquainted with the topic.

Now all there was to say, is said. Continue, dear reader, and be introduced to the power and the genius of one of the greatest artists of all time.



The sources of all the illustrations this study contains will be given at the end of the bibliography which is to be found on page 40. Quoted commentaries are marked either by the name of the author and if necessary the number of the page or, if the quote is taken from the Internet, by the letter "I" and a certain number. In both cases this indication is placed within parenthesis right after the quote, be it direct or indirect. In addition direct quotes are illustrated by quotation marks as it is commonly done. All the works quoted are fully named in the bibliography. Quotes taken from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* directly which is, of course, the chief source of this study, are solely marked by the numbers of Act, Scene and Verse without the unnecessary repetition of the playwright's name. Thus, each quote can be assigned easily to its source without much ado as it should be.

2 The Great Four



There was a time approximately between 1599 and 1606 when William Shakespeare, at the height of his dramatic power, produced in rather quick succession four tragedies which are, to speak metaphorically, the “rump” of his tragic work, the pillars of his hall of falling down, or as the Cambridge History of English and American Literature puts it, “the four wheels of his chariot, the four wings of his spirit, in the tragic and tragicomic division” (11). These four works are commonly known as Shakespeare’s Great Tragedies, being *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth*.

2.1 Why are these four so “great”?

Before we try to find the source of the singularity of the four works named above, it is at first easier to formulate the question thus: What makes the other tragedies not so “great”? Why are they inferior?

Different critics offer different answers to that question. Let us begin with the tragedies of *Julius Caesar* and *Antony and Cleopatra*, written approximately before and after, or even while, completing the Great Four. What makes them so different? A.C. Bradley, professor of English Language and Literature as well as Poetry, to whom I owe most of the information this Chapter contains, offers the brief explanation that these two Roman plays, in addition with *Richard III* and *Richard II* are mere “tragic histories or historical tragedies” (Bradley 21) than actual pure tragedies, whatever that means. They show “considerable deviations from that standard” (21) since Shakespeare was obliged to stick to the historical pattern these plays are based on, and thus could not let his intuition solely choose the story’s path. His genius was, so to say, trapped within certain limits. (cf. Bradley 21)

Well, that may be true regarding the Roman plays, but concerning *Richard II* and *Richard III* Bernard McElroy, author of *Shakespeare’s Mature Tragedies*, offers a more thorough explanation: These two are at whole still on a quite different scale than the Four, meaning that they are not yet mature and to some extent imperfect or maybe even faulty.

When Richard III is struck with doubt on the eve of Bosworth, nothing about it comes close to being worthy of the word ‘collapse’, which is central in the development of the heroes in the Great Four. His inner struggle is isolated and does not at all interfere with the outer

action. On the morning after Richard continues his business as ever before and naught can be observed of a divided soul (cf. I4). This shows very well that in this early phase of Shakespeare's work inner and outer conflict has not yet started to mingle.

Different is the case of this king's predecessor Richard II whose story the great playwright dramatised years after. As McElroy says, it "constitutes an important milestone in Shakespeare's development" (I4). In it much reminds of the mature tragedies. However, the play is "less concerned with questions of universal order than with questions of political order." (I4) Shakespeare did not yet quite dare to touch those mighty matters beyond the drama's surface but they are there all the same. (cf. I4)

There are still some more dramas to single out. *Titus Andronicus*, Shakespeare's first tragedy, for instance. A.C. Bradley briefly declares that he "shall leave [this tragedy] out of account, because, even if Shakespeare wrote the whole of it, he did so before he had either style of his own or any other characteristic tragic conception." (Bradley 21). He probably did not like it very much. Bernard McElroy focuses somewhat more on the matter stating that *Titus Andronicus* "is a clear marker on the long road to King Lear." (I4), because it contains psychic dissolution signalling "the collapse of the subjective world" (I4). However, "it makes no sense to talk of Titus' subjective world because the character is not that elaborately drawn." (I4).

The tragedy of *Timon of Athens* is on the whole not attributed to Shakespeare (cf. Bradley 21) and the "complementary balance characteristic (...) [has] completely broken down" (I4). It is clearly no great tragedy either.

There remains one that cannot be set aside for any of those reasons. One that surely is a "pure tragedy" (Bradley 21) and probably amongst Shakespeare's most famous. Why is it that *Romeo and Juliet*, the tragedy that is, although not history, closer to reality than all the other Shakespearean works, and still, be it on stage or screen, makes people cry today, is not granted with the title of greatness?

It is an "early work" and thus "immature" (Bradley 21) the famous critic explains. But is that really the case? To me, the ancient story of Romeo and Juliet is as mature and as perfectly masterly as any of the Great Four can be. The real difference is that it is another kind of tragedy, no great man's fall, no single being struggling against the evil world, no, it is a tragedy of love and thus singular amongst Shakespeare's other masterpieces. In the

matters it touches and the clearness these are drawn in, *Romeo and Juliet* is as well greater and smaller, more and less than *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* can ever be.

Now, as it is finally said why the others are not “great”, whatever that means, it is easy to arrive at the conclusion that the reason for the singularity of the Four merely lies in the inferiority of the rest. But since speech exists it never sufficed to state what something is by just saying what it is not. Thus, one paragraph is still to be added here.

The four tragedies of *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear* and *Macbeth* are singular amongst Shakespeare’s work because of the power they have in common. There is something about them: a certain grimness, darkness, sadness – the tragic fact. Most striking are their complexity, their ambiguity and, most of all, their depth. There are lines, enigmatic and yet not understood, maybe never intended to be understood, destined to be eternal mysteries and yet clear as an azure sky on a September morning. Those tragedies do not take place only on the stage, they are set in our minds showing human failure as well as strength. One might say they are even haunting, in the meaning of ‘persistently recurring to the mind; difficult to forget’ (cf. King 139). They are one of the greatest combination of the twenty-six letters of the alphabet plus dots and commas, the human mind has ever accomplished, and thus they are because they contain and consist of what the following chapter is all about.

2.2 Common characteristics

Most of the information and speculation the following part of this chapter contains is more or less extracted from or at least based on the first chapter, The Substance of Tragedy, of A. C. Bradley’s book *Shakespearean Tragedy*. If some part is to be credited to some other person, the information will be given.

It is important to note that many of the features pointed at in this chapter are also true for other Shakespearean plays than the Four Great Tragedies. However, in no other are they thus thoroughly developed.

2.2.1 On the rough

Opening a booklet containing one of the Great Tragedies – or seeing it on stage, it does not matter – for the first time and reading through it, one will instantly observe the following:

- There are a whole lot of dramatis personæ in it
- It is the story of one person, the hero
- The hero always is a person of high degree and great importance
- At the end, the hero must die
- Suffering and calamity precede and conduct to the hero's death
- The suffering and calamity are exceptional, unexpected and in contrast to previous happiness or glory

This is what the medieval mind conceived as tragic fact. Should one of these six points – except perhaps the first one – be amiss, the tragedy would not be really tragic. If there were no hero to focus on, the play would be destined to fall apart. If the hero were a peasant, his fall could never be as great as a prince's because his nation or empire would fall with him. If the hero's death were instantaneous, like a stroke, it would not be accepted by the audience. If the suffering preceding death were not unexpected and the hero were instead slowly rotting away by disease, the tragedy would not be good at all. The tragic fact must be maintained to achieve a pure tragedy.

2.2.2 Getting closer

But is this all? Many playwrights in the history of literature, before and after William Shakespeare, have kept to those points above and yet achieved nothing like *Hamlet*. There must be more. The Shakespearean idea of the tragic fact must go beyond that. And it does. So let us ask again: What is a Shakespearean tragedy?

Thus far we are: it is “a story of exceptional calamity leading to the death of a man in high estate.” (Bradley 28) It is not right. There is something important yet to be added here. These calamities, be it Lear's madness, Iago's evil soliciting and its causes, or Claudius' poison plot, are never accidental. Unlike a stroke of lightning, they “do not simply happen (...) [but] proceed mainly from (...) the actions of men.” (28)

The characters on the stage, solely or in unison, execute certain actions. And “these actions beget others, and these others beget others again, (...)” (28) Everything ends in the

catastrophe which does not simply happen but is caused by the persons concerned. The hero “always contributes in some measure to the disaster in which he perishes.” (28)

A single stone cast adrift by the erring feet of a lonely wanderer may set many others in motion while speeding down the mountainside. In the end, whole rocks may be falling and the mountain can collapse beneath the wanderer.

Shakespearean Tragedy thus is a story “of human actions producing exceptional calamity and ending in the death of (..) a man[of high estate].” (32)

2.2.3 Certain Circumstances

In Shakespearean tragedy it is quite impossible to foresee at the beginning of the play what the end will be like. Even if it is possible to mark the tragic potential present in the hero or other personages, it is very hard to depict if this potential will ever be initiated and thus gain the name ‘action’, for “had [they] not met with peculiar circumstances, [many characters] would have escaped a tragic end, and might even have lived fairly untroubled lives” (30). These circumstances do not have to be necessarily characteristic deeds but may issue from quite different sources. Those may be subordinate since Shakespeare does not use them often and lets the human action be dominant, but still they are there. A.C. Bradley sets them in three categories.

- Abnormal Conditions of Mind

Insanity manifested in somnambulism or hallucinations is not really a deed or action executed by certain characters. Not being subject to control gives madness a special significance. However, it is important to note that an abnormal condition of mind is never the direct source of any dramatic deed leading to catastrophe. It seldom has any real influence. “Macbeth did not murder Duncan because he saw a dagger in the air: he saw the dagger because he was about to murder Duncan.” (30). Neither did any real insanity as of Lear or Ophelia cause any tragic conflict, being just a result already.

- The Supernatural

There are ghosts in the dramatic world of Shakespeare as well as witches. Being more than just off-springs of a troubled mind – others can see them too – they are a striking sight to the audience, most notably in *Hamlet* and in *Macbeth*. It is quite important to note – at least for Bradley – that these supernatural beings neither force anyone to do something nor initiate any action directly. Their power is limited to confirming “inward movements already present and exerting an influence” (30).

- Chance

“Any occurrence (not supernatural, of course) which enters the dramatic sequence neither from the agency of a character, nor from the obvious surrounding circumstances” (31) may be called chance or accident. Things happen, and there is nothing to do about it: lightning may strike; Romeo may miss a message; Juliet awakes a minute too late; Desdemona drops her handkerchief at the wrong moment. Bad luck, one might say. Fact is that these accidents or chances occur. Never will anyone be able to foresee or even control them. We are all slaves of chaos that may strike at anytime.

2.2.4 Conflict

Were there no conflict, there would not be a crisis either and thus no tragedy. In each of the Great Four it is more or less easy to place the major characters into two “antagonistic groups” (33). The conflict between those two rises eventually to a crisis and ends in a catastrophe, which is as a rule the hero’s – and many times many other persons’ – death. In *Macbeth* this separation of dramatis personæ is, as the reader knows, most clearly visible. However, in other plays there are some characters for whom it is quite hard to decide to which group they belong – Edgar and Ophelia, for instance.

Viewing a Shakespearean tragedy as a mere conflict between two groups seems a bit flat, and it is of course. Once again there must be more. Does the conflict only occur between those groups or is there another one within them? There always is, and to me this inner struggle seems much more important and, furthermore, much more interesting than any outer conflict can ever be. The heroes of the Four Tragedies never have an undivided soul. There is conflict within. Hamlet is Claudius’ mortal enemy, but he hesitates to kill him because of another much more powerful enemy: his own irresolute mind. This inner conflict is most vehement in *Macbeth*.

2.2.5 The Heroes

Hamlet, Prince of Denmark; Lear, King of Britain; Othello, noble General of the Venetian army; and Macbeth, former General of the King's army and King hereafter: four men, four tragedies – with all the differences between them, what do they have in common?

“They are exceptional beings.” (35), Bradley answers. Exceptional are not only their positions and sufferings, but they themselves in their proper souls. They are “made of the stuff we find within ourselves and within the persons who surround them.”(35). Surely they are, so to say, great amongst their fellow beings, gifted with genius or special passion; a “terrible force” (36) is alive within them. However, in all we observe “a marked one-sidedness, a predisposition in some particular direction; a total incapacity, in certain circumstances, of resisting the force which draws in this direction; a fatal tendency to identify the whole being with one interest, object, passion, or habit of mind.” (36). A flaw of nature it is that all of them have in common, different as is it may be. Hamlet's irresolution, Lear's folly, Othello's suspicion and the ruthless ambition and poetic imagination of Macbeth - all these “fatal gifts”, these “fundamental tragic traits” (cf. 36) are the basic sources of the tragedy that awaits all of them.

A.C. Bradley observes that if any of those fatal heroes, would be replaced by the main character of other Shakespearean dramas like *Cybeline* or the *Winter's Tale*, a happy end would be the result. Well, Bradley apparently misses the observance that in order to achieve such a theoretic good outcome, and thus letting the tragedy cease to be called so, it is not really necessary to switch one of the four tragic heroes with a totally different character. The very same can be accomplished by a different distribution of the four amongst the Four. Othello would have no problem to handle Hamlet's situation, Hamlet likewise Othello's.

Resuming the discussion of above we may say that each tragic hero is gifted by a “tragic trait” (cf. 36) that makes him great but in the end quite “dead”. It is “fatal to him”(37). Through it he causes conflict and crises, either by committing a certain action like Macbeth or failing to do so as it is the case with Hamlet.

2.2.6 The Essence

Near the middle of his great study A.C. Bradley wrote a paragraph about the central feeling the Great Four evoke in the viewer or reader. Here it is:

“This central feeling is the impression of waste. With Shakespeare, at any rate, the pity and fear which are stirred by the tragic story seem to unite with, and even to merge in, a profound sense of sadness and mystery, which is due to this impression of waste. ‘What a piece of work is man,’ we cry; ‘so much more beautiful and so much more terrible than we knew! Why should he be so if this beauty and greatness only tortures itself and throws itself away?’ We seem to have before us a type of the mystery of the whole world, the tragic fact which extends far beyond the limits of tragedy. Everywhere, from the crushed rocks beneath our feet to the soul of man, we see power, intelligence, life and glory, which astound us and seem to call for our worship. And everywhere we see them perishing, devouring one another and destroying themselves, often with dreadful pain, as though they came into being for no other end. Tragedy is the typical form of this mystery, because that greatness of soul which it exhibits oppressed, conflicting and destroyed, is the highest existence in our view. It forces the mystery upon us, and it makes us realise so vividly the worth of that which is wasted that we cannot possibly seek comfort in the reflection that all is vanity.” (38)

In this fantastic paragraph I think the great critic succeeded to touch the profound essence of tragedy, and Shakespeare was certainly also aware of it.

Here is another one:

“The essence of Shakespeare’s tragedies is the expression of one of the great paradoxes of life. We might call it the paradox of disappointment. Defeat, shattered hopes, and ultimately death face us all as human beings. They are very real, but somehow we have the intuitive feeling that they are out of place. They seem to be intruders into life. Tragic literature confronts us afresh with this paradox and we become fascinated by it.” (12)

Here is my own:

In Shakespearean tragedy, human beings of fault and virtue like and unlike us, are confronted with a world that is a broken but clean mirror of our reality. The psychological or even more the philosophical aspect behind it is that by conceiving tragedy, we are reminded of the tragic beings we are ourselves and learn to accept and live with this knowledge. A comedy helps to forget what and who and where we are. A tragedy lets us remember and see and thus helps to understand life.

2.2.7 Argument

I could write on like that for thirty more pages. There is so much present in the Great Four Tragedies yet to discuss. Evil, Power, Fate, all hidden and interesting. When I started writing this chapter, I also intended to focus on the common construction but unfortunately, this chapter has to end here for the following three reasons:

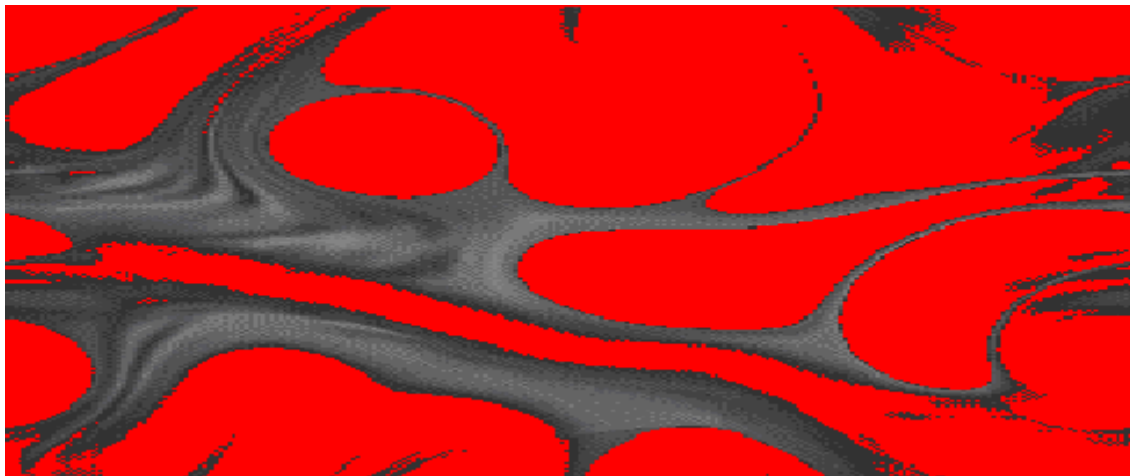
1. This study is limited and I need enough space for the discussion of Macbeth.
2. I am weary of just quoting and repeating thoughts thought before by others and finally want to add my own results which is not exceedingly possible in this chapter.
3. The real interesting matters ought to be discussed now.

But before this chapter is to be concluded one more point has to follow.

2.2.8 Death

Death ends it all. It stands like a huge black gate at the conclusion of each of the Great Four but its significance changes significantly. Hamlet is a tragedy because the hero dies. If survival had been his lot, a good king he would have been. Othello is already doomed to death by killing his beloved Desdemona. The loss of his own life is relief to him. Lear's death is not the real tragedy, but being alive is. And in Macbeth, the hero's death is a mere by-product of the inevitable end. (cf. I4)

Thus the role of death alters. In the chronological order (*Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*), the dramas become progressively darker and more cruel. And this is the end.



3 Macbeth



Let us now turn to the last-written of the four great tragedies, in English theatre-circles best known as the Scottish piece, in which appears what we can justly call Shakespeare's final style. Let us turn to the fascinating, sublime or even horrifying tragedy of Macbeth, or as A.C Bradley describes it, "the most vehement, the most concentrated, (...) the most tremendous" (Bradley 306) piece born on paper by the great master's plume.

3.1 The Scottish Piece at first Glance

There are quite a few striking features in Macbeth the reader observes almost instantly once he has briefly glanced through the drama. These characteristics distinguish this tragedy amongst its fellow plays of greatness and make it all the same worthy to be one of them. Here are the most obvious, the most important, the most interesting of those features of overwhelming presence in Macbeth.

3.1.1 The Blackness

Each of Shakespeare's tragedies has a special atmosphere of its own, but in no other than the Scottish piece is this peculiarity marked thus clear. A great number of indicators, obvious or disguised, large or small, all through the play evoke a special emanation that lies like a thick black cloud all over the drama and is best described as being rather ominous, ghastly, frightening and even more as being dark.

In fact, this obscurity or even blackness is the most striking feature of this tragedy. It is indeed utterly dark. Almost ninety-five percent of the play takes place at night or in some dark spots where shrill and piercing screams echo within the vaults of old castles and witches "hover through the fog and filthy air" (I.i.12) of thundering storms. "The moon is down" (II.i.2), "the candles are all out"(II.i.5) and even the stars are asked to hide their fires (cf. I.iv.50). "Light thickens' (...) [and] 'night's black agents to their prey do rouse'" (Bradley 307). It is the time to hasten home and fly from dusk. We see a dawn at which the sun fails to awake. Mute ghosts walk around, daggers, means of murder, float along dark corridors, mousing owls over desolate heaths hawk falcons in twain and in deep caverns "black, and midnight hags" (IV.i.48) let cauldrons bubble to "double toil and trouble"

(IV.i.10,20,35). There are mad queens sleepwalking, walls faintly talking, owls screaming and wolfs howling. “Noble horses” eat each other, the creatures of the dark are out, “thrice the brinded cat hath mew’d” (IV.i.1) and a sudden cry announces “murther” (II.iii.84). This is Macbeth in all its darkness.

3.1.2 The Blood

Blackness is brooding over the drama. Certainly its presence is most striking, but still it is not incessant. Any language probably lacks the right words to explain this matter, but surely the reader familiar enough with the four tragedies will understand. Despite all the dark gloom of *Macbeth* it is not as cold as *King Lear*. We do not feel an equal feeling of unease in the former, which is present in the latter and which makes many a reader even feel unhappy. A.C Bradley has probably found the right words in stating that “Macbeth leaves a decided impression of colour; it is really the impression of a black night broken by flashes of light.” (Bradley 308).

What light? Certainly there are the flashing colours of the thunderstorm and many scenes are illuminated by flames. We remember Fleance and his torch as Banquo is murdered. There is Lady Macbeth and her candle by her side in the last stage of her suffering. We also recall the boiling cauldron and the horrifying apparitions around it. Are these the flashes of light A.C. Bradley meant? Only in part because there is one colour in the play that dominates all the others. It appears not only in action but also in speech. Hardly is there any scene where it is not once mentioned. It is the colour of blood that is forced upon us, even where it does not seem to fit at all.

What is the first thing we see after the violent witchcraft opening of the play? A “bloody man” (II.i.1) appears on the stage, marked with countless wounds squirting out the reddish juice of life. Right away “he can report, as seemeth by his plight, of the revolt the newest state” (I.ii.1f) and tells us a hero’s tale of “bloody execution” (I.ii.18), “carved out passages” (cf. I.ii.19) and other things alike until his story reaches a second battle even bloodier. The opposing parties “ment to bathe in reeking wounds” (I.ii.40).

And that is only one scene. It goes on like that all through the play. Soon Lady Macbeth enters and almost at once she seems to evoke some evil spirits and asks them “to thicken her blood” (cf. I.v.42) and make her cruel. It would be needless here to mention all those

images that are stained alike since there are far too many. But still I have to mention the most striking ones.

We see Macbeth, at first gazing at a bloody dagger floating in the air, then at his hands, red as a rose, knowing that “all great Neptune’s ocean”(II.ii.59) can never wash this blood clean from his hand. Rather it will “the multitudinous seas incarnadine” (II.ii.61) and all the green will be soon red. In IV.i the apparition of a bloody child advises Macbeth to be bloody, and as he acts accordingly, we imagine him wading through seas of blood. Perhaps the one scene the reader remembers best is the one in which we see Lady Macbeth sleepwalking. Her words uttered in bare madness caused by immense grief, a nuance of repentance or frankly the consequence of action, are quite touching. A.C. Bradley even dares to call them “the most horrible lines in the whole tragedy” (Bradley 309).

Yet who would have thought the old man
to have so much blood in him?
(V.i.38f)

3.1.3 The Supernatural

More than in any other tragedy born on paper by Shakespeare’s plume, Macbeth is full of strange, nightmarish creatures and appearances that cannot be explained by the principles of reason. These things evoke a certain unease in the spectators mind, most notably at the beginning.

*[An open place.] Thunder and
lightening. Enter three Witches.*

FIRST WITCH:
When shall we three meet again?
In thunder, lightening, or in rain?
SECOND WITCH:
When the hurlyburly’s done,
When the battle’s lost and won.
THIRD WITCH:
That will be ere the set of sun.
FIRST WITCH:
Where the place?



SECOND WITCH: Upon the heath.
THIRD WITCH: There to meet with Macbeth
FIRST WITCH: I come, Graymalkin!
SECOND WITCH: Paddock calls.
THIRD WITCH: Anon!
ALL:
Fair is foul, and foul is fair:
Hover through the fog and filthy air.
[Exeunt.]
(I.i.1-12)

Thus begins the last great tragedy. We imagine the audience rapt and silent at once, all struck by the same thought: Something is seriously wrong here. Then a bloody man staggers upon the stage.

What or who exactly are these witches? Can they be identified? “Weird Sisters” (I.iii.32) they call themselves. The term “weird” might be derived from wayward, but is more likely to have its origin in the old English term *wyrd* meaning fate. (Günther* 212). It was believed that they resemble the *Moirai*, the three fates in Greek mythology who are spinning, measuring and cutting the threads of life. However, their real source is to be found in the Norse legends. They represent the three Norns, *Verdani* (Present), *Skuld* (Future) and *Urd* (Fate) whose purpose it is to determine the destiny of god, giants, dwarfs and men. (cf. Cotterell 182)

There is another supernatural character in *Macbeth* of doubtful origin. Hecate is her name. The *Encyclopaedia of Mythology* states the following about her: being a descendent from the Titans, she was a Greek Goddess of two different faces. At daytime she had a positive influence on agriculture but at night she was involved in witchcraft, ghosts and tombs. Often she is depicted with three heads. (cf. Cotterell 45)

Another source tells that Hecate actually means “‘she who works from afar’”. She is the guardian of the cross-roads, (...) the goddess of the underworld, earth and sky. Due to this and the fact that there were three paths meeting at the cross-roads, she is usually represented by threes.“ (I6).

In *Macbeth* the witches seem to be subordinate to Hecate. She kind of rebukes them for not letting her be part initially of their affairs with the former general and latter king. It is also she who evokes the three apparitions in the second prophecy scene.

Without the witches, all the misery Macbeth has to go through would probably have never happened. However, they are not to blame for Duncan's death, for they never did suggest a deed like that to Macbeth. The ambition to do so was present in the general before he met them.

3.1.4 On Irony

When Samuel Taylor Coleridge wrote in his study on Macbeth and Hamlet that in the former there is an "entire absence of (...) irony" (Coleridge 32), he either must have been out of his mind or, more likely, had not read the play but once. It is almost impossible not to notice the overwhelming irony that is spread out over many passages. Indeed, there is no other play created by Shakespearean plume in which this feature is as strongly developed as in Macbeth.

I do not want to point out just the ordinary irony which we witness, for instance in III.vi. where Lennox tries to express his opinion without really talking about the matter itself. The special kind of irony called by A.C. Bradley "Sophoclean irony" that is present in many scenes, is not perceived by the characters themselves. It is the story itself and, therefore, the author that keeps being ironic and this is conceived by the audience. (cf. Bradley 311)

A few examples will bring some light on that theory.

There is no art
To find the mind's construction in the face:
He was a gentleman, on whom I built
An absolute trust.
O worthiest cousin....
(I.iv.11ff)

In the last line, after talking about the disloyal Thane of Cawdor, Duncan addresses himself to Macbeth, the ongoing traitor, on whom again he builds absolute trust. What else is this but irony?

Other instances in the drama that are quite alike and give impulse to more speculation are to be found all through the play but most notably at I.ii.56ff and I.iv.1ff.

One more feature full of irony that cannot be omitted is the different attitudes of Lord and Lady Macbeth towards their "great business" (I.v.67) most clearly expressed in the hand-washing metaphors.

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.
(II.ii.59ff)

in contrast to:

A little water clears us of this deed
(II.ii.66)

There is just one single reason to dwell a little bit longer on the irony. The audience is not always well aware of the hidden messages in the quoted passage of the king or of others. Knowing nothing about Macbeth and being totally ignorant of the course the story will take later on, all this beautiful irony would escape the grasp of the audience fitting that description. A spectator in a theatre that sees the Scottish piece for the first time will not understand why the guy seated next to him grins like mad at lines of Duncan quoted above. This proves that reading Shakespearean plays only once can never lead to full understanding. It also tells us something about the great playwright's intention. He did not write just to impress his audience the first time, he intended to give his work some dynamic of its own.

3.2 Peculiarities

A Shakespearean tragedy is full of indicators that give impulse to further speculation. There are various things within, as well as about the story, worthy to be called interesting or, at least, peculiar. Be it something about the play's history, the plot's history, a single soliloquy's significance or a striking number of certain stylistic devices, all can be part of this chapter. Hundreds of these are there to be discussed, ten I intended to grant with this honour, for four I actually had time and space. Here they are:

3.2.1 On numbers

Numbers are very significant in Macbeth, especially the three. There are three witches, three apparitions, three murderers at the assault on Banquo. The twilight world in which

Macbeth is partly set is neither night or day but a third. “Thrice the brindled cat hath mew’d” (IV.i.1). “Thrice to thrice, and thrice to mine/And thrice again to make up nine” (I,ii,35f). As in Goethe’s Faust, witches like numbers, of course, and three is a very special one. It may “signify unresolved ambiguity” (cf. I5).

I may add a rather strange assumption I arrived at through a thorough observance of the piece itself: Numbers can be even and odd. Interestingly, the witches never do appear in a scene that has an even number, but in I.i, I.iii, III.v and IV.i. Furthermore, while reading the fifth act I noticed something else concerning evenness and oddness. This last act is characteristic for its rapid change of scenes. In modern versions there are nine of them. Once there were but seven, the last three being one. Observing it thus, it is even more convenient to state the rule that in scenes with even numbers the party of Malcolm and Macduff is advancing, while in odd scenes, Macbeth is there to set the course. That may be nothing but coincidence, but perhaps Shakespeare set it thus at purpose smiling at his talent to hide little signals and symbols like that and wondering whether anyone might find it some day.

3.2.2 The Story behind

Macbeth, usurper, tyrant, murderer of children who is “bloody, luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful, sudden, malicious, smacking of every sin that has a name” (IV.iii.57ff): thus villainous Shakespeare presents him. Justly? Deep in the Middle-Ages behind the thick fog of time, there was once a real Macbeth. Who was that man of legend?

To understand his role in the course the world has taken back then, it is not very helpful to look for information in Shakespeare’s play itself because that would be “a wasted effort, since the playwright was in the business of filling his playhouse with plays that people would pay to see” (I3). Whether this might be true for Shakespeare or not, there are other means of getting closer to the historical Macbeth.

Historians from the sixteenth century give more detailed accounts on the matter and the playwright himself did depend on their views. However, their description of Macbeth’s time, the eleventh century, is very much limited since it was recorded five-hundred years

after. Therefore the only way to get accurate information is to travel back into the darkest medieval time itself. (cf. I3)

Archaeological information deserves, if anything does, to be called quite rare – only one axe head found from the eleventh century – but there is some revealing poetry: Macbeth was a warlord, ruler of the “Mowmar of Murray” (I3). When he was in his teens, an event typical for early Scottish history occurred. His cousin killed his father and Macbeth effectively took revenge by killing his cousin along with fifty followers. He also married his departed cousin’s wife, Gruagh, more familiar to us as Lady Macbeth, the “first queen to be named in Scottish history” (I3). But she was no queen yet. There was still a king – Duncan was actually her cousin – to murder. It is not known whether Gruagh really took any part in it. J.R. Costa describes her as “a good woman who generously funded and gave land to the Caudies monks who transcribed manuscripts on an island in Loch Levlan” (I3)

After defeating or at least taking part in the defeat of the Norwegian lord Sweno, Macbeth ventured to kill king Duncan. How this exactly happened is not clear. Various sources give quite different accounts. Anyway, Duncan died and Macbeth was his successor on the Scottish throne.

If we believe the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* by Raphael Holinshed whose historic compendium served Shakespeare as a source for several of his plays, Macbeth ruled the Celtic kingdom for about seventeen years as a good king well loved by his people. It is also stated in the *Chronicles* that he did actually believe in witches. There is also a vague description of the Birnam wood incident.

During his reign the usurper united the North and the South of Scotland for the first time. He organised a military patrol and helped to enforce law and order in his country (cf. I7). No track of the bloody tyrant Shakespeare created. Much worse a king Duncan had been. He “ascended the throne after killing his grandfather” (cf. I7) and his reign meant death for his people by failed campaigns. So the real Macbeth probably had good reason to overthrow him.

In 1054 Malcolm, son of Duncan, started his campaign to avenge his father. Defeated at the battle of Dunsinane, Macbeth fled and was then killed three years later.

All this was not unimportant in the history of Scotland. After Malcolm had revenged his father, he changed the whole country’s orientation from the old Celtic way to the Anglo-

Norman one. Had Macbeth “the last great Celtic King of Scotland” (I3) survived, the whole history of Scotland might have developed in a very different manner (cf. I3). J.R. Costa accuses Shakespeare of “maligning this last Celtic king [and providing] great entertainment at the expense of Macbeth’s real place in Scottish history” (I3). Well, that might be so, but it ought to be remembered that no matter how much Shakespeare altered or profaned the memory of that Scottish king of yore, he also did something for him, that many a great man once living on earth would have desired and given everything for. With his play, Shakespeare made this long gone medieval king’s name immortal to eternity, for his tragedy is known and remembered by many more than any historical account can ever be.

3.2.3 One Man in the audience

Shakespeare did certainly not decide to write Macbeth because he just felt like it. There was good reason to create the Scottish piece at the time he did and how he did. I dare to assume that, this time, the playwright’s primary goal was not to satisfy his broad audience. Macbeth was probably written for one single man whom pleasing was more than just important, James I.

When Queen Elizabeth I died and James VI of Scotland, son of Mary Stuart, ascended the throne of united England, Scotland and Ireland, much changed. Shakespeare’s existence as actor and playwright certainly was in a swaying position. Elizabeth had always liked and supported him. Would king James I do the same? At that time he was known to “fall asleep during plays” (I8). Something had to be done. Due to the new king, a fascination for everything Scottish was raging through England at that time. Shakespeare set about to create a new great tragedy.

Looking at Macbeth as a play and then at the biography of James I, many striking similarities are to be discovered: James I became king because Elizabeth had “no children” (cf. IV.iii.216). He believed in witches and even wrote a book “on witchcraft and how to punish witches” (I8). There were several attempts to kill him, most notably the famous Gunpowder Plot. James was once held hostage by the Thane of Glamis. The name of a conspirator was Lennox (cf. I8). But most important of all is, I think, that Shakespeare dared to insert the foundation of James’s ancestral line of kings in his play. How rapt James

must have been at the scene in which his predecessors “A show of eight Kings, the last [James I] with a glass in his hand” step out of the fire in the second prophecy scene IV.i. Certainly Shakespeare had to be exceedingly careful in designing the character of Banquo, “semi-legendary thane of Lochquhaber” (I11) and founder of the House of Stuart. In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles it is said that Banquo actually assisted in the assassination of Duncan. It is obvious that Shakespeare did not dare to call his king’s ancestor a murderer. Better it seemed to let him be murdered. (cf. I11)

Anyway, Shakespeare succeeded in satisfying the new king who became patron of his theatre troop.

3.2.4 The Cycle

No more that Thane of Cawdor shall deceive
 Our bosom interest. – Go pronounce his present death,
 And with his former title greet Macbeth
 (...)
 What he hath lost, noble Macbeth won.
 (I.ii.65ff)

These are the words of Duncan after the news of Macbeth’s victory over “that most disloyal traitor, the Thane of Cawdor” (I.ii.53f) – “‘Thane’ is an honorific title like ‘Earl’ or ‘Lord’” (Perry 13) – reaches him. In addition to the ordinary meaning of the king’s words the spectator is well aware of some further sense between the lines. There is a kind of movement being described here. Something is transferred from one person to another. Is it only a title?

The Thane of Cawdor, former trusty kinsman of Duncan who became a traitor, has to take leave from this very title, and once free from it, his forgotten noble spirit of long gone days that the audience does not know of, returns at his execution, as we are thoroughly informed in I.iv.5ff. He repents deeply.

At this man’s death, Macbeth gets his former title. Thane of Cawdor seems to work as a synonym for traitor. It appears as if some demon of treason lies over that title. A hero defeats a traitor and becomes the new traitor. A picture of a continuous circle forms in the head of the spectator. At the end of the tragedy Macbeth is defeated by Macduff, on whom

Malcolm surely puts “absolute trust” (I.iv.14). We wonder whether he will be rewarded with another title besides Thane of Fife. Cawdor would be free.

Of course this whole speculation is simplifying the whole story to a great extent, putting the reason for treason on a spiritual transfer accompanied by a title. Yet these are the thoughts that form in the mind of the audience listening carefully to Duncan’s words, that surely initiate an ominous feeling and grant the sound of Cawdor an effect that causes some shivers.

All this is even more strengthened by the king’s last line in which echo the images of the witchcraft scene that begin the play; especially the line “When the battle’s lost and won” (I.i.4)

Now the spectator is able to understand this exclamation in a deeper sense. It does not just mean that when a battle is over, one party obviously lost and the other one won. No, there also is a hidden message here. The battle is lost regarding the fact that the Thane of Cawdor, bewitched by the spirit of treason and a tool of the witches, is defeated, but in respect to the becoming traitor, Macbeth, the witches gained a victory.

Is this cycle of treason finally over with the death of Macbeth? As Howard Bloom observed before me, something is not right with the ending of the tragedy. A tyrant who by men like Malcolm and Macduff was once “thought honest” and “lov’d well” (IV.iii.13) – Macduff slays him. That does sound familiar. Malcolm is certainly trusting this hero by now.

“Macbeth slew Macdonwald in order to restore social order and protect Duncan”
(Perry 23).

Macbeth kills Duncan.

“Macduff slew Macbeth in order to restore the social order and protect Malcolm”
(Perry 23).

This story is to be continued. Like this, for instance: “Macduff kills Malcolm.” It would not be the first time that a hero falls to treason.

But one important point is still not taken into consideration: all the prophecies must be fulfilled. There is one left. When I first read Macbeth, I always hoped a certain character, last seen in III.iii, might appear again. I was disappointed. However, this person is destined to play a role in future events for he shall be king one day. Somewhere out there, Fleance, ancestor of James I, father to a line of kings, still is wandering about waiting for his time to come.

3.3 The central motif

Each of Shakespeare's great tragedies has a certain central motif. That is a term difficult to explain. It is something like a guiding principle, a leading thought or perhaps theme that is present all through the play like a red thread that shimmers between the lines. A good metaphorical circumscription would certainly be to call it the bedrock layer beneath a steep mountain range that touches the surface only on a few spots but is present everywhere. It is a thought that is thought over and over again with different approaches. It is a word that is twisted until it is barely recognizable and then spun back out again. All that is a central motif in the Shakespearean sense.

In the case of Macbeth it is quite easy to conceive. There is a little group of words that appears very often in the play at situations quite different from each other. But these few words have the power to connect all the action in a certain way. They even seem to give the play a central message. Those two little words are "fair" and "foul" and hence equivocation is the central motif of Macbeth.

Already in the first scene all this is introduced to us in the highly cryptic words violently exclaimed by the witches.

Fair is foul, and foul is fair
(I.i.11)

A paradox, one might conclude at first sight, which would be nothing but right. It is a paradox as well as it is a paradox to call a battle lost and won and the witches women and bearded (cf. I.ii.45f). But what else is there to say about it?

Before we go further, let us ask a simple question. Fair and foul, what does that mean? It cannot not be too hard to define those two little words, or can it? Indeed, the application of fair and foul is so broadly diffused that it is almost impossible to conceive their exact meaning.

Fair and foul can be used to define the weather. It can state if an action is decent or rather nasty. Skilled and clumsy, attracting and disgusting, clean and dirty, bright and dark, holy and depraved, honest and dishonest, chaste and obscene, good and bad, all this and more can simply be expressed through the words fair and foul (cf. Günther199).

What does Macbeth mean when we first see him after the battle trotting on the stage and saying: “So fair and foul a day I have not seen.” (I.ii.38)? Is he talking about the weather, the battle or what? In the head of the spectator his words are at once connected with those in the first scene and thus a relation between the “weird sisters” and the hero is already conceivable before they have even met (cf. Günther 200).

All through the play, the central motif of equivocation continues to reappear in different arrangements and meanings. Each time I read Macbeth I notice some new places where I have not perceived that before. Things fair and/or foul are to be found at I.iii.51f, I.iii.131, II.iv.41, III.i.2f, IV.iii.24 and more.

It is also interesting how Shakespeare plays with the rhyme of fair and air. The effect is that every time air is mentioned, a connection to the witches is formed at once in the mind of the audience (cf. Günther 200/201). Their presence is felt even if they are far away. When Duncan praises the air around Macbeth’s castle, which “nimble and sweetly recommends itself” (I.vi.3), this is a terrible foreboding to the audience.

Naturally this “fair and foul” paradox is not the central motif just because it is to be found that often in the text. It is also an important part of the plot. The prophecies of the supernatural to Macbeth – “Thane of Cawdor” (I.iii.49), “King hereafter” (I.iii.50), that “none of woman born shall harm” (IV.i.80f), that “shall never vanquish’d be, until Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill shall come against him” (IV.i.92) – do indeed seem very fair at first. Yet they are foulest to the very root and bring nothing upon their believer but misery.

On the whole, the tragedy also has a final statement, something the spectator is supposed to learn from all the chaos on the stage, something that Shakespeare wants to tell us. And where else should this message be expressed more clearly than in the hero’s (almost) last words:

An be these juggling fiends no more believ’d,
That palter with us in double sense;
That keep the word of promise to our ear,
And break it to our hope.
(V.viii.19ff)

This is the final conclusion the hero draws from his fate. Banquo apparently knew this all along until his death. Spoke he not once:

And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of Darkness tell us truths;
Win us with honest trifels, to betray's
In deepest consequence.
(I.iii.123ff)

The passage above spoken by Macbeth includes the word “double”, which had in Shakespearean time always a nuance of evil in it. Many still used words remind us of that Elizabethan disposition towards applying words or phrases including “double” for rather foul things: double-faced, double-edged, double-hearted, double-tongued, double-minded, double meaning as Frank Günther lists it in his interpretation (cf. Günther 202).

All these expressions have a negative meaning. There are also many lines in Macbeth where similar forms and applications of that word are used. The one the spectator remembers best is probably the obscure chorus of the witches: “Double double toil and trouble” (IV.i.10,20,35). What Shakespeare tries to say in the lines quoted above is that we should not believe and trust things that are double-faced. Macbeth seems to have learned his lessons, but he dies anyway.

Now, let me ask a question few interpreters dared to dwell on and passed by in silence. If there is a conclusion, a lesson to be drawn from a Shakespearean tragedy as it is definitely or, at least in my opinion, in Macbeth, can this “moral of the tale” actually be applied to our way of life or that at Shakespeare’s time? Was it ever meant to? Did Shakespeare really want to teach us?

Fair is foul and foul is fair. Things often are not what they appear to be. It is not always profit, what seems to have been won. Evil can be hidden every where. A book shall never be judged by its cover only.

There is an ancient Chinese tale a million times told. Let me tell it again:

A farmer’s horse ran off into Barbarian Lands	Foul
The horse returned accompanied by another of most noble breed	Foul is fair
The farmer’s son breaks his hip riding on the new horse	Fair is foul
The Barbarians invade. Every young man fit for service must fight	Foul is fair

(cf. Mitchell 118)

To judge is one of the most difficult things. Things often are equivocal and fair as well as foul. Today this is true to a much greater extent than in Elizabethan England. Thus a lesson

can indeed be learned and a philosophical statement derived from the tragedy of Macbeth. The phrase lives on: Fair is foul and foul is fair.

3.4 Characterisation

The number of characters in a Shakespearean tragedy is as a rule always very high. In Macbeth there are, ranging from the protagonist to the tiniest messenger, about forty-three speaking parts (cf. Suerbaum 262). I would enjoy discussing every single one of them. That may sound somewhat exaggerated, but it is not. Shakespeare had the power to give even the least important person some dynamic of his/her own. There is something to talk about concerning all the characters such a masterpiece like Macbeth includes. There are highly interesting things, I wish to write about such minor and yet very important personages such as, for instance, Lenox, Cathness, General Siward and his son, Seyton, Lady Macduff and her son, the porter or even the Old Man in the desolation. How authentic they all are, how strange and yet fitting. One paragraph to at least each of them is worthy to be attributed in this study, but that shall not be since cruel limitations must be fulfilled at the cost of perfection.

Thus forced to take my leave of all those beautiful minor creations, I must devote the rest of this chapter solely to the protagonist and another person on whom to dwell is inevitable. According to A. C. Bradley there are “two great terrible figures, who dwarf all the remaining characters of drama. (...) within them is all that we felt without – the darkness of night, lit with the flame of tempest and the hues of blood, and haunted by wild and direful shapes, ‘murdering ministers’, spirits of remorse, and maddening visions of peace lost and judgement to come.” (Bradley 321). Meant are of course: Macbeth and his Lady. And with the latter, I shall begin.

3.4.1 Lady Macbeth

Macbeth himself is too sensitive and too perceptive to be a good protagonist on his own, since these qualities make him very difficult to move (cf. Suerbaum 266). Thus, the main character’s wife is essential for the story. She plays the role of the tempter. All along the second half of Act I she pours her spirits in Macbeth’s ears (cf. I.v.25), whose nature “is

too full o' th' milk of human kindness" (I.v.16). If we dare to call Macbeth Adam, she must be Eve and this "(...) Eve tempts this Adam. Once Macbeth has taken the first bite, he is lost." (Hugo 34). Murdering Duncan is like plucking the red apple from the forbidden tree. The Lady's words that lure her husband closer and closer to the execution of his "great business" (I.v.67) are a unique example of the art of persuasion. Every reason Macbeth finds to abolish their plan, his wife turns into nothing.

It is also interesting that to the same extent as the resistance in Macbeth subsides, the night gets darker scene by scene until even "the moon is down" (II.i.2).

Considering her arguments one after another; the reader will find them to be rather shallow, irrational and overall immoral but "by personal appeals, and through the admiration she extorts from him [Macbeth], and through sheer force of will, (...) she impels him to the deed." (Bradley 337). Could she have done it herself? That is an interesting question.

Indeed, Lady Macbeth does answer it:

Had he not resembled
My father as he slept, I had done't
(II.ii.12f)



Do we believe that? No, her father has nothing to do with it. Lady Macbeth would never have been able to murder the king. The resistance in her husband is not the only one she has to fight. To her the deed must seem appalling too, but she regrets this feeling and casts it aside by performing that strange prayer to cruelty in I.v.39ff .

Later in the play, she cannot handle all this anymore and has to see that her hands are still bloody. Guilt drives her mad. Also she seems horrified by the actions of her husbands who is not any more "young in deed" (III.iv.143).

The Thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now?
(V.i.41f)

All that appalls and destroys her. The gravity of the development is clearly to be seen in the famous sleepwalking scene. It is also interesting that soon after the murder of the king Lady Macbeth loses her role as an important character. Her purpose is fulfilled in pushing her husband across the brink of crime from where he can go on himself.

At the morn after the night in which Duncan died, Macbeth's acting is supreme. He authentically plays the shocked host, absolutely terrified by the horrible deed. His wife in

contrast shows some major insensibility: the king was murdered, an occurrence that in Elizabethan time meant much more than the assassination of any modern man could ever do. Murdering a king was like killing a god, like destroying all order and pushing the world into chaos, as we witness it in II.iv (cf. Günther 197).

And what are the first words that Lady Macbeth exclaims after hearing news of the deed?

Woe, alas!
What, in our house?
(II.iii.85f)

This shows “that she does not even know what the natural feeling in such circumstances would be” (Bradley 338). Then she faints. Whether this is authentic or not is discussed thoroughly in Note DD in A. C. Bradley’s lectures.

Is Lady Macbeth evil? This question may sound quite banal, which it actually is. Though it should be made clear that she is no Goneril. The audience still feels some pity for her. She suffers and in order to do what she did, she needed to “stop up th’access and passage to remorse” (I.v.43). Goneril never had to do that because there simply was no need to. There is no main character in Macbeth, which the spectator is allowed to hate – besides perhaps the witches, who do not count – and that is, after all, the reason why the Scottish piece does not have that “cold dim gloom” (Bradley 308) of King Lear.

It is also interesting that in her last scene Lady Macbeth speaks only prose. Shakespeare sticks to his practise of not using verse when the speaker is either insane or not fully conscious in another sense. Of all the major characters in all his plays, Lady Macbeth thus is the only one whose last words “What’s done cannot be undone. To bed, to bed, to bed.” (V.i.66) are only in prose (cf. Bradley 365).

3.4.2 Macbeth

The protagonist himself is introduced to the audience as a great war hero, thought honest and trusted by the king and his attendants. Indeed, he was a good man. A.C. Bradley states that Macbeth is not “of a ‘noble’ nature, like Hamlet or Othello; but he had a keen sense both of honour and of the worth of a good name.” (Bradley 322).

Like his wife, the hero is very ambitious, but quite unlike her, his thoughts go beyond “desire and effect” (Suerbaum 267). Within his soul there lies some deeper understanding which is the part of him the audience admires. As the story goes on, this inner consciousness has to subside but it keeps on manifesting itself in visions expressed in speech or visible on stage.

There are many examples like the dagger floating through the air, the voices Macbeth hears after the deed is done, Banquo’s ghost, the picture in his mind of his hands reddening all the oceans and him wading through seas of blood and many more; this is the language of his inner consciousness, which resembles “the imagination of a poet” (Bradley 323). The protagonist’s speech is full of its effects – mostly obscure metaphors.

Lady Macbeth has no such elements in her speech. It is this very disposition that causes the hero’s long hesitation before the murder of Duncan. It is not the fear of consequence and blood that holds him back, it is the fact that his inner consciousness tells him that murder is not right. It is for the same reason that Macbeth cannot enjoy being king. He is tortured by being forced to “sleep no more” (II.ii.42). His inner “poetic genius” (Blake 32) keeps on reminding him of his terrible deed. As long he is possessed by this consciousness the audience pities him, tortured by guilt-caused hallucination and insomnia as he is. But when he is left alone by his inner imagination – as in III.i – there remains only hate towards him. It is clear that Macbeth is not aware of the disposition in his mind. He fears, but knows not what to fear. At first it is Banquo, he blames for this feeling of insecurity, then he switches to Macduff. Thus the protagonist is driven into an everlasting circle of murder and his tyranny is now fully developed. “The whole flood of evil in his nature is now let loose.” (Bradley 333).

Somewhere above I compared Lady Macbeth with Goneril and stated how different they are. Just alike it is possible to set Macbeth in contrast to Iago. The audience hates the latter, but the other one never loses our sympathy.

“There remains something sublime in the defiance with which, even when cheated of his last hope, he faces earth and hell and heaven. Nor would any soul to whom evil was congenial be capable of that heart-sickness which overcomes him when he thinks of the ‘honour, love, obedience, troops of friends’ which ‘he must not look to have’ (and which Iago would never cared to have)” (Bradley 334).

“Watching Macbeth, we suspect the height and depth of our own evil, testing ourselves up to the waist in the waters of some bloody lake. (...) There we see ourselves projected, gone

somehow suddenly wrong, participating in the unforgivable, pursued by the unforgiving, which is most of all, ourselves. (...) We pity him because, like us, he stands next to innocence in a world in which evil is a prerequisite for being human.” (Low 54-55)

Macbeth who went straight ahead into the darkness dies as a hero. He is way too weary to live any longer. All hope is gone. Life just seems an endless dusty road of vanity.

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.
(V.v.19-23)

My own words would seem too flat illustrating this sad passage. Thus nothing remains but quoting one of the greatest interpreters of Shakespeare one more time and seeing what he has to say about Macbeth's thoughts.

“In the very depths a gleam of his native love of goodness, and with it a touch of tragic grandeur, rests upon him. The evil he has desperately embraced continues to madden or to wither his inmost heart. No experience in the world could bring him to glory in it or make his peace with it, or to forget what he once was and Iago and Goneril never were.”
(Bradley 335)

It is time to come to an end of this poor attempt to dissect one of, and to me the greatest of all the Shakespearean tragedies. I only managed to touch the surface of it. But still this document's purpose is fulfilled.

Macbeth is a drama that formulates some major questions about the human soul. It defines greed and ambition and dives deep into the abyss of despair. To conclude this chapter I will add one more excerpt of striking beauty in which Macbeth near the end of his development – or evolution – commits himself, as many tragic characters in many plays by many playwrights tend to (cf. Schiller III.vi.2318-2338), to profound nihilism and thus shows how a conscious entity fails without losing.

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.24-29)



4 Is Macbeth the Last Great Tragedy?



None of Shakespeare's plays can be dated with absolute certainty. One might say that it is quite unimportant to the quality of such a drama whether the exact year of its creation is known or not. However, the dating of literature has always been a matter of great interest. And in the case of Macbeth the dating is even more important because it determines whether the Scottish piece is really the last of Shakespeare's great tragedies or not.

But how is it possible to determine the date of a drama's creation when there are no historical accounts about it? Different approaches can be made.

4.1 Dr. Forman

When Dr. Simon Forman moved to London in 1592, he wanted to be a great magician and performed occult experiments and research. He ventured to create an alternative medical practise and worked as physician and surgeon. By the time London was gripped by the black plague, he remained in the city and cured many people including himself with medicinal waters based on astrology. As his fame grew, the Royal College of Physicians refused to give him a licence for practising. Although his attempts to produce the Philosophers Stone were never successful, Dr. Forman is said to have managed contact with the spirit of a black dog. A week before he died, he prophesied this oncoming event and told his wife. (cf. I9)

Certainly an interesting fellow, but what has he got to do with this study? Very much indeed. Dr. Simon Forman recorded every aspect of his life. From his writings, a great deal of what life was like in London at his time, that is from 1592 – 1611, is known. He wrote about his experiments, his disputes with the College of Physicians, the doings of his servants, his sexlife and, most interesting to us, his love of Shakespeare. On April 20th, 1610, Dr. Forman attended the production of Macbeth at the Globe theatre. That he was very rapt, is only of minor importance to us. The date is essential, for it tells us that Macbeth could not be written later than that. (cf. I10).

4.2 Internal Clues

Now let us look deep into the drama itself. Is there an answer to be found?

King James I ascended to the throne in 1603. There are references to him in the play (IV.i.) and the dramatic use of witchcraft is only one more detail alluding to him since he was an authority on this subject. A rough approach is thus made. *Macbeth* was written sometime between 1603 and 1610.

A.C. Bradley lists several more clues within the text. The speech of the porter in II.iii is very informative:

“Here’s a farmer that hang’d himself on the expectation of plenty” (II.iii.4f) The price of wheat was quite low in 1606.

“Here’s an equivocator, that could swear in both the scales against either scale; who committed treason enough for God’s sake, yet could not equivocate heaven” (II.iii.8-11)

The Jesuit Garnet was hanged in 1606. He commenced a dispute of his right to swear false if it were for a good outcome. Another allusion to that may be found in IV.iii.48-54.

(cf. Bradley 442)

Apart from this there are also references in other works of Shakespearean times alluding to *Macbeth*. These, also, do point to the year of 1606.

In this respect the following order of the four great tragedies can be accepted with more or less high certainty: *Hamlet*, *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*.

To confirm this even more, there is still the evidence of style and meter. In his voluminous study A.C. Bradley focuses on the latter, the metrical test, especially. To describe this briefly I shall say that a poet’s style never stays the same. It changes significantly during his lifetime. The same was true with Shakespeare. In his latter works the verse is progressively less formal. Speeches may end in the middle of a line. Enjambment and overflow grow more frequent, as well as light and weak endings (cf. Bradley 444-452). I do not want to explain all these aspects one by one since this is neither interesting nor important. Essential is only that at the end of all that metrical testing, the order of the tragedies mentioned above is confirmed. “It strongly confirms the impression that in *Macbeth* we have the transition to Shakespeare’s last style, and that the play is the latest of the (...) [four] tragedies.”(Bradley 452).

5 Afterword

Finally this study is finished. I wrote what I wrote and I hope to be read. No, actually not. Who will read a “Fachbereichsarbeit” like this besides the examiners, the examiners, the teacher attending its creation, a few disinterested friends with no dramatic conception and some relatives who do not speak English very well? Probably nobody. So why did I write all this rubbish? Just to satisfy the world and to fulfil the requirements in order to get my Matura? No. Well, I admit it: That was a factor, but a minor one. I could have chosen a much easier topic than Macbeth or perhaps even done something else than to write an “FBA”. I wrote *Macbeth: Shakespeare’s Last Great Tragedy* because I wanted to do so. I simply chose to. Not for the Matura’s sake, not for school, I wrote it for me. That may sound somewhat egocentric but I could equally say: I wrote it for itself, for the tragedy, for Macbeth, for Shakespeare, for art and deeper understanding. There is a story of a bloody rise and fall. I wanted to conceive it fully, to understand it, to dive deep into its darkest and deepest pits. There is no better way to do this but to write a study on the matter. Now I know and I can tell:

Crawling on the planet’s face there is the human race. A chaotic mass of individuals who strut and fret through space. Some of them are poor, others rich. Some have great strength, some imagination. There are men of willpower, of ambition, of insight and vision. Some have power, others guide them all, greatest, those who course and form the often forgotten. All give us hope and things to die for, things to forget. They are the most important, the mightiest human beings that existed, exist and will exist in future. It is not politicians I am talking about, nor revolutionaries or religious leaders. Not at all. I am talking about men of a certain profession that is much more ancient than any of those others. This profession still is of great public admiration, especially in the Islamic world. It is: the storyteller.



do not. But those who those whose power is the really set our history’s shape of life, those are along our existence, they wrath, things to live for, things to believe in and

The importance of this most noble, most divine, most sublime profession of all is often forgotten in the busy world of our time. Still, story-telling has always been one of the most

central aspects in human life. Stories can be humorous and sad, heart-rending and deeply moving. They make us laugh, make us cry, make us think. Even the most extreme misanthrope being – justly – hostile to all human beings and the terrible deeds they committed all through their long and painful history of existence, has to admit one virtue of the creatures we are. He can justly damn all our bloody actions, our hypocrisy, our way of thinking, everything, but there is one thing he can't touch, one virtue man has that nobody can defy. If there is anything good about our species, then it is this: We can tell beautiful stories.

We cannot live them, cannot make them real, but still they are there. What is a story? Literature is full of them, of course: novels, poems, dramas. The bible is also a nice story. Religions are stories. Paintings tell us stories. Every piece of music does, too. I dare to set art equal with storytelling. Stories give us orientation, they help us to live on and since our beginnings we have told a whole lot of them.

Every day new stories await us. Some are better than others. To know them all is impossible. Never before in recorded history has there been such an enormous amount of things to know. The mere number of information stuffed in an average contemporary teenager's head would easily – though being quite senseless – compete with all the knowledge an Aristotle ever had. Applying the philosophy of stories outlined above, there are two “noble truths” not to forget:

1. There are so many tales yet to be told.
2. There are so many tales told not to forget.

Stories must be saved from being buried beneath the dust of passing time. Let us look at the youth of our time: a sad picture. How many are still out there who have travelled with Jonathan Harker over the Borgo-pass into the wilderness, who have run side by side with David Balfour upon the Scottish heaths, who know that two plus two equals five? Teenager of today, have you ever witnessed the fall of Troy, seen the watery part of the world with Ishmael, stranded on Lilliput or been a Robinson? No. I pity you. Stories are dying when the world ceases to know them, and that must not happen.

William Shakespeare surely was one of the greatest story tellers. Macbeth is a story of striking beauty, but the forgetting has begun even here. The world has to be reminded and I wanted to know what all that Shakespearean legend was about. So I studied, read and wrote, tiptoeing with a dagger in my hand, thinking thoughts of deep and black desire, wading through lakes of blood, riding over a desolate heath and seeking the beauty beneath.

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