

Macbeth's 'Make Be' and Its Undecidability

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In his illuminating study of *Hamlet, To Be and Not To Be: Negation and Metadrama in 'Hamlet'*, James L. Calderwood argues that 'Hamlet seems bound by the illogic of "To be *and* not to be"' (a thing may be both A and not-A), rather than 'To be or not to be' (a thing is either A or not-A).¹ Killing the King for revenge is both good and evil. To Hamlet there is no difference between life and death since they are both abominable to him. After the abortive voyage to England, however, there comes a change in him. 'The Hamlet who agonized in irresolution between "To be" and "Not to be,"' Calderwood goes on to write, 'has now become the Hamlet who concludes his "the readiness is all" speech with the quiescent "Let be."² This principle of 'Let be,' or 'Keats's Negative capability,'³ is in keeping up with Hamlet's final entrustment of everything, including his revenge, to God's providence. Thus *Hamlet* is a tragedy not so much about choosing between the two alternatives as about the undecidability of A and not-A.

Calderwood discusses *Macbeth* in his subsequent book, *If It Were Done: 'Macbeth' and Tragic Action*, and he begins his argument with the comparison of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* in the first chapter, entitled '*Macbeth*: Counter-*Hamlet*.' His assertion is that the two plays 'are almost systematically opposed, so that *Macbeth* emerges as a kind of "counter-*Hamlet*,"'⁴ 'a photographic negative of the earlier play.' (It would be better to add in haste that the term 'photographic negative' is perhaps misleading in a sense, for Calderwood says soon after that '*Hamlet* is best characterised by negation and absence, where *Macbeth* is, I suggest, positively charged.'⁵

Calderwood elaborates on some contrastive concepts of the two plays, such as the 'inbetweenness' of Hamlet and the 'immediacy of Macbeth,' the 'reactive and retentive (i. e. past-oriented)' Hamlet and the 'initiative and protentive' Macbeth, as well as the one play that 'moves toward meaning' and the other that 'moves from meaning.' As a conclusive set of oppositions Calderwood speaks of the 'both/and-ness' of Hamlet and the either/or-ness' of Macbeth. This contrast is worthy of our closer examination.

According to Calderwood's shrewd metaphoric definition, Hamlet is a poststructuralist with an undecidable text hard to read while Macbeth is an existentialist who shapes his identity in the deeds he performs. 'Hamlet occupies a world that simultaneously is and is not.'⁶ Such a world of both/and-ness does not invite clear-cut choices. 'Hamlet finds in madplay[sic] and wordplay a defiladed cleft between action and inaction, a place where he can be, not do. But

the question for Macbeth is not “to be or not to be” but “to act or not to act”⁷ and he continues to seek his identity in deeds to the end. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, Calderwood asserts, ‘transform...both/and’s into unequivocal either/or’s’⁸ and, given that either/or moral choice, they choose evil.

I submit that Calderwood’s contention outlined above inevitably induces us to wonder if, in the final analysis, the question for Macbeth, too, does not change from “to do or not to do” into ‘to be *and* not to be.’ Earlier on he is certainly in two minds as to whether he should murder Duncan. Once he has committed the crime, however, Macbeth recognises that

To know my deed, ’twere best not know my self. (2.2.71)

And as soon as he is crowned as the new king, Macbeth realises

To be thus is nothing

But to be safely thus. (3.1.49-50)

Macbeth can be said to feel that he is and is not the King. He has entered into a new world of undecidability. Then ‘to act or not to act’ is no longer his question; certainly he is forced to continue to act, yet his mind is not torn between the two alternatives as before. He has to abandon his old self and establish his new identity, seeking for the secure *being* of kingship, though without success after all. Hence comes his struggles—ceaseless struggles with himself, with the counter-action from the good forces, and even with what Macbeth refers to as ‘fate,’ represented by the Witches. If Hamlet eventually reaches the calm state of ‘Let be,’ Macbeth embraces, I would say, the desperate principle of ‘Make be.’

In clear contrast to *Richard III*, in which more emphasis is on how Richard captures the throne, how Macbeth struggles to find his identity as the king seems to me to be very important in this play. It is indisputable that the tragic stature of Macbeth owes much to the capacity for conscience and fear he shows before he kills Duncan. And yet the rest of the play is often regarded as no more than Macbeth’s further decline into depravity and its retribution. But is that so? Before we look further into Macbeth’s problem of ‘Make be,’ therefore, it may be worth noting how sharply divided critics are as to what will become of Macbeth eventually.

G. Wilson Knight describes Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as turning into allegorical embodiments of evil absolute and extreme instead of becoming mere villains.⁹ George Lyman Kittredge holds that Macbeth ‘grows stronger and more resolute as fate closes in upon him, and is never greater than in the desperate valour that marks his end.’¹⁰ Conversely many critics understand Macbeth as a shrinking and diminishing character who ends up in becoming an ‘automaton,’¹¹ or an ‘animal,’¹² or even a senseless ‘stone.’¹³ Macbeth’s image, it seems to me, does not reach either of these extremes. In particular, as we shall see, I cannot agree with those who explain that Macbeth becomes something insensitive and less than a human being.

Not only is King Macbeth’s world of ‘Make be’ undecidable to him, but moreover it is presented to us in undecidable ways. We might rather say such undecidability is not limited to the new Macbeth but pervades the whole of this play. Let us examine that first.

According to G. Wilson Knight, '*Macbeth* is the apocalypse of evil,'¹⁴ and G. K. Hunter calls the play 'an anatomy of evil.'¹⁵ It will be said that the undecidability of *Macbeth* comes foremost from the fact that this play is about evil. To the philosophers the nature of evil has always been ambiguous and undecidable.

In considering the theme of evil it may be fitting to be reminded that Jacques Derrida propounds his deconstructive idea of 'undecidable supplementarity.' In the binary opposition of nature and civilisation or education, we cannot, as Rousseau or Lévi-Straus did, assume that nature has existed first and later civilisation supplements or taints it, but we should consider that nature has been always and already supplemented by civilisation. In other words, nature would never have been nature without being originally contaminated by a sort of civilised culture that might be called 'arche-culture.' Nature has always harboured arche-culture from the very beginning.¹⁶

A similar undecidable relationship is found in the antitheses of the two terms, including that of good and evil, in *Macbeth*. On the surface of it Scotland seems to be under the reign of the gracious King Duncan, Macbeth and Banquo being his worthy vassals and generals. A closer look into the first few scenes, however, discloses that Duncan is an elderly king incapable of engaging in battles himself and that his country is undeniably afflicted with uprisings and invasions. As it is often pointed out, the bloody Captain's eulogistic report of Macbeth and Banquo in Act 1, Scene 2 reveals to us, contrary to his intention, that the both of them are merciless and bloodthirsty enough to 'memorize another Golgotha'(1.2.40). The speech describes his generals and the traitors as 'so intertwined as to be indistinguishable.'¹⁷ And Macbeth is reported 'in a curiously indiscriminating adjective'¹⁸, to use Calderwood's phrase, as confronting the Thane of Cawdor '*rebellious* arm 'gainst arm' (italics mine, 1.2.56). After the Thane of Cawdor has been executed his title is given to Macbeth by Duncan, who refers to Cawdor with obvious dramatic irony:

There's no art
To find the mind's construction in the face.
He was a gentleman on whom I built
An absolute trust. (1.4.11-14)

Thus these statements betray the speakers' unintended meanings, and, at the same time, render indistinguishable the difference between violence in a good cause and savage violence.

In this connection let us notice René Girard's argument that there is no essential difference between public violence exemplified by the ancient rituals of human sacrifice and ordinary violence as we might conceive of it in its usual sense. In practice, however, some sort of distinction is made in any community. Only when the distinction is actually lost is it an emergency to the community, which Girard calls the 'sacrificial crisis.'¹⁹ This is what happens as Macbeth kills Duncan and continues to commit murderous crimes as King Macbeth. But the distinction between violence sanctified by a monarch and violence by his enemies is made obscure from the start of the play, thus unsettling the hierarchical order between those two terms.

Most critics agree that the good characters, including Malcolm and Macduff, are less individualised and, accordingly, flatter and more vapid than the title hero. It will also be a critical commonplace now to say that thus Shakespeare deconstructs the hierarchical order between good and evil in favour of Macbeth. Here suffice it to say that the order restored by the forces of good does not seem to be represented as totally secure, because the close of the play makes us register a cyclic return to the beginning, with the head of Macbeth reminding us of the image of Macdonwald's head that is reported soon after the opening of the play to have been fixed by Macbeth on the battlements, and with Donalbain, who we know seizes the throne from Malcolm in history, not present at the close of the play.

What makes Macbeth determine to murder Duncan is undecidable as well. In Shakespeare's tragedies the central characters' motives are very often less obvious than in their supposed sources. Why does King Lear conduct a love test? What is Iago's motive for trapping Othello? Why does Hamlet procrastinate his revenge?—these questions are more plausibly elucidated in the acclaimed source stories or chronicles. That may well indicate that it is surely part of Shakespeare's intention that the motives of his characters are less articulate than in his sources.

Shakespeare gives Macbeth less justifiable cause to kill Duncan than *Holinshed's Chronicles* on the one hand, while he presents the title hero as a character with great moral foresight and an extraordinary capacity for imaginative fear on the other hand. As a result, we feel that for all his wife's instigation there is a gap between Macbeth's initial hesitation and his unredeemable decision to carry out the murder of Duncan. This undecidable presentation, however, may be effective at least in conveying the impression that Macbeth chooses evil at once of his own free will and for being possessed by some demonic power.

No doubt the most absorbing illustration of the both/and-ness of this play is afforded by the Witches. The motif of equivocation 'Fair is foul and foul is fair' is pursued throughout the play. The hierarchical order of good and evil in Macbeth's moral sense is deconstructed when the Witches release his evil passion which heretofore has been contained by his sense of justice. This ambitious passion 'outruns his pauser, reason,' subverting the natural order. But the Witches, as Terry Eagleton puts it, 'do not so much invert this opposition [of 'fair and foul'] as deconstruct it.'²⁰ They are merely capable of unsettling the order and tempting men. It is Macbeth that inverts the order of his society.

In their supernatural soliciting the Witches, like catalysts, do not change themselves. As marginal beings they can live even in the subverted order of things whereas ordinary human beings simply could not live in the inverted order, much less the king, who is literally central to society. The undecidability of both/and-ness again comes into play here. Macbeth's kingship is the most foul in that he has usurped the throne while at the same time kingship is the fairest thing Macbeth could attain in this world. The king would not be able to live in accordance with the doctrine of 'Fair is foul.' But Macbeth tries to do so, in part deluded into believing that he is 'charmed' and is not likely to be harmed or vanquished by any other man. He proclaims:

For my own good
All causes shall give way. (3.4.135-136)

I would argue that this challenge, which is something a man just could not do, is what the play is about in its second half. This is King Macbeth's humane conflict of 'Make be' in his new undecidable world. And our contention has been that his affliction from that time on is represented also in such undecidable ways as to make us feel that things are conceived both to be and not to be.

In his essay on Thomas Middleton's *The Changeling* T. S. Eliot speaks of Macbeth's habituation to crime. He holds that the essence of Middleton's tragedy is 'the *habitation* of Beatrice to her sin.... Such is the essence of the tragedy of *Macbeth*—the habituation to crime.'²¹ Indeed it is terrible and essential to the drama that Beatrice is habituated to her relationship with De Flores and in the end she belongs far more to De Flores than to her lover Alsemero. But Macbeth's habituation to his crimes cannot be comparable to Beatrice's, if only because Macbeth does want to habituate himself to crime while Beatrice is forced to become habituated. Besides, the most crucial point is, I should think, that it is undecidable if he really grows 'habituated' to his evil deeds in the proper sense of the word. Macbeth says at the end of the banquet scene where he has lost himself, panicked by Banquo's apparition :

My strange and self-abuse
Is the initiate fear that wants hard use.
We are yet but young in deed. (3.4.141-143)

But later, it is true, he boasts that

The mind I sway by and the heart I bear
Shall never sag with doubt nor shake with fear. (5.3.9-10)

Then he also bluffs about his 'hard use' when he hears a dreary cry of women in his castle :

I have almost forgot the taste of fears :
The time has been my senses would have cooled
To hear a night-shriek and my fell of hair
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir
As life were in 't: I have supped full with horrors ;
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,
Cannot once start me. (5.5.9-15)

Actually, however, Macbeth's confession below to Macduff reveals that he is still 'young in deed' as late as just before his death :

Of all men else I have avoided thee.
But get thee back. My soul is too much charged
With blood of thine already. (5.10.4-6)

We should notice that Macbeth's bullish and bearish tones alternate with each other to the end. We cannot decide whether or not he is conceived to have habituated himself to crime, his initiate fear having faded away completely.

Yet many critics consider that Macbeth has completed his dehumanisation not just by putting his fear under control but also by shedding his humanity, as pointed out above. John Wain, for instance, has this to say of Macbeth's dehumanisation :

...we see Macbeth, in his last solitary moment, facing the knowledge that, as far as this world is concerned, he is no more than an animal. 'They have tied me to the stake; I cannot fly, / But bear-like I must fight the course.' His descent from humanity is complete. The play is over.²²

What beast is it, then, that confesses to Macduff before the play is actually over that 'my soul is too much charged / With blood of thine already' ? Or one would not be able to say that Macbeth is an animal just because he compares himself to a baited bear.

Referring to the above-cited lines ending with 'Direness... / Cannot once start me' Calderwood claims that Macbeth 'no longer "wants" in either of that word's senses because he has completed his own dehumanization and grown sated with horrors.'²³ We should be reminded, however, that it is just after the lines above that the 'dehumanised' Macbeth makes the poetic and memorable 'Tomorrow' speech.

As for the 'Tomorrow' speech Stephen Greenblatt contends 'Macbeth experiences a gradual numbing or deadening of the self until he reaches a state of absolute spiritual emptiness'²⁴ of the speech. We should say, however, that reflecting with emptiness on one's life is one thing, and reaching the state of absolute emptiness of the numbed self is another.

Some critics assume that this speech illustrates that Macbeth has hardened and become so insensitive that he cannot express any heart-felt sorrow at the news of his wife's death.²⁵ But remember how little more than the fact Brutus in *Julius Caesar* tells Cassius about the death of his wife, Portia, who was more worthy of Brutus's sorrow than Lady Macbeth was of Macbeth's. The 'Tomorrow' speech and the 'My way of life' speech in Act 5, Scene 3 are Macbeth's relevant ways of expressing his feelings in those hard-pressed situations. Besides, do we not sense that Macbeth does not grow numb in his feelings but rather that he just strains hard as part of his 'Make be' to cauterise his feelings? At least we cannot judge by those speeches that Macbeth has grown heartless and insensitive.

The account given above shows, I hope, that Macbeth's dehumanisation is not conceived to be completed, but presented as undecidable. The meanings of Macbeth's curses or swearings will also be seen as undecidable in a deconstructive way. He declares that he would 'let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer, / Ere...' (3.2.18-19) he wins the sense of secu-

city. He also demands that the Witches should answer his most crucial question

Though you untie the winds and let them fight
Against the churches, though the yeasty waves
Confound and swallow navigation up,
Though bladed corn be lodged and trees blown down,
Though castles topple on their warders' heads,
Though palaces and pyramids do slope
Their heads to their foundations, though the treasure
Of nature's germens tumble all together
Even till destruction sicken.... (4.1.68–76)

These bombastically illogical and nihilistic statements deconstruct their own signifieds by foregrounding and unmetaphoring their figures of speech, unlike the dead metaphor in a phrase such as 'I'll be damned if....' They make it look as if Macbeth wished that he himself would be destroyed along with the whole universe, though actually he emphasises his strong will and desire to make all causes give way for his own good.

Shakespeare's choice of undecidability as the way of portraying Macbeth keeps our ultimate view of him from going to any extreme degree of either exaltation or denigration. It makes us unable either to identify him with an allegorical personification of absolute evil, or to think of him as most heroic in his last-stage resistance. It would be also impossible to feel that he grows dehumanised and animal. Instead we are made to realise that Macbeth's struggle of 'Make be' is quite horrible and yet quite human.

Kenneth Muir suggests that *Macbeth* is Shakespeare's best tragedy after *King Lear*.²⁶ Unlike *King Lear*, *Macbeth* owes much of its tragic greatness to the stature of the title hero. Undoubtedly, we witness the crimes and punishment of a damnably savage villain. Nonetheless we are moved both by his human recoiling within his world of undecidability and by his desperate determination not to succumb to adversity. Macbeth is shown in a manner of undecidability to veer to the last between defiance and cowardice, as illustrated in epitome in the following speech :

I 'gin to be aweary of the sun,
And wish th'estate o'th' world were now undone.
Ring the alarum-bell. Blow wind, come wrack!
At least we'll die with harness on our back. (5.5.47-50)

And his spiritlessness is consummated when he admits that Macduff's revelation of the secret about his birth 'hath cowed' his 'better part of man' (5.10.18).

On the other hand, Macbeth's unconquerable and strenuous soul seems to be rendered in one covert way as well. Although stage directions vary among texts, one thing we can say for certain is that he is intended to be not easily slain by Macduff. At the end of Act 5, Scene 9,

Siward reports to Malcolm, 'The castle's gently rendered.... The day almost itself professes yours, / And little is to do' (1-4). In the following scene Macbeth and Macduff do not fight it out but go off the stage fighting, then seemingly soon come back, still fighting, and Macbeth is slain. In the subsequent final scene, Macduff comes back with Macbeth's head to Malcolm's camp. At that moment Malcolm and his colleagues are remarking that the important persons who have not yet returned from the battle are Macduff and Siward's son. The latter has not come back because, Ross tells us, he has paid a soldier's debt. This means that Macduff is the slowest to return, probably having taken his considerable time managing to kill Macbeth, who we know has proclaimed his never-say-die spirit. This may well be the last and the only possible homage Shakespeare pays to his villain hero at his death instead of providing him with a death speech.

Unlike Hamlet, Macbeth must pursue his identity to the very end. He keeps wading the river of blood until he meets with death, though Lady Macbeth becomes unable either to cross over or to return. We feel that we might be able to go and die the way Lady Macbeth does, but that we could never be able to do as Macbeth does. From this fearful but admiring awareness comes Macbeth's magnanimity as a tragic hero with his 'paradoxical nobility,'²⁷ in Willard Farnham's epithet.

Notes

- ¹ James L. Calderwood, *To Be and Not To Be: Negation and Metadrama in 'Hamlet'* (New York: Columbia UP, 1983) xiv, 96.
- ² Calderwood 34. 'Let be' appears only in the Second Quarto. All the quotations from Shakespeare are from Stephen Greenblatt gen. ed. *The Norton Shakespeare Based on the Oxford Edition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).
- ³ Calderwood 34, 108.
- ⁴ Calderwood, *If it Were Done: 'Macbeth' and Tragic Action* (Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1986) ix.
- ⁵ Calderwood, *If It Were Done* 2, and 4.
- ⁶ Calderwood, *If It Were Done* 24.
- ⁷ Calderwood, *If It Were Done* 23.
- ⁸ Calderwood, *If It Were Done* 24.
- ⁹ G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire* (1930; London: Methuen, 1949) 152.
- ¹⁰ George Lyman Kittredge, ed. *The Tragedy of Macbeth* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1939) xiv.
- ¹¹ Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986) 7 and A. R. Braunnmuller, ed. *Macbeth*. The New Cambridge Shakespeare (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 40.
- ¹² John Wain, *The Living World of Shakespeare: A Playgoer's Guide* (Macmillan, 1978) 125 and Wilbur Sanders, *The Dramatist and the Received Idea: Studies in the Plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare* (1968), *Major Literary Characters: Macbeth*. ed. Harold Bloom. (New York: Chelsea House Publishers. 1991) 167.
- ¹³ G. K. Hunter, ed. *Macbeth*, New Penguin Shakespeare (London: Penguin Books) 25.

- ¹⁴ Knight 158.
- ¹⁵ Hunter 7.
- ¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (1967), trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Johns Hopkins UP, 1976), esp., 'Part II: Nature, Culture, Writing' and *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (U of Chicago P, 1978).
- ¹⁷ Stephen Booth, '*King Lear*,' '*Macbeth*,' *Indefinition and Tragedy* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1983) 97.
- ¹⁸ Calderwood, *If It Were Done* 77.
- ¹⁹ See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred* (1977), trans. Patrick Gregory, (Johns Hopkins UP, 1979).
- ²⁰ Eagleton 3.
- ²¹ T. S. Eliot, 'Thomas Middleton,' *Selected Essays* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932) 164.
- ²² Wain 186.
- ²³ Calderwood, *If It Were Done* 63.
- ²⁴ Greenblatt 2559.
- ²⁵ See, for example, William Rosen, *Shakspeare and the Craft of Tragedy* (1960; Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1967) 94 and Thomas MacAlindon, *Shakespeare and Decorum* (London: Macmillan, 1973) 145.
- ²⁶ Kenneth Muir, ed. *Macbeth*, The Arden Edition of the Works of William Shakespeare (1951; London: Methuen, 1984) lxxv.
- ²⁷ Willard Farnham, *Shakespeare's Tragic Frontier: The World of His Final Tragedies* (1950; London: Cambridge UP, 1963).