The Tragedy of Macbeth

Author: William Shakespeare (Copyright 1992 The Folger Shakespeare Library)

The One Who Would Be King

The Tragedy of Macbeth is a Shakepearian drama which tells the story of a Scottish nobleman who wants to become king of Scotland. Even though the current ruler, King Duncan, awards Macbeth a new title and land because of his successes in battle, the latter is ruled by his ambition to become the over-all ruler and he plots the assassination of King Duncan. Macbeth takes comfort for his desires from the prophetic words of three witches whom he encounters. When he gets cold feet which prevent him from carrying his plan through, Lady Macbeth, his wife, persuades him to the rightness of his course of action, and she helps him in the practical implementation of the murder of King Duncan. Once Duncan is out of the way, Macbeth is fuelled by fears that Duncan’s sons, or his fellow nobleman and friend Banquo or his heirs will prevent his success. So he goes after these people and hires assassins to eliminate them as far as possible. He is not fully successful in this endeavour because Duncan’s sons escape to England and engage an army to combat Macbeth. Macbeth also finds himself fuelled by tremendous guilt for his actions. The ghost of Banquo haunts him. He finds neither rest nor peace and Lady Macbeth experiences similar episodes of inner turmoil and dismay. She finally commits suicide. Macbeth, though feared, is deserted on all sides. An invading army battles him and he is killed and he has his head cut off by the Scottish nobleman Macduff, and Malcolm, a son of Duncan, ascends the throne of Scotland.

Macbeth and the Scriptures

There are numerous Scripture references to both the Hebrew Scriptures and the Christian Scriptures throughout the play. These are easily accessed through internet search engines, and several links are given at the end of this piece. Here are some examples:
The Temptation of Jesus.

Banquo issues a warning. “The instruments of darkness tell us truths, Win us with honest trifles, to betray’s In deepest consequence – “ (Act 1.3.123-4) This finds an echo in the way Satan tempts Jesus with words of Scripture when Jesus is on retreat in the desert. (Matthew 4, Mark, Luke)

Jesus and Judas at the Last Supper

Macbeth remarks. “If it were done when ‘tis done, then ‘twere well It were done quickly. (Act 1.7.1) In John 13:27 we find Jesus saying to Judas “Be quick about what you are to do.” (New American Bible. Catholic Edition)

Jesus and Pilate

Lady Macbeth remarks to her husband after the murder of King Duncan. “Go, get some water and wash this filthy witness from your hand.” (Act 2.2.58) “Pilate called for water and washed his hands in front of the crowd, declaring as he did so, ‘I am innocent of the blood of this just man. The responsibility is yours.’” (Matthew 27:24)

The Place where Jesus was Crucified

There is a reference to Golgotha to describe the way in which Macbeth and Banquo bloodily put down the enemies of Duncan at the outset of the play.

Blood and guilt in Isaiah

Lady Macbeth: “Here’s the smell of blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand.” (Act 5.1.46-47) In Isaiah 59 we find: “It is your crimes that separate you from your God. It is your sins that make him hide his face so that he will not hear you. For your hands are stained with blood, your fingers with guilt. (Isaiah 59:2-3)

The Temple as a Sacred Building

Macduff: “Confusion now had made his masterpiece. Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope The Lord’s anointed temple and stole thence the life of the building.” (Act 2.3.76-79) In the Hebrew Scriptures we find that the Lord “anoints” the kings – King Saul, King David, King Solomon. But the place that King Solomon built to house the ark of the covenant – the Temple – is also anointed by God so that God is thought to dwell there in a special way. Further, the image of the Temple is used as a metaphor to refer to the dwelling of God within the human person. “You must know that your body is a
Temple of the Holy Spirit, who is within.” (1 Corinthians 6:19) We find this highlighted in the wordplay of Jesus in his interaction with the local leaders in the episode of the clearing of the Temple. (John 3:13-21) Jesus promises that even if the Temple is destroyed it will be rebuilt in three days; the leaders are incredulous thinking that he is referring to the physical building whereas he is in fact referring to his own being. A further echo in these lines is located in the Gospel accounts of the resurrection when it was put about that the body of Jesus had been stolen from the tomb by his followers. (Matthew 28:13)

Remorse Without End

Before he murders King Duncan, and his two guards, Macbeth is filled with fear and loathing at the prospect of what he is about to do. He wants to draw back from it; he tries to draw back from it. To Lady Macbeth he forwards the argument that King Duncan has in fact been good to him lately. Yet he finds himself surrendering to his “vaulting ambition”. (Act 1.7.27) He allows himself to be persuaded by the arguments put forward by Lady Macbeth. Even prior to committing the murder he is hallucinating. He sees the knife that is to be the weapon already covered in blood; he forsees sleepless nights filled with images of howling wolves and ghosts and witches as he envisages a horrific and uncontrollable post traumatic stress disorder. (Act 2.1.44-74)

But it is after Macbeth does the deed that the psychological pressure really rachets up, and he is unable to contain his anxiety. He is unable to utter the word “Amen” (Act 2.2.39) in response to the prayers of the guards. He hears a voice that tells him that he will never sleep again. “Macbeth does murder sleep.” (Act 2.2.48) He is unable to return the bloodied daggers to the scene of the crime because it is so horrible and he leaves Lady Macbeth to do so. He thinks he will never be able to rid himself of the blood on his hands. (Act 2.2.80). Every noise unsettles him. (Act 2.2.76) He absolutely wants to deny that he actually did this... that this is him. “To know my deed ‘twere best not know myself.” (Act 2.2.93)

“Had I but died an hour before this chance, I had lived a blessed time; for from this instant There’s nothing serious in mortality. All is but toys. Renown and grace is dead. The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees Is left this vault to brag of.” (Act 2.3.107-112)
But besides the anxiety in remorse, Macbeth is also filled with the anxiety of paranoia. This leads him to compound his crimes. Trusting in the “new age” prophecy of the witches he employs mercenaries to kill Banquo and his son Fleance. Fleance escapes, but Banquo is murdered and his ghost shows up to haunt Macbeth at a banquet to celebrate Macbeth’s ascendancy to the throne of the Scotland. (Act 3.4) Macbeth’s reaction is to descend into further violence and to kill the family of Macduff, a potential rival. Faced with the nervous breakdown and suicide of Lady Macbeth and desertion by his supporters, Macbeth collapses into a dark state of nihilism…a state of depression without relief, without hope, without any possibility of transformation, without meaning.

“I have lived long enough. My way of life
Is fall’n into the sere, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have, but in their stead
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath
Which the poor heart would fain deny but dare not. “ (Act 5.3.26-32)

“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.” (Act 5.5.23-7)

Now unlike other Shakesperian protagonists Macbeth does not take his own life. He decides to fight in battle, and he is killed. But he goes there knowing that his end is coming since the prophecy of the witches is being fulfilled against him on all counts. In his ending there is no up-beat.

When he is told about the mental troubles of his wife Macbeth addresses her doctor.

“Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuffed bosm of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart?” (Act 5.3.50-55)
The Response of Christian Anthropology to the Macbeth dilemma.

Is there a Christian response to Macbeth’s question? How do faith traditions respond to the woes of life – whether self-inflicted or caused by circumstances beyond our control? Faced with the final tragedy of his decisions, what does the Christian thinker have to say to Macbeth? Is there an alternative way of seeing life than the one conveyed by Macbeth when faced by the hangman’s noose?

Henri Nouwen has written a beautiful little book on Rembrandt’s painting “The Return of the Prodigal Son.” In this work Nouwen lays out an alternative response to the heart of darkness. He does not in any way downplay the depth of the darkness in the tunnels that we can create for ourselves, the spiralling fantasies of false dreams and false hopes, the hardening of hearts that trap us in the prisons of our possessions and our status in the world, the vanities that capture our imaginations. Nouwen invites us to look at the painting; to allow the painting to speak its language. Then we can turn to the text of the Scriptures itself and read the parable of the Prodigal Son in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 15:11-32), and allow the text to seep into our minds and souls and imaginations.

Rather than careen off into further acts of terror, if Macbeth could enter the reality of this narrative, he would find himself shocked into seeing things from a completely other point of view. Where sin abounds, grace doth the more abound. (Romans 5:20) Somehow there is a possible step in the midst of darkness where we are able to come to our senses, or where we are allowed to come to our senses, or where we decide to come to our senses. “Then he came to his senses…” (Luke 15:17) We realize we have to journey back ways. What a humiliation! To journey backwards? There is no inevitability about the taking of this step. But we can do it. Humans have done this over many generations. We have to rewind the tape as it were, though one knows it is impossible to put Humpty Dumpty back together again because the deeds are done, the blood has been spilt, lives have been sacrificed. The Prodigal Son story points to that possibility – that we can sit in rock bottom, in the horror of our situation...so far away from home, from the innocence of childhood, from the gentleness of a mother’s affection and a father’s caress, so psychologically distanced from our original state of spontaneity and goodness, so wounded and damaged in the depths of spirit and perhaps body that there is no hope...and yet we can rise (who knows by what unseen power or grace) and we can go back.

We go back. We go back with reduced expectations. It is just that we have discovered a tiny glimmer of hope that our wounds can be stenched perhaps somewhat, that the pain could be dulled a little. Maybe, we think, in that space of original blessing some possibility of relief resides. We go towards that space, but before we get there something extraordinary, which is
outside of our expectations, takes place. We find ourselves clasped around the shoulders. Not the clasp of handcuffs. No, it is the clasp of an embrace, an embrace that is completely out of this world yet which reaches into our world, an embrace that is utterly transformative, that is utterly indescribable, that is utterly freeing, that is utterly moving, that causes butterflies of gentle joy to play about within one’s stomach, that causes tears of profound feeling to pour from the eyes and to tear open one’s heart. We find ourselves wearing the robe of such deep consolation and peace that we are transported into a different and new horizon of endless, depthless gratitude. The experience of St Paul. The experience of St Ignatius of Loyola. The experience of the woman at the well in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John. The experience of countless humans down through the ages. This could be the experience of Macbeth.

Christian Anthropology is grounded in the dynamic of the Paschal Mystery of the life, suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus. He came from God. He brings us to God. He enters entirely into our domain. He takes on the worst of our foolishness and prejudice, the smallness of our minds, the warped complexity of our desires, the words that bite out of fear, pride and anger, the violence and abuse built up through generations of oppression and abuse. The craving for freedom that is propelled out of Macbeth, Jesus offers this. In the way of the Cross, in the words from the Cross, in the removal of the stone from his tomb, he offers this...a richness of abundance and mercy, the radiance of deep healing, the fullness of reconciliation. The splendour of God’s love, the immensity of God’s CARITAS covers all, and makes all of us whole again.

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