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MACBETH AND THE PLAYERS

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PREFACE TO THE PAPERBACK EDITION

In July 1743 an eighteenth-century journalist wrote that the ‘action of a Just player is a kind of living criticism of a Dramatic Poem’. *Macbeth and the Players* attempted to demonstrate the sense in which this was true. Actors may become critics in one sense of the word, the second sense in which D. H. Lawrence uses it in *Psychology of the Unconscious*: ‘We can see with the endless modern critical sight, analytic and at last deliberately ugly. Or we can see as the hawk sees the one concentrated spot where beats the life heart of our prey.’ This second sense, which some actors of genius have possessed, is paradoxically inseparable from the act of creation itself.

When Flora Robson realized before any critic or scholar did that Shakespeare had concealed an implicit stage direction in:

To bed, to bed; there’s knocking at the gate. Come, come, come,
 come, give me your hand. What’s done cannot be undone. To bed,
 to bed, to bed. (v. i. 64–6)

this sense was at work. The line which gave the clue to the way in which Macbeth and his wife should leave the stage after the murder of Duncan was, ‘Come, come, come, come, give me your hand.’ When the knocking at the gate was heard, Flora Robson clasped Charles Laughton’s blood-stained hand in her own, now blood-soaked (‘My hands are of your colour; but I shame/To wear a heart so white’—II. ii. 63–4), to take him away, realizing that this was what Shakespeare must have intended, but as she clasped Macbeth’s hand—the imaginative life of the scene had so gripped her—she withdrew her own with an involuntary shudder; the blood was now actual enough, thick and clammy to the touch and there was an inexorable emotional logic at work. In the sleep-walking scene she re-lived the moment again: there was the same impulse to touch, the same shuddering withdrawal. What we have in this piece of business is the poetry of gesture which embodies and gives physical immediacy to the ironies implicit in the verbal poetry of Macbeth’s line. ‘The eye wink at the hand’ (I. iv. 52), ironies which reverberate throughout the play. What Flora Robson had opened, in that implicit stage-direction, was a secret

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door into the tragedy of dissociation, the attempt to divide the self which is at the heart of the play's meaning. This kind of critical insight which springs from the spontaneous creative unconscious, from the personality as a whole, is in a great player often the surest kind of insight.

I have in the book described such examples of criticism and creation, and left the reader to draw his own conclusions, not stated them myself. There have been, of course, examples of uncritical creation and un-creation as well.

The edition remains therefore as it was, with a few emendations shown to be necessary by some correspondents and reviewers, for which I thank them here again. I have not, regrettably, introduced interpretations after 1964; Trevor Nunn's wonderfully expressive production of *Macbeth* at Stratford upon Avon in 1976 would have been worth exploring, but it must await another book.

Monash University
1978

D.B.

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In this task of reconstructing and evaluating players' interpretations of *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth* I have been assisted by the players themselves. Sir Lewis Casson, Dame Sybil Thorndike, Dame Flora Robson, Miss Beatrix Lehmann and Mr Eric Porter talked of productions of *Macbeth* and gave me much valuable information. For this I am grateful. I wish to thank Mr Byam Shaw, who put his notes and his director's copy of *Macbeth* at my disposal, Mr Robert Speaight who discussed several productions of *Macbeth* with me, Sir Alec Guinness and Sir John Gielgud for their letters, which helped to answer some of my questions.

A study of this kind necessarily owes much to the work of scholars in many fields. I found the scholarly excavations of Professor A. C. Sprague, Professor Alan Downer, Dr Bertram Joseph and Dr Kalman Burnim in my own field indispensable. Mr Nash of the Gabrielle Enthoven Collection and his staff, the staff of the British Museum, the staff of the Shakespeare Memorial Library at Stratford, Miss J. Aylmer of the British Theatre Museum, Mrs Jane Nicholas of the British Council, Mrs Mary Salas and Mrs Norma Bolton of the English Department of Monash University helped to make my way smoother.

I must record a special though not fully definable debt of gratitude to Professor Geoffrey Bullough of King's College, University of London. To Professor W. A. Armstrong, whose help cannot be measured, and whose suggestions were of the greatest value when this book was being written as a Doctoral thesis at King's, I am particularly indebted. To the editors of the Cambridge University Press, who presided over the transformation of *Macbeth and the Players* from thesis to book, and Dr Geoffrey Hiller of Monash, I owe much again.

To my wife, who helped to keep the book alive at all times, I dedicate *Macbeth and the Players*.

D. B.

Melbourne
1967

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I have tried in this book to test the proposition that players achieve special insights into a text, insights not normally available to critics and scholars, in rehearsal and during performance, as musicians perceive the richness of the music they play in the very act of playing. Scholars have supported the proposition. In the eighteenth century, Steevens wrote that to Garrick, a single glance of whose eye had long been the best expositor of Shakespeare's meaning, the cold annotations of the scholars must appear tedious.¹ And Professor Brander Matthews wrote early in our century of the importance of the tones of a player's voice, movements, gestures, subtle, creative, seemingly unpremeditated, which give life and body to character and illuminate a text. Brander Matthews thought that no commentary on *Hamlet*, of all the countless hundreds that had been written, would be a more useful aid to a larger understanding of the text than a detailed record of the readings, the gestures, the business employed in the successive performances of the part by Burbage and by Betterton, by Garrick, Kemble, Macready and Irving.²

Players themselves have believed in the truth of the proposition examined in this book, and some have been strong-minded enough to assert it. Macready wrote in 1844 that neither Goethe, Schlegel, nor Coleridge had revealed in all their elaborate remarks the 'exquisite artistical effects' he could see in *Hamlet*. Long meditation over *Hamlet*, like long straining after sight, had brought forth the 'minutest portion of its excellence' to his view.³ When, a few weeks after seeing his particularly expressive and illuminating interpretation of Marlowe's Jew in *The Jew of Malta* at Stratford-upon-Avon, I suggested to Eric Porter that actors achieve specific and particular insights into a text, the idea was so obvious to him it hardly needed asserting.

Yet while good actors certainly do reveal a text, bad ones

¹ See chapter 4, pp. 58–9.

² *Shakespearean Studies*, ed. Brander Matthews and Ashley H. Thorndike (1916), p. 6.

³ See chapter 8, pp. 156–7.

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obscure it. If players' interpretations of character on the stage have been creative and illuminating, they have also been unintelligent, unsubtle and purely external. The idea needed to be tested. A single text—*Macbeth*—was chosen to test it. Interpretations of the two principal characters in the play were singled out because it was the only way in which this study could be kept within manageable bounds.

As this book begins with the earliest known description of a performance of *Macbeth*, on April 20, 1611, the first task was one of reclamation and reconstruction. As I had to consider players' interpretations of character not merely in terms of ideas but in terms of concrete realities of expression, of speech, of make-up and costume, of gesture and movement as well, the task of reclamation was both laborious and exciting. The evidence, slight but important in the age of Burbage, grew in volume as the centuries rolled by. It was sometimes necessary to consider lighting, for make-up, costume and lighting are interrelated. At other times it was useful to consider décor, for properties and objects on the stage can affect gesture and movement. Evidence relating to the way in which actors spoke the words in *Macbeth* led to an investigation of the nature of the stage, for the structure of the stage and the size of the theatre affect the speech of the actor. The English stage itself, like other social institutions, has responded to the movement of history.

As the task of reclamation and evaluation went on, this study began to throw some light on the implications of old disputes. What, for example, was the style of acting at the Globe? Professor Alfred Harbage has expressed the view that the style of acting in Shakespeare's day, like the stage on which the actors worked, was non-realistic, 'formal' and not 'natural'.¹ It seemed to follow that, ideally, interpretations of Shakespeare's characters could not be subject to variation but would be fixed in an immutable, formal pattern. More recently, in *Acting Shakespeare* (1960), Dr Bertram Joseph has shown that while Shakespeare's art had formal elements, these elements had to be approached creatively by the actor: they had to be re-lived and re-created afresh. Dr Marvin Rosenberg, totally dissenting from any formalist view of Elizabethan acting, has attempted to show from internal evidence and descriptions of performances in Shakespeare's day that the

¹ See *Theatre for Shakespeare* (1955), p. 92.

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more skilled players at the Globe were not ‘marionettes’, but essentially natural and creative in their approach.¹

A great deal, of course, depends on the meanings we give to the words ‘formal’ and ‘natural’; their meanings alter from one period to another and from one culture to another; and they may become interchangeable. What is natural in one age may appear to be formal in another.

While these words may contain an intensely subjective element, at given periods in the history of the English theatre they have been used to describe different ways of interpreting Shakespeare on the stage. Quin’s approach to Macbeth was formal without success, while Cooke was thought to be natural, though not successful either. The great interpreters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth appear to have combined formal and natural elements in their art. Garrick, as Macbeth, cut Duncan’s throat with dignity,² and Byron, writing of Mrs Siddons, reports that among the actors he knew, Cooke was the most natural, Kemble the most supernatural, Kean the medium between the two. But Mrs Siddons was worth them all put together.³ Players like Garrick and Mrs Siddons were equally responsive to naturalistic and formal elements in Shakespeare’s art, while players like Quin or Cooke stressed one element at the expense of the other.

Shakespeare’s own language shows that a balanced approach would be most effective. Macbeth does at times speak a language removed from ordinary conversation, a language mysteriously grand and powerful:

. . . this my hand will rather
 The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
 Making the green one red. (II. ii. 61–3)

But there are occasions when Macbeth speaks colloquially:

I’ll put it on.
 Send out moe horses, skirr the country round;
 Hang those that talk of fear. Give me mine armour.
 How does your patient, doctor? (v. iii. 34–7)

Yet at all times his language seems in character, natural to him and fully alive.

¹ ‘Elizabethan Actors: Men or Marionettes’, *PMLA*, LXIX (1954), 919.

² See chapter 4, p. 80.

³ See chapter 6, p. 103.

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While writing this book, I have not at any point wished to dismiss ‘business’ and ‘spectacle’ from the Shakespearean stage altogether. Business can be functional and organic, as in the arming of Macbeth, or irrelevant and distracting, as when Rossi, playing Macbeth in Paris, confronted by the ghost of Banquo in the banquet scene, tripped over his cloak and somersaulted.¹ Spectacle has been associated with the commercial impulse, with the irrelevant and the decorative, taking our attention away from Shakespeare’s words. But it can in his own hands become dramatic and relevant. The stage blood in *Macbeth* is spectacular and yet profoundly functional.

The use of spectacle and business in Shakespearean production demands tact and discrimination and some idea of the total rhythm of the play. If one outlawed them, as John Wain clearly wishes to,² this would only impoverish Shakespeare’s plays on the stage and deprive them of necessary acts and rituals. The notion that Shakespeare’s words alone can speak for themselves on the stage is a notion that ought to be entertained only by those who see drama not as a thing done but as a thing read. When an actor speaks he uses tones of one kind or another, and tones imply an interpretation. It is impossible to speak Shakespeare’s lines intelligently and not interpret them.

What this study investigates is another approach to Shakespeare—the player’s. At a time when critics like Derek Traversi and John Holloway offer their different approaches to Shakespeare with little or no thought of the stage, it seems useful, if only as a mild corrective, to suggest that there is, and has been yet another approach to Shakespeare, one which could not help but keep the stage in mind.

¹ See chapter 10, p. 209.

² See *Encounter*, xxii (1964), 59.

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ABBREVIATIONS

- MLR* *The Modern Language Review.*
- N & Q* *Notes and Queries.*
- PMLA* *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America.*
- RES* *The Review of English Studies.*
- SP* *Studies in Philology.*
- TN* *Theatre Notebook.*
- Note* Unless otherwise stated, the place of publication of works referred to in this book is London.
- Texts* References are to Peter Alexander's *Tudor* edition of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare* (1951), unless otherwise stated.