

CHAPTER I

Introduction: ‘pity, like a naked new-born babe’

Macbeth is a fast-moving play, and as early as Act 1 the hero is faced with the terrible consequences of his actions. Although at this point the murder of the King is hypothetical, Macbeth is deeply unsettled by the prospect. This is made manifest in an intense soliloquy that could have led to a change of heart – we cannot know – had it not been interrupted by Lady Macbeth:

Besides, this Duncan
 Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been
 So clear in his great office, that his virtues
 Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongu’d, against
 The deep damnation of his taking-off;
 And pity, like a naked new-born babe,
 Striding the blast, or heaven’s cherubin, hors’d
 Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
 Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
 That tears shall drown the wind. I have no spur
 To prick the sides of my intent, but only
 Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself,
 And falls on th’ other.

(1.7.16–28)¹

Enter Lady Macbeth. Macbeth has worked himself into a position where he recognises the paucity of his motivation, and the magnitude of his victim’s merits. He is distracted from this meditation by the latest news. One thing that has often struck readers about this

passage is the extraordinary simile at its heart: ‘pity, like a naked new-born babe’. The resemblance proposed by the word ‘like’ doesn’t readily resolve into clarity after it is thought over. Once it seemed to me, for example, to be symptomatic of a special kind of spontaneity in Shakespeare’s language. Without imputing any actual lack of design in the creation of such a simile, I felt the effect was of an extravagant display of linguistic crisis. Reader and text, or perhaps reader and writer, find themselves at the edge of a precipice, where the abstract noun ‘pity’ clearly begs an appropriately energetic complement to ‘like’. The ‘naked new-born babe’ effects a kind of rescue, in that the line continues past the point of crisis, and the simile itself expands onward, accumulating more strange and vivid material. The obscure aspects of its meaning, and the vertiginous quality in the reader’s experience, remind us of the expressive problems underlying such moments of dramatic intensity.

In this book I want to explore another way of reading the challenges in this simile – its complexity, its apparent genesis, its consequences – and many other comparable incidents. In some ways the approach is a more natural one: I shall treat the effort and invention involved as something achieved by the character speaking the lines. In other ways, it is relatively abstruse, in that I shall be seeing this as a cognitive achievement, or at least as something with a close relationship to cognition, to the ways in which the brain works. The point will be to recognise that at moments like this, Shakespeare represents his characters facing severe mental challenges: understanding their situations, and responding to them, both require great effort. Their approach to these challenges is poetic and rhetorical. They use the resources of poetry and of rhetoric, which in Shakespeare’s time was a discipline giving rules for effective public speaking but also anatomising more generally the ways in which language could be made more effective.

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The similes and metaphors and other tropes that they use (all part of the realm of rhetoric) are the means by which they take mental command of the world, or fail to do so. Success and failure co-exist closely, as a character's inability to find a good way of conceiving a given situation may yet happen in language which strikes the reader as powerful, or beautiful, or indeed as possessing some sort of poetic insight or knowledge. Macbeth's 'pity' simile is a dazzling achievement from one angle, a tangled problem from another. As will be seen, there will be a tension between this approach and that of explication, and a consequent need to be precise about when something is deemed inherently and ultimately opaque, rather than just difficult to understand for a while before the pieces of a hermeneutic jigsaw are in place.

Shakespeare's characters' mental strains and stretches, then, must be conveyed in the strains and stretches of language: in the tropes of rhetoric. This book will pursue the connection between rhetoric and cognition, at times, beyond the boundaries of fiction, but it is in dramatic characters that it will most frequently and concretely be explored. To some extent this has become a problematic foundation for a critical argument. The concept of character was significantly battered over the course of twentieth-century scholarship.² More recently, Margreta de Grazia has weighed in against potentially anachronistic attention to the presumed interiority of Hamlet.³ From a variety of perspectives the stability and unity of fictional persons have been compromised by attention to the dynamic work of language, and the operation of literature on its recipients and their societies. Given that this book sets some emphasis on the viability of a character as something that a theatrical audience in particular interacts with, it is necessary to place the argument in relation to evolving debates about character – even if ultimately there will be an appeal to intuition. The arch-culprit of maligned character criticism

is A. C. Bradley, who, more than a century ago, produced some memorable targets for his opponents. Here he makes a remarkable set of suppositions about Iago:

That he [Iago] is supremely wicked nobody will doubt; and I have claimed for him nothing that will interfere with his right to that title. But to say that his intellectual power is supreme is to make a great mistake. Within certain limits he has indeed extraordinary penetration, quickness, inventiveness, adaptiveness; but the limits are defined with the hardest of lines, and they are narrow limits. It would scarcely be unjust to call him simply astonishingly clever, or simply a consummate master of intrigue. But compare him with one who may perhaps be roughly called a bad man of supreme intellectual power, Napoleon, and you see how small and negative Iago's mind is, incapable of Napoleon's military achievements, and much more incapable of his political constructions.⁴

Bradley is often very acute in the way he pieces together linguistic evidence, but here in an extreme form he demonstrates his tendency to treat literary characters as real people. 'Within certain limits' – within the fiction – the qualities described are evident, but the extrapolation required to imagine Iago on the same actual and metaphorical battlefields as Napoleon has come to seem perverse. Shakespeare's characters, like all fictional figures, have special limits to their capability; they are not born free to determine themselves; only with great wariness can one transpose their traits to other situations.

The Bradleyan tendency to synthesise, characterise, and conclude has suffered during subsequent theoretical turns in criticism. The central reference points from which observable characteristics emanate – the things which constitute an integral essence of character – seem vital to his judgments. This way of thinking has undergone serious challenges in psychology, and yet more so in literary criticism. It seems wisest not to count on there being anything somehow below or behind the matrix of language and gesture

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that makes up a dramatic character, and so the relationship between one character and another, between them all and the play's whole world of words, must be that bit more provisional. Some critics have noted the risk involved in this development. Tom McAlindon, for example, in a book lamenting the effects on Shakespeare criticism of post-structuralist thinking in particular, maintains that changeability and incompatibility of qualities – two things invoked at times against the possibility of a unitary idea of character – are (in, say, Cleopatra) facets of the very distinctiveness (indeed, unmistakability) that might be the strongest guide towards accepting the viable separateness of a person on stage, or in a book.⁵ As it happens, my use of the notion of character, and my identification of spoken words with fictional thoughts appearing to belong to these separable figures, does not arise from an antipathy to theoretical developments or their suspicions about the coherence and integrity of fictional selves. However, it benefits from salutary reminders from McAlindon and others that apparently old ideas have resources that need not be ignored.

Edward Burns has usefully constructed a more historically grounded 'characterology' that attends closely to theatrical technique.⁶ Christy Desmet's approach to the notion of character takes a rhetorical turn that is highly suggestive for my argument. She endorses the 'successful' attack on the coherent fictional self in proposing that we appreciate characters as sites where 'Rhetoric, Ethics, Identity' (her subtitle) interact.⁷ By seeing characters as orators she is ingeniously able to focus on their emphatic, individual, characteristic presences, while also seeing them as manifestly constructed out of language. For her, different tropes – hyperbole, metaphor, proverb – come to look a bit like ways of thinking about things, but not exactly like thought processes (which is essentially the position to which I am leading). Yet more recently, the issues

have been reappraised in a collection of essays entitled *Shakespeare and Character*. Here there is a rearguard in favour of taking on characters as such.⁸ The point is not to suggest that the tide is turning, but rather to note that the concept has the capacity to resist the tide, and to impress itself on readers and audiences nonetheless. William Dodd turns towards the ‘part-script’ – actors originally received manuscripts with only their lines and cues – as a source of inward coherence. Each character’s lines spent crucial time in close proximity to one another, separate from the play’s overall linguistic texture. Dodd looks at the evidence of revision in *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet* to explore ‘the scaffolding of the fictional interaction script’. It turns out to be ‘sturdy’: these plays are based, it seems, on a strong basis of interplay between these important units.⁹ Andrew James Hartley and Robert Weimann recognise that the body is the location of much characterisation; the visible physical boundaries of a body map onto – not simply of course – boundaries of personation.¹⁰ Leonore Lieblein proposes a more interactive definition, but still one that prizes presence and effect:

A dramatic character in performance is not necessarily either unitary or static. Rather, the early modern experience of dramatic character [as attested e.g. in Heywood’s *Apology for Actors*] suggests that it is a product of an intersubjective communication among the person personated, the actor, and the audience.¹¹

The collective impression gained from these essays is an encouragement to responding to what look like manifestations of character – as momentary, distinctive, emphatic, disoriented, challenged, and so on – in spite of doubts about treating them as having a sort of coherent reality to which the play is merely testifying.

A telling intervention on the question of character comes in an essay by Graham Bradshaw. This essay is important to the next chapter of this book as well, because it tackles the relationship between

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twenty-first-century literary criticism and late twentieth-century ideas about metaphor in related disciplines. In 'Othello in the Age of Cognitive Science' Bradshaw examines the hero's speeches and actions and asserts that 'the poetic-dramatic representation of what is happening to and in Othello goes far beyond what the speaker knows or understands'.¹² This is a telling corollary to the suggestions about *Macbeth* made above. What we are seeing is something that elicits the paradoxical preposition 'in' – something that seems to arise from a location underneath the costume, even though we know that under there we'd really find the actor. Invoking the actual inward – the person beneath the character – is not incidental.

Part of Bradshaw's argument bears on how these plays should be performed. If their great rhetorical discoveries are presented – in a realist idiom – as discoveries made by characters, then this is a misunderstanding. If an actor savours the concept of 'pity', and presents the 'like a naked new-born babe' simile as an apt and penetrating coinage (with self-congratulation combined with awe at the meaning unleashed), then this kind of rhetoric's proper depth, well below the surface, is lost. This works against the instincts of some performers, as is evident in Lisa Moore's account of playing Helena in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

Having a discovery onstage rather than filling the audience in is always the more interesting choice, so I let the Cupid argument occur to me piece by piece, and indeed Shakespeare makes the text build on itself there. He lets you figure it out like a math problem. Oohhh, *that's* why Cupid is said to be a child! Because in choice he is so oft beguiled!¹³

This character's cognitive richness is central to Chapter 4, so Moore is addressing the same metaphorical phenomena here. Shakespeare does not make it easy for actors, who have to find a way of relating to their words. So there is a potential tension between the thought

of something underlying an actor's performance, and the need to testify to that underlying process.

This comes into the territory explored by Palfrey and Stern's ground-breaking study of part-scripts, the system whereby actors received only their own lines and cues, so the play-text was typically distributed and divided rather than whole. As they conclude – this is the last paragraph of the book, and the last paragraph of the *Macbeth* section – the tension observed above, between the actor's wish to contain the character, and a critical feeling that some things cannot be spoken knowingly, is part of something extraordinarily creative:

The part is written by the playwright, but it is written *for* the individual actor; unlike the full script, it is effectively meaningless, or a ghost of intended meaning, without the actor to give it body. But then, as much as it is the actor's – owned by him, loved and nurtured into being by him – it is still never fully *possessed* by the actor. He cannot understand it all; he cannot know all of the things it alludes to; still less can he know all the matters it elides. Given the procedures and necessities of Shakespeare's theatre – various plays on at one time, limited private rehearsal, old plays unpredictably renewed – it is obvious that no amount of tuition to an individual actor could ever have filled in all the gaps merely in *his* part; when we remember that a play might have thirty or more parts, we should realise just how many 'surprises' were likely to remain open. In the moment of its enacting, this kind of theatre has to remain potentially a thing of sudden, vertiginous, serendipitous discovery. Given no way to avoid this fact, Shakespeare very simply revelled in it.¹⁴

Such 'discovery' could take a number of forms; and the metaphor of vertigo nicely captures the metaphorical levels at which Shakespeare's language may seem to operate. Speech recedes and reveals something lower down. Bradshaw's approach accepts character as the source of what is said and thought, but proposes that we understand the concept better if we realise that characters' speeches are not necessarily like people's speeches; in effect, they represent thoughts as well as words.

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The point of this book is to open up these implications. In the first main section – Chapters 2 and 3 – the relationship between rhetoric and cognition will be explored, with a view to suggesting that rhetorical solutions to cognitive problems are not the preserve only of literature. In fact, cognitive scientists, philosophers of language, and rhetoricians have all in different ways stated, or suggested, or implied that the characteristic patterns of key rhetorical tropes have an intimate relationship with the way thought works. They do so to the extent that metaphor, metonymy, metalepsis, and others may be treated not only as ways of conveying the results of complex thought, but also as maps of the way complex thought might actually happen, inasmuch as that can be asserted with any confidence. The outcome of Chapter 3's survey of rhetoric manuals will be a suggestion that rhetoric might be thought of as a kind of cognitive science, an attempt, often unwitting, to map the workings of the thinking brain. This will be given a particular context in the renaissance, since manuals of that period have what might be read as distinctive intimations of the thought that rhetoric could be a science of thinking even before it is a science of speaking.

The main reason to focus on this period is that, as Chapters 4, 5, and 6 will explore, the affinity between rhetoric and cognition is a Shakespearean affinity, so its role in contemporary writing has particular pertinence. These chapters will develop the affinity between cognitive crisis and rhetorical extravagance that can be seen in Macbeth's pity simile, and the implications of this affinity for the workings and significance of other plays will be at issue. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Cymbeline*, and *Othello*, many kinds of rhetorical working-out emerge. These characters' tropes enable them to summon up new ways of apprehending their predicaments: sometimes good ways, sometimes bad. Different characters manage different realities in different tropes. In the end, however, the point

will not simply be to domesticate the interdisciplinary suggestions of Chapter 2 in literary-critical concerns: characterisation, mimesis, language. Rather, the intensity of these Shakespearean examples will enable a further suggestion of the affinity between rhetoric and cognition beyond his works. This does not mean that Shakespeare seems to endorse the idea that thinking happens in the form of language, or anything much like it, which would fly in the face of the nuances of cognitive science and cognitive linguistics recruited by Chapter 2. Rather, it means that Shakespeare seems to explore how the resources of rhetoric – its special forms of language – reveal things about thinking. Characters can only think in words, or perhaps in the implications of their words. This puts a limit on the extent to which we can impute to Shakespeare any views on the philosophy of language. Indeed, if Shakespeare has something so grand as a philosophy of language, then it is an implicit one worked out in the course of speech and action. It is only such as can be reached by means of representing characters who are not people – and I do not mean this allegorically; these characters are wholly characters, and are not ciphers for human beings. Ironically, this non-limiting limitation enables a speculative fluidity that fuels my sense that the implications of his displays of cognitive rhetoric might be congruent with the explorations in cognitive science, cognitive linguistics, and the philosophy of rhetoric, that feature in the next chapter.

What really holds these things together is the heuristic aspect of mental tropes. Heuristic is a usefully supple term, in that it can relate both to the solving of problems and to discovery. Those interested in cognition have suggested that metaphor in particular is a way we can model the brain's efforts to solve problems and to deal with new situations and concepts, a connection that will be developed in Chapter 2. In Shakespeare, we see characters appear to solve their emergent problems by means of rhetoric. There is an important