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The Structural Function of the Banquet Scene in *Macbeth*

J. P. DYSON

T is by now a commonplace of Shakespearian criticism that Shakespeare, in his major works at least, usually focuses the meaning of each particular play in one or more key scenes. The implication is not that the total meaning of the play is to be found in these single scenes (indeed the great tragedies are so packed with meaning that it is difficult to see how anything could be left out of them), but that a firm grasp of the structure and meaning of such scenes is frequently the key which unlocks the structure and the meaning of the play as a whole. Another way of putting it is to say that exploration of these particular scenes usually leads one into exploration of the issues most relevant to an intelligent interpretation of the play. *Macbeth* has several scenes of great significance. Of these, the banquet scene (III. iv) is, in a number of ways, the most important structurally.

Before we examine the scene itself, perhaps a preliminary word is in order regarding the approach to *Macbeth* as a whole presupposed in this paper. To begin with an obvious point, *Macbeth* is a play about evil and damnation. The evil forces are embodied principally in the Weird Sisters and the Macbeths and in images (dramatic and verbal) of blood, disorder, mutilation, hallucinatory states of mind, vicious animals, etc.; the good is presented partly in terms of characters such as Duncan, Malcolm, and Macduff, but more "by means of imagery, symbolism and iteration".¹ The nature of the good and evil in the play is brought out powerfully in the contrasted passages beginning, "The raven himself is hoarse . . ." (I. v. 39ff.) and "This guest of summer / The temple-haunting martlet . . ." (I. vi. 3ff.).² The former is a prayer, an invocation to the evil forces at work in the play; the latter is a lyric, a symbol constructed to express many of the positive experiences in the play. The raven passage draws together most of the themes of the *Macbeth* evil: the bird of prey; the constricted, closed-in atmosphere ("battlements", "thick night", "blanket of the dark"); mutilation and sterility ("unsex"); hell; hospitality violated; hate—all expressed in verse full of stop consonants, heavy in movement. The latter passage clusters the positive *Macbeth* values around the martlet: values such as the medieval notion of hospitality ("guest"); religion ("temple-haunting"); heaven; procreation, family, and fertility; sleep and security ("pendant bed and procreant cradle"); the lightness and delicacy of the atmosphere, free-playing breezes, and airy heights—all caught in verse as

¹ Kenneth Muir, ed., *Macbeth*, Arden ed. (London, 1951), pp. li-lii.

² All citations from the text of the play are to the Arden edition referred to above.

light and delicate as the air it describes. It is out of the experiences formulated in each of these passages that the contrasted values of the play develop. This brief examination scarcely exhausts the meaning of these passages; one is reminded here of L. C. Knights's remark that "You cannot isolate a single significant passage of the poetry in *Macbeth* without finding that the whole play is involved in its elucidation."³ Suffice it to say that in the martlet passage we have a particularized and concentrated expression of order, fulfillment, and harmony; in the raven passage an equally particularized and concentrated expression of the complete perversion of order, fulfillment, and harmony. The concreteness of the two passages grows directly out of the contrasted experiences explored in the play.

It is impossible therefore to dissociate the banquet scene from the rest of the play. Any complete account of *Macbeth* must give full value to the opening scene, a dramatic and verbal image of the demonic "truth" that "Fair is foul and foul is fair"; to the raven-martlet contrast just described; to the kingship of Duncan expressed in terms of fertility and grace; to the murder scene—that tense excursion into the demonic and hostile universe; to the banquet scene which we will come to in a moment; to the witches' "banquet"; to the sleepwalking scene, in which the "sleep" theme and the unnatural forms of consciousness found in the play reach the climactic stage of their metamorphosis; and to Macbeth's final soliloquies, the last stages of damnation.

The importance of the banquet scene rests on two facts: First, in this scene, "speech, action and symbolism combine"⁴ to present analogously the whole movement of the play, the movement, both internal (to Macbeth) and external, from order to chaos; and second, it is in this scene that the whole play turns over, so to speak. Macbeth begins the scene still hoping to take his place as king; he ends it knowing that he has passed the crisis in his journey toward damnation. It is in this scene that Macbeth achieves the moment of tragic insight: the realization that he is living in an ambiguous world, a world over which he has no control, a world in which dead men return to "push us from our stools".

The scene falls naturally into **five sections or "moments"**, each with its particular significance. **The first** is from the opening of the scene to the entrance of the First Murderer; it is here that the basic symbolism of the scene is established, the intended direction indicated. **The second section** is the conversation of Macbeth with the Murderer, an ironic interlude in terms of what precedes and what follows. **The third** is the central part of the scene, the apparitions of Banquo's ghost; it is here that the play shifts its direction. **The fourth section** is the chaotic disorder in which the feast ends. **The fifth** is the aftermath in which it is clearly indicated that Macbeth is not what he was when the scene began; in a sense, the initiative has passed out of his hands. He knows now that he has moved out into the wasteland, the wasteland which can only end in "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow . . ." (V.ii.17).

So much notice has been given by Wilson Knight⁵ and others to the mean-

³ "Shakespeare: *King Lear* and the Great Tragedies", *The Age of Shakespeare*, ed. Boris Ford, rev. ed. (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin, 1956), p. 242.

⁴ L. C. Knights, *Explorations* (New York, 1947), p. 40.

⁵ G. Wilson Knight, *The Imperial Theme* (London, 1931), p. 136; and *The Crown of Life* (London, 1947), p. 215-216.

ing of banquets in Shakespeare that it is scarcely necessary to demonstrate why a banquet rather than, say, an audience chamber or a field is the setting for this scene. Banquets and feasting are traditional symbols of harmony, fellowship, and union. They are dramatic symbols of life-forces, a fulfillment of nature in a way that parallels the procreation and fertility of the martlet passage.

This emphasis is brought out in the language and gesture of the scene. Macbeth is the "host", Lady Macbeth the "hostess", surrounded by "all our friends". "Welcome" is the key word of the opening—it is used three times in the first seven lines of the scene.

Related to the notion of banquet as symbol of union is the notion of banquet as symbol of order and hierarchy. The opening line, as has been frequently noted, establishes this immediately: "You know your own degrees, sit down." The scene, in the context of the Elizabethan platform stage, obviously opens with a procession in which the lords are ranged according to "degree". The contrast between this and the later "Stand not upon the order of your going" (l. 119), is a leading motif of the scene. But we will leave elaboration of this until later.

The "sit down" of the opening line is also a pregnant phrase, because this scene is, symbolically, all about "sitting down". The throne is onstage and Macbeth attempts to occupy it; that is to say, he attempts to take his place in society, to act the part of king, and he simply does not get away with it. The murder of Duncan secured possession of the throne; the banquet scene is what we might call the formal or gestural attempt to enthrone himself, to become the *true* king. We have here a ceremonial, a social ritual at which all sit about under the aegis of "the good king". "The good king" here tries (with almost Scriptural overtones) to play the "humble host" and mingle with his people. (We are reminded perhaps of Henry V, "the good king" *par excellence*, mingling with his soldiers the night before Agincourt.) In this ordered hierarchy of "first and last"—a grouping according to rank or place, but all, nevertheless, within the unity of a family or state—Macbeth is determined to take his place ("Here I'll sit in the midst"). He will join his family and as a further symbol of their unity they will "drink a measure / The table round". The symbolism of the scene here both depends on and helps define for the audience an understanding of the nature of human society and its cornerstone, the king.

There are echoes of an earlier feast, that which preceded Duncan's murder:

The king's abed.
He hath been in unusual pleasure, and
Sent forth great largess to your offices.
This diamond he greets your wife withal,
By the name of most kind hostess, and shut up
In measureless content.

(II. i. 12-17)

This is what Macbeth aspires to be, but his crime has been one against degree. As kinsman, host, and subject, he has violated ties of blood, hospitality, and state. He has overturned the whole order of things; it is in this scene that his actions boomerang—the order of things turns on him.

The incident of the conversation with the Murderer is best understood in the context of the lines preceding and following it:

Lady M. Pronounce it for me, sir, to all our friends,
For my heart speaks they are welcome.

[*Enter* FIRST MURDERER *to the door*. . . .]

Macb. Be large in mirth, anon we'll drink a measure
The table round. [*Approaching the door*.] There's blood upon thy face. . . .

Macb. Get thee gone. Tomorrow
We'll hear ourselves again. [*Exit* MURDERER.]

Lady M. My royal lord,
You do not give the cheer.

The irony, scarcely needing to be commented on, draws our attention to the completely non-naturalistic technique used here by Shakespeare. From a naturalistic viewpoint, the coming of the Murderer (with or without blood upon his face) to whisper at the door of a state banquet is ridiculous. The contention that Macbeth has to find out somehow the results of the ambush before Banquo's ghost appears is, of course, valid, but does not explain why Shakespeare chose this particular way of doing it.

Perhaps a more profound explanation lies in the fact that Macbeth is here attempting to pass himself off as an inhabitant of the "martlet" world, the ordered and harmonious world of the banquet, while his real habitat is the "raven" world, the world of the First Murderer. He moves from the light of the banquet scene to the outer darkness of the conference because that is where he belongs. The Murderer appears because, in the *Macbeth* universe, the raven world must invade that of the martlet. As a result of the Murderer's visitation Macbeth is left "cabined, cribbed, confined, bound in / To saucy doubts and fears". Lady Macbeth's prayer for the descent of "thick night" (I. v. 51) continues to be fulfilled in the soul of her husband. For him indeed, "light thickens" and will continue to do so till in his isolation he will be "the crow" who "makes wing to the rooky wood" (III. ii. 50). This impingement of darkness upon light will be amply reinforced by the full-scale eruption of the demonic world, in the form of Banquo's ghost, into the brightness of the banquet. By the end of the scene, Macbeth will know for a certainty that the martlet world is for him a lost dream. Here Shakespeare sets side by side symbolically the two levels of reality before one makes chaos of the other. The total effect is sharpened by the irony of Lady Macbeth and of Macbeth himself—he who would be the Holy King is shown trafficking with the devil.

Macbeth is recalled by his wife to his part in the banquet charade. Called upon in his capacity as (would-be) king to fulfill his part in the "ceremony", he grants, God-like, "good digestion", "appetite", and "health". He is twice invited to take his place. There are religious resonances to the second invitation: "Please't your Highness / To grace us with your royal company." This is high courtesy turned unwittingly to sacrilege. Invited to take his place, Macbeth cannot—a major point of the play. Macbeth attempts to take his place and, quite literally, all hell breaks loose. The demonic wish for the presence of Banquo, the devil's attempt to play God, rebounds: Banquo's ghost appears.

The ensuing scene involves a double perspective, two levels of reality:

Lady M. This is the very painting of your fear. . . .
Oh, these flaws and starts,

Impostors to true fear. . . .
 When all's done,
 You look but on a stool. . . .
Macb. If I stand here, I saw him.

We are carried back to a similar dialogue:

Macb. There's one did laugh in's sleep, and one cried "Murder!"
 That they did wake each other. I stood and heard them.
 But they did say their prayers, and addressed them
 Again to sleep.

Lady M. There are two lodged together. . . .

Macb. Still it cried "Sleep no more!" to all the house.
 "Glamis hath murdered sleep and therefore Cawdor
 Shall sleep no more. Macbeth shall sleep no more."

Lady M. Who was it that thus cried? . . .

Macb. No, this my hand will rather
 The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
 Making the green one red. . . .

Lady M. A little water clears us of this deed.

(II. ii)

Lady Macbeth is mistaken. She sees reality, but of a limited sort. It is not she with whom we are identified but Macbeth. She thinks that reality is what you make it; the sleepwalking scene shows reality taking its toll. She is doomed to failure in her attempt here to impose the appearance of order on the chaotic reality. She has never lived at the same level as Macbeth, but we realize forcibly at this point that he has moved into an area where she cannot follow.⁶

We are here at the center of the play, the moment when Macbeth's world turns over, the moment of tragic insight.

The time has been
 That when the brains were out the man would die,
 And there an end. But now they rise again,
 With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,
 And push us from our stools. This is more strange
 Than such a murder is.

Appearance becomes reality; evil becomes more than atmosphere. Macbeth goes into nothingness and explores it until the end.

Susan B. Taubes has suggested that "Tragedy means that the relation between man and the noumenal sphere, upon which his survival and happiness depends, has become uncertain, conflictual, strained to the limit, and can be expressed only in terms of contradiction and paradox. . . . The noumenal world has become incomprehensible and full of menace and no longer assures him of an ultimate harmony."⁷

Macbeth had thought that he could achieve the kingship alone; he suddenly realizes that (in a metaphysical sense) there is someone (or something) else in

⁶ Irving Ribner in his "*Macbeth: the Pattern of Idea and Action*", *SQ*, VI, 2 (Spring 1959), 147-159, comes close to the point but psychologizes it. Macbeth does not merely live "more and more with his own *fears*" (my italics) but with the nothingness-reality into which he has entered.

⁷ "The Nature of Tragedy", *Review of Metaphysics*, VII (1953), 195.

control of things. The rules have suddenly been switched; he has been catapulted into a world of inverted values.

If we wish, we can psychologize this moment of insight and say that Macbeth is mad; or we can moralize it and say that his conscience has caught up with him. The fact remains, however, that it is not presented in either of these ways. It is presented as a fact, a vision of life.

One further point needs comment. D. A. Traversi speaks of "the ghost of Banquo intervening to occupy the place destined for Macbeth as king at head of his table. The apparition breaks in upon the show of loyalty and order which he seeks, by virtue of his usurped dignity, to command."⁸ Wilson Knight suggests that in staging *Macbeth*, the ghost be made to sit, at his first appearance, in Macbeth's place at the table. When it disappears, Macbeth is to take his place at table, then turn to see the ghost, in his second appearance, ensconced on the throne at one side of the stage.⁹ Knight's suggestion would undoubtedly be theatrically effective and the point that both he and Traversi are bringing out is a valid one, namely Macbeth's abortive attempt to gesturally assume the kingship. But it goes deeper than that. Macbeth does not say "push us from our thrones", but "push us from our stools". The line is not political; it is metaphysical. Macbeth, not as king but as man, suffers insight on the level of the universal. It is a perception not of having no throne, but of having no place at all in the world. This is what makes it tragic.

Here Shakespeare draws out what was implicit in the dialogue of the murder scene:

Macb. I have done the deed. Didst thou not hear the noise?
Lady M. I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry.
 Did you not speak?
Macb. When?
Lady M. Now.
Macb. As I descended?
Lady M. Aye.
Macb. Hark!

(II. ii. 14ff.)

The rhythm itself conveys the experience of finding oneself isolated in a universe suddenly turned hostile, a world of perpetual darkness in which "Good things of day begin to droop and drowse / Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse" (III. ii. 52), a world in which the only refuge is the death wish of

Better be with the dead,
 Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
 Than on the torture of the mind to lie
 In restless ecstasy. Duncan is in his grave,
 After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.

(III. ii. 19ff.)

This, it seems to me, is the turning point of the play, not Fleance's escape as some editors would still have it.¹⁰ A turning point such as Fleance's escape is

⁸ *An Approach to Shakespeare*, 2nd ed. (Garden City, N. Y., 1956), p. 169.

⁹ *Principles of Shakespearean Production* (New York, 1936), pp. 201-202.

¹⁰ Cf. for example, the Arden edition. In the footnote to III. iii. 18, the stage direction "*Fleance escapes*", the comment is simply, "The turning point of the play" (p. 91).

based on a mistaken notion of a reversal in Macbeth's fortune, a notion which takes reversal at the wrong level. The presupposition is that, if Fleance had not escaped, Macbeth would have been successful. But it is clear that in terms of the play as it exists there is no possibility of success for Macbeth in the sense of getting away with it. It is more a question of his perception of the direction in which he is actually going and has been going since his first appearance. The ghost of Banquo is the catalyst of insight, the message from the underworld which opens Macbeth's eyes to the new "reality".

The consequence of the ghost's visit is, of course, chaos—chaos presented verbally in Lady Macbeth's "You have displaced the mirth, broke the good meeting / With most admired disorder. . . . Stand not upon the order of your going . . ." and dramatically in the scramble of the guests for the exits, a vivid contrast to the stateliness and order of the processional entrance. The final twist of the knife is contained in the unwitting irony of the guests' parting remark, "Good night, and better health attend His Majesty!" "Better health" will never attend His Majesty and His Majesty now knows it. It is to the clarification of this lack of "better health" that the remainder of the scene is devoted. We are witnesses to the aftermath.

"It will have blood. They say blood will have blood", thinks Macbeth. Here by means of an old wives' tale, Shakespeare crystallizes an experience. Macbeth is in the process of discovering that murdered men are never dead to their murderers. He has penetrated to a world where nothingness has come to life; he has seen that which is menacing him.

Macbeth, we have said, is a play about damnation. This final part of the scene represents the mid-point in Macbeth's progression into hell—not a theological hell strictly speaking, but a metaphysical one. The murders are not presented just as crimes, which are against society, though society exacts its claims on Macbeth; not as sins in a theological sense—the question of where Macbeth is going after death is certainly not in the forefront; but as sins or sin in a metaphysical sense, a sin against the whole order of things. Macbeth's damnation is not expressed in social or moral terms; his punishment is not a sanction imposed. It is, rather, a formal consequence of his actions: by doing *this* you become *that*.

All the significant strands making up the vision of damnation embodied in the play are here reiterated and clarified. They grow out of what has gone before and are worked through until they reach their final modulations in the last act.

Macb. What is the night?

Lady M. Almost at odds with morning, which is which.

In this brief question and answer we sense again the rocking ambiguity at the heart of the play. This is a minor analogue of what seems to me to be the basic structure of the play. Further discussion of it will be postponed until the concluding pages of this paper in which an attempt will be made to place the banquet scene in relation to the over-all structure of the play.

A second question and answer follow:

Macb. How say'st thou that Macduff denies his person

At our great bidding?

Lady M. Did you send to him sir?

The tone of Lady Macbeth's reply underscores one aspect of damnation: emotional exhaustion. It is echoed by Macbeth a few lines later:

For mine own good
All causes shall give way. I am in blood
Stepped in so far that should I wade no more
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.

The key word is "tedious". Here, in terms cognate to the "thickening" motif of the play, is the feeling of draining vitality, the fulfillment of Lady Macbeth's earlier prayer to "stop up the access and passage to remorse" (I. v. 45); there is no longer any possibility of "compunctious visitings of nature". The growing impotence and frustration experienced by Macbeth are akin to that felt by a person dragging himself through heavy sand. There is but one way for it to end and that is in the total and final incapacity to react emotionally:

The time has been my senses would have cooled
To hear a night shriek. . . .
 . . . I have supped full with horrors.
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,
Cannot once start me.

(V. v. 10ff.)

In its final phase it is coupled with the nihilism of the death wish:

I'gin to be aweary of the sun
And wish the estate o'the world were now undone.
(V. v. 49)

The theme of damnation as isolation enters again: "For mine own good / All causes shall give way." Lady Macbeth will not be seen again until she walks in her sleep, alone in a world of her own, completely outside the reach of others—a bitterly ironic comment on her final statement here, "You lack the season of all natures, sleep." Macbeth, in his turn, proceeds on his own way; he has moved like "withered murder . . . with Tarquin's ravishing strides" (II. i. 54), and like the solitary crow, he "makes wing to the rooky wood" (III. ii. 51), until alone and "bearlike", "Tied to a stake", he "must fight the course" (V. iii. 1). He is deserted by all, even the doctor. From "Let them fly all", it is but a step to "I have lived long enough. My way of life / Is fall'n into the sear . . ." (V. iii. 22). Isolation plus emotional exhaustion—nothing becomes anything any more and everything becomes nothing. Macbeth is like a man sitting all alone in a room somewhere with a bottle knowing that whether he lives or dies makes no difference to anyone.

One final theme is reiterated in the concluding couplet of Macbeth's speech:

Strange things I have in head that will to hand
Which must be acted ere they may be scanned.

This is what Francis Fergusson sees as the underlying action of the play, namely, "to outrun the pauser reason".¹¹ There is a definite sense of "o'erleaping" in the play. It is as if the soul were trying to get ahead of something and stay ahead of it. It is the eye winking at the hand (I. iv. 52), the keen knife seeing not the wound it makes (I. v. 53), the "very firstlings" of the heart becoming the very firstlings of the hand—a self-division which gradually disappears into the pure

¹¹ *The Idea of a Theatre* (Garden City, N. Y., 1949), p. 147.

appearance of Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking and Macbeth's complete incapacity for fear and horror. Macbeth has moved from fear before his first murder ("If it were done . . .") to suppression of fear before his second ("To be thus is nothing . . .") to senseless slaughter ("We are but young in deed"). At the end of this scene he is almost obsessed, carried along by a quiet fixation similar to that of Lady Macbeth as she sleepwalks. His spiritual crisis has come and gone.

To place the banquet scene structurally in relation to the play as a whole requires a brief commentary on the over-all structure of the play itself. *Macbeth* is built on imaginative contrast governed by progression in the directions already indicated. Its structure produces and, in a sense, is the tension resulting from the exploration of opposed areas of experience, those which we earlier called for convenience the martlet world and the raven world. The contrast is not merely verbal or logical; it is not point for point. It is, rather, the exposure of the paradoxical facets of human experience, the one demonic, the other paradisaical.

The tension grows out of two contradictory progressions in the good-evil of the play. Macbeth himself moves from the martlet world (to which he never entirely belonged perhaps) into that of the raven while the play as a whole moves in the opposite direction from the world of the raven to that of the martlet. Macbeth attempts to mask as a good king only to be finally unmasked; Malcolm seems evil in his flight and attempts to mask as an evil king (IV. iii), only to be revealed as a good king. Macbeth becomes quickly identified with the "fog and filthy air" of the opening scene; the praise heaped on him rapidly vanishes; he wishes to "look like the innocent flower" while being "the serpent under't" (I. v); he moves on into a world where fairness and foulness are truly inverted until the evil with which he has become fully identified is unmasked: "I begin / To doubt the equivocation of the fiend / That lies like truth" (V. v); "Be these juggling fiends no more believed / That palter with us in a double sense" (V. viii). On the other hand, the play as a whole moves from the reversed values of the opening scene through the murder of "the gracious Duncan", past the king of England whose "sundry blessings hang about his throne / That speak him full of grace" (IV. iii) to the last act with Malcolm's "Your leavy screens throw down / And show like those you are." The climactic lines of the play's final speech cap the progression with their vision of order (reinforced by the religious resonances):

. . . and what needful else
That calls upon us, by the grace of Grace
We will perform in measure, time, and place.

The raven-martlet tension underlies the play structurally on all levels. It is the keynote to Macbeth himself. In his speech beginning, "Two truths are told . . .", the raven-martlet struggle can be seen not only in the contrasted ideas that flit in and out of his mind but in the very rhythm itself with its lurching and rocking: ". . . cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill . . . If good . . . and nothing is / But what is not."¹² It is this sort of imaginative contrast built into the character itself which provides an understanding of Macbeth, not realistic psychology.

The pattern of alternation is expressed graphically in the dramaturgy of the

¹² Knights, *Explorations*, p. 35.

last act. The scenes shift back and forth between the forces of good and the forces of evil, between the forces marching under the aegis of "the powers above" and those under the command of the "hellhound". It is only in the final scene that the forces join battle overtly (although for Macbeth the battle is already over; since his "Tomorrow . . ." he is merely a corpse waiting for someone to put him out of sight) and reach their ultimate dramatic resolution in the ascension of a new king "of Grace" to the throne.

In the light of all this, the structural function of the banquet scene should be sufficiently clear. It is the great watershed through which the action must pass; it marks the decisive change. It is the great dramatic symbol of order disrupted—the martlet setting (transposed by the tonality of State added to domestic) of harmony and union into which the raven world erupts in the form of the demonic visitation. It is the climactic moment in which the universe of the play turns over, the moment of insight for Macbeth. He has been moving further and further out of the martlet world into that of the raven, but it is only here that he perceives the nature of that which he has embraced. He has chosen nothingness; in the banquet scene nothingness reveals itself to him.

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⁶ **Macbeth: The Pattern of Idea and Action**

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