



Macbeth

Act I, Scene ii

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Exposition

Duncan's Predicament

Act I, Scene ii of *Macbeth* is the true prologue or what is technically called the exposition of the play. The audience learns about the state of affairs in Scotland. King Duncan is faced with a threefold danger, the open revolt of Macdonald, the foreign invasion of Sweno, the King of Norway and the secret intrigues of the Thane of Cawdor.

Irony

Duncan is now too old to lead his forces in person, but clearly commands the respect of his Thanes and is prompt to recognise their services; His praise helps to emphasise the nobility of Macbeth. There is dramatic irony in his resolve not to be further deceived by the Thane of Cawdor, since he will again be betrayed by the new Thane of Cawdor and moreover it is the transfer of the title to Macbeth that encourages his hopes for the crown. The irony is underlined by the Captain's proverbial observation: "So from that spring whence comfort seem'd to come, / Discomfort swells". This would not be apparent until the next scene, but there is a faintly ominous echo of the Second Witches' words ("When the battle's lost, and won") in Duncan's last line ("What he hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won"). Macbeth's winning of this title will lead to loss not only for Duncan but for himself.

Exposition

Macbeth's Valour

Macbeth with the help of Banquo saves him from this danger. This scene focuses our attention on Macbeth. It is Shakespeare's intention that the best in Macbeth should be first emphasized so that his ruin may be more tragic.

Battlefield Scenario

The scene changes from the undefined supernatural setting of Act I, Scene i to the urgent physical action of the battlefield. The ferocity of the conflict and the heroism of Macbeth and Banquo are conveyed through the excited interjections of the Captain and the elaborate descriptions (there are extended similes and frequent personifications) of fortune, valour and justice.

Macbeth's Heroics

Macbeth is “Valour’s minion” and “Bellona’s bridegroom”. This formal epic style gives his achievements and ideas heroic character, but in no way diminishes the realism of the account. It has primitive violence: Macbeth “carv’d out his passage” and without more ado “unseamed” Macdonald “from the nave to th’ chaps”, his sword “smok’d with bloody execution” and both he and Banquo seemed determined “to bathe in reeking wounds”. The scene is full of images of blood as is the whole play and the occasional broken lines convey the Captain’s own pain and weariness.

Is the Scene Spurious?

There are some critics who hold the scene to be spurious. The following are their reasons:

- The meter is rough and irregular
- The style is bombastic
- It is absurd to send a severely wounded soldier to convey the report

Responses to the Charge of Spuriousness

As regards the first point, we may say that the scene undoubtedly shows Shakespeare's earlier style. Dover Wilson pronounces the verse to be Shakespeare's and modelled on the Pyrrhus' speech of Hamlet. He also holds Middleton responsible for the metrical irregularities and abrupt transitions since the later had undoubtedly a hand in the Hecate scenes. Muir, however, explains the incoherence as due to the sergeant's physical condition.

Responses to the Charge of Spuriousness

As regards the second point, the report is set forth in stilted language as might be expected from a petty officer speaking in the presence of a king. Further, the style is full of Shakespearean phrases like “Disdaining Fortune” (l. 17), “rebel’s whore” (l. 15), “memorize another Golgotha” (l. 40), “What a haste looks through his eyes” (l. 47), “Confronted him with self-comparisons” (l. 55) etc. Thus the style is deliberately epic rather than tragic.

Responses to the Charge of Spuriousness

As regards the third point, it is dramatically effective that the news of victory should come from one fresh from the battle as the reeking wounds should visibly testify it and lends vividness and force to what might otherwise be an insipid tale of incidents happening off the stage.

