

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S
MACBETH

The Opening Scene

SHAKESPEARE'S STRATEGY

In the handling of the opening scene of his plays Shakespeare displays a good deal of artistic skill. His usual plan is tragedy is to begin with a short scene either full of life or stir or in some other way arresting. Thus having secured a hearing he proceeds to conversation at a lower pitch accompanied by little action but conveying much information.

SIMILARITIES WITH OTHER TRAGEDIES

This is particularly true of his masterly tragedies like *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. *Julius Caesar* begins with a crowd in commotion and when this excitement has had its effect on the audience there follow quiet speeches in which the cause of the excitement and a great part of the situation are disclosed. In *Hamlet*, the ghost appears and increases the action to such an effect that the dramatist can introduce a dialogue to explain the state of affairs at Elsinore.

IMPORTANCE OF THE OPENING SCENE VIS-À-VIS THE SUBSEQUENT ONE

The opening scene of *Macbeth* is even more remarkable for there is probably no parallel to its first scene where the senses and imagination are assaulted by a storm of thunder and supernatural alarm. This scene is only twelve line long. But its gripping influence is so great that in the narrative of battle (“Bellona’s bridegroom” etc) in the next scene, the artist can safely give us a conversation at a lower pitch exposing the best side of the character of the hero and the existing relation between the King and him. When this plan is adopted by Shakespeare, he generally keeps the hero for some time out of sight and makes other people talk about him so that we await his entrance with curiosity.

DELAYED ENTRY OF THE HERO

Macbeth is unique in this respect. Its hero has been the most inspiring figure - through invisible presence - throughout the first two scenes of the first act and as the opening scene has given him the first place in our thoughts we await his entrance with burning curiosity.

STRIKING THE KEYNOTE

Another practice of Shakespeare is that the opening of his tragedies strikes the very keynote of his plays and leaves clues and hints to enable the audience to understand the ensuing events and carry us into the very heart of the tragedies. The poet's object is to raise the mind at once to the high tragic tone that the auditors might be ready for to witness the precipitous consummation of guilt in the early part of the play.

A C BRADLEY ON THE OPENING SCENE OF *MACBETH*

“We receive at the very outset a strong impression of the force which is to prove fatal to the hero’s happiness. When we see the hero, the shadow of fate already rests upon him. We are made conscious at once of some power which is to influence the whole action to the hero’s undoing.”

THE SUPERNATURAL

In *Macbeth*, we see and hear the witches (in *Hamlet*, the Ghost) often. Again, at one or more points during the exposition, this feeling is reinforced by some expression that has an ominous effect. The first words we hear from Macbeth: “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” echo - though he knows it not - the last words that we heard from the witches: “Fair is foul and foul is fair”. In other words, the witches introduce that atmosphere of mystery horror, guilt and evil which hang as a pall over the whole play.

MORAL TOPSY-TURVY

Things indeed have gone topsy-turvy. We find ourselves in a world of moral anarchy symbolized by the withered beings to whom “foul is fair”. This is the sort of world which the play enfolds; the world where “Good things of day begin to droop and drowse” (III, ii, 52). This reversal of normal moral values is the central principle of Satanism; as Satan says in *Paradise Lost*: “Evil be thou my Good” (*Book 4*, line 110).

THE WITCHES AND THEIR WORDS

The rhymed tetrameter verse of the witches - verse in which each line of seven or eight syllables is divided into four metrical feet with its emphatic trochaic rhythm where the accent falls on the first syllable of each foot - sounds like an incantation and contrast throughout with the blank verse spoken by the other characters.

THE AMBIVALENT ARTICULATIONS OF THE WITCHES

They can foresee the future - they evidently know what the outcome of the battle will be and their enigmatic speech suggests that they are in touch with knowledge denied to ordinary mortals.

THE AMBIVALENT ARTICULATIONS OF THE WITCHES

We do not know what battle is taking place or in what sense it will be lost and won. This might mean merely that the vanquished will lose and the victors will win. But the witches' condemned phrase implies something more than this obvious fact and the close connection of winning and losing might suggest that the two are indistinguishable; that what seems to be a success is really failure as Macbeth discovers in the course of the play. They already have an interest in him and he is thus first introduced to the audience in a powerful if undefined atmosphere of evil.

THUNDER, LIGHTNING AND RAIN

As the moment of their first appearance is significant, so is the scene. They appear in a deserted place, with thunder and lightning. It is the barren place where evil has obtained the mastery of things and the implied storm (created like that in *The Tempest* by incantation) not only harmonizes with them and their rites, but becomes a symbol also of the present convulsion in Duncan's kingdom and of the still greater convulsion to come (a precisely similar effect is gained by the storm scenes in *King Lear* and *Julius Caesar*).