
'MACBETH' AND THE CONCEPT OF MULTIPLE FUTURES

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"Time and the hour runs through the roughest day" says the Thane of Glamis in Act I Sc. 3; time, and the nature of time, is of vital importance in any attempted comprehension of Shakespeare's 'Macbeth'. The central dilemma of the play is intimately bound with time, and the relationship between the Present and the Future may be regarded as the mainspring of the plot.

Before discussing this central dilemma it would be best, however, to establish logical notions concerning the nature of time, because indolence, custom and carelessness often combine to produce treacherous conceptualisations composed of half-truths and inaccuracies. Shakespeare's mind was obviously and remarkably free of such habitual or sloppy thinking, and it is therefore up to the intelligent reader to clarify his ideas if he is to share at all vividly the dramatist's vision.

Although Einsteinian physics have furnished us with new terminology such as 'continuum' and 'the fourth dimension' by which to discuss time, it cannot be said that this has altered, to any significant extent, the popular vision of time which has been extant for centuries.¹

To the common mind, time is some kind of straight line having three significant points called Past, Present and Future respectively, along which human life progresses in one direction only. Although (up to the present) this irreversible directionality seems indisputable, the other elements constituting the popular vision outlined above are at worst inaccurate and misleading and at best simplistic.

It is first of all apparent that we always exist in what we call 'the Present'. If the concept of Time as a straight line may be temporarily

1. The concept of linear Time was born with Christianity, since the Creed does not admit of recurrence and everything in it is aimed at a particular point: The Last Day, the end of the world. Galileo Galilei, in his *Discussions and Demonstrations* (1638) promoted the theory that time was a geometrically straight line and not a circle. Isaac Barrow (1630 1677) the English mathematician, also considered it as an essentially mathematical concept having the sole attribute of length. It is of uniform parts, and may be regarded, as either the addition of contiguous points or the progression of a single point. See Johannes Von Buttlar, *Journey To Infinity*. (Glasgow, 1975).

utilised for the sake of clarity, then the 'now' is somewhere along the line and the Past would consist of discarded 'nows'. A minute lying in the Future is transformed, by the processes of life and consciousness, into a minute of the Present; when these particular sixty seconds are lived and experienced they become part of our Past. We cannot, however, re-experience them, nor can we experience prematurely others which lie in the Future. One of the basic laws of Nature apparently states that we are prisoners of the Present.

One other obvious fact concerning the subdivision of Time into these three parts is that only the Present may be called a point along the 'line' of Time. The Past has a magnitude it shares (one hopes) with the Future, but not so the Present. Even as we say 'now', that 'now' belongs to the Past. This may be trite, but it is nevertheless necessary since it enables us to conceive Time as being composed of two relatively large areas called 'Past' and 'Future' with a point (possessing, by definition, no magnitude) called 'the Present' dividing them.

Although Past and Future share a kinship of magnitude, they are not at all alike in nature, and it is the Present and the Past which exhibit similarities of nature. We are in more or less complete possession of the salient facts of our Past (what we call memory) and we usually comprehend what we may term 'the present situation'. Not so the Future, which is uncertain and unpredictable, more or less tantalisingly unknown.

If, once again, the over-simple conception of time as a straight line may be used, it should be observed that in spite of the delicate differences between Past, Present and Future, each point along the 'line' is bound to preceding and succeeding ones by causality. The Present is therefore the result of Past causes, as the Future 'is', broadly speaking, of Present ones.

The mysteriousness of the Future is due to the fact that it (the Future) relies, for its resolution into a particular Present, on two sets of causes, one known and the other unknown. The first set of causes is nothing else but our decisions, taken presently and intended to produce a Future situation.

Unfortunately, things have the habit of not happening according to plan, and this is where the second set of causes, the unknown ones, are seen to operate. These sets of causes may be collectively termed 'the random factor'² and they constitute the haphazard element in our life. They cause people to believe in good or bad luck, to gamble, or to believe in prophecy and fortune-telling. Divine Revelation aside, our acknowledgement of our ignorance and the helplessness of our plight

2. For a more detailed discussion of this random factor see Arthur Koestler, *Roots Of Coincidence* (New York, 1972).

must be one of the strongest roots of Faith and Religion. The random factor lies beyond logic or logical prediction. No amount of forethought could predict the (usually) banal slip-ups which could wreck any sophisticatedly-planned project. Only super-human or supernatural intervention may render the random factor scrutable, if, that is, one is given to trusting such 'voices'. It is already apparent that this discussion impinges directly on 'Macbeth'.

Before dealing with the play itself, one final and supremely important conclusion must be drawn and this concerns the question of whether it is at all correct to visualise time as a linear entity. Let us, for a moment, imagine a man walking not in a straight road, but in an ample square, traversing it. He will consciously avoid static obstacles such as lamps, benches or stationary groups of people. This would correspond to decisions taken wilfully and consciously concerning our future. Our hypothetical pedestrian cannot sit down and, previous to crossing the square, make a plan of it and chart an ideal route. Or he may, but he could not possibly follow that planned course. His hat may be blown off his head and he would have to chase it, or he may be called over by a friend. Rather than an ideal and pre-plotted line, his progress would be an unpredictable and meandering one, having only a general and indeterminate aim. The angles of deviation from the planned course cannot possibly be predicted since they result from the random factor.

There is no need to resort to complicated probability studies to infer that for each individual there exist at least two Futures: One wherein he realises his aspirations and one wherein he does not. Both are equally possible. These constitute two extremes, and to anyone occupying a point he chooses to call 'The Present', 'The Future' is not a single 'thing', but a complex of possible directions, much like the lines fanning out of the centre of a geometrical protractor.

This somewhat overlong preamble was necessary precisely because the Future and its nature is of central importance in Shakespeare's 'Macbeth', and the play requires the elimination of habitual simplistic assumptions concerning the terminology of Time which may be present because semantic tyranny causes the mind to 'swallow' ideas whole rather than to 'chew' them. Any reading of the play which ignores the fact that Macbeth has a number of possible futures to choose from is condemning the reader to a determinism which Shakespeare seems actually trying to eliminate from the universe of his play. The central pathos in 'Macbeth' lies in the fact that the protagonist is most of the time acting as a determinist in a universe based on free will, a pathos arising from the voluntary enslavement of the mind to a vision of the universe which is but an illusion. The tragedy lies in the belated confirmation of the fallaciousness of such a vision.

One complication which is raised by 'Macbeth' is that however much we empathise or identify with the protagonist we are completely separate from him. What sort of future was he envisaging and possibly striving for before his fateful meeting with the witches in I,iii? Was this in any way altered by the witches' words or was his aspiration consonant with their predictions, his resolve being strengthened by their words? Or, conversely, was his personal conception of the future so different that their words inflamed his mind precisely because they suggested a new world of possibilities?

The evidence offered by the text is quite conflicting. According to what we learn of Macbeth in I,ii, he is a brave, selfless man who has brilliantly engineered and executed the annihilation of two attacking forces. He was fighting for Duncan the man as much as for Duncan the king; he was safeguarding both the office and the person of the King. We are presented with a case of apparently absolute loyalty. Moreover, Duncan's own words in I,iv, 14-21 and 54-58³ confirm this, although we should keep in mind that Duncan is a poor judge of character (cf. I,iv, 11-14). Macbeth's own horror at the realisation that murder has come quite spontaneously into his mind after the witches' words is, however, indicative of a more disquieting possibility. The thought of murder is gratuitous at this point (I,iii) because the witches had merely told him he would become king, and Scotland's throne was elective, not hereditary. Although it is debatable how far Shakespeare understood the details of the elective process as expressed in his sources, one cannot ignore the possibility of his having understood them. Why then should he think of murdering Duncan? Could not Duncan die, as all men do, and thus make way naturally for Macbeth, who would be an obvious choice? The only reason for this could be that the idea of eliminating a weak king and clutching his crown had always swum as a half-formed monster in the murky depths of Macbeth's subconscious. He was as responsible for this as a sick man for his virus, but it was there, and it surfaced when the words of the witches stunned his conscious mind, allowing a primitive subconscious to assume control. The cover had been kicked off the hell-hole, and the demon came out.

One very important assumption which must be made at this point concerns the weird sisters' knowledge of the future. If the witches did not know the future they were certainly excellent psychologists. They must have known that if a man is told he has a promising future he would strive to realise it, gaining great energy in his attempt from his belief that nothing can go wrong because all is fated to succeed.

In a fatalist's universe there can be only despair or an assurance which is nearer to smugness than self-confidence. Macbeth exhibits these

3. All references are from the Arden Edition of *Macbeth* (ed. K. Muir), 1973.

extreme feelings throughout the play, according to whether any 'revelation' promises for him ease or duress.

If Macbeth seems to accept the witches' prophetic powers as a fact, it seems that Shakespeare takes pains to establish a universe which is not deterministic. Why else would he have created Lady Macbeth, or at least endowed her with her particular character? It is safe to assume that Macbeth, on his own, would not have killed Duncan; this is more of a platitude than a hypothesis, but Lady Macbeth is there to act upon her husband's will. There can be no will or willing in a deterministic universe; the fact that she has, as main function, the influencing of another mind's decisions implies that the universe of the play is not deterministic. It could be argued that believing in the possession of a will is the last illusion in a deterministic universe, but why should Shakespeare attempt to express such profound cynicism when irony (that issuing from the contrast between a protagonist who believes in a deterministic universe and a universe which is not) proves to be so much more fruitful and meaningful? There is every reason to believe that Macbeth's vacillation, his evaluation of possible courses (I,vii) and his acceptance of causality and morality are due to a transient awareness of things as they are. How can a man concern himself with morality in a deterministic universe? Heaven and Hell, as the terminal 'loci' of mortal life, are only possible through a premise of free will. Yet Macbeth reverts to fatalistic vision time after time, whenever his interpretation of the witches' words seems favourable.

What is far more interesting is his sudden refusal of determinism in III,i:

For them the gracious Duncan have I murder'd;
Put rancours in the vessel of my peace,
Only for them; and mine eternal jewel
Given to the common Enemy of man,
To make them Kings, the seed of Banquo kings!
Rather than so, come, fate, into the list,
And champion me to th' utterance!....." (III,i, 65-71)

The interpretation of the last two lines is crucial. Henry Cunningham, the editor of the original Arden 'Macbeth' which appeared in 1912, felt that Macbeth was here asking fate to be his champion in the defence of his royal title, but this is nothing but a pathetic misreading of the text. The more correct interpretation would be that wherein Macbeth challenges fate to 'combat', a fight to the finish (cf. "to th' utterance!" — from French 'a oultrance'). In prosaic terms, Macbeth is unhappy with the revelation concerning Banquo's issue and is going to attempt to change destiny.

How can a fatalist believe he can change his destiny? Should we understand that Macbeth forfeits his faith in a deterministic universe

when events seem to assume an unfavourable turn? Such a 'swing', from one extreme position to the other is in itself indicative of the instability of his character. The murdering of Duncan has unshackled him morally, and he has no certainties left.

Macbeth's belief in the wiches, re-affirmed time after time, indicates his fatalism. This fatalistic frame of mind, congenital or derived, aids his downfall immensely, because it hinders him from thinking. Had he reflected better, he would have realised that there is no such thing as 'a future' but in fact several possibilities.

It is now appropriate to consider what Macbeth failed to do, and review these possibilities.

Broadly speaking, Macbeth had three possible futures. It has already been pointed out that when the witches tell Macbeth he would become King, in I,iii, he immediately thinks of murder, and this, being completely gratuitous, implies the pre-existence of a temptation toward an illicit wrenching of Duncan's crown. This is not improbable, since Duncan was a weak king who could not even fight his own wars. Yet it would not have been amiss for Macbeth to harbour a desire for the crown. Scotland's throne was elective, and Macbeth, through his prowess and courage, would surely have been elected with general approval on Duncan's death. This does not amount to treason but rather to reasonable expectation. In fact, it would have happened had not Duncan forestalled everything by pronouncing his successor in III,iv, 35-39. This declaration made it most improbable for Macbeth to obtain the crown, because Malcolm was a youth. Although Duncan's intention was not spontaneous (he must have harboured dreams of dynasty, as Macbeth and Banquo do) his declaration is, and must be considered as, a random factor which alters the 'direction' chosen by Macbeth when he declares, in II,iii, 144-145:

If Chance will have me King, why, Chance may crown me,
Without my stir.

It is immediately apparent from the above that two Futures already seem possible:

- (a) One future is that wherein Macbeth becomes King; without illicit intervention after Duncan's natural death.
- (b) Another possibility is that wherein Macbeth kills Duncan after Duncan renders the first possibility most improbable by unexpectedly declaring his son successor.

There is, however, a third possible future which has to be considered as well. This is one wherein Duncan dies a natural death and Malcolm — or someone else — becomes King. Macbeth would live on as a possibly embittered man of high status whose royal aspirations have never been realised because his sense of honour and loyalty had restrained any dangerous passions. For such a future to become actual

there could be neither a Lady Macbeth nor the witches.

Macbeth's wife and his supernatural confidantes are the two factors which, apart from Macbeth's own character, influence most the realisation of his particular and unpleasant progress through life. Lady Macbeth belongs to those factors which one may call predictable. Macbeth is, unlike Duncan, not a poor judge of character, and could sum up his wife's character as accurately and succinctly as she could sum up his own in I,iv, 16-30. Had Macbeth been a deeper thinker he would have been able to assess how inflammatory his account of his meeting with the witches would prove to be for her, as well as to predict her reaction.

The witches cannot be classified thus; they belong, together with Duncan's declaration of his son's succession, or his decision to sojourn at Macbeth's castle, to the realm of the random. Naturally, their appearance was a pre-calculated event, pre-calculated that is, by 'someone'; but Macbeth could never, by any amount of logical thought, have predicted their appearance on the heath.

In plainer terms, the "supernatural soliciting" of the witches is unsolicited. The intriguing question is, at this point, what would have happened had the witches never appeared. We have to assume that in such a case the dormant (or subconscious) ambitions of the Thane (and his wife) would never have 'awakened'. Which, then, of the three 'Futures' considered above would have been most probable? The first possibility, we may recall, is that wherein Macbeth becomes king without resorting to murder. This was probable, except for Duncan's declaration about his successor. This is apparently unconnected with the appearance of the witches, and may or may not have taken place irrespective of them. This 'future', then, is only possible, and not probable, depending not on Macbeth but on Duncan.

The second 'future' was that which is actually realised in the course of the play, i.e., the accession to the crown through murder. Without the appearance of the witches this would have been most improbable. There would have been no stimulus to trigger off such violent passions in the Thane and his wife.

The last 'future', that wherein Macbeth never becomes king because Malcolm succeeds his father is, of course, the most probable one, since as has been pointed out earlier, Duncan's decision to appoint his son successor was sudden in its declaration, not in its formation. It amounts, after all, to a neat piece of legal loopholing by which the elective procedure is rendered inoperative. Added to this is the fact that it was customary for kings to resort to nomination. Premeditation is always present in cases of such great import. It is safe to assume that Duncan would, in any case, always have declared his son successor to the throne. In other words, the 'future' wherein Macbeth never becomes

king was always the most probable one, all things remaining equal.

This throws much light upon a vexed question which is not, however often put: did the witches really know the 'future'? This is not the same as to ask whether they were human or supernatural. I have never harboured any doubts about Shakespeare's intention to depict them as creatures of the Devil. Their provenance is clear. But this raises another question: Does the Devil (as conceived by Shakespeare) know the 'future'? Not necessarily, it seems, in 'Macbeth'. What the Devil seems to possess is not prescience but science, or intelligence.

Macbeth must have known that it was most probable that he would never become king and must have resigned himself to it because it was so probable. He had his ambitions but he kept them under tight control. Granted this, at the precise moment when the witches announce to him that he would become king they must have been lying. As things were up to that point he would not have become king because Duncan had already intended his son to succeed him. Because the lie was palatable Macbeth believes it is the truth, and acts fatalistically to make it come true. The Devil does not know the 'Future': he only has to work at making the one he wants to happen. The Devil, indeed, "lies like Truth"!

There is no doubt that the witches constitute the most influential element of the play, since their unexpected appearance sets off a train of events which causes the most improbable of three possible futures to be realised. Because their words are attractive he gives them credence, and reneges his faith in the ennobling concept of Free Will. Out of this original sin, which transforms him into a pagan, issue all the other more obvious ones. In his mistaken belief in a unique Future lies the seed of his tragic end, and Shakespeare again demonstrates how fatal it can be to confuse appearance with reality.