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Two Notes on "Macbeth"

Translating many years ago Shakespeare's *Macbeth* into Croatian I came across some difficulties in the text of the play which, I venture to suggest, have never been satisfactorily explained. Here I wish to submit to the consideration of Shakespearian scholars, as well as to that of theatrical directors and actors, my attempt to interpret two famous passages of the play in a way which differs considerably from the generally accepted interpretations.¹

I

What hands are here? Ha! they pluck out mine eyes.

In Act II Scene 2 of *Macbeth*, after the murder of Duncan, when Lady Macbeth has left the stage to take the daggers back to the king's chamber and to smear the sleepy grooms with blood, Macbeth is left alone on the scene and, after a brief tense silence, loud knocking at the castle gate is heard. Macbeth is dismayed and exclaims (ll. 56—57):

How is't with me, when every noise appals me?

What hands are here? Ha! they pluck out mine eyes.

I cannot agree with the commentators who all, as far as I know without exception, interpret that Macbeth in the second line of the above quotation is referring to his own blood-stained hands. Against this interpretation I should like to put forward the following arguments:

¹ This is an expanded version of a paper read, under the title "Some Marginal Notes on *Macbeth*", at the Fifteenth International Shakespeare Conference held at the Shakespeare Institute, Stratford-upon-Avon, 27 August to 1 September 1972. A summary of the paper was published in the *Report* of the Conference (p. 23).

1. If Shakespeare had wanted to convey that Macbeth is thinking of his own hands, he would have probably written "What hands are these" and not "What hands are here" as he has obviously written. But even had he written "What hands are these", the sentence would not necessarily apply to the hands of the speaker. And as for the phrase "What hands are here", I instinctively feel that it cannot possibly allude to Macbeth's own hands.

2. Earlier in this same scene (l. 20) Macbeth had noticed his own bloodstained hand or hands and exclaimed: "This is a sorry sight". If he has already seen his bloody hands, why should he now (in line 57) be surprised to see them, as if he had never seen them before and as if he were looking at them for the first time? The late John Dover Wilson, commenting on this line in the Cambridge New Shakespeare edition of the play and trying to get out of the difficulty, and a difficulty it certainly is, suggests that Shakespeare had here forgotten the earlier line! According to him it seems that Shakespeare could have easily done this because the phrase "This is a sorry sight" is divided from "What hands are here" by 37 lines. I am afraid I cannot find this explanation convincing. Furthermore, in line 57 there is nothing to suggest that the hands, no matter to whom they belong, are bloodstained.

3. It seems to me that the sentence "They pluck out mine eyes means exactly what it purports to mean and not metaphorically "My bloodstained hands offend my eyesight" as most commentators interpret. If the phrase, then, has a concrete meaning, why should Macbeth pluck out his eyes with his own hands? Besides, on the stage the business accompanying the quoted line would look very strange indeed. The fact that in connexion with this line many commentators quote Matthew XVIII, 9 ("And if thine eye cause thee to offend, plucke it out, and cast it from thee") does not help us very much. I find the reference to the New Testament in this context rather misleading.

4. As a contrast to these two spectral hands, immediately after this line Macbeth twice mentions only one concrete hand of his own:

*Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand?*

And replying to his own question, as if anxious not to leave any doubt that he is speaking of his own one hand, he continues:

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

I wish to stress the point that Macbeth is here speaking of his one hand, and that two lines previously he had mentioned two hands which, I venture to suggest, are not his own. I cannot agree with Harry Rowe, quoted by H. H. Furness in the New Variorum edition of the play, who finds a different and not very satisfactory way out of this difficulty. Commenting on the first line of the above quotation, he says: "There is something very beautiful in Macbeth's sudden transition from both hands to the right hand that had done the bloody deed". Nor do I see anything "very beautiful" in this.

Despite the fact that Lady Macbeth (in line 11) had spoken of the grooms' daggers in the plural ("I laid their daggers ready; He could not miss 'em") and that after the murder, coming out of Duncan's chamber, Macbeth obviously holds two daggers in his hand or hands, for Lady Macbeth (in line 47) asks him: "Why did you bring these daggers from the place?«, I feel absolutely certain that, in murdering Duncan, Macbeth must have naturally used only one of his hands, presumably his right one in which he was holding the dagger with which he stabbed his king, and that it was only this hand that got stained with blood. It is true that earlier in the scene (line 27) he had generally spoken of his »hangman's hands«, but 20 lines later (l. 47) Lady Macbeth, looking at his hands, says to him:

*Go, get some water,
And wash this filthy witness from your hand,*

that is from your one hand which is stained with blood. I find a confirmation for this interpretation in the above quoted sentence of Harry Rowe who speaks of Macbeth's "right hand that had done the bloody deed" and in J. Dover Wilson's edition of *Macbeth* who, after Macbeth's phrase "This is a sorry sight", adds his own stage direction — "stretching forth his right hand".

What I want to suggest here is this:

In his excitement Macbeth, as his wife says, thinks "brain-sickly of things" (II, 2. 45), he sees and hears things which are not there: "And nothing is but what is not", to quote his own words (I, 3. 142). His "horrible imaginings" (I, 3. 138), even the Weird Sisters themselves, seem "corporal" to him (I, 3. 81); they are real and concrete. Just as in the preceding

scene (II, 1) he had seen the "fatal vision" (l. 36) of a dagger which was but (ll. 38—39)

*A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain,*

and just as earlier in this same scene (II, 2) he had heard a voice cry "Sleep no more" (l. 34), so now he sees two ghastly hands appear before him in the air and approach his eyes as if they wished to pluck them out.

In favour of this interpretation speaks also, in part at least, Professor Kenneth Muir in his Introduction to the new Arden Edition of *Macbeth* (1951), especially in the passage where he discusses "the opposition between the hand and the other organs and senses" which recurs again and again in the play (pp. XXX—XXXII). Professor Muir says: "Macbeth observes the functioning of his own organs with a strange objectivity: in particular, he speaks of his hand almost as though it had an independent existence of its own". And then, after quoting the whole passage of which the line with which I am here concerned is the first, he says: "In the first line of this quotation the hand-eye opposition appears in its most striking, most hallucinated, form". After that, a little farther on the same page, Kenneth Muir gives another instance of the "hand-eye opposition" from Act III (Scene 2, ll. 46—50) which, I think, corroborates my interpretation of the line "What hands are here". Professor Muir says: "Just before the murder of Banquo, Macbeth invokes Night:

*Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day,
And, with thy bloody and invisible hand,
Cancel, and tear to pieces, that great bond
Which keeps me pale.*

The bloody hand has now been completely detached from Macbeth and become a part of Night". In my interpretation of the phrase "What hands are here?" I go a step further. I think that the hands there are not only "completely detached from Macbeth" but that they actually do not belong to him; just as, if I may be allowed to suggest, the "bloody and invisible hand" of "seeling Night" never belonged to Macbeth.

It is interesting to notice that Professor Mira Janković, in her review of my translation of *Macbeth* (Zagreb, 1969), makes use of the same above-mentioned quotation to support my interpretation of the line in question, given briefly in my "Notes" to the play. Professor Janković says: "Commenting on a controversial line (...) Professor T. gives his own explanation

which disagrees with all the distinguished commentators of Shakespeare. One of several of his arguments he corroborates by quoting various resonances of Macbeth's vision of "hands that pluck out eyes". In favour of his interpretation of this disputable line speak also Macbeth's words in Act III Scene 2:

Come, seeling Night,

*And, with thy bloody and invisible hand,
Cancel..."²*

It may seem futile to insist so much on this detail, but the thing gains in importance when the line is spoken on the stage and accompanied by a gesture. The general practice in the theatre, and also on the film screen, does not agree with my interpretation of the line. As far as I know, all interpreters of Macbeth, e.g. Paul Schofield on the stage and Orson Welles in his old film, at this point stare at their outstretched hands stained with blood; and this, I think, is not in keeping with Shakespeare's intentions.³ It seems to me that the gesture does not correspond with the meaning of the text. The actor here certainly does not follow Hamlet's advice; he does not "suit the action to the word, the word to the action". I must admit that I found it always rather strange to see a player looking at his hands stretched out before him and at the same time to hear him say that they pluck out his eyes.

As opposed to this, in the production of *Macbeth* which was on the repertoire of the Dubrovnik Festival for three seasons (1970, 1971, 1972) the director Vlado Habunek, following my interpretation of the passage, at this point made the actor playing Macbeth shrink back and with his hands shield his eyes from two invisible hands which seemingly approached his face from the dark. And the result was both convincing and effective.

In passing I may be allowed to add a few remarks on the last line of this famous short soliloquy of Macbeth:

Making the green one red.

In Folios 1, 2, 3 there is a comma after "one" while "Red" is spelt with a capital "R". Folio 4 omits both the comma and the capitalization, and this is (rightly, I think) accepted by

² M. Janković, "Macbeth u prijevodu Josipa Torbarine". *Umjetnost riječi*, Zagreb, XIII/1969, No 4, pp. 365—367.

³ John Finch as Macbeth, in Roman Polanski's film, at this point actually washes his bloodstained hands in a pail of water, angrily muttering: "What hands are here?"!

most modern editors. Bearing in mind the place of the original comma in the early folios, the line simply means "changing the green sea into a red sea", and this interpretation ought to satisfy everybody. It was Dr Johnson who, by altering the punctuation of the early copies, first introduced a slight confusion in the interpretation of the line. He placed a comma after »green« and capitalized "One", thus giving a somewhat different significance to the line which now came to mean "changing the green sea into total red". Johnson was followed in this by George Steevens who instead of the comma put a dash after "green". Their practice, and the resultant interpretation, has been accepted by most modern editors some of whom, e.g. J. Dover Wilson in the Cambridge New Shakespeare, retain even Steevens's dash. However, the original comma after "one" of the early Folios had to be explained away and, in order to do this, some modern commentators, to suit their interpretation of the line, quote Simpson (*Shakespeare's Punctuation*) who "shows that in the Folio, a comma often follows a stressed word".

The text as it stands, with the original comma after "one" or without it, is clear, and the reader of *Macbeth* would be well advised to disregard the notes of the commentators. The point is very slight indeed but it also gains in importance when the line is spoken on the stage. I for one feel that the actor playing Macbeth is putting a strained sense upon the words when, as many actors do, he makes a longish pause after "green" and pronounces "one red" as if it were almost a compound.

II

My second note concerns the famous soliloquy "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow" (*Macbeth*, V, 5. 19). By being quoted so often and included in anthologies as a detached piece, this soliloquy (from line "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow" to "Signifying nothing") has come to be regarded as a separate unit, so that even many commentators treat it as if it were somehow taken out of the context of the play. I would first suggest that Macbeth's soliloquy actually begins at line 9:

I have almost forgot the taste of fears,

and goes on to line 28:

Signifying nothing.

I would further suggest that this longer soliloquy of 19 lines forms an unbroken organic whole, interrupted very briefly by Macbeth's question "Wherefore was that cry?" and Seyton's answer "The Queen, my Lord, is dead".

Before going further it may be necessary to recapitulate here the stage of the action at this point and give an epitome of the context in which Macbeth speaks his longer monologue. The stage direction at the head of V, 5 reads "Enter Macbeth, Seyton, and Soldiers, with Drum and Colours". Then Macbeth speaks his functional speech of six lines and a half, beginning

Hang out our banners on the outward walls,

which is interrupted by "a cry within of women". Macbeth asks: "What is that noise?"; Seyton replies: "It is the cry of women, my good Lord", and goes out to see what the cry is about.

It may be useful to interpolate here a word about the stage directions which are very scant indeed in this scene (V, 5). So, for example, there is no indication that the Soldiers who have entered with Macbeth leave the stage before the end of the scene, when all "Exeunt". I do not think it plausible that the Soldiers stand passive in the background during the whole scene, and would suggest that, after Macbeth's first line, "Hang out our banners on the outward walls", the Soldiers go out to execute his order. If not here, they certainly go off before the cry of women is heard, for then Macbeth's question "What is that noise?" is only addressed to and answered by Seyton.

The same applies, later in the scene, to the Messenger who comes to announce that Birnam Wood began to move. Although there is no stage direction indicating that he leaves the scene after delivering his message, it is natural, I think, that he should go out after hearing Macbeth's lines addressed to him:

*If thou speak'st false,
Upon the next tree shalt thou hang alive,
Till famine cling thee: if thy speech be sooth
I care not if thou dost for me as much,*

for it is then that Macbeth resumes and concludes his intimate meditation:

*I pull in resolution, and begin
To doubt th'equivocation of the fiend,
That lies like truth. Etc.*

The only person who perhaps remains on the stage with Macbeth to the end of the scene is Seyton who is his personal attendant officer; although there is no reason why he too should not leave the stage after announcing that the Queen is dead.

Now we may return to Macbeth's monologue. After Seyton has gone out to see what the cry of women is about, Macbeth is left alone on the stage and it is then that his soliloquy proper begins:

*I have almost forgot the taste of fears:
The time has been, my senses would have cooled
To hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair
Would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir
As life were in't. I have supped full with horrors;
Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts,
Cannot once start me.*

At this point "Seyton returns". Macbeth asks him "Wherefore was that cry?" and, as I mentioned, the answer is: "The Queen, my Lord, is dead". Macbeth then resumes his soliloquy:

*She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word...*

What I want to suggest here is: 1) that these two lines are not addressed to Seyton, as is generally implied, often interpreted so and sometimes confirmed by the practice on the stage; and 2) that the two lines are closely connected with the rest of Macbeth's soliloquy beginning with the line "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow". Now we have first to decide what these two lines actually mean because their sense is far from being absolutely clear. "This apparently simple statement is ambiguous", says Professor Kenneth Muir in his edition of *Macbeth*. I cannot possibly agree with the majority of commentators who think that "She should have died hereafter" means "She would have died hereafter", or "sometime" or "anyhow", or "at some later date". This, I think, is misinterpreting the meaning of Shakespeare's words who, here at least, distinguishes very well between "should" and "would", as is clearly shown by these two lines in the first of which he uses "should" and in the second "would" with a purpose.

Those who claim that the "should" of the first line ought to be interpreted as a modern "would" sometimes recall the parallelism between this passage in *Macbeth* and the reaction of Brutus to the news of his wife's death in *Julius Caesar*. The parallelism is certainly there but only up to a point and can-

not, I think, be used to corroborate the above interpretation of Macbeth's words "She should have died hereafter". In *Julius Caesar* (IV, 3. 188—191) Messala breaks the news of Portia's death to Brutus:

For certain she is dead, and by strange manner,

to which Brutus reacts:

*Why, farewell, Portia. We must die, Messala.
With meditating that she must die once,
I have the patience to endure it now,*

where, of course, the first "must" is a present and the second a preterite. In the new Arden Edition of the play (1955) Professor T.S. Dorsch, commenting on these lines, rightly says that "once" here means "at some time"; and then, referring to the parallel line in *Macbeth*, he implicitly says that it means "She must have died hereafter"; but he is careful to add: "However, Macbeth's state of mind is very different from that of Brutus".

Professor Harold Jenkins too expatiates in a most stimulating way on this parallelism, adding a reference to an analogous passage in *Hamlet*. To him in Macbeth's line there is no ambiguity. Here is what he says: "When Brutus learns that his wife is dead, he meditates that 'she must die once', that is to say at some time. And this is clearly what Macbeth means when he responds to the news of his wife's death in a line that commentators have strangely found ambiguous: 'She should have died hereafter'. If she had not died now, her death would still have come. 'There would have been a time', he says, 'for such a word'. And the same thought occurs to Hamlet with reference to his own death: 'If it be now, 'tis not to come... if it be not now, yet it will come'. In each case, I think, this reminder of the common destiny of human beings points forward to the catastrophe, which it prepares us to accept".

In conclusion, however, Professor Jenkins makes a clear distinction between the reaction of Brutus to the news of his wife's death and that of Macbeth in a similar situation. "Yet reflections identical in substance", he says, "may in different contexts have dissimilar effect. What gives Brutus patience to endure the loss of his wife marks for Macbeth his inability to feel the loss of his. The thought which shows Hamlet in a state of preparedness to meet his death leads Macbeth only to a meditation on the futility of life".⁴

⁴ "The Catastrophe in Shakespearean Tragedy". Inaugural Lecture delivered on 3. XI. 1967 by Harold Jenkins, p. 7. Edinburgh, 1967.

This is all very attractive and yet I cannot help feeling that Shakespeare in this case uses "should" and "would" in the modern grammatical sense. Had he wished the first line to mean "She would have died sometime", he would very likely have written "would" and not "should" as he has written. Dr Johnson seems to have been of the same opinion and I find his interpretation of the two lines satisfactory. According to him, at this point Macbeth meditates on his dead wife as follows: "Her death should have been deferred to some more peaceful hour; had she lived longer, *there would at length have been a time for the honours due to her as a queen . . .*". And then, at the end of a very long note on this passage, Johnson gives an alternative, though essentially identical, interpretation: "Macbeth might mean that there would have been a more convenient *time* for such a *word*, for such *intelligence . . .*". I should only like to expand Johnson's interpretation a little further by closely connecting these two lines with the "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow" speech which immediately follows. Thus interpreted the passage would mean: Lady Macbeth ought to have died later. There would have been a more convenient time for such a word as "the Queen is dead" even to-morrow, but today, now, at this present moment I do not wish to hear of it.

In all modern editions of *Macbeth* and in all translations known to me the famous soliloquy "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow" is divided from the preceding sentence by a full stop or even by a full stop and dash. There is, as far as I know, only one exception to this rule and that is the New Penguin Shakespeare edition of *Macbeth* (1967) in which the editor, Professor G.K. Hunter, places here a dash and not a full stop. For using a full stop in this place the modern editors of *Macbeth* have no justification, for in the first Folio, which is the only and basic source of all later and modern texts, at this place quite clearly stands a colon and not a full stop. And, as is well known, in the dramatic punctuation of Shakespeare and his contemporaries the colon represents a far weaker and shorter pause than a full stop. Of course, the few modern editors who reproduce faithfully the Folio pointing naturally preserve the original colon in this place.

Those who prefer to put a full stop in this place, explicitly or implicitly blame the compositor of the Folio text for having made an "error" and placed a colon here. It may be useful to quote what G. Blakemore Evans has to say on the compositors in his illuminating article on *Shakespeare's Text: Approaches and problems*. "Being human", he says, "compositors were

liable to error, some more liable than others. (. . .). Moreover, a compositor might be an inexperienced apprentice and hence tend to multiply mistakes. (. . .) Since dramatic manuscripts were generally very sporadically and lightly punctuated (. . .), the task of 'pointing' the text seems in great part to have been the responsibility of the compositor. This was a large responsibility and, again varying with the expertness and literary sense of the compositor, often led to misunderstandings of an author's meaning. Despite the dangers, however, it should always be remembered that the pointing in the early printed editions was done by men who had a contemporary feeling for the spoken relation of words and the rhythm and emphasis of Elizabethan English, and editors who, like those of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, tamper with it unnecessarily do so at their peril and with unfortunate strait-jacketing of the idiomatic turn and run of the dialogue".⁵

This has to be borne in mind in connexion with what I said before about the "Making the green one red" line and also with what I have to say now about the "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow" soliloquy for which I tentatively propose a slight change in the punctuation. But even without tampering with the pointing of the early copies the soliloquy may be interpreted in the way which I wish to suggest.

If one places a full stop after the sentence "There would have been a time for such a word", as practically all modern editors do, the "To-morrow, and to-morrow" speech seems somehow to hang in the air. In the printed text of my Croat translation of *Macbeth* I have therefore taken the liberty of slightly altering the traditional punctuation: the first "to-morrow" I have divided from the preceding line only by a dash (but even that is not absolutely necessary) and, in order to mark and underline the pause which in my opinion follows after this first "to-morrow", I have placed there a semicolon; for I think that the traditional soliloquy has to be closely connected with the foregoing text: There would have been a time for such a word — to-morrow. After that Macbeth twice again automatically repeats "and to-morrow, and to-morrow" which leads him to a meditation on the transience of mortal life which is a "brief candle",

*a walking shadow; a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more.*

⁵ "A New Companion to Shakespeare Studies". Edited by Kenneth Muir and S. Schoenbaum, p. 234. Cambridge, 1971.

The "improved" punctuation which I suggest for the passage in question would then be:

*There would have been a time for such a word —
To-morrow; and to-morrow, and to-morrow, etc.*

It will be noticed that I have not changed the place of any punctuation mark. For changing the Folio colon at the end of the first line into a dash, no justification, I hope, is needed. I do not think, however, that it is wise or permissible to change the colon into a full stop (or a full stop and dash). But even if the original colon is retained, the passage can still have the meaning that I suggest. As for changing the comma after the first "To-morrow" into a semicolon, I have a precedent in the practice of J. Dover Wilson who, in "A Note on Punctuation" prefixed to the first volume of the Cambridge New Shakespeare (*The Tempest*, 1921), under the heading "Comma" (p. LVIII), says: "We have been obliged to take greater liberties with this stop than with the others. A large number of fresh commas have been introduced into the text for grammatical reasons; original ones have been omitted for a like cause; sometimes full-stops or, less often, semicolons, have been substituted".

With the resultant interpretation of the passage agreed, in a private conversation, Professor Allardyce Nicoll who in passing informed me that on the stage Sir Lawrence Olivier interpreted the lines more or less in this fashion. Unfortunately I never saw Sir Lawrence's *Macbeth*, but we know that in the past the passage was so interpreted by the famous Italian actor Tommaso Salvini (1829—1916). In the *Cornhill Magazine* for February 1889, quoted by H. H. Furness Jr. in the revised edition of the *New Variorum Macbeth* (1903), an anonymous reviewer wrote about Salvini's interpretation of the passage as follows: "The lines are purposely abrupt to show the emotion, and Salvini consistently and touchingly rendered the passage clear, if his punctuation was not absolutely justified by the text of the Folio, thus, making the pause at the first *To-morrow*. And to-morrow, etc."

The *Cornhill Magazine* reviewer does not mention whether Salvini connected the first "To-morrow" with the preceding line or not. Anyhow, in the Dubrovnik Festival production of *Macbeth*, punctuated in the way which I suggest, the "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow" soliloquy was found to gain in expressiveness and clarity, and was approved of even by those members of the audience whose knowledge of the play was very thorough.