The Shakespearean Moment

by David P. Gontar (June 2016)

Macbeth and Banquo meeting the witches on the heath by Théodore Chassériau

"my mind misgives some consequence yet hanging in the stars" – Romeo

Many there are who find the Shakespearean moment in the intersection of man and fate. A collision occurs in which the will seems to stand in opposition to an inscrutable yet commanding terminus in which our actions, though important, bear strange consequences just beyond their intent. Some, like Romeo, have the wisdom to recognize this and accept what life may make of our strivings, imploring "he that hath the steerage of my course direct my sail." (I, iv, 112-113) Prince Hamlet is of the same cloth, confessing that "there's a divinity that shapes our ends, rough-hew them how we will." (V, ii, 10-11) Our deeds are not edicts but questions we put to the gods, and there are those who have the grace to accept this. Others, of more imperious inclination, would seize the future by the throat. Such headstrong personalities are interesting and instructive, and Shakespeare is at pains to delve more deeply into their tossing minds, the heavings of their hearts. Less apt to attend to the promptings of experience, the subtle clues dropped in our path, they chart their own journeys, march by their own brave lights. A madman in the throng warns a popular fellow not to go to work at mid-month, and his wife is shaken by violent dreams. But what cares he for dreamers? (*Julius Caesar*, I, ii, 26) He is the captain of his soul, not others, and thus the world has its way. What if "the scolding winds have rived the knotty oaks" (I, iii, 5-6) and the bird of night hoots and shrieks in the marketplace at noon? (I, iii, 26-28) Yon Cassius hath no fear, and when the cross blue lightning flashes in the turbid sky he bares his bosom to the thunderstone and "tempt[s] the heavens." (I, iii, 53) Lo, this daredevil a few brief acts later is dead by the hand of Pindarus. (V, iii, 44) Brutus knows full well he has a rendezvous with Caesar's ghost at Philippi (IV, ii, 335), but confident that he is "at the height" and on his way "to fortune," he attacks – and loses all. What was that spectral thing which came to him in Caesar's form to make his blood run cold and hair to stand on end? Scan the text. No "ghost" appears at Philippi. But would "Caesar send a lie?" (II, ii, 65) No. The

apparition which interrupts Brutus' lucubrations in his tent, then, is not the late dictator of Rome so much as the voice of Fate declaring what must be to a man who heeds only his own brittle impulses.

Such is one version of the Shakespearean moment, the willful turning of the human spirit to its own private narrative against the larger scheme of things. It is this theme which emanates from the plays' "molten core" of which G. Wilson Knight was so fond. The prototypical Bardic character, therefore, is most often not the neurotic who cannot do the deed, but rather the precipitous agent so wrapped up in his own frantic obsessions that he is blind to warning signals flashing about him, *e.g.*, Othello and Titus. It is therefore a serious error to see Shakespeare as a champion of liberty urging us to reject passivity and annihilate the petty obstacles in our paths. We act in haste; we have "too much liberty," as Claudio says to Lucio, liberty we misuse. (*Measure for Measure*, I, ii, 117) This leads on to deeper reflections. Is our experienced spontaneity real – or the mask of what must be? Who has not felt at times that over all our days there hangs the pall of Necessity, paradoxically, a Necessity woven by our own impulsive, uncomprehending conduct? Those who take Shakespeare at his word will readily affirm that such is his philosophy. Well did he know that those three sisters of Wyrd in *Macbeth* are none other than the haggish Norns who carve into Yggdrasil, the tree of life, the destinies which roil just over the rainbow. What's past is prologue. As Dan McCoy ("Norse Mythology for Smart People") shows, the Norns graft into the tree some of the substance of our own actions, and as such there is theoretical scope for the adjustment of what lies in store for us. But with the passage of time the burden becomes weightier and less tractable, until the sky thickens with portents and prodigies. Though lions prowl the streets and thunder roars, human kind is generally deaf to its self-generated menace – or perhaps attracted by it. Hubris makes us tempting victims.

"King Lear"

Edmond is typical. His father Gloucester is well aware of the meaning of ominous events swirling around them.

> These late eclipses in the sun and moon portend no good
>
> to us. Though the wisdom of nature can reason thus and thus,

yet nature finds itself scourged by the sequent effects. Love

cools, friendship falls off, brothers divide; in cities mutinies,

in countries discords, palaces treason, the bond cracked between

son and father. (*The History of King Lear*, Sc. 2 , 103-109)

Against this seeming paternal superstition, Edmond poses his own empty restlessness, opening a path to villainy. He can find no meaning in his state but what will spring from his own plotting. Yet in duping his brother Edgar as to his father's wrath, Edmond cites the efficacy of the very eclipses he mocked moments before. (Sc. 2, 138-144) Thus he seals his fate with his own presumption. The irony is that Edmond's very name refers to the moon, (think "*Mond*ay") a heavenly body which presides over his eventual undoing. Our old friend King Lear exhibits the same lack of judgment, as, exposed to the fury of the elements, he confronts the unprecedented meteorological explosion on the heath as though it were a personal challenge from the gods he might outface with his own bluster. His half-senile bravado reminds us of Cassius's cavalier baring of his bosom to the thunder-stone:

Blow, wind, and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow,

You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout

Till you have drenched the steeples, drowned the cocks!

You sulphurous and thought-executing fires,

Vaunt-couriers to oak-cleaving thunderbolts,

Singe my white head . . . .

(Sc.9, 1-7)

Poor Lear does not recognize in the turbulent weather a reflection of his own miscreancy, the unruliness of nature portending a doom not of accident but of folly. In personifying the elements he seems to almost grasp the meaning of these signs, but stops short of recognizing their full implications. Thus in the last act Lear and Edmond both perish – each in contrition.

In what follows we'll catalogue a few illustrations of Shakespeare's fatalism. It is plainly not a mechanical determinism of the sort that arose after Galilieo and Hobbes, nor is it Christian predestinationism. Rather, he escorts us into a sentient moral cosmos vulnerable to and expressive of human misdeeds. The floods, distemperatures and rheumatic diseases of the sublunary world described so vividly by Titantia in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (II, i, 81-117) are consequences of the dissension of this sprite and spouse. The sheer abundance of portents, signs and wonders in Shakespeare and their sequent realization and fulfillment imply they are not theatric "techniques," and are not included to achieve mere "dramatic effect," "foreshadowing," or any other mood or stage atmosphere, but rather are meant to body forth the essence of reality, a tantalizing, nearly intelligible reality in direct contradiction to that presented in, say, the senseless causal nexus of Lucretius. The moral sensibility of Shakespeare savors of pagan wisdom, and is consistent with the tenor of the Celtic Bards who preceded him. It recalls the tragedy of Oedipus, who in laboring to circumvent his doom, brings it about. It is in that ironic vein that our poet writes. As we act we inscribe our destiny in the book of life, as, for example, the struggles of Posthumus Leonatus in *Cymbeline, King of Britain* are translated into the delphic fortunes he finds following the visitation of Jupiter. Each comes true. That is the Shakespearean moment. It is not a fairy tale. The mounds of dead bodies in *Hamlet*, *Lear*, *Macbeth*, the history plays and many more prove that. What matters is the lesson that though what we do is of inestimable value and importance, in the final analysis we are not in charge. The future is not a function of what we do but a comment on it. *"O Time,"* cries Viola, *"thou must unravel this, not I; it is too hard a knot for me t'untie."* (*Twelfth Night*, II, ii, 39-40) We are in the hands of something much greater than ourselves. In the words of Olivia:

> *Fate, show thy force. Ourselves we do not owe.*
>
> *What is decreed must be; and be this so.*
>
> (I, v, 300-301)

Call it Providence, destiny, doom, the gods, or what you will, Something there is that witnesses our deeds, and determines where and how we must conclude. We fancy that what we undertake is our private affair, without cosmic consequence, and yet the odd brood of calamities cluttering the pages of our author points in

a different direction. It should be mentioned that, though his scenes teem with ghosts, curses, and prophecies, a fair number of writers would narrowly circumscribe the ambit of Shakespeare's otherworldliness. For example, in his still-cited 1907 article "Supernatural Soliciting," Mr. H.M. Doak (1841-1928) strained heroically to persuade readers that the non-rational aspects of the plays, especially *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, are of no actual moment, and that everything in Shakespeare is explicable in terms of quotidian actions and other mundane factors. (15 *The Sewanee Review* 321, July, 1907) Nothing could be further from the truth. The characters in Shakespeare's more serious plays are bathed in numinosity and in their journeys we can perceive the handiwork of entities beyond our comprehension. (Hughes, 'Introduction') In reading Mr. Doak, who sweeps aside any notion of astral reality and efficacy with a curt stroke of his pen, one has the sense that his opinions reflect little more than the positivist prejudices of his age. Significantly, what is so-often discerned in the Shakespearean moment is not merely a supra-rational irruption within ordinary affairs, but the discomfitting of skeptics such as Caesar, Cassius, Lear and Edmond, whose grim comeuppances surely reflect something of the dramatist's metaphysical bias. Could all this be nothing more than "special effects" used by a canny showman for spooky atmosphere? When, over the body of Titinius, Brutus exclaims: "Julius Caesar, thou art mighty yet. Thy spirit walks abroad, and turns our swords in our own proper entrails," we can see that he honors belatedly yet emphatically those presiding stars which Cassius mocked at the beginning of the plot. Here meaning lies.

Before rounding out our inspection of mystery in the tragedies, let us consider the role it plays in Shakespeare's histories.

"King Henry VI"

Those familiar with the 1904 Stratford Town Edition from the Shakespeare Head Press, reprinted by Barnes and Noble as *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (1994), will have noticed that the first words of the text are these:

> Hung be the heavens with black, yield day to night!
>
> Comets, importing change of times and states,
>
> Brandish your crystal tresses in the sky,

> And with them scourge the bad revolting stars
>
> That have consented to Henry’s death.
>
> Henry the Fifth, too famous to live long!
>
> England ne’er lost a king of so much worth.
>
> (p. 1)

These portentous words serve as a preface to the entire corpus. The death of acclaimed leader, Henry V, is attributed not to the chances of war or natural weakness, but to the power of fate as figured in the stars. With the loss of Harry the Fifth comes the disintegration of England’s conquests in Europe. The Duke of Bedford prays to the comets to intervene and recover England’s destiny as an incipient imperial state. Everything else in this edition follows this invocation of astrological potency. But whatever its position in the corpus, the passage expresses the key belief in transcendent control and intervention in the affairs of men.

In a sense this is not remarkable. Belief in the power of the heavens to influence earthly goings-on is as old as mankind itself. Though set in a Christian era, Bedford’s prayer is addressed not to God but to the stars. What is worthy of comment is how that theme recurs throughout *King Henry VI* and the other histories. The nemesis Joan of Arc is presented as a demonic figure in league with the fiends, fiends who soon desert her. Soon, however, the voice of skepticism is heard. Not all persons are so credulous. Joan may have been simply deluded. And in the second part of the play, we encounter a conflict between those Shakespearean characters who embrace magical powers and prophecies and those more parsimonious souls who will have no such thing. Humphrey’s wife, the Duchess of Gloucester, consults a witch, Margery Jordan, who as the spirit Asnath utters in thunder and lightning prophetic words about key figures in the Wars of the Roses. Of King Henry VI: “The Duke yet lives that Henry shall depose, But him outlive and die a violent death.” Of the Duke of Suffolk: By water shall he die, and take his end.” Of the Duke of Somerset: “Let him shun castles. Safer shall he be upon the sandy plains than where castles stand.” (II Henry VI, I, iv, 30-40) Skeptics Buckingham and York mock what they suppose are phony soothsayings, yet we hardly notice when each of these prophecies is later fulfilled. (II Henry VI, IV,i, 140 [Suffolk] V, ii; [Somerset]; III Henry VI,

I, iv, 179 [York] and V, vii, 60 [Henry]. This is particularly ironic in the case of the Duke of York, who laughs off the spirit's utterances as nonsense (II Henry VI, I, iv, 59-61), but later suffers a crucifixion at the hands of Queen Margaret. Though few notice this, Shakespeare is at pains to mock the mocker, showing the accuracy of the prophecy, not its falsehood. This is a classic instance of The Shakespearean Moment, a moment spanning two parts of the trilogy which is his longest and most imposing work by far.

[As a curious footnote to all this, there is consensus amongst our Stratfordian friends that William of Stratford wrote the *third* part of *King Henry VI* first. Someone might want to explain how he was able at the ripe old age of 25 (and in the chaos of the Spanish Armada) to compose the fulfillments of Asnath's prognostications prior to setting forth the predictions themselves. Anyone with his head affixed to his shoulders can see these segments were written seriatim and by someone not unacquainted with the language, politics and customs of chivalry and the English court. Indeed, how many of those venturing opinions on the "authorship question" have even glanced at *King Henry VI*? Notice that the Earl of Oxford is a character in the last part of the trilogy.]

Let us now revert to a portion of an intriguing passage forgotten by just about everyone. It is part of the dread-filled confrontation between King Henry and Richard of Gloucester, whose career trajectory calls for him to murder the King of England in the Tower, clearing a path for his ascension to the throne as King Richard III.

KING HENRY

Hadst thou been killed when first thou didst presume,

Thou hadst not lived to kill a son of mine.

<u>And thus I prophesy</u>: that many a thousand

Which now mistrust no parcel of my fear,

And many an old man's sigh, and many a widow's,

And many an orphan's water-standing eye —

Men for their sons', wives for their husbands',

Orphans for their parents' timeless death –

Shall rue the hour that ever thou wast born.

The owl shrieked at thy birth – an evil sign;

The night-crow cried, aboding luckless time;

Dogs howled, and hideous tempests shook down trees;

The raven rooked her on the chimney's top;

And chatt'ring pies in dismal discords sung.

Thy mother felt more than a mother's pain,

And yet brought forth less than a mother's hope–

To wit, an indigested and deformèd lump,

Not like the fruit of such a goodly tree.

Teeth hadst thou in thy head when thou wast born,

To signify thou cams't to bite the world . . . .

(III, *Henry VI*, V, vi, 35-54)

This wincingly acute passage reflects a doubly prophetic message: Not only does it foretell the wringing of hands of woe over Richard's future deeds, it looks back to the grim signs of ill surrounding his birth, including *à la Julius Caesar* "hideous tempests" that "shook down trees." Henry, about to be slaughtered by bloodthirsty Gloucester, is granted the gift of second sight, and confirms that the horrible events preceding Gloucester's birth and the very constitution of his body were and are marks of his perversity of character, though they may have been previously discounted or scanted. Once more the validity of clairvoyance is set forth by Shakespeare in grand and heartfelt images. Who will say that the author of such passages did not embrace the meaning of Lancaster's words – and thus the capacity of mortals to grasp the sense of things whose awful appearance requires no comment?

"King Richard III"

Move forward then to Richard's own play. By this we mean the full "*Tragedy of King Richard the Third*," not the bowdlerized version titled "*Richard III*" churned out by Hollywood like popcorn for audiences allergic to history and literature. In omitting Queen Margaret, the character who acts as an essential equipoise to Richard, Tinseltown makes of the text a beast without a heart. Let us be clear about the singular importance of Margaret: she is the only Shakespearean character to appear in four plays, and those are in succession of one another. She is a major dramatic personage who lends continuity and a portentous gravitas to the first tetralogy. Further, in her encounters with the cornered Duke of York in the Third Part of *King Henry VI*, Act 1, Scene 4, and again in her confrontation with Richard of Gloucester in Act 1 of the *Tragedy of King Richard the Third*, Margaret is a principal in the most electrifying verbal exchanges in all of literature. In fact, it is supposed that from these very explosive volleys of words that the world first hears of Shakespeare (in *Greene's Groats Worth of Wit*, 1592, "O tiger's heart wrapped in a woman's hide.") It was thus Queen Margaret who launched the career of "Shakespeare," not Hamlet or Lear.

Margaret is memorable for many things, including her courage and martial skill, which far surpasses the dainty skirmishes of La Pucelle. But she is remembered above all for her role as a prophetess. (*Tragedy of King Richard the Third*, I, iii, 299). That is, the play revolves not around Richard, for he is but a satellite who orbits Margaret and her astonishing imprecations. (I, iii, 206-211; 213-223; 297-300) Indeed, the play might well have borne the title, "The Curse of Margaret." It is a searing condemnation of all her adversaries, Richard, Rivers, Dorset, Hastings, Buckingham and Queen Elizabeth, which looks faultlessly into the future and foresees the downfall of all these scowling lords, including Richard of Gloucester. These curses are deliberate verbal weapons which bring down the wrath of heaven on her enemies.

QUEEN MARGARET

What, dost thou scorn me for my gentle counsel,

And soothe the devil that I warn thee from?

O but remember this another day,

When he shall split thy very heart with sorrow,

And say, ‘Poor Margaret was a prophetess’. –

Live each of you the subjects to his hate,

And he to yours, and all of you to God’s.

(I, iii, 295-301)

By Act III, Margaret’s curse has taken effect as the damned lords recognize: “Now Margaret’s curse is fall’n upon our heads . . . .” (III, iii, 14) As the harrowing deaths mount, she rejoices in her power: “Bear with me. I am hungry for revenge, and now I cloy me with beholding it.” (IV, iv, 61-62)

The special curse she lay upon Richard’s head, reminding us of Macbeth’s murder of sleep, is that the only slumber he shall have is the nightmarish haunting of his rest by those he slaughtered, which we see unfold in a hardly bearable cavalcade of retribution in Act V, when the ghosts of Prince Edward, Clarence, Rivers, Gray, Vaughn, the Princes, Hastings, Lady Anne and Buckingham all accost him.

Thus is Margaret’s awful prophecy fulfilled.

“*King Henry IV*”

We can now move back to earlier epochs equally drenched in marvels. Recall Hotspur’s revulsion at Owen Gendower in *King Henry IV* Part One, when Glendower asserts the miraculous circumstances of his birth.

GLENDOWER

At my nativity

the front of heaven was full of fiery shapes,

Of burning cressets; and at my birth

The frame and huge foundation of the earth

Shaked like a coward.

(III, i, 12-16)

HOTSPUR

Why, so it would have done

At the same season if your mother’s cat

Had but kittened, though yourself had never been born.

GLENDOWER

I say the earth did shake when I was born.

HOTSPUR

And I say the earth was not of my mind

If you suppose as fearing you it shook.

GLENDOWER

The heavens were all on fire, the earth did tremble —

HOTSPUR

O, then the earth shook to see the heavens on fire,

And not in fear of your nativity.

Diseasèd nature oftentimes breaks forth

In strange eruptions; oft the teeming earth

Is with a kind of colic pinched and vexed

By the imprisoning of unruly wind

Within her womb, which for enlargement striving

Shakes the old beldam earth, and topples down

Steeples and moss-grown towers. At your birth

Our grandam earth, having this distemp’rature

In passion shook.

GLENDOWER

Cousin, of many men

I do not bear these crossings. Give me leave

To tell you once again that at my birth

The front of heaven was full of fiery shapes,

The goats ran from the mountains, and the herds

Were strangely clamarous to the frighted fields.

These signs have marked me extraordinary,

And all the courses of my life do show

I am not in the roll of common men.

(III, i, 12-41)

Shakespeare’s point here is not the cause of the quaking earth or fiery shapes in the sky on this occasion, but the difference between two kinds of

people. Glendower is a dashing, romantic figure. Hotspur is spiritually tone-deaf. Though he is Shakespeare's literary character, he boasts that he detests poetry. (III, i, 124-131). He is impetuous, quick to quarrel and hasn't the patience to sound things to their bottom. He cannot understand sentiment and is awkward dealing with Lady Percy's feelings for him. He acts on preconceived ideas and has trouble seeing things as they are. When on the eve of battle he inquires about that namby pamby, the Prince of Wales, he receives this report:

> I saw young Harry with his beaver on,
>
> His cuishes on his thighs, gallantly armed,
>
> Rise from the ground like feathered Mercury,
>
> And vaulted with such ease into his seat
>
> As if an angel dropped down from the clouds
>
> To turn and wind a fiery Pegasus,
>
> And witch the world with noble horsemanship.
>
> HOTSPUR
>
> No more, no more! Worse than the sun in March,
>
> This praise doth nourish agues.
>
> (IV, i, 105-113)

The man who couldn't tolerate the romantic claims of Owen Glendower balks instantly at ideal tropes and the chivalrous appearance of Prince Hal on his charger. The highlighted language shows the similarities. It is Hotspur's innate disposition that alienates him from Glendower's claims of nobility, not scientific proof of ordinariness, and when the subject turns to the Prince of Wales, the same reflexive rejection of transcendent qualities blinds him to real danger. Unsupported by his allies, including his own father he rides into battle

and perishes. And it is just here that Shakespeare's genius bursts through once more. The heavy hand of fate weighs on Hotspur's shoulders, and his denials to the contrary notwisthstanding, he knows his fate. "Doomsday is near," says he: "die all, die merrily." (IV, i, 135) There is the Shakespearean moment in all its astonishing singularity. Inside the doughty skeptic lurks the tender heart.

On the other side as well the combatants would seek to know the judgment of necessity. King Henry, attempting to dissuade the rebel forces, has recourse to the same conceit:

> What say you to it? Will you again unknit
>
> This churlish knot of all-abhorrèd war,
>
> And move in that obedient orb again
>
> Where you did give a fair and natural light,
>
> And be no more an exhaled meteor,
>
> A prodigy of fear, and a portent
>
> Of broachèd mischief to the unborn times?
>
> (IV, iv, 15-22)

But *les jeux sont faits*. The rebels go down to their prescribed defeat.

> "*Antony and Cleopatra*"

Paul Cantor observes that Shakespeare's principal Roman plays exhibit three stages of spiritual development. The early Republic is fairly barren of transcendence and mystery. Politics is the dominant leitmotif. With *Julius Caesar* we witness the advent of the spiritual, with its ghosts, apparitions and uncannily fulfilled predictions, most famously, "Beware the Ides of March." Roman tempests are not mere rain and wind but reflections of things to come. Finally there is *Antony and Cleopatra*, life in all its dimensions seen as the toy of fate. The soothsayer appears not once, as in *Julius Caesar*, but twice, each time telling the future accurately. And the clown in Act V who comes bearing the gift of death is a comic shaman who recapitulates in ambience and

demeanor the soothsayer in Acts I and II. Seemingly as addled as Dogberry, we sense he knows quite well how all will unfold, and his laughter sounds eerily as the voice of fate.

In *Julius Caesar*, though the signs of looming disaster are blazoned in the sky and easily recognized as prodigies of great import, voices of doubt and skepticism are heard. Caesar calls the soothsayer a “dreamer,” and scants Calpurnia’s dream. And sensible Cicero questions whether the extraordinary and unnatural events in Rome raining down on every hand bear any significance.

CASCA

Are you not moved, when all the sway of earth

Shakes like a thing unfirm? O Cicero,

I have seen tempests when the scolding winds

Have rived the knotty oaks, and I have seen

Th’ ambitious ocean swell and rage and foam

To be exalted with the threat’ning clouds;

But never till tonight, never till now,

Did I go through a tempest dropping fire.

Either there is civil strife in heaven,

Or else the world, too saucy with the gods,

Incenses them to send destruction.

(I, iii, 1-13)

Cicero has a far cooler disposition and will not be goaded to leap to conclusions.

CICERO

Indeed it is a strange-disposèd time;

> But men may construe things after their fashion,
>
> Clean from the purpose of the things themselves.
>
> (I, iii, 33-35)

Here is another instance of the Shakespearean moment. Cicero demonstrates in his doubts the very subjectivity and arbitrariness he invokes to challenge the *prima facie* meaning of all these odd events.

In *Antony and Cleopatra*, however, prophecy, while it may be played with, is never deliberately resisted or challenged. In Act 1, Charmian and Iras take the fortune teller as a funny parlor game, tease each other with smutty humor and have a good laugh as their imminent deaths are proclaimed by a polite but unswerving prognosticator. (We know by inference, of course, that the soothsayer is Cleopatra's personal consultant, and the reason he is present is because the Queen has been interrogating him as to the best means of keeping Antony.) But when the same soothsayer, borrowed by Antony, is taken to Rome, he is half believed before his summary dismissal. Note that Antony has brought the soothsayer along to spot risks. When he is told that Caesar is more in favor with the stars than himself, he knows it is correct. Unlike her erstwhile lover, Julius Caesar, who scanted the words of prophets as nonsense, Cleopatra (and Antony) are devotees of necromancy. The tale begins with the soothsayer's declaration of what must come to pass, and ends with the fulfillment of his words in the deaths of all three women. In the last Act Cleopatra dons her royal robes and crosses the Styx to rendezvous with her Antony, the coda of this symphony of fate being the haunting cry of Charmian, "Ah, soldier!" (V, ii, 322) What she sees to bring forth that shuddering sigh is not shared with us. But what we can apprehend is that the totality of the play is placed in the shadow of the Wyrd.

Throughout Cleopatra is recognized as an incarnation of Isis, and referred to as such. In the midst of the play we learn that she appears in the person of Isis on state occasions. (III, vi, 16-18) And external sources tell us that Antony appeared as Osiris.

> In 37 B.C. the Triumverate was renewed. Antony returned to Cleopatra and fathered a son, Ptolemy Philadelphus. The lovers grew more public in their relationship, participating in deification ceremonies where they took the

> roles of the Greco-Egyptian gods Dionysus-Osiris and Venus-Isis. (History.com: Ancient History, “Mark Antony”)

More significantly for us modern skeptics is the fact that Cleopatra (Isis) herself prefigures the contemporary terrorist group bearing that name, and seems to make prophecy in her imprecation:

> “Melt Egypt into Nile, and kindly creatures turn all to serpents!”
>
> (II, v, 78-79)

Did not Egypt melt into Nile when Cleopatra’s personal domain, Alexandria and all that it contained, including her grand palace, was swept beneath the waves, where it remains to this day? Archeologist Marcus Devol in his Field Notes of 1/27/14 titled “Cleopatra’s Sanctum Sanctorum” comments as follows:

> This [undersea photo from the Bay of Alexandria] is from the exploration that took a team of divers to the palace and temple of. . . Isis. This is a central and essential part of the palace compound. The goddess Isis was special to Cleopatra. Isis was the goddess of magic and power. Cleopatra is reputed to have been schooled in the mysteries of Isis and Osiris . . . . It is in this Temple in a small room known as “The Sphere of Destiny” that Cleopatra was supposed to have kept a large quartz block. It had a smooth polished surface about the size of two hands on one of the upper faces of the stone. It was by scrying into that dark mirror that Cleopatra was supposed to be able to see the past and future . . . The stone of power was called the “Eye of Cleopatra” and it was rumored to be as old as Egypt itself. After the death of Cleopatra and Antony the stone disappeared, never to be seen again.

It may be wondered whether the “Eye of Cleopatra” was purloined by grave robbers and found its way centuries later to Mecca, to be installed there as the Black Stone of the Ka’aba, which is strangely said to resemble a pudenda. Might worshippers of “Allah” be bowing today before the eye of Isis?

Prima facie, *Antony and Cleopatra* is another example of a Shakespeare play which can be seen as a vehicle of unfathomed significance and potency. At any rate, it would appear that these two personages were well aware of their pending fates. Confronted by the spectre of pitiless Roman vengeance, they knew it was only a

matter of time before Egypt fell to the legions of Octavius. They delved habitually and feverishly into the occult to put themselves in a position to make the best of their final days, but alas that was not “in the cards.” For us *Antony and Cleopatra* stands as a monument to Shakespeare’s fidelity to the power and predominance of the supernatural.

“The Scottish Play”

Shakespeare’s ‘Scottish play’ is a seething cauldron of malignant energy. It is a vital plasma rippling through the imagination and driven by unnamable force, darkness in a single instant made light, a *billet-doux* from Hades. The majority of the other works are agreeably continent, keeping their currents within tidy banks, confining the supernatural to the text and its enactment, but the Scottish play, like its Egyptian and Caesarean cousins, rudely overflows its bounds, allowing a barely controlled animus to rush into the very lives of audiences and cause disruption there. The conventional presentation of Macbeth as ambitious and Brutus as purely intellectual stands the facts on their heads: Brutus is the guy fraught with unacknowledged ambition, whilst Macbeth is far too confused to really covet the crown. King Duncan has just designated his son, the Prince of Cumberland, as his successor. Assassinating him would accomplish nothing but to install his son on the throne. Does this deed in Cawdor seem ambitious? Banquo speaks truth when he suggests that Macbeth may have “eaten on the insane root that takes the reason prisoner.” (I, iii, 82-83) If readers see such insidious fantasy as somehow mere scheming for promotion we can only conclude that the witches’ spell is pandemic, and from the very first *we ourselves* construe foul as fair at their bidding. Here a man with glazed eyes scratches at the door of destiny, seeking with witches’ aid to “look into the seeds of time” to see who shall grow great and who must wither and decay. (I, iii, 56) It is a spectral exercise, an indulgence for the damned. The plain premise is that there is no way to avoid our doom except by disguising it as liberation or enlightenment. This is the Shakespearean moment *par excellence*: fleeing despair by supposing that in consciously limping to our ordained destruction (our ‘petty pace’) we are in fact leaping to clouds of glory, surely a tale told by an idiot.

Meanwhile, in the midst of New York Harbor stands a severe giant bearing the whimsical name “Statue of Liberty.” In what sense does its appearance illustrate that quality? Where are the flowing robes, the graceful gestures and supple

limbs which would warrant the name of “liberty”? There are none. The stolid, mannish figure on her barren bivouac is a solitary prisoner, expressionless, rigid and unbending. Who is she? Thirty minutes online or in any competent library will give the answer: it is Hecate, goddess of the underworld and consort of the prince of darkness. (See, *e.g.,* “Libertas or Hecate,” July 4, 2012) The tell-tale spiked crown, upraised torch and placement *in limine* (a port) identify her definitively. This is no emblem of liberty but implacable necessity, the future cast in iron and steel. One of the principal works that channels Hecate from the ancient world to ours is, of course, *Macbeth*, where she is sergeant of a platoon of bearded (I, iii, 44) witches. These are the Norns, as explained above, and at the same time body forth the Greek Moirai or Fates, incarnations of destiny. Significantly, these three sisters are the daughters of the primordial divinity Ananke, or Necessity. In Act III, Hecate confers with her troop of witches and informs them that in the morning Macbeth will come to them “to know his destiny.” (III, v, 17) The play reeks of “fate and metaphysical aid.” (I, v, 28)

Three witches are the very first speakers in *Macbeth*, placing the entire poem under their spell. Failure to perceive this gives rise to the jejune misrepresentations of *Macbeth* as a Halloween melodrama in which a bad man is spanked for his naughtiness. Such an interpretation has the inestimable merit of making the play teachable in fourth grade. On an adult level, however, *Macbeth* is better seen as an eruption of the Wyrd, a tearing aside of the veil of everydayness to reveal the roots of existence in the gratuitous soil of nothingness. What we have is cosmic tragedy, not a moral lesson for children. Examined with care, *Macbeth* does not “make sense” nor is it designed to. Rather it deconstructs bourgeois complacency. It is a charm through which we see ourselves not in the perfunctory roles we play in life but, per Heidegger, as elemental *dasein* thrown into the world to keep our appointment with mortality. Throughout are strewn enticing clues. For example, the witches frolic under the label of the “weird sisters,” (I, iii, 30), but when Macbeth and Banquo meet them they know not what or who they are. They are utterly foreign, without title or identity.

BANQUO

What are these,

So withered, and so wild in their attire,

That look not like th'inhabitants o'th' earth

And yet are on 't? – Live you, or are you aught

That man may question? You seem to understand me

By each at once her choppy finger laying

Upon her skinny lips. You should be women,

And yet your beards forbid me to interpret

That you are so.

(I, iii, 37-44)

These are creatures, then, from an entirely alien dimension, nameless and unfathomed. They neither have names nor could names be assigned to them. Yet not having heard the phrase "weird sisters," Macbeth and Banquo magically refer to them as such. (II, i, 19; III, iv, 132; IV, i, 152) Lady Macbeth reads a letter from her husband in which he calls these wholly unknown personages "these weird sisters." (I, v, 7) How does he acquire this locution? The play is not a mere transcript from Holinshed. In Shakespeare's hands it becomes a dream we share with him and his protagonist, an experimental encounter with supersensible inevitability. As the hero approaches his destiny is his mind set on rank and temporal power? There is no sign of it. Whither he is bound, His Majesty Macbeth must, like Richard III, wade through blood.

MACBETH

I am bent to know

By the worst means the worst. 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.

Strange things I have in head that will to hand,

Which must be acted ere they may be scanned.

(III, iv, 133-139)

In other words, he is a blood-thirsty lunatic altogether addicted to killing and desperate to learn where his felonious career is taking him. That is, he turns his damnation into a question of itinerary, as if his end could be altered by setting his curiosity at rest. He does not live in order to accomplish rational ends; his sanguineous transgressions are the only things that give him the thrill he craves. Having advanced to the pinnacle of Scottish society he and his wife are in fact worse off than they ever were. They inhabit the same old drafty castle, and feed with the same lumpen lords at supper. The appearance of Banquo at the table is hardly an appetizer. The only advantage now is that Macbeth can slaughter with relative impunity.

Consider that he may not have become such a monster by destroying Duncan; Macbeth was a killing machine well before that. Return to the opening of the tragedy to see whom the weird sisters select as their fall guy. As “shipwrecking storms and direful thunders” (I, i, 26) signal the defeat of the King’s battered legions, Macbeth arrives.

CAPTAIN

For brave Macbeth – well he deserves that name –

Disdaining fortune, with his brandished steel

Which smoked with bloody excecution,

Like valour’s minion

Carved out his passage till he faced the slave,

Which ne’re shook hands nor bade farewell to him

Till he unseamed him from the nave to th’ chops,

And fixed his head upon our battlements.

(I, i, 16-23)

* * *

[Macbeth and Banquo] [were]

As cannons overcharged with double cracks,

So they doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe.

Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds

Or memorize another Golgotha, I cannot tell –

(I, i, 37-40)

In other words, the prophecy that he will be kicked upstairs, from his present station to Thane of Cawdor and then to monarch of Scotland "cannot be ill" yet "cannot be good." (I, iii, 130) It cannot be ill because to wear a golden crown is the status to which all men aspire, yet what can be good about having to leave soldiering in the blood-drenched field to be confined to paperwork and decision making, the life of a king? The solution is to transform one's reign into a reign of terror. "Be bloody, bold and resolute." (IV, i, 95) As to where Fate would ultimately conduct such a one, it is best to avert one's gaze. After all, there is no reason to think him cursed: none born of woman shall do him harm, nor will he be brought down "until Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane" hill shall come. Macbeth is safe, nestled in the bosom of Destiny.

But what of ouselves? We cannot close this section without recalling that the witches' curses have become a problem in mounting productions, where troupes of players are actually prohibted from uttering the play's name or title. It is known in the theater world euphemistically as "the Scottish play." This is a superstition with some foundation. For over the last four centuries there have been a substantial number of stage accidents in performances of this play, and, again, this can be confirmed by the reader online. It makes no real difference whether the play is actually cursed; what matters is that its spiritual penumbra seems to extend beyond the stage to embrace acting companies and theater patrons as well. That is how we perceive it, and that is important. Lady Macbeth can "feel now the future in the instant," (I, v, 56-57), and so perhaps can we. The membrane separating us from Shakespeare is at all times porous and tantalizing.

Some cases of '*Macbethitis*' are more compelling than others. With Abraham Lincoln, it reached a fever pitch. It's *a propos* to note that "In early life Lincoln had argued for the Doctrine of Necessity, that is, a belief in man as a mere pawn of universal law, without free will." (from Angels and Ages: Lincoln's Language and its Legacy," by Adam Gopnik, *The New Yorker Magazine*, May 28, 2007) Lincoln was obsessed with Shakespeare, and was fond of regaling Cabinet members with readings and recitations of *Macbeth* and other plays. He didn't care much for the comedies, preferring instead the darker histories and tragedies. The war ended, and Lincoln was being stalked by one of the most prominent of Shakespearean actors, John Wilkes Booth. He received multiple warnings from family and staff that he was in mortal danger, and rather like Shakespeare's Julius Caesar he, the great predestinationist, chose to ignore them. "Just five days before the assassination, on April 9, 1865, steaming up the Potomac in the Presidential yacht, he spent "several hours" reading aloud from Shakespeare to those on board," writes Mr. Gopnik. Most of that reading was from *Macbeth*.

Mr. Gopnik continues.

> But even stranger and more striking is Lincoln's identification, or at the very least, fascination with the figure of Claudius. In that same letter to Hackett, Lincoln insisted that Claudius's soliloquy beginning "O, my offense is rank," was superior to any of Hamlet's, and we know that he committed it to memory, and would recite it at length even to acquaintances . . . . Lincoln's evaluation was as unorthodox then as it is now. And what is the burden of Claudius' speech? It is about guilt and ambition, and about the fraternal blood-dealing that it produces. As Kenneth Tynan has pointed out, Claudius' tragedy is that he is clearly the most able man in Denmark. But he has got his throne through blood and cannot be free of the taint. His speech runs through to the difference between his conduct as seen on earth and in Heaven, and ends with an image of a limed bird, caught in a sticky trap, that gets more stuck as it struggles.

Interestingly, Mr. Gopnik, for all this, doesn't go so far as to suggest that Lincoln, the prime mover of the Civil War and swan of Gettysburg, felt any such guilt as he plainly detected in Macbeth and Claudius. It's difficult not to laugh out loud when we are informed that "There's no reason to believe that Lincoln "identified" with Claudius, or thought his own conduct evil." Which is more likely, that Abraham Lincoln walked with a spring in his step in 1865,

knowing that he bore no responsibility for unprecedented carnage, and pursued Shakespearean tragedy and history for mere entertainment and distraction? — or that the depth of his guilt was so profound that it could not be heaved into his mind and heart, but could only be dealt with by incessant encounters with Shakespeare's most outstanding rogues, Macbeth, Claudius and others, relieving him of the need to acknowledge his own fault while ruminating over that same fault writ large in the lives of Shakespeare's characters? Lincoln, the dedicated Shakespearean who "felt no guilt" over the torrents of blood unleashed in the war he created, was being stalked by a Shakespearean actor who blamed him for destroying the South. Had Lincoln outgrown his youthful sense of doom as his life drew to its final bizarre scene? Apparently not.

> Fittingly, Booth's victim was as devout a Shakespearean as the actor who played Brutus to his Caesar. Abraham Lincoln was an intense reader, and during his time in the White House he turned with increasing frequency to two books: the Bible and the works of Shakespeare. He saw parallels between the American Civil War and the Wars of the Roses as depicted in Skakespeare's English-history plays, and he was deeply affected by the title character's call for "sad Stories of the death of kings" in *Richard II*. *He understood the fatalism of the Prince of Denmark, and he once confided that "I have found all my life, as Hamlet says, 'There is a Divinity that shapes our ends, Rough-hew them how we will."* (John F. Andrews, "Was the Bard Behind it?" –Old Light on the Lincoln Assassination," *The Atlantic*, October, 1990)

It turns out that April 9, 1865 was an even more momentus day than the quote from Mr. Gopnik indicates.

> On Palm Sunday, April 9, the same day that Grant and Lee were meeting at Appomatox, Lincoln engaged several of his companions in a lengthy discussion of Duncan's assassination in *Macbeth.* A day or two later Lincoln told his wife about a dream in which he saw a President shrouded an a catafalque in the East Room of the White House. Like Calpurnia in *Julius Caesar*, Mrs. Lincoln was terrified by what sounded like a portent, and her husband regretted sharing his nightmare with her. But, "like Banquo's ghost," he said, "it will not down." At the end of the week, on a misty Friday evening and in a way that recalled both *Hamlet* and *Julius Caesar,* Lincoln disregarded his premonitions and proceeded with his plan to attend

a performance of *Our American Cousin*. (Andrews, op. cit.)

But well did Mr. Lincoln know that he was inscribing himself in all these tragedies. Who knew better the boast of Cassius and Brutus, who, as they bathed his hands in the still warm blood of the vanquished Caesar, declared to his comrades Shakespeare's unnerving prophecy:

BRUTUS

Stoop, Romans, stoop,

And let us bathe our hands in Caesar's blood

Up to the elbows, and besmear our swords;

Then walk we forth even to the market-place,

And, waving our red weapons o'er our heads,

Let's all cry 'peace, freedom, and liberty!"

CASSIUS

How many ages hence

Shall this our lofty scene be acted over,

In states unborn and accents yet unknown!

BRUTUS

How many times shall Caesar bleed in sport,

That now on Pompey's basis lies along,

No worthier than the dust!

(III, i, 106-117)

Conclusion: The Problem of Humanism

It should be clear that Shakespeare acknowledged the reality of the supernatural, and set many of his plays in contexts in which uncanny forces are supervenient and dispositive. At the same time, this author is still revered as an exponent of humanism. The question is, how is it possible to reconcile Shakespeare's humanism with his obvious commitment to what we might call 'the Beyond'? Do these dimensions rule one another out? Many seem to think so, especially those for whom the term "humanism" is a code word for atheism. The latter concept has no place in Shakespeare. (See, *e.g.,* "Indices of Divinity in Shakespeare's All's Well That Ends Well," *Hamlet Made Simple*, 161-185.) As the contest between modern naturalism and traditional religious forms came into view, Shakespeare stubbornly cleaved to transcendence and mystery.

> They say miracles are past, and we have our
>
> philosophical persons to make modern and familiar
>
> things supernatural and causeless. Hence it is that
>
> make trifles of terrors, ensconcing ourselves into
>
> seeming knowledge when we should submit ourselves
>
> to an unknown fear.
>
> (*All's Well That Ends Well*, II, iii, 1-6)

Note the reference to "seeming knowledge." There is nothing of the gnostic temper in the mind or poetry of Shakespeare, who took as his purpose to show "*what our seemers be*." (*Measure for Measure*, I, iii, 54) His skepticism is not directed to transcendence but to what would pretentiously be denominated as "science" in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Shakespeare was, like Mozart, the child of the Muses, receiving and preserving their gifts. He could hardly have renounced their agency. Like actors who cannot see their audiences on account of the glare of the footlights, we disport ourselves for and before powers invisible yet felt in our bones. That is the human condition. The knowledge we *seem* to possess has been interpreted by many eager souls as ruling out any form of transcendence, now vulgarly reformulated as a compelling curiosity about

“life on other planets,” a practical fantasy and excuse to spend large sums of money blinking at “space.” Yet nothing has changed. As “the universe” has expanded in size “man” has dwindled to the dimensions of a microbe, a microbe which puts on airs about its “knowledge” to keep anxieties at bay. As modernity beckoned, Shakespeare the seer pointed in another direction. In this he followed his teacher Socrates, who taught that the *human* condition is one of ignorance, not “knowledge.” The passage of centuries has only reinforced the wisdom of the Socratic standpoint. Those who prattle about “modern knowledge” are those who haven’t any idea how they move their fingers on their own keyboards, or where the seeming thoughts come from that buzz in their brains. So-called “science” serves the purposes of jittery humanity as a nightlight quiets the minds of children in their darkened bedrooms.

The fact is that “human” and “divine” are terms complementary and interdependent, as are “man” and “god.” The human realm is one that stands in an unalterable relation to transcendence. But what the natures of that transcendence and that relation are we cannot know. Our glory and our shame, our tragedy and our comedy, is that we can neither dismiss them nor bring them within our ken. Realizing our predicament, Shakespeare represented our condition in his works, always setting the human condition in relation to an unreachable pantheon. “Humanism” is the project of exploring that tragedy, that comedy. Grasping our lot in life is the Shakespearean moment.

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