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John Stafford
Carroll College

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THE MOTIVATION OF MACBETH

BY

John D. Stafford, A. B, '33

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THE MOTIVATION OF MACBETH

In the play Macbeth may be found much wealth of controversial matter. Perhaps the most fascinating problem of all is the question whether Macbeth came upon the contemplation of murdering Duncan unaided, or whether he was tempted in this respect either by supernatural agencies or by his wife. This question exists in virtue of the conflicting interpretation of two passages of the play. In I,III, it appears that Macbeth is tempted by the witches; in I,VI, that he had his evil purpose before he met them for the first time. Before approaching this problem the student must first determine, if he can, if Shakespeare was sufficiently interested in the complete character of Macbeth to give sufficient clues, whether the play is an integral whole, and whether several contradictions in it can be explained away by resorting to Shakespeare's source.

There are several other contradictions in the play which suggest revision.

1. In I,II, Ross reports to the king; Duncan, that the rebel Cawdor had been defeated in battle. He is instructed by Duncan to confer this man's title upon Macbeth. The latter had personally overthrown Cawdor in hand to hand conflict.

But, upon hearing Ross's message he says in I,II:

The thane of Cawdor lives; why do you dress me in borrow'd Robes?

LL. 108-109

In I,II, Angus, Ross's companion, also expresses ignorance of what has happened to Cawdor, saying of the latter:

Whether he was combin'd with those of Norway, or did line To rebel with hidden help and vantage, or that with both He labored in his country's wrack, I know not, but trea-
son's capital, confess'd and prov'd,
Have overthrown him. (11.11-116)

These lines are difficult to explain in view of Ross's report to the king and of Macbeth's having stood the brunt of battle against Cawdor, yet explaining nothing.

2. In I,VIII, Lady Macbeth says:
   I have given suck, and know
   How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me: (11.154-55)

On the other hand, in IV,III, Macduff, speaking of Macbeth, says:
   He has no children. (1.216)

Of course, Lady Macbeth might have been married previously or her children might, at the time of the play, be dead. But, since Shakespeare nowhere produces this vital bit of information, we are led to believe that he somehow is guilty of oversight.

3. In I,V, Lady Macbeth speaking of murdering Duncan says:
   He that's coming
   Must be provided for; and you shall put
   This night's great business into my dispatch; (11.64-66)

In I,VIII, she says:
   What cannot you and I perform upon this unguarded Duncan? (11.69-80)

In I,VIII, Macbeth says:
   I am settled, and bend up
   Each corporal agent to this terrible feet. (11.70-90)

In II,IV, Macbeth tells his Lady that he has done the deed. (1.140)

These several contradictions must be explained in a fairly plausible manner if we are to assert a definite theory concerning Macbeth's character and the original motivation of murder.

Now is known that several details of the play, notably the killing
in the murder's own home and the omen of the king's horses eating one another, are derived from the story of Donwald in Holinshed.¹

Accordingly, a theory has been suggested by Professor Henry David Gray² that Shakespeare some time before 1605 wrote a play using the Donwald story from Holinshed as his source. Later, about 1605, returning to the play, he revised it a good deal—substituting for scenes and incidents of the first two acts and all of the last three, a new story using the Macbeth story of Holinshed as his source. In short, this theory would explain the inconsistencies of Macbeth on the grounds that Shakespeare revised his original play using a different source and failing to synchronize the two in minor details.

That the present play is not as originally written we are sure. It is generally acknowledged that the Hecate speeches in III, IV, and IV, I, are interpolations taken from Middleton's Witch, a play almost certainly of later date than Macbeth.³ Very probably these passages were interpolated by the actors of Shakespeare's company some time between 1605 and 1623, the date of the first folio edition.

These acknowledge interpolations of the actors and any others which might be considered as hypothentical must be understood as distinct and separate from the Revision Theory.

Using the Revision Theory to explain the second of the inconsistencies noted above, we find that I, III, would be from the Donwall source where there is no reason to believe that Donwald had no children. The Macduff line is from IV, III, which has for its source the Macbeth version of Holinshed where, from the general trend of the story,

¹. Macbeth 11, 11, and 11, IV, 14-20, corresponding to Holinshed, p.359 and 359, respectively, to the Furness edition.

². In lectures at Stanford University, 1928, communicated to me by Professor Wilson, my advisor.

³. See, for example, E.H.C. Oliphant, Shakespeare and His Fellow Dramatists, 11, 46.
we are led to believe that Macbeth has no children. The third inconsistency, as to who shall murder Duncan, occurs between 1, IV and 11,11. 1, VII and 1, V1 might be considered doubtful as coming from either of the two sources; 1, VII from the Donwald story and 11,1 from the Macbeth version; 11, 11 from the Donwald with a strong possibility of overlapping. The Revision Theory might well apply, then, to the plan of murdering Duncan. For that matter, the possibility of a missing scene, probably cut out by the players, which would explain this last is not to be overlooked.

Applying the Revision Theory to the motivation of Macbeth we find that the scene where the witches met him for the first time, 1, 111, is evidently from the Macbeth version of Holinshed where the witches first suggest the thought of murdering Duncan and tempt him with vague promises of future glory. In 1, VII, Lady Macbeth says, speaking of the contemplated murder: Nor time nor place Did then adhere, and yet you would make both. These lines which seem to indicate that Macbeth considered his treasonable act before meeting the witches, are to be attributed to the Donwald source where the murder is contemplated long before committed. Likewise occur the incidents of Donwald committing the murder in his own home and of Duncan's horses eating one another.

Thus far the Revision Theory has apparently explained away two important contradictions, 2, and 3, namely the question as to whether Macbeth had children and the uncertainty as to who shall kill Duncan. At first glance it should go far in explaining the motivation of Macbeth. But there are two reasons why this writer prefers not to lend a too credulous ear to such an explanation. First of all, the theory, while explaining two contradictions does not seem an adequate

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remedy for the third.

It will be remembered that Shakespeare makes Cawdor an open rebel against the king, fighting against Macbeth, and that the news of Cawdor's overthrown kingdom was brought by Ross. Yet both of these men seem in ignorance of any such occurrences. If we endeavor to apply the Revision Theory, we find that not only does the Donwald story of Holinshed lack such an occurrence as the meeting of Ross and Macbeth but does not even mention the name of Cawdor. Since Shakespeare could not have written a Donwald version of this event and later revised it, the most probably theory seems that either Shakespeare made a careless error or that the players of his company later inserted this scene. Since the latter is a purely unfounded hypothesis, the acceptance of the simpler error theory seems more natural.

That Shakespeare was in error—both in the point of motivation as well as in the contradictions listed would seem especially probably if any other solution for the former could be proposed.

Another reason why I cannot pretend to hold the Revision Theory is from purely artistic grounds. The theory is assuming that Shakespeare took portions of his play from two distinct, though similar, stories and failed to make them dovetail in particular details. I cannot conceive of the great artist that Shakespeare undoubtedly was creating the imposing Macbeth and making his character hopelessly inconsistent in the first moment of moral crisis simply because he was borrowing from two different stories. There should be a sufficiently simple explanation to justify the poet. Such a one, I trust the reader will consider the following.

The scene in the play where Macbeth meets the witches is evidently from the Macbeth story in Holinshed where the hero in undoubtedly tempted to think for the first time of killing Duncan. Yet Lady Macbeth says in I, Vii,------------------------
Nor time nor place

Did then adhere, and yet you would make both:

This last would seem to indicate that Macbeth previously contemplated murder. The only plausible explanation, I believe, is to be found in I.V----

ENTER MACBETH

Great Glamis! Worthy Cawdor!
Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter!
Thy letters have transported me beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant. (II.52-56)

The first three lines above show that Lady Macbeth received communications from her husband revealing the witch incident, and what is there to forbid us from believing that in these letters Macbeth also indicated that he was trying to create, but could not find, an occasion to murder Duncan. Viewed from such a simple explanation, this formidable contradiction with which the critics have troubled themselves falls like a house of cards and it becomes obvious that Macbeth was first tempted by the witches and later egged on by his wife. The latter is amply corroborated by Holinshed.
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Oliphant, E.H.C., (Editor) Shakespeare and His Fellow Dramatists.
(Prentice-Hall Inc., New York, 1929.)