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Lucia Folena

“All That May Become a Man”: *Macbeth* and the Breakdown of the Heroic Model

Abstract I: Mentre sembra inizialmente conformarsi alla tradizionale rappresentazione epica della guerra come duello tra Bene e Male, o Diritto e Torto, *Macbeth* — all’incirca due secoli prima che un’analogia demistificazione si verifichi nel romanzo borghese — finisce per smantellare questo modello così geometrico e irrealistico, suggerendo che tutta la guerra è caos, e che valori antichi ed ereditati come l’eroismo e l’onore non bastano a salvaguardare le collettività dalla caduta nella confusione e nella distruzione.

Abstract II: While initially appearing to conform to the traditional epic representation of war as a duel between Good and Evil, or Right and Wrong, *Macbeth* — a couple of centuries before a similar debunking takes place in the novel — ends up deconstructing this neat, unrealistic model and suggesting that all war is chaos and that ancient, inherited values such as heroism and honour are not sufficient to preserve communities from falling into confusion and destruction.

The epic tradition of the West, at least from the *Iliad* onwards, has typically rewritten the unbearable disorder and the inevitable loss of ethical justifications which accompany any war into the simplified, comprehensible and tolerable scheme of the duel, in which, in most cases, labels of Right and Wrong get attached to the two opponents¹. This is also the image Carl von Clausewitz proposes in 1832 as the starting point of his analysis of warfare: the latter “is nothing but a duel on an extensive scale” (Clausewitz 1873: 1). It is, in fact, its being made up of a “countless number of duels”, he adds, that authorizes such a drastic reduction². A few years before writing *Macbeth*, Shakespeare had already suggested how arbitrary and at the same time unavoidable this synecdochic and symbolic compression was for a playwright confronted with the ‘wooden O’ of a stage; but he had

¹ Scurati 2007: 3-141; Folena 2013: 153-162.

² “War is nothing but a duel on an extensive scale. If we would conceive as a unit the countless number of duels which make up a war, we shall do so best by supposing to ourselves two wrestlers. Each strives by physical force to compel the other to submit to his will: his first object is to throw his adversary, and thus to render him incapable of further resistance”, Clausewitz 1873, I: 1.

also, differently from the Prussian general, called upon his audience to reverse the process and mentally reconstruct the postulated complexity of the picture³.

Along with the duel model, but outside the epic, literature has recurrently offered another, more realistic rendering of war, which seems to have gradually turned into the predominant modality of representing it — that of chaos. This is the “war of every one against every one”, as Thomas Hobbes defines it⁴, where no right and wrong can be distinguished nor any two sides identified. One of the best early pictures of this turmoil is offered by Ovid’s description of the Iron Age⁵.

The technical and logistic impossibility of staging a battle has led dramatists and directors ever since classical times to resort to simplifying modalities of representation⁶, two of which are particularly relevant to *Macbeth*. One is the third-person account provided by an eyewitness of events that have happened off scene. Thus a bleeding captain returning from the battlefield informs Duncan about the feats accomplished by his valorous general Macbeth; shortly thereafter Ross comes to report on the loyalist army’s victory and the enemy’s surrender (I.ii.7-41, 48-62). The second modality, much in the way suggested in *Henry V*, synthesizes the entire mêlée into a duel fought by two central characters who become the ‘champions’ of the two sides in conflict.

Two such duels — synecdoches and emblematic representations of clashes between two armies — are featured in *Macbeth* as the action’s points of departure and arrival. The opening one, seen indirectly through the captain’s narrative, finds a strikingly fitting counterpart in the concluding one, which takes place largely on stage. As a matter of fact the two wars that are recapitulated through them are reversed mirror images of each other. Each is caused by a rebellion of a part of the nobility against their ruler, and in each foreign troops — Norwegian in the first case, Anglo-Saxon in the second — intervene in support of the insurgents. Each conflict is the outcome of a clear-cut situation where one of the sides is immediately identifiable as right and the other as wrong, with a complete turnaround between the beginning and the end. For the initial revolt against ‘good’ king Duncan appears largely if not utterly unjustified, whereas an armed reaction to Macbeth’s tyranny and misrule, magnified by his criminal ascent to the throne, seems not only legitimate but morally necessary. And between the first and the last act the protagonist has shifted from the embodiment of Virtue — Machiavellian *virtù* (I.ii.17-19) joined with righteousness and justice — to that of Vice, good only for becoming “the show and gaze o’th’time” by being exhibited at fairs as the quintessential Monster, the antonomastic Tyrant (V.viii.23-27)⁷.

³ *Henry V*, Prologue, 9-32.

⁴ *Leviathan*, Chap. 13 (Hobbes 1962: 100-101).

⁵ *Metamorphoses* I.141-150.

⁶ Scurati 2007: 119-141.

⁷ For a “Machiavellian reading” of the play see Riebling 1991: 273-286.

This geometrical setup provides a frame within which the world around and inside humans gradually collapses into a state of chaos. What follows Duncan's victory, rather than actual peace, is a rapidly spreading web of fissures and rifts in the order of society as well as in that of the natural world. Things are beginning to work differently from what was expected. Language in particular becomes so ambiguous that contraries stop denying each other, so that the apparent paradoxes of fair being foul and battles being lost and won at the same time (I.i) become not just viable but typical of a serious disruption in ordinary communication. As Banquo suddenly realizes on his way back to Duncan's camp after the battle, one comes across beings who refuse to occupy a predefined, unequivocal position in the Great Chain of Being, disavowing any possibility of establishing clear-cut boundaries between terms which were previously thought of as mutually exclusive — spiritual and material, female and male:

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).

If these forms of madness were confined to the Weird Sisters, they would be ascribable to their peculiar subversiveness — to their interfering with worldly affairs as human emissaries of infernal powers in order to bring about the disintegration of society. But the phenomenon is a far more general one. The gap between appearances and realities, surfaces and substances, is becoming unfathomable. "There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face", Duncan laments in an awkward attempt to justify himself for his failure in foreseeing the former Thane of Cawdor's treacherous intentions, adding: "He was a gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust" (I.iv.11-14). And it is precisely the sovereign's utter inability to see beyond facades that later leads him to his death, and Scotland to ruin. Not only does he now build an "absolute trust" on Macbeth, but on approaching his castle he completely misreads its look, praising its "pleasant seat" and the nimble and sweet air that surrounds it as if they were a guarantee of peace and safety instead of a *trompe-l'œil* to mask the evil nested inside (I.vi.1-3).

On this level Duncan is a king of the past, fit to govern a simpler world where no particular interpretive skills are required of those in power because things may be taken at face value and the distinction between right and wrong, good and evil, is patent and given once and for all — a world where wars may all be legitimately simplified into duels and

the combination of valour, honour and loyalty provides a sufficient ethical model for any man, whether monarch, thane or warrior. His rule is in this sense anachronistic, and this makes his elimination politically inevitable, even though of course not morally justified. But he is not only a sacrificial victim, for he himself — otherwise a paragon of the traditional virtues of the 'good' king — suddenly also violates a rule, and one as important for the preservation of harmony among the nobility as that of tanistry, when he designates his elder son as heir to the throne (I.iv.35-39)⁸.

Some degree of disorder thus precedes and in more than one sense facilitates the ultimate transgression — the regicide. At that fatal moment the entire frame of both human and natural worlds starts falling to pieces, portending "dire combustion and confused events, / New-hatched to th'woeful time", as Lennox declares on entering the castle the following morning (II.iii.50-51). From now on images of chaos multiply. Dark night supplants daylight, falcons are killed by owls, horses devour each other (II.iv). Macbeth has knowingly caused this state of things and is determined in seeking to worsen it, if that is necessary in order to satisfy his greed for power. "But let the frame of things disjoint, both the worlds suffer, / Ere we will eat our meal in fear", he says to his wife while waiting for news from the murderers hired to kill Banquo and Fleance (III.ii.16-17). In demanding answers from the witches he later constructs an articulated and ghastly picture of universal chaos:

Though you untie the winds and let them fight
Against the churches; though the yeasty waves
Confound and swallow navigation up;
Though bladed corn be lodged and trees blown down;
Though castles topple on their warders' heads;
Though palaces and pyramids do slope
Their heads to their foundations; though the treasure
Of nature's germens tumble all together,
Even till destruction sicken; answer me
To what I ask you (IV.i.51-60).

It is essentially the same kind of cosmic demolition which Malcolm, in testing Macduff's loyalty, falsely attributes to himself, were he to become king:

had I power, I should

⁸ In "the Celtic system of tanistry [...] the succession passed down not by direct primogeniture but by alternation between different branches of the royal house" and the monarch needed to be elected by the thanes (Norbrook 1987: 86; see Braunnmuller 1997: 16). This system would have justified Macbeth's claim to the throne, as he was Duncan's first cousin. Historically, as a matter of fact, the rule of tanistry had already been violated by King Kenneth III, who had introduced primogeniture, opening up a phase of strife and instability in the country (Norbrook 1987: 87-90).

Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell,
 Uproar the universal peace, confound
 All unity on earth (IV.iii.97-100).

The “milk of concord” is produced by the “king-becoming graces” listed in the preceding lines (92-94: “justice, verity, temp’rance, stableness, / Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness, / Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude”), and it seems to have a very strong affinity with virtues that are traditionally seen as ‘feminine’, such as tenderness, compassion, empathy, gentleness — that part of herself which Lady Macbeth attempts to do away with when she asks the spirits to “take [her] milk for” the “gall” of ‘masculine’ resoluteness and ruthlessness (I.v.46), and when in putting her husband to shame for hesitating in displaying those selfsame qualities she depicts herself as the kind of mother who would be capable of dashing her baby’s brains out while breast-feeding it if she had promised to do such a thing (I.vii.54-59).

The boundary between misrule and anarchy is flimsy. Bad government — tyranny — tends to turn into no government at all, just as the language of equivocation spoken by the Weird Sisters, which eliminates any apparent difference between opposites, is here ultimately impossible to distinguish from the language of inversion, which confirms opposites by simply exchanging them⁹. Both are essentially carnivalesque in origin¹⁰, but with James Stuart’s ascent to the throne of England both tend to become dangerous, demonically subversive rather than useful as instruments to contain social discontent and potential lower-class upheavals. “[T]he deuill as Gods Ape”, James states in his *Daemonologie*, “counterfeites in his seruantes this seruice & forme of adoration, that God prescribed and made his seruantes to practise”¹¹. Likewise, that of the world-upside-down, from a playful consolatory fiction, is gradually turning into a serious threat to the traditional order of society: “freedom is the man that will turn the world upside down”, Gerrard Winstanley will promise in 1649¹². The witches’ and Lady Macbeth’s ‘masculinity’ is an integral part of this grim carnival.

Chaos seizes minds as well as bodies and things. The usurper’s and his wife’s mental landmarks are swept away by variants of madness. The country bleeds and suffers from a potentially mortal disease. A doctor must be found to restore its health (IV.iii.141-158, 216-217; V.i; V.ii.27-30; V.iii.38-55). All this makes the final duel not only inevitable, but also

⁹ Clark 1977: 156-181; Clark 1980: 98-127; Stallybrass 1981: 189-209.

¹⁰ Bakhtin 1968: 263-268; Davis 1975: 96-151; Burke 1978: 182-191; Stallybrass & White 1986: 27-79.

¹¹ James I 1924: 35.

¹² “A Watch-Word to the City of London and the Armie”; see Hill 1991: 87 ff. “Fantasies of inversion” linked to political or social discontent whether ritualized and defused in Carnival celebrations or placed in declared antagonism to the accepted order of the community — being engendered by ‘outsiders’ such as witches or insurrectionist groups — had already been circulating, at least in France, at the end of the 16th century. Cf. Le Roy Ladurie 1966: I.407-414.

desirable. Macduff is a synecdoche for right and legitimacy, and for the whole army which is fighting to restore those principles in Scotland. Yet this duel must be the 'end-all' of wars. Duel-warfare is no longer possible, for, just as misrule gives way to anarchy and inversion to equivocation, any confrontation in the form of a duel — which like misrule and inversion should confirm contraries — is now bound to disintegrate into chaos, the annihilation of any possible distinction.

The world has become too complex to be reducible to a neat antithesis. It has turned from Homeric into Machiavellian, and possessing, and abiding by, the ethical code which pertains to a true 'man' — king, aristocrat, warrior — though still essential, is no longer enough. Those who do not understand this and uphold the traditional values or simplified variants of them are wiped out, as happens to Duncan himself, to Banquo, and to young Siward in his hopelessly noble confrontation with the protagonist (V.vii.5-12). This code is what makes Macbeth hesitate before the regicide, when he is still mindful of the multiple loyalties he owes: "He's here in double trust: / First, as I am his kinsman and his subject, / Strong both against the deed; then, as his host, / Who should against his murderer shut the door, / Not bear the knife myself" (I.vii.12-16). And it is what makes him rebuke his wife for calling him a coward by declaring: "I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none" (I.vii.46-47). A 'man' is someone whose potentially endless determination and aptitude for violence are always controlled by the rules of the group he belongs in. His wife's view is in fact absolutely one-dimensional and does not take into any consideration the social and political obligations and ties without which life in a collective context would inevitably become horrible if not impossible.

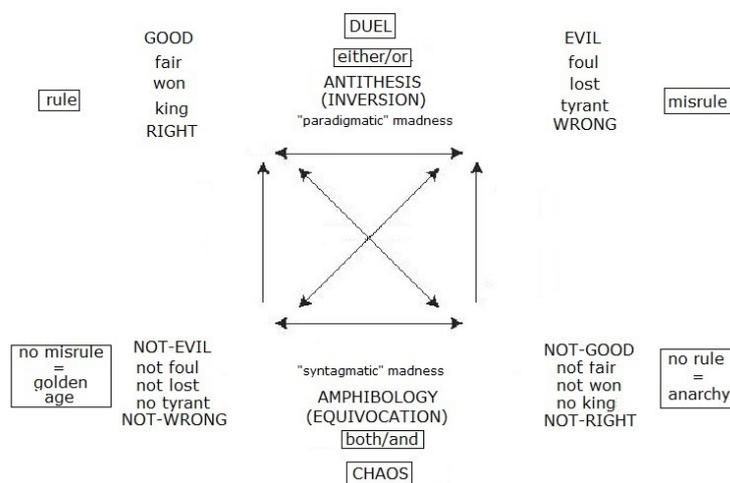
Lady Macduff, for all her being, differently from Lady Macbeth, a 'good' woman and a loving mother and wife, has a comparably simplistic (though opposite) notion of the duties which pertain to a 'real' man. She is unaware of the conflict between two separate loyalties — to his family on one side, to his legitimate king and his country on the other — which her husband had to face before deciding that the latter was at that moment a priority. Thus she completely misreads his motivations for leaving Fife and Scotland and accuses him of cowardice and treason: "When our actions do not, / Our fears do make us traitors". Evidently, she adds, he "wants the natural touch" which consists in a man placing his family above any other concern (IV.ii.3-4, 9).

On the contrary, Macduff is a figure of the 'new' man whose complexity suits the new times. His unfaltering allegiance to the cause of legitimacy and the restoration of right in the state is in fact accompanied by what his wife denied he had — feelings of love and tenderness for her and their children, their "pretty ones" (IV.iii.218). When Malcolm incites him to "[d]ispute" the terrible news of the massacre at Fife "like a man", he replies, "I shall do so; / But I must also feel it as a man" (222-224).

Yet combining the traditional heroic model with a gentler ethos which incorporates the 'feminine' side of affection and caring is not sufficient. Besides being tempered by the

Wren, that “most diminutive of birds” that is nonetheless “determined to fight, / Her young ones in her nest, against the owl” (IV.ii.9-11), the Lion must now be accompanied by the Fox. Diplomatic and political talents are literally vital, in particular that “art / To find the mind’s construction in the face” which Duncan knew nothing about but which Malcolm masters perfectly, as becomes evident when he deploys his rhetorical skills and his capability for deception in order to ascertain Macduff’s real intentions (IV.iii). Thomas Hobbes in the *Leviathan* (Chapters 26 ff.) stresses the need for any ruler aiming at building a firm control over his subjects and preserving peace and prosperity in his country to appropriate and monopolize the power of interpretation. True, he refers primarily to the interpretation of secular and divine laws and sacred texts; here, on the other hand, one is faced with a whole world, human as well as natural, which the confusion of anarchy and equivocation has made as ambiguous and undecipherable as the obscurest of texts. It is not only Duncan who falls victim to his inability to read words and people, but Macbeth himself, in his dealings with the “juggling fiends [...] / That palter with us in a double sense” (V.viii.19-20; see V.v.41-43) as well as in the paranoid mistrustfulness, stemming from his self-admitted ignorance of the art of interpreting human beings, which turns him into a ruthless serial killer: “Then live, Macduff, what need I fear of thee? / But yet I’ll make assurance double sure / And take a bond of fate: thou shalt not live” (IV.i.81-83).

This is a further reason, along with his crimes, that makes him an absolutely unsuitable king. No concord, no possibility of recovering the order and harmony which enable a community to live fully, can exist in a situation where the monarch, after spreading chaos around himself by breaking rules and social ties, is unable to restore them because he does not understand his people. From now on the preservation of peace by those in power will depend on their success in engrafting on the traditional ethos, with its rules of loyalty and honour, a new aptitude for deflecting hostility and strife through cunning.



Macbeth in a semiotic square

The transition between Elizabethan and early Jacobean cultures is marked by a tendency to what might be termed ‘ideological code restriction’¹³. Different figures of alterity — the witch, the Puritan, the New World native, the bearer of lower-class discontent, the sexually transgressive, the grotesque body of Carnival, and so forth — become ultimately reducible to one, thus automatically invested with negative moral connotations and implicitly reunited in an image of absolute otherness with regard to the community as a whole, to whose fundamental values and principles they embody a constant threat. To cite only one obvious example, when “the sinne of witchcraft” becomes interchangeable with political and social disobedience (James I 1624: 5) as well as with lack of respect for parents and princes (James I 1682: 24) and “wilful murther, Incest [...], Sodomy, Poysoning, and false coyne” (James I 1682: 23), this is precisely what comes into existence — a primary antithesis incorporating all imaginable variants of supposedly deviant practices or behaviours¹⁴.

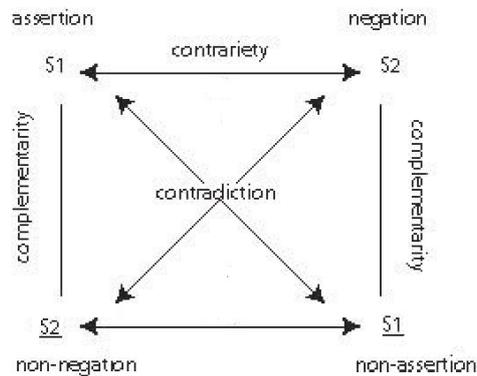
A number of plays written by Shakespeare in the decade after James Stuart’s accession to the throne of England — along with *Macbeth* one might mention, in different senses, at least *Othello*, *Measure for Measure*, and *Antony and Cleopatra* — seem to ‘resist’ this simplification of the ideological code. An antithetical scheme is initially set up in them only to be later challenged as providing an utterly inadequate representational model, incapable of accounting for the complexity of human affairs. The starting one-dimensional opposition is articulated and developed into a two-dimensional construct; the restricted code is dissolved into a more extended one.

The easiest way of synthesizing this, as far as *Macbeth* is concerned, is by making use of a ‘semiotic’ square. This figure has a long history, for it was invented by ancient logic — it is notably present in Aristotle’s *De Interpretatione* — and widely employed by medieval and later philosophers, logicians and grammarians¹⁵, until A. J. Greimas (*Du sens* 1970) turned it into a valuable tool for semiotics and cultural studies, in the following form:

¹³ I am here combining Robert Hodge’s extensive definition of ideology as “a unitary object that incorporates complex sets of meanings with the social agents and processes that produced them” (Hodge 2016) with an adaptation of Basil Bernstein’s and Umberto Eco’s notion of restricted (as opposed to extended or articulated) linguistic code. See Bernstein 1971; Eco 1977.

¹⁴ I am applying the category of antithesis to “ideas” rather than “words”, along the lines already indicated by the anonymous *Rhetorica ad Alexandrum* (3rd century B.C.), Chap. 26. See Brogan & Halsall 2012.

¹⁵ See Parsons 2012.



Briefly, S1 and S2 are identifiable as 'contraries' (e.g., white vs. black); S1 and S1 are 'contradictories' (white vs. not-white), as are S2 and S2 (black vs. not-black); S1 and S2, on the one hand, and S2 and S1, on the other, are 'complementaries' (white being part of all that is not black, and black part of all that is not white). The left side of the square contains the 'positive' deixis, as opposed to the 'negative' one represented on the right.

The duel model initially proposed in *Macbeth* implies a clear binary opposition, constructing a situation where things are 'either' one way 'or' the contrary and no confusion is possible between any two possible poles — 'good', 'right', but also 'legitimate monarchy' ('king'), as well as 'hero', being incompatible with 'evil', 'wrong', 'tyranny', and 'villain'. Good rule is the exact reverse of misrule. In such a context, hypothetical dissent or subversion must needs take the form of linguistic and ideological 'inversion', displacing one or more of the terms from the right side of the square onto the left, thus subjecting them to an ethical re-investment which turns them from negative to positive. Thus, however declaredly antagonistic, inversion confirms the ideological antithesis it opposes by simply turning it upside down. In the very first scene of the tragedy, on the other hand, the Weird Sisters already signal that this neat scheme is more problematic than one might have imagined, and that "fair" being "foul" and "the battle" being "lost and won" at the same time might imply that no identifiable criterion for distinguishing the two supposed *antitheta* is now available. This announces a fall into the realm of 'amphibology' or equivocation (II.iii.1 ff.; V.v.41-43), where the either/or pattern gives way to a both/and possibility and the heroic paradigm of war-as-duel is replaced by an image of cosmic chaos, just as anarchy, as absence of rule, may indifferently take the form of golden-age bliss or Hobbesian generalized conflict.

Madness in *Macbeth* functions along the same lines. The protagonist mistakes hallucinatory figments — daggers, Banquo's ghost — for factual truths, thus substituting (in an either/or modality) the materializations of his fears for his ordinary reality in a way that is reminiscent of the 'metaphorical' or paradigmatic disturbance in language described by Roman Jakobson¹⁶. The owl killing the falcon and night replacing daylight in

¹⁶ See Jakobson 1990.

II.4 reproduce the same kind of inversion in the natural world. Contrariwise, Lady Macbeth — in V.i — seems to suffer from a ‘metonymical’ or syntagmatic disorder which leads her to combine and confuse (in the both/and form) the products of her imagination and the data of her waking life. This sort of equivocation, as loss of distinctions between opposites, corresponds to the “dire combustion and confused events” that start taking place around humans after the regicide and lead to absolute chaos.

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Lucia Folena is Associate Professor of English Literature at the University of Turin. Her principal research fields are Renaissance and early modern literature, theory, cultural studies, literature and philosophy, literature and the visual arts. Her recent publications include "Dark Corners & Double Bodies: Espionage as Transgression in Measure for Measure", forthcoming in *Plots: Double Agents and Villains in Spy Fictions*, ed. by C. Concilio (Mimesis); "Gardez mon secret: Giordano Bruno and the Historian's Spy Story" in *Spy Fiction: un genere per grandi autori*, ed. by P. Bertinetti (Trauben 2014); "Il ritorno di Cerere: la signora Ramsay e la guerra-caos" in *La Guerra e le armi nella letteratura in inglese del Novecento*, ed. by L. Folena (Trauben 2013); "La seduzione del linguaggio", and "Dove fioriva l'eloquenza: Satana seduttore in Paradise Lost" in *Retoriche del discorso amoroso nella letteratura in inglese*, ed. by L. Folena (Trauben 2012).

lucia.folena@unito.it