

Macbeth and the Sterility of Adverse Arithmetic

We start with the famous opening scene, of course. In a scene with thirteen ominous lines, three witches appear on stage to prepare the audience for what is to come. At every moment of this play, let us note, the audience is more aware than the characters of what is to happen, in the same way that the witches seem to know everything in advance.

Equivocation appears surreptitiously and very quickly: “When the battle's lost and won...”. How can a battle be lost and won? Easy. In a battle you have a winner and a loser. Yes, but perhaps, here, Macbeth will win *and* lose. “Fair is foul and foul is fair.” Very rapidly we become aware of something extremely important in this scene: that although there are three witches, who will soon demonstrate the magical power of the number three, their vision of the world is binary, and the language and structure of the play which follows insists on pairings, opposites and ‘*double* dealing’.

The witches later deliver their famous three-fold prophecies, and chant their three-fold spells:

“Thrice to thine, and thrice to mine,
And thrice again, to make up nine...”

We note as we proceed that there are *three* things that provoke lechery, three apparitions, and three miles to the “moving grove”. Though the number three may be magical, there is surely an ironic reversal at play here of the Holy Trinity, and perhaps also of their self-evident masculinity (*is* the Holy Ghost masculine?).

Nevertheless, the witches refer constantly also to *doubles* (“Fair is foul and foul is fair”). Macbeth and Banquo have “doubly redoubled their strokes upon the foe”. He begins by being paired, first with Banquo and then with his wife. When he is with Banquo, they are both met by two messengers (why two when one would have served?). The King has two sons, Malcolm and Donalbain and there are “two delinquents” whom Macbeth kills in “pious rage”.

Doubles abound: “All our service, “ says Lady Macbeth, “in every point twice done and then done double, were poor...” I.6 (notice the key word “done” –“I am afraid to think what I have done” II.2. , which, with “do”, “-why then ‘tis time to do it”, “I’ll do and I’ll do and I’ll do”-

dully reverberates throughout the play). Macbeth explains soon after that “He’s here in double trust” I.7. “Double, double, toil and trouble,” chant the witches as Macbeth, falling into their speech patterns (including rhymed couplets), promises to “make assurance double sure” as far as Macduff is concerned. There are two daggers, the “air-borne” dagger and the real one he draws. This real one is joined by another real one, and both are then left by Lady Macbeth by the *two* bodyguards.

Two murderers are joined by a third. This has traditionally been seen as a problem. Is the third murderer Macbeth in disguise, come to check on the other two? On one level, it is an indication of mistrust and fits Macbeth’s style of proceeding (“There’s not a one of them But I keep in his house a servant fee’d”). At another level, perhaps, it is a significant rendering of the number 2 into the witches’ key figure of 3.

The notion of equivocation itself suggests a universe of division and polarity. Scotland and England. Good and evil. Truth and lies. Heaven and Hell. Yet it also conjures up a universe with a third dimension: a Manichean universe where God may be in both Good and Evil. Equivocation is the ‘Third Way’, where truth exists and lies exist, but there exists *also* truth-within-lies.

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After the spell, in which a sow has eaten her nine farrow, the witches invoke three apparitions who address Macbeth thrice. Macbeth grimly quips “Had I three ears I’d hear thee!”. There is then a show of eight kings, but followed by the ghost of Banquo, who thus turns it into an eerie nine again or thrice three (three raised by the power of two?). Macbeth cannot bear the sight of the kings and says, “some I see That two-fold balls and treble sceptres carry”. Again, we note the juxtaposition of doubles and triples.

It is straight after this when Lennox arrives to report that there are “two or three” (a more significant numbering perhaps than might at first be thought) who claim that Macduff is fled to England.

We have said that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth make a pair, a pairing where ironically Lady Macbeth is endowed with masculine qualities; Macbeth says admiringly, “Bring forth men children only... I.7 , whilst Macbeth’s own masculinity is impugned by his wife, till he is forced to utter, “I dare do all that may become a man, Who dares do more is none”. However,

their dual (double) identity is challenged by the question of whether they have a child (“I have given suck...”) or not (“He has no children” states Macduff). L.C. Knights famously disposed of this conundrum, but what if the ambiguity were perfectly deliberate? They might be a twosome, *and* they might be a threesome! In fact, the historical Lady Macbeth did have one child but not with Macbeth, so Shakespeare is at least consistent with history. Would it not be theatrically interesting to let them have a child on stage, ignored, invisible, inconsequential to their lives?

Ambivalence reigns where numbers are concerned. Even Lady Macbeth has numbers on the brain, “One two, why then ‘tis time to do it”. This is the scene of her sleepwalking, watched by two witnesses: a Doctor of Physic and a Waiting Gentlewoman, who have watched for two nights. At the end, she starts her speech with “To bed, to bed...” but finishes, significantly with three: “To bed, to bed, to bed.”

Macbeth himself becomes aware too late of the dangers attending this world as a place of doubles, warning of “Those fiends believe who palter with us in a double sense”. It is interesting, then, to see him almost explicitly falling into the witches’ ironic triples, with “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow”. He had done this before with “If it were done when ‘tis done, then ‘twere well it were done quickly” I.7 I say “ironic” because I assume that in their case, they are mocking the Holy Trinity. Malcolm’s utterance “By the grace of Grace We will perform in measure, time and place” can be taken to be both rhetorically satisfying as a triplet, as well as an indication of his awareness of a trinity-linked vision of grace.

The three witches provide a mocking triple (which mocks the trinity) in a universe whose real numerical identity is binary (Manichean, divided, equivocal). The confusion Macbeth is led to is underpinned by his numerical confusion, dramatically represented on stage by pairings or triplings. Is the world Manichean, where there is good or bad, male or female, darkness or light, or is it a world of threes: the Holy Trinity, obviously, but at a more sinister level too, a world of good or bad *and* good/bad; male, female *and* male/female “(by your beards...)”; truth, lies and equivocation – false truth, fake news!

Macbeth’s real tragedy, perhaps, is that two cannot go into three, nor vice versa.