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# The Narrators in *Macbeth*

Barbara Hardy

Hilda Hulme Memorial Lecture 1986





**Hilda M Hulme**

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University of London

The Hilda Hulme Memorial Lecture 1986

# The Narrators in *Macbeth*

Professor Barbara Hardy

Chairman: Professor Howard Jenkins



## Chairman's Introduction (from a tape-recording)

Ladies and Gentlemen:

A FEW YEARS AGO, when I was preparing an edition of *Hamlet*, I did what any editor of that play has to do. I had to find myself confronted with a number of variant readings from one text and the other. And there was one particular pair of readings that I had to decide between, which occurs in the scene, you remember, in which the grave-digger tosses up the skull, and as he turns over the skull in his hand Hamlet says, 'This might be the pate of a politician which this ass now ... *o'er-reaches*', the quarto says. But the Folio says 'which this ass now *o'er-offices*'. And I thought this was a very interesting and attractive reading. I liked the idea of the grave-digger by virtue of his office lording it over the chap who had been a politician intriguing for office in life and now had to submit to the humble grave-digger. But it was a little disconcerting to find all my previous editors had rejected this reading in favour of what seemed to me the much flatter alternative, and that the most distinguished bibliographers of the day dismissed it as just a stupid misunderstanding of some incompetent Folio compositor. Very disconcerting – until one day I happened upon an article by Dr Hilda Hulme, which said, '*o'er-offices* – a brilliant emendation, surely, if it is one'. And from that last little sly wit I detected that Dr Hulme, as I did, thought it wasn't an emendation at all, that it wasn't a case of the later text correcting or corrupting the earlier, but fully recognized there the authentic Shakespearean inventiveness in the use of language. And thus encouraged by seeing someone else in print prefer this reading, I read it with much less hesitation than I otherwise might have done. And it is interesting to note by the way that the precedent I set is now followed by the Oxford edition of the *Complete Works*, which came out just over a month ago. I mention this, however, just to give one small example of the interest, the percipience, the originality that Dr Hulme often showed in her comments on the language of Shakespeare. Originality certainly, because, as you see, she was departing from the whole editorial tradition. Her book *Explorations in Shakespeare's Language*



is, I suppose, the one which is outstanding among her works and the one by which she is certain to be remembered, and one which is regularly used, as it must be, by scholars and editors of Shakespeare. It is a book which is packed with suggestions over the whole Shakespeare canon for readings, explications, interpretations of Shakespeare's words and locutions. And it's the kind of book that of course you don't write just by having happy intuitions, although perhaps I have already illustrated that Hilda Hulme could have those; but it's the kind of book that you write – if you write it – when you have spent years and years in close familiarity with the English language as it was written in past centuries. And Hilda Hulme's experience of the English language was in some ways unrivalled, in so far as she had months and years working in archives, reading written but unpublished records in record offices up and down the country.

When she first started this kind of work, she expected to find in local records evidence of regional dialects, and that of course she did plentifully find. But she very soon discovered that the importance of such local records was much greater than that. Records coming close to what people actually said, written down but never printed, could frequently give evidence of the existence and the survival of words and forms of words and uses of words that couldn't be found in dictionaries which depended on printed sources. And it was with her knowledge, extensive knowledge, of this kind of material that Hilda Hulme was able so often to throw light on possible meanings of words used by Shakespeare and his contemporaries. I say 'possible meanings', and I said before 'packed with suggestions', because she was never dogmatic about this, but she was always enlarging the possibilities of what Shakespeare might and could have meant, as a result of her knowledge of what words were used and did mean on the evidence of local records.

Hilda Hulme was of course a product of the London School of English, which always set particular store by the contact between language and literature; and she exemplified in her work the way in which a knowledge of the language is necessary if you are to understand the literature on which critics try to commentate. Hilda Hulme came up to University College in 1932, and she took English Honours there. Then after some years away teaching in the provinces she came back to University College as a lecturer. And I remember what I think I have never before repeated to anyone, how Professor Sisson, then Head of the Department at University College, said to me one day, 'You know, Dr Hulme was a very active scholar, and that is why I was very glad to get her back here'. She was a Lecturer, and subsequently a Reader, at University College, teaching Old English, Germanic Philology including Gothic, and the History of the Language of course, to English Honours students. And when she was not

doing that down the road at University College, she was probably ensconced in a carrel up in the Library here sorting out the material she had collected in local records and – I don't know what – working on all the Shakespeare texts. And then, after thirty years, she was forced to take early retirement as a result of that very sad and distressing illness from which she died in 1983. And now her husband, Dr Aslam, himself a Ph.D. of this University and a former student of University College, where he met his wife, has beneficently founded the Hilda Hulme Memorial Lectureship in memory of Hilda Hulme and her contribution to English scholarship, a foundation of which we are to hear the first lecture this evening.

For my part, I count it a great privilege to have been asked to take the chair at this first Hilda Hulme Memorial Lecture. For Hilda Hulme and I were for a number of years colleagues at University College; and from being colleagues we became friends, and indeed neighbours, as a result of our swapping recommendations of house-agents at a time when house-agents were singularly incapable of finding flats for people to live in; as a result of which, for some time, my wife and I and Dr Hulme actually lived in the same building, and I was able to say quite literally that I daily operated over Dr Hulme's head. In the literal sense, I think, only. When it came to our work on Shakespeare, neither of us, I hope, operated over the head of the other. We approached the subject from different angles – from the side of literary criticism and as an editor of the Shakespeare texts, she, as I have said, as a student of the English language. Even so, we frequently found ourselves confronted with the same knotty problems of variant readings and interpretation, and had many interesting discussions on such points. Of my profiting from one of her printed observations I have already given an example; and there were of course many others.

But I don't wish to speak further of myself. My further duty is to introduce the first Hilda Hulme Memorial lecturer. That of course is not an onerous duty, since Professor Barbara Hardy is extremely well known in this University. But there are one or two things I would like to say: for although it seems a long time ago now, Professor Hardy and I also were once colleagues at University College, where Professor Hardy was also a colleague of Dr Hulme's, before she left for Birkbeck, from where she went to Royal Holloway and then came back to Birkbeck, where she is still professing English Literature in this University long after I have ceased to do so. Outside the University she is also of course very widely known, as a scholar and a critic of nineteenth-century literature, especially for her work upon the novel. And if I may mention one particular novelist with whom her name is especially associated, it must of course be George Eliot. And I remember how on at least one occasion she, a

former colleague and close friend of Dr Hulme, was also a collaborator; for there is a volume on the novel edited by Barbara Hardy to which Hilda Hulme contributed an essay on the language of George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. You will see that Hilda Hulme's range of activity was not narrowly restricted – Old English, Shakespeare, George Eliot – and neither of course is Professor Hardy's range of activity restricted. Known especially as an authority on George Eliot and the Victorian novel, she is also well capable of lecturing on Shakespeare; and I know that she has recently lectured elsewhere on *Hamlet* and on *King Lear*. It seems to me, as I am sure it does to you, particularly appropriate that the first Hilda Hulme Memorial Lecture should be delivered by a former colleague, close friend and collaborator of Dr Hulme, and also singularly appropriate that Professor Hardy should have chosen, in view of what came to be the focal point of Dr Hulme's research, that she should have chosen for this evening a Shakespearean topic.

I am now delighted to ask Professor Hardy to inaugurate the Hilda Hulme Memorial Lectureship by speaking to us on 'The Narrators in *Macbeth*'.

# The Narrators in *Macbeth*

IT IS AN HONOUR AND a sorrow to be giving this first lecture in memory of Hilda Hulme, my friend and teacher. When she taught her students Old English, she never forgot that it was poetry, placing 'The Dream of the Rood', for example, in the context of her knowledge and love of Milton. Her fine Shakespearean scholarship is a model of learning, restraint, and speculative power. The application of her linguistic experience and critical acuteness made a valuable contribution to George Eliot studies. She was a colleague with whom one could enjoy the rare pleasure of disputation about language and literature.

## I Expositions

The most famous narrator in *Macbeth* – whose incapacity has been vaunted and compounded by Rose Macaulay's *Told By An Idiot* and William Faulkner's *The Sound And The Fury* – is that pure example of what critics of fiction have called the unreliable narrator, the idiot of Macbeth's metaphor. The idiot's tale, like Shakespeare's, is full of sound and fury, unlike it in signifying nothing. To project even such a brief abstract of artistic incompetence – and Shakespeare, like Cervantes, Thomas Hardy, and James Joyce, can elaborate fuller demonstrations – is to signal artistic control and confidence.

The first acts of narration in Act I, scene 2, are energetic. In Act I, scene 1, a context is created for this energy; the play arrests the attention of its audience by a device also used in *Othello* and *The Tempest*, a conspicuous gap in exposition. Absence of narrative, in the first uninformative speeches of the weird sisters, creates a need, posing a question which yearns for an answer. Their laconic storm-set questions, answers, and riddles are wild but elegantly organised in couplets, single lines and shared lines for three separate voices, with a final ensemble. It is a lyric overture which tells little, an action actively

isolated. After it, Shakespeare meets and matches absence with expansive presence, concentrating exposition in a double narration which is framed, formal, contrastive, dynamic, theatrically ominous and politically suggestive. The first scene is a triad, the second a dyad. Expository narration is divided between two specialised narrators, the bleeding Captain and the thane Rosse. Each supplies information in ways dear to Shakespeare's art. The bleeding Captain is one of Shakespeare's most vivacious nonce characters. He dominates the scene. His outside perfectly matches his style and subject, and the part is a joy to the actor, whether or not he combines it with another role. Rosse is a character open to a range of histrionic interpretation. He is not dominant, but theatrically sustained and developed, reporting in this first scene and still telling away in the last, within thirty lines of the end. He is given a series of crucial and plot-precipitating narrations. His subordination is vital.

These two tellers are contrasted and linked. The Captain comes on bleeding and in pain. Rosse arrives with haste looking through his eyes, 'So should he look/That seems to speak things strange'. The Captain is a frontline soldier. Rosse is an officer, and an ambassador or diplomat. The Captain comes straight from the fighting and can 'report ... of the revolt/The newest state', but he is given a traditionally epic style, which is continued, less loftily, violently, and intensely, by Rosse. Each narrator is formally identified, introduced and questioned. Each speaks in an exalted, metaphorical, and hyperbolic style.

The Captain's expansive three-paragraphed speech is twice the length of Rosse's two-part address, and elaborated by many retarding elements:

*Cap.*           Doubtful it stood;  
As two spent swimmers, that do cling together  
And choke their art. The merciless Macdonwald  
(Worthy to be a rebel, for to that  
The multiplying villainies of nature  
Do swarm upon him) from the western isles  
Of Kernes and Gallowglasses is supplied;  
And Fortune, on his damned quarrel smiling,  
Show'd like a rebel's whore: but all's too weak;  
For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name),  
Disdaining Fortune, with his brandish'd steel,  
Which smok'd with bloody execution,  
Like Valour's minion, carv'd out his passage,  
Till he fac'd the slave;  
Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him,

Till he unseam'd him from the nave to th' chops,  
And fix'd his head upon our battlements.  
*Dun.* O valiant cousin! worthy gentleman!  
*Cap.* As whence the sun 'gins his reflection,  
Shipwrecking storms and direful thunders break,  
So from that spring, whence comfort seem'd to come,  
Discomfort swells. Mark, King of Scotland, mark:  
No sooner justice had, with valour arm'd,  
Compell'd these skipping Kernes to trust their heels,  
But the Norway Lord, surveying vantage,  
With furbish'd arms, and new supplies of men,  
Began a fresh assault.  
*Dun.* Dismay'd not this  
Our captains, Macbeth and Banquo?  
*Cap.* Yes;  
As sparrows eagles, or the hare the lion.  
If I say sooth, I must report they were  
As cannons overcharg'd 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 -  
But I am faint, my gashes cry for help.<sup>1</sup> (1, 2)

It contains several similes, brief but circumstantially expansive enough to remind us of Homer, like a similar one in the First Player's demonstration speech in Act III, scene 2 of *Hamlet*. It is punctuated by parentheses and clear caesural pauses. Its narrative markers and fillers respond to Malcolm's formal imperative, 'Say to the king' with 'Mark, king of Scotland, mark' and 'If I say sooth, I must report'. The penultimate line, 'I cannot tell' breaks to resonate in complex conclusion. The narration's irregular lineation,<sup>2</sup> formality, lexical grandeur, and slow stately progress, make a perfect register for the actor's passionate voicing of praise, pain, exhaustion, and breathlessness –

1 Extracts are from *Macbeth*, ed. Kenneth Muir, Arden edition, Methuen, London, 1986.

2 For a full and still interesting discussion of the 'irregularities' in the scene see Richard Flatter, *Shakespeare's Producing Hand*, Heinemann, London, 1948.

Shakespeare knows the pangs of certain acts of telling. On several occasions<sup>3</sup> he pays tribute to Aeneas's forced utterance of grief unutterable to Dido in Book Two of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and these tributes transcend the classical commonplace in their fluent notation of individualised passions. Shakespeare takes care to provide for his functional characters and the Captain is no exception. Stage records and reviews<sup>4</sup> are rich in illustrations of this acting part, reporting narrators who fall, collapse, reel against the king, nearly strike him with a sword, and are brought on in litters. They are joined by the current (1986) Royal Shakespeare Company performance in Stratford, by Joseph Mydell. His is a robust rendering, bloody but not breathless, not using caesural pauses, short lines and other cues for gasps, nor joining portentousness with pants in 'Mark, King of Scotland, mark'. His gashes never cry out for help till the last line.

Rosse's report is terser, more self-controlled, and political, bringing news of victory and settlement, even specifying the gain in dollars, and continuing though not completing the Captain's story. He tells us more about Norway, and adds the new character of the Thane of Cawdor. Duncan has to be told that he comes from Fife:

Rosse           Where the Norweyan banners flout the sky,  
And fan our people cold. Norway himself,  
With terrible numbers,  
Assisted by that most disloyal traitor,  
The Thane of Cawdor, began a dismal conflict;  
Till that Bellona's bridegroom, lapp'd in proof,  
Confronted him with self-comparisons,  
Point against point, rebellious arm 'gainst arm,  
Curbing his lavish spirit: and, to conclude,  
The victory fell on us:-

Dun.           Great happiness!

Rosse           That now  
Sweno, the Norway's king, craves composition;  
Nor would we deign him burial of his men  
Till he disbursed at Saint Colme's Inch  
Ten thousand dollars to our general use. (1, 2)

3 *Titus Andronicus*, III, 2 and V, 3; *The Comedy of Errors*, I, 1. I have discussed these examples, and the Virgilian narration (commonly known as the Pyrrhus speech) in *Hamlet*, II, 2, in 'The Figure of Narration in *Hamlet*, A Centre of Excellence: Essays Presented to Seymour Betsky ed. R. Druce, Costerus, new series, Rodopi, Amsterdam, 1987.

4 Marvin Rosenberg, *The Masks of Macbeth*, University of California Press, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1978.





Rosse is ambiguous and suggestive enough to have been interpreted as a liar (in the horse-story) by William Empson, and a traitor and spy by the Victorian scholar, M.F. Libby.<sup>5</sup> The film director Roman Polanski shows him letting in the assassins at Fife after the tender farewell to his cousin's family. It is easy to defend him against the charge of unreliability, but it is an implausible rather than preposterous response to a play where information is so often incomplete, obscure, oblique, unreliable and ambiguous, where truths and lies so commonly change places and faces.

## II More messengers and messages

The Captain and Rosse are the first of many messengers. The Captain is a nonce narrator, and so are the Old Man, the rough and humble messenger aware that his hasty warning terrifies Lady Macduff, and several servants abused by Macbeth. Messengers and messages<sup>6</sup> fill the interstices of many classical, mediaeval, and Renaissance plays to inform audiences inside and outside the drama, to create motive, precipitate action, move the plot on its way. Like Sophocles, the author of the morality play *Everyman*, and Samuel Beckett, Shakespeare likes to animate and individualise the messenger or *nuntius*, or the *nuncio* as he familiarly names Viola/Cesario in *Twelfth Night*. The bleeding Captain, Rosse and the Old Man are fine instances of 'the passionate and weighty *Nuntiug* as John Webster called him in that great iambic pentameter which rises from the weighty prose of his Address to the Reader in *The White Devil*. All the messengers in *Macbeth* 'enliven death' in ways probably not intended by Webster. They swell that company of memorable messengers which includes the soldier in *Antigone*, the 'mighty messenger' Death in *Everyman*,<sup>7</sup> the ambiguous boy or boys in *Waiting for Godot*, and Shakespeare's own brief shadow, the vividly dark Marcade in *Love's Labour's Lost*. Impassioned narrators

5 I have not seen M.F. Libby's book, *Some New Notes on Macbeth* (1893) mentioned by Empson in *Essays on Shakespeare*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986, and quoted by Rosenberg, *op. cit.*

6 For previous work on Shakespeare's messengers see Wolfgang Clemen, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Art*, Methuen, London and New York, 1972, and Gary J. Scrimgeour, 'The Messenger as a Dramatic Device in Shakespeare', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, xix, 1968, which appeared after the original German publication of Clemen's discussion.

7 While this lecture was being written, in 1986, Joe Grundy, a character in Radio 4's serial, *The Archers*, was enterprisingly cast for this part but the Ambridge production of *Everyman* was never put on.

like these intensify and dignify the role. They are also thematically responsive to their play. In *Macbeth* the messengers' narrative behaviour develops the theme of dangerous, compromised and passive discourse. Messengers are traditionally vulnerable. Shakespeare's are bearers of evil tidings who are not killed, but have a bad time. The escape imagined by Robert Frost for his 'Bearer of Evil Tidings', who prudently gives up the mission and settles down in the middle of the journey, is not open to the oppressed and serviceable messengers here. Macbeth is often refused and snubbed, as well as tricked and teased, by the oracles and heralds of the play's darkness, and his inferiors are often put down and insulted too. The timid or terrified serving-messengers are patronised and bullied, but they come off better than Kent in *Lear*, who is stocked, and do not suffer as badly as the messenger who is beaten, haled up and down, and threatened with pickling by Cleopatra, or the man so shamefully whipped on Antony's orders. (The servants in *Antony and Cleopatra* draw on Shakespeare's experiments in message-bearing and message-receiving in *Macbeth*). One servant's terrified pallor is finely abused as creamfaced and goose-like as he stutters out news of the ten thousand approaching English soldiers. Though another is understandably frightened at having to report a wood on the move, he is merely threatened with hanging if his news is not true, and invited by Macbeth to do as much for his master if it is. But most of the messengers are demonstrably and clearly victims of despotism and tyranny. Shakespeare never lets us forget the politics of power.

The subservience of messengers emerges as messages multiply. Messengers are structurally dependent on each other, their messages fitting, or nearly fitting, together in an imperfect jigsaw. In scenes 1, 2, and 3 of Act I, we only get the complete story of Macdonwald's rising after listening to four narrators, the Captain, Rosse, Angus, and Malcolm, and we never come to know exactly how the Thane of Cawdor co-operated or with whom. Unlike Hamlet's players, Shakespeare does not tell all, and his reserve is purposeful:

*Angus*            Who was the Thane, lives yet;  
                     But under heavy judgment bears that life  
                     Which he deserves to lose. Whether he was combin'd  
                     With those of Norway, or did line the rebel  
                     With hidden help and vantage, or that with both  
                     He labour'd in his country's wrack, I know not;  
                     But treasons capital, confess'd and prov'd,  
                     Have overthrown him. (I,3)

Details accumulate: the audience is like Desdemona busy about the house while Othello tells his life-story, hearing history 'in parcels, not intently'. Individual speakers don't know the whole truth: 'I cannot tell (the Captain) and 'I know not' (Angus). There is the politically significant irony of Macbeth's ignorance about his enemy and predecessor: 'The Thane of Cawdor lives' he protests, first to the witches, then to Rosse and Angus. *Macbeth's* dissemination of news brings home the bitter reality of a front line lack of military information, not only about political causes and effects but even about the identity of the enemy. Shakespeare's rendering of war-reports has been called careless or textually corrupt, while Stendhal has been praised for his politically astute rendering of the ramshackle, backyard, piecemeal, and obfuscated experiences of war in *The Charterhouse of Parma*. Fabrizio wanders in the maze of Waterloo, and on his way back to Italy wonders if he has been in a battle, if the battle was Waterloo, and if he can find out what has happened to him from reading a newspaper. At Fife too the news is uncertain, the battle dispersed, the terrain doubtful, and you are rewarded with your enemy's title and estate before you know he is your enemy. The arbitrariness, mess, fragmentations, and obscurity of war are thoroughly, harshly, and quietly imagined by Shakespeare as he uses messages and messengers to delineate and define political communication and power, as well as get the action rolling. Macbeth becomes a tyrant who controls the lines of communication but he starts off as a submissive soldier, fighting in the dark.

The characteristic message in *Macbeth* is refracted, indirect, and second-hand. Reports accumulate doubt and lose clarity as they pass from one mouth to another. Communication is dilapidated, like all personal and political relationships in this play. Duncan says that the bleeding Captain 'seems' to be a likely reporter of war. Lennox says Rosse looks like one 'that seems to speak things strange'. Macbeth and Banquo repeat to each other the witches' promises, bewildered, incredulous, suspicious. Malcolm tells Duncan what he has heard from others of Cawdor's death. Lady Macbeth reads or re-reads Macbeth's letter. A servant says one of his fellows has arrived 'almost dead for breath, with scarcely more than would make up his message', and the breathless messenger is memorialised by Lady Macbeth, after her offguard, 'Thou'rt mad to say it', as the hoarse raven That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan/Under my battlements'. After the cauldron-scene, Lennox tells Macbeth that messengers have brought news of Macduff's departure to England, this is one of the few slips in the communication of communications in the play. In the previous scene (III, 6) a Lord, another nonce messenger, has already told Lennox that Macbeth has been exasperated by the news of Macduff's departure, and

related how Macbeth's messenger was rebuked. This Lord's report of reporting particularises the messenger in the image 'cloudy', imagined imaginary dialogue, and the lively stage-direction, 'hums':

*Lord* ... with an absolute 'Sir, not I,  
The cloudy messenger turns me his back,  
And hums, as who should say, 'You'll rue the time  
That clogs me with this answer.' (III, 6)

Malcolm tells Macduff about the false agents sent by Macbeth to lure him back to Scotland, whose deceptions have shaken his faith in embassy. All these refracted messages are excellent economies, curtly selecting and summarising as they re-report reports. Convolutions and compoundings draw attention to the narrative forms and figures being used. Most important, news and reporting are compromised.

Vivid firsthand reports also highlight indirections. The urgent messenger in Act III who tells Lady Macduff to escape with her children, apologises for frightening her with his savage telling. He comes too late. The scrupulous waiting gentlewoman in Act V, scene 1, refuses to repeat what she has heard Lady Macbeth say in her sleep because there was no-one else present to 'confirm her speech'. Perhaps she gives a cue to the doctor who decides to take notes while watching and listening as the queen walks and talks in her sleep: 'I will set down what comes from her, to satisfy my remembrance the more strongly'. In Act V, scene 5, Seyton, never rebuked by Macbeth, is brief and possibly sympathetic: 'It is the cry of women, my good Lord', and 'The Queen, my Lord, is dead'. Like Shaw's after him, Shakespeare's forms of address vary finely, and each message and messenger appropriately registers relationship and occasion. There can be a touch of compassionate or tender respect in Seyton's 'my good Lord' and 'my Lord', though the phrases can also be neutrally or coldly formal. Shakespeare never forgets the actor, in major or minor roles.

### III

## Malcolm and Macduff: Expansive Narration<sup>8</sup>

The messengers are professional narrators, their theatrical function traditional and stylised. They are plainly much more than artistically functional, used by the play to expose and analyse acts of social correspondence and communication in particular power-structures. But professional narration in *Macbeth* has greater psychic, ethical and social complexity than these minor messengers exhibit. Shakespeare is interested in the narrative acts and arts of his more important public men and women. In many of the plays he uses a major narration to swell or extend or centralise a character whose role might be too backgrounded, too simplified, or too stereotyped. Gertrude, Enobarbus and Edgar, for instance, are characters who are deepened and complicated by a single long narration. In *Macbeth* the two characters in danger of being outshaded by the principals are Malcolm, son and heir of Duncan, and Macbeth's successor, and Macduff, the chief opposition thane. Their expansive narration-scene was not invented by Shakespeare, but adapted from Holinshed and used at the beginning of Act IV, scene 3, in which narration is prolonged, varied, and contrasted. In the first part of this scene, which dramatises Malcolm's distrust of Macduff, and his testing and tempting by a many-faceted impersonation of the tyrant, Shakespeare revises Holinshed. In Malcolm's boast, he transforms the third aspect of assumed political villainy in Holinshed, which is lying, to a love of discord and war. The change may have been made because there is some logical awkwardness in making a character lie about being a liar, then withdraw the lie and claim truth, (as in the logical teaser in which a Cretan asserts that all Cretans are liars) though he restores the sin of lying in Malcolm's speech of retraction: 'my first false speaking/Was this upon myself. Shakespeare also makes a small but important change as he dramatises and defines Macduff's response to the falsehoods. After Holinshed's Malcolm reveals that he has been pretending to outdo Macbeth, and possesses all the virtues instead of all the vices, the two are immediately reconciled: 'incontinently hereupon they embraced each other, and promising to be faithful the one to the other, they fell in consultation how they might best provide for all their business, to bring the same to good effect.'<sup>9</sup> Shakespeare is more interested than Holinshed in both

8 I have discussed this aspect of narration in the essay on *Hamlet* cited in note 3, and in 'Shakespeare's Dramatic Narrative', Papers from the first Nordic Conference for English Studies, Oslo, 1981.

9 Geoffrey Bullough, *Narrative & Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare*, Vol. VII, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1973.

psychological effect and political ambiguity, and makes his Macduff unable to turn off the mood of moral loathing with which he responds to the acted lying:

*Malcolm*        Now we'll together, and the chance of goodness  
                          Be like our warranted quarrel. Why are you silent?  
*Macduff*         Such welcome and unwelcome things at once,  
                          'Tis hard to reconcile.

Imaginative artist and experienced actor, Shakespeare knew that people don't switch emotions in an eyeblink, but that a passion once generated will survive after the cause has been withdrawn. He also wants to stress the continuity of that political distrust which motivated Malcolm's experiment and which runs right through the play. Macbeth's false agents have poisoned Malcolm's faith, and he in turn poisons Macduff's mind. Malcolm has compromised integrity in telling lies for the sake of truth, and Macduff responds with distaste to the opportunism of the next king of Scotland. Theatrical records show how actors have responded to this subtlety, refusing to shake hands, for instance, or slowly coming to shake hands, in what H. Granville-Barker called 'tame puzzlement... man torn between hope and despair' and what M. Rosenberg in *The Masks of Macbeth* called 'injured scepticism'. The scene shows Shakespeare's knowledge of the powers and effects of performance, on and off stage.

In the next two parts of the scene, narration is varied. Malcolm is given a beneficent narration to counter his false-speaking, as he tells the healing tale of the healing of the King's Evil by Edward the Confessor, in a ritualised passage of considerable symbolic significance. The initial narration of the Doctor, and its expansion by Malcolm, also give Macduff time to convalesce from his distrust and contempt. Communication is healed and emotion modulated. No sooner has Macduff recovered, under cover or through the agency of the impersonal and benign episode of telling and listening, than he is made to listen to another terrible story, this time a true one. Rosse comes on, to tell slowly, reluctantly, imaginatively, and selectively, the play's most horrible piece of news, the report of the massacre at Fife:

*Rosse*             Would I could answer  
                          This comfort with the like! But I have words,  
                          That would be howl'd out in the desert air,  
                          Where hearing should not latch them.  
*Macd.*             What concern they?  
                          The general cause? or is it a fee-grief,  
                          Due to some single breast?

Rosse            No mind that's honest  
                  But in it shares some woe, though the main part  
                  Pertains to you alone.  
Macd.            If it be mine,  
                  Keep it not from me; quickly let me have it.  
Rosse            Let not your ears despise my tongue for ever,  
                  Which shall possess them with the heaviest sound,  
                  That ever yet they heard.  
Macd.            Humh! I guess at it.  
Rosse            Your castle is surpris'd; your wife, and babes,  
                  Savagely slaughter'd: to relate the manner,  
                  Were, on the quarry of these murther'd deer,  
                  To add the death of you. (IV, 3)

Shakespeare returns to the friction between Malcolm and Macduff as Macduff instructs his elder in manliness, that much discussed theme in the play: 'Dispute it like a man'. This detached moral advice provokes the fine response 'But I must also feel it as a man'. Malcolm's 'Be comforted' is answered by the ambiguous lines, 'He has no children', which may be performed with equal propriety as a reference to Macbeth or Malcolm. This whole scene, like Act I, scene 2, is a continuous sequence of contrasts: facts and doubts are revealed by concentrating and permuting acts of narrating and response. Like the other messages and messengers, this masterpiece shows the instabilities and corruptions of telling, with the pains and perils of listening.

#### *Lady Macbeth and Macbeth: Narrative Circumlocution*

Telling in *Macbeth* is corrupted in many ways. There are the fragmentary, riddling, and imagistic snatches of narrative used by the witches, and their topsyturvy transformations of truth to lie and lie to truth. There are the inhibited and violently released stories that Lady Macbeth does not tell or hear, but has to hint in her sleep. Like *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, this is a play where letters are important: there is Macbeth's letter to his wife in Act II, scene 1, and the letter we and the Doctor hear about from the gentlewoman, which Lady Macbeth writes, seals, and locks away in her closet, and whose contents are never disclosed. (It is one of the secrets the play refuses to divulge.) The letter written and read in sleep is a fellow of the letter from Macbeth which Lady Macbeth reads alone but to the audience. In both episodes, one on stage, one off stage, Shakespeare shows his interest in the confections of reading with writing. In Act II, scene 1, the actress

playing Lady Macbeth makes Macbeth's letter her own, either reading it as for the first time, and stressing amazement, gratification, expectation and surprise, or performing a revisionary re-reading, as many actresses<sup>4</sup>, including Mrs. Siddons and Judy Dench, have played it, miming a pondered purpose. Dench quoted instead of reading the script, to show that the narration had already become assimilated and re-created. Both interpretations counterpoint a reader's explicit responses on a writer's implicit passions.

Lady Macbeth's narrations are mostly private, and many of Macbeth's are too. He plans, ponders, fantasises and remembers, in the common narrative activity of inner life. Prominent among the forms and figures of his narrative language is circumlocution. This is a form of deception or equivocation shared by Macbeth and the witches, who deceive with actualities, like a Caesarean birth (Macduff's) or military camouflage (Birnam Wood), disguised and surrealised as fantastic impossibilities. Circumlocution is not Lady Macbeth's style. Her dreamed recall, 'Who would have thought the old man had so much blood in him', and her dream's imperative, 'Out damned spot', name things bluntly and plainly, in a fragmentary but specific telling which is the opposite of circumlocution. Her Johnsonian habit of calling spades spades and kicking stones to refute ideas and ideals is in marked contrast with Macbeth's visions and fantasies: 'When all's done/You look but on a stool' (III, 4) and 'A little water clears us of this deed' (II, 2). These interpretations are coarse simplifications, not truths. They offer themselves as closer to 'reality' – which the play shows as a subjective and elusive concept – than Macbeth's images or his hyperbole, 'This my hand will rather/The multitudinous seas incarnadine,/Making the green one red' (II, 2). His circumlocutions are more to the point than her plain-saying; they image guilt's horrid sufferings, she reduces them to objective-sounding stool and water. She comes to revise her pragmatism, at least in sleep, where she offers her version of the 'multitudinous seas' in 'all the perfumes of Arabia', forgoing her former rhetoric of deceptive understatements. Macbeth's habit of circumlocutory narrative is not a decent recognition of events, however, but a way of meeting them evasively, partially, ideally, abstractly, or impersonally. He compulsively imagines the future, for instance, but in defensive figures which generalise and externalise hideous particularities,<sup>10</sup> so making them easier to handle:

<sup>10</sup> Macbeth's evasive generalisation anticipates that of George Eliot's case of uncandid conscience, Bulstrode, of whom she remarks that his guilty 'long unvisited past ... has been habitually recalled only in general phrases'. *Middlemarch*, Ch. LXI.



Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse  
The curtain'd sleep; Witchcraft celebrates  
Pale Hecate's off'rings; and withered Murther,  
Alarum'd by his sentinel, the wolf,  
Whose howl's his watch, thus with steathy pace,  
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design  
Moves like a ghost. (II, 1)

These images are not 'unreal', in a play where we see and hear witches, Hecate and ghosts, but for Macbeth they are convenient metamorphoses of specific acts. He transforms his imminent sin of bloody murder into a Morality Play, with Murder generalised, not individualised. His murderer's stealth too is externalised and made literary or historical, in the reference to Tarquin's strides, itself distanced by metonymy and metaphor. Before Banquo's murder he is similarly imagined as imagining in animal images and impersonalisations which evade and disguise:

Light thickens; and the crow  
Makes wing to th' rooky wood;  
Good things of Day begin to droop and drowse,  
Whiles Night's black agents to their preys do rouse. (III, 2)

Such evasion is used to tell and yet not tell Lady Macbeth, keeping her literally 'innocent of the knowledge' but alive to the moral imperative and – however elaborately and retardingly – condemning the 'deed':

Ere the bat hath flown  
His cloist' red flight; ere to black Hecate's summons  
The shard-born beetle with his drowsy hums,  
Hath rung Night's yawning peal, there shall be done  
A deed of dreadful note.

More publicly, hysterically registering fear and guilt as well as deceit, Macbeth accumulates dignifying metaphor to break the news of murder to Malcolm: 'The spring, the head, the fountain of your blood/ Is stopped'. His subliming circumlocutions are translated, corrected, and snubbed by Macduff's directness, 'Your royal father's murdered' (II, 3). Much has been said and unsaid about what A. C. Bradley, in *Shakespearean Tragedy*, called Macbeth's 'poetic imagination', but the rhetoric with which the dramatist endows his hero is a characteristic language which shows how it is possible to exalt, decorate, facilitate, and so live with, killing. It is the language of a complex tragic consciousness, creating a figure who is an un-Aristotelian tragic hero in his interiorised wickedness.

It is also the dangerous language of politicians, impersonalising, abstracting, beautifying, deceptively detaching agent from deed. We hear it all around us every day. It is not usually as responsible or conceptually candid as Macbeth's style, which at least judges his moral actions for what they are, while holding their corruption at arms' length as he tells their story.

## V Images of Narration

Rhetoric itself draws attention to its modes. Shakespeare's constant use of contrastive and convoluted structures makes his narration, like other figures of his craft, conspicuous and self-conscious. Narrative self-consciousness shows itself in *Macbeth* directly, through explicit namings of narration, tale, story, writing, reading, and listening. Although the society in *Macbeth's* Scotland is less polished and civilised than the society in Shakespeare's Troy, Venice, or Elsinore, it is a literate one, closer to the seventeenth than to the eleventh century. A small cluster of literary images, supported by actions, makes a pattern barely visible until it is powerfully concentrated towards the end in Act V, scene 5.

Macbeth is told in quick succession about two crucial and terrible events: his wife's death, reported by Seyton, and the sight of 'a moving grove' coming to Dunsinane, reported by an anonymous messenger. His response to the first news is registered in imagery drawn from history, language, theatre, and narration:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow; a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more: it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing. (V, 5)

Such compounding of self-conscious artistic references is found in intense scenes of crisis in other plays. Shakespeare often provides his actors with a combination of impassioned lines and reflexive technical references, mixing

introverted and extroverted forms. He does this, for instance, in the prison scene in *Richard II*, where Richard discusses and illustrates analogy, order, and music, as he waits to die; and again in Hamlet's soliloquy, 'What a rogue and peasant slave am I', which reflects passionately and analytically on an actor's remarkable performance of passionate narration. Unlike the cultivated Richard and Hamlet, Macbeth does not analyse art, but he refers to it sensitively. The images or references to books and stories in the play are few, but whether we notice them or not, they habituate the mind to such subjects and such self-reflection. In Act I, scene 3, Macbeth thanks Rosse and Angus for bringing him good news, saying that their pains 'Are registered where every day/I turn The leaf to read them'. Memory is a book, to be opened, turned, and read. In Act II, scene 4, the Old Man's 'volume' contains 'things strange', made trifling by 'this sore night'. Truth is stranger than fiction. In Act I, scene 5, Lady Macbeth says 'Your face, my Thane, is as a book where men/May read strange matters'. Consciousness is a book, dangerously open, to be closed, and not read. In the banqueting scene she tells Macbeth, who is unnerved by Banquo's ghost, that his 'flaws and starts...would well become/A woman's story by a winter's fire/ Authorised by her grandam'. His moral fears are relegated to frivolous fantasies. Winter's tale and old wives' tales are compounded in dismissal, and folk-lore authority dangerously belittled, in a sexism characteristic of Lady Macbeth's attempt to masculinise herself and join the man's world. Her judgment must be reversed; trust the woman's tale authorised by the grandams; read the winter's tale of *Macbeth*. In Act V, scene 3, Macbeth asks the doctor if he can 'Raze out the written troubles of the brain'. Memory is a text inscribed, read, and re-read, like Macbeth's letter and Lady Macbeth's letter which she writes in sleep; neither is to be erased. These are the explicit preparations, and the matrix, for the image-cluster in Act V, scene 5. (We may add to them one more image of the tale, which provides a pre-echo of sound rather than sense. This is a crux in Act I, scene 3. In one of the frequent refracted narrations, Rosse tells Macbeth that his prowess in battle has been reported to Duncan by many messengers [of which the audience has heard two, the bleeding Captain and Rosse himself] who have come 'post with post', 'as thick as tale'. Theobald's emendation of 'tale' to 'hail' is still followed by Kenneth Muir in the Arden edition; in the last impression (1986) he mentions but does not answer Hilda Hulme's defence of the Folio 'tale' in *Readings in Shakespeare's Language* [Longman's, London, 1962], where she argues, with her habitual alertness to nuance, knowledge of language-use, and textual conservatism – the only kind of conservatism she endorsed – that 'tale' may mean 'talk'. Even if 'tale' refers to enumeration – and the etymology of enumeration is interestingly bound up with that of narration

– the emendation is redundant, and I take this ‘tale’ as a phonic contribution to the pattern.)

The image of the tale told by an idiot originates in two less forceful narration-images in *King John*, a play with several pre-echoes of *Macbeth*, which Shakespeare may have recalled when writing his new play about a tyrant and murderer. In *King John*, Lewis of France, the Dauphin, images his *ennui* and disappointment at failure by calling life ‘as tedious as a twice-told tale,/Vexing the dull ear of a drowsy man’ (III, 4). This is dullness compounded in teller and listener, object and subject. Shortly after, King John’s second coronation is not only said to gild refined gold and paint the lily but compared to ‘an ancient tale new told,/And in the last repeating troublesome,/Being urged at a time unseasonable’ (IV, 2). This again compounds denigration, but this time it is the timing and urging of narration which is blamed, no doubt because Shakespeare wished to qualify and vary the self-conscious joke about new telling of ancient tales, which is what he is doing in writing the histories.

*Macbeth* continues the subject of *ennui*, and the habit of rhetorical compounding. ‘Idiot’ is suggested by or echoes the abusive ‘loon’ in the previous scene. ‘Recorded time’ may owe something to the doctor’s records, though it also refers, like the *King John* image, to Shakespeare’s work on historical chronicles. The ‘dismal treatise’ is a startling image, standing as it does between two references back to unliterary sources, night-shrieks and supping with horrors:

*Macbeth*        The time has been, my senses would have cool’d  
                     To hear a night-shriek; and my fell of hair  
                     Would at a dismal treatise rouse, and stir,  
                     As life were in’t. I have suppd full with horrors... (V, 5)

Two unforgettable experiences in the play are oddly joined by the reference to Macbeth’s susceptibility to a horror-story. It echoes the reference to his hair ‘unfixed’ by his ‘horrid image’ of Duncan’s murder (I, 3), but has no experiential source in the play and refers to the implied pre-existence of characters. (It is also an echo of that oral culture dismissed by Lady Macbeth.) It is an important reminder, very rare in this play, though frequent in the other major tragedies, of past or potential ordinary life, free from tragic necessity.

The tale told by an idiot is bracketed with the meaningless performance of the poor player, whose poverty of performance is only one possible nuance. Theseus reminds us that ‘the best in this kind be but shadows’ (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*). Strutting or fretting is show-off or uncontrolled acting, but not only this. We are all poor in our mortality. Shakespeare made money from

the theatre but many actors were poor. The images are literal, metaphorical, metonymic. The walking shadow contains the shadow of Theseus's image.

One of Macbeth's rhetorical habits is negation. His Faust-like capacity to see the best while following the worst is shown in the frequently and feelingly summoned presences of virtue and value: 'Stars, hide your fires', 'Pity, like a naked new-born babe', 'Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful Day' and 'Cancel, and tear to pieces that great bond/Which keeps me pale'. Divine fire, pure pity, unbearable compassion, and moral dread are asserted through negations, and rejected or shunned. These images dramatise the apprehension of a moral system. A specific sensitivity to pity and fear is established in Macbeth, through indirections which direct us. His yearning after human kindness is a more vivid conjuration of moral force than any of the positives affirmed by the virtuous characters, like Macduff or Malcolm. We have already seen how Malcolm's virtue is presented unstably, his negation of evil is the obverse of Macbeth's negation of good. Malcolm's intense, hyperbolic, multiplied image of tyranny is the play's strongest imaging of evil. Macbeth's rejections are its strongest imagings of good. Both characters tell their story in negative. The audience has to develop a positive. Macbeth's 'tale told by an idiot' is in keeping with his other assertions; by the time he imagines it, the audience has learnt how to read his language by reversal. The habit of negation is exquisitely appropriate to hell. The porter pretends to be porter of hellgate, but Inverness is really hellgate. Malcolm pretends to be a worse villain than Macbeth, projecting an image of deepening and widening violence not 'literally' acted out but acted in the performance within the performance. (Macbeth's own villainy is 'only' acted.) It is apt that Macbeth's list of negations should end with a tale's absent significance. Meanings in Shakespeare are commonly grasped and summed up as actors, play, and audience come to an end.

In *Macbeth* hell is an absence like the hell of Marlowe's Mephistopheles. It is like the use of photographic negative by Cocteau in his film *Orphée*, for the crossing to Hades, recalled by Resnais in *Alphavillds* systematic defamiliarisation of colours and values. The tale told by an idiot is a dark and covert assertion of Shakespeare's positive. It makes a muted claim to remind us of this tale of *Macbeth*, and to enlarge metaphysical expectation. *Macbeth* is also full of sound and fury, but told by impassioned reason, signifying something. At one stroke Shakespeare is defining Macbeth's nihilistic *ennui*, and using a negative, most reticently, to claim a positive for his play, for art, and perhaps for human existence. The language of the claim is not irony or understatement, but proposes a compromised and tentative positive. It is not unlike Malcolm's reversal of role and tale.

## VI Narrative in conclusion

I am the more confident in asserting the importance of this tale which signifies nothing, because it offers a negative version of a typical reference to narrative or story or tale occurring at the end of many (indeed, most) of Shakespeare's plays,<sup>11</sup> to stress, in concluding a character's life, or the play's, or both, a call for narrative recapitulation. In *Cymbeline*, the collective recall does not satisfy Cymbeline, who requires that the 'fierce abridgment' should eventually be replaced off stage by a full version, with all its 'circumstantial branches.' Othello asks Lodovico to tell his story to the Venetian senate, nothing extenuating. Hamlet requests Horatio to absent himself from felicity and draw his breath in pain in this harsh world to tell his story, to heal Hamlet's reputation, and – as Horatio tells Fortinbras – to avert civil riot. These terminations and anticipations are requests for meanings. Macbeth is faced by unmeaning, by a history he wants to erase, a book he wants to close and not re-read.

The characteristically Shakespearean closing invocation of narrative order, which *Macbeth* and Macbeth both lack, reminds the audience of fictionality by providing the characters with a little touch of 'reality'. The actors are acting real people who are turning into stories. They are also inviting the audience to compare its knowledge of the story with the ignorance of the story's participants. Macbeth's words about language, acting, history, and story perform a survey of artistic constituents which is most specific in self-reference. The words 'last syllable' occur in an extra-syllabic line, drawing attention to its last syllable. The suggestion of professional inefficiency in 'poor player' (like Cleopatra's reminder of the squeaking boy) gives the good actor an extra nuance in performance. The rejection of narrative signification is demonstrated and contradicted, as the word 'nothing' is immediately followed by the entry of a messenger too overwrought to say anything, provoking Macbeth's 'thou comest to use thy tongue; thy story quickly'. His command also shows the pragmatic persistence of Macbeth's old thirst for meanings even as he is rejecting them. It is obeyed by a grim demonstration of the narrative significations in those tales full of sound and fury told by the witches. Macbeth comes to recognise meanings he has mis-read; he has read the witches' negatives as positives and their positives as negatives. After imagining meaninglessness, through his customary evasive depersonalising imagery, in the tale told by an idiot, he

11 I have discussed this subject of terminal narration in the Kathleen Banks Memorial Lecture, Loughborough, 1984 (unpublished) 'This Fierce Abridgment: Narration and Conclusion in Shakespeare'.

comes to feel the particular horror of the absence of expected meaning, and the presence of unexpected meaning, in substantial events which demonstrate 'the equivocation of the fiend./That lies like truth'. He quotes the lie which sounds like a truth, 'Fear not, till Birnam Wood/Do come to Dunsinane', in one more refracted narrative.

Malcolm's final speech in Act V, scene 9, contains no large recapitulations of history or story, only more doubts and hints which continue the play's habits of undermining information:

...What's more to do,  
Which would be planted newly with the time,-  
As calling home our exil'd friends abroad,  
That fled the snares of watchful tyranny;  
Producing forth the cruel ministers  
Of this dead butcher, and his fiend-like Queen,  
Who, as 'tis thought, by self and violent hands  
Took off her life ... (V, 9)

Lady Macbeth's suicide is reported, doubtfully, 'Who, as 'tis thought by self and violent hands ...' and the gross description of the tragic pair as 'this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen' does not elicit assent but is there to remind the audience of its access to a larger, more intricate, and more subtle story than the one Malcolm knows and crudely summarises. As Macbeth's metaphor of the idiot's tale reverses the usual Shakespearean call for meanings and orderings of narrative, it follows the bent of the whole play, from beginning to end.





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The Hilda Hulme Memorial Lectures were established in 1985 following a donation from Mr Mohamed Aslam in memory of his wife, Dr Hilda Hulme. The lectures are on the subject of English literature and relate to one of 'the three fields in which Dr Hulme specialised, namely Shakespeare, language in Elizabethan drama, and the nineteenth-century novel'.

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