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"Let It Come Down": Some (Emersonian) Thoughts on the Tragedy of Macbeth

MARK RICHARDSON

In this essay I would like to reconsider, from a more or less Emersonian point of view, a fairly well-known scene in Macbeth (3.iii)—the scene in which Banquo is murdered. The exercise is worth undertaking because this scene, I believe, can help us understand a little better the general meaning of Shakespearean tragedy:

Enter three murderers.
1 Murderer. But who did bid thee join with us?
3 Murderer. Macbeth.
2 Murderer. He needs not our mistrust, since he delivers Our offices and what we have to do To the direction just.
1 Murderer. Then stand with us.
The west yet glimmers with some streaks of day.
Now spurs the lated traveller apace
To gain the timely inn, and near approaches The subject of our watch.
3 Murderer. Hark! I hear horses.
Banquo within. Give us a light there, ho!
2 Murderer. Then 'tis he;
The rest that are within the note of expectation Already are i' th' court.
1 Murderer. His horses go about.
3 Murderer. Almost a mile; but he does usually,
So all men do, from hence to th' palace gate
Make it their walk.

Enter Banquo and Fleance with a torch.

2 Murderer. A light, a light!

3 Murderer. 'Tis he.

1 Murderer. Stand to't.

Banquo. It will be rain tonight.

1 Murderer. Let it come down.

[The murderers attack. First murderer strikes out the light.]

Banquo. O, treachery! Fly, good Fleance, fly, fly, fly!

Thou mayst revenge. O slave!

[Dies. Fleance escapes.]

3 Murderer. Who did strike out the light?

1 Murderer. Was't not the way?

3 Murderer. There's but one down; the son is fled.

2 Murderer. We have lost

Best half of our affair.

1 Murderer. Well, let's away, and say how much is done.

Exeunt.

The ambiguity of the first murderer's line ("Let it come down") has attracted notice from time to time (the American writer Paul Bowles took it for the title of one of his novels). With it, the murderer essentially "answers" his victim Banquo, who has innocently uttered a perfectly commonplace remark about the weather: "It will be rain tonight." The first murderer is, so to speak, an off-stage audience for Banquo's remark, here placed on-stage—a theatrical device well suited to exaggerate the dramatic irony that is the chief rhetorical motive in this play. And not beside
the point is the fact that the whole of this violent scene is done up in blank verse, though this was not inevitably Shakespeare’s practice in scenes of the kind by the time he wrote *Macbeth* in about 1606. Prosodically speaking, the violence is very well enough controlled, and the murder well enough managed, as we shall see—even if Fleance *does* escape. It is simply a question of *who* is doing the managing and controlling, of who is really directing the action (and it isn’t, in the event, *Macbeth*). Of course, there is a feeling everywhere in the play of uncanny “management” from without. I suppose, in the final instance, that the witches, the weird sisters—or whatever power it is that they represent—are the real managers. Banquo himself says: “A heavy summons lies like lead upon me.” Among the literary consequences of this burden, of this summons, is that characters in the play are seldom altogether in possession of what they say, or what they do. We often feel their lines as *lines*—as utterances overheard by auditors better situated than the speakers are themselves to understand the full import of those utterances. Shakespeare never undertook a more thoroughgoing exercise in dramatic irony than *Macbeth*. This play is forever a lesson in how circumscribed, in how hemmed in by fortune, we always already are; it is a lesson in how little we ever possess ourselves.

The conjoined remarks of Banquo and his murderer, of course, form a single blank verse line. This prosodic harmony makes it seem, at least for the reader, as if Banquo refers to his own coming death, as, in respect to dramatic irony, he—or rather the play itself—may certainly be said to do: It will indeed be foul weather tonight. There is, I suppose, also the suggestion that Banquo in some sense invites the Fate he meets. It is as if he somehow *deserves* what he gets, for who can speak so innocently on a night like this in Macbeth’s Scotland? Banquo has, after all, committed the sin of trust in a brutally dishonest world, where no good deed—in
fact, no deed—goes unpunished.

And why, we have to wonder, does Banquo not see the murder coming? He certainly appears, in a speech delivered at the beginning of act two, to smoke Macbeth out:

Thou hast it now,—king, Cawdor, Glamis, all,
As the weird women promis'd; and, I fear,
Thou play'dst most fouilly for't.

Apparently, Banquo is just obtuse enough not to be able to put the thing together. He would make a bad detective, and for that reason probably a bad king. Point one: The witches said Macbeth would be the last in his line. Point two: They said Banquo would be the father of kings (and so never a king himself). Point three: Macbeth heard them say all of this and has come to believe their prophecies. Point four: These circumstances attach much significance to Fleance, and if Macbeth realizes it, then so should Banquo, especially when—and here is point five—Macbeth says to him, before arranging the murder: “Adieu, / Till you return at night. Goes Fleance with you?” That last remark must be delivered in a mock off-the-cuff manner, as if to suggest it were an after-thought, a by-the-way. (In his essays Francis Bacon advises the politic man to tuck in his really important matter unobtrusively, at the end of an exchange—precisely in this manner.) Banquo’s reply to Macbeth’s query is simply too much to bear in its innocence: “Ay, my good lord: our time does call upon’s.” Too much to bear also is his remark earlier in the same scene, speculating as to whether he will regain the castle before sun-down:

Go not my horse the better,
I must become a borrower of the night,
For a dark hour or twain.
More than an hour or two is he a borrower of the night that night; as it happens, the night owns him. Banquo knows not what he says. Lines like these have two speakers, two points of origin—the character who speaks them, and (let us say) the "mind" of the play itself. Only the latter "understands" what is really meant. As I suggested, this sort of effect makes us constantly aware of the characters as characters—as people who have been given lines to say, acts to perform. And Shakespeare makes sure that Macbeth makes sure we don't forget this when he echoes Banquo's words in ordering the murderers on:

Fleance his son, that keeps him company,
Whose absence is no less material to me
Than is his father's, must embrace the fate
Of that dark hour.

Banquo had simply obliged him by speaking of the dark hour first;—which sort of lets Macbeth off the hook, and allows him further to indulge the idea that he is only playing a part in something much bigger than he is, something of which only the weird sisters have perfect knowledge. And in this connection, we might regard his great speech about being a "poor player strutting and fretting his hour upon the stage" in the same self-exculpatory light: take this metaphor seriously, and you might well self-mercifully shirk responsibility, at least insofar as the metaphor puts in doubt the reality of a merely personal agency. Someone (or something) else is always writing the scripts we perform. And soon enough Banquo is caught uttering to his auspicious son Fleance his last inauspicious words on earth: "It will be rain tonight." The weird sisters have their wisdom.

The first murderer's reply to Banquo's last words—"Let it come down"—has both literal and figurative aspects, and in the second, or figurative, case perhaps refers to his own gesture of bringing his dagger
down on Banquo. Of course, the first murderer need not be the one who brings the dagger down. Stage directions vary. The 1623 Folio text, the earliest of *Macbeth* we have, provides no stage direction at all. In his 1709 edition, Nicholas Rowe inserts this direction: “They fall upon Banquo and kill him; in the scuffle Fleance escapes.” More simply, Lewis Theobald suggests, in his edition of 1733: “They assault Banquo.” A.R. Braunmuller, in the New Cambridge Shakespeare, offers the following: “The murderers attack. First murderer strikes out the light.” The editors of the 1918 Yale Shakespeare, in turn, offer us this: “Strikes out the light; stabs Banquo.” Braunmuller’s direction is surely the best among those I have seen, and that of the Yale the worst. The placement and conjugation of the stage direction given in the Yale edition indicate that the first murderer alone stabs Banquo, when it may well be that he doesn’t stab him at all: he is too busy putting out the light that he shouldn’t put out, God bless him. It is, I think, better to think that the first murderer is pretentiously playing the commanding general to his confederates in crime.

The conjunction in this scene between the unnatural act of murder and the natural fall of the rain (they share the pronoun “it”) makes it seem as if nature itself conspired to bring this malign event about, or as if the murder is perversely in the natural course of things. And murder is in the “natural” order of things in the world of this play: scene and action rhyme. The phrase “Let it come down” also reveals something about the first murderer as a character. For one thing, he can joke at a time like this, and can appreciate the unconscious verbal and thematic cooperation of Banquo with Macbeth’s darkest designs: “It will be rain tonight.” This is in keeping with the tendency the first murderer has already exhibited to dramatize his own actions, investing them with added weight, as when he pauses to point out, a little poetically, that “the west yet glimmers
with some streaks of day. / Now spurs the lated traveller apace / To gain the timely inn.” Here is a murderer with an appreciation of the figure he cuts, a murderer who can take time out. The third murderer has to break him off with “Hark! I hear horses” lest he get carried away and complete the poem he almost seems to be composing (if I may be whimsical for a moment):

In Banquo see'st the twilight of such day  
As after sunset fadeth in the west,  
Which by and by black night doth take away,  
Death's second self, that seals up all in rest.

In short, the first murderer embarrasses the whole bloody enterprise. His grandiloquence is misplaced, beside the point. He is neither as alert nor as anxious as the other two murderers, and this makes them wary. He tangles the gears of their efficiency (though he is himself, so to speak, a well-oiled gear in a larger machine not managed by Macbeth and his black agents, but by the Fates).

The first murderer apparently believes he is in control of his words and deeds, of the implications of what he says and does (he even allows himself, as we have seen, the satisfaction of circumscribing Banquo’s innocent remark about the rain). But as I suggest, no character is really in control of himself in this play—unless we consider the weird sisters. And of what design of darkness to appall are they the executrixes? I should add in passing that readers have for centuries objected to, or been embarrassed by, or frustrated with, what A. R. Braunuller calls the extraordinary “volatility” of the language of Macbeth, which is at times baffling. Dryden thought it barely controlled at all in certain difficult speeches of Macbeth. It “outruns the pauser reason,” to borrow a phrase from Macbeth himself. And whatever the aim may have been, the effect is fit-
ting enough: in this play, we constantly meet with the suggestion that our language is not our own. Shakespeare really gets *inside* the play in his writing of it.

And as for losing control: the scene before us here, as the first murderer obligingly orchestrates it, does not disappoint us. In “letting it come down” he also “strikes out the light,” as if he were extinguishing that “last glimmer of day” to which he earlier, somewhat histrionically, referred. This botches the business, because the darkness and confusion allow Fleance to escape, and Fleance was all (“We have lost / Best half of our affair,” says the second murderer). Macbeth hadn’t really to worry about Banquo, whom he kills, essentially, for good measure. “Who did strike out the light?” says the third, or supplementary, murderer, the one Macbeth sent to see that the thing got good and done. But the joker in the pack—the first murderer—can only reply, weakly: “Was’t not the way?” Well, no, it was not the way! But the first murderer was too busy savoring his lines to see: “Let it come down,” he says, as if the better to possess his unpossessible action.

That the first murderer is somehow out of tune with the company is suggested as well by the unwarranted, perhaps slightly ceremonious, suspicion with which he apparently greeted the third murderer. The second murderer makes the point by way of reproach: “He [the third man] needs not our mistrust, since he delivers / Our offices and what we have to do / To the direction just.” A.R. Braunmuller, editor of the New Cambridge *Macbeth*, calls the first murderer an “amateur.” That is good, but it doesn’t quite catch the splendor of his—to use a Yiddish-American colloquialism—*schtick*. His sort of self-circumscribing gesture (“Let it come down”) is apt and grimly dignified when Othello makes it, in murdering Desdemona. “Put out the light,” Othello says, extinguishing the candle by the bed, “and then put out the light.” He knows why he says
what he says; and he certainly knows what murder is (notwithstanding
that Iago deceived him). But there is something unsettling about a man
like the first murderer who fails—or so it would appear—adequately to
understand the gravity of the situation he finds himself in, or who fails,
as Othello does not, in his effort to be poetical about it. Such a man
seems, in his extravagance, to profane things, and so to bring on ruin, as
the first murderer does. You have got to respect the night in Scotland.
And above all, never ask for rain, lest a hard one fall.

Macbeth, at any rate, respects the Scottish night in the speech that
precedes the scene here described:

Come seeling night,
Scarff up the tender eye of pitiful day,
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond
Which keeps me pale! Light thickens, and the crow
Makes wing to th' rooky wood.
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,
While night's black agents to their preys do rowse.

"Night's black agents" most immediately refers, apparently, to the three
murderers. Macbeth in this speech is contemplating their act, which is
really his act (he has just sent them on their errand). And in botching the
murder, the first murderer, I would suggest, is actually following
Macbeth's "real" orders to the letter, if he and Macbeth but knew it. The
speech "Come seeling night" is echoed, bathetically, in the first murder-
er's little riff on "the last glimmer of day," and echoed not only in theme
but in figure: The "crow makes wing to the rooky wood" in order to find a
safe perch for the night, like the traveler spurring his horse on to "the
timely inn" in the murderer's speech. (Incidentally, William Empson calls
attention to an equivocation in Macbeth's figure that ought to be mentioned here. It is not altogether clear whether the crows are looking for a perch for the night, and so are "things of day," or whether they are among "night's black agents.") Macbeth's speech suggests, I believe, that he is not of one mind. He has to cheer himself up to the murder. He is still "pale," not altogether blackened by the night. That is to say, he is at once of the day and of the night, and his sense of guilt is profound enough, in the end, to be indirectly suicidal. He seems to know, and somehow to like knowing, that in sending Banquo to his death he signs his own death warrant. Why shouldn't he hire a man like the first murderer? Who better than this haplessly serviceable villain—"Was't not the way?"—to carry forward what he may really (as the Freudians say) wish to see rebound against himself? Lady Macbeth herself says: ""Tis safer to be that which we destroy, / Than, by destruction, dwell in doubtful joy." With which her husband agrees: "Better be with the dead," he says in reply, "Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace, / Than on the torture of the mind to lie / In restless ecstasy." Maybe having Fleance escape really was the way to gain his peace. That Macbeth dispatches a third murderer, to the surprise of the other two, indicates how vexed he is by after-thoughts and second-thoughts, and is for that reason probably a sign not so much of his resolve as of his weakness. He is always doing things, in the progressive tense, and never quite getting them done; and he is surely his own antagonist. That is, I take it, among the lessons of Shakespearean tragedy—that we are our own antagonists, and that we are "always already" (as the saying goes) implicated in a web of circumstance that is well beyond out management. "Shallow men believe in luck," Emerson writes in The Conduct of Life. "Strong men believe in cause and effect . . . As we are, so we do; and as we do, so is it done to us; we are the builders of our fortunes; cant and lying and the attempt to
secure a good which does not belong to us, are, once for all, balked and vain" (891).

All of this is to suggest that, in a way, the first murderer's actions are more in harmony with Macbeth's purpose than the other two murderers may suppose. His way is the way—the only way. And this brings us to another implication of the line "Let it come down." The first murderer may wish to think of his act as instrumental rather than personal, and in that way to mitigate his responsibility. The grim deed is a part of the Scottish weather, and who can control that? It is the Nuremberg argument about bad acts committed in bad times: He is only following orders; his act adds nothing to the scene that isn't already latent in it. (Macbeth himself may speak from the same motive when, after contracting the murder, he says in soliloquy: "It is concluded:—Banquo, thy soul's flight, / If it find heaven, must find it out to-night." There is a saving impersonality in the passive phrasing "It is concluded"—just as there is in the phrasing "Let it come down." And of course, things were in fact somehow already "concluded" when Banquo and Macbeth first met the weird sisters on the heath: time present and time future were the same.)

Another ambiguity has to do with how the murderer's line is spoken. Is it whispered with a snicker? Or shouted out in cold blood as the murderers strike? Either reading would play well, though each shades the character in its peculiar way. Actor and director have to sort it out, according to how sinister they take the first murderer to be, and to how equivocal and giddy they take the tone of the scene to be. (As for myself, I think the same actor who plays the Porter should play the first murderer, and I would like to believe Shakespeare himself acted them both: this is where he resides in the play, as surely as he resides with Bottom in A Midsummer Night's Dream.) The first murderer is, as it happens, a kind of unwitting hero in Macbeth. His campy sense of mood and scene—or his
“amateurishness,” as Braunmuller puts it—allows, or seems to allow, Fleance to escape. He was too busy acting up to act. He undoes the murder and so undoes Macbeth, who has, in setting him to the task, undone himself; which is probably what Macbeth wanted anyway—to sleep with Duncan the peaceful sleep of the dead. Was the first murderer only following orders? Whose orders, after all? All things considered, it is the prophecy of the weird sisters that he advances; and, through him, I suppose they take Scotland to heart. Justice has its circuits. The nation needed a purge. Emerson says of the world—again, in *The Conduct of Life*—“that the dice are loaded; that the colors are fast, because they are the native colors of the fleece; that the globe is a battery, because every atom is a magnet; and that the police and sincerity of the Universe are secured by God’s delegating his divinity to every particle” (892). That is the plea I enter on behalf of the first murderer. He is, in spite of himself and of Macbeth, one of God’s sincerest policemen; he is evidence of a divinity—whether a malign or benign one is somehow beside the point—carried down to the “particulate” level. Fleance must escape, and the first murderer’s actions allow it. Scotland would be lost without him, and so would James I—the monarch for whom this play was first performed (he claimed descent from Banquo through Fleance). And Macbeth and his wife know all of this, somewhere in their dark hearts. In the last act, this knowledge of “the reaction of his fault upon himself” (once again to adapt a sentence of Emerson’s) leaves the bloody Scottish king “in the solitude and devastation of his mind” (*Conduct of Life* 892).

After calling Macbeth “a valiant gentleman” and also “somewhat cruel,” Holinshed, Shakespeare’s source, points out that “Duncane was so soft and gentle of nature, that the people wished the inclinations and manners” of him and Macbeth (his cousin) had been “so tempered and interchangeablie bestowed betwixt them, that where the one had too
much clemencie, and the other of crueltie, the meane virtue betwixt these two extremities might have reigned by indifferent partition of them both” (126-27). Things in Scotland were badly distributed. The balance had to be put right—which is what Shakespearean tragedy, and Holinshed's story, are alike about: the transcendence of antagonism, the restoration of balance. And as Braunmuller points out, the period in which Macbeth is set was one in which Scotland was moving, unstably but inevitably, toward a system of primogeniture to decide the question of succession. It was a time whose agitations and anxieties were perhaps the more meaningful to Shakespeare's audience, given that Elizabeth's issueless reign had opened up again the question of English succession. Macbeth—if we are to imagine it as flattering to James—offers an elegant sort of literary solution: here is a play about the anxious resolution of a problem of succession; and here, even more particularly, is a play that tells the story of a rearrangement of affairs in Scotland that allowed for the emergence, through Banquo's line, of precisely the monarch who would settle the question of English succession in 1603 (and who came to the throne complete with a son). So the first murderer, in his incompetence, very competently sends the true stream of royal blood (Banquo's) underground, where it will issue, ultimately, in King James I of Scotland, for whom, as I say, Macbeth was likely first performed. (Shakespeare may have written the play especially for the occasion of a state visit to James, in 1606, by his brother-in-law Christian IV of Denmark.) The “first murderer” was to James what Judas was to the Pope—a necessary evil. One wonders if King James got the point, though we are certainly entitled, with Braunmuller, to suppose that James might well have welcomed a “narrative of his own supposed ancestry, leading to the ‘show of kings’ [in act four], where Banquo's and Fleance's and James's line stretches out, as Macbeth fears, ‘to th' crack of doom’ (4.i.116).
In any case, *Macbeth* amounts to thinking of a supremely dialectical order. Shakespearean *tragedy* amounts to thinking of a supremely dialectical order, which is what speakers of English forget when they abuse the term “tragedy.” No plane crash was ever tragic (as a friend once pointed out to me). In tragedy men get what they deserve; in tragedy human events and human destinies have a certain fitness, a certain logic. “Fortunes are not exceptions but fruits,” Emerson says, again in *The Conduct of Life*, and it is to him that I would turn for an understanding of Shakespearean tragedy (891). It is true that Macbeth, in his over-leaping ambition, brings his own end about, and must bear responsibility for it (that is why some readers find it distasteful to suggest, in any staging of the play, that the witches force Macbeth to play his hand). But it is also true that Macbeth is but a local part of a very large machine the nature of whose workings the play only darkly hints at (that is, through the medium of the witches). The play probably does not really believe in freedom of will, probably does not really believe in a strictly “personal” responsibility. It is dialectical not simply in that Macbeth’s actions rebound upon him tragically; it is dialectical in a larger and more mysterious sense—namely, in its suggestion that individual, personal will is at once both real and illusory. The play involves, in the actions of its main character, the simultaneous assertion and negation of individual will. We *must* treat men, and their wills, as if they were real; worldly affairs leave us no alternative. But we must also acknowledge that “personal” agency is a circumstantial thing—a thing “dependent,” for its “arising,” on impersonal causes (as a Buddhist might say).

This brings us round again to Emerson, a thinker who, famously, could speak of “self-reliance” and also maintain with perfect sincerity that the “self” was a kind of illusion, a very thin reed indeed—a mere effect of Maya (to use the Indian term he himself favored). In *Macbeth*
Shakespeare "dares to uncover," as Emerson would say, "those simple and terrible laws which, be they seen or unseen, pervade and govern," and which make a mockery of our efforts to contain ourselves (Conduct of Life 888). The conviction that there are such laws informs Macbeth's late speech, alluded to above, about strutting and fretting his hour upon the stage: he feels like a marionette, like a thing moved about by unseen hands, and he wants to feel that way (that is his absolution). G.L. Kittredge may well be right in associating the witches of Macbeth with the Norns of Scandanavian mythology because, as he explains in the introduction to his edition of the play, "the Norns were goddesses who shaped beforehand the life of every man." Their office, he says in summary, "was not to prophesy only, but to determine" (xviii). After all, it is perfectly fitting that the weird sisters should be, in this play, the portal through which we have access to the "terrible laws" of which Emerson speaks, and imperfect access at that. Their uncanny, horrifying faces rightly evoke the most common human response to intimations of a will larger than our own, and inscrutable to us (call it our response to the uncanny suggestion that we are all particles through which a wave of power moves). We experience that in the first instance as an evil, perhaps because it returns us to a condition of infancy, wherein we have no self-control, no self-possession. But the evil is only apparent, Emerson would say, and the mature response to it is a kind of resignation, wherewith, if we have it, the weird sisters—the Fates—cease to horrify us. They may even comfort us, as an insurance company might, with the wicked suggestion that Scotland is, after all is said and done, in "good hands"—that the great globe itself, after all, is in good hands. "[W]e learn to be content," Emerson says in "Compensation" (299). And somehow, always, good Fleance escapes.
Works Cited


