Macbeth, the “dead Butcher”.

When Malcolm refers to Macbeth as a “dead butcher” (V.ix.35), the point is clear: the events of the play have been created and undertaken by a man with a driving blood lust and lack of respect for propriety. The play post dates Julius Caesar, a play in which the antithesis of butchery and beneficial sacrifice is laid clear by Brutus: “Let’s be sacrificers, but not Butchers, Caius” (JC II.i.173), “Let’s carve him as a dish fit for the Gods,/ Not hew him as a carcass fit for hounds (JC II.i 180/1). Allowing that Brutus is to be seen as the quintessential “honourable” man accepting the need for Regicide to cleanse and heal the state, Macbeth might well be seen as his polar opposite with Malcolm’s words merely serving to draw our attention to the fact. Shakespeare, as we might imagine, gives us much more – a rounded portrayal of a war hero who degenerates as his character becomes tainted with the illicit power suggested to him by the Witches.

The play opens with descriptions of warfare and of Macbeth’s performance on the field. There is a sense of anticipation built up as Shakespeare delays the first meeting with Macbeth and allows the King and his men to discuss his exploits in his absence: “For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name), /Disdaining fortune…carv’d out his passage…Till he unseam’d him from the nave to the chops/ and fix’d his head upon our battlements” (I.ii 16ff). The Captain’s description of Macbeth’s heroics serve to show him as everything Duncan could wish – brave and heroic in defence of the Kingdom and even the description of the savage upper cut surely reflects the savagery of war, rather than plain butchery. We should notice, however, that he is “Valour’s minion” in this passage, “disdaining Fortune”. Perhaps here there are hints at what is to come? A minion often carries overtones of sexual exploitation by a stronger party (See Marlowe Edward II) and this together with the disdain in which Macbeth holds Fortune, may well suggest that his own character is not strong enough to withstand the pressure that it will be subject to. Duncan grants Macbeth the title of Thane of Cawdor and we await our first meeting with this military superman.

When the witches announce to Macbeth and Banquo that the elevation is at hand, Macbeth is far from confident – “Good Sir, why do you start, and seem to fear/Things which sound so fair? (I.iii 51)- and his reluctance to accept the information seems genuine, even as he realises the true import of what has been shown to be true: “This supernatural soliciting/Cannot be ill; cannot be good:-“ (I.iii 129) and begins to weigh up the true implications of what he has been told. Recognising that the murder which must be committed is abhorrent to nature, Macbeth decides that “Chance may crown me/ Without my stir.” (I.iii 144). This warrior, so adept in warfare seems curiously unwilling to wield his sword in a manner contrary to nature at this stage. Even when Malcolm is raised to the Prince of Cumberland and Macbeth calls for the “stars to hide your fires!” (I.iv 50), Macbeth acknowledges his “black and deep desires” but requires a catalyst for his actions.

Lady Macbeth can be that catalyst and in receipt of the letter in I.v sees at once the issue at hand: “Yet I do fear thy nature:/It is too full o’ the milk of human kindness” (I.v.16); Thou…Art not without ambition, but without/The illness should attend it” (I.v.19). She notes that he would act “holily” given the choice and sets out to turn her warrior-husband into the butcher described by Malcolm.

In the soliloquy in I.vii Macbeth, on the point of action, is still considering his deed. Lady Macbeth has convinced him of the need to act and to ensure that he appears trustworthy, yet his conscience still troubles him. “He’s here in double trust…” ( I.vii) begins a sequence of ideas that present themselves as reasons not to kill Duncan which Shakespeare balances with the good/evil antithesis which runs throughout the play. Even now, Macbeth is clearly aware of the “deep damnation” which his act will incur for Duncan (as well as for himself) and recognises that his only motive is “vaulting ambition”. At this point he is interrupted by the arrival of his wife who shores up his courage and sends him to do the deed, contemptuously adding that he might otherwise “live a coward in thine own esteem,/Letting “I dare not” wait upon “I would”…”. Her language is that of the “fiend-like Queen” as Malcolm describes her (V.ix 35) as she imagines how she would “while it was smiling in my face,/Have pluck’d my nipple from his boneless gums/And dash’d the brains out” urging Macbeth to act against “Th’unguarded Duncan” and “His spongy officers”. Her language is powerful and easily conveys the weakness of the prey. The speech is centered on the claim made by Macbeth to be a “man” She has already prayed to be unsexed and now Macbeth suggests that only male offspring are suitable for one such as her.

In Act II Macbeth’s subconscious still troubles him as he approaches the chamber, yet the deed is done, effectively but not completely, and he seems mentally unhinged when he meets Lady Macbeth on completion of the murder. It is she who takes the opportunity to murder the guards leaving Macbeth to wait in terror “whence is that knocking?” (II.ii 56). The knocking continues, linking the scenes and adding the subtext to the porter who will emerge like the porter of Hell, clearly rendering Macbeth’s castle into Hell itself. The new King of Hell, having “murdered sleep” seems trapped in agonies of guilt and an awareness of the moral implications of his actions. In II.iii 89ff “Had I but dies an hour before this chance…” Macbeth is given the chance to portray his innocence whilst telling anyone with knowledge of the crime committed the truth. He sees that his way is now clear and that there can be no turning back. As he tells the tale of the upper rooms the antithesis between Good and Evil re-emerges –Duncan’s skin is silver, “lac’d with his golden blood” and the stab wounds look like a “breach in nature”. There is no opportunity given from this point on for him to reflect on his acts or show remorse. Indeed the moral implications of the deed are not really the basis for his lack of impetus. To this point Shakespeare has given us a portrait of a man totally aware of the lack of motive for his action and struggling to overcome his qualms about acting in cold blood. After this, things will be different.

It seems that from this point Macbeth becomes obsessed with the need to kill to maintain his safety. Whilst Lady Macbeth becomes wracked with torment and guilt, he moves from one act to the next with a degree of certainty, even seeking to hide his actions from his wife lest she manages to dissuade him. That he needs to kill Banquo is obvious to him “To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus:” (III.i46ff) and his soliloquy is driven by references to his jealousy and sense of injustice that Banquo’s offspring shall become Kings after him. Murderers are organised ( the confusion over the Third Murderer need not delay us here) and all is done without the driving of Lady Macbeth who is given one of the very few opportunities in this play to present a case with pathos. Her portrayal of the tormented and sleepless Macbeth is rudely brushed aside, however (“We have scorch’d the snake…”) and the scorpions in his mind lead him to the simple decision to carry on with his action. Lady Macbeth is shut out at this point and seems to be ignorant of the deeds, even when Macbeth is facing Banquo’s ghost at the banquet. Her response than harks back to her taunts in Act 1 as she cries, “What! Quite unmann’d in folly” and links Macbeth’s response to the lack of manhood perceived at the time of the murder of Duncan. As Macbeth is driven on to his next murder –“How say’st thou, that Macduff denies his person, At our great bidding?” she notes merely that he lacks “the season of all natures, sleep” (III.iv125ff).

When the witches conjure the apparitions in IV.i 70ff, Macbeth acknowledges that they have “harp’d my fear aright” acknowledging that his fear of Macduff is already strong, the parade of Kings stands more as a political gesture by Shakespeare than a further intensifying of the message. The murder is not carried out by Macbeth, but is in his name and Shakespeare focuses the audience on the death of a child – innocence being slaughtered. Against this background, Macbeth’s character is commented upon by Malcolm and Macduff in IV.iii as they discuss their country from the safety of the Saintly English King’s court. The country is described with a metaphor of the yoke and “each day a new gash is added to her wounds”(IV.iii 40), presumably by the butcher who now rules the country. As Malcolm seeks to show his unworthiness to rule, Shakespeare shows us the true nature of Macbeth: “black Macbeth”, “bloody, Luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful, sudden, malicious” as he seeks to show his own weaknesses. Macduff will counter this and hold him as fit to rule before the news of his own loss is brought. After the pathos of the murder scene, the news is carried briefly, with little exaggeration of the deaths of the children and the wife. The message is juxtaposed with the description of the saintly Edward the confessor and contrast is clear. Macbeth, hitherto suggested as the King of Hell, is now clearly seen in that light.

It is a light which will prevent him mourning his wife’s death and provide Shakespeare with a nihilistic vision of the world in which Macbeth finds himself (“Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow”). In the early acts Macbeth seems concerned about the effects his actions might have and seems prepared to leave much to chance. Now his life is measured out in repetitive days with no hint of hope of anything. The great ruler of Scotland/Hell is reduced to equating man to a shadow, to wishing the candle of life were out and to recognising his life as “full of sound and fury,/ Signifying nothing” (V.iv 28). This recognition is important as Shakespeare is bringing the play to a close in which order and the “right” way of things is restored. It is clear that Macbeth’s rule should be seen as hollow and empty in this way. As he dies he severs any last link with Brutus and the like by refusing to “play the Roman fool” and warns Macduff with the idea that his “soul is too much charg’d/ With blood of thine already” (V.viii.6). It is open to conjecture whether or not Macbeth is feeling remorse here or rationalising his own fear, or even boasting, but the language of the final duel does not reflect butchery in any way. The pair converse not in taunts of warriors, but in the interpretation of the witches’ pronouncements. Macbeth is given a curious end and one that might be designed to help the audience to perceive as a victim of circumstance. He is terrified of fighting but, warrior that he is, finds an element of nobility in his acceptance of certain death at the hand of Macduff. He vanishes from the play, his head appearing in a stage direction, but with no final comment. The play closes with Malcolm’s speech in which he states that he will restore the world to rights. He refers to Macbeth as a “butcher”, to Lady Macbeth as a “fiend-like Queen” but otherwise the focus looks forward. There is no dwelling on the fall of a tragic hero or a recognition of the “moral” of the tale.

Is it just, this appellation? Certainly Shakespeare has set up an idea that butchery is linked with potentially sinful acts and dishonour and there are enough references to Rome and Caesar for this to seem relevant. Undoubtedly Macbeth is a sinner, in fact he can be equated, thanks to the porter, with the ruler of Hell itself, but he is not yet a “butcher”. The single murder he commits is botched and requires his wife to finish the job; he employs murderers for all his other killings and seems reluctant to take up weapons at the close of the play when faced by Macduff. In III.iv 135ff he seems to sum up his life – not one of endless violence and slaughter, but one of circumstance: “I am in blood/Stepp’d in so far, that, should I wade no more,/Returning were as tedious as go o’er”. This sentiment seems very close to that of “Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow”. Macbeth is driven by circumstance and need and behaves as he does since he sees it as the only way he can behave. He is not a “butcher”- Malcolm exaggerates.

References from Arden Edition of Macbeth, Ed: Muir. 1951.