

THE CONCEPT OF GRACE IN SHAKESPEARE'S "MACBETH" AND
RACINE'S
"ATHALIE"

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ABSTRACT

The design of both *Macbeth* and *Athalie* asserts the triumph of the spiritual over the temporal in the sense that both plays demonstrate the way in which the recipients of grace become the means through which divine providence chooses to work. At the opposite end of the scale of grace we find the self-seekers. Like Shakespeare, Racine does not focus on the cause, but on the nature of a corrupt will. In each case the protagonist is shown to possess an overreaching desire for self-aggrandizement and a determination towards the acting out and enforcement of their personal will. Both plays end with a coup de théâtre, a kind of dramatic 'trick' which symbolizes the illusory nature of the protagonists' power-seeking.

It is, I think, a risky undertaking to introduce theological concepts into the interpretation of drama which is concerned with human action rather than with systems of beliefs. The dramatic situation explores the quality of life within the framework of varying kinds of pressures that are brought to bear upon it. Although a play may therefore contain certain theological concepts as part of its frame of reference, one should guard against lifting out the underlying concepts and beliefs and turning these to a premise upon which the entire play is based. Neither Shakespeare nor Racine set out to illustrate any particular theological doctrine in any of their plays. Any reading of the plays of both dramatists which pretends otherwise, ignores the rich texture of multifaceted life and the interplay of characters and ideas contained in them. The reduction of

Lear and the Last Plays to neat little Christian allegories is the obvious example.

From a strictly theological point of view the plays of both Racine and Shakespeare are full of contradictions. George Santayana cites the example of Hamlet who himself sees a 'true ghost' yet soon after that he speaks of death as the 'undiscover'd country from whose bourne no traveller returns'.¹ At the same time what determines the quality of life in both Racine and Shakespeare's oeuvre is an ethical code whose point of reference is not only social, but also metaphysical. Think of the moral universe created in a play such as Macbeth. The polarities of Good and Evil in this play are clearly rooted in the supernatural.

If the Witches embody the mysterious power of Evil, this is balanced, on the opposite side of the scale, by the equally mysterious power of Good, represented, for example, by the healing powers attributed to the King of England. In the same way, the infernal equivocating prophecies of the Witches are counterbalanced by the 'heavenly gift of prophecy' with which the King of England is endowed. Significantly it is Malcolm, the true heir to the Scottish throne, living in England where he has found refuge from the usurper Macbeth, who speaks these words about his host:

... How he solicits Heaven
Himself best knows; but strangely-visited people,
All swoll and ulcerous, pitiful to the eye,
The mere despair of surgery, he cures;
Hanging a golden stamp about their necks,
Put on with holy prayers: and 'tis spoken,
To the succeeding royalty he leaves
The healing benediction. With this strange virtue,
He hath a heavenly gift of prophecy;

¹ G. Santayana, 'The Absence of Religion in Shakespeare', *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (New York: Scribner, 1905), p. 149; quoted by Ivor Morris, *Shakespeare's God: The Role of Religion in the Tragedies* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1972), p. 19.

And sundry blessings hang about his throne,
That speak him full of grace

(IV. iii. 149-159).

The word 'grace' is used here in its full theological sense. In the New Testament, 'charis', grace, denotes God's good-will and help, enabling men to be well-pleasing to him: it finds expression in various ways.² Here it is expressive of what is known in theology as 'actual Grace', which is divine promoting to good and blessed actions.

The traditional Christian view of grace is summed up in the words of St Augustine:

Our nature, corrupted by sin, produces citizens of earth: and grace freeing us from the sin of nature, makes us citizens of heaven.³

The prompting of grace is therefore 'that movement which draws man into the love of God, and his fellows in despite of the self and its peculiar virtues. The effect of grace is to eliminate the self-choosing which is the chief barrier between man and God'.⁴

The evidence for a state of grace achieved is harmony between the will of man and the will of God.

This brings us to the idea of divine providence and order, and, more specifically, the role assigned to a ruler within a universe which is

² A Dictionary of Comparative Religion, ed. S.G. Brandon (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1970), p. 310.

³ De Civ. Dei XV.ii; quoted by Morris, p. 131.

⁴ Morris, p. 251.

perceived as functioning according to a divine plan. Within the seventeenth-century context, the office of kingship itself was seen as endowed with particular grace. According to the doctrine of the divine right of kings, the king was divinely appointed, he was God's 'anointed' and his task was to execute God's justice and power in the sphere of the body politic. More precisely, the function of the king was to be the human agent through which the divine power operated. With the title of kingship, as Malcolm is well aware, go the 'king-becoming graces':

As Justice, Verity, Temp'rance, Stableness,
Bounty, Perseverance, Mercy, Lowliness,
Devotion, Patience, Courage, Fortitude

(IV. iii. 91-94).

The title of king does not fit Macbeth who is therefore an 'untitled' tyrant and Malcolm, so Macduff is led to believe, by wilfully denying in himself the 'king-becoming graces', 'By his own interdiction stands accursed' (1.201). To hold the office of kingship, even if rightfully, without the evidence of the special grace that should accompany it, is to be damned. Conversely, the aura of blessedness that surrounds the truly gracious king serves as a reminder that within the system of belief that holds kingship to be divinely ordained, the king is both the receiver and the bestower of 'grace'. This is the point of the scene of light, summer fragrance and tranquillity as the King, Duncan, and his retinue approach Macbeth's castle at Inverness. A subtle relationship is established between the setting and the ideal presence of the King. Thus the aura of sanctity suggested in the presence of the 'temple-haunting martlet' and 'heaven's breath' is linked with the notion of 'grace' emanating from the King, 'the Lord's anointed temple'. This scene, of course, finds its complement in the scene set in England which likewise evokes a sense of order and stability. Prof. Tillyard has pointed out that much of the effectiveness of this scene derives from the fact that 'it follows and is

interrupted by the report of Macbeth's culminating crime and supreme act of disorder, the murder of Macduff's family'.⁵

The scene culminates and ends in Malcolm's words:

... Macbeth
Is ripe for shaking, and the Powers above
Put on their instruments.

Malcolm and Macduff are the instruments of God's all-inclusive order, now at last beginning to reassert itself against the usurper, Macbeth, whose violent reign of terror has been bolstered up by his superstitious adherence to the Witches and their prophecies. The play ends with the order and harmony of sanctified kingship restored by 'The grace of Grace'.

Racine's tragedy *Athalie* follows a remarkably similar pattern. As Martin Turnell points out:

The temple and the palace of *Athalie* face one another. They stand for the conflict of two orders: one religious, the other secular; one based on 'divine law', the other on force bolstered up by superstition.⁶

In passing, we should note that Racine's play follows the classical tradition in its strict adherence to the three unities - that of time, place and action. The whole action takes place within 24 hours, so that the play begins at the moment of crisis. The catastrophe - the overthrow and death of *Athalie* - is foreseen from the opening moments of the play.

⁵ E.M.W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare's History Plays* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1961), p. 321.

⁶ M. Turnell, *Jean Racine: Dramatist* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1971), p. 300.

Joas, the high-priest, in conversation with Abner, a high-ranking official at the Court of Athalie who is, however, an adherent of the true faith, delimits the duration of the action very precisely:

... quand l'astre du jour
Aura sur l'horizon fait le tiers de son tour,
Lorsque la troisième heure aux prières rappelle,
Retrouvez vous au temple avec ce même zèle.
.....
Allez: pour ce grand jour il faut que je m'apprête,
Et du temple déjà l'aube blanchit le faite
(I.i. 153-160)

Thus the fatal day which will see the end of Athalie and her replacement by Joas on the throne of Juda begins with the suggestion of daybreak, clearly symbolic of the light of the spiritual realm triumphing over the darkness of Athalie's realm. As the action progresses the pale dawn light will be transformed into the brightness of full daylight, which is symbolically reflected in the dazzling white robe worn by the child Eliacin (the future king Joas). This 'robe éclatante' to which Athalie refers no fewer than three times, underlines both the innocence of the child and the fact that he appertains to God - for the robe is that worn by the Levites. As in Macbeth the aura of sanctity, suggested through the use of effective symbols, is linked with the state of grace.

Of course in Racine's play, apart from the biblical material, the setting itself determines the religious tone. In accordance with the convention demanding unity of place, there is no change of scene in Athalie: the entire action takes place in the temple at Jerusalem. The decor thus constitutes a closed space which functions symbolically. It concretizes the immanent presence of the divine force which directs the whole action. The very opening scene establishes the significance of the day and the place of the action: the faithful are gathering in the temple to celebrate the day of the giving of the Law, signifying the pact made by Jahveh with his chosen people. This pact seems to have been broken through Athalie's extermination of the descendants of David, and it is from the royal line of David that the promised Messiah is to be born. It is,

however, also within the precincts of the temple that the secret of the child Eliacin's origin has been guarded:

Du fidèle David, c'est le précieux reste
(I.ii. 256).

Athalie's real adversary is not Joad, but the God of Israel of whom the High Priest is only the instrument. At the heart of the play (the end of Act III) we find the impressive scene where the Divine Presence floods the entire scene. Encircled by the Levites and the chorus of young girls, Joad, in a state of trance, incarnates the Voice of the Lord to render the great prophecy not only on the fall of the Old Jerusalem but also of the advent of the New Jerusalem and the Saviour Christ. On the fate of Joas hangs the fate of all mankind, the vindication of God's Word, the fulfilment of the divine purpose.

This clear focus on divine providence emphasizes the spiritual framework of the play as a whole.

A unique feature of *Athalie* is the chorus of young girls, introduced by Racine, it has been said, because he wrote the play for performance by the demoiselles of St Cyr. But the lyrical choral songs have a dramatic function as well: they serve to emphasize the mystical atmosphere reigning in the temple, which represents the spiritual realm. The intrusion of Athalie, representing the material realm, threatens and interrupts this harmony.

In *Macbeth*, written for a very different type of stage, the religious, if more specifically Christian frame of reference, is conveyed mainly through the language.

In *Athalie* the temple and all those associated with the temple represent the spiritual realm, in contrast with the usurping queen who founds her reign on her own strictly temporal power. The scene of Joas's coronation dramatically underlines this point. The sacred objects to be used in the ceremony are solemnly presented:

Josabet à Zacharie

Mon fils, avec respect posez sur cette table
De notre sainte loi le livre redoutable.
Et vous aussi, posez, aimable Eliacin,
Cet auguste bandeau près du livre divin.
L'évite, il faut placer. Joad ainsi l'ordonne,
Le glaive de David auprès de sa couronne

(IV. i. 1241-46)

The crown and sword of David which will be entrusted to Joas symbolize that he is of the line of kings acceptable to the Lord. The natural order of this line of succession has been overthrown by Athalie's assassination of the legitimate heirs. The coronation of Joas of the House of David, serves to reaffirm the pact between God and his chosen people. Furthermore, the oath of obedience to the Law which Joas has to take, signifies the supremacy of the Divine Law over all man-made ordinances.

Similarly, in Macbeth, Duncan is the 'sainted king' and his son, Malcolm, the legitimate heir to the Scottish throne, by acknowledging 'the grace of Grace' implicitly submits his kingly power to the Supreme Power, whereas the usurper Macbeth has thought that he could with impunity 'cancel, and tear to pieces, that great bond'.

To sum up: I don't think that there can be any doubt that the values operative in both Athalie and Macbeth are religious values. The design of both plays asserts the triumph of the spiritual over the temporal in the sense that both plays demonstrate the operation of divine providence in the destinies of individuals as well as nations.

So far we have been discussing the positive aspects of divine grace and the way in which the recipients of grace become the means through which divine providence chooses to work. However, the question arises: If God is the cause of the will to do good, what is the cause of an evil will?

I have quoted the words of St Augustine: 'our nature, corrupted by sin, produces citizens of earth, and grace freeing us from the sin of nature, makes us citizens of heaven'. I have also said that the effect of grace

is to eliminate the self-choosing which is the main barrier between man and God. It follows therefore that if grace is withheld, man is thrown back upon his earthly, corrupted nature with nothing to stand between his self-choosing.

Now, according to the doctrine of the Fall, original sin affects the will before all else. Despite the activity of the providential will, the sins committed by man proceed from his will, which inclines him to evil. This inclination to evil is itself a result of man's fallen state. However, by the gift of grace this necessity for an evil choice may be removed, to be replaced by the necessity of the will's co-operation with God.

In Macbeth Shakespeare confronts us with a situation where two men of equal stature and reputation are exposed to the mysterious forces of evil. Among the great number of critics who have explored the function of the Witches is I. Ribner who, rightly, I think, ascribes the impulse to evil to Macbeth himself. The Witches, he says:

...simply suggest an object which may incite the inclination to evil which is always within man because of original sin, and they do this by means of prophecy.⁷

Ivor Morris takes the argument further:

While the good man, sharing in Divine grace as well as in original sin, can resist their appeal, the evil man falls.⁸

The relation between Macbeth and the Witches is a subtle and a tricky one. The first words uttered by Macbeth in the play, before the actual encounter with the Witches, echo their earlier incantation suggesting a mysterious kinship. However, neither the Witches nor Lady Macbeth are

⁷ I. Ribner, "Macbeth: The Pattern of Idea and Action", Shakespeare Quarterly, X (1959), 151.

⁸ Morris, p. 314

responsible for suggesting the way towards Macbeth's attainment of the crown - the thought of murder is his own. Banquo warns Macbeth not to trust the Witches. He has watched Macbeth's 'rapt' reaction to the apparent fulfilment of the first prophecy, and senses his susceptibility:

That, trusted home,
Might yet enkindle you unto the crown,
Besides the Thane of Cawdor. But 'tis strange:
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of Darkness tell us truths;
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence

(I.iii. 120-126).

And he is right. Macbeth's vivid imagination is already at work:

... Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thought, whose murther yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man,
That function is smother'd in surmise,
And nothing is, but what is not

(I.iii. 137-142).

Shakespeare is therefore content to suggest a kinship between the Witches who externalize the presence of evil in the world and Macbeth's own evil thoughts. He does not presume to explore the cause of this evil. Morris, whose interpretation I am following here, puts it well:

It may justifiably be concluded that we shall never know, and that Shakespeare does not wish us to determine, whether the weird sisters control Macbeth's fate, or whether their prophecies are a reflection of his character. That he drives us to this conclusion may mean simply that Shakespeare will not claim a wisdom beyond humanity. It may point to his awareness of the strength of man's passionate endowment, his compulsive inclination to evil, and his

sense of over-ruling destiny that have always puzzled those who have speculated on the human will. To enquire into the cause of an evil will has been likened to seeking 'to see darkness, or to hear silence': this is a point at which humanity's inquiries vanish as breath into the wind.⁹

The cause of Macbeth's evil will to power thus remains a mystery. Yet it is true that in *Macbeth*, more than in any other play by Shakespeare, the problem is presented in biblical terms. Even such a cautious critic as Miss Muriel Bradbrook has said of *Macbeth*:

In murdering Duncan, he committed mortal sin - the sin against the Holy Ghost as James called it in *Daemonologie* (book I, chapter 11) - that is, he consciously and deliberately did that which he knew to be evil, and which he detested even as he did it.¹⁰

For both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth heaven and hell are realities; in other words, they believe in the existence of heaven or hell. Consider Lady Macbeth's invocation to the forces of evil where she deliberately wants the possibility of remorse, which would permit the operations of grace, to be excluded:

... Come, thick Night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry, 'Hold, hold!'

(I.v. 50-54).

⁹ Morris, pp. 314-315.

¹⁰ M.C. Bradbrook, 'The Sources of *Macbeth*', *Shakespeare Survey*, IV (1951), 43.

And Macbeth, hearing the bell struck by Lady Macbeth to indicate that all the preparations for the heinous murder have been completed, states:

I go, and it is done! the bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell
That summons thee to Heaven or to Hell
(11.i. 62-64).

Even more significant is Macbeth's appalled reaction after he has committed the deed:

But wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'?
I had most need of blessing, and 'Amen'
Stuck in my throat
(11.ii. 30-33).

He knows that his inability to pronounce 'Amen' is associated with the destruction of what he later calls 'that great bond'. Both references clearly indicate a spiritual state from which all grace is absent. From the moment of sacrilegious murder, it is borne in on him that:

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
I had liv'd a blessed time; for, from this instant,
There's nothing serious in mortality;
All is but toys; renown, and grace, is dead;
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of
(11.iii 91-96).

He realizes that he has given the 'eternal jewel' of his soul to 'the common enemy of man' and his fatalistic outlook from this time on indicates his descent into hell. The vision is an eschatological one, echoing Macbeth's own evocation of the Last Judgement in the soliloquy where he pauses to consider the implications of the deed he is only contemplating at that point Duncan's virtues:

Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against
The deep damnation of his taking-off;
And Pity, like a naked new-born babe,
Striding the blast, or heaven's Cherubins, hors'd
Upon the sightless couriers of the air,
Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,
That tears shall drown the wind ...
(I.vii. 18-25).

Clearly such words can only be spoken by someone whose conscience is extremely alive. On the other hand, Macbeth's even greater susceptibility to evil is manifest from the start. He is immediately prepared unconditionally to accept the prophecy of the Witches upon learning that their first prediction has come true. Once more, the different reactions of Macbeth and Banquo are significant:

Banquo. What! can the Devil speak true?
.....
Macbeth. (Aside) Glamis, the Thane of Cawdor!
of Cawdor!
The greatest is behind ...

Macbeth is so mesmerized by the image of his own greatness, that it immediately becomes a reality, and the whole of reality, for him. Hence he immediately sees Malcolm's proclamation as the Prince of Cumberland as a blocking of his own aspirations:

... That is a step
On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,
For in my way it lies ...
(I.iv. 48-50).

This arrogant assumption of greatness in both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, his 'dearest partner of greatness', denotes an immoderate degree of

self-absorption. Lady Macbeth knows her husband's proud and ambitious nature:

... Thou wouldst be great;
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it: what thou wouldst highly,
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win ...
(I.v. 18-22).

What needs to be activated is not Macbeth's desire, but his will. The self-seeking quality is already there. So when he draws back, Lady Macbeth piques his pride by accusing him of weakness of will. This rekindles what Rossiter calls 'the ruthless impulse of self-assertion, the blind urge to dominate through power'¹¹ which henceforth becomes the dominating passion of Macbeth:

... For mine own good,
All causes shall give way: I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.
Strange things I have in head, that will to hand,
Which must be acted, ere they may be scann'd
(III.iv. 134-139).

So, the beginning of all evil lies in the wilful assertion of the self, in the desire to possess as an end what is the means to an end. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth crave 'the golden round' for the sense of earthly power which they think it will give them.

¹¹ A.P. Rossiter, *Angel with Horns: Fifteen Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. Grahame Storey (New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1961 (c)), p. 226.

Therefore, to sum up once more: it seems that at the opposite end of the scale of grace, we find the self-seekers. Let us see if this statement holds true for Athalie as well. Throughout the play, the protagonist is referred to as 'la superbe Athalie'. Like Macbeth's tyrannous reign, Athalie's is based on domination through power, i.e. brute military force. She proudly proclaims:

Sur d'éclatants succès ma puissance établie
A fait jusqu'aux deux mers respecter Athalie
(II.v. 471-472).

A corollary of the sense of earthly power is the desire to amass and possess earthly treasures. Athalie's cupidity is mentioned several times. Mathan, a renegade Levite, now chief priest of Baal and Athalie's main adviser and confidant, tempts the queen by telling her that Joad has hidden the treasure amassed by King David in the temple. Her desire to lay her hands on this supposed treasure is the direct cause of her fall. For, firstly, she delays the sack of the temple for fear of destroying the treasure, and, secondly, she is enticed into the temple and falls straight into the trap set by Joad when she comes to claim the promised treasure - which turns out to be Joad enthroned.

Like Macbeth who blames the 'juggling fiends', Athalie blames God for dazzling her with the riches of His temple. But both protagonists succumb to temptation because of the self-seeking quality which is part of their natures. Like Shakespeare, Racine does not focus on the cause, but on the nature of a corrupted will. In each case the protagonist is shown to possess an overreaching desire for self-aggrandizement and a determination towards the acting out and enforcement of their personal will.

In Racine's play, the figure of Mathan provides an interesting understudy of what I have called the corrupted will. Mathan states unequivocally that obedience to divine law and self-choosing are inimical:

Né ministre du Dieu qu'en ce temple on adore,
Peut-être que Mathan le servirait encore,

Si l'amour des grandeurs, la soif de commander,
Avec son joug étroit pouvaient s'accommoder
(III.iii. 923-26).

Mathan's fate is the same as that of Athalie and Macbeth - he has his throat cut.

In the downfall of the self-seekers and the re-establishment of the order they have threatened and overthrown, the working of divine providence can be seen. However, more striking than the external events, is the internal tragic pattern which follows the movement from self-deception to self realization in the soul of the protagonists.

Both Macbeth and Athalie deliberately and knowingly set themselves up in opposition to divine law. Macbeth knows the hideousness of the murder he is contemplating and the inadequacy of his 'vaulting ambition'. His fear stems not only from the certainty of having 'judgement here', but also from his acute moral awareness. The 'fatal vision' of the dagger dripping blood symbolizes Macbeth's awareness of the implications of the act he is about to commit. His 'heat oppressed brain' teems with images of violence, guilt and an awareness of moral outrage. The great frame of order in which the Elizabethans believed included not only the macrocosm, but also the microcosm of the individual self. Thus they believed that divine harmony should prevail not only in the state, but also within the individual. Macbeth's conflict of conscience reveals the disruption of his integrity, his 'inner state of man', and in the dagger-soliloquy we see his apprehension of both natural and supernatural menace:

... Now o'er the one half-world
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtain'd sleep: Witchcraft celebrates
Pale Hecate's offerings; and wither'd Murder,
Alarm'd by his sentinel, the wolf,
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design
Moves like a ghost. - Thou sure and firm-set earth,

Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear
Thy very stones prate of my where-about,
And take the present horror from the time,
Which now suits with it ...

(II.i. 48-60).

For Macbeth the world has become a gruesome, sinister and eerie place. Sleep which should be refreshing, life-giving, a part of the natural order of things, is disturbed and haunted by 'wicked dreams'. Macbeth is not only enveloped by the darkness of night, but, in the inner darkness of his mind he feels himself surrounded by evil forces. Note the epithets 'pale' and 'wither'd' which qualify the evil 'presences' conjured up by Macbeth's troubled imagination. The very fact that he uses these terms, suggesting death-like pallor and desiccation, indicates his own suppressed consciousness of the moral blight attached to his intended deed.

Similarly in Racine's play Athalie is haunted by the fear of the God she has abandoned. Her very first appearance shows her shaken and un-nerved. The cause of her agitated state of mind is soon revealed:

Un songe (me devrais je inquiéter d'un songe?)
Entretient dans mon coeur un chagrin qui le ronge.
Je l'évite partout, partout il me poursuit.
C'était pendant l'horreur d'une profonde nuit

(II.v. 486-490).

The emphatic 'songe/ronge' indicates the psychological process taking place. Athalie's innermost being is undermined, literally 'gnawed away' by the terrifying vision which pursues her. As in Macbeth the terror and darkness, here suggested by 'profonde nuit', extend over everything.

The prophetic aspect of Athalie's vision introduces the element of fate, as do the prophecies of the Witches in Macbeth. But, once more to re-iterate, the emphasis in both plays is on the reaction of the protagonists. Both Athalie and Macbeth continue to trust in their own powers and think

that by an act of their own personal will they can enforce their pattern on the world and shape their own destinies. In both protagonists the will to power submerges reason and conscience and leads to a state of illusion.

The recognition of the illusory nature of their power is then what constitutes the anagnorisis or tragic insight.

In this respect Macbeth is very different from Athalie. The peripeteia in Macbeth occurs immediately after the murder of Duncan. Before the sacrilegious murder Macbeth could still say:

If it were done, when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly ...
(I.vii. 1-2).

But immediately after the murder is done the happiness which Macbeth hoped to reap in killing Duncan is turned into misery:

But wherefore could not I pronounce 'Amen'?
I had most need of blessing, and 'Amen'
Stuck in my throat
(II.ii. 30-32).

Macbeth now knows

To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself
(II.ii. 72).

Morally and psychologically speaking, from this point onwards, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth appear as souls in disintegration. They are cut off from each other, from the life around them, from all springs of joy. From Lady Macbeth's:

Nought's had, all's spent,
Where our desire is got without content:

'Tis safer to be that which we destroy,
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy
(III.ii. 4-7)

to Macbeth's:

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 ...
(V.v. 19-23).

We watch the disintegration of these two heroic personalities. Lady Macbeth breaks under the strain, but Macbeth keeps up the struggle, continuing to discover essential truths about himself and the nature of life itself. So when the catastrophe comes, it is, as Ivor Morris has seen 'only the outward sign for something already concluded'.¹²

The truth of Malcolm's statement:

... Macbeth
Is ripe for shaking, and the Powers above
Put on their instruments ...
(IV.iii. 237-239).

is endorsed by Macbeth himself:

I have liv'd long enough: my way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf;
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,

¹² Morris, p. 272.

I must not look to have; but in their stead,
Curses, not loud, but deep ...
(V.iii. 22-27).

In *Athalie*, which, as I have pointed out earlier, is written in the classical tradition, the *peripeteia* and *anagnorisis* occur almost simultaneously, to be followed immediately by the catastrophe. When *Athalie* finds herself face to face with *Joas* enthroned, totally surrounded by the armed Levites, abandoned by *Abner*, and the news comes that her entire army has either fled or joined the jubilant populace in singing the praises of the son of *David* risen, as it were, from the dead, she knows that her fate is sealed. Only then does she recognize the power of the God whom she has spurned:

Dieu des Juifs, tu l'emportes!
.....
David, David triomphe: Achab seul est détruit.
Impitoyable Dieu, toi seul as tout conduit
(V.vi. 1768-1774).

However, as in the case of *Macbeth*, the audience has been prepared for the inevitable outcome. *Malcolm's* quietly confident statement, '*Macbeth* is ripe for shaking' is echoed by *Joad's*:

Grand Dieu, voici ton heure, on t'amène ta proie
(V.iii. 1668).

The *coup de théâtre* which enacts the reversal of *Athalie's* fortune is a kind of dramatic 'trick' which symbolizes the illusory nature of *Athalie's* avaricious power-seeking. *Athalie* confronts *Joad*, and imperiously commands him to hand over the child, *Eliacin*, as well as the treasure of *David*:

Athalie: Cet enfant, ce trésor qu'il faut qu'on me remette,
Où sont ils?

Joas: Sur-le-champ tu seras satisfaite:
Je te les vais montrer l'un et l'autre à la fois
(V.v. 1715-17).

He draws back a curtain and Joas is revealed seated on a throne. Athalie's refusal to accept this blow of fate reveals her heroic stature. She calls on her soldiers to deliver her from this 'fantôme odieux'. But a second coup de théâtre follows: the great hangings at the rear are thrown back, revealing the interior of the temple, while armed Levites appear from all sides. This dramatic opening of God's sacred dwelling place symbolizes Athalie finding herself at last face to face with the justice of God.

Macbeth ends with a similar coup de théâtre. A messenger brings the fearful news that what seemed to be a moving wood was approaching Dunsinane, causing Macbeth to recall

... th' equivocation of the fiend,
That lies like truth: 'Fear not, till Birnam wood
Do come to Dunsinane' ...
(V.ii. 43-46).

In the face of this blow of fate, Macbeth too reveals his heroic stature:

Ring the alarum bell! - Blow, wind! come, wrack!
At least we'll die with harness on our back
(V.v. 51-52).

But then, as Macbeth is making his last stand in his fortress, Macduff confronts him:

Turn, Hell-hound, turn!

Even though he recoils from Macduff, because:

... My soul is too much charg'd
With blood of thine already

Macbeth in this last extremity rises to meet Macduff's challenge, clinging to his last illusion:

Let fall thy blade on vulnerable crests;
I bear a charmed life; which must not yield
To one of women born
(V.viii. 11-13).

The dramatic 'trick' whereby the circumstances of Macduff's birth are used to belie Macbeth's illusion of his invulnerability, causes the final collapse of Macbeth's false sense of power. Appropriately it is Macduff himself who becomes the 'instrument' of that divine justice whose intervention Malcolm foresaw upon hearing of the savage slaughter of Macduff's family by Macbeth.

It is, finally, significant that both Athalia and Macbeth's last gestures should be unyielding defiance and that their last words should contain a curse. They both die unredeemed, without any comfort or consolation, utterly alone.

But the tragedies do not end with the death of the protagonists. Both Athalia and Macbeth are executed off stage and both plays conclude with the sober announcement that justice has been done. The total isolation of the protagonists at the end symbolizes their breaking of the great bond which links man to man and man to God within the circle of grace. At the end of both plays, in the epilogues spoken respectively by Joad addressing Joas and Malcolm addressing his 'thanes and kinsmen', the circle is closed once more by the emphasis on the links that are necessary for the great circle to hold.