IRONY AND REVERSAL IN MACBETH: THE QUESTION OF AMBIGUITY

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"Words, words, they're all we've got to go on."[1] This
is how Tom Stoppard, in his revision of Shakespeare's Hamlet,
defines the ambiguous character of human experience, which
is projected by means of a discourse necessarily subject to
various interpretations. A discourse codified by the myths
and fictional creations of the community, therefore carrying
social and individual features. An enigma which requires the
act of decoding, and whose interpretation is charged with
Desire.

Theatre, because it continuously confronts the
spectator with such a need for decoding implied in Stoppard's
text, foregrounds precisely the enigmatic character of our
discourse and of human experience itself. It brings into
focus the relation between being and appearance, a relation
which is ambiguous, fluctuating in each act of speech,
carrying a multiplicity of meanings.

Operating basically on the principle of ambiguity, and
with irony and reversal its main structural devices, Macbeth
thus projects these essential questions, as it deals with
the polysemic nature of the discourse and the connection
between desire and interpretation.

The ascension of Macbeth to power is in itself

characterized by an irony which makes evident the ambiguity
and the illusory character of that power. His trajectory up-
ward is due to his apparent fulfillment of the value codes
of his community, but it constitutes in reality a farce, since
in the same ascension he is violating, without the knowledge
of the group, the very codes he pretends to espouse. At first
the saviour of the community, Macbeth will later be seen as
an element of pollution. From king to pharmakōs, from friend
to enemy, from support to threat, Macbeth is subject to   a
polarization of readings by the members of the community. This
reveals that he is nothing more than a fictional creation of
himself and of the social group, thus personifying the double
character of human beings. The play, in this way, projects
the polarities of the Absolute and the Relative, of the
Objective and the Subjective, each thing containing its
opposite, and revealing the paradoxical nature of reality.

The act of interpretation —"words, words, they're all
we've got to go on" — is required from the characters at
every step. Questions are asked, enigmatic answers are offered,
the decoding of messages is carried out. From Macbeth's
speeches to the opinions formulated by other characters,
from his dialogues with the witches and the enigmatic answers
given by the apparitions conjured up at his request, from the
initial blindness to the gradual insight of the group in
relation to the King's acts, everything is used to foreground
the ambiguity of words and the relativity of interpretation.The
discourse can be used to mask or unmask reality, it may be
correctly or incorrectly interpreted, it may be given a partial

reading, it may constitute an instance of persuasive manipula-
tion on the part of the enunciator which the enunciatee may
perceive or ignore. At any rate, what is emphasized in every
case is the complexity of the act of interpretation. From the
very first speeches by the characters, different — and even
opposed — types of reading are suggested: a systematic
opposition of cognitive fields is established, be it in rela-
tion to the levels of knowledge of different characters, be
it in relation to their knowledge and that of the audience.
Statements carrying one particular meaning from the enun -
ciator's viewpoint acquire another value and are interpreted
as omens by the spectators — they become true, but not in the
sense in which they were formulated by the enunciator. Or, in
other cases, the spectator realizes the enunciator is conscious
ly making a false statement — but the enunciatee ignores
this fact and accepts the statement as true. Or, still, without
the enunciator's knowledge, what is said is completely opposed
to the facts presented. All of these oppositions thus consti-
tute the basic form of organization of the text, and its most
relevant structural components: irony and reversal. From the
beginning of the play to its end, this will be constantly
reelaborated, pointing to the dominant themes of the text.

In the first scene of act I the witches announce: "Fair
is foul, and foul is fair."[2] The use of alliteration and the
equivalence of the signifiers fair/foul, as well as the
parallelism of the construction, establish one of the most
recurrent devices employed by Shakespeare in this play:the
juxtaposition of contraries, a vehicle for the projection of

the theme of the paradoxical nature of reality. What is made
evident is that each thing contains its opposite — the
double character of phenomena — and there is a suggestion
that an univocal reading will be necessarily flawed and
incomplete. In addition, the possibility of identifying
Macbeth and the witches is suggested as he, in his first
speech, will use exactly the same words: "So foul and fair
a day I have not seen" (I.iii.38). This first reference to
Macbeth's double nature will be reinforced by other statements
which, with no such intention on the part of the enunciators,
will be reversed so as to refer to him in a negative manner.
Such is the case of the sergeant's description of the battle
which has ended with Macbeth's victory: "As whence the sun
'gins his reflection/Shipwracking storms and direful thunders
break, /So from that spring whence comfort seem'd to come/
Discomfort swells" (I.ii.25-28). The statement as it is
formulated aims only at praising Macbeth for having overcome
all the obstacles up to his final victory but it may be
interpreted as an omen. The irony becomes evident when the
King decides to have the traitor Thane of Cawdor killed and
transfer his title to Macbeth, stating that "no more that
Thane of Cawdor shall deceive our bosom interest" (I.ii.65-
66). But it will be precisely the new Thane of Cawdor, asso-
ciated in the description of the battle with the sun, who
will inaugurate in Scotland a period of "discomfort," with
"shipwracking storms and direful thunders." In scene IV, still
referring to the first Thane of Cawdor, Duncan affirms that
"there's no art to find the mind's construction in the face"
(I.iv.11-12), for that had been "a gentleman on whom I built

an absolute trust" (I.iv.13-14) — the same blind trust he now
transfers to Macbeth . Likewise, the praises Duncan addresses
to his cousin acquire a meaning of pressage and are thus to be
seen in their ironic implications: "More is thy due than more
than all can pay" (I.iv.21); "I have begun to plant thee and
will labour to make thee full of growing" (I.iv.28-29); "it is
a peerless kinsman" (I.iv.58). These statements, as well as
those in which Macbeth reaffirms his loyalty to the King, may
be contrasted to his speeches in the scene with the witches.
One realizes that Duncan's words are true, but in a sense
contrary to that which he has conferred on them: Macbeth does
believe he deserves more than the honors Duncan grants him;
he will try to reach full growth; and, indeed, there is no
kinsman like him, for he will murder his cousin in his own
house, violating at the same time the rules of loyalty to the
King, of hospitality, and of kinship.

Another form of irony used in the text is the creation
of an opposition between cognitive fields. In most cases, the
opposition occurs between what Macbeth knows and what the
other characters do. In terms of the audience, the level of
knowledge parallels Macbeth's, which decreases dramatic irony
but still indicates that multiple possibilities of interpreta-
tion exist.

One of the devices used to deepen the audience's level
of perception is Macbeth's asides, by means of which his
thoughts are conveyed to the audience, without being heard by
the other characters. Likewise, his letter to Lady Macbeth
and the various monologues (his or Banquo's) have the same
function: the characters interrupt the interpretation of their

social roles and are revealed in their totality. Another
example is the fact that the audience — unlike most of the
other characters — partakes in Macbeth's visions, which
reveal either his desires (the witches and the dagger in
II.i.)or his feeling of guilt (Banquo's ghost at the
banquet). Only at one moment does the audience reach a
level of cognition superior to the protagonist's: having
already heard the prophecies foretold by the apparitions
conjured up by the witches (IV.i.), the spectators realize
that with the stratagem to be used by Malcolm, son of the
murdered King, to fool Macbeth, the destruction of the usurper
is imminent. But throughout the whole play, the contrast is
established between Macbeth and his wife, on the one hand,
and the other characters on the other. The opposition between
appearance and reality, and the function of human discourse
in the projection of such opposition is expressed by Lady
Macbeth as she addresses her husband:

> Your face, my thane, is as a book where men
> May read strange matters. To beguile the time,
> Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
> Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent
> flower,
> But be the serpent under't.
> (I.v.63-68)

From this point on, there will be a series of
incorrect readings effected by the various characters, thus
reinforcing the irony: Duncan's praise addressed to Macbeth
or his wife, Macduff's attempt to prevent her listening to
the account of the murder:

> O gentle lady!
> 'Tis not for you to hear what I can speak;
> The repetition in a woman's ear
> Would murder as it fell.
> (II.iii.90-93)

In several other instances, false statements are accepted
as true by the other characters, such as Macbeth's words
after the crime. However, it is even more ironic that these
statements will be indeed revealed as true, but in a sense
Macbeth does not suspect at this point:

> 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.
> (II.iii.98-103)

Macbeth's objective is to cover the fact that he has
committed the crime. But without knowing he is making an
affirmation which will be repeated at the end of the play,
and this time he will really mean it — his famous monologue
on the illusory character of human experience.

A similar instance of irony occurs in III.i. when
Macbeth, already crowned as King, invites Banquo — his
"chief guest" — to take part in the banquet he will offer
that night. Banquo accepts the invitation, as his duties
"are with a most indissoluble tie for ever knit" (III.i.18-
19) to Macbeth. The reference to the ties, that can be inter-
preted as the secret both of them share, is in itself ironic;
but even more so is the fact that Macbeth has already decided
to eliminate Banquo, and the invitation is again a form of
manipulation. After being murdered, however, Banquo indeed

becomes Macbeth's "chief guest": his ghost will come to the banquet, causing the King to lose control.

The opposite use of a false discourse constitutes an additional form of reversal. Such is the case of the dialogue between Macduff and Malcolm in which the latter, aware of the fact that an appearance of honesty may be the vehicle of treason, tests Macduff's loyalty to his cause and to Scotland. Malcolm, the real heir to the crown, describes himself as an oppressor potentially more destructive than Macbeth. As he receives proof that Macduff's loyalty is authentic, he then reverses what he had said about himself. The same dominant themes are thus restated — the ambiguous nature of human discourse, the opposition appearance/reality, and the role of the discourse in the projection of this duality.

To follow the same line of analysis, one of the most important scenes to reveal the complexity of the act of decoding and the connection between interpretation and desire is Macbeth's reading of the prophecies voiced by the witches or the apparitions. In his second encounter with the witches, the determining role of desire in the act of decoding will become evident. The apparitions conjured up by the witches do not give direct answers to the questions posed by Macbeth, but in an enigmatic manner announce the future. What the King fails to perceive is not only that the prophetic discourse announces his destruction, but also the fact that the apparitions themselves are signs to be decoded. The first apparition is an armed Head, who warns the King against Macduff. At the end of the play, Macduff will kill

Macbeth and cutoff this head. The second apparition is a
bloody child, who announces he should

> Be bloody, bold, and resolute;
> laugh to scorn
> The power of man, for none of woman born
> Shall harm Macbeth.
>   (IV.i.79-81)

The king interprets the prophecy as an announcement that no
man will be capable of destroying him. At the end, however,
it will become clear that the bloody child was a sign of
Macduff himself, since he had been "from his mother's womb
untimely ripp 'd" (V.vii.44-45), thus not having had a natural
birth. The third apparition, a child crowned with a tree in
his hand, announces:

> Be lion-mettled   , proud, and take no care
> Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are:
> Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until
> Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill
> Shall come against him.
>   (IV.i.90-94)

Macbeth interprets   this prophecy as a sign of his
invincibility, failing to grasp the fact that, on the contrary,
it describes the stratagem used to destroy him: Malcolm,
leading his troops in the siege of Dunsinane, will give
this order:

> Let every soldier hew him a bough
> And bear't before him: thereby shall we shadow
> The numbers of our host, and make discovery
> Err in report of us.
> (V.iv.5-8)

Malcolm, after Macbeth's death, is crowned King. Thus, the first apparition refers symbolically to Macbeth himself, the second to Macduff, the third to Malcolm. Macbeth, however, is as incapable of effecting a decoding of the symbolic nature of the figures as of perceiving the ambiguity of their language. This can be seen as an indication that Macbeth's capacity of decoding has been undermined by his desire, since, in his first encounter with the witches, both he and Banquo had realized that several interpretations were possible. "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (I.i.11), Macbeth already knew.

Banquo, for example, doubts the witches' existence: "I' the name of truth, are ye fantastical, or that indeed which outwardly ye show?" (I.iii.52-54); and

> Were such things here as we do speak about?
> Or have we eaten on the insane root
> That takes the reason prisoner?
> (I.iii.83-85)

Later on, when Macbeth is already Cawdor, Banquo expresses his fear that

> That, trusted home,
> Might yet enkindle you into 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.
> <div align="center">(I.iii.120-26)</div>

Macbeth here realizes the double possibilities of interpretation, but his choice will be made:

> This supernatural soliciting
> Cannot be ill, cannot be good; if ill,
> Why hath it given me earnest of success,
> Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.
> If good, why do I yield to that suggestion
> Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair
> And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,
> Against the use of nature? Present fears
> Are less than horrible imaginings;
> My thought, whose murder 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.
> <div align="center">(I.iii.130-42)</div>

The terms "yet" and "surmise" are indicators of the direction to be followed by Macbeth. On the other hand, the opposition and juxtaposition of contraries are emphasized in several ways, such as "nothing is but what is not," in the quotation above, and in the references to Banquo made by the witches:

> - Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.
> - Not so happy, yet much happier.

              - Thou shalt get kings, though thou
            be none.
                        (I.iii.65-67)

        Again, as in "foul" and "fair," the juxtaposition of
contradictions reveals the transitory and ambivalent nature
of reality and of the power for which Macbeth strives.
        One other device used to reinforce ambiguity is the
strange and mysterious mood in which the conflict unfolds.
Time references are always to night, night with thunder
and storms, or peopled by witches, in which images of blood
and death recur. All the traditional formulas that evoke
horror occur: spells, the enchantment of prophetic discourse,
sounds associated with death (such as the bell tolling when
Duncan is murdered or the women's cries announcing Lady
Macbeth's suicide), the knocking at the gate, chimneys
blowing down, lamentings and strange screams, the earth
shaking, the clamours of birds, storms, a falcon killed by an
owl, horses turning wild and eating each other. If all these
elements tend to create an atmosphere of strangeness, in a
paradoxical way they reduce the mystery. The use of such
conventions of horror stories indicates that Macbeth's acts
 are contrary to the laws of Nature and Society and will have
to lead to evil and destruction.
        One last aspect to be discussed in terms of ironic
construction is the relationship between the protagonist and
the characteristic by means of which he ascends to power, and
the fulfillment or reversal of the expectations of the
community. Macbeth is defined, in his own eyes and in that

of others, by his strength and courage: "I dare do all that
may become a man; who dares do more is none" (p.85). Since
these are the qualities by means of which he establishes his
identity, to Macbeth the relation between power and action
is a necessary one. The alternatives, for him, are not
between loyalty and ambition, but rather between passivity
or dynamism:Confronted with the decision of yielding or not
to the possibility of immediate ascension to power, Macbeth
has indeed no real choice. He _is_ a man of action, he _is_
Power itself in process. He is active and dynamic. To deny
the impulse to act to achieve the highest position in
Scotland is to give up being Macbeth. His excess in the
very quality which distinguishes him and makes him fulfill
the expectations of the community is exactly what will lead
to a reversal, when he violates the rules of the group and
threatens the community. Mme. de Staël has pointed out that
we have the defects of our own virtues, and it cannot
be denied that here lies the tragedy of men: the same force
that elevates a man to his full height may destroy him and
undermine his greatness. Macbeth _is_ excessive strength, and
thus unable to remain in a position of waiting. Accumulating
violence upon violence, he prepares his fall, which will
be symbolically accompanied by the loss of the quality that
defines him: Macbeth, man of action, characterized by strength,
is reduced to passivity,decapitated, by Macduff, agent of his
destruction. This, once again, reveals how the same quality
can be simultaneously good and bad: "Foul is fair, and fair
is foul." Nothing is just one thing, no univocal interpretation
can be trusted. Power is transitory, as transitory as life
itself. Human experience is ambiguous, an ambiguity carried

and expressed by the polysemic nature of our discourse.

As he is informed of his wife's suicide, Macbeth
presents, in a perfect synthesis, his perception of that
transitoriness:

> Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
> 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.iv.19-28)

Macbeth here asserts the illusory character of human
experience and, by means of the theatrical metaphor, expresses
the belief that life is a fiction, a meaningless tale. A
tale which is told by an idiot, projected in words. And words,
"they're all we've got to go on."

NOTES

[1]Tom Stoppard, <u>Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead</u>
(London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 31.

[2]Shakespeare, <u>Macbeth</u>, in <u>Shakespeare. Complete Works</u>
(London: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 847. All quotations
from the play were taken from this edition and indications
are given in parentheses.