Macbeth and the twists of the soul

Rafael Campos Oliven

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MACBETH AND THE TWISTS OF THE SOUL

Rafael Campos Oliven*

RESUMO: *Este artigo tem por objetivo analisar a construção de certa configuração anímica em Macbeth por meio da investigação do simbolismo de seus personagens, compreendidos aqui como parte de uma configuração maior que os engloba e na qual todos estão, de alguma forma, inter-relacionados. O pano de fundo sobre o qual esta análise se apoia é a questão do Mal e sua origem, um tema recorrente em Shakespeare e crucial nesta peça. As teorias psicanalíticas elaboradas por Freud acerca da arte e da literatura, assim como as ideias desenvolvidas por Janet Adelman e Susan Snyder, entre outros, sobre esta obra de literatura, serviram de embasamento para a argumentação do artigo.*

PALAVRAS-CHAVES: *Literatura Inglesa; Macbeth; Mal; psicanálise.*

ABSTRACT: *This article aims to analyze the construction of a certain soul configuration in Macbeth by means of an investigation of the symbolism of its characters, understood here as part of a larger configuration that encompasses them and in which they are all, somehow, interrelated. The backdrop upon which this analysis relies is the question of Evil and its origin, a recurring theme in Shakespeare and crucial in this play. The psychoanalytical theories elaborated by Freud about art and literature, as well as the ideas developed by Janet Adelman and Susan Snyder, among others, about this work of literature, served as a basis for the argumentation of this article.*

KEY WORDS: *English literature; Macbeth; Evil; psychoanalysis.*

1. The Characters and their Doubles in *Macbeth*

For those who appreciate reading Shakespearean tragedies or seeing them performed on stage or in a film, entering the universe of *Macbeth* is like entering a dark cave. Sentiments of fear, guilt, envy, superstition and inaptitude to accept one's own hierarchical position in society hover over people's heads tormenting them like ancient feelings or primal drives:

> The play spreads out from our interest in the hero; and the hero is here a criminal or rather a man obsessed by his relation to those criminal tendencies that are so universal that we best describe them by speaking of 'evil'. The play is a discovery or anatomy of evil. Of all Shakespeare's plays *Macbeth* is the one most obsessively concerned with evil. (Hunter, 1974, p.7)

Although evil is a *modus operandi* throughout the whole play, Shakespeare appears to have placed it and the hero's action, as Irving Ribner suggests, "on a wider canvas" (Ribner, 1971, p.139). Almost every character seems to encompass his or her self and alter ego in the same person or through another character who works as a foil or shadow. Thus, besides being the other half of his wife in roles that alternate, Macbeth is shadowed by Macduff, who is a father and husband and acts as a foil to him, as well as

* Rafael Campos Oliven holds a Bachelor's Degree in Philosophy from UFRGS (Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul, Porto Alegre, Brazil) and a Teaching Degree in English and Portuguese from the Methodist University of Porto Alegre. He is currently a Master's student in Literatures in English Language at UFRGS. His dissertation is entitled "'Thus conscience does make cowards of us all': the construction of soliloquies in Shakespeare."

Banquo who is a general and his peer and also a father but does not succumb to Evil. Both of them haunt Macbeth in different ways to the point that the first loses his whole family at the behest of the tyrant whereas the latter is killed by Macbeth's murderers while his son Fleance, whose name ironically suggests the action of fleeing, manages to flee the scene of the crime alive.

Lady Macbeth, in her turn, is foiled by Macduff's wife, the nurturing and down-to-earth mother who recognizes, moments before her death and her son's, that:

> Whither should I fly?
> I have done no harm. But I remember now
> I am in this earthily world, where to do harm
> Is often laudable, to do good sometime
> Accounted dangerous folly. (*Macbeth*, act IV, sc. 2)

Yet both Macbeth and his wife, the two principal characters, also contain their other side in themselves, as mentioned above, which is expressed before, during and after the main assassination in the play: the killing of Duncan, the King of Scotland, who is also a symbol of paternal authority. The woman who tells her husband to 'look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under't' and to 'screw your courage to the sticking place. And we'll not fail' is the same who remarks that 'my hands are of your color, but I shame to wear a heart so white' after the king's assassination and who realizes in her sleepwalking that "the Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now?', a clear allusion, produced by her distorted conscience, to her foil's demise, Lady Macduff.

Macbeth, on the other hand, who faltered before the assassination, is able to experience consciously the implications of their crime although he becomes more and more of a tyrant as the play unfolds. Contrary to his wife, who gradually becomes mentally ill and ends up committing suicide, he dies stoically fighting against Macduff even though he knows he has been damned as a man. Therefore, he is the strongest character after the assassination even though she was the dominant one before it. Nevertheless, he is still able to realize the chances he has missed, albeit only at the end of the play, when it is already too late:

> Seyton! − I am sick at heart
> When I behold −Seyton, I say! − This push
> Will chair me ever or disseat me now.
> I have lived long enough: my way of life
> Is fallen into the sere, the yellow leaf;
> And that which should accompany old age,
> As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
> I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
> Curses, not loud, but deep, mouth-honour, breath
> Which the poor heart would fain deny and dare not. −
> Seyton! (Macbeth, Act V, Sc. 3)

Hence, he is by no means oblivious to the fact that, had he chosen a different path for his life, things might have been different, at least for him. However painful this realization in the form of an afterthought might be, it presents us with a regretful mind still torn between good and bad principles, or rather, in a more psychoanalytical plan, life and death drives. What his mind can conceive so easily, his will could not put into practice.

Therefore it is reasonable to argue about *Macbeth* that "as a crime-does-not-pay story it is less concerned with the uncovering of the crime to others than with the uncovering of the criminal to *himself*." (Hunter, 1974, p.7) It is important to notice that

his servant's name, Seyton, is homophonous with the word Satan. Therefore, it is as though Macbeth were having a private conversation with the devil. This kind of speech, although not a soliloquy in the literal sense of the word, is very similar to it since Macbeth is speaking to only one person whom he feels very at ease to express his innermost feelings and thoughts. However, whether Shakespeare chose the name Seyton on purpose, i.e., consciously, cannot be truly ascertained.

As for the emergence of the double, one should bear it in mind in order to better understand the psychological disposition of the two main characters in this play, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. According to a passage in *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory*, about Freud's famous article "The Uncanny":

> ... the double is paradoxically both a promise of immortality (look, there's my double, I can be reproduced, I can live forever) and a harbinger of death (look, there I am, no longer me here, but there: I am about to die, or else I must be dead already). The notion of the double undermines the very logic of identity. (Bennet, 2009, p.41)

As we have just analyzed, the double can be inside the characters, as well as outside them. This finding brings to the fore the question of *extimacy*, as opposed to that of intimacy. The former is a concept which was originally coined by Lacan, and that stands as an opposite to the concept of intimacy. The concepts of interiority and exteriority are already present in the work of Shakespeare and might have contributed or even paved the way to the more contemporary concepts of objectivity and subjectivity explored by psychoanalysis, linguistics and ethnology.

Regarding the distinction between the objective and the subjective nature of the characters and the transition from the page to the stage, Harriet Walter, a renowned British actress, argues in an interview that:

> The difficulty is to, um, to sustain a balance between the objective nature of the characters that the narrator is describing and the subjective, which as soon as you dramatize something and give actors the role, they become subjects of their own story, rather than objects of the writer's eye and, um, that's the main difference when you dramatize something as opposed to when you read it, because you have a private transaction with the writer where you're sort of caught in and come and look at this, whereas when you have to embody the character, you have to believe in her and care about her and make an apology for her, however badly behaved she is. (WALTER, 2014)

In this interview, Walter is talking, among other things, about playing a bad character, Fanny Ferrars Dashwood, in the 1995 film adaptation of Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility*, where at least in the book there is a formal narrator. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to extend her line of thought to Shakespearean characters in general and how they are performed on stage or in the cinema. In this case, their objective and subjective nature is created by the author, without the use of a narrator, and given to the audience or the reader through their speech and acts (performed or not by an actor), as well as what appears in the *dramatis personas*.

Shakespearean characters who are villains or simply evil may lead the audience or the reader to identify or not with them through their speech and acts (and a possible performance). However, the readers and spectators may also, at a later point, reconsider their initial reactions and experience a turnaround of feelings. Be that as it may, evil is a recurring theme throughout Shakespeare's tragedies as it presents itself differently through distinct characters in particular contexts.

In light of this, the following remark by Harriet Walter on the same interview, about playing bad characters in general and the public's reaction to them, is quite relevant here:

> People always say it must be such fun playing horrible people, I don't really like playing horrible people, I mean, um, If they are funny there's a great pleasure to be had, but it can get a bit comfortable for the audience to know, oh, this person is a villain I'm going to dismiss them and laugh at them and (pause) I prefer to tread a slightly more ambiguous line, where the audience kind of begin to identify with you and think oh, maybe I do that, and then suddenly you turn round and become very unpleasant, and they have to face perhaps that in their own nature rather than constantly stand outside and laugh at it. (WALTER, 2014)

Although it is often easy to pinpoint evil in others and sometimes even to identify with it, evil is not a simple thing. It can interfere with people's zone of comfort, forcing them to reconsider what they usually take for granted. Therefore, once it is spotted in others, or in ourselves, it can assume rather frightening proportions. Distressing and painful though it is, if put into practice inadvertently or on purpose, it can lead to broken hearts, a heavy conscience, or just quick retorts that may counterbalance it and avoid degenerating into bitter revenges.

2. The Psychoanalytical Relevance of Shakespearean Plays

Analyzing the role of Shakespeare in T.S. Elliot's *The Waste Land*, K. Rosenfield argues that:

> The Shakespearean drama brings into play lands and kingdoms devastated by voracious ambitious, nevertheless never recognized in their original root: the desire to be loved by the heroes. The blindness and denial of this loving demand make legitimate desires degenerate into indifference, repugnance, hatred and madness, bastardized expressions of originating aspirations. (Rosenfield, 1996, p.89)

That passage raises a few questions. The first one is that there certainly is a focus on love here, but what kind of love exactly? The focus, it turns out, is on misplaced loved, since the demand for love is not by the heroes themselves, but by the other characters who want to be loved by them. The second question is to which plays does this theory apply to. Since the theme of that statement is hatred, madness, indifference and so on, it follows that it best applies to tragedies.

I believe that *Macbeth* fits the example perfectly. The desire to be loved by Duncan, the king, by both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, is not corresponded in the way they expected. Thus, the denial of their loving demand degenerates into bad feelings which are nothing more than manifestations of frustrated or unrequited love.

The third and last question is what does it mean, psychoanalytically speaking, to love and not be loved? Is our desire, as Lacan puts it, the desire of the Other? The answer to this last question, I believe, requires a whole detour and it would be wiser to start by summarizing *Macbeth* and then proceed to a more detailed analysis of some of its main themes.

The story of the play takes place mainly in Scotland and in some parts of England in the middle of the XI century and its plot concerns a general called Macbeth who also possesses the title of *Thane of Glamis*. After hearing the prophecies of three

witches in a blasted heath, that he is also *Thane of Cawdor* and king to become, he gets obsessed with this idea. After having been granted the title of *Thane of Cawdor* by Duncan, the king of Scotland, he writes to his wife telling the news. Subsequently, the king announces that he is going to spend a night in their castle. Instigated by his ambitious wife to assassinate the monarch with the intention of materializing the prophecy of the witches, he hesitates at first but ends up giving in to her appeals. Both commit the crime and the king dies, which generates an atmosphere of hysteria among those around them. Macbeth is crowned king and his wife becomes queen. From then on, the couple starts ordering the murder of all those they consider a threat to their sovereignty. Consequently, numerous people die. At the end, Lady Macbeth goes crazy and commits suicide, Macbeth is assassinated and the political order is restored.

One of my choices to write about *Macbeth* is due to the fact that, of all Shakespearean plays, this is the one which has always fascinated me the most and given me most pleasure in reading. It is one of his most philosophical plays, as well as *Hamlet*, since it not only transcends the immediacy of things and everyday life (as most of his plays do) but also reflects, through written language and conceptual references, about the essence of life and human beings in general. In this sense, this particular play is able to break the stamp of its age and geography and echo for indefinite time for those who are struck by it, doing justice to what Freud calls, in his essay "Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-analytic Work":

> [...] the powerful effect which the tragedy has upon the spectator. The dramatist can indeed, during the representation, overwhelm us by his art and paralyse our powers of reflection; but he cannot prevent us from attempting subsequently to grasp its effect by studying its psychological mechanism. (Freud, 1997, p.164)

It is important to notice that in writing *Macbeth* Shakespeare went back in time 500 years to an era which he did not know except from books like the second edition of Holinshed's *Chronicles*, published in 1587. The story on which *Macbeth*'s plot is based happens in the middle of the XI century during the kingdom of Duncan I of Scotland and takes place mainly in Scotland, but also in England. Although the play is based on historical facts, it is considered a tragedy and not a historical play like *Coriolanus*, *Julius Cesar* and *Anthony and Cleopatra*.

It is also interesting to bear in mind that the time that separates Shakespeare's life from the time to which this specific work that he created refers to and our era is the same distance in time: more or less 500 years. Shakespeare wrote in the beginning of Modern English (Early Modern English) and the time of the play marks the transition from Ancient English (Old English) to Medieval English (Middle English). Receding half a millennium into an era about which little is known, like a jolt back in time, might have helped the author to create a scenario where tormenting issues could be addressed more easily.

Moreover, the play takes place in the Middle Ages and reflects some aspects of that period. One of them is the fact that, at that time, people believed in and punished certain magical practices. In her book *A Feitiçaria na Europa Moderna*, Laura de Souza e Mello argues that, although magical practices have existed in Europe since antiquity, witch hunts and the concept of witchcraft are actually a phenomenon of the Modern Age, the latter being centered on the notion of heresy through a pact with the Devil. She points out that, according to Henningsen, "it is estimated that 20,000 people were burnt in Modern Europe, the different regions knowing outbreaks of varying intensity in different moments. The persecution focused basically on women. ... In general terms,

the apex of this repression would range between 1560 and 1630." (Souza e Mello, 1987, p.30) Thus, by creating the three Weird Sisters in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare was probably projecting into the Middle Ages a phenomenon of his own era.

Another important aspect is that the kings enjoyed a lot of power and a very high social status. The actual titles attributed to Macbeth, *thane*, *Thane of Glamis* and *Thane of Cawdor*, open up to more than one meaning. On one hand, it's an equivalent to a baron or an earl of that time, titles of nobility which designated a retainer of land of an Anglo-Saxon lord without obligations - something similar to a feudal baron, keeping lands and owing military compliance only to the king. The second meaning refers to the idea of a servant, of someone who is at the mercy of a more powerful feudal lord or to the king.

This feeling of servitude in no way satisfies Macbeth and his ambitious spouse. None of them is pleased with the idea of subordination or of being mere supporting actors in the glittering scenario of royalty and its apparatuses. They consciously covet the crown, which would confer them absolute power − and which they end up accomplishing, by arbitrary and violent means − and, in a more unconscious level, the treatment that a father, in this case the monarch Duncan, confers to his children, Malcolm and Donalbain. This treatment does not necessarily imply the explicit manifestation of affection and pampering, but rather the succession and access to certain rights and privileges.

One of the main themes of the play is the question of infertility and impotence towards some decrees of life and nature. Macbeth and his wife appear to be on that age when their parents have already died and, in their specific case, there is no perspective of having children. A complicated situation for those who are not well structured psychologically and which, in their case, produces many mental breakdowns and even psychotic episodes. Macbeth's soliloquy, which sounds more like daydreaming, about the witches' prophecy that he would become king but beget none and that Banquo, another general and also his peer, would get kings though he be none, elucidates quite well his personal disillusionment and frustration regarding this doom:

> They hailed him father to a line of kings.
> Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown
> And put a barren sceptre in my grip,
> Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand,
> No son of mine succeeding. (Macbeth, Act III, Sc. 1)

Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, who had the most dominant personality in the beginning, is "an example of a person who collapses on reaching success, after striving for it with single-minded energy [...]" (Freud, 1997, p.159). However, before committing the crime of assassinating the king she is ready to sacrifice her sex and womanliness for that end, as is exemplified in the following soliloquy:

> Come, you spirits
> That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here
> And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
> Of direst cruelty. (Macbeth, Act I, Sc. 3)

The implicit dichotomies of feminine and masculine, strong and weak, healthy and pathological and the tension between sex and power are at stake here. Not only Lady Macbeth is the dominant character before the criminal act, but also Shakespeare seems to be playing through her in an unprecedented way with a range of stereotypes that we, and his public at the time, usually take for granted. She is a woman with male

attributes just as her husband lacks the virility that he longs for. Not by chance, one can identify a whole gradient of gender attributes and potential roles being played by these two characters, in what seems to be a dance of the soul between feminine and masculine forces and gender attributed roles. Therefore, Freud's remark, referring to a Shakespearean study by Ludwig Jekels, becomes relevant here:

> Shakespeare often splits a character up into two personages, which, taken separately, are not completely understandable and do not become so until they are brought together once more into a unit. This might be so with Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. (Freud, 1997, p.165)

This Freudian line of thought is shared by other theorists, such as Janet Adelman, who argues in her article ""Born of Woman" Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*", among other things, that this play produces extremely confusing and disturbed images of masculinity and femininity. This disturbance is present in the figures of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth and the witches and seems to her to be both the cause and consequence of Duncan's assassination, who would be an androgynous and ideal father, i.e., with both masculine and feminine attributes. In her words:

> For Duncan combines in himself the attributes of both father and mother: he is the center of authority, the source of lineage and honor, the giver of name and gift; but he is also the source of all nurturance, planting the children to his throne and making them grow. (Adelman, 1987, p.94)

The aftermath of their murderous act is reflected differently in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. According to Maynard Mack, the discourse of Lady Macbeth during her sleepwalking can be called *umbrella speeches*, since more than one consciousness can take cover under them. He points out that this is a very common characteristic of Shakespearean dramaturgy, because they are discourses that reflect "not simply mental disintegration, but a strong sense of a fragmented moral order." (Maynard, 1986: p.208) Unlike other characters like Iago or the witches themselves, Lady Macbeth suffers with remorse for her actions and is a fine example of a consciousness torn between good and evil forces, even after having opted for the latter. This is best exemplified by a Freudian remark:

> I believe Lady Macbeth's illness, the transformation of her callousness into penitence, could be explained directly as a reaction to her childlessness, by which she is convinced of her impotence against the decrees of nature, and at the same time reminded that it is through her own fault if her crime has been robbed of the better part of its fruits. (Freud, 1997, p.163)

Therefore, her life drive only appears in a negative way, through penitence and remorse for the realization of the damage of their enterprise, as expressed through her broken speech during the sleepwalking scenes:

> A soldier and afeard? − What need we fear who
> knows it, when none can call our power to account? −
> Yet who would have thought the old man to have
> had so much blood in him?
> […]
> The Thane of Fife had a wife; where is she now?
> […]
> I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he cannot
> come out on 's grave. (Macbeth, Act V, Sc.1)

The juxtaposition of incongruous elements is therefore an important aspect of this play, as is rightly mentioned by G.K. Hunter in his *Introduction* to *Macbeth*'s 1974 Penguin edition: "*Macbeth* is a play of stark disjunctions (murder amid feastings, the laughing Porter at the gate of hell, the whitest innocence beside the blackest treachery, femininity coupled with violence) (...)" (Hunter, 1974, p. 41) This substratum, which defies a purely rational explanation, is probably what leads Susan Snyder, in her article "*Macbeth* A Modern Perspective" to conclude that the play offers "provocative questions and moral ambiguities" (Snyder, 2009, p. 207)

3. Language, Ethics and Evil in Shakespearean Tragedies

In order to understand the presence of Evil in language and the discourse of human beings we should first strive to understand some functions of these two terms.

Language is, in one sense and up to a certain point, a means of expressing our thoughts, feelings and desires. It also intermediates our relationship with reality and with other people. In its intermediary relationship between people and reality, it ends up shaping reality (in addition to just defining it) and influencing how we perceive it. Without language, reality would not be the same. However, language can also be a source of misunderstanding.

Throughout his work, Freud argues and tries to demonstrate that language not only serves to manifest thoughts and conscious desires, but also is a means of expressing, even against our vigilant attention, intimate thoughts and repressed desires that, frequently, we try to hide from others. These desires and thoughts come up through jokes, slips and involuntary sayings.

Thus, for psychoanalysis, it is through language and dreams that we have access to people's unconscious. Whereas dreams are perceived and felt only by us, language serves as a means of communication between us and other people, as well as a way to report a dream and express more intimate thoughts that we share with only a few people.

In *Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-analytic Work*, Freud (1997) aims to trace certain human conducts in their path from instinctive desires to neurotic symptoms. Based on the analysis of clinical cases of some patients, he seeks to examine what makes certain people move from the desire (common to all human beings) to be considered and treated as an exception, i.e., someone exceptional with rights and privileges that are not applied to all, to people who actually act so as to put this into practice.

He points to the fact that what makes certain people act this way goes back to real or imaginary injustices that they think or feel they have suffered. From there, he starts to approach the character Gloucester, in *Richard III*. This villain, wronged both by nature and society, sees in his deformation and lack of charm the ideal excuse for an unscrupulous conduct, which does not take others into account and channels in his actions a revenge in relation to the evils he has suffered. Freud quotes a soliloquy from this character that exemplifies well this line of thought:

> And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover,
> To entertain these fair well-spoken days,
> I am determined to prove a villain,
> And hate the idle pleasures of these days. (Richard III, Act I, Sc. 1)

Next, he argues that this character serves as a magnifying glass that amplifies feelings that we all have, but that most people are able to repress in deference to others and with an awareness of not doing evil unduly. The author outlines a theory of neurosis as the frustration of libidinous desires, added to unresolved ideals of personality that are constituted in the instance of the *ego* and which end up repressing these desires.

Before using Lady Macbeth as an example of a person with a torn ego who collapses after reaching her goal, Freud distinguishes between internal and external frustrations by stating that,

> If the object in which the libido can find its satisfaction is withheld *in reality*, this is an external frustration. In itself it is inoperative, not pathogenic, until an internal frustration is joined to it. This latter must proceed from the ego, and must dispute the access by the libido to other objects, which it now seeks to get hold of. Only then does a conflict arise, and the possibility of a neurotic illness, i.e., of a substitutive satisfaction reached circuitously by way of the repressed unconscious. Internal frustration is potentially present, therefore, in every case, only it does not come into operation until external, real frustration has prepared the ground for it. (Freud, 1997, p.158)

The symbolic lack that operates in some Shakespearean tragedies (frustration, unrequited love, lack of beauty and power, impotence and infertility, among others) is cryptically inscribed in many of the main character's lines and calls into question the very possibility of ethics, and what lays in the foundational basis of it, in the face of disgrace.

In order to exemplify this kind of reasoning − and receding a bit from a purely psychoanalytical approach − we will go through some of the main lines of the witches in *Macbeth* in the next chapter, analyzing their symbolic elements while bearing in mind Foucault's definition of discourse and language. It is important to note that the Weird Sisters play the role of symbolic narrators in this play, since they foretell and foreshadow what is about to happen throughout the story.

Discourse, which has a social function and can only exist through language, should not be understood here as something that supports a political ideology defended by a group of people (social class) or social institution (political parties, government, etc). It should be understood rather as the manifestation of unconscious desires that are projected towards an Other and that, at the same time, possess a social ideology.

Foucault, in his formulations about discourse, always kept it associated with power relations and the effects that it can bring about. For example: the dominant discourse of a social class or political party that can determine what is acceptable or not in society. In a passage he states that:

> Discourse battle and not discourse reflection... Discourse − the mere fact of speaking, of employing words, of using the words of others (even if it means returning them), words that the others understand and accept (and, possibly, return from their side) − this fact is in itself a force. Discourse is, with respect to the relation of forces, not merely a surface of inscription, but something that brings about effects. (Foucault, 1994, p.123)

The power of the witches, established through their discourse is, nonetheless, only indicative of potential actions. It neither has the means, nor the claim, of imposing an ideology or way of thinking. Therefore, its power is not expressed through a normative discourse. Their discourse only suggests possibilities of action and points to certain tendencies and aspects of human nature. Moreover, it is the discourse of those

who are on the fringes of society and also have an antisocial and indifferent vision regarding life, as we shall examine more closely further on.

Following this line of a more historical, philosophical and sociological approach to discourse, a passage from Foucault's *The Order of Discourse* gives us more food for thought or, rather, further helps to analyze the witches' discourse and way of living, by posing the following question:

> On the other hand, if the discursive events must not be treated like homogeneous series, but discontinuous one in relation to the other, which status should we give this discontinuous? It does not have to do, of course, either with the succession of instants of time, or the plurality of the various thinking subjects; it has to do with caesuras that break the moment and scatter the subject in a plurality of possible positions and functions. (Foucault, 2006, p.58)

Bearing this in mind, it becomes clear that the witches can be understood as discursive agents and subjects that play at the same time a social and symbolic role. They represent everything that is on the fringes of the society of that time and, therefore, like the tramps and clowns in *Waiting for Godot*, do not feel beholden to anyone and are free to speak their own mind and do what suits them in an open way.

Far from the glamorous life in the castles of the Middle Ages, oblivious to the masculine logic imprinted into the flow of wars (so common then and now) and indifferent in terms of psychological identity to the rise and fall of kings and queens, they stand for everything that is opposed to the monarchy and the rigid hierarchical structure of feudal society. Moreover, an informal definition of a witch is that of an irreverent woman who does not conform to certain types of formal conduct which prevailed mainly in medieval Europe, such as, for example, genuflection and contained sexual activity. Witches in certain parts of Europe were said to take part in promiscuous sexual orgies where they copulated with Satan, who was supposed to have an enormous and deformed sexual member.[1]

Let's go back to the question of language. Foucault states, in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* that:

> Language seems always populated by the other, the absent, the distant, it is tormented by absence. Is it not the place of emergence of something other than itself and, in that role, does not its own existence seem to dissipate? Now, if we want to describe the enunciative level, one must take into account precisely this existence; interrogate language, not in the direction to which it refers, but the dimension that produces it, neglect the power it has to appoint, name, show and make appear, to be the place of meaning or truth and, instead, to hold the moment − soon solidified and involved in the game of the signifier − that determines its unique and limited existence. (Foucault, 2010, p.126)

Having this definition of language in mind, we should ask ourselves what is the other in the witches' language and what is its primary driver. Their language and discourse are permeated by what we recognize as manifestations of Evil expressed by helpless souls.

The witches, understood from a psychoanalytical perspective, are desperate beings seeking someone to transfer their anguish, as well as their mental and

[1] cf. *A Feitiçaria na Idade Moderna*, p. 22-23

psychological confusion to. In this case, they succeed through the power of language, which is their instrument of magic and spell. Furthermore, they can also be seen as mediators of a discourse (the discourse of ambiguity and ambivalence) whose recipient is Macbeth. Therefore, he is also, without knowing it, the product of the discourse of these evil beings, his domineering wife and his unresolved ambition.

We should also understand these discursive manifestations as fragments or isolated points which belong to a certain historical-social configuration and that would probably assume different facets in a distinct historical, social and geographic context. We will dwell on the relevance and signification of the witches' discourse in more detail next.

4. *Macbeth* and the Various Facets of Evil

Macbeth starts at the end of a meeting between three witches:

> FIRST WITCH
> When shall we three meet again?
> In thunder, lightning, or rain?
> SECOND WITCH
> When the hurly-burly's done,
> When the battle is lost and won.
> THIRD WITCH
> That will be ere the set of sun.
> FIRST WITCH
> Where the place?
> SECOND WITCH
> Upon the heath.
> THIRD WITCH
> There to meet with Macbeth.
> FIRST WITCH
> I come, Graymalkin.
> SECOND WITCH
> Paddock calls.
> THIRD WITCH
> Anon.
> ALL
> Fair is foul, and foul is fair,
> Hover through the fog and filthy air. (Macbeth, Act I, Scene I)

This succinct prologue of the play sets the tone of *Macbeth*. It also plays with language conveying different shades of meaning in a subtle way. The passage "Fair is foul and foul is fair", uttered in chorus at the end of their first appearance foreshadows much of what is to come and is worked throughout the play (crisis of values, indifference towards the other, ambiguity, ambivalence and relativism). Likewise, this discourse illustrates the ambiguous and paradoxical way of thinking and facing life of the witches.

The first and second lines of the second witch "When the hurly-burly's done, when the battle is lost and won" leads Stephen Orgel to argue that:

> The unsettling quality of the witches goes beyond gender. Their language is paradoxical − fair is foul and foul is fair; when the battle is lost and won. One way of looking at this is to say that it constitutes no paradox at all: any battle that is lost has also been won, but by somebody else. The person who describes a battle as lost and won is either on both sides or on neither; what is

> fair for one side is bound to be foul for the other. The witches' riddles and prophecies mislead Macbeth, but in an important sense, these double-talking creatures are also telling the truth about the world of the play − that there are really no ethical standards in it, no right and wrong sides. (ORGEL, 2000, p.xxxiii)

The passage "when the battle is lost and won" could also be read as playing with the homophony present in English between the word won /wʌn/ and one /wʌn/ making it possible, in a more thorough and careful reading out loud, to interpret that the fight or battle in fact is one, i.e., an internal battle of the individual with himself (his conflicts and ambivalences, moral dilemmas, etc.). In this case, the individual is Macbeth.

The witches' way of thinking could yet convey, in a sweeping statement, a studied subversion of some values and principles carefully erected and maintained by Western European civilization understood here as a whole. This could be exemplified by the contrast between a way of framing the world by a more paternalistic society, symbolized by the king Duncan, and the view of those who stand at the fringes of society, namely, the witches. This is possibly one of the reasons that makes Stephen Orgel also state that:

> Duncan certainly stands out looking like a good king: the rhetoric of his monarchy is full of claims about its sacredness, the deference that is due to it, how it is part of a natural hierarchy descending from God, how the king is divinely anointed, and so forth. But in fact none of this is borne out by the play. Duncan's rule is utterly chaotic, and maintaining it depends on constant warfare − the battle that opens the play, after all, is not an invasion, but a rebellion. Duncan's rule has never commanded the deference it claims for itself − deference is not natural to it. In upsetting that sense of the deference Macbeth feels he owes to Duncan, perhaps the witches are releasing into the play something the play both overtly denies and implicitly articulates: that there is no basis whatever for the values asserted on Duncan's behalf; that the primary characteristic of his rule, perhaps of any rule in the world of the play, is not order but rebellion. (ORGEL, 2000, p.xxxiii-xxxiv)

Moreover, the location where the witches usually meet is the heath. It could be taken as a place that stands for ambiguity and where moral dilemmas may be dissolved by primal feelings and drives. It is there that values in general are questioned and where dangers and the unknown lurk. As if we were watching a movement downwards from upright behaviors, the pomp of royalty or even the symbolic haughtiness of felines, who usually owe satisfaction to no one, to the more anti-social environment of the precarious and lethal underworld of reptiles, snakes and scorpions, where bonds and relationships risk no longer being retrieved.

Not by chance, the third apparition evoked by the witches during their magic ritual mocks the very concept of royalty by alluding to the king of the animals, the lion, and at the same time displaying it like a card without value, i.e., as a merely void symbol that represents exactly the opposite of what Macbeth stands for and how he should feel:

> THIRD APPARITION
> Be lion-mettled, proud, and take no care
> Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are;
> Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until
> Great Birnan Wood to high Dunsinane Hill
> Shall come against him. (*Macbeth*, Act IV, Sc. 1)

Later on, the witches make their second apparition on the third scene of the first act, talking with each other again and then making their prophecies in the heath to Banquo and Macbeth, both generals and thanes. They address first Macbeth and prophesize:

> FIRST WITCH
> All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!
> SECOND WITCH
> All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!
> THIRD WITCH
> All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter! (*Macbeth*, Act IV, Sc. 1)

As everything suggests, for some real or supernatural reason, the witches know that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor, because the person who held this title betrayed Duncan, the king. The latter says that the former is to be killed and that Macbeth will succeed him as the new Thane of Cawdor. The dramatic irony here is that Macbeth will also prove to be a traitor. As for him to become king, it is just a prophecy that could or not materialize depending on Macbeth and his wife's attitudes. The witches, however, say neither how he will become king nor the price he will have to pay for it. As Susan Snyder puts it: "The Weird Sisters present nouns rather than verbs. They put titles on Macbeth without telling what actions he must carry out to attain those titles. It is Lady Macbeth who supplies the verbs." (SNYDER, 2009, p.199) Also important to consider, as regards Macbeth's feelings about becoming king, is that "[...] surely one way to read his fear is that the word "king" touches a buried nerve of desire." (SNYDER, 2009, p.198).

As for his peer Banquo, they predict that he will beget kings though he be none. Their lines to Banquo play both with masculinity and happiness, as well as heredity:

> FIRST WITCH
> Lesser than Macbeth and greater.
> SECOND WITCH
> Not so happy, yet much happier.
> THIRD WITCH
> Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.
> So all hail, Macbeth and Banquo! (*Macbeth*, Act IV, Sc. 1)

In a few words they seem to say everything. Although they salute both Macbeth and Banquo, the difference lies in the way they salute them: Banquo will not have the pomp of royalty, but he will be a progenitor of kings while Macbeth will ascend to the throne without leaving descendents. The other in their discourse seems to contain the very question of masculinity and its power of procreation. From then on, we witness Macbeth act in an ever more omnipotent fashion (killing and ordering others to kill for the sake of ambition) and, for his own personal grief and dismay, stricken with impotence, unable to form a true family, with descendents, loyal friends and a wife who respects and admires him. Lady Macbeth, on the contrary, dominates and controls him with her thoughts, threats and ambition.

From the moment Macbeth and his wife kill the monarch, who is hosted in Dunsinane Castle which is their home, everything starts to go astray. After the monarch's assassination, Macbeth becomes increasingly dependent on the witches' prophecies, who turn a cold shoulder to him and even reach the point of symbolically transforming him into one of the worst substances, namely, that which is expelled from beneath:

SECOND WITCH
By the pricking of my thumbs,
Something wicked this way comes.
Open, locks,
Whoever knocks.
Enter Macbeth (Macbeth, Act 4, Sc. 1)

Macbeth seeks them in their dark cave, where they practice their ritual. One of the prophecies they make there, that Macbeth shall not fear anyone who is born from a woman, turns out more to the end of the play to be flawed and therefore fatal to him. Macduff, who had all his family assassinated by command of the tyrant king Macbeth, fights against him and ends up killing him. However, before the assassination, he warns him that he was born by cesarean, thus not born from a woman. Macbeth, feeling betrayed, perceives the slyness and trickery of the witches and their half truths which operate through equivocation. He fights until the end and is beheaded by Macduff.

In light of the unfolding of the story, the following remark makes a lot of sense:

> In tragedies where right and wrong are rendered problematic, the dramatic focus is likely to be on the complications of choice. *Macbeth*, on the contrary, is preoccupied less with the protagonist's initial choice of a relatively unambiguous wrong action than with the moral decline that follows. (Snyder, 2009, p.202)

It is important to note that the modern tragedy (and the Shakespearean one) function differently from the classic Greek tragedy. According to Hegel, what differentiates one from the other is that:

> The heroes of ancient classical tragedy encounter situations in which, if they firmly decide in favour of the one ethical pathos, that alone suits their finished character, and they must necessarily come into conflict with the equally justified ethical power [*gleichberechtigt*] that confronts them. Modern characters, on the other hand, stand in a wealth of more accidental circumstances, within which one could act this way or that, so that the conflict is, though occasioned by external preconditions, still essentially grounded in the character. The new individuals, in their passions, obey their own nature...simply because they are what they are. Greek heroes also act in accordance with individuality, but in ancient tragedy such individuality is necessarily... a self-contained ethical pathos... In modern tragedy, however, the character in its peculiarity decides in accordance with subjective desires... such that congruity of character with outward ethical aim no longer constitutes an essential basis of tragic beauty... (Hegel, 1927, p.567-8)

It is interesting to notice that Hegel points in the direction of the modern concept of subjectivity when referring to modern characters and their autonomy to act according to their will instead of any existing or pre-existing system. It would also be interesting to probe how much of this reasoning gives ground for the more postmodern and contemporary concept of the individual as a subject intercepted by language, the unconscious and collective memories.

Drawing from what we have examined, it can be verified that the various facets of Evil in *Macbeth* present themselves in different ways and do not have a single core that would refer, for example, to only one character in the play.

Evil, in *Macbeth*, emerges mainly from badly solved or elaborated personal deprivations and frustrations. They end up serving as a pretext for a malevolent conduct which seeks to compensate these disappointments (the lack of children, impotence

towards the contingencies of life) through subterfuges and personal escapes. Therefore, it arises as a contraposition to an original personal reality which proved unfortunate and is utilized by one or more individuals as an attempt to subvert this configuration.

One learns, above all, that to understand what it means to be human one should take into account the fact that bad acts and thoughts have always existed in humanity, and that this aspect of human nature cannot be forgotten or underestimated. Nor either can it be eradicated or totally mastered. At best, it may be encircled.

It is not by chance that the witches in *Macbeth* never die or cease to exist. Although they vanish for good in Act IV, scene 1 of the play, the reader knows they are still out there, as a principle of Evil. This becomes very clear in Roman Polanski's 1971 film version of *Macbeth*, in which at the end of the movie the Weird Sisters are still practicing their magic ritual in their cottage and can be felt, but not seen, by Duncan's youngest son and his horse. One way of interpreting this scene, is that he wants something from them and, therefore, Evil persists because the fight for power at any cost continues, which is a constant historical vision in Shakespeare. Another way of putting it, is that one should come to terms with Evil's existence and learn to deal with it, recognizing that these feelings also exist in ourselves.

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