

Macbeth and the Third Person

The following is an extract from the Shakespeare Lecture, delivered by **Dr Adrian Poole** of Trinity College, Cambridge, on 21 April 1999 at the British Academy

There are some terrible moments in Macbeth, but none more terrible than this, when one man has to break the news to another that his dear ones have all been murdered:

*Your castle is surprised; your wife and babes
Savagely slaughtered. To relate the manner
Were on the quarry of these murdered deer
To add the death of you.*

The two men are not alone; a third is present and listening, and it is he who completes the line left suspended by the messenger's words: 'To add the death of you.' 'Merciful heaven!' this third person cries. He urges the bereaved man to give sorrow words, to be comforted and to dispute it like a man – with 'us'.

*Let's make us med'cines of our great revenge
To cure this deadly grief*

To which the man whose life of incurable grief is just beginning famously responds:

He has no children.

We cannot tell for certain whom he means by 'he' – whether the man who is trying to comfort him too promptly, or the man who has killed his children. He might have said 'Thou hast no children', or 'You have no children'. It is not the only occasion in *Macbeth* where it is not clear who 'he' is.

Pronouns help us work out who we are, you are, they are, and their singular equivalents. In the theatre, pronouns acquire a radical urgency because they are wrought into the conditions of performance. They remind us at less than fully conscious level that we are all performing these pronouns all the time, whether we like it or not. The three men

in this scene do have names of their own: Ross, who brings the news; Macduff, who receives it; and Malcolm, who listens and intervenes. But in the theatre we do not *hear* these proper names as we hear the pronouns that enact the relations between them: I, you, thou, he. We hear the name of Macbeth many times in the scene, but the names Ross and Malcolm are never uttered nor heard here because the speakers and addressees identify themselves simply and I, Thou or You, and We.

I want now to set up some thoughts about 'the third person'. Let me swiftly sketch a spectrum of beliefs and practices. At a mundane level there is the legal position of the 'third party', that is to say, 'a party or persons besides the two primarily concerned', as in the third-party insurance familiar to car-drivers.

At a more fabulous level, we may think of the triple daughters and sisters of myth and folk-tale, of whom the third represents 'that which shall be', or in Freud's tragic scenario, the Goddess of Death in masquerade as Cordelia, Aphrodite, Cinderella and Psyche. Less paganly, we may think of the Holy Ghost as the Third Person of the Trinity, or of Christ on the road to Emmaus, or of the figure in T.S. Eliot's *What the Thunder Said*: 'Who is the third who walks always beside you?' The figure of the third is always ominous, whether of good or of ill, of black magic or white. 'When shall we three meet again?' Such a sociable question to open a play with, far from the uncouth spirit in which a couple of humdrum murderers will later greet a third accomplice: 'But who did bid thee join us?' It none the less always portentous and pregnant, this

In 1910, Mrs Frida Mond provided for the foundation of the Shakespeare Lecture. In a letter to the Secretary, Sir Israel Gollancz, Mrs Mond asked for an annual lecture to be delivered 'on or about 23 April on some Shakespearean subject, or some problem in English dramatic literature and histrionic art, or some study in literature of the age of Shakespeare. In order to emphasize the world-wide devotion to Shakespeare, any person, of any nationality, shall be eligible to deliver the Shakespeare oration or lecture'.

shadow of the third and the three it makes up, whatever the issue it bodes.

We should also think of the superstitious ideas of third bodily organs. Apart from our fingers and toes, we mainly think of our basic corporeal endowment in terms of one and twos. We normally greet with alarm the idea of two heads or three nostrils.

To have a third nipple was no joke in Shakespeare's time, but a matter of life or death for those suspected of witchcraft. Macbeth makes a nervous joke in response to the Second Apparition, the bloody child who cries: '*Macbeth, Macbeth, Macbeth,*' to which Macbeth replies '*Had I three ears, I'd hear thee.*' But this play holds so many triple happenings and utterances that perhaps one does need a third ear.

Perhaps one could do with the 'third eye' familiar to Hindu and Buddhist belief. We might also pause over the 'third tongue' – the figurative sense, now obsolete, of 'a backbiter, slanderer', a false witness who 'maketh debate between a man and his neighbour'. Or between a husband and a wife, so that one might think of the character of Iago as exactly 'the third tongue' who comes between Othello and Desdemona.

My own emphasis is on the ethical significance of this figure. The third person may stand at the edge of the scene, a bystander and looker-on, like so many attendant lords and servants. I am particularly

interested in the moment when such a figure 'comes forward' and steps into a scene between two (or more) others. Of course, he or she or they may signally fail to do so; or they may be positively turned away and ejected, no longer one of us, to speak and be spoken to, but only to be spoken about.

We need to be alive to the conditions of power and helplessness out of which these figures make their entrance onto the scene. At one end of the spectrum are the figures of supreme authority, worldly and divine, who intervene to settle disputes and dispense judgements, like the Duke at the end of *Measure for Measure*, who has been '*a looker-on here in Vienna*'. At the other is the figure of the child, who 'comes between' the mother and father, as the child unborn and then cast away comes between Hermione and Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*. This figure harbours the power of the future, to redeem and to heal, as Perdita does; in tragedy it comes back with a vengeance, like the bloody child in *Macbeth*, like Orestes and Oedipus.

We do not go to tragedy for fantasies of immunity. *Macbeth* reminds us that there is no safe place for the third person, not even for the reader. We should attend to the predicament of those onlookers, witnesses and bystanders whose choices and fates prefigure our own as we endlessly turn from him and her to thee and you and me and us, playing our parts and taking them, making and unmaking our one common world.