

A sermon arising from *Macbeth*

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[The two readings before this are:

Luke 9: 21-27 (Jesus foretells his own death).

Macbeth Act I, Sc III,

from 'ENTER MACBETH AND BANQUO' to 'WITCHES VANISH']

‘Regrets... I’ve had a few... but then again... too few to mention...’

So sang Frank Sinatra, in what became his signature song, *My Way*.

We might consider whether this is a song that Macbeth might sing.

I want to begin by contrasting Macbeth’s life with the life that appears in Sinatra’s 1969 hit.

It is a song sung to celebrate a tough but ultimately successful life.

It’s a full life. There are regrets, sure, but their significance is small. It’s a planned life – each careful step along the byeway. It’s a life where a man stands tall, takes the blows, and – ultimately – relies on himself. And does it *My Way*.

We must take into account the ‘me, me, me’ culture of the 1960s which made a song like this even remotely plausible as an account of a life. It’s nonsense, of course. But it was the kind of nonsense that people bought and bought into. A life where I am in control. I call the shots. I run the show.

When we listen to it now, it has a curious effect on us. Its cocky bravado sits awkwardly with our awareness that it is contemporary with the contradictions of the Tet offensive in the Vietnam War between January and September 1968, and the manned Apollo moon landing in July 1969. It is a song that articulates the majesty of an individual life, in the midst of an era dominated by astonishingly powerful government spending, in which individuals seem vanishingly insignificant. It is this contradiction, perhaps, that explains in part why this song still holds the record for the longest number of weeks in the UK charts: 124 in all. It entered the charts seven times, between 1969 and 1971. A song that enters the charts seven times in two years is perhaps a song that tells us about an era. It’s a lie. But it’s the kind lie that everyone wanted to hear – over and over again, loud and confident.

I think Macbeth, the man, might have listened to *My Way* in the same compulsive fashion. For his, too, is a life dominated by alien forces, and if they are not the forces of the US government of the 1960s, we should remember that Shakespeare’s time is a time of political upheaval – the courses of which would eventually climax half a century later in the so-called ‘glorious’ revolution of 1688. The forces of nature are in chaos at the start of the play, mirroring the political mayhem of Scotland. And the narrative of the three witches, which shapes – indeed drives – the self-consciousness of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, is a powerful reflection of the increasingly self-conscious way in which English intellectuals reflect on the power of narrative in this period.

We can see immediately why *Macbeth*, the play, might be thought to present a total contrast with *My Way*. Macbeth, the man, increasingly does not perceive himself as an agent, but as an object in a narrative that he has not composed.

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

He says this, instructively, right after he affirms his intent to visit the three witches, again. He seeks knowledge of his fate; and the only ones who can give him this, he thinks, are the three sisters.

Accompanying this, in the passage about blood, he has strange things in his head, and he has compulsively to enact them before thinking about them. The most obvious reading is that Macbeth has some dark acts, and needs to carry them out before other people notice what he's up to. But it can also be interpreted as an insight into his unconscious. He has to act before he himself realises what he's doing. It's as if he knows that thinking, reflecting, might undo the power of the witches' narrative. I am tempted to wonder if one is the consequence of the other. If you think that the future is knowable (even if it is someone else, and not you, that knows it) your actions may tend to become as it were intentionally thoughtless.

Thinking, after all, might get in the way of the inevitable.

If Macbeth might listen compulsively to *My Way*, surely he cannot sing it with any confidence. His life's narrative is sung – or rather chanted, in a fog – by others whose purposes are obscure, but whose authority is absolute.

Let us ponder fate. We have a life which – as described by its principal subject – is dominated by an alien fate: narrated; inscrutably but inexorably. Macbeth does, at one point – at the start of Act IV – ask the witches what they are doing. They answer in unison: 'A deed without a name'. Macbeth lacks not only his own narrative into which the witches and their knowledge might be placed; he lacks – and the audience lacks – even a language to name it. He is robbed of the power of description.

That is by no means all. Macbeth thinks he is coming to ask the witches about his future. His plan – such as it is – is to visit them and discover his fate. So when the witches conjure the first apparition, he takes a deep breath and begins...

'Tell me, thou unknown power,-- '

...but is cut off by the First witch, who tells him that his speech is unnecessary. He is bidden to listen rather than speak. He is robbed, then, not only of description but of the power to question. He is told that he lacks agency, and indeed is strongly encouraged to relinquish speech.

Fate has destructive effects, in *Macbeth*, on agency, speech, language.

But notice a contradiction. He believes his life is narrated for him – by the witches. Yet he is not content to let fate take its course. He wills himself – freely – to become an agent in the alien drama: first by permitting his wife to kill Duncan, then by ordering the murderers to dispatch Banquo. He freely becomes unfree.

It is thus not at all a matter of being ‘in the hands of fate’. Macbeth’s motivations are certainly obscure to us – a fact which has led some scholars to conjecture that there may be a longer, now-lost, original play. Such an original might have provided more detail into Macbeth’s reasonings. Possibly. But then again, so many of our decisions to hand over our lives to others – to sub-contract our responsibilities, as it were – are quite as obscure as Macbeth’s. Nonetheless: he is the one who hands over his life.

It might appear, then, that we have a stark contrast between Sinatra’s *My Way* and Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. That would be a contrast between a life I control, and a life given over to fate; a bold and grizzled retirement versus a life destroyed by external forces.

We do not, I think; Sinatra’s ‘signature song’ account of his life is not just fiction; it’s self-deceiving nonsense. And Macbeth’s affirmation that the witches ‘know’ his future is also nonsense, although of a darker hue, whose consequences are suffering and insomnia. It is the tragic abdication of responsibility for a life.

Macbeth does not sub-contract his agency. He retains it fully, although it appears to him in an alien form; he considers that it has a life of its own. He sub-contracts his responsibility. It is unsurprising that he should give his famous ‘tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow’ soliloquy. He allows the narrative of the witches to smother all other narratives, including his own – to the point where he disregards military reports or any kind of description that fails to tally with his dogmatic conception of reality.

Instead of a contrast between Sinatra and Macbeth, we can discern a kind of complicity – exaggerated self-control and exaggerated abdication of responsibility side by side. They are, alike, reckless. There is a kind of swagger common to both: one absurdly implausible, the other bloodily tragic...

Consider the passage from Luke’s Gospel.

We can notice two striking features of this passage. First, Jesus announces his own future. He is not engaged in some other project and ‘comes across’ his future as an interruption to that project, as Macbeth does at the opening of the play. The future is not announced to Jesus by an alien force. But it is hardly his own invention. Jesus is not the author of his future. He does not as it were decide on a course of action whose outcome is intended to be suffering, rejection, death and resurrection. Second, it draws others – his follows – into its narrative not by force, as Macbeth progressively drags his castle into his doom, but through the awakening of desire.

‘If any want to become my followers’

Jesus’ followers will suffer, but not in the same way as the unfortunate inhabitants of Macbeth’s court. Jesus’ followers will suffer because they choose to take up their cross.

And here we see a kind of double inversion of the relation between knowledge and the future. Jesus' followers *know* what they are getting into by following their master – suffering and salvation – in a way that Macbeth does not. But at the same time, the kind of knowledge they have is astonishingly vague. Macbeth has a precise – although misleadingly two-faced – account of the future announced to him. Jesus' account of the followers' future offers surprisingly little information; only this:

Those who want to save their life will lose it; and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.

Followers of Jesus know less, and yet more.

There can be no swaggering here, of any kind at all.

The contrast with *Macbeth* and *My Way* goes deeper. Both of the latter – whether one claims total control over one's life, or total abdication of one's responsibility – require a peculiar understanding of the relation of cause and effect. A life, if it really is a life and not just a lonely nightmare, involves relations with other people, other agents; they have projects of their own which may or may not mesh elegantly with our own. To claim control of one's life, or to give it over to completely to another, requires that other people are merely *factors* to be taken account of, or *objects* to be manipulated. If one is to control one's own life, one needs to control everyone else's life too, because they are players in one's field of agency.

This is also true even more strongly of Macbeth, who has an astonishingly narrow conception of causation. It is not only others who are objects to be manipulated; he comes to see himself as such an object: persons are *only* objects, in the end, however much they strut and fret. Macbeth's life is merely an *effect* of an alien causation; Lady Macbeth's death is merely an effect. Macbeth's own death is merely an effect – and Shakespeare nicely performs this by having it happen off-stage. We know of it when we see Macbeth's head: an exemplary case of an effect pointing to a cause.

It is quite otherwise in Luke. The summary of the Gospel and the hard invitation to follow Jesus in his suffering and death is not a matter of cause and effect, nor of absolute freedom and self-determination. It's something else – something wonderful, but increasingly unfamiliar to ears that are over-attuned to lives that shuttle to and fro between *Macbeth* and *My Way*, between refusal to take responsibility, and implausible claims to be the sole authors of our fates.

We are offered no control of the future, but neither are we to sub-contract our responsibility. We called to be neither Sinatra nor Macbeth.

So what is this wonderful alternative to cause and effect (*Macbeth*), or absolute freedom and self-determination (*My Way*)? What is the alternative to knowing the future (*Macbeth*) or thinking we author it (*My Way*)? In Luke, *we are shown the way*.

This is an utterly different account of agency and responsibility. Our own actions are imitations – whose shape is initiated by another – but imitations whose details are genuinely owned by us, freely and wholly. What's missing from *My Way* and *Macbeth* is any notion of what it might mean to imitate. Our own actions may, through God's grace, be forms of

obedience. This idea too is missing in the play. Macbeth does not obey the witches; they do not command him. They equivocate; and he jumps to conclusions.

[What is imitation? This question is interesting for us because imitation has a very low value in our culture. Imitation is associated with a lack of imagination, or a lack of originality, or – worse – with plagiarism. It used to be a commonplace that imitation is the sincerest form of flattery. I suspect that many people today think that imitation is the lowest form of agency.

Surely not. Imitation is a matter of initiative and response; of giving and receiving; of showing and responding. It is how children learn language; it is how composers learn to write music. It is, in a nutshell, about learning. But not only that. It is a model of agency that differs very significantly from what we are offered in *Macbeth*. If I imitate you, where does your agency end, and where does mine begin? After all, my actions are genuinely mine, and responsibility for imitating you, rather than someone else, lies with me. And yet my actions are responsive to you, shaped by you. It is a kind of shared action.

This can be quite alarming. After all, if I choose to imitate you, then you become responsible for my actions, in a way, even though you did not choose them. If that sounds altogether unpalatable, then consider what is going on when a wise person makes allowances for the fact that a child has received poor parenting.

It also makes sense of some seemingly odd Christian teaching. It is often objected strongly against Christians that we think that when people do good deeds, we give God the glory, but that when people behave wickedly, we hold them responsible. This seems unfair if not idiotic. But suppose our agency to be imitative. Then good imitation is indeed something that shows God's glory, and poor imitation hides it, and displays, rather, the incompetence of the imitator. Try another analogy. The choir that sings well, wins accolades for the composer. The poor choir heaps opprobrium only on itself.]

Imitation and obedience are not missing merely from *Macbeth* and *My Way*, of course, and that is why they are significant for us. They are often missing from our culture, our ethical life, our institutions, even our universities. But not wholly. They still live, even if they are unpopular, not least in this chapel. The world of Luke's Gospel is the world of imitation, where freedom and causation have their place, but do not call the tune. It is a world of obedience: in Luke's vision it is hard to tell where Jesus' agency ends and ours begins... and that is surely as it should be.

This is a world quite different from that of fate, of *My Way*, of *Macbeth*. In the shorthand of theology, it is the world of the Spirit, and of our future – known and yet unknown – in the body of Christ.