

*Below, author John Passfield explores some of the ramifications of his novel-writing project. In the first section are passages from the novel; in the second, passages from Passfield's planning notebook showing the evolution of his thinking about the structure and content of the novel; and in the third, passages from Passfield's Journal show his reflections on the meaning of the novel.*

*Lord and Lady Macbeth: Full of Scorpions is My Mind: The Novel*

Lady Macbeth:

1

That walk in the meadow was the day of all my days. The flowers were blooming on the hillside and the sun was bright. I could barely believe how much we said with very few words.

We both had royal blood in our veins. I was an undervalued princess. My lowly status was an accident of birth.

And you were not the first man of the second row. You were Macbeth – with all that entailed. An obligation to take the fort at the top of the hill.

2

When I was a child, I lost a trinket. It was a little tiny ring. A tinker gave it to my mother and she gave it to me.

“This is a faery’s ring,” he said. “Keep it as close to you as your heart. It will always keep you safe, secure and warm.”

People bury treasure and forget where they placed it. Squirrels bury nuts and starve to death. I have buried you and you have buried me.

3

I don’t know when I am in touch with my deepest thoughts. When I am awake – do you think – or when I am asleep? I don’t know whether it is waking or sleeping that I fear the most.

Do you know the boy who fetches the firewood? He brought the hatchet into the hall the other day. I sat with my back to him – waiting for it all to end.

I often walk upon the battlements. I lean over the parapet. I watch the activity in the courtyard down below.

4

We were riding through a muddy market town. I have never been good at remembering names. The town was small, and the market was not robust.

A crowd had gathered – as is always the case in these towns – to watch the royal progress. I could feel the drizzle run down the back of my neck. I was holding, with one hand, the reins of my horse, and with the other hand, I was trying to right the balance of my crown.

And there was a lady in the crowd. She was standing amidst her brood. Rain and drizzle not withstanding – she was a queen.

And I had a notion – just for a moment – that I should stop the royal train, and climb down into the mud, and put my crown upon this lady, and sweep my robe around her shoulders, and bid the footmen help her to mount my horse, and let this lady take my place as Scotland’s Queen.

And what of me? What would I do? Would I take this lady’s place among her brood?

But I knew. I knew in the midst of this fantasy – queen or not. That there could never be another place for me.

Macbeth:

1

No, I don't despise you, love. You have done nothing to me that I haven't done to myself. Every creature we meet adds venom or milk to our veins.

You have been a seminal midwife. Taught me to walk – taught me to crawl – taught me to breathe. You encouraged me to thicken my carapace.

You are the one who believed my dreams. How could you know that my dreams were hollow? As hollow as the tree that falls on the house.

2

I descended into a deep, dark pit. Venomous toads at the bottom of a well. Better for you, I said, that I make this journey alone.

I was living at the edge of a desolate landscape. Fishing a little at the banks of Acheron. Saving pennies for the fare to the other side.

Bloody puddles in the driving rain in the courtyards. Blood-stained rushes where the dogs sniff crumbs in the dining halls. Blood-stained hands when I reached for the bread and the wine.

3

I've taken to sleeping on the floor at the foot of my throne. A sword and a dagger in my hands. I trust no guards because guards will sleep and snore.

I have no friends and wish to have none. I prefer my enemies ranged around me in the dark. I can see their eyes and their claws in the campfire's glow.

I have lowered the action to a level that has left them paralyzed. Don't challenge Macbeth unless you are a Macbeth. Blood for blood, tooth for tooth, nail for nail.

4

There was a man stretched out on the rack. He had been captured and beaten and starved. And he had been laid out on the rack and his limbs had been stretched.

He had been like this for days. Perhaps a week. Every day they tightened the rack a little more.

His face was swollen and one eye was closed. Many of his bones had been snapped. The trick is that you never break the skin.

And the torturers were asking him questions. What was his knowledge about Macduff? And at every denial they would give him a jolt of pain.

And I stood behind the shoulder of the master-torturer. And this man with one eye looked straight through to the back of my skull. And I knew that he had told everything he had known.

"I'm sure there's more he can tell," I said. "I'm sure he's about to crack." I clapped the torturer on the shoulder and left the cell.

*The Notebook: Planning Full of Scorpions is My Mind*

1

There is a battle of imagery going on in the preconscious minds of the major Shakespearean characters. The fascinating thing is that we, the viewers-readers, cannot know the thoughts of the main characters except by our own speculations – our own interpretations.

2

A few weeks ago, I watched a *Macbeth* with Ian McKellen and Judi Dench. It was made for TV in the 1970s and it was filmed in closeup. The last few days I watched *Persona*, by

Ingmar Bergman, & it is mostly in close-ups & involves a very close / very apart (shared and not-shared agendas) relationship between two people. [Later] As I watched *Macbeth* [again], a sense that I would like to write a two-character relationship novel occurred to me. It occurred to me that I could write a Macbeth-Lady Macbeth novel of shared & not-shared agendas – using all the techniques & concerns of my earlier novels.

3

This is how a Shakespearean play differs from a prose novel. In the prose novel, the objective correlative (image-pattern) from both author & main character (& narrator) is given on the surface of the text. This is why some novels, like *Heart of Darkness*, are so irritating to some readers. It is a poetic novel & the mental journey of the main character must be interpreted by the reader & (in imagination) must be undergone by the reader.

4

Critics have said that we deplore Macbeth's actions but we admire him for the power of his imagination. That he can see the value of "troops of friends", but forgo them for his career ... is the key to the character of Macbeth, and, in a milder way, to Ingmar Bergman, and to all ambitious people. It has echoes of ... Leni Riefenstahl. The cluster of imagery from ... *Macbeth*, Bergman's *Persona* and ... Bergman's autobiography is fascinating.

5

The attempt of the Macbeths to live in prose while thinking in poetry makes the story of the Macbeths a fascinating image-quarry by which to explore the phenomenon of what it is to be human. This novel is a creative response to a reading of the play, *Macbeth*.

*The Journal – The Making of Full of Scorpions is My Mind*

1

Lord and Lady Macbeth are being stung, not by scorpions, but by imagery, the medium by which human beings think at the deepest levels. And the kingdom which they seek to conquer and to control is not just Scotland, but the kingdom of the mind. Imagery enlightens, but it also obscures; imagery is loyal, but it also betrays; imagery is visible on the surface, but manifests itself at hidden depths. Their mutual struggle – to live in prose while thinking in imagery – affects the two Macbeths in different ways.

2

A literary work of art becomes not only an artistic artifact, with its own almost-sacred text, word for word; it also becomes an image-quarry from which other artists are free to pick and choose imagery for their own creations. There are some commentators – guardians of literary shrines – who do not realize the difference between the two concepts of the role of a work of art in a society.

3

Although I feel that I have done justice to my conception of the workings of the mind of Macbeth, I have actually found the workings of the mind of Lady Macbeth to be the more intriguing of the two, and have a feeling that the imagery by which she expresses her thoughts is more complex than the imagery by which he expresses his thoughts.

4

All artists work in the genres which are most congenial to their life-views, but ... the best artists test the limits of their genres, working at the frontier where that genre offers the most service without shattering into fragments. The best writers not only write at the frontier of their chosen genre, but expand that frontier by redesigning the genre technically to suit their artistic needs and purposes.

5

The purpose of writing a novel ... is to create a myth which is complex-enough to appeal to sensitive readers over the head, as it were, of the myth-makers who are depicted as characters in the novel, assuming that no myth-making character in the novel is a spokesperson for the myth-making author. To me, this last point is the dividing line between sub-literature and literature, between the prose novel and the poetic novel.