



MACBETH

2017

notes taken from UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA PROFESSOR, PAUL CANTOR and other sources

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CONTOUR OF THE NARRATIVE

Macbeth is a play about a good man who betrays himself

MACBETH'S JOURNEY

The play's efficient structure means that we stay with Macbeth from the moment he meets the witches to the moment of his grisly death at the end

- Despite the fact that he performs numerous wicked deeds, Shakespeare has designed him in such a way that we never lose fascination for him
 - This is particularly evident in the way Shakespeare portrays him as a possible victim of a variety of external and internal forces, therefore asking us to have some sympathy for him
 - At the beginning he is presented as someone who is tempted to commit acts of evil, but because he knows they are evil, it portrays him as a man of moral scruples
 - Although eventually, those moral scruples are overcome
 - During the course of the play, Shakespeare takes us deep into the mind of a man who is aware of evil
 - To some extent, we may see him as a man who is dragged into committing evil and eventually does so against his own better nature
 - Admiration for him can be derived from the sense that he is a morally-aware character
 - He shares, with the audience, at every stage, his awareness of the consequences of his actions

MACBETH'S LANGUAGE

Shakespeare designed Macbeth's language to be alive, theatrical and engaging

- It is meant to help the audience measure the complex variety of emotions Macbeth experiences in his journey of the narrative
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MACBETH AND FEMALE FIGURES OF POWER

Macbeth is associated with the following female figures of power:

- The Three Witches
- Bellona (Roman Goddess of war): 'Bellona's Bridegroom'(1.2.55)
- Lady Macbeth
 - But the favour he seems to find in them is equivocal and leads to his doom
 - Perhaps this is another way of ingratiating himself with James I who was known to have a misogynistic outlook and believed women were much more easily aligned with the devil



SELF-AWARENESS: MACBETH vs LADY MACBETH

MACBETH

Take thy face hence.

Servant exits.

Seyton!—I am sick at heart

When I behold—Seyton, I say!—This push
I have lived long enough. My way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have, but in their stead
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath
Which the poor heart would fain deny and dare
not.—

Seyton!

- While Lady Macbeth dies in a state of madness, Macbeth maintains a strong sense of self and life
 - However, the fact that he calls for Seyton three times here may illustrate an increasing state of isolation which he and his wife have in common
 - She becomes isolated before her death and, apparently, so does he
 - The point that Shakespeare may be making here is that unchecked ambition will lead to loneliness before a disgraceful death

MACBETH THE PAGAN vs CHRISTIANITY

'Blood hath been shed ere now, i' th' olden time,
Ere humane statute purged the gentle weal;
Ay, and since too, murders have been performed
Too terrible for the ear. The time has been
That, when the brains were out, the man would die,
And there an end. But now they rise again
With twenty mortal murders on their crowns
And push us from our stools.
This is more strange Than such a murder is.'

MACBETH AS A PROBLEMATIC HERO

Shakespeare has constructed Macbeth as a very problematic hero

- We would prefer to call him a villain or tyrant
 - Like [Richard III](#), one of Shakespeare's earlier plays
 - Shakespeare created other problematic heroes such as:
 - [Othello](#)



- King Lear
- Hamlet
- Coriolanus
- Anthony
- Julius Caesar
 - But Macbeth is arguably Shakespeare's most extreme case of a tragic hero because he slips into villainy and we want to see him as simply evil
 - In the beginning Shakespeare presents him as an admirable warrior, even though the audience may find it difficult to have admiration for someone who is essentially a killer
 - But this is part of the moral complexity of the society he lives in, that Shakespeare weaves into the narrative

MACBETH AS A HOMERIC HERO

At the beginning, the captain says he is 'brave Macbeth – well he deserves that name' (1.2.16)

- In the Holinshed Chronicles, Shakespeare found a lot of admiration for Macbeth: in the play, we are introduced to him namely in battle and he is presented as a Homeric hero, also known as a pagan hero
 - This view sets up a pagan vs Christian interpretation
 - Homeric heroes, in ancient Greek myth were characterized by their presentation in Homer's Iliad
 - They were humans, male or female
 - Endowed with superhuman abilities
 - 'Disdaining fortune, with his brandished steel' (1.2.17)
 - descended from immortal gods
 - Macbeth is not described as being descended from an immortal god but he is called 'that Bellona's bridegroom' (1.2.54)
 - Bellona was the Roman goddess of war
 - A bloodthirsty warrior who loved to rampage on the battlefield
 - This allusion is also interesting in how it defines Macbeth against a female figure, just as Lady Macbeth will lead him until act 3
 - It appears to be part of Shakespeare's exploration of gender roles within the play
- Valour is the chiefest virtue in a Homeric hero
 - 'like valor's minion carved out his passage' (1.2.19)
- Homer compares ordinary people to tame animals and heroes to wild animals
 - 'Duncan: Dismayed not this our captains, Macbeth and / Banquo?
Captain: Yes, as sparrows eagles, or the hare the lion' (1.2.34 - 36)
 - In 4.3.223, Macduff echoes the Captain's description of Macbeth as an 'eagle', with 'hell-kite'



- We see here the only difference between the two descriptions is one abstract noun, 'hell'
 - Again it drives us towards the issue of moral ambiguity
 - In fact, a 'kite' is much smaller than an 'eagle' but the addition of the abstract noun 'hell' gives us the impression that Macduff sees Macbeth as evil
- Symbolically, the lion also appears on the Scottish King's coat of arms and so here, Shakespeare associates the lion as a Scottish symbol of royalty with heroic imagery of bravery
 - However, there is also further ambiguity in that Macbeth turns out to be a traitor to the king and so this may be a subtle hint that Shakespeare is criticizing James
- Additionally, by presenting Macbeth as an eagle, or a lion, both animals being predators at the top of their respective food chains, it perhaps foreshadows the idea that animalistic predators prey on the weak and vulnerable by instinct and although that instinct is praised at the beginning of the play, it causes him to become the hunted because at points in the play, he preys on the weak and vulnerable
 - It also brings us to the point about Shakespeare's love for words and the power they hold to present something one way and then another with only a change in context
- The Homeric hero is praised for acts of barbarity that are seen as heroic
 - Macbeth is praised because he 'unseamed' 'the merciless Macdonwald' 'from the navel to the chops, / And fixed his head upon our battlements'

MACBETH AND MORAL AMBIGUITIES

- 'Brave Macbeth' is described by the sergeant as having 'unseamed' 'the merciless Macdonwald' 'from the navel to the chops, / And fixed his head upon our battlements'
 - Duncan says 'O valiant cousin! Worthy gentleman!' (1.2.24)
 - Gentleman meant nobleman in the Elizabethan era but there is some sense of the modern meaning in it as well
 - The praise Macbeth receives for such gruesome acts can be seen as hyperbolic and strange, particularly for a modern audience
 - The captain also says 'Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds / Or memorise another Golgotha,' (1.2.39-40)
 - This can be seen as Christian allusion but can also be seen as an anti-Christian allusion because they were creating another Golgotha



- Golgotha was where Christians believe Jesus was crucified by the Romans so by creating another Golgotha, they are creating another instance or scene of extreme treachery
 - Macbeth is praised as a hero for murdering people and this places a question mark over the morals of the type of society Macbeth lives in, in the play
 - More specifically, it places a question mark over the barbarism of the Scots, a dangerous game for Shakespeare to play considering that James I had just inherited the English throne from Elizabeth I and had taken over the patronage of Shakespeare's theatre company
 - However, in contrast, in the final scene, Macbeth calls him a 'dead butcher' (5.8.70) and in the second scene, ironically, he is a live butcher, praised for cutting Macdonwald in half.
 - The reader is presented with a morally ambiguous situation when considering that he was praised for butchering Macdonwald but was hunted down for murdering Duncan – Shakespeare may be asking the audience to consider what, if any, difference is there between the two acts
 - This is also reminiscent of the witches' line 'fair is foul and foul is fair' because it makes us consider which action was morally right and which action was morally wrong.
 - Furthermore, the witches equivocal words place us in a world of antithetical values

SYMPATHY FOR MACBETH: A VICTIM OF A REALM OF ANTITHETICAL VALUES

The qualities for which Macbeth is praised in the battlefield turn him into a 'butcher' when the same predatory powers manifest themselves in a domestic scenario.

- Shakespeare appears to have created a world of clashing values in *Macbeth*
 - This world of antithetical values is captured poignantly in 4.2.68 – 74 by Lady Macduff, who says:
 - 'Whither should I fly?
I have done no harm. But I remember now
I am in this earthly world, where to do harm
Is often laudable, to do good sometime
Accounted dangerous folly. Why then, alas,
Do I put up that womanly defense,
To say I have done no harm?'
 - This is similar to the scenario in *Merchant of Venice* where Shylock and Bassanio are trying to negotiate a loan agreement and the audience finds out that they are dealing with two different meanings of the word 'good'



- Bassanio talks about his guarantor, Antonio as being morally good
- Shylock uses it to determine whether Antonio is financially sound, enough to be Bassanio's guarantor
 - The same situation has arisen here: we have two different meanings of the word 'good'
 - We see in scene two that 'to do harm / Is often laudable' where Macbeth is lauded for cutting Macdonwald in half

SYMPATHY FOR MACBETH: A VICTIM OF MISINTERPRETATION AND EQUIVOCAL LANGUAGE

We may see his downfall as being caused by misinterpretation of the witches' prophecies

- This may be intentional or unconscious
- He may have superimposed his own definition of their prophecies as a result of his own ambitions
 - Shakespeare may be exploring how ambition forces us to manipulate the words of other people in order to suit our own endeavours – the result being destructive
- Alternatively, Macbeth's misinterpretation of the witches' language may be because its form and content are intertwined 'in a double sense' (5.8.20)
- This forces him to paraphrase their words rather than analyse them
 - They 'palter' with their language
 - Palter means to trick with words, to equivocate
 - Paltering is intrinsic to Shakespeare's own language and construction of the play because doubleness and ambiguity function to structure the play and its exploration of ambition and agency
 - The play can also be seen as an exploration of the power of words
 - In this way, Macbeth is engaged in the same involvement with language as we, the audience and readers are.
 - the point here may be that Shakespeare's language cannot simply be paraphrased because doing this loses its meaning
 - this is reinforced with the quote:
 - 'Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be, until / Great Birnham wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him' (4.1.92 - 4)
 - this does not mean Macbeth will never be beaten

MACBETH vs KING DUNCAN

Duncan's first line is 'What bloody man is that?' (1.2.1)

- This line is quite telling because what it shows is that he is not a battle king or any kind of field commander
 - In a world where masculinity is defined by extreme barbarism, Duncan's reaction to the sight of the wounded captain portrays a sense of shock at the 'bloody man' and therefore does not fit the definition of a man in his world
 - He needs 'reports' to know what is happening in battle
 - He even has to be told by Malcolm that 'This is the sergeant / Who like a good and hardy soldier fought / 'Gainst my captivity' (1.2.3)



- We have the impression that Duncan does not even know his own soldiers and therefore seems detached from the battle and even its very nature, particularly one that is going on to protect him and his kingdom
 - This is in stark contrast to the context of Shakespeare's other rulers, who are portrayed as leaders who command their troops on the battlefield
 - Coriolanus
 - Brutus
 - Cassius
 - Marc Anthony
 - Octavius was criticized because he won more in his lieutenants than in his person
 - It could also be said that there has been a long-standing human principle that the great king always leads his troops into battle
 - Henry V
 - Alexander The Great
 - Julius Caesar
 - The great rulers were men who risked their lives in battle and did not stand around waiting for 'reports' from shockingly bloodied men
 - The point that Shakespeare may be making is that a successful leader will need to possess the qualities of bravery in order to be a successful king
 - Being detached from the battlefield also seems to portray Duncan as naive
 - He is far too trusting of his heroic Thanes, whom he does not appear to consider may be competing against each other to be next in line to the throne and who may harbor grander ambitions than simply being a Thane
 - He says 'There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face.' (1.4.12-13)
 - Antithesis points out the lack of fit between face and heart
 - This is often remarked upon by Shakespeare throughout a variety of his plays
 - For example in Hamlet, thinking of his uncle:
 - 'One may smile and smile and be a villain' (Ham 1.5.108)

INTERPRETATION – AO1

It should be bared in mind that the witches always speak the truth; whereas Macbeth takes the spirit's prophecy to mean that no man born of a woman can harm him, when actually, the spirits mean it is the method of birth which is the signal for his end.

The introduction of the noun "woman" is actually a red-herring; it is designed to lead Macbeth astray; if the apparitions had simply said "nobody born a natural birth", the meaning of the prophecy would have been much clearer, that an unnatural birth is actually a caesarian.



Simply by referring to the word “woman”, they have successfully introduced an element of doubt into Macbeth’s mind

LANGUAGE; SEMATIC FIELD – AO1

“Great Birnham Wood to high” – “Great” echoes the description of a king and “high” mirrors the idea of high status that Macbeth thinks he has; this plays on Macbeth’s ambition; the language to describe the “wood” is also the language used to describe the king and this “Great ... wood” and “high .. hill” is where Macbeth has his castle and so he associates this vocabulary with himself. Perhaps we could see it as a symbol of his greatness and his nobility but the witches mean it ironically.

Additionally, the spirits say the “Wood .. come against him” rather than “march against him” and so this may lead him to miss the fact

MACBETH’S TRAGIC FLAW: HAMARTIA – AO2

Macbeth’s heroics in battle have own him his place in society but his bravery in battle appears to evolve into his hamartia

His hamartia is his tragic flaw which makes him kill Duncan later in the play; he cannot blame the witches for it

KEY VOCABULARY
