

SHAKESPEARIENCE
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"I Dare Do All That May Become A Man":
Passion, Politics, and Gender in Macbeth

by

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How does Duncan's "peerless kinsman" (1.4.58), the "worthy" Macbeth become transformed into or finally revealed as the "hellhound" (5.8.4) usurper whose head is displayed by the victorious Macduff to Malcolm, the new king of Scotland who closes the play by referring to Macbeth as "this dead butcher and his fiendlike queen" (5.8.70)? Are we to accept Macbeth's own terse explanation for his motives: "I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition" (1.7.25-27)? Seen from this perspective, as Kenneth Muir explains, Macbeth "has merely an inordinate ambition that makes murder itself seem to be a lesser evil than failure to achieve the crown" (quoted by Foakes 9). But as R. A. Foakes observes, focusing on Macbeth's ambition seems to subordinate the play's moral action, which Willard Farnham summarizes thus:

Its hero is worked upon by forces of evil, yields to temptation in spite of all that his conscience can do to stop him, goes deeper into evil-doing as he is further tempted, sees the approach of retribution, falls into despair, and is brought by retribution to his death.

Yet, as Foakes notes, such a view of Macbeth's downfall does not account for those who, like Wilson Knight, feel that Macbeth wins "through by excessive crime to an harmonious and honest relation with his surroundings. . . . He now knows himself to be a tyrant confessed, and wins back . . . integrity of soul" (Foakes 10). Evidently, a number of problems and questions remain. If we accept that Macbeth is ambitious, why does he seek the crown and why is he willing to kill Duncan, who is his kinsman and his king, to achieve his desire? If he is tempted, what do we mean and assume (or what does the play presume) by aligning his tempters with forces of evil and the unnatural? Does Macbeth "win" through to a heroic understanding of his actions and passions? Finally, how might we analyze the implications of the latter part of Malcolm's reference not only to Macbeth but to his "fiendlike queen?" As you consider the play in the classroom, in performance, and through the Shakespearience program, you might refer to the ways this brief essay (and the accompanying study questions) prompt you to reflect upon the larger cultural and historical contexts of Shakespeare's drama and our responses to it; such reflection upon the play's passions, its politics, and its gender relations may enable you to evaluate not only the importance of these issues to Shakespeare's contemporaries, but also to you and your peers. What does it mean today to "dare do

all that may become a man," or a woman?

At the play's end, Malcolm's portrayal of Macbeth as a "butcher" offers a pointed reminder of Macbeth's brutal participation in the killing of Duncan, Banquo, and Macduff's wife and children, not to mention young Siward. Hence Macbeth's end apparently contrasts with the play's beginning, where he is portrayed as "brave Macbeth"; but his butchery of Macdonwald seems nearly as brutal as the way he ruthlessly dispatches his later victims: "he unseamed him from the navel to the chops, / And fixed his head upon our battlements" (1.2.22-23). In Macdonwald's defeat and his beheading, we see a prophetic image of Macbeth's future, an intimation of things to come that depends upon our identifying Macbeth with Macdonwald at some level--at the level of one who is a "brave" butcher, a rebel-butcher, or one who is a rebel butchered? The witches seem to predict as much, but their foreknowledge does little to explain who Macbeth is or why he acts upon such knowledge. Upon receiving his new title Macbeth also becomes identified with the rebellious Thane of Cawdor, but Cawdor repents in the face of death whereas Macbeth vows: "I will not yield," declaring to Macduff that he will "try the last" (5.8.28,32). In a world represented by reciprocal acts of violence and betrayal as well as by Duncan's faith in Cawdor as a "gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust" (1.4.13-14), how are we to understand Macbeth? If we link his subsequent usurpation of Duncan to the desires and identities of the rebels he defeats, are we any closer to explaining why Macdonwald, Cawdor, and then Macbeth become traitors? Is such "unnatural" behavior simply part of the order of nature, a violent impulse in human nature itself? Or have the witches and Lady Macbeth tempted the "evil" that exists in Macbeth as it exists in all of humanity since the fall of Adam through Eve's seduction by Satan? Or might there be forces, values, and relationships in Macbeth's world (or Shakespeare's?) that help to precipitate such events, that prompt such desires, that shape the way Shakespeare himself defines and presents his characters and their situations to his audience and to us?

R. A. Foakes acknowledges that the witches' presence generates a sense of evil in the play (8), but he suggests that Macbeth has already considered murdering Duncan before meeting the witches, or at least their greetings to Macbeth give "conscious expression" to Macbeth's desires, which exist as "horrible imaginings" in his "thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical" (1.3.139-40). Foakes' argument helps us to ponder the way Macbeth's experience as a soldier habituates him to the horror of the battlefield to the extent that he becomes "untroubled by the 'strange images of death' [1.3.97] he makes and sees all round him" (Foakes 12), and we might push Foakes' recognition of Macbeth's historical situation further to wonder about a political and social system that seems a necessary condition of, and almost a catalyst for, Macbeth's ambition and his "evil" aspirations. Despite his lack of fear later in the play, initially Macbeth is anxious over the prospect of murdering

Duncan, and so troubled by the consequences of his intentions-- "Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return / To plague th' inventor" (1.7.9-10)--that he tells his wife: "We will proceed no further in this business" (1.7.32). Here our attention, and much of the critical response to the play and the question of Macbeth's will and motives, shift to the character who persuades Macbeth to "screw [his] courage to the sticking place" (1.7.61): How do we evaluate Lady Macbeth's character, her role and function in the play?

I have appended to this essay a brief response to the play written by a student in an introductory Shakespeare course at the University of Idaho. In this response, titled "In the Line of Duty," the writer presents a thoughtful assessment of Macbeth as a "valiant soldier," a "powerful tool and weapon to be wielded by whoever was in charge." The writer then identifies Lady Macbeth as the power behind Macbeth's actions:

Lady Macbeth distorted Macbeth's sense of judgment and his loyalty. She forced a transfer of the loyalty Macbeth held for Duncan to herself, thereby gaining control of this great and noble warrior in order to satisfy her own vaulting ambition.

We might pause to question Macbeth's "nobility" in view of his murderous thoughts prior to meeting Lady Macbeth, but I want to focus on the way the writer shifts responsibility to Lady Macbeth, blaming her, as have many, for "her own vaulting ambition." If Lady Macbeth is ambitious, we are still left with questions about the sources and objects of her ambition (the same questions that troubled us about Macbeth); we also need to speculate why Macbeth succumbs to her entreaties and scorn; and we need to return to questions posed previously that prompt us to think about Lady Macbeth's function in the play rather than evaluating and responding to her simply as a character or individual who somehow acts of her own accord, independent of Shakespeare's influence and intentions or the play and its cultural context.

Lady Macbeth's own statements and actions seem to damn her and evoke a strong sense that her character and purpose are evil, witch-like, and unnatural--a perversion of morality and motherhood:

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!
(1.5.40-43)

Come to my woman's breasts
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers
(1.5.47-48)

I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me;
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this.
(1.7.55-60)

Our inclination and capacity to identify and evaluate Lady Macbeth in such terms depend greatly, however, upon cultural assumptions and values we associate with men, women, witches, nature, and motherhood, and these assumptions tended to work even more powerfully upon Shakespeare's original audience. To begin to understand the functions of Shakespeare's characters, we need to learn more about Renaissance culture: its beliefs, values, and codes of behavior. How did early seventeenth-century English society shape perception, roles, and identity?

This is a huge topic, beyond the scope of this essay--let's concentrate on a few observations offered recently by historians and literary scholars interested in reconstructing the social relations of Shakespeare's England. We'll begin with Carolyn Merchant, whose research links images of women with images of nature:

The image of nature that became important in the early modern period was that of a disorderly and chaotic realm to be subdued and controlled. Like the Mother Earth image described in Chapter 1, wild uncontrollable nature was associated with the female. The images of both nature and woman were two-sided. . . . woman was both virgin and witch: the Renaissance courtly lover placed her on a pedestal; the inquisitor burned her at the stake. . . . Disorderly woman, like chaotic nature, needed to be controlled. (127)

. . . women were also seen as closer to nature than men, subordinate in the social hierarchy to the men of their class, and imbued with a far greater sexual passion. The upheavals of the Reformation and the witch trials of the sixteenth century heightened these perceptions. Like wild chaotic nature, women needed to be subdued and kept in their place. (132)

Merchant also points out that the majority of those prosecuted for witchcraft (over 80%) were women, particularly those in the "lowest social orders" (138). Citing James I's as well as other intellectuals' interest in demonology and its manifestations in women who were witches, Peter Stallybrass shows that for Renaissance scholars to suggest that "the monarchy was under demonic attack was to glorify the institution of monarchy" (191-92) and to legitimize rule by men, the "hegemony of patriarchy" (190) within the family and the state. Given such attitudes towards women and their place within the social order, we can begin to see how Lady Macbeth's (as well as Macbeth's) perverse behavior reinforces, even perhaps as it questions, traditional notions of the natures of women and men. Before returning to Lady Macbeth and Macbeth's roles, I want to quote Stallybrass at length, as he comments on the way Lady Macduff serves as a redemptive contrast to Lady Macbeth (and we might add Macduff's contrast to Macbeth to this example, particularly since Macduff is "none of woman born"):

But how can the family be conceptualized if women are literally, faithless? One way is to show that not all

womanhood falls under the curse of witchcraft, and this is surely an important reason for the introduction of Lady Macduff in IV.ii, a scene which has no base in Holinshed [Shakespeare's source for an historical account of Macbeth]. Indeed, it is the destruction of this "ideal" family which leads to Macduff's revenge and the final denouement. But Lady Macduff is introduced late in the play, and we have already been presented with another way out of the dilemma: a family without women--Duncan and his sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, Banquo and his son Fleance (at the end of the play, Siward and his son Young Siward). On the one hand, there are the (virtuous) families of men; on the other hand, there are the antifamilies of women. (197-98)

If order is what is at stake in this play, especially the order of the state as an effect and symptom of the order of the family, specifically the sexual and gender roles and relations of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth, then that order can be understood as both dependent upon and a cultural product of Renaissance ideology, the society's systems of belief.

Now we are in a position to reconsider Lady Macbeth's ambition. Ambition in a Renaissance woman was largely, according to prevailing attitudes, inherently perverse, but Joan Klein argues that in Lady Macbeth's case such ambitious behavior does not simply pervert her contemporary wifely roles of hostess, helpmate, and mother, but in peculiar ways fulfills such expectations: "she conceives of herself almost exclusively as a wife, a helpmate" (243). Unlike Shakespeare's "Goneril, Regan, Cordelia, and Desdemona--all of whom take to the field of battle--Lady Macbeth waits for Macbeth at home, where good-conduct books tell her to stay" (Klein 245). When the moment for killing Duncan arrives, Lady Macbeth finds she cannot harm such a patriarchal figure: "Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't" (2.2.12-13). Once the deed is done, Lady Macbeth finds herself increasingly isolated from her husband and others, without a clearly defined place in society or the home; there is no room for her in the exclusively male world of treason and revenge (Klein 247). Does she even have the love of her husband earlier in the play? She measures Macbeth's love by his willingness to murder Duncan (1.7.40), but it seems less likely that Macbeth responds to her entreaties and scorn out of love than out of concern for the way she questions his manhood (Klein 243-44): "And to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man" (1.7.51-52). But as events unfold, the deed itself seems to unman Macbeth, disrupting the opposition between male and female rather than proving his masculinity, and as Christopher Pye and David Wilbern have shown, the fateful act can be read as an instance of patricide, matricide--Duncan is given maternal, "nurturing," characteristics--rape--Macbeth moves "with Tarquin's ravishing strides" toward the fatal bedchamber--and

thus incest, and taking Lady Macbeth's characterizations of the act into account, infanticide: something, in other words, for the whole family.

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In light of, or rather, in the perplexing darkness of such complex and contradictory ways of seeing what pervades the play's characters, their actions, and what may be our ambivalent responses to all of this, what are we to conclude about Macbeth and its conclusion?

Are we to take any consolation, however bleak, from Macbeth's numbed response to the news of his wife's suicide? He seems to look beyond the present moment, but all he sees or experiences is a collapse of the past, present, and future into a drama emptied of meanings and narrative purpose:

She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word.
Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

(5.5.17-28)

In Macbeth's comments, history, identity, love--all values seem impossible or incomprehensible. And yet Macbeth "will not yield / To kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet / And to be baited with the rabble's curse" (5.8.28-30). Are the wellsprings of his final words and actions clarified or obscured by the play and all that we have considered? What has been Macbeth's function? Have we witnessed or perhaps even participated in something tragic? Can you declare with confidence that the "time is free" (5.8.55)?

Works Cited

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Appendix

In the Line of Duty

MacBeth was a glorious, valiant soldier. From the onset of the work, we are confronted with reports of his courage and bravery. Even in the face of overwhelming odds, MacBeth had proven that his mettle as a warrior was second to none. His performance in battle was so superior, it earned him recognition and generous reward from King Duncan.

To be such an outstanding soldier on the battlefield, MacBeth surely possessed a keen sense of military bearing, discipline, and an ability to carry out orders to meet an objective, even if such objectives required personal sacrifice or abandonment of individual preference. MacBeth had a heightened sense of military protocol. He clearly understood who was in charge, and his duties as a soldier to that person: "The service and loyalty I owe, in doing it, pays itself. Your Highness' part is to receive our duties; and our duties are to your throne and state..."

MacBeth possessed all the qualities of a good soldier, but as such was slated to always be a valiant soldier. For, most exceptional soldiers like MacBeth, Hotspur, Henry IV, Eisenhower, Patton, etc., do not make exceptional politicians, kings, or leaders off the battlefield.

MacBeth was a very powerful tool and weapon to be wielded by whoever was in charge. Lady MacBeth identified this. It was unfortunate that the qualities which initially earned MacBeth honor and recognition were corrupted by his wife, and subsequently earned him scorn, hate, and labeled a traitor.

Although MacBeth entertained fleeting thoughts of "catching the nearest way" to greatness, he would never have forsaken his sense of loyalty and military bearing to attain such a plateau. Lady MacBeth distorted MacBeth's sense of judgment and his loyalty. She forced a transfer of the loyalty MacBeth held for Duncan to herself, thereby gaining control of this great and noble warrior in order to satisfy her own vaulting ambition.

Whereas most readers see MacBeth as an evil murderer, I see him as a tactical soldier, striving to meet his commanding officer's (Lady MacBeth) objectives by conquering, eliminating, and overcoming any and all obstacles and/or challenges to his mission. Lady MacBeth's greed, rapaciousness, and lack of understanding had shut her eyes to the long-range consequences of her sinful ambition. Nonetheless, Macbeth knew that Duncan's murder was just the first battle in what would be a long, bloody, and ultimately fatal war.

MacBeth was not an evil man. He was reluctant to commit murder, but, putting personal preference aside as exceptional soldiers are accustomed to do, he accomplished the crime with a "sad and rational deliberateness". He died like a honorable soldier trying to complete his mission. A mission ordered by Lady MacBeth. He died in the line of duty.