

Macbeth and Divine Order

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Abstract:

Indeed to Macbeth life has become meaningless, he feels that he is a mere player in life, manipulated by darker forces to commit a heinous crime and ultimately face destruction and consequences for it, but the truth is Macbeth faced a series of choices in which he repeatedly chose to sin and err and hence is entrapped in the consequences he has to face by divine justice catching up with him after he has erred on the side of evil.

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The play Macbeth is a demonstration of the palpable struggle one faces as a moral agent between the forces of good and evil and the inexorable justice that one faces upon transgressing divine order and facing divine justice as Macbeth is led from one murder to another and ultimately faces revenge as a consequence of his rotten act of murder. A post-structuralist reading would highlight the aporia Macbeth faces, Macbeth would be deemed neither good nor evil but somewhere between as he is situated in moral aporia and indecision. However I would argue against such a reading as Macbeth is clearly a moral agent faced with a choice and along the way he has the choice of not choosing evil and murder though he repeatedly succumbs to temptation. Rather than be cautioned by Banquo against the Weird sisters as demonic forces out to entrap him, Macbeth is seduced by their vision of him as Thane of Cawdor and thus swept by their dark prophecy into a series of dark deeds, beginning with the murder of Duncan and followed by the murder of Banquo.

However divine justice is swift for Macbeth as he is soon haunted by Banquo's ghost at one of his royal banquets. Macbeth is soon undone by his conscience, as while he had been propelled by ambition to carry out the deeds of darkness as well as Lady Macbeth's flattery and seductive persuasion to carry out the murders he soon faces the hauntings of his conscience and cannot enjoy the royal throne he has gained through corrupt means by murder. Lady Macbeth also experiences a gradual descent into madness and suicide as she repeatedly tries to rid herself of the 'damned spot' that the murders have seared into her conscience. It is shown that as moral agents, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, while tempted by ambition to murder in order to gain the throne, are undone and dwindle into madness because of their moral transgressions and the torment of their respective consciences. Both are driven to madness and destruction by overwhelming feelings of guilt and regret that the deed of murdering Duncan and Banquo 'cannot be undone' as Lady Macbeth says 'What's done cannot be undone. (Macbeth 5.1.75) It is thus the first moral transgression, namely the murder of Duncan to secure the throne of Scotland that propels them to further murder Banquo as a witness as he had been witness to the dark prophecies of the Weird sisters and hence Macbeth's motivations for murder.

A post-structuralist reading would also note the inversion of masculine and feminine in the play, as Lady Macbeth commands spirits to unsex her and thus rid her of female compassion and mercy that she may carry out the dastardly deed with her husband Macbeth.

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; make thick my blood,
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
The effect and it! (Macbeth 1.5.38)*

However it is not so much masculinity and any inversion of femininity that the deed demands but a blindness to the moral consequences of one's actions, as was Eve's rationalization of the deed before the fall, both Eve and Lady Macbeth are seduced by the immediate gratification that sin gives them, for Eve it is knowledge of good and evil and for Lady Macbeth it is power for her husband Macbeth to ascend the throne of Scotland, but they are both blinded temporally to the eternal consequences of sin as well as the moral consequences they invoke by their transgression of divine law and in Lady Macbeth's case, the moral consequence for murder is that she will never have peace of mind and be able to live with herself again or with a clear conscience.

Out, damned spot! out, I say! (Macbeth 5.1.38)

Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him? (Macbeth 5.1.43)

The Thane of Fife had a wife: where is she now? (Macbeth 5.1.46)

Here's the smell of the blood still: all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand. (Macbeth 5.1.45)

I would not have such a heart in my bosom for the dignity of the whole body. (Macbeth 5.1.60)

What's done cannot be undone. (Macbeth 5.1.75)

We thus see that Lady Macbeth is haunted by the deed and the eternal consequences of her sin, her moral transgressions have caused her to lose her peace of mind and she is tormented by her conscience to eventually descend into madness and sleepwalk because she cannot live with herself after having performed the deed. Psychology is thus useful here: It is conscience eventually that proves to be the undoing of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. They are done in by their respective consciences rather than an external agent though it is indeed Macduff who avenges his father's death at the end.

*The attempt and not the deed,
Confounds us. (Macbeth 2.2.12)*

*Had he not resembled
My father as he slept I had done't. (Macbeth 2.2.14)*

*I had most need of blessing, and "Amen"
Stuck in my throat. (Macbeth 2.2.35)*

*Methought I heard a voice cry, "Sleep no more!
Macbeth does murder sleep!" (Macbeth 2.2.36)*

*'T is the eye of childhood
That fears a painted devil. (Macbeth 2.2.58)*

*Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red. (Macbeth 2.2.61)*

Macbeth is thus equally if not more tormented by the gravity of sin as his deed and the consequences of his deed show, he is equally driven by guilt to despair and

desperation as seen in his final soliloquy after Lady Macbeth's suicide:

She should have died hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word,
To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
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. (Macbeth 5.5.16)

Indeed to Macbeth life has become meaningless, he feels that he is a mere player in life, manipulated by darker forces to commit a heinous crime and ultimately face destruction and consequences for it, but the truth is Macbeth faced a series of choices in which he repeatedly chose to sin and err and hence is entrapped in the consequences he has to face by divine justice catching up with him after he has erred on the side of evil. Indeed life signifies nothing for him because he has been defeated in life as a consequence of making the wrong moral choices. Hence while Macbeth denies responsibility as a moral agent in this play, we see that while circumstances inexorably set him up to perform the deeds of darkness, it is ultimately his choice of evil and his ambition that causes him to murder Duncan and Banquo and thus ultimately face the consequences of divine justice. There is thus no postmodernist aporia in the play or paradoxical indecision, Macbeth chooses evil in murdering Duncan and Banquo and faces the consequences of his sin in divine justice restoring order when Malcolm regains the throne and Macduff avenges his father.

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