

CRIMINAL ETHOS AND THE CONCEPT OF RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE IN WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE'S *MACBETH*

Abstract

This paper explores the criminal ethos in Shakespeare's great play Macbeth, in relation to the concept of retribution. It argues that Macbeth's horrendous murder of Duncan and his other subsequent killings are essentially premeditated, and not borne out of any supernatural influence, as many critics would want us to believe. It is the opinion of this writer that Macbeth is a criminal, and that his soul-searchings before and after he has embarked on his career of murder are thoughts of a guilty man who still suffers from qualm of conscience, but has to consent to a life of evil because of the promises of power. The paper equally posits that the various kinds of nightmare, which Macbeth and his wife suffered afterwards, and Macbeth's final defeat and death at the hands of Macduff, are adequate forms of retribution for a character who consciously rejects the possibility of salvation, which is not beyond his reach.

John Fraser posits that "the essential element in the greatness of Shakespeare's major histories and tragedies is obviously the speeding-up of the processes by which ideologies issue in physical actions of the most irreversible and often shocking kinds"(123). And in no other play of his does Shakespeare achieve this in a more engaging way than in *Macbeth*. In full support of this view, Bradley observes that "Our experience in transversing it is so crowded and intense.... It is the most vehement, the most tremendous of tragedies" (265).

However, Shakespeare does not reveal in *Macbeth*, the criminal character of men of his age, merely to satisfy "in full measure, the desire of audiences for stirring display and action", he "invites the play goers to a sumptuous feast of words, poses pertinent questions about life and death and generally mirrors in a most magnificent way, their own lives and time"(Vargas 112).

In this essay, attempt is made to examine the criminal ethos in *Macbeth*, and how the unfailing hands of retribution clutch the heels of

premeditated evil. The position of this paper is that, in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare rubs our noses in the disagreeable, in order to demonstrate as it were, "a disturbing social disintegration that follows political upheaval" (Zesmer 184). In this great play, murder becomes a great sharpener of judgment as "one is required most obviously to reaffirm or reassess one's own values, and to acknowledge the necessity of having as strong and clearly articulated a value-system, as sharply defined a self, as much alertness to others and as firm a will as possible" (Fraser, 157).

In *Macbeth*, we observe an intense and unparalleled physicalization of criminality. In this tumultuous play, Macbeth's overweening lust for the crown, compels him to commit a culpable crime of murdering King Duncan, a man who loves him dearly.

Ossie Enekwe rightly explains that Macbeth "shares full responsibility for his crime and doom" (145). Macbeth knows that, according to Scottish tradition, he is not to be King, even if Duncan dies naturally. This is because Duncan has children who can replace him. Macbeth acknowledges this when he says that "to be king stands not within the prospect of belief" (Act, I Scene III). This typifies the fact that Macbeth's heinous and bloody act is premeditated, and never borne out of the influence of the witches as some critics suggest.

Vaulting ambition, which means in this play, "the intention and planning of murder" (Knott 87), propels Macbeth to think aloud of murder shortly after his encounter with the witches:

My thought whose murder is yet
But fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man,
That function is smothered in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not (Act I, Scene III).

The "horried image" of death 'unfixes' Macbeth's hair, and makes his heart knock about his "ribs", yet "palpable dangers leave him unmoved" (Bradley 277). Bradley rightly argues that "slumbering murder has been lurking in Macbeth's heart, for no innocent man would have started, as he did, with a start of fear at the mere prophesy of a crown, or have

conceived thereupon immediately the thought of murder" (273). Bradley maintains, and it is true, that "the words of the witches are fatal to the hero only because there is in him something which leaps into light at the sound of them" (277). In support of this point of view, Enekwe submits that the "tragedy of *Macbeth* is the outcome of evil conspiracy", for "although the witches prophesy that he will be king, they never suggest that he become one through treachery and murder" (143). There is sufficient evidence that Macbeth is not wanting in contemplative life, that he is fully conscious of what he does. For example, in a soul-searching exercise before the killing of Duncan, Macbeth is convinced that he has no reason whatever to kill the king. To him, Duncan is:

...here in double part:
First, I am his kinsman and subject,
Strong both against the deed;
then, as his host,
who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself (Act I, Scene VII).

But in spite of this conviction, and the fact that Duncan honoured Macbeth lately, having been "transfixed by the horror of his crime and the power of promises, he consciously rejects the possibility of repentance, salvation and an eternal future for the man that he has been". He "chooses to know himself no longer, but instead, to know only the deed and the power it will bring, and so he becomes the very embodiment of his crime: the bloody usurping tyrant" (Microsoft Encarta). To confirm this, Macbeth states:

I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent,
but only vaulting ambition, which o'er-leaps itself,
And falls on th' other (Act I, Scene VII)

So, in the person of Macbeth, "false face must hide what the false heart doth know" (Act I, Scene VIII). Another criminal dimension of Macbeth's personality is revealed in his dexterity in covering up the murder. In the first instance, before he carries out the murder, he

employs the seductive power of strong drinks to lure the king's guards to sleep making them conscious only in the fairy world of dreams. After killing Duncan, Macbeth accepts his wife's suggestion to make the guards appear culpable by staining them with the king's blood, and by dropping the blood-stained daggers by their side. He follows this up by murdering the innocent guards in the morning of the following day, under the pretext that he has found incriminating evidence of the murder against them. Nevertheless, unsettled in his mind, Macbeth hatches plans to eliminate all the noble men who are likely to attribute the killing of Duncan to him. Although he succeeds in murdering Banquo on his way to his castle, Fleance, one of the sons of Banquo, escapes the operation wipe out. This reinforces the popular feeling that Macbeth is behind the cold death of the king. And this leads many thanes and friends to desert him. Consequently, Macbeth resorts to wanton killings in order to retain power. Lamenting the reckless killing of his perceived offenders, Macduff, the self-exiled Thane of Fife, says:

Each morn
New widows howl, new orphans cry
New sorrow strikes heaven in the face that it resounds
As if it felt with Scotland and yelled out (Act IV, Scene III).

The assassination of King Duncan amounts to a terrible violation of the concept of degree and order, which the Elizabethans cherished so much. According to John Harvey, "there could be no greater violation of the natural order for the Elizabethans than the murder of a King by one of his subjects" (17). Macduff equates the murder of King Duncan with "the breaking open of the Lord's anointed temple and stealing the life of the building" (Act II scene III). Duncan's gruesome death "reverberates through hell and heaven" (Elton 182). Even the elements acknowledge this maximum disturbance of cosmic order and balance, this vital aspect of the Scottish unwritten constitution. Lennox, one of the noble characters in the play, describes the event of that night, thus:

The night has been unruly
Where we lay,
Our chimneys were blown down, and as they say,
Strange screams of death
And prophesying with accent terrible
New hatched to the woeful time.
Some say the earth was feverous,
and did shake (Act II Scene III).

The unnaturalness of this murder is again fully explained by the conversational reports of Ross and the old man, who appear in the play, to be a "measure of human experience" (Beckerman 84). The old man has attained "the proverbial extent of a man's life" (84), that is, three score and ten years. He has seen "hours of dreadful, and things strange, but this sore night hath trifled former knowing" (Act II, Scene IV). Ross acquiesces that Duncan's horses eat each other to "the amazement of" his "eyes that looked upon it" (Act II Scene iv). Both reports are indications of dislocation of natural order, and they spell doom for Scotland. As the fountain-head of Scotland, "the gashed and suffering body of the King, Duncan, becomes the gashed and suffering body of the whole country" (Harvey 15). The death of Duncan throws Scotland into a state of complete disorder, especially, as the heir-apparent is not caused to ascend the throne.

For the purposes of ensuring justice, both nature and man devise appropriate ways of redressing evil and punishing crimes. Retribution, which is the cardinal goal of punishment, finds expression in the penal codes and sentencing practices of courts, as well as in the principle of equal retaliation embedded in the mosaic law of "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth". It is also clearly evident in the natural law of reciprocal action, an unbendable rule that insists that, "what a man sows he will reap many times over" (Abd-ru-shin 7). Abd-ru-shin maintains that, "just like the harvest yields a multiple of the seed, so man will always receive back greatly multiplied what in his own intuitive perceptions he awakens and sends out, according to the nature of his

volition" (7). He further reminds us that bearing the responsibility of one's deeds "begins already with the making of resolution, not just with the accomplished deed, which is simply a consequence of the resolution (8). Although Lady Macbeth seeks to convince her husband that "A little water clears us of this", retribution never waits long. It clutches at the heels of the deed without delay. The play's sustained evil and violence are balanced by its study of the minds of its main characters. "Macbeth and his wife are repulsed and torn by their own behaviour, and they both seem to verge on hallucination and madness as they recoil from the mayhem they have created around themselves" (*Microsoft Encarta*).

Immediately Duncan is murdered, little noises begin to appal Macbeth, causing him great disquietude of the mind. As soon as he emerges from the chamber of murder, he fearfully tells his wife:

Me thought I heard a voice cry,
Sleep no more!
Macbeth doth murder sleep – the innocent sleep
Sleep that knits up the raveled sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life
Balm of hurt minds
Great nature's second course;

Chief nourisher in life's feast (Act II Scene II).

Macbeth's statement above suggests that he is already experiencing mental torture and anguish of the soul. Mental pain causes him to feel the pull of his humanity. He becomes paralytic as he contemplates his dastardly deed. Even though Lady Macbeth accuses him of being a coward, he bluntly refuses to enter the guards' chamber, and tells her plainly:

I'll go no more.
I am afraid to think what I have done;
Look on't again I dare not.

Thus, as fear starts to dominate the entire being of Macbeth, he begins to suffer from intense nightmare. According to Jan Knott:

There is no tragedy without awareness.

Richard III is aware of the Grand Mechanism.

Macbeth is aware of nightmare. In the world in which murder is being imposed as fate, compulsion and inner necessity, there is only one dream: of a murder that will break the murder cycle, will be the way out of nightmare and will mean liberation. For the thought of murder that has to be committed, murder one cannot escape from is even worse than murder itself (90).

With mutiny and screams against tyranny at home, the desertion of troops, friends and thanes, and the untimely death of Lady Macbeth, Macbeth finds himself in sore need of everything, hence his bitter lamentation:

I have lived long enough: my way of life
Is fallen into sear, the yellow leaf.
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but in their stead
Curses not loud but deep (Act V, Scene III).

For being her husband's pillar of support and source of enduring courage, Lady Macbeth has a fair share of retribution in her sleep-walking madness. Overpowered by guilt, she complains:

Here's the smell of blood still.
All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand
(Act V, Scene I).

Although she threatens to wish away the blood, it is clear to her that "what's done cannot be undone" (Act V Scene I). The overweening influence of guilt saps away the strength, which *ab initio* compels her to think that "it is the eye of childhood that fears a painted devil". Here, "Shakespeare wishes to stress that evil is sterile and self-destructive" (Harvey 42). When Lady Macbeth dies, Macbeth in utter despair, realizes albeit belatedly, the futility of unconscionable life. In a death wish, he sees life as a candle in the wind, and cries:

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 (Act V, Scene V).

But his helplessness assumes even a more terrifying dimension when Birnam wood closes in on him. Listen again to the lamentation of a desperate and finished man:

They have tied me to a stake:
 I cannot fly.

But bear-like, I must fight the cause (Act V Scene Vi).

Thus, when Macbeth in a mad battle, loses his head to the avenging sword of Macduff, he suffers in more than like measures, the humiliation and anguish of his victims. "Macduff, not Macbeth, had to win the hand-to-hand combat" (Beckerman 31), in order to restore equilibrium in the overheated polity. And this equilibrium is maximally attained in the coronation of Malcolm – the heir – apparent.

In conclusion, this paper examines the nature of criminality and retribution in *Macbeth*. The writer feels that Macbeth is intensely evil, and that his "soul-searchings before and after he has embarked on his career of murder are the thoughts of a guilty man whose conscience still troubles him after his will had already consented to a life of evil" (Vargas 111). However, this paper expresses the notion that Macbeth is created to demonstrate, among other things, the consequences of violating the idea of, and belief in, cosmic degree and order, which is very dear to the hearts of the Elizabethans. Macbeth himself harps on this all-important value-habit of his people in the banquet scene, where he tells the Lords:

You know your own degree,
 Sit at first and last,
 The hearty welcome (Act III, Scene III).

Similarly, when the ghost of Banquo causes Macbeth to behave in an outlandish way that eventually disrupts the banquet, Lady Macbeth again reminds the Lords as they make haste to go, to "stand not upon the order of your going" (Act III, Scene IV). This implies that even in social life, the Elizabethans were to observe the idea of degree and order. It is the conviction of this author that Shakespeare, in this dense and concentrated tragedy, puts the concept of degree and order into dramatic action in order to vitalize it. Fraser posits that "intellectual positions, ideas, value-systems are sometimes only fully vitalized and assessable when they issue in action, especially action with grave potential or actual consequences" (122). The Elizabethans flaunted the idea of degree and order as an existential dogma, but in their daily existence, they frequently trampled upon it. Shakespeare, therefore, created the character, Macbeth in order to reveal the gulf between what ideally his people would want their society to be, and the turbulent reality of this society. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare deals with violence in a fundamental way. John Fraser argues that any playwright who deals with violence in a manner Shakespeare does in *Macbeth*, "becomes a kind of nose-rubber or mirror-holder, someone rubbing the spectator's nose in the disagreeable and holding up a mirror in which he can contemplate the essential filthiness, nastiness, beastliness of mankind, or at least, of unregenerate bourgeois mankind" (110). In the main, it is the writer's view that Shakespeare dramatizes the criminal ethos of men of his age, not only to show us some of the disquieting human possibilities, but equally, to "give back to thought, the kind of existential fullness that is normally denied to it by the wrong kind of idealizing and abstracting" (122). Although, in *Macbeth*, life experiences appear to parallel expectations, Shakespeare is able to use the play to shed light on one of the maxims, which his people attempted to use to order their society, which frequent political cataclysm and madness appeared to threaten. By juxtaposing impressions of world of order and disorder, Shakespeare shows us "the flow of images of life as a reflection of a reality that is always shifting" (Serban 43), and asks us to make a choice.

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