

Heroism in *Macbeth*

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Abstract: In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the representations of heroism, tyranny, and witchcraft are intermingled and the audience's emotional responses should therefore be complicated. This essay focuses on the gap between the dramatic presence of Macbeth and his political role in the Jacobean period. It considers the dramaturgic strategy that is employed in *Macbeth* to fill the gap in the images of the protagonist.

Keywords: Macbeth, Heroism, Witchcraft

1. Introduction

The official purpose of the production and performance of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is supposed to be the praise for the ancestor of James I, who was the patron of King's Men, and to show the popular acceptance of his authority. As a matter of course, the protagonist in *Macbeth* is represented as a villain who orders the assassination of Banquo, the king's ancestor, and also as a usurper who was incited by the witches' prophecies. Witchcraft was often associated with political matters in early modern England. In the conventional political belief, legitimate kings were equipped with royal magic whereas usurpers employed witchcraft for their evil plot.²⁾ Macbeth's illegitimacy is emphasized further by his vulnerability to witchcraft.

Macbeth is thus politically an illegitimate tyrant to be eliminated. Yet he is also dramatically a villain hero who can attract the audience with his strong theatrical presence, though the final scene of the play is the murder of the usurper and Malcolm's enthronement. These contradictory aspects of Macbeth may arouse from the audience two opposite emotions toward the protagonist: aversion to the cruel usurper and empathy with the problematic hero. This essay is going to analyze the heroism of Macbeth and consider how the play successfully reconciles his political identity and dramatic identity in order to make the play appear to meet the official purpose.

2. A New Type of Villain – Introversive Hero

Heroism is in many cases represented in the contexts of war and conquest in the texts of early modern English literature, and it is mostly associated with masculinity [1]. In *Macbeth*, too, whether a character's behavior is heroic or not is represented in the discourse of gender. Mary Beth Rose argues that heroism is obtained through elimination of femaleness and severance of maternal domination. She observes that Macbeth is the most idealistic hero of all the Renaissance literary heroes:

Macbeth's quest to conquer and dominate takes the unambiguous form of eliminating women and the female. His journey is a savage one; but within the logic of male tragic heroism, it is supremely successful ... Because of the gendered purity of the hero's quest, *Macbeth* provides the most unrelenting scrutiny and scathing critique of aristocratic male heroism in all of English Renaissance literature.³⁾

In his duel with Macduff, Macbeth is indeed totally independent of witches' prophecies and demonstrates heroic bravery. Until that moment, however, Macbeth is constantly under the domination of the female: he is deprived of self-reliance and urged

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²⁾ "...rebellion is as the sinne of witchcraft" (I Sam. 15.23).

³⁾ Rose, p.3.

by Lady Macbeth's castigation and the witches' prophecies. The process in which his heroic identity is constructed can thus be interpreted as his struggle to overcome the female threat [2]. This part of the essay is going to focus on and analyze the psychological conflict of Macbeth in his relationship with those female characters.

For the protagonist, Lady Macbeth is not a loving wife but a threatening mother. Despite his heroic bravery verbally presented in the opening scene, Macbeth is depicted as a submissive son who is continually urged by his wife to be manly and ambitious. Paradoxically, however, the more obedient he is to his wife, the less manly Macbeth seems to become. When he is disturbed by the ghost of Banquo, Lady Macbeth treats her husband like a timid boy whose "flaws and starts would become a woman's story at a winter's fire authorized by her grandma" (3.4.63-66) [3].

The witches' influence on Macbeth is also analogous to that of Lady Macbeth. The protagonist almost never doubts the witches' initial prophecy that he will be enthroned. Their later prophecy of Birnam Forest works as a talisman against his fear for subversion. His obsession with witchcraft is such that he shows the childish fantasy of his invulnerability:

Thou [Macduff] lovest labour:
As easy mayst thou the intrenchant air
With thy keen sword impress as make me bleed.
Let fall thy blade on vulnerable crests;
I bear a charmed life which must not yield
To one of woman born. (5.8.8-13)

Macbeth's willingness to depend on witchcraft can evoke childish absorption in oldwives' tales full of supernatural episodes, and this suggests his retrogression into childhood, when the obedience to maternity is essential. Macbeth reveals his urgent desire to abandon his ambition and enjoy comfort.

Methought I heard a voice cry, 'Sleep no more:
Macbeth does murder sleep', the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feat. (2.2.38-43)

Sleep is mentioned here as a relief from the burden of everyday reality, and being explicit in demanding it goes against masculine stoicism and is thus supposed to be shameful for an adult man. Through this exposure of his psychological conflict between socially demanded masculinity and retrogressive dependence upon maternity, however, Macbeth rather succeeds in presenting himself as a distinct hero. Unlike the traditional villains such as Richard III and Iago, who boast of their wickedness and enjoy complicity with the audience, Macbeth's psychological oscillation between ambition and regression may have appealed to the audience especially of the early modern period, when the existing value system was drastically changing [4].⁴ Indeed, Macbeth's villainy itself is conventionally welcomed in the festive upside-down space of theater [5]. Yet in addition to this, Macbeth successfully invites the audience's empathy with his introversion and delicate heroism.

3. Infertile Tyrant

Although Macbeth has a strong dramatic presence as a complicated hero to attract the audience, his elimination should gain their consent in order for the play to meet the official purpose of its production and performance. This section will consider the dramatic strategy in *Macbeth* by which the murder of the villain hero is justified for the audience.

In contrast to Duncan, whose kingly generosity can be associated with fertility, Macbeth and his wife evoke sterility. Lady

⁴Lamb, p.61.

Macbeth is depicted as an unmotherly brute: she shows her willingness to “pluck her nipple from the boneless gums” of “the babe that milks her while it was smiling in her face” and “dash the brains out” for the achievement of the ambition. Macbeth is represented as a bloodthirsty tyrant with an infertile image as well. He never hesitates to murder Macduff’s “wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls / That trace him in his line” (4.2.151-152). He also recognizes his approaching senility and his desolate life:

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 honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have... (5.3.22-26)

Both his cruel deed of infanticide and self-image as a solitary old man may evoke an image of an evil witch who is likely to be banished to the periphery of the community on suspicion of causing infertility. Early Modern people believed that evil witches needed to be expelled from the community because they threatened the prosperity and continuance of the community by harming the crops, livestock, and children [6][7]. His annihilation of Macduff’s children can be associated with the discontinuation of the offspring, which may overlap the image of witchcraft causing infertility.⁵⁾

In addition to such popular antipathy toward witchcraft, old age was also regarded as the enemy to the community’s prosperity in the overthrown-ordered world of festivity, where people enjoyed temporary relief from social order and discipline, as is seen in the festive farces of *charivari*, for example. In the discourse of fertility and festivity, Macbeth’s senility, as well as his infertile image, suggests his declining fortune in contrast to the liveliness of the English forces led by Macduff: while Macbeth’s “way of life is fall’n into the sere, the yellow leaf,” they are “a moving Birnam grove” wearing green “leafy screens” on themselves.

Through these images of infertility and decline, the audience is encouraged to become convinced of the necessity for the elimination of the sterile tyrant. While Macbeth’s dramatic presence as a distinct introverted hero had the power to attract the audience, Shakespeare partly succeeded in justifying the murder of Macbeth in the end by arousing the communal antipathy toward infertility from the audience.

4. Conclusion

The end of *Macbeth* sees the restoration of order. Macduff hails Malcolm as a legitimate king of Scotland and all the characters on stage felicitate the usurper’s death. Though Macbeth is certainly depicted as an evil tyrant, his dramatic presence as a hero still continues to be felt at the end of the play. Macbeth cannot completely be the object of the audience’s aversion and expulsion in spite of the official purpose of performing the play.

On the other hand, we never find the direct admiration for Banquo, the ancestor of James I, in any scenes of *Macbeth*. Although the bravery of Banquo as well as of Macbeth is verbally presented at the opening, Banquo fails to make his dramatic presence felt as strongly as Macbeth. He cannot be the hero of justice, either. Like Macbeth, he suggests his willingness to believe in the three witches’ prophecy. He only disturbs Macbeth as a ghost and is practically never praised after being assassinated. It seems that *Macbeth* makes the boundary between heroism and kingship ambiguous, as the three witches’ words “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” suggest.

5. References

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⁵⁾ Woodbridge, pp.171-180. Also see Thomas, pp.775-776.

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