

Keith Waddington

Michael Brian

Shakespeare 320

The Fatal Flaws of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth

Though perhaps something of a truism, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth suffer from the same predominant flaw: uncontrolled ambition. But this is only part of the story, for ambition need not lead to tragedy; and it is only when we examine the tragedy in its religious context that we can understand the multiple causes of their married downfall.

Though Macbeth enters the stage without royal robes, he is nevertheless Thane of Glamis: a nobleman. His personal relationship and kinship with King Duncan describe further his lofty social position; and when Duncan grants him the title Thane of Cawdor, his status is further exalted. Indeed, it has been suggested¹ that Duncan had previously hinted at the possibility of Macbeth being his successor. Whether or not this is the case, Macbeth, from the earliest of scenes, is presented as the most noble and worthy personage in the Kingdom². Much of the exposition is in this way directed, and can perhaps be summed up with Duncan's own words: "Oh valiant cousin! Worthy gentleman!" (39) The fall of Macbeth then is a fall from the greatest of heights. It is when Duncan decides his son shall

¹See *Realms of Macbeth*.

²This is rather a far reaching assertion, but I do nevertheless feel it holds up to scrutiny.

succeed him that Macbeth overtly suggests for the first time the possibility of regicide. We can perhaps sympathise here with Macbeth, for he has demonstrated by his valour, loyalty and even wisdom—when he speaks of the nature Kingship with Duncan—that he is at that time more deserving the crown than any other, including Malcolm. He is more deserving but for one essential particular: the established order will not allow him that position; and unfortunately the established order is not simply a worldly convention, but an order sanctioned by God and of which God is a part. Even Macbeth realises this, saying that his ascension to the throne “Stands not within the prospect of *belief*”(43)(my italics). It is then a fatal error of judgement that sees him set murder in his heart. And it is a crime not only against the King but against God. Of course, when Macbeth refers to the witches as “. . . those that *gave* the Thane of Cowdor to me . . .”(45)(my italics) he reveals himself, even at this early stage, to be in partnership with the forces of evil. The religious implications then are paramount, and we see in the fall of Macbeth from the right hand of the King a Biblical parallel.

If we have seen the fatal error, what then was the fatal flaw which saw this possible? Quite simply, it is Macbeth's belief that he can close his eyes to the sacrilege and morality of the murder. This he does, until immediately after the deed is done. His wavering resolve until that point is certainly not so much in consideration of the religious implications as his sense of honour and duty, and especially his desire to flaunt that honour

like a new set of clothes. Thus he speaks of Duncan's presence in his home:

. . . He's here in double trust:

First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,

String both against the deed; then, as his host,

Who should against his murderer shut the

door.(55)

And then to Lady Macbeth:

We will proceed no further in this business:

He hath honoured me of late, and I have bought

Golden opinions from all sorts of people.

Which would be worn now in there newest gloss . .

.(56)

The commercial imagery, "business," "bought," "golden" show Macbeth at this moment firmly entrenched, like his wife, in the material world. But Macbeth, perhaps because he is—at least initially—essentially honourable, and also perhaps because he has an imagination, does have a notion of the morality involved. He is though a victim of himself. His hunger for power is stronger than his sense of grace.

Lady Macbeth recognises that it is his sense of honour that has caused Macbeth to abandon the plan, so she manipulates that same sense of honour to change his mind, suggesting that his love for her is as weak as his resolve. Honour then, though laudable in most men, is turned against Macbeth by the manipulation of his wife.

Lady Macbeth knows her husband well, and continues her

systematic attack, next bringing into question his courage:

. . . Art thou afraid
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire?(56)

Macbeth the worrier naturally possesses a heightened sense of his own mettle and insists he dares do anything that "becomes" a man—the implicit meaning being that the act of regicide will unman him, just as Lady Macbeth's participation will unwoman her, at least to the point of making her barren.

All though this seems an effective retort, Lady Macbeth takes it as a cue to assault his very manhood.

. . . 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 . . .(56-57)

This is indeed a masterful manipulation for in the imagery it is her very womanhood that she represents as superior to his manhood. This is as much as Macbeth can take and he is forced to neutralise her assertion by agreeing that the murder shall be done, after all.

Systematically then, Lady Macbeth takes what might have been qualities in her husband and uses them as weapons of manipulate. And it is these self same qualities, combined with others, that are not only manipulated but actually make the murders possible.

Macbeth is in part a practical man. On the eve of the murder he shows himself ready to gamble the intangible and uncertain

after life: "jump the life to come,"(55) but knows, "We still have judgement here."(55) It is his practicality which prevents him from seeing where the real danger lies until it is too late.

Although Macbeth's first reaction to the murder of Duncan is to recognise, with horror, the religious and moral implications, his quick return to practicalities—ensuring that his new position is firmly established by initiating new murders—should not be seen as evidence that he has returned to his former insensibility. Macbeth is hence forward deprived of the grace of sleep, he has "murdered" sleep, for it is only in doing, in action, that his mind can be sufficiently distracted, that the crying of his soul at the sacrilege can be silenced. In a scene prior to the murder of Banquo, Macbeth acknowledges: ". . . mine eternal jewel/Given to the common enemy of man."(76) Nowhere else does Macbeth so clearly admit that his soul now belongs to the Devil;³ and from now on he must live life without moralistic reflection. But it is at the very end that Macbeth shows his entrenchment in the world of doing, subsequent to the regicide, was mere play acting caused by necessity.

. . . Out, out, brief candle!

³Any question as to the identity of the *third* murderer, who so suddenly appears at the scene of Banquo's demise can be set to rest if we realise that *who* he is matters not so much as *what* he represents: Macbeth, speaking earlier to the identified assassins, alludes to the third murderer, and the *raison d'être* for this new unnamed servant of crime is to demonstrate the extension of Macbeth's influence: to suggest the beginnings of a network of evil doers which helps to support and explain the general illness that Scotland suffers.

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.(124)

There is certainly a note of self reflection on the part of Shakespeare, but these words are more Macbeth's than his. Macbeth, in the darkness of foul deed, avoids the sight of the true state; but no matter how dark that darkness might be, no matter how tightly his eyes are closed, the emptiness of life without God—and the eternal—cannot be completely hidden and is the emptiness of a word without meaning. Macbeth does not speak overtly of this, but we see the end result of a life lived without moral consideration, and so the lesson is implicit.

Another flaw we must bear in mind is also a point of pride: Macbeth's violent nature. In the religious and historical context, that violence is legitimate when properly directed. Nevertheless, it is his violent nature which makes the murder possible; and this is underlined when Lady Macbeth admits being unable to finally do the deed. Where her female weakness failed, his masculine valour succeeds. This worrier instinct, combined with all the other ingredients, creates that fatal and fateful brew.

Turning now to Lady Macbeth, it seems at first that her final madness and death are inadequately supported. After all, we have seen numerous instances of her entrenchment in the physical

world and her inability to grasp the moral dimension. But if Lady Macbeth seems out of touch with heavenly defined morality, she does however acknowledge a sense of humanistic morality.

“Stop up th’ access and passage to remorse
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose . . .

Lady Macbeth then reveals that there is something within her which might cry out at regicide. And despite the hard mask she wears, despite her ardent insistence that the murder be done, despite seeming more a man than many men, that fatal flaw, that thing that might cry out against the murder is her intrinsic unalterable female nature. Indeed, since Lady Macbeth was unable—due to Duncan’s resemblance to her father—to finally commit the crime, it seems clear that her plea “unsex me here”(51) was not entirely answered. We might also wonder why this remarkable resemblance was never before mentioned. The coincidence seems rather a product of her feminine “weakness” than of actual appearance.

It is Lady Macbeth’s hatred for her own womanhood⁴ that proves

⁴I realise that this analysis is slightly at odds with the view presented in class, namely that Lady Macbeth lost the thing she most valued: her femininity; but I find no evidence of this. Rather, I find that she was punished by what she tried to deny herself. Also, though there is evidence to suggest that Lady Macbeth is barren after the regicide, this is not to say she has lost her intrinsic female self. Indeed, it would seem a superfluous detail for someone no-longer female to be described as barren. It is only because her true nature remains intact, despite her “prayers” to the

a fatal defect not only for herself but Macbeth also. We saw earlier the dexterity with which she manipulated Macbeth by bringing his manhood—amongst other things—into question; but that same dashing of the babe's brains passage reveals also the depth of her dissatisfaction with her own sex. Indeed, the hand imagery—a figurative reference to action, particularly foul action—as applicable to Lady Macbeth comes to a head when she cries: "Here's the smell of the blood still. All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand."(117) This line is important for several reasons: the reference to perfume and the littleness of the hand underlines that her femininity *still* exists. In fact, it is her femininity that is in revolt. It is her femininity she has tried to strangle, but it is her femininity that cries out at the heinousness of the crime. It is through her femininity that the moral dimension is realised. Apart from this, the religious aspect is also highlighted: it is the death of the King that most troubles her, and it was the death of the King that was most sacrilegious; also, the "perfumes of Arabia," make reference to the dubious domain outside Christianity; and finally, the quotation makes reference to the night of the murder when Macbeth struggled with the religious and moral implications to which she then replied: "A little water clears us of the deed."(64) Clearly Lady Macbeth is now plagued by that moral dimension, and this was revealed not

contrary, that the barrenness has any tragic effect. See my analysis of the sleep walking scene for further exploration.

through a religious revelation but through her female sensitivity.

To support further the interpretation that Lady Macbeth is plagued by her woman hood, which she cannot though would exorcise, and which remains until her death, we might take note of the fainting episode in act II scene III. It can easily be argued that this is a pretence effected to silence Macbeth, who she feels is over-playing his part. But this idea seems to stem from the notion that Lady Macbeth is a stronger being than the play will allow her. Certainly, in the patriarchal Christian frame-work, it seems altogether more appropriate to draw a woman as corrupting but weak. If it seems unlikely that Lady Macbeth would faint at the description of Duncan's murdered state and yet was earlier able to return to the scene, subsequently appearing with bloodied hands, we must bare in mind the negating effects of action upon the conscience. Lady Macbeth, in a moment of supreme danger was forced to act, and the action of the act allowed her, for once, to follow Macbeth's example and avoid contemplation. The description of the deed though requires contemplation from the auditors, and it is at this moment that the horror is realised. Lady Macbeth's fainting away then is a real fainting away. It is another instance where we see the weak female constitution that she so much resents.

We saw Macbeth using action to distract his mind, avoiding the terrors of thought. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, constrained by her sex, is forced into inactivity. Macbeth, shortly after the regicide, has sufficient momentum and, as we have seen, dire

motivation to act now of his own accord. Lady Macbeth's encouragement and participation are no longer needed and she is forced into inactivity. Since she is therefore deprived of an active role by virtue of her sex, she is therefore deprived of the means—action—to avoid thought, and it is for this reason that she, unlike her husband succumbs to madness. Lady Macbeth, so long asleep to the moral dimension, in sleepless sleep finds her imagination awakened to the inhumanity of the act. In her idle torment blood, a paradoxical symbol of both life and death in the play, is again upon her hands, only now she realises, as did Macbeth, that it cannot so easily be removed.

Lady Macbeth's materialism is initially the flaw which, combined with ambition, leads her astray. But since she is deprived of the ability to act, her entrenchment in material things is much more problematical. It is for this reason that we see contrasting development: while Macbeth "acts" and by so doing becomes ever more rooted in materialism, Lady Macbeth, with an increasingly less active part to play, follows the opposite course, her mind ever more plagued with the immaterial. Lady Macbeth shows no contrition in the religious sense, but it is with humanistic morose that she ends her life.

In the simplest of possible terms, Lady Macbeth is killed by her own conscience. Macbeth, on the other hand, has already murdered—or at least bound and gagged—his own conscience:

The very firstlings of my heart shall be
The firstlings of my hand. And even now,
To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and

done(100)

These words—notable for their profound poetry—demonstrate that Macbeth, though fully aware of the damnable nature of his deeds, shall pay no heed to conscience and morality.

It was Macbeth's ambition which first allowed evil to enter his heart. And evil, once allowed entrance is like an unwelcome guest who takes possession of the home. And from that moment, all things that would have been positive qualities become aspects of that fatal flaw: his sense of honour, his courage and violent nature, his practicality and "poeticity," his sense of his own man hood. All these act for him and so against him. All these, in his own as well as the manipulative hand of Lady Macbeth, become together a double edged sword that finally severs the head that dares not think.