

## REFLECTION OF TIME IN THE DRAMA "MACBETH"

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**Abstract.** Macbeth by Shakespeare tells the tale of a great soldier, who is prophesized to become the king of Scotland upon meeting three witches, commits regicide and a chain of crimes, which led to his own tragic demise. The supernatural dominates all aspects of the play of Macbeth. The actions of Macbeth are influenced by his belief in the existence of supernatural powers, which convince him that he can become the king of Scotland. The supernatural did not help Macbeth discover his future. Instead, the witches do not bring certainty but rather confusion and chaos that perplex and mislead Macbeth.

The play makes an important distinction: Fate may dictate what will be, but how that destiny comes about is a matter of chance of man's *own choice* or free will.

Basically, the idea is that time literally comes to a halt when Macbeth murders King Duncan and takes the throne. All of the events that take place between the murder and the final battle seem to happen out of time, almost in some sort of alternate reality, in some witch-land outside of history. Macduff's final remark that the "time is free" now that Macbeth is defeated and Malcolm is set to take his rightful position as hereditary monarch clues us in to the relationship between the seeming disruption in linear time and the disruption of lineal succession: without its rightful ruler, a country has no future.

Mistakes after mistakes ultimately become his downfall, which is the main focus of this Shakespearian tragedy. The effects of the supernatural and time are examined in this analysis of Macbeth's characterization.

**Introduction** The play Macbeth is the shortest of Shakespeare's tragedies at twenty-one First Folio pages and it was first performed in 1606. It is one of thirty-

eight plays that are thought to have been written (or co-written) by Shakespeare. Macbeth ought to be the least sympathetic of Shakespeare's hero-villains. He is a murderer of old men, women, and children and has a particular obsession with overcoming time by murdering the future: hence his failed attempt to kill Fleance and his successful slaughter of Macduff's children. In Renaissance, myths, icons, and emblems were crucial parts of poetics and were often used to point a moral. Therefore, we lower our appreciation of the complexity of Shakespeare's dramatic and poetic technique when we ignore his indebtedness to iconographical and mythographical material such as the tricephalous hieroglyph of time around which Macbeth is shaped. [1]

The idea of time occurs insistently in Renaissance art and literature. Shakespeare's concern with time is keynote of his lyric poetry and drama. In the Sonnets he is haunted by the destructiveness of the God Kronos, who with his powerful jaws seems to gnaw at everything that beautiful in the world of nature and man. [2] Shakespeare explores the means by which time's greed can be overcome and, in line with the teachings of Diotima in Plato's Symposium, he suggests two outlets from time's tyranny: one, accessible to all, to be achieved through marriage and reproduction: the other obtainable by the intellectually gifted through poetry and fame.

Time makes its appearance again in the comedies, but playing a different role. He is the winged God Aion who heals wounds, allows wrongs to be undone and truths to be discovered, and mends the past with his regenerative power.

In Macbeth time is under scrutiny in its tripartite sequence of past, present and future, which finds its graphic representation in a frightful tricephalous monster revived from antiquity by Renaissance iconographers, and before them by Petrarch. Shakespeare uses the word "time" forty - five times in the play. [3] At the beginning of Macbeth Shakespeare introduces the hero as the brave, valiant, worthy gentleman fighting for his king and country. We should expect him to behave in accordance with the virtue of prudence. Yet Macbeth yields to the sinister monster of iconographical tradition and encounters his own ruin. The tripartite sequence of past, present and future belongs to historical objective time, a linear continuum in which events occur. It

is the road on which man journeys and on which everything finds a patterned order sanctioned by God's will. Macbeth's subjective experience of time dislocates this natural order. He coerces time in two ways. On the one hand, he accelerates it by hastening Duncan's death: on the other hand, he stops its natural unfolding by trying to prevent succession of Banquo's progeny. Like the voracious wolf of *Serapis'* [4] monster, he tries unsuccessfully to wipe out the memory of past murders. He is so blinded by the lure of a royal future that he can not appreciate the dangers the metaphysical convulsion involved in trying to "jump the life to come". His sin is far more presumptuous. By interfering with past and future, Macbeth crystallizes the world around him in continuous present, in fixed permanency. If the present, however, were to be a continuum, there would no longer be time, but only eternity. Only by following the past and becoming future does the present belong to time. Time and eternity are incompatible. Macbeth tries to live in everlasting present and dresses himself in "borrow'd robes" "that cleave not to their mould". By his "vaulting ambition" Macbeth fails to understand the difference between providence and fate. Macbeth deceives himself into thinking that he may partake in God's foreknowledge. His act of killing both the past, in the person of Duncan, and the future in the person of Banquo, becomes a parody of God's creation. God created light, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth destroy it. This results in chaos and in unnaturally prolonged night falling over the world. Rosse is astounded at this strange phenomenon:

by th' clock 'tis day,  
And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp.  
Is 't night's predominance, or the day's shame,  
That darkness does the face of earth entomb,  
When living night should kiss it ? [5] (II. IV. 6-10)

The deadly power of the night undermines the life-giving energy of the sun.

The morality and spirituality of the individual characters in the play could almost be measured by their respective attitude toward time. That Banquo perceives time as growth is indicated several times:

If you can look into the seeds of time

And say which grain will grow, and which will not  
Speak then to me, who neither beg, nor fear,  
Your favours nor your hate. ( I. III. 58-62 )

His time - growth perceptions is reinforced when he reassures Duncan, who holds a similar attitude with the following words,

There if I grow,  
The harvest is your own. ( I. VI. 31-32 )

At the deceiving sight of Inverness castle, the idea of birth and growth surfaces again:

This guest of summer,  
The temple-haunting martlet, does approve,  
By his lov'd mansionry, that the heaven's breath  
Smells wooingly here: no jutty, frieze,  
Buttress, no coign of vantage, but this bird  
Hath made his prenent, and procreant cradle:  
Where they most breed and haunt, I have observ'd  
The air is delicate. (I. IV. 3-10)

Banquo sees himself as "the root and father / Of many kings" (III. I. 5-6. ) His lineage, which unfolds in front of Macbeth's eye's in the dumb show ( IV. I ), seems to "stretch out to th' crack of doom" ( IV. I. 177. ). The emphasis in this scene falls on the likeness of the eight successive kings to Banquo himself. The motif of resemblance between parents and children is recurrent in Shakespeare. In the "Winter's tale" it is used in relation theme of the regeneration and spiritual rebirth of the old; in the Sonnets it is one way to attain immortality. The idea of circular time in "Macbeth" is embodied in Duncan, Malcolm, and more specifically, banquo as the ancestor of King James. After the killing of Duncan and just before the murder of Banquo, Macbeth remarks that

We have scroch'd the snake, not kill'd it:  
She'll close, and be herself. ( III. II. 13-14. )

The image of snake occurs again after the murderers' report:

Thanks for that. –

There the grown serpent lies; the worm that's fled,  
Hath nature that in time will venom breed,  
No teeth for th' present. ( III. IV. 27-30. )

Macbeth invokes Hecate [6] before Duncan's murder. According to the medieval and Renaissance *scala naturae* ( lat.), the king is on earth what the sun is in the sky, and the king's death, is, therefore, the metaphoric cause for the disappearance of the "travelling lamp". In addition Macbeth's sin is reminiscent of *Satana*'s. The porter scene clearly suggests a correspondence between the castle at Inverness and Hell. Macbeth has tried to obliterate the past. Memories of his murders, nevertheless, keep coming back to him as sounds and visions. A voice crying "Sleep no more!" Macbeth does murder sleep" ( II. III. 34-35. ) haunts him after the murder of Duncan, and Banquo's ghost shakes his gory locks at him in the banquet scene. (III. IV. ) Macbeth is also unsuccessful to stopping the future, which in Act IV comes to meet him in the form of three iconic images. The first, an armed head, gruesomely prefiguring his own, as displayed by Macduff at the end of the play, warns him against the power of the two images which are to follow. For the duration of the tragedy Macbeth's vaulting ambition remains insensitive to the warning "fair is foul, and foul is fair" issued to him three-headed time itself.

Critics remark endlessly about two aspects of Macbeth, its obsession with "time". Macbeth, even in the somewhat uncertain form that we have it, is a ruthlessly economical drama, marked by a continuous eloquence astonishing even for Shakespeare. It cannot be an accident that it is the last of the four supreme tragedies, following Hamlet, Othello, and Lear. Shakespeare surpasses even those plays here in maintaining a continuous pitch of tragic intensity, in making everything overwhelmingly dark with meaning. Early on, Macbeth states the ethos of his drama:

My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,  
Shakes so my single state of man that function  
Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is  
But what is not.

Murder is the center and will not cease to perplex Macbeth, for whom its ontological status, as it were, has been twisted askew:

The time has been,  
That when the brains were out, the man would die,  
And there an end; but now they rise again  
With twenty mortal murders on their crowns,  
And push us from our stools. This is more strange  
Than such a murder is.

Everything that Macbeth speaks in the course of the drama leads into its most famous and most powerful speech, as fierce a Gnostic declaration as exists in our language:

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.

The dramatist, according to Macbeth, is the Demiurge, who destroys all meaning whatsoever. But his nihilistic play, featuring life as hero-villain, is so badly acted in its most crucial part that the petty pace of fallen time is only accentuated. Macbeth therefore ends in total consciousness that he has been thrown into the cosmological emptiness:

I gin to be a-weary of the sun,  
And wish th' estate o' th' world were now undone.

Mysticism, according to an ancient formulation, fails and then becomes apocalyptic. The apocalyptic fails and then becomes Gnosticism. Gnosticism, having

no hopes for or in this life, necessarily cannot fail. Macbeth, at the close, cannot fail, because he has murdered all hope and all meaning. What he has not murdered is only interest, our interest, our own deep investment in our own inwardness, at all costs, at every cost. Bloody tyrant though he be, Macbeth remains the unsurpassed representation of imagination gone beyond limits, into the abyss of our emptiness.

**Conclusion** There is much evil in the five acts of Macbeth. It is a fast moving and intense play, being highly compressed as it hurtles forward scene-by-scene and act-by-act. However, when one returns to read, to listen to or to watch the play, there are many many surprises and the shock value is still there upon reaching the appalling murders of Duncan and of Banquo and of Macduff's wife and children. In lots of ways Macbeth is of its time—as exemplified by the three witches and their mystical powers. Indeed witches and witchcraft were very much part of life back in 1606 and the play has many lessons for mankind in the 21st century and for a world that is both overpopulated and full of inequality. Macbeth is particularly instructive in the ways that it demonstrates that power and political influence corrupting those who find themselves in leadership positions.

**Notes:**

1. See Oxford Shakespeare Concordances, Macbeth, ed. T.H. Howard-Hill (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1971), pp. 219.

2. The Italian mythographer Vincenzo Cartary also assigns the three-headed monster to the god Serapis. See V. Cartary, *Le Imagini...degli Dei* (Venice: Valgrifi, 1571.) p. 81.

3. All quotations from the play are taken from New Arden edition, ed. Kenneth Muir (London: Methuen, 1951).

4. Significantly, the number three is also associated with the triune Goddess Hecate, whose patronage over the witches seems evident. Hecate is called *Triforme*, *Tregemina* and *Trivia* by Cartary (p. 114-115), and often represented iconographically with three faces.

5. [http://www.literaturepage.com/read/shakespeare\\_macbeth-3.html](http://www.literaturepage.com/read/shakespeare_macbeth-3.html)

6. Жаҳон адабиёти дурдоналари. Вильям Шекспир. Отелло. Инглиз тилидан Жамол Камол таржимаси. – Тошкент: Ғафур Ғулом номидаги Адабиёт ва санъат нашриёти, 1991. –Б. 784. 9,20. Б.

7. <http://lib.guru.ua/SHAKESPEARE/makbet.txt>