

Themes of Revenge, Time and Timelessness in Shakespeare's 'Macbeth'

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Dearly Beloved, avenge not yourselves,

But rather give place unto wrath: for it
Is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay.
Saith the Lord!

(Romans 12.19)

Revenge was a popular theme in Elizabethan tragedy, but it must not be supposed that private revenge was considered morally justifiable in that age. It was denounced alike by Church and State for it was in contravention of the law of God and theologically repugnant to Christianity; it also challenged the smooth functioning of the law of the land, for the person intending to take revenge was in actuality challenging the political authority of the administration by taking the law into his own hands. Sir Francis Bacon, one of the most brilliant intellectual figures of the Renaissance, condemned any attempt at private revenge:

Revenge is a kind of wild justice which the more man's nature runs to, the more ought law to weed it out. For as for the first wrong, it doth but offend the law; but the revenge of that wrong putteth the law out of office.¹

In conformity with popular morality, however, the tradition of revenge was often accepted and even praised, and revenge-heroes of Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy are seen to reject the moral laws that govern and control nature. They refuse to wait for Divine Providence to take its course, and violate the laws of the state. Many plays of this period present these two contrasting visions of life, in the singular conflict between the desire for revenge and the theme of Christian morality.

The Spanish Tragedy (circa, 1585) by Thomas Kyd is often regarded as the greatest of English tragedies written on the theme of revenge, and it influenced drama, especially tragedy, for the next twenty years. Kyd had been an avid reader of Seneca (circa. 4 B.C. – A.D. 65), especially influenced by the latter's play *Thyestes* and he adopted many of the themes and devices of that play. Just as *Thyestes* commences with the Ghost of Tantalus accompanied by Fury Megaera to take revenge, Kyd too opens his play with the Ghost of Don Andrea, escorted by Revenge. However,

the controlled speech and action of the Roman tragedy was replaced by colourful speeches and violent action on stage, in keeping with the exuberance of the Elizabethan audience following the Renaissance.

The first extant specimen of Shakespearean tragedy is *Titus Andronicus* (1593-94) in which Shakespeare is influenced by Kyd as well as by Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine* (1587) and the *Jew of Malta* (published 1633) The world displayed in the play is linked to political and social disturbances in Rome. The instance of the royal hunt in the 'ruthless woods' symbolizes the ruthlessness of the Roman court while Titus' blindness may be regarded as reflecting the tyranny prevailing in Rome and its violation of the people's rights. The ravishing and mutilation of Lavinia, 'Rome's rich instrument,'² metaphorically reflects Rome's political disorder.³ Significantly, the chaotic and violent world depicted in *Titus Andronicus* is linked to the volatile socio-political conditions of Rome and does not merely reflect an amoral world as do the plays of Seneca, where, 'Concepts of Order, Law and Authority were unable to protect the innocent from the wickedness of power, and it was the dark horror of this vision which was often levelled against Providence.'⁴ Instead, the propensity of displaying violence on stage reflects on moral, ethical and political contexts in Shakespeare's tragedy.⁵

Macbeth, too, transcends the limits of traditional revenge tragedy, focusing on human responsibility and freedom of human will. The tragedy of *Macbeth* stems from the lust for power and extreme ambition :

"I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent; but only
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
And falls on the other."¹⁹

Much before the conclusion of Act I of the play, the reader is made aware of the positive moral order which *Macbeth* will violate. Shakespeare portrays the aspects of evil represented not only by *Macbeth*, but also :

the related aspects of that evil, which is simultaneously felt as a strained and unnatural perversion of the will, as obfuscation of the clear light of reason, a principle of disorder (both in the 'single state of man' and in his wider social relations) and as a pursuit of illusions.²⁰

This sense of unnaturalness and evil is reinforced further by the violent emotions latent in Lady *Macbeth*'s invocation of the 'Spirits' whom she desires will 'unsex' her and replace the 'milk of human kindness' in her with 'gall.' Thereby she deliberately represses her maternal feminine instincts:

"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 th' access and passage to remorse;
That no compunctious visitings of Nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th' effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murth'ring ministers."

[I. v. 40-48].²¹

Lady Macbeth, often regarded as the fourth witch, represents, as do the weird sisters, 'a malignant female power both in the cosmos and in the family.'²² She emerges as a more terrifying and evil figure than the witches, who are reduced to 'juggling fiends ... that palter with us in a double sense/ That keep the word of promise to our ear/ And break it to our hope.'²³

[V.vii. 19-22]. She represents an evil that influences, encourages, taunts and guides Macbeth to commit Duncan's murder. She questions Macbeth's masculinity, being convinced of his vulnerability and emotional dependence upon her, little realizing that once the first murder is committed, Macbeth will plan and execute subsequent murders and cease to be emotionally dependent upon her. In his progress along a career of violence and bloodshed; his bloody deeds will be provoked by an intense insecurity and fear of discovery, for his mind is 'full of scorpions.' [III. ii. 36]. This tussle between ambition and conscience which characterizes Macbeth is totally absent in the lady, who coolly envisages the 'fatal entrance of Duncan / Under [her] battlements.'" [I. v. 38-40). She is only anxious to remove her husband's scruples about catching 'the nearest way' [I. v. 17] to success. She is depicted as a woman whose inflexible will makes her determined to win for Macbeth what she deems to be his proper reward – the crown; and in achieving her aim she allows no room to either ethical speculations or to her innate feminine qualities.

However, when she last appears in Act V, Scene I, the suppressed conscience of Lady Macbeth has risen to the surface, and in unbearable agony, she somnambulises, trying to wash the blood of Duncan from her hand;

"Here's the smell of blood still:
all the perfumes of Arabia will not
sweeten this little hand: Oh! Oh! Oh!"

[V. i. 48-50]

Instead of the woman who had coldly planned the murder of Duncan, we see the one who speaks with sick horror about the slaughter of Macduff's family :

"The Thane of Fife had a wife, where is
she now? What, will these hands ne'er be clean?
No more o' that, my Lord, no more of that."

[V. i. 40-42]

— this seems like an appeal to her husband to stop his bloody deeds. This is evidently a changed woman. Intimation of this collapse is, however, present from the very beginning. In the murder scene, she is deterred from murdering Duncan by filial feelings :

“Had he not resembled/ My father as he slept, I had done’t.”[II. ii. 14-15]

Thus, it is clear that her efforts at suppression of her feminine feelings are only temporarily successful. When Macbeth’s hypersensitive imagination envisages the air drawn dagger (II.i) or ‘Pity like a naked new-born babe’ blowing ‘the horrid deed in every eye’ [I vii. 24], he gives figurative expression to his mental conflict, thereby helping himself to overcome it. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, in whom practicality takes the place of imagination, has no outlet for her suppressed mental turmoil, which her husband has. This proves fatal for her. The atrocity and the unnaturalness of the deed come home to her suddenly when she hears Macbeth comparing the ‘gash’d stabs’ in Duncan’s body to ‘a breach in nature/ For ruin’s wasteful entrance.’ [II. iii. 113-14]. In addition to this, when she hears that her husband has committed two more murders by killing the grooms, the shock is too much for her, and she faints. When we see her next as the Queen of Scotland, the glory of her dream has faded. She has expended practically all her limited physical energy and can exert no more external pressure. Her suppressed conscience re-asserts itself, and in abject misery she exclaims :

“Nought’s had, all’s spent.

Where our desire is got without content

‘Tis safer to be that which we destroy,

Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy.”[III. ii. 4-7]

Soon after this, she, no doubt, summons all her strength and ascendancy to save her husband from at least an open disclosure of Banquo’s murder in the banquet scene. But, as a result of this magnificent effort, she is completely exhausted. When Macbeth speaks of further bloody deeds, she is horrified at the thought, and, full of sorrow for the mental agony which drives him on, says:

“You lack the season of all natures, sleep.” [II. iv. 140]

The statement reveals a deep empathy which can only be the result of her own lack of sleep. The tragic irony in these words becomes fully significant in the sleep-walking scene. However, even in the terrible sufferings of somnambulism, her limited imagination remains evident. She cannot say like Macbeth :

“Will all great Neptune’s oceans’ wash this blood

Clean from mine hand? No, this my hand will rather –

The multitudinous seas incarnadine,

Making the green one red.”[II. ii. 61-64]

— but, being a woman and a Queen accustomed to expensive cosmetics, she can only wearily refer to the perfumes of Arabia which

“will not sweeten this little hand.”

[V. i. 49]

In fact, this comparative imagination diminishes Lady Macbeth's stature. Undoubtedly, she suffers torments but they do not assume massive, universal proportions that Macbeth's agony, magnified by his imagination, does. Also, she presumably commits suicide, thereby proving herself inferior to Macbeth, who, even when stirred by taunts, does exhibit a Promethean blaze of courage in the end:

“Lay on Macduff;
And damn'd be him that first cries, 'Hold, enough!'" [V. viii. 62-63]

This produces a tragic sense of waste far more pronounced than in Lady Macbeth's case. We lament the loss and damnation of such a man who could have achieved much.

Lady Macbeth's contribution to the tragic disaster in Macbeth is vital. It is she who forces her vacillating husband to commit the first murder. Until then, Macbeth is a man who can be redeemed. But, once he commits the heinous crime of murdering the King, God's representative on Earth, he defies the hierarchy of Nature and becomes an excommunicated man. The crimes which follow are almost inevitable as he frantically searches for security, freedom, and mental peace by eliminating Banquo and Macduff's family, regarding them to be potential sources of danger. Had Lady Macbeth not urged him, Macbeth might have proceeded "not further in this business" [I. vii. 31] and the tragedy would never have taken place. Also, the fear arising in Macbeth's mind on the night of Duncan's murder, magnifies and takes on horrifying proportions and ultimately destroys Lady Macbeth. He, by giving vivid expression to them, overcomes those fears, but she, who scorns them, is the one to be eventually overwhelmed.

The intense mental agony that Macbeth suffers becomes the other focal point of the tragedy and Shakespeare offers a deep psychological insight into human behaviour and causes for human action in his skilful analysis of Macbeth's character. The play becomes reminiscent of :

the high and excellent Tragedy, that openeth the greatest wounds, and showeth forth the ulcers that are covered with tissue: That, with stirring the affects of admiration and commiseration, teacheth the uncertainty of this world, and upon how weak foundations gilded roofs are builded.²⁴

In committing acts of violence and murder, Macbeth's "Genius is rebuk'd" [III. i. 55], his noble self is consciously distorted and gradually destroyed: "To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself." [II. ii. 72] His willingness to be guided by the witches' predictions is filled with unpredictable danger, for their words are ambiguous, confusing and intended to mislead and cause harm. As Horace warned :

*Tue ne quaesieris, scire nefas, quem, mihi, quem tibi
finem Di dederint, Leuconoe, nec Babylonios
tentaris numeros.*

[Do not inquire

We may not know, what end

The Gods will give, Leuconoe, do not attempt
Babylonian calculations] ²⁵

Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth willingly court evil, invoking the spirits to assist them in their dark deeds:

Lady Macbeth : “Come thick night
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of Hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor Heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry, ‘Hold, Hold!’” [I. v. 50-54]

Macbeth : “Stars hide your fires! Let not light see
my dark and deep desires.” [I. iv. 50-51]

This association of night with deeds of evil may be traced back to Seneca. However :

to the Christian imagination night suggests also the deeper terror of abandonment by God, isolation and intense spiritual dread, as the innumerable hymns, belonging to all the churches, testify. All motion is suspended in Dante’s purgatory. And all this sense is communicated by the image of night in *Macbeth*.²⁶

After King Duncan’s assassination, likewise, darkness prevails, though “by the clock ‘tis day” [II. iv. 6]. Dark night overshadowing the sun evokes the image of crucifixion of Christ and his agony on the Cross, as referred to in the Synoptic Gospels, while Christ is referred to as the Sun of Righteousness in The New Testament. Furthermore, Mithra the solar god, is regarded by critics as the origin of Christ.²⁷ The tragedy of *Macbeth* was deeply influenced by the scriptures; however it is noteworthy that :

this Christian view is not personal to Shakespeare but that of his age and of his people; what belongs to him is, ... the power, the range and integrity of the poetic realisation of the idea, showing that he does not merely passively receive and record it, but achieves a genuine cognition of it through arduous intellectual and emotional effort.²⁸

Malcolm’s army advancing to overthrow the tyrant Macbeth is not led by any predominating motive of revenge or personal ambition, but through the defeat and death of Macbeth, Malcolm and Macduff aim to free Scotland of ailment : “The time is free,” says the new king Malcolm, and all duties shall be performed “in measure, time and place.” [V. ix. 21 and 39]. The tragedy attains the level of a poetic drama of superb grandeur. Indeed :

Macbeth projects the Christian vision of life and Man’s history... the vision ... not one of evil but of good triumphant at the end with the aid of the ‘Powers above.’²⁹ The play portrays the violation of the moral order of the universe, and the tragic hero is condemned by society and the cosmic order, while ironically, he ‘condemn[s] himself as well.’ In this, the play is strongly individualistic, displaying the self-assertion of Renaissance man:

The play incorporates two simultaneous movements, the 'moral' and the 'heroic' ... Macbeth revolves upon two poles of the Renaissance philosophy of man: the sense of a moral order, and the power of man that cannot be confined within it.³⁰

Interpretations of Time and Timelessness in 'Macbeth'

'Those two times therefore, the time past and the time future, how are they; since the time past is now no more, and the time future is not yet come? And as for the present, if it could be forever present, and not pass on to become time past, truly it should not be time but eternity.'

'Confessions' of St. Augustine

This quotation focuses on the concept of time that existed during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance alike and this concept is to be found in 'Macbeth'. The blasphemy of Macbeth consists of his rebellion against these sacred concepts of the ordinary, temporal world and the very laws of creation.

'Macbeth' opens with a prediction. When Macbeth hears the prophecies of the Weird Sisters, and later when he deliberately seeks them out and commands them, he is 'clinging' to the 'dimension' of time past and time future and their words do not release him but instead bind him completely within the confines of time. The Witches lack any spiritual knowledge – their knowledge is temporal, gained by means of a charm prepared by the most reprehensible objects of Nature: 'eye of the newt' and 'toe of the frog...'. Macbeth is not possessed by an evil spirit, but with his strong imagination he interprets everything that the Witches say to suit his own dynastic and purely self-oriented ambitions that inevitably lead to self-destruction. His relationship with them is not merely a psychological dependence but a dramatic symbiosis that is most apparent in the verbal repetition unknowingly uttered by him on his first appearance. The Witches chant: 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair'; Macbeth says: 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen'. Psychologically, Macbeth seems to internalize the Witches so that what they prophesy represent his own thoughts and imagination about his future. While Macbeth does not imagine the Witches, the latter reflect his imagination. What the Witches say to him, in some ways, is what Macbeth says to himself. The Witches predict the future which is intricately linked with Macbeth's imagination. Imagination tells Macbeth that he will be King of Scotland, imagination pronounces him invulnerable to man of woman born, that is, he cannot be harmed by any mortal being. Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane is a paradigm of impossibility and beyond the bounds of Macbeth's imagination. Macbeth commits a heinous, morally reprehensible, impossible crime and is ordained to face impossible physical consequences. One cannot aim to disrupt the moral, natural order of the universe, in Shakespeare's view, without facing the consequences, as Macbeth realizes much later.

Macbeth's ambition to become the King portrays an obsession with the future, which makes him restless and does not allow him to be at peace in the present. The three Witches represent Macbeth's imaginative obsession with the future and Lady Macbeth attempts to stir up his emotional and intellectual preoccupation with what is to come:

‘Thy letters have transported me beyond/
This ignorant present, and I feel now/
The future in the instant’
[I.V.53]

She is contemptuous of the present, believing that the present is only there to enable them to hoodwink those who live in the present and thereby she and her husband can look forward to a glorious future:

‘To beguile the time/ Look like the time...’ [I.V. 62-63]

To her, the present is significant only in relation to the attainment of a future end. Macbeth, too, is firmly in the grip of his imaginative obsession with the future. In his letter to Lady Macbeth he states that:

‘these Weird Sisters saluted me, and referred me to the coming on of time, with “Hail King that shalt be!” ‘ [I.v.8-10]

From this time, Macbeth is trapped in the dreary concept of the ‘coming on of time’ – a result of his ‘vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself’. Shakespeare himself refers to the rape of Lucrece [II.i.55] and in the poem on this subject he had depicted Tarquin with a similar reckless obsession before the crime and disgust after it. Macbeth, through his words ‘Macbeth does murder sleep’ powerfully combines murder and sleep but the phrase means more than sleeplessness in the literal sense. That Macbeth has murdered the sleeping Duncan is what is especially fearful in his deed. Not only has Duncan been wronged but the sacred nature of sleep has also been violated. ‘Wronged sleep’ rises in the conscience of the murderer powerfully. Sleep, that is ‘the death of each day’s life’ [II.ii.37] has been murdered by him and thus time, for Macbeth, becomes incessant. He and his wife now resemble the tortured criminal of China whose eyelids are cut away – only in their case this is not physically but metaphysically applicable.

After Duncan’s murder, though the clock depicts the progress of time, the day is dark:

‘...By the clock ‘tis day,
And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp’ [II.iv.6]

Macbeth’s castle represents a murky world where there are no alternations between day and night and time cannot be punctuated into its normal periods and changes. Time, therefore, is overwhelmingly oppressive, tedious and filled with horror. This is the world in which Macbeth lives – the world in which time is incessant. Thus, the ‘tomorrow’ for which Macbeth committed his heinous crime will never come for he looks for joy in a time that will never be – this is the strange poetic justice of the play. Just as the Witches torment the shipman by not allowing him to sleep, or to punctuate time into night and day, today and tomorrow, for Macbeth too time is monotonous, for he cannot sleep and cannot look forward to new hope on a new day. For him, there is only tedium:

‘Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;

.....

..... it is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
... signifying nothing.’ [V.v.19-21, 26-28]

Life becomes meaningless to Macbeth – a tale told by an idiot. Words themselves become meaningless and without significance – the term ‘Hereafter’ used by the Witches is echoed by Lady Macbeth in a reverential manner – ‘Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter!’ [I.v.55] – not appropriate to be used to describe a potential usurper. Finally, this same word that signified Macbeth’s ambition and faith in the supernatural, is used with bitterness by Macbeth when he hears of Lady Macbeth’s death:

‘She should have died Hereafter;
There would have been a time for such a word.’ [V. v.17-18]

_ ‘hereafter’ or future time must be validated by ‘Hereafter’ or eternity in order to give meaning to life, failing which, it will merely be a tale told by an idiot – meaningless and futile.

The dichotomy in the predictions of the Witches becomes apparent when Birnam Wood indeed comes to Dunsinane – a proposition initially considered to be impossible by Macbeth. And when the truth is revealed about Macduff’s birth, Macbeth realizes the deceptive nature of the Witches’ prophecy:

‘And be these juggling fiends no more believ’d,
That palter with us in a double sense;
That keep the word of promise to our ear,
And break it to our hope.’ [V.viii. 19-22]

Since Macbeth has been dwelling on false meanings, his life becomes meaningless. He lives under the illusion that if he somehow acts on his impulses with immediacy, he will be able to overtake the flow of time:

Strange things I have in head that will to hand,
Which must be acted ere the may be scanned’ [III.iv.138-140]

Later, Macbeth uses the image of a race to describe his response to time:

‘Time, thou anticipat’st my dread exploits:
The flighty purpose never is o’ertook
Unless the deed go with it. From this moment,
The very firstlings of my heart shall be
The firstlings of my hand.’ IV.i.144-48]

Macbeth believes that if he acts with immediacy, he will be able to overtake the flow of time and this illusion results in an absurd impatience at the end of the play, when he learns that the enemy is

approaching. He shouts at the 'cream-faced loon' [V.iii.11] who reports about this, puts on his armour unnecessarily early and instead of fortifying himself inside his castle, decides to fight in an insane hurry. All these responses are a consequence of Macbeth's desire to live in the future. Unscrupulous and selfish actions can result in temporary gains in worldly affairs that aim at a future goal. However, the human and moral laws that Macbeth has violated will inevitably reassert themselves, and those very things in the universe and in mankind that contradict the laws of time, rise up to destroy Macbeth. Birnam Wood does come to Dunsinane : that which seemed physically impossible, actually happens; finally, Macbeth, invulnerable to 'man of woman born' is confronted and vanquished by Macduff who

'...was from his mother's womb
Untimely ripp'd'. [V.viii. 15-16]

Macbeth, scornful of moral, law-abiding humanity, has not taken into account those aspects of humanity which are 'untimely' and eternal or timeless. Macbeth's desire to control time and gain supremacy over it is defeated by the timelessness symbolized by the victorious army of Malcolm. Macduff proclaims after Macbeth's death that 'the time is free' [V.ix.21] and Malcolm ordains that from now on, the 'grace of Grace' shall rule over actions performed in 'measure, time and place'. [V.viii.72-73]. The eternal laws of time will now prevail.

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