

Come, seeling night

Notes of Kildare Youth Theatre's production of *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare

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Macbeth is endlessly fascinating as a character. He grows and changes as the play progresses (as do Banquo, Malcolm, Lady Macbeth, and others). His soliloquys let us see him wrestling with the changes in his character, working out what he thinks he must do, always under pressure. For us, Macbeth's primary motivation is to rule well and to be liked and respected as a great leader. However, not everyone can make the transition from warrior to politician easily—each role requires completely different, and often contradictory, personal skills. Just look at the careers of Robert Mugabe in Zimbabwe; Sadat in Egypt; Gaddafi in Libya; Galtieri in Argentina; Pinochet in Chile; Chavez in Venezuela; Hussein in Iraq; Musharraf in Pakistan; Al-Assad in Syria; Mussolini in Italy; Franco in Spain—all successful soldiers before taking control of their country, and most failing to transform into politicians, with tragic and brutal consequences for their people. Like Macbeth, who early in his career was 'thought honest', 'valiant', 'brave' and who 'bought golden opinions from all sorts of people', these real dictators mostly started their political lives with the desire to improve their country's lot. Mugabe was hugely popular at first, as was Chavez. But power can corrupt. Shakespeare's great achievement in this play is to show *how* power corrupts. It is not a simple process. The whole play offers perspectives and insights, symbols and images, situations both real and magical, thoughts and actions, which - when taken together - offer us the Western World's best treatise on the nature of power and ambition. With this singular text we understand the need for accountability, transparency, democracy, and all of the checks and balances that can prevent the seemingly inevitable slide from 'peerless kinsman' to 'butcher'.

Pale hearted fear

Macbeth excels as a soldier because he can control his fear. He despises fear. This does not mean he is not at times fearful—he is—but he never lets anyone see it. His reasons for killing the Macduffs are primarily in case anyone would view him as fearful (which he confuses with mercy, conciliation, and negotiation—skills a politician would use). When the witches warn him to "beware Macduff" he thanks them for confirming what he already felt ("Thou hast harped my fear aright"). But when they assure him that "none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" he declares "Then live, Macduff: what need I fear of thee?" This is significant. Macbeth's meeting with the witches here (Act 4, Scene 1) is in private. He can freely say what's on his mind without any mortal overhearing. So he muses and debates, and having pronounced Macduff as no threat to him, he reconsiders. "Thou shalt not live, / That I may tell pale-hearted fear it lies / And sleep in spite of thunder." The real threat is not Macduff, but the perception of being afraid. What if people thought he was afraid to kill Macduff? That would be abhorrent to him. Better to be seen as one who has no fear, to be like someone who is easily able to sleep, unafraid, during a thunderstorm.

He can only kill Duncan when he works himself up into the *state of berserker*, a condition that is ferocious on the battlefield and that now helps him kill the old king. This condition banishes all emotions, especially that of fear. The language here, in Act 2 Scene 1, is our clue to how he's behaving on stage. It begins with a series of questions and doubts when he sees the "air-drawn dagger". The sentences are comparatively short – full thoughts in each one. "I have thee not, and yet I see thee still." "There's no such thing." "Come, let me clutch thee." He tries to work out if it's really there or in his "heat-oppressed brain". The action is fast, repetitive, and symptomatic of a state of nervousness, the kind we all experience just before doing a hugely significant action (an interview for an important job, a very public speech, a declaration of undying love, a crime we know is dreadful, a risk that could ruin us). We all know these moments, and we all know that we would never accomplish them if we didn't *get a grip*, become focused, grounded. So it is with Macbeth. He knows he has to banish "the milk of human kindness" and become "unnatural". Having worked himself up into a frenzy with the dagger, he suddenly becomes still and terrifying. The language

changes to become one fluid seven-line sentence full of broad vowels that slow the pace right down. It presents us with a compelling image of an alien thing, the personified 'Murther', stalking through the night with a singular purpose. As in all Shakespeare, the images contained in a character's soliloquy, always serve to tell us how that character subconsciously feels about *themselves* and not about what they purport to describe. Here Macbeth enters a trance-like state in which he is a supernatural, or unnatural, thing about to commit an unnatural act of destruction. This is the *berserker* in him that excludes all reality except the defined goal, the same state that made a 'Golgotha' of the battlefield in the play's opening and allowed him to carve "out his passage" with "his brandished steel" until "he faced the slave / Which ne'er shook hands, nor bade farewell to him / Till he unseemed him from the nave to th'chops". It takes tremendous energy to work oneself up into this state.

Only afterwards, when he comes out of this trance-state does he realise what he has done. The scene with Lady Macbeth immediately after the murder of Duncan shows us a man exhausted, in a state of complete shock, who has a muddled recollection of what happened, and who still clings to the weapons of execution, while his frantic wife tries to snap him out of it. She must finish it off because he is in no shape to do anything now. "I am afraid to think what I have done: / Look on't again I dare not." It is himself, and the uncontrollable beast within him, that is the focus of Macbeth's deepest fear here.

The soldier king

How can such a one be a ruler, let alone a king? Several times in the play he declares that he does not care if "destruction sicken" or if the world is consumed in waves, earthquakes or disaster, so long as he gets what he wants. The *berserker* will not be stopped. And what he wants is for his demon, with its "bloody and invisible hand," to destroy his fear, to "cancel and tear to pieces that great bond / Which keeps me pale!"

So he strives to act at all times to remove anything and anyone who might sense this unnatural being within him. He needs to "make our faces vizards to our hearts, / Disguising what they are." Of course his tragedy is that he cannot "look up clear" or "beguile the time" – these are the skills of diplomats and politicians. But Lady Macbeth can. She is the most practised politician here. All of Europe knew then, three years after the death of Elizabeth I, just how much a woman of skill and ambition, could change the course of history by masking what she felt in a world dominated by men and in which she played a male role.

Lady Macbeth's tragedy is that she never gets the opportunity to be the queen she had planned to become. She excels at public speeches, shifting between the complex formal language of state (Act 1, Scene 6) to that of conciliation and appeasement (Act 3, Scene 4). She lies effortlessly and manipulates superbly. The sacrifices she made were ultimately not worth it, because in the end she could not make the warrior a ruler.

Macbeth certainly tries to become a ruler. He makes speeches, holds state banquets, holds court in state, keeps loyal subjects on his side—but he can't do any of the political stuff well: the berserker-warrior is still there in the newly-forged politician. This is a man who rages at insults, real or imaginary. He is one who lashes out with violence rather than with diplomacy. He imagines that his "genius is rebuked" by barriers placed in his way at every turn and he must spend most of his time figuring out how to remove them rather than employing his time ruling. Like Oedipus, he desperately wants to "cast / The water of my land, find her disease, / And purge it to a sound and pristine health" not realising that the disease is actually himself. He envies the dead Duncan who can no longer be plagued by political issues ("Malice domestic, foreign levy"). Where he set out to rule in such a way that courted and maintained respect ("certain friends ...whose loves I may not drop"), he finds that his reign results in isolation: "honour, love, obedience, troops of friends, / I must not look to have, but in their stead / Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath."

The Machiavellian king

He does not see that many of these barriers are of his own making. Lady Macbeth, of course, *can* see that these problems are of his making but can find no way to make him realise it. She knows that absolute power comes at a price, and that price is often the suppression of humanising emotions and reflective thought. She has paid it (“unsex me here / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty”). She knows that thinking and reflecting makes one mad, and that the best course is to action (“you must leave this”, “Come on, ...sleek o’er your rugged looks”, “what’s done cannot be undone”). She would be open, Machiavellian and bold. She knows the one chilling and true fact about absolute power, and subsequently, about fear: “What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to account?”

Her motivation is to be queen with all the social and public trappings of power. What she gets is isolation, as Macbeth withdraws further into his thoughts and becomes psychologically *interior* (beautifully symbolised by his retreat inside to a small, heavily fortified stronghold on top of Dunsinane hill as his enemies converge on it from all sides across the whole island). In the end, it has not been worth it. “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.”

The People

The witches in our production are forces that impel him but do not control him. In fact, he tries to control them and to bend them to his will. They are the people. At the start of the play, Duncan’s disastrous regime has exposed the country to rebellions and invasions in which we see the people suffering. The kingdom of Scotland is in turmoil, and the poor and dispossessed are at the mercy of warring factions and kings. The murderer’s speech “I am one, my liege, / Whom the vile blows and buffets of the world / Have so incensed that I am reckless what / I do to spite the world” is a key note in this production. It shows the poor, the servants, the soldiers, and the witches all as one class pitted against the ruling class. The production draws parallels with contemporary Syria and Gaza where the fight for freedom against dictators and repressive regimes still goes on.

In this land there are many witches: the poor have turned to any means possible, including witchcraft, to help them rid their country of intolerant dictators. Although only 3 of the witches speak, they have infiltrated the regime, posing as servants and aides (Seyton, for example) in an attempt to bring it down.

The Puritan king

Macduff is a bit of a Puritan. He disapproves of the servants drinking; he is stern in his duty to Duncan; and he publically disapproves of the election of Macbeth as king – for even though Macbeth created the ‘opening’ for succession, the Thanes still have the power to elect and crown a successor. This was common practice in the Irish *derbfine* system and in the Scottish clan system. Macbeth has been ‘named’ by the Thanes and they will ‘invest’ him with the title in Scone. Macduff does not take part in the investment: his principled stance sends a strong message of disapproval, and he warns Ross to be vigilant “Lest our old robes sit easier than our new.” Yet Macbeth, as Malcolm later says, was “once thought honest” and there is no good reason at this stage for anyone to suspect, as strongly as Macduff does, that Macbeth is a regicide. Macduff holds firmly to his suspicions and to his principles, both of which motivate his flight to England to recruit armed help. This results in there being no-one there to protect his wife and children. Lady Macduff is correct: “He wants the natural touch.” He is not emotionally reckless like Macbeth; nor is he warm like Banquo. He is influenced by religious piety and perhaps blinded by principle. Given his early suspicions about Macbeth he should have known that to ‘abandon’ Fife will leave it exposed and vulnerable. He is to blame for their deaths. Even Malcolm is critical of this foolhardy action: “Why in that rawness left you wife and child ... without leave-taking?” So, while Macduff is principled, righteous, and patriotic, we believe that he is cold, and hard to like. When Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* was performed in 1606 there was a 7 year old boy in Huntingdon who would grow up to become one of England’s most calculating and principled Puritan leaders. The boy, Oliver Cromwell, became by

1645 Lieutenant General of the Parliamentary forces that took power by force, executed the king, and imposed a genocidal war of attrition on Ireland. 'Fit to govern? / No, not to live.' In a few of Shakespeare's plays we get an impression that he either gently mocks Puritanical characters (Malvolio in *Twelfth Night*) or else shows them as dangerous (Angelo in *Measure for Measure*). It's not surprising considering that the Puritan faction in London's government was one of the most vocal enemies of the theatre, accusing it of malign influence and unholy practices, and they strove to shut down theatres and censor plays. We are conjecturing here that such highly principled men of religion may not have received positive representation in Shakespeare's plays, and we suggest that there are elements of this attitude in his depiction of Macduff.

The sainted king

Duncan comes in a line of interesting patriarchal figures found in Shakespeare – all of whom make some disastrous mistake of judgement early in the play which sparks untold misery for those around them and for the world in general. The mistake is usually connected to a very public conferring of power or succession (Lear dividing his kingdom and leaving it to the wrong children; Titus nominating the wrong successor for emperor). How many people have to die – often horribly – before a patriarch learns something about humanity? Shakespeare seems to imply, at the end of these plays, that the suffering has been worth it because the patriarch has been humanised, has found inner peace. Thus, the world sacrifices itself to the edification of old men who, in the process of learning about it, destroy it.

Duncan is also seen as a semi-Christian entity, whom Macduff calls 'a most sainted king' whose wife spent more time praying than on anything else. Nonetheless, under his rule there are not one but two rebellions (MacDonwald's and Cawdor's) and an invasion (Sweno of Norway), none of whom he fights personally, preferring his generals to do the fighting. Additionally, his timing in announcing the succession could have been better. If Macbeth needed a spur to prick the sides of his intent, then this could easily have been it.

It is interesting that Malcolm, like his father, makes what we interpret as an unfortunate announcement at the end of the play to a room full of patriotic Scots thanes who have just overthrown a bloody dictator to gain freedom. He anglicises them with the command "Henceforth be earls", a notion that will surely not sit well with all "our country's honour" who some scenes earlier despaired at the quality of "unrough youths" who made up the bulk of Siward's reinforcements.

The king-becoming graces

Shakespeare goes to great lengths to expound the king-becoming graces, and to contrast good kings with bad ones (Edward of England and Duncan are pitted against Macbeth in this respect). The scene in which kingship is examined by Macduff and the apprentice king, Malcolm, (Act 4 Scene 3) is perhaps the most propagandist in the play as it places the concept of the English as a civilizing Christian force in symbolic opposition to the unlawful, heathen and tribal Scottish. There are no witches in the garden of Edward the Confessor. Instead we get a mild king who performs miracles. In our production Malcolm is dubious about the quality of the 'healing' provided by this god-king, and sneers at the spectacle, reminding us of the attitude of many toward the evangelical healing-pastors in the Western churches today who know how to work a crowd and gain power and money by 'divine communion'. The English are presented very interestingly, and if we can look past the propaganda, we see values extolled by English leaders that we can still see today in military culture. In our production we highlight some of these as unsavoury. For example, Siward's only concern upon hearing of the death of his son in this 'foreign' war is to know if he died fighting or fleeing ("Had he his hurts before?" / "Ay, on the front"), and he rather curtly shuts off sympathy from the Scots. The English have sent 10,000 teenagers to fight in this war - "many unrough youths, that even now / Protest their first of manhood" – which, of course, can be considered symbolic of the hatred the island feels for Macbeth that even adolescents burn to depose him. But for us it illuminates the ease with which the English leaders can send so many of their children to their deaths, and care not so much that they died but that they died fighting.

The horrid deed

Being a monarch was a dangerous business in medieval times. Several fell to the sword, blade or rope—weapons usually wielded by their uncles, powerful nobles, siblings and relatives. However, when Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* Elizabeth I had recently died of natural causes having ruled for decades. Her successor, James I believed in divine absolutism, that is, that kings were agents of God and had a divine right to rule. In addition to the themes we have already explored in the play, we suspect that Shakespeare had to obviously foreground other themes (and ones that exist only superficially) for the royal audience of his play. In presenting *Macbeth* to James I, Shakespeare is, on one hand, saying that only those possessed by the Devil would dream of killing a monarch. On the other hand he is catching something of the spirit of his time, and suggesting that once the king is seen to be vulnerable, human, infallible, not to mention wicked, then he is fair game and should be removed by whatever means necessary. Less than 30 years after Shakespeare died, James' son, Charles I, was executed during a popular revolt led by, not the warring nobility, but the emerging middle class. In that short space of time Britain saw a profound shift in popular and cultural attitude regarding the sanctity of the monarch.

In the beginning of the play the Macbeths are embarking on a truly dreadful deed, beyond the imaginative scope of most of those around them. By the end of the play we realise that the boy king, Malcolm, has little hope of survival, now that Macbeth has shown the lords that all it takes is a knife, a party, and the cover of darkness.

Mouth honour

The language of *Macbeth* shifts between the formal, public declarations of loyalty, welcome, communal ritual, and the informal, private deliberations and anxieties of the individual. The images Shakespeare employs for formal speeches are, for the most part, suitably dense and complex, appealing to an educated audience.

But those he deploys in private conversations and in heated reflections are vivid, electric and compelling. The dialogue between characters when they are 'in private' is often tougher and sharper than any found in modern drama.

In this production we have used the public, formal discourse to help us build images of the feudal, hierarchical and strict culture prevailing when Duncan is king. The characters usually act as one unit in this fairly rigid society. That is the price they pay for order, stability, unity. This social order, however, is becoming harder and harder to maintain—rebellion, civil war, and invasion are all symptoms of an authority slipping.

The private dialogue allows us to create contemporary gestures, mannerisms, whisperings, mumbles and hesitations. For many critics, *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth* are an early prototype of the Machiavellian modern partnership, the type that would blossom with the burgeoning capitalist world and who will bend the inhibiting medieval social order to their will. They are presumably what Shakespeare saw all around him and, crucially, what was within himself as well (property owner, business man, profiteer). One assumes that, as a writer, Shakespeare uses characters in other plays as developments and as experiments for *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth* (Goneril, Regan and Edmund in *King Lear*; Tamora and Aaron in *Titus Andronicus*; Volumnia and Coriolanus in *Coriolanus*). They are eager, fascinating, self-seeking individuals who are still loosely tethered to the old, formal, public world of medieval order but who are straining greedily towards the promising utopia of capitalism and industry. This theme gets its fullest and most marvellous treatment in *The Merchant of Venice* (where the *true* merchant of the play, Portia, uses everything at her disposal, including her gender, to 'hazard' and to make bonds and profit). If modern tragedy can be said to have a unifying theme in the way that Greek tragedy arguably did, then it is perhaps provided not so much by the ultimate victory of these characters (salesmen, bureaucrats, power brokers, slave traders) but by the price they paid to create that victory—the suppression of the regulatory human qualities. *Lady Macbeth's* invocation of the spirits to turn her "milk to gall" so that she can achieve her "fell purpose" is the moral cornerstone on which their progress is built.

Restless ecstasy

Banquo is a slightly different version of the soldier. He is humanised by having a son with whom he spends considerable time (unlike Macduff who abandons his). Yet he is also on the look-out for a chance that might improve his lot. He seems to balk at the methods he suspects Macbeth used to get what he was 'promised' and he trusts a lot more in fate than Macbeth does. And of course, he has no Lady Macbeth to spur his ambition on. He is Macbeth's friend and ally. Their conversation when we first meet them is friendly, showing close camaraderie, but this changes as time and events progress. Their final conversation is formal, impersonal and lacks all of the intimacy of the earlier.

Macbeth has killed countless people, including Duncan – yet he is troubled by the ghost of only one. This possibly indicates the way Macbeth views the murder of Banquo, as something more troubling even than the murder of Duncan. In the wonderful soliloquy 'To be thus is nothing' we see Macbeth trying to convince himself that Banquo has to go – he lists reasons for this, as if he needs persuasion. It all turns on the fact that Banquo's sons will be kings while Macbeth's will not. This gives us an insight into the kind of power pre-Christian kings aimed for. They are Homeric, Norse, relying on the greatness of their deeds to confer immortality on them after they die – the hope that they will live on in the praises of others. Macbeth has already squandered the chance of fame and glory in the afterlife as he has "given to the common enemy of man" (ie the Devil) his "eternal jewel" (his soul). And he's not making much of a job in gaining loyal and loving subjects who will fondly remember his reign in songs and poetry ("the thanes fly from me"). So he needs successors here in this world if he is to have reputation, heart-honour as opposed to mouth-honour, and a form of immortality. The witches have told him, and told Banquo, that Macbeth will not have royal successors. But he is a warrior. So he fights against fortune, and destiny "Come fate, into the list / And champion me to th' utterance." This is Macbeth's longest battle in the play – with *destiny*, which he takes on in single combat, and loses. He will challenge Fate the only way he knows how to – as a warrior.

Killing Banquo and Fleance is a way to fight Fate, to thwart the prophecy, to ensure that what the witches predicted would now not actually happen. Thus when he murders Banquo he is stunned to see the latter's ghost. "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." He is used to murder, and doesn't find it strange. But he cannot understand that something simply refuses to die. It's wonderfully symbolic. Shakespeare shows us Fate, recently challenged by Macbeth, pushing back against him. Here it's as if Destiny is saying in no uncertain terms that 'You, a mere mortal, cannot control the outcome of generation and of succession. Banquo will rise, live on in the heredity of his lineage, and be remembered, while you will be forgotten.' With all his power Macbeth cannot fight against Fate and win. He cannot even shape his own destiny. He cannot be loved, admired and respected enough to be celebrated as a just and true king after he dies.

Thus it is with most tyrants and dictators. They retreat into themselves, collapsing into the knowledge that their best efforts to be good become perverted by the wretched methods they have used ("Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill"). They become isolated, hated creatures, amassing more enemies than friends, squandering all the nation's resources on their protection.

Macbeth sinks to this pit of despair, in which he has (like Lear), profound realisations about being human. Death is the end of all. There is no afterlife and no way to make an impression big enough in this life that it will carry your name to the "last syllable of recorded time". One's whole life is "a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more." Never to be heard again is one of his greatest fears. And like Lear, he emerges from the abyss and returns to the fight, something that he knows and understands. "I will not yield." Almost his last words, spoken with sword in hand. And as he began so he ends: "A soldier, and a'feard."