

A Comparative Study of Macbeth and Brutus on the Grounds of Psychoanalysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to make a comparative analysis on Shakespeare's immortal characters Macbeth and Brutus on the grounds of psycho-analysis. Shakespeare, with his wit, has designed various characters. They differ from one another in many aspects. But some characters are very similar in their actions. In some way they become victims of the game that is played on them by other characters. Macbeth and Brutus are such victims. Both Brutus and Macbeth kill their kings. But they were very faithful to their kings once. In *Macbeth*, the three Witches and Lady Macbeth create evil in Macbeth. In Brutus' case Cassius changes him against Caesar. Till their death, both the characters have been suffering from mental conflicts. These conflicts lead to Brutus' pathetic suicide and makes Macbeth to more evil by killing many people in suspicion. This paper analyses both the characters' mental conflicts and their inability to overcome those conflicts.

KEYWORDS

Macbeth; Brutus: Psychoanalysis; Characterisation.

Macbeth is introduced in the play as a warrior hero, whose fame on the battlefield wins him great honour from the king. Though, he is a human being whose private ambitions are made clear to the audience through his asides and soliloquies. These often conflict with the opinion others have of him, which he describes as "golden". Despite his fearless character in battle, Macbeth is concerned by the prophecies of the Witches, and his thoughts remain confused, before, during, and after his murder of King Duncan. When Duncan announces that he intends the kingdom to pass to his son Malcolm, Macbeth appears frustrated. When he is about to commit the murder, he undergoes terrible pangs of conscience. Macbeth is at his most human and sympathetic when his

manliness is mocked and demeaned by his wife in Act I, scene VII:

"Was the hope drunk,

Wherein you dress'd yourself? Hath it slept since,

And wakes it now, to look so green and pale

At what it did so freely? From this time

Such I account thy love, Art thy afeard

To be the same in thine own act and valour

As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that

Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life

And live a coward in thine own esteem,

Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I
would',
Like the poor cat I' the edge?"

However, by Act III, Scene 2, Macbeth has resolved himself into a far more stereotypical villain and asserts his manliness over that of his wife. His ambition now begins to spur him toward further terrible deeds, and he starts to disregard and even to challenge Fate and Fortune. Each successive murder reduces his human characteristics still further, until he appears to be the more dominant partner in the marriage. This feature of his personality is well presented in Act IV, Scene 1, when he revisits the Witches of his own accord. His boldness and impression of personal invincibility mark him out for a tragic fall.

Macbeth's wife is one of the most powerful female characters in literature. Unlike her husband, she lacks all humanity, as we see well in her opening scene, where she calls upon the "Spirits that tend on mortal thoughts" to deprive her of her feminine instinct to care. Her burning ambition to be queen is the single feature that Shakespeare developed far beyond that of her counterpart in the historical story he used as his source. Lady Macbeth persistently taunts her husband for his lack of courage, even though we know of his bloody deeds on the battlefield. But in public, she is able to act as the consummate hostess, enticing her victim, the king, into her castle. When she faints immediately after the murder of Duncan, the audience is left wondering whether this, too, is part of her act. Ultimately, she fails the test of her own hardened ruthlessness. She becomes mentally deranged, a mere shadow of her former commanding self, gibbering in Act V, Scene 1 as she "confesses" her part in the murder.

In *Julius Caesar*, Brutus is the most complex character in the play. He is proud of his reputation for honour and nobleness. He is the only major character in the play

intensely committed to fashioning his behaviour to fit a strict moral and ethical code, but he takes actions that are unconsciously hypocritical. One of the significant themes that Shakespeare uses to enrich the complexity of Brutus involves his attempt to ritualize the assassination of Caesar. He cannot justify, to his own satisfaction, the murder of a man who is a friend and who has not excessively misused the powers of his office. Consequently, thinking of the assassination in terms of a quasi-religious ritual instead of cold-blooded murder makes it more acceptable to him. Unfortunately for him, he consistently misjudges the people and the citizens of Rome; he believes that they will be willing to consider the assassination in abstract terms.

Brutus is guided in all things by his concepts of honour. He speaks of them often to Cassius, and he is greatly disturbed when events force him to act in a manner inconsistent with them. Consider his anguish when he drinks a toast with Caesar while wearing a false face to hide his complicity in the conspiracy. Ironically, his widely reputed honour is what causes Cassius to make an all-out effort to bring him into an enterprise of debatable moral respectability. Brutus' reputation is so great that it will act to convince others who are as yet undecided to join. Brutus' concentration on honourable and noble behaviour also leads him into assuming a naive view of the world. He is unable to see through the roles being played by Cassius, Casca, and Antony. He does not recognize the bogus letters as having been sent by Cassius, although they contain sentiments and diction that would warn a more perceptive man. He underestimates Antony as an opponent, and he loses control over the discussion at the Capitol following the assassination by meeting Antony's requests too readily. Brutus as a naive thinker is most clearly revealed in the scene in the Forum. He presents his

reasons for the assassination, and he leaves believing that he has satisfied the Roman citizens with his reasoned oration. He does not realize that his speech has only moved the mob emotionally; it has not prodded them to make reasoned assessments of what the conspirators have done.

Brutus is endowed with qualities that could make him a successful private man but that limit him severely, even fatally, when he endeavours to compete in public life with those who do not choose to act with the same ethical and moral considerations. In his scene with Portia, Brutus shows that he has already become alienated with his once happy home life because of his concentration on his "enterprise," which will eventually cause him to lose everything except the belief that he has acted honourably and nobly. In the tent at Sardis, after learning of Portia's death and believing that Cassius is bringing discredit on the republican cause, Brutus becomes most isolated. His private life is destroyed, and he also has difficulty avoiding the taint of dishonour in his public life.

Brutus makes moral decisions slowly, and he is continually at war with himself even after he has decided on a course of action. He has been thinking about the problem that Caesar represents to Roman liberty for an unspecified time when the play opens. After Cassius raises the subject and asks for Brutus' commitment, he requests time to think the matter over, and a month later, speaking alone in his orchard, he reveals that he has since thought of little else. He has trouble arriving at a decision whether to participate in the assassination, he expresses contradictory attitudes towards the conspiracy, he attempts to "purify" the murder through ritual, and he condemns Cassius' money raising practices while asking for a share. His final words, "Caesar, now be still: / I kill'd not thee with half so good a will," are almost a supplication for an end to his mental torture. On the other

hand, Brutus characteristically makes decisions that are essential to his and Cassius' success with much less forethought, and after he's committed to a plan, he does not waiver. He quickly takes command of the conspiracy and makes crucial decisions regarding Cicero and Antony. He does not, however, make adequate plans to solidify republican control of government following the assassination, and he too readily agrees to allow Antony to speak.

Brutus' character is made even more complex by his unconscious hypocrisy. He has conflicting attitudes toward the conspiracy, but he becomes more favourable following his becoming a member of the plot against Caesar. He attacks Cassius for raising money dishonestly, yet he demands a portion. Nevertheless, at the end, Brutus is a man who nobly accepts his fate. He dismisses the ghost of Caesar at Sardis. He chooses personal honour over a strict adherence to an abstract philosophy. He reacts calmly and reasonably to Cassius' death, as he had earlier in a moment of crisis when Popilius revealed that the conspiracy was no longer secret. In his last moments, he has the satisfaction of being certain in his own mind that he has been faithful to the principles embodying the honour and nobility on which he has placed so much value throughout his life.

While attempting to analyse the Shakespearean villains, it is must to do psychoanalysis, as the characters are not completely historical but of his own. In *Macbeth*, the final play under consideration here, what compels the main protagonist to destroy not only several others but himself also? Is he simply ruthlessly ambitious? Manipulated by his wife? A victim of competitive feudalism? The better to respond to it in the context of a broader query about the value of psychoanalysis, we might reframe this motivational query as follows: is Macbeth's downfall caused by metaphysical, social or

personal factors? If we argue that metaphysical factors are to blame, then we are saying that tragedy is caused by events which lie outside human control and can be summed up as 'fate'. For example, the connection between the witches and Macbeth is set up in the first scene; they declare oxymoronically that 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' and his first words are 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen'. This either suggests their magical power over him and ability to infect his language and therefore his thoughts or it could be Shakespeare's way of indicating their psychological similarities. There are undoubtedly metaphysical elements to this play, most likely designed to engage King James who was greatly interested in the occult and witchcraft. So any attempt to present *Macbeth* solely in psychological terms would be to misrepresent Shakespeare's probable conceptions and intentions. In some instances, a supernatural aspect is an essential partner to the script, such as when Lady Macbeth calls up dark forces to guide her. If this were to be performed without any kind of special effects, the theatricality the scene demands would not be brought out.

However, the play also contains three scenes which seem to demand a psychological reading. These scenes feature visual manifestations of unconscious motivations at work in the psyche: in 2.1, Macbeth sees a dagger leading him on to murder Duncan, in 3.4 Banquo's ghost appears to him, and in 5.1 Lady Macbeth imagines there to be spots of blood on her hands.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, the dagger Macbeth sees is a visual manifestation of a compulsion to act, Banquo's ghost is a manifestation of Macbeth's guilt and the spots of blood are manifest symbols of guilt. Whether Banquo's ghost actually appears or not is a production decision: if there is no ghost we deduce that Macbeth is mentally unstable and a psychological reading is needed but,

if there is one, the supernatural aspects of the play are elevated and there is far less need for Freudian analysis. We can be sure of the unlikelihood of any production showing blood stains on Lady Macbeth's hands as the psychological impact of this scene is indicated in the verse. While most of the play is written in steady blank verse, in this scene the hand-washing Lady Macbeth speaks in irregular, choppy prose, reflecting her diminishing grasp on reality, just as Othello's mental instability is reflected in his linguistic breakdown. The doctor present in the scene is unable to assist because there is nothing physiologically wrong with her – only psychologically. Freud attributed continual, obsessive hand washing to a patient's fear of sexuality and a lack of moral purity.

In *Julius Caesar*, Shakespeare depicts the unconscious and the struggle on the fields of the first topography. Shakespeare sends the main action in Plutarch—Anthony presenting the crown to Caesar—offstage, and replaces it with the first conspiratorial dialogue between Cassius and Brutus. The repressed but rebellious unconscious of Rome is foregrounded. Cassius teases the conspiracy in Brutus out from his private thoughts; he causes Brutus to remove his "veiled" look and to speak his mind consciously and publicly. Brutus explains to Cassius that he is "at war" with himself. When Cassius asks if Brutus can see his own face, Brutus responds with a statement that sounds clearly the mutual recognition: "No, Cassius; for the eye sees not itself/But by reflection, by some other things". Cassius is that mirror that reflects Brutus' private thoughts, and with them, the unconscious of the situation in Rome, for Brutus to know himself, for Cassius to affirm that Brutus is politically reliable, and for the audience to see. Cassius serves the purpose, albeit for his own strategic interests, of the interpreter who reveals

the tragic conflict between Brutus' inner world and his political statecraft.

Ambition, hierarchy, the supernatural - from a psychoanalytic perspective, we must also take into account the connotations such terms would have had for an Elizabethan audience. Elizabethans saw ambition, for example, as a threat to hierarchy associating it with Satan's rebellion against God, as well as being one of the human motivations which resulted in the fall. So what seems to originate in Macbeth and Brutus' psyche actually have greater implications for society as a whole. In this case at least the mental and the social are inseparable. If we look at both the plays with such cultural knowledge in mind, it becomes apparent that Macbeth and Brutus know that the implications of their regicidal actions extend beyond themselves. And this, interestingly, leads us back to psychoanalysis for we must deduce that Macbeth and Brutus are driven by a narcissistic compulsion which is ultimately self-destructive.

When Duncan's body is discovered and Donalbain asks "What is amiss?" Macbeth's reply seems to apply more to himself than anyone else present: 'You are, and do not know't: / The spring, the head, the fountain of your blood / Is stopped, the very source of it stopped'. Clearly Macbeth cannot shake his belief in the divine chain of being; by murdering Duncan he has disturbed the God-given order of things and condemned himself. He knows on some level that he is simply not up to playing the part of king, which is why his 'borrow'd robes' and title begin to 'Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe / Upon a dwarfish thief'. He has killed the father figure only to discover that he cannot perform the father's duties, and does not even seem to enjoy being a monarch. Lady Macbeth, too, identifies Duncan as a paternal figure, telling Macbeth that the king's sleeping form 'resembled / My father'. By helping to murder him she has,

in part, fulfilled an Oedipal desire which, according to Freud, precipitates the onset of madness. Continuing the motif of parenting, Lady Macbeth is, initially at least, the diabolically maternal figure who instructs the Macbeth to use a dagger to take the paternal king. She complains he is 'too full o'th'milk of human kindness' to commit such a deed, equating maternal influence with weakness and resisting all such motherly instincts herself. i.e. Images of violence, unnaturalness and childlessness⁷¹ plague their marriage, the scene where Lady Macbeth calls up spirits to 'unsex me here' being one of the most striking in the play. Children are not merely absent in this play. Freud believed the childlessness of the Macbeths to be an example of 'poetic justice' as well as the cause of Lady Macbeth's mental breakdown.

Shakespeare, in the first scene of the second act has Brutus speak in soliloquy, the dramatic form that most closely resembles psychoanalytic free association. Brutus admits to himself that he has no personal reason to kill Caesar. He works out the political reasons why he must do it. It is revealed through Portia's dialogue with Brutus that this contradiction has not been easy on Brutus. She tells Brutus that he has been getting out of bed suddenly and walking about "musing, and sighing, with arms across" - a position that Shakespeare stages to show disturbed thoughts. After the assassination, Brutus explains to the masses why he killed Caesar. It is in this speech, which Freud quotes, where Brutus' ambivalence is most salient. He claims to love Caesar as much as Caesar's dearest friend. He weeps because Caesar loved him, rejoices at Caesar's fortunes, honours Caesar's valour, cries tears for having killed a man with all of those qualities, yet he slew Caesar to prevent becoming a slave under Caesar's ambition. While the logic of the speech makes sense at a political level, and the gullible masses are easily swayed to its

conclusions, there remains an unresolvable contradiction at the subjective level. If Brutus truly had so much love for Caesar then his desire to kill Caesar, even in its liberationist context, must arise from and function at a different location of his mind's topography. It arises from a place where hates Caesar. It is the result of a joining of political strategy with an unconscious death drive against a rival.

Shakespeare dramatizes the results of Brutus' conflict. His militarily ill-timed fight with Cassius may be a symptom of Brutus' frayed relations with those he loves. While on the surface, Brutus may have a valid and politically-correct complaint against Cassius' forces for bribing and robbing, the traumatic memory of the assassination haunts this scene like a revenant. Brutus says to Cassius, "Remember March, the Ides of March remember", which recalls the soothsayer's warning, "Beware the Ides of March". The day carries, in its traumatic memory load, Brutus' unresolvable conflict; it now stages its traumatic repetition as a militarily inappropriate fracture of unity with Cassius. Minutes later, he reveals to Cassius that Portia committed suicide due to his absence, another victim of the fracture of loving relations. When he tries to sleep that night, Caesar comes back to him as a revenant.

At this point in the play, Brutus' logic for killing Caesar has moved to his conscious. It is his *love* for Caesar that has taken up a position in his unconscious, and with the unrelenting force of the return of the unconscious, is manifested as a ghost. When asked what he is, the ghost claims to be Brutus' evil spirit and announces that he will see Brutus on the battlefield at Philippi. He is now facing *both* of his conflict; they are both in his conscious and their dissonance will take over and determine the last few steps of Brutus' life. He makes another military error by calling an attack too soon, which indirectly results in Cassius killing himself. Now all of the people he loved most Caesar, Portia and Cassius have died. It remains for Brutus to kill the last place where his struggle rages on – himself. He tells Volumnius that their enemies have beat them to "the pit". The image of the pit tropes both the hunt—a hunted animal is driven into a pit. Brutus reasons with Volumnius that "it is more worthy to leap in [themselves]. The scene that he faces is the irreconcilable conflict in his mental topography—a tragic double-bind that can only be resolved by his death. When he kills himself, he clearly states the function of his action, "Caesar, now be still".

The characters' decisions taken in impulse have made their tragic flaw. These decisions drive both the characters good to bad and then to worse at last to worst.

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