

PATRIARCHATE, FATE, DESIRE AND IMAGINATION

- A study of *Macbeth*

Joacim Frisk 720223-1911

INTRODUCTION

My interest for this play arose two years ago, during the introductory 5 point-course in Shakespeare's work. I read the play as an addition to the other comprehensive plays and was instantly captured by its dazzling metaphorical language. It's a violent play, and most of all, I find its content of ideas extremely fascinating. Last year, at Gotland University, I studied Ingmar Bergman's films. I analyzed Bergman's film *Hour of the Wolf* (1968) and was immediately struck by its similarities with *Macbeth*. This essay is not to be about Bergman, but I believe a better insight into the content of ideas in *Macbeth*, will make me better understand *Hour of the Wolf*, which is by many reconciled as the most obscure film of Bergman.

The purpose of this essay is partly to do a minor study of critical literature on *Macbeth* and partly to describe my own theories and thoughts on the play. In this matter, I try, as impartial as possible, to find out what the play really is about. What does it tell the audience of today? My method is to study some interesting conceptions which I think are relevant to the play's intrigue. It is not my intention to adequately explain these conceptions, rather to give my personal interpretation of them. I study these conceptions in their dramatic context and give a close reading of them.

The conceptions I have chosen to analyze within this limited context are a) *Patriarchate* - In what way can you say that the play is permeated by a patriarchal worldview? b) *Fate* - What does *Fate* mean, and can the characters' actions in the play be better understood if you consider this conception? c) *Desire* - How does *Desire* effect the characters' actions in the play? d) *Imagination* - What meaning has *Imagination* and in what way might one relate the conception of *Imagination* to the conception of *Desire*?

This essay is disposed in the following way : On the pages to come, I will systematically analyze the above mentioned conceptions in their dramatic context. When this brief account is accomplished, I will, as pointed out earlier, carry through a minor study of critical literature regarding this play. I am curious to explore, if the literature gives any support to my analyze of *Macbeth* with these four conceptions. How do literature view *Macbeth*, and do its thoughts have any resemblance to mine? These questions will hopefully be answered in the summary, which will conclude this essay. My ambition is not, of course, to cover every aspect of *Macbeth*, and many other conceptions would probably be of relevance. But now let's get down to business!

CONCEPTIONS

In this part of the essay, I will present the four conceptions, which, according to my view, are of central significance in the understanding of *Macbeth*.

Patriarchate

When it comes to the conception of *Patriarchate*, I aim at the overarching system of ideas that the characters in the play are a part of. What most adequately characterizes the system called *Patriarchate*, is loyalty, obedience, fidelity, bravery and steadfastness, among other things. *Macbeth* shows both bravery and steadfastness in the opening scene, at least we are told so, by a brave warrior.

Act 1, Scene 2
Sergeant :

“ ... For brave *Macbeth* – well he deserves that name ...”

The enemies attack again in new formations, but *Macbeth* and *Banquo* are not terrified. They *steadfastly* enter the combat again with double powers.

Act 1 Scene 2

Seargant:

“I must report they were as cannons overcharged with double cracks, so they doubly redoubled.
Strokes upon the Foe.”

As a proof of his warlike application and loyalty, Macbeth is rewarded the title Cawdor – a mark of what importance the *title* has in a firmly rooted patriarchal culture.

Act 1 Scene 2:

Duncan:

“No more that thane of Cawdor shall deceive
Our bosom interest – go pronounce his present death
And with his former title great Macbeth.”

An example of the deep loyalty Macbeth initially feels towards the king is disclosed when the king and Macbeth meet after the final combat.

Act 1 Scene 4:

Macbeth:

“The service and the loyalty lowe in doing it (Serve the king) pays itself. Your highness part is to receive our duties and our duties.
Are to your throne and state children and servants which do but what they should, by doing every thing
Safe toward your love and honour.”

In this part we are also given a clear example of the pompous, airy, spiritualized usage of language, which I mean characterizes a patriarchal culture. A bit later, in the sixth scene, this is further hold up. Duncan senses a spritualized atmosphere at Macbeth’s castle.

Act 1 Scene 6:

Duncan:

“This guest of Summer
The temple haunting martlet, does approve
By his loved mansionry, that the heaven’s breath
Smells woolingly here...”

The visit at the castle is regulated by a strict ceremonial. Duncan pays his respect to the hostess.

Act 1 Scene 6:

Duncan:

“See See, our honourd hostess...”

The celebration of victory is soon ended and the gentle folks and the servants go to sleep. But the Macbeths got evil things on their minds. Macbeth has a bad consciousness, but his lady pushes him on. This evidently bad consciousness of Macbeth,

what does it really depend on? According to my view of things, it depends on former unshakeable loyalty to the king and his system. Macbeth has doubts, when he stands in front of the fact of breaking this system of structure. His desire wants it, but his rational consciousness self speaks another language. This is where we front the tragedy of Macbeth. A desire to break down the prevailing system and alongside with that his own Ego – and thereby reach the title of king, *or* keep his loyalty towards the ruling king and the prevailing structure and *accept* his present place within this network:

Act 1 Scene 7

Macbeth (speaking to Lady Macbeth):

“We will proceed no further in this business
He hath honour’d me of late, and I have bought
Golden opinions from all sorts of people
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss
Not cast aside so soon.”

Apparently Macbeth is a very complicated nature. The murder that he commits breaks him down and he is constantly aware of it. An echo of the old times always haunts his soul. His final insight in the last act, is an insight that he carries within him all the time during the play.

Fate

How should one then understand the role of *Fate* in this cruel play? According to my view, the adamant patriarchal structure is closely connected to a strong belief in fate. In a patriarchal structure culture, the concept of order is of great importance. The task is to defeat chaos where ever it arises, that is, struggling towards a conception that threatens to break down the fundament of society. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare illustrates, more explicit than in i.e. *Hamlet*, a radical *stoical* philosophy, which forms the fundament in this ancient Scottish society. What is then stoic philosophy? Above all, stoic philosophy is about restraining one’s desires and passions (Lindberg, 2001). The important thing is to fit in God’s all-embracing plan or the fate God has decided for humanity and for each individual. There is a slight difference between Hellenistic and later renaissance neostoicism (breaking news during Shakespeare’s life-time, foremost representative was Justus Lipsius, Dutchman 1547-1606). Ancient stoical philosophy with Seneca as foremost representative denied the existence of God, and the main task was to follow one’s own destiny. Neostoicism could only exist on the premises of an all-embraced God – one could not deny God during this time. God and destiny thus became concepts describing the same thing. To obey the law of God, and follow the path God has chosen, meant maintaining both order within oneself but also maintaining civic order, which – as I wrote above – meant not letting imagination, desire and passions become rampant.

One might then ask oneself, what kind of society this worldview generates? What kind of people dwell in such a place? The stoic ideal closely relates to that of Christian philosophy. Man’s mission lies in Eternity. He shouldn’t let earthly matters get a grip of him. This is a sharp dualistic philosophy. Sharp limits are set between Spirit and Matter, Sin and Righeousness, Order and Chaos, Woman and Man, and so on.

The system postulates a human type that is compliant in the inherent structure and directs his mental energy towards a righteous brave, loyal life. But, and here is the interesting thing about this, Man suffers under this dualistic totalitarian bondage. In order to play the role of a decent creature of society, he is forced to deny part of his own nature, the chaos in him, i. e. his phantasies, dreams, desires, sexuality and need of disorder.

Considering the above, it is perhaps not difficult to conclude, that Macbeth constitutes the most complex role in the play. He is really suffering under this dualistic philosophy. He feels desire – for the crown and for power. He is suffering under the burden of the overarching structure, and he wishes no more than to break it down. He *could* have had these feelings towards the state within him already *before* the meeting with the witches. The duality in his nature has created a preparedness in his perception and when the desire attacks him, it takes over his soul like an evil spirit, who thereafter directs his actions – one finds, by the way, a similar theme in *Measure for measure*, where the desire eventually shows itself superior even to the Puritan duke Angelo.

In addition to this we must also have in mind the schizophrenia of violence and war, which the patriarchate creates and that is within the patriarchal sphere. I mean, as a warrior you can commit what sinister actions you want, if they only are directed towards things and people coming from outside the system.

Act 1 Scene 2

Captain:

“...Till he (Macbeth) unseamed him from the nave to the chaps
And fixed his head upon our battlements.”

Within the system, loyalty and tolerance are expected. But violence creates, perhaps, new violence. Isn't that the way of the world? Back to the matter again; how is this expressed in the play? How does Shakespeare express that Macbeth's tragedy in fact also is Scotland's tragedy? We can see this in the text. That stoical philosophy permeates the play and is obvious in act 1, scene 4. It's Cawdor's way of dying, Shakespeare deals with here, in accordance with “the fate-philosophy” of the society.

Act 1 Scene 4

Malcolm:

“...Nothing in his life
Became him like leaving it : he died
As one that had been studied in his death
To throw away the dearest thing he owned
As't were a careless trifle.”

Macbeth, in contrast, immediately begins to indulge in day dreams about the crown. Why not help fate a little? But he is frightened by his desire and phantasies.

Act 1 Scene 3

Macbeth:

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

But he is not so sure. His next line is:

Act 1 Scene 3

Macbeth:

“If chance will have make me king, why,
Chance will crown me
Without my stir.”

But he falters again, when Duncan has announced the act of succession.

Act 1, Scene 5

Macbeth:

“The price of Cumberland! That is a step
On which I must fall down or else o'erleap...”

Macbeth's cupidity battles with his will to obediently follow destiny. He gets pangs of conscience when he faces his created murder plans. In act 1 scene 7, he speaks about Duncan, now visiting Inverness.

Act 1 Scene 7

Macbeth:

“...To our own lips. He’s here in double trust:
First as I am his kinsman and his subject
Strong both against the deed, then as his host
Who should against his murderer shut the door.”

After all complications Macbeth finally comes to a conclusion. His struggle against fate, against God has only turned out to be a conceited dream.

Act 5, Scene 5

“... 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.”

Desire and Imagination

I deal with these two conceptions at the same time, because I think they are intimately connected to one another in the play. As pointed out earlier, *Desire* and *Imagination* are opposites to the virtues we find in a patriarchal society. They both threaten the order of society. We can observe this in Shakespeare’s language, like when the witches speak in the very first scene, but also when Macbeth speaks. The witches’ line in Act 1 Scene 1, is a gloomy omen speaking of an order that is threatened by disintegration. As mentioned earlier, this disintegration is inherent in the nature of the system.

Act 1, Scene 1

Witch 2:

“When the hurly burly’s done
When the battle’s lost and won.”

The violence creates a world of madness (see above). In the first scene, in act one, the witches together utter the very famous lines in the play:

Act 1, Scene 1

The Witches:

“Paddock calls – Anon –
Fair is foul and foul is fair
Hover through the fog and filthy air.”

Macbeth himself, deeply affected by the bloody combat of the day and by the contradiction which lies inherent in murdering for the system’s survival, utters the following line just before the meeting with the witches:

Act 1, Scene 3

Macbeth:

“So foul and fair a day I have not seen.”

The conflict of the society is also the conflict within each citizen in that society. The difference of the conceptions of God and Evil seems so disappear. The vision of the witches and their promise of future power could be a cherished dream that Macbeth and Banquo share, a great desire to reach power.

Banquo is the one of them that manages to suppress this dream. Macbeth is driven forward by his lust, but also, most important, by his wife Lady Macbeth. Her also being a part of the system transforms according to the principle of chaos, desire into a male virtue. Virtuous Macbeth doubts and wants to give up his plan, but Lady Macbeth insists.

Act 1, Scene 7

Lady Macbeth:

“... Art thou a feared
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire.”

Macbeth, torn between male virtue and desire, cannot stand this. He gets furious.

Act 1, Scene 7

Macbeth:

“...I dare do all that may become a man
Who dares do more is none.”

Here is one of the first signs of his impending crisis. When he confuses male courage with desire, the catastrophe is just around the corner. The system starts to break down as does himself. In the following line Lady Macbeth confuses Macbeth even the animal and the man.

Act 1, Scene 7

Lady Macbeth:

“What beast was't then
That made you break this enterprise to me
When you durst do it, then you were a man...”

The truth is finally defeated. The power of lies takes over. The first act ends with the following line:

Act 1, Scene 7

Macbeth:

“False face must hide what false heart doth know.”

In the kingdom of lies, imagination is the absolute ruler. Just before the murder, Macbeth imagines that he sees a knife:

Act 2, Scene 1

Macbeth:

“Is this a dagger which I see before me...”

A recurrent image for the madness, which prevails is the conjuration Macbeth utters in fear of being revealed. The eyes must not see this evil deed. The eyes become a metaphor for reason. We meet this metaphore for the first time in the following scene:

Act 1, scene 4.

Macbeth:

“...Stars, hide your fires
Let not light see my black and deep desires
The eye wink at my hand, yet let that be
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.”

Lady Macbeth utters something similar in the following scene.

Act 1, Scene 5

Lady Macbeth:

“...Come thick night,
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell
That my knife see not the wound it makes...”

The night becomes a symbol of insanity, the dark and evil time of desire. The horrors of imagination continues to haunt Macbeth during a terrible night. Macbeth even imagined that King Duncan's sons woke up at the time of the murder.

Act 2, Scene 2

Macbeth:

“There's one did laugh in 's sleep and one cried,
“Murder”...”

Imagination and reality run into each other within Macbeth. I think you have to imagine Macbeth as a reflection of Scotland. In the second act's fourth scene, Ross and an old man discuss the supernatural events that occurred in Scotland at the night of the murder. The Scottish reality has also tuned into imagination. When the king falls, the whole of Scotland falls with him. The Scottish people now reflect Macbeth and can neither tell right from wrong, imagination from reality. Scotland has become a country of chaos. Macbeth's visions continue. After having murdered Banquo, he imagines that he sees his ghost at a banquet.

Act 3, Scene 4

Macbeth:

“Which of you have done this?”

Macbeth reaches the climax of his insanity at the other meeting with the witches (Act 4, Scene 1). The witches seduce him with their visions, and then everything goes downwards.

Lady Macbeth turns insane. Eventually, she commits suicide. Macbeth defies Fate until the end, then being killed by Macduff on the battlefield. He keeps though, through the entire play, a tiny reminder of reason which makes him somehow human, and I think Shakespeare wanted it that way. The blood on Lady Macbeth that she cannot wash of becomes a symbol of the total dissolution of Ego:

Act 5, Scene 1

Lady Macbeth:

“Here's the smell of the blood still, all the perfumes...”

According to my interpretation of the play, the four conceptions support each other well. But now let's see what the literature says about this play.

THE PLAY INTERPRETED BY FRYKMAN AND JOHNSTON

I limit my study to two different texts, which in different ways analyse *Macbeth*. First, I study what Erik Frykman has to say about the play in his book *Shakespeare*, from 1986. I have also found a paper, published on the Internet by Ian Johnston, a lecturer teaching English at Malaspina-University College in Nanaimo BC, Canada. In different ways, these two analytical texts enrich my study. But now let's start with Frykman.

Frykman's analysis

Frykman opens up his passage on *Macbeth* by telling how hard it is to stage this drama. He also tells us that the play is surrounded by superstition, generally a setting of it turns into trouble. Sometimes it's just called "It". In the beginning of his analysis we are told, with great plausibility, that Shakespeare has used *Holinshed history*, which in turn was based on earlier Scottish chronicles. Frykman dates the play to the summer of 1606 by setting it into a historical context. But that's not what I'd like to concentrate on, more interesting is his analysis of the ideas in the play. To Frykman, *Macbeth* is, above all, a play about the opposites *Appearance/Reality*. Chronologically, he goes through the play with this overarching theme on his mind. First, he writes about the scene with the witches, the third scene in the first act, and he asks: Are the witches real or not?

Act 1, Scene 3 Macbeth

"... I' the name of truth
Are ye fantastical, or that indeed
Which outwardly ye show..."

Frykman also points out that this question, *Appearance vs Reality*, can be comprehended on two different levels. The play is both a play on appearance and reality on a more metaphysical level, but it also deals with the conflict *Dissimulation vs Sincerity*. The problem is then brought down to a more physical, human, level.

As an example on the theme *Appearance/Reality* he also treats the scene where Macbeth holds a monologue to an imagined knife. He also takes up a theme which I completely missed out in my account, that is the question on *Nature vs Unnaturalness*. After the murder and old man says:

Act 2, Scene 4 Old man:

"`T is unnatural
Evenlike the dead that's done on Tuesday last
A falcon, towering in her pride of place
Was by a mousing owl hawked at, and killed"

Frykman studies a very interesting dialogue, the one between Malcolm (Duncan's son) and Macduff, which in a dazzling way takes up the theme *Dissimulation vs Sincerity*. Malcolm tricks Macduff that he would become even a worse dictator than Macbeth, should he conquer the crown of Scotland. He does this to prove Macduff's loyalty, according to my view of looking upon things, on of the typical patriarchal virtues.

Another motif Frykman deals with, is the metaphoric language that accompanies Macbeth's usurpation of power. It has to do with borrowed and badly fitting clothes. Macbeth, for instance, asks the messenger, telling him that he now is Cawdor.

Act 1, Scene 3 Macbeth:

"The Thane of Cawdor lives : why do you dress me
In borrowed robes?"

Frykman also examines an important component in the play, the psychological interplay between the Macbeths, and as an example he takes the scene where Lady Macbeth has turned mad. Frykman emphasises how human she in fact is; she realizes her sin and how deep it goes.

In the remaining part of his text on Macbeth, Frykman examines the play step by step until the bitter end. He lifts forward Macbeth's immense solitude at the end, his bitterness and his duality between moral insight and cruel violence.

Ian Johnston's analysis

On the Internet I found a text by Ian Johnston, lecturer on Malaspina University College, which I would like to present. He starts his essay with a short comparison between *Richard III* and *Macbeth*. The difference between the two plays is, of course, that when Richard is only evil, Macbeth is more complicated. This leads to the fact that *Richard III* is more a play about Richard's *outer*, false behaviour and not, like in *Macbeth*, where a great part of the action takes room inside the main character. Johnston means that *Macbeth* is that of Shakespeare's plays, which you best can make an in depth analysis of the main character. The dramatic weight in *Macbeth* lies in the second half of the play, while in *Richard III*, it's in the first half - that is before Richard is crowned, and the focus is on Richard's sinister actions.

In the beginning of his analysis of *Macbeth*, Johnston makes clear that Macbeth is the architect of his own destruction, he is not forced to do anything in the play. Why does he kill King Duncan? Johnston criticizes the simple theory that it only has to do with Macbeth's ambition (which is a theory many of his colleagues find likeable). That is a shallow reading of the play though, according to Johnston, which reduces the play into a simple morality. Instead, he means that the interesting thing lies in the fact that Macbeth "is in grip of something which he does not fully understand and which a part of him certainly does not approve of". He's got scruples. Johnston means that there is something inside Macbeth that wants to be a king already in advance, but it isn't clear where from this desire has its origin. It could, for instance, be the witches who seduce him, but there is also a strong indication that the Macbeths already had discussed the matter before the encounter with the witches.

Act 1, Scene 7
Lady Macbeth

"What beast wasn't then
That made you break this enterprise to me?"

Should that be it, the witches would rather be an answer to Macbeth's desire, the desire itself does not create it. Johnston analyses Macbeth's irresolution before the murder, and thinks it's fascinating that Macbeth's character never totally drops moral thought. Macbeth knows he has to commit violence against the system, and even though this insight causes him suffering, his desire becomes too strong. Macbeth knows that when he kills the king, he breaks down the fundament of society.

Johnston means, and I agree, that the problem lies in the desire and the imagination. Macbeth's desire for the crown doesn't let go of him. Banquo is also tempted by the witches, but in his case, reason defeats desire.

Lady Macbeth's role in the beginning of the play, is to support Macbeth's desire. Unlike Macbeth, she has not counterwailing consciousness. She even denies her own motherhood:

Act 1, Scene 7
Lady Macbeth:

"How tender 't is 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, had I sworn as you
Have done this"

Responsible for the murder is yet Macbeth himself. He has his free will to do whatever he likes. He is never really sure whether he wants the crown or not and lets his imagination take control over his reason. "He is, it seems, in the grip of his imagination and is not serving some conscious rational decision he has made" (Johnston) Macbeth is still aware that he is

doing wrong, and yet he is ruled by forces which he cannot control. Johnston makes a very interesting interpretation of the dagger-scene, imagination is here given free scope. Johnston argues that it is the dagger that *leads* Macbeth into king Duncan's bedroom, rather than Macbeth's free will or desire. Macbeth mistakes the dagger and takes it for his desire, but it could actually be a *projection* of his desire, and not desire itself. He "imagines" that he has a desire for the crown, but does he in fact?

Johnston has split the conceptions of imagination and desire in an interesting way, which would indeed explain Macbeth's doubt before the murder. Johnston asked himself for a long time, why Macbeth, seemingly a man with high moral standards, could commit such an act as killing the king. Johnston expresses it in the following way :

"Macbeth has freely chosen to embrace evil in his imagination. He has not resisted the impulse to imagine himself king and what needs to be done in order for that to come about... But he vacillates, knowing full what the act means. For as long as he has not actually killed Duncan, he thinks he is free to imagine what being king would be like, that is, he is free to indulge in his evil desires, and yet he is also free to change his mind... But before he realizes it his commitment to evil desires has trapped him."

Consequently, Johnston means that imagination, rather than desire, is the key to Macbeth's murder : "His imagination has committed him to evil before his conscious mind realizes that the decision has been made..." Apparently, Macbeth fools himself. He thinks he wants to kill Duncan, but perhaps it's only his imagination mocking him? A sign that this could be the case, is that he, immediately after the murder, regrets himself.

Johnston analyses Macbeth's career as king, and he asks himself why the second part of the play is interesting; despite the murdering and lying, why is *Macbeth* such a haunting play? Johnston argues, that it is Macbeth's awareness of the sinister deeds he commits. Despite Macbeth's former courage on the battle field, he has become scared of himself. He is tormented by evil thoughts. He wants to get rid of these thoughts and commits whatever actions to do so, for instance murdering his friend Banquo. The imagination rules him. Is Banquo a real threat to him? "Macbeth care less about the future of the world than he does about his own determination to resolve his inner torment." The emphasis of the play is now on a psychological, rather than political, level. But Macbeth has in spite of his inner torment not forgotten his moral values, he is fully aware what he does and this makes him extra tragic. What we are witnessing in the second half of the play is, according to Johnston, Macbeth's gradual dehumanization. He loses contact with society. Johnston also means that one should interpret Macbeth's insight monologue in the fifth scene of the fifth act as a *bitter* insight. He is now totally on his own, cannot expect any grace. "Instead of living out his life, as normal people (including Banquo) do, in a drama out of his total control, he seeks to change the plot. And the result is a play that leaves him feeling increasingly pained, disoriented, and afraid (that we in modern terminology might call inauthentic)."

Johnston finishes his text with an analysis of the character of the witches, but I won't account for it here. It does not bring any news to this essay anyway.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, you might say that there is a rather big concordance between my analysis, Frykman's and Johnston's. Frykman's analysis is not meant to be deep. Rather it is a presentation of the play and of Shakespeare for the public. And yet we can find much suitable stuff here, for instance the dating of the play and the actual historical events that took place in England 1605-06, which can enlighten the play further.

Johnston on the contrary, does a full-cover analysis of the play. On the whole, he and I say the same things, but the most striking difference in our analysis is that Johnston doesn't split the conceptions desire and imagination. It is a tough question whether you can split them or not, but I really appreciate Johnston's point of view.

On the whole, this deep study of one play hasn't decreased my interest in Shakespeare. *Macbeth* is a very interesting play and it will continue that way for me, hopefully through my whole life.

SOURCES

Frykman, Erik (1986) *Shakespeare*. Stockholm : Norstedts.

Johnston, Ian (2003) *Introduction to Macbeth*.

URL : <http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/eng366/lectures/macbeth.htm> [2003-07-02]

Lindberg, Bo (2001) *Stoicism och stat. Justus Lipsius och den politiska humanismen*. Stockholm : Atlantis.

Shakespeare, William (1992) *Macbeth*. Longman Literature Shakespeare.

Shakespeare, William (1991) *Macbeth*. Stockholm : Ordfronts förlag.