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Expose 20.261: Why Shakespeare?

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“Black and Deep Desires”

Tragedy and Criminology in *Macbeth*

William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* narrates the tale of a hero’s tragic fall from grace. The curtain rises on a “peerless kinsman” renowned for his loyalty yet falls on a tyrant savagely decapitated for his treachery (1.4.58). The audience see Macbeth sharply and suddenly turn as “devilish” as the slaughter he commits in his ambition for the Scottish crown, sparking the murders of the esteemed King Duncan; his beloved friend Banquo; and even of those of an innocent woman and child. Thus Shakespeare asked the question of how Macbeth could turn so villainous.

This essay will attempt to unearth the roots of Macbeth’s “black and deep desires” (1.4.51), and ask whether they originate from ‘within’ his character or from somewhere ‘outside’. This problem of why Macbeth acts the way he does rests on the tension between the ‘internal’ vs. ‘external’ influence of behaviour, of which this essay will study three possible resolutions.

At the extreme end of internal influence is the argument of ‘Individualism’. This would explain Macbeth’s “black and deep desires” as entirely originating from ‘within’ him. Thus individualism would place *Macbeth* amongst other works of classical Ancient Greek tragedy. This tradition would view Macbeth as a character whose inner ‘hamartia’ of ruthless ambition (his characteristic fatal flaw) is the sole culprit for his demise (Massai). In more contemporary

terms this neatly translates into the biological argument of criminology, which states that an individual's behaviour is caused by an innate nature predisposed by chemical hormones and DNA. However at the other, external end of the behavioural spectrum is the argument of 'Determinism'. This stands at a direct polarity to individualism in that it would explain Macbeth's desires as imposed by the external and mysterious forces of fate and destiny. This would rather place *Macbeth* with the 'de casibus' tradition, popular in medieval tragedies during Shakespeare's 16th century. Such would view Macbeth as a character that falls victim to the witches' cruel manipulation of 'Fortune's Wheel', eradicating all personal agency asserted by individualism (Massai). However both individualism and determinism see individual character and its environment as mutually exclusive, thus failing to account for the important relationship between Macbeth and his surroundings.

Macbeth is neither a helpless victim of fate nor is he born the sole agent accountable for his crimes; rather his *internal* agency is shaped by his *external* environment. Shakespeare's character should be seen as a product of his complex environmental influences, varying in degree of subtlety and severity. The witches' prophecy, Lady Macbeth, Macbeth's troubled past, and the social disorder of his Scottish society all combine to form the 'perfect storm' for the ruin of a hero and the rise of a villain.

In this sense the debate turns to 'Environmentalism' as a third and most promising explanation of Macbeth's treacherous behaviour, as illuminated by Robert Merton's theory of criminology presented in his famous essay, "Social Structure and Anomie." He proposed that it is the external intricacies of social environment that shape the internal agency of an individual. In particular, Merton argued that behaviour is caused by the interplay of cultural goals and institutional ethics within an environment. Thus Merton can be used as a lens through which to

view *Macbeth*, revealing how ‘Macbeth the tyrant’ is fashioned from the clay of his surroundings. This has broad implications for both criminology and literary tragedy as the two widely different disciplines can be seen to play on the same terms.

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Merton’s theory highlights the witches’ prophecy as a crucial environmental influence of Macbeth. The prophecy dangles the cultural goal of royal power whilst remaining ethically unachievable, thus frustrating and provoking Macbeth to murder. Merton was particularly concerned with criminal activity or what he called ‘The Innovation Response’, a behaviour that adequately describes that of Macbeth in the play. The behaviours included “Fraud, corruption, vice, crime ... [and] become increasingly common when the emphasis on culturally induced success-goal becomes divorced from a coordinated institutional emphasis” (Merton 675-6). In other words individuals may diverge from institutional ethics in order to achieve the goals that they deem valuable. Merton argued that this is especially likely when individuals are predisposed to symbols of success whilst being unable to find socially approved means through which to attain such success (Merton 679).

This theory manifests in the play as Macbeth desires to be king without the presence of modern democracy to provide a relatively simple path to achieve the title, leaving him no option but to transgress the law and murder. Firstly the witches’ prophecy can be seen as actively placing an external success symbol onto Macbeth. In Act 1: Scene 3 the weird sisters forecast Macbeth’s upcoming promotion to Thane of Cawdor as well as, “All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!” (1.3.50). These lines immediately conjure the symbol of the Scottish crown, which taps into the conventional cultural goals of power and dominance. Macbeth confesses, “Why I do yield to that suggestion” (1.4.134). Here Shakespeare depicts Macbeth as passively

bowing to the active influence of the witches. Moreover, Banquo states how “To win us to our harm, / The instruments of darkness tell us truths”, again depicting themselves as passively won over to the tune of outside “instruments” to their harmful ends (1.4.124). This parallels Merton’s argument that external success symbols have the power to actively influence the behaviour of individuals.

Moreover, the cultural goal promised by the prophecy is soon shown to be ethically unachievable. Macbeth says himself how the fortune “stands not within the prospect of belief” (1.2.48-9). Indeed, Shakespeare presents the news of Malcolm as the Prince of Cumberland as “a step / On which [Macbeth] must fall or o’erleap” as Macbeth is faced with a kingly rival (1.2.48-9). In light of Merton’s theory Malcolm constitutes a “step” or obstacle along the path to success, resulting in either Macbeth’s “fall” (conformity to the law at the cost of not being king) or his “o’erleap” (transgressive innovation in the form of murder). Macbeth ultimately chooses the later and, much “like valour’s minion carved out his passage”, he too ‘carves’ out his own bloody path to power without concern for the institutional ethics that hold him back (1.2.19).

Lady Macbeth can be seen as a ‘fourth witch’ in that she too acts as a second environmental influence of Macbeth’s murder of Duncan. Macbeth, concerned that Duncan’s murder will earn him a “deep damnation” in hell (1.7.20), arrives to tell Lady Macbeth that they “will proceed no further in this business” (1.7.31). Nonetheless Lady Macbeth’s reproach poses itself as a far stronger influence than that of the afterlife as she proceeds to shower her husband with abuse calling him “a coward” (1.7.43). This relates to Merton’s discussion of the importance of “occasional sacrifices involved in institutionalized conduct [with] socialized rewards” or else individuals lack the compensation to stop them from transgressing the law (Merton 674). In *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth does the opposite as she punishes Macbeth’s for even

thinking to sacrifice the crown. Shakespeare's metaphor of the spineless "poor cat i' th' adge" attacks Macbeth's cowardice as he fears to 'get his hands dirty' in order to achieve his ambitions (1.7.45). Lady Macbeth graphically challenges Macbeth's fortitude by asserting that she would have "dashed the brains out" of her own baby had she promised to do so, and condemning him for not matching her courage (1.7.58). Thus she joins the weird sisters in being a "spur / To prick the sides of [Macbeth's] intent" of murder (1.7.25-6).

It is not only the characters in the play that have the power to shape Macbeth, but also the experiences of his past. For instance Lady Macbeth claims to "have given suck" to an infant however there is no further mention of children in the play, suggesting that Macbeth may have suffered the death of a child (1.7.54). Another influential experience is presented through the Captain's recollection of Macbeth having "Unseamed [his enemy] from the nave to th'chaps / And fixed his head upon our battlements" (1.2.22-3). Shakespeare likened this brutal slicing in half of a person to the mundane act of unseaming of a stitch, implying how such violent behaviour can become normalised on the battlefield. The majority of today's sociologists would argue that both experiences would have a severe effect on Macbeth's behaviour. This is supported by Shakespeare's final depiction of Macbeth who says, "Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts / Cannot once start me" (5.5.14-15). He has been so "supped full with horrors" of war and grief that he is now numbed to fear and desensitised to pain (5.5.13).

Macbeth's environment in general can also be seen to reflect the same sickly nature found in his actions, supporting a sociological reading. Shakespeare presents a world with "lamentings heard i' th' air, strange screams of death" (2.3.54), and an earth that is "feverous and did shake" (2.3.59). This environmental disorder seems to be contagious to the individuals within it as even the horses turn "wild in nature ... contending 'gainst obedience" to devour one another

(2.4.16-7). Macbeth can be said to do the same as he breaks his “obedience” to the law, wildly killing his peers in order to be king. If social environment fashions behaviour, then it is not hard to picture why Shakespeare’s sickly and chilling depiction of Scotland lends itself to the rotting of Macbeth’s character.

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Viewing *Macbeth* in light of Merton’s theory of criminology asks the audience to turn their attention away from Macbeth being the sole culprit of his sins, and outwards into the world in which he lived. In this sense it is Shakespeare’s portrayal of Macbeth’s relations with other characters, with his past and with Scottish society that hold the answers to the question of what causes a ‘good’ man to turn ‘bad’. Without these factors Macbeth would not be the character that he turns out to be, nor would he have done what he did.

Merton’s theory allows the view of Macbeth’s environment as like a machine, within which lie various sociological cogs all uniquely affecting the production of his character. This is not to say that Macbeth is merely a puppet at the mercy of his societal strings, remaining completely innocent to the crimes that he commits. Rather his “black and deep desires” must be seen as stemming from beyond Macbeth’s psyche alone and to a far more tangled pattern of external causation.

This insight produces a ripple effect throughout the reading of the text and into the domains of literary tragedy and modern criminology. As alluded to earlier in the paper, the debate of individualism vs. determinism vs. environmentalism is shown to manifest both in regards to why tragedy happens and also to why criminals behave the way they do. Though each position may speak in different terms depending on the chosen discipline (for instance individualism can speak in terms of either ‘hamartias’ or genetic traits) they all grapple with the

same problem of why people do bad things. It is especially fascinating to see how an American sociologist writing on homicide could have explored the same tensions four centuries after an English playwright writing about tragedy (Calhoun). It reveals how mankind is plagued by the study of how and why they can cause such tragedy to one another, marking the issue as one that cuts at the core of human nature.

*Macbeth* is a work far ahead of its time in the literary and criminological debate of internal vs. external causation of behaviour. It marks Shakespeare's departure from the popular tragedies of his time and into an unknown academic field sensitive to the complicated pattern of behavioural cause and effect. This work is forever altered as the sociological cogs, once hidden behind the drapes of language and dramatic effect, reveal themselves along Macbeth's path to murder. Thus Shakespeare's depiction of Macbeth's environment is its own 'witch's cauldron', its mixture of ghastly ingredients plaguing the kingdom with their sociological spell.

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