

Bloodlust, Savagery, Obsession and Excess - Gothic Macbeth

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Is it really possible to use the conventions of the Gothic - a literary movement from the late eighteenth century - to analyse a play written in the early seventeenth century? Dr Pamela Bickley's illuminating discussion of Shakespeare's troubling play suggests it is.

When Shakespeare wrote Macbeth in or around 1606 he was certainly not writing a Gothic text; he was producing a vividly dramatic script for his theatre company to perform. Neither Shakespeare nor his audience would have understood 'Gothic' as a literary concept; the term emerged with the genre itself in the mid- eighteenth century. In what respects, then, can Macbeth be identified and read as Gothic? What characteristics does the play share with later Gothic texts?

Gothic Transgression and Excess

I am in blood

Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more, Returning were as tedious as go o'er (3:4)

Gothic writing uncovers a world of taboo, challenging and overstepping norms. One of the key aspects of the genre that can be identified through its long survival is its engagement with the unspeakable, from the rape, incest and diabolism of Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) to the late twentieth century and the grotesque world of Patrick McCabe's *The Dead School* (1995). In *Macbeth*, as in any play of the period, the ultimate taboo is regicide: to kill the king is a heinous act, violating feudal loyalties and offending against God. Macbeth always knows that Duncan's murder is 'deep damnation'. In his first soliloquy he reveals the early stirrings of '*horrible imaginings*', thoughts that terrify him and deprive him of all sense of reality - '*nothing is, but what is not*' (1:3). And in his later musings, he envisages the entire cosmos recoiling in horror: '*tears shall drown the wind*' (1:7). Similarly, when Macduff discovers Duncan's body, his imagery is religious, not simply political:

Confusion now hath made his masterpiece! Most sacrilegious Murder hath broke ope The Lord's anointed Temple ... (2:3)

But in this play the regicide is not the only taboo. The apparition of the 'bloody child' conjured by the Witches symbolises the most horrifying slaughter of all - the deaths of innocent children. Lady Macbeth's hyperbole of dashing her baby's brains to the ground is part of this Gothic excess; Macbeth himself goes much further in his willingness actually to sacrifice

Fleance and then Macduff's children.

Brutality and Lust for Power

The play introduces Macbeth in terms of excessive savagery. He is initially the fearless soldier defending his king from treachery and invasion and, in this respect, all approve Macbeth's military prowess. But Shakespeare's words emphasise the physical brutality of the hand-to-hand fighting:

*his brandished steel,
... smok'd with bloody execution, ... carv'd out his passage (1:2)*

Macbeth's sword steams with the hot blood of his victims as he fights his way towards the disloyal Macdonwald who is '*unseam'd [...] from the nave to the chops*' and beheaded. When the Captain goes on to describe Macbeth as seeming to '*bathe in reeking wounds*' he speaks literally - the warrior would be covered in blood and gore. The Captain's words partly prefigure how Macbeth will end - fatally wounded and subsequently beheaded. But this opening battle scene also typifies the world of the play: the world that Macbeth inhabits but then perpetuates beyond the battlefield, violating the domestic space of his own and, later, Macduff's castle. Macbeth finds in himself an affinity with blood and darkness. He does not scruple to seek the deaths of Banquo and his young son Fleance; Macduff's wife, children and babes will all be sacrificed to Macbeth's overwhelming desire for supremacy. When he says,

*For mine own good,
All causes shall give way (3:4)*

he typifies the overwhelming hubris of the Gothic hero. Frankenstein's ambition, for example, possesses him '*like a hurricane*': Life and death appeared to me ideal bounds, which I should first break through, and pour a torrent of light into our dark world.

Frankenstein - Obsessions, Isolation and the Torture of the Mind

Macbeth and Frankenstein pursue different ends but they are both consumed by an obsession which sweeps aside all moral restraint or societal norms. In Frankenstein's world, Gothic transgression is revealed in his graveyard activities: violating the dead is an absolute taboo. In Macbeth's world, regicide is the taboo which makes '*my seated heart knock at my ribs*'. In this respect the play resembles the nightmare of the Gothic: a world where the brakes are off and the unthinkable is enacted.

The world of Macbeth is not limited to physical violence, however: '*the torture of the mind*' (3:2) is vividly realised in this play. Macbeth's own intense mental, emotional and spiritual suffering is evident from his anguish before (and, of course, after) Duncan's murder up to his final soliloquy where he finds only '*Nothing*' at the heart of life. The isolation of his suffering is part of the horror of the play - and again connects him with the apartness of the Gothic protagonist. Angela Carter's Bluebeard (in *The Bloody Chamber*) is briefly an object of pity when his terrified victim perceives '*the atrocious loneliness of that monster*'. Macbeth's solitude is inherent to his tragedy; equally, Lady Macbeth is tormented by nightmare, horror and

isolation. These two have embraced a world of blood and it haunts them.

'Secret, black, and midnight hags' - the Occult in *Macbeth*

The dark and mysterious world of the supernatural dominates *Macbeth* from the opening moments of the play. Who are the witches and what is their purpose? Of course, Shakespeare is exploiting contemporary fears of witchcraft and the new king's obsession with it. James believed he had suffered from demonic attempts to destroy him, and published his own views in his *Demonologie* (1597). The witches themselves clearly exist on the margins of the 'real' world: they haunt battlefields for totemic body parts and pursue their own private revenges.

Dismembered body parts are often part of the horror of the Gothic, from *Frankenstein* (1818) to McCabe's *The Butcher Boy* (1992). The witches later played their own part in Gothic tradition, inspiring a number of paintings in the second half of the eighteenth century. The painter Henry Fuseli found *Macbeth* a particularly rich source for dark and troubling depictions of the supernatural; 'The Weird Sisters' (1793) is still an uncompromising and challenging painting. A particularly striking modern interpretation of the witches can be seen in Roman Polanski's film of *Macbeth* (1971), where they both begin and end the drama. Polanski supplies a final scene where the witches, clearly part of the bleak and inhospitable landscape, are discovered by Donalbain, returning to Scotland. Polanski's implication is that their malevolence is ever-present and so is the susceptibility of individuals to their tempting ambiguities. The witches are perhaps the most obviously threatening and Gothic aspect of the play: their evil remains undefeated and their existence challenges conventional views of the supremacy of spiritual good over evil. In the same way, *Dracula*'s world of the undead undermines the religious certainties of the Victorian reader.

The world of the numinous is not limited to the Satanic arts of the witches, however. Both *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth* call upon dark forces as though the night can unleash evils that are concealed or repressed during daylight hours. When he is plotting the murder of Banquo and Fleance, for example, *Macbeth* conjures '*seeling Night*' not simply for obscurity but because the night harbours wickedness:

Good things of Day begin to droop and drowse, Whiles Night's black agents to their preys do rouse. (3:2)

His wife, similarly, invokes '*you Spirits/That tend on mortal thoughts*'; '*you murth'ring ministers*' (1:5) when she first reads, in her husband's letter, of the witches' prophecy and *Macbeth*'s subsequent advancement to Thane of Cawdor. She clearly believes that she is summoning a waiting world of spiritual beings bent on destruction. This world of the unknown is unpredictable and tormenting, however; *Macbeth* is courageous in battle but the appearance of Banquo's ghost at the feast unmans him completely. The otherworldly has a power beyond rational human explanation. And Banquo's ghost appears uniquely to *Macbeth*, further isolating him in his tormented imagination.

Apocalypse -'let the frame of things disjoint'

Closely connected with the supernatural and with the rhetoric of Gothic excess, is the apocalyptic. This presupposes the end of the universe, possibly as a dark and climactic Last Judgement. When Macbeth seeks out the witches, he addresses them as though they might hold all the powers of destruction; he invites anarchy:

*Though you untie the winds, and let them fight Against the churches; though the yesty waves
Confound and swallow navigation up [...] Although the treasure
Of Nature's germens tumble all together, Even till destruction sicken ... (4:1)*

To see Macbeth simply as a warlike Scottish thane with an ambitious wife would be wholly inadequate here. Shakespeare depicts a man to whom darkness and chaos is welcome and whose mind inclines always towards total destruction. When Birnam Wood approaches and he knows the witches' prophecies to be 'the equivocation of the fiend' he confronts his own death - but he desires apocalypse:

*I 'gin to be aweary of the sun,
And wish th' estate o' th' world were now undone (5:5)*

The effective Gothic text functions best when preying upon the imagination, hinting at dark possibilities. In Macbeth Shakespeare draws together a cult of bloodlust with a brooding and dark supernatural world. The Porter's words, usually delivered as blackly comic, are also prophetic. Macbeth's castle has become Hell.