

The Gothic in *Macbeth* - Shakespeare's radical tragedy

When we think of Gothic, we tend to think of the novels of Horace Walpole, Matthew Lewis and Anne Radcliffe, but the seeds of the form were sown much earlier. In this article Andrew Green explores the presence of Gothic in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.

Introduction

The roots of the Gothic precede the defining works of Horace Walpole, Sophia Lee and Clara Reeve. The focus on the grotesque in the medieval period (visible especially in the paintings and architecture) provides a key backdrop against which Gothic must be read, as does the proliferation of violent and often grotesque tragedies written for the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre, with their detailed - even exultant exploration of the supernatural, vice, corruption, imprisonment, brutality and sexuality, all of which were to provide the very stuff of the Gothic authors.

Macbeth & Gothic

Macbeth provides a very useful example of just such a pre-Gothic text. The comparison between Shakespeare's tragedy and Gothic is informative. In fact, the novelist Sir Walter Scott used *Macbeth* as an example of the difficulties of successfully managing the effects of the supernatural and the horrific:

'... the supernatural in fictitious composition requires to be managed with considerable delicacy, as criticism begins to be more on the alert. The interest which it excites is indeed a powerful spring; but it is one which is peculiarly subject to be exhausted by coarse handling and repeated pressure... The marvellous, more than any other attribute of fictitious narrative, loses its effect by being brought much into view. The imagination of the reader is to be excited if possible, without being gratified. If once, like *Macbeth*, we '*sup full with horrors*', our taste for the banquet is ended, and the thrill of terror with which we hear or read of a night-shriek, becomes lost.'

And it is not only in its use of the supernatural and horror that *Macbeth* relates to the Gothic genre. Like many Gothic texts, the play dramatises extremes, exploring borderlands of experience. Many of the oppositions set up, challenged and destabilised in the classic Gothic texts are also seminal to *Macbeth*: good and evil, innocence and guilt, freedom and imprisonment, sanity and insanity, the natural and the unnatural (and/or the supernatural), morality and immorality (and/or amorality), humanity and inhumanity, death and life. It also employs many of the typical devices of Gothic:

- Wild landscapes (the heath)
- Ruined or grotesque buildings (the witches' cave), castles (*Macbeth*'s castle, Dunsinane)
- Sudden and violent shifts of emotion
- Excess and extremity (violence, cruelty)
- The supernatural and ghostly (the witches and Banquo's ghost - also figurative 'ghosts' of the past or the future which haunt the characters)
- Imagery of darkness, shadow and decay
- Isolation and loneliness (relating to both setting and character, including orphaning and widowing) blurring of distinctions between sanity and insanity crime, lawlessness and abuse (often linked to absolute and

tyrannical power) the devilish and arcane.

Good & Evil

Good and evil are a potent source of conflict within *Macbeth*. Not only do we have the overtly evil presence of the witches and the domineering Lady Macbeth, but we also have the deeply divided character of Macbeth himself, where this conflict works itself out in depth. The first act of the play offers an increasing insight into the complex interaction of good and evil in Macbeth's mind. The noble, valiant and loyal soldier of the early scenes is tempted by the visions of future personal glory conjured by the witches and comes increasingly under their influence. The battle between these conflicting elements of Macbeth's character becomes evident immediately after the first of the witches' prophecies has come true, when he observes:

'this supernatural soliciting Cannot be ill, cannot be good' (1:3).

In this, Macbeth is comparable to Schiavoni, Ambrosio, Melmoth and the catalogue of hero-villains who stalk the pages of Gothic fiction, asserting their wills through the use of naked power. David Punter reflects on this lawlessness when he observes:

Gothic was the archaic, the pagan, that which was prior to, or resisted the establishment of civilised values and a well-regulated society.

It is in the nature of the Gothic villain, though, that, however evil his actions, he never wholly loses our sympathy. Count Dracula, for instance, in spite of his murderous attacks and brutal incursions into Victorian society, remains vigorously attractive. We are never unambiguously opposed to him. Likewise, Macbeth never completely loses our sympathy. When he goes through the anguish of losing his wife we are moved, in spite of the fact that he has brutally deprived Macduff of his entire family. In this the tragic hero - flawed, yet sympathetic - compares interestingly to the classic hero-villain of Gothic.

Innocence & Guilt

Closely allied to good and evil are innocence and guilt. Macbeth is at first tortured by guilt at the thought of murdering Duncan and the need - if the witches' prophecies are to be made true - to overcome his natural loyalty and honour. The famous soliloquy of Act 2, Scene 1, where Macbeth is guided by a hallucinatory dagger captures the fevered conflict of his mind, and his carelessness in walking away from Duncan's chamber carrying the murder weapons is a further sign of the numbing guilt that stupefies him. The impact of Macbeth's actions is not on him alone, however. The evil consequences of Macbeth's reign of terror will descend to future generations, pre-figuring the classic Gothic fear of generational repetition and continued cycles of evil.

Lady Macbeth, too, is struck by something like guilt as she sees a strange resemblance between King Duncan and her own father. This guilt becomes an increasingly potent force within her, leading to her eventual madness and death. Parallels to this are often to be found in Gothic fiction - Lydia Gwilt (surely Wilkie Collins intends us to read Guilt?), the anti-heroine who poisons herself at the end of *Armada*, provides a good example.

Internal & External

Ideas of good and evil also attach to the opposition between the internal and the external. Macbeth's haunting by the ghost of Banquo provides a good example. The ghost seems to be an externalisation of Macbeth's guilt in the wake of Banquo's murder:

It will have blood, they say: *blood will have blood. (3:4)* This is similar to Lady Macbeth's feverish hand-washing as she tries to rid herself of the *'damned spot' (5:1)* of Duncan's blood which clings to the fingers of her mind. Such eruptions of the internalised world of the protagonists into the external world serve to emphasise the important conflict between internal and external realities. Macbeth's frequent asides throughout the play indicate through dramatic convention the importance of this conflict and how dissembling his public persona often is. He is well able, in order to gain power, to put into practise his wife's injunction to *look like th'innocent flower, But be the*

serpent under't (1:5) Furthermore, looking at where his actions have led him, tracing a path from morality, through immorality, to a final amoral indifference:

I am in blood

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

The vocabulary of goodness that attaches to Macbeth at the beginning of the play is also totally overturned, to be replaced by vocabulary of evil. Macduff refers to him as '*hell-kite*' (4:3) and '*hell-hound*' (5:8). He also tells us, after his wife and children have all been slaughtered, that: '*Not in the legions/Of horrid hell can come a devil more damned In evils to top Macbeth.*' (4:3)

Even the witches, the most obvious source of evil in the play, refer to him as '*something wicked*' (4:1) when he visits them for the second time. The tortuous mental games the witches, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth play are also typical of Gothic. There is often a cat-and-mouse, game-like quality to the interactions of Gothic, as villains toy with, and gain perverse pleasure from, the suffering and fears of their victims. David Punter writes about this: '*Gothic works, it is often objected, are not fully achieved works: they are fragmentary, inconsistent, jagged ... If Gothic works 'do not come out right', this is because they deal in psychological areas which themselves do not come out right, they deal in those structures of the mind which are compounded with repression rather than with the purified material to which realism claims access ... And it is here that we come to the crux of the matter: Gothic writers work - consciously or unconsciously - on the fringe of the acceptable, for it is on this borderland that fear resides.*'

Here Punter identifies the jagged, imperfect and psychologically disturbing world of Gothic. The form represents its contents and concerns; Gothic does not deal with the neat and the orderly, and therefore the works themselves are frequently neither. Interestingly for a play written in the classically ordered form of tragedy, such ideas are also integral to our understanding of *Macbeth*. The incursion of the messy and disorderly Gothic into the regimented world of tragic theatre illustrates Shakespeare's boldness in experimenting with dramatic form. The combination of the highly ordered principles of tragedy with the freely rhapsodic nature of Gothic challenges the audience's view of the possibilities of tragedy, creating something disturbingly complex, powerful and challenging.

Terror & Horror

In her essay of 1816 'On the Supernatural in Poetry', Ann Radcliffe (whose sequence of novels *The Romance of the Forest*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian* did so much to shape the Gothic form) makes a key distinction between terror and horror:

'Terror and Horror are so far opposite, that the first expands the soul and awakens the faculties to a higher degree of life; the other contracts, freezes and nearly annihilates them.'

This is a useful distinction to bring to our reading of *Macbeth*. When Macbeth refers to the '*scorpions*' of the mind (3:2), he seems to be experiencing terror rather than horror. His faculties are fully alert, even heightened. When he visits the witches for the second time and experiences his visions of the future (and the mixed hopes and fears these inspire in him), Macbeth is spurred into action. Likewise, when he sees the dagger on his way to murder Duncan ('*this terrible feat*' – 1:7), and when he experiences the '*terrible dreams/That shake us nightly*' (3:2), Macbeth is in a state of psychological terror which 'expands his soul' and drives him on. Similarly, the heightened terror of discovery experienced by Lady Macbeth after Duncan's murder enables her to take the weapons and return to '*smear/The sleepy grooms with blood*' (2:2)

By way of contrast, when faced by the resemblance between the sleeping Duncan and her father, Lady Macbeth finds herself struck with horror at the reality of murder and cannot act. Similarly, in the wake of the killing of Duncan, Macbeth walks away with the bloody murder weapons still in his hands. He is stupefied by the physical horror of his actions. Macduff, too, when he discovers the dead body of Duncan is at first incapable of action and can only exclaim: '*O horror, horror, horror!/Tongue nor heart cannot conceive nor name thee*' (2:3)

It is no accident that Radcliffe looks to Shakespeare when she seeks to define the distinction between terror and horror: I apprehend that neither Shakespeare nor Milton by their fictions, nor Mr Burke by his reasoning,

anywhere looked to positive horror as a source of the sublime, though they all agree that terror is a very high one; and where lies the great difference between terror and horror, but in uncertainty and obscurity, that accompany the first, respecting the dreaded evil?

Conclusion

While *Macbeth* cannot be seen as conventionally Gothic, it is important that we recognise the extent to which the play - and much of the drama of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras - prefigures Gothic conventions. The fragmented Scotland of the end of the play embodies the Uncertainties about the nature of power, law, society, family and sexuality [that] dominate Gothic fiction.

Especially when we consider the fact that many Gothic texts are set in a projected past, the appearance within the literary past of many of the features typical of Gothic should not, perhaps, come as a surprise.