

Topicality and Timelessness: Treason in Macbeth

Sean Rocke

Dr. Snow

LIT 350

10 March 2010

Those seeking to praise the long span of Shakespeare's impact and popularity often refer his plays to as "timeless". However, Shakespeare was also very much a writer of and for his time, incorporating popular or relevant topics into his works in subtle ways. The various ways that the theme of treason is approached in *Macbeth* demonstrates that Shakespeare was sophisticated in his ability to simultaneously address the popular concern about treason triggered by recent events during his lifetime, and the more universal causes and consequences of treason which have given the play such a lasting significance.

The seriousness of treason is first introduced in Act I, scene 2, with the discussion of the original Thane of Cawdor's auspicious treachery against Duncan and Scotland. His punishment is death, his trial nonexistent, his title forfeit to Macbeth. Significantly, Duncan proclaims that what Cawdor lost, "noble Macbeth hath won."¹ He is, of course, referring to the title of Thane of Cawdor, but his words ominously foreshadow Macbeth's eventual adoption of Cawdor's disloyalty and treason. Because English Renaissance tragedy was written with the intention of imparting a moral lesson to its audience, Cawdor's violent sentence is an early indication that *Macbeth* will show how "a hero turns traitor, and in dying teaches the audience to avoid his own treachery."²

Although treason is an interesting issue to address in any historical period, the historical context within which Shakespeare created *Macbeth* sheds light on the

¹ William Shakespeare, *Macbeth: Folger Shakespeare Library*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (London: Washington Square Press, 1992), I.2.67. All subsequent citations refer to this edition.

² Rebecca Lemon, "Scaffolds of Treason in *Macbeth*", *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 1, Tragedy (Mar., 2002): 26.

choice to focus on the consequences of treason. Likely written in 1606, *Macbeth* would have premiered on stage within a year of the attempted Gunpowder Plot, a foiled plan to bomb the houses of Parliament and kill King James I. *Macbeth* channels the “horror unleashed by a supposedly loyal subject who seeks to kill the king”³ that would be so fresh and frighteningly real in the minds of its viewers.

Of course, by virtue of the play being set in a time and place far from Jacobean London, there are no direct references to the Gunpowder Plot within *Macbeth*. However, there are a multitude of subtle references to the controversy that would not have escaped its original audience. Even Shakespeare’s initial stage directions would have created an assault on the audience’s senses from their very first moment in the theatre. The play opens with thunder and lightning created using fireworks, which would have infused the air with the smell of gunpowder. Therefore the initial moments in the theatre would have immediately evoked the recent political situation.⁴ Throughout the play, short phrases like ‘dire combustion’, ‘vault’, and ‘blow’ echo keywords from the Gunpowder Plot scandal that would have caught the ears of the original audience.⁵

The Gunpowder Plot keyword that is most often repeated within *Macbeth* is ‘equivocation’. No longer a particularly well-known concept, this reference could easily escape the attention of a modern audience, but for the original audience, equivocation was synonymous with scandal and treason. The last of the traitors

³ Jonathan Gil Harris, “The Smell of Macbeth”, *Shakespeare Quarterly* 58.4 (2007): 473.

⁴ Harris, 466.

⁵ Kenneth Muir, introduction to *Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1986), xxi. Harris, 473.

incriminated in the Gunpowder Plot was the Jesuit Henry Garnet, who brought equivocation into the spotlight before his execution in 1606. Garnet had written an influential book called *A Treatise of Equivocation*, which assured Catholics that they committed no sin when they disguised the truth in order to escape incrimination or protect hidden Catholic priests.⁶ Of course, the practice of equivocation was therefore highly suspect and intensely criticized.

The play's first reference to equivocation takes place at the porter's gate, a scene rife with references to the gates of hell. He describes an equivocator as one "who committed treason enough for God's sake, yet could not equivocate to heaven"⁷, welcoming the equivocator through the hellish doors. Lady Macduff echoes this damnation of equivocators in Act IV, scene 2. She tells her young son that a traitor is "one who swears and lies", or equivocates, and moreover she proclaims "everyone who does so is a traitor and must be hanged."⁸ Her son misunderstands, thinking that everyone who uses foul language or fails to tell the truth is destined for the gallows, which in his mind constitutes a majority of the population. This provides a humorous counterpoint to what would have been a deadly serious issue at the time, perhaps offering a subtle commentary on the absurdity of being able to punish people simply for speaking vaguely. On the whole, however, Shakespeare's treatment of equivocation within *Macbeth* shows that he

⁶ Matt Simpson, *Student Guide to Shakespeare's Macbeth*, (London: Greenwich Exchange, 2003), 5; Vike Martina Plock, "'Knock knock. War's where!': History, *Macbeth*, and *Finnegans Wake*", *Joyce Studies Annual* (2010): 215.

⁷ Shakespeare, II.iii.10-1.

⁸ Shakespeare, IV.ii.54-6.

was taking pains to condemn equivocation, and therefore the actions of the Gunpowder Plot conspirators, thus remaining in line with King James I.⁹

Particularly reflective of James I's outlook on treason is Shakespeare's incorporation of the witches as equivocators. The Weird Sisters are not accused of this crime until very near the end of the play, when Macbeth begins "to doubt th' equivocation of the fiend"¹⁰ as the witches' prophecies unravel to his dismay. However, the witches' roles as treacherous equivocators can be seen from their first appearance. With "fair is foul" and "lost and won", the witches make equations of opposites and therefore exemplify the equivocator.¹¹

This is a perfectly appropriate characterization, as it reflects "King James's belief in a connection between treason and witchcraft."¹² Indeed, James I was involved in the persecution of witches, participated in the trials of many women accused of witchcraft both in Scotland and England, and wrote *Demonology*, first published in 1597, to express his views.¹³ He claimed that men were susceptible to witchcraft and the work of the Devil when their ambition allowed them to become victims of the promise of "greate riches, and worldlie commoditie."¹⁴ The connection to Macbeth's plight is clear, as he bemoans his own "vaulting ambition"¹⁵ as the source of his treacherous plan. Then, "It is clear... that Shakespeare was writing with authority when he portrayed Macbeth as subjected by the passion of

⁹ Simpson, 4.

¹⁰ Shakespeare, V.v.49

¹¹ Simpson, 15.

¹² Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, introduction to *Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare (London: Washington Square Press, 1992), xiii.

¹³ Lily Campbell, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes* (Strand: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1962), 87.

¹⁴ King James, *Demonology*, 32.

¹⁵ Shakespeare, I.vii.27

ambition to the temptation of... the supernatural¹⁶, and that authority came from no less important and eminent a source than James I.

James I provided other significant influences on Shakespeare's treatment of treason in *Macbeth*. It is worth remembering that this play was originally performed in court for James I, probably in the company of visiting royalty from Denmark. In such a context, Shakespeare walks a fine line by bringing up delicate issues surrounding James' family history. It could be argued, after all, that both of James's parents were killed as a result of treason. James's father, Lord Darley, King of Scotland, was a victim of treason, murdered for unclear motives and found dead in the wake of a large gunpowder explosion.¹⁷

Then, of course, there is the topic of James's mother, the infamous Mary, Queen of Scots. Executed by order of her sister Elizabeth I for treason against England only nineteen years before the first performance of *Macbeth*, Mary was the epitome of treachery against family and country. Therefore, Shakespeare faced an interesting dilemma in presenting a play to the new King that simultaneously discussed an example of Scottish treason and attempted to glorify the Stuart family line. This precarious balance can best be seen in the Act IV, scene 1 vision of the line of eight kings, ending with a representation of a glorified James I. However,

“the real record contains not only eight Stuart kings but a Stuart Queen—Mary, Queen of Scots... The uncomfortable gap between the members of the procession and the executed queen would surely be present in the minds of Shakespeare's audience and would arouse

¹⁶ Campbell, 214.

¹⁷ Alan Stewart, *The Cradle King* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003), 48-55.

associations of the uneasy nature of Anglo-Scottish relations in not so distant years,"¹⁸

providing an example of Shakespeare's tendency throughout all of his works to add a darker shadow to an otherwise glowingly pro-Stuart passage.

Beyond being an example of Shakespeare's masterful ability to walk the line between the relevant and the politically dangerous with his choice of topic, *Macbeth* is also a perfect example of how Shakespeare's incorporation of contemporary issues is outweighed by his consideration of universal, timeless issues. Instead of writing a play that directly addressed the events of his time, Shakespeare set *Macbeth* in a distant time, allowing him to deal more broadly with the concept of actions, specifically disloyalties, and their consequences.¹⁹ *Macbeth* causes its audience to wonder about how the loyal subject became the "dead butcher" in an eternal attempt to place the blame. It is easy to blame the witches, of course, although they do nothing more than plant ideas in Macbeth's mind. One argument is that Macbeth's solemn and fearful reaction to the witches' prophecy, and his first conversation with Lady Macbeth, indicate that Macbeth had contemplated Duncan's murder before the appearance of the witches. Padelford suggests that "the witches came to him because the wickedness of his thoughts made his mind fertile soil for the sowing of the corrupt seed."²⁰ However, it is important to remember that throughout the early action of the play, Macbeth is very conscious of the "deep

¹⁸ Sharon Alker and Holly Faith Nelson. "Macbeth, the Jacobean Scot, and the Politics of the Union" *SEL* 47, 2 (Spring 2007): 379-401

¹⁹ Simpson, 23.

²⁰ Frederick Morgan Padelford, "Macbeth the Thane and Macbeth the Regicide." *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Apr., 1901), pp. 112-119

damnation”²¹ that awaits as a result of such a grievous sin as regicide. Macbeth is no self-proclaimed villain like Richard III; he is a dramatically compelling character because of the internal conflict of “the awareness of the depth to which the deed will drive him is the upward and irresistible surge of his ambition.”²²

Macbeth’s compelling struggle is undoubtedly influenced by his wife’s actions. Interestingly, this can be viewed as Shakespeare connecting *Macbeth* not to current events, but into Biblical tradition. A really fascinating argument connects Macbeth, the loyal (but perhaps deeply evil) subject committing an unforgivable sin and falling from his position of power, to the Biblical falls of Lucifer and Adam. Of course, if the example of Adam is to be followed, Lady Macbeth makes a dangerous and daunting Eve, a connection only strengthened by her line urging Macbeth to “Look like th’ innocent flower,/But be the serpent under’t.”²³ Shakespeare does not even need to rely on Biblical precedents, instead setting Macbeth, as Coursen suggests, as a timeless “symbol of any man who has been similarly torn between his virtuous understanding and his corrupt will.”²⁴

This ultimately broad view of treason compliments the incorporation of a multitude of small, historically specific references to issues surrounding treason within Shakespeare’s lifetime. Clearly, Shakespeare was influenced by the issues in his world, and understanding them helps the modern reader to understand why Shakespeare chose to write *Macbeth* when and how he did. More importantly,

²¹ Shakespeare, 1.vii.20.

²² Herbert R. Coursen, Jr. “In Deepest Consequence: Macbeth.” *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Autumn, 1967), 379.

²³ Shakespeare, I.vi.76-7.

²⁴ Coursen, 379.

however, Shakespeare's ability to create a compellingly conflicted character has allowed *Macbeth* to be relevant even to modern audiences who are unaware of the historical context.

Works Cited

- Alker, Sharon and Holly Faith Nelson, "Macbeth, the Jacobean Scot, and the Politics of the Union" *SEL* 47, 2 (Spring 2007).
- Campbell, Lily, *Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes* (Strand: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1962).
- Coursen, Herbert R., Jr., "In Deepest Consequence: Macbeth." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (Autumn, 1967).
- Harris, Jonathan Gil, "The Smell of Macbeth", *Shakespeare Quarterly* 58.4 (2007).
- King James, *Demonology* (1597)
- Rebecca Lemon, "Scaffolds of Treason in *Macbeth*", *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 54, No. 1, Tragedy (Mar., 2002).
- Muir, Kenneth, introduction to *Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1986).
- Padelford, Frederick Morgan. "Macbeth the Thane and Macbeth the Regicide." *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (Apr., 1901).
- Plock, Vike Martina, "'Knock knock. War's where!': History, *Macbeth*, and *Finnegans Wake*", *Joyce Studies Annual* (2010).
- Shakespeare, William, *Macbeth: Folger Shakespeare Library*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine (London: Washington Square Press, 1992).
- Simpson, Matt, *Student Guide to Shakespeare's Macbeth*, (London: Greenwich Exchange, 2003).
- Stewart, Alan, *The Cradle King* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2003).