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Morality and the politics of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

Abstract

When morality is defined in terms of moral theology, and politics in the pragmatic terms of gaining and retaining power, the two concepts as they are developed in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* are not mutually incompatible but mutually interdependent.

This article seeks to establish the moral elements of pragmatic kingship in the play.

Machiavelli's *The Prince* was known by reputation in Shakespeare's England, even though the first complete translation did not appear until 1640, some thirty-four years after the earliest performances of *Macbeth*.¹ His logical pragmatism was assumed to be cynically opposed to all commonly held notions of morality, and his name came to represent the "diabolical" elements of political expediency, which would pursue power and disregard virtue.

Shakespeare portrays Macbeth as a man so filled with "Vaulting ambition" (I.vii.27) that he deliberately discards moral principles as he kills to become King and to retain the throne. The plot of the play itself, however, ends with the treacherous Macbeth's "cursed head" (V.ix.21) brandished triumphantly by Macduff, indicating on the most obvious level that betrayal, murder, and

1. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is assumed to have been written between 1603 and 1606, after the accession of James I to the throne of England. It was most probably in performance sometime after the end of March 1606.

tyranny are not in the long run as expedient as they appear at first to the evildoer. The play as it develops indicates on the contrary that efficient politics leans more heavily than is generally supposed on traditional classical and Christian concepts of morality.

The term “politics” is commonly associated with the skills of government. It is concerned with power: it explores the problems of acquiring it, applying it, and keeping it. Its methods include diplomacy, and force where necessary. It is most often connected with the terminology of efficiency, pragmatism, manipulation, and expediency.

The term “morality” has been connected with the distinctions between virtue and vice rather than with the problems of political prosperity or failure. Its study has explored social interaction and the effects of personal choice; it has analysed human behaviour in terms of ethical or “moral” criteria, and these in turn have been disseminated through religious dogma.

Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* examines carefully the principles of politics in action, but as it juxtaposes different examples of kingship through the figures of Duncan, Macbeth, Edward the Confessor, and Malcolm, it also measures success in terms of the extent to which rulers are able to combine virtue with political strategies.

The concept of “morality” in *Macbeth* is based firmly on the theology of the cardinal (or “principal” or “moral”) virtues, and on the belief that evil is the perversion of goodness. The medieval Church based its formulation of “virtue” on the writings of Plato and Aristotle² and on the Christianising of the classical virtues by Augustine. His writings formed the basis of Thomas Aquinas’ work in the thirteenth century, in which “morality” comprises the four ancient virtues of fortitude (or courage), temperance (or moderation), righteousness (or justice), and prudence (or wisdom), in connection with the three Christian theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity (or love).³

Thomist thought establishes the theological virtues as directing the individual towards God and towards supernatural happiness. God is the source of reason, so that faith directs the intellect towards God; hope and love are emotional extensions of faith, directing the soul through its human passions towards God, the object of faith. The four cardinal virtues may be broadly grouped as social virtues, or virtues that are dominant in an individual interacting with other individuals in society. Inspired by the theological virtues, the moral man employs the cardinal virtue of the intellect – that is,

2. For Plato’s four virtues see his *Republic*, IV. For Aristotle’s definitions see the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, II, i.

3. For Aquinas’ examination of cardinal and theological virtues, see the *Summa Theologica*, II, i (especially Q. LXI and Q. LXII respectively).

prudence – in assessing facts before him fully and accurately enough to determine the extent to which they draw him towards happiness in God or hinder him. He employs the other three cardinal virtues of the will – fortitude, temperance, and righteousness – when he acts out his moral duties to his fellow man. With fortitude he endures danger for the love of God; with temperance he avoids all sins of excess; and with righteousness he ensures that persons and creatures subject to him gain what is their fair due.

Sin, in terms of Aquinas' definitions, is the contrary of virtue and nature (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II,i:Q.LXXI), and he quotes Dionysius, saying "Now *man's good is to be in accord with reason, and his evil is to be against reason*" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II,i:Q.LXXI,Art.2). The implications of this statement are that if the sinful man perverts his reason, or the intellectual virtue of prudence, he is then not able to employ fully the virtues of the will. Instead of wisdom he will employ unreason, false logic, and rationalisation. This will turn the virtue of fortitude into foolhardiness and rash, emotional, foolishly impulsive action; the virtue of temperance into immoderate sins of excess; and the virtue of righteousness into injustice, cruelty, or tyranny.

In the light of these theological definitions of virtue and vice, Shakespeare fuses Macbeth's obsessive sinfulness with his political failure. The crown of the "most sainted King" Duncan (IV.iii.109) becomes an instrument of tyrannous oppression in the hands of the usurper, while the weaponry of Macbeth turned coward as he kills the sleeping Duncan is countered at the end of the play by the sword of justice and righteousness, wielded with fortitude by Macduff when he helps to restore legitimacy to the throne of Scotland.

The idea of evil as a perversion of virtue is dramatised at the beginning of the play with the words of the witches, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (I.i.11), signifying, according to Dr. Johnson's gloss, that "'to us', perverse and malignant as we are," (Johnson, 1968:755) what is beautiful is called ugly and what is ugly is called beautiful. Macbeth's association with the evil represented by the witches illustrates the corruption to which he succumbs as the "fair" rewards of his victory turn him to "foul" means of achieving further gain.

In the first act of the play, the audience is introduced to the "brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name)," (I.ii.16), who has earned the title, Thane of Cawdor, because of his courageous fighting in the service of his King against Norwegian invaders and Scottish treachery. The bleeding Captain's association of fierce battle on Duncan's behalf with "Golgotha" (I.ii.41) shows Macbeth's commitment to virtue and legitimate power as the play begins, yet as he gains lawful honours from Duncan in reward for excellence, his thoughts turn towards the illegitimate gains that seem suddenly within reach of his ambition.

Macbeth's fall from honour is illuminated by Aquinas' exploration of ambition. If "honour" is defined as the due reward for excellence, then sinful ambition in this play closely illustrates the Thomist view of "ambition" as the inordinate and intemperate desire for honour and status by a man who wants more of it than is his due, who wants to have it at the expense of virtue, and whose appetite for it is directed to his own profit at the expense of other people. Aquinas quotes the observation of Sallust, saying that "*the good as well as the wicked covet honours for themselves, but the one, i.e. the good, go about it in the right way, whereas the other, i.e. the wicked, through lack of the good arts, make use of deceit and falsehood.*" (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II,ii:Q.CXXXI,Art.1.) He adds the rider that ambition is one of the sins of excess, because of its appetite for more than a person deserves. (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II,ii:Q.CXXXI,Art.2.)

Shakespeare introduces Macbeth's ambitious thoughts in I.iii. in the presence of Banquo, his comrade in arms. Both men have fought bravely and look forward to being rewarded, but the contrast between them underlines Macbeth's inordinate greed for power. Where Macbeth begs for further knowledge of future greatness from the witches with the words "Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more" (I.iii.70), Banquo is content with what he has heard and asks no further, understanding very well that prudence must stand firm against corruption by "the insane root,/That takes the reason prisoner" (I.iii.84–85). He stands firm in his integrity, so that when Macbeth obliquely offers him "honour" in exchange for his support, Banquo replies with word-play that he will be pleased to accept it provided that he "lose none/In seeking to augment it," (II.i.26–27) and that any benefits he acquires for himself are not bought through betrayal.

Macbeth's ambition arises from his excessive desire for power and status. He is told by the witches that he is to be "King hereafter" (I.iii.50), and his reason tells him that if this is indeed to be his future, he need only wait for circumstances to fulfil the prophecy:

If Chance will have me King, why, Chance may crown me,
Without my stir.

(I.iii.144–5)

His intemperate greed for power, however, perverts his reason, and he decides to pre-empt Chance by murdering Duncan. He is still capable of prudent thinking when he contemplates regicide, listing all the reasons why he should not kill Duncan. He understands that the just consequences of murder will be self-destructive, for if he unleashes bloodshed, others in turn will destroy him:

We still have judgment here; that we but teach
Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return
To plague th'inventor: this even-handed Justice
Commends th'ingredience of our poison'd chalice
To our own lips.

(I.vii.8–12)

The destructive greed implied by the image of drinking from a poisoned cup makes Macbeth impatiently turn prudence to one side as he succumbs to the encouragements of his wife. With the last vestiges of temperance and moderation he tells her,

I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more, is none.

(I.vii.46–47)

He accepts her murder plan with all its flaws without criticism, however, and a mere thirty-five lines later he says,

I am settled, and bend up
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.

(I.vii.80–81)

Macbeth's act of killing Duncan in the face of his own careful reasoning begins a cycle of inexorable corruption in all the other areas of his virtue. The first murder leads to intemperance and excessive cruelty as he hurriedly and unjustly kills the King's two attendants in order to cover up his own guilt; he then proceeds to order the deaths of Banquo and Fleance, and the Macduff household. As Macbeth's reign continues, however, Shakespeare shows us that the actions of the usurping King are not merely immoral but also politically suicidal as he rashly persists in this cruelty till his tyranny becomes obvious to everyone. Under this rule, says Macduff,

Each new morn,
New widows howl, new orphans cry; new sorrows
Strike heaven on the face . . .

(IV.iii.4–6)

The imagery of heaven, suggesting an affront to God Himself, combines with the logic of politics to overthrow Macbeth. As his violence escalates, he makes new enemies, and as he tries to control his country with further violence, he turns more people against him.

The final act of the play shows the political consequences of Macbeth's immoral action. By now he is feared and detested so much by his subjects that many of his supporters desert him: in the final confrontation at Dunsinane he has to rely on mercenaries, his own soldiers abandon him to fight with the

avenging forces of Malcolm, Siward, and Macduff, and the castle surrenders easily. As old Siward reports to Malcolm:

. . . the castle's gently render'd:
The tyrant's people on both sides do fight;
The noble Thanes do bravely in the war.
The day almost itself professes yours,
And little is to do.

(V.vii.24–28)

An analogous situation is also illustrated in Machiavelli's *The Prince*, which warns against the kind of rule that leads to civil conflict and political ruin. Chapter XIX, "The need to avoid contempt and hatred", quotes the example of Maximinus, who was a "very warlike man" and "did not hold the empire for long". An "upsurge of hatred caused by fear of his ferocity" led to rebellion among his subjects, and his own troops "sickened of his cruelty; seeing how many enemies he had they feared him less, and they killed him" (Bull, 1961:111–2).

The failure of Macbeth's internal politics combines with a breakdown of reason in his military strategy at the end of the play. When he hears that the invading army is advancing, he decides, with some logic, that he is strong enough to outstay any siege:

Our castle's strength
Will laugh a siege to scorn: here let them lie,
Till famine and the ague eat them up.

(V.v.2–4)

Furthermore, a siege means sealing off the castle of Dunsinane, so no more of his followers will be able to desert. Soon, however, the half-truths of the witches start eroding what is left of his judgment. When he hears that Birnam wood is moving, superstition takes over from logic, and he discards his only remaining chance to survive the encounter when he moves out of the safety of the castle into vulnerability and death:

Arm, arm, and out!-
If this which he avouches does appear,
There is nor flying hence, nor tarrying here . . .
Ring the alarum bell!-Blow, wind! come, wrack!
At least we'll die with harness on our back.

(V.v.46–48 and 51–52)

These are expressions of desperate foolhardiness, not courage. Now the only chance that seems to remain for Macbeth is the prophecy that no man "of woman born" can harm him (IV.i.80). By now his fears and actions are ruled

by superstition rather than by reason. When he hears that “Macduff was from his mother’s womb/Untimely ripp’d”(V.viii.15–16) he finally loses what confidence he has left and although he is forced to continue fighting to the death by Macduff, he is already psychologically defeated before he is slain.

In contrast with the figure of Macbeth, Shakespeare introduces the portrait of ideal kingship in the person of King Edward the Confessor, whose piety coexists with successful politics. The language of religious morality is used to describe kingship as the English King is described by Malcolm, with his miraculous healing powers over the disease (probably a kind of tuberculosis called “the Evil”. In this context, the King’s powers also represent royal benevolence, which keeps the nation healthy and peaceful. As Malcolm says admiringly of Edward’s reign,

And sundry blessings hang about his throne,
That speak him full of grace.

(IV.iii.158–9)

The accession of Malcolm to the throne in this play re-establishes the legality and justice that were lost with the murder of his father. The very nature of evil is that it destroys with gratuitous cruelty and injustice, and its measure is the number of innocent victims that it claims. The increasing tyranny of Macbeth’s reign is a metaphor for the power of evil to be so ruinous that it has itself to be destroyed if normal life for ordinary people is to be re-established. As the anonymous Lord reports, Macduff’s search for help from Malcolm and the English is precisely in order that, with God’s help,

. . . we may again
Give to our tables, meat, sleep to our nights,
Free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives,
Do faithful homage, and receive free honours,
All of which we pine for now.

(III.vi.33–37)

With terrible irony, Macduff pays with the life of his household for bringing Malcolm back as King of Scotland, and the savage injustice of the murders at Fife deliberately draws attention to the moral as well as political need to restore lawful rule.

The death of Duncan is accompanied with images of blasphemy and desecration when Macduff announces the murder with the words:

Most sacrilegious Murther hath broke ope
The Lord’s anointed Temple, and stole thence
The life o’th’building!

(II.iii.66–68)

Duncan's reign, as it is revealed at the beginning of the play, combines justice with generosity as he orders the execution of the treacherous Thane of Cawdor and rewards the brave actions of the loyal Macbeth. Not only does Shakespeare present an ideal figure associated with religious images of virtue, but also a politician who has gained a great victory and who pragmatically follows precepts associated with Machiavellian expediency. Chapter XXI of *The Prince*, entitled "How a prince must act to win honour", states that

A prince should . . . show his esteem for talent, actively encouraging able men . . . the prince should be ready to reward men who . . . endeavour . . . to increase the prosperity of their city or their state. (Bull, 1961:123)

The portrait of Duncan deliberately combines competent kingship with virtue, and his death makes him the first innocent victim in the play of Macbeth's evil.

His son Malcolm, exiled as a result of the murder, knows his enemy as his father did not, and in his testing of Macduff he assesses with prudent wariness the possibility of hypocrisy and betrayal. Moral, yet at the same time pragmatic, he uses reason as a weapon against treachery. Schooled in the virtues abounding under Edward's rule, moreover, Malcolm recognises that the political virtues needed to restore long-term peace to Scotland are the virtues of Thomist moral theology. A king who rules with the intellectual virtue of reason and who delights "No less in truth, than life" (IV.iii.130) establishes a power base within which temperance, fortitude, and righteousness hold sway. In such a kingdom, ideally, virtuous subjects have nothing to fear, and the king maintains sufficient strength and support to overcome evil. As Malcolm enumerates "the king-becoming graces" he speaks with synonyms for Thomist virtues:

. . . Justice, Verity, Temp'rance, Stableness,
Bounty, Perseverance, Mercy, Lowliness,
Devotion, Patience, Courage, Fortitude . . .

(IV.iii.92–94)

The play *Macbeth* celebrates the dependence of true political pragmatism upon moral virtue in its strict theological sense. The logical interaction of two principles that are frequently presented as mutually incompatible lies in the factor of reason that is common to both. Without reason and logic, no king or politician can be expedient enough to survive; without reason and logic, no person can exercise righteousness, temperance, or fortitude sufficiently to be truly virtuous.

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