

Sigmund Freud on the Macbeths

from *Some Character-types Met With In Psycho-analytical Work* (1916)

Analytic work has no difficulty in showing us that it is forces of conscience that forbid the subject to gain the long-hoped-for advantage from the fortunate change in reality. It is a difficult task, however, to discover the essence and origin of these judging and punishing trends, which so often surprise us by their existence where we do not expect to find them. For the usual reasons I shall not discuss what we know or conjecture on the point in relation to cases of clinical observation, but in relation to figures that great writers have created from the wealth of their knowledge of the mind.

We may take as an example of a person who collapses on reaching success, after striving for it with single-minded energy, the figure of Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth. Beforehand there is no hesitation, no sign of any internal conflict in her, no endeavor but that of overcoming the scruples of her ambitious and yet tender-minded husband. She is ready to sacrifice even her womanliness to her murderous intention, without reflecting on the decisive part that this womanliness must play when the question afterwards arises of preserving the aim of her ambition, which has been attained through a crime.

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
[...] Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring ministers [...]. (I.v.47-55)¹

I have given suck, and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe below that milks me:
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this. (I.vii.61-67)

One solitary faint stirring of reluctance comes over her before the deed:

Had he not resembled
My father as he slept, I had done it [...]. (II.ii.16-17)

Then, when she has become Queen through the murder of Duncan, she betrays for a moment something like disappointment, something like disillusionment. We cannot tell why.

Naught's had, all's spent,
Where our desire is got without content.
'Tis safer to be that which we destroy,
Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy. (III.ii.6-9)

¹ All line numbers correspond to the Folger Shakespeare Library text of *Macbeth* (1992, 2013)

35 Nevertheless, she holds out. In the banquet scene that follows on these words, she alone keeps her head, cloaks her husband's state of confusion and finds a pretext for dismissing the guests. And then she disappears from view. We next see her in the sleepwalking scene in the last Act, fixated to the impressions of the night of the murder. Once again, as then, she seeks to put heart into her husband:

40 Fie, my lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? What need we fear who knows it,
when none can call our power to account? (V.I.38-41)

She hears the knocking at the door, which terrified her husband after the deed. But at the same time she strives to "undo the deed which cannot be undone." She washes her hands, which are blood-stained and smell of blood, and is conscious of the futility of the attempt.

45 She who had seemed so remorseless seems to have been borne down by remorse. When she dies, Macbeth, who meanwhile has become as inexorable as she had been in the beginning, can only find a brief epitaph for her:

She should have died hereafter.
There would have been a time for such a word. (V.v.20-21)

50 And now we ask ourselves what it was that broke this character that had seemed forged from the toughest metal? Is it only disillusionment—the different aspect shown by the accomplished deed—and are we to infer that even in Lady Macbeth an originally gentle and womanly nature had been worked up to a concentration and high tension that could not endure for long, or ought we to seek for signs of a deeper motivation that will make

55 this collapse more humanly intelligible to us?

It seems to me impossible to come to any decision. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a *pièce d'occasion*, written for the accession of James, who had hitherto been King of Scotland. The plot was ready-made, and had been handled by other contemporary writers, whose work Shakespeare probably made use of in his customary manner. It offered

60 remarkable analogies to the actual situation. The "virginal" Elizabeth, of whom it was rumored that she had never been capable of child-bearing and who had once described herself as "a barren stock," in an anguished outcry at the news of James's birth, was obliged by this very childlessness of hers to make the Scottish king her successor. And he was the son of the Mary Stuart whose execution she, even though reluctantly, had ordered,

65 and who, in spite of the clouding of their relations by political concerns, was nevertheless of her blood and might be called her guest.

The accession of James I was like a demonstration of the curse of unfruitfulness and the blessings of continuous generation. And the action of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is based on this same contrast.

70 The Weird Sisters assured Macbeth that he himself should be king, but to Banquo they promised that his children should succeed to the crown. Macbeth is incensed by this decree of destiny. He is not content with the satisfaction of his own ambition. He wants to

found a dynasty—not to have murdered for the benefit of strangers. This point is overlooked if Shakespeare’s play is regarded only as a tragedy of ambition. It is clear that
 75 Macbeth cannot live for ever, and thus there is but one way for him to invalidate the part of the prophecy that opposes him—namely, to have children himself who can succeed him. And he seems to expect them from his indomitable wife:

Bring forth men-children only,
 For thy undaunted mettle should compose
 80 Nothing but males. (I.vii.83-85)

And equally it is clear that if he is deceived in this expectation he must submit to destiny; otherwise his actions lose all purpose and are transformed into the blind fury of one doomed to destruction, who is resolved to destroy beforehand all that he can reach. We watch Macbeth pass through this development, and at the height of the tragedy we hear
 85 Macduff’s shattering cry, which has so often been recognized to be ambiguous and which may perhaps contain the key to the change in Macbeth:

He has no children! (IV.iii.255)

There is no doubt that this means: “Only because he is himself childless could he murder my children.” But more may be implied in it, and above all it may lay bare the deepest
 90 motive that not only forces Macbeth to go far beyond his own nature, but also touches the hard character of his wife at its only weak point. If one surveys the whole play from the summit marked by these words of Macduff’s, one sees that it is sown with references to the father-children relation. The murder of the kindly Duncan is little else than parricide; in Banquo’s case, Macbeth kills the father while the son escapes him; and in Macduff’s,
 95 he kills the children because the father has fled from him. A bloody child, and then a crowned one, are shown him by the witches in the apparition scene; the armed head that is seen earlier is no doubt Macbeth himself. But in the background rises the sinister form of the avenger, Macduff, who is himself an exception to the laws of generation, since he was not born of his mother but ripp’d from her womb.

100 It would be a perfect example of poetic justice in the manner of talion² if the childlessness of Macbeth and the barrenness of his Lady were the punishment for their crimes against the sanctity of generation—if Macbeth could not become a father because he had robbed children of their father and a father of his children, and if Lady Macbeth suffered the unsexing she had demanded of the spirits of murder. I believe Lady Macbeth’s
 105 illness, the transformation of her callousness into penitence, could be explained directly as a reaction to her childlessness, by which she is convinced of her impotence against the decrees of nature, and at the same time reminded that it is through her own fault if her crime has been robbed of the better part of its fruits.

In Holinshed’s *Chronicle* (1577), from which Shakespeare took the plot of

² **talion** from Latin *lex talionis*, the legal principle from biblical and early Roman law that criminals should receive as punishment precisely those injuries and damages they had inflicted upon their victims (i.e., the literal interpretation of the “eye-for-an-eye” principle)

110 *Macbeth*, Lady Macbeth is only once mentioned as the ambitious wife who instigates her
husband to murder in order that she may herself become queen. There is no mention of
her subsequent fate and of the development of her character. On the other hand, it would
seem that the change of Macbeth's character into a bloodthirsty tyrant is ascribed to the
same motives as we have suggested here. For in Holinshed *ten years* pass between the
115 murder of Duncan, through which Macbeth becomes king, and his further misdeeds; and
in these ten years he is shown as a stern but just ruler. It is not until after this lapse of time
that the change begins in him, under the influence of the tormenting fear that the prophecy
to Banquo may be fulfilled just as the prophecy of his own destiny has been. Only then
does he contrive the murder of Banquo, and, as in Shakespeare, is driven from one crime
120 to another. It is not expressly stated in Holinshed that it was his childlessness that urged
him to these courses, but enough time and room is given for that plausible motive. Not so
in Shakespeare. Events crowd upon us in the tragedy with breathless haste so that, to judge
by the statements made by the characters in it, the course of its action covers about *one*
125 *week*. This acceleration takes the ground from under all our constructions of the motives
for the change in the characters of Macbeth and his wife. There is no time for a long-
drawn-out disappointment of their hopes of offspring to break the woman down and drive
the man to defiant rage; and the contradiction remains that though so many subtle
interrelations in the plot, and between it and its occasion, point to a common origin of
them in the theme of childlessness, nevertheless the economy of time in the tragedy
130 expressly precludes a development of character from any motives but those inherent in the
action itself.

What, however, these motives can have been that in so short a space of time could
turn the hesitating, ambitious man into an unbridled tyrant, and his steely-hearted
instigator into a sick woman gnawed by remorse, it is, in my view, impossible to guess.
135 We must, I think, give up any hope of penetrating the triple layer of obscurity into which
the bad preservation of the text, the unknown intention of the dramatist, and the hidden
purport of the legend have become condensed. But I should not subscribe to the objection
that investigations like these are idle in face of the powerful effect that the tragedy has
upon the spectator. The dramatist can indeed, during the representation, overwhelm us by
140 his art and paralyze our powers of reflection; but he cannot prevent us from attempting
subsequently to grasp its effect by studying its psychological mechanism. Nor does the
contention that a dramatist is at liberty to shorten at will the natural chronology of the
events he brings before us, if by the sacrifice of common probability he can enhance the
dramatic effect, seem to me relevant in this instance. For such a sacrifice is justified only
145 when it merely interferes with probability not when it breaks the causal connection;
moreover, the dramatic effect would hardly have suffered if the passage of time had been
left indeterminate, instead of being expressly limited to a few days.

One is so unwilling to dismiss a problem like that of *Macbeth* as insoluble that I
will venture to bring up a fresh point, which may offer another way out of the difficulty.
150 Ludwig Jekels, in a recent Shakespearean study, thinks he has discovered a particular
technique of the poet's, and this might apply to *Macbeth*. He believes that Shakespeare
often splits a character up into two personages, which, taken separately, are not completely
understandable and do not become so until they are brought together once more into a

unity. This might be so with Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. In that case it would of course
155 be pointless to regard her as an independent character and seek to discover the motives for
her change, without considering the Macbeth who completes her. I shall not follow this
clue any further, but I should, nevertheless, like to point out something which strikingly
confirms this view: the germs of fear which break out in Macbeth on the night of the
murder do not develop further in *him* but in *her*. It is he who has the hallucination of the
160 dagger before the crime; but it is she who afterwards falls ill of a mental disorder. It is he
who after the murder hears the cry in the house: "Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder
sleep" and so "Macbeth shall sleep no more"; but we never hear that *he* slept no more,
while the Queen, as we see, rises from her bed and, talking in her sleep, betrays her guilt.
It is he who stands helpless with bloody hands, lamenting that "all great Neptune's ocean"
165 will not wash them clean, while she comforts him: "A little water clears us of this deed";
but later it is she who washes her hands for a quarter of an hour and cannot get rid of the
bloodstains: "All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand." Thus what he
feared in his pangs of conscience is fulfilled in her; she becomes all remorse and he all
defiance. Together they exhaust the possibilities of reaction to the crime, like two
170 disunited parts of a single psychical individuality, and it may be that they are both copied
from the same prototype.