
The Tragic Mistake of Macbeth

Shakespeare frequently makes use of the adjective 'weird' in his tragedy Macbeth. Along with bringing to mind the supernatural and unearthly, the word also forces one to consider the nature of the word's antonym – what is normal? Macbeth's emotions and actions become progressively more disjointed through the course of the play. When ultimately he loses his ability to feel emotion, Macbeth also loses his humanity; in other words, he becomes 'weird.'

The prophecy catalyzing Macbeth's demise comes from the "Weird Sisters," and 'weirdness' is prevalent throughout the play. For example, Ross says: "Threescore and ten I can remember well: Within the volume of which time I have seen hours dreadful and things strange; but this sore night hath trifled former knowings" (2:4:1-4). Ghosts appear frequently in Macbeth, as do paranormal occurrences. Shakespeare does not use supernatural elements merely to drive the plot, however; elements of weirdness help elucidate Macbeth's tragic flaw by forcing the reader to define normalcy.

In order to fully understand the importance of 'weird,' one must also examine the play's other themes and symbols. The play's opening lines are full of dialectic speech and paradox. The Weird Sisters' speech is full of statements such as "When the battle's lost and won" (1:1:4) and, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1:1:12). Macbeth repeats the paradox in a prophetic way: "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (1:3:38). Thus from the beginning, the reader is inclined to question the opposite of a statement or scene. For example, Lady Macbeth asks the murdering ministers to un-sex her. What is the opposite of an un-sexed woman? Not man but instead a sort of 'not-woman' who cannot be defined without reference to her opposite. So it is that Macbeth's tragic flaw as 'weird human' cannot be understood without first defining a normal human.

To help define the normal human we can turn to the Macbeth of the play's early acts. He is introduced as a valiant warrior and faithful constituent of the king. Duncan summarizes Macbeth's attributes by saying, "More is thy due than more than all can pay" (1:4:21). Macbeth possesses normal human emotions, rational nature, and an exceptional ability to convey his feelings: "Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair and make my seated heart knock at my ribs?" (1:3:135-136). Macbeth reveals his intense emotionality again with his fear of disappointing Duncan: "He's here in double trust; First, as I am his kinsman and his subject" (1:7:12-13). These examples make it clear that in the beginning of the play, Macbeth is a fully normal human who is well respected by the highest-ranking men of his society.

Since it is established that Macbeth is an emotional, rational person, the next logical step would

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be to inquire if his emotions have the ability to drive his actions. At least one scene suggests they do. Immediately after meeting the Weird Sisters and hearing their prophecy, Ross addresses Macbeth with the title 'Thane of Cawdor.' Surprised, Macbeth replies, "The Thane of Cawdor lives; why do you dress me in borrow'd robes?" (1:3:108-109). Here, one sees that Macbeth still has the ability to connect emotions with actions and speech. One can surmise that Shakespeare was making a philosophical assertion that what makes a normal human (e.g. the Macbeth of early scenes) is the dialogue between mind and body, emotion and action.

It follows that the disintegration of the body/soul connection signals the end of one's humanity. In the later parts of the play, Macbeth has become a tragic hero who has lost his ability to feel emotions. For example, when told that Lady Macbeth is dead he says listlessly: "She should have died hereafter" (5:5:19). He also confesses that "I have almost forgot the taste of tears" (5:5:10). Crying exemplifies the connection between mind and body that define normal humanity; one feels, and tears emerge. If Macbeth cannot cry, or no longer has sensory perception, he has clearly become an abnormal – or 'weird' – human.

Others have described other traits –among them ambition, unwillingness to let fate run its course, and depravity – as Macbeth's tragic flaw. These arguments have some merit, but certain statements disprove them. For example, Macbeth states: "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me, without my stir" (1:3:143-144). Here it is clear that he surrenders to fate and does not want to 'stir,' suggesting a lack of ambition, not a surplus of it. Also, Macbeth is portrayed in the first act as a feeling and heroic man – hardly a fundamentally evil character. Thus one must surmise that Macbeth's tragic flaw did not exist, or was dormant, at the beginning of the play; rather, something changed that created or made evident that flaw. That change was his becoming 'weird.'

Two main external influences catalyzed Macbeth's change: the weird sister's prophecy and Lady Macbeth's manipulations. Obviously, had the weird sisters never prophesied Macbeth's impending kingship Lady Macbeth would have never pressured Macbeth to commit murder. Appropriately she enters immediately after Macbeth says, "I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent" (1:7:25-26) – she becomes that "spur" through direct and indirect verbal assaults that hasten Macbeth's emotional disintegration. Through attacks on Macbeth's masculinity and trustworthiness, Lady Macbeth encourages him to act without thinking: "I would, while it was smiling in my face, have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums, and dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn as you have done to this" (1:7:56-59). She also works subtly on Macbeth, not acknowledging him as her husband until after he kills Duncan: "My husband!" (2:2:13), she finally cries. This emotional manipulation successfully snuffs Macbeth's emotions and allows him to act without feeling; that is, without his humanity.

Through Macbeth, Shakespeare makes the case that being human is not merely physical;

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rather, to be human one must also have emotions and that anything less makes one 'weird.' With Macbeth's tragic flaw Shakespeare probes the gray area between biology and philosophy. Although an explicit discussion of this connection does not arise in the play, Macbeth's tragic flaw does provide insight into how one can avoid departing this world a "dead butcher" (5:8:70), one who has lost his emotions and thus his humanity.

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