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MORAL CORRUPTION IN SHAKESPEARE'S *MACBETH*¹

Abstract

The paper deals with the notion of moral corruption in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. It hopefully proves that the roots of the protagonist's moral corruption stem from diverse social and historical circumstances rather than from his innate capacity for evil, as some critics suggest. By offering the chronicles of crimes and portraying the relationships with the female characters, Macbeth's pangs of conscience are utterly exposed. The paper also includes a detailed account of the notion of guilty conscience and what it uncovers about the protagonist's psyche and the nature of his supposed wickedness.

Keywords: moral corruption, conscience, guilt, society, psyche

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Brief Introductory Remarks

The paper deals with the notion of moral corruption in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and its roots. Our research has the aim of showing that despite his undeniable villainy Macbeth was not born destined to perform evil deeds but that he rather became corrupted under diverse external influences. We will offer a detailed analysis of the play with respect to four key points: the chronicles of his crimes, the role of the female characters in the play, the consideration of the feelings of guilt and the origin of their moral corruption. Bearing this in mind, the theoretical background of the paper is mostly, but not solely, based on Bloom's *Shakespeare – The Invention of the Human* (1998) and Freud's postulation of the psychoanalytical theory – *Some Character-Types Met With In Psychoanalytic Work* (1916).

Macbeth's Wrongdoings

As Kamčevski points out in his work '*Stars, hide your fires...*' – *A Study in Shakespeare's Psychological Method* (2010), two very different Macbeths can be perceived at the beginning and at the end of the play. Namely, Macbeth undergoes a tremendous psychological shift during the course of the play. In order to appreciate the extent of his change it is important to sketch a portrait of Macbeth as he is shown prior to all the crimes he eventually committed.

Macbeth himself appears on the stage for the first time in the third scene of Act I. The play opens with the appearance of the three witches, the weird sisters, who inform the audience that they intend to meet Macbeth upon a heath 'When the battle's lost and won' (I, i, 348). Knights notes in his work *Macbeth as a Dramatic Poem* (1933) that these words signify the kind of metaphysical pitch-and-toss that is about to be played out with good and evil (Knights 1933: 191). Likewise, the weird sisters here utter the words which will echo through the entire play: 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair' (I, i, 348). Their words imply confusion and contradictions. Knights comments yet again on the witches' words in his work *Some Shakespearean Themes* (1960) and states that they suggest the reversal of values which will mark the entire play and which are associated with the premonitions, disorder and moral darkness into which Macbeth will plunge himself (Knights 1960: 122). The supernatural opening of the play is succeeded by

a scene in a camp near the battlefield where the audience learns something about Macbeth's character for the first time. We glimpse Macbeth from the account of the unnamed sergeant who gives the report of the ongoing battle to King Duncan and his two sons. He states that Macbeth killed the rebel Macdonwald and describes him as follows: 'brave Macbeth – well he deserves that name –' (I, ii, 348). He goes on to say that the two generals, Macbeth and Banquo, continue to fight vigorously against the unexpected assault by the Norwegian army. Thus, the image we get of Macbeth at the very beginning of the play is that of a courageous warrior, loyal to his king and devoted to the destruction of his enemies. The Sergeant conveys the image of Macbeth's warlike skills in combat against the traitor by saying that Macbeth 'unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps / And fix'd his head upon our battlements' (I, ii, 348). Moreover, the king learns from the Scottish nobleman Ross that a final victory over the Norwegian intruders has been won and decides to award Macbeth with the title of the Thane of Cawdor. Such an image of Macbeth as an epic hero begins to waver and alter from the very first time he appears in the play and as the audience sees him interact with the witches.

Macbeth appears on the stage for the first time accompanied by Banquo and they meet the three witches. The witches hail Macbeth with three titles, the Thane of Glamis, the Thane of Cawdor and the king-to-be. After such an address, Banquo's words reveal Macbeth's reaction: 'Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?' (I, iii, 348) The very fact that Macbeth winces at hearing the witches address him as the future king could be seen as the first manifestation of his guilty conscience. We may guess that he has had thoughts of kingship before the encounter with the witches and thus was startled at hearing his secret desire verbalized. The witches then prophesy that Banquo shall not himself be king but shall be the father of many kings and then they vanish into thin air. Macbeth and Banquo rejoin the king and other noblemen and the first prophecy comes true as the king greets Macbeth with the title of the Thane of Cawdor. The king shows sincere gratitude and favor to the two generals and promises them advancement in their positions and success and they all start towards Macbeth's castle. Once the first prophecy comes true, Macbeth's mind begins its toil to decide whether he should act towards its final fulfillment or not. However, at this point, he is still far from the fatal decision.

If left to himself and to the dilemma that the witches have produced in his mind, Macbeth would, quite possibly, have refrained from committing

the crime of regicide. However, straight from the influence of the witches' prophecy, he moves to the influence of his ambitious wife, Lady Macbeth. Booth states in his work *Macbeth as Tragic Hero* (1951) that Macbeth should have simply waited for the third prophecy to come true, without doing anything himself, for if the witches were right about the two titles he gained, then the third and most desired title would also have become his (Booth 1951). However, he is urged to act by his wife from whom we learn something more about Macbeth's nature:

...Yet do I fear thy nature.
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldest be great;
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. What thou wouldest highly,
That wouldest thou holily; wouldest not play false,
And yet wouldest wrongly win. (I, v, 350)

Thus we learn that Macbeth is just and kind though admittedly ambitious. However, his wife is there to corrupt his better nature and convince him to murder the king.

It is stated in *Bloom's Shakespeare Through the Ages: Macbeth* (2008) that, in addition to his many crimes, Macbeth also committed a crime against the ancient law of hospitality when he killed a guest in his house whom he should have dutifully protected (Bloom & Marson 2008: 29).

However, the taunts of Lady Macbeth on the account of his masculinity and the urgings of his own ambition overrule his finer judgment in the end and he murders the sleeping king in his chambers. He murders him with the daggers of the king's own guards (who were at the time fast asleep due to intoxication with wine arranged by Lady Macbeth) and then frames them for the deed. In the morning, when the deed is discovered, Macbeth slays the guards allegedly in his blind fury caused by the beloved king's death. Duncan's sons flee the court after the murder fearing that whoever killed their father will try to kill them as well. Their escape arouses suspicion of their guilt and thus Macbeth is crowned the king of Scotland.

Having gained the crown does not bring Macbeth peace and ease of mind. Given that the prophecies made to him by the witches all come true, then the same must go for Banquo who is promised to be the father to the line of kings.

Bloom states in his work *Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human* (1998) that the possible cause of Macbeth's moral demise is his childlessness. The sterility of the Macbeths as a possible explanation of their moral degradation shall be discussed in the part of the paper dealing with the roots of Macbeth's moral corruption. For now, it is important to state that Macbeth is led to commit his second crime in order to make sure that Banquo's heirs will not be kings after him. Namely, he hires assassins to murder Banquo and his son Fleance. Banquo is killed on Macbeth's orders; however, Fleance manages to escape. At the feast in his castle following Banquo's death, Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo and loses his temper due to fear and guilt. Given Macbeth's unusual behavior and the two murders that occurred unexpectedly, two noblemen, Ross and Macduff become suspicious and flee to England to join Duncan's eldest son Malcolm and plead with the English king to help them rid Scotland of the 'tyrant' Macbeth.

Tortured by his conscience and ambition, Macbeth decides to seek out the witches and ascertain his destiny. The witches perform a spell and Macbeth sees a number of apparitions who warn him against Macduff (of whom Macbeth was by that time suspicious himself) and prophesy that '...none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth' (IV, i, 354) and 'Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him' (IV, i, 355). However, to the burning question troubling his mind, whether Banquo's heirs shall indeed be kings the apparitions offer no consolation. Instead, Macbeth sees a procession of eight crowned kings, the last of whom carries a mirror, with Banquo's ghost walking at the end of the line. Before Macbeth manages to ask for clarification, the witches once again vanish into thin air.

By this time in the play, Macbeth's great change has already occurred. Indeed, Knights notes that after killing Duncan, there is something compulsive in his other crimes and that he is no longer a free agent (Knights 1960). It can be perceived how Macbeth decides more easily to order Banquo's and Fleance's murder without the moral dilemmas that preceded the murder of Duncan. After the second encounter with the witches, he decides, yet more easily, to order the murder of Macduff's wife and children.

The murder of Macduff's wife and children is the next crime added to the list of Macbeth's wrongdoings. However, after convincing him to kill Duncan, Lady Macbeth ceases to be his accomplice as he no longer seeks

her council or informs her of his plans so as to spare her the knowledge of his bloody intentions. Thus, Lady Macbeth's demise begins and she commits suicide by the end of the play, tortured by her awakened conscience.

Macbeth does not stop, however. He is somewhat appeased by the assurances of the apparitions of his invincibility. However, all that comes to the test when Malcolm and Macduff, aided by the English king, return to Scotland with a besieging army. Having already committed the fatal mistake of trusting the witches, Macbeth begins to lose himself and appears half-mad near the end of the play. Knights notes that '...it is not only the besieging army that hems him in; he is imprisoned in the world he has made' (Knights 1960: 140). Macbeth's adversaries cut down Birnam Wood and use the boughs and leaves to camouflage the approaching army. Thus, Birnam Wood indeed comes to Dunsinane Hill. In Act V, scene VII, Macbeth commits the only murder in the play which the audience actually sees; he slays the son of Lord Siward. It is significant that the only murder committed by Macbeth the audience gets to see is the one that can be justified, as it happens during the battle. This was cleverly arranged by Shakespeare so that the audience could feel sorry for Macbeth and attempt to justify his conduct. According to Sir Quiller-Couch in his work *Shakespeare's Workmanship* (1918) the only way the audience can sympathize with Macbeth is if we suppose that his crimes proceeded from the deadly influence of hallucinations (Sir Quiller-Couch 1918: 178). The play ends with Macbeth dying at the hands of Macduff who informs him that he was not born by woman but '...was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd' (V, viii, 357). At the very end of the play, Macbeth is killed by the man born through Cesarean section and his reign comes to an end. Malcolm reclaims the usurped throne of his father with the promise of the new age for Scotland.

Macbeth is the shortest tragedy written by Shakespeare. Knights states that there is nothing superfluous in this play and that the action moves directly and quickly to the crisis and from the crisis to the full working out of plot and theme (Knights 1960: 122). And yet, short and direct though the play is, it proved to be sufficient to show the downfall of the man that could have been great.

Macbeth and the Female Characters of the Play

The Weird Sisters are the characters who open the play. It has already been stated how their chants and the usage of contradictions such as 'fair is foul, foul is fair' and 'when the battle's lost and won' (I, i, 348) symbolize the moral confusion that pervades the entire play. Moreover, they inform the audience that they are about to meet Macbeth, so we get the impression that they have already mediated some sinister plan. The logical question that rises is who or what these witches actually are. In the play they are referred to as 'the witches' and 'the weird sisters', however, we should note the meaning of the word 'weird' more closely as it used to mean something quite different in Shakespeare's day. According to Mabillard in her article *The Weird Sisters* (2000) the word 'weird' in this play comes from the Anglo-Saxon 'wyrd' meaning 'fate' which makes them the foretellers of Macbeth's destiny (Mabillard 2000). Furthermore, the word 'fate' immediately raises the association with the Fates, the three mythological women, the personifications of destiny, who were believed to have supremacy over human fate, with the power to control or cut the threads of life.

The witches are thus wrapped in a veil of mystery and their physical appearance does not help us much in interpreting them. The dreary appearance of the witches, according to Kamčevski, reflects the darkness of Macbeth's intentions and their chanting signifies the loss of the moral compass (Kamčevski 2010: 155). They can be interpreted as temptresses that awaken Macbeth's ambition and his hidden desires. Their temptations continue when they next appear on the stage accompanied by Hecate, the Queen of Witches, and produce from their cauldron a number of apparitions that further mislead Macbeth.

Shamas compares the witches with the Great Goddess in her book "We Three": *The Mythology of Shakespeare's Weird Sisters* (2007). Namely, they correspond to the third form of the goddess – the hag. As such, they represent femininity and the powers of the Goddess banished from the patriarchal societies. It can be noted that the witches appear during the battle and that they address the two generals, representatives of the patriarchal world. The witches then represent the feminine aspect which is marginalized and banished from this hierachal system and which abides in the world of nature and the elements. According to Holderness, Potter and Turner in the book *Shakespeare: The Play of History* (1987), the witches are in rebellion against this patriarchal system and all the taboos

and distinctions that sustain it (Holderness, Potter, Turner 1987: 134). The temptation of the witches is carried on by another representative of the feminine in the play, Lady Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth appears for the first time in Act I, Scene V when she receives a letter from Macbeth informing her of the witches' prophecy. In the soliloquy cited above she mentions the kind nature of her husband which she fears and she decides to convince him to act towards the fulfillment of the prophecy. The hypothesis that Macbeth and his wife already had dreams of attaining the throne or even murdering Duncan is once again made quite possible. Just as Macbeth winced at hearing the witches name his hidden desire, Lady Macbeth proceeds to making plans for manipulating her husband into murdering the king the moment she reads the letter. Lady Macbeth prepares to act, and in order to do so, she must set aside her conventional, feminine role, and must make use of masculine characteristics, much like Queen Margaret in *Richard III*. Thus, she invokes the spirits of murder as follows:

...Come you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here
And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctionous visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace between
The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,
And take my milk for gall, you murdering ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief! (I, v, 350)

By this ominous request, Lady Macbeth expects to be ready to act and exert influence which would not be possible if she kept her role as a female. However, this 'unsexing' of her own will does not bring her the complete fulfillment of her wishes as we will further show. Moreover, Sandra Gilbert states in her article '*Unsex Me Here*: Lady Macbeth's 'Hell Broth' (2016) that Lady Macbeth was, in a way, dehumanized by her unsexing as she stepped out of the natural order in which 'the milk of human kindness' nurtures moral feeling. Likewise, through this dehumanization, Lady Macbeth further aligns herself with the three witches (Gilbert 2016). From the moment of her unsexing, Lady Macbeth begins her fatal urging of Macbeth

towards the completion of the bloody deed. As soon as he arrives, he is under her compelling influence.

Upon learning that Duncan will spend the night in their home with the intention of leaving the following day she states: 'O, never / shall sun that morrow see!' (I, v, 350) Lady Macbeth is now at the height of her power and influence and she expresses stunning confidence and mettle. Her husband, even now tortured by doubt and guilt, appears powerless under her will.

Lady Macbeth assumes the male role in her relationship with her husband and exerts her power over him. She constantly taunts him by making reference to his manliness and putting his reputation at stake. When Macbeth exhibits signs of a change of heart or, due to his feelings of guilt, decides to quit their vile scheme, Lady Macbeth touches upon his courage as follows:

...Art thou afear'd
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life
And live a coward in thine own esteem,
Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would'
Like the poor cat i' the adage? (I, vii, 351)

Macbeth answers as follows in defense of his valor:

I dare do all that may become a man;
Who dares do more is none. (I, vii, 351)

By his words we know that Lady Macbeth hit the spot. Macbeth defends himself and his courage, which means that he does feel they are being brought into doubt. Once he begins to doubt himself, Macbeth becomes an easy victim and is soon led on to agree to commit the deed he dreads. Lady Macbeth continues in the same manner:

When you durst do it, then you were a man,
And, to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man. (I, vii, 351)

She goes on exaggerating her own courage and making him seem an even greater coward by comparison:

...I have given suck and know
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me –
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. (I, vii, 351)

We shall recall this passage again when we consider the childlessness of the Macbeths. A claim of such ruthlessness does seem unreal, but to Macbeth it signifies that a woman has more nerve than he does, and with this she defeats his moral considerations. He states:

Bring forth men-children only,
For thy undaunted mettle should compose
Nothing but males. (I, vii, 351)

Lady Macbeth thus succeeds in convincing her husband to murder the king. This is what Wayne Booth states in his work *Macbeth as Tragic Hero* (1951) about her taunting:

...she shifts the whole ground to questions of Macbeth's valour. She twists him for cowardice, plays upon the word 'man', and exaggerates her own courage. Macbeth's whole reputation seems at last to be at stake, and even questions of success and failure are made to hang on his courage: 'But screw your courage to the sticking place / And we'll not fail.' So that the meaning of his past achievements seems to hang on the decision to murder Duncan. (Booth 1951: 189)

She proceeds by making sure that Duncan's guards are heavily intoxicated and Macbeth kills the king. After the deed is done, he feels such remorse and guilt that he needs to be ordered around by his wife who does not lose her composure. She is as yet in full command of the situation and she even states that 'Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't.' (II, ii, 351) We will get back to these words shortly. It has already been noted how Macbeth committed all the other misdeeds far easier after he had killed Duncan. The same cannot be said for his spouse. Her steady downfall begins once Macbeth starts to act completely independently of her, and when she is no longer his accomplice.

Macbeth does not tell her that he hired assassins to kill Banquo and his son Fleance, but he states: 'Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, /

Till thou applaud the deed' (III, ii, 353). The last time we see Lady Macbeth onstage before her mental breakdown is at the feast when Banquo's ghost appears. Upon seeing the ghost (and as he is the only one who sees it), Macbeth is overridden with guilt and he behaves strangely in front of the other noblemen. Lady Macbeth appears yet again composed and aids him by saying that his behavior is but a fit he has been having since his youth and bids the noblemen pay no attention to it. She says apart to Macbeth yet again: 'Are you a man?' (III, iv, 354).

This is the last we see of Lady Macbeth before her illness and eventual suicide. It seems that she was firm in her intent and strong in will until she achieved her goal. Having gained success, her downfall followed almost instantly. This peculiarity of Lady Macbeth was noted by Freud in his work *Some Character-Types Met With in Psycho-Analytical Work* (1916) and he used her as an example of people ruined by success.

Freud notes how there are people who seem to fall ill at the moment when they reach the fulfillment of a long-harbored wish. At the bottom of such a paradoxical occurrence lies a deep-rooted feeling of guilt which stems from their infantile sexuality. That is why, when their long-yearned-for, forbidden wish comes true, they undergo a complete mental breakdown. We should now recall Lady Macbeth's words of how she would have murdered the sleeping Duncan had he not resembled her own father. It is possible that this was a hint at her infantile sexual feelings towards her father that were not resolved and which have tortured her ever since, culminating with her demise. A sexual wish towards a parent of the opposite sex is normal for infants in the process of sexual development according to Freud. At this stage, they already feel that this desire is shameful and thus must not be expressed, which is why they feel guilt for harboring it. When the infantile sexuality is not resolved and a person experiences a fulfillment of another forbidden desire, it evokes the troubling memories from this early developmental phase which can then cause psychological damage.

The last time we see Lady Macbeth in this play is in her sleep-walking scene. She has gone mad and in her sleep she begins to walk the castle and attempt to wash her hands which she claims are blood-stained. There will be more talk of this occurrence in the next segment dealing with guilty conscience in *Macbeth*. For now, it is important to state that Lady Macbeth who has previously been observed to say: 'A little water clears us of this deed' (II, ii, 351) now makes a complete shift to the following words: 'All

the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this / little hand. Oh, oh, oh!' (V, i, 356) After this, the audience learns that Lady Macbeth committed suicide as the culmination of her illness.

The fact that the Macbeths had no children is very significant. Some commentators claim that the issue of childlessness pervades the entire play and indeed it plays a very prominent part. Macduff's wife and children are slain on the orders of the childless Macbeth. If we recall Lady Macbeth's mention of how she has known the love a mother feels for her child we can only conclude that their child died or that she has had a child or children by a prior marriage. However, we have no way of finding that out. If we next consider Lady Macbeth's taunting on account of Macbeth's manhood, it does not seem far-fetched to assume that he may have been either impotent or sterile. It would also seem reasonable to assume that Lady Macbeth came to regret her urging of the spirits to unsex her. This is what Freud says about her illness:

I believe Lady Macbeth's 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 her crime has been robbed of the better part of its fruits. (Freud 1916: 3018)

It is important to state, however, that even though Lady Macbeth, to use Kamčevski's words 'tipped the balance to the other side of the scales' (Kamčevski 2010: 156) in convincing Macbeth to murder the king, she cannot be taken as fully responsible for this crime. Indeed, as Gordić Petković states in her foreword to Stefanović's translation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: 'The female influence, presented through the characters of the witches and Lady Macbeth, cannot create ambition where there is no ambition, but it can awaken it and move it to action.' (Gordić Petković 2003: 18). Macbeth has all along had a wish to attain the throne as well as the ambition to raise his position in society. The female characters merely led him on into following his secret, corrupt desires. Given that Macbeth himself was aware of his own vaulting ambition, during the course of the play he can be perceived to be suffering from severe pangs of conscience almost from his very first appearance on the stage.

Guilty Conscience in *Macbeth*

Bloom states that 'Macbeth suffers intensely from knowing that he does evil, and that he must go on doing even worse' (Bloom 1998: 517). From his shudder at the witches' mention of his kingly prospects we are aware that Macbeth is not void of ambition, however, at the beginning of the play, he is still far from being set on committing the crime.

At this point, murder is to him scarcely imaginable, and it can be concluded that what unfixes his hair and makes his 'seated heart knock at my (his) ribs' (I, iii, 350) is precisely his conscience, the one that made him shudder upon hearing the prophecy. Unfortunately, the thought of murder is not destined to remain 'fantastical' (I, iii, 350) to Macbeth for long, since he swiftly moves to the persuasive influence of his wife.

Once Macbeth arrives with Duncan to his castle, the struggle to decide whether he should or should not commit regicide begins. Macbeth is perceived to be constantly changing his mind, and Lady Macbeth taunts him incessantly as we have shown in the previous segment. Here we should bear in mind that in Elizabethan England, conscience was viewed as an instrument of providence. Thus, Macbeth fears damnation for the mortal sin he is about to commit. Not only is Duncan the Lord's anointed ruler, his own cousin and guest, but there are also his undeniable virtues to consider.

Duncan's virtues and the goodness he expresses towards Macbeth are, according to our protagonist, bound to cause his eternal damnation. Likewise, Macbeth here admits that it is his own ambition that tempts him and drives him towards the unpardonable crime. After further consideration he tells his wife: 'We shall proceed no further in this business' (I, vii, 351). He appears to be on a moral see-saw, constantly moving between two options none of which he deems acceptable. In the previous part we have given an account of the fierce tauntings of Lady Macbeth and her iron will to convince Macbeth to perform the deed, thus, it is not the least surprising that she should succeed. Macbeth eventually claims: 'I am settled, and bend up / Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.' (I, vii, 351). His mind is made up to follow her advice. Lady Macbeth instructs him to '... look like the innocent flower / But be the serpent under it' (I, v, 350). He begins to act adhering to her instructions and the following words echo her sinister advice: 'False face must hide what the false heart doth know' (I, vii, 351).

The first act ends with these words and the next act will see a new, changed Macbeth – Macbeth the regicide.

Once resolved to murder Duncan, Macbeth experiences his first hallucination. Namely, he perceives a floating dagger leading him on to Duncan's chamber. The dagger appears in the first scene of act two, and when the second scene commences the deed has already been performed and thus not shown in the play. It has already been stated that Duncan's murder is not shown on the stage so that the audience can feel pity for Macbeth. According to Gordić Petković, the act of murder has been omitted, but not so Macbeth's struggle before and after it (Gordić Petković 2003: 20). The sense of mental agitation roused by this inner struggle pervades the entire play. Thus, the feeling of guilt is present through it all and it provokes the hallucination of the dagger. The following is stated in Bloom's *Shakespeare Through the Ages: Macbeth* (2008): 'Macbeth has no powers of introspection, so it is ironic that he frames this illusionary weapon as a "dagger of the mind, a false creation." It demonstrates once again that there is a constant undercurrent of self-doubt, that he is tormented on a deep and unconscious level' (Bloom 2008: 31). It is indeed evident that Macbeth is constantly in doubt and insecure concerning his actions and decisions but he rarely pauses to examine them in detail. This lack of introspection on Macbeth's part makes it possible for Lady Macbeth to sway him from his decision to let go of his bloody intention.

Macbeth appears on the stage after the murder of Duncan badly shaken. He tells Lady Macbeth how the chamberlains awoke once and before going back to bed said their prayers. Macbeth wanted to say 'amen' with them, but could not, the words remaining stuck in his throat. This is another example of the divine concept of guilt; being that he killed his king, he can no longer partake in prayer as the act of murder is a direct violation of God's law. Moreover, Macbeth claims that he heard a voice cry out '...'Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep" (II, ii, 351). The voice is yet another hallucination he experiences and the ensuing insomnia an additional harbinger of his tormenting feeling of guilt. In his agitation, Macbeth forgot to leave the chamberlains' daggers next to Duncan's body and informs his wife that he cannot return to the scene of the crime. He cannot stand to behold his hideous crime. Lady Macbeth, irritated by his shrinking and repenting goes to the chamber to frame the chamberlains. Macbeth examines his bloody hands with the feeling of guilt culminating.

The symbol of dirty hands appears several times throughout the play. It signifies the guilt which stains the soul. The need to wash his hands and

make them clean again represents Macbeth's yearning to be absolved of the crime he committed. Xu, Bègue and Bushman studied the connection between the feeling of guilt and hand washing and in their article *Washing the Guilt Away: Effects of Personal Versus Vicarious Cleansing on Guilty Feelings and Prosocial Behavior* (2014) they state that such cleansing can be found in various religious rituals, such as baptism, where water is used to wash away sin and make the person clean and pure (Xu, Begue, Bushman 2014). This is then another link of conscience and providence, as religious rituals are used to rid an individual of the feelings of guilt. Unfortunately, Macbeth does not achieve redemption although he heartily regrets murdering Duncan which he openly states: 'To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself / Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst! (II, ii, 351)

Macbeth's guilt gradually accumulates as the play progresses. 'O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!' (III, ii, 353) Macbeth states. And indeed, to his troubled conscience is added a new worry, the promise of the witches that Banquo's heirs shall be kings in the future. That is why Banquo becomes his next victim. However, unlike Duncan, Banquo reappears as a ghost at the feast in Macbeth's castle and drives Macbeth into a fit. It is very significant that Macbeth is the only person who can see the ghost being that it is a projection of his throbbing feeling of guilt; however, Banquo's ghost serves another function as well. According to Stoll, his errand is plain: 'it is prophecy, retaliation, vengeance. He sits in Macbeth's royal chair as a token that none the less his seed shall sit here hereafter.' (Stoll 1907: 206) The knowledge that a dreadful crime has been committed in vain, for somebody else's issue is unbearable to Macbeth, which is why the audience begins to perceive him as deranged in the ghost scene.

Macbeth muses how the dead can rise from their graves unlike in the past when the death of the body was absolute. He estimates this illogical occurrence as a breach of the natural order. What he does not perceive is the underlying meaning of this 'rising'. According to Knights, the dead rise in the murderer, that is, in his troubled mind, given that murder is not natural between men and as such represents a violation of his essential humanity (Knights 1960: 134). Macbeth lives in dread of his conscience and thus, to him, there is no scarier sight than that of the ghost of his victim – the very personification of his guilt.

His ever present pricks of conscience leave no doubt as to his guiltiness and Macbeth is aware of this as much as the audience. Unfortunately,

Macbeth sees no alternative and no way back. He likewise continues his bloody reign and progressive downfall until his death, which he meets at the hands of Macduff. He states: ‘...I am in blood / Stepp’d in so far, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o’er.’ (III, iv, 354) He does not return and carries on guilt-ridden to the very end.

Lady Macbeth vanishes from the audience’s sight quite abruptly. After she intervenes and endeavors to provide an explanation for Macbeth’s unusual behavior when he sees Banquo’s ghost, she disappears and we do not see her sane again. When she reappears on the stage, the audience sees her sleep-walking and obsessively washing her hands. This is deeply contrasted to her previous claim to Macbeth which she used as a consolation after he murdered the king, and that is: ‘a little water clears us of this deed’ (II, ii, 351). In the madness scene, she proves that her encouragements and reassurances made to Macbeth are not valid and cannot apply to either of them. From her ramblings we gather that she is referring to past events, which means that she is experiencing flashbacks. In her article *Mental Illnesses in Macbeth* (2017) Tandon states the following:

This scene indicates that while she is sleepwalking, Lady Macbeth is flashing back to memories of deeds that still haunt her. Although she seemed to be poised in front of Macbeth, her flashback proves that she has a guilty conscience, and her treacherous deeds have a deeper effect on her than she shows. (Tandon 2017)

Lady Macbeth’s breakdown goes to show that even seemingly unflinching and ruthless minds can eventually suffer under the blows of conscience. Macbeth, who is no stranger to those blows, asks of the doctor attending on Lady Macbeth:

Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,
Raze out the written troubles of the brain,
And with some sweet oblivious antidote
Cleanse the stuff’d bosom of that perilous stuff
Which weighs upon the heart? (V, iii, 357)

However, there is no surgical solution for the guilt one experiences which is a lesson that the Macbeths learn the hard way. Lady Macbeth’s lapse into madness is followed by suicide and Macbeth himself is referred to as mad and deranged until the end of the play.

The atmosphere the play produces is that of trouble, dismay and haunting unease. There are numerous references to and invocations of darkness and night and the majority of the plot happens in the dark. Knights states:

Both Macbeth and his wife willfully blind themselves ('Come, thick Night', 'Come, seeling Night...'), and to the extent that they surrender the characteristically human power of intellectual and moral discernment they themselves become the 'prey' of 'Night's black agents', of the powers they have deliberately invoked. (Knights 1960: 139)

However, their attempt to blind themselves to their crimes and thus fool their conscience evidently fails. Thus, our protagonist, according to Hazlitt, rushes towards the goals of his ambition and recoils from them betraying the harassed state of his feelings. We perceive him as perplexed and absent in thought, sudden and desperate in act from distrust of his own resolution throughout the entire play (Hazlitt 1955: 14).

The Roots of Macbeth's Moral Corruption

Macbeth has been compared with Doctor Faustus by many critics and likewise termed an over-reacher. His ambition is, of course, undeniable and evident throughout the entire play. As we have already shown, there is an eerie link between Macbeth's shudder upon hearing the prophecy of the witches and the readiness with which Lady Macbeth starts making plans for Duncan's murder the moment she reads her husband's letter. This behavior indicates premeditation; it appears that both of them have had dreams of attaining the throne and quite possibly of murder. Such an interpretation sheds a new light on the events of the play. Gordić Petković claims the following: 'If we accept such an interpretation, we perceive quite differently the prophecy of the three unusual women: the witches could then be a projection of Macbeth's desires, that is, a fantasy or a hallucination that reflects his hidden urges' (Gordić Petković 2003: 22).

Once a person loses control of their ambition and lets their desires and urges overshadow their better judgment, they are in danger of losing themselves in the process, much like Macbeth. Kamčevski warns us: 'We saw the dark side of the ambition and how, unless controlled by the use of

the moral code and humane means, it can come to control the ambitious one' (Kamčevski 2010: 161). Thus, we can say that Macbeth is guilty of succumbing to his own ambition, aided by his wife's taunting and the misleading prophecy. If we consider now the influence of the witches and their prophecy, one would be justified in remarking that Macbeth should simply have waited for the third prophecy to come true on its own, without his intervention and that the prophecy does not excuse him. However, Booth states: '...it is also true that almost any man could be thrown off his moral balance by such supernatural confirmations. His misunderstanding is thus obvious and dramatically effective and at the same time quite forgivable' (Booth 1951: 188-189). Dismissing the influence of the prophecy will not do, for in a situation such as the one Macbeth experienced, where one is faced with forces beyond human comprehension, it is not surprising that one should be misled and eventually succumb to the lowest urges.

While the evil in Macbeth is undeniable, it should be more closely defined. Like Faustus who signed his doom with his own blood, Macbeth parts with his better nature through his greed. Knights states that 'Macbeth defines a particular kind of evil – the evil that results from a lust for power' (Knights 1960: 120). It can be learned from Shakespeare's *Macbeth* that ambition, which in itself does not necessarily imply vileness, can easily reach proportions harmful to one's humanity. Macbeth is easily swayed throughout the play as he does not engage in introspection and show a faulty perception of his own personality which is just as dangerous as his vaulting ambition.

We should recall Macbeth as we first saw him in the play. He is described as a great warrior, fearless in battle and loyal to his king; we should remember Duncan's gratitude towards Macbeth and the honors he bestows on him. However, this positive image of heroic Macbeth vanishes from the audience's memory the moment he begins to plot Duncan's murder. But it is undeniable that this too is a part of Macbeth's character. It is hard to imagine such valor and devotion in a man predestined to be evil. If we set aside what he becomes at the end of the play, we would be justified in saying that Macbeth was indeed an honorable thane fighting for the king he pledged to follow. His reputation and past achievements are very important to him and thus we should recall how Lady Macbeth used to make all this depend on him murdering Duncan, as if it would all have been in vain if he spared the king. Booth rightly notes how she shifts the whole ground to the question of his valor and how she makes it appear that

his whole reputation is at stake (Booth 1951: 189). With this in mind, we perceive a new significance of Duncan's murder. It was done not only for the sake of the throne, but as a matter of personal reaffirmation. Kott states that 'Macbeth has killed not only to become king, but to reassert himself. He has chosen between Macbeth, who is afraid to kill, and Macbeth, who has killed.' (Kott 1986: 73) The fact that he feels such a strong need to prove himself uncovers his lack of self-knowledge and insecurity.

Macbeth as we see him in the play is a fully-grown man and a thane. He is in a position to rule and influence other people and as such it is expected of him to have a sense of direction and set principles and goals. However, his insecurity and the ease with which he is swayed from his track by his wife and the witches indicate the contrary. This is the fault George Held finds with Macbeth in his work *The Difference Between Macbeth and Richard III* (2014). He states:

...he lacks that quality which one associates perhaps above all else with great political leaders: a sense of direction. In mid-life he still has not worked out for himself the relative values of things. Not knowing what he wants for himself, he can hardly know what he wants for others. It is for this reason that he is so easily imposed on by others, such as his wife and the witches. He seeks direction from them since he does not find it in himself. (Held 2014)

That Macbeth is not constituted to be a ruler proves true once again when he becomes the king. His short reign was marked as a dark period in Scottish history and he was termed 'a tyrant'. Yet another possible source of his insecurity has to do with his childlessness and it will be elaborated later on in this paper. In order to consider Macbeth fully as a character, we shall now take into account Macbeth's personality prior to his encounter with the witches. Based on his resistances to the pressure of his own ambition and the manipulation of his wife and his constant feelings of guilt, we can conclude that he is not thoroughly vile. Had it not been for the prophecy and subsequently the influence of his wife, we can imagine how he would have lived out his life as an honorable thane, loyal to the crown. According to Booth, the victory of evil over potential goodness is a prominent element of this tragedy. He states:

His crimes are thus built upon our knowledge that he is not a naturally evil man but a man who has every potentiality for

goodness. Indeed, this potentiality and its destruction are the chief ingredients of the tragedy. Macbeth is a man whose progressive external misfortunes seem to produce, and at the same time seem to be produced by, the parallel progression from great goodness to great wickedness. (Booth 1951: 184)

We can agree with Booth that Macbeth indeed was not a ‘naturally evil man’ but that he nonetheless committed certain fatal errors that caused his devastating corruption.

One of his errors undoubtedly is the fact that he succumbed to his worst impulses. This is directly linked to his faulty self-awareness and a certain gullibility exemplified in his swift surrender to his wife’s will. Booth sees Macbeth’s errors as follows:

His tragic error, then, is at least three-fold: he does not understand the two forces working upon him from outside; he does not understand the difference between ‘bloody execution’ in civilian life and in military life; and he does not understand his own character – he does not know what will be the effects of the act on his own future happiness. (Booth 1951: 189)

The effects on his psyche are devastating and lead to his ultimate demise. However, such insecurity, self-doubt and moral confusion somehow do not fit the character of Macbeth, the great and courageous thane from the opening of the play. It seems as if we are missing a crucial piece of the puzzle in viewing his disposition. The solution has been offered by many critics (Bloom and Hughes among others) who found the answer to the central problem of the play in the childlessness of the Macbeths.

It is evident that the Macbeths have no children, unlike Duncan, Banquo and Macduff. At the very beginning of the play, what first incites Macbeth’s anger towards Duncan is him naming his son Malcolm the Prince of Cumberland. Macbeth states: ‘The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step / On which I must fall down, or else o’erleap, / For in my way it lies.’ (I, iv, 350) Though it does appear logical that if he is to be the new king, Duncan’s heir is an obvious obstacle, there is something more sinister in his cry ‘The Prince of Cumberland!’ (I, iv, 350). Macbeth is likewise a nobleman of Scotland, and yet he does not have an heir. The significance of a male heir for rulers is a known fact and throughout history many kings and their queens anxiously awaited the birth of a son. Usually, the blame for the lack of male heirs or childlessness was cast upon women. However, in the case

of the Macbeths we have Lady Macbeth's testimony that she is or was a mother, for she states: '...I have given suck and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me' (I, vii, 351). Here we must once again engage in speculation. We might conclude that the Macbeths had a child that died; on the other hand, such an interpretation seems unlikely as Lady Macbeth emphasizes that she has known the love a mother feels for the child which strikes as if she were contrasting her knowledge of the parent's love to Macbeth's ignorance thereof. If they had had children, she would probably have alluded to their common knowledge of the love parents feel for their children. It appears, however, that Macbeth is excluded from her statement and that she alone experienced parenthood. A more likely interpretation then would be that Lady Macbeth has or had a child (or possibly children) by a prior marriage. This would then prove her fertility and put the blame for their childlessness on Macbeth.

According to Hadley and Hanley in their article *Involuntarily Childless Men and the Desire for Fatherhood* (2009), the burden of childlessness bears huge psychological consequences on men, including a sense of loss, depression, exclusion, isolation, among others. The desire for posterity is an integral characteristic of human beings as a species and so the suffering caused by childlessness transcends historical periods. Macbeth must have likewise felt all those dreadful feelings mentioned in this modern-day study despite the difference between historical periods. After all, the question whether Lady Macbeth has had children or not and whether they were Macbeth's children as well is irrelevant when faced with their evident childlessness during the course of the play. Bloom is one of the critics who emphasized Macbeth's infertility. He states:

Freud, shrewder on *Macbeth* than on *Hamlet*, called the curse of childlessness Macbeth's motivation for murder and usurpation. Shakespeare left this matter more uncertain; it is a little difficult to imagine Macbeth as a father when he is, at first, so profoundly dependent on Lady Macbeth. Until she goes mad, she seems as much Macbeth's mother as his wife. (Bloom 1998: 522)

Macbeth expresses dependence on his wife as if she were his mother, and Lady Macbeth states that she would have killed the sleeping Duncan herself had he not resembled her father as he slept. Based on these occurrences, the play gives out a strong sense of unresolved infantile sexuality and palpable sexual tension. That is why Bloom likewise notes that killing becomes a

mode of sexual expression for Macbeth; given that he is unable to father children, he slaughters them (Bloom 1998: 529).

Bloom also points to the similarities between *Macbeth* and Shakespeare's narrative poem *The Rape of Lucrece*. In this poem, a Roman soldier Tarquin enters the chamber where chaste Lucrece is sleeping and rapes her. The comparison between Macbeth and Tarquin is made by Macbeth himself who says that he '...with Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design / Moves like a ghost' (II, i, 351). He then enters, much like Tarquin, the chamber in which his victim is sleeping. The fact that we do not see Duncan's murder on stage only intensifies our imagination; if we take murder to be Macbeth's mode of sexual expression, then the stabs he inflicts on Duncan's body seem like thrusts. This, however, is not the only sexual allusion in the play. Another one is made in the only scene which offers comic relief in this play – the porter scene.

The aforementioned comic relief occurs in the third scene of act two. In this scene the porter goes to answer the knocking at the gates grumbling comically along the way. He says that he was up late carousing and that alcohol causes red noses, sleepiness and urination. He also remarks the following: 'Lechery, sir, it provokes and unprovokes: it provokes / the desire, but it takes away the performance.' (II, iii, 351) According to Bloom, this scene offers far more than just a comic interval in an otherwise dark plot. It possibly offers the clue for the better understanding of the protagonist. Bloom states:

Drunkenness is another equivocation, provoking lust but then denying the male his capacity for performance. Are we perhaps made to wonder whether Macbeth like Iago, plots murderously because his sexual capacity has been impaired? If you have a proleptic imagination as intense as Macbeth's, then your desire or ambition outruns your will, reaching the other bank or shoal, of time all too quickly. The fierce sexual passion of the Macbeths possesses a quality of baffled intensity, possibly related to their childlessness, so that the porter may hint at a situation that transcends his possible knowledge, but not the audience's surmises. (Bloom 1998: 528)

If we take this to mean that Macbeth's sexual capacity is impaired, then Lady Macbeth's taunting can be seen in a new light. It would be much easier for her to impose domination over Macbeth if his confidence was shaken by a

sexual impairment. Furthermore, all Macbeth's self-doubt and insecurities could be explained by his inability to perform. According to Kott, in this childless union Lady Macbeth plays the man's part and demands murder of Macbeth as a confirmation of his manhood, almost as an act of love (Kott 1986: 71). Thus, to prove his manhood and spare himself the humiliation, Macbeth is induced to commit the dreadful deed.

Freud likewise saw the issue of childlessness as the central problem of our protagonist. The whole play seems to revolve around fathers and sons. It does seem like too big a coincidence that Macbeth should hear of his kingly prospects from the witches and at the same time hear them name somebody else's children as the kings-to-be. Not only do they place a 'fruitless crown' on his temples, but they also mock him when the apparitions show the procession of eight kings followed by Banquo's ghost holding a mirror. For a man enduring the sorrow of childlessness, this is enough to incite in him anger and vengefulness.

Next we shall consider the murder of Macduff's wife and children. Macduff did run away to join Malcolm in England, but his wife and children need not have paid the price of his betrayal. Macbeth is, however, contrasted with Macduff when the apparitions warn him against this man. Macduff turns out to be his chief adversary and the man destined to kill Macbeth. Macbeth's childlessness becomes evident when he is brought into comparison with Macduff, an accomplished father. This observation does not evade Macbeth and his jealousy of Macduff's posterity is enough to make him order such a gruesome crime. Upon hearing that his wife and all his children have been killed, Macduff cries: 'He has no children' (IV, iii, 356). Freud interprets these words as follows:

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 might lay bare the deepest motive which 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.
(Freud 1916: 3018)

Macbeth is indeed guilty and not only of murdering Duncan and ordering the deaths of Banquo and Macduff's family. He is guilty also of usurping the throne and robbing his country and countrymen of the time of peace, ushering them instead into a turbulent, violent period which lasts until his demise. Freud sees an instance of poetic justice in Macbeth's childlessness, for he states:

It would be a perfect example of poetic justice in the manner of the talion 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. (Freud 1916: 3018)

Conclusion

In his works, Shakespeare brilliantly presents human nature and the key problems we still face to this day. Though the modern world as we know it differs greatly from the time in which Shakespeare wrote his plays, human nature in essence has not changed. That is why in reading Shakespeare we learn about ourselves and the world around us. Severe moral corruption represents an acute problem nowadays, so it is important to understand the true origin of moral degradation and endeavor to prevent it. The atrocities of the two World Wars, the horror of the Holocaust and the ever-present threat of nuclear destruction are indicators of the ever-present possibility of evil and violence, and thus the need to know the origin of moral corruption and how to prevent it is still a burning problem for the human kind.

The example of Macbeth shows that generalizations and demonization of individuals do not solve the problem. To understand evil as being innate is a deception which serves the function of concealing its true origin. It is important to realize that moral corruption mostly stems from the society and its fixed norms. *Macbeth* reminds us that we are all human and as such are subjects to flaws and vice. Rather than bring out the worst in each other, we should endeavor to enhance and encourage one another's virtues and potentiality for goodness.

Freud's theory of psychoanalysis tells volumes about the nature of our mental development and the significance of love and understanding for the development of healthy individuals. Thus, we should note the importance of showing love and affection to the people around us, for the power to corrupt and induce evil lies in our hands and so does the responsibility for its prevention. Rather than simply note the corruption in others and ponder its origin and the question of whether it could have been prevented, we should learn from the great works in literature and ultimately be humane.

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МОРАЛНА ИЗОПАЧЕНОСТ У ШЕКСПИРОВОЈ ТРАГЕДИЈИ МАКБЕТ

Сажетак

У раду се проблематизује појам моралне изопачености у Шекспировој трагедији *Макбет*. Корени моралне корупције главног јунака ове Шекспирове драме траже се у разноврсним друштвеним и историјским приликама на супрот прилично заступљеним алузијама појединих књижевних критичара на Макбетову урођену склоност ка злу. Кроз разоткривање Макбетових злочина и детаљан опис његових веза са женским ликовима, у раду се такође посебна пажња поклања појави гриже савести. Стање свести, као и природа наводне моралне изопачености главног јунака се потом детаљно критички преиспитују.

Кључне речи: морална изопаченост, савест, свест, кривица