

Why must Macbeth be so cruel?

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The plays we've been watching again and again in the last 2700 years are full with cruelty and with acts of violence. "Oedipus Rex" and "Medea" are examples from the Greek Theatre. "Macbeth", "Hamlet" and "King Lear" are examples from the Elizabethan Theatre, and even "Uncle Vanya" by Chekhov has a very violent scene when the generous and gentle uncle Vanya tries to kill Prof. Serbriakov.

The fact that there's so much violence and cruelty in our theatre must encourage us to explore the possibility that cruelty and violence are immanent elements in our theatre – especially in the tragedy and in its various forms.

Let's explore one case of extreme cruelty and violence – in the play "Macbeth" by William Shakespeare. The play begins after Macbeth's great victory on the rebel MacDonwald and on the King of Norway. The reports of the bleeding sergeant in Act 1 scene 2 and afterwards by Ross portray a brave and valiant victorious general, loyal to his king and his people. But as Macbeth and Banquo, his second in command, are on their way to meet King Duncan of Scotland, they meet three witches. The witches tell the two that Macbeth will be the Thane of Cawdor and afterwards the King of Scotland. They tell Banquo that "Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none". In simpler words: You shall not be a king but your sons will be kings".

How does Macbeth react to this news? Banquo sees him and is surprised. He notices that Macbeth is not very happy, and he asks him: "Good sir, why do you start; and seem to fear Things that do sound so fair?"

What is Macbeth afraid of? Later in the same scene, after Macbeth received the title of Cawdor according to the prophecy, he turns to Banquo:

Do you not hope your children shall be kings,
 When those that gave the thane of Cawdor to me
 Promised no less to them?

This is not a naïve question. Macbeth wants to know if Banquo believes that there's any truth in the prophecy of the witches. Banquo rejects the witches' prophecy and warns Macbeth: "And oftentimes, to win us to our harm, the instruments of darkness tell us truths".

This is perhaps one of the most important moments of the play. A huge action has been triggered inside Macbeth. He is not startled because of the prophecy that he's going to be a king. That's not a big threat. He possibly thought about it many times himself. He is startled to realize that in spite of his power, in spite of his victories, in spite of the honor he has just received - he might not be sovereign over his fate. And even if he is a king, his children will not be kings, and more than that- Banquo will not be a king but his children will be kings. Macbeth can't accept the mere fact that his fate is pre-determined by some external authority.

Later in the play Macbeth decides to kill King Duncan. Of course we can say that he became obsessed with the idea of being a king, and encouraged by his wife he decided to hasten his coronation. But there's another way to understand it. If Macbeth accepted the prophecy of the witches and by accepting it also accepted the fact that his fate is pre-determined, why would he take the risk and kill Duncan, who was a good and benevolent king? I think Macbeth decided to kill King Duncan because he wanted to prove to himself that he is sovereign over his life, and he'll be the one to decide if and when he is a king – and not some external fate.

After he has proved to himself that he can make himself king and not any fate, he must continue and abolish the rest of the prophecy. He must kill Banquo and his sons to prevent any circumstances that Banquo's sons will be kings. He kills them not because they are a threat. He kills them to prove that the witches were wrong, and he can defeat fate and decides about the kings after him.

Yes, it is true. Macbeth is a serial killer. He has no compassion for men, women and children. But it seems that his cruelty doesn't serve his obsession to secure his kingdom. It serves his struggle to defeat fate.

This is of course only an interpretation, and I'm sure that there are many other valid interpretations. Why am I choosing this one?

As you know in many plays the characters do not explain their motivations, and very often, we, the readers must decipher them through the characters' actions. Macbeth never explains to us why he is obsessed with becoming a king and with securing his kingdom. He never tells us that he struggles against fate, although he gives us a clear hint in Act 3 scene 1, just before he sends the murderers to kill Banquo and his son Fleance, and he says:

To make them kings, the seed of Banquo kings!
Rather than so, come fate into the list.
And champion me to the utterance!

This is a rather a clear hint about who is Macbeth fighting against. It does explain a motivation he hasn't revealed yet. But let's go to the end of the play and read Macbeth's famous soliloquy after his wife's suicide. In this soliloquy he says:

To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more.

It seems to me that Macbeth's biggest discovery at this terrible moment is that he has failed in his struggle against fate. At this moment he realizes that he is not sovereign over his fate – he is only a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage. He is a puppet in the hands of some tyrant playwright and a dictator director who decide about his actions.

This discovery of Macbeth is actually the discovering of his Hubris – the Hubris to defeat fate. The term Hubris is familiar to us from Aristotle poetics. It's one of the most important terms in the theory of the tragedy. But the journey that Macbeth travels in the play can serve us to explain an even more important and more complex Aristotelian term – one which Aristotle actually has never clearly defined – The Catharsis.

The ancient Greek word Catharsis is a medical term which means the cleansing of the body from its illness. Aristotle probably used it metaphorically to describe the cleansing of the spirit from its illness. But Aristotle never said whose spirit he referred to. For more than two thousand years most scholars believed that Aristotle referred to the spirit of the spectator, and that therefore the Catharsis is the cleansing of the spectator's spirit. At the end of the 20th Century more and more scholars – for example Else in 1957 - have come to the conclusion that maybe it's not only the spectator's spirit – but first and foremost the protagonist's spirit. The Catharsis is, first and foremost, a process that the protagonist is going through, through the plot of the tragedy, in which he realizes his Hubris and cleanses himself from it, by giving up his principal action.

The spectator, who follows the protagonist from his seat in the theatre, experiences, through his empathy for the protagonist, the same process, and therefore also goes through a catharsis.

But if we observe these two processes – the catharsis of the protagonist and the catharsis of the spectator - we see a big difference between them. The protagonist always ends his catharsis in a catastrophe. He dies, he commits suicide, he is killed or completely ruined. The spectator, on the other hand, ends his catharsis with reinforcement in his struggle to accomplish the same principal action which the protagonist has just failed to accomplish. Let's look for an example at the tragedy "Romeo and Juliet". Both Romeo and Juliet struggle through the play to fulfill forbidden love and at the end of the play they both fail and both commit suicide. But the spectators leave the theatre reinforced that forbidden love is so sacred that they must keep struggling for it in their real life. I never met a spectator who saw the play and said afterwards that forbidden love is so dangerous that he'll never allow himself to fall in love if it's forbidden.

This paradox is very essential in understanding Macbeth. If he was just a monster pursuing power, the spectator would not feel much empathy for him, and the play would simply not work. The play works because Macbeth doesn't only pursue power. He has a superior principal action – he struggles to become sovereign over his fate. That's why we feel empathy for him. We all want to be sovereign over our fate. We struggle for it, each one of us in his own way, from the moment we are born; from the moment we discover that we have parents, teachers, kings, and institutions. While watching the play we want Macbeth to win. We lose our moral judgment and we forgive him for his murders. Why? Because we want him to defeat fate, because we want to defeat fate.

Now we know a partial answer to the question why must Macbeth be so cruel – because he's struggling against the mightiest power in our universe – fate. Or in a more modern terminology: he's struggling against man's most powerful enemy – his weakness in his struggle for his sovereignty.

But Macbeth must be cruel also because he can't compromise this desire of his to be sovereign over his fate. He'd rather die than give up the struggle. So do Romeo and Juliette who prefer to die than give up their love, and so does Antigone who is prepared to commit suicide so she won't obey Creon's orders. The Protagonist can realize his Hubris only after he suffers a great suffering – the Pathos, in Aristotelian term – and this can happen only if he inflicts suffering on the characters around him – that means he'll be cruel to them.

Finally, let's look for a moment at a spectator who watched some of the protagonists we mentioned. After watching "Romeo and Juliette" he will be strengthened to fulfill love which is forbidden by his society or his family. After watching "Antigone" he is strengthened in his struggle to follow the will of his heart instead of the king's order, and after watching "Macbeth" he is strengthened in his struggle for his sovereignty over his life, and he won't give it up in the hands of fate or of the gods. All these examples prove that the tragedy is a highly subversive art. It undermines the authority of the society, of the kings and of the gods. This subversiveness is probably the most important characteristic of the tragedy. That's why we continue seeing tragedies – because the cruelty in them strengthens us to doubt, to rebel, to undermine authority – In other words, it strengthens us to progress.