THE MACKSEY JOURNAL
A PUBLICATION OF JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY

Volume 5 Article 30

2024

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Abstract

The text of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a highly intricate exploration of the realization of gender roles in social contexts. Macbeth experiences a type of queer time; what alters how he lives his time, in addition to the prophecy by the witches, are Macbeth's struggles to realize his role as a male effectively in homosocial situations. The language of the text implies Macbeth is impotent; lacking an heir is emasculating. To counter this, Macbeth lashes out with violent acts. Murderous stabbings act as a phallic extension of Macbeth, allowing him to sow a legacy without the ability to sow children. This is also reaffirmed by his infanticidal tendencies. Acting in this manner is a symptom of Macbeth's experience of queer time as he lives with a tainted sense of the present. Instead, he lives in a solely future oriented way. Despite his lamentations about predestination and destiny, his violent actions in the present represent Macbeth attempting to normalize his future oriented queer time.

Keywords: Elizabethan, literary studies, performance, queer theory, Shakespeare

The violent ends of various men are told in Shakespeare's Scottish play about the titular social climber. Much like in other of Shakespeare's works, masculinity aligns itself with conquest. While this is sometimes a romantic or economic conquering, in *Macbeth* conquest is earned through bloodshed. *Macbeth* specifically relates these ideas of conquest to male bodies – young and old – as well as male duty. Conquest demands language of covetousness, underlying the text with queer subtexts which orient homosocial relationships. It also demands language of violence, fastening male desires to themes of bloodshed. Much of this develops via the locus of bloodlines rising and falling throughout the text. Through these relationships, Shakespeare develops a world where the sexual and political desires of men – especially those of Macbeth – operate through the same currency, bodies. Through bodies, the ideas of sexuality, masculinity, and duty are juxtaposed in complex ways.

Recent discourse on *Macbeth* has already explored some queer aspects of the play. Christine Varnardo's chapter in the collection *Queer Shakespeare* moves away from the queerness of people and instead highlights the innate queerness of weather and natural phenomena in the play. She resists the modern idea of nature's inherent role as "the antithesis of queerness" but instead roots her argument in early modern conceptions that weather has queer affect (177-8). Vanardo's essay effectively outlines how nature is a queer force, and that queerness can exist "beyond the boundaries of human life and sexual production" (178). Still, while the scope of her focus is on the natural realm, the majority of the play takes place in human society. Nature, the queer *natural* environment of the text, has a foil in the society of man – a society artificially constructed, involving infrastructure and social hierarchies – that stands for heteronormativity. Man takes nature and unqueers it, rendering it functional and predictable.

Functionality and predictability factor into the ability to construct a society that contrasts the storminess and unpredictability of nature. While introducing his idea of the commodity fetish, Marx writes:

> So far as it is a use-value, there is nothing mysterious about it, whether we consider it from the point of view that by its properties it satisfies human needs, or that it first takes on these properties as the product of human labour. It is absolutely clear that, by his activity, man changes the forms of the materials of nature in such a way as to make them useful to him. The form of wood, for instance, is altered if a table is made out of it. Nevertheless the table continues to be wood, an ordinary, sensuous thing. But as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness. (163)

We can bolster the queer framework with Marxist ideology to diametrically oppose nature and human society in the play. Turning to the titular character himself, Macbeth bridges the natural and the artificial environs of the play. Prophecies out of nature push him towards his violent actions, but they are also an attempt to usurp control, and in many ways, conform to the society he was reared in. In conjunction with this general Marxist framework informing my ideas, my understanding of queer time as a concept derives from performance studies. I adhere to the idea that "the notion of strictly linear time – the sequential progression of past, present and future – begins to come undone when considered in the context of trauma and survivorship" (Pryor 4). For *Macbeth*, sequential timelines disrupt as bloodlines do. Men

become ghosts – figures of the past stuck in the present – and children are slaughtered, effectively the infanticide of futurity.

Masculine roles are not innate in *Macbeth*; instead, they function more as goals to aim for or earn. Macbeth himself demonstrates this when he asks, "Why do you dress me / In borrowed robes?" to fellow Thanes adorning him in the attire of the Thane of Cawdor (Shakespeare 1.3.108-9). Borrowed implies reappropriation and the economic fluidity of distinct roles, however this language shifts to opportunistic judgement when Angus declares:

> Who was the Thane lives yet,
> But under heavy judgement bears that life
> Which he deserves to lose. Whether he was combin'd
> With those of Norway, or did line the rebel
> With hidden help and vantage (1.3.110-5)

This passage emphasizes the hyperfocus on demonstrating masculinity and the dire consequences it can render, foreshadowing Lady Macbeth's emasculating rhetoric. Suggesting he was "combin'd" with Norwegian forces has a slight sexual undertone, doubling the penetrations of sword combat with those of political allyship. "Hidden" evokes subversion as well but juxtaposing it with "rebel" deems the two as related to warfare and internalized conflict. As Macbeth moves into his new title as the Thane of Cawdor, he begins to display similar psychosexual and political ambitions as the late former Thane, framing the play with the social pressures on men via "borrowed" masculine roles.

Initially, Macbeth seems content with the prophetic visions of the witches, believing "chance may / crown me / without my stir" (1.3.146-8). Still, the potential for social climbing leads to "murder[ed]" thoughts that "shakes so my single state of man / That function is smother'd in surmise / And nothing is but what is not" (1.3.141-4). Ambiguous potentialities queer Macbeth's internal monologue, shifting his nature from contentment to covetousness that subscribes to his societal gender roles but not necessarily his initial personality. Lady Macbeth notices this as she chastises her husband, telling him he "Art not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it" (1.5.19-20). Juxtaposing Lady Macbeth's assertive pragmaticism with here chastening of her effeminately characterized husband solidifes representations of heteronormativity suggests gender roles in *Macbeth* fall of a spectrum. The illness endemic to Macbeth does not suggest normativity but rather queers him further by highlighting his slowness to violently act out his expected covetousness and complete his masculine duty. The action Lady Macbeth commands him to do is penetrative, coupling this with their suggested childlessness sexualizes the assassination of Duncan as a type of consummation of their love. The lack of a legacy for Macbeth forces him to acknowledge his "existence is predicated upon the unknowability of the future" and his improper contribution to homosocial society because of his marriage's barrenness (Harper 605). It produces a queered legacy of usurpation versus a natural, heteronormative legacy of a child. The couple have contrasting views of masculinity; Macbeth justifies his position claiming, "I dare do all that may become a man / Who dares do more is none" whereas Lady Macbeth goads him by "account[ing] thy love" through her husband fulfilling her interpretation of the prophecy. Directly, one represents passivity and the other activity, switching the idealized notion of masculine and feminine gender roles (1.7.46-7, 1.7.39).

Ambiguity of male action does not translate in ambiguity of the covetousness of male bodies. In a punny sort of way, a body could be the corpse or the corpus – yet either desired outcome has a strong relationship to physical violence. Male friendship within the play is described in sensualized contexts, for example, Banquo's description of Duncan's stay at Inverness,

> The King's abed:
> He hath been in unusual pleasures and
> Sent forth great largess to your offices (2.1.12-4)

positions itself around the bedroom and attributing his "unusual pleasures" to Macbeth. Unusuality in pleasure specific to Macbeth queers the relationship literally and psychosexually. Here the juxtaposition of "largess" to "offices" ironically indicates Macbeth's duty lies in pleasuring the King, smirkingly foreshadowing his imminent assassination. Likewise, it also constructing sexual parallels between both of Duncan's bodies as each body gets coveted in proportion to its state. Through this reasoning, I agree with Amanda Zoch's complaint that critics care too much about whether or not Macbeth had children, especially related to merely "confirm[ing] Macbeth's tyranny" (370). Bodies are anything but axiomatic in the text; beyond corpses they represent legacies, endings, political tools, and objects. Macbeth's own stormy moods and uncertainty increase with the body count. He tries to conform to society by sowing a legacy through a simulacrum of sexual intercourse through violence, while at the same time, altering history and society into an image of his internalized struggle now externalized. Thus, currying political favor relies on pleasuring the living body, moving up on the political ladder requires the penetration of the living body to a climatic corpse. The pleasure of Duncan is just as short lived as the orgasm pleasure of Macbeth and his wife, as both rules come to an eventual end, where only the living can make the rules of the game.

Paradoxically, the creation of corpses gets further sexualized by plays obsession with progeny and lineage. Jealous and fearful of Banquo, Macbeth recollects how the witches

> Hail'd him father to a line of kings;
> Upone my head they plac'd a fruitless crown,
> And put a barren sceptre in my gripe
> Thence to be wrench'd with an unlineal hand,
> No son of mine succeeding. (3.1.59-63)

Power seems almost pointless to Macbeth without the continuation of his line. Simultaneously, his fears ironically queer power. Macbeth takes the title of king and thane in the play, but Banquo (and Macduff) earn a title that eludes him: father. Notably, the soothsaying witches juxtapose fatherhood to kinghood. To achieve his means, Macbeth takes life – either personally or by proxy – yet he obsesses over making life. His own sexual prowess gets belittled by the self-deprecating phallic image of a "barren sceptre" which the witches force him to take hold of and recognize. The transition of power he describes, furthers the play's queer subtext as Macbeth's barren sceptre moves to another, younger male personage (implied to be the son of his political rival Banquo), emphasizing fruitlessness for Macbeth in its simulation of homosexual intercourse, albeit nonconsensual on Macbeth's part as a non-heir succeeds him. Macbeth's agitation shares similarity to his nihilistic malaise towards the plays conclusion. Just

as his power was fruitless Macbeth ultimately considers his life “a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing” (5.5.25-7). Despite the complexity of characters like Lady Macbeth claiming the true masculine duty lies in the usurpation of power, Macbeth’s fatal flaw lies not in his neglecting his duty to manhood and society. He attempted to usurp what could not be usurped: a child, an heir. In other words, corpse do not beget bodies.

Covetousness of this nature explains Macbeth’s obsessions with destroying bloodlines. Slaughtering children emasculates Macbeth’s opponents as it renders them forcefully and retroactively impotent. Upon hearing the news of the murder of Macduff’s wife and children Malcom exclaims “What, man!” creating a disbelief in this action being associated with manhood (4.3.209). While from Macbeth’s perspective, this is his means to an end to achieve his masculine duty of political social climbing, but in a greater social context this queers Macbeth’s manhood, rendering him something other than a man. Macbeth’s fruitless quest for legacy leads him to desire to kill other legacies; or in Ross’s words to Macduff and Malcon, “the quarry of these murder’d deer, / To add the death of you” combining the death of the futurity of children with the death of the present self (4.3.207-8). Perhaps instead of egotistical or ambitious, vanity may best describe Macbeth’s almost compulsive infanticide. Fertility and time are juxtaposed throughout the play, notably by Banquo’s early phrase “the seeds of time,” highlighting the differences between future and present potentialities (1.3.58). Macbeth’s violence has a generational quality to it; as he cannot consummate his own masculinity and produce children, he lashes out at the children who represent the legacy barred from him. Simultaneously, he attacks the success of his non-queer peers who have children as evidence of their conformity. Ultimately, Macbeth attempts to queer time by infanticidal attempts at controlling futurity but instead queers himself by drawing more attention to his childlessness, his otherness, through his murderous methods.

Masculinity and queerness are intensely complex subjects which requires contextualization to understand. However, regarding the aforementioned topics, Shakespeare’s explorations of subjects like violence and enduring legacies within the play, coupled with the anxiety of its titular tyrant, justify interpreting aspects of the play along these lines. While the language contemporary to Shakespeare might have lacked either the words or the nuanced meanings of masculinity and queerness that exist today, as critics it is important to acknowledge that those ideas still existed, and perhaps existed in complex ways which are either lost to translation or to time. It would be hubris to postulate humanity had less complexity then than now. Queerness appears in sexual nonconformity and societal nonconformity in relation to the tenuous term of masculinity, emphasizing the insecurity of Macbeth as a person, a powerful political figure, and a victim of the pressures of society and time.

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