Gender, Guilt, and Fate - Macbeth, Part 2: Crash Course Literature #410

Crash Course: Literature
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

Hi, I'm John Green, this is Crash Course Literature, and today we'll be doubling, bubbling, toiling, and troubling as we continue our discussion of Macbeth.

Today, we'll be looking more closely at the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, as well as discussing the play's treatment of gender roles, and the question of whether life is just a tale told by an idiot.

[Intro Music]

So one of the most remarkable things about Macbeth is that it presents us with a hero who is also a villain - like, as we discussed last time, when we first meet Macbeth, he's just helped win a major battle for Scotland. The first time he's mentioned, a sergeant introduces him as "Brave Macbeth," and being brave and winning battles were two of the major signs of great "mandom" at the time.

Now yes, this Macbeth is already a *bit* violent, he does slice an opponent down the middle and spike his head on the battlements, but he's definitely still the hero of the day, and Duncan, the king, rewards him.

And at the beginning of the play, I think Shakespeare wants us to be on Macbeth's side, and we stay on his side when he has a lot of second thoughts about his wife's plan to kill the king. Basically, his wife has to talk him into it, and she does that by attacking his masculinity, but more on that later. I think, though, that our sympathies mostly stay with Macbeth, even after the murder. We worry that someone is going to find him out - maybe the same someone who's knocking so relentlessly on the gate - and we hope he gets away with it, even though we know it's horrible. Like, one of the ways Shakespeare gets us to empathize with Macbeth is by showing just how conflicted he is about this whole king-killing thing, I mean it *literally* sickens him.

But then, once he becomes king, his paranoia kicks in, and so does his cruelty. He starts ordering *more* murders, maybe even some that he doesn't have to order - like that of Banquo. And now *he's* the one encouraging murders, not his wife. He's gone from being a hero at the start of the play to being very much the anti-hero, a journey that has since been undertaken by everyone from Walter White to Tony Soprano to Pablo Escobar to Don Draper to Jamie Lannister to that Hannibal Lecter guy in *West World*.

I wonder if it's a coincidence that all those dudes are dudes. Probably not.

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

But before we get there, let's examine how to understand Macbeth's choices in the Thought Bubble.

Could we argue that Macbeth's encounter with the witches has *made* him evil? I mean, there's no suggestion that they've enchanted him, and they never tell him to kill Duncan or even suggest that killing Duncan is a possibility. They let Macbeth and his wife figure that part out for themselves, along with all the blood and the daggers, but the witches *do* light up his ambition with their prophecies.

Now, maybe Macbeth has been a terrible guy from the get-go, a Thain who just needed the excuse of the witches' prophecies to act on his worst impulses. As we saw, there are signs of his cruelty, even from the beginning; splitting open opponents from neck to belly is not the work of an especially meek and mild person.

But then, if Macbeth is inherently evil, in the manner of some Shakespeare villains, then why do his actions trouble him so much? Almost immediately, Macbeth loses the ability to pray, and sleep, and he even seems to envy Duncan, "after life's fitful fever he sleeps well." Meanwhile, Macbeth is an insomniac. He also doesn't seem to enjoy being king, a job he was literally willing to kill for, and whether he actually sees Banquo's ghost in the banquet scene or just hallucinates him, neither suggests a man who is happy in his life choices. A sociopathic villain, like I'd argue Iago is in *Othello*, just wouldn't be haunted in that way.

But for a guy who maybe isn't evil to begin with, he does keep getting a lot of people murdered. Or, maybe seeing that the murder of Duncan has already damned him for eternity, he figures there's no point repenting now. As he says to his wife: "I am in blood / stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, / returning were as tedious as go o'er." Basically, if you're already midway through fording the river of blood, shouldn't you just go ahead and cross over to the other side?

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

So that is actually a really interesting theological question. If you've done something that's so terrible that it can't be forgiven, that you are already damned for all eternity, what is the point of even trying to be good? That question was much explored in Shakespeare's time, and is related to the question of predestination: can we do things that are so bad that they're unforgivable, or is forgiveness always available to all humans. As usual when it comes to Shakespeare's theology, he asks the question without offering an answer, which in 17th century England, was a good strategy.

But however we understand Macbeth, by the midpoint of the play, probably around when he orders the murder of Banquo and his son, we've mostly stopped rooting for Macbeth and his wife to get away with their crimes. Instead, we're hoping they'll get their comeuppance, preferably before Macduff's wife and kids are brutally murdered in front of us. But alas, Shakespeare keeps the violence off-stage until that scene, and then allows it full-reign, which should shake anyone who still feels sympathy for Macbeth. Even the witches now acknowledge his evil; the next time he approaches them, they say: "Something wicked this way comes."

And as for nameless Lady Macbeth, Hollinshead, the author of the play's source material, describes her as "verie ambitious, burning in unquenchable desire to beare the name of a quéene." She's the one spurring Macbeth on to murder when he's reluctant or frightened or listening to his conscience. In her opinion, at least early in the play, stabbing a king is no big deal. She even offers to go frame the guards by smearing them with Duncan's blood, saying "a little water clears us of this deed."

And it's interesting to note the opposite effect the murder has on each of them: it hardens Macbeth into a serial murderer, but it softens Lady Macbeth into a victim. Her mind becomes disturbed, she begins to sleepwalk, miming washing her hands over and over, desperate for that little water that will clear her of the deed. But even endless water and washing can't get the spot of blood out, even after it's visibly gone.

It's often been said that Lady Macbeth is the first character in English literature to have obsessive compulsive disorder, and I have to say as someone with OCD that I can certainly see some similarities. Except, for the record, I have never encouraged my

spouse to kill the king of Scotland. Or anyone.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

To understand more about this dynamic, let's look at how the play treats masculinity and femininity. This tragedy has a particular interest in what it means to be a man, but we get our first taste of this by characters who don't really seem male or female: the witches.

Banquo says to them: "You should be women, / and yet your beards forbid me to interpret / that you are so." These are the weird sisters, which may be a corruption of the wayward sisters, and there's definitely a suggestion that characters who aren't identifiable as male or female are destabilizing and upsetting.

And this was certainly a period that oppressed gender fluidity, even though it's worth noting that theatre was a place of gender complexity, since male actors played female roles, and Shakespeare's characters often play with traditional gender constructions.

But we get another taste of how the play imagines masculinity: when Lady Macbeth reads her husband's letter, and starts worrying that he won't be "man enough" to get himself the crown. Knowing that he'll need her help, she calls on spirits to "unsex her." "Make thick my blood; stop up the access and passage to remorse, that no compunctious 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."

Okay, wow, so Lady Macbeth is saying "stop me from menstruating, stop me from lactating, basically take everything about me that is liquid and feminine and pliable, and make me hard and cruel." When Macbeth tells her he's not going to kill the king, she tells him he's unmanly. "When you durst do it, then you were a man," she says.

And then it gets worse, she says that she's breastfed children (where those children have gone is the sort of problems that gives literary scholars fits) and loved those children, but that she would happily, quote, "have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums and dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you have done to this."

Again, wow. And, just a cool poetic meter note here, when they're having these kinds of arguments, especially the one about killing Duncan, many of Macbeth's lines have so called "feminine" endings, which means an extra syllable in the line, and Lady Macbeth's don't.

So far, the play seems to be suggesting that there's something cruel and almost unnatural about masculinity, about this idea of "manning up," and maybe we can see this as another reason why Macbeth gets so murder-y. Having committed to such a hard and unyielding version of masculinity, like the kind his wife offers, he doesn't really know how to soften again.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

But that is not the only vision of masculinity that the play provides. There's a scene between Malcolm and Macduff, where Malcolm tries to brag that he's really evil and greedy and lecherous, but then he takes it all back, suggesting it's his innocence and even his virginity, his "unmanliness" that will actually make him an honorable king. And in that same scene, Macduff learns that his wife and all of his children have been murdered, and nice, virginal Malcolm tries to tell him, Lady Macbeth style, to man up. "Dispute it like a man," Malcolm says.

But here's the difference between Macduff and Macbeth. Instead of going along with this toxic vision of masculinity, Macduff finds another way. He says: "I shall do so, but I must also feel it as a man: I cannot but remember such things were, that were most precious to me." Macduff, you'll recall, is "not of woman born," so you could argue he's the manliest of anyone in the play, and his definition of manliness is different: it involves fighting, but it also involves feeling, and loving, and mourning.

Of course, none of that stops him from decapitating Macbeth in the end, but...Macbeth deserves it.

And let's take a quick look at that ending. So before the final battle, Macbeth receives the news that his wife has died, and he recites a soliloquy saying that to him, now, life means nothing. "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 is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Those beautifully written, if somewhat nihilistic, lines have resonated through the last four hundred years. Faulkner titled his most famous book after them.

Here at the end, Macbeth doesn't seem anything like the Thain we met at the beginning of the play. He doesn't seem worried, or brave, or ambitious, or bloodthirsty. He just seems tired. The dagger, the line of kings, Banquo's ghost, even his wife's death, none of it matters.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

And yet, he doesn't let that stop him from going on one last murderous rampage before his own death. His humanity just seems gone, and it's almost as though he'd like someone to stop him, but he can't bring himself to commit suicide, and he's worried that no one equals him in battle, but then, there is the surprise of Macduff, the C-section baby.

But what I find fascinating is that even here at this revelation, Macbeth is still worrying about his manliness, saying: "accursed be that tongue that tells me so, / for it hath cow'd my better part of man!" Grieving Macduff, meanwhile, is much more worried about cutting off Macbeth's head, which he does.

Then, of course, being a Shakespearean tragedy, there must be a fond farewell, which comes from Malcolm, who talks about the dead butcher and his fiend-like queen. But none of those words - not dead, not butcher, not fiend-like, and not queen - describe the Macbeth and Lady Macbeth we meet early in the play. It's a short play that charts two extraordinary transformations of character.

And at the end, we still don't know if Macbeth's fall was inevitable, even divinely ordained, or whether he brought it on himself through his choices. Macbeth, both the play and the man, is complicated, just like the world that shaped them.

But one of the reasons Shakespeare's plays have hung around is because the best characters in them aren't one thing or another - they aren't only good or only evil, they aren't only ambitious or only meek, only weak or only strong. Macbeth endures because ambition and its costs endure, and because we are still asking that old question: was I doomed to this, or did I choose it?

Thanks for watching. We'll see you next week.

[Outro Music]

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