

Metaphors of Crime and Punishment in Shakespeare's "Macbeth"

Marina A. Pershina

*Interregional Open Social Institute, Yoshkar-Ola, Russia; University of Alcala, Alcala de Henares, Spain,
marina.andreevna.pershina@gmail.com*

ABSTRACT: The aim of the article is to study the notions of crime and punishment in the Shakespeare's tragedy "Macbeth". It analyses the role of supernatural elements and metaphorical symbols as key components of the images of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Complex metaphors and poetic symbols go through the play's plot. They follow the development of the characters' inner struggle, reveal their intentions, and finally reflect their fall. Most symbols represent the supernatural dichotomy of the heaven (king Duncan's virtues are compared to angels) and the hell (Macbeth is called a devil). Even the scenes of nature are depicted fantastically. The words of Hecate and the 'weird sisters' express the idea of existence in the external human world of something unknown that affects people's internal motivation. At the end of the tragedy, metaphors in Macbeth's soliloquies embody the themes of death, destruction, moral disintegration of the personality of the person who lost the meaning of life. The results of the research show that metaphors and symbolic elements are implied in the tragedy to create a psychological portrait of main characters. On the one hand, Shakespeare used them to show individuals. On the other hand, these characters become the collective images of sinners and righteous men.

KEYWORDS: crime, Lady Macbeth, Macbeth, metaphors, punishment, Shakespeare

Introduction

William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is colored with religious overtones. Aside from its historical basis, the play alludes to stories from Scripture and incorporates elements of religious beliefs and practices in Renaissance England, particularly regarding witchcraft, prophecy, and the dangers of sin. "Demonological phenomena occur repeatedly in his works, but they are usually used as a foundation on which to build stories of more complex human emotion and incident" (Gibson and Esra 2016, 10). Shakespeare offers a vivid description of a man's demise due to his involvement with sin and crimes that carry penalties. "Shakespeare's perspective on morality does not emerge ex nihilo... but instead draws upon a rich variety of intellectual traditions, Christian as well as classical, even in its moments of most ardent critique" (Gray and Cox 2014, 13). Shakespeare introduces such a variety of heaven and hell imagery to remind the audience of the ever-present roles of God and Satan and the gravity of committing crimes. "Macbeth is a study not only of regicide and tyranny but of a damned soul, of a man who, having destroyed his own conscience, is capable of acting in defiance of the restraints both of human nature and religion" (Jack 1955, 183). Macbeth's fall into damnation illustrates the spiritual dangers of sin.

Macbeth is a tragedy of crime and punishment in which the character carries out crimes as if contrary to his nature. In his soliloquies, Macbeth represents himself as "a divided and increasingly tortured personality" (Smith 2005, 821). Lady Macbeth expresses misgivings that her husband will not be able to commit murder because of his natural kindness. "Yet I do fear the nature," Lady Macbeth meditates about her husband. "It's too full o'th' milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way" (1.5.15-16). Then she says that Macbeth's ambitiousness has a lack of "illness" that should attend ambitious plans. Refusal of humanity is called "illness" of ambitious people. So, Shakespeare in metaphorical way shows the main origin of future internal agony of the character. He is not cruel by nature; he groans to achieve fame but does not want an unfair game, to prevail by hedge or by stile.

Discussions and Results

"Macbeth's conscience is one of the most impressive things about him. Over and over again it draws us to him and asks us to pity him. It asks us to see him as a man who knows the demands of goodness and decency, however much he refuses to meet those demands" (Farnham 1950, 108). Fight in the mind of

Macbeth is conveyed by complex metaphors in his soliloquy in the scene 7 of the first act, filled with poetic images. In the first line Macbeth thinks about consequences of crime. The image of a net which helps to catch consequences of murder arises, and then images of earth time and ageless time after death. Murder, stroke with a dagger will not be the end of all on this “bank and shoal of time” (1.7.6). Macbeth confesses to himself that if a murder did not cause consequences here he would “jump the life to come” (1.7.7). This metaphor hides dangerous thought that fear of judgment of Christ, of punishment in the other realm cannot prevent the crime from being committed.

Thought about requital on the earth about unavoidable punishment appears in the image of poisoned chalice ingredients of which justice brings to lips of poisoner. However, not only thought about requital prevents Macbeth from killing Duncan, other feelings are stronger, such as an obligation of the subject, rules of kinship and hospitality and finally compassion to a victim.

Macbeth admits that Duncan is a meek ruler, beloved of all, his murder excite pity for him. And a pity like a “naked new-born babe striding the blast” or “Heaven’s cherubim horsed upon the sightless couriers of the air”; news about malicious murder “shall blow the horrid deed in every eye” and “tears shall drown the wind” (1.7.21-24). Pity and compassion are presented like spontaneous natural force with stands to bloody works. Macbeth ends the soliloquy with a metaphor that gives rise to doubt. He says: “I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself / And falls on th' other –” (1.7.25-28). The idea sounds vague and unfinished. The intention of the murder is presented as a horse, ambitiousness looks like “spurs” so the horseman-ambitiousness races ahead. However, it is not clear who it leaps over and who it falls on. In this case the verb “overleaps” can mean that the horseman is exhausted by the race and falls but why “on the other”? It is quite significant that the climax of the soliloquy illustrates Macbeth’s refusal of his intention. Only the interference of Lady Macbeth brings him back to previous decision to kill Duncan.

The second soliloquy of Macbeth lends evidence of verity of Lady Macbeth’s assertion about “nature” that prevents Macbeth from committing the crime. The description of delusion and its reasons represents nervous tension of the character, who is ready to murder his king. Macbeth thinks about reasons of his delusion: a dagger is only brainchild; it is “A dagger of the mind, a false creation, / Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain” (2.1.38-39). The dagger is like that Macbeth is going to stab Duncan with. On its blade Macbeth sees drops of blood. Night seems his accomplice of murder, nature is like dead “wicked dreams abuse / The curtained seep” (2.1.50-51). At night murder is disturbed with a wolf howl and Tarquin’s ravishing strides when he is moving like a ghost. Metaphors in this soliloquy reflect horror that invades Macbeth some minutes before the murder.

As soon as he kills Duncan, Macbeth suffers from guilty conscience. It appears in strange obsessive visions and metaphors: he fears that servants saw his bloody arms, he thinks he heard a scream “Macbeth shall sleep no more” (2.2.43). Toward the end of the play, this sleeplessness will “take its toll ... Macbeth, like a man kept awake so long that he can feel nothing, dully regards it as merely a premature instance of the inevitable exit from life’s fitful illusions” (Calderwood 2010, 17). Lady Macbeth will sleepwalk her way to a guilty death. However, at first, she does not understand her husband’s agony and tries to bring him to reality. She advises him to smear servants with blood but Macbeth cannot force himself to look at bloody body. Any trifle seems to him an awful sign. Knock at the gates terrifies him. The metaphor, which conveys his fear, is used to tell about future: “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?” (2.2.60-61). Macbeth asks himself and answers by means of hyperbole “No; this hand will rather / The multitudinous seas incarnadine, / Making the green one red” (2.2.61-63). A rare verb “incarnadine” that means “to make the color of flesh” enforces symbolical meaning of the hyperbole.

The sorrow of Macbeth when Macduff brings news about death of the king looks sincere. His self-confession “Had I but died an hour before this chance, / I had lived a blessed time” (2.3.89-90) feels like a great despair. “Renown and grace is dead, / The wine of life is drawn and the mere lees / Is left this vault to brag of” (2.3.92-94). At first the metaphor is not clear; Macbeth tells about Duncan’s death but implicitly it is more about himself that he will not see anything except lees in his life.

The next soliloquy of Macbeth (3.1.47-71) expresses his fear of Banquo. The situation vaguely resembles an episode in *Julius Caesar* when Caesar has already planned his upheaval; he voices

concern getting a sight of Cassius. Macbeth considers Banquo dangerous due to many reasons as he is honorable, fearless, brave and wise. He remembers that the Witches predicted Banquo he would be the father of kings. Macbeth also mentions that Banquo eclipses him like Octavius Caesar sidelined Antony. Macbeth tells about his sufferings, impending retribution but again plays with destiny meditating murder of Banquo and his son. Here, the guilty conscience of Macbeth is associated with the image of a snake: “We have scorched the snake not killed it: / She’ll close and be herself, whilst our poor malice / Remains in danger of her former tooth.” (3.2.13-15). Macbeth envies Duncan that sleeps well; treasons, malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing can touch him. In his speech, there is an image of sufferings from tortures: it is better to be with the dead than “on the torture of the mind to lie / In restless ecstasy” (3.2.21-22). The word “ecstasy” which expresses “extreme exiting” here is used for presenting nameless miseries. To get rid of these tortures Macbeth is ready to “let the frame of things disjoined, both the worlds suffer” (3.2.16). Desperation of a murder, so dangerous that threatens overall devastation, is embodied in this hyperbole.

Macbeth confesses that “full of scorpions is his mind” (3.2.36); it seems to him that the reason of this is his fear of Banquo. He appeals to night with entreaty to “with thy bloody and invisible hand cancel and tear to pieces that great bond” a reason of his “pale fear” (3.2.48-50). Great bond is a relation of one person with other people, his alliance with society, humanity, conscience. Macbeth finishes his appeal to the night with a sentence-generalization: “Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill” (3.2.55).

Further behavior of Macbeth shows that “great bond” is not fully ruined. The Ghost of Banquo rankles him, and strange generalization comes up in his speech: “blood hath been shed ere now, i’ th’ olden time ... when the brains were out, the man would die ... but now they rise again” (3.4.75-80). Image of the rising dead appears again when the Witches calm him with equivocal predictions and Macbeth exclaims: “Rebellious dead, rise never, till the wood of Birnam rise” (4.1.97). In most foreign translations the image of “rebellious dead” is lost. Meanwhile, for Shakespeare the metaphor “rebellious dead” is full of deep meaning. It relates to previous thoughts of Macbeth about murder consequences in different times. Primitive mind of the wild men did not know such agony as there was no idea about resurrection of the dead or guilty conscience, murder was a common matter and it did not involve such onerous consequences. These meditations of the hero are reproduced, according to Shakespeare’s intention, not only by religious ideas of new Christianity, commandment “thou shalt do no murder” but by more sophisticated nature of human relationships when “great bond” between people turns to be more powerful than cruel affairs.

On the eve of the decisive battle Macbeth is “smitten with deep sorrow” (Schlösser 1977, 416). He speaks about autumn of his life that looks like a “sere yellow leaf” (5.3.25). He is deprived of all that attends the old age: honor, obedience, love; friends are not for him, he will get only damnations. When enemies attack, he hears shouts and gets message about Lady Macbeth’s death. Metaphorical estimation of his life which expresses total devastation and loss of meaning of life is shown in his reaction to this message: there is no future whereas the past is the “way to dusty death” (5.5.23). “Out, out brief candle!” (5.5.23) are the words used by Macbeth to appeal to his life. He ends the soliloquy with generalization “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.” (5.5.24-28). Macbeth loses the will to live so that firstly he even rejects to fight with Macduff and only danger that he will be carried in cage like a tyrant or a rarer monster for crowd’s fun forces him out to continue the fight with Macduff. This “guilt, as much as the ambition, is at the heart of the play, for only his constant knowledge that he is doing wrong accounts for his misery, petulance, wrath, and desperate and suicidal end” (Parker 2006, 21).

Last judgment of conscience is retaliation that the character had come up with long before his life faced danger. Even predictions of the Witches promising him safe and success were not able to release Macbeth from torments. Scenes with the Witches are immensely important for Macbeth’s character development and transformation as “the witches treacherously promise greatness and later invulnerability as the serpent falsely promises divinity and immortality... In believing himself vulnerable... he believes himself to be divine” (Colston 2010, 86).

Shakespeare found the reference of the Weird Sisters in Holinshed's "The Chronicles". Besides, as commentaries determined, he used two writings different in directions such as the tractate of Reginald Scot "The Discoverie of Witchcraft", where superstitions were disproved with scholarly integrity, and King Jacob's "Daemonologie", which states that God could use witches to punish sinners even though they work for the devil: "where the devilles intention in them is euer to perish, either the soule or the body ... God, by the contrarie, draws euer out of that evil glorie to himselfe" (James I 1924, 14). That is why scenes with Hecate and her servants are so appealing to Shakespeare's contemporary spectators as many of them believed that devil forces tempting a man helped evildoers and saw numerous executions of witches. At the time of Macbeth's originally production, the crime of associating with the Devil was a major component of people's perception of witchcraft, "an omnipresent force, ever ready to prey upon man's weaker instincts and to tempt him away in paths of evil... To help him in his task he had an army of demons and evil spirits" (Thomas 1991, 557).

In general, the presence of the Weird Sisters in the tragedy is symbolic, their poetry is "the controlling influence which the dramatist never lets the audience forget" (Paul 1950, 262) because almost all their speaking bares a deep sense, which makes it truly hard to translate into other languages. For example, the first significant utterance "Fair is foul, foul is fair" (1.1.11) is usually translated as "Good is evil, evil is good". Meanwhile both epithets are multivalent. "Fair" means "beautiful", "decent", "honest", "legitimate", "plain", "clean" and some other tinges that express positive principle in life and in people; the opposite "foul" may mean "disgraceful", "sinful", "dishonorable", "unjust", "inclement", "mucky". These words always oppose each other but in the prophecy of the Witches they signify the relativity of moral estimations, possibility of transforming of one quality into another, and recognition of their inextricable connection in nature. Enigmatic allegory sounds like a warning. First words of Macbeth are aligned with this epigram. After a bloody battle that he won, Macbeth said "So foul and fair day I have not seen" (1.3.38). This congruence helps to reveal the function of the Witches in the tragedy. Their "diverse, conglomerate nature and mystery is represented aurally by their tune ... the tune suggests that those who spur Macbeth on are elemental beings who can infiltrate the unconscious minds of others (Kranz 2003, 369). They embody internal motives of Macbeth and serve as a trigger of the beginning and continuation of his crimes.

The Weird Sisters penetrate the bodies and minds of those they are willing to destroy. Lady Macbeth's sleep-walking was called "demoniacal somnambulism" (Curry, 1939, 86) due to fact that, according to medieval demonology, witches took possession of men's bodies through their minds. Macbeth's sin is "the result of his willingness to risk the consequences of eternal damnation for the glory of a temporal crown" (Echeruo, 1972, 450). Macbeth perceives the news that the king has given him a title of the thane of Cawdor as a first step on his ladder to the crown. He asks himself if he should reckon prophecies as fair or foul. This is the moment when the word "murder" appears in his soliloquies. This "imaginary" murder is those "horrid images" which make his "seated heart knock at his ribs" and "unfix his hair" (1.3.135-136). Even thought about such a crime "shakes" Macbeth's "single state of man" (1.3.140). Short internal soliloquy is completed with figurative conclusion: "Present fears / Are less than horrible imaginings" (1.3.137-138) i.e. prophecies forged the ambitious dreams of the character and at the same time horrified him so that their realization is "smothered in surmise, and nothing is / But what is not" (1.3.141-142). This epigram defies any interpretation. If we convert this tropology into logical language, we see a rather plausible explanation: getting crowned at the cost of murder is so awful that such intentions pass away just as they come up. The interjection "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me, / Without my stir" (1.3.144-145) proves out Macbeth quit of these intentions.

Macbeth is stunned by the prophecy which clarified his hidden agendas. His friend Banquo, on the contrary, asks the Weird Sisters about his destiny but adds that he is the one who 'neither beg nor fear their favours nor their hate' (1.3.60-61). Banquo expresses the interest of an explorer: he takes notice of the Witches' strange dress and appearance, asks them if they are live, can they predict which "seeds of time" (1.3.58) will grow and which will not. He also mentions "heath bubbles" (1.3.79) and supposes that together with Macbeth they ate "the insane root that takes the reason prisoner" (1.3.80).

The heroes' perception of the prophecy is so different that it makes clear the author's intention: external malign forces enslave those who already possess "seeds of evil" inside.

Connection between predictions and internal intentions of the character is only one of functions of fantastic episodes in the tragedy. These episodes are filled with unusual, dark and fateful images which have their own meaning and the Witches should be perceived as real creatures not as a product of deformed imagination of the character. They pursue the aim to subject a person to their will.

Mistress of dark Hecate is not pleased with her servants because they did not manage to fully gain possession of Macbeth's soul. For this purpose Hecate is going to use the help of the supernatural: in her soliloquy, the mysterious image that symbolizes a tie of wizard witcheries with mystic natural phenomena appears: she is off to do "great business": "upon the corner of the moon there hangs a vap'rous drop profound; I'll catch it ere it come to ground" to turn these vapors in "artificial sprites" that make Macbeth "spurn fate, scorn death and bear his hopes 'bove wisdom, grace, and fear" (3.4.22-31). These words of Hecate are explanation of natural reason of witchcraft success – obnubilation of intellect and sin fall of human beings.

Description of devilish potion potting settled in "pit of Acheron" (4.1) takes several dozens of lines. Toad, that days and nights have thirty-one sweltered venom sleeping got, wool of bat, toe of frog, tongue of dog, finger of birth-strangled babe ditch-delivered by a drab, scale of dragon, tooth of wolf and many other distasteful or dangerous for people things. This long list could cause disgust and fear of spectators who believed in existence of the supernatural world, but potion components did not excite horror of educated people, they took it as primitive way of admass deception like, for example, in *The Alchemist* by Ben Jonson.

Weird Sisters only plan final death of Macbeth when he appears in their dominion and conjures them to predict his destiny at any price: "Though you untie the winds and let them fight / Against the churches; though the yesty waves / Confound and swallow navigation up ... Though palaces and pyramids do slope / Their heads to their foundations" (4.1.52-58). This conjuration ends with a thought-provoking metaphor in which the wreck of universe is embodied "though the treasure / Of Nature's germens tumble all together / Even till destruction sicken" (4.1.58-60). Scholars associate this image with the ancient philosophical conception of the universe origins which are shown as "seeds" or "germs" of everything that exists in nature though being imperceptible for humankind. *Macbeth* is not the only play where Shakespeare mentions this mysterious principium of the world using enigmatic, expressly uncertain metaphors, for example, King Lear asks: "Crack nature's moulds, all germens spill at once / That make ingrateful man!" (3.2.8-9).; in *The Winter's Tale* prince Florizel is ready to be stand by his love mate despite father's threats and "Let nature crush the sides o' the earth together / And mar the seeds within!" (4.4.478-479); in *King Henry IV (Part 2)* Warwick says: "...of the main chance of things / As yet not come to life, who in their seeds / And weak beginning lies entreaured. / Such things become the hatch and brood of time" (3.1.83-86). These metaphors express the idea of all things developed from some "origin" and their possible death caused by any destruction. They ultimately suggest a fated plan or a divine origin as in the end it gets apparent that the Witches can read the "seeds of time", the order of things which can be also called Providence.

Death of "germens" of all existence is associated with death of humanity in soul of Macbeth, his metaphorical images embody readiness of the hero to learn about his future at the price of universe death. Even when he hears good prophecy that "for no one of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" (4.1.80-81), he regrets that he did not kill Macduff immediately and orders to kill his wife and children. So, after meeting with the Weird Sisters Macbeth loses all the remains of humanity and twinges of conscience. He says to himself: "I have supped full of horrors; / Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts, / Cannot once start me." (5.5.13-15).

Conclusions

Thus, *Macbeth* as a play "about consequence reveals the allure and complexities of evil as well as the negative consequences of giving in to the temptation of evil" (Abbas 2017, 16). Most symbols represent the supernatural dichotomy of the heaven (king Duncan's virtues are compared to angels) and the hell (*Macbeth* is called a devil). Even the scenes of nature are depicted fantastically. Hecate and the Weird

Sisters' speeches compile the idea of existence in the external world some unknown laws which influence human internal intentions. Direful attributes of witchcraft: cauldron, potion, charms, equivocal prophecies, disgusting things as symbols of odious and sinful origins of life – all this creates dark moral and psychological atmosphere, affects Macbeth at the moments of extreme tension when he must make a decision that will determine his fate. "Macbeth is a portrait of damnation, a study of evil, and a landscape of Hell" (Morris 1967, 36). Because of his concession to sin, Macbeth becomes immersed in the evils of Hell. At the end of the tragedy, metaphors in Macbeth's soliloquies embody the themes and motives of death, destruction, moral anomie of the character who has lost the meaning of life.

The results of the research show that metaphors and symbolic elements are implied in the tragedy to create a psychological portrait of main characters. On the one hand, Shakespeare used them to create individuals. On the other hand, these characters become the collective images of sinners and righteous men.

References

- Abbas, S.Z. 2017. "Macbeth and Witchcraft: A Study of Sources, Influence and the Fall." *IJELLH* 5 (12): 3-19.
- Calderwood, James L. 2010. "Macbeth: Counter-Hamlet." *William Shakespeare's Macbeth*, edited by Harold Bloomfield. 7-32. New York: InfoBase Publishing.
- Colston, Ken. 2010. "Macbeth and the Tragedy of Sin." *Logos: A Journal of Catholic Thought & Culture* 13 (4): 61-95.
- Curry, W.C. 1939. *Shakespeare's Philosophical Patterns*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Echeruo, Michael J. C. 1972. "Tanistry, the 'Due of Birth' and Macbeth's Sin." *Shakespeare Quarterly* 23 (4): 444-450. Folger Shakespeare Library and George Washington University.
- Farnham, Willard. 1950. *Shakespeare's Tragic Frontier: The World of His Final Tragedies*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gibson, M., Esra, J.A. 2016. *Shakespeare's Demonology: A Dictionary*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Gray, Patrick and John D. Cox. 2014. "Introduction: Rethinking Shakespeare and Ethics." *Shakespeare and Renaissance Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jack, Jane. 1955. "Macbeth, King James, and the Bible." *ELH* 22 (3): 173-193. The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- James I. 1924. *Daemonologie, in the Forme of a Dialogue*, edited by G.B. Harrison. London: Curwen.
- Kranz, David L. 2003. "The Sounds of Supernatural Soliciting in Macbeth" *Studies in philology* 100 (3): 346-383.
- Morris, Harry. 1967. "Macbeth, Dante, and the Greatest Evil." *Tennessee Studies in Literature* 12: 23-38. Knoxville: Tennessee Philological Association and University of Tennessee.
- Parker, John. 2006. "Shakespeare and the Geneva Bible: The Story of King Saul as a Source for Macbeth." *Tennessee Philological Bulletin* 43: 6-23. Memphis: Tennessee Philological Association.
- Paul, H.N. 1950. *The Royal Play of Macbeth*. New York: Macmillan.
- Schlösser, A. 1977. *Shakespeare. Analysen und Interpretation*. Berlin: Weimar.
- Smith, Emma. 2005. "Introduction to Macbeth." *William Shakespeare The Greatest Comedies and Tragedies*. Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Limited.
- Thomas, Keith. 1991. *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. London: Penguin Books Ltd.