

James i of england and macbeth

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Some say he's mad; others, that lesser hate him, Do call it valiant fury" (Caithness: Act 5, Scene 2) Consider Macbeth as a gothic protagonist in the light of this comment.

Although William Shakespeare's 'Macbeth' was written in a time before the introduction of the Gothic genre, it is fair to argue that he fits the role typically prescribed to Gothic protagonists. However, the question of whether he is 'mad' or shows actions of 'valiant fury' is a matter open to interpretation. Sickness and madness are common themes in Gothic texts, and it is arguable to suggest that as a Gothic protagonist, Macbeth is indeed driven to madness.

Firstly, his repeated association with various supernatural elements in the play present him as being a character who is perhaps driven by his own mental manifestations; upon seeing a levitating dagger, Macbeth questions whether it is in fact "a dagger of the mind", citing the possibility of his "heat-oppres'd brain" being the factor behind this vision. However, while many Gothic protagonists are associated with elements of the supernatural, that is not to say that they are mad. For example, when Macbeth witnesses Banquo's ghost - "Never shake thy gory locks at me!" - it is perhaps fairer to argue that the ghost is a manifestation of his own guilt as opposed to an outright madness which possessed Macbeth.

Those who argue that Macbeth is mad may relate his madness back to the notion of Gothic protagonists possessing an all-consuming passion or goal which they are determined to reach. In Macbeth's case, this desire is arguably his thirst for power and desire to kill the king. Some critics would

refute this point, and argue that Macbeth does not harbour such a passion, and that it is the femme fatale-esque character of Lady Macbeth who taunts Macbeth with demeaning rhetorical language such as " Are you a man?" and " I would be ashamed to wear a heart so white"; there is certainly evidence to suggest that Macbeth's desire to be king does not lead to his madness, and that it is his wife's power that leads him to the first of many murderous acts.

However, this interpretation may be too narrow in its analysis, and it is perfectly possible to argue that Macbeth's inherent thirst for power is what leads to his 'madness'. In act one scene four Macbeth expresses quiet dismay at Malcolm's appointment as the Prince of Cumberland, referring to the obstacles in his path to glory as " a step / On which I must fall down, or else o'er-leap". In terms of structure, this scene occurs before Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's onstage discussion, and suggests that Macbeth's madness does indeed stem from the typical Gothic protagonist role as one who is driven to madness or inner conflict by an all-consuming passion. Furthermore, this passion is present even in Macbeth's first meeting with the witches, where Banquo notes that Macbeth is " rapt withal" at the possibility that he " shalt be king hereafter".

Another typical feature of a Gothic protagonist is a high social rank, which " noble Macbeth" certainly adheres to. It may then be in his nature as a worthy warrior to strive for greatness and power; perhaps Macbeth's actions are down to 'valiant fury' after all. Shakespeare's use of adjectives such as " brave" and " worthy" establish him as a high-ranking soldier before he is even introduced; this of course contrasts with the language used to describe

him later, where demonic imagery such as referring to him as a "hell-hound" and "something wicked" associates him with inherent evil.

In act one scene two, the Captain describes Macbeth's fearlessness and fury on the battlefield, describing how Macbeth ran his sword "from his navel to the chops" in what is considered an act of bravery. This may lead to the assertion that Macbeth is not 'mad' after all, and that the nature of his character is far more likely to succumb to 'valiant fury', since he is a warrior and, as already mentioned, has the will to kill the king harbouring within him as soon as he hears the witches' prophecy. However, the word 'valiant' suggests a sense of honour and dignity surrounding Macbeth's tyrannical reign.

Macbeth's actions may have been valiant, had King Duncan been a cruel and oppressive king. However, Shakespeare presented Duncan as a kind and virtuous character, perhaps to appease King James I, who was the king at the time of writing and admired Shakespeare's work. The fact that Macbeth murders the king is already contrary to the divine right of kings at the time, but the fact that the king was virtuous allowed for little interpretation calling Macbeth 'valiant'. Furthermore, Macbeth's duplicitous nature in the play sets him aside as a character who does not possess 'valiant fury' at all.

He openly lies to Banquo, his trusted friend, by replying with "I think not of them" when questioned about the witches, and after Duncan's body is found he delivers a melodramatic and duplicitous monologue expressing his professed grief. The fact that Macbeth is called "noble" and is described indirectly as "a gentleman on whom I built an absolute trust" directly contrasts with his duplicitous and cunning nature. This contrast is perhaps

best explained as the extremes of Macbeth's behaviour as a character, a feature typical of Gothic protagonists.

Most Gothic protagonists are caught in a dilemma or inner conflict, which often leads to extremes of behavior. In Macbeth's case, it is as though he is aware of his own actions and cannot even say the word 'murder', instead making use of euphemisms such as " this bloody business", yet he is also flippant in certain orders, such as the request that Macduff's " wife and babes" should be killed. Therefore, considering his conflicting and deceptive nature, it is indeed possible to refer to Macbeth's actions as fury rather than madness. Valiant fury, however, is perhaps not true; there seems to be almost no honor or nobility in Macbeth's actions and willingness to lie.

Macbeth's alleged madness is often linked to his use of emotive language. For example, the metaphor " full of scorpions is my mind" makes it sound as though Macbeth's mind is poisoned, or out of his control. However, as just one of many instances where Macbeth uses Gothic language, it is not necessarily true to link such metaphors to madness. Instead, it is perhaps likely that Macbeth is referring to the conflicting nature of his mind, and the inner turmoil that he is facing as a Gothic protagonist. In conclusion, the assertions that Macbeth is either 'mad' or harbours 'valiant fury' both seem to undermine his nature as a Gothic protagonist.

Macbeth's 'madness' is perhaps better described as the conflicting nature of any Gothic protagonist, and the notion that Macbeth's fury is 'valiant' contrasts the numerous times where Macbeth's cunning is anything but valiant or noble. Macbeth is indeed typical of a Gothic protagonist but, like many, does not necessarily fall into just one category.