

Mocking time with fairest show: tragic macbeth makes time his foe

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Time plays a crucial role in Shakespeare's tragedy Macbeth. Like all Shakespearian tragedies, the main character is necessarily at odds with time. By its very nature, a tragedy must end with the death of the hero. The hero, therefore, must bide his time in such a way as to prevent his own tragic demise. While some characters, like Hamlet, seem absorbed with the past and frozen by inaction, others, like Macbeth, feel the need to act quickly, manipulating the passage of time. Macbeth, like all Shakespearian tragic heroes, is presented with a problem which he will prove incapable of successfully dealing with. While Hamlet, it seems, would lament and Othello demand proof, Macbeth resolves to take immediate murderous action to resolve his problem. Like Hamlet, Macbeth's eventual resolve to kill seems inextricably tied to his sense of the nature of time. At the opening of the play it seems as though Macbeth has great faith in time. As a successful war hero, time has delivered Macbeth many favorable fates. Time is also faithful in its passing. Day and night come regularly, delivering the fate of all. Macbeth, until King Duncan's life-changing proclamation, has also been faithful. He has fulfilled his duties to the fullest and could never be named treasonous. Macbeth reveres time and mirrors its faithfulness. However, all this is to change. Macbeth's uncertain future, coupled with Lady Macbeth's strong coercion, drives Macbeth to doubt time and fate. By his murder, Macbeth becomes unfaithful to his King and wishes time to be unfaithful too in its duty. He wishes his murder to be isolated in time and thereby not connected to successive moments. Treasonous Macbeth mocks time and abandons his previously faithful trust in it. Time, however can not be manipulated and Macbeth realizes that the successive moments are to deliver his tragic end.

By the end of the play, Macbeth realizes that he has made time his foe. Time cannot be manipulated and will deliver justice. Macbeth's conception of time evolves from a reverent faithfulness in it to ideas of its inferiority and controllability and finally to a disillusionment with it and the life he has lead. The last twenty-two lines, while restoring order, give a sense of what time really is; something faithful and stable around which one should plan and organize appropriately and not vice versa. Macbeth first speaks about time after his first encounter with the witches. It is here that we get our sense of how important a theme time will play. Macbeth seems to hold much faith in time and its ability to bring him good fortune. As a successful warrior, Macbeth has every reason to trust that time will be faithful in its continuance of delivering good fortune. Macbeth says, "Come what come may / Time and the hour runs through the roughest day (1. 3. 145-6)." We get the sense that Macbeth is a strong believer in the power of time and fate. It seems that Macbeth reveres time as a superior power in these lines. Furthermore, it is as if Macbeth is skilled at using time to his advantage. He tells Banquo, "Think upon what hath chanced, and at / more time / The interim having weighed it, let us speak" (1. 4. 151-3). At this point Macbeth's loyalty and faithfulness extend both to the king and to time as a higher power. Both are respected by Macbeth and order is maintained. However, Lady Macbeth's murderous plans for her husband upset all of Macbeth's previous relationships and conceptions. Lady Macbeth, employing her coercive powers to build Macbeth's resolve, tells her husband that "To beguile the time / Look like the time" (1. 6. 61-2). Figuratively, Lady Macbeth wants to ensure that he greets Duncan without provoking suspicion. Her suggestion is that his

expression fit to the occasion. However, literally, her statement is in regards to beguiling time. It is her suggestion that her husband appear steady and faithful, like time itself, while attempting to deceive both time and king. Macbeth's soliloquy that follows is undoubtedly influenced by the words of his wife as he expresses his mounting desire and anxiety about acts of murder, manipulation and treachery. The beginning of Macbeth's soliloquy in 1. 7 raises many of these important issues which Macbeth will have to overcome before the murder. Once again the issue of time is presented. Macbeth realizes that time is a series of moments. Interconnected, these moments bring consequences for actions. The words of his soliloquy are connected here too. Phrases like "surcease success" and "be-all, end-all" are strung together phonetically to emphasize this continuousness and Macbeth's problem with it. To be successful in his endeavors Macbeth must trick time or steal a moment. His resolve becomes apparent in his words "Away and mock the time with fairest show" (2. 1. 81). Mocking time and flouting natural succession with his treacherous act, it becomes apparent that natural order has been interrupted. Ross tells an old man, "By th'clock 'tis day / And yet dark night strangles the traveling lamp" (2. 4. 6-7). By his interference with natural succession, Macbeth has upset the natural order. In killing the rightful King, Macbeth has caused Malcolm, the legitimate successor, to flee. Macbeth has also mocked time and its succession. By believing he can isolate his momentous murder in time and detach himself from consequences, he mocks time and order. After Macbeth is crowned king, we see his idea of time change accordingly with his success. As Act III begins and Macbeth and Banquo converse, it is evident that Macbeth's

perception of the nature of time has changed drastically since the beginning of the play. While Banquo speaks of time in a way that implies its power and superior order, Macbeth talks of its controllability. Banquo's words "As far, my lord, as will fill up the time" and "Our time does call upon's" suggests a deference to time (3. 1. 25/3. 1. 38). Macbeth, who has, at this point, gotten away with murder, proclaims in an aside "Let every man be master of his time" (3. 1. 42). This statement is in stark contrast to his earlier statement, "Come what come may / Time and the hour runs through the roughest day" (1. 3. 145-6). Macbeth's confidence, however, begins to wane as he notices problems with nature and order. Banquo's ghost has appeared before him causing him to vacillate between courage and despair. Macbeth says, "the time has been / That, when the brains were out, the man would die / And there an end" (3. 4. 77-9). In these lines we get the sense that Macbeth no longer feels as powerful as he did earlier. Banquo's ghost makes him uneasy and leaves him to question his fate. So shaken is he by this haunting apparition that another consultation with the witches seems necessary. Although Macbeth is now unsure what time has in store for him, his approach with the witches is authoritative and overblown. Pushing past his uncertainties, Macbeth puts on a powerful front. He demands "Tell me, thou unknown power" and "Call 'em, let me see 'em" (4. 1. 79/84). Macbeth's forceful demeanor changes to one of anger as he is shown the images of Banquo's progeny as kings. The witches having vanished, Macbeth is then left alone. In anger, Macbeth curses the time, "Let this pernicious hour / Stand aye accursed on the calendar" (4. 2. 149-50). Macbeth seems angry and desperate. He still tries to exhibit his control over time but his attempt is

now weak. Macbeth curses out of anger and the effect is a sense of anxious desperation rather than strength and control. It is also relevant that in cursing an hour on the calendar the effect will be felt annually, well into the future. Macbeth doesn't specify who the day will be accursed for and more importantly doesn't exclude himself. With the witch's prophecy fresh in his mind, Macbeth's curse seems to imply that he will soon be dead and Banquo's successors will be left to feel the effects for many generations. In an aside that follows, Macbeth declares, "Time, thou anticipat'st my dread exploits" (4. 2. 160). Although further acknowledging his sense of imminent personal tragedy, Macbeth refrains from despair. In the lines that follow he resolves to act instinctively and immediately so that time can no longer hinder him in his exploits. Unable to undo what has been done, Macbeth resolves to take quicker action in the future. With news of his tragic end, although outwardly denying it possible, Macbeth realizes that his time may be limited and he must act quickly to succeed. Time, however, can not be beaten and fate can not be changed. When Macbeth learns of his wife's death, his soliloquy is full of despair. Macbeth is a broken man. He says "she should have died hereafter" (5. 5. 17). The word hereafter reminds us of both the witch's prophecy and Lady Macbeth's greeting upon her husband's return to their castle. Lady Macbeth, if not for her husband's murder and mocking of time, would certainly have died hereafter. There is a sense that Lady Macbeth, possibly having taken her life, has also taken control of time by augmenting her natural life span. Macbeth acknowledges what the audience already knows; Lady Macbeth's death is untimely. The lines that follow can only be described as full of anguish. Time may be all powerful, but

its power rests only in its faithful flow. Time is superior to human action, yet it is “petty”, only serving as a guiding force towards death (5. 5. 19).

Macbeth is utterly alone. With no children and a wife, untimely dead, all of Macbeth’s actions have only brought him loneliness. Macbeth realizes he is powerless to time and all of his actions intended to mock time and alter natural order and succession have only brought him closer to loneliness and death. His story, “full of sound and fury”, signifies nothing (5. 5. 26).

Macbeth’s death necessitates a restoring order and an appropriate conception of time to fill the nothingness he speaks of in his last soliloquy.

Combating hierarchical uncertainty and the depressing, life trivializing speech that was Macbeth’s last soliloquy, Malcolm’s final lines function to restore order for both his subjects and the play’s audience. Malcolm’s order restoring speech gives many references to time and seems even to crown time as supreme ruler. Time reigns supreme as it faithfully brings day and night, fate and death. Malcolm acknowledges this in many ways. “We shall not spend a large expense of time” suggests that time should be rationed carefully (5. 1126). It also suggests that our time is finite and we should evaluate our actions accordingly. Malcolm also goes on to declare that the actions taken to restore order will be “planted newly with the time”(5. 11. 31). The planting metaphor implies a cooperation with and deference to time. It also acknowledges that time is the medium through which things grow. Malcolm, continuing his speech, chastises Lady Macbeth for the use of her own hands to bring about an untimely death. Malcolm’s final lines signal the culmination of the play: “That calls upon us, by the grace of grace / We will perform in measure, time and place. / So thanks to all at once, and to

each one, / Whom we invite to see us crowned at Scone" (5. 11. 38-41). Reinforced by rhyming couplet structure, the final four lines underscore again order's relation to time and place and the necessity of using time properly to restore order. Malcolm also uses the word "us" when referring to whom is being crowned. "Us" can be taken to mean himself and his newly appointed earls or, possibly, himself and time. Macbeth's battle with time and order leaves him alone and full of despair. His initial relationship with time is not unlike Malcolm's at the end. Macbeth once respected time, he rationed it, he knew it to be faithful and powerful. Macbeth was once successful because of this relation. However, with his murder of Duncan Macbeth mocks time. He thinks himself master of it, only to be left disillusioned at the end. Realizing he has used his time irrationally, Macbeth dies alone without a single family member or friend. When order is restored time's superiority is assured and worry assuaged. Shakespeare seems to tell us that our time is natural and finite; like any resource, time must be rationed and respected.