

# Macbeth: tragic hero or monster

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The idea of man as monster is one perpetually peddled not only by Gothic writers, but throughout literature; Shelley toys with the concept in *Frankenstein*, and Shakespeare himself explores the dark fringes of humanity in character such as Richard III. Yet *Macbeth* is not quite so simple - whilst he certainly possesses irredeemably features, it is difficult to bracket him with the Duke of Gloucester; similarly, though he begins the play a hero, his descent cannot be easily compared to that of the archetypal tragic hero *Othello*.

Rather, he is a complex hybrid, challenging audiences and critics to consider the nature and definition of monstrosity itself. Perhaps *Macbeth*'s most 'monstrous' feature is his ambivalence to his own tyranny; whilst the natural order of Scotland is turned upside down, he acknowledges that he is 'in blood stepp'd in so far that should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er'.

Here, Shakespeare summons a viscerally violent image of *Macbeth* wading in a river or lake of 'blood' before having him casually dismiss it as 'tedious'; the contrast of surreal horror and offhand flippancy highlighting what would appear to be *Macbeth*'s complete lack of empathy. Combine this with the fact that, in the context of production, *Macbeth*'s regicide would have represented one of the greatest possible breaches not only of judicial but of moral code, and his fate as a character seems sealed.

It may even be argued that the play's archetypally Gothic conclusion: having the characters embark to meet 'at Scone' - the traditional site of Scottish coronations representative of all the social strictures *Macbeth* flouts - would

lose impact if Macbeth's evil was not absolute; if his downfall is to serve as a warning against the breaking of societal regulation, then the audience must surely be without doubt that his actions were irredeemable.

Though this may be an easy argument to superficially impose in pursuit of a clear-cut moral message, we must not forget that Shakespeare was a dramatist, not a sermoniser, and that to impose definite meaning on his work is to undermine it. Throughout the text, there are suggestions that Macbeth is in fact a form of Renaissance man, bridging the gap between the Medieval and the modern.

In Act I, Scene iii, Macbeth ascertains that the witches' predictions 'cannot be ill, cannot be good'; a phrase not only reminiscent of the witches' chants of 'fair and foul', linguistically linking him to the misty supernaturalism they represent, but also unintentionally echoing the literary debate which Macbeth is most famous for; whether the witches can or cannot be seen to have any direct impact on the events of the play.

In this way, Macbeth inhabits a self-aware, meta-literary role in which his monstrosity makes up just one part; his Act V, Scene V speech in which he brands himself 'a poor player who struts and frets' supports this idea, suggesting that whilst Macbeth may appear to be ambivalent to his actions, he in fact recognises their 'poor' insignificance in the grand scheme of life. Though these metaphysical ponderings may not elevate him to the lofty philosophical heights with which critics regard Hamlet or Lear, they certainly lift him from the more simplified view of Macbeth as pantomime villain.

Finally, Macbeth must be viewed in the context of the play's other characters; most notably that of his wife, Lady Macbeth. Before Macbeth has committed any physical crime, Lady Macbeth cries for dark spirits to 'unsex [her]' - the use of a compound adjective such as 'unsex' representing - in its linguistic irregularity as much as in its meaning - a total betrayal of all that it means to be human; to have a predetermined biology.

In breaking the bonds of gender, Lady Macbeth finds the ability to foster ambition in Macbeth with sexually provocative blackmail ('When you durst do it, then you were a man! '); perhaps Shakespeare's suggestion is that Macbeth only acts as a vessel for evil, whereas the witches, and Lady Macbeth, both of whom actively embrace the supernatural, represent the seed of evil which can take root in a man even as 'brave' and 'noble' as the formerly heroic Macbeth.

To brand Macbeth as a monster feels far too simplistic; though, if Macbeth is to be viewed as a pre-Gothic text, the interpretation of him as an archetypal villain is understandable, this is an aspect of the play in which the imposition of a stylistic code feels reductionist and irrelevant. Instead, Macbeth ought to be viewed as a complex character in his own right, whose actions and words throw up as many conundrums as the critic or audience member may hope to find.