

Re-creation and
immortal fame: the
search for eternal life
in macbeth and
coriola...



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In Shakespeare's time, having children was, arguably, even more important than it is today. In a society dominated by rules of inheritance and birthright, children were important, not only as the means of carrying on a name and genetic material, but also title and property. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus* take up this issue but seem to draw different conclusions.

Although the perception of children in these plays differs, both plays use children to accentuate the tragic flaws of the hero. *Macbeth* is a play obsessed with time, inheritance and progeny. Childless Macbeth slays men, women and children, hopelessly trying to maintain his unnatural hold of the throne that is prophesized to ultimately belong to generations of Banquo's sons. Because of Macbeth's futile obsession with everlasting rule, the interplay between fathers, sons and succession becomes important. The familial relationships in *Macbeth* all suggest the naturalness and necessity of close relationships between fathers and sons. Father and son pairs work together in this play, thereby creating companionship and ensuring the future of the son and family upon the father's death. Surrounded by these relationships, yet himself childless, Macbeth fails in his endeavors and dies forever cursed and alone. *Coriolanus*, however, is much unlike the men and fathers in *Macbeth*. Having an heir seems not as important in this play.

Coriolanus refuses dependence on everyone, including an heir to carry on his name. He is ready to "tread over" Rome and his family to achieve his own personal revenge (5. 3. 123). Although children and inheritance are deathly important in *Macbeth*, the play *Coriolanus* represents another culture with a fiercely independent tragic hero more concerned with personal legacy than progeny. While the close father and son relationships of *Macbeth* accentuate

Macbeth's anxious childlessness, *Coriolanus*' comparative carelessness for
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his son accentuates his refusal of dependence. Macbeth is a play that seems to float functional father and son pairs. All of the important men in the play have sons to succeed them except Macbeth. King Duncan has two sons, one of whom is destined to eventually proceed him on the throne. Macduff, Siward and Banquo also have sons that function as their potential heirs. Macbeth is the only childless man and it seems no accident that he shares the play with so many fathers. Macbeth is the only man who has failed to reproduce a legitimate son and his successes are therefore in danger. Even though Macbeth eventually succeeds the throne, he seems to realize that even if he is to maintain it until death he has no one to pass it on to. By the end of the play, Macbeth's life is joyless, because he realizes he has no one to share it with. In his last soliloquy he laments, " Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow / creeps in this petty pace from day to day. Out, out brief candle. / Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, / And then is heard no more" (5. 5. 18-25). Macbeth's reference to life as a " brief candle" is interesting in that a candle can spread its flame to other candles and thereby let its flame live on; however, failing to do this, it dies. Like Macbeth's failure to reproduce, the eventual extinction of the flame symbolizes death and loss of power. Without children, Macbeth lacks all potentiality after death. Without a son, Macbeth's death can not be avenged and neither, had he maintained the throne, could he be succeeded by his own progeny. Macbeth can possess no hope for the future and his present is bereft of the companionship he sees offered to his enemies with sons. The father and son relationships in this play, indeed, serve both to mock Macbeth and float the importance of having a son to raise for companionship and heir potential. The latter is evidenced by the <https://assignbuster.com/re-creation-and-immortal-fame-the-search-for-eternal-life-in-macbeth-and-coriolanus/>

fact that all the sons seem to function for these means only. Fleance, Malcolm and Young Siwald all fail to have their own agendas when their fathers are alive. Their purpose seems only to follow and inform their fathers of current events while maintaining their function as heirs. Malcolm apprises his father of war events in 1. 4, addressing him as “ my liege” (1. 4. 3). Fleance too acts as an aid to his father throughout the play. As Banquo enters in 2. 1 with the question “ How goes the night, boy?”, Fleance faithfully relays to him the situation and offers his opinion on the time, “ I take’t ’tis later, sir” (2. 1. 1-4). Both Malcolm and Fleance seem to be in training for the role that they must fill upon their fathers’ deaths. Many scenes before his death, Banquo symbolically offers his son his sword as he fights sleep, “ Hold, take my sword / A heavy summons lies like lead upon me/” (2. 1. 3-6). This scene foreshadows the later scene in which Banquo, struck by his murderers, metaphorically passes on his sword to his son saying, “ Fly, good Fleance, fly, fly, fly! / Thou mayst revenge” (3. 3. 17-18). Raising a son capable and willing to carry out any necessary revenge and carry on the family name requires this close training and companionship with the father. Macbeth seems to place a great importance on the interplay between father and son for this reason. Nowhere is the importance placed on father/son interaction more apparent than in Lady Macduff’s conversation with her son in 4. 2. Her young boy is the only child in the play and is not given a name, he is simply called Macduff’s Son. Macduff’s Son is both his name and his function. As a child heir to Macduff, the boy in 4. 2 is significant only by virtue of the fact that he is a male heir. The use of the boy in this scene gives Shakespeare the means by which to show two tragedies of detriment to their family system. The first tragedy occurs when Lady

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Macduff receives information about her husband, leading her to believe that he became a traitor who is now dead. Her worry seems to be for her son, whom she believes must face a life without a father. "Fathered he is, and yet he's fatherless", cries Lady Macduff when she hears the news (4. 2. 27). She goes on to ask "And what will you do now? How will you live?" and twice she asks the question "How wilt thou do for a father?" (4. 2. 31-38). Although it seems as if the scene should be consumed by her grief at the loss of a husband, she claims that she can "buy twenty at any market" and seems to suggest that the real loss is the loss of a father to her son (4. 2. 40). A young child growing up without a father seems to be the real tragedy in this scene. As young Macduff expresses views suggestive of ignorance and lack of fatherly instruction, namely the idea that "liars and swearers are fools, for there / are liars and swearers enough to beat the honest men and hang / up them," Lady Macduff responds by saying "Now God help thee, poor monkey!" (4. 2. 56-59). The tragedy of a father's early death is significant in that the son may not be properly trained. A young son left fatherless seems tragic in that his training for manhood is taken away leaving his future and the future of the family in doubt. However, this problem is replaced by an even bigger tragedy for the Macduffs when they find that they are to be murdered and Macduff finds he is to be left with no family and no heirs. There is, perhaps, no better play by which to compare this function of children and inheritance than *Coriolanus*, a play in which the fiercely independent tragic hero who grows up fatherless refuses dependence on everything, including the potential of his son as heir. Contrary to the importance placed on growing up with a father in *Macbeth*, the tragic hero of this play, a successful warrior of Rome, has grown up under only his

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mother's influence. If Coriolanus were a character in Macbeth, we could understand this situation as tragic, much like that of Young Macduff, the "poor monkey" (4. 2. 59). However, Coriolanus is in his own play in a different time and culture. In this play, tragedy has little to do with children, heirs and inheritance. Coriolanus spends his time at war away from his son and for most of the play, doesn't seem as concerned about him as his own warrior life. However, both Coriolaunus and his son, despite what we would expect based on Macbeth, are extremely tough and resilient. Far from the "worthless bird" Young Macduff thinks he will be, Coriolanus has demonstrated himself as a fearless warrior and there is evidence that Young Martius will do the same. "He had rather see the swords and hear a drum / than look upon his schoolmaster" says Volumnia of her grandson (1. 3. 52-3). Valeria too talks of his hunting and shredding a small butterfly, "O, I warrant, how / he mammocked it!" (1. 3. 601). However, although Young Martius' warrior instincts are conspicuous, Coriolanus fails to notice his son's behavior as a source of potential and dependence. When his family comes forward to plead on behalf of Rome and themselves, they accuse Coriolanus of preparing to "tread over" his mother's womb, his wife's womb and his son (5. 3. 124-8). Coriolanus is prepared to sacrifice his family and progeny for his own glory. Unlike the fathers of Macbeth, Coriolanus realizes his future in the annals, or stories that will be told, and not in his son. It is for these reasons that we question Coriolanus' motivation for deciding not to attack Rome. We wonder if Coriolanus really wants to spare Rome and his family as he says he does, or if he is simply scared that his name will "be dogged with curses / Whose chronicle thus writ: The man was noble, / but with his last attempt he wiped it out, / Destroyed his country" as Volumnia suggests to <https://assignbuster.com/re-creation-and-immortal-fame-the-search-for-eternal-life-in-macbeth-and-coriolanus/>

him (5. 3. 145-8). Coriolanus' actions before and after his decision suggest the latter to be true. His decision must be legitimate to Aufidius and therefore he feigns his decision as a concession to the emotional pleas of his family rather than express his fear of eternal defamation. Coriolanus' fierce independence prevents him from having loyalties, even to his family. This independence also prevents him from receiving the aid of others which could potentially help him. His son, Young Martius, seems to be maturing the same way. Unlike the sons of Macbeth who obstinately respect and support their fathers, Young Martius fails to address his father with the reverent "sir" and "my liege" used by the sons in Macbeth. The one instance where Young Martius talks of his father he uses "A", to mean "he" and fails to even use his name. In the same sentence he refuses allegiance to him and suggests that he will fight him when he is bigger, "A shall not tread on me. / I'll run away till I am bigger, but then I'll fight" (5. 3. 128-9). It is essentially because of this statement that we know Coriolanus will not be avenged by his son like other Shakespearian characters. Coriolanus' fear of dependence coupled with Young Martius' independence and disloyalty prevent both Coriolanus from relying on him and Young Martius from eventually defending and avenging his father. Contrary to Banquo's death in Macbeth, Coriolanus, instead of leaving behind a duty of revenge, cries out "Boy! False hound, / If you have writ your annals true, 'tis there / That, like an eagle in a dove-cote, I / Fluttered your Volscians in Corioles. / Alone I did it. Boy!" (5. 6. 13-7). Coriolanus doesn't use his last words to delegate the duty of revenge to his son, nor does he use them to wish his family well. Both these ways are common in Shakespeare, as they are ways of acknowledging the power to live on through family. However, fittingly to his character, Coriolanus wishes

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to continue living through his written story. His last plea is that his story be written correctly with him portrayed as a most heroic warrior. It is suggested that there are two ways to be successful and achieve solace in the short and grueling life that characterized the Renaissance. The first is to gain immortal fame and the second is to reproduce (Maus, 1/19/03). Shakespeare explores both of these in his plays *Macbeth* and *Coriolanus*. While the men of *Macbeth* are obsessed with royal succession and heirs, *Coriolanus* is concerned only with immortal fame. However, it is this quest for generations of power and immortal fame that leads to the detriment in these characters. Searching for eternal life through power and progeny is ill-fated for both as they learn their actions will necessitate an untimely death.