

“Filthy Air” and the “Heat-Oppressed Brain”: Fear in *Macbeth*

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Macbeth is often discussed and taught as Shakespeare’s tragedy of ambition. A long history of literary and theatrical criticism has taken this approach. The judgment of the eighteenth century’s greatest critic, Samuel Johnson, was that in *Macbeth*, “the passions are directed to their true end and the danger of ambition” (229). William Hazlitt put ambition at the fore as well, observing of the leading couple that Lady Macbeth’s “strong-nerved ambition furnishes ribs of steel to ‘the signs of his [Macbeth’s] intent’” (44). Sarah Siddons, the most famous actress of the eighteenth century and whose most famous role was Lady Macbeth, said that in this character, “one sees a woman in whose bosom the passion of ambition has almost obliterated all the characteristics of human nature” (Schoenbaum 21). And A.C. Bradley, the early twentieth century’s most influential Shakespearean critic, characterized Macbeth as “exceedingly ambitious . . . by nature” (323) and the Macbeths as “fired by one and the same passion of ambition” (321). Standing behind this line of interpretation is the word of Macbeth himself, who declares that he has “no spur | To prick the sides of my intent, but only | Vaulting ambition” (1.7.25-27). His statement, direct and definitive, would seem to foreclose further discussion and debate.

But Macbeth is wrong. Granted, he is ambitious for fame in battle, and he and his Lady’s aspirations for political power help to stoke their outrageous and terrifying conduct. But this drive is not the Macbeths’ *only* spur, as we’ll see. Further, even though ambition lives in the tragedy, it wavers—at least at first. In addition, as Barbara Everett points out, ambition is “in itself a fairly limited and trivial impulse, however large its ends and rewards” (95).¹ The word’s etymology also tells us that ambition is not wholly accurate for the character or the action: at its root, “ambition” refers to the way candidates would go around to win over an electorate. Finally,

the play is not primarily a test of Macbeth's ambition, since early on (2.2) the play answers whether Macbeth has enough drive to murder. Most of the play is about the aftermath: the response of the individual psyche, the political body, and the natural world to the heinous act.

So, to interpret the tragedy only through the lens of ambition would lead us to miss much of the play's value and import. To see a fuller picture of this tragedy, I propose an alternative lens: fear. Here I may appear to be merely substituting one abstraction for another, so immediately I want to specify what kinds of fear I'm talking about. *Macbeth* draws on archetypal tribal dreads and Elizabethan-Jacobean anxieties in creating a pervasive and invasive tragic climate. This atmosphere both reflects and produces fear in the drama's characters, and all of these fears together create the play's tragic effect. Fear tragically makes survival possible and violence common, allowing the characters to be human and pushing them to be inhuman.

As a depiction of violent *realpolitik*, *Macbeth* raises the archetypal problem of succession in an uncanny and fearful atmosphere. The play also touches on deep-seated anxieties over political succession. James Frazer puts these profound and widespread fears at the center of his huge comparative study of human culture called *The Golden Bough*, published in ever-expanding editions between 1890 and 1915. Initially, Frazer's goal was to explain why in ancient times the priest or king in the bucolic Italian village of Nemi was routinely, ritually murdered. This tragic custom led Frazer to investigate tribal or pre-literate life around the world, delving into folklore and folk customs, early myths and modes of thought. When completed, his encyclopedic collection reached twelve volumes. He found that, across a variety of cultures and times, virtually the same stories and rituals existed, including the rite of slaying the sacred leader. The practice in Nemi was replayed as far away as India and Africa, and for Frazer it came to exemplify early human social life. These rituals also produced a political atmosphere characterized by fear. His sketch

reads like a description of the setting and action of *Macbeth* and is therefore worth quoting at length:

Down to the decline of Rome a custom was observed there which seems to transport us at once from civilization to savagery. In this sacred grove there grew a certain tree round which at any time of the day, and probably far into the night, a grim figure might be seen to prowl. In his hand he carried a drawn sword, and he kept peering warily about him as if at every instant he expected to be set upon by an enemy. He was a priest and a murderer; and the man for whom he looked was sooner or later to murder him and hold the priesthood in his stead. Such was the rule of the sanctuary. A candidate for the priesthood could only succeed to office by slaying the priest, and having slain him, he retained office till he was himself slain by a stronger or a craftier.

The post which he held by this precarious tenure carried with it the title of king, but surely no crowned head ever lay uneasier, or was visited by more evil dreams, than his. For year in, year out, in summer and winter, in fair weather and in foul, he had to keep his lonely watch, and whenever he snatched a troubled slumber it was at the peril of his life. The least relaxation of his vigilance, the smallest abatement of his strength of limb or skill of fence, put him in jeopardy. . . . To gentle and pious pilgrims at the shrine the sight of him might well seem to darken the fair landscape, as when a cloud suddenly blots the sun on a bright day . . . now in twilight and now in gloom, a dark figure with a glitter of steel at the shoulder. . . . (Frazer 11-12)

Although the topography of Nemi's grove and Scotland's heath differ in many details, several elements of Frazer's description fit Shakespeare's drama, and both landscapes have similarly charged atmospheres. Frazer's "in fair weather and in foul" directly echoes Macbeth's famous climate. Storms provide our initial impression of *Macbeth*'s world as well: the text's first line is a stage cue: "Thunder and lightning" (1.1.0). Amidst the weather in both worlds, darkness nearly entombs the face of the earth (*Macbeth* 2.4.9). The blackness in Nemi resembles the moment "when a cloud suddenly blots the sun on a bright day," and this analogy recalls the more elaborate

figure of speech for covering the sun in *Macbeth*: “by the clock ‘tis day | And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp” (2.4.6-7). In act three, “light thickens” when “night’s black agents to their prey do rouse” (3.2.53, 56). The play’s memorable scenes almost all occur at night or in dark places, scenes including Macbeth’s vision of the dagger, the murders of Duncan and Banquo, and Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking. In the menacing twilight and “fog and filthy air” (1.1.13), prominent geographical features of the setting—heaths, caverns, ditches—become especially foreboding.²

Frazer closely correlates the landscape of the territory with the mindscape of the king, and this correlation is present in Shakespeare’s drama, too. The main figures in both texts—grim, armed, pacing and prowling, lonely, tense, and sleepless—exhibit the fears of their place and time.³ The geography and meteorology, as Simon Palfrey notes, “serve to externalize the characters’ most secret places, as crime or anxiety find expression in uncanny mutations of place” (224-5). But we can think about this relationship the other way around as well: the internal sphere is not only projecting into the external world, but the external world is also penetrating into the internal sphere. In *Macbeth*, the brutal tensions of unstable civic life condition the apprehensive mentality and violent action of the king.

The archetypal political problem of succession is that of Shakespeare’s drama. Here Scotland is a place of armed rebellion against the king, with political order imperiled. In this land, the Thane of Cawdor is almost, by virtue of his title alone, a treasonous threat: in this play, to be Thane of Cawdor is to be a traitor. Even amidst the ostensible peace and comfort offered by a stay in the home of a most valuable and trusted ally, the king is slaughtered. The new king’s tenure is precarious, his head is uneasy, he’s visited by a troubled slumber and evil dreams, he feels he can show no weakness lest he fall prey to assassination, his potential enemies suffer butchery carried out on his order, and he finally succumbs to regicide himself in his turn. This is Shakespeare’s only play to feature two regicides, as if to emphasize the tragic cycle Frazer puts at the fore of early human society.⁴ Americans can easily forget how overwhelming the problem of political succession has been

throughout human existence, since we've largely solved the problem by staging an organized and bloodless revolution every four years called a presidential election.

The early modern British would not have lost sight of the succession issue. While Shakespearean society wasn't carrying out annual sacrifices of its leaders, *Macbeth's* original audience was familiar with the consequences, sometimes bloody, of English monarchical transitions during the Tudor dynasty (1485–1603). The dynasty began when the army of a usurper, Henry VII, cut down the life of another usurper, Richard III, who had allegedly murdered his two young prince-nephews in the Tower of London to preserve his own power. The most famous of the Tudor kings, Henry VIII, created anxious conditions across the country when he reacted to his own succession crisis—his first wife, Catherine of Aragon, didn't produce a male heir—by breaking from the Roman Catholic Church. Following their divorce, Henry married five times over the next fourteen years. The split in religion and the complicated royal genealogy combined to make succession in the fifteenth century highly unstable. Following Henry's death in 1547, his Protestant son Edward VI ascended to the throne, although he never had a chance to rule for himself, since he was only nine years old at the time and died at age fifteen. From the turmoil caused by his death, Lady Jane emerged, but her reign lasted only nine days, and she was executed seven months after she lost the throne. The claimant who overtook her was a Catholic, Mary Tudor, also called Mary I, known famously as “Bloody Mary” because, in her five-year tenure as queen, she had more than 300 Protestants burned at the stake for heresy. When she died in 1557, the succession lay open and undecided until ultimately the crown passed to her Protestant half-sister Elizabeth, at which point English people once again had to fear whether their religious beliefs and practices, as well as their lives, were at risk.⁵

Elizabeth purportedly vowed not to “make windows into men's hearts and secret thoughts”⁶—that is, not to ask or tell about people's religious orientation or practices—and she acquired a reputation as a moderate, particularly in the first half of her reign. Nevertheless, she did conduct campaigns against Catholics through her ministers,

although the victims in her reign died for treason rather than for heresy. Almost two hundred were executed. Others perished in prison. Torture was conducted more often in this period than any other time in English history. The 1580s and 1590s were also a great age of Jesuit mission and treachery, especially in northern England near Scotland.⁷ And increasingly in the last decade of her life, when it became clear that she was not going to produce an heir, people grew fearful over what would happen to the monarchy when she passed away. Their unease didn't go away when she named the Catholic James VI of Scotland to replace her and become James I of England. What would happen when religion was reversed yet again? Would this new Catholic be as bloody as the last?

In sum, a large portion of the fifteenth century in England was marked by momentous religious upheavals that were also momentous political upheavals. Under all the monarchs between 1547 and 1603, “the legal heir to the throne was known to be hostile to the religious stance of the incumbent. Mary and Elizabeth each reversed the ecclesiastical settlements that they found on their succession” (Williams 22). The first audience for *Macbeth* was all too familiar with this narrative of succession and turmoil.

Yet the play taps into more than the crowd's general memory of the previous century's disruptions and bloodshed. The tragedy has a more specific historical referent and has a mythical and historical backdrop that plays into its audience's fears. In early 1605, a group of disaffected gentry, whom we would now call terrorists, plotted to blow up Parliament by placing thirty-six barrels of gunpowder under the House of Lords. They intended to kill the king and the entire country's leadership and then roll back the Protestant Reformation begun under Henry VIII. But they were discovered at the last moment, or perhaps the government, aware of the plot, waited until the last moment to prevent them. Had they succeeded, they would have killed thousands of people (estimates ran as high as thirty thousand) and destroyed the repositories of English law and history, along with London's greatest architectural landmarks. Not long after the conspiracy was thwarted, a short-lived armed uprising took place in Warwickshire. The plot and its aftermath in

the Midlands touched close to home for Shakespeare: some of his neighbors were implicated, for his hometown abutted the safe houses where the plotters met, weapons for the intended uprising were stored, and a supply of religious items for the hoped-for restoration of Catholicism were hidden (Shapiro 8-9).

A sampling of early modern accounts gives the flavor of the fear that absorbed the city: “the city is in great uncertainty”; “All was in a buzz”; and “everyone has his own share of alarm”; and “a general jealousy possessed them all [the common people].” One source said that even, and perhaps especially, the “king is in terror; he does not appear nor does he take his meals in public as usual. He lives in the innermost rooms, with only Scots about him.” The specific nature of the collective atmosphere may be lost, but the general mood of dread and panic seems clear. The political administration responded to this state of affairs by going into what we might now call a protectionist mode. A civil night-watch was established at the city’s gates, “the severest in any fort in Christendom.” Great bonfires were set ablaze to signify relief at being spared and to light the jittery city. And the king went into hiding.⁸

These themes evidently occupied Shakespeare’s mind as he set to work on *Macbeth*, probably written within a year after the Gunpowder Plot, still fresh in the public’s awareness. What, Shakespeare and his audience might have wondered, does the primitive mentality, here represented by the thoughts and actions of medieval Scots, look like? How does that mindset persist into the modern age? What’s the right way to hand down political power? How can sane people commit such atrocious and unspeakable crimes? What happens to the culprits, the survivors, and the community when such terror strikes? These are some of the tragedy’s most probing questions.

With London’s recent collective trauma as background, and these large questions at stake, we can see that *Macbeth* is obsessed with fear. Nothing makes this obsession clearer than Shakespeare’s use of the word itself. “Fear” in its various forms (fear, fear’d, fears, fearful, afeard, afraid) occurs more than fifty times in this play, which works out to be the highest raw number and the greatest relative

frequency of “fear” in any Shakespearean work.⁹ The characters are all fearful: The potential and actual heirs Donalbain, Malcolm, and Fleance all flee after the murder because they (justifiably) fear they, too, will be killed. Lady Macbeth’s dread arises in her “slumbry agitation” (5.1.11), which the Doctor associates with “infected minds” (5.1.72). Macbeth can’t sleep, “terrible dreams” disturb him nightly, and his mind is “full of scorpions” (3.2.36). On top of this, as a tragedy, *Macbeth* stages terrifying events, acute crises, exquisite suffering, irreparable loss, profound distress and despair—the most fearful things in life. The backdrop is a bloody, “doubtful” (1.2.7) rebellion. The Macbeths completely violate the rules of hospitality, committing an irreversible crime, murder, conducted against a defenseless and innocent ally as he sleeps. Macbeth murders sleep itself (2.2.37). The response of the natural world to this crime includes horses eating one another (2.4.14-18), the earth shaking as with a fever (2.3.52-53), and darkness entombing the face of the earth (2.4.9). Children are hunted down and killed. The two leading female characters don’t survive. And the final great monologue reduces human life to “a tale told by an idiot, signifying nothing” (5.5.16-27).

What, exactly, is Macbeth afraid of? He doesn’t seem to be scared of royal responsibilities. He shows no fear of battle. In the drama’s second scene, the messenger Captain recounts what Macbeth did in battle to the traitor Macdonald’s body: “He unseamed him from the nave [navel or groin] to the chaps [jaw] | And fixed his head upon our battlements” (1.2.22-23), meaning that Macdonald’s head was cut off and set upon the end of a pole for display on the battlefield (just as the heads of traitors, including those who perpetrated the Gunpowder Plot, were stuck on pikes atop London bridge for public display). Macbeth himself wonders why the witches’ suggestion “doth unfix my hair | And make my seated heart knock at my ribs, | Against the use [custom] of nature?” (1.3.137-13).

One answer comes at a crucial point, after he and Lady Macbeth have discussed the dark deed and Duncan has arrived at Macbeth’s castle and greeted his hostess. Macbeth speaks a