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**"What We Feel, and What Doth us Befall":  
A Study of Letter Motif in *Macbeth* \***

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O blessed letters, that combine in one All ages  
past, and make one live with all, By you we do  
confer with who are gone And the dead-living  
unto causel call: By you th'unborn shall have  
communionOf what we feel, and what doth us  
befall. (Harbage, 1966, P. 147)

**Abstract**

The present essay is an attempt to scrutinize Macbeth's letter to Lady Macbeth formalistically with much care and seek hints which may lead us back and forth to understand what befell before and after the composition and emission of the letter. The letter seems to help us plunge into Macbeth's consciousness, and of course later to that of Lady Macbeth; it is a transparent aid to perceive the hidden purpose and ambition of Macbeth, about which so much ink has been spilled to clarify it. The diction, the tone of the writer of the letter, and the later response of the addressee to the letter all are issues which this short letter contains and makes it a device in the hands of this great master of speech and drama to dramatize human nature. Thus, the letter transcends its simple function as a written message and turns it into an influential dramatic device which unfolds much about the two central

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characters: one who knows bounds towards crime with open eyes mesmerized by the glitter of crown; the other, on the other hand, also mystified by the temptation of the "golden round," is blind to the consequences of her menacing instinctive impulses.

**Keywords:** 1. *Macbeth* 2. Letter motif 3. Dramatic effect 4. Consciousness

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. The dramatic function of the letter written by Macbeth to Lady Macbeth

Shakespeare's plays—whether comedies or tragedies—are imbued with letters exchanged for different reasons and messages which signify different purposes. One of the rare plays in which letters appear less frequently is *Macbeth* (and *Othello*). However, in these mentioned plays this motif, namely the motif of letters, plays a crucially central and expansive role as it does in *Macbeth*: its effect reflects the hidden and dark purposes of the characters prior and after its composition. Much of the meaning of the play is concentrated in one letter: the same famous letter written by Macbeth addressing his wife Lady Macbeth. The content of the letter, the diction used to express its message, the immediate scene before and after the writing of the letter and the response it provokes in its addressee unfold much about the intention and hidden motivation of its writer and its reader, Lady Macbeth. It also forms the turning point of the story which leads to the climax and the subsequent catastrophe of this great tragedy. In other words, the letter, as self-contained as a soliloquy, verbalizes the dark intention of Macbeth, the tragic hero whose lofty ambition causes his fall.

Yet, one has to be cautious of oversimplification of the play not to reduce this great drama to a limited theme as such. The play displays the psychology of crime and delves deep into human psyche, what has caused many critics to acclaim Shakespeare as a poet, as a philosopher and sometimes as a psychologist. Craig maintains that Shakespeare's reader experiences philosophy arising 'naturally,' that is, "out of the

diligent pursuit of answers to the problems and questions and perplexities implicit in ordinary political life" (1999, p. 193). He also sees Shakespeare as a philosopher as well as a poet whose greatness derives even more from his power of thinking than from his "genius for linguistic expression"(p. 4). Shakespeare, he continues, possesses a "great wisdom" and bases his reading on the premise that there are "universal truths of human psychology, and that they are manifested in virtually all social milieu"(1999: p.8).

Moreover, Hart focuses on the "psychological struggles within King Macbeth." He confirms that it is true that his actions produce public effects, but "the audience is more concerned with his private values and morals than with his public actions." It is thus this "inner conflict which most engrosses the audience"(1972, p. 825). Therefore, Macbeth "suffers from a conscience" (p. 827).

Professor Bradley, in his insightful article on *Macbeth*, also highlights the main concern of the tragedy to convey Macbeth's ambition which turns into a passion and "sets his good name, his position and even his life on hazard. It is also abhorrent to his better feelings. Their defeat in struggle with ambition leaves him wretched"(1957, p. 294). Although we see apparently the first sparks of ambition enkindled by the witches' prophecy, Macbeth's letter uncovers the deep-rooted ambition inherent in Macbeth which had no chance to manifest itself prior to the witches' prediction.

Probably Shakespeare's preoccupation with ambition as a human passion and its devastating effect on human psyche and public enterprises has been the cause of his slight violation of Aristotelian doctrine of the ignorance of the tragic hero of his own flaw and its consequences. As Craig and Bevington assert, Macbeth's flaw is not a blind one; he moves towards crime with complete consciousness and with open eyes (1973, p. 1045), as if mesmerized by the glitter of the "imperial round." However, his fall does not give us the feeling of deserved punishment since he is not an absolute villain: his vivid imagination is his virtue; this is exactly what makes the audience pity him since they witness the waste of an

invaluable human grandeur and potentiality. Bradley states that "his imagination is thus the best of him, something usually deeper and higher than his conscious thoughts; and if he had obeyed it he would have been safe" (1957, p. 295). Bradley also adds Macbeth's "frightful courage" to his active imagination; the courage that paradoxically robs him from his eternal jewel."

Therefore, Shakespeare does not seem to present an absolute villain to make his fall pitiable and thus he gets close to Aristotle's principle of the tragic hero being far from black or white. Yet Macbeth does not act out of utter ignorance and that is why, it is called "tragedy of villainy" (Adams et al., 1987, p. 256).

Moreover, despite all the controversy over the play as the "travesty" of mythological and heroic figure of Scottish history and culture, Aitchison, by presenting a detailed account of the historical background of the historical Macbeth, justifies Shakespeare's choice of this figure and thus reveals the important distinction between a dramatic narrative structured by character and motivation; Aitchison seems to stress the immediate theatrical purpose of Shakespeare to appall Macbeth and to renew the suspense animating his drama (1999, p.107). Probably the choice of a familiar historical figure—whose tyranny in his actual historical record was considered less an act of ambition than continual warring over territory and power—could be an appropriate choice for Shakespeare's play based on the psychology of crime. Besides, evidence indicates that in Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587), which was the source of Macbeth, there is no reference to or trace of any letter to his wife and Lady Macbeth's destiny at the end (Brown and Johnson, 2000, pp. 10-19): it seems it was Shakespeare's own scheme to include the letter and Lady Macbeth's wretched end to dramatize the characters' ambition more objectively.

Therefore, dramatically speaking Shakespeare utilizes the letter as a device to manifest Macbeth's evil and ambitious thoughts, which had occurred to him prior to sending his wife the letter; all the thoughts, which seemed to be mere temptations, come to a determined resolution in

his letter; his "frightful courage" and boldness, with which he confides his thoughts to his wife, emboldens Lady Macbeth to think and speak of conspiracy against king Duncan in order to have a shortcut to the crown.

## **2. The Main Discussion: The Significance of the Letter Motif**

### **2.1 Bradley's question**

We better commence our contemplation on the focal significance of the letter with Bradley's epoch-making book, as a major early study on Shakespearean tragedy. In the separate notes on this play, Bradley poses this question as "When was the murder of Duncan first plotted?" (1957, pp. 413-417). To answer this question, Bradley puts forth two propositions: Whether Macbeth and Lady Macbeth had speculated the plot of murder in advance and had had a private interview about it and the way it should take place prior to his letter, or whether the thought of it occurs to Macbeth first and then transferred to his wife after she reads the letter, in which the news of the witches' prophecy and the realization of half of this ominous divination is broken to her.

The present writer quite positively and with trusted documentation confirms Bradley's second suggestion supported by his offered insinuations. In order to scrutinize the conditions for such a probability, one has to consider the scenes before the letter and then peruse the letter and its diction.

### **2.2 The events prior to the letter**

Immediately before the letter scene, scene V, we see Macbeth bewildered and highly excited by the news of being appointed as the Thane of Cowdor; he was already the Thane of Glamis and now another honor has been bestowed on him which proves the authenticity of the witches' prediction. But the main and more tempting promise has remained: the promise of being a king in near future. He thinks: "Two truths are told, / As happy prologues to the swelling act / Of the imperial theme" (I. iii. 127-129). The "swelling act" of "imperial theme" is of course kingship by whose promise Macbeth is startled, but he does not

dare at this point to refer to it directly. Macbeth's next statements illustrate that this is not just a simple surprise: he is apprehended and highly alarmed by the temptation of the offer. He wonders if this "natural soliciting" is good, "why do I yield to that suggestion whose horrid image doth unfix my hair / And make my seated heart knock at my ribs/ Against the use of nature?" "Present fears/ Are less than imaginings" (I.iii. 134-138). This means that Macbeth experiences feelings—passion of kingship and fear of that "horrid image" which unfixes his hair—that are unprecedented and unknown to him. If he had already thought of such "horrible imaginings" and even had spoken about them to his wife, he would not be so astounded and terrified by his own thoughts: "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me, without my stir" (I. iii. 144-46). He is himself confused and terrified by this seduction and "stir." He comes to confront something in his nature—which is against nature—and is alien to him; the impetus of the word "stir" should be highlighted since Macbeth's own wonder at such a temptation has scared him so that even the thought of conspiracy and plot at this point which "is but fantastical" makes him shiver. Thus, despite his tremendous fear of the thought of "murder," the very fear proves that the thought of murder, as a shortcut to power, does occur to him. Meanwhile, the same fear shows that it is the first time he has contemplated it; the horror he feels is a proof for his previously clear conscience, which is gradually contaminated with the thought and desire of crime. Even when uttering the above statements, one can detect a kind of child-like meekness that vanishes gradually and is replaced by the hard-heartedness and tyranny we witness later.

One has to bear in mind that, despite the brevity of the scene, we should remember the intensity of the scene and the way Macbeth's mind is heavily assaulted by the thought of kingship and the way he can practically leap to the throne. That is exactly under these circumstances that the deliberate dramatic irony of Duncan's speech is acutely felt: Duncan regrets that he could never suspect the previous Thane's villainy and treason, the moment he showers Macbeth with verbal praise unaware

of the fact that Macbeth already cherishes thoughts of betrayal against him. Duncan's statement then brings a bitter smile on the audience's lips: "There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face: / He (the rebellious Thane) was a gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust" (I. iv. 12-15). Now he again builds on "absolute trust" on the second traitor, Macbeth. Macbeth is drowned in the flattering thoughts of grandeur when Duncan declares Malcolm, his son, as his successor. Macbeth's immediate response is "That is a step / On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap, / For in my way it lies" (I. iv. 47-49). We see how he gradually grows bolder in expressing his evil thoughts to which he referred only by insinuation. From here on, this becomes his private secret which he asks the stars to "hide (their) fires" not to unfold it. Thus in this short, but very crucial and forcefully intense scene, the audience has enough time and proof to believe Macbeth's growing grudge against Duncan, who has set an obstacle in his way to the "golden round," metonymy for the crown and kingship, an obstacle he has to overleap.

Regarding the conflict Macbeth undergoes and the above-mentioned process of the elevation of his passion and boldness, one can hardly believe that, prior to the letter scene or between these scenes, any interview has occurred between husband and wife. The scene, which immediately precedes the letter scene, is concluded with words which already mark Macbeth's firm determination for murder: "Stars, hide your fires, / Let not light see my black and deep desires: / The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be, / Which the eye fears, when it is done to see" (I.iv. 50-53). What are those "black deep desires," or what is so excruciating that "the eye wink(s) at the hand," or "the eye fears, when it is done to see?" It is certainly Duncan's murder scene, as it later does indeed terrify whoever looks at it. As mentioned before, the previously hesitant, shaky and frightful tone changes to a determined and resolute one.

### **2.3 The content of the letter and its effect after its deliverance to Lady Macbeth**

This is exactly the same determined thought or 'enterprise' that he breaks into Lady Macbeth in his letter. He presents a quite confident tone and forceful diction in his letter; he talks about the day of his victory—which the wounded soldier so magnificently and elaborately reported as a sign of Macbeth's valor and bravery—as the "day of success." He also refers to the wizards' prediction as the "perfect report" and poses them above "moral knowledge." Furthermore, he expresses his excitement in receiving more information as "burned in desire" and his disappointment in their withdrawing that information and vanishing into the air, leaving him bewildered, as being "rapt in the wonder of it." Then he promises "the partner of (his) greatness" "dues of rejoicing" of what she has been "promised." This is not just the position as the wife of a Thane, his present position, but the position as the "queen" of Scotland. In the letter we do not see any sign of previous talk or discussion about this matter. Moreover, a prediction which was delivered to him in front of Banquo is no secret anymore which he so confidentially recommends his wife to "lay it to (her) heart." As the evidence implies, Macbeth, without referring directly to the matter of murder or plot, insinuates something more than an honor endowed to him in the long run and via the passage of time; an implication which Lady Macbeth is clever enough to grasp. Clemen's comment, although a little long, is worth quoting since it exactly focuses on the moment of reading the letter by Lady Macbeth and the probable mental process taking place:

When Lady Macbeth makes her first entry, she is reading her husband's letter aloud, indirectly introducing herself in soliloquy via the words of another. Both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are characterized by the letter, Macbeth in as much as he keeps back the important fact that Banquo was also present at the meeting with the witches and received a prophecy which might well thwart his own



expectations. Macbeth records the witches' decisive prophecy 'Hail, King that shalt be' without drawing any conclusion and without betraying anything of the compulsive fantasy which has already laid hold of his imagination. Only the phrase with which he addresses his wife immediately afterwards—'my dearest partner of greatness' – anticipates the future. . . when the letter quotes the witches' prophecy, something like a sudden enlightening takes place within her, as she contemplates the undreamt. . . she calculates at once what his must involve for the future . . . avoiding the word 'king'. *Thus the cryptic message of the letter has taken effect just as the writer in all probability intended; it is a veiled appeal to Lady Macbeth to utter the unspeakable and to plan the inconceivable.* (1990, pp. 143-144, emphasis is mine)

As shown above by Clemen, Lady Macbeth's response to the letter reminds us of Macbeth's initial fascination with the witches' prophecy in the third scene of the first act. Clemen also holds that in that scene Macbeth's mind is so preoccupied that "he is oblivious of others and begins to speak to himself. Murder is mentioned for the first time: 'My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical' (I.iii. 139)" (1990, p. 144).

As a result of the content and intent of the letter and the response it evokes, if there were any previous contrived plan, there was no reason why she should suspect her husband's boldness and courage when she expresses her fears thus: "Yet I do fear thy nature; It is too full o' the milk of human kindness/ to catch the nearest way"(I. v. 17-19). Yet she does realize that he is not "without ambition." That is why Lady Macbeth does feel the urge to goad him into this plot which the letter and its words echo, but she must make sure that these words lead to actual deed of murder to seize Duncan's throne : "Hie thee hither,/ That I may pour my

spirits in thine ear;/ And chastise with the valour of my tongue/ All that impedes thee from the golden round"(I. v. 26-29).

Nevertheless, as time passes, as Lady Macbeth had foreseen, Macbeth is haunted by doubt and fear; when Lady Macbeth states that when Duncan comes to their palace, he should not see tomorrow's sun, he evasively answers, "We will speak further"(I. v. 72). Later, when she finds him more hesitant due to the struggle he undergoes to murder not only his guest and king, but his cousin, she accuses him of cowardice, an attribute Macbeth highly abhors; she sarcastically addresses him that he was a "man" when he broke the "enterprise" to her (I. v. 48-49). Here she points out to the content of the letter in which he had spoken so confidently about his kingship and her queenship. This has been obviously the electrifying energy of the words of the letter which, like lightening, had illumed Macbeth hidden purpose and "dark desires."

Probably the present reader's suggestions and interpretations do not exactly correspond to what the writer intends, but they need not accord with modern literary criticism.

Formalism focuses on the text and what it implies, regardless of the "intention" of the author. Kinney (2001) employs an interesting methodology; he studies whatever written and circulated between 1600 and 1606 and puts his findings in recent literary criticism and historiography, plus neuroscience and computer science. Then he arranges the data into "lexias" or "strings of data" (2001, p. 35). One model for this method is to consider the play *Macbeth* as a "hyper text" where a single word, image or piece of information can invite the reader to "click" and follow a chain of electronic links. The other model for this method is neuroscience's view of the brain as a net of neurons, where every person arranges information in different chains or strings of brain cells, responding to a stimulus like a performance of *Macbeth* by using different unique synapses. Kinney refuses to tie this lexias to a single reading of the play; instead he privileges "a newly realized hermeneutics of indeterminacy" giving the pleasure of various responses to the play in its original cultural moment (2001, p. 24).

Thus by responding to the diction of the letter and their association, the reader may figure out from where the first thought originated. All Macbeth needs now to whet his ambition is a wicked temptress like his wife whose motto is "look like th' innocent flower, but be the serpent under 't" (I. v. 67-69).

Consequently, the events before and after the letter and the passion it reveals and even later provokes, lead us straight to the character traits and consciousnesses of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. The former is not without ambition and, as opposed to his foil character Banquo, cannot divorce his mind and thoughts from the thought of kingship and of the surest and shortest path to this destination.

However, the later conflict between this desire and his clear moral vision that "this even-handed justice / Commends th' ingredients of our poison'd chalice/ To our own lips" (I.vv.10-12), elucidates his strong sense of guilt which is finally overpowered by the passion of kingship and political power. For that matter, Macbeth's strong vision and imagination is revealed to us; he can even predict what hatred the murder of popular Duncan may arouse in the hearts of his adherents towards him. On the contrary, Lady Macbeth, with all her apparent daring soul, has no imagination: Macbeth can anticipate the consequences of his actions, but Lady Macbeth, with her imbecility, thinks a little water can wash the blood away from their hands, whereas the same bloody hands haunt her and drive her to her doom. Armstrong restates Freud, who goes on to "enumerate various ways in which Lady Macbeth manifests the signs of anxiety and guilt Macbeth himself represses: her lack of sleep, her obsession with blood, her mental disorder" (2001, pp. 32-33). Freud also confirms that these two characters come into a unity and they exhaust the possibilities of reaction to the crime, like two disunited parts of a single psychical individuality, and it may be that they are both copied from a single prototype" (Armstrong, 2001, p. 33)

### 3. Conclusion

In short, the only letter exchanged between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in this monumental tragedy informs the pivotal point of the play around which other events evolve and grow. Most important of all, the letter, besides a written message, imports much knowledge to us about the writer's and the addressee's character traits and their psychology, which can represent human psychology as well. This poses all the dramatic burden and effect on the letter: its diction, its content and its effect on the total meaning of this enduring tragedy.

The internal conflict Macbeth suffers from before and after the crime, echoed in the letter, conveys to his human integrity and conscience which make man ashamed of his vicious conceptions and misdeeds. Then he is not meant to represent an absolute villain by any means; neither is he the hero who acts upon ignorance and blindness not realizing the hazards of his actions. In this, Lady Macbeth stands at the opposite pole; she is so much blinded by the alluring glitter of the crown that she cannot conceive of the results of their treacherous deed. Therefore, the letter does indeed covert into a motif much weightier than a note to communicate a quick message: it is a motif which absorbs much meaning woven into the main texture of the play. It is a sign which bares "What We Feel, and What Doth us Befall."\*

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