

What Happens in Macbeth: An Originalist Reading of the Play

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Macbeth is a case study in how a Shakespeare play can be misread and thus misunderstood, especially by Stratfordian academics whose commentaries on what happens in *Macbeth* have misled readers and theater audiences. What happens in *Othello* has also been misunderstood, and the same may be true for other Shakespeare plays, notably *Hamlet*.

The Stratfordian commentators have described *Macbeth* as a tragedy about a noble hero, even an idealized hero, whose tragic flaw is an excessive, or “overweening,” ambition to be king that leads to his downfall and death. This has long been the standard reading of the play. It’s a reading that is simple and familiar. It’s comfortable even for a tragedy; it resembles Greek tragedy. It meets the expectations of readers and playgoers. That is how directors want to see it performed on stage. Macbeth’s “overweening ambition” has been so widely accepted that it has become a cliché. It is, however, almost certainly wrong.

This is how leading Stratfordian commentators describe Macbeth’s motive and actions in the play. One of the earliest was Samuel Johnson, the great lexicographer, essayist and Shakespeare scholar. He wrote in his *Miscellaneous observations on Macbeth* (1725) that “the danger of ambition is well described.”¹ A few decades later, Thomas Whately, a writer and member of Parliament, wrote that Macbeth assassinated King Duncan “to gratify his ambition” and that he ordered the rest of the murders “for his security.”² In 1847, George Fletcher, author of historical and literary works, described Macbeth in his *Studies of Shakespeare* as a man of “extreme selfishness . . . who has brought himself to snatch at an ambitious object by the commission of one great sanguinary crime.” Later, he says that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are “absorbed in an ambitious enterprise.”³ In *Shakespearean Tragedy*, A.C. Bradley, the widely revered, early twentieth-century scholar, describes Macbeth as being “bold” and “exceedingly ambitious.”⁴

More recently, Kenneth Muir, in his Arden edition of the play, cites Macbeth's "inordinate ambition."⁵ Harden Craig, in his collected plays, says Macbeth sacrifices everything to "wicked ambition."⁶ David Bevington, in his collected Shakespeare works, refers to Macbeth's "perverse ambition."⁷ Stephen Orgel in his Pelican edition cites Macbeth's "murderous ambition" that is evoked by his wife.⁸ Harvard's Stephen Greenblatt, in his Norton edition of Shakespeare, says that "Macbeth and Lady Macbeth act on ambition, restless desire and a will to power."⁹ Yale's Harold Bloom refers to Macbeth's "ambitious imagination" in his *Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human*.¹⁰ Oscar J. Campbell of Columbia, co-editor of the *The Reader's Encyclopedia of Shakespeare*, says in his entry on the play that Macbeth's "ambition . . . becomes an overwhelming passion that sweeps away every moral constraint."¹¹

This reading by Shakespeare scholars is reflected in paperback editions of the play and has become firmly entrenched in popular culture. Campbell's Bantam edition says the play is about a great man who pays the penalty for his "overweening ambition" (xiv). Joseph Papp, not a Shakespeare scholar as such but a theater producer and director and founder of The Public Theater in New York City, says in his foreword to the Bantam edition that "people always say that *Macbeth* is a play about ambition" (xiv). The co-editors of the popular edition from the Folger Shakespeare Library say that *Macbeth* raises huge questions: does Macbeth murder because fate tempts him, or because his wife pushes him into it, or "because he is overly ambitious?"¹² The Wikipedia article on *Macbeth*, a ready resource for students, says that Macbeth "chooses evil as the way to fulfill his ambition for power." A web site for students ("No Sweat Shakespeare") says the main themes of the play are Macbeth's "overweening" ambition and guilt.

It's hard to believe they may all be wrong, but shaking off the persistent drumbeat of Macbeth's supposedly overweening ambition (and that's not easy) and plunging afresh into a careful reading of *Macbeth* shows that what happens in the play is not only very different but also very obvious once it is recognized. This kind of reading might be called "originalist," or "naïve" in the good sense of the word, that is, with a completely open mind, reading *Macbeth* simply to find out what happens in the play as the dramatist wrote it without being distracted by what the Stratfordian academics have promulgated.

This is what really happens in the play and what does (and does not) motivate Macbeth: In act 1 scene 3, the Third Witch, in her persona as the prophesying "Weird Sister," or Fate of classical mythology, cries, "All hail, Macbeth! Thou shalt be king hereafter!" (1.3.50). Macbeth, however, does not exult at this good news. He is startled by it. Banquo asks him, "Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?" (1.3.51-52). As the supernatural Weird Sisters begin to vanish, Macbeth asks them to tell him more: "to be king," he says, "Stands not within the prospect of belief" (1.3.73-74). He's very skeptical. He also cannot believe the news that he has won the title of Thane of Cawdor, his rival: "The Thane of Cawdor lives. Why do you dress me / In borrowed robes?" (1.3.73-74). Macbeth shows no sign at all of any ambition, much less an overwhelming ambition. He is perplexed.

A few minutes later, Macbeth asks himself, “why do I yield to that suggestion / Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair and make my seated heart knock at my ribs . . . ?” (1.3.134-136). He tries to resist the idea of seizing the throne violently, a hair-raising, “horrid image” that makes his heart pound with anxiety and fear. In this twelve-line soliloquy, he does not exult in the possibility he could be king. He agonizes over what he might have to do against his better judgment to be king. The prospect of assassinating King Duncan unnerves him. He is reluctant to try to seize the crown by force; he is fearful of even contemplating such a move.

In act 1 scene 5, Lady Macbeth, alone on stage, waits for Macbeth to arrive home. Sounding hopeful, she says that her husband is “not without ambition” (1.5.15). With this double negative, she recognizes backhandedly that he does not have enough ambition to seize the throne by force. She worries that he is too principled and not ruthless enough. She says that he “wouldst not play false, / And yet would wrongly win” (1.5.17-18). She vows to force him to do what he is reluctant to do, to play false.

Scene 7 opens with Macbeth, alone, agonizing over what he must do: “If it were done when tis done, then twere well / It were done quickly” (1.7.1-2). He lists all the reasons he should not kill King Duncan: he is Duncan’s friend and kinsman. And he is Duncan’s host, “who should against his Murderer shut the door, / Not bear the knife myself” (1.7.15-16). And Duncan’s virtues are like angels who will plead against, “The deep damnation of his taking off” (1.7.20). That is, the damnation to hell of Duncan’s murderer. And, he continues, pity for the virtuous Duncan “Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye” (1.7.24). The murderous deed will ruin Macbeth’s reputation as an honorable military commander in the eyes of everyone.

He concludes this eloquent twenty-eight-line soliloquy with an ingenious, equestrian metaphor underlining his sense that he has no qualifications or true desire to be king: “I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition, which overleaps itself / And falls on the other” (1.7.25-28). The phrase “vaulting ambition” might seem to reflect his ambition to be king but in fact it does the opposite. He says he has “no spur,” that is, no sharp incentive (*OED* 4.a), to be king but “only” an inept vaulting ambition that would overleap itself and fail. The metaphor draws on the feat of vaulting onto the bare back of a running horse, the earliest meaning of “to vault” (*OED* 1), like a circus trick today. Macbeth is saying he doesn’t have what it takes to do that successfully and, by extension, to reach for the throne successfully. He is the would-be rider of the horse of ambition who has nothing to spur him on except the inept desire of someone who wants to vault to the back of a cantering horse but who would jump too far and fall off the other side, no doubt looking quite foolish. The “vaulting” metaphor describes an inept, reluctant, ineffective ambition, not a powerful, confident ambition.

Lady Macbeth enters, interrupting his soliloquy, and he informs her bluntly: “We will proceed no further in this business” (1.7.31). These are not the words of a man with an overwhelming ambition to be king. She berates him for acting like a coward, and he asks, almost plaintively, “If we should fail?” Lady Macbeth fires back,

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“We fail?” (1.7.59), and her bullying overwhelms Macbeth’s reluctance, doubts and fears—his lack of ambition that is so distressing for him, and for Lady Macbeth.

After he kills Duncan, he does not exult that now he will be king. He fears he will “sleep no more” (2.2.34). He says, “I am afraid to think what I have done” (2.2.50). Nor are these the thoughts of a man of “overweening ambition.” He is not relishing the chance to become king with all the power, perquisites and wealth of the monarchy. All he can express is remorse for killing the king: “To know my deed / ’Twere best not know myself. He hears someone knocking at the gate and exclaims, “Wake Duncan with thy knocking! / I would thou couldst” (2.2.73-74).

In the next scene, Macbeth again expresses his remorse and in a way that produces powerful dramatic irony for the audience, which knows he has killed the king, although no one on stage knows that yet. When Macduff tells everyone that the king has been murdered, Macbeth delivers a speech that is heard by those around him as deep sorrow that the king has been killed, but his speech is heard by the audience as remorse for having committed the murder.

Had I but died an hour before this chance
[unfortunate event (OED I.2)],
I had lived a blessed time; for, from this instant,
There’s nothing serious in mortality:
All is but toys [trifles, rubbish (OED II.5)],
Renown and grace is dead.
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag on.
(2.3.81-86)

Reluctance and then deep remorse, not excessive ambition, consume Macbeth.

From now on, as king, he has to steel himself to continue to act against his better self in order to maintain his rule. He finds he must lie and deceive those around him in court. He must order the murders of Banquo, Fleance and Macduff’s wife and children, which will turn the country against him. The warrior-hero becomes a liar, a dissembler and a tyrant who plunges to his downfall and death.

Nowhere in the play does he express an ambition to be king. The closest he gets to it occurs in his soliloquy in act 1 scene 4 when he’s pondering the prophecies of the Weird Sisters. He wonders naively “If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me / Without my stir” (1.4.143-144). Maybe he won’t have to do anything to be king. Again, these are not the private thoughts of a man with an “overweening” ambition to be king.

A few Stratfordian commentators have read the play as Macbeth’s struggle with his conscience. In his introduction to the Leopold Shakespeare (1877), F.J. Furnivall wrote that “*Macbeth* is the play of conscience, although the workings of conscience are seen much more clearly in *Lady Macbeth*.”¹³ William Hazlitt says Macbeth is “not equal to the struggle with fate and conscience.”¹⁴ It is a “defeated conscience” for Robert S. Miola in his Norton Critical Edition.¹⁵ In the Riverside

collected works, Frank Kermode calls the play a “fierce engagement between the mind and its guilt.”¹⁶ This “guilty conscience” interpretation, however, necessarily and probably unwittingly supports what really happens in *Macbeth*, for a guilty conscience results from a tentative, weak ambition or a lack of ambition. Excessive ambition would brush aside any promptings of conscience that might interfere with achieving ambition’s goal. Macbeth suffers a guilty conscience for the crimes he commits to be king and as king precisely because he is never ambitious to be king.

An “originalist” reading of the playtext, freed from the Stratfordian chorus of Macbeth’s “overweening ambition,” reveals a different play, the play as it was written by the dramatist. It was not about Macbeth’s excessive ambition leading to his downfall. It was a play about a skilled and courageous warrior who triumphs in battle, saving Scotland from invasion, but is unsuited by experience and temperament to prevail in the arena of court intrigue and power politics. Macbeth fails to understand that success on the battlefield does not translate to success in the treacherous world of court intrigue. This is not the play that the Stratfordian academics want to explicate.

Macbeth is essentially a brave and honorable commanding general and combat fighter who is drawn into a disastrous course of action in the corridors of political power. The treacherous lying of the courtier-like Thane of Ross, his unsought confederate, clears the way for Macbeth to reach for the Crown—if he truly wants to.¹⁷ Ross does this by falsely telling King Duncan that the Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth’s rival, was a traitor on the battlefield and was captured. The king orders that the innocent Cawdor be summarily executed. Stratfordian commentators, not understanding what happens in the play, have missed Ross’s crucial role probably because they do not expect to see a thirteenth-century Scottish warrior thane acting like a manipulating, Elizabethan courtier. Puzzled, they dismiss Ross as a mere messenger.

Adding more fuel to Macbeth’s natural, if vague, desire to be king are the deceptive prophecies of the Weird Sisters, who predict that he will be king. Finally, the bullying of Lady Macbeth, who is the one who shows an excessive ambition to the throne, goads him into assassinating King Duncan, his revered monarch, close friend and house guest. He suffers a guilty conscience that triggers hallucinations and insomnia. Ignobly, he hires murderers to kill Banquo, Fleance, and Macduff’s family so that he can stay in power and create a dynasty. The murders turn the country against him. In spite of himself, he has become a tyrant. At the end, he desperately tries to recapture his warrior’s lust for battle, but it is too late. Abandoned by his troops, surrounded by overwhelming forces, his wife a suicide, he puts on his armor with desperate bravado to meet his fate, dreading the ignominy of defeat and capture (as does Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra*).

Macbeth’s struggle with his lack of ambition and his self-inflicted assaults on his sense of honor, loyalty, and self-respect evoke fascination with his predicament. The anguish he expresses in his soliloquies wins a measure of sympathy despite his treasonous and cruel deeds. He is drawn into committing crimes against his better judgment, crimes that he had never before contemplated. The evil he does

is appalling, yet strangely understandable. Conflicted, morally compromised, unhappy, and deeply human, Macbeth is much more complex, compelling, and even sympathetic for all his faults. He is an antihero.

Theater directors and actors recognizing what really happens in *Macbeth* have an opportunity to challenge the expectations of their audience and bring to stage and screen a more rewarding way to perform this play, a performance that would be faithful to the dramatist's intention as expressed in the playtext. Such a production, true to the original text, could be a more powerfully affecting experience for the audience.

The misreading of *Macbeth* by Stratfordian commentators may well stem from their belief that the author was a commoner writing for commoners. In this view, Macbeth is simply a warrior thane whose tragic flaw is an excessive, murderous ambition to be king. For a commoner this kind of immoral ambition must be wrong and will be punished by a guilty conscience and death. It's a simple, straightforward story uncomplicated by the nuances of Macbeth's character and the machinations of court intrigue that engulf him.

In contrast, an originalist reading of *Macbeth* indicates an author who had first-hand knowledge of court intrigues, ambitious noblemen, assassination plots, and the burning issue of who would succeed Queen Elizabeth, who never named a successor. That would be a dramatist like Edward de Vere, seventeenth Earl of Oxford, a ranking nobleman in her court and the leading candidate as the true author of the works of Shakespeare. He was privy to the succession debates and the maneuvering and plotting among her courtiers and noblemen, including William Cecil, her principal adviser and Oxford's father-in-law.

When Oxford wrote *Macbeth* and the other Shakespeare plays, he almost certainly had in mind an audience of noblemen and courtiers in Elizabeth court. The extant records show more than twice as many performances of Shakespeare plays at her court and other venues for noblemen and aristocrats than in the public theaters.¹⁸ A court audience could feel sympathy for Macbeth's predicament and recognize that his fatal flaw is political incompetence. Nothing in the life of Will Shaksper of Stratford indicates any experience of generals, monarchs, courtiers, court intrigues and treacherous political power plays, or opportunities to understand what personal attributes it would take to seize the Crown by force and then to rule successfully. Stratfordian commentators probably sense this lack and shy away from an originalist reading, which requires an author who, like Oxford, was an insider at court.

Macbeth is not the only Shakespeare play that has been identified so far as suffering from a misreading by Stratfordians. An originalist reading of what happens in *Othello* also reveals a misreading of that play. As detailed in our Oxfordian edition of the play, *Othello* is a satiric farce that ends in shocking murders and Othello's suicide.¹⁹ He is not the tragic hero whose unfounded jealousy of Desdemona leads to his downfall. He is terrified that word of his being cuckolded by Desdemona and Cassio (which is not true) will result in public disgrace. He is a foolish character based on the boasting, naïve, Spanish/Moorish *Capitano* of the Italian, satirical

comedy called *commedia dell'arte*. He and all the other leading characters in *Othello* are modeled on leading, stock characters of *commedia dell'arte*, improvised theater virtually unknown in England at the time but at the height of its popularity in Italy when Oxford was there for several months.²⁰ Stratfordian academics sometimes recognize the comedy and satire and the disparagement of Othello but tend to discount it, failing to see how central it is to what happens in the play. An exception, also discounted by the Stratfordian academics, was Thomas Rymer, drama critic and historian, who concluded in his essay, published in 1693, that *Othello* is “a bloody farce.”²¹

Hamlet, the dramatist’s most personal masterpiece, may also have been misunderstood. It has puzzled virtually all Stratfordian commentators. Most of the leading commentators call it an enigmatic play and Hamlet himself an enigma. They suggest various possibilities. It might be a revenge play, or a play about the problems created by a usurper, or a play about a melancholy Dane, or a play about an indecisive prince and heir to the throne, or a play about the perils of youthful love, political marriage and incest. All can be found in the play. John Dover Wilson wrote in *What Happens in Hamlet* that there are dozens of puzzles in the play that must be solved together “if *Hamlet* was an artistic unity at all.”²² It’s safe to say the dramatist did not set out to write an enigmatic play full of puzzles. Knowing that the true author was not a commoner but a ranking nobleman in Queen Elizabeth’s court, which was notoriously corrupt, may well provide the key to what happens in *Hamlet*.

In sum, an originalist reading of *Macbeth* reveals a play about a warrior-hero who is not excessively ambitious to be king and who is unsuited by experience and temperament to resist the temptations of ambition, to navigate the corridors of political power, to assassinate his king and to do what he thinks he must do to rule Scotland successfully. Similar readings of what happens in perhaps many more Shakespeare plays, readings that are also informed by the view that Oxford wrote them, promise a much greater appreciation of what the dramatist intended when he wrote them.

Endnotes

- ¹ Qtd in *Macbeth Variorum* (1873), 400.
- ² Qtd in *Macbeth Variorum* (1873), 463. (His essay on Macbeth and other Shakespeare characters was published after his death by his brother in 1785.)
- ³ Qtd in *Macbeth Variorum* (1873), 401, 405.
- ⁴ Bradley, 244.
- ⁵ Muir, (xlvi).
- ⁶ Craig, 1045.
- ⁷ Bevington, 1219.
- ⁸ Orgel, xli.
- ⁹ Greenblatt, 2558-2559.
- ¹⁰ Bloom, 532.
- ¹¹ Campbell, 484.
- ¹² Mowat, Barbara A. and Paul Werstine, xiv.
- ¹³ Furnivall, lxxvii.
- ¹⁴ Hazlitt, *Characters of Shakespear's Plays* (London, 1817); excerpt in Miola, ed. *Macbeth, a Norton Critical Edition* (2004), 221.
- ¹⁵ Miola, ix.
- ¹⁶ Kermode, 1311.
- ¹⁷ See Whalen, "An Overlooked Sub-plot in *Macbeth* Reveals Oxford's Hand" in *Shakespeare Matters* 7:3 (Spring 2008), 6, 28-31.
- ¹⁸ See Whalen, "Shakespeare's Audience: A Reassessment of the Stratfordian View" in *The Shakespeare Oxford Newsletter* 40: 4 (Fall 2004), 1, 7-9, 11-12.
- ¹⁹ Draya, Ren, and Richard F. Whalen. *Othello* in the Oxfordian Shakespeare Series. Truro MA, Horatio Editions, 2010.
- ²⁰ See Whalen, "Commedia dell'Arte in *Othello*: a Satiric Comedy Ending in Tragedy" in *Brief Chronicles* 3 (2011).
- ²¹ Rymer, Thomas, *A Short View of Tragedy* (1693) (Scolar Press facsimile 1970), 86-146.
- ²² Third edition 1970, by Wilson (first edition 1935), 9.