

Bloodlust, Savagery, Obsession and Excess - Gothic Macbeth

Is it really possible to use the conventions of the Gothic - a literary movement from the late eighteenth century - to analyse a play written in the early seventeenth century? Dr Pamela Bickley's illuminating discussion of Shakespeare's troubling play suggests it is.

When Shakespeare wrote Macbeth in or around 1606 he was certainly not writing a Gothic text; he was producing a vividly dramatic script for his theatre company to perform. Neither Shakespeare nor his audience would have understood 'Gothic' as a literary concept; the term emerged with the genre itself in the mid-eighteenth century. In what respects, then, can Macbeth be identified and read as Gothic? What characteristics does the play share with later Gothic texts?

Gothic Transgression and Excess

*I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far, that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er*
3.4.135-8

Gothic writing uncovers a world of taboo, challenging and overstepping norms. One of the key aspects of the genre that can be identified through its long survival is its engagement with the unspeakable, from the rape, incest and diabolism of Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) to the late twentieth century and the grotesque world of Patrick McCabe's *The Dead School* (1995). In *Macbeth*, as in any play of the period, the ultimate taboo is regicide: to kill the king is a heinous act, violating feudal loyalties and offending against God. Macbeth always knows that Duncan's murder is 'deep damnation'. In his first soliloquy he reveals the early stirrings of 'horrible imaginings', thoughts that terrify him and deprive him of all sense of reality - 'nothing is, but what is not' (1.3.142). And in his later musings, he envisages the entire cosmos recoiling in horror: 'tears shall drown the wind' (1.7.25). Similarly, when Macduff discovers Duncan's body, his imagery is religious, not simply political:

*Confusion now hath made his masterpiece!
Most sacrilegious Murther hath broke ope
The Lord's anointed Temple ...
2.3.65-7*

But in this play the regicide is not the only taboo. The apparition of the 'bloody child' conjured by the Witches symbolises the most horrifying slaughter of all - the deaths of innocent children. Lady Macbeth's hyperbole of dashing her baby's brains to the ground is part of this Gothic excess; Macbeth himself goes much further in his willingness actually to sacrifice Fleance and then Macduff's children.

English Literature A Level transition work

The play introduces Macbeth in terms of excessive savagery. He is initially the fearless soldier defending his king from treachery and invasion and, in this respect, all approve Macbeth's military prowess. But Shakespeare's words emphasise the physical brutality of the hand-to-hand fighting:

*his brandished steel,
... smok'd with bloody execution,
... carv'd out his passage*
1.2.17-9

Macbeth's sword steams with the hot blood of his victims as he fights his way towards the disloyal Macdonwald who is 'unseam'd [...] from the nave to the chops' and beheaded. When the Captain goes on to describe Macbeth as seeming to 'bathe in reeking wounds' he speaks literally - the warrior would be covered in blood and gore. The Captain's words partly prefigure how Macbeth will end - fatally wounded and subsequently beheaded. But this opening battle scene also typifies the world of the play: the world that Macbeth inhabits but then perpetuates beyond the battlefield, violating the domestic space of his own and, later, Macduff's castle. Macbeth finds in himself an affinity with blood and darkness. He does not scruple to seek the deaths of Banquo and his young son Fleance; Macduff's wife, children and babes will all be sacrificed to Macbeth's overwhelming desire for supremacy. When he says,

*For mine own good,
All causes shall give way*
3.4.134-5