Jung Macbeth: The Tragedy of a Man Dominated by Passions Unseen and a Creature Manipulative

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CARL JUNG IS QUOTED AS HAVING SAID “WHAT WE DO NOT MAKE CONSCIOUS WE ARE DOOMED TO LIVE OUT AS FATE.” THIS IS A SOMEWHAT MYSTICAL STATEMENT; JUNG WAS ONE OF THE MOST MYSTICAL PSYCHOLOGISTS. WHAT DOES HE MEAN? IS IT TRUE? WHILE HIS STATEMENT’S VALIDITY IS A PERSONAL DECISION, IT IS MUCH MORE UNDERSTANDABLE WHEN IT IS MADE CONCRETE. LITERATURE OFFERS MANY GREAT OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUCH PSYCHOBIOGRAPHY. UNFORTUNATELY, BASEING ALL UNDERSTANDING OF A CHARACTER’S PERSONALITY ON A SINGLE THEORIST’S WORK CAN BE LIMITING. HOWEVER, THIS PSYCHOANALYZING OF A LITERARY WORK CAN BE VERY USEFUL. LIKE THE FREUDIAN INTERPRETATION OF THE TEMPEST’S ARIEL AND CALIBAN—PROSPERO’S SUPER EGO AND ID PROJECTIONS RESPECTIVELY—A JUNGIAN INTERPRETATION GIVES THE READER A NEW PARADIGM, A DIFFERENT FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING A COMPLEX CHARACTER. SHAKESPEARE’S MACBETH GIVES US A LITERARY—IF NOT REAL—MAN WHO, AFTER ANALYSIS, GRAPHICALLY ILLUSTRATES JUNG’S STATEMENT.

VIEWING MACBETH THROUGH A JUNGIAN LENS MAKES HIM SEEM DEVELOPMENTALLY YOUNGER THAN HIS POSITION IN THE SCOTTISH COMMUNITY WOULD INDICATE; HE HAS NOT Begun TO DEAL WITH THE ADULT DEVELOPMENTAL TASK OF INDIVIDUATION. ACCORDING TO JUNG, IN THE PROCESS OF INDIVIDUATION “UNCONSCIOUS POTENTIALS ARE EXPLORED AND REINTEGRATED WITH THE TOTAL SELF” (CLONINGER 73). THE EXPLORATION OF CERTAIN PARTS OF THE UNCONSCIOUS BRINGS TO CONSCIOUSNESS UNACKNOWLEDGED “MISSING PIECES” THAT WILL “ALLOW THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SELF TOWARD PSYCHIC WHOLENESS” (CLONINGER 73). MACBETH’S FAILURE TO INDIVIDUATE SUCCESSFULLY IS REFLECTED BY THE DISTANCE BETWEEN HIS RIGID PERSONA AND HIS REAL PERSONALITY, AN INABILITY TO CONFRONT THE SHADOW ASPECTS OF HIS PSYCHE, AND THE COM-
plete rejection of his anima. These difficult developmental issues only seem able to get Macbeth’s attention through his hallucinations and visions. Jung said that “only through the adult development of individuation can the person become truly an ‘individual’ and not simply a carrier of unconscious images and other people’s projections” (Cloninger 74). This “carrier of unconscious images” and receptacle of “other people’s projections” is exactly how Shakespeare paints Macbeth: Macbeth is Duncan’s “O worthiest cousin” (I, iv, 17), the murderers’ “Highness,” “liege,” “lord” (III, I, 81, 102, and 131), and Malcolm’s “tyrant” (IV, iii, 14). Throughout the play Macbeth’s identity is formed by Shakespeare’s other characters. The tragedy of Macbeth is that he has failed to explore his unconscious and discover and accept his true identity. Because he has not individuated, he can be molded and pushed into identities and actions that others project onto him. Macbeth is very conscious of his persona:

He hath honored me of late, and I have bought
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,
Not cast aside so soon. (I, vii, 35-38)

He is cognizant of the positive reputation he has cultivated, and he enjoys thinking of himself in this way. According to Jung, the persona is the “aspect of personality that adapts to the world”; “[It] reflects the roles that we play not in the theater but in society” (Cloninger 75). Throughout the play Macbeth attempts to put on a “false face” (I, vii, 95) so that he can hide what his “false heart doth/know” (I, vii, 95-96). When he has plotted Banquo’s death and is preparing to make merry with his guests, Macbeth decides he and Lady Macbeth are

... unsafe the while that we
Must lave our honors in these flattering streams
And make our faces vizards to our hearts,
Disguising what they are. (III, ii, 36-39)
Macbeth is indulging in ego inflation; he identifies “too closely with con­
scious experience and intentions,” placing them at the center of personality
(Cloninger 74). He believes that he can cover not only his conscious knowl­
edge of his role in Banquo’s death from others but keep his unconscious
feelings of fear, shock, and guilt at arranging a murder from himself. During
dinner Macbeth has a hallucination. He sees the ghost of Banquo come to
haunt him and denies his guilt: “Thou canst not say I did it. Never shake/
Thy gory locks at me” (III, iv, 61-62). Throughout the play Macbeth refuses
to own his unconscious; he places supreme importance on appearances—his
persona, his consciousness—and refuses to deal with any desires and actions
which challenge his idealized self. His rejection and disregard of this
“shadow” keep him ignorant of its motivational power and the gulf that
develops between his persona and real personality.

Jung described the shadow as “those aspects of the psyche that are rejected
from consciousness by the ego because they are inconsistent with one’s self­
concept” (Cloninger 75). Macbeth’s history of denying his shadow is detailed
throughout the play. In Act I, after learning of Duncan’s intention of having
Malcolm succeed to the throne, Macbeth rejects his ambitiously motivated
ability to become a traitor:

The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step
On which I must fall down or else o’erleap,
For in my way it lies. 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, 55-60)

Macbeth is pragmatically hiding from his shadow; he seems to know the
darkness he is capable of—and appreciates its usefulness—but refuses to
consciously confront anything that is inconsistent with his positive persona.
Jung says that as we show our persona to others and conceal our shadow from
ourselves, “the shadow gets more and more ugly, and the split between per-
sona and shadow. . .widens” (Cloninger 75). For Macbeth, this is true. After he kills Duncan, Macbeth refuses to believe that he could be a murderer—one of his shadow qualities: “I am afraid to think what I have done./Look on ’t again I dare not” (II, ii, 66-67). Twenty-six lines later he decides to repress the incident altogether: “To know my deed ‘twere best not known myself” (II, ii, 93). Although this ability to murder is present in Macbeth’s character—and he is for a time aware of it—he pushes the knowledge further into his “shadow” because it is incompatible with his persona. As the play continues, Macbeth’s shadow does get uglier, and the gap between it and his persona widens. After his second meeting with the Weird Sisters, Macbeth resolves to kill Macduff’s family in the Thane of Fife’s absence and to do so while he is still in hot blood:

From this moment
The very firstlings of my heart shall be
The firstlings of my hand. And even now,
To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and
done. (IV, I, 166-170)

Macbeth has decided he must give himself no time for reflection on his proposed actions; he is allowing no time for the kind of introspection he did before killing Duncan (I, vii, 1-28). Macbeth’s shadow abilities do get uglier, just as Jung theorizes:

The castle of Macduff I will surprise,
Seize upon Fife, give to th’ edge o’ th’ sword
His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls
That trace him in his line. No boasting like a fool;
This deed I’ll do before this purpose cool. (IV, I, 171-175)

Macbeth has progressed from ambitious regicide to familial genocide. Because he has not confronted his shadow, the necessary moral conflict that should happen during this phase of individuation does not occur (Cloninger 76).
Without the moral conflict caused by introduction of the shadow to consciousness, Macbeth cannot perform the necessary checks on his inner moral compass. This allows him to commit his atrocities without having to justify them to his strong persona. Ironically, part of Macbeth’s shadow—his anima—is positive, but it is repressed because he believes it to contain negative qualities.

According to Jung, men have “repressed feminine-typed qualities” (their anima) and women have “repressed masculine-typed qualities” (their animus) (Cloninger 76). While this area of Macbeth seems cloudy, I believe that Macbeth cannot explore what Jung would call the inner feminine qualities of empathy and emotion because Lady Macbeth is constantly questioning his identity as a man. Two passages support this theory. When Macbeth begins to vacillate between killing Duncan and maintaining his honorable reputation, Lady Macbeth chastises him for not being man enough to take what he wants (I, vii, 39-49). She also calls him to task for not being a man of his word:

What beast was ‘t,
then,
That made you break this enterprise to me?
When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And to be more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man. Nor time nor place
Did then adhere, and yet you would make both.
They have made themselves, and that their fitness now
Does unmake you. I have given suck, and know
How tender ‘tis to love the babe that milks me.
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this. (I, vii, 53-67)
Lady Macbeth claims that she, a woman, is more manly than Macbeth. Macbeth is expressing fear and guilt, emotional inner controls, and Lady Macbeth pokes fun at him. This drives Macbeth’s anima traits further into his unconscious. Later, when Macbeth is confronted with his hallucination of Banquo’s ghost, he expresses fear and revulsion at what he has done to Banquo through the ghost’s horrible appearance. Lady Macbeth tells him to stop acting like an hysterical woman and to live in reality. She even asks Macbeth, “Are you a man” (III, iv, 70):

O, proper stuff! This is the very painting of your fear.
This is the air-drawn dagger which you said
Led you to Duncan. O, these flaws and starts,
Impostors to true fear, would well become
A woman’s story at a winter’s fire,
Authorized by her grandam. Shame itself!
Why do you make such faces? When all’s done,
You look but on a stool. (III, iv, 73-81)

By continually telling Macbeth that what he is feeling is wrong, Lady Macbeth gets him to push his horror at killing his friend back into his anima shadow.

While Macbeth clearly rejects his “inner woman,” as shown by the ease with which he is manipulated by gender role identification (and it would be wrong to blame Lady Macbeth for his lack of individuation), he is severely hampered in uncovering his anima by her disparaging of his male identity. Macbeth does not feel enough of a “man” to explore his “inner woman,” so he leaves it in his shadow.

Macbeth’s strict adherence to his persona, his unwillingness to deal with his shadow, and his rejected anima have psychological consequences; he has hallucinations which point to “efforts and obstacles in the developmental task of individuation” (Cloninger 87). Although Jung “interpreted psychotic hallucinations and delusions as direct expressions of the collective uncon-
scious” (Cloninger 87), I believe that it makes more sense to interpret Macbeth’s visions as a type of dream, drawing their meaning from his personal unconscious. Act II’s floating dagger can be read as a shadow impulse forcing its way into consciousness. The second apparition’s advice, which causes Macbeth to scorn any “man of woman born,” can be seen as an indication of anima rejection. Jung theorized that “[i]f the unconscious is consistently ignored, it may act in extreme ways to block consciousness, creating symptoms (including psychogenic illness and neurosis) that force attention to neglected issues” (Cloninger 74). Through his visions, Macbeth’s unconscious is trying to show him the issues he must deal with. One of the sadder aspects of the tragedy is that he is constantly dissuaded from looking at them.

I believe that what Macbeth refuses to make conscious—his shadow and his anima—becomes his fate. Because he does not reconcile his shadow with his persona, he is doomed to be motivated by the base aspects of his personality while denying their existence. The moral conflict needed to mitigate his desire is not present. Macbeth represses his anima too and is manipulated into suppressing any remorse or emotion that would let him empathize with others. He is constantly acting to suppress his unconscious—the real Macbeth—and by the end of the play sees life only as a false role to be played:

Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (V, v, 27-31)

Macbeth’s tragedy is trying to play the part of his false persona—he does not explore his unconscious though he needs to. This is why poor Macbeth is so far from the mark with his comments on life. He does not know enough about himself to allow anything but a shallow, two-dimensional interpretation of his life, letting himself be directed by passions unseen and a creature manipulative.
Works Cited
