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Life as a Walking Shadow

Very little in the works of Shakespeare is just one thing, free from allusion or connotation. Peel back one layer, and you will find five more behind it. Playwrights - especially playwrights given to fashioning scathing social commentary in an era where an upset despot could have your head on a platter at the cost of a few mere words - had to be infinitely careful about how they presented their productions. King Lear and Henry IV had a great deal to say about social injustice, and the power of the monarchy. That trend comes to a brutal conclusion in Macbeth. Here the imagery is stark and unmistakable, the final destination of totalitarian rule. This is tyranny at its worst (and its most inescapable), so it is not surprising that the most recurring themes deal with sickness (and the need for purgation) and darkness. The latter is particularly omnipresent, with obvious connotations to an audience schooled in religious metaphors equating God and goodness to light. Night as metaphor also presents the reader with several less overt meanings, one of the more interesting being as a symbol for transition, or the period before the rise of a new day. Several applications for this metaphor exist, including the final death of feudalism at the hands of capitalism, the advance of free-form and "personal" morality over that of traditional concepts of right and wrong, and the effects that the accompanying loss of humanity bestows upon the person in transition.

good

Nice

The king of England at the time of Shakespeare's writing of Macbeth was James. It is not a coincidence then that the bard focused the ultimate play on the corruption of the monarchical style of governance on a king of Scotland, James' former seat of power. James was not a brutal tyrant himself, but he had written a book on the subject of monarchy which ultimately led to the doctrine of Continental absolutism. Outright attacks on the monarchy are not present in Macbeth, beyond the existence of Macbeth himself. What Shakespeare seems to be doing is creating an impossibly high threshold for kingly conduct in the person of Duncan, the counterpart of the "most pious Edward," king of England and an obvious allegory to James himself. As Macbeth's reign descends into murderous darkness, the audience is left to ponder which

sort of king they are most likely to find on the throne: Duncan or Macbeth? To even the least educated peasant standing in the pit, the answer was obvious. In Macbeth, the role of king ultimately falls to Malcolm, the much downtrodden son of Duncan. Malcolm thus plays a similar role to Edgar in King Lear, with Shakespeare stating again that the only kings worthy of their throne are those who have suffered much and who feel comfortable with the common man. Since no such kings exist in the real world - a fact known to all - the conclusion is inescapable about the value of their rule. *excellent*

Macbeth can only feel murderous at night. This time is characterized as evil, full of "wicked dreams"; in these times, Macbeth can "sleep no more." After the banquet, his wife tells him that he lacks "the season of all natures, sleep." This gloom is moral as well as physical (and outside of the "season of all natures," i.e., the natural state of life for man, because it is caused by a desire to supercede and obliterate human compassion). Nietzsche must have loved Macbeth. In the protagonist, we see a personification of his philosophies in Beyond Good and Evil, and the risks of dispensing with traditional morality without replacing it with something equally as firm. Throughout the play, Macbeth is transitioning from a morally troubled hero, desperate to please his wife and affirm his manhood, into an almost perfect nihilist. Macbeth seems almost pathologically fixated on overcoming mere humanity, to ascend into the realms of a new creature. These are lines almost quoted verbatim in Nietzsche's writings on the Übermensch, the superman. As the philosopher noted later, this ascent is frought with peril, with any fall leading straight into the abyss of nihilism; he understands what Mozart did when the latter wrote "Ein Mensch zu sein," or, to be truly a man is high enough aim. Macbeth himself seemed to understand some of this, when he stated *true*


I dare do all that may become a man;

Who dares do more is none.

fraught
In this quote, he was channeling Shakespeare directly, and the bard was leaving us with a potent commentary on the inherent loss of humanity when certain actions are taken. In a sense, Macbeth is a victim of his times, a period of deep transition in which no ground seemed stable. Since mankind is always living in these twilight eras, the lessons are applicable in a very permanent way. Shakespeare appears to be setting a sort of groundwork

for a secular ethics in this play, with justice being brought out of the heavenly realm into the worldly one. Macduff wonders how heaven could possibly have witnessed his family's brutal murder, and in this play it is apparent that "heaven" is becoming synonymous with man's collective will towards social good. Orthodox belief only really shows its head in the ramblings of the tipsy gatekeeper, a not-so-subtle slam on the myth of St Peter and his judgement. *good*

The lesson here is that deprived of heavenly and absolutist justice, man is confronted with two choices: descend into nihilism where anything and everything is permitted (the path that Dostoevsky believed was inevitable in his The Brothers Karamazov), or bond with others into a social web wherein our compassion for the humanity in all of us is paramount. Shakespeare gives a striking portrayal in this play about the humanity lost when the first option is taken. One of the most heart-wrenching examples of this is the loss of love between Macbeth and his wife over the course of the complication. The two started the play as a very close-knit team. They were the first couple since Brutus and Portia to have such a deep bond that they could plot murders together. She was his "dearest partner in greatness," his "dearest love." In a comment taken from Othello and Antony and Cleopatra, she was his "dearest chuck." His desire to be worthy of her masks a deep insecurity in himself that ultimately manifests in the destruction of his rivals, potential or imaginary. His evolution from thane to king to tyrant to nihilist severs this bond, to the point that when he learns of her death the only thought that can escape his lips is one of the most potent examples in literature about the meaninglessness of human existence. The line is such a classic, in fact, that if you asked the average citizen on the street to quote any line from Shakespeare, it is more likely than any other that this line will deal with walking shadows, poor players strutting about a stage, signifying nothing. Such is the reward for the man who learns to live apart from all others, Nietzsche's "man on high mountains," the "wicked archer." Given that Shakespeare was daily witnessing the first transitions from feudalism to capitalism, this lesson was pressing for him. The hallmark of capitalism is the struggle for personal wealth, personal gain, and this comes about usually at the expense of everyone else. Since capitalism ultimately wedded itself to Puritan work ethics, this pursuit of material goods became almost holy in nature,

*full of
sound and
fury*


a fact the bard foresaw when he wrote

What thou wouldst highly,

That thou wouldst holily;

a reality which still plagues modern societies. Therefore, the story of the lonely king who "supped full of horrors" is perhaps more important today than in any time before.

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excellent, as always!