# The Price of Power

## Critical Analysis on *Measure for Measure* and *Macbeth*

Nicholas Kim

May 2022

### Severing Thought from Action

In both plays, Shakespeare demonstrates the duality of man as being both capable of understanding goodness yet doomed to fail in upholding it. This characteristic of man is so fundamental in the two characters of Angelo and Macbeth that they describe their internal struggle against evil as their body and mind being in opposition with each other.

> 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.4.50-53)

Macbeth wishes for the eye, representing his conscience and the part of him which makes judgement and feels remorse, to disregard his hand's despicable murder. Likewise, Angelo, reflecting on his first interaction with the saintly Isabella, notes how his tainted mind and purpose go astray from the prayerful words of his tongue.

> Heaven hath my empty words,
> Whilst my invention, hearing not my tongue,
> Anchors on Isabel.
> (II.4.2-4)

The same truth of human nature is demonstrated in Angelo as with Macbeth, though the roles of the body and mind, the two opposing forces in each of their cases, have been swapped. This dichotomy between man's knowledge of right and wrong and his sinful nature cannot be attributed solely to either, and perhaps, by comparing Shakespeare's words across these two plays, it can be understood that man's fatal flaw transcends both body and mind. Nonetheless, it lies as the stone upon which Angelo and Macbeth stumble into the abuses of power that cannot go unpunished.

**Motives and Temptations**

The tempting of Macbeth is not first initiated by Lady Macbeth, but rather implanted within him by the witches during their encounter in Act I Scene 3 when he is promised the title of king. At this point, Macbeth is the noble Thane of Glamis and a brave warrior armed with valor. Having slaughtered the rebelling Norwegian army, and as can be inferred from how he addresses King Duncan in Act I Scene 4, Macbeth is introduced as having utmost loyalty and sworn allegiance to the throne.

> Your highness' part
> Is to receive our duties, and our duties
> Are to your throne and state children and servants,
> Which do but what they should by doing everything
> Safe toward your love and honor.
> (I.4.23-27)

Macbeth's behavior in response to the witches' prophecy, however, provides the initial insight to his deepest desires which, though having long been suppressed by reality, are only now beginning to surface. Ironically, what speaks most

of Macbeth in this scene is his silence. Suddenly, being confronted with the intrigue of promised royalty, the now-timid Macbeth can elicit no response, as Banquo points out.

> Good sir, why do you start and seem to fear
> Things that do sound so fair?
> (I.3.51-52)

It is during this moment of cautious silence when absolute power, perhaps for the first time, enters the realm of possibility for Macbeth. When he does finally speak, his inquisitiveness and desperation toward the fleeting witches show that Macbeth has fallen from high into temptation.

> Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more:
> By Finel's death I know I am Thane of Glamis,
> But how of Cawdor? The Thane of Cawdor lives,
> A prosperous gentleman; and to be king
> Stands not within the prospect of belief,
> No more than to be Cawdor.
> (I.3.70-75)

The key word in question is "How?" Macbeth, being lured by the prospect of king, wishes to know what he must do to obtain it. From here on, Macbeth is motivated by how he can not only obtain, but retain power.

> I have no spur
> To prick the sides of my intent, but only
> Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself
> And falls on th' other –
> (I.7.25-28)

There is no incentive—nothing to be gained in wielding power—which drives Macbeth toward his intent to murder other than the goal of wearing the crown. Power itself is the means and the ends.

Angelo is a man of utmost virtue whose motives lie in enforcing the law in sinful Vienna. He uses his newly appointed power as a means of upholding the law and his moral standard upon others. Whereas temptation has sparked Macbeth's bloody motivations, for Angelo, it will instead unravel his former good purposes.

> Boundless intemperance
> In nature is a tyranny. It hath been
> Th' untimely emptying of the happy throne
> And fall of many kings.
> (IV.3.66-69)

Macduff's commentary on unchecked power certainly strikes a tone with "Absolute power corrupts absolutely." It is a most fitting theme for side-by-side analysis of *Macbeth* and *Measure for Measure* as Angelo and Macbeth wield power to the severe detriment of themselves and those around them.

**The Role of Woman in the Fall of Man**

In both *Measure for Measure* and *Macbeth*, the relationships between man and woman are integral to the downfall of the tragic protagonists. Perceptions of masculinity, especially those of men who wield power, are prevalent in how Angelo and Macbeth's actions are steered and assessed by women. Lady Macbeth, loving wife to the abruptly appointed Thane of Cawdor, is manipulative and tantalizing in driving her husband toward murderous gain.

> 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.
> (I.7.47-51)

After having unsexed the compassionate qualities that makes one feminine, she tempts Macbeth by assaulting his manhood. Lady Macbeth conjures in him the image of man as daring without compromise upon one's desires and, as Coppélia Kahn describes, "untouched by pity or fear" (181). As can be seen in Macbeth's moment of greatest vulnerability, this question of what it means to be a man has dug a firm root in his psyche.

> What man dare, I dare.
> Approach thou like the rugged Russian bear,
> The armed rhinoceros, or th' Hyrcan tiger;
> Take any shape but that, and my firm nerves
> Shall never tremble.
> (III.4.100-104)

Kahn articulates the significance of the masculine self image that has taken control of Macbeth when the irreversible consequences of his daring action take the form of the ghost. Only after the apparition disappears does Macbeth become a man again.

> Macbeth's rhetoric shows how desperate he is to make himself into his wife's kind of man, if only in words, and how he lacks any confidence in his own identity as a moral being . . . He can only feel himself a man when he has repressed what is most characteristically his—his moral feelings—and conformed to the one-dimensional manliness his wife shames him into . . . (182)

Despite Isabella being vastly different from Lady Macbeth, she plays a similar role in the fall of Angelo as Lady Macbeth does her husband. Isabella is an emotional young virgin with a matured moral conviction, using eloquence and passion in her manner of speech when pleading Angelo for mercy yet quick to fiercely condemn her dear brother for prompting her to forsake her chastity. In her eyes, a man must be reserved and careful with his power, an understanding which is antithetical to Lady Macbeth's.

> O, it is excellent
> To have a giant's strength, but it is tyrannous
> To use it like a giant.
> (II.2.107-109)

From these words to the end of their confrontation in Act II Scene 2, Angelo hardly speaks another word, let alone tries to reason against her unrelenting attacks on his false virtue. Her sense, as Angelo describes, is that which he had never seen in other women.

> Never could the strumpet
> With all her double vigor, art and nature,
> Once stir my temper, but this virtuous maid
> Subdues me quite.
> (II.2.182-185)

To be subdued, as in subjugated rather than merely aroused by, gives an accurate depiction of the critical state which both Angelo and Macbeth are brought down to by the women that influence them.

**The Consequences of Threatening Corrupt Power**

More significant is that Angelo recognizes his sin, erasing that quality which had previously justified his deputization. With the Biblical themes in Measure for Measure being as overt as they are, the audience's first insight to Angelo's thoughts in monologue strikes an image of the Book of Genesis when Adam sees his own nakedness. With this scene in focus, J. M. Gregson wrote this about Angelo's moment of turmoil:

> So far in the play we have had every reason to believe the reports that he is a man of severe and unflinching rectitude: his conduct as a ruler has endorsed them. Shakespeare carefully withholds all mention of Mariana until Act III. Angelo has begun the scene with Isabella with the bearing of an ascetic monk, balancing her entry as a nun. He ends it by revealing in soliloquy the inner man, torn by dark unsuspected drives which horrify him, and which will topple his exercise of power. (123)

This realization marks a turning point in Angelo's rule now that his authority, which had been built upon his unwavering virtue, has been undermined. In the first act, The Duke attributes to him the metaphorical candlestick of the Gospels which must give its light unto others. Escalus shares his sentiment, deeming him worthy among all in Vienna. Even Lucio acknowledges his "snow broth" blood being unmoved by sexual passions. After losing the justification for his authority, Angelo completely abandons his purpose in reinstating moral behavior and instead acts upon a fear of dethronement by suppressing Isabella.

> Who will believe thee, Isabel?
> My unsoiled name, th' austereness of my life,
> My vouch against you, and my place 'i 'th state,
> Will so your accusation overweigh

That you shall stifle in your own report
And small of calumny.
(II.4.153-158)

Not only does Isabella witness Angelo's crimes and threaten to speak out against them, but she is a voice of reason for mercy which counters the deputy's unyielding fixation on punishment as a means of restoring justice. Rather than accepting his own fault, Angelo will seek to bring Isabella down with him, forcing the young maiden to choose between her brother or her chastity, one sacrificing the other and neither of which being irreprehensible. Unfortunately for Isabella, in her attempts to overcome Angelo's tyranny, she slips into the same merciless philosophy which she had deplored.

O, fie, fie, fie!
Thy sin's not accidental, but a trade;
Mercy to thee would prove itself a bawd,
'Tis best that thou diest quickly.
(III.1.147-150)

A similar symbolic juxtaposition is seen in *Macbeth* through Banquo, who undermines the foundation of Macbeth's kingship, that being not his virtue but the prophecy of the weïrd sisters. Like Angelo, who goes on to forsake the virtues of truth and purity, Macbeth will go against even his own foundation which he relies on throughout the play in a desperate attempt to retain the power supposedly promised to the seeds of Banquo.

To be thus is nothing, but to be safely thus.
Our fears in Banquo stick deep,
And in his royalty of nature reigns that

Which would be feared.
(III.1.48-51)

Furthermore, Banquo is steadfast in his goodness and guided by a wisdom which Macbeth does not possess. In Act 1 Scene 3, a stark contrast between the two warriors in their response to the three witches, diverging their paths and establishing a rivalry which even death will not part. The prophetic greetings followed by the news of his promotion are music to Macbeth's ears—"happy prologues to the swelling act of the imperial theme"—and drown out the warning from Banquo who, on the other hand, with arguably the greatest stroke of dramatic irony in the play, reveals precisely the trickery of the weïrd women while maintaining cautious composure.

But 'tis strange;
And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's
In deepest consequence.
(I.3.122-126)

The witches' promise that "none man of woman born" may harm him was certainly a betrayal of Macbeth's false security in his final duel with Macduff, but Macbeth himself will also harness these instruments to betray King Duncan and, ironically, Banquo himself.

Just as Angelo compels Isabella to lose sight of her moral authority, evil forces in Scotland are seeking to quietly undo Banquo's integrity. In the awareness of darkness encroaching, the polarity between Macbeth and Banquo is made further evident with his call on heaven to "restrain in [him] the cursèd thoughts" which the powers of evil have inflamed in his adversary whose presence quickly follows.

> If you shall cleave to my consent, when 'tis,
> It shall make honor for you.
> (II.1.26-27)

Macbeth makes a cunning attempt to win Banquo over to his side during this tense prelude to war in which the once brothers-in-arms now hold careful suspicions against each other. One may recall from Macbeth's enticing language the prompting of Isabella to "yield up [her] body to [Angelo's] will."

Shortly after taking up his imaginary dagger, Banquo takes his stand "in the great hand of God . . . against the undivulged pretense . . . of treasonous malice." Leo Kirschbaum interprets the dynamic of these characters as "figures who have chosen different sides in the struggle between Heaven and Hell" (56). He continues:

> Macbeth is the representative of the Tempter, and Banquo refuses the bait, not with polite evasiveness but with formal rejection. For there is a dichotomy both in Macbeth and in Macbeth's world as long as Banquo represents the good; from Macbeth's viewpoint, Banquo must either be absorbed or destroyed if Macbeth is to gain ease. (56)

Although Kirschbaum's interpretation of Banquo as purely symbolic goodness refuses the possibility that he succumbs to these dark forces, his final soliloquy and farewell to Macbeth at the opening of Act III suggest that Banquo has finally given in to the same temptation which led Macbeth to King Duncan's deathbed.

> Why, by the verities on thee made good,
> May they not be my oracles as well
> And set me up in hope?
> (III.1.8-10)

This cycle of power is explored extensively in *Macbeth* starting with the very first scene in which the rebellious Thane of Cawdor is overthrown, foreshadowing the seizure of power by those who follow. Malcolm, the rightful heir to the throne, certainly recognizes this cycle in his conversation with Macduff in Act IV Scene 3, admitting that though Macbeth is "smacking of every sin," he too would overbear the threats to his power as a result of desire. Banquo's susceptibility to this pattern of corruption is certainly not out of the question, as Millicent Bell affirms.

> Banquo too, after all, has received a thrilling promise of futurity from the witches, and it, too, depends for its fulfillment on the removal of Duncan and, eventually, of Macbeth himself, as Macbeth later realizes. (201)

This last interaction between the rivals, in which Banquo addresses Macbeth as king, draws sharp parallels to how Macbeth insincerely addressed the king in Act I Scene 4 followed by the uncovering of his desire to kill him. Of course, Macbeth is all too familiar with this scenario, except this time, he is the one who wears the crown, and he has no intention of sharing Duncan's fate.

> Let your highness
> Command upon me, to the which my duties
> Are with a most indissoluble tie
> Forever knit.
> (III.1.15-18)

What is discovered in both Isabella and Banquo is a bold and honorable effort to stand up against these tyrannical figures, though they inevitably descend to the same faults as the oppressor. By showing how even the most noble of adversaries of ill authority can fall, the consequences of their rule on the rest of the society in which they govern can only be even more catastrophic.

**List of Works Cited**

Gregson, J. M. *Public and Private Man in Shakespeare.* Barnes Noble Books, 1983.

Kahn, Coppélia. *Man's Estate: Masculine Identity in Shakepseare.* University of California Press, 1981.

Kirschbaum, Leo. *Character and Characterization in Shakespeare.* Washington State University Press, 1962.

Bell, Millicent. *Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism.* Yale University Press, 2002.