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Sounding and Dressing the Part: Understanding Macbeth through Language and Costume

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Abstract

Macbeth, written by William Shakespeare, is a complex tragedy driven by the relationships of its characters. While it can appear that Macbeth decides his own actions, staging of this production greatly influences the audience's perception of Macbeth as a character. Is Macbeth inherently disposed towards evil, or do the witches possess him to do these wicked deeds? In stage productions, the relationship of Macbeth to the three witches influences readings of Macbeth and his status as a sympathetic character. This paper will analyze the link between the witches and Macbeth through the relationship identifiers of verbal similarity and costume in three productions of the play and demonstrate how these two elements define the character of Macbeth for an audience. Relationships define *Macbeth* and its titular character, and it is the relationship he has with the three witches that casts the most light on his disposition. This relationship is based in Shakespeare's text and built on repetitive words and poetic devices that appear in the language of both parties. Interpretations of this relationship impact the kind of message the audience receives and the kind of performance they view, ranging from a private supernatural war to a close-to-home struggle against human nature.

Macbeth, written by William Shakespeare, is a tragedy driven by the relationships of its characters. This play revolves around Macbeth, a Scottish general under King Duncan. The action begins when he receives a prophecy from three witches who tell him that he will be king. The following action arises from Macbeth's attempts to achieve the prophecy as he murders and conspires against any that would stand between him and the throne of Scotland, including Duncan, his son Malcolm, and even Macbeth's friend Banquo. While it can appear that Macbeth decides his own actions, staging of this production greatly influences the audience's perception of Macbeth as a character. Is Macbeth inherently disposed towards evil, or do the witches possess him to do wicked deeds? In stage productions, the relationship of Macbeth to the witches influences readings of Macbeth and his status as a sympathetic character. This paper will analyze the link between the witches and Macbeth through the relationship identifiers of verbal similarity and costume in two productions of the play and attempt to demonstrate how these two elements define the character of Macbeth for an audience.

Before investigating how these identifiers appear in the individual productions, it is important to look to Shakespeare's text to understand the basis for the perceived connection of Macbeth to the witches. The witches, in giving Macbeth the prediction that he would become thane of Cawdor and then king, are the instigators of the play's main action. After receiving confirmation of his new title, Macbeth's thoughts immediately turn to murder to attain the second part of the prediction (1.3.138-149; 1.4.48-53). These thoughts and subsequent deeds are the direct result of the witches' intervention in the life of Macbeth. If supernatural forces are at work, Macbeth is placed in a position of subordination to the agency and motivations of the witches. Contrarily, if the prediction ignites Macbeth's inherent ambition, he has command of his actions and responsibility rests on him. Whether Macbeth is merely a puppet under the control of

supernatural and possibly demonic forces, fated to endure tragedy, or the creator of his own downfall determines the exigency and message of the play itself.

Verbal echoing is the evidence from the original text indicating that a link does exist and secondly, the kind of relationship Macbeth has with the witches. David L. Krantz's article "The Sounds of Supernatural Soliciting in *Macbeth*" describes the multiple instances and variations in which the language used by Macbeth is highly reminiscent of the witches' speech. Like many scholars, Krantz points to the opening speech of the witches as one of the strongest indications of a connection. As they part, the three witches intone, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair:/Hover through the fog and filthy air" (1.1.11-12). With his first entrance onto the stage two scenes later, Macbeth echoes them, saying, "So fair and foul a day I have not seen" (1.3.38). With the repetition of "fair" and "foul," Macbeth establishes an audible link between himself and the witches. Krantz argues that Macbeth could not have overheard the witches, and "Thus it is by means of verbal echo...that Shakespeare first connects Macbeth to the Weird Sisters" (346). He is not simply using the same words, but he is also employing the same poetic pattern used by the witches. This kind of language is complex, not simply paradoxical (Krantz 350). Their particular speech makes Macbeth's association with the witches overt and easily heard by the audience.

As Macbeth sinks deeper into murder and plotting to achieve and maintain the throne, his verse becomes marked with repetition, similar to the doubling and tripling of the witches when they hail Macbeth and Banquo in the third scene of the first act (Krantz 356-357). The audience would hear the repetition in the lines given by Macbeth as he frets over his decision to murder Duncan (1.7.1-9) and the lilt in his language when he resolves himself to the task (2.1.62-64). Echoing and repetition is very noticeable in Macbeth's second encounter with the witches as well.

These examples of the witches' speech patterns appearing in Macbeth's language are just a few instances in which he verbally demonstrates the growing link between the witches and himself.

In the *Macbeth* production put on by Tomahawk Theatre at Oxford Castle from July 1st to July 13th, 2013, the relationship between Macbeth and the supernatural was defined initially by the choice of casting a solitary witch instead of three. One witch, played by actress Kate Rose Comery, decreased the likelihood of hearing the echo in Macbeth's speech, since its presence is more evident when three different characters employ repetition. With the help of audio effects, the witch often spoke with an eerie repetition and echo of her own voice. This gave the witch a definite supernatural presence but precluded a clear audible association with Macbeth. Many of her lines, especially in hailing Macbeth, were sing-song or mocking in tone. Her pronouncement over Macbeth was delivered with pleasure, as if to suggest that she knew the outcome that would result from her prophecy. Her relationship to Macbeth made the following events and tragedy seem as if the witch was an arbiter of fate, and she had selected Macbeth for a personal vendetta. Her presence throughout the play, including scenes in which the witches are absent in the text, seemed to be a further indication of her individual quest for vengeance.

The witch's personal grudge defined Macbeth as a character. The action of the play became a private struggle as Macbeth, played by Craig Finlay, strove to achieve the future predicted to him. There was little sense of reluctance on his part to execute the deeds necessary to place him on the throne. Once he was availed of the prophecy, there was nothing to do but run headlong into that fate. This fateful atmosphere was confirmed by the final moments of the play with the witch as the last player to leave the stage. She departed in satisfaction carrying Macbeth's head in a bloody sack—an almost identical action to one she had performed before the play began. The vengeance was completed; the play had come full circle.

Krantz's article notes that Malcolm and Macduff, characters who play vital roles in the downfall of Macbeth, have semblances of the witches' speech patterns in their language at the end of the play, especially in the repetitive hailing of Malcolm as king. This echoing, which Krantz terms "the witches' tune," is not an indication of a relationship between Macduff or the other characters and the witches, but it may point towards a close. He states, "Since all Scotland is touched by the tune and especially since the revenging forces clearly sing it at the end, Shakespeare may be representing through the witches' stylistic signature a power inclusive of but greater than the merely demonic: a fatal or providential force" (368). Macbeth possesses an inevitable fate and, in this production, one that was ominously forecasted and grimly concluded.

The production of *Macbeth* given by the Globe Theatre in London, playing June 22nd through October 13th, 2013, presented another vision of the relationship between the protagonist and the witches, making for a dynamic presentation of the character. The language of the witches was natural, which connected it easily with Macbeth's language. Repetition was more audible in the diction and delivery of Joseph Millson as Macbeth and Moyo Akandé, Jess Murphy, and Cat Simmons as the witches. This interpretation of the witches by director Eve Best seemed much more benign. They were not overly malevolent in their line delivery, seeming to simply pass along information. In the first scene of act four when Macbeth goes to the witches, they spoke the messages of the apparitions rather than separate actors giving those lines. They shifted their tones towards more uncanny delivery in an effort to emphasize that they were just the messengers and not the originators of the predictions and warnings.

Macbeth voiced understandable emotions of frustration and confusion, especially in this second meeting. However, it is clear from his asides that he is making up his own mind. Ultimately, he decides that he has nothing to fear from the seemingly contradictory warning to

beware Macduff and the assurance that no man born of woman will kill Macbeth, despite the accuracy of their earlier predictions (4.1.71-124). Macbeth's downfall is his speed in reasoning away the counsel given to him in an effort to assuage his own uncertain position without considering the ramifications of the witches' riddles for what the future holds. Though the performance included verbal echoing between these characters, it was evident that both parties were independent of each other, creating a more realistic depiction of Macbeth.

This discussion will now turn to the identifier of costume to show how another element of performance supports and enhances the visions presented by the verbal interpretation of the relationship. Costume, according to Hollywood designer Jeffrey Kurland, is composed of "concept, character, and color" (qtd. in Nance 7). Though largely expressed through clothes, a costume design includes the hairstyle, make-up, and jewelry that create the overall appearance of the character (Nance 8). A character's costume—in essence, their stage presence—is complex and must be constructed with consideration.

The importance of costume originated on the stage of Shakespeare's day. According to Andrew Gurr, during the time when Shakespeare's plays were being performed, "Costume was an instrument of meaning as well as spectacle and color" (194). This element of stagecraft has no less of a function in modern performance, and costume designers spend great amounts time in planning and creating individual costumes. The text is a vital part of this process. This commitment towards creating costumes demonstrates the vital role costume plays in a production.

Several scholars have noted that much of a costume's power comes from its ability to give information to the audience about the locality or setting of the play, convey social status, and focus attention on important characters (Gurr 198; Nance 6). Hameed Olutoba Lawal examines the use of costume and how it enhances characterization. While his analysis is centered

on film, he draws on the work of theatre scholars looking at the function of costume on the stage to extrapolate his findings. He argues that the relationship of costuming and characterization is “symbiotic” in the way that it “enhances and embellishes the action in terms of identifying the personality... mood, and emotion” (Lawal 137). Costume has the ability to speak for characters where the text is limited or silent. This increased role of costume reveals not only individual details for a single character, but it also has the potential to reveal interpersonal information. Costume can establish character relationships (Lawal 136). How characters are presented on stage through specific features can convey how these characters relate to each other and speak to the audience in subtle or even unconscious ways.

As a visual element, the component of color is another indication of relationships and meaning. This detail was another element used by actors in Shakespeare’s time and was a “major source of stage symbolism” (Gurr 193). The use of color to suggest emotion and meaning is a familiar stage device, and many of the connotations Shakespearean audiences associated with colors are still held by modern audiences (198). In these productions of *Macbeth*, the colors red and black are highly evident and reinforce the bloody action that takes place as well as the darkness of the morality examined in the play. Taken all together, the three components of costume—concept, character, and color—shape the link between *Macbeth* and the witches.

In the production by Tomahawk Theatre, the costumes were focused around a military theme. King Duncan, Banquo, Macduff, several of the lords, and *Macbeth* were clad in variations of camouflage, black shirts, and military uniforms. Over the course of the play, *Macbeth* took on the color red. After Duncan’s assassination, *Macbeth*’s hands were stained red. While faded, the blood stains were still visible for the rest of the play. The witch, while garbed similarly in black, wore jeans and a hooded sweatshirt. This was in strong contrast to *Macbeth*

and subtly contributed to the personalized vengeance put forward in the verbal interpretation of their relationship as it placed these two characters in separate categories: military versus civilian.

This binary was another building block for the foundation of the witch's supernatural presence. Not only did she sound different from the other members of the cast, but she appeared visually different. Unlike Macbeth, clothed in military garb and the limitations that accompany those garments, the witch is free to act outside of the order enforced by the military. As such, she could be seen as an element of chaos outside the boundaries set for the human characters. She is not confined to human limitations. When Macbeth attempts to take hold of his destiny and break out of the order by pursuing the prophecy, he makes a foray into that unstructured supernatural space and is destroyed in the process.

The Globe production of *Macbeth* presented another interpretation of the relationship through costume. At the beginning of the play, the entire cast filled the stage, beating on drums. When this rousing song was completed, all of the actors left the stage, save three who began to give the lines of the witches. They were dressed in the same kinds of Renaissance garments as the other actors and did not distinguish themselves until later, when the witches shed the outer layers of their dresses to go about in linen chemises. This change of appearance separated them visually from the other characters. They associated themselves with the natural world in this action, disregarding fashion to wear only simple clothing and accessories of flowered garlands on their heads or smeared ash or clay on their faces.

This change made the witches into unusual characters, but rather than being presented as supernatural beings, they seemed to still be very much human, though choosing to go against social norms in favor of a closer connection to the earth. Like the witch of Tomahawk Theatre's production, the witches appeared in scenes in which the text does not include them, but these

instances only served to reinforce their association with nature as they imitated the martlets that Banquo remarks upon when entering Macbeth's castle (1.6.4-9), and they threw flower petals during Macbeth's coronation. In both of these occurrences, they stood in the third floor galleries among the audience, separated from the action and the actors on stage.

Macbeth was dressed in traditional Renaissance clothing. At the beginning of the play when Macbeth and Banquo make their first entrance, they wear the dirty and ragged clothes of the battlefield. Upon entering again in scene six of act one after their encounter with the witches, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are distinguished by red clothing, and Banquo and his son Fleance wear blue. This distinction was strengthened by the colors of the other characters, whose costumes also reflected their filial relations. Because of the strength of the identifying colors, the change Macbeth and Banquo undergo after their meeting with the witches seems to be a sign of Macbeth's first disconnect with his long-time friend and descent into tragedy. When Macbeth is struck by the possibilities of their prediction, he sets himself apart from Banquo in dress. Before he kills Duncan, Macbeth calls himself a friend of Banquo (2.1.11), but after he has achieved the crown, Banquo becomes his enemy (3.1.127-137).

While the use of color established interpersonal relationships, it also served to define Macbeth's downfall. As Macbeth murders, schemes, and begins to realize the emptiness of his falsely gained position, he slowly sheds his own layers, first his outer coat, then a vest. As he discards these garments, his association with the color red diminishes. When he is crowned king, he gains the gold color of Duncan, but those robes are soon discarded. In the scene when Macbeth goes to the witches for another prediction, his appearance is highly similar to theirs as he is dressed down to his linen shirt. In scene three of act five, Macbeth calls for his armor as his

kingdom begins to crumble around him (5.3.32-53), yet in the Globe production, he ultimately takes only weapons and a pair of bracers, disregarding any real protection.

In this production, costume further indicates the natural element of Macbeth's tragedy. It is his own innate ambition that leads him to kill for his gain and not any fated design. The shedding of layers to the basic, almost colorless linen is a visual that ties him to the witches, characters related to the basic nature of the world and unburdened by societal pressure to disguise themselves with fashion. Macbeth's ultimate colorlessness and lack of complicated dress is a symbol for his inherent character, the disastrously ambitious character that fashionable clothes and color hid. At the end, his association to other characters is no longer visible.

Taken together, these instances of verbal identifiers and costume serve to bring the character of Macbeth to the foreground. The culmination of both verbal and costume association puts forwards the perspective of Macbeth that the audience is meant to take. As the previous paragraphs have shown, specific details and choices allow for separate readings of the characters of *Macbeth* and their relationships to each other.

The production put on by Tomahawk Theatre presents a picture of a Macbeth at odds with supernatural forces beyond his understanding. He is committed to that fate, aroused to dark possibilities through the knowing prediction of the witch. The descent into darkness is quick, and the play ends with a murky conclusion. This production allowed small room for sympathy for Macbeth as there seemed to be no time for hesitation or the attendant emotions that would surely accompany his first black deed. He was dedicated to evil and perpetrated evil on his friends and neighbors, whether for the pleasure or purpose of the witch, whose own motivations seemed malicious. The personal nature of the relationship between Macbeth and the witch closed the

play's lessons to the audience as a whole, converting it into a tale of one man stepping beyond his position and his futile opposition to supernatural beings and fate.

The production at the Globe offered a dynamic presentation of *Macbeth*. By downplaying the supernatural aspect of the witches, Macbeth was granted agency. He made his own decisions and bore the consequences of his actions. In a way, this version of *Macbeth* makes the story more immediate to an audience. If *Macbeth*'s tragedy begins with his own ambition and spirals down through his decisions, independent of supernatural tampering or intervention, who is to say that a similar rise and fall could not happen to any member of the audience? Despite the immediacy of *Macbeth*'s tragedy, the conclusion of this production could be said to have a positive ending. Though the other production included the same words, the sense of conclusion was much more profound in this one when Malcolm takes his place as king and promises to rebuild what *Macbeth* destroyed. Rather than centering on the tragedy and being lost in a wash of uncertain emotions accompanying *Macbeth*'s death, the audience is left with the possibility of restoration, of hope.

Relationships define *Macbeth* and its titular character, and it is the relationship he has with the three witches that casts the most light on his disposition. This relationship is based in Shakespeare's text, built on repetitive words and poetic devices that appear in the language of both parties. Interpretive decisions greatly influence the reception of *Macbeth*'s character and impact the kind of message the audience receives and the kind of performance they view, ranging from a private supernatural war to a close-to-home struggle against human nature. From the results garnered by these combinations of verbal delivery and costume choices for *Macbeth* and the witches, it is obvious that the power of interpretation should be handled carefully, as it determines the exigency and message of the play for a watching audience.

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