

## *Violence and Meta-Narrative in Shakespeare's Tragedies* Caleb Wexler

...And thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges.

—Shakespeare, *The Tempest*

*Hamlet* and *Macbeth* both represent societies in upheaval following the death of a monarch. In both cases, the usurper is taken to be a singularly tyrannical ruler whose removal will return the nation to order and peace. However, the supposed tyrants of both plays are in actuality nothing more than symptomatic expressions of their underlying social conditions. By looking at how the past is represented, this paper will show that these are societies which are built upon, and maintained by, political violence. Furthermore, this essay will compare these plays with each other as well as other works in the tragic tradition to show that these plays become tragic because the characters are consumed by historic processes defined by political violence. Understanding the plays to operate in these terms makes it clear that because the rulers are treated as being a problem in and of themselves, the underlying conditions of these societies are never changed, and for this reason the plays take on a cyclical character, where the conditions at the play's end are fundamentally the same as its beginning. Consequently, we can understand these plays to be a critique of authoritarian violence and the complicity of individuals in maintaining tragic systems.

Integral to these stories is a state maintained by violence. In both plays the state is shown early in the play to be predicated on violence, and order is either maintained or restored through it. However, in each case violence creates the groundwork for more violence, so order thus obtained is only temporary. In "On Violence," Hannah Arendt makes it clear that instability is a necessary feature of violence because:

The very substance of violent action is ruled by the means-end category, whose chief characteristic, if applied to human affairs, has always been that the end is in danger of being overwhelmed by the means which it justifies and which are needed to reach it. Since the end of human action...can never be reliably predicted, the means used to achieve political goals are more often than not of greater relevance to the future world than the intended goals. (Arendt 106)

Thus, the various ends which these plays' character hope to achieve by violence are, as will be shown, less important to the outcome than the violent means, which threaten always to consume the ends.

Despite these violent conditions, action in these plays is predicated on a belief that the leader who takes power after the king's murder is not one immoral character among many, but a singularly immoral tyrant. In the case of *Hamlet*, for Hamlet to take revenge on Claudius, it is necessary that he be a tyrant, as René Girard makes clear when they write:

In order to perform revenge with conviction, you must believe in the justice of your own cause. The revenge seeker will not believe in his own cause unless he believes in the guilt of his intended victim. And the guilt of that intended victim entails in turn the innocence of that victim's victim. If the victim's victim is already a killer and if the revenge seeker reflects a little too much on the circularity of revenge, his faith in vengeance must collapse. (169)

If Claudius were no worse than Hamlet's father then vengeance wouldn't be the restoration to moral order that Hamlet needs it to be, so Claudius has to be cast as singularly evil. *Macbeth* similarly is cast as a tyrant, perhaps nowhere as clearly as in the following exchange:

MALCOLM. It is myself I mean, in whom I know  
 All the particulars of vice so grafted  
 That, when they shall be opened, black Macbeth  
 Will seem as pure as snow, and the poor state  
 Esteem him as a lamb, being compared  
 With my confineless harms.

MACDUFF. Not in the legions  
 Of horrid hell can come a devil more damned  
 In evils to top Macbeth. (*Macbeth* 4.3.50-57)

As with Hamlet, Macbeth's tyranny is necessary for Macduff to restore moral order. He must be worse than the king he usurped as well as the king that would usurp him so that his death will actually be a return to order and not just one more in a chain of killings.

In both of these cases, the moral restoration remains outside of the character's reach precisely because the tyrants are not unique villains, but are only symptomatic of the state's general condition. To explain Hamlet's reluctance towards vengeance Girard points out,

It cannot be without purpose that Shakespeare suggests the old Hamlet, the murdered king, was a murderer himself... However nasty Claudius may look, he cannot generate, as a villain, the absolute passion and dedication demanded of Hamlet. The problem with Hamlet is that he cannot forget the context. As a result, the crime by Claudius looks to him like one more link in an already long chain, and his own revenge will look like still another link, perfectly identical to all the other links. (169)

Hamlet then is aware of exactly the futility of his actions and his inability to restore a moral order through vengeance. Hamlet does eventually choose the course of vengeance, adding another link to the chain, and dooms the play to end in much the same place that it began.

Looking at the succession of rulers, we see that violence doesn't restore order, rather it imposes a cyclical structure on the plays. Let us begin with the rule of Prince Hamlet's father, Hamlet the Dane. What little we learn of the king's rule is related in the remembrances of Horatio in 1.1. He was a conqueror who expanded Denmark's rule through war, as when he killed King Fortinbras. King Hamlet was so defined by warfare in life, that in death he wears "the very armor he had on / When he the ambitious Norway combated" (1.1.59-60). Therefore the defining feature of Hamlet the Dane, and by extension the Danish state, is violence. Claudius similarly begins his rule with the murder of his brother, and later plots to have Hamlet killed in order to maintain the security of his rule. This of course sets the stage for the revenge plot, as well as the deaths of Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Laertes. Furthermore, in the bloodbath of 5.2, the means-end threat that Arendt identified comes to fruition. The supposed ends were the maintenance of political order (in Claudius's case), or the restoration of moral order (in Hamlet's case) but these are entirely subsumed by violence. The only suitable heir to this violent world is the young Fortinbras who, on his own quest for revenge, has brought his army to Denmark. This is why Hamlet, conscious of the chain of violence that defines Denmark's history, uses his dying breaths to vote for Fortinbras as the next ruler of Denmark. Thus the play ends with the essential violent structure of rule unchanged, and with another warlike ruler taking the throne.

When we consider *Macbeth* alongside *Hamlet*, we see that it functions in a very similar way, and some of the stranger elements become clear. In particular, Macduff's insistence of Macbeth's absolute evil appears inscrutable. He has not yet received the news of his family's death, so he has no personal motive against the king. Any vice of Macbeth's which we might imagine has turned Macduff against him, Malcolm promises to surpass. So why is Macduff still so insistent that

Macbeth be overthrown? It is because he is in the same position that Girard describes Hamlet as being in. In trying to understand Macduff we should bear in mind:

...the scene in which Hamlet, holding in his hands the two portraits of his father and his uncle, or pointing to them on the wall, tries to convince his mother that an enormous difference exists between the two. There would be no Hamlet ‘problem’ if the hero really believed what he says. It is also himself, therefore, that he is trying to convince. (Girard 170)

We might understand the extremity of Macduff’s conviction in the same terms. In this framing, his assertions that “Not in the legions / Of horrid hell can come a devil more damned / In evils to top Macbeth” (4.3.55-57) are to convince himself, as well as Malcolm, of the “justice of [his] own cause” (Girard 169). We see in this scene the same suppressed consciousness of vengeance’s vanity that Girard identifies in Hamlet.

Looking at *Macbeth* within the context of its succession of rulers, we see, as with *Hamlet*, a structure of authority which maintains itself by violence. Also like *Hamlet*, the structure of *Macbeth* is essentially cyclical; it begins in a place of political unrest, and ends with a looming threat of the same. At the outset of Act 1, Duncan is at war with a rebellion against his crown. Macbeth is one of the principle fighters in Duncan’s army and is celebrated as one of the most violent, as when the Captain relates that:

For brave Macbeth—well he deserves that name—  
Disdaining Fortune with his brandished steel,  
Which smoked with bloody execution,  
Like valor’s minion carved out his passage....(*Macbeth* 1.2.16-19)

From the first act we see that order in this society, as in Denmark under the elder Hamlet, is maintained through violence. Macbeth then becomes the king when he and Lady Macbeth murder Duncan. From this point Macbeth is cursed with the knowledge of the usurper, the intimate knowledge of how fragile sovereignty is and how easily another could reproduce the usurper’s own actions. It is from this position of knowledge that Macbeth becomes paranoid and recognizes that the stability of his reign relies on the murder of its prophesied threats, namely Banquo and his son—prophesied to be the progenitor of a line of kings in 1.3.68— and Macduff and his family—whom the witches warn Macbeth against in 4.1.70-72. Thus, like Duncan, Macbeth comes to rely on violence to maintain the stability of his rule. Finally, Macduff kills Macbeth and Duncan’s son Malcolm is restored to the throne. Ostensibly Scotland can now return to peace, but there remains the threat of Banquo’s son, Fleance. According to prophecy, Fleance or his heirs will take the throne of Scotland, meaning that the peace obtained by Malcolm is only temporary, and he’s destined to fall to a rebellion, just like the one which began the play.

It is worth stopping for a moment to better define what is meant when I say that the play ends where it begins. The rulers change, but the form of rule does not. In each instance is a ruler who maintains order through violence, what we might call (if loosely) authoritarian. We don’t see Fortinbras or Malcolm’s rule, but we see enough to get a sense of the kind of rulers they might be. Looking on Fortinbras’s army, Hamlet reflects:

Witness this army of such mass and charge,  
Led by a delicate and tender prince,  
Whose spirit with divine ambition puffed  
Makes mouths at the invisible event,  
Exposing what is mortal and unsure  
To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,

Even for an eggshell. (4.1.46-52)

What Hamlet admires here in Fortinbras is the kind of character with which the late king was described, that of a martial conqueror who goes to war even for the sake of “an eggshell”. Given this description, we might very well suppose that he would be the same sort of authoritarian ruler as the elder Hamlet. Like Fortinbras in Act 5, Malcolm enters the action at the head of an army, casting himself, depending on perspective, as either the avenging hero or another usurper. What, more than anything, defines his rule is the looming presence of Fleance. Any analysis of *Macbeth*'s conclusion must pay heed to this one detail because Fleance's importance cannot be overstated. It is the threat of Banquo's line which first pushes Macbeth from being an usurper to being a tyrant, which he declares when he says “...To make them kings—the seeds of Banquo kings! / Rather than so, come fate into the list, / And champion me to th'utterance!” (3.1.70-72), and this same threat looms over Malcolm's rule. It's possible that in the future Fleance seizes power from his own ambition, in which case the play's ending threatens another Macbeth. It is equally possible that Fleance's eventual rebellion will be in response to a tyrannical rule by Malcolm, in which case the play ends with the threat of another Duncan. In either case, the witches' prophecy means that Scotland has another tyrant in its future, and the play's events are simply waiting to be repeated. Both of these plays thus have the same problem. While the individuals in power may change, the leadership form remains the same, and so long as the authoritarian form remains either present or imminent, we cannot but see the play as ending where it began.

We can further understand *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* as being not only similar, but intimately related plays. In “Macbeth and the Antic Round” Orgel reflects, “Suppose we try to imagine a *Hamlet* written from Claudius' point of view, in the way that *Macbeth* is written from Macbeth's... This play would not be about politics but about how the dead do not disappear, they return to embody our crimes, so that we have to keep repeating them—just like *Macbeth*” (264). The implication of Orgel's analysis is that these plays are telling the same story from two perspectives, so what is that shared ur-narrative? I argue that it is what *Twelfth Night*'s Feste dubbed “the whirligig of time”. The whirligig of time can best be understood as history structured around sequences of self-perpetuating violence. As we see in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, these societies rely on violence and so always create the violence which eventually ruins them. In building the Danish state, Hamlet the elder sets the stage for Fortinbras the younger to invade; in seizing power through fratricide Claudius brings on Hamlet's revenge; and in preemptively attempting to eliminate rivals Macbeth creates the enemies who will later dethrone him. We can therefore understand the tyrants to be symptomatic not only of a temporary violent period in their countries, but of violence as an underlying historical condition.

Understanding the whirligig of time to be the historical condition of these plays, we might now try to position this conception within the broader tradition of tragedy. To begin with, we would be well served by understanding the textual origins of *Hamlet*. In the Norton introduction to *Hamlet*, Stephan Greenblatt points out the connection between Hamlet and the historical Danish prince Amleth. However, Greenblatt also points out the differences between Hamlet and Amleth. For example, Amleth's mother helps to kill his uncle, there's no moral questioning of vengeance, no supernatural intervention, and he is able to immediately take the throne (Greenblatt 1753). To resolve these differences in plot we might consider the parallels between *Hamlet* and *Oresteia*, a tragic trilogy consisting of *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers*, and *The Eumenides*. In *The Libation Bearers*, Orestes returns from abroad, having been informed by a supernatural entity (albeit Apollo rather than his father's ghost) that his mother murdered his father, to exact revenge on his mother, Clytemnestra, and her new husband, Aegisthus (not her husband's brother, but his cousin). In this play Orestes hesitates to avenge his father because it would

require the crime of matricide, and while he does follow through on the mission of vengeance which was dictated to him, he has to flee Athens pursued by the furies (*Oresteia*). Here we see the guilt of the mother, the moral question, the supernatural intervention, and the denial of a happy ending, all of which are critically missing from the historical account of Amleth. We can see how elements of *Hamlet*, namely the ambiguity of Gertrude's guilt, and the role of the brother, not the wife, as murderer, are midpoints between these two stories, which arise from the *The Libation Bearers* being mediated by the historical events of Amleth.

The parallels between *Hamlet* and *Oresteia* opens to us the possibility of understanding *Hamlet*—and by extension Shakespearian tragedy—in direct comparison to Greek tragedy. Greek tragedies are centered around a hero who's been caught up in forces beyond their control, often in multigenerational cycles of violence and revenge. Salman Rushdie gives an excellent account of this in the following passage:

The Greek fleet had set sail for Troy to retrieve the faithless Helen, and so the angry goddess Artemis had to be appeased so that she would allow a fair wind to blow, and so Iphigenia daughter of Agamemnon had to be sacrificed, and so her grieving mother Clytemnestra, Helen's sister, would wait until her husband returned from the war and then would murder him, and so their son Orestes would avenge his father's death by murdering his mother, and so the furies would pursue Orestes, and so on. Tragedy was the arrival of the inexorable, which might be external (a family curse) or internal (a character flaw) but in either case events would take their inescapable course. (275)

What Rushdie highlights so well here is that in the tragic cycle it's impossible to rest blame with any one character. Just as Orgel considers the consequence of framing in his analysis of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, we might consider framing in the tragic cycle Rushdie outlines. In the *Libation Bearers* the action is framed around Orestes, and Clytemnestra is cast as the villain. However, if we take the play *Agamemnon* and focus them around Clytemnestra, then she is transformed from the villain to the avenging hero, but if we go back further still we can lay blame with Athena, or with any of the previous heads of house Atreus, all the way back to its origins with Tantalus and the beginning of the family curse ("Atreus"). What Rushdie calls the inexorable manifests here as a long historical process which is ultimately perpetuated and maintained by the gods and which subsumes the individuals.

When we consider *Hamlet* in comparison with this, there are striking similarities, but also very telling differences. History presents itself in *Hamlet* as in the *Oresteia* as a long progression of wrongs and vengeance. As Orestes kills Clytemnestra for killing Agamemnon who killed Iphigenia, so does Hamlet kill Claudius for killing King Hamlet who killed Fortinbras. The crucial difference is the presence of the inexorable. In the *Oresteia* the original curse is placed on house Atreus by the gods, and Athena holds back the winds from Agamemnon's fleet until he kills Iphigenia. Ultimately the mortals in this play are at the mercy of the gods. Shakespeare is not so willing to let humanity off the hook. The supernatural inserts itself in these plays for purposes of exposition—telling Macbeth he'll be king, or telling Hamlet that his father was murdered by Claudius—but beyond that does not directly interfere in the action of the plays. The responsibility then lies ultimately with the play's characters. We therefore cannot understand it to be inexorable because it is contingent on the continued complicity of the characters. What we might call it instead is the meta-narrative, the story in which all the personal, particular stories are organized and find cohesion. Rushdie hints at this cohesion by linking each aspect causally with "and, so", and Orgel hints at its organization by demonstrating that protagonist, villain, and victim all embody each role depending on the framing of the particular story, and each particular story, with each set of framing is contained within the meta-narrative, what I have been referring

to as the whirligig of time. We can then revise Rushdie's definition of tragedy from the arrival of the inexorable to the emergence of the meta-narrative. This meta-narrative is also the ur-narrative I identified earlier as linking *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. However, meta-narrative continues only so long as the characters perpetuate it. Hamlet recognizes this. When he commits to the course of revenge he declares, "This is I, / Hamlet the Dane" (236-7). Of course "Hamlet the Dane" was the title of his father and, as prince, would not apply to him. This can therefore be read as Hamlet acknowledging that his mission to avenge his father's death requires him to reproduce the conditions of the past, to bring the whirligig of time around in its revenges.

Having come to understand the function of history in this way, we can now return to the issue of cyclicity with which we began. As I previously argued, the villains in these plays are treated as singular, violent aberrations, even though they echo the actions of the rulers before them. Now that I've explicated the underlying historical conditions, I want to return to this point and revise it to say that the tyrants do not only echo those before them, but exist as symptoms of the whole system which gave rise to them. So when Marcellus attests, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (*Hamlet* 1.40.90) we must realize that the rot goes deeper than Claudius's particular crime of murder. The tragedy begins as the result of the historical structures of violence and the prevailing forms of rule, and the tragedy reproduces itself through the failure of the characters to change either these historical patterns or the forms of rule. The would-be heroes engage in "...changing [not] the world (or the system), but only its personnel" (Arendt 123). So when Hamlet ends the tyranny of Claudius, an authoritarian society remains, ready for Fortinbras to take his place; when Macduff and Malcolm overthrow Macbeth, the world is still one driven by violence and Fleance is waiting in the wings to begin the cycle anew. As a result, the tragedy implicates all of its characters, hero and villain alike, in the maintenance of the tragic meta-narrative, and in any tragedy which sought true moral restoration, the hero would have to directly grapple with this meta-narrative.

In the final analysis, we see that *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* have at their centers the same driving historical forces, the same meta-narrative in which all the particular narratives of their characters are organized and related to one another. It is a narrative of violence, particularly political, authoritarian violence, which gives rise to specific tyrants, but is never overthrown with them because each violent reversal is just another turn in the violent cycle. Having developed this vision of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* we might, in the future, consider how the whirligig of time spins at the heart of other tragedies, as well as how works in other genres relate to similar issues of authoritarian violence—which are certainly present in Egeus's filicidal threats in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in the paranoid tyranny of Leontes in *The Winter's Tale*, and in the gulling of Malvolio in *The Twelfth Night*, from which I've borrowed the phrase "the whirligig of time", to name but a few—without descending into tragedy. We might even use these lessons from Shakespeare to contextualize how we consider the tyrants that manifest in our own political world and the extent to which we treat them either as unique villains or as more deeply symptomatic of historical processes.

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