

Getting a Head in a Warrior Culture: Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and the Problem of Identity

LYNNE M. ROBERTSON

Writing on the conclusion of *Macbeth*, William Ingram observes:

It seems inescapable that the closing events of the fifth act—Birnam Wood moving, Macbeth arming, Macduff telling of his birth, Macbeth's death, the bringing in of the head—repeat in reverse order the apparitions of the beginning of the fourth act . . . Macbeth's own head is 'armed' for the first time to our view when Seyton dresses him for combat in V, iii; the helmet, even more than the head, ought to be the same (in stage productions) as the apparition, and at this point, and not earlier, we ought to notice the resemblance. The prompt fulfilment of the other two prophecies would then leave us in little doubt about the impending fate of Macbeth's armed head.¹

Julian Mates, however, in his response to Ingram's article, surely comes closer to the crux of the matter:

All Londoners were familiar with heads atop the southern gate towers of London Bridge, the heads of those executed as traitors. Surely here we have the reason for Macbeth's death offstage, a death necessarily followed by decapitation, in order that the final view the audience had of Macbeth was not only as dead, but also, and the association must have been immediate, as traitor.²

This seems to me to be highly relevant, but I would disagree with Mates' earlier assertion that Shakespeare creates an "obviously awkward situation" by spending the "better half of the play leading to a confrontation, then [having] the murder take place offstage." What Mates dismisses as a "seeming dramaturgical lapse" is in fact more complex than he allows. In all the breadth of the Shakespearean canon, there is only one other tragic hero who dies offstage (Timon, whose death is of course of an entirely different sort), and no others who are beheaded.

What this means is that Macbeth—unlike any other Shakespearean tragic hero—is denied the right to “stage” his own death; the closest he comes to the traditional death speech which we associate with the likes of Othello, Lear, and Hamlet, is in his climactic battle with Macduff:

I will not yield,
To kiss the ground before young Malcolm’s feet
And to be baited with the rabble’s curse.
Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane,
And thou oppos’d, being of no woman born,
Yet I will try the last. Before my body
I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff;
And damn’d be him that first cries ‘Hold,
enough!’ (V.viii.27-35)³

This “intolerable . . . dislocated self,”⁴ although at this stage not literally beheaded, is in fact the culmination of a process of disembodiment that has been steadily emerging from the second act of the play onwards. After murdering Duncan, the shaken Macbeth returns to his wife who instructs him to “wash this filthy witness from your hand” (II.ii.47), and continues:

. . . If he do bleed,
I’ll gild the faces of the grooms withal,
For it must seem their guilt . . . (55-57)

The consistent “hand” imagery is continued over the next fifteen lines in the dialogue between them, and is picked up again by Lennox in the following scene:

Those of his chamber, as it seem’d had done’t.
Their hands and faces were all badg’d with blood; (II.iii.97-99)

We notice immediately that Lady Macbeth refers only to the faces of the grooms while Lennox mentions both their hands and faces. This is all the more remarkable as the term “hand” (or its plural) is mentioned five times in the previous conversation between Macbeth and his wife. The significance of this is that Lady Macbeth is here marking the initiation of a process of association through repeated imagery which will permeate the entire play and ultimately inform our reading of the closing scene where it will (having now outlived Lady Macbeth) be

echoed once again, this time by her husband in his conversation with the servant:

MACBETH The devil damn thee black, thou cream-fac'd loon!
 Where got'st thou that goose look?
 SERVANT There is ten thousand—
 MACBETH Geese, villain?
 SERVANT Soldiers, Sir.
 MACBETH Go, prick thy face, and over-red thy fear,
 Thou lily-liver'd boy. What soldiers, patch?
 Death of thy soul! Those linen cheeks of thine
 Are counsellors to fear. What soldiers, whey-face?
 SERVANT The English force, so please you.
 MACBETH Take thy face hence. (V.iii.11-19)

What this process involves is an initially inferred and ultimately explicit dichotomy between “self” and “body” which is made manifest through a code of imagery and rhetoric linking “self” as essential identity, with head (or face); and “body” with the complete absence of this. When Macbeth is beheaded therefore, he is not only—as Mates correctly argues—marked immediately as a traitor, but his essential identity is also instantaneously removed. It follows that in a warrior culture his social power is removed also. The fundamentally problematic nature of “the self” and its relation to the body in Renaissance literature has, of course, attracted the attention of numerous commentators, with critics such as Norbrook situating *Macbeth* at the centre of the debate.⁵ Belsey’s work on Renaissance tragedy is also suggestive in this context:

The quest for the truth of the self, our own and others’, endlessly fascinating, is precisely endless, since the subject of liberal humanism is a chimera, an effect of language, not its origin.⁶

From the first act onwards, *Macbeth* has been gradually establishing and developing the “clothes” and “dressing” metaphor as a means of representing the cloaking of one’s true intentions. It begins when Lady Macbeth asks her husband “Was the hope drunk / wherein you dressed yourself?” (I.vii.36) and is picked up firstly and most obviously by Macbeth himself later in the same act with the famous “False face must hide what the false heart doth know” (I.viii.81-82), and again in Macduff’s hope that “things [be] well done . . . Lest our old robes sit

easier than our new" (II.iv.39), but the metaphor can also be seen as relevant to Macbeth's famous soliloquy which immediately follows the news of his wife's death:

She should have died hereafter;
 There would have been a time for such a word.
 To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow,
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
 To the last syllable of recorded time,
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
 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.17-28)

It is at this point that the gradual process of disembodiment (which will end with Macbeth's beheading) first begins to build towards its climax. Following the strong medial caesura in line twenty three the imagery centres around the stage metaphor, for it is the opportunity to "stage" his own death which Macbeth is to be denied. "Life" may be "a poor player, / that struts and frets his hour upon the stage" with all the attendant notions this carries, but it is also, equally importantly, "a walking shadow," a disembodied figure—an undifferentiated representation of the original upon which it depends for its existence (the relationship, it is worth noting, is not symbiotic). This disembodied figure has no presence just as it has no present ("struts and frets his hour and then is heard no more"); it has, in effect, no self, just as the tale has no meaning (only sound and fury).

This process of disembodiment will of course be brought to its conclusion in the final scene when Macbeth's head is held aloft by the victorious Macduff with the pole now taking the place of his body. From the first act the play has prepared us for this through the parallel development of, firstly the cloaking of intentions metaphor, and secondly the association of these cloaked intentions (and therefore the person's true nature and identity) with the head/face:

DUNCAN Is execution done on Cawdor? Are not
 Those in commission yet return'd?

MALCOLM

My liege,

They are not yet come back. But I have spoke
 With one that saw him die; who did report
 That very frankly he confess'd his treasons,
 Implor'd your Highness pardon, and set forth
 A deep repentance. Nothing in his life
 Became him like the leaving it: he died
 As one that had been studied in his death
 To throw away the dearest thing he ow'd
 As 'twere a careless trifle.

DUNCAN

There's no art

To find the mind's construction in the face.
 He was a gentleman on whom I built
 An absolute trust. (I.iv.1-13)

Compare this with Lady Macbeth's later observation:

Your face, my thane, is as a book where men
 May read strange matters. To beguile the time,
 Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
 Your hand, your tongue; look like th'innocent flower,
 But be the serpent under't. (I.v.59-63)

Macbeth later demands reassurance that Banquo is in fact dead, and the murderers supply it with the lines: "Ay, my good lord. Safe in a ditch he bides, / With twenty trenched gashes on his head, / The least a death to nature" (III.iv.2-28) and this is picked up again in Banquo's ghost's "gory locks." When Macduff's wife enquires as to the identity of the murderers she asks: "What are these faces?" (IV.ii.770), but the most obvious foreshadowing of the events of the final scene comes in the immediately preceding act:

That will never be.

Who can impress the forest, bid the tree
 Unfix his earth-bound root? Sweet bodements, good!
 Rebellion's head rise never till the wood
 Of Birnam rise, and our high-plac'd Macbeth
 Shall live the lease of nature, pay his breath
 To time and mortal custom. Yet my heart
 Throbs to know one thing; tell me, if your art
 Can tell so much—shall Banquo's issue ever
 Reign in this kingdom? (IV.i.94-103)

The meaning of the phrase "rebellion's head" is obvious enough in its primary sense, but the verb which follows it is particularly relevant, for if Macbeth is to be the physical embodiment of rebellion, then the raising of rebellion's head (on a pole) is precisely what Macduff will enact in the final scene. There is, however, a further layer below the surface of the text, doubling back upon, and undercutting itself, for at the very moment when Macbeth is held up (literally) and displayed as what he really is (the embodiment of rebellion), he is in fact entirely disembodied (his head is on a pole). At the very moment when the cloaking of intentions metaphor is brought to a conclusion and thrown aside, the disembodiment theme rises up (in two senses: [1] like rebellion [2] on a stick, literally) and dramatically undercuts it. This is one reason why the play has been, since the first act, associating essential identity with the head and face. That Macbeth's beheading is an act bearing considerable symbolic significance is, in itself, irrefutable, but the manner in which this particular act channels into larger questions concerning violence and the State is, for the play as a whole, a more complex issue:

Generally, in Europe in the sixteenth century the development was from Feudalism to the Absolutist State . . . The reason why the State needed violence and propaganda was that the system was subject to persistent structural difficulties. *Macbeth*, like very many plays of the period, handles anxieties about the violence exercised under the aegis of Absolutist ideology.⁷

Justice must be seen to be done, the tyrant must be seen to be overthrown, and a new social order must be seen to emerge, free of the tyranny and oppression of the old. Indeed this is one of the most distinctive characteristics of Shakespearean tragedy in general. In *Macbeth*, therefore, the undercutting of one strand of imagery by the simultaneous climax of another cannot be allowed to stand in the way of this: another means must be found of achieving the effect, and this is why Macbeth is beheaded, for according to the symbolism and imagery of the drama up to this point, a person's essential identity (their essential "self") resides wholly in their face/head. Earlier in the play Lady Macduff proclaims that all traitors "must be hang'd" (IV.ii.50), but Macbeth—traitor though he undoubtedly is—is not hanged because that would not facilitate annihilation of his true "self":

Hail, King! for so thou art. Behold where stands
 Th' usurper's cursed head. The time is free.
 I see thee compass'd with thy kingdom's pearl
 That speak my salutation in their minds;
 Whose voices I desire aloud with mine—
 Hail, King of Scotland! (V.viii.54-59)

Writing on beheadings during the French Revolution, Regina Janes asks why a disembodied head should carry such social and ideological power, and finds the answer in its potential, its relevance as a signifier:

Like other detached body parts, ambulatory hands or forlorn feet, a detached head is a sign we privilege. As a sign, it can enter into a variety of discourses and its meanings will derive from the discourse(s) of which it forms a part, from the tribal to the psychoanalytic, from the developmental to the discursive. Wherever it appears, a severed head is a sign in a discourse over which that head exerts no power and no control.⁸

The discourse which Macbeth's head enters into is that of power, or more specifically, a transfer of absolute social power in a warrior culture. Virgil's *Aeneid* (II.557-58) is also quoted by Janes in support of what she terms "the prestige of the head," but this reverence for the human head can be traced back much further than Virgil. There is strong archaeological evidence which points to the presence of head-hunting in Europe during mesolithic times. A reverence for the human head and a recognition of its importance in relation to the identity of an individual has therefore been in place since before the dawn of what we would now term civilisation; it is something both primal and inherent to the human condition and as such its consistent appearance in literature through the ages should hardly surprise us. In classical drama the theatrical on-stage death of the main character is not a prerequisite for tragedy. Indeed, it is not uncommon for the tragic hero not to die at all (e.g. Philoctetes). Even here, however, where characterology can often be—at least in relation to Renaissance tragedy—of secondary significance, the same theme arises:

ELECTRA. Glorious victor, sprung of a father that brought victory from the war at Ilium, receive, Orestes, this diadem for the clusters of your hair. You return from no profitless six-lap race that you have won, but from killing your enemy, Aegisthus, who destroyed your father and mine.

Orestes enters at this point in Euripides' play bearing the head of the slain Aegisthus, whose body is carried by the following servants. Electra then crowns him with chaplets and he proceeds to offer her the head in order that her former master be her slave:

. . . expose him for the wild beasts to devour, or impale him on a high stake to be plunder for the birds, the children of the sky. He is now yours.⁹

The fact that the head in question is not that of the tragic hero, in combination with the traditionally cosmic scale of classical dramaturgy may well serve to undercut the effect somewhat, but this is still quite clearly a discourse of power. Orestes enters carrying the head, is himself crowned, then offers the head to Electra to impale it. She will then exert power over this head upon the stake (her former master) in the same way that Macduff will control his former master when he holds Macbeth's disembodied head aloft and declares the time to be free. The subtext here is not concerned so much with the acquisition of authority as with the display of authority. And so the Greek text continues:

ELECTRA. I am ashamed, yet I should like to speak—

ORESTES. What? Say it. You have nothing now to fear.

ELECTRA. I am ashamed to insult the dead for fear some ill may strike me.

The fear of the dead is placed here in a social context: "Our city is hard to please and quick to find fault," but it can, on other occasions in classical texts, take a more literal form, and is seen at its most extreme in the concept of "maschalismos"—the act of removing a dead body's hands/feet to eliminate the possibility of its somehow taking revenge upon its murderer.¹⁰

An interesting variant of this is to be found in *Beowulf*. Grendel is killed by a fatal blow which rips his arm from his shoulder. The hero subsequently—in Grendel's lair for the purpose of killing his mother—seeks out the corpse and proceeds to decapitate the lifeless body. As in the *Electra*, the head is then taken as a trophy, to play its part in the discourse of power that operates within the context of "comitatus":

Four men were needed laboriously to cart Grendel's head on a spear-shaft to the hall of gold-giving Then, by the hair, the head of Grendel, fear-some

thing, was borne into the hall where people were drinking, into the presence of the earls, and of the queen in their midst, a rare spectacle; the men stared at it.¹¹

The association of a disembodied head with the notion of spectacle is not uncommon in texts of this period. A. H. Smith defines "heafod-stoccc" as "the post on which the head of a beheaded criminal was exposed," and goes on to state that it appears frequently in O.E. charters.¹² *The Toronto Concordance*, however, lists only two occurrences, the first of which is in MS 1. Winchester College.¹³ This is the *Sawyer 470 Charter* and would therefore date the usage around 940 A.D. (Precise dating of the *Beowulf* manuscript is still disputed).

Compare this with the following quotation from *Judith* (London British Library Cotton Vitellius A xv Folio 202a-209a), which dates from approximately 1000, and we can clearly see a line of this type of imagery which can be traced from mesolithic times through classical dramaturgy, to Old English, and eventually into Renaissance art and literature:

Then the clever woman ornamented with gold directed her attentive servant-girl to unwrap the harrier's head and to display the bloody object to the citizens as proof of how she had fared in the struggle. The noble lady then spoke to the whole populace:

'Victorious heroes, leaders of the people; here you may openly gaze upon the head of that most odious heathen warrior, the dead Holofernes'¹⁴

(Relevant sections of the Deuterocanonical Books are 'Judith' Chapter 13, Verses 15 and 18, and Chapter 14, Verse 1).¹⁵

The list of such occurrences could easily be extended, but the point has surely been made; the physical disfigurement of Macbeth—the separation of head from body—which McMillan rightly points to as a "mirror of his psychic disfigurement"¹⁶ can be constructively viewed in this wider context, and Macduff's line "That way the noise is. Tyrant, show thy face" (V.vii.14) takes on even greater significance for it can reasonably be read as a synonym for 'Tyrant, show thy self.' When we continue into the following scenes this becomes yet more apparent in Macbeth's previously quoted speech: "Before my body / I throw my warlike shield" (V.viii.28-35) where "body" means just that, and in this case (according to the symbolism of the drama to this point) we must

interpret "body" as representative of an absence or lack of essential identity (i.e. self). The fact that all this immediately follows Macduff's "We'll have thee . . . Painted upon a pole" serves, of course, to underline the point. Macbeth's "self" is, in this act, almost exclusively associated with Macduff who uses only terms linked in some way to the head ("face," "pole"), and so all that remains for Macbeth himself is the "body" along with the inevitable accompaniment to this (complete absence of coherent identity).¹⁷ This is the loss or absence which Macbeth has fought desperately to prevent throughout the final act as the creeping inevitability of his fate gradually enveloped him. The witches' prophesy begins to reach fulfilment:

. . . [I] begin
 To doubt th' equivocation of the fiend
 That lies like truth. 'Fear not, till Birnam wood
 Do come to Dunsinane.' And now a wood
 Comes toward Dunsinane. (V.v.42-46)

and Macbeth responds with a bold and actively direct assertion of his own identity ("My name's Macbeth") in the face of constantly increasing odds, for the momentum is now clearly moving irretrievably in the opposite direction. And so as the incorporeal and intangible slayer of Macbeth ("What's he / That was not born of woman?") becomes the very real and present Macduff, the tragic hero—despite his best attempts at self-assertion—becomes in his own final speech a mere "body," and ultimately not even that (a head upon a pole). Macbeth then, loses not simply his head, but perhaps more importantly, his essential identity, and with it his right to die "as one that had been studied in his death"; his integrity and unity the inevitable sacrifices in order that the final speech of the play may carry the same weight as that of Shakespeare's other non-Roman tragedies.

University of Glasgow

NOTES

¹William Ingram, "'Enter Macduffe; With Macbeth's Head,'" *Theatre Notebook* 26 (1971): 75.

²Julian Mates, "Notes and Queries. Macbeth's Head," *Theatre Notebook* 28 (1974): 138.

³All Shakespeare quotations are from *Complete Works of William Shakespeare: The Alexander Text* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994).

⁴Dorothy McMillan, "Introduction to *Macbeth*," in *Complete Works of William Shakespeare: The Alexander Text* (Glasgow: HarperCollins, 1994) 1049.

⁵See David Norbrook, "Macbeth and the politics of historiography," *Politics of Discourse*, ed. Kevin Sharpe and Steven Zwicker (Berkeley: U of California P, 1987).

⁶Catherine Belsey, *The Subject of Tragedy: Identity and Difference in Renaissance Drama* (London: Methuen, 1985) 54.

⁷Alan Sinfield, "Macbeth: History, Ideology and Intellectuals," *Critical Quarterly* 28 (1986): 63, 64.

⁸Regina Janes, "Beheadings," *Death and Representation*, ed. Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1993) 250.

⁹The English translation used here, *The Plays of Euripides*, trans. Hadas and McLean (New York: The Dial Press, 1936) 323, refers to "the body," however, F. A. Paley's commentary on the Greek text clearly relates to Aegisthus' head. See "The Electra," in *Euripides, With An English Commentary*, ed. George Long and A. J. Maclean, vol. 2 (London: Whittaker and Co., 1858) 361.

¹⁰For a detailed study of the fear of the dead see Claude Lecouteux, *Fantômes et revenants aux Moyen Age* (Paris: Ed. Imago, 1986). On "maschalisimos" see G. L. Kittredge, *American Journal of Philology* 6 (1885): 151.

¹¹S. A. J. Bradley (ed.), *Anglo-Saxon Poetry* (London: Dent, 1991) 454-55.

¹²A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, English Place Name Society 25 (Cambridge: CUP, 1956) 237.

¹³Muniment Room, Cabinet 7, Drawer 2, no. 2 (s.x med.; O.S. Facs., ii, Winchester Coll. 3).

¹⁴Bradley (ed.) 500.

¹⁵"Book Of Judith," *The Holy Bible Revised Standard Version Containing the Old and New Testaments Catholic Edition*, ed. D. B. Orchard and R. C. Fuller (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1966) 445.

¹⁶McMillan 1049.

¹⁷For a detailed study of the various fates which could await the "criminal body" in the Renaissance and Reformation period see ch. 4 "Execution, Anatomy, and Infamy" in Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (London: Routledge, 1995).