Abstract

Act 4, Scene 3 of *Macbeth* introduces the political future of Scotland, establishing the personalities of Malcolm and Macduff who will be sustaining the gored state of Scotland after Macbeth's inevitable defeat. Most commentators find Malcolm's and Macduff's behaviors in this scene to be overwhelmingly positive, but my paper argues otherwise. Malcolm not only lies to Macduff, but Macduff countenances Malcolm's self-confessed vices of lust and avarice in the interests of political expediency. Moreover, there are indications that Macduff is not so distressed by the slaughter of his family as he pretends. Rosse, like Malcolm an "imperfect speaker" (1.3.70), initially lies to Macduff, saying that his family is "well" and only delivering the catastrophic news upon Macduff's repeated promptings. Just prior to the revelation, Macduff states "Humh! I guess at it" (4.3.203), a dispassionate response which undermines the credibility of his emotional outburst shortly thereafter. That someone could be so callous as not to care about the slaughter of family members finds confirmation in Act 5, where Macbeth seems unmoved by the death of his wife, and Siward, described by Malcolm in 4.3 as "a better soldier none / That Christendom gives out" (191–92), responds indifferently to his son's death in battle. Hence, the duplicity of Malcolm, Macduff, and Rosse in 4.3, which so much resembles Macbeth's elsewhere, implies that the new order in *Macbeth* may not in fact be new at all, but rather a different mask on an all-too-familiar monster.

The New World Order in 4.3 of *Macbeth*

By Gary Harrington

Act 4, Scene 3 of *Macbeth,* in which Malcolm and Macduff meet in England to orchestrate an assault upon Macbeth in Scotland, strikes many as anomalous. Frank Kermode, for example, has recently remarked upon "the long and curious lull of IV.iii . . . . [which] is rather generally, and I think correctly, thought a blemish on the play, certainly its least well-written scene."[1] By comparison with most of the play, which fairly crackles with theatrical vitality, 4.3 does seem curiously flat, and particularly so given the two absorbing and distressing scenes which precede it. Nevertheless, 4.3 is crucial in establishing the personalities of Malcolm and Macduff, who will be sustaining the gored state of Scotland after Macbeth's inevitable defeat.[2] Their behaviors in this scene, distressing at best, augur ill for their future conduct as political leaders and consequently for Scotland under their sway.

Malcolm initially may appear to represent a substantial improvement over Macbeth; indeed, he strikes some commentators as the embodiment of an ideal king. Leonard Tennenhouse, for example, asserts that in 4.3, "Shakespeare goes to great lengths to stress both the passivity and the purity of Malcolm. . . . Shakespeare thrusts Malcolm forward as the ideal patriarch."[3] H. W. Fawkner goes even further in remarking that Macduff and Malcolm, whom he describes as "the new heroes," are "nowhere more saintly and snow-white than they are in this fourth act."[4] In this same hagiographic mode, Michael Long maintains that Malcolm must ultimately "play the iconographic role of heaven-inspired saviour" and that in Act 5 "the poetry and dramatic iconography of the play's ending are so beautiful that he will in fact fulfil that role with all possible grace."[5]

Others, such as John Turner and Marvin Rosenberg, would qualify such overwhelmingly positive assessments, calling particularly into question Malcolm's enthusiasm in cataloguing the vices which he ascribes to himself, ostensibly, to test Macduff.[6] In any case, it is significant that in this scene Malcolm, for whatever putative reasons, lies to Macduff—either Malcolm's self-accusation or its recantation must be a lie. Moreover in 4.3, both Ross and Macduff are also in their own ways "imperfect speakers," to borrow that memorable phrase which Macbeth employs to describe the Weird Sisters (1.3.70).[7]

Malcolm, early in the play, speaks little: for example, upon being appointed Prince of Cumberland in 1.4, he says nothing whatsoever; his next remarks occur as asides to Donalbain, and in 4.3 his conversation with Macduff, and later Rosse, is held in private. Throughout Act 5, however, all of his comments are delivered in a public forum: indeed, his speech to the troops as future king closes the play. In this sense, then, Shakespeare charts Malcolm's development from a private speaker to one who becomes adept in the art of public political discourse.

Consequently, 4.3 is crucial in presenting Malcolm's trying out on one of the more skeptical of his countrymen his ripening verbal abilities, talents which he has presumably begun to hone in his dealings with the English court. Through most of the play Macbeth pretends to goodness to disguise his villainy, whereas Malcolm, at least according to his retraction in 4.3, confesses to evil while remaining good as a way of testing Macduff's character, using "indirections [to] find directions out," in Polonius's politic phrase (*Hamlet,* 2.1.63).

Malcolm's test, however, ultimately proves little, since he essentially has to force Macduff to condemn the objectionable behaviors which Malcolm ascribes to himself. Tellingly, Macduff countenances Malcolm's "confession" of lechery, despite what Macduff as a family man should find to be the deeply unsettling personal implications in Malcolm's declaration:

> There's no bottom, none,
> In my voluptuousness. Your wives, your daughters,
> Your matrons, and your maids could not fill up
> The cistern of my lust (4.3.60–63).

Indeed, Macduff's reaction here endorses a political hypocrisy which most would assume more appropriate to Macbeth than to these two "saints": "You may / Convey your pleasures in a spacious plenty, / And yet seem cold, the time you may so hoodwink. / We have willing dames enough . . ." (70–73). As Harry Berger, Jr., notes, "Macduff's response to Malcolm's proclamation of lust smirks with a smooth prurience that affirms the prerogatives of the privileged sex."[8] When Malcolm accuses himself of avarice, Macduff's response that, although avarice is permissible, it "sticks deeper" (85) than lust may well indicate that in this patriarchal society—or at least for Macduff—possessions have a higher value than do women.

Disturbingly, as Macduff condones these two vices, he remarks that each has led to the deaths of kings, that lust "hath been / Th' untimely emptying of the happy throne, / And fall of many kings" (68–70) and that avarice "hath been / The sword of our slain kings" (86–87); nonetheless, he encourages Malcolm to engage in both.

Malcolm probably expects Macduff to object immediately after each confession so that Malcolm could then embrace Macduff as a fellow moral paragon and so solidify his support in the upcoming war with Macbeth. When Macduff, however, excuses lust and avarice, Malcolm—presumably chafing at the bit—employs exasperated overkill in his self-indictment to ensure that Macduff will at last provide the requisite response.[9] Malcolm spews out a catalogue of depravity which would make even Macbeth blush to acknowledge as his own, insisting that he has no virtues whatsoever but instead wallows in every form of wickedness. Malcolm even goes so far as to engage in the following outrageous hyperbole: "had I power, I should / Pour the sweet milk of concord into hell, / Uproar the universal peace, confound / All unity on earth" (4.3.97–100). Macduff has little choice but to condemn this self-confessed Satan Incarnate, and his finally doing so suggests either that Macduff possesses a shred of decency or, and perhaps more likely, that he has finally caught on to Malcolm's game. Malcolm's commending Macduff's much-belated response as a "noble passion, / Child of integrity" (114–15) rings hollow.

Nonetheless, Malcolm for public relations purposes must at least pretend to admire Macduff to ensure his support. In addition to being untried in battle, Malcolm is leading an enormous English force into Scotland, and having the battle-tried Macduff on his side will lend legitimacy to Malcolm's expedition and attract Scottish defectors to his side. As Rosse remarks to Macduff in 4.3,

> Now is the time of help; your eye in Scotland
> Would create soldiers, make our women fight,
> To doff their dire distresses (186–88).

Malcolm's recantation, geared to convince Macduff of his future king's goodness, is problematic. As Rosenberg points out, Malcolm's inventory of "king-becoming graces" (4.3.91) is more appropriate to a saint than to an earthly ruler;[10] this seems particularly dangerous when Macduff in this scene refers to the easily-assassinated Duncan as a "most sainted king" (4.3.109). Certainly, the merits which Malcolm attributes to himself, such as being a virgin, do not seem particularly relevant to a future ruler of the deeply corrupt and dangerous political environment of Scotland. Ironically, given the fact that he has just been lying flagrantly to Macduff, Malcolm also insists that he is not a liar: that he "never was forsworn" (126), "At no time broke [his] faith" (128), "and delight[s] / No less in truth than life" (129–130). His claim that "My first false speaking / Was this upon myself" (130–31) presents either an infelicitous harbinger of future behavior or one more instance of an ingrained habit of lying. In any case, his remark that he is Macduff's to command (132) is more polite—or cunning—than accurate, especially in that Malcolm issues orders throughout Act 5.

Another aspect of Malcolm's campaign to win Macduff over consists of Malcolm's glorification of his English allies. Significantly enough, he mentions that he has already garnered their support in the same speech in which he "unspeak[s] [his] own detraction" (123), thus girding his ostensible moral worthiness with a solidly practical endorsement of his side's superiority in numbers. Indeed, he mentions the English troops three times in this scene, twice to Macduff directly and once to Rosse within Macduff's hearing (43-44; 190). A further exaltation of the English occurs when the Doctor describes Edward the Confessor's ability to cure "the Evil" (146).

Many commentators view this episode as a somewhat clumsy interlude intended merely to contrast "the most pious Edward" (3.6.27) with the demonic Macbeth. However, the clumsiness may well be Malcolm's rather than Shakespeare's. Malcolm invites the Doctor over, presumably with some shrewd purpose in mind. Otherwise, he would hardly allow such a crucial conference to be interrupted by anyone, and certainly not by some doctor bent on gassing about Edward's healing abilities. Perhaps the Doctor's entrance has been planned in advance by Malcolm as a calculated component of his campaign to win Macduff over, providing an opportunity to attribute divine sanction to the king, and, by extension, to the English forces who will be supporting Malcolm.[11] Malcolm's thirteen-line response to Macduff's simple question "What's the disease he means?" (146) seems excessive, particularly in that Malcolm so stridently insists upon Edward's competence as a conduit for miracles and one with a notable flair for prophecy and prayer.

Although in Holinshed both the Doctor and Rosse are absent altogether from this interview, Rosse's entry in Shakespeare is somewhat more plausible than the Doctor's: Malcolm would presumably want to hear the latest news from Scotland. Oddly, though, Malcolm does not put Rosse to any test, although earlier Malcolm had implied that he tests every visitor from Scotland, including Macduff. Moreover, Rosse has just recently been one of Macbeth's nearest associates and much closer to the tyrant than Macduff had ever been. Perhaps Malcolm has met with Rosse earlier and orchestrated Rosse's entrance to subject Macduff to another test, this one consisting of Malcolm's gauging Macduff's response to the news of his family's slaughter.

In any case, Rosse's hedging in his conversation with Macduff, while perhaps understandable at the human level, remains disquieting. Not only does his equivocation recall both the Porter's comments in 2.3 regarding equivocators and the apparitions' equivocations to Macbeth, his comment that Macduff's wife and children are "well at peace" (179) echoes Macbeth's bizarre justification of his assassination of Duncan:

> Better be with the dead,
> Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace . . . .
> Duncan is in his grave,
> After life's fitful fever he sleeps well.
> Treason has done his worst; nor steel, nor poison,
> Malice domestic, foreign levy, nothing,
> Can touch him further (3.2.19–20, 22–26).

Rosse's reason for equivocating is also troubling; along with more humane considerations, he fears Macduff's temper: "Let not your ears despise my tongue forever" (201).

Macduff, however, seems to most readers not to warrant such mistrust. For example, Terry Eagleton feels "Malcolm's 'man' is the patriarchal stereotype of courage and emotional control; Macduff himself appeals beyond this ideology of gender to the common humanity which cuts below it, to the level of shared compassion where differences of gender are not finally very important."[12] And Eugene M. Waith maintains that "When Malcolm accuses himself of all Macbeth's sins, Macduff demonstrates his 'truth and honor' by his horrified rejection of Malcolm, and thus reveals the moral qualifications of 'true' manhood."[13]

Macduff's multiple missed opportunities to prove his ethical worth in his conversation with Malcolm, however, counter such assessments, as does Macduff's having left his wife and children. Holinshed's Malcolm never raises the issue of why Macduff abandons his family in Scotland; Shakespeare does, however, and the playwright's purpose in highlighting the matter clearly challenges the sincerity of Macduff's putative concern for his family. Not only do Lady Macduff's comments in 4.2 gravitate almost entirely around this issue, but in 4.3 Malcolm asks Macduff point blank,

> Why in that rawness left you wife and child,
> Those precious motives, those strong knots of love,
> Without leave-taking? (26-28).[14]

Significantly, Macduff never responds directly to this question, instead indulging in bombast beginning "Bleed, bleed, poor country" (32). As Berger notes, in 4.2 and 4.3, "the male flight from vulnerability, and from what Malcolm calls 'those strong knots of love,' is disturbingly actualized in Macduff's precipitate flight from his wife and child. He dodges Malcolm's question about this with an evasive allegorizing apostrophe that generalizes and displaces it to 'Great tyranny' and Malcolm's pusillanimous 'goodness'" (70).

Macduff then threatens to leave, a ploy guaranteed to prompt Malcolm to change the subject, which he immediately does, begging Macduff, "Be not offended" (37). In Holinshed, "Macduff apparently knows of his wife's death before he approaches Malcolm."[15] Ostensibly, Shakespeare's Macduff remains unaware of the catastrophe which has befallen his family; however, his rather gruff "Humh! I guess at it" (203) as Rosse is working up to telling him of the slaughter raises the issue of the sincerity of Macduff's rather histrionic display of grief upon learning shortly thereafter of his family's fate. It is possible that he did not assume at the time he fled that Macbeth's bloodlust extended to women and children, but Rosse's remark to Lady Macduff in 4.2 that her husband "best knows / The fits of the season" (16–17) might be seen to imply otherwise, especially since the word "fit" is associated with Macbeth himself previously (3.4.20; 3.4.54).

Janet Adelman and others have emphasized the extent to which the warrior ethos in *Macbeth* depends upon the male's distancing himself from female attachments, and Macduff's leaving his wife and children behind may well be seen to partake of this pattern, whether consciously or not.[16] Immediately after Macduff receives the news "Your castle is surprised; your wife, and babes, / Savagely slaughter'd" (204–05), he says nothing but rather pulls his hat down over his brows. This has typically been received as a sign of his enormous grief. Rosenberg maintains that "To hide the trauma and its accompanying tears, Shakespeare makes the stoical Macduff shield his face with his hat, in sorrow too deep, too private for words"; likewise, Long feels that "When Macduff hears of his family's fate, it is overwhelmingly affecting as an individual human drama . . . . [Macduff] pulls his hat upon his brows in an ordinary gesture of inconsolable heart-break."[17] However "ordinary" such an action might seem to be, it is significant that Macduff in fact hides his response from his countrymen, and in doing so may be disguising the fact that he has *not* been deeply affected by the news. In *Julius Caesar,* Brutus complains about the conspirators' disguising their true intentions by pulling their hats down to hide their faces (2.1.73-79), and in *The Merchant of Venice* the religious hypocrite Gratiano promises Bassanio, "If I do not put on a sober habit . . . Nay more, while grace is saying hood mine eyes/ Thus with my hat and sigh and say amen . . . never trust me more" (2.2.190–197). While the very idea of not being affected by the death of one's wife and son seems monstrous, precisely such a situation occurs in Act 5 when Macbeth seems completely unaffected by the death of his wife—"She should have died hereafter" (5.5.17)—and Siward could not care less about the death of his son, just so long as he had "his hurts before" (5.9.12).

Conversely, the false expression of emotion over the death of a family member arises elsewhere in *Macbeth.* As Malcolm notes just after he has been informed of his father's death, "To show an unfelt sorrow is an office/ Which the false man does easy" (2.3.136–37). In Act 2, Macbeth pretends to be stricken over the death of Duncan, who not only is presented metaphorically as Macbeth's father, but is in fact related to him by blood. And just as Macbeth overacts his part in that scene, Macduff's expression of sorrow in 4.3 seems to partake more of theatrics than of genuine sentiment. If so, much irony accrues to the fact that the first time a character literally masks his features in this play which so frequently insists on the unreliability of appearances, he ends up deceiving both his onstage auditors and, as suggested by the overwhelmingly sympathetic critical response to Macduff's display, the audience.

Virtually all readers of *Macbeth* assume that Macduff pulls his hat down to hide his tears. But Malcolm, suspicious of Macduff from the start of the scene, rather cagily insists that Macduff lift his hat immediately after he pulls it down, presumably to discover whether Macduff is in fact crying. Contrary to perceived notions, the dialogue indicates that Macduff has been caught out, that he has not actually been weeping, and has probably pulled down his hat to give himself time to conjure up some crocodile tears. As a cover when Malcolm circumvents this ploy, Macduff stridently if unconvincingly attempts to excuse himself for not crying by remarking, "Oh I could play the woman with mine eyes, / And braggart with my tongue!" (230–31), thereby implying that his lack of feeling is instead valiant stoicism. However, the theatrical metaphor involved in the word "play" suggests, as so often elsewhere in Shakespeare,[18] that the onstage figure is himself quite selfconsciously playing a role, and that only by that means could Macduff generate the tears which would be appropriate to his situation. Also, insofar as the pronoun in that much-disputed line, "He has no children" (216) refers to Macbeth, the line might reflect Macduff's desire to kill a child for a child; this comment, after all, immediately follows and is at least potentially in response to Malcolm's "Let's make us medicines of our great revenge/ To cure this deadly grief" (215–216).

Significantly, when the scene opens, Malcolm is very palpably acting the role of the grief-stricken soul, and Macduff attempts to rouse him to action. As the scene ends, the situation is reversed, with Malcolm exhorting the apparently shattered Macduff to action. By analogy, then, Malcolm's feigned sorrow at the beginning of the scene might well be mirrored by Macduff's at the scene's end. Similar to Malcolm earlier, Macduff here speaks his own detraction: "Sinful Macduff, / They were all struck for thee! Naught that I am, / Not for their own demerits, but for mine, / Fell slaughter on their souls" (224–27). Yet as Berger notes, "Macduff laments his loss, and his responsibility for it, in the Christian language of the cosmic morality play. . . . These terms again avoid the real issue: 'He is not,' as the Arden editor observes, 'blaming himself for his flight from Scotland, but for his sinful nature.'"[19]

The genuineness of Macduff's self-debasement in general might be doubted when taking into account that Malcolm's doing so early in the scene was not only fraudulent but also part of his larger plan to win Macduff over to his side; similarly, Macduff may well be putting on a show to convince Malcolm and Rosse of his essential humanity. Moreover, while Macduff seems to accept primary responsibility for the disaster, he also lays part of the blame on God, saying "Did Heaven look on, / And would not take their part?" (223–24), and another part on circumstance: "And I *must* be from thence!" (212, my emphasis). In context, the "must" in that exclamation seems not to carry the force which Macduff would impute to it—why *must* he be away? Or if he *must* be away, why did he not take his family with him? Both of these issues are central to 4.2 and should influence our estimation of Macduff in 4.3, and while an answer may perhaps be devised, neither here nor elsewhere does Macduff provide one.

After Macduff takes revenge, his entering the stage carrying Macbeth's head clearly recalls Macbeth's own behavior in Act 1, and so the prospect emerges of one Macbeth being replaced by another. Likewise, Malcolm's rewarding Macduff for slaying a traitor recalls Duncan's having done the same for Macbeth. These and other "mirroring moments" in which Act 5 replicates Act 1 suggest that despite the horror and slaughter in *Macbeth,* not much has genuinely changed. Hence, and especially in combination with the mendacity of both Malcolm and Macduff in 4.3, it seems that the New Order of Scotland may not in fact be new at all, but simply a different mask on an all-too-familiar monster.

Notes

1. Frank Kermode, *Shakespeare's Languages* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2000), 214. See also, for example, Michael Long, *Macbeth* (New York:

Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), 100, and Marvin Rosenberg's summary of the negative perspectives on the scene in *The Masks of Macbeth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 543.

2. *Narrative and Dramatic Sources of Shakespeare,* ed. Geoffrey Bullough, Vol. VII (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), 450.

3. Leonard Tennenhouse, *Power on Display: The Politics of Shakespeare's Genres* (New York: Methuen, 1986), 130-131.

4. H. W. Fawkner, *Deconstructing "Macbeth": The Hyperontological View* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), 148. It should also be noted, however, that Fawkner maintains that even the three principal characters in 4.3 are ultimately tainted.

5. Long, 101.

6. John Turner, *Macbeth* (Buckingham, Philadelphia: Open University Press, 1992), 110. Rosenberg remarks that "Malcolm is even now engaged in highly skilled 'leasings' and could hardly deny later that he was inexperienced in all the vices he had so convincingly enumerated" (548).

7. All quotations in this essay from *Macbeth* and other Shakespeare plays are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare,* second edition, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

8. Harry Berger, Jr., "Text Against Performance in Shakespeare: The Example of *Macbeth.*" In *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance.* Ed. Stephen Greenblatt (Norman, Oklahoma: Pilgrim, 1982), 70.

9. As Rosenberg notes, "The Malcolm-actor may feel that the design by now includes a justifiable suspicion at Macduff's readiness to accept so vicious a claimant to the throne; how can he paint himself any blacker? A sense of almost desperation may be felt to gather in him" (548). Rosenberg attempts, however, to redeem Macduff's countenancing Malcolm's first two "confessions" by maintaining that in Macduff's finally rejecting Malcolm as potential king, Macduff "may be seen to release the suppressed revulsion evoked by Malcolm's first-and-second-step 'confessions'" (550).

10. Rosenberg, 548; he goes on to suggest that the "virginal picture [Malcolm] projects is itself as extreme as the earlier corrupt one" (550).

11. See also Turner, who says, "is not Malcolm, in talking to the court doctor, trying to persuade Macduff of his credentials as a ruler, his success in forging an alliance with England . . . ?" (109).

12. Terry Eagleton, *William Shakespeare* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 100.

13. Eugene M. Waith, "Manhood and Valor in *Macbeth,*" *Twentieth Century Interpretations of "Macbeth,"* ed. Terence Hawkes (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1977), 65.

14. It is interesting that Malcolm only asks Macduff why he departed without "leave-taking," although the implied question may be why Macduff left them—or left them behind—at all.

15. Bullough, 450.

16. See Janet Adelman, "'Born of Woman': Fantasies of Maternal Power in *Macbeth*," in *Cannibals, Witches, and Divorce: Estranging the Renaissance*, ed. Marjorie Garber (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 90-121. She says of Macduff, "we discover dramatically that Macduff has a family only when we hear that he has abandoned it. Dramatically and psychologically, he takes on full masculine power only as he loses his family and becomes energized by the loss . . ." (108). See also Richard P. Wheeler, *Shakespeare's Development and the Problem Comedies: Turn and Counter-Turn*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981,who asserts that "the play expresses a deep fear of women as transgressors of masculine autonomy and power grounded in the patriarchal order" (147).

17. Long, 102-103; Rosenberg, 553.

18. A similar circumstance occurs in *2 Henry IV*, in which Northumberland uses a number of theatrical metaphors to describe his grief at his son Hotspur's death and to vow revenge upon those responsible (1.1.155-60). Northumberland's "grief," like Macduff's, is also of questionable sincerity, especially in that he, too, has abandoned his son in seeking safety for himself.

19. Berger, 70.

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