The Existential Macbeth
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English 499
Dr. William T. Listen
May 8, 1972
Introduction

William Shakespeare's characterization of Macbeth convincingly demonstrates a man struggling within an existential plight. This is not to say, however, that Shakespeare is an existentialist. Shakespeare's universality arises from an apparent lack of a systematized ideology. Rather than represent his, or any, general life theory, Shakespeare's subjects merely represent themselves. This quality allows each successive generation of critics to appraise, by its own standards, each Shakespearean production. It is, therefore, inaccurate to call Shakespeare an existentialist. We may, however, legitimately interpret Shakespeare's characterization of Macbeth in existential terms, since the character represents, not the Elizabethan author, but Macbeth—a man defined by his own actions.
The Existential Macbeth

Part I: Defining Existentialism

An existential interpretation of Macbeth's character clearly breaks with the universally established Elizabethan view of life which asserts that man is part of a divine order, and that any violation of the order, socially or ethically, will bring down divine punishment on the offender. Such a theory does not enter into Macbeth's life at all. His view of life surprisingly agrees with the more modern existential view of life.

In comparison with the divine order theory, existential philosophy maintains that each individual, as a man, is condemned to make choices based on his subjective and isolated experiences, rather than on any abstract rule set forth by society. Fyodor Dostoevsky, the Russian writer often included among the early existentialists, believes that man is trapped between will—the drive motivating a desire for things he may even know to be evil or reprehensible—and reason, that faculty which occasionally controls his will but that can never really "command the chaos of existence."¹ Man is in an existential trap.

Each choice, whether for good or evil, that an individual makes brings to him a clearer perception of the man that he is and a greater awareness of his inner self. A basic existential premise is that actions rather than thoughts define the individual. A man is what he does. Therefore, any man faced with the agony of a decisive choice often awakens a terrifying fear within himself, for this choice affects his entire life—and can never be recalled. The weight of this choice-making, when applied to the universal code of ethics, is described by Søren Kierkegaard, a writer whose works express Christian existential beliefs. Kierkegaard states,

Where then as an abstract rule it [the ethic or society's moral beliefs] commands something that goes against my deepest self (but it has to be my deepest self, and herein the fear and trembling of the choice reside), then I feel compelled . . . to transcend that rule. I am compelled to make an exception because I myself am an exception; that is, a concrete being whose existence can never be completely subsumed under any universal or even system of universals.²

Choice-making is the lonely and solitary responsibility that each man must do for himself. The lone individual decides his own fate with each choice he makes.

Although man makes his choices privately, the modern Existential philosopher, Jaspers, believes that an individual does not become human by himself. Self-being is real only in communication with other people. In every form of his being, man is related to something other than himself: "as a being to his world, as consciousness to objects, as spirit to the idea of whatever constitutes totality."³ In an existential world a fragile


and wavering line is all that separates a man's happily contained self and his newly discovered self, so consciously aware of the fragility of human life, that he becomes alienated from the surrounding world. Alienation begins when the individual excludes the world around him and, in a deep breeding about himself and his choice, loses his humanity.

An awareness of death speeds the loss of humanity, as it gradually separates the man from the world around him. The impending threat deepens a man's desire to search within himself for the answers to the questions "who am I?" and "of what value is life?" William Barrett confirms this existential view in his book _Irrational Man_. He explains that the reality of death returns man to the absolute solitude of his own individual self. One positive factor arises from the presence of death, however, and that is that it reveals one truth, even though the content of the revelation is chiefly the pointlessness in the way the man has lived. (p. 144).

As a man's preoccupation with death increases so does he become increasingly self-conscious and self-centered—so much so, that even death seems meaningless in comparison with his own life. Both Jaspers and Kierkegaard agree on this point. Jaspers says that if a man "makes himself the immediate object of his efforts he is on his last and perilous path"; for it is likely that he will lose contact with the world and then no longer find meaning in himself. To this Kierkegaard adds that a man who "chooses himself and his life, resolutely and consciously in the face of death that will come," deliberately makes the choice that is "a piece of finite paths in the face of the vast nothingness stretching before and after his life." A man negating meaning in both life and death,

4"Existenzphilosophie," in Kaufmann, p. 141.

5As quoted in Barrett, pp. 164-165.
who is centered in himself, alienated from his personal world, and who yet chooses life, does so for only one reason, the "will to power."

Nietzsche, the anti-Christian Existential philosopher, believes that the strongest will of life lies not in the struggle to exist, but in the "will to power." Nietzsche's theory reveals a new hardship for the individual. Any man must choose; bound to himself alone, the man chooses life and power, only to find that no matter how far the power is extended, power for power's sake leaves always the threat of the void beyond.

Bleak is the existential view of life. In its terms man is defined as an unfortunate being forced to make choices, which bring him good or evil, based upon his uniquely individual and subjective experiences. He alone feels the fear, anxiety, guilt, dread and anguish brought on by the choice. The intensity of the individual's feelings gradually leads him to alienation and estrangement from the world around him. Sensing the fragility and finitude of human life and the threat of nihility, while simultaneously feeling the solitary and unsheltered condition of his life, leaves man little, if any, reassurance of his own existence. He is left to face a meaningless death with only his superficial power as a shield.

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6As found in Barrett, p. 198.
Part II: Macbeth: Lost in the Existential Plight

Although created by the Elizabethan Shakespeare, the character Macbeth remarkably defines himself by patterns astonishingly similar to those of the existentialists. Macbeth's individual actions reveal the unique and isolated manner of his existence and uncover the nothingness in his life. During the movement of the play he gradually loses himself to the existential plight, as he severs his ties with humanity and alienates himself from the world around him. This alienation finally destroys Macbeth and sets him adrift in the existential dilemma. It is, however, not until near the play's conclusion that Macbeth finally admits that he can never recall the self-isolating choices he makes. The lonely world in which he lives is unalterable.

The isolated responses of an individual during choice-making coupled with the comparative differences in reaction to the same external experience by two people is elemental to existentialism, which stresses that each choice and experience is subjective and unique. These ideas are also elemental factors in the study of Macbeth's character. Early in the play, Macbeth and his comrade, Banque, meet the three witches while traveling together. The men hear exactly the same prophecies, yet each responds in a totally unique way when part of the prophecy (that Macbeth is to be appointed Thane of Cawder) becomes fact. Banque reacts with doubt and wonder to the prophecy that he will beget kings, while Macbeth encounters his first thoughts concerning the decision to murder Duncan. The thoughts are painful, for the decision will drastically affect the rest of his life.

The decisive quality of the thoughts brings about Macbeth's first
encounter with himself and starts him on the road to alienation from humanity. When the Macbeth of good reputation meets the Macbeth who could kill a king the turmoil inside himself intensifies. He is not yet ready to face the choice he will make when he says,

Present fears
Are less than horrible imaginings.
My thoughts, whose murder yet is but a fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smothered in surmise." (I.iii.137-141)

Macbeth is also saying at the same time through the expression "my single state of man," that he recognizes the beginnings of the isolation in his world.

Macbeth's anxiety about the choice to kill or not to kill Duncan intensifies when Macbeth returns to Inverness and speaks with Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth preds Macbeth to accept the choice he soon will carry out, even though he knows it to be evil and reprehensible. The choice to kill Duncan, however, is still Macbeth's alone--made on personal responsibility. He chooses consciously and resolutely to murder Duncan himself. He says,

I am settled, and bend up
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat. (I.vii.79-80)

Following this statement Macbeth begins a series of acts and choices leading eventually to his downfall. With each personal act his self-perception, including an increased self-awareness of his alienation from his world, becomes more clear and more terrifying. Following the first choice, the murder of Duncan and his servants, Macbeth cries out from within himself, "To know my deed, 'twere best not know myself." (II.ii.72).

Macbeth wishes to deny himself the knowledge of his completely developed choices, although he realizes the impossibility of such a wish. The seeds of ambiguity in his own existence deeply implanted here continue to grow and to plague Macbeth.

In complete accordance with existentialism, Macbeth, humanly incapable of denying himself, faces the lonely and horrifying reality of the man he has become. His life reflects the fear prompting an earlier, but denied, wish that past actions might be forgotten—never to be rediscovered. Before the murder of Duncan he thought that,

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly . . . that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all--; here,
But here upon this bank and sheaf of time,
We'll jump the life to come. (I.vii.1-7)

But Macbeth's escape from his own thoughts and actions is not to be. Kierkegaard has said, "We bind ourselves to ourselves for a lifetime."\(^8\) This is what Macbeth also discovers. He is left inescapably alone with himself. Macbeth must accept the result of his choice even though in doing, he finds himself more terrifying and more of a stranger than two commanders of enemy armies meeting for the first time. Such is the intensity of the isolated and lonely battle within Macbeth.

Macbeth's personal guilt and agony continue to alienate him from his surrounding world. He withdraws into himself, becomes increasingly self-centered and self-conscious. Early in Macbeth, he is seen in conversational groupings with King Duncan, with Banquo and in intimate conversation with his wife. Following the murder of Duncan, however, Macbeth's extreme fear and guilt feelings gradually alienate him from God, from the people and from other natural things in the world immediately

\(^8\) As quoted in Barrett, p. 165.
Macbeth's intense guilt feelings, combined with an overpowering sense of the aloneness in his actions and the consequences of his actions, bring Macbeth to believe that even God has forsaken him. Macbeth recognizes that his decision to murder Duncan, and the lonely execution of that choice, isolates him from God. Immediately following the murder of Duncan he implies to Lady Macbeth that no God exists for him. Despairingly remorseful Macbeth cries,

But wherefore could not I pronounce "amen"? I had most need of blessing, and "amen" Stuck in my throat. (II.ii.30-32)

Only when used as a common expression of courtesy to others (and never in direct reference to himself) will Macbeth again refer to God in the play. Macbeth's private world (as all existential worlds are private) is void of God. He carries out Kierkegaard's belief that we alone "summon good or bad into existence for ourselves." Macbeth personally estranges himself from God as he will gradually alienate himself from nature, his wife and other men.

His alienation from Banquo roots from a sense of distrust and greed growing undeniably stronger within Macbeth. Once men of equal rank and honor, Macbeth unscrupulously gains power and rank over Banquo. Macbeth's friend and companion, at the first meeting of the witches, becomes Macbeth's immediate, though unsuspecting, enemy following Duncan's murder. In the first scene of Act II, Macbeth fears that Banquo either knows or suspects too much about Macbeth's actually extra-legal ascendency to Scotland's throne. When Banquo recalls to Macbeth the

9Quoted from Barrett, p. 165.
prophecy of the weird sisters Macbeth chooses to isolate himself and his thoughts, as a protective device, from his onetime comrade. Fearing discovery and too greedy to share the throne, as the weird sisters predict, with Banquo's heirs, the deceptive Macbeth plots the murders of both Banquo and Banquo's son, Fleance. These new schemes break yet another bond with mankind for Macbeth. He becomes consciously more alone with each act he pursues and choice that he makes.

A short time before Macbeth attends to the details of Banquo's murder he makes a statement, concerning the banquet, which unknowingly also describes the reality of his own isolation from others. He says before meeting the hired murderers,

Let every man be master of his time

... To make society

The sweeter welcome, we will keep ourself

Till supper time alone. (III.i.40-43)

And alone he is. Macbeth soon chooses and is aware of his isolation. These lines unconsciously imply the privacy of his chosen actions—not even to Lady Macbeth does he reveal the plot to murder Banquo.

Independently choosing to exclude Lady Macbeth from his actions, Macbeth isolates yet another being from his intimate world. Although they are married and are considered a unit, each exists separately as befits the existential philosophy. Macbeth, steadily growing more aware of the existential plight within him, consciously excludes his Lady. Macbeth's self-knowledge compels his alienation. The knowledge is so intensely personal and subjective that he cannot share it. By Act III, Macbeth completely isolates himself into a world of madness brought on by intense feelings of guilt. Macbeth is entirely alone in his mental anguish when he sees Banquo's ghost at the people-crowded banquet. Not even Lady Macbeth breaks into his isolation, although she tries. It is an individual fight with the hostile environment of his own mind. Only
he can oppose, yet never defeat, its existential tyranny.

Macbeth, however, does not suddenly recognize his existential state following Duncan's death and other subsequent actions; rather, it is because of Macbeth's gradually developing self-conscious awareness of his plight that he personally drives forward his lonely destination to complete existential isolation. Instances revealing Macbeth's existential awareness appear early in the play. These include his noticing nature's estrangement from him and the tormenting and unceasing battle against images created within his own mind. Macbeth is entirely alone when he hallucinates the blood-dripping dagger before the murder of Duncan. Only he feels the intense mental torture created by the vision. In the same scene (II.1) he recognizes that his evil choice to murder also destroys a protective nature for him. Nature is no longer an ally or source of protection for the man that he has become. He mourns, both for Duncan and himself, both literally and figuratively, when he says,

Now o'er the one half world [his world]
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtained sleep. (II.1.49-51)

Macbeth is once again describing his own alienated plight. By the end of the third act Macbeth, with naught to blame except his own free will and "vaulting ambition" faces his plight entirely alone.

Macbeth grows steadily more conscious of, repulsed by, and yet impelled by, the man that he cannot deny is himself. This growing self-knowledge curtails nothing, as he sinks deeper and deeper into the inescapable and lonely existential plight. He is unfortunately become what the existentialists call a "man of perception." Jaspers wrote the following about the perceptive man,

If he makes himself the immediate object of his efforts he is on his last and perilous path; for it is possible
that in doing so he will lose the Being of the other [that is, lose his ties with humanity] and then no longer find anything in himself. If man wants to grasp himself directly, he ceases to understand himself, to know who he is and what he should do.¹⁰

Such a man is Macbeth. He consciously begins his intensified self-awareness early in the play. From the first act Macbeth recognizes that each choice he makes is intended to benefit himself alone.

I have no spur
To prick the sides of my intent, but only
Vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself
And falls on th' other-- (I.vii.25-28)

From this time Macbeth knowingly becomes the immediate object of all his attentions. He is also becoming increasingly alienated from others because of this. He focuses all thoughts on "who am I?" only to confuse himself mere, and fall deeper into existential despair. One of Kierkegaard's general principles is that despair is never finally over the external object, but over ourselves. Macbeth pursues such a path as he continually gains his bewildering and isolating self-knowledge. In gaining this knowledge, Macbeth recognizes himself as deceiver. "False face must hide what the false heart doth know" (I.vii.82). He later questions who he really is, believing, yet not daring to believe, that he is a murderer. Puzzled and almost non-acceptant of himself, he notes,

"Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawder
Shall sleep no more, Macbeth shall sleep no more."
(II.ii.41-42)

Macbeth credits this speech to a supernatural voice. It is easier to believe, however, that the voice came from within Macbeth. He is like Sartre's Pable Ibbieta who says, "I represented this true, but bad situation to myself as if I had been someone else."¹¹ The confused Macbeth knows

¹⁰"Existenzphilosophie," in Kaufmann, p. 141.

¹¹"The Wall," in Kaufmann, p. 239.
and yet does not want to know himself. To blame his fears on the mysterious momentarily delays the anxieties arising from the question "who am I?"

The self-revealed truth that he is of no significance is finally accepted, although unwillingly, by Macbeth. He acknowledges the finitude of his actions in determining his life. Any choice he makes is unalterable. He knows that he cannot go back. Macbeth acknowledges that,

I am in blood
Stepped in so far that should I wane no more,
Returning were as tedious as go e'er. (III.iv.136-138)

Macbeth is his own witness, jury and executioner. He strips away any self-delusions when he admits,

My strange and self-abuse
Is the initiate fear that wants hard use.
We are but young in deed. (III.iv.142-145)

Macbeth does know himself quite well and knows he will never return to innocence. He really feels very much like a minor character describes him. Discussing Macbeth, Menteith says,

All that is within him does condemn
Itself for being there. (V.ii.24-25)

Macbeth indeed wishes he did not know himself. Peace of mind is found in not knowing himself; however, Macbeth will find no peace.

Macbeth's self-knowledge and concern lead him immediately to a preoccupation with death. Unalterable acts he committed led to the deaths of two good men and the beginning of his isolation. Following the murder of Duncan he laments,

Had I but died an hour before this chance,
I had lived a blessed time. (II.iii.87-88)

Death at this time would be an easy escape from his unhappy existence. This, however, is not to be for Macbeth, and his self-torture continues.

Having sent the hired murderers to kill Banquo, he once again considers death as a possible escape,
Better be with the dead,
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy.  (III.ii.19-22)

But Macbeth speaks empty words. In reality death is as meaningless to him as life will come to be. It is almost as if Macbeth knew this when he spoke the following lines. He, ironically, chooses the word "mortality" to mean life; however, the word also can be used to mean death.

There's nothing serious in mortality:
All is but toys. Renown and grace is dead,
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees
Is left this vault to brag of.  (II.iii.88-92)

To Macbeth death and life are vast nothingnesses, voids to be faced at their proper times. Actual thoughts of death that later enter Macbeth's mind occur because he thinks of the death that is certain to come and not because death holds any unknown secrets. By Act V, he knows that death does not change anything. He says, "I have almost forgot the taste of fears" (v.9). Death neither helps nor hurts Macbeth. When informed that his wife is dead he sheds no tears and merely comments,

She should have died hereafter:
There would have been time for such a word.  (V.v.17-18)

As death lacks meaning for Macbeth, so does life. In life, he has nothing; he is nothing. He recognizes that his end is surely coming and that he is all alone--alienated from friends and love. He grievously admits,

I have lived long enough. My way of life
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
Curses not loud but deep, mouth-honor, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.
(V.iii.22-28)

Without other people Macbeth recognizes, as Jaspers warns, there is no humanity--only nothingness. For what purpose is Macbeth's life? He
queries the significance of his being and the effects of his actions when he recalls the complete prophecy of the witches:

Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown
And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,
Thence to be wrenched with an unlinial hand,
No son of mine succeeding. If 't be so,
For Banque's issue have I filled my mind;
For them the gracious Duncan have I murdered.

(III.1.61-66)

If it be so, Macbeth is truly mired in the void of an existential plight. He is alone in his world. He finds nothing in death, and, by his own words, nothing in his life's actions. Each choice he makes is as useless as the life to which it belongs. He notes,

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.19-28)

If the choices he makes in life do indeed signify nothing, then Macbeth has nothing left to fear. Death is certain to come and end everything for him. He has reached the bounds of human consciousness. Yet, amid all this hopelessness Macbeth persists in living, as do the other "fools." Macbeth confirms the "Sartre-ian" thesis: the bubble of life is empty and will collapse, and all that is left man is the energy and passion to spin that bubble out.12

And this is what Macbeth chooses to do. He summons all the power he has, both as man and king, to fight the void of life and death. Attitudes mean nothing to Macbeth, since he no longer esteems the human state. "The

12Barrett, p.247.
very concept of man has crumbled to pieces, and there is nothing left, "except Macbeth's power. Even until his last fight Macbeth hangs on to life and power. He challenges Macduff in Act V, refusing to yield until Macduff kills him. Macbeth recalls for this last fight the "barefaced power" he felt when he and the hired murderers were planning Banquo's death. Unfortunately for Macbeth "power for power's sake" leaves him to face the impending void beyond life, having no friends to ease the pain. As Angus remarks,

These he commands move only in command,
Nothing in love. Now does he feel his title
Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe
Upon a dwarfish thief. (V.ii.19-22)

Angus's statement is all too true for Macbeth. Macbeth's robe of power is much too big for him and will soon fall off, leaving him naked, exposed to inevitable nihility.

Threatened by alienation from his wife and friends, despondent because of his estrangement from God and nature, isolated between the void of life and death, Macbeth clings to the only thing left an existential man--his will to power--only to have it fail him, leaving him prey to the void beyond life. Macbeth's power, as Nietzsche philosophized, and as is aptly stated by Shakespeare in Troilus and Cressida, completed his destruction. In that play, Ulysses observed,

Then everything include itself in power.
Power into will, will into appetite,
And appetite, a universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power
Must make perforce a universal prey,
And last eat up himself. (I.iii.119-124)

The quest for power destroys Macbeth and plunges him into the depths of existentialism.

Macbeth is more action than soliloquy as befits the existential

And Macbeth is indeed an existential man. He illustrates his own plight as we see him making the choices and carrying out the actions that determine his life. Throughout the play each decision made is Macbeth's own. We watch as Macbeth feels the fear, anxiety, guilt and dread his choices bring. We see his gradual alienation from the surrounding world. Existential is Macbeth's private world, even though Shakespeare's was not. That Shakespeare created the existential Macbeth adds one more star to the bard's already richly bejeweled crown.
Bibliography


