

*Headnote by James Shapiro.* McCarthy's essay originally appeared in *Harper's* (June 1962) and was collected in *The Writing on the Wall, and Other Literary Essays* (1970).

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## Mary McCarthy

(1912–1989)

### *General Macbeth*

McCarthy writes that she “majored in Elizabethan literature” at Vassar, where she studied Shakespeare with Professor Helen Sandison and recalled that year-long course as “formative.” Looking back in 1979, she told an interviewer that aside “from Christian doctrine, the thing that has most formed my cast of mind has probably been Shakespeare.” Best known as a novelist, essayist, and social critic, early on in her career McCarthy was also a theater critic (writing about Orson Welles’s productions of *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth* in *Partisan Review*). Her reading of *Macbeth*, published in *Harper's* in 1962, turns received wisdom on its head. Rather than seeing Macbeth as a hero possessed of vision and imagination, McCarthy suggests instead that his tragedy resides in his literal-mindedness, that he is no more than a familiar “modern” and “bourgeois type,” superstitious and credulous, the “eternal executive” whose “main concern throughout the play is . . . to get a good night’s sleep,” and whose savvy wife—who sees him for what he is, a shallow mix of “fear and ambition”—can barely mask her impatience and contempt for him. The moral: “ambition, fear, and a kind of stupidity make a deadly combination,” one that McCarthy sees around her in modern-day leaders, all too willing to unloose “the potential destructiveness that was always there in Nature.” In recasting the play in contemporary terms, McCarthy turns the domestic dynamics of the Macbeths into a familiar suburban story (akin to the marital dynamics of Richard Yates’s *Revolutionary Road*, published in 1961), and the politics of the play into a mirror of the Cold War world. It is no surprise that her good friend Hannah Arendt, who came across “General Macbeth” in *Harper's* while she was at work on her own study of a banal and evil figure, Adolf Eichmann, wrote to McCarthy that “I fell greatly and enthusiastically in love with the Macbeth article.”



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HE is a general and has just won a battle; he enters the scene making a remark about the weather. "So foul and fair a day I have not seen." On this flat note Macbeth's character tone is set. "Terrible weather we're having." "The sun can't seem to make up its mind." "Is it hot / cold / wet enough for you?" A commonplace man who talks in commonplaces, a golfer, one might guess, on the Scottish fairways, Macbeth is the only Shakespeare hero who corresponds to a bourgeois type: a murderous Babbitt, let us say.

You might argue just the opposite, that Macbeth is over-imaginative, the prey of visions. It is true that he is impressionable. Banquo, when they come upon the witches, amuses himself at their expense, like a man of parts idly chaffing a fortune-teller. Macbeth, though, is deeply impressed. "Thane of Cawdor and King." He thinks this over aloud. "How can I be Thane of Cawdor when the Thane of Cawdor is alive?" When this mental stumbling-block has been cleared away for him (the Thane of Cawdor has received a death sentence), he turns his thoughts *sotto voce* to the next question. "How can I be King when Duncan is alive?" The answer comes back, "Kill him." It does fleetingly occur to Macbeth, as it would to most people, to leave matters alone and let destiny work it out. "If chance will have me King, why, chance may crown me, Without my stir." But this goes against his grain. A reflective man might wonder how fate would spin her plot, as the Virgin Mary must have wondered after the Angel Gabriel's visit. But Macbeth does not trust to fate, that is, to the unknown, the mystery of things; he trusts only to a known quantity—himself—to put the prophecy into action. In short, he has no faith, which requires imagination. He is literal-minded; that, in a word, is his tragedy.

It was not *his* idea, he could plead in self-defense, but the witches', that he should have the throne. *They* said it first. But the witches only voiced a thought that was already in his mind; after all, he was Duncan's cousin and close to the crown. And once the thought has been put into *words*, he is in a scrambling hurry. He cannot wait to get home to tell his wife about the promise; in his excitement, he puts it in a letter, which he sends on ahead,

like a businessman briefing an associate on a piece of good news for the firm.

Lady Macbeth takes very little stock in the witches. She never pesters her husband, as most wives would, with questions about the Weird Sisters: "What did they say, exactly?" "How did they look?" "Are you sure?" She is less interested in "fate and metaphysical aid" than in the business at hand—how to nerve her husband to do what he wants to do. And later, when Macbeth announces that he is going out to consult the Weird Sisters again, she refrains from comment. As though she were keeping her opinion—"O proper stuff!"—to herself. Lady Macbeth is not superstitious. Macbeth is. This makes her repeatedly impatient with him, for Macbeth, like many men of his sort, is an old story to his wife. A tale full of sound and fury signifying nothing. Her contempt for him perhaps extends even to his ambition. "Wouldst not play false, And yet wouldst wrongly win." As though to say, "All right, if that's what you want, have the courage to get it." Lady Macbeth does not so much give the impression of coveting the crown herself as of being weary of watching Macbeth covet it. Macbeth, by the way, is her second husband, and either her first husband was a better man than he, which galls her, or he was just another general, another superstitious golfer, which would gall her too.

Superstition here is the opposite of reason on the one hand and of imagination on the other. Macbeth is credulous, in contrast to Lady Macbeth, to Banquo, and, later, to Malcolm, who sets the audience an example of the right way by mistrusting Macduff until he has submitted him to an empirical test. Believing and knowing are paired in Malcolm's mind; what he *knows* he believes. Macbeth's eagerness to believe is the companion of his lack of faith. If all works out right for him in this world, Macbeth says, he can take a chance on the next ("We'd jump the life to come"). Superstition whispers when true religion has been silenced, and Macbeth becomes a ready client for the patent medicines brewed by the jeering witches on the heath.

As in his first interview with them he is too quick to act literally on a dark saying, in the second he is too easily reassured. He

will not be conquered till “great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come against him.” “Why, that can never happen!” he cries out in immediate relief, his brow clearing.

It never enters his mind to examine the saying more closely, test it, so to speak, for a double bottom, as was common in those days (Banquo even points this out to him) with prophetic utterances, which were known to be ambiguous and tricky. Any child knew that a prophecy often meant the reverse of what it seemed to say, and any man of imagination would ask himself how Birnam Wood *might* come to Dunsinane and take measures to prevent it, as King Laius took measures to prevent his own death by arranging to have the baby Oedipus killed. If Macbeth had thought it out, he could have had Birnam Wood chopped down and burned on the spot and the ashes dumped into the sea. True, the prophecy might still have turned against him (since destiny cannot be avoided and the appointment will be kept at Samarra), but that would have been another story, another tragedy, the tragedy of a clever man not clever enough to circumvent fate. Macbeth is not clever; he is taken in by surfaces, by appearance. He cannot think beyond the usual course of things. “None of woman born.” All men, he says to himself, sagely, are born of women; Malcolm and Macduff are men; therefore I am safe. This logic leaves out of account the extraordinary: the man brought into the world by Caesarean section. In the same way, it leaves out of account the supernatural—the very forces he is trafficking with. He might be overcome by an angel or a demon, as well as by Macduff.

Yet this pedestrian general sees ghosts and imaginary daggers in the air. Lady Macbeth does not, and the tendency in her husband grates on her nerves; she is sick of his terrors and fancies. A practical woman, Lady Macbeth, more a partner than a wife, though Macbeth treats her with a trite domestic fondness—“Love,” “Dearest love,” “Dearest chuck,” “Sweet remembrancer.” These middle-aged, middle-class endearments, as though he called her “Honeybunch” or “Sweetheart,” as well as the obligatory “Dear,” are a master stroke of Shakespeare’s and perfectly in keeping with the prosing about the weather, the heavy credulousness.

Naturally Macbeth is dominated by his wife. He is old Iron Pants in the field (as she bitterly reminds him), but at home *she* has to wear the pants; she has to unsex herself. No “chucks” or “dearests” escape her tightened lips, and yet she is more feeling, more human finally than Macbeth. She thinks of her father when she sees the old King asleep, and this natural thought will not let her kill him. Macbeth has to do it, just as the quailing husband of any modern virago is sent down to the basement to kill a rat or drown a set of kittens. An image of her father, irrelevant to her purpose, softens this monster woman; sleepwalking, she thinks of Lady Macduff. “The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now?” Stronger than Macbeth, less suggestible, she is nevertheless imaginative, where he is not. She does not see ghosts and daggers; when she sleepwalks, it is simple reality that haunts her—the crime relived. “Yet, who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?” Over and over, the epiphenomena of the crime present themselves to her dormant consciousness. This nightly reliving is not penitence but more terrible—remorse, the agenbite of the restless deed. Lady Macbeth’s uncontrollable imagination drives her to put herself in the place of others—the wife of the Thane of Fife—and to recognize a kinship between all human kind: the pathos of old age in Duncan has made her think, “Why, he might be my father!” This sense of a natural bond between men opens her to contrition—sorrowing with. To ask whether, waking, she is “sorry” for what she has done is impertinent. She lives with it and it kills her.

Macbeth has no feeling for others, except envy, a common middle-class trait. He *envies* the murdered Duncan his rest, which is a strange way of looking at your victim. What he suffers on his own account after the crimes is simple panic. He is never contrite or remorseful; it is not the deed but a shadow of it, Banquo’s spook, that appears to him. The “scruples” that agitate him before Duncan’s murder are mere echoes of conventional opinion, of what might be *said* about his deed: that Duncan was his king, his cousin, and a guest under his roof. “I have bought golden opinions,” he says to himself (note the verb), “from all sorts of people”;

now these people may ask for their opinions back—a refund—if they suspect him of the murder. It is like a business firm's being reluctant to part with its "good will." The fact that Duncan was such a good king bothers him, and why? Because there will be universal grief at his death. But his chief "scruple" is even simpler. "If we should fail?" he says timidly to Lady Macbeth. Sweet chuck tells him that they will not. Yet once she has ceased to be effectual as a partner, Dearest love is an embarrassment. He has no time for her vapors. "Cure her of that," he orders the doctor on hearing that she is troubled by "fancies." Again the general is speaking.

The idea of Macbeth as a conscience-tormented man is a platitude as false as Macbeth himself. Macbeth has no conscience. His main concern throughout the play is that most selfish of all concerns: to get a good night's sleep. His invocation to sleep, while heartfelt, is perfectly conventional; sleep builds you up, enables you to start the day fresh. Thus the virtue of having a good conscience is seen by him in terms of bodily hygiene. Lady Macbeth shares these preoccupations. When he tells her he is going to see the witches, she remarks that he needs sleep.

Her wifely concern is mechanical and far from real solicitude. She is aware of Macbeth; she *knows* him (he does not know her at all, apparently), but she regards him coldly as a thing, a tool that must be oiled and polished. His soul-states do not interest her; her attention is narrowed on his morale, his public conduct, the shifting expressions of his face. But in a sense she is right, for there is nothing to Macbeth but fear and ambition, both of which he tries to hide, except from her. This naturally gives her a poor opinion of the inner man.

Why is it, though, that Lady Macbeth seems to us a monster while Macbeth does not? Partly because she is a woman and has "unsexed" herself, which makes her a monster by definition. Also because the very prospect of murder quickens an hysterical excitement in her, like the discovery of some object in a shop—a set of emeralds or a sable stole—which Macbeth can give her and which will be an "outlet" for all the repressed desires he cannot satisfy. She behaves as though Macbeth, through his weakness,

will deprive her of self-realization; the unimpeded exercise of her will is the voluptuous end she seeks. That is why she makes naught of scruples, as inner brakes on her throbbing engines. Unlike Macbeth, she does not pretend to harbor a conscience, though this, on her part, by a curious turn, *is* a pretense, as the sleepwalking scene reveals. After the first crime, her will subsides, spent; the devil has brought her to climax and left her.

Macbeth is not a monster, like Richard III or Iago or Iachimo, though in the catalogue he might go for one because of the blackness of his deeds. But at the outset his deeds are only the wishes and fears of the average, undistinguished man translated into half-hearted action. Pure evil is a kind of transcendence that he does not aspire to. He only wants to be king and sleep the sleep of the just, undisturbed. He could never have been a good man, even if he had not met the witches; hence we cannot see him as a devil incarnate, for the devil is a fallen angel. Macbeth does not fall; if anything, he somewhat improves as the result of his career of crime. He throws off his dependency and thus achieves the "greatness" he mistakenly sought in the crown and scepter. He swells to vast proportions, having supped full with honors.

The isolation of Macbeth, which is at once a punishment and a tragic dignity or honor, takes place by stages and by deliberate choice; it begins when he does not tell Lady Macbeth that he has decided to kill Banquo and reaches its peak at Dunsinane, in the final action. Up to this time, though he has cut himself off from all human contacts, he is counting on the witches as allies. When he first hears the news that Macduff is not "of woman born," he is unmanned; everything he trusted (the literal word) has betrayed him, and he screams in terror, "I'll not fight with thee!" But Macduff's taunts make a hero of him; he cannot die like this, shamed. His death is his first true act of courage, though even here he has had to be pricked to it by mockery, Lady Macbeth's old spur. Nevertheless, weaned by his very crimes from a need for reassurance, nursed in a tyrant's solitude, he meets death on his own, without metaphysical aid. "Lay on, Macduff."

What is modern and bourgeois in Macbeth's character is his

wholly *social outlook*. He has no feeling for others, and yet until the end he is a vicarious creature, existing in his own eyes through what others may say of him, through what they tell him or promise him. This paradox is typical of the social being—at once a wolf out for himself and a sheep. Macbeth, moreover, is an expert buck-passer; he sees how others can be used. It is he, not Lady Macbeth, who thinks of smearing the drunken chamberlains with blood (though it is she, in the end, who carries it out), so that they shall be caught “red-handed” the next morning when Duncan’s murder is discovered. At this idea he brightens; suddenly, he sees his way clear. It is the moment when at last he decides. The eternal executive, ready to fix responsibility on a subordinate, has seen the deed finally take a *recognizable* form. Now he can do it. And the crackerjack thought of killing the grooms afterward (dead men tell no tales—old adage) is again purely his own on-the-spot inspiration; no credit to Lady Macbeth.

It is the sort of thought that would have come to Hamlet’s Uncle Claudius, another trepidant executive. Indeed, Macbeth is more like Claudius than like any other character in Shakespeare. Both are doting husbands; both rose to power by betraying their superior’s trust; both are easily frightened and have difficulty saying their prayers. Macbeth’s “Amen” sticks in his throat, he complains, and Claudius, on his knees, sighs that he cannot make what priests call a “good act of contrition.” The desire to say his prayers like any pew-holder, quite regardless of his horrible crime, is merely a longing for respectability. Macbeth “repents” killing the grooms, but this is for public consumption. “O, yet I do repent me of my fury, That I did kill them.” In fact, it is the one deed he does *not* repent (*i.e.*, doubt the wisdom of) either before or after. This hypocritical self-accusation, which is his sidelong way of announcing the embarrassing fact that he has just done away with the grooms, and his simulated grief at Duncan’s murder (“All is but toys. Renown and grace is dead, The wine of life is drawn,” etc.) are his basest moments in the play, as well as his boldest; here is nearly a magnificent monster.

The dramatic effect too is one of great boldness on Shakespeare’s



part. Macbeth is speaking pure Shakespearean poetry, but in his mouth, since we know he is lying, it turns into facile verse, Shakespearean poetry buskined. The same with “Here lay Duncan, His silver skin lac’d with his golden blood. . . .” If the image were given to Macduff, it would be uncontaminated poetry; from Macbeth it is “proper stuff”—fustian. This opens the perilous question of sincerity in the arts: is a line of verse altered for us by the sincerity of the one who speaks it? In short, is poetry relative to the circumstances or absolute? Or, more particularly, are Macbeth’s soliloquies poetry, which they sound like, or something else? Did Shakespeare intend to make Macbeth a poet, like Hamlet, Lear, and Othello? In that case, how can Macbeth be an unimaginative mediocrity? My opinion is that Macbeth’s soliloquies are not poetry but rhetoric. They are tirades. That is, they do not trace any pensive motion of the soul or heart but are a volley of words discharged. Macbeth is neither thinking nor feeling aloud; he is declaiming. Like so many unfeeling men, he has a facile emotionalism, which he turns on and off. Not that his fear is insincere, but his loss of control provides him with an excuse for histrionics.

These gibberings exasperate Lady Macbeth. “What do you mean?” she says coldly after she has listened to a short harangue on “Methought I heard a voice cry ‘Sleep no more!’” It is an allowable question—what *does* he mean? And his funeral oration on *her*, if she could have heard it, would have brought her back to life to protest. “She should have died hereafter”—fine, that was the real Macbeth. But then, as if conscious of the proprieties, he at once begins on a series of bromides (“Tomorrow, and tomorrow . . .”) that he seems to have had ready to hand for the occasion like a black mourning suit. All Macbeth’s soliloquies have that ready-to-hand, if not hand-me-down, air, which is perhaps why they are given to school children to memorize, often with the result of making them hate Shakespeare. What children resent in these soliloquies is precisely their sententiousness—the sound they have of being already memorized from a copybook.

Macbeth’s speeches often recall the Player’s speech in *Hamlet*—

Shakespeare's example of how-not-to-do-it. He tears a passion to tatters. He has a rather Senecan rhetoric, the fustian of the time; in the dagger speech, for example, he works in Hecate, Tarquin, and the wolf—*recherché* embellishment for a man who is about to commit a real murder. His taste for hyperbole goes with a habit of euphuism, as when he calls the sea "the green one." And what of the remarkable line just preceding, "The multitudinous seas incarnadine," with its onomatopoeia of the crested waves rising in the t's and d's of "multitudinous" and subsiding in the long swell of the verb? This is sometimes cited as an example of pure poetry, which it would be in an anthology of isolated lines, but in the context, dramatically, it is splendid bombast, a kind of stuffing or padding.

The play between poetry and rhetoric, the *conversion* of poetry to declamation, is subtle and horrible in *Macbeth*. The sincere pent-up poet in Macbeth flashes out not in the soliloquies but when he howls at a servant. "The Devil damn thee black, thou cream-faced loon! Where got'st thou that goose look?" Elsewhere, the general's tropes are the gold braid of his dress uniform or the chasing of his armor. If an explanation is needed, you might say he learned to *use* words through long practice in haranguing his troops, whipping them and himself into battle frenzy. Up to recent times a fighting general, like a football coach, was an orator.

But it must be noted that it is not only Macbeth who rants. Nor is it only Macbeth who talks about the weather. The play is stormy with atmosphere—the screaming and shrieking of owls, the howling of winds. Nature herself is ranting, like the witches, and Night, black Hecate, is queen of the scene. Bats are flitting about; ravens and crows are hoarse; the house-martins' nests on the battlements of Macbeth's castle give a misleading promise of peace and gentle domesticity. "It will be rain tonight," says Banquo simply, looking at the sky (note the difference between this and Macbeth's pompous generality), and the First Murderer growls at him, striking, "Let it come down." The disorder of Nature, as so often in Shakespeare, presages and reflects the disorder of the body politic. Guilty Macbeth cannot sleep, but the night of

Duncan's murder, the whole house, as if guilty too, is restless; Malcolm and Donalbain talk and laugh in their sleep; the drunken porter, roused, plays that he is gatekeeper of hell.

Indeed, the whole action takes place in a kind of hell and is pitched to the demons' shriek of hyperbole. This would appear to be a peculiar setting for a study of the commonplace. But only at first sight. The fact that an ordinary philistine like Macbeth goes on the rampage and commits a series of murders is a sign that human nature, like Nature, is capable of any mischief if left to its "natural" self. The witches, unnatural beings, are Nature spirits, stirring their snake-filet and owl's wing, newt's eye and frog toe in a camp stew: earthy ingredients boil down to an unearthly broth. It is the same with the man Macbeth. Ordinary ambition, fear, and a kind of stupidity make a deadly combination. Macbeth, a self-made king, is not kingly, but just another Adam or Fall guy, with Eve at his elbow.

There is no play of Shakespeare's (I think) that contains the words "Nature" and "natural" so many times, and the "Nature" within the same speech can mean first something good and then something evil, as though it were a pun. Nature is two-sided, double-talking, like the witches. "Fair is foul and foul is fair," they cry, and Macbeth enters the play unconsciously echoing them, for he is never original but chock-full of the "milk of human kindness," which does not mean kindness in the modern sense but simply human "nature," human kind. The play is about Nature, and its blind echo, human nature.

*Macbeth*, in short, shows life in the cave. Without religion, animism rules the outer world, and without faith, the human soul is beset by hobgoblins. This at any rate was Shakespeare's opinion, to which modern history, with the return of the irrational in the Fascist nightmare and its fear of new specters in the form of Communism, Socialism, etc., lends support. It is a troubling thought that bloodstained Macbeth, of all Shakespeare's characters, should seem the most "modern," the only one you could transpose into contemporary battle dress or a sport shirt and slacks.

The contemporary Macbeth, a churchgoer, is indifferent to

religion, to the categorical imperative of any group of principles that may be held to stand above and govern human behavior. Like the old Macbeth, he'd gladly hazard the future life, not only for himself but for the rest of humanity: "Though palaces and pyramids do slope Their heads to their foundations; though the treasure Of Nature's germens tumble all together . . ." He listens to soothsayers and prophets and has been out on the heath and in the desert, putting questions to Nature on a grand scale, lest his rivals for power get ahead of him and Banquo's stock, instead of his, inherit the earth. Unloosing the potential destructiveness that was always there in Nature, as Shakespeare understood, the contemporary Macbeth, like the old one, is not even a monster, though he may yet breed monsters, thanks to his activities on the heath; he is timorous, unimaginative, and the prayer he would like to say most fervently is simply "Amen."

(1962)