

The Demonic and Narcissistic Power of the media in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

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I have heard

That guilty creatures sitting at a play
Have, by the very cunning of the scene,
Been struck so to the soul that presently
They have proclaimed their malefactions.

Hamlet in *Hamlet*. P. 308

Not Narcissistic Enough?

Writing in June of 2016, the Republican primaries and Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* share the spectacle of a radical disruption to conventions of political legitimacy. Moreover, although the primaries are without the murders, witchcraft and criminal behavior, and with major differences of culture and era, both theatrical events share an instability in the discourse of narcissism. In this paper, I want to explore how this equivocal portrayal of narcissistic personalities amounts to a productive *magic*, mesmerizing the political and psychological landscapes of both early sixteenth century England and twentyfirst century America.

Narcissism is unstable here because the drama of the Donald Trump nomination and the character Macbeth's tragic and tenuous grasp of the monarchy both rely on the protagonists inhabiting, and yet failing to be fully possessed by, Freud's secondary narcissism, the problematic failure to accept the separation between self and objects (Samuels, Shorter and Plaut 1997). Whereas Freud theorized that primary narcissism was a wholly plausible stage in infantile development prior to the capacity to relate to others, secondary narcissism is a pathological "stuckness" in fantasies that ought to have been re-framed if the Oedipus complex had been negotiated successfully.

The point is that his omnipotence and grandiosity are a distorted version of the selfhood he might have attained in relation to his parents, but did not. Ibid. p. 98

By recognizing the father's presence and potential to separate mother and baby, the infant of either sex must relinquish fantasies of omnipotence that his or her unbounded union with the mother has previously fostered. Following the path of Oedipus, as Freud considered proper for the male child, means that desire for the mother's exclusive love has to be renounced under threat of castration. The tiny boy therefore represses incestuous desires to form the ego/unconscious structure and is compensated by assuming the social and phallic power of the father. That Oedipus's father is a king and not just any man is not considered by Freud, just as he has far greater difficulty in positing an Oedipal route for the small girl.

Arguably C.G. Jung's far greater sense of the cultural factors in psycho-social development may offer a way of looking at the issue of relating to a paternal icon of extreme power. Although narcissism as a pathological disorder is little considered in his *Collected Works*, its key indication of being erotically obsessed by a mirror image is significantly re-worked. Twice in CW12, *Psychology and Alchemy*, gazing rapt at a mirror image is regarded as a potentially productive part of individuation. This process for Jung signifies the gradual accessing of a greater psychological coherence by means of learning how to unite and separate from the unconscious (p. 114-5, p. 116).

The problem for Jung with looking into mirror is over-reliance upon what the glass signifies to the person, 'his' superior intellect. Much more preferable is a more mysterious type of reflection, the mandala circular image as a mirror of wisdom (CW13, p. 22). Here the mirror does not reflect the outer being of the person, either in the Freudian erotic obsession or the Jungian risky reliance upon rationality. Rather the mirror indicates the deeper ordering principles of the self, icon of wholeness and majesty that cannot be swallowed by the ego in omnipotent fantasy.

So where does this leave the current Republican nominee for United States President, and Shakespeare's Macbeth, who, I suggest, share a break in the assumption of narcissism that has a magical effect on their audiences? Donald Trump's success in primary elections is predicated upon his playing the role of political outsider, one who is not narcissistic enough to assume presidential trapping in conventional language.

On the other hand, narcissism surely *also* inheres in his claim to the Presidential throne without the usual political qualifications. These are accompanied by assertions of supreme intelligence and business acumen. While it is useless to speculate on what a political candidate ‘really’ believes, Trump is nevertheless playing the role of genius who is fit for office because he not “fitted” for office, not one of the elite insiders.

Macbeth’s tragedy is different but similarly structured on his own perception of being unfit, illegitimate. Successful in obtaining the throne of Scotland by murdering the true king and exiling his sons, Macbeth is carrying out an archaic myth unacceptable to his present day society. The myth is of a potent young man killing an ageing king and taking his place as lover of a Queen signifying the sacred fertility of the earth. Such an underlying structure is visible in several of Shakespeare’s tragedies including *Hamlet* and *King Lear*.

These plays are tragedies because ritual murder is no longer permissible within the consciousness of the times and its Christianized culture. Macbeth is haunted by his illegitimacy in the actual figure of his friend Banquo, for whom a royal descent is prophesied. Childless Macbeth has he has been goaded into his great crime by his feminine m/other representing the dangerously infertile land, his wife, Lady Macbeth. Let us take a closer look at this protagonist’s narcissistic maneuvers.

Macbeth’s Primary and Secondary Narcissism

I want to consider the witches in *Macbeth* as having a magical effect similar to the media in the modern presidential race. This comparison is not a precise equation since these witches are secret, witnessed in the drama only by Macbeth and briefly by Banquo, where the modern media are public and ubiquitous. They are a feminine other to the political order of reality it the play inhabited by kings, thanes and two very different wives. Rather, it is in the magical effect of the witches on this character, and possibly the play’s audiences then and now, that parallels can be draw with contemporary events.

In fact the witches form a supernatural arena of psychic transformation for Macbeth. They are his dynamic and dramatic psychic mirror, and as Jung indicates, it is his too great reliance upon them as mirror that is his downfall.

Witches: Fair is foul, and foul is fair:

Hover through the fog and filthy air. *Macbeth*, Act 1, sc.1 l. 11-12.

Macbeth: So foul and fair a day I have not seen. Act 1, sc.3 l. 38.

Macbeth's very first line echoes the concluding chant of the witches in the very first scene. He is already their creature, although only the audience can sense it in the auditory repetition. Moreover, as well as undoing moral and aesthetic categories, "fair is foul...", the witches suggest that they can defy the very bounds of gravity as they "hover" in atmospheric dirt. Here indeed is a pre-Oedipal state of fusion that is con-fusion. The witches proclaim the powers of horror that give the title to Julia Kristeva's book on the pre-Oedipal as the realm of the abject as the not yet subject (Kristeva 1982). Without clean and proper boundaries, being is a world of terrifying invasion of monsters and evil. No territory is protected, no body is safely a *body* with psychic integrity.

In his opening words, Macbeth reveals his pre-Oedipal predilections in straying into the wilderness of mirroring the abjecting witches. When they hail him successively as Thane of Glamis, Cawdor and King; they conjure him into a world in which time and agency are similarly detached from social and physical realities. Macbeth knows he is already Thane of Glamis. He does not know that he has been given the traitor's title of Thane of Cawdor. To be king would be to go outside social and moral rules because he would have to kill the incumbent and push away that man's natural bodily successors.

Such a move would transfer the primary narcissism (constellated by the witches taking him back to pre-Oedipal lack of subjecthood) to a secondary narcissism in which he cannot separate himself from the object of desire, being king. Symptomatically, after committing the murder, primary narcissism overtakes him again. He loses a sense of his own body as whole and bounded.

Macbeth: What hands are here? Ha! The pluck out mine eyes.

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood

Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather

The multitudinous seas incarnadine,

Making the green one red. Act 2, sc. 2, l. 58-62

Hands wanting to destroy eyes show a horrifying sense of bodily dis-integration. Bloody hands that can dye whole seas indicate the psyche trapped in a world without end, without limits to his crime. Transfixed by pre-Oedipal enchantment in the witches reincarnating his primary narcissism, Macbeth has struck down his king, his father figure who was the obstacle to his deepest and forbidden desires. Such a perversion of the Oedipal situation propels him into a secondary narcissism in which his crime traps him in an endless mirroring of his murder.

The psychic dysfunction is even more marked in his pre-murder exchanges with his wife. She overtly rejects any primal bond of love that could provide an-other to his Oedipal fantasies.

Lady Macbeth: When you durst do it, then you were a man...

Does unmake you. I have given suck and know

How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:

I would while it was smiling in my face,

Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,

And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn

As you have done to this. Act 1, sc.7, l. 49, 54-8.

Such graphic destruction of maternal love effectively cuts away the 'normal' Oedipal path by which fear of castration by the actual father is succeeded by the boy Macbeth eventually becoming a father. It is later made explicit in the play that the Macbeths have no children, giving Lady Macbeth's terrible lines the visceral context of babies that have died, typical for the period. In these lines we sense a rejection of a potential mirroring of love. Macbeth cannot see himself being mothered safely and lovingly in the person of a baby son.

Imaging his own mother, Lady Macbeth fuses all possible Eros or in Jung's terms, feeling and connection into Thanatos, the sacred drive to death. All her relational energy is predicated on Macbeth removing the father-king as obstacle to *her* desires that cannot be separated from his desire which has to be repressed if he is see himself as separate from the kingship. Lady Macbeth un-represses his Oedipal drive by choosing identification with it instead of mother love that feeds the baby. She pushes him into the mirror of secondary narcissism in portraying the alternative as the feminine that annihilates the defenseless child. She channels a pre-Oedipal mother that he can never appease, nor escape, once he has submitted to her desire as his desire and killed the king-father.

Unsurprisingly, murderer Macbeth is haunted by children. Since the witches proclaimed his sometime companion Banquo as the father of future kings, he has his friend murdered with the command to execute the child also. Banquo's son escapes as do King Duncan's progeny but not so fortunate is the family of defector, Macduff. The only other woman in the play is only appears as a loving mother. We see her affectionately playing with her children until the entire family is murdered by Macbeth's henchmen. It is time for Macbeth to visit the witches again. They show him a mirror.

Secondary Narcissism and relying too much upon the mirror

Trapped in his secondary narcissism, Macbeth cannot stop killing because he cannot see himself as a legitimate ruler. He keeps murdering to repeat the primal crime that got him the throne but none will give him that separation from the object, kingship, that would stabilize his identity. Rather he is trapped in the mirror of murdering to achieve his desires and each murder takes him further from his lost desire, to take his father-king's place, to be king like Duncan was, respected, loved and a father. So Macbeth returns to the scene of his primary narcissism, the abject feminine of the witches. His visit awakens narcissistic possibilities in the play's audience.

Macbeth: I conjure you by that which you profess...

..... though the treasure

Of nature's germens tumble all together,

Even till destruction sicken, answer me

To what I ask you. Act 4, sc. 1 l. 50, 58-61.

Assuming the position of the witches as the chaos energy of the planet (“I conjure you...”), Macbeth proceed by envisioning terrifying destruction in which fertility itself, “nature’s germens” is distorted beyond repair. Such is the psychological position of a fertility rite, in the archaic myth, or an Oedipal process, literalized in secondary narcissism.

The witches enable Macbeth and the audience to receive three supernatural messengers, an armed head, a bloody child and a crowned child carrying a tree. The messages are successively a warning about Macduff, that none of woman born can kill Macbeth, and that he will not be defeated until Birnam Wood comes to Dunisnane, his fortress. Macbeth, now a creature of the abjecting world without inner sight or in-sight, interprets all three messages disastrously. The armed head is right that Macduff is a particular danger because he is his future killer. Macbeth sees the fragment of a warrior and thinks he can kill part of his being, his family. Instead of incapacitating Macduff, the atrocity actually spurs him on.

Thinking that no person of woman born means no human being, is a similar mistake for the bloody child suggests the power of the infantile psyche in the narcissistic mirror that Macbeth is trapped in. In a fight to the death, Macduff will tell his opponent that he is that man of no woman born because he was from his mother’s body “untimely ripp’d” (Act 5, sc.8, l. 16). The crowned child carrying a tree branch is another false mirror in Macbeth’s secondary narcissism. Macbeth interprets Birnum Wood coming to his castle Dunsinane is a mere statement of impossibility. Now nothing can detach him from his throne; he is fused with it as object.

More pertinent would be to see the bloody child and the crowned child as emblems of his own catastrophic failure to negotiate his Oedipal desires for kingship. The bloody child recalls Macbeth’s own first appearance in the play, covered with the blood of a traitor. At the end of the play, he will be that traitor and appear finally as the first vision, a decapitated armed head. In between he metaphorically then intentionally and at last actually kills children. He accepts his wife’s horrible narcissistic identification with his desire in her statement about being willing to murder their child. Once Oedipal killer of Duncan, Macbeth intends to kill Banquo’s son, the play’s icon of fertility and generation. With the slaughter of Macduff’s family, the tyrant’s

journey to literalism and narcissistic identification with the act of murder in an Oedipal mirror is complete.

Each time Macbeth commissions murder he is killing part of himself because he fatally embodied his desire to be father-king instead of being able to repress it, and take the place of child-who-will-be-father in a familial overcoming of primary narcissism. Rather, murder continues his libido stuck in secondary narcissism where he *is* the bloody child *and* needs to kill the bloody child. He is also, of course, the crowned child, the child who killed his father and became king. However, in holding a tree and speaking of Birnum Wood moving, this third vision cements Macbeth's secondary narcissism by imaging what kingship itself might mean, if Macbeth could be the king that he can never be; that is fertile, as in the archaic myth part of the renewing fertility of the land. And Macbeth cannot be that king because he killed a father rather than becoming one.

It is this crowned child with branch who makes absolutely explicit that it is loving, loyal Banquo who is king-lover of the land as goddess.

A show of eight kings, the last with a glass in his hand;

Banquo following.

Macbeth: Thou art too like the spirit of Banquo: down!..

What! Will the line stretch out to th' crack of doom?

Another yet? – A seventh? – I'll see no more –

And yet the eight appears, who bears a glass,

Which shows me many more: and some I see,

That two-fold balls and treble scepters carry. Act 4, sc.1, l 112, 117-21.

When Birnum Wood *does* come to Dunsinane (as the soldiers are commanded to carry a tree branch in order to conceal numbers), and the wood appears to march, the land itself appears to

regenerate by rising up against Macbeth. The crowned child with a tree that Macbeth thinks speaks of the impossible, a moving wood, shows merely what is impossible *for him*. He commands a show of kings who will be descended from Banquo as father whose family relation did not fall in to fatal secondary narcissism.

Additionally, these phantom kings make explicit something about *Macbeth*, the play as well as Macbeth, the man. What if the intimate Oedipal and archaic nature of this drama tempted *the audience* into a secondary narcissism? Extraordinarily, such a dangerously tragic psychological trap is written into this very dramatic script.

Kings, Politicians and their Narcissistic Audiences

“Glass” in Shakespearean English means a mirror. The eight Banquo descended king holds a mirror out to the audience and invites them to see themselves in what Macbeth next howls, a line of kings with the balls and scepters of the throne of England. The explanation for such a reference is made even more magically potent when we consider this interaction in a Jungian context as we will see. In a straightforward sense, these lines confirm that this play, first performed around 1604, was conceived for the new monarch James I who was legendarily a descendent of Banquo. As a complement to the new king-father, who fortunately was already a father, the mirror held out to the audience invites the king himself to see his own legitimacy confirmed upon the stage.

And yet this is a crucial violation of the stage as boundary between realities in a play full of the violation of sacred, nature, political and familial boundaries. The mirror invites new king James to a secondary narcissism of seeing stage phantoms as performing his own political claims to his very new role. After all, James became king of England as well as native Scotland by *familial* ties, as the most intimately living relation of dead Queen Elizabeth. That these familial ties are bloody is shown by the fact that James inherited the English throne via his mother, who plotted to kill her cousin Elizabeth and was in turn executed.

And what does James I see? He is now invited to identify through an actual and literal mirror with a play in which a good king is murdered and a bad king is overthrown by force – and, a play

claiming, enacting, prophetic powers. C. G. Jung suggested that a visionary work of art, one vibrating to the music of archetypal themes not fully present to the artist, would be to the collective society like a dream to the individual (CW15, para. 161, p. 104). It could show where s/he or society, was going. So where is England of 1604 going?

In 1605 James I and his parliament suffered the Gunpowder Plot, a failed bomb plot against the government leading to brutal executions. Less than twenty years later an army did march against a king they called tyrannical, James's son, Charles I. After a trial, the defeated king was beheaded, suffering the same fate as semi-fictional Macbeth. His son, Charles II, achieved the throne with the consent of the forces who defeated his father and wisely chose to forego revenge against all but the signatories to his father's death warrant. Some of these found refuge in the American colonies whose leaders refused to hand them over in an early act of defiance to the English crown. Otherwise unlike Macbeth, Charles II, a notorious womanizer, had no legitimate children. His brother, James II and his son, Charles, were not able to hold onto power.

Charles I was not inevitably doomed to the fate of Duncan and Macbeth of violent death. Rather he summoned his own downfall by foolishly refusing to recognize any legitimate political power but his own. He famously believed in the divine provenance of kings, which gave him a narcissistic identification with the role. *He* could not separate himself from the mirror that was kingship. Here a dream commented upon by C. G. Jung seems illuminating

DREAM

The dreamer, a doctor, a pilot, and the unknown woman are travelling by airplane. A croquet ball suddenly smashes the mirror, an indispensable instrument of navigation, and the airplane crashes to the ground. Here again there is the same doubt: to whom does the unknown woman belong? (italics in original, CW12, para. 147, p. 113)

Significantly the theme of flight heralds disaster just as the witches' "hovering" proves unfortunate for Macbeth. Jung comments pertinently on the fate of the mirror.

The "mirror" as an "indispensable instrument of navigation" doubtless refers to the intellect, which is able to think and is constantly persuading us to identify ourselves with its insights ("reflections")... The term "instrument of navigation is an apt expression for

this, since it is indeed man's indispensable guide on pathless seas. But when the ground slips from under his feet and he begins to speculate in the void, seduced by the soaring flights of intuition, the situation becomes dangerous. (Jung, CW12, para. 149. Pp. 114-5).

For Jung's dreamer, the croquet ball smashes the mirror so preventing the danger of seduction by ungrounded intuition whereas Macbeth's perilous mirroring is not so interrupted. He is seduced by the witches as an ungrounded feminine intuition. As in Jung's reading of the dream, the witches mirroring persuades Macbeth to identify himself with the visions they bestow. Having failed to negotiate Oedipal distance from his desires, he is unable to conceive that these visions or intuitions do not serve his fantasy identification with the crown.

Similarly, had a croquet ball interrupted the fateful mirroring of the plays procession of fertile and just kings in the implied royal audience, who are James I and his family; perhaps they too would have been more aware that their people's *reflections and insights* were not wholly favorable. How far does the play, *Macbeth*, anticipate the narcissistic downfall of the Stuart dynasty? Jung would have said that literature as a form for archetypal evolution within a culture in supplying what is absent from conventional social mores.

Therein lies the social significance of art: it is constantly at work educating the spirit of the age, conjuring up the forms in which the age is most lacking. (Jung, CW 15, para. 130, p. 82)

Art conjures. It is capable of witchcraft on a collective social level as well as its effect on the audience and artists. But who is the unknown woman, Jung asks of his dream above? What both the dreamer and Macbeth lack is grounding. Macbeth for sure has missed his chance to be grounded through his relation to his wife and the potential mother of his children. The visions of bloody and crowned children mock his ungrounded and infertile narcissistic kingship.

For Jung the unknown woman will prove to be that necessary feminine psychic relation, the anima. For Macbeth, the ground he cannot connect to, cannot love is the land itself. In his narcissistic tyranny, he has made a wasteland of Scotland. Far from incarnating the lover of the goddess in taking the place of an ageing King, he has rather been the destroyer of the earth as sacred feminine. His slaughter of the Macduff family is only the most graphic metonym of his desecration of the Earth-Goddess through his catastrophic secondary narcissism.

So in what sense are Macbeth's fateful witches, the demonic mirror, comparable to the modern media. Crucially *Macbeth*, the play, is not so much *about* magic as an enactment of it. The witches chant spells; that is all they do. In that sense they are dramatists, not supernatural beings. Their spells liberate the potential for secondary narcissism in Macbeth. Once trapped in their ungrounded narcissistic mirroring, he himself does the rest.

Moreover, arguably the play is a rite rather than a dramatic entertainment. If it really does conjure up the forms in which the age is lacking, does it promote, or (by bringing to consciousness), reduce, the likelihood of James I and his son, Charles I being unable to dis-identify with the image of king as divinely appointed? I am suggesting that the play *is* magic because it demonstrates and promotes narcissistic temptations. In this sense, it anticipates the distorting and productive mirror of the modern media.

While ostensibly claiming to inform and communicate, no one could assume the modern media to be a neutral or transparent medium. With its internet enhanced range from the latest social media to venerable newspapers, the media reflects back powerful figures in ways that permit or even seduce into narcissistic (mis)identification. Media energies are multiple, unpredictable, capable of being manipulated but not wholly controlled. Such a perspective suggests that the media is a form of the psyche itself, or, in the language of this old Shakespearean world: magical. Ultimately what might matter in elections to the populace is which candidates can love and make fertile the ground we stand on.

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