



# A Wave of Destruction: Time's Inexorable Effects in Hamlet and Macbeth

## Citation

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A Wave of Destruction: Time's Inexorable Effects in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*

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A Thesis in Partial Fulfillment of the Field of English  
For the Degree of Master's in Liberal Arts for Extension Studies

Harvard University

November 2015



## Abstract

This thesis explores the typically cited character flaws of Macbeth and Hamlet and asserts that these flaws are not the main cause of their tragic downfalls, but, rather, it is the immense psychological and corporeal stresses created by the inexorable progression of time on the chief characters of Shakespeare's plays, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, which lead Macbeth and Hamlet to their destruction. This thesis begins by examining the typical "character flaw" interpretation of Macbeth and Hamlet, which many critics assert, led to their eventual ruin and deaths of many around them. Subsequently, I cite substantial critical evidence from major literary critics, as well as my own close readings of these two plays, both of which quite strongly support my novel argument that the extreme psychological and bodily stresses of time experienced by Hamlet and Macbeth, and, to a lesser extent, by the other main characters in these two plays, rather than simply their character flaws, ultimately lead to their tragedy, loss, and death. I elaborate on my argument by showing how it fits quite well with other major types of critical approaches to literature, including gender-based literary criticism and psychoanalytic and Freudian analysis of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. I conclude by demonstrating via a novel approach that only through a comprehensive analysis of the emotional and physical tolls of the inescapable progression of time as experienced by Hamlet and Macbeth, and other chief characters, can one achieve an accurate understanding of these two Shakespearean tragedies.

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## I. Introduction

Upon hearing of his wife's death, Macbeth exclaims in a soliloquy, "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day / To the last syllable of recorded time" (5.5.20-28). Likewise, Hamlet, after seeing the ghost of his father, laments, "The time is out of joint" (1.5. 188). These quotes are examples of how these two tragic heroes demonstrate a vivid concern about time and its effects—the inescapable fact of death. As Simone Weil, the French philosopher noted, "Time is the most profound and the most tragic subject which human beings can think about. One might even say: the only thing that is tragic. All the tragedies that we can imagine return in the end to the one and only tragedy: the passage of time, and humans' inability to control it" (Weil, 197). One of the contributions of recent literary scholarship on Shakespeare has been to explore why and how time has such a great impact upon his chief tragic protagonists. The predominant scholarship argues that the major impact of time upon Shakespeare's tragic heroes is through time's action, which exposes and often magnifies their tragic flaws. The canon in this type of literary scholarship is represented by such major works of literary criticism as David Kastan's *Shakespeare and the Shapes of Time* (1982) and Soji Iwasaki's *The Sword and the Word: Shakespeare's Tragic Sense of Time* (1973). These works suggest that time's disastrous effects upon Shakespeare's tragic heroes result mainly from these characters' tragic flaws and, hence, are largely predetermined.

Thus, based on these and other influential works of literary criticism, other very critical impacts of time upon Shakespeare's tragedies have been largely overlooked. In this thesis, I analyze two of William Shakespeare's most famous tragedies, *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. Certainly not by coincidence, much Shakespearean literary criticism focuses on these two tragedies, and furthermore both *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* were greatly concerned with time, both of which led me to focus upon these two plays, rather than his lesser-known plays.

This thesis explores several major questions that I strive to answer. Beginning with *Macbeth*, I address two chief conundrums. First, how does Macbeth's preoccupation with the celerity or the dilatory nature of time compel him to make key decisions that determine his fate? Second, how does Macbeth's insatiable desire to hasten events so as to achieve success impact him? Similarly, I explore two major questions in *Hamlet*. First, is time a subjective, ineluctable force that drives Hamlet toward his tragic demise? Second, how does Hamlet feel such great psychological pressure from time's rapid passage, a pressure that thrusts him into several horrific mistakes, particularly in his efforts to avenge his father's tragic death? Finally, I compare and contrast the ways in which the major characters of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* internalize time pressures in a manner that shapes their tragic destinies.

I suggest that it is not merely the influence of time upon the "tragic flaws" of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* in these two tragedies that cause their ruin. Instead, I argue that time acts in multiple ways upon these chief, tragic protagonists of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*: as a driving force of the plays; as a force that spurs these protagonists to rash and destructive action; and as a constant and even inevitable player upon their exaggerated egos and

weaknesses. This thesis contributes to existing research by showing that Macbeth and Hamlet vividly exemplify the tremendous damage that can result when individuals try to rush or slow down time. Hamlet, for instance, finds that he is trapped in the past, and anxiously anticipates death, which seems to be lurking behind every corner.

Consequently, instead of immediately avenging his father's murder, Hamlet hesitates and seemingly stymies the flow of time. However, as a result of Hamlet's hesitation, as literary critics Barbara Everett and Agnes Heller have noted, much more chaos and many more deaths result than would have happened otherwise. Similarly, Macbeth tries to 'rush the future' by killing Duncan so as to become king sooner, and by killing Banquo to prevent his former friend's heirs from ascending the throne. Macbeth's egregious attempt to tamper with time, in turn, brings on bloody consequences and, later, a bloody death for Macbeth. Likewise, Macbeth's extremely disordered world is made orderly only by Macbeth's death. In these tragedies, Shakespeare, strikingly illustrates the force of time, which is stronger than humans. Shakespeare reveals in these two plays that tomorrow will always come; attempts to tamper with the progression of time result in disaster.



## Chapter II

### Background

The advent of the Renaissance was accompanied by a concomitant concern with the impact of time. Europeans of the Medieval period, preceding the Renaissance, were highly focused on the afterlife. In stark contrast, Renaissance society, although still widely focused on the afterlife, developed a greater concern with earthly life. An excellent example of this difference, as the literary critic Lucas Guj asserts, is that many people during the Renaissance saw the earth as a place where humans “could assert their power and realize their inherent potential” (175). Likewise, the goal of making a name for oneself became of greater value during the Renaissance. Accompanying this interest, however, came the acknowledgement, as Guj adds, “that Man was helpless against time” (175). The mortal life is, after all, mortal; it cannot go on forever, and, thus, individuals remain largely helpless against the overpowering force of time. As the scholar Eric P. Levy argues, “the Renaissance person was temporally insecure, often expressing concern with the saturnine quality of time, construed in terms of menacing and destructive activity, analogous to that of the mythical Saturn, the god who consumed his own offspring” (366, qtd. in Lowe). Moreover, Levy notes, the march of time inevitably leads to the end of life: “For those whose eyes have left the shadows and its seductions, time exacts the greatest pain since the pathos of the fear of death is the greatest known to the human heart” (3, qtd. in Lowe). Thus, what may very well have been of interest to Renaissance society was how one reacts to and against time. Therefore, it is not

surprising that Shakespeare made frequent use of this common motif in his tragedies. In addition to the historical and cultural effects of the Renaissance upon Shakespeare's concept of time in his tragedies, there are three major philosophical categories of time that Shakespeare strikingly employed in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Agnes Heller, in *The Time Is Out of Joint: Shakespeare as Philosopher of History* (2002), categorizes these three key types of time in *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* as 1) time as a "double bind," 2) psychological time versus clock time, and 3) time as "irreversibility." As Heller notes:

[I]n tragedies like *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, the tragedy unfolds around the conflict inherent in the double bind. . . . Is it natural to serve a wicked master or a foolish master, or does acting naturally mean loyalty at all costs? Is it natural when a woman incites her husband to murder out of love? . . . The time is out of joint. Shakespeare portrays the double bind and the tragedies revolving around it. The double bind is not just a personal matter, although it can tear a person apart, as it does Hamlet. (21-22)

Hence, as one can see from this quote, time can have a dual sense in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*: neither right nor wrong, necessarily, but always presenting this terrible double bind to the major characters of these two tragedies. Moreover, according to Heller, Shakespeare found this last point especially compelling:

The fact that the heroes of his tragedies . . . are men and women who cannot escape the double bind, and who interpret and invent themselves with the help of both tradition and natural right, intimates that Shakespeare finds characters subject to the double bind the most interesting and their secrets the most worthy of exploration. (24)

The dichotomy between psychological time and clock time serves as the second major category of time that Shakespeare utilized so vividly in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Here, once again, as in the case of the double bind, Heller finds a complex, dual nature to psychological time versus clock time in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. An excellent example of

this, Heller points out, is the key comparison and contrast in Shakespearean tragedy between psychological time, such as the eternal, the immortal, and the infinite, and clock time, which is signified by the finite, the transient, and the present: “For it is not through the eternal, the immortal, and the infinite that truth . . . is revealed in Shakespeare’s . . . tragedies, but through the finite and the transient that truth is revealed to the finite and the transient” (371). Moreover, Heller distinguishes between psychological time and clock time in Shakespearean tragedy: the existential, or psychological stage and the historical, or clock-based stage. Heller highlights this idea by referring to the dramatic and temporal stages in *Hamlet*: “The purpose of playing . . . was and is, to hold . . . the mirror up to nature, to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (3.2.20-24). As Heller states, “When presenting virtue and vice, one mirrors nature; virtue and vice present themselves as such on the existential stage. But the play also wears the impress of age and time. . . . The mirror, the drama [psychological time], shows virtue and vice. But the pressure of [clock] time modifies them. This is how there are two stages. . . . He does not present one as the true measure and the other as the untrue one” (371-372).

A third major category of time that Shakespeare utilizes in his tragedies of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, according to Heller, is time as “irreversibility”; in other words, time cannot be reversed, no matter how much a person wishes it could be or tries to undo what has occurred:

In politics, ‘missing the proper time’ is an *irreversible* failure. If one misses the proper time to do a thing of political exigency, if one hesitates, if one lets opportunity go unused, similar opportunity will not present itself again. There is no second time or third time; there is only once. . . . Had Hamlet been a politician he would have killed Claudius at the

moment he was praying alone, and he would have ascended the throne with popular support, would have set time right and become a great king. . . . In political terms and in general, missing the proper time is a mistake. But the opposite is also true: catching the proper time can be politically right but can still be a crime. . . . Macbeth had one great opportunity to become king. Lady Macbeth was politically right: if you want to be king—and Macbeth wanted to be king—such a splendid opportunity presents itself only once in a lifetime. The king was sleeping in their castle. Macbeth could easily kill him and ascend the throne—either now or never. And Macbeth catches time, but what is the result? The crime itself becomes his gravest mistake. . . . Hamlet becomes himself in making his downfall irreversible. Hamlet did not catch time, whereas Macbeth did. In Macbeth’s case, catching the time was irreversible. He becomes a murderer, and he cannot wash his hands clean. Neither can Lady Macbeth, as we see in her madness scene. (130-131)

Heller vividly concludes her elucidation of the irreversibility of time in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* by pointing out that “[i]n the tragedies . . . time cannot be set right; no one can set it right” (131).

Heller, as I have previously discussed, makes quite perspicacious and compelling arguments concerning the nature of time in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. One might even pose the rhetorical question, What need is there for further discussion of the complex characteristics and nature of time in these two Shakespearean tragedies? However, in my thesis, I attempt to examine in a novel and holistic manner the great impact of time upon the major characters of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Rather than merely classifying the impact of time upon the chief characters of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* into three major categories, as Heller did, I provide a more comprehensive treatment of time and its impact upon the major dramatic personages of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Throughout my thesis, for example, I provide examples of how time, and its interaction with the central characters of these two Shakespearean tragedies, create very significant psychological and corporeal stresses upon these plays’ central characters, and that these pressures lead them to disaster. Thus,

I see time in a much more holistic light, not merely as a classifying factor, but rather as a principal driving force in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. Thus, I make what I believe is a novel and quite important argument that it is not solely the tragic character flaws that lead the chief characters to their ruin, but, rather, the great mental and physical stresses created by the interaction and the catalytic effect of the inexorable progression of time on the major characters, which lead these characters to their destruction. I explore the nuances of this argument throughout my thesis, and I believe that this is a key feature distinguishing my argument from those of other literary critics, including Heller.

### Chapter III

#### Hamlet

Some literary critics, such as Robert Miola and Brian Richardson, have provided different interpretations of the driving forces of these two plays. They argue that *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* are driven by forces other than those that I have chosen to explore. An excellent example of this is *Hamlet*, which is often interpreted as a Shakespearean tragedy driven by a tragic hero, Hamlet, whose fatal flaw, his indecisiveness, leads him directly toward tragedy. As Graham Holderness notes, “We’re all familiar with the theory of the ‘fatal flaw’ as it is customarily applied to tragedy, including the tragic plays of Shakespeare. The tragic hero is an exemplary individual admired by all; by the community of the drama and by the audience alike; but he is cursed with an Achilles’ heel, a disabling imperfection or weakness of character (in Hamlet’s case, indecisiveness), which leads him directly toward some tragic experience” (Holderness 53). I attempt to go one step farther and argue, as does Heller, that Hamlet’s fatal flaw—his indecisiveness—is only part of a larger problem with time that plagues Hamlet. This disastrous interplay between Hamlet and time, I argue, is the major driving force of *Hamlet*, rather than a fatal flaw in Hamlet’s character. Even literary critics such as Holderness acknowledge that “if Hamlet’s ‘tragic flaw’ is defined as ‘indecision,’ then the ‘tragic flaw’ key will certainly not unlock the mystery of this particular drama. Can

we regard Hamlet as an exemplary character, his integrity fissured only by a reluctance to act?” (Holderness 58).

Hamlet’s great misapprehension of the future accompanies his fatal preoccupation with the past. Levy explicates this dual, tragic nature of time: “Hamlet’s delay presupposes the passage of time—and heightens awareness of the passage of time” (376, qtd. in Lowe). Hamlet’s great delay in killing Claudius causes his awareness of time to become increasingly pronounced as times passes, and, ultimately, forces *Hamlet’s* major characters to acknowledge it. Hamlet, for example, dreads the future, as he senses impending death. As Levy further notes, “In order to accomplish what needs to be done, time must be construed in such a way as to appear less threatening, or else human existence within time must not be made to feel so helpless” (Levy,370). Thus, Hamlet must accept time as inexorable, rather than fearing its progression. Levy asserts that when Hamlet hesitates to carry out his plan to murder Claudius, that “this actually displays trust in temporal movement from the present toward the future. Here, the forward movement of time is welcomed, not feared or resisted”( Levy, 378). In contrast, as Levy further notes, “Claudius does all that he can do to ‘make the future become the past,’ through his efforts to dispose of Hamlet” (Levy, 379). Therefore, Claudius exemplifies a fear of the future, and, consequently, creates additional chaos.

Hence, throughout *Hamlet*, it appears that only through the acceptance of time can the principal characters achieve restoration. Levy asserts that this is of great importance in the play: “Time is set right when the one-way forward flow of time toward the future fructifies or actualizes the potential of the past” (Levy, 386). Hamlet vividly exemplifies this critical observation in that, by trying to accept the future, Hamlet is capable of

precipitating the forward events of the play. Moreover, at *Hamlet's* end, both Claudius and Hamlet face death in the present, instead of in the future: "Because Hamlet learns to accept expiration while it was in the future, he is also capable of handling the proposition in the present" (Levy, 383). Hamlet cries out as he dies, "Had I but time. . . O, I could tell you. . . But let it be" (5.2.341-343). Although Hamlet may be willing to accept the future, that future involves his death. Claudius is, according to Levy, "still caught in the dread of such a fate and obsessed with remaining in the past. Consequently, Hamlet's desires are carried out, but not Claudius's. Thus, the revenge mentality demands fixation in the present on the memory of the past in order to determine movement toward the future" (Levy, 383). Reconciliation with the past is necessary, but literary critics such as Brian Richardson, David Bevington, and Michael Hattaway, argue that it must be tempered by both the desire for and movement toward the future, in order for subsequent goals to be achieved.

Another key way in which time dramatically affects the major characters of *Hamlet* is the combination of time and various kinds of stresses, which, ultimately, leads these characters to disaster. From the beginning of *Hamlet*, for example, Hamlet is plagued by inordinate time pressures that enervate him. Hamlet's friend, Horatio, and the soldier, Marcellus, stir Hamlet's interest in going to the graveyard in the hope of catching sight of and identifying a ghostly apparition. These three arrive at the graveyard at the stroke of midnight, the "witching hour," and the combination of this unpropitious hour and the accompanying stresses that go along with this clock time, rather than merely some character flaw of Hamlet's, soon begin to take their toll on Hamlet. Hamlet opens this scene, for example, with unusual disquiet and apprehension by noting, "The air bites



shrewdly; it is very cold” (1.4.1). Moreover, Hamlet quickly notes that both the striking of the midnight chimes and its significance bode very badly, both for him, and for Denmark:

The King doth wake tonight and take his rouse,  
Keeps wassail, and swaggering uprisng reels,  
And as he drains his draughts of Rhenish down  
The kettledrum and trumpets thus bray out  
The triumph of his pledge . . .  
But to my mind, though I am native here  
And to the manner born, it is a custom  
More honored in the breach than the observance.  
This heavy-handed revel east and west  
Makes us traduced and taxed of other nations.  
They clepe us drunkards and with swinish phrase  
Soil our additions, and indeed it takes  
From our achievements, though performed at height,  
The pith and morrow of our attribute. (1.4.8-22)

Act III similarly reveals how time, not merely Hamlet’s character flaws, in combination with great physical and emotional stress, lead to his tragic demise. Here, Hamlet has the opportunity to avenge his father’s death by killing his uncle Claudius. However, he deliberates at length, which creates a crucial delay. He sees his uncle kneeling before him, unaware, yet Hamlet pauses repeatedly, and, in the end, talks himself out of killing his uncle. Thus, at this juncture, the laborious passage of time, and conscience, weigh heavily on Hamlet, and prevent him from decisive action, causing him to miss the opportunity to kill Claudius and, presumably, to reign happily ever after as the king of Denmark. Even the style of Hamlet’s speech, at this crucial juncture reveals great heaviness and indecision, as it is quite convoluted and hesitant. In a tortured speech, in

which he tries, in vain, to shake off his great lethargy and to end his protracted self-torment, suffering, and hesitation about killing Claudius, Hamlet says:

Now might I do it pat, now 'a tis a-praying,  
 And now I'll do't. And so 'a goes to heaven,  
 And so I am revenged. That would be scanned.  
 A villain kills my father, and for that  
 I, his sole son, do this same villain send  
 To heaven.  
 Why, this is hire and salary, not revenge.  
 'A took my father grossly, full of bread,  
 With all his crimes broad blown, as flush as May;  
 And how his audit stands, who knows save heaven?  
 But in our circumstance and course of thought,  
 'Tis heavy with him; and I am then revenged,  
 To take him in the purging of his soul,  
 When he is fit and seasoned for his passage? No. (3.3.73-87)

Thus, as the quote reveals, it is not due only to some mere character flaw that Hamlet is unable to act decisively; rather, it is the pressure of the inexorable passage of time that creates both psychological and physical stress, and causes his fatal indecisiveness. Here again, for example, the laborious vacillations that Hamlet makes, as he starts and stops, and starts and stops again, to kill his uncle Claudius, strikingly manifest themselves in the greatly roundabout justifications that Hamlet makes for not killing Claudius at that instant. Hamlet again fails to act in time to save himself and his friends, by convincing himself that some future action might be better than decisively killing Claudius in that moment:

Up, sword, and know thou a more horrid hent,  
 When he is drunk asleep, or in his rage,  
 Or in th' incestuous pleasure of his bed,  
 At game a-swearing, or about some act  
 That has no relish of salvation in't—  
 Then trip him, that his heels may kick at heaven,  
 And that his soul may be as damned and black

As hell, whereto it goes. My mother stays.  
This physic but prolongs thy sickly days. (3.3.88-96)

In addition, later in Act 3, when Hamlet finally convinces himself to kill Claudius, the tremendous pressure exerted by that moment causes him to act precipitously, and kill Polonius accidentally, instead of Claudius. Hamlet begins the Act III, Scene 4, for instance, by browbeating his mother: “Come, come and you sit down. You shall not budge. / You go not till I set you up a glass / Where you may see the inmost part of you!” (3.4.19-21). Hamlet’s mother, the queen of Denmark responds in terror: “What wilt thou do? That wilt not murder me? Help, ho!” (3.4.22-23). Hamlet blindly strikes out with his sword, attempting in one fell swoop to eliminate the monstrous psychological and physical pain that has tormented him: “How now? A rat? / Dead for a ducat, dead! (*Thrusts his rapier through the arras and kills Polonius*) (3.4. 24-25).

Similarly, the bodily and psychological stress created not by mere character flaws, but by the incessant, inexorable passage of time, with all of its terrible vicissitudes, drive both Hamlet and his lover, Ophelia, to madness. For example, Ophelia, in deep pain and sorrow, notes how Hamlet appears to have lost his mind. In her famous soliloquy in Act III, Ophelia vividly enumerates all of Hamlet’s great virtues, which, seemingly, have succumbed to madness:

O, what a noble mind is her o’erthrown!  
The courtier’s, the soldier’s, scholar’s, eye, tongue, sword,  
Th’ expectancy and rose of the fair state,  
The glass of fashion, and the mold of form,  
Th’ observed of all observers, quite, quite down!  
And I, of ladies most deject and wretched,  
That sucked the honey of his musicked vows,  
Now see that noble and most sovereign reason  
Like sweet bells jangled, out of time and harsh,  
That unmatched form and feature of blown youth  
Blasted with ecstasy. O woe is me

T' have seen what I have seen, see what I see! (3.1.153-164)

Hamlet, prior to Ophelia's above comments, gives Ophelia every reason to believe that he had lost his mind. For example, Hamlet evidently would prefer that Ophelia spend the rest of her life without a lover, in a nunnery. Why, one might ask, does Hamlet feel this way? Hamlet gives little reason why Ophelia should enter a nunnery, other than that Ophelia has done things that he cannot forgive:

I have heard of your paintings, well enough.  
 God hath given you one face, and you make  
 yourself another. You jib and amble, and you lisp;  
 you nickname God's creatures and make your wantonness your ignorance.  
 Go to, I'll no more  
 on't; it hath made me mad. I say we will have no  
 more marriage. Those that are married already—all  
 but one—shall live. The rest shall keep as they are.  
 To a nunnery, go. (3.1 144-152)

Likewise, in Act IV, Ophelia goes mad and then commits suicide, not merely because of a character flaw, but because of enormous stress created by the terrible and inexorable manner in which time unfolds. Shakespeare makes Ophelia's madness all the more real, and her ranting more lifelike, via Ophelia's vivid imagery that is both familiar and startling. Ophelia, in the throes of madness exclaims bawdily:

By Gis and Saint Charity,  
 Alack, and fie for shame!  
 Young men will do't if they come to it,  
 By Cock, they are to blame.  
 Quoth she, "Before you tumbled me, You promised to wed."  
 He answers:  
 "So would I a done, by yonder sun,  
 And thou hadst not come to my bed." (4.5.58-66)

Later, in Act IV, Ophelia, still hopelessly lost in her madness, sings quite a different tune, one of sadness, death, and goodbyes, rather than one of love and sex:

They bore him barefaced on the bier (*Song*)  
 Hey non nony, nony, hey nony  
 And in his grave rained many a tear—  
 Fare you well, my dove! ...  
 You must sing 'A-down a-down. And you call  
 him a-down a'. O, how the wheel becomes it! It is  
 the false steward that stole his master's daughter....  
 And will'a not come again?  
 And will'a not come again?  
 No, no, he is dead,  
 Go to thy deathbed,  
 He will never come again.  
 His beard was white as snow,  
 All flaxen was his poll.  
 He is gone,  
 And we cast away moan.  
 God' a' mercy on his soul!  
 And of all Christian souls, I pray God. God bye you. (4.4.164-199)

In addition, soon afterwards, in Act IV, Queen Gertrude of Denmark mournfully recounts how the extreme psychological, corporeal, and temporal demands that drove Ophelia to severe madness, ultimately resulted in her tragic suicide:

There is a willow grows askant the brook,  
 That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream:  
 Therewith fantastic garlands did she make  
 Of crow flowers, nettles, daisies, and young purples,  
 That liberal shepards give a grosser name,  
 But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.  
 There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds  
 Clambering to hang, and envious sliver broke,  
 When down her weedy trophies and herself  
 Fell in the weeping brook.... But long it could not be  
 Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
 Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
 To muddy death. (4.7.166-183)

At this point, I return to my discussion of the central thesis, that the great psychological and bodily stresses created by the interaction of time with the chief characters of *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, and not mere character flaws, drive these characters

toward disaster. Thus, I examine more closely three of the most important quotes from *Hamlet* that reflect the great tragedy created by the intersection of the stresses of time and the chief characters in *Hamlet*.

#### Hamlet's "Had I But Time"

Hamlet's "Had I But Time" (5.2.335-341) soliloquy, near the end of the play, can be interpreted in different ways. Each of these ways vividly illustrates how the interaction of time with the chief characters of *Hamlet* creates great psychological and physical stresses that lead these characters toward destruction. For example, this quote can be interpreted literally or figuratively. If taken at face value, Hamlet's "Had I But Time" soliloquy seems to mean that given more time, there is much that Hamlet could have told concerning the remarkable events that had transpired. For example, although Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo all believe that they have seen an apparition, Hamlet is the only character to whom the ghost, Hamlet's dead father, the murdered King of Denmark, revealed his true identity. Moreover, Hamlet is the only character to whom the ghost recounts how Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, seduced Gertrude, Queen of Denmark, and killed Hamlet's father by poisoning, so as to become king. Similarly, Hamlet, given enough time, would have had much to recount concerning his uncle's treacherous role in arranging the fatal duel of foils between Laertes and Hamlet. For, after Laertes and Hamlet have both been wounded by a deadly, poisoned foil, Laertes, just before he dies, confides to Hamlet that Claudius was, ultimately, responsible for Gertrude's death, as he had arranged a cup of poison for Hamlet, but Gertrude inadvertently drank it. Additionally, Laertes also tells Hamlet how Claudius had rigged the foil battle between Laertes and Hamlet, so that Hamlet, alone, would be killed, and Hamlet's father could

retain his power as king. Also, Hamlet, given sufficient time, would, presumably, have been able to describe how Claudius attempted to arrange Hamlet's death in England:

Up from my cabin,  
 My sea gown scarfed about me, in the dark  
 Groped I to find out them, had my desire,  
 Fingered their packet, and in fine withdrew  
 To mine own room again, making so bold,  
 My fears forgetting manners, to unseal  
 Their grand commission; where I found, Horatio—  
 Ah, royal knavery!—an exact command,  
 Larded with many several sorts of reasons,  
 Importing Denmark's health, and England's too,  
 With, ho, such bugs and goblins in my life,  
 That on the supervise, no leisure bated,  
 No, not to stay the grinding of the ax,  
 My head should be struck off. (5.2.12-24).

In addition, if Hamlet had time to do so, he would have recounted the most revealing, secret knowledge regarding his strange behavior toward Ophelia, which may have contributed to her madness and, ultimately, her suicide.

If taken figuratively, Hamlet's "Had I But Time" (5.2. 335-341) soliloquy appears to symbolize how *Hamlet's* major characters seem to lack sufficient time to bring their plans to fruition. For example, if Hamlet had avoided his fatal battle of foils with Laertes, he very well might have become king of Denmark and lived a long and prosperous life. Similarly, if Hamlet had more time to carefully consider his actions before he rashly stabbed Polonius to death, then Laertes would not have felt obligated to avenge Polonius's death, and hence, there would have been no need for the fatal battle that killed both Hamlet and Laertes. Likewise, if Gertrude had more time to consider her actions, she might not have so rashly reached for the cup of poison intended to kill Hamlet, and could have avoided her death. Likewise, if Ophelia had more time to realize that Hamlet

loved her and did not wish her any harm, then, perhaps, she might not have descended into madness and committed suicide. Overall, if Hamlet had more time to think carefully, then he might have realized the exigency of killing his incestuous uncle sooner, before his uncle arranged the final snare that resulted in Hamlet's death.

### Hamlet's "Whips and Scorns of Time"

Hamlet's "whips and scorns of time" soliloquy (3.1.70) (within his renowned "To be, or not to be" (3.1.56) soliloquy) can be interpreted in several ways. Each of these ways strikingly shows how the tremendous psychological and physical stresses created by time's interaction with the major characters lead these characters to disaster. One way is whether life, despite its numerous tribulations, is preferable to death. In this interpretation, "the whips and scorns of time" (3.1.70) can be seen as a symbol of just how harsh these tribulations of life can be. Hamlet does not merely ponder the question of whether life is preferable to death but enumerates several reasons why death might be preferable to life:

To be, or not to be: that is the question:  
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
 And by opposing end them.  
 To die, to sleep—  
 No more—and by a sleep to say we end  
 The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks  
 That flesh is heir to! 'Tis a consummation  
 Devoutly to be wished. To die, to sleep—To sleep—  
 perchance to dream: ay there's the rub,  
 For in that sleep of death what dreams may come  
 When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,  
 Must give us pause. There's the respect  
 That makes calamity of so long life:  
 For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,  
 Th' oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,



The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,  
 The insolence of offence, and the spurns  
 That patient merit of th' unworthy takes,  
 When he himself might his quietus make  
 With a bare bodkin? Who would fardels bear,  
 To grunt and sweat under a weary life,  
 But that the dread of something after death,  
 The undiscovered country, from whose bourn  
 No traveler returns, puzzles the will,  
 And makes us rather bear those ills we have,  
 Than fly to others that we know not of?  
 Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,  
 And thus the native hue of resolution  
 Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,  
 And enterprises of great pitch moment,  
 With this regard their currents turn awry,  
 And lose the name of action. (3.1 56-87)

Another way that Hamlet's "the whips and scorns of time" (3.1.70) could be interpreted is that it is often difficult to avoid indecision and to take "correct" action at the proper time. For example, Hamlet reluctantly admits to his mother that he understands how her biological urges might have overruled her good sense, when she struck up an incestuous relationship with Hamlet's uncle (her murdered husband's brother): "Proclaim no shame when the compulsive ardor give the charge / Since frost itself as actively doth burn, / And reason panders will" (3.4.86-89). Moreover, in the last act, Hamlet notes the fickle nature of time, human will and action:

Sir, in my heart there was a kind of fighting  
 That would not let me sleep.  
 Me thought I lay  
 Worse than the mutines in the bilboes.  
 Rashly (and praise be rashness for it) let us know,  
 Our indiscretion sometimes serves us well  
 When our deep plots do pall, and that should learn us  
 There's a divinity that shapes our ends,  
 Rough-hew them how we will. (5.2.4-11)

And, to conclude my analysis of the pressures of time, another soliloquy by Hamlet even more clearly shows how “the whips and scorns of time” (3.1.70) can pressure one to dodge necessary action to avoid disaster:

How all occasions do inform against me  
 And spur my dull revenge!  
 What is man,  
 If his chief good and market of his time  
 Be but to sleep and feed?  
 A beast, no more.  
 Sure that he made us with such large discourse,  
 Looking before and after, gave us not  
 That capability and godlike reason  
 To fust in us unused. Now, whether it be  
 Bestial oblivion, or some craven scruple  
 Of thinking too precisely on th' event—  
 A thought which quartered, hath but one part wisdom  
 And ever three parts coward—I do not know  
 Why yet I live to say, “This thing’s to do,”  
 Sith I have cause and will and strength, and means  
 To do’t. Examples gross as earth exhort me.  
 Witness this army of such mass and charge,  
 Led by a delicate and tender prince,  
 Whose spirit, with divine ambition puffed,  
 Makes mouths at the invisible event,  
 Exposing what is moral and unsure  
 To all that fortune, death, and danger dare,  
 Even for an eggshell. Rightly to be great  
 Is not to stir without great argument,  
 But greatly to find quarrel in a straw  
 When honor’s at stake. How stand I then,  
 That have a father killed, a mother stained,  
 Excitements of my reason and blood,  
 And let all sleep, while to my shame I see  
 The imminent death of twenty thousand men  
 That for a fantasy and trick of fame  
 Go to their graves like beds, fight for a plot  
 Whereon the numbers cannot try the cause,  
 Which is not tomb enough and continent  
 To hide the slain? O, from this time forth,  
 My thoughts be bloody or be nothing worth! (4.4. 32-66)

Hamlet’s “Time Is Out of Joint”

Hamlet's observation that "time is out of joint" (1.4.188) also lends itself to more than one interpretation. Each of these interpretations clearly illustrates how the great mental and corporeal stresses created by time's interaction with the chief characters of *Hamlet* lead these characters toward destruction. For example, the quote is metaphorical. In the same way that a broken bone or joint can be said to be "out of joint," Shakespeare seems to signify that the expected and correct progression of time in Hamlet's Denmark has been broken by the murder of Hamlet's father by Hamlet's uncle. This should not have happened, it was not expected—the king should have lived a long life. Even Hamlet's friend Horatio, forcefully notes this breakage in time's expected progression: "O day and night, but this is wondrous strange!" (1.5.164). Hamlet's statement, "The time is out of joint" (1.5.188) conveys the terribly destructive acts that have broken the "joint" of time, the natural temporal progression of events in Denmark, events that Hamlet learns about by conversing with the ghost of his father. Hamlet learns from his father's ghost that the brother of Hamlet's father, "that incestuous, that adulterate beast. / With witchcraft of his wit, with traitorous gifts / ... won to his shameful lust / The will" (1.5.42-46) of Hamlet's mother. Hamlet's worst suspicions are confirmed. In addition, further emphasizing the broken, unnatural, break in time in Denmark, Hamlet's uncle kills his brother, the King, during a very peaceful time, when he is asleep: "Sleeping within my orchard, / My custom always of the afternoon, / Upon my secure hour thy uncle stole / With juice of cursed hebona in a vial, / And in the porches of my ear did pour / The leprous distilment, whose effect / Holds such an enmity with blood of man ..." (1.5.59-65).

Furthermore, the quote, “The time is out of joint” (1.5.188) has romantic and sexual connotations. These connotations, similarly, reveal how the great mental and physical stresses created by time’s interaction with the major characters of *Hamlet* lead these characters to their destruction. The much-esteemed marriage between Hamlet’s father and mother is rent asunder by his mother’s affair with her husband’s brother. Likewise, Hamlet’s intense romantic relationship with Ophelia is also irreparably broken. What appears to signal a romantic, sexual encounter between Hamlet and Ophelia is quickly broken apart, thrown “out of joint” (1.5.188):

Hamlet: Lady [Ophelia], shall I lie in your lap?  
 Ophelia: No, my lord.  
 Hamlet: I mean, my head upon your lap?  
 Ophelia: Ay, my lord.  
 Hamlet: Do you think I meant country matters?  
 Ophelia: I think nothing, my lord.  
 Hamlet: That’s a fair thought to lie between maids’ legs.  
 Ophelia: What is, my lord?  
 Hamlet: Nothing. (3.2.115-124)

Similarly Hamlet has so dissevered his romantic relationship with Ophelia that he commands her, “Get thee to a nunnery./ Go, farewell. / Or if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool, for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. / To a nunnery, go, and quickly too. Farewell” (3.1.138-142).

Thus, Hamlet’s quote, “The time is out of joint,” (1.5.188) could also represent the broken psyches of Hamlet and Ophelia and their descent into madness. Polonius notes Hamlet’s seeming madness early on in the play: “Lord Hamlet is a prince out of thy star.... / he, repelled, a short tale to make, fell into a sadness, then into a fast, / Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness, / Thence to a lightness, and by this decision, / Into the

madness wherein he now raves, / And all we mourn for” (2.2.141-151). Ophelia later notes Hamlet’s apparent madness even more vividly:

O what a noble mind is here o’erthrown! . . .  
 The glass of fashion, and the mold of form,  
 Th’ observed of all observers, quite, quite down!  
 And I ... now see that noble and most sovereign reason  
 Like sweet bells jangled, out of time and harsh  
 That unmatched form and feature of blown youth  
 Blasted with ecstasy. O woe is me  
 T’ have seen what I have seen, see what I see! (3.1.153-164)

Similarly, now Ophelia, too, descends into madness. First, she begins acting crazily and singing gibberish: “You must sing ‘A-down a-down, / and you call him a-down a.’ / O, how the wheel becomes it! / It is the false steward that stole his master’s daughter” (4.5.170-172). And, then Ophelia commits suicide in a bizarre fashion:

Therewith fantastic garlands did she make  
 Of crowsfeet, nettles, daisies, and long purples,  
 . . . Her clothes spread wide,  
 And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up,  
 Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds...  
 But long it could not be  
 Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
 Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay  
 To muddy death. (4.7. 168-183)

## Chapter IV

### Macbeth

Some literary critics of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, such as Douglas Peterson, Matthew D. Wagner, Harry Levin, and Graham Holderness, believe that, as in *Hamlet*, the driving force of *Macbeth* is Macbeth's "fatal flaw," which leads to his downfall. The most cited flaw is Macbeth's ambition, which Holderness cites as the major precipitating cause of this play's tragedy:

Clearly, Macbeth himself can be identified as the tragic protagonist, the noble hero with a single tragic suffering, since his flawed nobility commands our sense of compassion; we feel fear at the terrible ravages exacted by fate, and a shudder of apprehension at the thought that we, too, may harbor a similar tragic imperfection. Ultimately, therefore, in this theoretical perspective, *Macbeth* can be seen as a dire warning against any attempt, however well-meaning or misguided, to challenge the supreme laws of nature or the dominant authority of the gods." (Holderness 60)

Again, I argue, as I do for *Hamlet*, that the major catalyst of the play is not Macbeth's tragic flaw—his blind ambition—but, rather, is the tragic interplay between Macbeth and time, with its accompanying terrible psychological and physical stresses. What, I believe, lends a unique aspect to my argument is that throughout *Macbeth*, not only Macbeth, but also Lady Macbeth, Duncan, Macduff, and Malcolm, face terrible time pressures that often take on a staccato momentum and build to a terrifying crescendo, resulting in murders and bloodshed. Macbeth's soliloquy that follows exemplifies this exigency of time:

If it were done when 'tis done, the 'twere well it done quickly.  
If the assassination could trammel up the consequence, and catch,

With his surcease, success, that but this blow  
 Might be the be-all and the end-all-here.  
 But here, upon this bank and shoal of time,  
 We'd jump the life to come. (Barnet, 10-11)

As the literary critics A.C. Bradley, Luisa Guj, and Susan Snyder point out, Macbeth demonstrates great confusion and pain that result from his attempts to control the speed of time. Near the beginning of the play, for example, Macbeth attempts to direct time according to his own desires, and unwisely rushes the future by killing Duncan, instead of allowing the witches' prophecy to unfold naturally. Moreover, another principal character in *Macbeth*, Banquo, envisions time as a "growing process" (Guj, 181), even when the witches tell him, "Thou shall get kings, though thou be none" (1.3.70). In contrast, Macbeth seems to believe that he can dictate time according to his own whims. The witches, for instance, according to Guj, "place Macbeth in a temporal sequence of past, present, and future in the first prophecies they give him naming him 'Thane of Glamis'—his past title—'Thane of Cawdor'—his current title, although he does not realize it yet—and 'that shall be king'—a title that has certainly not yet come to pass" (183-184). Likewise, the seeming promise that future time holds for Macbeth prompts him to try to speed up time. The time that stretches before Macbeth gives "him hopes that encourage fixation on time" (Lowe, 178), and he accelerates it by hastening Duncan's death and tampering with the natural order. As Levy notes, "By plunging time into chaos, Macbeth drags his entire world, as well, into terror and great destruction" (Lowe, 180). Subsequent to Macbeth's initial attempt to rush the future, his fixation on the future rapidly changes to fear and he tries to slow down time. Despite his earlier attempts to push time forward by killing Duncan, Macbeth later attempts to stop the "natural unfolding of time by trying to prevent the succession of Banquo's progeny,"

(Lowe, 180), by murdering Banquo and attempting to murder Fleance. Thus, Macbeth tries very hard to make the present last forever. Although Macbeth hesitates initially because he considers his newly gained titles to be “borrowed robes” (1.3.115), Macbeth becomes extremely arrogant when he learns that those titles may soon be his. Subsequently, Macbeth rejects the “borrowed” (Lowe, 180 ) status of his titles. Moreover, by acquiring knowledge of the future, Macbeth believes that he is exceptionally powerful. Thus, as Levy continues, “he dismisses God’s plan, which has to unfold in time, and in so doing, deceives himself into believing that he may partake in God’s foreknowledge” (Lowe, 181). Moreover, as the critics Frank Amon and Susan Snyder point out, Macbeth now assumes that he is safe, both because of the ambiguous prophecies that the witches have made, and because of Macbeth’s own, obsessive desires to remain safe inside an eternal present. It appears likely, as Alfred Harbage points out, that if not for his extreme arrogance in believing that he has the right and power to control time, Macbeth would not have suffered such devastating destruction and chaos.

Near the end of *Macbeth*, restoration, and the correction of egregious errors by the play’s characters, can only occur after Macbeth is killed. Macbeth may perceive himself to be safe, in part because of the witches’ ambiguous predictions, and also because of his own desire to perceive himself safe. Unfortunately for Macbeth, however, he does not comprehend that, in attempting to dictate time, and perceive himself safe, he unbalances his world. Macbeth is “creating such an atmosphere that allows seemingly impossible events to become possible” (Guj, 185). For example, can there exist such a man who is not of “woman born” (4.1.91)? It is only after these chaotic predictions come true that time can be restored to the world of *Macbeth’s* characters. Thus, Macbeth’s great



irrationality toward time comes back to haunt him: “Macbeth is ultimately slain by Macduff . . . allowing time to move forward again” (Guj, 186). After Macbeth’s death, his desire for a continuous present ends. “The future is allowed to progress naturally once more, the madness ends, and order is restored” (186).

There is a close parallel between *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* in terms of their relationship with time. A crucial manner in which time dramatically affects the major characters of *Macbeth*, other than merely because of characters’ tragic flaws, is the combination of time and various mental and physical stresses, which, ultimately, lead these characters to disaster. At the very beginning of *Macbeth*, for example, there is great confusion for the three witches about the time, the weather, and the situation. There is so much confusion that fair cannot be distinguished from foul:

First Witch: When shall we three meet again?  
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

Second Witch: When hurlyburly’s done,  
When the battle’s lost and won.

Third Witch: That will be ere the set of sun . . .

First Witch: Where is the place?

Second Witch: Upon the heath.

Third Witch: There to meet with Macbeth.

All: Fair is foul, and foul is fair. /  
Hover through the fog and filthy air.” (1.1.1-11)

Similarly, near the end of Act I, scene 5, Lady Macbeth conflates images of the light of life and time, with images of darkness and death:

The raven himself is hoarse. That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan

Under my battlements. Come you spirits  
 That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,  
 And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full  
 Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood,  
 Stop up th' access and passage to remorse,  
 That no compunctious visitings of nature  
 Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
 Th' effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,  
 And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring minister,  
 Wherever in your sightless substances  
 You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,  
 and pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,  
 That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,  
 Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,  
 To cry 'Hold, hold! (1.5.39-54)

Likewise, at the conclusion of Act I, scene 5 of *Macbeth*, the great psychological and physical stress facing Lady Macbeth, created by the inexorable passage of time, inspires her to see time as something that must be tricked, if the murder of King Duncan is to proceed as planned:

O, never  
 Shall sun that morrow see!  
 Your face, my Thane, is as a book where men  
 May read strange matters. To beguile the time,  
 Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye.  
 Your hand, your tongue: look like th' innocent flower.  
 But be the serpent under 't. He that's coming  
 Must be provided for: and you shall put  
 This night's great business into my dispatch;  
 Which shall to all our nights and days to come  
 Give solely sovereign sway and masterdom....  
 Only look up clear.  
 To alter favor ever is to fear.  
 Leave all the rest to me. (1.5.62-75)

Likewise, in Act III, the same terrible time pressures that afflicted Lady Macbeth, now greatly pressure Macbeth into a second murder, that of Banquo. For example, everything concerning this murder must, according to Macbeth, be done immediately and

swiftly. It is as if Macbeth feels inexorably compelled, with each passing moment, to murder Banquo, just as he earlier murdered King Duncan. Moreover, Macbeth seems to believe, that unless he acts *now*, then all will be lost. Speaking to Banquo's two murderers, Macbeth states:

Your spirits shine through you. Within this  
hour at most  
I will advise you where to plant yourselves.  
Acquaint you with the perfect spy o' th' time,  
The moment on't, for t' must be done tonight,  
And something from the palace; always thought  
That I require a clearness: and with him—  
To leave no rubs or blotches in the work—  
Fleance his son, that keeps him company,  
Whose absence is no less material to me  
Than his father's, /must embrace the fate  
Of that dark hour. Resolve yourselves apart:  
I'll come to you anon. (3.1. 127-138)

Moreover, after Macbeth has finalized his plans for his second murder, the murder of Banquo, Macbeth, in the same way that his wife did in Act I, conflates the polar opposites of times of day, light and darkness. It is as if by invoking darkness, rather than light, that Macbeth hopes to cleanse himself of Banquo's murder. Thus, once again "fair is foul, and foul is fair" arises:

Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck,  
Till thou applaud the deed. Come, seeling night,  
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day  
And with thy bloody and invisible hand  
Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond  
Which keeps me pale! Light thickens, and the crow  
Makes wing to th' rooky wood.  
Good things of day begin to droop and drowse,  
Whiles night's black agents to their preys do rouse.  
Thou marvel'st at my words: but hold thee still;  
Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill:  
So, prithee, go with me. (3.3.44-56)

Macbeth is not satisfied with having killed King Duncan and Banquo. The great psychological and corporeal pressures that the unyielding pressure of time brings to bear upon Macbeth in Act 4, impel Macbeth to kill Macduff and all of Macduff's family, of which he declares:

Time, thou anticipat'st my dread exploits.  
 The flighty purpose never is o'er took  
 Unless the deed go with it. From this moment  
 The very firstlings of my hand. And even now,  
 To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done:  
 The castle of Macduff I will surprise;  
 Seize upon Fife; give to th' edge o' th' sword  
 His wife, his babies, and all unfortunate souls  
 That trace him in his line. No boasting like a fool;  
 This deed I'll do before this purpose cool:  
 But no more sights! Where are these gentlemen?  
 Come, bring me where they are. (4.1.143-156)

Again, in the final act, the terrible pressures created by the unyielding interaction of time with Macbeth's desires to control it, lead him to his own tragedy and death. In the final scene of the play, Macbeth's unbridled temper compels him to engage in what he knows to be futile hand-to-hand combat with Macduff's advancing army. As a result, Macbeth is killed, and all of Macbeth's murders, and all of his vast property, now appear futile and empty to Macbeth:

I will not yield,  
 to kiss the ground before young Malcom's feet,  
 and to be baited with the rabble's curse.  
 Though Birnam Wood be come to Dunsinane,  
 And thou opposed, being of no woman born,  
 Yet, I will try the last. Before my body  
 I throw my warlike shield. Lay on Macduff;  
 And damned be him that first cries "Hold, enough!" (5.8.27-33).

Likewise, Macbeth attempts to evade the terrible psychological and bodily stresses that his interaction with time creates for him, when he weighs the consequences of murdering King Duncan; “I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself / And falls on th’ other (1.7. 25-28).

Macbeth’s “If Chance Will Have Me King”

Macbeth’s declaration, “If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me” (1.3. 141-142) in scene 3 of Act 1 appears to have multiple meanings. All of these meanings clearly show how the terrible mental and physical stresses created by time’s interaction with the major characters of *Macbeth*, lead these characters to their destruction. Macbeth seems to mean that he is both mulling over killing Duncan and hoping for the opportunity to become king by chance, rather than having to kill or remove those ahead of him in line to the crown. The following speech by Macbeth vividly reveals these dual desires:

Two truths are told,  
 As happy prologues to the swelling act  
 Of the imperial theme.—I thank you, gentlemen.—  
 [Aside] This supernatural soliciting  
 Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,  
 Why hath it given me earnest success,  
 Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor:  
 If good, why do I yield to that suggestion  
 Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair  
 And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,  
 Against the use of nature?  
 Present fears are less so my single state of man that function  
 Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is but what is not. (1.3.127-142)

Similarly, later on in *Macbeth*, after King Duncan greets Macbeth using his new title, “Cawdor,” Macbeth has similar doubts about whether chance alone will elevate him to king, or if he will have to commit murder to become king:

King: “My worthy Cawdor!” (1.5.48)

Macbeth: [Aside]: The Prince of Cumberland!  
That is a step on which I must fall down, or else o’erleap,  
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires;  
Let not light see my black and deep desires:  
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be which the eye fears, when it is  
done, to see. (1.5. 49-54)

In conclusion, Macbeth’s lengthy soliloquy in Act 2, perhaps best reveals this tension between his hope that chance will make him king, or if he will have to make this happen by committing murders:

Is this a dagger, which I see before me,  
The handle toward my hand ? Come let me clutch thee.  
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.  
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible  
To feeling as to sight, or art thou but  
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,  
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?  
I see thee yet, in form as palpable  
As this which now I draw.  
Thou marshal’st me the way that I was going;  
And such an instrument I was to use.  
Mine eyes are made the fool’s o’ th’ other senses,  
Or else worth all the rest. I see thee still;  
And on thy blade and dudgeon gouts of blood,  
Which was not so before. There’s no such thing.  
It is the bloody business which informs  
Thus to mine eyes. Now o’er the one half-world  
Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse  
The curtained sleep; witchcraft celebrates  
Pure Hecate’s offerings; and withered murder,  
Alarumed by his sentinel, the wolf,  
Whose howl’s his watch, thus with his stealthy pace  
With Tarquin’s ravishing strides, towards his design  
Moves like a ghost. Thou sure and firm-set earth,

Hear not my steps, which way they walk, for fear  
 Thy very stones prate of my whereabouts,  
 And take the present horror from the tie,  
 Which now suits with it. Whiles I threat, he lives;  
 Words to the heat of deeds too cold blood gives. (2.1.33-61)

“The Seeds of Time”

Banquo’s comment about time’s ultimate power, near the start of *Macbeth*, indicates that time is all powerful and that humans are at its mercy. “If you can look into the seeds of time, / And say which grain will grow and which will not, / Speak then to me, who neither beg nor fear / Your favors nor your hate” (1.3. 58-61). This can be interpreted in different ways. Each of these ways strikingly illustrates how the great psychological and corporeal stresses created by time’s interaction with the chief characters of *Macbeth* lead these characters toward ruin. For example, Shakespeare appears to utilize the metaphor of “the seeds of time” (1.3.58) to reflect the unknown elements of the future. Banquo, for instance, exhorts the three witches to “look into the seeds of time, /And say which grain will grow and which will not,” (1.3.58-59), so that he and Macbeth both may learn of their destinies. Moreover, as so often happens, Macbeth fails to understand exactly what the witches are predicting for him and so he pleads,

Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more:  
 By Sinel’s death I know I am Thane of Glamis;  
 But how of Cawdor? The Thane of Cawdor lives,  
 A prosperous gentleman; and to be king  
 Stands not within the prospect of belief  
 No more than to be Cawdor. Say from whence  
 You owe this strange intelligence? Or why  
 Upon this blasted heath you stop our way  
 With such prophetic greeting? Speak I charge you. (1.3.70-78)

Like Banquo, Macbeth, too, is puzzled by the three witches' prophecies: "The earth hath bubbles as the water has, / And these are of them. / Whither are they vanished? / Were such things here as we do speak about? Or have we eaten on the insane root / That takes the reason prisoner?" (1.3.79-85).

Furthermore, this great confusion that Macbeth and Banquo experience, when they hear additional prophecies by the three witches who "look into the seeds of time" (1.3.58), is a recurrent theme in *Macbeth*. The opening scene of Act 4 provides particularly vivid evidence of this theme:

Macbeth: How now you secret, black, and midnight hags! What is't you do?

All: A deed without a name.

Macbeth: I conjure you, by that which you profess,  
Howe'er you come to know it, answer me:  
Though you untie the winds and let them fight  
Against the churches; though the yeasty waves  
Confound and swallow navigation up;  
Though bladed corn be lodged and trees blown down;  
Though castles topple on their warders' heads;  
Though palaces and pyramids do slope  
Their heads to their foundations; though the treasure  
Of nature's germens tumble all together,  
Even till destruction sicken, answer me  
To what I ask you.

First Apparition: Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! Beware Macduff! Beware the Thane of Fife.

Macbeth: What'er thou art, for thy good caution thanks:  
Thou hast harped my fear aright. But one word more—

Second Apparition: Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth!

Macbeth: Had I three ears, I'd hear thee.

Second Apparition: Be bloody, bold, and resolute! Laugh to scorn  
The pow'r of man, for none of woman born



Shall harm Macbeth.

Macbeth: What is this  
That rises like the issue of a king,  
And wears upon his baby-brow the round  
And top of sovereignty?

Third Apparition: Be lion-mettled, proud, and take no care  
Who chafes, who frets, or where conspirers are: Macbeth shall never  
vanquished be until Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill Shall  
come against him.

Macbeth: I will be satisfied. Deny me this,  
And an eternal curse fall on you!  
Let me know. Why sinks that cauldron?  
And what noise is this? (4.1.47-106)

To conclude, extremely unhappily for both Banquo and Macbeth, these three witches' prophecies, which they fail to understand, come true, and both Banquo and Macbeth die terrible deaths, exactly in the manner in which the three witches predicted.

*Macbeth's* "If it were done when 'tis done"

Macbeth's comment, "If it were done when 'tis done" (1.7.1), contains quite a bit of complexity and thought. This quote, in full, reads: "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly" (1.7.1-2). This quote, too, clearly reveals how the tremendous mental and physical stresses created by time's interaction with the major characters of *Macbeth* leads them toward destruction. One very important idea that Macbeth conveys is that he believes that if, by murdering the king, all of his troubles will vanish, which gives Macbeth the nerve to commit this evil deed: "If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well it were done quickly. If th' assassination/ Could trammel up the consequence, and catch, / With his surcease, success; that but this blow / Might be the be-all and end-all—here, / But here, upon this bank and shoal of time, / We'd jump to the

life to come” (1.7.1-7). However, Macbeth quickly corrects his previous line of thought, and enumerates the terrible consequences of murder: “But in these cases / We still have judgment here; that we but teach / Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return /To plague th’ inventor: this even-handed justice / Commands th’ ingredients of our poisoned chalice / To our own lips” (1.7. 5-12). Subsequently, Macbeth realizes how horrible the consequences would be if he killed his kinsman, the king, who has many great qualities:

He’s here in double trust:  
 First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,  
 Strong both against deed; then, as his host,  
 Who should against his murder shut the door,  
 Not bear the knife myself.  
 Besides, this Duncan Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been  
 So clear in his great office, that his virtues  
 Will plead like angels trumpet-tongued against  
 The deep damnation of his taking-off;  
 And pity, like a naked newborn babe,  
 Striding the blast, or heaven’s cherubim, horsed  
 Upon the sightless couriers of the air,  
 Shall blow the horrid deed in every eye,  
 That tears shall drown the wind (1.7.12-25).

Macbeth ends his soliloquy with his reluctance to kill the great King Duncan: “I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition, which o’erleaps itself / And falls on th’ other—” (1.7. 25-28).

To conclude, Macbeth’s soliloquy, which begins, “If it were done when ’tis done,” (1.7.1) takes on even more complexity and meaning. Lady Macbeth angrily confronts her husband, and vehemently goads him into murdering the king:

Lady Macbeth: He has almost supped. Why have you left the chamber?

Macbeth: Hath he asked for me?

Lady Macbeth: Know you not he has?

Macbeth: We will proceed no further in this business: He hath honored me of late, and I have bought Golden opinions from all sorts of people, Which would be worn now in their newest gloss, Not cast aside so soon.

Lady Macbeth: Was the hope drunk Wherein you dressed herself? Hath it slept since? And wakes it now, to look so green and pale At what it did so freely? From this time Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard To be the same in thine own act and valor As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that which thou esteem'st the ornament of life, And live a coward in thine own esteem, Letting "I dare not" wait upon I would," Like the poor cat I' the adage?

Macbeth: Prithee peace! I dare do all that may become a man; Who dares do more is none.

Lady Macbeth: What beast was 't then / That made you break this enterprise to me? / When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man. / Nor time nor place / Did then adhere, and yet you would make both. / They have made themselves, and that their fitness now / 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 plucked my nipple from his boneless gums, / And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you / Have done to this. (1.7.28-57)

“ Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow”

Macbeth's soliloquy, "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow," (5.2.19) contains a great wealth of meaning about his experience of time. This quote, for instance, vividly shows how the terrible psychological and corporeal stresses created by the interaction of time with the chief characters of *Macbeth* lead them toward disaster. For example, the beginning of this quote is Macbeth's powerful response to news of his mother's death: "She should have died hereafter; / There would have been a time for such a word" (5.2.17-18). Furthermore, the ensuing lines reflect Macbeth's contemplation of the nothingness, the hopelessness, the futility of life, as he sees it through his lens of time:

“Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow/ Creeps in this petty pace from day to day” (5.2.19-20). And, not only is life futile from day to day, Macbeth emphasizes, but it is futile for eternity: “To the last syllable of recorded time” (5.2.21). Moreover, Macbeth adds that all feelings, memories, desires, and experiences are, ultimately, meaningless and futile, because they end in death: “And all our yesterdays have lighted fools / The way to dusty death” (5.2.22-23). At this point in his soliloquy, Macbeth is overcome by helplessness and asks death to overtake him: “Out, out, brief candle!” (5.2.23). Again, he refers to life’s shortness—it is just a brief candle in time. In addition, after this call for death, Macbeth utilizes the symbolism of a staged play and its actors to emphasize the emptiness and meaninglessness of life: “Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player / That struts and frets his hour upon the stage / And then is heard no more” (5.2. 24-26). Here, again, is a reference to life’s brevity: “his hour upon the stage.” This theatrical imagery is, in itself, quite powerful, but it gains even further relevance from the Scotch nobleman, Ross, who highlights the seeming meaninglessness, pain and brevity of life: “Ha, good father, / Thou seest the heavens, and troubled with man’s act, / Threatens his bloody stage. / By th’ clock ‘tis day, / And yet dark night strangles the traveling lamp: / Is’t night’s predominance, or the day’s shame, / That darkness does the face of the earth entomb, / When living light should kiss it?” (2.4.4-9). Macbeth’s final soliloquy “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow” more strongly emphasizes the utter futility and nothingness of life. In these final lines, Shakespeare was able, with just fifteen words, to convey the sense of meaninglessness of our short lives.

## Chapter V

### Conclusion

I return now to the central thesis of my paper which is that it is not merely character flaws that lead to tragedy in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, but rather Hamlet and Macbeth's interactions with and perceptions of time, and the accompanying psychological and bodily pressures that the inexorable progression of time places upon them, which cause their ruin. These temporal pressures, ultimately, drive both Macbeth and Hamlet to their untimely deaths. And, in a larger sense, this tension created by their perceptions of time and their attempts to control it, is what propels both plays forward. For example, not only does Hamlet's failure to make haste and kill Claudius, so that he can claim the throne, cause Hamlet's premature death, but it also causes the deaths of his mother, his beloved Ophelia, his uncle Claudius, Laertes, and Polonius. Thus, just as time steadily and incrementally increases throughout the play, so, too, do the deaths of these characters steadily accumulate in Hamlet's response to these temporal pressures. Likewise, it is not only Macbeth's inability to curb his lust for power that drives him to successive murders and result in his downfall, but also the accompanying psychological and bodily pressures from the inexorable progression of time that lead to disaster and death. As Lady Macbeth so aptly notes, it is impossible to wash away the blood that has been shed as a result of these pressures. This is quite apparent and tragic in both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*.

The central thesis of my paper also fits quite well with gender-based literary criticism of *Macbeth*, although gender-based criticism does not go far enough in recognizing the extremely crucial psychological and bodily pressures that time's interaction with the central characters of *Macbeth* creates, which lead to their destruction. This is because Lady Macbeth and Macbeth both have their respective strong and weak points, but both are ultimately subject to and defeated by time's terrible vicissitudes. As Macbeth very sadly notes, in a soliloquy, when he hears that Lady Macbeth died, "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow," always arrives, and men and women both are left upon their deaths with nothing but dust. This temporal synchronicity between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth leads to the gender-based point that Lady Macbeth can be seen, in effect as "one personality" (Chiu, 44). Here, Freudian psychoanalytic literary criticism of *Macbeth*, like gender-based literary criticism of *Macbeth*, vividly exemplifies the central argument of my thesis, although it, too, fails to appreciate the terribly destructive interaction of time with the main characters in *Macbeth*, which leads to their destruction. For example, Freud claimed that Shakespeare "would often split a character into two parts" (Freud, 323). Thus, in many ways, Freud argued that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are so equal that "together they exhaust the possibilities of reaction to [the murder of King Duncan of Scotland], like a single physical individuality" (Freud, 324). Thus, "the germs of fear which break out in Macbeth upon the first murder, though they are indeed brewing in Macbeth, ultimately surface in Lady Macbeth" (Chiu, 44) as well. Sigmund Freud utilizes this temporal and character convergence, and shows how the rapid action of the play and the switching between *his* and *hers* results in a merging of the two characters' sense of guilt:

It is he [Macbeth] who has the hallucinations of the dagger before the crime; but it is she [Lady Macbeth] who afterwards falls ill of a mental disorder. It is he who after the murder hears the cry in the house: 'Sleep no more!' Macbeth does murder sleep . . . and so 'Macbeth shall sleep no more'; but we never hear that *he* slept no more, while the Queen, as we see, rises from her bed and, talking in her sleep, betrays her guilt. Thus, what he feared in his pangs of conscience is fulfilled in her." (Freud, 324)

Chiu notices a synchronicity too, yet of opposites. "Thus, she becomes all remorse while he is all defiance," (Chiu, 44) and, under other temporal circumstances, vice-versa.

The main thesis of this paper is that it is not merely character flaws, but also the great stresses that the inexorable passage of time creates for the chief characters of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, and their attempts to control time—their future and their past—which leads to their downfalls. This also coincides, as earlier noted, with some psychoanalytic and gender-based, interpretations of *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. For example, Freud classified the chief protagonists of *Macbeth*, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, as being driven by a temporal progression toward disaster, in that both reached apexes of time, and then, subsequently, were wrecked by their successes. Freud, for example, points out that both of these dramatic characters fall victim to "fear of success." That is, they are "people [who] occasionally fall ill precisely when a deeply-rooted and long-cherished wish has come to fulfillment" (Freud, 317). Moreover, Freud notes with regard to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth,

It is not at all unusual for the ego to tolerate a wish as harmless so long as it exists in phantasy alone and seems remote from fulfillment, whereas the ego will defend itself hotly against such a wish as soon as it approaches fulfillment and threatens to become a reality. (Freud, 317-318)

Lady Macbeth, for instance, is “wrecked by success” (Freud, 318) in the sense that she “collapses on reaching success” (Freud, 318). After reaching the temporal apex, for example, of the successful planning and consummation of the murders of King Duncan and Banquo, Lady Macbeth degenerates into madness and, eventually, death. Here again, as it so often is in *Macbeth*, the terrible fluxes and chaos of time are best described by “Fair is foul, and foul is fair./Hover through the fog and filthy air (1.1.10-11). Lady Macbeth’s sleep degenerates, for example into crazed wakefulness and vice-versa. Lady Macbeth reveals her misgivings, guilt and growing madness during her sleepwalking soliloquy, as she vainly attempts to cleanse her hands of the blood of the murders of King Duncan and Banquo:

Yet here’s a spot...  
 Out damned spot! Out, I say! One  
 : two: why, then ‘tis time to do’t. Hell is murky.  
 Fie, my lord, fie! A soldier and afeard? What need  
 we fear who knows it, when none can call our  
 pow’r to accompt? Yet who would have thought  
 the old man to have had so much blood in him?...  
 The Thane of Fife had a wife. Where is  
 she now? What, will these hands ne’er be clean? No  
 more o’ that, my lord, no more o’ that!  
 You mar all with this starting...  
 Here’s the smell of the blood still.  
 All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little  
 hand. Oh, oh, oh!...  
 Wash your hands; put on your night-gown; look not so pale!  
 I tell you yet again, Ban-quo’s buried.  
 He cannot come out on’s grave. . . .  
 To be, to bed! There’s knocking at the gate.  
 Come, come, come, come, give me your hand!  
 What’s done cannot be undone.  
 To bed, to bed, to bed!” (5.1.34-72)



Chiu aptly summarizes Lady Macbeth's tragic "fear of success," by noting that "the forces of conscience may... forbid a person [from] gaining the long-cherished-for advantage from his [or her] wish-fulfillment" (Chiu, 43).

Macbeth, like his wife, similarly experiences a tragic "fear of success," in which, each time that he reaches a temporal highpoint, he sabotages himself. For example, in Act I, soon after returning to Scotland as a war hero, Macbeth quickly succumbs to the temptations of political ambition and power, and begins to plot the murder of King Duncan, so as to claim the crown that he sees as rightfully his:

Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor:  
The greatest is behind.  
[To Ross and Angus] Thanks for your pains.  
[Aside to Banquo] Do you not hope your children  
shall be kings,  
When those that gave the Thane of Cawdor to me  
Promised no less to them?...  
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,  
Shakes so my single state of man that function  
Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is  
But what is not....  
If chance will have me King, why,  
chance may crown me,  
Without my stir.  
Come what may,  
Time and the hour runs through the roughest day. (1.3.117-148)

Likewise, soon after Macbeth has murdered King Duncan and ascended the throne of Scotland, Macbeth again sabotages himself by deciding that he must have his friend Banquo murdered to protect his throne. Thus, Macbeth is not only a prisoner to time's inexorable march to his destruction, but Macbeth is an active agent who soon self-destructs, after attaining a difficult goal:

Our fears in Banquo stick deep,  
And in his royalty of nature reigns that

Which would be feared. 'Tis much he dares;  
 And to that dauntless temper of his mind,  
 He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valor  
 To act in safety. There is but he  
 Whose being I do fear: and under him  
 My genius is rebuked, as it is said  
 Mark Antony was by Caesar (3.1.49-57).

Similarly, after planning Banquo's death, Macbeth commits another malicious act, planning the death of Fleance, Banquo's son, as well:

Macbeth [*To the Murderers*]: Your spirits shine through you. Within this hour at most  
 I will advise you where to plant yourselves,  
 And something from the palace; always thought  
 That I require a clearness: and with him—  
 To leave no rubs nor botches in the work—  
 Fleance his son, that keeps him company,  
 Whose absence is no less material to me  
 Than is his father's, must embrace the fate  
 of that dark hour. Resolve yourselves apart:  
 I'll come to you anon. (3.1.127-138)

Not satisfied with these murderous acts, Macbeth degenerates still further, and moves a step closer to his and his wife's death, by plotting to kill Macduff and Macduff's wife and children. Once again the terrible psychological and bodily pressures that increase with each succeeding murderous act, against the unstoppable progression of time, weigh upon Macbeth and lead him to disaster:

Time, thou anticipat'st my  
 dread exploits.  
 The flighty purpose never is o'ertook  
 unless the deed go with it. From this moment  
 The very firstlings of my heart shall be  
 The firstlings of my hand. And even now,  
 To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done:  
 The castle of Macduff I will surprise;  
 Seize upon Fife; give to th' edge o' th' sword

His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls  
that trace him in his line. (4.1. 143-152)

Lastly, in the final act, Macbeth, after hearing of his wife's death, does not attempt to flee Macduff's steadily advancing armies, and Macbeth is eventually murdered, ground down by his enemy, and by the inexorable pressures of time:

If thou speak'st false,  
Upon the next tree shall thou hang alive,  
Till famine cling thee. If thy speech be sooth,  
I care not if thou dost for me as much....  
Arm, arm, and out!  
If this which he avouches does appear,  
There is nor flying hence nor tarrying here.  
I 'gin to be aweary of the sun,  
and wish th' estate o' th' world were now undone.  
Ring the alarum-bell! Blow wind, come wrack!  
at least we'll die with harness on our back. (5.5 38-52)

Not only does the central thesis of my paper lend itself readily to a Freudian, psychoanalytic interpretation of *Macbeth*, but also it lends itself to an interpretation that aligns with gender-based literary criticism of *Macbeth*. For example, Lady Macbeth can be seen throughout the progression of the play, up to the point of her psychic breakdown and death, as a stronger character than Macbeth. Additionally, on the frequent occasions when Macbeth loses his initiative, it is Lady Macbeth who goads her husband to commit the murders that he has contemplated. The following conversation between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth, who is having second thoughts about killing King Duncan, shows how Lady Macbeth can be seen as the real force behind Macbeth's powerful actions:

Macbeth: "We will proceed no further in this business: He hath honored me of late, and I have bought/ Golden opinions from all sorts of people,/ Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,/ Not cast aside so soon."

Lady Macbeth: “Was the hope drunk/ Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since?/And wakes it now, to look so green pale/ And what it did so freely? ... Art thou afeared / To be the same in thine own act and valor/ As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that’ which thou esteem’st the ornament of life, / And live a coward in thine own esteem,/ Letting “‘I dare not’ wait upon ‘I would,....’”

Macbeth: “If we should fail?”

Lady Macbeth: “*We* fail?/ But screw your courage to the sticking-place,/ And we’ll not fail.”

Macbeth: “Bring forth men-children only; For thy undaunted mettle should compose/ Nothing but males....” (1.7. 35-74)

Likewise, for *Hamlet*, my central thesis is that it is not merely character flaws, but also inordinate time pressures created by the unstoppable progression of time that drive the chief characters of *Hamlet* toward disaster. This central thesis, can be even more crucial to understanding *Hamlet*, because it lends itself extremely well to a Freudian, psychoanalytic interpretation of *Hamlet*. Such a psychoanalytic interpretation has its basis in ancient Greek tragedy, particularly *Oedipus Rex*. For example, Sigmund Freud “identifies the Oedipal relationship as a general result in early childhood, which he thinks may explain “the gripping power of *Oedipus Rex* and, perhaps, *Hamlet* (Gay, 100). Moreover, Freud closely linked his discovery of the Oedipal complex with the cathartic effect of *Oedipus Rex*:

Every member of the audience [of *Oedipus Rex*] was once a budding Oedipus in phantasy, and this dream-fulfillment played out in reality causes everyone to recoil in horror, with the full measure of repression which separates his infantile from his present state. (Freud, 38)

Furthermore, “The enigma of *Hamlet* had long fascinated Freud” (Chiu,36). Thus the next step was for Freud to “apply the concept to both plays” (Chiu, 36). Freud explains this directly:

From understanding this tragedy of destiny [*Oedipus Rex*], it was only a step further to understanding a tragedy of character—*Hamlet*, which had been admired for three hundred years without its meaning being discovered or its author’s motives guessed. It could scarcely be a chance that this neurotic creations of the poet should have come to grief... over the Oedipus complex. (38)

Furthermore, “Freud fully elaborates on the guilt feelings aroused in Hamlet by his incestuous desire for his mother and his wish to displace his father” (Chiu, 36). In addition, Freud points out that, while Hamlet’s Oedipal complex is repressed, in contrast, in *Oedipus Rex*, the Oedipal wish is carried out (Chiu, 36). Freud argues that in *Hamlet*, the superego is ignored and “provides for the play’s audience in a way in which they can satisfy themselves imaginatively (Chiu, 36). Freud also cites *Hamlet* as an excellent example of the dramatization of a psychopathological character. Freud largely attributes the great success that *Hamlet* has enjoyed over the years to three reasons based upon his psychoanalytic theories: (1) The hero of the play is not psychopathic, but, rather, *becomes* psychopathic in the course of the play. (2) The repressed impulse (Oedipus complex) is a conflict shared by all of us. (3) This impulse, struggling into consciousness, is never given a definite name. The spectators are carried through with their attentions diverted and are in the grip of their emotions instead of examining what is happening (Freud, 309). Indeed, the Oedipal complex is a vital part of Freud’s psychoanalytic criticism, which he links to Hamlet, and credits the Oedipal complex, in great part, “for the play’s popularity” (Chiu, 37).

Another psychologist, Ernest Jones, likewise, utilizes Freudian psychoanalytic theory to analyze Hamlet's apparent Oedipal complex. Freud, from whom Jones borrowed, believed that sexuality started in infancy, and that young boys have sexual desires for their mothers, which cause them to wish to kill their fathers, who are rivals for the boys' sexual desire for their mothers. Freud called this complex, the Oedipal complex, after the Greek tragedy, *Oedipus Rex*, in which a young man kills his father, marries his mother, and has sexual relations with her. Jones argues that Hamlet's Oedipal complex is a major cause for Hamlet's erratic behavior, and explains why Hamlet has such a difficult time avenging his father's death ( Jones, 80). According to Jones, Hamlet's subconscious sexual desire for his mother prevents him from killing his uncle.

Jones further argues that Hamlet's relationship with his mother, Gertrude, provides strong evidence for an Oedipal complex. There are strong sexual overtones between Hamlet and Gertrude throughout the play. For example, Gertrude has unusual fondness for her son, as noted by Jones: "The queen his mother lives almost by his [Hamlet's] looks" ( Jones, 80). Moreover there are strong sensual overtones between Hamlet and Gertrude, which manifest themselves, at different times in *Hamlet*, and in the different ways in which Hamlet relates to Gertrude and to his girlfriend, Ophelia. For example, as Jones notes, Hamlet strikingly expresses that he would rather sit with Ophelia, than with Gertrude, at dinner, during the play within a play scene. Jones maintains that these actions appear to reveal either Hamlet's unconscious desire to suppress his sexual desire for his mother, or as an attempt to make Gertrude jealous (Jones, 80).

Moreover, Jones argues that Hamlet's Oedipal complex is largely responsible for his inability, when he has a chance, to kill his uncle Claudius, and become King of Denmark. For instance, Jones maintains, Hamlet's repressed, unconscious sexual desires toward his mother, in addition to his boyhood regard of his father as a rival, manifest themselves when Hamlet learns of his father's murder (Jones, 80). So as to hide these desires, Hamlet must mute his anger toward his father's murderer, Claudius, because, Claudius merely acted out Hamlet's secret desires. Thus, Jones argues, this explains why Hamlet cannot kill Claudius, until after Gertrude has died, and Hamlet is mortally wounded, which allows him to dissociate his guilt from avenging his father's murder (Jones, 80). As Jones points out:

In reality, his [Hamlet's] uncle incorporates the deepest and most buried part of his own personality, so that he cannot kill him without also killing himself. This solution, one closely akin to what Freud has shown to be the motive of suicide in melancholia, is actually the one that Hamlet finally adopts.... Only when he has made the final sacrifice and brought himself to the door of his death is he free to fulfill his duty, [and subconscious desire] to avenge his father, and to slay his other self—his uncle" ( Jones, 88).

Jones notes Hamlet's inability to consciously face his deepest, disassociated, unbearable, and perverse desires:

There are two moments in the play when he is nearest to murder, and it is noteworthy that in both the impulse has been dissociated from the unbearable idea of incest. The second is when he actually kills the king, when the Queen is already dead and lost to him forever, so that his conscience is free of an ulterior motive for the murder. ( Jones, 89)

Freud, similarly, makes very much the same argument, in explaining Hamlet's Oedipal complex, and his resulting inability to avenge his father's death earlier:

Hamlet is able to do anything—except take vengeance on the man who did away with his father and took that father's place with his mother, the man

who shows him the repressed wishes of his own childhood realized. Thus, the loathing which should drive him on to revenge is replaced in him by...scruples of conscience, which remind him that he himself is literally no better than the sinner whom he is to punish. Here I have translated into conscious terms what was bound to remain unconscious in Hamlet's mind (Freud, 299).

Moreover, the central thesis of my paper not only fits very well with a psychoanalytic interpretation of *Hamlet*, but also with a gender-based interpretation of *Hamlet*. For example, in general, Hamlet's misogynist behavior toward Ophelia is very representative of his repressed desires for his mother (Endicott, 1). Similarly, Hamlet behaves in a misogynistic manner toward women throughout the play, and some feminist interpretations suggest that this is what drives Ophelia insane, and leads her to commit suicide. For example, the manner in which Hamlet handles Ophelia in the scene where she evokes his madness, while Claudius and Polonius secretly watch, causes Ophelia to fear Hamlet, because of his crazed actions. This is probably a side of Hamlet that Ophelia has seen never before. Hamlet's speech to Ophelia in this scene is an excellent example, because Hamlet raves to her like a madman. Hamlet begins his speech to Ophelia, by saying "I did love you once," (3.1. 115), and vociferously pronounces his hatred and disdain for Ophelia. Hamlet goes so far as to say, in very blunt terms, that he does not love Ophelia, that she will never escape calumny, and that she should make her way to a nunnery, and spend the rest of her life locked in there. In an understandable response to Hamlet's ravings, Ophelia loses her mind, and begins singing and speaking gibberish, and eventually commits suicide, before she ever sees Hamlet, or her beloved father, again. Thus, as noted earlier, to borrow from *Macbeth*, "tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow always arrive," together with psychological and bodily pressures, created by interaction with the inexorable progression of time, which often lead the central



characters of both *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* to their destruction. For, as Lady Macbeth tragically notes, no amount of hand-washing will ever wash away the blood of treacherous and ill-timed murders. This is a tragic, but not often discussed, truth of both of these Shakespearean tragedies, which I have attempted, in my thesis to illuminate.

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