

## On Neptune's Ocean: Classical Allusion and Tragic Agency in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

Scholars have often noted how the characterization of Macbeth in Shakespeare's play is full of complex notions about reason, strangeness, and the imagination. As Hammond (2009) states: "When we say 'Macbeth' we name someone whose integrity decomposes, whose mind produces hyper-physical scenarios, and parts of whose body seem to exist in uncanny detachment or autonomy" (138). Macbeth is unable to properly see his own position of power, or react with reason and a clear mind. This presentation will explore how Macbeth's false vision and tragic agency echo the characterization of Creon in Sophocles' *Antigone*. When trying to come to terms with their choices, both Creon and Macbeth utilize rhetoric and themes in final speeches that are very similar in their focus on the idea of impaired sight. As Hall (2010) explains: "Tragedy, ultimately, does not draw so very hard and fast a line between people in their 'right mind' and those that are deluded" (188). Through a comparative characterization between Creon and Macbeth, this paper will demonstrate how the eye and false perception are connected to mental reason and judgment in these two tragedies.

Various scholars have noted influence of classical mythological figures on Shakespeare's works, especially in terms of his tendency to produce "hyper-physical scenarios" in *Macbeth*. For example, Zimmermann (2006) offers a fascinating character study of the two tragic heroes, Macbeth and Hercules, and argues the character of the mad and murderous Hercules influences Shakespeare in his depiction of Macbeth at the moment following the killing of Duncan: "Both Hercules and Macbeth yearn for absolution and express their horror for the indelible nature of their crime, using the same images" (363). This presentation, however, instead of comparing Macbeth to the character of Hercules, will explore how Shakespeare's portrayal of Macbeth is rich with allusions to the way that human sight can be false and manipulated; and specifically, I

argue that the diction and rhetoric in Macbeth's final speech links him to Creon because of the similar themes of false vision and tragic agency.

The play *Macbeth* further situates itself within the classical lineage of tragedy through an allusion to Neptune's ocean. In one of the hyper-physical scenarios that Macbeth undergoes after committing regicide, he realizes the futility of trying to absolve his crime. After Macbeth kills Duncan he says: "What hands are here? Ha, they pluck out mine eyes!/ Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood/ Clean from my hand?" (*Macbeth* 2.2.62-64). The image of Neptune's ocean being the force capable of washing away the blood is in direct opposition to the other time Shakespeare creates a similar imagine. In *Hamlet* Claudius says "What if this cursèd hand/ Were thicker than itself with brother's blood? Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens/To wash it white as snow?" (3.3.45-46). It is significant that for Macbeth it is not the redemption of God that could wash the blood like in *Hamlet*, but Neptune's ocean (2.2.63). The significance of the classical mythological allusion to Neptune, I argue, evokes the genre of tragedy and recalls the tradition of regicide that often occurs in classical tragedy. Shakespeare is choosing to reference a classical figure, and in doing so he locates his play firmly in the world of the Greek tragic stage.

The reference to Neptune activates classical allusions within *Macbeth*, especially at the very moment when the character of Macbeth speaks of the failure of vision ("Ha, they pluck out mine eyes!/ Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood/ Clean from my hand?"; 2.2.62-64) as he recognizes his errors carried out because of his deep *hubris*. Throughout *Antigone*, and also in *Macbeth* the connection between the figurative eye of the mind, delusions, and reason come to a head as both men realize their own *hubris* has led to the tragic events that have befallen them.

## Bibliography

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