

***...And Were We Angels  
After All?***

*So, if you want an education, the odds aren't with you: The professors are off doing what they call their own work; the other students, who've doped out the way the place runs, are busy leaving the professors alone and getting themselves in position for bright and shining futures; the student-services people are trying to keep everyone content, offering plenty of entertainment and building another state-of-the-art workout facility every few months. The development office is already scanning you for future donations. The primary function of Yale University, it's recently been said, is to create prosperous alumni so as to enrich Yale University.*

*So why make trouble? Why not just go along? Let the profs roam free in the realms of pure thought, let yourselves party in the realms of impure pleasure, and let the student-services gang assert fewer prohibitions and newer delights for you. You'll get a good job, you'll have plenty of friends, you'll have a driveway of your own.*

*You'll also, if my father and I are right, be truly and righteously screwed. The reason for this is simple. The quest at the center of a liberal-arts education is not a luxury quest; it's a necessity quest. If you do not undertake it, you risk leading a life of desperation – maybe quiet, maybe, in time, very loud – and I am not exaggerating. For you risk trying to be someone other than who you are, which, in the long run, is killing.*

**Mark Edmundson, Who Are You and What Are You Doing Here?**

*Occasionally, my mother would tease him about women, asking about female Indian students at MIT, or showing him pictures of her younger cousins in India. "What do you think of her?" she would ask. "Isn't she pretty?" She knew that she could never have Pranab Kaku for herself, and I suppose it was her attempt to keep him in the family. But, most important, in the beginning he was totally dependent on her, needing her for those months in a way my father never did in the whole history of their marriage. He brought to my mother the first and, I suspect, the only pure happiness she ever felt. I don't think even my birth made her as happy. I was evidence of her marriage to my father, an assumed consequence of the life she had been raised to lead. But Pranab Kaku was different. He was the one totally unanticipated pleasure in her life.*

**Jhumpa Lahiri, Hell-Heaven**

*That's why you came to me, isn't it, Captain? Because you knew I could do those things that you weren't capable of doing? Well, it worked! And you'll get what you want: a war between the Romulans and the Dominion.*

*And if your conscience is bothering you, you should soothe it with the knowledge that you may have just saved the entire Alpha Quadrant. And all it cost was the life of one Romulan senator, one criminal, and the self-respect of one Starfleet officer.*

*I don't know about you, but I'd call that a bargain.*

*So...I lied. I cheated. I bribed men to cover the crimes of other men. I am an accessory to murder.*

*But the most damning thing of all...is that I think I can live with it. And if I had to do it all over again, I would.*

*Garak was right about one thing: a guilty conscience is a small price to pay for the safety of the Alpha Quadrant.*

*So I will learn to live with it.*

*Because I can live with it...*

## 1. All the Lies and Fantasies I Picked to Deny What is Right

Does Duncan deserve to die in *The Tragedy of Macbeth*?

This is, perhaps, a morbid question. Let's explore it further.

In order to be a successful ruler, a king from olden times needed to be able to do at least three things:

- 1) Recognize and defeat threats to his country and his throne;
- 2) Earn the loyalty of his subjects by behaving virtuously (no hoarding treasure!);
- 3) Produce heirs – preferably male, and as many as possible.

The first qualification chiefly requires intelligence, enlightenment, perception, what have you. As king, you must correctly distinguish trustworthy parties from those that need monitoring. You must decide how to respond to your enemies. (Should you follow the old adage of keeping your friends close and your enemies closer, or would you prefer trying to overwhelm them by force instead of playing nice?) Finally, you must be a sound tactician in order to avoid wasting lives. Good kings didn't pick fights with nations or enemies they couldn't defeat. People will die for you if they think the cause is both righteous *and* necessary. If you ask people to sacrifice themselves unnecessarily, they will stop dying for you.

The second qualification requires strength of character – a matter of personal strength and understood identity – because kings must resist the obvious temptations of power. When people bring you the spoils of war without question, and when no checks exist on your will or whims, it's extremely easy to abuse your position of authority. The best kings refrained from doing so.

The third qualification is more of an avoidance of a perceived flaw than anything else. If a king has no sons, the country is perpetually at risk; its security is threatened whenever its ruler is under fire, because the loss of the king would result in a power vacuum at the head of the state.

Kings who could not meet all three qualifications almost always wound up dying young. A king who fails on one or more of these counts will be a weaker ruler, and someone else will rise up against them, either from within or without. It's also a matter of necessity; a country was probably better off in the long run if it risked its short-term stability to dispose of an ineffective king. (If you're a SFHP kid, you'll see this in *Beowulf*, when you study how Denmark fares under King Heremod vs. under Shield Sheafson, Beow, Halfdane, and Hrothgar; if you're in Myth, you'll see a much stranger take on this phenomenon in *King Lear*.) In this way, the needs of the many – which may outweigh the needs of the few, or the one – are best served over time.

So the understanding in Macbeth's era was simple: That good kings should thrive, and that bad kings should die. As kings, they deserve it.

Duncan certainly meets the demands of the third qualification, considering that he produces multiple sons. He also seems to be a model of good behavior and virtuous rule, his oddly passionate bloodlust (visible in his enthusiastic reactions to the reports of slaughters and executions he receives) notwithstanding.

But the first qualification...oh, how the first qualification proves problematic for Duncan.

Let's look for a moment past the fact that Duncan didn't see Norway's massive attack coming. Let's ignore the fact that Duncan wholeheartedly trusted the Thane of Cawdor, blind to a threat to his nation as it sat across the table from him. And let's even ignore the fact that Duncan completely misses Macbeth's plot to kill him, or that he so quickly places his trust in a new Thane of Cawdor so shortly after the old one betrayed him.

All of these mistakes count against Duncan, because all of these mistakes place Scotland at grave risk – the very thing a king exists to prevent. But there's something far simpler we can notice, a black mark on Duncan's first qualification that's so obvious that it's easy to miss (unless I point it out in a lecture).

When we begin the play, before we even meet Macbeth, Duncan's citizens are already rebelling against him!

Shakespeare glosses over the reason that people have risen up against the crown, and thus allows most people to simply accept that the king must put down the rebellion. After all, his perspective is the first we really see, and in the absence of some compelling reason to believe his people had a good reason to rebel, we sympathize with him. Others figure that the Bard includes the uprising because he's going by the "facts" in Holinshed's famed history of Scotland.

In either case, the effect is the same. We accept that the king is in a different place because he needs to be kept safe, and don't worry that his main source of information from the battlefield is from a wounded fighter who's quickly bleeding out as he speaks. We don't question whether this is any way to lead a nation, or to wage a war for its soul. We simply turn the page, already accepting that the rebellion against Duncan is wrong without even finding out what the fight is about. That's awfully trusting of us, especially when the rebellion serves to further underscore Duncan's complete (and soon-to-be-fatal) blindness to threats.

Shakespeare may have glossed over the reasons for the rebellion because they didn't interest him, or because time spent on them would distract from his morality play. However, it's more likely that he didn't mention them because doing so threatens the play's foundations – for in order to buy into the play's moral conflict, we have to like Duncan, and must in turn condemn Macbeth for killing such a kind and effective leader.

But standards are standards, and Duncan fails to meet them.

Good kings thrive; bad kings die.

They deserve it.

## 2. Ruin Pushes Rubble in the City of Sin

My indictment of Duncan is somewhat tongue-in-cheek; after all, even Macbeth admits that Duncan is a good king, which leaves my attack on his qualifications (not to mention his right to live) ringing a bit hollow. But I do think that it's fun to think about texts in this way, and I find that my internal debates over the kind of issues we so often take for granted almost always lead me to a better understanding of the world a book creates, as well as the characters who populate it.

This is particularly useful for me when reading *The Inferno*, because I'm certainly not Dante's target audience. Before I picked up the book, I knew little about Florence (even though I'm vaguely proud of my half-Italian heritage) or the political maelstrom surrounding the medieval/Renaissance-era Church. Even my grasp of myth and folklore, solid enough for an average person, pales badly in comparison to the author's expertise on the subject. These may seem like minor, even understandable gaps in my learning, but they greatly compromise my ability to perceive what Dante's really doing with his work. (It's never fun to recognize that you're reading the byproduct of one of humanity's most brilliant minds working at the height of his considerable powers – and that you're missing out on everything but the book's most superficial aspects.) And most problematic: my sense of morality feels worlds removed from the author's.

Fortunately, Dante sought to accomplish more than one thing with his *Comedy*, and his work could be read by believers and non-believers alike. For while it would appear at first blush that the *Comedy* merely exhorts its readers to lead a good, Christian life, Dante is doing something much more provocative. He uses his three books to examine the nature of belief, the fundamentals of faiths, and the core of human nature – the soul.

It's important to note that Dante takes for granted the idea that humans have souls – some non-corporeal aspect of their being that survives over time. Even if we do believe as Dante believes, his treatment of souls in his books raise some uncomfortable questions: What *is* the soul? Is it part of a human being? Is it something non-human? Does it obey our physical laws? Do our moral codes apply to it? Does it have any control over our actions? (If not: Why do we reward or punish it in death?)

Dante was not the first to suggest that an awareness of the perils your soul can face in the course of daily life could serve as a corrective; the idea at the end of the *Comedy* is that Dante, having learned to recognize and reject sin, can start living a more faithful, fruitful, and satisfying life from here on out, because he's more aware of the *very* long-term effects of his choices. Nor was he the first to suggest that our souls reflect our natures: the "bad souls" in Dante's *Inferno* didn't worsen once they ended up in Hell.

One of the things that makes *The Inferno* – and the whole *Comedy* – so revolutionary, however, is in its treatment of the afterlife of a place of real, tangible consequence. Anyone who reads that chilling Guy Raffa piece *Hell: An Introduction* knows that humans have long had very creative ideas about what awaited them after death; some focused on exquisite rewards, while others dwelled on awful torments. But Dante was the first to offer such a well-rounded, full-spectrum view of what lay beyond knowable reality. And everything a soul receives in the afterlife, whether punishment or reward, is seen as *deserved*. The contrapassos (logical relationships between

sins and their rewards/punishments) hold the entire enterprise aloft; after all, if a soul didn't understand what was happening to it, how could we feel such a system was just?

Yet here's the thing: *there's no point to the souls in Hell knowing why they're being punished*. Hell isn't prison (although some prisons certainly seem hellish): there's no chance of parole, no hope for redemption or rehabilitation. Most of the sins on display don't seem to be of the lock-him-up-and-throw-away-the-key variety; in fact, some of them appear in milder form in Purgatory, where redemption *is* possible – suggesting that degree matters more than anything else. If the souls aren't in Hell to learn, why give them awareness, or consciousness, at all?

I asked earlier if Duncan deserves what happens to him, fully expecting you to say no; after all, his "sins" seem pretty light, and it's not like he had a fair fight on his hands. I also imagine you feel Dante's exile from Florence, couched in the bloody political battles of his age, was similarly unearned; based on his writings, Dante certainly seems to feel that way. He, too, never got a chance to face those who wronged him.

There's a really interesting tension between the tangible and intangible in both *Macbeth* and *The Inferno*. In the latter, Dante keeps fainting when the abstract is made real for him. It's a deeply sensory work, assaultive and overwhelming, in order to make real the universe's abstract rules of accountability. *The Tragedy of Macbeth* handles accountability in similar fashion. (It never gives us Duncan's vengeful ghost, but it does offer up Banquo's bloody shade in spades.) Ephemera and visions keep pushing Macbeth into committing brutally physical crimes – and then torment him afterward, with no possibility of escape. In both works, then, there is this idea that the unseen world will exact a toll for what you do in the physical one: that we toy with the non-physical world at our own peril, and that the things we do in the dark get repaid a hundredfold by the things we cannot perceive in time.

This brings me to *In the Pale Moonlight*, a *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine* episode centered around many different kinds of lies and deceptions. (It's not accidental that the big hook in the plan involves using holographic – illusory – technology to trick the Romulan senator.) Viewers rarely pause to ask how Sisko could be so unaware that Garak, a man viewers (and Sisko) know full well can act ruthlessly, had his own plans for dealing with Vreenak. Garak says as much when Ben finally confronts him in the shop near episode's end.

And indeed, repeated viewings reveal Sisko showing signs of self-awareness as he sinks further and further into that world of moral compromise and double-dealing. His body language shifts. We never see his son. In fact, we stop seeing him interacting with anyone else, as though he wants – on some level – to avoid tainting those around him with his misdeeds as he gets hopelessly stuck in what was once such a simple plan.

The big questions at the end of the episode aren't just about how complicit Ben Sisko is in Vreenak's *assassination* (again, a word Shakespeare invented for *The Tragedy of Macbeth*), nor about whether Vreenak's murder was justifiable. *In the Pale Moonlight* portrays the senator as surly, abrasive, and obstinate – yet some part of us still recoils at what happens to him, chiefly because it *doesn't* seem deserved.

No: the big questions are for us. Sisko crosses a very dark line, and takes us right with him – because we absolve him. After all: “His cause is righteous; his intentions are good.”

And we watch him the next week, because we want to watch him – we want to see where this goes. We don’t think he’s a bad person just because he got involved with bad people, or because the choices he made directly led to atrocities. We still think he’s a good person, a good father, a good man. We call him a hero because we need him to be one.

And in the end, not only do the Romulans stick with Ben’s coalition, but the Cardassians – Garak’s people – rebel against the Dominion and contribute to its fall, at the cost of billions of lives. Sisko’s choice, known only to one other person in the world, catalyzed a sequence of events that saved us all.

One wonders how badly Dante would have made his soul suffer for it.

### **3. She’ll Destroy Every Inch of Light**

For what it’s worth, I rather like Duncan, at least as much as I can like a character who’s alive for barely more than twenty minutes of the play. I do think that his blindness to the threat Macbeth poses is a fatal flaw, but that’s kind of the point – Duncan’s goodness and eagerness to trust those close to him blinds him to the (somewhat conflicted/ambiguous) evil Macbeth represents.

However, today is not the day to discuss love, trust, and betrayal. For now, we turn our attention back to the nature of human goodness, and to the simple question we’ve raised before, but never buried: If someone offered you comfort and happiness – if you knew someone would take care of you and make decisions for you – would you take them up on the offer? Would you trade your independence for a likely-more-prosperous/stable life?

It’s a serious question, and one that needs to be asked whenever we try to analyze Lady Macbeth. At first, we can’t understand her naked, seemingly unquenchable thirst for power. After all, what’s so bad about her life? She’s married to someone successful, seems to enjoy good health, and has been blessed with intelligence to spare.

Yet she is not free, at least not as a fully independent agent. We often forget this because we usually see her only when Macbeth is around, and she strikes a powerful contrast to her easily influenced husband. But that’s the extent of her power; she can *maybe* manipulate Macbeth, and little else.

I find the *Macbeth* universe a particularly difficult one to make students understand on its own terms. To many of you, Lady Macbeth’s ability to manipulate Macbeth seems typical. If you’ve been raised on a steady diet of American television, you’ve been exposed to an embarrassingly large number of wife/mother figures who exist solely to nag, scold, and control their husbands, who inevitably act harried and much-abused upon being told to do something. (That the “something” is typically the sort of thing that mature adults do without complaint usually goes unnoticed; our sympathies lie with the scolded.) Or you live in families where your mother’s influence is strongly felt, and it doesn’t strike you as particularly odd that someone would follow the whims of a matriarchal presence.

Well, that's not the model of femininity advanced by Macbeth's society – not at all. Women were powerless, and I mean that in every sense of the word. Nobody would have expected Lady Macbeth to have any property to her name. (She doesn't have a name, for that matter – remember how much that mattered in *Siddhartha*?) She wouldn't have been educated. She wouldn't have been able to divorce her husband if he abused her. No recourse existed for her if she were, in fact, mistreated. With no education, no property, and no pull, a woman in Lady Macbeth's position couldn't even leave the castle without her husband permitting it. (She wouldn't have been taught how to ride a horse.)

In any and all things, then, Scottish society was designed to silence Lady Macbeth, to render her seen and not heard or felt. That Macbeth seems to be under her sway at all is actually pretty remarkable: Lady Macbeth has no means of forcing him to listen to her! (The Macbeths' relationship dynamics would've struck audiences as particularly bizarre at the time.)

But even if she is able to “control” Macbeth, what sort of influence could Lady Macbeth realistically hope to wield? Her husband has influence, but not enough to be remembered forever. (Think of being Thane of Glamis as a better version of Mark Edmundson's “having a driveway of your own.”) And he's a blunt instrument, which can be effective in certain circumstances – Macdonwald's headless, unzipped body attests to this – and less so in others. If I gave you a hammer, you could help build a house or break a computer with it. But the list of things you couldn't do with one far outstrips the list of possibilities you could pursue. And that's not even considering the distinct possibility that Macbeth, with a mind of his own, won't do as she requests – that he'll make like the hammers in *The Wall* and march away.

So consider Lady Macbeth's perspective. She's more ambitious and intelligent than her husband. If you had been denied independence for your entire life – as she has – wouldn't you thirst for influence just as strongly? (Similarly, imagine how intoxicating a queen's power must be for someone who's used to having none.) As young adults, don't you look forward to the days of controlling your own destinies with anticipation, even if the control that accompanies adulthood is less exciting than you believed?

When she receives her husband's letter, Lady Macbeth gets a glimpse of a better future. For the first time, she would get the chance to control her own life. No one to answer to, and no one to impress; queens put on airs for no one. That possibility is dangled in front of her, and then – like everything else – pulled away before she can grasp it. The hammer-husband starts marching away; after all, if he doesn't become king, nothing bad really happens to him. It's Lady Macbeth's life that was set to markedly change for the better. No wonder she reacts with such savagery over her husband's complete disregard for her needs, her wants, her fears! She has no friends, no other company save perhaps servants we never see; Macbeth is likely the only person in the entire universe who ever pays attention to her, let alone who would have a genuine conversation with her. And if he won't help her, nobody will. *She knows she will die as less than what she could have been* – and that her husband will, too. He will put that coin back in his pocket without flipping it...unless she does something.

Lady Macbeth is twisted, hateful, and greedy. Shakespeare's portrayal of her, groundbreaking as it was, smacks of misogyny (he toughens her by emphasizing her masculinity), and it is unlikely he wanted anyone in his audience to feel sorry for her. Yet when you consider her circumstances, when



you study her in the context of the times, when you realize she is a brilliant individual who is a prisoner to her society's marginalization of her gender – and whose potential, and life, have therefore been squandered – her most hateful qualities seem a bit more understandable. In fact, she may even emerge as a slightly (or oddly) sympathetic figure.

After all, the best villains are the ones who make us shiver – not because we fear them, but because we fear we can understand them.

#### **4. ...And I Let Them Betray Me, By Faith and By Choice**

I could ask you whether Macbeth or Lady Macbeth is “more evil.” I could probably guess which name you would have written before you read this blog.

I would say that both are capable of great evil. However, I would also confess that I'm not sure that being capable of evil actions indicates that a person is, in fact, evil. After all, aren't all human beings capable of evil? Shouldn't we evaluate the “evilness” of a person on the basis of their actions?

If we do so, I'd like to point out that the individual many initially consider more evil (Lady Macbeth) never harms a single living being over the course of the play. There's blood on her hands, certainly. Where does it come from? From the corpse of a man she admits she couldn't kill because of his resemblance to her father – probably the only man besides her husband who ever loved her, and someone she undoubtedly lost. And when her husband, the one person she has left to love – one wonders whether they ever had a child! – comes blundering through the door of their bedroom, ranting and raving about his crime, she takes his weapons, goes back to Duncan's chamber, cuts the body of her father's doppelganger, smears the blood on his guards, and returns. She does what she couldn't bear to do in order to protect the person she loved. It's this very action that saves her husband...and that ultimately costs Lady Macbeth her sanity.

Meanwhile, Macbeth racks up a fairly impressive body count – not just in the scenes preceding his coup, but in those that follow, as he maintains an increasingly desperate and bloody grasp on his ill-gotten throne. By the end of the play, he seems to be a more effective killer of friends and innocents than of enemy warriors; he's particularly good at killing the children of those he perceives as threats.

But there's always that awful point to consider: Macbeth resolved not to kill before being bullied into it. Lady Macbeth essentially manipulated him into it, even considering that we've already examined how bizarre it is that she can influence him at all.

How do you feel about a man who knows what he about to do is wrong, doesn't want to do it, and then does it anyway?

Who is more evil – the planner, or the killer?

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- + We recognize the “tipping point” – the line separating “good but flawed” from “better avoid him/her, because that’s an evil person” – instantly (or should, in Duncan’s case). Well, how can you tell the difference – in other words, how can you tell that some people are good? Can we blame Duncan for his blindness?
  - + Do our choices determine our “nature,” or is something nebulous inside of us (a conscience, a soul, etc.) more responsible? Is it possible for a person’s “nature” to change – for a good person to become evil, or for an evil person to become good?
  - + Can you conclusively say that you are a “good” person? Are you somewhere between “good” and “bad,” leaning in a certain direction? What sort of criteria are you basing your response on – your actions, your thoughts, or both? Do you believe you will become a better person as you age, as you gain experience and knowledge, as you live, love, and learn – or will you decline?
  - + Can you live with all the things you’ve done? Do you believe Sisko when he says he can live with his choices - and their consequences?
  - + Do you believe that other people can influence your “goodness,” for better or for worse? If so, how?
  - + Is what goes on in my head – my consciousness and thoughts – different from my soul? Is one’s soul separate from one’s identity?
  - + Can your soul be damaged? Can you control, change, or improve your soul? If not, do you have the freedom to be the person you “choose” to be?
  - + Is a soul “responsible” for a human’s behavior? If not, and it’s more immortal than its vessel...why should a soul’s eventual fate depend on what a human does here?
  - + Are we capable of goodness because of our experiences, or because of what we’re born with?

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Blog Title: “The Night Starts Here,” Stars, *In Our Bedroom After the War*

Section Title #1: “I’m a Monster,” Ours, *Fallen Souls*

Section Title #2: “Love in the End,” John Mark McMillan, *Borderland*

Section Title #3: “Blame It All on Me,” Sound the Alarm, *Stay Inside*

Section Title #4: “An Introduction: You Can’t Just Walk Away From Someone Who’s Leaning On You,” Some by Sea, *On Fire! (igloo)*

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