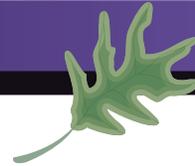


# Off The Couch



**PSYCHOANALYSIS  
AND CULTURE**

V4N4



## **Macbeth**

An opera by Giuseppe Verdi  
Metropolitan Opera Live in HD Broadcast

**Macbeth** is an opera in four acts by Giuseppe Verdi, with a libretto by Piave and Maffei, based on William Shakespeare. It was Verdi's tenth opera, first performed on March 14, 1847 in Florence. This is considered Verdi's middle period, after his initial successes but before some of his masterpieces, such as *Rigoletto*, *La Traviata* and *Otello*. An expanded French version was performed in Paris in 1865. Much of the third act was re-written, a chorus opened act four and the ending was revised. Most of the revivals use the 1865 version. The opera was well received but then faded from view until mid-twentieth century revivals. One of the major changes from Shakespeare is substituting the chorus for the three witches, divided into three groups. The revised opera was first performed at the Metropolitan Opera in 1959. The principle roles include Macbeth (baritone), Lady Macbeth (soprano), Banquo (bass) and McDuff (tenor).

I think it is not an accident that this opera resonates with our current age. Throughout his career, Freud thought that sexuality and other forms of loving connections were the prime motivations in human relations. However, under the impact of the savagery and carnage of World War I and the rise of Nazi Germany, Freud became much more pessimistic and upgraded the role of aggression as a second prime motivator in human relations. We are now used to aggression as a major force in our political life, two major wars, almost continuous minor wars, genocide, brutal dictators and the acceptance of torture as ethically acceptable among many others.

The current Met production of Macbeth debuted on September 24, 2014. Zeljko Lucic plays Macbeth, Rene Pape plays Banquo, Anna Netrebko plays Lady Macbeth, and Joseph Calleja plays Macduff. Fabio Luisi conducts and the production designer was Adrian Noble (former artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company). The Med Live in HD broadcast was on October 11, 2014. The acting, the music and the singing were all superb.

The production is in modern dress. The men first appear as guerrilla fighters, dressed in leather jackets with Kalashnikov rifles and bandoleers on their chest. The settings are spare and modern, with innovative use of lighting as accent and prop. Verdi, I think, makes the case here for opera enhancing Shakespeare. It brings out the emotional aspects of the play in the music that cannot be conveyed by words alone. In this essay, I will concentrate on the emotions of aggression and sex, and how they are intertwined in Macbeth.



I will start with the witch's chorus that opens the opera. It lays out the underlying aggression that is the major psychological emotion in the opera. Enlarging the three witches into groups of three amplifies and makes more powerful the motif of aggression. Verdi, it is reported, thought of the witches as one of the major characters in the drama. One has slit a boar's throat. Another is plotting revenge against a steersman's wife by drowning her husband. These, of course, foreshadow the actual slitting and killing later in the opera. The witches are dressed as lower class English women, in pearls, hats and period dresses, set in sharp contrast with the nobility. This division into black and white will be one of my themes. When Macbeth and Banquo arrive, two of the witches greet them with legs spread out in a sexual gesture, foreshadowing the fusion of sex and aggression in the opera. The witches make two prophecies to Macbeth, that he will become thane of Cawdor and King of Scotland. During their prophecy, individual faces are lit, literally black and white. Freud was to call the urge toward aggression the death instinct. We can understand the death instinct broadly as the human urge toward hate and self-hate. The witch's prophecy touches on Macbeth's latent ambition to be king. He is ambivalent about his desires:

Fate offers me a crown, which I will not

Stretch out my hand to snatch. (Act one, scene three)

Alla corona che m'offre il fato  
La man rapace non alzerà;



In the next scene, we meet Lady Macbeth. She is sleeping and wakes with a start as if startled by a nightmare. The first shock is that she is blond. She is dressed in a negligée, low cut and revealing all of her bodily charms. All of this suggests erotic appeal. A servant comes in with a letter from Macbeth telling her about the witch's prophecies which she reads. Then she sings her aria:

You are an  
ambitious soul, Macbeth. You long for greatness,  
but will you be wicked enough?  
The road to power  
is filled with crimes, and woe to him  
who sets an uncertain foot upon it and retreats! (Act one, scene five)

Ambizioso spirito  
Tu sei Macbetto. Alla grandezza aneli,  
Ma sarai tu malvagio?  
Pien di misfatti; il calle  
Della potenza, e mal per lui che il piede  
Dubitoso vi pone, e retrocede!

I could easily imagine Stalin or Hitler with a similar justification for violence. She goes on:

Come! Hurry! I wish  
to light a fire in your cold heart!

I shall give you the courage  
to carry out this bold undertaking. (Act one, scene five)

Vieni t'affretta! Accendere  
Ti vo' quel freddo core!  
L'audace impresa a compiere  
Io ti darò; valore;

I think there is no doubt how she intends to light Macbeth's fire. She will both seduce him and shame him for not being a man. She makes a token attempt to cover up with a robe but it keeps opening up to reveal what is within. Sex and aggression are always fused together in some combination. When Macbeth appears, he has a pistol in his hand. As she suggests that Macbeth kill the king, she takes the pistol from him and strokes it, clearly suggesting what Macbeth can expect if he carries out the killing. At the end of the scene, he takes the pistol back.



Macbeth is often thought of as the passive victim of Lady Macbeth's ambition. Yet she is right that he already had latent ambition but lacked the 'balls' to do whatever it takes. Moreover, once he kills King Duncan, Macbeth is an active participant, suggesting that Banquo and his son must be killed as well. We might understand Lady Macbeth as Macbeth's projected twin. She embodies his more aggressive impulses which he is too guilty to consciously entertain. Later, she will embody his projected guilt and disintegrate while he, rid of his guilt by projection, reintegrates.

In the second act, there is a particularly interesting juxtaposition. This is a chilling scene where the assassins surround Banquo, stab him and cut his throat. The horror of killing and death immediately morphes into the ballroom scene, where the new king and queen entertain their guests in full evening dress. Lady Macbeth is dressed in a red gown which echoes the red blood in the previous scene. Lady Macbeth sings the famous drinking song:

Fill the cup

with the choicest wine.  
Give life to pleasure  
and death to sorrow.  
Let hate and scorn  
fly from us  
and let love alone  
reign here. (Act two, scene five)

Si colmi il calice  
Di vino eletto;  
Nasca il diletto,  
Muoia il dolor.  
Da noi s'involino  
Gli odi e gli sdegni,  
Folleggi e regni  
Qui solo amor.

The first version of the aria is sung with the faintest of irony while in the background is a bacchanalia of the frenzied guests. The psychological attempt is to repress the hate and guilt. Then Banquo's ghost appears to Macbeth and he breaks down. Lady Macbeth tries to rally him:

Are you a man? (Act two, scene seven)

E un uomo voi siete?

Note the need to shame. Then she sings another version of the aria but this time she is commanding, trying to banish death. The guests are now dancing in a frenzy to avoid death.

If the first two acts are primarily about sex and power, then the last two acts are about guilt and disintegration. Unless one is a sociopath, aggression and guilt are always paired in the human mind. The guilt and disintegration are present as soon as regicide is proposed. Macbeth in his aria before he kills the king:

Horrid sight!  
The blade is streaked with blood!  
But now there's nothing there.  
Only my bloody imagination gives it shape  
and presents a dream to my eyes as a reality. (Act one, scene eleven)

Orrendo imago!  
Solco sanguigno la tua lama irriga!  
Ma nulla esiste ancor. Il sol cruento  
Mio pensier la dà forma, e come vera  
Mi presenta allo sguardo una chimera.

He has a momentary hallucination, a direct image of his guilt. He hears a voice:

O Macbeth, you will have only thorns for a pillow. (Act one, scene thirteen)

Avrai per guanciali sol vepri, o Macbetto!

He expects to be punished for the regicide. He then is too guilty to go back in the room to finish the business and Lady Macbeth does it for him. Another hallucination of knocking:

Oh, if only I could wipe my crime  
from my mind! (Act one, scene fifteen)

Oh, potessi il mio delitto  
Dalla mente cancellar!



Then in the banquet scene, Macbeth has another extended hallucination, that of the ghost of Banquo, who silently accuses him.

Do not say that it was I!  
Do not shake your bloody locks at me! (Act two, scene seven)

Non dirmi, non dirmi ch'io fossi!  
Le ciocche cruenta non scuotermi incontro.

Macbeth consults with the witches again, hoping to be consoled. This is another powerful scene in which the witches perform a parody of the Eucharist, giving the wine and host to children, then making them vomit and using the vomit in their ceremony. We are now securely in the realm of Hell and death.

The first scene of Act four has another powerful contrast. The scene opens with a soldier sitting on a jeep with a gun smoking a cigarette, an image of modern warfare. Then a group of refugees, straight out from current headlines, sings a chorus to the grief of oppression, followed by an aria from Macduff who vows revenge and deliverance. Then soldiers pour in, hand our rifles and prepare for battle.



Scene three is the famous sleep-walking of Lady Macbeth. The staging is quite effective. She is surrounded by a group of the witches who assist by placing chairs for her to walk on. Freud would call this the return of the repressed. She can no longer banish her hate and guilt. She is dressed in a blood spotted plain shift with her hair unmade. Then a screen descends and now we are in the mental asylum, with a doctor and female attendant. She is completely psychotic, quite the contrast from her previous strength and resolve, even when her husband was disintegrating.

There's still a spot here.

Away, I tell you, curse you! (Act four, scene four)

Una macchia &egrave; qui tuttora.

Via, ti dico, o maledetta!

Later we learn that she is dead, likely a suicide.

Interestingly, Macbeth has regained his sanity. We do know clinically that when one member of a family recovers from psychosis, another member will become psychotic. He is aware of his precarious position and the likelihood of his own defeat, but this a realistic appraisal of his position. In the battle that ensues, Macbeth is killed by Macduff and Malcolm, the son of Duncan, is crowned king. There is one final chilling image. The new king goes among his soldiers to greet and thank them. Here we have a foreshadow of the twentieth century soldier dictator, propped up by his army.

Robert S. White