

# Narration, Compassion and Tactics in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

Yuan Sun<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Language, Henan University, Kaifeng, Henan, China

## ABSTRACT

The paper explains from the perspective of narratology why Macbeth as an anti-protagonist could arouse its readers' and audience's deep sympathy and compassion. The reason lies in that Shakespeare uses two tactics in his fabrication of the drama, the passive presentation of the events and the shifted narrative focalization. By these two tactics, Shakespeare managed a strong identification between the lookers and the looked. And this identification prompts an unavoidable sense of immersion or engagement in readers' reading experience, which makes them view the tragedy in the eye of the anti-protagonist, a fusion of horizons.

**Keywords:** *Macbeth, Narrative pattern, Dramatic mood, Identification, Fusion of horizon.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE PROPOSAL OF THE PROBLEM

*Macbeth*, the last one of Shakespeare's great four tragedies, is regarded as the darkest and one of the most mature works of the bard. The protagonist of the play, Macbeth, though a tyrannical ruler, a usurper, still wins deep compassion from the readers and audience. Then, here is the question, whence comes the compassion for the anti-protagonist? Is it that the readers or the audience do not have their lowest value, or their concept of morality opposite the orthodoxy thought? Or do they lose or purposely abandon the ability to tell good from bad? When the heart strings of the readers echo with Macbeth's heavy soliloquies, do they shrink away from their moral judgment? The readers or audience are undoubtedly not so naive to be taken by the nose and persuaded into giving up their capability of distinguishing, but it seems that their responses of compassion for Macbeth can halt the ethicists' pause to consider for seconds. But viewing the play from a perspective of text, it can be found that readers' emotion is controlled or manipulated by the playwright.

But how did Shakespeare achieve such an effect? There are a large number of research papers concerning *Macbeth*, yet few of them hit the point of the question, and too many of them are merely lingering peripherally, in the present author's eyes,

around the essence of the drama. This question, perhaps can be answered from the perspective of narrative. And the following analysis is expected to be such one, through which a reasonable reply might be able to be accessed.

## 2. NARRATIVE STRATEGY AND DRAMA

Narrative strategy, a well-developed term in narratology, is defined as "in recounting a narrative, the set of narrative procedures followed or narrative devices used to achieve some specific goal" (Prince, 1987: 64). In fact, the problem of narrative strategy has already been in existence since the beginning of narrative from the early age of human history, myths, epic poems, from verbal form to literal form. It draws great attention from the literary circles, and its coverage has already extended from its original analysis of fiction to a much larger field of information or narrative form, TV plays, films, dramas, and even advertisements. Nowadays, it is prevalent in every respect of the fabric of people's lives. Hence, there comes the culture narrative, female narrative, history narrative, autobiography narrative, etc.

Habitually, classical scholars and critics would like to associate narrative with novels. Seldom do they link narrative with dramas, partly because the terminology in narratology does not usually apply

to dramas. Say, the point of view. It seems that all the point of view in dramas is in the third person. And it is hard for us to delimit the external or the internal focalization in a drama. The narrator in a drama is omnipresent, or even, there is no such a narrator in a drama at all, because the story of a drama is presented by the actors on the stage but not told by a narrator somewhere.

However, with the deepening of narratology study, post-classical narrative does not only limit its realm in novels any longer. It has diversified and pervaded people's everyday life and become a part of the fabric of their life, and its interpretation and implication has already jumped out of the conventional context in the texts. Since there has emerged seminars and treatises on film narratology, it is also reasonable to borrow something from novel narrative patterns into the analysis of dramas.

In Gerald Prince's *A Dictionary of Narratology*, there are two prevailing definitions of narratology. The first definition as a structuralist-inspired theory of narrative was developed by Todorov. According to Todorov, "Narratology studies the nature, form, and functioning of narrative (regardless of medium of representation) and tries to characterize narrative competence. More particularly, it examines what all and only narrative have in common (at the level of story, narrating, and their relations) as well as what enables them to be different from one another, and it attempts to account for the ability to produce and understand them"(Prince, 1987:66) .

The second definition is developed by Genette, referring to "the study of narrative as the verbal mode of representation of temporally ordered situations and events. In this restricted sense, narratology disregards the level of story in itself (it does not attempt to formulate a grammar of stories or plots, for instance) and focuses on the possibility relations between story and narrative text, narrating and narrative text, and story and narrating. Specifically, it investigates problems of tense, mood, and voice"(ibid).

Subtly or largely divergent, there still are some further views on narratology. Manfred Jahn claimed that anything, in the widest possible sense, that tells or represents a story. Karen Vanhaesebrouck put forward a comparatively more concrete idea that a narrative exceeds the terrain of the exclusively verbally narrated texts and functions, and consequently, the approach of discourse narratology seems to be the best theoretical approach for tackling matters that exceeds the traditional logocentric mode of signification. However, he

criticizes Jahn's text-oriented narratology of drama, which he regards, as ignoring the very specific (bilateral) interaction between play and spectator and a major part of the theater production in which the text is no more than a peripheral element within the larger structure of the actual performance. The former enlarged the spectrum of narratology poetics, while the latter elevated to a certain degree the discipline's application context, from an all-around included text-fabricated horizon to a sociological plateau.

For the present study, it is more practical and essential to follow the inclination to Genette's view, for Genette emphasized the relations between story, narrative text, and narrating, which consists of the infrastructure of the present script-oriented study.

Theoretically, drama consists of four primary elements: script, director, actors, and audience, and among the four major elements of a drama, mobility in the latter three is fairly usual. Naturally, different directors, actors, and audiences would hold different interpretations and perceptions towards the same script text, and what is comparatively stable is nothing more than the narration embedded in the text of a drama. Once the script is fixed down in the form of narrative text and published, it can hardly alter despite temporal factors.

Besides, when narrative is talked about, academics naturally think of the subjectivity in narrating. A narrative is the immediate result of narrating. According to the present author's understanding, narrating is a process within the scope of the selection, the rearrangement, and the reconstruction of narrative materials corresponding to the intention of the narrator. The more predominant a narrator is, the more the readers would be affected by his narrative, and Shakespeare, happened to be one of the most predominant.

### **3. THE NARRATIVE STRATEGY IN *MACBETH***

Having exploited the text of the drama, it can be found that the narrative strategy in *Macbeth* is mainly reflected in two aspects, the presentation of the events and the shift of focalization. Next, the discussion about the two would be carried out respectively.

### 3.1 *Passive Presentation of the Events*

Aristotle's most famous theory claims that the best tragedy should be one that reveals the process that a man, who is not pre-eminent in virtue and justice, neither falls into misfortune through vice or depravity, but falls because of some mistake. It seems that Macbeth is outside of Aristotle's regulations of a tragic hero. The biggest distinction between Macbeth and the other protagonists in the four great tragedies of Shakespeare lies in that none of the murders conducted by Macbeth is out of mistakes. It could be biased if Macbeth denied to be a pre-eminent figure, for he has been illustrated by the bard as a noble man, a brave soldier, and loyal to his state in the first half of the drama.

As the king's cousin, Macbeth is initially portrayed to readers as an exceptionally skilled general through the praises of other characters after he successfully quells a rebellion and repels a foreign invasion. In these conflicts, he exhibits immense personal bravery, a trait that persists throughout the play in facing various perils. His remarkable personal courage is demonstrated in his defense of the country; however, on the other hand, once this profound courage becomes ingrained in his bloodstream, driving him to pursue power and status, it poses a significant peril to both his sovereign and the realm, as subsequently evidenced in subsequent acts and scenes. Consequently, Macbeth cannot be regarded as a prototypical tragic figure within the realm of drama.

But the present author aims to identify three external factors that contributed to Macbeth's hasty usurpation in no later than Act I, Scene iii, iv, v.

Macbeth, in his first show in the drama, met with the imperfect prophets, the three sister witches at the moor.

"All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, thane of Glamis!"

"All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, thane of Cawdor!"

"All hail, Macbeth! That shalt be king hereafter!" (I, iii, 51-53)

These three hails directly stimulate Macbeth's imagination of his future, but the witches vanish leaving no single scrap of words for a more comprehensive elucidation of Macbeth's inquiries. The ambiguous prediction seems to indicate that his destination is Thane of Cawdor and a more tempting title, the king of Scotland, which makes

Macbeth half inspired and half skeptical. He had already been Thane of Glamis at that time, so it seems the title of Thane of Cawdor and the King of Scotland was accessible to him. His desire for the scepter began to swell from his inner consciousness.

In the succeeding scenes, Macbeth realizes his dream of being bestowed as Thane of Cawdor for his illustrious military exploits. Not having recovered from the ecstasy of becoming Thane of Cawdor, he calmed down by the abrupt claim that Malcolm, the elder prince of Scotland, would be the heir. Malcolm's designation as the heir piled up a great block in Macbeth's legal way to the throne.

"The prince of Cumberland!

That is a step on which I must fall down,  
or else o' verleap, for in my way it lies". (I, iv, 46)

Macbeth was sensible enough to recognize the situation of his way to the throne. He was so absorbed in the imagery illusion, to "fall down, or else o' verleap" that he even neglected the king's warm-hearted praise.

Lady Macbeth, another critical figure in the drama, to whom many critics would like to pay their scholastic efforts, has a spectrum of diversified hypotheses concerning her function in the drama. One saying is that she, as well as the three sister witches, was the externalization of Macbeth's inner activities. That is why a fairly part of critics like to look into Macbeth from the perspective of psychoanalysis. She is a woman with a poignant perception. Macbeth's ambition and weakness are exposed before her like a naked baby.

"It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness

To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great.

Art not without ambition, but without

The illness should attend it." (I, v, 16-19)

This is her remarkable remark on her husband. Her sharp penetration through the subtle fluctuation in Macbeth's mind urged her to persuade him

"to beguile the time,

Look like the time; bear welcome in your eyes,  
your hand, your tongue; look like th' innocent  
flower,

but be the serpent under't." (I, v, 72-75)

Hence hypocrisy is not a part of Macbeth's personality. It has to be admitted that his mentally

tough wife in a certain degree affects deeply the weak-minded husband.

The equivocate indication released by the witches, the proclamation on the heir of the king, and the propelling form Lady Macbeth, all the three forces converge into an uncontrollable impact towards Macbeth. Any of the forces is beyond the disposal ability of Macbeth. The witches are supernatural, Duncan's consideration of the estate accords with the throne succession, and Lady Macbeth, is too tough to be controlled at least in the first half of the drama. None of them could be manipulated by Macbeth.

As a result, Macbeth seems to have no other choice but to be pushed by the convergent forces. Thus, the information transmitted by Shakespeare's narrative to the readers is not that Macbeth committed the regicide, nor a literal representation of a criminal event in the active voice, but a passive voice as Macbeth was cornered in the crime track. The image developed in the spectators' mind becomes that Macbeth was dragged into the whirl of evil by a force he cannot resist, nor can he restrain, neither escape nor stop.

Todorov states that "meaning does not exist before being articulated and perceived...; there do not exist two utterances of identical meaning if their articulation has followed a different course"(Rimmon-kenan 2002: 8). This articulation opens a psyche room for readers to accept Macbeth as a tragic hero and his seeking for power and right reasonable. Mark Currie also points out that readers' attitude towards a character is not so ready-made, and there is no clear-cut moral judgment. Even it is perhaps not imprudent to conclude that it is sometimes naive to judge a hero in literary works solely from the perspective of conventional moral value. Macbeth is of course out of the realm of such a judgment. The present author does not intend to conduct a defense for the criminal behavior of Macbeth, but it has to be confessed that the readers' reaction in reading could be manipulated by the elaborated narration. The bard's narration of the three external forces does affect the reconstruction of Macbeth's image.

### 3.2 *Shift of Focalization*

According to Genette, focalization refers to "the perspective in terms of which the narrated situations and events are presented; the perceptual or conceptual position in terms of which they are rendered (Prince, 1988: 31-32). When there is no

such a position or beyond locatable, the narrative is considered to have zero focalization or to be non-focalized; when such a position is locatable and entails conceptual or perceptual restrictions, the narrative is regarded to have internal focalization; and if what is presented be limited to the characters' external behavior (words and actions but not thoughts or feelings), their appearance, and the setting against which they come to the fore, external focalization is said to obtain.

Another narrative strategy Shakespeare adopted in the drama is the shift of focalization, say, from external focalization to internal focalization. How did Shakespeare manage it? There is another concept: dramatic mode, one of the eight possible points of view according to Friedman's classification. When the dramatic mode is adopted — as in the so-called objective or behaviorist narrative — the information provided is largely limited to what the characters do and say, and there is no direct indication of what they perceive, think, or feel. Though the concept originated from the analysis of fiction, if adopted in drama, it would be fairly applicable. All that the script or the stage gives off is merely the characters' behaviors, thoroughly objective and externally focalized. But the objectivity is not as stable as it has been imagined.

Distance, closeness, and access, Mark Currie states, can technically produce and control the production of sympathy. A sufficient supply of the protagonist's information in *Macbeth* shortens the distance between readers, the audience, and the protagonist, who seems no more strange to us, but an old friend with genuine intimacy between us. Macbeth is accessed from the eyes of various roles, Duncan, Banquo, Lady Macbeth, Macduff, Malcolm, as well as other noblemen. Through different views, a panoramic image of Macbeth is built at the beginning of the play entirely different from that at its end. Macbeth's profile is far beyond a flat one but a dimensional one.

And more important, the inner voice of Macbeth can easily be heard. Almost one thirds of the large amount of information about Macbeth is his soliloquies, among which, three are the longest in length. "We are more likely to sympathize with people when we have a lot of information about their inner lives, motivations, fears, etc."(Currie, 1998: 19). The three soliloquies play a key role in getting access to Macbeth's inner heart, eg., in Act I, scene vii,

“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  
... ..”

The equivocation of the soliloquy expresses the complexity of Macbeth’s situation under the pressure of the impending regicide. He tried his best effort to make his thoughts logical and orderly, however, his words slipped away from his lips. He sorted out the reasons he should not murder Duncan and admonished himself for horrible consequence of this deed, and he could even foresee his fall. The anxiety in his mind is obvious, which was leaked out by his language, and he, was actually in a violent conflict about whether to kill Duncan or not. He was not so tough in his mental will. By now readers can see his weakness and rationalism.

In Act II, scene i, when Macbeth is in his castle, he gives out a soliloquy in which he sees the vision of a dagger before him. The vision he felt he perceives is fatal, guiding the way he will be going. The moment he is going to commit the regicide has been on its way. The dagger with blood should have been a real vision a moment later, but now it appeared before Macbeth ahead of time, therefore, it was the result when Macbeth was under extreme nervousness. At the last moment, he made up his mind to kill Duncan. “I go, and it is done: the bell invites me”. From hesitation to determination, the soliloquy expresses Macbeth’s conflict, pressure, and struggle in his inner heart, as well as the complexity of the commitment to the crime.

His further involvement in crime is shown in the soliloquy in Act III, Scene i. For fear of his scepter fruitless, and that Banquo’s descendants would be the kings of Scotland, and for fear of his offensive murders worthless, and that the witches’ prophecy of Banquo would realize, Macbeth buys two murderers to kill Banquo and his son Fleance. On one hand, he sternly sticks to the belief that his ambition would come true which has been affirmed by the sister witches. On the other, he spares no effort to prevent the other half of the prophecy from becoming true. Macbeth has been trapped in a pitiful situation of self-contradiction, irrational, and unreasonable.

Up to now, a lineal progression of how Macbeth metamorphoses from a rational upright general into a tough dictator, an irrational killer can be seen

clearly. When critics criticized Macbeth, it seems that they all forget the precondition of the tragic story, there is someone else rather than Macbeth who has first violated the legal or just convention. At that time, the produce of a Scotland king is elected but not the nominated, and the inheritance of the king is by the merit and contribution of the candidates to the kingdom, but not their blood lineage. Macbeth has well protected the country whenever is needed, so he holds good reason to claim his sovereignty, while Duncan only pacifies Macbeth with a thane but nominates his elder son Malcolm his heir. This is the very point where Macbeth feels treated unfairly. If tracing to the source of the story, it is Duncan, yet not Macbeth, who causes the whole tragedy.

In the progress of Macbeth’s revenge for his unfairness, spectators are no longer on-lookers. They indulge themselves improperly in the story, show irrevocable sympathy for the anti-protagonist, and share the same thoughts, horror, and agony with him. And finally, they find that they have already been caught in a psychological identification with the man they gaze at, hating and pitying. But that does not stop there, what makes them fascinating more is Macbeth’s deep thinking of death, of time, of courage and crime. That means, Macbeth, in a thorough cold-bloodiness, as if with a surgery lancet, dissects his inner self and his behaviors. What makes the readers more upset is that Macbeth has never become disordered mentally or physically, nor does he hide or fly, unlike Lady Macbeth sometimes disguises her guilt in hallucination, Macbeth soberly and deeply feels every stroke of the lancet from his skin to his nerves.

And this sobriety equips him with poignant thinking, for example, in his dialogue with Lady Macbeth, “I am in blood stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o’ver”, a mood with irretrievable, irrefutable regret is reflected.

“life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury  
Signifying nothing.”

The lines above extracts from Macbeth’s dialogue with the doctor, or more even another soliloquy after the death of Lady Macbeth, reflects Macbeth’s consideration of life. Like a philosopher,

his thought has pricked the essence of life. There are so many lines in the drama like these enabling us get access into Macbeth's innermost thoughts, yet other characters can only reach the out surface of Macbeth. Usually, "we sympathize with people when we see other people who do not share our access to their inner lives judging them harshly or incorrectly"(Currie, 1998: 19), so in the second half of the drama, the readers have already, though unconsciously, taken the same stance with Macbeth to view the outside world.

Actually, Macbeth is not the sole anti-protagonist who wins the compassion of readers under the manipulation of the bard, another one is Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, and some others in other dramas. It seems that a standard narrative pattern can probably be drawn from the two anti-protagonists: *wrongly treated, bitter sufferings, inner heart struggling, finally taking action, and no matter the result*. This pattern can not only help to shape the image of the typical anti-protagonist, like Macbeth and Shylock, into tragic heroes as Prometheus or Sisyphus but also help readers to perceive the sublimity of an action without God's blessing or even against the usual sense of moral value.

All in a word, in Shakespeare's narration, the external focalization in a kind of drama mood, could be inconspicuously substituted in a certain way by the inner focalization. The audience has developed a deep agreement with the anti-protagonist, gaining the same motivation, emotion, and cognition. Their sympathy for moral value has already smoothly given their way to the concrete person in their life. They see themselves as the anti-protagonists, and share the same fusion of horizons. And at that moment, those anti-protagonists have become themselves, doing things that they want to but dare not.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The paper explores technically the two narrative tactics, say, presentation and focalization in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, to answer the question of why people have compassion for Macbeth, the usurper and regicide murderer. And from the cases of Macbeth and another famous Shakespeare role, Shylock, the paper develops a comparatively universal narrative pattern, which can be brought out as a framework for compassion analysis. Readers' sympathy for Macbeth can not be imprudently defined as irrational, and instead, it should be a result of compromise, the compromise

between the responses of readers' common emotions and the bard's skillful narrative technique. And what is there is not only the compromise but also a secret or open reverence from the bard to the action ability in the anti-protagonist, and this adds to the darkest drama a light of sublimity.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Shakespeare, William. 1963. The tragedy of Macbeth, edited by Sylvan Barnet. New York: The New American library of world literature, Inc.
- [2] Prince, Gerald. 1987. A Dictionary of Narratology. Aldershot: Scholar Press.
- [3] Rimmon-Kenan, Shlomith. 2002. Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics. London: Routledge Taylor&Francis Group.
- [4] Currie, Mark. 1998. Postmodern Narrative Theory. New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc. — 2004. "Towards a Theatrical Narratology?" Vanhaesebrouck, Karel. Image and narrative.