

Macbeth's Two-Part Heart as the Seat of Conflict for Passions and Morals And: A Midsummer Night's Heart Attack

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WRITER'S COMMENT: *As I scrolled through course descriptions each quarter of my college career, I strategically avoided two little words: "term paper." I love studying literature, but always shied away from committing to one topic for too long, fearful of losing interest half-way through. Having already taken one Shakespeare course with Professor Gina Bloom, however, I could not resist the opportunity to enroll in her more in-depth Topics in Drama: Shakespeare. While reading Macbeth, I noticed the repetition of the word "heart." Because Macbeth does not usually fall under the category of romance or comedy, two genres I would associate with emphasis on the heart, the repetition intrigued me. Through my research, I found that the late 16th and early 17th century understanding of the heart deeply intertwined the heart's physical and intangible functions; the heart, the seat of both passion and morality, motivates physical action. I argue this fascinating view of the heart proves key to Macbeth's downfall in this timeless tragedy. Thank you, Professor Bloom, for working with and encouraging me in this essay; I am glad I did not let the threat of a term paper scare me away from this course.*

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: *The course that lead to Jenna's paper was Advanced Shakespeare, one of several classes in the English department designed to teach research skills to upper-level English majors. Like some others in the class, Jenna had taken my Shakespeare lecture class earlier in her undergraduate career and was ready to bring her study of Shakespeare to the next level. Students worked throughout the quarter on reading challenging literary criticism and applying it to the plays assigned. The final paper asked students to craft their own topic, read extensive scholarship on that topic, and then produce a critical essay that responds to this literary critical field, making an intervention into it. Building on some work we'd done earlier in the quarter on the senses and embodiment, Jenna decided to focus on the meaning of the heart in Macbeth. In choosing to write on Macbeth, a popular play that has been the subject of countless essays and books, Jenna had her work cut out for her in terms of working out an argument that would not duplicate*

other published scholarship. She manages, however, to offer a grounded and novel reading of *Macbeth's* tragic story. Using William Slights' work on early modern understandings of the heart as the seat of both emotion and morality, she argues that this two-part heart creates an internal conflict for *Macbeth* who, tragically, is unable to marry these disparate meanings.

—Gina Bloom, Department of English

Like any romantic comedy, William Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* presents a tangled web of romance, straightening seemingly hopeless knots of affection just in time for a tidy finale as the curtain falls. Just when it seems Lysander and Demetrius will leave Hermia forlorn and kill each other in their delirious pursuit for Helena's love, Robin Goodfellow steps in with magic flower juice and a lighthearted spell: "Jack shall have Jill,/ Naught shall go ill,/ the man shall have his mare again, and all shall be well" (3.3.45-47). A darker fear, however, lurks beneath the comedic confusion as lovers find themselves susceptible of being robbed of their hearts, an organ commonly identified – in the early modern period just as in our own time – with romantic love and emotion. The language of the characters in the play reveals a deep anxiety concerning the heart. Lovers fear the separation of the heart – specifically, the passions and desires housed in the heart – from the physical courses of action they take. The undertones of anxiety throughout this comedy lay the groundwork for further investigation of the consequences of such division in Shakespeare's later tragedy *Macbeth*.

William Slights's book, *The Heart in the Age of Shakespeare*, provides historical context for Shakespeare and his contemporaries' understanding of both the physical and metaphorical heart in the late 1500s and early 1600s. The discourse around the heart as "the body part most conspicuously in continuous motion" involved scientific, spiritual, emotional, theological, and artistic fields, and utilized the words "motion" and "emotion" (Slights 78). "Motion" spoke of "a motive force in the mind or some part of the body, especially the heart, which could come to dominate a person's actions" (Slights 78). The word "emotion" grew out of "motion," and Slights explains that "in the later seventeenth century the term 'emotion' gained prominence in discussions of the stirrings or agitated movements triggered in the body by the passions or 'affections'" (Slights 80-81). Discourse on the heart also associated morality with the heart, and people's actions purportedly revealed their moral quality

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(Slights 86). Slights explains, “the matter of linking head and hand to heart as the instruments for conceiving and enacting the will was not at all settled in the early modern period” (Slights 87).

With the word “heart” appearing twenty-seven times throughout *Macbeth* without once referring to romantic love, the unsettledness or insecurity surrounding the heart becomes a certain, if subtle, theme. Macbeth demonstrates a great awareness of the interconnection between the heart and other body parts, and sees the heart as the driving force behind his actions. In his quest for power, however, he finds himself caught by two parts of his heart: the moral part and the emotional or impassioned part. While passions propel him in one direction, namely in the bloody route to the throne, his morals continually check his passions, making him question his actions and plaguing him with guilt. While other tragic heroes in Shakespeare’s plays manage to overcome this guilt, such as Caesar in *Julius Caesar*, Macbeth cannot seem to win in this struggle. In his quest for power, Macbeth attempts to divide the moral and the emotional parts of his heart to separate the moral part from his hand, or action. Although he manages to disconnect his morals from his actions just long enough to commit bloody deeds, his tragic fate and feelings of guilt evidence the difficulty and danger of separating heart from hand.

This essay will first look at *A Midsummer Night's Dream* to establish the treatment of the heart in a comedy. “Heart” in this genre primarily refers to romance, which proves vastly different from how the word functions in *Macbeth*. Studying the heart in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, nevertheless, sheds light on how to understand the concept of the heart that governs how this organ functions in the tragedy of *Macbeth*; thus, the essay then returns to *Macbeth* and the internal-turned-external dilemma the tragic hero battles throughout the play.

**An Attack on the Heart in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* –
Dangerous Romance in Comedy**

As a romantic comedy, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* deals with the heart in relation to romantic love, making the heart the seat of emotion, romantic affection, and romantic passion. This love, however, does not come merely with excited, pleasant emotion, but also with fear of the effect others exert on the heart. The fear of a lover’s heart being stolen by another introduces the possibility of the heart separating from the body.

The play opens with Egeus accusing Lysander of having “filched my daughter’s heart” (1.1.36), a concern soon echoed by Helena, who claims Hermia “sway[s] the motion of Demetrius’[s] heart” (1.1.193). Here, Helena’s diction effortlessly conflates the early modern ideas of motion and emotion by alluding to the physical beating of the emotionally infatuated heart. Demetrius’s love for Hermia sways his emotions away from Helena as well as incites the physical responses of an increased heart rate and pursuit of Hermia. Later, in the woods, the tables turn, and Hermia now demands of Helena, “You thief of love – what, have you come by night/ And stol’n my love’s heart from him?” (3.2.284). Hermia identifies the heart as the seat of romantic love and pointedly presents the four lovers’ shared belief in the possibility of separation of heart and body. This possibility of disconnection makes the heart susceptible to being stolen from the body or self by another. Slight’s work on the heart helps make sense of this disconnect when he calls attention to Shakespeare and his contemporaries’ view of the heart as both the “proactive source of many passions” and “the elastic receptacle of emotions” (Slight’s 83). This idea that the heart not only generates but receives emotions weakens personal control of the heart and thus becomes a source of fearful concern when placed in the light of what others can do to an individual’s heart.

The heart’s ability to respond to another by acting of its own volition, as separate from the volition of the body or self, characterizes the heart as a producer of emotion and reinforces the frightening prospect of the divisibility of heart from self. Perhaps the clearest example of this appears when Demetrius tells Lysander, “If e’er I loved her [Hermia], all that love is gone./ My heart to her but as guestwise sojourned/ and now to Helen it is home returned,/ There to remain” (3.2.171-174). In this passage, Demetrius isolates his heart as an agent of its own will. Separate from himself, his heart resided in Helena, travelled to Hermia, and returns now to Helena. He vehemently denies ever loving Hermia himself and blames his heart for loving her without the knowledge or agreement of his body. Helena also identifies her heart as an entity separate from herself. She decides to leave the others and return to Athens, and when she lingers, Hermia exclaims, “Why, get you gone. Who is’t that hinders you?” (3.2.319). Helena replies, “A foolish heart, that I leave here behind” (3.2.120). Helena effectively identifies her own heart as “who” impedes her departure from Demetrius, personifying it as separate from her body and capable of exerting its own will.

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By the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the fearful tensions of the body's lack of control over the heart dissolve in the pleasurable experience of romantic love. The play seemingly "celebrates the ongoing pleasures of resolving the conflict of inner and outer modes of experiencing love," effectually "resolving" the tensions and fears evoked by the volition and divisibility of the heart (Slights 169). The heart, as the seat of emotion, returns to act in happy accordance with the body so every Jack loves the proper Jill, even if a little magic does complicate the legitimacy of the concord. However, this problem of the heart's divisibility from the body appears not only in the easily resolved world of the romantic comedy, but also in the much less tidy world of the tragedy, a realm in which it presents deeper, deadlier consequences.

The Heart Struggle in *Macbeth* – Dangerous Motives in Tragedy

In *Macbeth*, the heart becomes not only the seat of emotion, but also the seat of morality, making the main danger not its susceptibility to others, but to its own conflicting parts. In her essay, "To See Feelingly': The Language of the Senses and the Language of the Heart," Judith Dundas uses the last acts of *King Lear* "to affirm one thing: the heart and its affections as the seat of moral life" (Dundas 49). Slights verifies that people in Shakespeare's time found the heart "singled out repeatedly in the Bible as the instrument of moral discernment" (Slights 29). Thus, when the passions align with morality, all remains well. When Macbeth's passions deviate from morality, however, he finds his heart pulled in two different directions. With the idea of assassinating Duncan newly born in his mind, Macbeth asks himself,

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 than horrible imaginings:
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is
But what is not. (1.3.247-255)

This passage reveals Macbeth's awareness of the immorality of his passions by referring to the contemplated murder with words like "horrid" and "horrible." And yet this impassioned idea continues to

impress itself on him, “shak[ing]” his “single state of man,” disturbing the alignment of morality and emotion. Macbeth’s “seated heart knock[ing] at [his] ribs” echoes Helena’s idea of the heart’s connection to the body and the influence of the heart’s motion on the body. The pounding of his heart indicates the intensity of his emotions – a hunger for power and a fear of what he might do. This morally-motivated fear betrays Macbeth’s belief in the connection of heart and action.

In fact, Macbeth and his contemporaries all share a belief in the heart’s ability to drive action – physically, of course, as the heart pumps blood through the body, but also morally and emotionally. The role of the Doctor clearly unites the physical and moral hearts. Upon hearing Lady Macbeth’s physical sigh, for example, the Doctor makes a diagnosis on the condition of her heart (5.1.44). He shortly thereafter claims that “foul whisperings and unnatural deeds/ Do breed unnatural troubles,” suspecting her of immoral conduct that now affects the physical condition of her heart (5.1.61-62). Macbeth’s expectation of the doctor to heal both Lady Macbeth’s physical and emotional ills demonstrates his belief in the physical heart’s relationship with both morals and emotions: “Canst thou not [.../.../] Cleanse the stuff’d bosom of that perilous stuff/ Which weighs upon the heart?” (5.3.42-47). The common awareness and acceptance of this physical-emotional-moral relation becomes apparent even earlier in the play, through Macbeth’s pseudo-response to Duncan’s murder. Upon “learning” of the assassination, Macbeth kills the guards he has painted as the murderers, then verbally reflects on this action in the following scene:

MACBETH: O, yet I do repent me of my fury
That I did kill them.

MACDUFF: Wherefore did you so?

MACBETH: Who can be wise, amazed, temp’rate and furious,
Loyal and neutral in a moment? No man.

Th’expedition of my violent love

Outran the pauser, reason.

/.../

Who could refrain,

That had a heart to love, and in that heart

Courage to make ‘s love known? (2.3.103-114)

Admittedly, although other emotions motivated him, Macbeth lies in suggesting moral, loyal “love” incited him to action. Nevertheless,

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through this passage Macbeth demonstrates an established belief that the morals and emotions of the heart drive action. Though Macduff initially questions Macbeth's rash action, after this explanation nobody finds further fault with Macbeth's response, indicating a general, pre-established understanding of the power of the emotions and morals on the heart. The idea that this act supposedly avenges Duncan moralizes Macbeth's response. According to the online Oxford English Dictionary, "courage" during Shakespeare's time referred to "the heart as the seat of feeling, thought, etc.; spirit, mind, disposition, nature." Macbeth justifies his actions by asserting his courage – otherwise called his feelings, emotions, or passions – "outran" his "reason" and drove his body to kill the two guards. His rhetorical questions, "Who can be wise...?" and "Who could refrain...?" portray him as almost a victim to his heart; like Demetrius, the overwhelming emotions of his heart gave Macbeth no control over his action. This interconnection of heart and action makes him morally fearful of what action his emotional, or impassioned, heart can prompt him to take. Yet Macbeth proves not so much a victim of a divided heart as a willful perpetrator of separation, leading to his ultimate downfall.

Because the moral part of his heart impedes the action his impassioned heart so desires, Macbeth fervently attempts to separate the moral and emotional parts of his heart, freeze the moral part, and let only the emotional heart drive his action. Since the heart serves as the seat of both morals and emotions, however, Macbeth finds his desire of separating them too paradoxical to achieve permanently. Macbeth's repeated reminder to Lady Macbeth that they need to hide their hearts with their faces illustrates Macbeth's attempt to separate the moral part of his heart from his actions in favor of the impassioned part. He bends "each corporal agent to this terrible feat," then urges his wife, "false face must hide what the false heart doth know" (1.7.78-82). Words like "terrible feat" and "false," combined with Macbeth's previous indecision about committing murder, highlight Macbeth's recognition of the immorality of it. In resolving to kill Duncan, then, Macbeth must suppress his moral qualms and allow the impassioned part of the heart to drive his actions; he fears his face betraying his moral conflict and must use his passions to control his expression. Macbeth's specific mention of "corporal agent[s]" indicates his keen awareness of his heart's connection to and effect on his physical actions. Clearly, Macbeth succeeds in temporarily hardening his heart toward morality; he does indeed murder Duncan.

However, John Anson, author of “*Julius Caesar: The Politics of the Hardened Heart*,” recognizes Macbeth as one of the most morally aware villains of Shakespeare’s stage, noting, “Macbeth, unable to blind the eye of conscience, becomes increasingly obsessed with the bloody deed of his hand” (Anson 27). Macbeth’s inability to freeze his morality, or achieve “moral petrification,” as Anson terms it, keeps him floundering in maddening guilt for his actions (Anson 14). Even in the immediate aftermath of the murder, Lady Macbeth scolds her husband for the weakness of his heart (2.2.62–63). Lady Macbeth fuels Macbeth’s desire for moral petrification by claiming he will become less than a man if he does not murder Duncan in his effort to gain power.¹ Stanley Cavell argues Macbeth paradoxically wants to commit the deed and undo it before it even occurs: “If it were done when ‘tis done, then ‘twere well/ It were done quickly: [.../.../] but that this blow/ Might be the be-all and end-all here,/ But here, upon this bank and shoal of time/ We’d jump the life to come” (*Macbeth* 1.7.1–7). Cavell sees Macbeth’s wish to “jump the life to come,” as opposing his wish to commit the murder. This paradoxical desire to do and undo the murder mirrors Macbeth’s paradoxical desire to petrify his morals and intensify his emotions to affect his actions. His view of the single, physical heart as the seat of both morals and emotions, along with his understanding of the deep interconnection between these three aspects of the heart, make sustained separation virtually impossible.

Macbeth’s paradoxical desire to both separate the moral part of the heart and unify the impassioned part of the heart with his actions leads to a tragic downfall – a downfall that others avoid by unifying their morals with their actions. John Anson’s study of Shakespeare’s *Caesar* argues for Caesar’s success in separating the heart from hand, a success that allows him to rise to great power. I see two possible explanations for how Caesar accomplishes separation of hand (action) from heart (morality and emotion) when Macbeth cannot. First, Anson explains that Caesar severs the tie between hand and heart by “excluding the passions [and] repressing the sensitive soul” (21). By repressing both his passions and his morals, Caesar may avoid the conflict of desire that prevents Macbeth from dividing his hand from his heart. On the other hand, Anson also explains that the Roman value of stoicism, or constancy,

¹ See Kimbrough for an in-depth analysis of Lady Macbeth’s efforts to masculinize her husband.

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supports Caesar's separation of heart and hand, saying, "the vigil of Stoic endurance, the 'untir'd spirits and formal constancy' of the Roman... The voluntary wound culminating in the turning of the hand against the heart, is exposed by the end of the play as the paradigm of Roman behavior" (Anson 30).

Essentially, the Roman values of Caesar's fictional-historical context allow him to align his morality with his desire to rise to power and to separate his emotions from his heart. The values of Macbeth's fictional medieval moment, however, do not make the same affordances; he cannot use stoicism or anything else to morally justify his actions, forcing him to attempt in vain to petrify his morals. Some of *Macbeth's* other characters seem to achieve separation of hand from heart, and again I see two options for what makes this possible. Malcolm claims that all of Macbeth's servants' "hearts are absent" from their service, or action, to Macbeth (5.4.13). Macbeth himself realizes this as well, and laments the fact, saying,

And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have; but, in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath,
Which the poor heart would fain deny, and dare not.
(5.3.25-29)

Slights interprets these lines to mean that "His [Macbeth's] has become a 'poor' heart, one lacking the courage to reject flattery and to defy opposition" (Slights 147). I disagree the "poor heart" refers to Macbeth, however. These lines list what Macbeth receives from others in place of the honor he could wish to have; thus I believe the "poor heart" refers to Macbeth's servants, whom he recognizes as constrained into obedience, "poor" referring to this unfortunate condition. In this case, Macbeth's comment acknowledges that his servants have been able to separate their hearts, which defy him, from their actions, which obey him. Their ability to achieve this separation may arise from the fact that they suppress the impassioned part of the heart that might want to rebel against Macbeth, not the moral part of the heart, which requires absolute obedience to even a tyrannical king. Macbeth's short speech giving homage to Duncan substantiates this idea, as Macbeth speaks of "the loyalty I owe," and describes the king's responsibility as merely "to receive our duties" (1.4.22-24). The king's subjects' "duties/ Are to [his] throne and state

children and servants,/ Which do but what they should, by doing every thing/ Safe toward [his] love and honour” (1.4.24-27). If these values reflect the values of all servants of a king, Macbeth’s servants may separate hand from heart and thus act obediently without motivation from the emotional, impassioned part of the heart. Alternatively, if Macbeth’s servants think they need to be loyal to Malcolm as the rightful king, they can separate both morals and passions from heart to obey Macbeth for their own safety.

Although Macbeth never achieves separation of heart and action in a sustainable way, he does manage to suppress his morality and propel his actions through his passions in his final moments, underscoring the deadly consequences of willful and improper separation of heart and hand. As previously mentioned, Macbeth separates his morals from his action long enough to kill Duncan, but his morality immediately returns in full force to guilt him about his deed, as evidenced by his lamentation, “To know my deed, ‘twere best not to know myself” (2.2.71). Macduff serves as a foil to Macbeth, for he demonstrates the unity of both parts of the heart with the hand. Malcolm encourages Macduff to “let grief/ Convert to anger; blunt not the heart, enrage it” (4.3.229-230). After a moment to “feel it [his sorrow] like a man,” Macduff resolves to go to Scotland, find Macbeth, and avenge his family (4.3.234-237). This progression of action suggests Macduff allows both emotion about the death of his family and his own morals about what his family deserves to propel his action. This union of morals and emotion to drive action makes Macduff a shining example of the proper union of the heart. Macbeth believes his previous wrongs against Macduff make it immoral to kill him, saying, “But get thee back; my soul is too much charged/ With blood of thine already” (5.10.5-6). This belief, combined with Macduff’s declaration he was not born by a woman, overwhelms Macbeth so much that he declares he will not fight Macduff (5.11.22). Dolores Cunningham, who also identifies Macduff as Macbeth’s noble foil, sees Macduff’s response, “Then yield ye, coward/ And live” as a generous offer to let Macbeth change from his evil ways (5.10.23-24). This moment, Cunningham claims, presents Macbeth’s “last opportunity to save himself” from his morally hardening heart (Cunningham 46). This seems a very optimistic view of the scene, for Macduff’s “offer” comes with the threat of imprisoning Macbeth as a hated object of scorn. Instead of an offer of life, Macduff’s lines provoke Macbeth to decide whether to unify passions and action to fight, or to

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surrender to his morals and give up the battle he already knows he cannot win. Reason, Slights states, could also serve as truths in the heart; by this logic Macbeth's mental knowledge that he will lose becomes part of the moral dilemma as well (Slights 86). Despite his moral qualms, however, Macbeth ultimately decides to rally his passions and fight Macduff to the death, declaring he "will not yield," that he will "try to the last" (5.10.28). Here, then, Macbeth intentionally casts aside the moral part of his heart and uses the impassioned part of his heart to motivate his final course of action: attacking Macduff. He achieves, in his death, separation of action from the moral part of the heart. Cunningham sees Macbeth's "inability to overcome the surrender to evil and cope with its consequences," as "the fundamental tragic pattern of Macbeth ... [and] Shakespearian tragedy generally" (Cunningham 46). More than an "inability" to overcome evil, however, Macbeth's choice to separate hand from heart brings him to a tragic end.

As a tragedy, we do not expect *Macbeth* to be full of romantic references to the heart. But the persistence of the word "heart" points to a strong, deep anxiety that permeates Macbeth's life throughout the play. The heart, as a physical, moral, and emotional entity, becomes an internal battleground for Macbeth's paradoxical desires. Initially fearful of what his heart, unchained from the moral aspect, will do to his actions, Macbeth fights to achieve this separation from morality. Unlike the lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Macbeth does not fear someone else stealing his heart as much as he fears his own heart's effect on his actions. Unable to permanently separate his heart from his actions, Macbeth struggles between conflicting desires and motivations. Slights writes, "the motions and affections of the sick or hardened heart were as likely to result in conflict as in truth" (Slights 88). This proves the case for Macbeth, who, toward the end of his life, admits, "I am sick at heart" (5.3.20). Though he ultimately manages to achieve his goal of separating morality from the heart while retaining the powerful driving force of the passions, this achievement costs him his life. Those who embrace the union between heart and hand, like Macduff, and those who choose the moral part of the heart over the passions do not face such tragic consequences. As the seat of both morality and passions, the heart becomes not only an organ contained within the body, but a powerful force that overwhelms the body's physical action. The mystery of the heart, *Macbeth* suggests, becomes the tragedy of the stage.

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