

"Hands" in Macbeth

At the beginning of the play, "Hands" is a word used to refer to Macbeth's brutal – but legitimate – killing of the Thane of Cawdor who "'ne'er shook hands" (1.1), symbolic of his lack of gentlemanly behaviour and loyalty in participating in rebellion – a theme of 'hands' throughout the play. In 2.2, Macbeth's "hands" are transformed into a "sorry sight" following Duncan's murder – now he is the disloyal one, having committed the ultimate sin of regicide. Macbeth himself calls them "hangman's hands" (2.2), and questions "what hands are here?" as though he no longer even recognises them as part of himself. They've become almost disembodied or part of somebody else. His dissociation seems to reflect his inner turmoil about the murder even at the moment of its committal. Next, Lady Macbeth compares her own – "my hands are of your colour but I shame/to wear a heart so white." (2.2). The gruesome visual imagery at this point is usually of Macbeth's hands slightly bloody, while directors take the opportunity to liberally coat those of Lady Macbeth, for example in the Rupert Gold version where her upright arms, bloody to the elbow, contrast with her white clothing to visually connect her to the witches who are, in this version, characterised as nurses throughout. Here, Gold's Lady Macbeth is a macabre surgeon of death.

Hands and blood remain intimately connected with the discovery of the murder as Lennox says the guards' "Hands and faces were an badged with blood" (2.3), the visual being taken as proof of their guilt. This idea of the visual representation of hands also echoes through the play. In act 1, the visual is a lack – of NOT shaking hands. In act 2, it is hands covered in blood to symbolise the guilt of murder. In act 4, Malcolm imagines a crowd of "hands uplifted in my right" (4.3) as he speaks of returning triumphantly to Scotland to save her from the wounds Macbeth is inflicting.

The symbolic guilt of hands returns with a vengeance in act 5, when Lady Macbeth's infamous handwashing is noted by the doctor and gentlewoman as she herself says "will these hands ne'er be clean?" This has become one of the most famous scenes and images of the play, and the most hotly debated; does Lady Macbeth's guilt come from an innate human sense of morality, a religious leaning inherent of the time, or perhaps simply fear that she is the only one who knows her husband's secret? As well as her own, she tells Macbeth (in her walking nightmare) to "wash your hands, put on your nightgown" (5.1), echoing a section of the scene we did not witness earlier but which suggests the partnership between them as they ready themselves for bed having committed the sin together.

Late in Act 5, others now comment on Macbeth's "secret murders sticking on his hands" (5.3) as they wait under Malcolm's command. Yet it is LADY Macbeth who has "by self and violent hands/took off her life" (5.8). Whereas Macbeth's hands were disembodied and not of his own in Act 2 and by Act 5 have come to symbolise his murder, they aren't described with the agency that Lady Macbeth's hands have here, being the instrument of her action – the hands took off her life, the action being attributed directly to her. Macbeth has murder "sticking on his hands" but isn't committing murder with his hands. Is this evidence of internalised misogyny of the time, particularly as Lady Macbeth is the demonic 'fiend-like queen' who could be, as Gold directs, played as one of the witches and 'blamed' for Macbeth's evil actions, for corrupting him from the hero of Act 1? Does the contrast in agency perhaps suggest Macbeth's helplessness against fate, as the 'hands' are being acted upon or described as objects, or even dissociated from him as though he's powerless?