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# Understanding Macbeth: A Returning Soldier

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# Understanding Macbeth: A Returning Soldier

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research ARTICLE

## Understanding Macbeth: A Returning Soldier

—Christy Clothier (Edited by Jennifer Lee)

As both a military veteran and an English major taking a course in English Renaissance drama, I found that the plays we were reading connected in a few surprising but very real ways with my own experiences. I noticed that many plays included characters who were soldiers returned from war only to become social outcasts facing unemployment or worse. Like those soldiers, I had been tasked with a job by my government and became defined by my military position and duties. However, once I re-entered society as a civilian, my accomplishments as a soldier were not recognized by nor transferable to civilian life. I was jobless and, in addition, unemployable to a certain extent because of disabilities stemming from my military service. I was socially and economically “demoted”: my only status was “unemployed.”

Not only did I see some of myself in those soldiers, but I also began to look at one of them, Shakespeare's Macbeth, as a fellow vet. This was all the more strange given that Macbeth, although cobbled together from historical persons, is a fictional character created by Shakespeare around 400 years ago. Yet great art is timeless and presents human universals to all ages even in very different contexts.

I recognize that military and civilian societies in twenty-first century America are certainly very different from those of seventeenth-century England. Then and today, many soldiers are welcomed home from war, rewarded and even celebrated. But many were and are not. Today's veterans have many services, such as those offered by the Veterans Administration, and incentives, such as the GI Bill; but those often cannot meet the physical, economic and especially psychological needs of soldiers returning from battle.

The distance between military and civilian life remains great and the transition between them difficult. Veterans, past and present, can feel alienated from their own friends and families as well as from society in general. This “outcast” state can lead to loss of self-esteem and self-confidence, creating a crisis of identity and possibly resulting in severe mental depression. This condition, coupled with post-traumatic stress syndrome, can lead to rash and violent acts. Most veterans do eventually construct new lives for themselves. Some, however, cannot readjust and may re-enlist or fall back on a military way of life. It seemed to me that Macbeth belonged in some ways to this last category.

His transition from military hero to ordinary nobleman was certainly not smooth. In the first act of the play of the same name, Macbeth is introduced as the savior of Scotland, who has almost single-handedly vanquished the King's enemies with his “bloody” sword. After a moment of praise and glory, he is directed to return

immediately to civilian life, no longer in a position of authority but docile and content with what he sees as meager rewards. The disastrous events that follow are well known: regicide, tyranny, madness, murders and finally his death back on the battlefield.

Macbeth certainly earned his reputation as a murderous tyrant and soon recognized himself the insane horror of his deeds. But he did not start out that way. Strong powers were working against him—think of the witches and Lady Macbeth. Might his initial condition of returning soldier have contributed to his downfall? Might Shakespeare have intended his audience to understand this? Before I could even begin to explore these possibilities, I had to find out what could have been Shakespeare's historic and dramatic contexts for his portrayal of Macbeth in the opening acts of the drama.

## **The Soldier in Renaissance History and Drama**

Military service was not optional for men, whether of nobility or a commoner; it was considered a duty to both king and God. The divine right of kings meant a war initiated by the throne was approved of by God; therefore, a good subject was obliged to take up arms in defense of both God and king, and to kill in their names. This duty, along with loyalty to the king, was preached from the pulpits of England. (See for example, *An Homily* 345-47). Bravery on the battlefield made you a military and a Christian hero.

Despite the fact that soldiers were fulfilling political and religious duties, they did expect to be rewarded. The officers, usually nobles, would share in the spoils of war, while the common soldier was to be paid. However, these military wages were often delayed or nonexistent (Hale 109). Even when the pay was regular, it was so low that soldiers, when not actively engaged in war, were allowed to have a second, part-time job (Hale 69). To make up for the low or lack of pay, soldiers often plundered local villages, taking whatever food and goods they could find as payment (Meron 18, Hale 116-119). The fact that they were not allowed to serve near their homes made this robbery easier (Hale 135). However, upon returning to their communities, their reputation of looting from innocent civilian strangers made them suspect. They were further shunned by many civilians who feared they no longer knew how to behave in ordinary society (Hale 188). It was not uncommon, while they were away, for others to take their places in their community, job and even in their families. Even if welcomed back by society and friends, an ex-soldier's military training and way of life was out of step with and unrecognized by civilian life.

Many English Renaissance playwrights in addition to Shakespeare depict the sad conditions of the common soldier returned from war. Middleton and Dekker's play, *The Roaring Girl*, (1611) presents the shifty vagrant Ralph Trapdoor, a veteran whose eligibility for employment consisted only of "A letter from my captain" (2.1.188). In John Webster's popular 1614 play *The Duchess of Malfi*, Bosola, an unemployed ex-soldier with no money to live on, laments, "Miserable age, where only the reward/ Of doing well is the doing of it" (1.1.31-32). Black Will and Shakebag are two roving ex-soldiers in *Arden of Feversham* (c.1592) who "for a crown would kill anyone" (2.12). Rather than starve, they are selling their military skills as mercenaries: a job keeping them from the demoralizing and hungry ranks of the unemployed. A particularly painful ex-soldier character is one who has returned maimed and disabled. Ralph Dampont in Thomas Dekker's *The Shoemaker's Holiday* (1599) is such a character. Dampont's loss of limbs in battle is seen as a loss of his masculinity. Margery, the wife of his boss, says to him, "I am sorry, Ralph, to see thee impotent" (10.71). The frequency of such characters suggests

that they were sights familiar to the audiences who attended the plays. Although these ex-soldiers may have seen and done bloody acts on the battlefield, in civilian life they are impotent outcasts.

Shakespeare is notably interested in the soldier off the battlefield (Jorgensen 215). Macbeth, a soldier of much higher rank than those cited above, nevertheless suffered similar difficulties upon returning from battle. He felt that he was neither adequately recognized nor compensated and that he was publicly and abruptly demoted to the state of civilian subject. His military authority was gone, and there was no longer a place for the warlike skills that had brought him glory. Shaken and demoralized, he was vulnerable to evil temptations and bad decisions. The witches and his witchy wife took advantage of his weakened condition.

## **Macbeth the Hero**

Shakespeare set the play of *Macbeth* in an earlier century and made Macbeth a heroic warrior of an era of brutal, hand-to-hand combat. He is admiringly described to Duncan, King of Scotland, as having cut his way through teams of foreign invaders to kill "the merciless Macdonwald" using only his sword "Which smoked with bloody execution" (1.2.9-19). He is the man of action, the super-hero soldier.

Although Duncan joins in the praise of Macbeth, he admits, "More is thy due than all can pay" (1.4.21). When the King proclaims Macbeth the new Thane of Cawdor, it is small reward or recognition for he is only giving Macbeth Macdonwald's title, something Macbeth had already earned by killing Macdonwald. This seeming gift from the King plays down Macbeth's achievements and diminishes his reputation, since a man's reputation was based on his actions, especially in battle (Harari 70). Shakespeare's audience would have noted this oblique insult as well as the next blow to Macbeth's position and pride.

In front of Macbeth and assembled nobles, Duncan proclaims his young son, Malcolm, Prince of Cumberland and therefore heir to his throne (1.4.35-38). All present knew that, in an era of elective kingship, Duncan did not have the right to do this. To Macbeth who, through a shared grandfather with Duncan, had a claim to the throne, this was a blatant insult (Holinshed 135). In an aside, Macbeth evidences further disappointment: "The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step/ On which I must fall down or else o'erleap,/ For in my way it lies" (1.4.48-50). He will not have his rightful chance to be king in the land that he saved from invaders nor, as we will see, will he be king in his own castle. Duncan, apparently to make their relative positions clear, then orders Macbeth to go home to Inverness and await the honor of his visit. Macbeth has been thoroughly relegated to his role as loyal subject to the King.

It is in this role that he returns home, essentially empty-handed and blocked from any position of power in his country. Lady Macbeth greets him rapturously and immediately works on his lowered self-esteem to mold it to her own (and ultimately to his) ends. Macbeth is reluctant to murder a king and kinsman for his own advancement, yet Duncan has put him in a position to be vulnerable to such ideas. Lady Macbeth challenges his bravery, his very manhood: "Art thou afeard," she exclaims, "to be the same in thine own act and valor/As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou... live a coward in thine own esteem...?" (1.7.39-43). The options Lady Macbeth presents her husband with are between brave, noble action and cowardly, ignoble inaction. A soldier knows which to take, and Macbeth bristles, "I dare do all that may become a man." "When you durst do it," she responds, "then you were a man" (1.7.48-50). Macbeth shows he is beaten when he weakly asks, "If we should

fail?" Lady Macbeth blocks that escape with "But screw your courage to the sticking place/ And we'll not fail" (1.7.59, 61-62). Macbeth is again committed to bloodshed—something, as a soldier, he is rather familiar with.

We hear of Macbeth's bloody and brutal killings on the battlefield in the opening of the play and see him in this role again in the final act. Shakespeare drew on several sources for the figure of Macbeth, and a favorite source was the *Chronicles* of Ralph Holinshed, a mix of history, gossip and superstition. In Holinshed he may have found suggestions of Macbeth's bloody brutality. Holinshed tells us that Macbeth had been ordered to execute the enemies, the Danes, while they slept. After exchanging promises of peace, Macbeth murders the "Danes [who] were so heavy of sleep, that the most part of them were slain and never stirred" (140). Macbeth's training has been to kill when ordered, and that training does not disappear on return to civilian life. Weapons are his tools of trade, and he has not acquired new ones. In a last, desperate soliloquy before killing his king, Macbeth imagines the murder weapon coming toward him: "Is this a dagger which I see before me/ The handle toward my hand?" (2.1.34-35). He finally does not refuse to use it.

### **A Soldier Who Never Returns**

Macbeth never really does return to civilian society, but wades deeper and deeper in blood and fear until his tyranny drives his countrymen to rebellion. In the last act of the play he is back in familiar territory, on the battlefield, fighting ferociously for what he knows is a lost cause. His wife has just died, and he laments the civilian life he forfeited by his murderous actions:

My way of life

Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf,  
And that which should accompany old age,  
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,  
I must not look to have... (5.3.22-26)

Perhaps Duncan did unknowingly contribute to his own death and the dark night of Scotland when he humiliated and insufficiently compensated his loyal soldier. But murder is an extreme and unforgivable response, and Macbeth paid the price.

It may be difficult at first to find parallels between Macbeth as a returning soldier and more recent veterans. It is clear, however, that when we first meet him, he is coming from one way of life, the military, back to another, the civilian. The elements that contributed to his failure to transition to civilian life can still be found today in the situations faced by many soldiers returning from war. These veterans certainly have much more help available than their counterparts in England 400 years ago, but civilian lack of understanding and sympathy with military life, the generally unreal view of soldiers and war presented in film and on TV, and the real economic hardships many veterans bear can make them as vulnerable to despair and doubt as was Macbeth.

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## Author Bio

Unlike most Inquiry articles, **Christy Clothier's** did not grow out of a research report or course assignment but out of her desire to follow up a possible connection between her life and the literature of a college course. She claims no one hometown since her military parents moved the family all over the country. After high school and a short stay in Belgium, she returned to the US and joined the Navy "to pay for college." During her six years of service she was trained as an air traffic controller, eventually becoming tower supervisor at the busiest airport in the military. There she met her future husband and, after leaving the military, they moved to

*Pennsylvania. In 2005 her husband was hired at a New Hampshire airport, and she entered UNH at Manchester to continue her college career. Christy will graduate in May 2007 with a degree in English and plans to go on to graduate school so she can learn to “give vets a voice.” She credits her mentor, Dr. Paterson, with “teaching me the new and what I already knew,” and the long Inquiry revision process with improving her writing and thinking skills.*

### ***Mentor Bio***

*Dr. Susanne F. Paterson, a first-time mentor, enjoyed working with Christy partly because her essay “was not an assignment I gave her. It is a subject that she selected, and the essay came from her heart.” Dr. Paterson is an associate professor of English in the Humanities division at the University of New Hampshire at Manchester. Her research and teaching interests are in renaissance and early drama; she has been at UNHM since 1999. Christy and Dr. Paterson worked together on focusing and revising Christy’s Inquiry essay for an audience wider than an academic one. During the process, Dr. Paterson taught Christy how to conduct academic research.*