Shakespeare’s Hysterical Murder

Shakespeare’s dramatic murders are staples of his tragedies, but hardly ever are they cold, calculated, or portrayed as the act of pure evil. A Shakespeare murder has a particular kind of emotionally charged tension to it, one that shows murder as a human experience rather than an act that is synonymous with the unfeeling, the animalistic. I am interested in this common, and very human, hesitation and inner conflict in the act of murder, especially when connected to the themes of overcompensation and toxic masculinity in culture and society. I believe that these themes contribute to a pressure to conform and an anxiety over standards for masculinity that ultimately causes not only violence, but a hysterical violence. I intend to look into conceptions of murder in Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies and see what common portrayals of murder on stage or in literature looked like compared to his. I want to know the specific archetypes that were popular, and how he complicates or challenges them. I also want to look at the source material for the three plays I will be examining and see how he changed or updated the psychology of the murderer. Shakespeare essentially lives in gray areas, but does his portrayal of hysterical murder reveal anything about human nature that was new at the time? I also intend to research the gender norms of the time, especially male standards for behavior in Shakespearean England.

Once a context is established, I will turn to specific murders occurring in Shakespeare’s texts, from Macbeth, Richard III, and Othello. Macbeth’s dagger scene is probably the most famous, but his hesitation is crucial to the trajectory of the play, and to Macbeth’s own spiral into cruelty and insanity. The majority of Richard III’s significance lies in a single scene, wherein two murderers are hired to kill the young princes, and hedge around the act for a good while when faced with the reality of killing innocent children. Even Richard III, who we are led to
believe is actually the cold and remorseless murderer, falls apart at the end of the play. Othello’s moment of intense rage leads him to murder his own wife, but before he does, he is clearly conflicted, clearly already grieving her loss. Othello is also an excellent example of the destructive tendencies of gender norms. All three plays further a reading of Shakespeare pointing out a toxic masculinity as the root of much violence. They also support a particular kind of “hysterical” murder; when the hesitation and conflicted feelings of the characters are combined with the anxieties over standards of masculinity the violence of the act is heightened, the murders are more intense, crueler, more painful, than if the murderers had perhaps had a little less sympathy. This seems counterintuitive at first glance, but when the hysteria caused by the hesitation and anxiety is taken into account, we can see Shakespeare highlighting the dangerous masculinity in their environments that makes the capacity for murder and violence greater in his male characters.
Preliminary Bibliography


