

## MACBETH'S IMPULSIVITY VS. HAMLET'S CIRCUMSPECTION

Cintra Whitehead

Ocala, Florida, USA

*Picture it:*

*George Kelly and William Shakespeare  
meet at a celestial pub and over mugs of ambrosia  
wile away a quiet eon in animated conversation:*

*Kelly: – and that's what I mean by impulsivity  
and circumspection, and the tightening and loosening  
of constructs.*

*Shakespeare: Passing strange! Now I think upon it,  
I once wrote a pretty pair of plays on that very subject.*

**“– be it thought and done” vs. “... lose the name of action”**

A construct theorist who reads or sees *Macbeth* and *Hamlet* in close succession will very likely see the plays and their respective protagonists related to each other as the two poles of a single construct are related and might speculate that Shakespeare held a construct that could be stated as *impulsive vs. circumspective* which he applied to human behavior and through which he viewed two of his greatest tragic protagonists and the dramatic situations in which he placed them.

Hamlet and the dramatization of his circumspective personality came first, it appears, to Shakespeare's mind and to his stage. Although exact dating is difficult, *Hamlet* must have first appeared just about the turn of the century, 1599 to 1601 (Edwards, 1985, 4-9), followed about five years later by *Macbeth* in 1606 (Brooke, 1990, 1). We have no way of knowing whether Shakespeare ever thought of the plays as related to each other as the bipolar ends of a single construct – *impulsive vs. circumspective* – are related, but when we now look at the two plays together, alerted by our hypothesis that they form the two ends of a construct, we are struck by the numerous contrasts which leap to our eyes: *Hamlet* is the longest of the tragedies, *Macbeth* is the shortest. The blow to the hero's construct

system with which the playwright begins *Hamlet* is the pronouncement of the dead king's ghost which causes Hamlet to reconstrue an event in the *past* (his father's death as murder), while in *Macbeth* the prophecy of the Weird Sisters causes the Thane of Glamis to try to make their prophecy of the *future* come true. The structure of *Hamlet* is complex, with scenes interleaved, requiring delay in validation of construction and prediction, while the structure of *Macbeth* is much simpler, with action in successive scenes extending and connecting directly the events of the plot chronologically and thematically. All these contrasts are related to, and indeed arise out of, the most telling contrast which is dramatically set forth first in Hamlet's apparent delay in wreaking revenge upon Claudius. Although the delay is less than some critics have thought and for different reasons, such delay as there is in Hamlet's reluctance to avenge his father's murder is the result of Hamlet's circumspection. This circumspection contrasts startlingly with Macbeth's rashness, demonstrated by his murder of Duncan and his even more impulsive decision to order the murders of Banquo and Fleance and finally to instigate the raid on the castle of Macduff.

*Macbeth's impulsivity vs. Hamlet's circumspection*

We have already considered Hamlet's circumspection in this journal (Whitehead, 2016) and are ready to examine Macbeth's impulsivity and what construct theory has to tell us about such impulsive behavior.

Even as Thane of Glamis, Shakespeare's Macbeth displays his impulsivity by his behavior on the battlefield:

*Disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel  
Which smoked with bloody execution,  
Like Valour's minion carved out his passage  
Till he faced the slave –  
Which ne'er shook hands nor bade farewell to  
him,  
Till he unseamed him from the nave to th' chops,  
And fixed his head upon our battlements.*  
(1.2.17-23)

When attacked by the Norwegians, as the captain who narrates the story of the battle continues, Macbeth and Banquo were

*As cannons overcharged with double cracks,  
So they doubly redoubled strokes upon the foe;  
Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds,  
Or memorize another Golgotha ...*  
(1.2.37-41)

These actions win for Macbeth from Duncan accolades phrased in tributes of "O valiant cousin, worthy gentleman" (1.2.24), and from the Thane of Ross the epithet "Bellona's bridegroom" (1.2.54), and result in Duncan's rewarding Macbeth with the title that belonged to the enemy Macbeth has defeated – Thane of Cawdor.

Rashness may "be admirable on the battlefield", but it is hard to control in the court as Duncan is to learn. Egged on by the Weird Sisters' prediction to Macbeth that he will be Thane of Cawdor and King, Macbeth is set upon a course of increasing impulsivity. When he learns that he has indeed become Thane of Cawdor, he sets himself on to make the rest of the prophecy come true. It seems to him and to his wife that the only way to realize the prophecy is to kill Duncan during his brief stay at their castle. The Macbeths hypothesize that the chance is now or never, and they seem to welcome the urgency of the time limitation and the precipitation into murder.

But Macbeth at this stage has some doubts. He has already said, "If chance will have me King, why chance may crown me, / Without my stir" (1.3.144-45), and now when Lady Macbeth urges him on to murder and the completion of the plot they have hatched, Macbeth hesitates:

*We will proceed no further in this business,  
He hath honored me of late, and I have bought  
Golden opinions from all sorts of people,  
Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,  
Not cast aside so soon.*  
(1.7.31-35)

Is Shakespeare on firm psychological ground here, in making his impulsive character falter? George Kelly would say so:

*Impulsivity is a form of control, not the absence of control. The field is preempted. A choice point is established. A decision is made. Action ensues. The characteristic feature of impulsivity is that the period of circumspection which normally precedes decision is unduly shortened. The preemption, upon the basis of which the decision is reached, is also likely to be of short duration. Thus, when a person behaves impulsively, he looks at the situation in a multidimensional manner for a short period of time only. He quickly narrows down the issues and makes a choice which commits him to a course of events. He may then follow this decision by an attempt to retreat to a point where he can look at the decision multidimensionally again and perhaps retract his decision.*

(Kelly, 1955. 1:526-27)

But valid as Macbeth's hesitation and retraction are from the point of view of psychological observation, Macbeth cannot be allowed to delay or there would be no play. That is why Shakespeare has provided Macbeth with a wife who will exhort him to "... screw your courage to the sticking place" (1.7.61). Shakespeare had already written a play about a circumspective protagonist some six years earlier when he wrote *Hamlet*; this play – *Macbeth* – was to examine the other side of the coin – or the other pole of the construct, as Kelly would say – and therefore the plot must proceed and Duncan must die.

When Macduff discovers the bodies of Duncan and his guards the morning after the murder

ders, Macbeth's explanation of why and how he killed the guards has the ring of truth about it although it is a lie. It sounds believable because in it Macbeth paints himself as the impulsive killer he has demonstrated himself to be on the battlefield except that now he pretends to a motive of righteous anger induced by love for Duncan:

*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?*  
(2.3.110-13; 117-19)

The construct theorist/reader may wish to pause to admire the neat listing of bipolar constructs in the first two lines quoted above: *wise vs. amazed, temperate vs. furious, loyal vs. neutral*, but must then go on to consider Macbeth's next attack of impulsivity. Macbeth now realizes that he has much to fear from Banquo and his knowledge of the Weird Sisters' predictions of kingship. This time the period of circumspection is brief indeed:

*To be thus is nothing,  
But to be safely thus. Our fears in Banquo  
Stick deep ...*  
(3.1.47-49)

He has already sent for the murderers, and he sends them to kill not only Banquo but Banquo's son Fleance in an attempt to prevent the realization of the prophecy that, although Banquo will not be a king, he will be a father of kings.

Again Kelly would reinforce Shakespeare's understanding of the impulsive personality:

*The [impulsive] person looks at his problem from a multidimensional point of view for a short time only. Or perhaps he scarcely sees it in terms of more than one dimension. Then he preempts, thus settling upon the issue. Then he makes his elaborative choice and goes into action.*  
(Kelly, 1955, 2:929)

By the time Macbeth comes to the knowledge that Macduff has fled to England where Duncan's son Malcolm has taken refuge following his father's murder, his decision to retaliate is the very epitome of Kellyan hostility toward Macduff. The reader needs to remember that Kelly defines hostility as an attempt to coerce validation of a prediction which has already failed. And so again Macbeth resorts to impulsivity in attempting to control a situation that has become confused and out of hand. Shakespeare lets his impulsive protagonist express it thus:

*Time, thou anticipat'st my dread exploits;  
The flighty purpose never is o'ertook  
Unless the deed go with it. From this moment,  
The very firstlings of my heart shall be  
The firstlings of my hand. And even now  
To crown my thoughts with acts – be it thought  
and done:*  
(4.1.159-164)

Here there is no circumspection at all; no multi-dimensional point of view. Nothing intervenes between evil thought and deed – “be it thought and done.”

In his discussion of anxiety and impulsivity, George Kelly says:

*In his eagerness to replace confusion with structure the [impulsive] person often seeks quick solutions. His anticipation cycles are shortened. He performs short-range experiments, collecting his validation evidence at the very earliest moment.*  
(Kelly, 1955, 2:898)

Shakespeare, sharing an understanding so similar to Kelly's, shows us Macbeth hurrying into his evil attack on Fife and Macduff's helpless family because he cannot reach Macduff or settle the brewing insurrection in England. In his impulsivity he must do something to try to calm his anxiety, and so he sends his murderers to surprise the castle of Macduff and kill Lady Macduff, her children, and “all unfortunate souls/That trace him in his live” (4.1.167-68).

In the meantime, Lady Macbeth has come to a different outcome of impulsive behavior: she has retreated into guilt (which we must remember Kelly defined as loss of a person's core role) and into a constriction of her constructs in which

she thinks only of herself, stained by the murder of Duncan. In what appears to be an episode of sleepwalking, she relives the events of the fatal night. Shakespeare's Doctor, called to view her sleepwalking, tells the gentlewoman who attends her, "Look after her,/Remove from her the means of all annoyance/And still keep eyes upon her" (5.1.73-75). Clearly he fears suicide. George Kelly would concur. In speaking of a modern woman's involuntional melancholia – a malady arising from a less dramatic situation than Lady Macbeth's but resulting in similar symptoms – he says in regard to *constriction*:

*She finds herself faced with confusion – anxiety – even in those constricted areas to which she had withdrawn for security. What shall she do? Shall she constrict further? Where? There is nothing much left to constrict except in the areas covered by her core structures. She seems to be faced with alternatives of anxiety or constricting illness – perhaps suicide.*

(Kelly, 1955, 2:905)

Specifically in regard to *guilt*, Kelly says:

*If the whole truth were known, it is likely that we would learn that the sustenance of life in the face of extreme guilt is difficult in any culture group, including our own. It is difficult because it interferes with the adequate distribution of our dependencies, but also because it interferes with the spontaneous elaboration of all our psychological processes, including the so called "bodily" processes. ... Through our constructions of our roles we sustain even the most autonomic life functions. There are indeed core role structures*

*... It is genuinely difficult to sustain life in the face of guilt. Some people do not even try.*

(Kelly, 1955, 2:909)

And thus dies Lady Macbeth. Whether Shakespeare meant his audiences and readers to understand that she dies violently by her own hand as Malcolm suggests at the end of the play (5.7.99-101), or passively in her bed of the physiological effects of her psychological guilt, twentieth-century construct psychologists would find the portrait of Lady Macbeth well-observed, accurate, and congruent with their own expectations in regard to the consequences of impulsive be-

havior.

The consequences of Macbeth's impulsivity lead him finally to a severe constriction of his construct system – a narrowing, as Kelly defines it, of "his perceptual field in order to minimize apparent incompatibilities" (Kelly, 1955, 2:564), and a tightening, one form of which is a "reduction of certain constructs to a state of unpermeability" (Kelly, 1955, 2:1066). Macbeth's constriction and tightening cause him to focus on – and trust unquestioningly – those predictions of the Weird Sisters that "... none of woman born/Shall harm Macbeth" (4.1.94-95), and "Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until/Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinan Hill/shall come against him" (4.1.106-08).

But hard upon the news of his wife's death, Macbeth is told that Birnam Wood is indeed moving toward Dunsinan in the form of branches carried as camouflage by the forces led by Duncan and MacDuff. The reaction that Shakespeare at the beginning of the seventeenth-century wrote for Macbeth is exactly what one would predict from the point of view of construct psychology in the last decade of the twentieth-century: Macbeth expresses his hostility – his wish to coerce from reality the validation of a prediction which has already failed – by calling the messenger, "Liar, and slave" (5.5.36), and by threatening to hang him alive to die of famine if he is lying (5.5.38-40). Macbeth ends with even greater constriction of his construct system by plunging into a battle which he knows he cannot win.

*'Fear not, till Birnam Wood*

*Do come to Dunsinan', and now a wood  
Comes toward Dunsinan. – Arm, arm, and out –*

*If this which he avouches does appear,  
There is no flying hence, nor tarrying here.*

*I 'gin to be aweary of the sun*

*And wish th' estate o' th' world were now undone.*

*Ring the alarum bell, blow wind, come wrack,*

*At least we'll die with harness on our back.*

(5.5.44-52)

For a brief time Macbeth is able to control anxiety by relying on the second prediction which he believes protects him from "man of woman born". Action also serves to ease his anxiety, and he engages in battle and kills young Seyward. But when he encounters Macduff he finds his

second talismanic prediction of immunity destroyed, for when he tells Macduff that he (Macbeth) bears a “charmed life, which must not yield/To one of woman born” (5.7.42-43), Macduff answers that “Macduff was from his mother’s womb/Untimely ripped” (5.7.46-47). Macbeth – in his last C-P-C cycle, as construct theorists would see it – at first declines to fight Macduff, but at the same time refuses to yield; then, his old impulsivity reviving as he realizes that it is too late to become circumspective and that he has exhausted all alternatives, he fights with Macduff and is slain.

Macbeth and Hamlet both come to their deaths by the sword, but the lives they have lived in their respective dramas up to the point of the decisions which precipitate each into his death duel have been psychological opposites. Hamlet has been so circumspect that he has been accused of immobility by some critics – all too often for the wrong reasons. When he does constrict and tighten, moving into the preemption-control phase of a C-P-C cycle, he kills Polonius thinking he is stabbing the king through the arras in his mother’s bedroom. He tries completing a C-P-C cycle once more, and saves his own life by stealing the directive which condemned him to death. He then sends Rosencrantz and Guildenstern on to England with a forged document which orders their deaths. But somehow, after his rescue by pirates and his return to the Danish court, he gives in to a chronic circumspection and waits for fate to shape the end of the drama. Macbeth has been from the beginning as impulsive as Hamlet has been circumspective, and although he too comes to a sort of resignation before he dies, it is the resignation of a man who *cannot* see any alternative because he himself has destroyed all alternatives, while Hamlet it seems *will not* see the alternatives that are open to him because they are not perfect alternatives.

Twentieth-century readers and viewers of the two plays cannot help but admire the playwright’s astute construing of his two protagonists and their circumspective vs. impulsive behaviors and the dilation/constriction, loosen-

ing/tightening dimensions that characterize those behaviors. Shakespeare, so far as we know, never talked about human behavior in theoretical terms nor used the vocabulary that George Kelly developed to talk about *circumspection vs. impulsivity*, the dimensions of *permeability vs. impermeability*, nor *preemptive, constellatory*, nor *propositional constructs*. The playwright simply construed the operation of such dimensions of human character and then dramatized them so tellingly that almost four centuries later we can see that, whatever else may have changed, Hamlet and Macbeth remain opposites whom we recognize all too well, and if we like to psychologize them a bit with modern jargon we need not fear it will harm their dramatic existences which will no doubt last at least another four hundred years.

## REFERENCES

- Brooke, N. (Ed.) (1990). *The tragedy of Macbeth. The Oxford Shakespeare. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.*
- Edwards, P. (Ed.). (1989 [1985]). *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark. The New Cambridge Shakespeare. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.*
- Kelly, G. A. (1955). *The psychology of personal constructs. 2 Vols. New York. W. W. Norton.*
- Whitehead, C. (2016 [1991]). Construing *Hamlet. Personal Construct Theory & Practice, 13*, 108-139

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cintra Whitehead (1929-2015) held an interdisciplinary doctorate in psychology and English literature and has taught in both fields. For a time she was publisher and contributing editor of *Constructive Criticism: A Journal of Construct Psychology and the Arts*. Retired from teaching, she lived in Ocala, Florida as a freelance writer and lecturer, concentrating on psychological literary criticism, critical theory, and personality theory.

*Macbeth's impulsivity vs. Hamlet's circumspection*

**REFERENCE**

Whitehead, C. (2016 [1991]). Macbeth's impulsivity vs. Hamlet's circumspection. *Personal Construct Theory & Practice*, 13, 140-144

(Retrieved from <http://www.pcp-net.org/journal/pctp16/whitehead16-8.pdf>)

Reprinted from:

Whitehead, C. (1991). Macbeth's impulsivity vs. Hamlet's circumspection. *Constructive Criticism*, 1, 155-165

Published 31 January 2016