

A Comparative Analysis of the Formation of “Nothingness” in *Macbeth* and *The Tragedy of Dr. Faustus*

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Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* and Marlowe’s *The Tragedy of Dr. Faustus* are important dramatic works of the English Renaissance. Despite the distance between their periods of creation, Shakespeare and Marlowe share the same background of social life, and in the same ideological and cultural context, the two playwrights coincidentally deal with the theme of “nothingness” in their respective works. The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast *Macbeth* and *The Tragedy of Dr. Faustus*, and to compare the similarities and differences in characterization and narrative techniques between the two works in exploring the theme of “nothingness”.

Keywords: *Macbeth*, Faust, desire, curiosity, renaissance, nothingness

Macbeth, written in 1606, is one of Shakespeare’s famous “Four Great Tragedies”, which was written in part to appeal to the monarch’s political considerations. In the play, Hecate and the three witches and witchcraft visions can be seen as deliberately staged to satisfy James I. But as for the story itself, the appearance of goddesses and witches makes *Macbeth*, to a certain extent, both a tragedy of character and a tragedy of fate. With the prophecy of the witches as the trigger, Macbeth listens to the prophecy, goes from hero to king, and is eventually crushed and lorded over for tyranny. In this process, Macbeth gradually changes from his passion for glory to the nothingness of “life is but a walking shadow”¹, which is the path of the formation of “nothingness” at the level of the characters themselves in *Macbeth*.

Christopher Marlowe, together with six other writers of the same period, is known as the “university genius” and is considered the “forerunner of Shakespeare”, of whom Marlowe was the most accomplished. Marlowe wrote *The Tragedy of Dr. Faustus* in 1593, and his Faustus is very different from Goethe’s. Marlowe’s Faustus has the base of “giant character”, but also has the color of “clown”. In the play, Faust ends up in a hell of destruction, and his spirituality is covered with despair and nothingness. Like *Macbeth*, *The Tragedy of Dr. Faustus*’ characters also point to a strong “nothingness”, but the paths to “nothingness” in the two works are quite different.

The formation of “nothingness” in the works is not only reflected in the characters themselves in the two works, but also in the different narrative techniques used by Shakespeare and Marlowe to create a greater distance between the two paths of “nothingness” in the two works.

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¹ The text of *Macbeth* is taken from William Shakespeare: *Macbeth*, translated by Zhu Shenghao, Beijing: Popular Literature and Art Publishing House, 2008. 2.

I. Chain of Desire: Sharing of Two Paths

“Macbeth” and “The Tragedy of Dr. Faustus” are identical in their respective paths to nothingness; at the same time, combined with the socio-spiritual and cultural characteristics of the Renaissance period in which the two works are set, the paths presented in each of the two stories essentially share the same archetype in that particular period, that is, the desire-centered, “curiosity-desire-nothingness” as the basic structure of the desire chain. The relationship between curiosity and desire is not purely linear, but dialectically interactive, with curiosity being a concrete manifestation of desire, which is temporary, and desire being the driving force of curiosity, which is long-term.

If not strictly subdivided, Shakespeare, who became famous during the Stuart dynasty, and Marlowe, who made his fortune and died during the Elizabethan period, were both great English Renaissance playwrights, both born in 1564, who grew up and conceived their literary works in the same social and cultural environment. They shared the humanist spirit of the English Renaissance, when the Catholic emphasis on God was under attack, and the humanistic ideas of human-centeredness, emancipation of individuality, and the pursuit of realistic desires on this shore were reborn.

Human liberation did achieve regeneration on the one hand, but on the other hand it was insufficient, and faith in Catholicism and recognition of Christian ethics are still visible in the literary and artistic works of this period. Supported by the requirements of social and economic development, the pursuit of this shore and the salvation of the other shore could be allowed by a more inclusive political culture, and although there were conflicts between this shore and the other shore, they were not all either/or and opposing. This coexistence is also the incomplete emancipation of humanity. People cast their attention to real life, rediscovering and recognizing the importance of intellectual learning such as law, medicine, economics, philosophy, and emotional relationships such as love and affection for human beings, and giving them a new status at the human level. In general, under the combined effect of the rediscovery and reorientation of desire and the incomplete emancipation of human nature, the emphasis on desire and the concrete pursuit of putting it into practice are in a vague and low state, i.e., there is a “curiosity” about the desire for knowledge, sexuality, food, power, etc., and the desire that accompanies the “The desires of the other” have not yet been initially satisfied, and people observe and attach importance to them, but they do not get deeply involved in them. This “curiosity” stage corresponds to the important spiritual and cultural nature of Renaissance literature and art.

In *The Tragedy of Dr. Faustus*, Faustus makes his debut by disparaging social knowledge such as logic, economics, medicine and jurisprudence, while Faustus, the prototype of the story, is himself an erudite intellectual. However, Faustus also said at the time of his appearance: “Is it the cheap goal of logic to be able to speak eloquently? Does it not work greater wonders?” “If you can make a man immortal, or bring back to life a man who has died, then the profession of medicine is worthy of respect” (Marlowe, 2018, p. 13). On the one hand, this reflects the “gigantic” character of Faust’s personality base, and on the other hand, it shows that it has passed the stage of “curiosity” and has moved to “curiosity about the world”—But for man, there is no end to the mastery of truth and the laws of the world, and “curiosity about the world” has the nature of desire, and at this point Faust enters the “desire” stage of the chain. The final movement towards nothingness is the turn of the “desire” stage that ends in the work.

Unlike *The Tragedy of Dr. Faustus*, the archetype of the chain of desire in *Macbeth* is presented by contrast. Macbeth enters the play in a state where he is out of the “curiosity” stage and has already made the transition from curiosity to desire. Most argue that Macbeth’s initial quest is for power, and therefore the tragedy begins with Macbeth’s powerful desire for power. However, as the text directly presents, Macbeth initially seeks and later defends honor, not power. From the time of Macbeth’s appearance until his regicide, Macbeth is an overall heroic figure: he fights to the death against the enemy and returns victorious, and after hearing the prophecy he remains humble and respectful in his dealings with Banquo. Lady Macbeth, who learns of the prophecy through a letter from her husband, describes Macbeth most accurately, summarizing the true character of Macbeth before the regicide: “But I fear for your nature: it is too full of the milk of human kindness to make you afraid to take the nearest short cut; you wish to be a great man, you are not without ambition, but you lack the treachery that is connected with that ambition; your desires are great, you are not without ambition, but you lack the treachery that is connected with that ambition. You have great desires, but you wish to use only rightful means; on the one hand, you do not want to play the trick, but on the other hand, you want to make a wrongful seizure” (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 31). In addition, Macbeth is the cousin of King Duncan and is a good fighter. Macbeth, who has already established his authority, can seize power without committing regicide. The acquisition of power necessarily includes the expected preparation for the consolidation of power, while the acquisition of honor pursues immediate temporality. Thus, it seems that the main content of Macbeth’s desire should perhaps be more the pursuit of honor.

There is a clear difference in the content of desire between Macbeth and Faust, which is one of the differences between the two paths. Faust’s character changes present a more complete chain of desire under the Renaissance, while Macbeth’s character changes represent fragments of the chain. This chain is an important reference in the search for similarities and differences in the formation of “nothingness” in the two works of the same Renaissance period.

II. Brokenness and Repetition: The Traceability of Characters’ Notion of Nothingness

The formation of Macbeth’s and Faust’s conceptions of nothingness is the “return” of “different paths”, and the “different paths” are the paths by which the two conceptions of nothingness are formed. To summarize the characteristics of the two paths, Macbeth forms the idea of nothingness because of the “broken” nature of his encounters, while Faust forms the idea of nothingness because of the “repetitive” nature of his experiences.

Macbeth’s “Brokenness”

In *Macbeth*, the goddess Hecate, the witches, and the prophecy are the preconditions for the creation of the “shattering”, i.e., the supernatural intervention that allows Macbeth to know in advance the end of the acquisition of the throne, which conveys two important messages to Macbeth and Banquo: Macbeth will be king and Banquo’s descendants will be king. For Macbeth, the two messages of the prophecy are opposites in nature: “Hail, Macbeth, future king!” affirms the possibility of gaining honor; “Though thou (meaning Banquo) art not a king, thy seed shall reign over a nation. Hail, Macbeth and Banquo!” Denying the survival of Macbeth’s throne (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 18). To place the two attitudes in Macbeth’s case is to affirm the feasibility of achieving his quest and to deny the significance of its realization. Macbeth’s misunderstanding of the one Ken and the other No runs throughout the play.

Why is it a misunderstanding? The witches' prophecy is highly ambiguous, with the three witches providing two important pieces of information about the prophecy in six effective lines of dialogue, with no explanation or addition beyond that. Which king will Macbeth become and whether Banquo's heir is the one who will take over the throne Macbeth will receive in the future? In the case of the succession of kings in the European Renaissance, such doubts are justified. The closest thing to the creation of the period is the death of Elizabeth I and the succession of James I. England passed from the Tudors to the Stuarts. Macbeth used unsupported speculation to erase the ambiguous parts of the prophecy and made it clear to himself by supplementing it with his own fictionalized guesses. This also led to Macbeth's reckless assassination of Banquo and Banquo's son after his reign. The fact that Macbeth misunderstands the prophecy is only an addition to the possibilities, not a denial of the fact that the goddess, the witches, and the prophecy introduce the actual text of "fate" in the play.

The series of events that follow the knowledge of the prophecy are characterized by the coexistence of acquisition and shattering. The hope of disobeying the prophecy is shattered when the son of Banquo survives and disappears, when the moral principles are abandoned and the king's glory is obtained; when the actions to cover up the crime are carried out successfully, Lennox still discovers the truth and his moral image collapses; when the family of Macduff is liquidated and Macduff survives, the plan to clean up the resistance is unsuccessful; when the second prophecy of the witch is believed, he and his army. In the end, he sees the army "forest" with branches walking to Dunsinane, and Macbeth is beheaded by Macduff, who was born by Caesarean section. For Macbeth, each event cannot be said to be unfinished, but the only remaining "foot in the door" makes everything go against the grain, and the only remaining "unfinished" serves as a point to make the "finished" side shatter again and again. The "unfinished" side of the story keeps breaking. Macbeth's experience of shattering is for the sake of acquiring, and the temporary acquisition will definitely shatter again, and at the beginning of the story, Macbeth confirms in the misunderstanding that what he has acquired will definitely shatter in the end.

This fragmentation is the direct and fundamental cause of Macbeth's descent into nothingness, which makes Macbeth feel denied on two levels: first, the constant denial of the values recognized by the subject in the face of new desires and needs; and second, the denial of the subject and the long-term continuity of his gains. On the one hand, Macbeth acquires through the shattering of self, as evidenced by his abandonment of moral principles to commit regicide and seize the throne in order to gain the personal glory he so passionately desires; on the other hand, Macbeth's acquired destiny is shattered, as the prophecy of the "queenless king," the survival of Banquo's son, the flight of the Dauphin, and the revolt of the nobility subject Macbeth to a constant denial, both of his honor—This is both a denial of his honor—i.e., the lack of succession to the throne, a denial of the continuation of the subject's meaning—and a denial of the legitimacy of his power—i.e., betrayal and rebellion against "Macbeth's kingdom", a denial of the subject's current state and the extension of the subject on the other. Under this multi-layered negation, Macbeth's doubts about the value of life are confirmed, forming the ultimate concept of nothingness.

The process of acquiring, acquiring and breaking reflects Macbeth's struggle, which leads him to nothingness. In addition, Macbeth always tries to achieve the purpose, but there is no real sense of despair, he is in resistance while accepting fate, his last line in the play said "Although the forest of Burnham has reached Dunsinane, although today and you meet narrowly, you are not born of a woman, but I have to raise my majestic shield, to do my last strength" (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 169). This is Macbeth's last defiance with heroic spirit, and

his struggle against the uselessness of fate in the story's several breakdowns. The formation of Macbeth's idea of nothingness is partly modern and also has a degree of existentialism.

Faust's "Repetition"

In contrast to Macbeth, there is no ambiguity about the fate that Faust knows, and his choice determines an unsalvageable end. Faustus does not struggle or act in defiance; what he embodies is a despair that cannot be redeemed. On the level of desire, Macbeth's descent into nothingness lies in the fact that none of his needs are temporarily satisfied after the regicide, while Faustus develops the idea of nothingness for the exact opposite reason: the overabundance of desire satisfaction.

Because of the contract with Mephistopheles, all of Faust's demands on the level of social reality are met. If Macbeth's nothingness is influenced by the fact that "things are not what they seem", Faust's tragedy lies in the fact that he gets everything "as he wants it". Faust's need for knowledge of the natural world is fully satisfied when he is helped by Mephistopheles to navigate the wonders of the world and the stars of the universe; Faust's need to prank Pope Adrian and save the King of Hungary and the Pope of Pseudo-Pope means that Faust's desires are satisfied across worldly power and he is able to show off the privileges he possesses. In terms of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, being above worldly power allowed Faust to achieve the second highest level of "respect needs," while Helen of Troy later fulfilled Faust's "physiological needs," and the friendship of nobles and intellectuals achieved "Social needs" level of satisfaction. In addition to the highest level of "self-needs", almost all of Faust's requirements were fully satisfied at all levels of desire.

Because all demands can be satisfied, according to the logical deduction: the pursuit is constantly fulfilled, the desire is constantly satisfied, what is valuable at one moment becomes worthless at the next, and what seems to be valuable at the next moment will become worthless immediately afterwards to meet the next round of value replacement. Because desires can be satisfied all the time, for the subject, value is lost and immediately replaced, and what is replaced will be lost again because of the next replacement. The meaning of the other cannot be confirmed, and there is a constant cycle of meaning between something and nothing, and this cycle and turnover without development is itself meaningless, and repetition with the connotation of cycle and turnover is the fundamental reason for Faust's concept of nothingness.

As Faust's disciple Wagner says in Act I, Scene II, "Isn't Faust a 'natural object'? All natural objects are inevitably 'moving', aren't they?" (Marlowe, 2018, p. 25). This is also a confirmation of the dislocation of Faust's subject in the perspective of others. In such a situation where repetition is unchangeable, the subject will directly negate the Other from the surface to the inside, which leaves the subject in a state of pure isolation. Without the Other as a reference, the subject cannot realize self-affirmation in the view of the Other as a mirror image, and thus goes to a total nothingness including the subject and the Other.

This is analyzed in the context of the spiritual and cultural characteristics of Renaissance secular society. In the storyline, Macbeth's enjoyment of this shore and salvation of the other shore are both untenable, while Faustus completely abandons the salvation of the other shore for the sake of the enjoyment of this shore, leading to nothing at the end of his life. Throughout the play, Faust first completely denies the meaning of the other shore and fully affirms the meaning of the other shore, thus accepting the fate of "leaving the other shore behind and having the other shore", while Faust finally turns to affirm the meaning of the other shore and completely deny

the meaning of the other shore. The direct neglect of the existing value makes Faust lose the direction to confirm the orientation of the subject, and is also an important factor in the formation of Faust’s concept of nothingness.

The Hero and the Clown: Two Narratives of Constructing Nothingness

The presentation of the theme of “nothingness” always falls on the specific characters in a literary work, and Shakespeare and Marlowe show great differences in the narrative techniques used to construct the characters’ conceptions of nothingness in these two works.

Like the other three tragedies, Shakespeare places the individual in the midst of a vast and chaotic environment, giving Macbeth a tragic tone of character, while adding supernatural elements gives Macbeth the character of a tragedy of fate. As the focus of the contradiction between character and fate, the irreversible prophecy and the relationship between “king and subject, husband and wife, colleague and enemy” are intertwined in the work, making the characterization in the process of Macbeth’s descent into nothingness a profoundly heroic narrative style.

Compared with Shakespeare’s narrative, which presents chaos in a spread and order in chaos, Marlowe’s narrative, which reveals the “giant character” of the characters, is characterized by restraint and focus. Marlowe’s dramatic conflicts are relatively few, focusing almost entirely on Faustus’ autonomous choices as the main character. Because of the dislocation of the subject in the cognition, the play’s behavior for Faustus is richly amusing, and the simplicity and straightforwardness of the motivation for the act contrasts greatly with Faustus’s intellectual identity.

Shakespeare’s “Heroic” Narrative

Shakespeare’s Macbeth can combine both tragedy of fate and tragedy of character, not only because of the narratives about supernatural objects such as goddesses, witches, and prophecies, but also because of Shakespeare’s setting of character relationships throughout the play.

What makes Shakespeare’s Macbeth a heroic narrative is that the play’s narratives about the Banquo fathers, Duncan and his son Malcolm, the Macduff family, Lennox, Lady Macbeth, Hecate, and the Three Witches are not mere appendages to the tragedy that shapes Macbeth and his characters; they constitute a sufficiently complex environment of relationships in the play while retaining a pivotal position that each character. Each character can almost become the central point of view of the entire story. Macbeth is placed in such a complex group, essentially a special individual in an unchangeable environment. In the midst of violent conflict, Macbeth struggles, with reservations, against the prophecy or fate that “the descendants of Banquo will ascend to the throne and Macbeth’s throne will not be inherited” (Shakespeare, 2008, p. 21). Macbeth is naturally not a heroic figure, but Shakespeare’s narrative and orchestration method of allowing conflicts to erupt rhythmically in a chaotic layout gives the characterization of Macbeth a solid background. This approach to characterization is a unique technique common to Shakespeare, and it is not a mechanical summary of characterization through symbolic events. Shakespeare’s narrative gives Macbeth’s continuing struggle a complete background structure and gives the entire tragedy a moving texture.

Marlowe’s “Clownish” Narrative

In *The tragedy of Dr. Faustus*, there are two clowns named Robin and Dick, the third scene in the third act, the two were turned into monkeys and dogs by Mephistopheles, turned into monkeys, Robin rode Dick off the stage, to increase the harmonic effect of the play; the fourth act, the fourth to the sixth scene in the appearance of the horse trader, coachman and Robin, Dick, Faustus on the same stage of the plot, also has a comic effect. From the role effect, the four characters are not coincidentally create a more light-hearted fun, this effect is also reflected in Faust.

Faust denies worldly knowledge, philosophy, and salvation in the other world, which is a denial of the present and the future at the level of knowledge; he holds the magic book from hell as a treasure: “This is a good book, thank you, Mephistopheles, I will keep it and treat it as my life”, where magic replaces life, and the value of life is denied (Marlowe, 2018, p. 63). The power and seriousness of life are also denied; Faust plays with the Pope as he pleases and shows off his magic in front of the king’s nobles to summon Alexander the Great and his wife. In contrast, Faustus does not use magic to make a great impact on society and the world, but rather to do a series of small, insignificant things. This discrepancy between the “great and the small” appears to the reader or viewer as ignorance, and ignorance is naturally comical.

In the narratives of other characters, Marlowe reflects his restrained and focused narrative character. Unlike Macbeth, all the characters in *The Tragedy of Dr. Faustus*, except Faustus, are either appendages to the portrayal of Faustus, as in the case of Satan and Mephistopheles and parts of the Turkish king and pope episodes, or appendages to dramatic visual effects, as in the case of the independent narrative of the clown character. *The Tragedy of Dr. Faustus* is linear and encounter-like; the protagonist is not placed in a vivid and large dynamic environment, and the clear fate of Faustus after he makes a choice is the only mainstay throughout the play. The interactions between Mephistopheles, Satan, the scholars, the nobles, the religious powers, the magicians, and Faust and their responses to him are serviceable in nature; they respond passively to Faust’s verbal actions, but there is no active feedback; all actions are executed step by step under Marlowe’s pen.

From the above two points, Marlowe’s narrative and choreography appear less ambitious than Shakespeare’s, but portray Faust’s more complete progressive changes in the chain of desires by fixing the focus of the narrative, and the chain is presented in a more complete way with a beginning and an end. Faustus has another distinctive behavior and thinking characteristic in the play because of the dislocated perception of the subject, i.e., capriciousness. Compared to Macbeth’s complex and subtle internal struggles, Faust’s emotions and attitudes are jumpy and appear temperamental and unpredictable. After the change in Faust’s attitude, he does not make any effort to change the status quo in his behavior, but only follows the established fate. Marlowe uses his narrative to present a witty Faust, which is the result of his clownish narrative.

Conclusion

Overall, *Macbeth* and *The Tragedy of Dr. Faustus* are comparable because of the importance of “nothingness” as a theme in both plays. The comparison of the two narratives does not mean that there is a superiority or inferiority; the narratives serve the tragedy of the characters and the exploration of the themes, and on this level, both narratives play their proper role. Shakespeare’s and Marlowe’s respective narratives

complete the construction of the path for the formation of the protagonist's conception of nothingness, and are also the main driving force behind the interpretation of the story on both paths.

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