
Ambiguities in Shakespeare's "The Tragedy of Macbeth"

Dramatic tragedies are by definition plays that enact the struggle and downfall of their main character or characters. "The Tragedy of Macbeth", by William Shakespeare, is a perfect example of this; the entire play portrays the fatalistic misadventure of the Macbeths. This Shakespearean play is emblematic for the omnipresent feeling of uncertainty it bears. Indeed, almost every situation carries paradoxical elements that flaws moral judgments. What presents itself as good augur often ends up being terrible. The world is presented as irrational, which can be observed throughout many aspects of the play.

This feeling of uncertainty is brought to the audience at the very beginning of the play with the first of the strange and confusing scenes where the Weird Sisters take part. After a short dialogue where they state that they must meet Macbeth after the battle, the witches leave the scene with their famous paradoxical line: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair [. . .]" (1.1.11). This contradictory statement has a heavy impact on the essence of the play since it comes back very often in different forms. Essentially, it means that appearances are not what they seem to be; they are flawed and no proper judgment can be made of them. It is interesting to see how this idea links together many other aspects of the play. For example, the literary device irony, which is used repeatedly as we will see further, is defined by the Oxford Dictionary as "the expression of meaning through the use of language which normally means the opposite"; it takes us back to the statement of the witches and the falsehoods it carries. The consequences of these ambiguities are meaningful to the outcome of the play; they imply that no moral judgment will be helpful to clear out the plot justly and that at some moments the events might seem to make no sense.

As explained above, the witches' prophecies have an important role in delivering the omnipresent impression of fog; not only do they mislead the audience with their contradictory statements, but they also mislead Macbeth by chanting his first prophesy to him: Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor and eventually King of Scotland (1.3.48-50). At first glance, this prediction must be of good augur to Macbeth's faith since it promises him kingship. However, by studying the prophecy's impact on Macbeth, the confusion becomes clear. How could he possibly react to a prediction that grants him so much and at the same time foresees its revocation? Naturally, it becomes difficult for him to take position whether the omen should be considered as fair or foul: "This supernatural soliciting / Cannot be ill, cannot be good" (1.3.131-132).

Most importantly, the prophecy misleads Macbeth into a devilish hunger for the crown: "My thought, whose murder [of Duncan] yet is but fantastical, / Shakes so my single state of man [. . .]"

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.]" (1.3.140-141). What starts out as a fair foreshadowing suddenly becomes a foul and dark vision of Macbeth's faith. Another example of the witches' participation is found in the second prophecy which they basically "show" to Macbeth. In this scene, Macbeth goes to the Weird Sisters "to know / By the worst means the worst [his faith]" (3.4.135-136). Upon his arrival, Macbeth is quickly given his second prophecy: firstly he must take guard of Macduff (4.1.85-86), secondly no man born of woman will be able to harm him (4.1.94-95) and thirdly he will never be overcome "until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsin Hill / Shall come against him" (4.1.107-109).

Similarly the first prophecy, the second is quite straightforward and delivers clearly its content. Once again, the prophecy lacks in details to understand it as a whole. This brings back the inherent confusion. Why should Macbeth fear Macduff if it is physically impossible for a forest to march or for a man not to be born of a woman? As a consequence of these predictions and their resulting confusions, Macbeth believes himself nearly invincible since he logically assumes that Macduff was born from a woman (4.1.96) and that it is impossible for the forest of Birnam to "Unfix his earthbound roots" (4.1.109-111). However, what has positively motivated Macbeth will eventually end-up being the cause of his downfall. His behavior stresses the dramatic irony since he will ultimately be slaughtered by Macduff who was not born from his mother's womb (5.7.45-46) and the marching forest of Dunsin which will only be hiding Seyward's army (5.4.4-7). Therefore, the witches' prophecies, as a result of their ambiguous nature, misled Macbeth to his doom by convincing him that they were of a good augur.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary to equivocate means "to use words than can be understood in more than one way in order to avoid the truth". It is interesting how evocation reflects the ambiguity of the play and how often it is used. The very first example is obviously the prophecies. As we discussed earlier, they continuously deliver their predictions in such a manner that Macbeth is unable to precisely figure out their true meaning. A second example is seen when Thane Macduff discusses with Ross after the death of Duncan:

ROSS. How goes the world, sir, now?

MACDUFF. Why, see you not?

ROSS. Is't known who did this more than bloody deed?MACDUFF. Those that Macbeth hath slain.

ROSS. Alas the day, What good could they pretend? (2.4.21-24)

This passage can be divided into three different parts that individually stress the verbal irony of

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their discussion. The tone that Macduff uses to answer Ross' first question is quite sarcastic and reveals well his thought on the present situation; he seems stricken by Ross' passiveness and reverts the question in a tone that suggests "is it not obvious enough?" The second part is prominent for its meaningful irony. Macduff's answer to Ross seemingly means that the murderers of Duncan were his servants since Macbeth has executed them; when observed properly we see that it could also imply that "Macbeth hath slain" (2.4.23) the king, which reveals an evocative accusation and irony. Finally Ross' claim that the servants had no advantage to slaughter their master is another argument that supports Macbeth's guilt and completes the irony.

Afterwards, another case of equivocation can be seen during the meeting of Macduff and Malcolm. At the beginning of their dialogue, Malcolm is on his guards and intentionally misleads Macduff in order to test his allegiance. Malcolm states that "black Macbeth / Will seem pure as snow" (4.3.52-53) when compared to him. His voluptuousness for women will have no ending (4.3.60-61) and his avarice will be insatiable (4.3.78). Macduff's reaction to these proclaimed vices makes him lose hope "Since that the truest issue of thy [Scotland] throne / By his [Malcolm] own interdiction stands accused, / And does blaspheme his breed?" (4.3.106-108). After this affirmation from Macduff, Malcolm is satisfied and finally explains that he has tainted himself to test his fellow's integrity and adds that he has none of these vices (4.3.114-133). Even though Macduff can now fully collaborate with Malcolm, there are indications that suggest that he becomes hesitant whether or not he should do so: "Such hard welcome and unwelcome things at once / 'Tis hard to reconcile" (4.3.138-139). This is perhaps a result of the ambiguity of Malcolm's words; after so much foulness, how can he be certain that his sudden change to fairness is true and everlasting? This distrust might be justified since at the end of Malcolm's redemption there is a hint of dishonest virtues residing in him:

I am yet Unknown to woman, never was forsworn, Scarcely have coveted what was mine one, At no time broke my faith, would not betray The Devil to his fellow, and delight no less in truth than life(4.3.125-130).

In this passage Malcolm presents himself as perfectly clear of any of the vices he enumerated earlier. This statement from him does not necessarily mean that he is as devilish as Macbeth is, but his lack of humility is an indication that he might be deceitful in future times. For these reasons, the use of words that can be understood in more than one way is a fine method to mislead the audience as well as the characters of a play, since they must confront situations where they must rely on ambiguous facts.

Shakespeare's intention for ambiguity can also be observed through the staging conventions and settings of his play. The "Gates of Hell", portrayed by the porter of Inverness (2.3.1-19) is

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quite evocative for the Christian audience of the period; it reminds St. Peter who was the porter of the Gates of Heaven (Brooke 79-80). By inverting the roles of the judge of Heaven to a judge of Hell, Shakespeare is probably parodying the necessity for a judge in Heaven as there would be more to do in Hell. Actually, if we consider all the characters of the play, it is striking how many characters show "evil" traits that can be perceived at least once; the only character that is exempt from any form of malice is King Edward, who serves as a foil. Darkness is a staging convention that symbolizes well the irrationality of the world of "Macbeth". Ross, during his dialogue with the Old Man, reveals well the extent of darkness in the play:

By th' clock 'tis day, And yet dark night strangles the traveling lamp; Is't night's predominance, or the day's shame, That darkness does the face of earth entomb When living light should kiss it? (2.4.6-10)

The personification of light is used to put emphasis on the illegitimate and evil reign of Macbeth and foreshadows the "dark" following times to come. The principle of ambiguity can be observed when Ross questions if it is "night's [evil] predominance, or the day's [good] shame" (2.4.8) that is responsible for the supremacy of evil. Ross is at least capable of identifying the coming of evil, but is incapable to explain it. He is lost in the fog of uncertainty, just as the audience is.

The behaviors and relationships of Shakespeare's characters in "Macbeth" follow the unwritten logic of uncertainty. The most striking contradiction is enacted by Macbeth and his wife. Even though at the beginning we can sense a tainted evil present in Macbeth, when he unfalteringly slays his enemies (1.2.7-23), we can assume by his fearing reaction to the idea of killing Duncan (1.1.140) that his conscience keeps him on the "good" side. On the other hand, his wife clearly reveals her "fires" and asks the spirit of evil to "unsex me here" (1.5.40), revealing her malicious intentions. She seems to know her husband will fail to accomplish his destiny and clearly states she will push him: "[. . .] That I may pour my spirits in thine ear, / And chastise with the valour of my tongue / All that impedes thee from the golden rounds, [. . .]" (1.5.25-27).

However, as the play progresses, Macbeth and his wife interchange position. This change becomes evident when Macbeth chooses not to tell his wife of his intentions to slay Banquo (3.2.48-59) and when she sleepwalks because of her torments (5.1). Macbeth then becomes the figure of authority for evil and Lady Macbeth metamorphoses herself into the "weaker vessel" of St. Peter (3.7). What began as being fair ends up foul and vice-versa. The character of Macbeth also portrays the leitmotif of the play. His "good side" can be observed on many occasions when he states he wishes not to advance any further in the process of killing Duncan (1.7.30-34) or when he asks the stone on the ground to "prevent him from committing the crime" (Brooke 125). Macbeth is even incapable to complete the murder of Duncan because of his conscience (2.2.49-51), which reveals some kindness that has stayed in him. However there

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is much evidence of his wickedness that must be taken into account. The regicide and murder of Banquo, the bloody battle against Macdonald and the brutal murder of Macduff's wife (4.1.165-171) are all indications of Macbeth's mischief. Therefore, Macbeth's personality is an amalgam of contradicting traits; because of his fair and foul traits, his alignment is nothing less than ambiguous.

Shakespeare has also implanted many "cliches" in his play that reminds the leitmotif. Just before the murder of Duncan, Macbeth openly states to his wife that a "False face must hide what the false heart doth know" (1.7.89). In other words, Macbeth simply describes the mechanism of treason and lies; a morally wrong person deceives his victim by presenting himself as kind. Macduff also refers to this belief when he openly suggests that "unfelt sorrow is an office Which the false man does easy" (2.3.138-139). It is interesting how close these statements are to the thematic. They remind us of the similarities between treason or lies with the leitmotif. Indeed, when you lie or betray someone, you hide your real intentions behind a false mask. You hide your foulness behind fairness.

It is now more than evident that Shakespeare has intentionally placed ambiguities in his play, either to mislead its characters or the audience. Because of the resulting uncertainty, it becomes quite difficult to rely on any moral values since all events are not what they seem to be. How many times in our lifetime have we been deceived by seemingly unmistakable facts? The reason why they seemed to be unmistakable is because of the subjectivity of our point of view, we all tend to see things as we want them to be.

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