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## Moral Codex in William Shakespeare's Macbeth

In Scene 2 of Act 2, Lady Macbeth's master plan to promote her husband to the throne finally comes to fruition. For the first time in the play, however, Lady Macbeth reveals some degree of weakness in her inability to actually murder Duncan with her own hands. Prior to this act, it would seem likely that Lady Macbeth would be the one to carry out the murder, yet in Scene 1 it is revealed that the ringing of a bell will be the signal for Macbeth himself to go in and kill the king. The first indication that Lady Macbeth may be more vulnerable than she appears to be is her frightened reaction to her husband's approach in Scene 2. Her first inclination is that the guards have awoken before Macbeth could complete the deed and she expresses fear that 'the attempt not the deed' has confounded the Macbeths. Even more surprising is Lady Macbeth's reason for not killing Duncan herself. She states: "Had he not resembled my father as he slept, I had done't." This is particularly unusual for a character that has so far been depicted as cold and heartless. Apparently, Lady Macbeth does have a degree of respect or even love for other people, and the fact that she compares Duncan to her father would seem to indicate that she still has a repressed affection for him as well.

Despite her momentary lapse of confidence, Lady Macbeth still maintains her bold but calculating role as Macbeth's driving force throughout the rest of Scene 2. In a way, she almost comes across as having his conscience, but in reverse; a negative, evil side of his personality, but one steeped in logical reasoning. She is resolute in following the plan through to the end, and when Macbeth refuses to bring the daggers back into the room to plant on the guards, she calls him 'infirm of purpose.' Her next lines are particularly chilling, as she refers to the 'sleeping and the dead but as pictures,' and confidently takes the daggers into the room herself. When she returns, she tells Macbeth that her 'hands are of your color,' referring to the blood, and then remarks 'but I shame to wear a heart so white.' As was demonstrated in Act 1, Lady Macbeth knows that her husband is fiercely defensive of his courage. Thus, she is a master of manipulation, able to pull Macbeth's strings with only a few simple words. Her outlook on the murder is also much more practical than that of her husband. Throughout the play, Macbeth constantly agonizes over the deed, wondering how it will impact him on a spiritual and psychological level. Lady Macbeth, however, sees it merely as a passing event. This contrast is best depicted in how the two characters deal with the bloodstains on their hands. Macbeth, shaken by a mysterious knocking at door, asks himself: "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?" In the next few lines, Lady Macbeth ironically tells her husband that 'a little water clears us of this deed. How easy it is, then.' It is clear, then, that Lady Macbeth does not address her husband's fears on the same level as his thinking. While he is dealing with a mortal sin, she is merely concerned with the logistics of a quick and passing event.

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The most memorable 'mental picture' of this act is the illusory floating dagger that Macbeth 'sees' near the end of scene 1. Macbeth's 'vision' is interesting, because on the one hand it echoes the supernatural themes of Act 1, while at the same time it is clear that it is not a ghostly occurrence, but a 'dagger of the mind,' created by Macbeth's own troubled imagination. It is illustrative of how deeply Macbeth has become enmeshed in the plot to kill Duncan. Macbeth sees a dagger floating just in front of him, but when he reaches for it, his hand passes through it. Today this effect can be achieved on stage, but in Shakespeare's time it is likely that there was nothing physically in front of the actor playing Macbeth. The creation of the scene would have relied mainly on his delivering of the lines and then reaching into thin air. In a way, this might have accomplished the desired effect better than any special effects could, provided that the actor was capable of acting as though he really saw something in front of him.

Having completed the murder of Duncan, Macbeth begins to moralize on a level not seen in Act 1. During the earlier parts of the play, Macbeth is depicted as a fearless warrior who brutalizes his country's foes without a second thought. In Act 1, Macbeth seemed confident in his plans and firmly believed that his deeds were the correct course of action. After the murder of Duncan, however, Macbeth begins to question himself, and it appears that his former boldness has given way to self-loathing and self-doubt. The strength of will that led him to murder Duncan vanishes as soon as the act is done, and, apparently, was only a facade for a mind in turmoil. This is demonstrated by Macbeth's reply to Lady Macbeth's request that he return to the scene of the murder to place the daggers on the king's guards. Even though Macbeth has just killed his king in cold-blood, he replies that he will 'go no more [into the King's chambers]... I am afraid to think what I have done.' Macbeth is a man corroded by guilt, and Shakespeare uses his lapses into periods of insanity to illustrate this point. In Act 2, Scene 1, Macbeth's guilt is already starting to build, despite the fact that the king is still alive. The floating dagger near the scene's end and Macbeth's description of his 'heat-oppressed brain' show that already insanity is beginning to take hold of the once sensible Thane of Cawdor. Even after he has actually killed King Duncan, he can not complete the plot by planting the daggers on Duncan's guards. Instead, Lady Macbeth must herself put the finishing touches on the murder. His guilt becomes even more apparent in Scene 3: Macbeth's dialogue, which up until this point has been grand and poetic, has been reduced to short phrases when he is discussing the murder of Duncan. When questioned about the king his responses are very short: 'Good morrow, both.... not yet... I'll bring you to him.' Lennox offers a complex description of the night's events and weather, but all Macbeth can bring himself to say is "twas a rough night." As in scene two, when Macbeth mentioned that he could not bring himself to say 'amen' in prayer, he appears to be tongue-tied, paralyzed by guilt, and unable to fully express himself. Perhaps the most tragic effect of the events of Act 2 is the fact that life has now lost meaning for Macbeth. In Scene 3 he states: 'There's nothing serious in mortality: all is but toys.'

Because of Macbeth's moral quandary, he ultimately comes across more as a tragic hero than

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as a villain. From the beginning of the play, it is clear that he was a noble, brave man, but he had two major flaws - his vicious courage and his 'vaulting ambition.' Lady Macbeth clearly recognized these flaws from early on and exploited them to the fullest, forcing Macbeth to choose between cowardice and murder. Ironically, he becomes all the more cowardly for giving in to his wife's taunting so quickly, but in his swiftness to defend himself he fails to realize this. It is also apparent from Macbeth's hallucinations that he is, in fact, the most tormented character in the play. Whatever pity Duncan is deserving of for having been betrayed, it is clear that Macbeth will ultimately face a more bitter future. In Scene 2, the voice that Macbeth thinks he hears tells him that 'Macbeth will sleep no more,' showing that all peace and comfort has vanished from Macbeth's life. Furthermore, Macbeth's regret is convincing, and Shakespeare gives the impression that Macbeth really wishes that he had made the right decision. Almost immediately after the murder, he hears a knocking at the door, which is revealed in Scene 3 to be Macduff. Macbeth, in his delusional state, however, cries out: 'Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst.' If we can take Macbeth at his word, it is safe to assume that if he were given the choice of murdering Duncan again, he would decide against it. This notion is questionable, however, as Macbeth's later murder of Banquo demonstrates that no amount of guilt can compete with his 'vaulting ambition.'

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