
Macbeth and the Appearance of Fairness

Starting with the witches' assertion that fair is foul, and foul is fair, it is clear that Macbeth is a play in which appearances will be deceiving and morality will be muddled. From the dialogue between King Duncan, Malcolm, and the wounded sergeant in Scene 2, it would appear that Macbeth is the most fair of all of the figures mentioned, while Macdonwald the Thane of Cawdor, who betrayed the Scots, is most foul. This can be inferred mainly from the sergeant's conversation with Duncan in Scene 2, in which he describes Macbeth's valor in combat against the merciless Macdonwald. The wounded sergeant describes Macbeth as brave, and then tells the king that well he deserves that name. King Duncan echoes the sergeant's admiration with his reply: o valiant cousin! Worthy gentleman! In the next few lines, the sergeant describes Macbeth's unrelenting assault on the enemy, and compares the magnitude of his slaughter to another Golgotha, which is the place where Christ was crucified. On the other hand, Macdonwald is spoken of with disgust, and since the reader is given only the Scots point of view, we share in their disdain. According to the wounded sergeant, Macdonwald is worthy to be a rebel, which stands in contrast to his later assertion that Macbeth well deserves to be called brave. Macdonwald is depicted as having the villainies of nature swarming about him and fortune is personified as the rebel's whore. Despite the fact that fortune has sided with Macdonwald, the sergeant explains that his cause was too weak to stand up to Macbeth's assault. When the disloyal traitor Macdonwald is at last reported to have been defeated, Duncan happily proclaims that his title be taken away and given to Macbeth. That being said, however, it is important that the theme of the play, fair is foul and foul is fair, be kept in mind when reading this scene. The very fact that Macbeth appears to be so fair is a clue that he is, in fact, foul at heart. What Macdonwald hath lost and he hath won may include the former Thane of Cawdor's treachery along with his title. It is this contrast between an appearance of fairness and a reality of foulness that will dominate the rest of the play.

Banquo seems to counterbalance Macbeth's character by acting as the voice of reason in their dealings with the mysterious witches of Scene 3. Both men respond to the appearance of the three witches with curiosity, but Banquo exercises a level of caution not demonstrated by Macbeth. Macbeth appears to be excited upon seeing the witches, supposing the event to be supernatural soliciting, but Banquo is quick to remind him that the instruments of darkness try to win us with honest trifles.... While Macbeth is quick to accept the witches words, Banquo is reticent, first asking himself can the devil speak true? He doubts the reality of what he sees, and goes so far as to ask Macbeth have we eaten of the insane root? Perhaps the greatest contrast between Banquo and Macbeth lies in how they deal with the prophecy after having heard it. Almost immediately, Macbeth begins taking matters into his own hands and comes up with a scheme to implement the witches predictions himself. In contrast, Banquo describes himself as

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one who neither beg nor fear your favours nor your hate. Banquo is able to accept events as they come, and does little on his own behalf to grab control of fate. At the same time, he recognizes that his friend, Macbeth, is enchanted by what he has heard, and reports that new horrors come upon him. Clearly, Banquo does not experience these horrors, because he does not have the murder of his king to look forward to, as Macbeth does.

By scene 4, it is obvious that Macbeth is plotting to fulfill the prophecy that he will become king by murdering Duncan. The challenges ahead of Macbeth are further deepened in this act, when Duncan names Malcolm as his official heir. Macbeth describes Malcolm as a step on which I must fall down or er leap, and realizes that he must put his plans into action with all haste if he is to become king. Thus, his motivation in leaving for Inverness before the king is not respect or gratitude, but the first step in his murderous plot. By arriving at the castle before Duncan, he will have time to plan the king's murder and consult with his wife, Lady Macbeth, before the act is done. This scene also hints at the level of influence that Lady Macbeth has in her husband's doings, as he uses her as the reason why he must act as the harbinger and make joyful the hearing of my wife.

While Macbeth has already toyed with the idea of murdering Duncan, it is Lady Macbeth who acts as the catalyst for his misdeeds. In scene 5, she wastes no time is presenting herself a murderous, power-hungry woman, bent on pushing her husband through to success, presumably for her own glorification. Lady Macbeth recognizes that her husband may be too full the milk of human kindness to follow through on his plans, and calls upon the spirits of evil to rid her of compassion and fill [her]... of direst cruelty. When she finds out that the King is arriving the following morning, she becomes ecstatic and declares never shall sun that morrow see! She then begins coaching Macbeth on how to behave the following day: bear welcome in your eye, Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower, But be the serpent under't.

These lines illustrate one key aspect of the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. In scene 2, the wounded sergeant gives a report of Macbeth's bravery and exceeding brutality on the battlefield, graphically describing how Macbeth unseamed an enemy and left his head on top of the battlements. It seems that Macbeth is outwardly courageous and brutal, but may be a bit barbaric in thought. Thus, it would appear that Lady Macbeth is the brains of the operation. She is a master of subtlety, which Macbeth lacks, and this is why she must tell him precisely how to behave the next day. Up until this point, Macbeth has had no clear plan for the murder of Duncan; now, his wife intends to provide a clever plan for him. She concludes the scene by saying leave all the rest to me, demonstrating that Macbeth may be more reliant on his wife's cunning than he realizes.

In Scene 7, Macbeth begins to doubt the morality of murdering his king, and his conscience forces him to tell Lady Macbeth will proceed no further in this business. Lady Macbeth, however,

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will not allow her husband to think twice about their plot, and begins belittling him until he finally relents. Her arguments do not stem from logic, but demonstrate a cunning manipulation of Macbeth's emotional state. She taunts him as a coward and mocks his manliness, then informs him that from this time, such I account thy love. Essentially, what this line means is that she will measure Macbeth's love for her based on what he chooses to do in the matter at hand. The threats on Macbeth's manliness are particularly embarrassing, especially in light of the high praise he received as a soldier at the beginning of the play. After she is done degrading her husband, Lady Macbeth continues her argument by telling Macbeth that only when he planned to kill the king, then you were a man. Furthermore, she emphasizes Macbeth's commitment to the murder by telling him that had she so sworn she would have dash'd the brains out of her own children. Macbeth is now ready to give in to his wife's prodding, but he expresses doubt in his line if we should fail? Lady Macbeth replies by reassuring him that if he is firm and screws his courage to the sticking place they will not fail. After hearing his wife's brilliant plan, Macbeth relents, and declares I am settled... false face must hide what false heart doth know. This entire scene is a clear demonstration of Lady Macbeth's ability to outwit and outthink her husband, but it also shows that they are thinking on two different levels. Macbeth, at the scene's beginning, is in a deep moral quandary. Lady Macbeth, however, is unflustered by the moral implications of the murder she is about to participate in. In her arguments, she completely avoids the moral issues of the murder and appeals to both Macbeth's emotional side (in her assaults on his manliness and on his love for her) and then to his practical side (in reassuring him that they will not be caught). Ultimately, this scene shows that Macbeth is not a cold-blooded killer like his wife, but his failure to think on her level of subtle scheming causes him to be easily goaded by her.

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