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## Macbeth and the Importance of the Contrast

'Macbeth' by William Shakespeare is a play in which great contrasts lie between its main characters. 'Macbeth' is a tragic play, set in eleventh century Scotland, which explores the psychological and political effects of the eponymous character, who commits regicide in order to fulfil his own ambition and is eventually killed as a result of his tyrannical actions. Macbeth is a profound character and an exceptional one; in itself, his place at the heart of Shakespeare's play ensures this. The strength of his nature, both positive and negative, is stressed through Shakespeare's comparison of him with other key characters: primarily his co-commander, Banquo and his wife, Lady Macbeth. Where relation to Banquo reveals the weakness of his mortality, comparison with his own wife and his own reflection on his evil deeds renders him thoughtful and profound.

From the very beginning of the play, Shakespeare illustrates the contrast in the character and consciences of Macbeth and Banquo. This initial difference in reaction is very important, marking the beginning of the different paths on which the two characters proceed throughout rest of the play. It is a meeting with three witches which sparks a yearning for kingship in Macbeth, after they tell him that he will obtain the crown. Enraptured by the words they speak, Macbeth urges the prophesising witches to speak further:

"Stay, you imperfect speakers, tell me more"

The strength of Macbeth's ambition is shown from the very moments that the witches speak their prophecy in Act 1 Scene 3. The repetitive use of imperatives here, evident again when he demands of them, 'Speak I charge you', shows Macbeth's huge interest in what the witches have to tell him.

In direct contrast with Macbeth's intense intrigue and his willing that '...they had stay'd', Banquo immediately sees the danger in the witches' words. On hearing that their predictions about Macbeth becoming Thane of Cawdor are true, Banquo's caution is very much evident, stating:

"What, can the devil speak true?"

Through his description of the witches as 'devils', Banquo reveals his wariness; the use of the word 'devil' can only imply one thing: the evil of those who spoke the predictions, and in turn the evil that will result from them. Banquo knows that the witches and their prophecies can mean no good, and, even more importantly, is willing to recognise this as a reason to reject

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them, despite the tempting rewards that they also predicted for him. Banquo's initial recognition of the evil in the witches' prophecies allows him to detach himself from the overwhelming hold that they have over Macbeth. Macbeth's enraptured state is emphasised in the following words, where Banquo comments on him:

"Look how our partner's rapt"

These words serve two purposes: the fact that it is Banquo who speaks them stresses how he has managed to avoid the lure of the prophecies, and they also reiterate Macbeth's own intense fascination. Banquo has managed to detach himself so much from the captivating nature of the witches' predictions - the sense of possibility -, that he is actually able to comment upon the contrasting state of his companion.

The contrast between the initial reactions of Macbeth and Banquo suggests that, despite their similar situations, there must be some fundamental difference in the characters of the two men. It is Macbeth's incredibly strong ambition - shown through his immediate enthrallment by the witches' words - that leads him to defy his King, his God and his own reason. It is not that Banquo lacks ambition, but that a principle strength of his character acts to counterbalance it; his morality. Macbeth and Banquo are in no way at either end of the moral spectrum; Banquo's traitorous dreams indicate that he is not immune from the strength of temptation, nor is Macbeth lacking a conscience altogether. Macbeth's conscience is revealed through his reaction to his own murderous thoughts, shown in the following lines:

"Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair

And make my seated heart knock at my ribs"

The physicality of Shakespeare's description here is incredibly vivid in portraying his horror, his self-disgust as a result of the regicidal thoughts he contemplates

The imagery of his hair standing on end and his heart beating in his chest makes the existence of his conscience undeniable; he is clearly and extensively affected by the prospect of the evil deed which he will inevitably commit.

The witches' description of Banquo as 'Lesser than Macbeth, and greater' in Act 1 Scene 3 captures the distinction between the two men perfectly. Banquo is 'Lesser than Macbeth' in terms of the burning ambition that consumes Macbeth, but is far 'greater' in terms of the strength of his conscience. The inevitability of Duncan's murder by Macbeth's hand is the result of his having a much greater sense of ambition than Banquo, and a much weaker conscience than him.

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The strength of Banquo's conscience means that he can keep his ambition in check, but only consciously. Banquo's reaction to his traitorous dreams is shown in the following words:

"Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature

Gives way to in repose!"

In sleep, Banquo's immoral, evil dreams mirror those of Macbeth; in the subconscious, with no conscience to control Banquo, the significant contrast between the characters is non-existent. The use of the exclamation mark in this line stresses Banquo's horror at his own ambition.

Through comparison with Banquo, and in examination of his flawed morality, Macbeth comes across as a weak character. However, it is only through his immoral acts that the audience can witness his true profoundness; as a thoughtful man, an insightful man and an honest man. As his only co-conspirator in the murder of Duncan, Lady Macbeth is the only character Macbeth can be truly compared with in terms of his attitude towards the deed. It is in this way that Shakespeare emphasises his true strength. Macbeth has a deepness of thought and foresight which his wife lacks, shown through his recognition of the dire consequences of the murder.

Both before and after murdering Duncan, Macbeth recognises the sheer evil and immorality in what he is doing; at no point does he attempt to justify his actions. This recognition is apparent in the following words:

"We jump the life to come...Bloody instruction, which, being taught, return

To plague the inventor"

As someone living in an intensely religious Medieval Scotland, Macbeth would believe in the afterlife, and be certain of the power of God. As God's representative on Earth, the murder of the King is by definition an evil deed, and one that Macbeth - and the society around him - knows will forfeit his chances of reaching heaven, and will resign him to eternal damnation. Therefore, the very fact that Macbeth accepts and openly admits this frankly terrifying conclusion in the words 'We jump the life to come' is surely incredibly courageous. At no point does Macbeth lose sight of the pure ambition and selfishness that drives him, nor the pure evil that will surround his kingship; these lines capture his acceptance of the fact that he is doing nothing for his country, simply setting a bad example. The words 'return/To plague the inventor' highlight another of Macbeth's realisations; his own regicide in order to take the crown is likely to lead to his own murder by another through the example he has set. Macbeth knows that he is not only destroying his own chances of eternal life, but also destroying his chances of a long life on Earth.

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In contrast to Macbeth's recognition and consideration of what the deed will mean for him, Lady Macbeth focuses solely on its practicalities. This is most evident in the aftermath of the murder, when Macbeth returns from killing Duncan in a state of horror at his own actions. Lady Macbeth refuses, unlike her husband, to ponder deeply the immorality of the deed and attempts to dismiss it. Her attitude is shown in the following words, in relation to the blood which covers her and her husband's hands:

"A little water clears us of this deed"

The sheer practicality of Lady Macbeth's thinking here highlights her shallow nature, as well as her unwillingness to consider the deeper truths, the deeper implications of the killing. Through this line, Shakespeare portrays Lady Macbeth as an incredibly superficial character, and it is through the contrast of Macbeth's own comments regarding his bloody hands that he shows the depth to the main character. The following words capture his contrasting sentiments:

"No; this my hand will rather/The multitudinous seas incarnadine"

The concept of the blood of his hands turning entire seas red confirms that Macbeth does not talk solely of the tangible substance which coats him, but also to the immense guilt that is engulfing him. The word 'multitudinous' in particular stresses the magnitude of this guilt. The depth of the main character's thoughts is stressed here, with his profound consideration of their immorality unable to inhibit his actions but present nonetheless. The directly contrasting lines of the two characters are effective in emphasising the fundamental differences between husband and wife; Macbeth considers the impact on the soul, whereas Lady Macbeth considers only the real and the physical.

Perhaps the most telling proof that Macbeth is, in fact, an exceptional character is not his acceptance of his dire state, but his foresight of it. Despite the dread his thoughts invoke, Macbeth foresees only that which he genuinely believes will be the result of his deeds, and never allows falsities to cloud the sharpness of those facts - a rationality of thought which, in spite of the inexcusable act he commits, is truly admirable.

"I dare do all that may become a man;

Who dares do more is none"

Macbeth's personal perception of masculinity is a thought-provoking concept, and is also rather revealing; he does not believe a man is purely defined by his physical strength, but also – and perhaps more so – by his moral strength. The exposure of such a fundamental belief prior to his murdering Duncan thus implies that having murdered him, Macbeth will no longer be able to see

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himself as a true man – self-contempt which could only lead to ruin. This notion is realised throughout the rest of the play, in turn demonstrating the way in which Macbeth predicts his own demise. The context of Act 1 Scene 7, in which these lines are spoken, is particularly important here. Having recently fought courageously in battle, he has won ‘Golden opinions from all sorts of people’; it is apparent to Macbeth that his reputation as a loyal subject and a respectable man is at its peak, and that further yearning can only mean decline.

It is in Macbeth’s ability to foretell his fate that the difference between husband and wife is most evident. Where his wife embraces the strength evil can bring, wishing that it would ‘unsex’ her, Macbeth resents that which his ambition leads him to; where his wife strives for stoicism and fails, Macbeth successfully predicts the destructive, corrosive repercussions. Lady Macbeth’s lack of self-knowledge and understanding is shown to the audience when she explains why she could not have killed Duncan personally:

“...Had he not resembled

My father as he slept, I had done’t”

These words inform the audience that Lady Macbeth has failed; she has been unsuccessful in filling herself with ‘direst cruelty’, and some compassion still remains. Her perception of herself as a cold, heartless being has simply been incorrect – she admits her inability to commit the deed that she so vehemently urged her husband to do. This suggests a certain hypocrisy on her part – although Macbeth committed the murder of his own accord, Lady Macbeth’s belittling tactics of persuasion are rendered extraneous as a result of her own weakness, further revealing the deep flaws in her character.

‘Macbeth’ by William Shakespeare is a play which contains highly contrasting characters. It is this contrast which plays a key role in exploring and revealing the traits of the protagonist. Through the contrast with Banquo’s words and actions regarding the witches’ prophecies, the audience learns not only of Banquo’s strength of conscience, but also of the strength of Macbeth’s ambition. Consequently, the contrast within the play is essential to its comprehension; it is the imbalance between burning ambition and weak morality which leads Macbeth, and Scotland, to ruin. As a co-conspirator, Shakespeare uses the character of Lady Macbeth as a means of emphasising powerful aspects of her husband’s personality: his foresight, his honesty and his thoughtfulness. In this way, the audience is able to recognise Macbeth not only as a man who commits evil, but also as a man who is plagued by the evil he commits. It is only when he is reduced to a man who has done wrong that we can truly witness the traits that make him great.

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