

The Building of Macbeth's Character through Comparison and Contrast

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One of the ways in which Shakespeare builds characters in *Macbeth* is by using comparison and contrast. In order to demonstrate this idea, we have selected three characters, namely Duncan, Banquo, and Lady Macbeth, who will be analysed in relation to Macbeth. The reasons for the choice of those three characters acting as foils to Macbeth are: a) their relevance to the play as characters proper; b) the significance of their link with Macbeth; c) their presence in moments which can be considered turning points in the plot.

Duncan opposes Macbeth, first of all, in the sense that while Macbeth's cunning mind is open to all possibilities and capable of pretence, Duncan's naivety makes him an easy prey to Macbeth's cleverness at deceiving. His misjudgement of character leads to his own destruction. He is first betrayed by the former Thane of Cawdor, and recognizes his own blindness by saying:

'... There's no art
To find the mind's construction in the face:
He was a gentleman on whom I built
An absolute trust.' (I,4,11-14)

It is quite significant that, in the play, this comment is immediately followed by Macbeth's entrance, as if the king's words were an ironic harbinger of the events to come, announced by Macbeth's aside:

'... Stars, hide your fires!
Let not light see my black and deep desires.'
(I,4,50-1)

In the second place, Duncan's regal behaviour and noble feelings when he arrives at Inverness oppose Macbeth's evil plotting. While Duncan offers his friendship and confidence, Macbeth, taking advantage of that, is about to betray him three times: as his subject, his relative, and his host.

Banquo and Macbeth are focused in a similar way in the beginning of the play: as brave leaders and loyal subjects. In spite of that, Macbeth seems to occupy an outstanding position, since it is he that makes peace terms with the king of Norway.

But some striking differences are gradually revealed as they meet the three witches and react differently. In the first place, Banquo seems to doubt their existence when he says:

'... Live you? or are you aught
That man may question?' (I,3,42-3)
'Are ye fantastical...?' (I,3,53)

Macbeth, on the other hand, does not question the reality of what he sees, and simply asks them to speak. After the prophecies, their attitudes do not change, as Macbeth wants to know more and more, and Banquo begins to attribute the vision to a mental hallucination:

'Were such things here as we do speak about?
Or have we eaten on the insane root
That takes the reason prisoner?' (I,3,83-5)

It is as if the prophecies had echoed Macbeth's own suppressed ambition, whereas Banquo's unshakeable loyal character repels any suggestion of a power whose nature seems to be ambiguous and even devilish.

The newly received title of Thane of Cawdor works for

Macbeth as a confirmation of the truthfulness of the prophecies:

'Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor:
The greatest is behind.' (I,3,116-7)

While he considers them 'As happy prologues to the swelling act / Of the imperial theme' (I,3,128-9), Banquo calls them 'The instruments of darkness' that 'Win us with honest trifles, to betray's / In deepest consequence' (I,3,124-6).

But let us not suppose that he is entirely without ambition. What happens is that he knows how to deal with it, and between his sense of loyalty and the temptation of power, he bends towards the former. The evidence that he also is in conflict is that he evokes the help of 'merciful powers' to free him from 'the cursed thoughts that nature / Gives way to in repose' (II,1,7-9).

In the beginning of Act III the two characters are once more confronted. Emphasis is put on Banquo's display of loyalty, which is strongly contrasted to Macbeth's symptoms of moral deterioration. Banquo places himself under Macbeth's acknowledged command, as his subject. However, he hints at knowing the truth about the crime, and at his own hopes concerning the prophecies. Thus, he threatens Macbeth's security in a double way, as Macbeth's throne is menaced both by Banquo's incriminating revelation and by his progeny. At this moment the audience understands the motivations for the murdering of Banquo, and the confront is now between Macbeth's cunningness and Banquo's passive behaviour. As he is plotting the deed, he conceals his evil intentions under apparently trifling questions about Banquo's plans for the evening, to which Banquo, unable to detect what lies behind, willingly answers.

Thus Macbeth's shrewdness is once again reinforced by contrast with Banquo's artlessness.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have the same aim, but they differ in their attitudes in the achievement of this aim. Macbeth becomes reluctant every time he has to face crude action:

'My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,
Shakes so my single state of man that function
Is smother'd in surmise.' (I,3,139-41)

But, to Lady Macbeth, action is no obstacle. As soon as she finishes reading her husband's letter telling her the news, she readily takes for granted the realization of the last prophecy. The audience promptly perceives that she is as cunning in relation to Macbeth as he is in relation to Duncan, because she knows of his inability to act in moments of crisis. She feels that he must come at once so that she can remove all the obstacles between him and the crown. If let to himself, he will hesitate, as his nature is 'too full o' the milk of human kindness/ To catch the nearest way'. (I,5,18-9). Her first step is to show him the ways of deceiving by defying him to act in keeping with his unrestricted desire. Up to the end of Act I, all his strength derives from her own, so much so that her advising him to be a serpent hidden under an innocent flower is echoed in his words in the final line of the act:

'False face must hide what the false heart doth
know.' (I, 7,82)

After the murdering of Duncan is committed, Lady Macbeth shows a perfect practical handling of the situation: she keeps watch lest someone may have witnessed the deed, appeases Macbeth's fears, tells him to wash away the incriminating blood in his hands and put his nightgown on, to place the daggers near the grooms and smear their clothes with blood to lay the blame on them. As he hesitates, she herself does it. In other words, she is concerned only with the concrete evidence of the crime. Macbeth, on the other hand, fears the moral implications of the murder, and the contrast is summarized in:

Macbeth: 'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this
blood
Clean from my hand?' (II, 2,61-2)

Lady Macbeth: 'A little water clear us of this deed.' (II, 2,68)

In Act III, scene II, the situation is reversed. Now it is Lady Macbeth that expresses her discontent in terms of spiritual values:

'Nought's had, all's spent,
Where our desire is got without content.' (III,2,4-5)

And Macbeth is the one who is worried about the problem of security in the physical sense, about things such as 'steel', 'poison', 'malice domestic' and 'foreign levy' (III,2,24-5)

Lady Macbeth is beginning to break down and even suggests that her husband should stop, which he will not do.

It is interesting to notice that, amid all evil, there is a touch of humanity provided by their mutual concern. They spare each other in different ways: she does not reveal her anguish lest he may be the more worried, and he does not involve her in his plotting, perhaps already detecting her imminent breakdown.

In the opening of the banquet scene they seem to be on the same level: gracious host and hostess welcoming their guests. Soon after, chaos emerges from order as Macbeth's delirium disturbs the ceremony. She reacts with her former strength, appeasing the guests and trying to keep an illusionary idea of order. At this moment of crisis she gathers all her inner resources to support her mentally disturbed husband. As she had done in the past, she appeals to his sense of manhood and tries to convince him that that ghost was made of the same stuff as 'the air-drawn dagger' (III, 4,62). This is her last outburst of courage and, as Macbeth gradually recovers self-control, she sinks into an apathy which won't leave her any more.

In act V Macbeth's self-control is transformed into an overboldness which will lead him to his own destruction. In a frenzy of violence, he gets stronger and fearless:

'I'll fight till from my bones my flesh be hack'd.
Give me my armour.' (V, 3,32-3)

As a matter of fact, this feverish state of mind is rather similar to Lady Macbeth's. The difference is that her disordered mind weakens her into madness:

Doctor: 'You see, her eyes are open.

Waiting gentle:

Woman: 'Ay, but their sense is shut.' (V,1,27-8)

She succumbs under the pressure of having suppressed her natural instincts to the advantage of her ambition. Her moral conscience, already awakened, rejects the bloody deeds they have sunk into, and throws her into the despair of saying:

'Here's the smell of the blood still: all the
perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little
hand.' (V,1,55-7)

We may conclude that the opposition that is reinforced in this relationship is of two kinds: a) inactivity versus action; b) madness leading to apathy versus madness leading to action.

As we have seen, through the confronting of Macbeth and each of the three characters, main faults and qualities are effectively emphasized. Our vision of Macbeth as a character is broadened by this kaleidoscopic perspective. And this positively enriches our understanding and appreciation of the play.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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