The relationship between macbeth and lady macbeth

Literature, British Literature

Macbeth is a classical tragedy, which plots the fall and death of a once great man. In part, Macbeth’s decline results from flaws within his own character. But he is also subject to a host of supernatural phenomena which seems to limit the scope of his independence: the Witches’ prophecies, the air-drawn daggers, unnatural dreams, terrifying omens, cannibal horses, day-time darkness, storms and hidden stars.

The human element, however, is provided by the relationship between Macbeth and his lady. They are bound by the strength of their love, and their understanding of and support for each other, but their attempt to achieve a mutual ambition destroys them and without each other they fall into despair and die.

The withering of this relationship reflects the gradual disintegration of the social and political world in Scotland and of the kingdom’s relationship with its new king, as well as the disintegration of Macbeth as an individual.

By tracing the meetings between the couple, therefore, we gain a greater insight into the meanings of the play and into the workings of the tormented heart and mind, for the protagonists live the greater part of their lives through their imaginations.

It is in the mind, perhaps above all, that their tragedies are enacted and thus, as these disintegrate, their deaths become inevitable.

From the moment of receiving Macbeth’s letter until Duncan’s murder, Lady Macbeth is ruled by her imagination, aware of the present but living in the future:

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be

What thou art promised.

(Act 1, Scene 5: 14-15)

She is already planning how to overcome the humane sides of Macbeth's nature by pouring her spirits into his ear. In her terrifyingly, unnatural prayer – ' Come, you spirits. . . ' (Act 1, Scene 5: 38-52) – she imagines the actual wounds she would make were she to carry out the murder herself:

That my keen knife see not the wound it makes

(Act 1, Scene 5: 51)

And when Macbeth arrives, she admits that she has been ' transported':

. . . beyond

This ignorant present and I feel now

The future in the instant

(Act 1, Scene 5: 55-57)

Undaunted by Macbeth's brief words, she seems already to have the entire plan organized: ' Leave all the rest to me.' (Act 1, Scene 5: 71)

Macbeth more expediently works out, in his mind, the consequences of:

Bloody instructions, which being taught return

To plague the inventor

(Act 1, Scene 7: 9-10)

He ponders the immorality of murder, but his wife's analysis of his character (Act 1, Scene 5: 14-23) has already shown us how well she knows her man. The fearful nature of his deeds on the battlefield, reported earlier by the bleeding captain and Ross, show what potential for violence he has, but we have seen his introduced in the early scenes as ' brave', ' valiant' and ' worthy'; Duncan himself calls him ' noble' and he has crushed Cawdor's rebellion loyally; his irresolution before the murder is prompted by moral arguments:

He's here in double trust:

First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,

Strong both against the deed; then, as his host

(Act 1, Scene 7: 12-14)

And Lady Macbeth fears his ' nature':

It is too full o'the milk of human-kindness

To catch the nearest way

(Act 1, Scene 5: 16-17)

Macbeth is also subject to the fear conjured up by his own imagination. His immediate response to the Witches, for example, suggests that he has already contemplated gaining the crown, yet his initial reaction is not the excitement one might expect:

Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear

Things that do sound so fair?

(Act 1, Scene 3: 51-52)

He cannot even name Duncan or the idea of murder:

. . . that suggestion

Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair.

(Act 1, Scene 3: 134-135)

Lady Macbeth thus realizes that though Macbeth has the potential for ‘ merciless’ violence, she must persuade him against his will and conscience and the moral and human leanings of his nature.

It is too glib to say that Lady Macbeth is simply ‘ fiend-like’. It is not, for example, she who puts the idea of murder into Macbeth’s mind. That ‘ horrid suggestion’ was the fruit of Macbeth’s own imagination and it was he who told her to ponder deeply the Witches’ prophecies – ‘ Lay it to thy heart’ (Act 1, Scene 5: 12). What Lady Macbeth does is to give him the support he needs, the strength and courage to perform the deed.

Her methods are perhaps devious but she only uses her own powerful imagination to gain power over his in order to help him attain their mutual desire. Indeed, she is only acting as a faithful partner in thus supporting him and it is their mutual support for and instinctive understanding of one another that makes them a remarkable couple.

It is clear from Macbeth’s eagerness to acquaint his wife with the prophecies so that she ‘ mightest not lose the dues of rejoicing’ (Act 1, Scene 5: 11), that he loves his wife. He calls her his ‘ dearest partner of greatness’, he talks of ‘ what greatness is promised thee’ (Act 1, Scene 5: 5, 11) and from

the moment the murder is committed, apart from an interlude at the banquet, it is he who tries to protect her. Knowing this, Lady Macbeth begins her taunts by questioning his love for her, persuasively turning his own words back on him (‘ dressed’ (Act 1, Scene 7: 36), for his ‘ worn’ (Act 1, Scene 7: 34):

Was the hope drunk

Wherein you dressed yourself? Hath it slept since?

And wakes it now to look so green and pale

At what it did so freely? From this time

Such I account thy love.

(Act 1, Scene 7: 35-39)

‘ Green and pale’ suggests cowardice so next she assaults his manliness, questioning hiss sexuality, his honour and his reputation:

Art thou afeard

To be the same in thine own act and valour

As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou. . .

. . . live a coward . . .?

(Act 1, Scene 7: 39-41, 43)

She clearly recognizes that his ‘ desire’ matches hers.

Macbeth counters her taunts with conceit and a defence of his honour:

I dare do all that may become a man;

Who dares do more is none

(Act 1, Scene 7: 46-47)

But again his wife turns his words against him, the term ‘ beast’ contrasting insultingly with ‘ man’:

What beast wasn’t then

That made you break this enterprise to me?

When you durst to it, then you were a man;

And to be more than what you were, you would

Be so much more the man. Nor time nor place

Did then adhere. . .

. . . their fitness now

Does unmake you.

(Act 1, Scene 7: 47-54)

‘ Unmake’ is an ironic pun ‘ unman’, against which she contrasts the strength of her own femininity to humiliate him further. She ends with an emotional challenge that she knows he cannot resist and which is thus the climax of this scene. She moves in imagination from looking backward (‘ I have given suck’) to the beastly imagination of braining her baby.

Her utterance is designed both to contrast her dependability and self-control (She would fight her strongest instincts, those of a mother, without emotion, rather than go back on her word) with his vacillation and temptation to break

an oath (‘ had I sworn so as you/Have’, lines 58-59) and to remind him of his lack of heirs, thus again challenging his sexuality. Macbeth argues no further and his next words show his agreement. He needs only to be shown that they can act with impunity. His wife is sufficiently resourceful, however, and explains how false appearances will cover their tracks and provides him with a clear, simple plan. Her practical resourcefulness allows her to take command at this point: he need only perform the act.

One cannot simply place Lady Macbeth in the Morality tradition, as Macbeth bad angel. Unless his letter had prompted her to read between the lines, this scene suggests that Macbeth himself first raised the question of murder – ‘ What. . ./. . . made you break this enterprise to me?’ and ‘ had I so sworn as you/Have done to this’. It seems a little too easy to say that this is simply persuasive hyperbole or Shakespeare’s poetic license and anyway she has succeeded in convincing him too quickly, within a few seconds. Her words are clever and manipulative but it takes her only thirty-six lines to wind his acceptance and certainly the remainder of the play would not support the suggestion that Macbeth was weak-willed. He seems now both convinced and in command – ‘ Away, and mock the time with fairest show’ (Act 1, Scene 7: 81) – and the couple are united in thought and desire.

Macbeth began as a great man and his continuing hesitation is designed to show us that he is not without moral fibre. He is therefore aware of the upheaval in the social and moral order that is threatened. He is conscious always of the immorality of his act, haunted by his conscience, tortured both by his imagination, which produces the hallucination of the dagger or the

voice that cries ‘ Sleep no more’, and later by remorse: ‘ Wake Duncan with thy knocking! I would thou couldst!’ (Act 2, Scene 2: 74). Indeed, all the murders are committed either offstage or by someone other than Macbeth so as not entirely to alienate the audience from him, and each id followed by a scene showing the Macbeths as victims too of the crime they have engineered.

As Macbeth commits the first murder, therefore, we see Lady Macbeth, not in command but a prey to her own imagination, first in fear of the present – ‘ Alack, I am afraid they have awaked’ (Act 2, Scene 2: 9) – and then in digging up affections from the past:

Had he not resembled

My father as he slept, I had done’t.

(Act 2, Scene 2: 13-14)

When Macbeth re-enters with the bloody daggers she calls him ‘ My husband’ for the only time in the play and each looks to the other for comfort and support. Macbeth is frightened and remorseful and Lady Macbeth recovers her composure first, having not yet seen the body:

MACBETH I am afraid to think what I have done;

Look on’t again I dare not.

LADY M Infirm of purpose!

Give me the daggers

(Act 2, Scene 2: 51-53)

Momentarily, Macbeth is mastered by his imaginative fear:

How is’t with me when every noise appals me?

What hands are here! Ha – they pluck out mine eyes!

(Act 2, Scene 2: 58-59)

and Lady Macbeth leads him off. But she is only composed because she has not yet had time to think on what she has seen and it is she who voices a real subconscious fear:

These deeds must not be thought

After these ways; so, it will make us mad

(Act 2, Scene 2: 33-34)

And her ‘ A little water clears us of this deed’ (line 67) comes in hindsight as an ironic rejoinder to Macbeth’s:

Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood

Clean from my hand?

(Act 2, Scene 2: 60-61)

For all the images of this Act – hands, blood, time, hell, darkness, courage, fear, power, the father – ultimately crowd into her imagination and do indeed contrive her madness.

After the brief Porter scene, Macbeth re-enters both composed and entirely in command. His wife appears calm but she utters only a few words. She stands silent whilst her husband explains the killing of the grooms and puts

on all the semblance of affronted loyalty. We cannot tell whether her swoon is real or feigned but just as her being the first character to enter alone hinted at her future isolation from humanity and society, so her swooning isolates her now from her husband's thought and action because she is removed from the scene, leaving him to act alone. When they are next seem together, Macbeth is king. He addresses no word to her as he plans the next murder and she is dismissed with the lords without a word to herself: ' We will keep ourself till supper-time alone' (Act 3, Scene 1: 44).

It is part of their personal tragedy that neither Macbeth not Lady Macbeth foresaw the results of evil on themselves or the state. They failed to realize that one murder would lead inevitably to others and to suffering and degradation, for their victims, the state, and ultimately themselves:

To be thus is nothing;

But to be safely thus!

(Act 3, Scene 1: 48-49)

The disease in the state would be mirrored in their own minds and within their own relationship.

This relationship depended on mutual trust, instinctive understanding and practical resourcefulness. Act 3, however, stresses Lady Macbeth's loneliness and gradual isolation as she has to send for her husband to talk with her and admits that possession has brought only unhappiness:

Nought's had, all's spent

Where our desire is got without content.

(Act 3, Scene 2: 4-5)

When Macbeth arrives, she tries to comfort and support him again and Macbeth seems about to confide in her – ‘ O full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!’ (line 36) – but he senses instinctively that it is she who feels helpless, he who must comfort her, protecting her from these mental scorpions:

There’s comfort yet! They are assailable.

Then be thou jocund.

(Act 3, Scene 2: 39-40)

She has become dependant on him and ends not with resolution but with a question: ‘ What’s to be done?’ (line 44). Macbeth’s jovial, tender attempt to protect her from further involvement – ‘ Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck’ (line 45) – recognizes her mental fragility but pushes her further from his life. They leave together, but silently, and he is now leading her.

The banquet scene is the climax of their disintegrating relationship as well as of Macbeth’s attempt to impose order and health on the state, for it contrasts with the welcome banquet for Duncan in Act 1, Scene 7, a scene of peace and harmony. The banquet itself is a symbol of order but here Macbeth’s response to the ghostly hallucination brings ‘ most admired disorder’ (Act 3, Scene 4: 110). As Lady Macbeth bids the nobles welcome, the First Murderer appears and those who entered on the words ‘ You know

your own degrees, sit down' (Act 3, Scene 4: 1), in a semblance of order, leave on the words:

Stand not upon the order of your going;

But go at once.

(Act 3, Scene 4: 118-119)

This disorder in the state is again mirrored in the relationship of husband and wife. They begin by sitting apart and Lady Macbeth cannot see the Ghost; she no longer knows her husband's mind. She does use her practical cunning again to try to restore order and cover for her husband – unmasked by his tortures imagination – employing the same taunts as before:

Are you a man? . . .

. . . O, these flaws and starts,

Imposters to true fear, would well become

A woman's story . . .

. . . What, quiet unmanned in folly?

(Act 3, Scene 4: 57, 62-64, 72)

This time, however, they are ineffectual, he makes no attempt to answer them and she fails to pursue them when the guests depart. She seems to have nothing left to say and he leaves her out of his future plans:

. . . I will send.

. . . I will tomorrow –

And bedtimes I will – to the Weird Sisters.

. . . for now I am bent to know

By the worst means the worst . . .

. . . I am in blood

Stepped in so far, that, should I wade no more,

Returning were as tedious as go o’er

Strange things I have in head, that will to hand

(Act 3, Scene 4: 129-138)

The speech is remarkable not only for its imagery and faltering rhythm, suggesting Macbeth’s increasing despair, but for being spoken entirely in the first person. The royal ‘ we’ has disappeared as has any thought of involving Lady Macbeth. The scene does end, however, on a note of intimacy:

LADY M You lack the season of all natures, sleep.

MACBETH Come, we’ll to sleep

(Act 3, Scene 4: 140-141)

But the final image is one of destruction, the couple isolated amongst the ruins of their feast, symbolizing the destruction of order in the state and the mind. They never speak together again.

When we next see Lady Macbeth she has become over-powered by her imagination. Her mind is diseased – ‘ A great perturbation in nature’ (Act 5, Scene 1: 9) – as all the secrets of her conscious and unconscious mind crowd

together, her barely articulate utterings, now reduced to prose fragments, suggesting a mind tormented beyond endurance.

The anxiety she had voiced in Act 2 (‘ It will make us mad’) is realized here in the climax of Shakespeare’s study of her psychology. The Doctor and Gentlewoman act as a symbol of the norm against which Lady Macbeth’s disorder can be contrasted. The Gentlewoman also exemplifies loyalty and duty – ‘ I will not report after her’ (Act 5, Scene 1: 14) – significantly reappearing only as the royal deaths approach, for only then will renewal be possible.

Lady Macbeth’s reference to hell and its darkness (‘ Hell is murky’, line 3) suggests that the taper she carriers represents her search for spiritual light and recalls her earlier ‘ Come thick night, / And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell’ (Act 1, Scene 5: 49-50). The memories of all the past bloodletting chronologically confused in her subconscious but she remembers even the time of the murder in which she was directly involved: ‘ One; two: why then, ’tis time to do’t’ (Act s, Scene 1: 34-35). In her minds she links the murder of the Macduffs with that of Duncan and perhaps a memory of Macbeth’s fit at the banquet:

The Thane of Fife had a wife . . . No more o’ that, my lord . . .

You mar all with this starting.

(Act 5, Scene 1: 41-43)

She begins with a child’s jingle and we recall that she had earlier compared Duncan to her father; Banquo’s sons, it is prophesied, will succeed and the

Macbeths are without heirs; she recalls Macbeth's fear after Duncan's murder and the ' flaws and starts' at the banquet have now indeed ' become a woman's story'. But the ideas mingle in her mind. She has also become obsessive, typical of psychological disturbance. The Gentlewoman tells us:

It is an accustomed action with her to seem thus washing her

Hands. I have known her continue in this quarter of an hour

(Act 5, Scene 1: 28-38)

She is obsessed by blood and this provides her with two new horrors, unacknowledged previously, though clearly hidden in her subconscious: ' who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him' (lines 38-39) – it was she who had returned to the scene of the crime – and ' the smell of the blood' (line 48). As they rise to plague her conscious mind, the weight is so great that she can only summarise her torture in one long inarticulate moan: ' Oh! Oh! Oh!' (line 49). As Macbeth had feared from the first, their ' bloody instructions' have returned ' to plague the inventor'.

The echoes from the past are tragically ironic here, as is the completeness of her isolation and her poignant expressions of need for her husband. The Gentlewoman tells us that the sleep-walking has started ' since his majesty went into field' Act 5, Scene 1: 4) and as she hears again the knocking at the gate, she asks him to lead her – ' come, give me your hand' (line 63) – to bed, reversing the details of the real occasion. Her despair will clearly lead to ' self-abuse' and suicide.

However, just as she disintegrates without her husband, so Macbeth is next seen on the verge of despair. Lady Macbeth has just informed us that he is still beset with nightmares – ‘ I tell you yet again, Banquo’s buried; he cannot come out on’s grave’ (Act 5, Scene 1: 59-60) – and some say he is mad. Certainly he vacillates constantly from one passionate outburst to another: he is defiant, angry, self-pitying, then ‘ sick at heart’ (Act 5, Scene 3: 19). He too is surrounded by metaphors of disease – his ‘ distempered cause’, his ‘ pestered senses’, the ‘ sickly weal’ full of ‘ weeds’ – and disorder.

Just as Lady Macbeth calls for his presence, so Macbeth is poignantly aware of such losses ‘ As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends’ (Act 5, Scene 3: 25), all the promise of the coronation banquet. When his wife’s death is announced, life becomes meaningless. ‘ Sound and fury’ become insignificant, life is reduced to an ‘ hour’, ‘ a tale/ Told by an idiot’ (Act 5, Scene 5: 25-28), and everything that had seemed so important before – ambition, hopes, desires, fear, bravery – is reduced to ‘ nothing’. He has violated the values that give meaning to life and sees himself a poor and quickly forgotten player on the stage of life. Though he leaps into action again as a Messenger arrives, rushing off to die a hero, from this moment, he begins ‘ to be aweary of the sun’ (line 49) and is only looking to the end.

Obviously, the couple’s crimes are unforgivable: from the start they have upset the natural order, creating a world which shattered the images that surrounded Duncan – ‘ loved’, ‘ wooingly’, ‘ procreant cradle’, ‘ breed and haunt’, ‘ temple-haunting’ (Act 1, Scene 6) – crimes ‘ against the use of

nature', invoking ' murdering ministers' who ' wait on nature's mischief'. Nevertheless, Macbeth wanted to restore order and heal his ' sickly weal'.

His murder of Banquo was an attempt to make his state perfect, the banquet an attempt to reimpose an order where society could be in harmony with nature, bound by love and friendship, ordered by law and duty. Indeed, his Lords do call, ' Our duties and the pledge!' (Act 3, Scene 4: 92), but the unnatural Ghost enters as Macbeth toasts, ' love and health to all!' (line 86) and is seen as soon as the Lords speak. For there is no retreat either from evil or from the consequential psychological disturbances, disturbances which mirror those in the state.

Exploring the Macbeths' relationship clarifies the upheaval in the kingdom, its relationship with the king, the causes of Macbeth's fall and disintegration, and allows us insight into the effects of conscience and remorse on the human mind; but it also lets us recognize the personal tragedy of the Macbeths, and their deaths come as a welcome escape, both for them and us, from unendurable self-knowledge. The English king can heal, magically, with his own hands; here, the Doctor says, ' This disease is beyond my practice' (Act 5, Scene 1: 55). He cannot cure it; they cannot live with it. This is why, when Malcolm dismisses them at the end of the play as simply ' this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen', we cannot help but feel, having suffered with them, that as a summary, this is totally inadequate.