

Macbeth: the Man

Who can tell us more about a man's character than his wife? Shakespeare allows Lady Macbeth to explain her husband's character as she understands it, and although she cannot see the *whole* truth, she tells us a great deal about Macbeth that *is* true. Two lines of her soliloquy in Act 1, Scene 5 are particularly significant:

Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it. (1, 5, 17–19)

By 'illness' Lady Macbeth means 'evil', but her metaphor is appropriate: Macbeth 'catches' evil, as one might catch a disease. The play shows how his symptoms develop, until there is no hope of a cure, and the man must die.

Macbeth the noble warrior

We hear a lot about Macbeth before he comes on to the stage, first from the Sergeant who has fought on his side, and then from Ross, who also speaks about Macbeth's courage in battle. These descriptions lead us to expect a noble warrior and a loyal subject to Duncan. We have only one slight doubt about Macbeth, and we are not able to explain quite what this is. We know that, somehow, he is associated with the witches; and this, surely, cannot be good.

Macbeth's ambition

Macbeth speaks very little when first the witches, and then Ross, hail him as 'Thane of Cawdor'. Perhaps he is stunned to silence by his good fortune. But soon we hear him speak – or rather, think aloud, for he does not mean to be overheard:

Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor:
The greatest is behind. (1, 3, 115–16)

Very soon he begins to admit to a 'suggestion', some 'horrible imaginings', and then he says the word 'murder' to himself (1, 3, 133–137; 138). Once this word has been spoken, we must regard Macbeth with suspicion, and the suspicion grows when he confesses his 'black and deep desires' in the scene that follows (1, 4, 51). Our suspicions are confirmed when his wife, speaking as though he were in the room with her, tells Macbeth that she knows he wants

that which rather thou dost fear to do,
Than wishest should be undone. (I, v, 23–4)

It is not, however, cowardice that restrains Macbeth. At the end of Act I he is wrestling with his conscience. He is deeply aware of the duty which he owes to Duncan:

He's here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. (I, vii, 12–16)

These are profound reasons for curbing his ambition, but Macbeth continues the soliloquy. Even if he were not – as kinsman, subject, and host – in duty bound to *defend* Duncan, rather than harm him, there would still be enormous sin in killing the king. Macbeth appreciates Duncan's fine qualities – his humility and his integrity in carrying out to perfection the tasks of kingship. Macbeth knows that to destroy such virtue would be a crime against heaven. He can appreciate Duncan's good qualities and this is a virtue in Macbeth.

Before Lady Macbeth comes on to the scene, Macbeth has won a great victory over himself, and he is almost triumphant when he tells her, 'We will proceed no further in this business' (I, vii, 31).

Macbeth and murder

But Lady Macbeth, unlike her husband, has no such conscience. At this moment, she is the stronger of the two, and Macbeth cannot stand up to her accusations that he is a coward, lacking in manliness, and a traitor to his word. He gives in to her and, in order to prove himself a man in her eyes, he allows her to guide him.

After the murder of Duncan, Macbeth is horrified to think of what he has done. Again Shakespeare contrasts Macbeth and his wife in their attitudes to murder. Lady Macbeth is bold and confident, because she does not understand that the deed is morally wrong; her only concern is to destroy the evidence. Macbeth, however, awakens to a consciousness of guilt that will remain with him until his death.

Macbeth now has to act many parts. When the body of Duncan is discovered, he must appear as the loyal subject, appalled by the murder of his king. In speaking to the two Murderers whom he has hired to kill Banquo, he tries to show that he is a worthy ruler, distressed by injuries which have been inflicted on his subjects. And at the state banquet, probably his first public appearance since he was made king, he plays

the part of host and friend to his thanes. He is not wholly successful in any of these roles. When the murder is discovered, he over-acts to such an extent that his wife tries to draw attention away from him by fainting. The Murderers are not interested in his efforts to justify the murder of Banquo: they have been hired to kill a man, and they will do the job they are paid to do. And the banquet is ruined for Macbeth by the appearance of Banquo's Ghost.

Macbeth appears again as himself (that is, not playing any 'part') at the end of Act III, Scene iv, when he and his wife face each other across the remains of their banquet. He now knows that 'blood will have blood' (III, iv, 122), and that the first murder is *only* the first. A new character is emerging – a man who is so desperate that he must act and not stop to consider the reasons for acting:

Strange things I have in head that will to hand,
Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd. (3, 4, 139–40)

The last line here refers to an actor's part in a play, which ought to be 'scann'd' – learned – before it is performed. With this comparison, Macbeth is beginning to recognize an element of unreality about his life.

Macbeth the cruel tyrant

The new Macbeth confronts the witches and demands to be answered. The answers give him a feeling of confidence which we, the audience, know to be unfounded. But Macbeth trusts no one. He has no faith in the loyalty of the thanes, and sets spies on each one of them (see iii, iv, 131–2). Now it seems that he will not trust even the witches and their 'masters', as he is determined to 'make assurance double sure' (iv, i, 82) by slaughtering Macduff's entire family.

We do not see Macbeth for some time after his appearance in this scene with the witches. We hear a lot about him, though – and everything that we hear tells us that Macbeth has become a cruel tyrant, and that he has changed Scotland into a country 'Almost afraid to know itself' (iv, iii, 167). There are more rumours to be heard when Malcolm's army moves towards Dunsinane, and we learn that opinions about Macbeth vary – but only slightly:

Some say he's mad; others that lesser hate him
Do call it valiant fury. (v, ii, 13–14)

He is indeed madly self-confident, believing that he is invincible:

Till Birnam Wood remove to Dunsinane,
I cannot taint with fear. What's the boy Malcolm?
Was he not born of woman? (v, iii, 2–4)

Macbeth the defeated

Alone, however, Macbeth is neither mad nor furious. He feels old and lonely:

My way of life
Is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honour, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have. (v, iii, 22–6)

Seyton tells him that his wife is dead, but he cannot grieve for her. Life has no meaning for him, and once again he sees himself as an actor,

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more. (v, v, 24–5)

He has lost everything, and when he hears of the 'moving grove' (v, v, 37) he knows that he is defeated.

Macbeth the dead butcher

Macbeth chooses to die in battle, 'with harness on our back' (v, v, 51), and the decision perhaps revives a spark of our former respect for the mighty warrior. At last he is challenged by Macduff, and he is reluctant to fight:

Of all men else I have avoided thee,
But get thee back, my soul is too much charg'd
With blood of thine already. (v, viii, 4–6)

How should we interpret this? The first of the Apparitions told Macbeth to 'Beware Macduff' – is this why he has avoided him? Or is it guilt that has kept Macbeth from coming face-to-face with the man whose wife and children he has so brutally murdered? Is conscience returning along with courage?