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Macbeth – A Study Commentary

Act One

Act One Scene Five

Commentary

Lady Macbeth is half-way through Macbeth’s letter when she enters – a realistic effect.

‘By the perfect’st report’ (on the most reliable grounds): Macbeth is still, in spite of Banquo’s warning, pinning his faith in the *‘trifle’* the Witches have given him, as proof that their promises can be trusted. 1-2

‘Burned in desire’: Can you recall the word Banquo used to suggest how Macbeth might be excited at the prospect of kingship? 3

‘That, trusted home, might enkindle you to the crown’ (Act One Scene Three lines 120-121)

'Made themselves air': Banquo's *'bubbles'*. They vanished into another world. 4

'Rapt': That interesting word again, but this time without any suggestion that he is hiding something – he is just 'enraptured'. 5

'The coming-on of time': Macbeth still hopes that kingship will 'come on' to him without his having to do very much. He continues to be reluctant to take any initiative himself – which may be why he is eager to involve his wife as quickly as possible. She, he knows, has it in her to be proactive, if that is what will be needed. Lady Macbeth in her response to this letter shows that she knows her husband well; there's no reason to suppose that Macbeth knows any less about *her*. So when he says he has written to her so that she can share the good news, he really means, 'Tell me what to do.' 7-11

'Lay it to thy heart' means both 'think it over carefully' and 'keep it to yourself.' Probably nine out of ten Lady Macbeths will stick the letter down the front of their dresses when the Messengers enter. (What will the tenth one do with it?) 11

The letter is in prose (usual) and Lady Macbeth's response to it is in blank verse (expected). What effect does the switch from one to the other have?

- o Macbeth has written in a clear and ordered manner and has kept his excitement in check. His language is largely non-figurative (literal).
- o Lady Macbeth's speech is strong in both rhythms and imagery. She is immediately more passionate about the prospect before them than Macbeth has so far been.

'What thou art promised': The possibility is so enormous that she cannot speak of it in plain terms – the prize, and the means to it, are unnameable. All the way through this speech she uses indirect phrases to refer both to the kingship and to the murder which will lead to it. List them.

- The kingship:
- o *'be great'*
 - o *'ambition'*
 - o *'what thou wouldst highly'*
 - o *'that which cries'*
 - o *'the golden round'* (the crown - a bit more to the point)
- The murder:
- o *'the nearest way'*
 - o *'the illness'*
 - o *'wrongly win'*
 - o *'Thus thou must do'*
 - o *'that which...thou dost fear to do'*

Lady Macbeth fears Macbeth's *'nature'*, she says. But she doesn't simply mean that he's too weak for the job. It is his *human* nature which is at fault. That's what *'human kindness'* is – it would be more clearly written as 'humankind-ness', and refers to what makes us people, as distinct from animals – or witches. So Lady Macbeth isn't complaining about Macbeth, but about *us*. *We* are not fitted for the kind of action which is necessary to make us 'great'; we don't *deserve* greatness. 14

That essentially human nature (which Lady Macbeth *does* see as weak) is passed down to us through the generations, in the very *'milk'* with which we are nursed. To become truly great we must be prepared to deny our inheritance and act ruthlessly in our own self-interest. So Lady Macbeth's speech is a rejection of all that we have seen happening (in the previous scene) in Duncan's court, where humane (another spelling of the word with slightly different connotations) and kind (in the more modern sense) behaviour is both ordained and practised. Lady Macbeth, in other words, wants Mankind to take a different path in his evolution. 15

Womankind, too. Women can out-man men. She herself asks in a moment (*lines 45-46*) to have her milk turned to gall (bitter fluid); and in *Scene Seven (lines 54-58)* she claims (boasts, even) that she would snatch her nipple from her feeding baby's mouth and dash its brains out, if she had sworn to do it. You can't get much more of a denial of humankind-ness than that.

It is important that you grasp that full meaning of those easily misunderstood lines (*14-15*). If you say, in an essay or a commentary, 'Lady Macbeth thinks Macbeth is too kind to kill Duncan,' you'll have missed an opportunity.

Macbeth has been 'seized' by the idea of kingship, you will remember. He in his turn must seize – *'catch'* – the swiftest means to achieve it. Lady Macbeth does not think he will. 16

The next few line are maybe overburdened with antithesis. It's as if Lady Macbeth has drawn up two lists: 16-23

- o What Macbeth wants
- o Why he will never get it without help.

She moves from one to the other in a manner which makes for a very contrived speech (and a demanding one for an actress); but the rhythms generated are powerful and convincing. She seems to know what she is talking about.

'Hie thee hither' has some dramatic impact (get used to that phrase). Things are about to move swiftly. Duncan will arrive before night and be dead before morning. 23

She wants Macbeth here so that she can *'pour [her] spirits'* in his ear. She may mean 'the spirit of boldness (*'valour'*) which will put the new Mankind wholly in control of his own future'. But if you know *Othello* and *Hamlet* you'll perhaps remember that the only thing poured into people's ears in those plays is poison. 24 25

'Do seem to have thee crowned withal': The phrasing is strange. (*'Withal'* just means 'with'.) The tense of the verb suggests that Macbeth is already crowned – in the world from which the Witches come, and perhaps also in Lady Macbeth's imagination.

'Thou'rt mad to say it': She starts in much the same way Macbeth did earlier; she too has been caught thinking bad things. The unexpected arrival of the king has something of the same impact, briefly, as the knocking on the gate which will wake up the household (in Act Two) to the discovery of his death. Her reaction here is that of a guilty person. (Some commentators have even suggested that when the Messenger says, *'The king comes here tonight'* she is so far forward in her imaginings that she thinks he means King Macbeth, and is momentarily flustered – *and* guilty – when she comes to her senses.) 29

She does attack the messenger, rather.

He is apologetic. You probably wouldn't want to contradict Lady Macbeth either. 32

The messenger has brought *'great news'* ('news of greatness' would be more accurate) and deserves to be rewarded, at least by being taken care of (*line 34*). 36

Ravens croak to announce imminent death (it was believed); the more important the death the louder the croak (we might imagine). This one has croaked himself almost to silence. Shakespeare needs us to be aware of just how momentous the impending murder will be: it will shake the very structures of the world.

'Under my battlements': Why *'under'*? Why *'my'*? 38

- o The impression given is that the battlements will loom over Duncan threateningly. (Look at what he himself says about the castle when he arrives, however.)
- o This is Lady Macbeth's, not Macbeth's, castle – a telling slip. It will in a sense be her plot too, since she becomes the force which drives it to its conclusion - and she's the one who cleans up afterwards.

Just who or what the *'spirits'* are to which Lady Macbeth refers here and in *line 46* (*'murdering ministers* – if both sets of supernatural creatures are the same) we don't really, as commentators, know. But as an audience in the theatre we will assume she means the Witches (or something very like). As often in drama, it's the impression, not the facts, which matters. 38

'Unsex me here' doesn't really confuse the issue of the New Mankind discussed above. The New Person will be sexless, and will have neither the softness of a woman nor the principles of a man; there will be no room inside this creature for anything but *'direst cruelty'*. Its blood will be too thick to carry feelings such as compassion (*'remorse'*) to its heart and it will have no conscience (*'compunctious visitings of nature'*). Its purposes will be *'fell'* ('ruthless'); and it will be very efficient at doing what it is programmed to do (nothing will come between its *'purpose'* and the *'effect'* – the carrying out of that purpose). 39

Recognise the picture? Isn't it eerily like one of those science-fiction creations, androids, which look like people but aren't and which go around proving how indestructible they are while destroying lots of real men and women? Has Lady Macbeth looked into the same future as some of our film-makers?

'Nature's mischief' may give us a bit of trouble, unless we see it as referring not to human nature (in which there is not *enough* mischief according to Lady M) but to Nature as a whole (ie Creation), including that part of it in which evil spirits live. There are other glosses (possible interpretations), but that's the most straightforward one. 48

The last part of this speech echoes Macbeth's in the previous scene, where he too calls for the stars to hide their fires so that he can act unseen. But Lady Macbeth's thinking and her poetry are much more fully developed. 48-52

Night is to be *'thick'* like the blood of the creature Lady Macbeth wishes to become, and will hinder sight in the same way that the thickness of her blood will *'stop up th'access'* (*line 42*) to human feeling. The darkness (gloomy smoke from hell) in which it will wrap itself will act as a *'pall'* (both a cloak capable of hiding something and a funeral winding-cloth).

'My keen knife': Does Lady Macbeth think she will have to commit the murder herself? She almost has to when the time comes.

There are perhaps forces in Creation which could work against the powers of darkness; but they have not been mentioned hitherto, and *'heaven'* receives here only a feeble mention. The Witches, it seems, will have everything their own way.

Just as Lady Macbeth reckons she can out-man men in ruthlessness, so she now out-does both the Witches and Ross in greeting Macbeth with his new titles. 53

Note, however, that she does not yet address him as king.

She has been carried away (*'transported'*) – into an unreal world, we might suggest – by the news in his letter. It is the world of *'hereafter'* (line 53) which exists *'beyond this ignorant present'* and lies in *'the future'*. But if things here and now can disappear into thin air (as those *'bubbles'* the Witches did) how much more likely it is that things offered for some future time will fail to materialise at all, and turn out to be illusions promised by illusions. We know that; but the two schemers do not, or do not want to. 54 55-56

(Macbeth does become king, of course, so in that sense the Witches keep their word. His assumption has been that kingship will last, however, and will bring content. That mistake is his, not theirs.)

Macbeth barely greets his wife. He is too full of the news of Duncan's arrival. 56-57

The next exchange is full of innuendo (hint and double meaning) – none of it particularly original, but chilling nonetheless. Are they concerned that someone may be listening? Or just afraid to hear themselves utter the terrible words which are in their minds?

Actors have a bit of a problem – it's easy to melodramatise (exaggerate the villainy of) these lines.

'And when goes hence?': 'Go hence' can mean 'depart this life'; in even plainer words... 58

die.

'Tomorrow, as he purposes': How long dare an actor pause between *'tomorrow'* and *'as'*?

Try it for yourself.

'O! Never /Shall sun that morrow see': This could be read as no more than the expression of a hostess eager that her guest.... 58-59

should stay as long as possible.

Here Lady Macbeth is diverted. She notices the look on Macbeth's face. What do you imagine that look might be? 60

Fear? Horror? Guilt? Astonishment at his wife's cold-blooded subtleties?

'Strange matters. To...': If your edition has a comma after *'matters'*, pretend it's a full stop. That's the only sensible way to punctuate these lines. 61

'Look like the time' means a bit more than just 'behave normally'. Think back to the previous scene. In order to *'look like the time'* at Duncan's court Macbeth had to go along with its jollity and excessive warmth, although he was far from being in the mood for it. *'The time'* means almost 'the fashion' – what is acceptable in the present circumstances. Your purpose in behaving in line with the norms of the day will be to *'beguile the time'* (deceive the people around you) so that, like a serpent beneath a flower (a snake in the grass) you will be able to strike suddenly and secretly. This advice is something of the *'spirits'* (line 24) Lady Macbeth wanted so badly to pour into Macbeth's ear; and it does indeed have some poison in it. 62

'He that's coming': She cannot even name Duncan. There's almost a kind of superstition in this refusal, as if to name him will be to break a spell. (Compare this with the theatrical tradition that *Macbeth* should be referred to only as *The Scottish Play*, and never by name, or bad luck will befall the production.) 64

Here are three more examples of linguistic subterfuge (hiding meaning in ambiguous statement). Try to give two explanations for each.

- o *'provided for'* 65
- o *'great business'* 66
- o *'my despatch'* 66

- | |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none">o looked after properly; taken care of (ie killed)o important visit by Duncan; wonderful opportunity to kill Duncano my care, so that he is made welcome; my care, so that he is 'despatched' (murdered) |
|--|

You may find this word-play a bit heavy-handed. The Elizabethans will have loved it.

'All our nights and days to come' has an ominous ring to it simply because it has an optimistic one. That's the case even if we don't already know that Macbeth will talk poignantly of *'all our yesterdays'* just before he dies. 67

'We will speak further': This sounds like a man who is looking for a means of delay. 69

'Only look up clear': Has he been looking physically *down*? 69

Lady Macbeth reassures him that all he needs to do is appear calm and she will do everything else. In this she is misleading him just as surely as the Witches...unless she does intend, at this point, to kill Duncan herself? 70-71

Overview: other things to note

Setting

- o Lady Macbeth sees and addresses spirits *'Wherever...you wait'* (lines 47-48); they are in an invisible world outside the one in which she walks up and down reading her husband's letter.

Character

- o Macbeth: Our knowledge of him deepens suddenly in this scene. Lady Macbeth's almost scornful account of his character has the effect of bringing him closer to us. He is human (that's her complaint against him). He is human (that is what connects him to us).
- o Lady Macbeth: A wholly startling woman. An encounter between her and the Witches would have been something to behold (Mrs Thatcher with an eye on Buckingham Palace as a desres meets the Furies).

Action

- o This is two scenes run together and divided by Macbeth's entrance. They are telescoped to give the impression of time moving swiftly on.
- o The speed of events (same idea): Lady Macbeth wants Macbeth to '*Hie*' to her; '*the king comes here tonight*' is a sudden and unexpected piece of news; '*our thane is coming*' is the next piece; Lady Macbeth then '*feels the future in the instant*'.
- o Indirect reporting. Several important episodes in the play do not happen on stage but are described by someone who saw them or knows about them. Look out for them and try to analyse the effect produced in each case.
- o Foreboding: the raven, yes; but also the rate at which Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are sliding downwards morally

Style

- o Its contrasts
- o Its gathering pace as it moves from the ordered letter at the beginning, through Lady Macbeth's intense analyses and invocations to the fragmented dialogue at the end as Duncan's arrival approaches

Ideas

- o Unnaturalness. Our whole discussion of human nature (page 21 above) had to do with that theme, and so does much of what Lady Macbeth says in the scene.
- o Sexuality (manhood as compared with womanhood)

General

- o Macbeth came to his wife looking for advice; by the end of the scene he must feel he has jumped on the back of a wild horse which has galloped away with him. How well *did* he know her?

Student Response

Carrie wants to know why, when Macbeth was in such a hurry to get to his castle and talk to his wife, he took the time to write quite a long letter before he set off.

There's a dramatic reason, of course: Macbeth's letter allows Lady Macbeth to move ahead of him in her imagination. Part of the tension of the scene rests in her struggle to draw him after her, once they are together. But there should also be, to support our theory about characters' actions needing to be convincing within the context of the play, an internal reason – internal to the story or to Macbeth himself. I ask the class to supply one.

'He might have thought he was going to be delayed on his journey.' He certainly didn't travel at top speed: the messenger who left after him with the news that Duncan was on his way overtook him.

'He sent the letter express mail.' (He probably did.)

'He wants her to know about the prophecy as soon as possible.' That's true, but it doesn't answer Carrie's question.

'Isn't he on his way to Forres to meet with King Duncan? He probably couldn't just take off for home instead.' (Pilar). That's the simple answer. Carrie's satisfied.

'Letters,' says Heather. 'She says *'letters'*: he must have written more than one.' We shouldn't worry too much about that either.

'This whole thing about human nature and a new kind of person: was Shakespeare really serious about that?' (Anwar).

It would be easy to be pompous and say something like, 'Shakespeare was serious about everything, even when he was making his audience laugh.' Instead I put an essay title on the whiteboard:

'Plays take us into worlds different from our own, but must have something to say about issues of importance in the world to which we, the audience, will return.'

Show how issues relevant to today's world have been raised in plays you have studied.

'What's more relevant than the question of who and what we are, and where we're going?'

That comes out as a bit pompous anyway, but it gives us plenty to talk about. As we go through the rest of the play we can examine each major idea we come across to see whether it's 'an issue of importance in the world to which we, the audience, will return'.

We start, however, with a discussion of just how different Macbeth's world *is* from ours. Not so very, we decide.

'Macbeth might have been happy there if it hadn't been for...?' I ask.

- o 'Ambition' (Philip) – his 'tragic flaw' (we'll talk about that at some later point)
- o 'The Witches' (Alecia) – temptation
- o 'His wife' (Ed) – sexual pressure
- o 'Duncan's wetness' (Rupert) – the feeling that he, Macbeth, would make a better king (there's no real evidence for that in the play – but see the brief discussion on page 31)

END OF SAMPLE SECTION