Macbeth And Ambition Essay, Research Paper

Macbeth

by William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616)

Type of Work:

Tragic fatalistic drama

Setting

Eleventh-century Scotland

Principal Characters

Macbeth, a noble Scottish chieftain

Lady Macbeth, his wife

Batiquo, Macbeth’s warrior-friend

Fleatice, Banquo’s son

Duncan, King of Scotland, a gentle and perfect ruler

Macduff, a rebel lord

Three Witches

Story Overveiw

On a stormy night, Scottish armies managed to suppress a rebellion, largely through the valor of two noblemen Macbeth and Banquo. They had also frustrated a Viking invasion that had received assistance from a prominent Scotsman, the Thane of Cawdor’ When news of these two events reached Duncan, King of Scotland, he was delighted with Macbeth’s performance, but insisted that Cawdor’s treason warranted his death. Accordingly, the king declared that Cawdor be executed and that Macbeth be named in his stead, Thane of Cawdor.

Meanwhile, Macbeth and Banquo, on their way home from war, happened upon a trio of witches – hags stirring a blackened caldron and heralding Macbeth’s arrival: “Double, Double, toil and trouble.” The witches astonished the pair by prophesying that Macbeth would become first, the new Thane of Cawdor, and then, King of Scotland; and that Banquo would become the father of kings. Then the dark hags vanished, leaving Banque and Macbeth to speculate over these strange prophecies.

No sooner had the witches departed than two of the king’s messengers arrived with news that Macbeth had indeed been named to replace the deposed Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth was amazed to see the first of the witches’ prophecies so quickly fulfilled, and began to believe in the ultimate fulfillment of the second. If he could be Thane of Cawdor, perhaps he could rule all of Scotland as well. This innocent belief quickly expanded into a deep-seated ambition, which began to taint Macbeth’s mind with dark thoughts: Would the prophecy fulfill itself, or would he have to take action to usurp the throne? Since Duncan was king, would not one of his two sons follow him in ruling Scotland? All this time, Banquo resisted any thoughts of hastening the witches , prophecy that his children would be kings, but could sense the unrest stirrin inside the soul of his fellow officer.

Banquo and Macbeth returned and reported to King Duncan, who warmly commended them both for their courage. But during the ensuing conversation he made two announcements which brought even more sinister ideas into Macbeth’s mind: First, he declared his son, Malcolm, heir to the throne; and second, he expressed his intention to visit Macbeth for a night at Macbeth’s castle. Macbeth felt he must somehow take advantage of Duncan’s visit to advance his own ambitions – or, as he saw it, his own destiny.

Hearing of her returning husband’s success and of the prophecies pronounced upon him, Macbeth’s wife was filled with a consuming desire to see him ascend to the throne. Vowing to stop at nothing in this quest, Lady Macbeth urged her husband to help her murder the king as he slept. She would undertake to induce the king’s guards to drink, giving Macbeth the opportunity to slip into Duncan’s quarters, slay him, and plant the murder weapons on the drunken guards. Macbeth hesitated at first, but his shrewd and aspiring wife eventually prevailed.

As announced, Duncan did visit Macbeth, and after feasting there with Banquo and others, he prepared for bed. According to plan, Lady Macbeth arranged to intoxicate the guards, then sent her husband to do the deed. Presently, Macbeth returned to her, Duncan’s murder accomplished. But now Macbeth was filled with guilt. Nonetheless, the conspiring spouses slipped, unseen, back to their chamber.

Two visiting nobles, Lennox and Macduff, finding the king’s lifeless body the next morning, sounded the alarm. Everyone rushed to the site, where Macbeth and his wife pretended to be shocked and heartbroken. Duncan’s two sons, suspecting a similar conspiracy would be attempted upon their lives, fled separately to England and Ireland.

After that, events moved swiftly. Everyone saw the flight of Duncan’s sons as evidence that they had been the conspirators against their father. Macbeth was crowned as successor to the throne; he had fooled everyone \_ except Banque, who was suspicious of Macbeth’s sudden rise to power.

In fact, Banquo, remembering the promises made by the witches regarding his own progeny, feared jealous attempts on both his life and the life of his son Fleance. Immediately he informed Macbeth that the two of them would be leaving the country.

The tormented Macbeth, who also remembered the witches’ ultimate prophecy, hired two assassins to kill Banquo and Fleance as they traveled. He could not allow Banquo’s son to rule. Banquo was murdered, but Fleance managed to escape.

Many days later, Macbeth gave a feast for his compatriots. As he raised the glass, mourning that he would have liked his friend Banquo to be present, lie was horrified at the appearance of Banquo’s bloody ghost – seated on Macbeth’s own throne. Now the terrified behavior of their new monarch virtually confirmed to the Scottish nobles that it was Macbeth who had contrived Duncan’s assassination. One of the Lords – Macduff immediately left for England to aid Duncan’s avenging son, Malcolm, in assembling an army to usurp Macbeth.

When Macbeth and his wife learned of this counter plot, they found and consulted the witches for advice. The witches warned them to fear Lord Macduff, but added that no harm would come to Macbeth “until great Birnham Wood onto high Dunsinane hill shall come.” Furthermore, “no man of woman born” should have power to harm him. Macbeth rejoiced: he was assured of ultimate victory. After all, how can a forest move itself? And what man is not born of a woman? But when the witches showed him a vision of eight Kings, Banque among them, his enthusiasm melted away, and he ordered the prompt murder of Macduff’s wife and children.

When Macduff, approaching with his armies, learned of these murders, his anguish only sharpened his resolve, and he swore to kill Macbeth with his own sword. When his armies reached Birnhaiyi Wood, Macduff instructed each soldier to cut tree boughs and hide behind them, in order to conceal their numbers. Like some kind of walking forest the men moved on Dunsinane, where Macbeth was poised to defend himself.

As Macbeth was preparing for war, his wife, chafing under her own guilty conscience, was walking in her sleep, attempting to wash from her hands invisible blood-stains. The horror of her crimes and the fear of death at the hands of her own untrusting subjects brought on her grim, agonizing dreams. Madness poisoned her spirit so bitterly that, on the eve of Macduff’s attack, Lady Macbeth died.

The King’s twisted mind too had been nearly destroyed. In his dementia, when word came that his wife had perished, lie remained nearly uni-noved. Moreover, as he dressed for battle, additional bad news arrived – Birnham Wood seemed to be moving toward them! Macbeth and his army rushed out to meet Macduff’s approaching forest of men. Macbeth fought recklessly, only bolstered by the false courage instilled by the witches’ pronouncement that “no man born of woman” could overthrow him.

Finally, the two warring leaders engaged in hand-to-hand combat. During the scuffle, Macbeth taunted Macduff; Macduff had not the capacity to kill him:

As easy mayst thou the intrenchant air

With thy keen sword impress as make me bleed.

Let fall thy blade on vulnerable crests.

I bear a charmed life, which must not yield

To one of woman born.

But Macduff, still inflamed over the slaughter of his family, answered his enemy that he had never been, in a sense, “born of woman.” “Macduff was from his mother’s womb/ Untimely ripped,” he replied.

Macbeth now fought in fear, with waning strength. The rebel at last gained the upper hand and plunged his sword into Macbeth’s breast, then severed the head from the body of the bloody counterfeit King of Scott and Macduff returned to the castle and hailed Malcolm, good King Duncan’s rightful heir, the new King of Scotland.

Commentary

This popular, fast-moving and relatively uncomplicated play has become a standard of the effects of ambition. At the outset, Macbeth is perfectly honorable – and the object of special honor from his king. However, the witches’ suggestion that he will attain the throne taps the well of ambition in him that (presumably) lies within us all. By the time he has slain Duncan, Macbeth is locked into a career of murder, and eventually becomes so desensitized as to remain unmoved even by his wife’s death.

Granted, Macbeth likely would never have carried out his plans if not spurred on by his wife’s stronger personality. In some ways, she is more of a man that he (”come you spirits,” she prays, “unsex me here . . . “). But in the end she is overcome with guilt that manifests itself in crazed hallucinations.

Only Banque, among those whose lives were “blessed” by the witches, escapes temptation: first, by refusing the seductions of ambition; and second, by refusing to conspire with Macbeth against Duncan. He is, as the witches prophesy, “lesser than Macbeth, and greater … not so happy, yet much happier.” It is by no accident that Shakespeare’s Banquo is a pure, upright fellow. The historical Banque was the direct ancestor of James 1, the King of England at the time of Macbeth’s first performance.

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