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Commitment Issues in Macbeth

Shakespeare's plays are masterpieces of literature that have provided centuries of scholars with material for further study. Regardless of whether one is discussing the comedies, the tragedies or the histories, Shakespeare's works have continued to illuminate the human condition and explore relationships. Macbeth is no exception to this general description. The play tells the story of a Scottish general, Macbeth, who has seen victory in battle just as he meets with three witches up on the moors. These witches tell him he will first become Thane of Cawdor, which is thought to be impossible as it is a rank of nobility and already occupied, and then that he will become King of Scotland, again a position already taken. However, hearing the news, Macbeth's wife is unwilling to allow time to lay the course and convinces Macbeth to murder the present king that very evening. This, of course, leads to increasing levels of violence as Macbeth attempts to retain control of the crown and secure his position. As this progression unfolds, it can be seen that Macbeth must contend with various commitments – his commitment to his king, his commitment to his wife, and his commitment to evil. At the same time, other characters in the play also demonstrate adherence to and dismissal of their own commitments. Thus, Macbeth can be read as a play of commitments as each of the characters struggles to find balance among their various allegiances.

As the play opens, Macbeth's commitment to King Duncan is revealed as this is his employer and his lord. The first two acts don't even see Macbeth as he is busy on the battlefield, attempting to defend Duncan's kingdom from the forces of Macdonwald, a man from the 'Western Isles.' Macbeth's loyalty is shown in the fierceness of the battle being fought as it is reported by the wounded captain in Act I, Scene ii. He tells the king the battle was "As two spent swimmers that do cling together / And choke their art" (I, ii, 8-9), indicating that the two sides were equally matched and Fortune was favoring Macdonwald. "But all's too weak / For brave Macbeth (well he deserves that name) / Disdaining Fortune, with his brandished steel ... unseamed him from the nave to th' chops" (I, ii, 15-17, 22). In addition to fighting for his king, Macbeth is quickly and well rewarded for his efforts as King Duncan quickly makes him the new Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth himself acknowledges his debt to Duncan as he considers the idea of assassination: "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" (I, vii, 12-15). Beyond this, he also knows that Duncan has been a good and fair king and killing him is unjustified.

Of course, his recent elevation to Cawdor reinforces the information Macbeth has been given on the moors by the witches, which introduces another, stronger commitment, which is to his own personal interests, such as his wife and the betterment of his position. His commitment to his wife is illustrated as he addresses her in his letter, "This have I thought good to deliver thee, my dearest partner of greatness" (I, v). This commitment plays a large role in his actions, decisions and mental state in ensuing scenes. Macbeth's commitment to evil, though, is a slowly developing process that only begins with this

letter. Although he knows he has no reason to move against his king other than “vaunting ambition, which o’erleaps itself” (I, vii, 25-27), his commitment to his wife and his greed proves overpowering, forcing him to the act. This single evil action thus commits him to further evil acts. When Macbeth willingly participates in murder, this quickly escalates to massacres of perceived enemies and the propagation of lies and deceptions as a means of maintaining the perception others have of him. His own deceit of Duncan forces him to consider the possible schemes of Banquo, thus leading him to order murder once again. To avenge himself on Macduff for having escaped him, Macbeth orders the massacre of Macduff’s family, and the evil flows on. Macbeth’s insecurities lead him to seek additional advice from the witches, thus intentionally seeking out evil rather than waiting for it to come to him, eventually losing his health and sanity in the process.

In many ways, it can be argued that Macbeth’s downfall was brought about by the women in the play – first as the witches gave him grandiose dreams of power and then as his wife hatched her scheme to kill the king. Lady Macbeth can be seen to make her own commitment to evil within the play. As soon as she learns of the witches’ prophecy, she immediately turns to the forces of evil as a means of procuring for her husband the highest title in the land. “Come, you spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty” (I, v, 38-41). Throughout this fervent prayer of hers, Lady Macbeth pleads with the spirits of darkness to remove any ‘feminine’ weakness within her, even going so far as to “take my milk for gall” (I, v, 46) as she struggles to put her plan for the murder of Duncan in place. To demonstrate her level of commitment to the forces of evil that pervade the castle, Lady

Macbeth tells her husband, "I have given suck, and know / How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me: / I would, while it was smiling in my face, / Have plucked the nipple from his boneless gums / And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn" (I, vii, 54-58). Her part in the murder is to drug the king's chamberlains so that the murder might be blamed upon them. In doing so, she passes by the sleeping king and later makes the comment, "Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done't" (II, ii, 12-13). Although her commitment to doing evil seems incredibly strong, in this single statement she reveals her weakness, setting up the move toward insanity she experiences later in the play.

Although at first Macbeth seems to waver on whether he should force the hand of fate or allow things to happen in due course, Lady Macbeth urges him to go forward with their scheme by appealing to the commitment promised between them as a part of their marriage vows. When Macbeth decides for honor's sake that he will not kill Duncan this night, it is Lady Macbeth who spurs him forward with the plan anyway, asking if all his resolve was just a show and promising "From this time / Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard / To be the same in thine own act and valor / As thou art in desire?" (I, vii, 38-41). In making this speech, Lady Macbeth not only calls into question the strength of Macbeth's commitment to her, but also his commitment to himself and his manhood, something that was even more important to the individual then than it is today. As Macbeth confesses to her his fears regarding his inability to say 'Amen' (II, ii), she consoles him and warns him against the future both share, "These deeds must not be thought / After these ways; so, it will make us mad" (II, ii, 32-33). Because of their relationship and dual commitment, though, the crime must be imprinted on both their hands. While Macbeth plunged the blade into Duncan, it was Lady Macbeth that

smear the old king's blood upon the persons of the chamberlains so as to frame them for the crime.

Several other characters in the play illustrate their commitments as well. Banquo, for instance, is present with Macbeth when the witches make their prophecy. While a normal reaction upon hearing that his friend will be king and he never will be, though his sons will, might be towards jealousy or plotting of his own, Banquo's reaction is mild and accepting, happy for his friend and glad for his lineage. He agrees with Macbeth to keep the encounter to themselves, which is a commitment Macbeth promptly breaks in writing to his wife, but Banquo apparently keeps as his own son, Fleance, seems to know nothing of it. When Macbeth and Banquo meet just before the murder of Duncan, Banquo brings up the subject of the weird sisters, but Macbeth again pledges him to silence. "If you shall cleave to my consent, when 'tis, / It shall make honor for you" (II, i, 25-26). Even knowing what he does, he does not immediately blame Macbeth for the murder that occurs within his own house, allowing the others to go ahead and blame Duncan's sons, who have mysteriously disappeared, for the murder. His suspicions are voiced only when he is alone: "Thou hast it now – King, Cawdor, Glamis, all, / As the weird women promised; and I fear / Thou play'st most foully for't" (III, i, 1-3). Within these thoughts, Banquo reveals his reasons for staying quiet. If Macbeth's prophecy came true, regardless of his role in bringing it about, perhaps Banquo's will also hold true and he is better off to keep things to himself for the moment, illustrating again that the stronger commitment is not to friendship or liege but rather to family and posterity. Although he commits to Macbeth when invited to the feast, "Let your Highness / Command upon me, to the which my duties / Are with a most indissoluble tie / For ever

knit” (III, i, 16-19), his previous thought patterns suggest this commitment is more in the nature of self-interest than true heartfelt devotion.

Macduff’s entry into the story is characterized by his prompt arrival at Macbeth’s gate during the hour previously appointed by the king. His concern can be heard as he tells Macbeth, “He did command me to call timely on him; I have almost slipped the hour” (II, iii, 42-43). Macduff also seems to be the first to pick up on Macbeth’s curious action of murdering the two men who were supposed to be the king’s guards. Although they looked guilty, with them dead, there was no one to say whether they were or no. It is a suspicion quickly followed in the minds of Donalbain and Malcolm, the king’s sons and Banquo, the one man who knows of the witches’ prophecy and how that might have affected the night’s events. Concerned about the events taking place in Scotland, Macduff flees to England, to Malcolm’s refuge, to try to discern the truth about why his beloved country is now under such a dark cloud. Although Malcolm tries to turn Macduff from his cause, Macduff refuses to believe the deceitfulness of Macbeth is best for his country. “I would not be the villain that thou think’st / For the whole space that’s in the tyrant’s grasp / And the rich East to boot!” (IV, iii, 34-36). His loyalty to Scotland is shown again and again and Malcolm tests him, avowing that he has every vice on earth to excess and Macduff’s answer is that he is not fit to govern nor to live: “Thy royal father / Was a most sainted king; the queen that bore thee, / Oft’ner upon her knees than on her feet” (IV, iii, 108-110). His honest despair for the condition of Scotland finally convinces Malcolm that he is fully committed to do what is right. This is contrasted sharply against his abandonment of his family in order to flee Scotland when he first felt trouble coming and becomes part of his lament when he hears of their deaths. “Sinful

Macduff, / They were all struck for thee! Naught that I am, / Not for their own demerits but for mine / Fell slaughter on their souls” (IV, iii, 224-227). In his actions and assertions, Macduff is a character who places his commitment to the state above his commitment to himself.

By exploring the theme of commitment that runs through Shakespeare’s Macbeth, one can begin to trace how Shakespeare judged his fellow man. The honorable, such as Malcolm and Macduff, were committed to doing what was best for the country and the benefit of the people. Each of them fled the country at their own expense, Malcolm’s reputation and Macduff’s family, in order to try to win support and aid for the people of Scotland. This represents a complete polar opposite from the position Macbeth takes, which is devotion to self and family at the expense of the crown and the people. That he is supported in this by his wife is perhaps not surprising, but demonstrates the failure of both to adhere to the Old Codes of honor and hospitality even as it undeniably goes against Christian morality. The couple’s rapid descent into evil is unsurprising to the audience as is the subsequent madness that is brought on as each struggles to find a balance between the actions of their greed and the knowledge of what’s right. Placed firmly between these two dichotomies is Banquo, who has ambitions for himself and his line, but who yet feels the necessity to hold true to his nature and his moral character. He remains loyal to the crown until he sees that to do so might jeopardize his own safety and the safety of those he loves. At this point, he opts to do nothing but watch and wait, declaring fealty when and where necessary to stay alive but not plotting or scheming to increase his status either. Thus, Macbeth illustrates the importance of placing commitments carefully and in balancing them between house and state or self and other.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. "Macbeth." William Shakespeare: The Complete Works. Alfred Harbage (Ed.). New York: Penguin Books, 1969: 1107-1135.