

The Equivocation Theme in *Macbeth*

EQUIVOCATION DU THEME DANS *MACBETH*

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Abstract: The thesis explores Shakespeare's use of equivocation in *Macbeth* from three aspects: i : The equivocation about prophecies; ii : The equivocation about characters, scenes, and ideas; iii: The equivocation about relationship between the world of reality and that of illusion. It holds that equivocation, beginning with the Weird Sisters in the very first scene to the final downfall of *Macbeth*, is threaded throughout the fabric of the play, thus it is the most important theme in the play. And the use of equivocation also gives us added appreciation of Shakespeare's supreme skills as a playwright.

Key words: Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, equivocation

Résumé: La thèse explore l'utilisation de l'équivocation par Shakespeare dans *Macbeth* dans les trois perspectives suivantes : 1. L'équivocation sur les prophéties ; 2. L'équivocation sur les caractères, les scènes et les idées ; 3. L'équivocation sur la relation entre le monde réel et le monde d'illusion. Selon cet essai, l'équivocation, commencée par les Weird Sisters dans la première scène jusqu'au déclin final de *Macbeth*, est enchaînée à travers l'organisation de la pièce, donc elle est le plus important thème dans cette pièce. D'ailleurs, l'utilisation de l'équivocation aide à augmenter notre appréciation pour la technique suprême de Shakespeare comme dramaturge.

Mots-Clés: Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, équivocation

Macbeth is Shakespeare's most haunting play. By reading this play, we can appreciate Shakespeare's supreme skills as a playwright. One of the most striking qualities that attracts me and impresses me deeply is his use of equivocation in the play. In Act 2, the porter extemporizes about the sin of equivocation, and in many ways, equivocation can be said to be the most important theme in this play. Starting from the Weird Sisters' first words at the beginning of the play, readers quickly ascertain that things are not what they seem. The article is to explore the use of equivocation from following aspects.

1. EQUIVOCATION ABOUT PROPHECIES

The word "equivocation" has two different meanings, both of which are applicable to this play. The first, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is:

The using (a word) in more than one sense: ambiguity or uncertainty of meaning in words; also...misapprehension arising from the ambiguity of terms (vol. 3, p. 266)

This definition is the one that modern readers are most familiar with, and this kind of verbal ambiguity is a major theme in the play. However, this is not the

definition of "equivocation" that the Porter intends. The second definition in the Oxford English Dictionary is:

The use of words or expressions that are susceptible of a double signification with a view to mislead; esp. the expression of a virtual falsehood in the form of a proposition which (in order to satisfy the speaker's conscience) is verbally true.

This intentional ambiguity of terms is what we see in the prophecies of the Weird Sisters; their speech is full of paradox and confusion, starting with their first assertion that "fair is foul and foul is fair" (I. i12). The witches' prophecies are intentionally ambiguous, and the alliteration and rhymed couplets with which they speak their omens contribute to the effect of instability and confusion in their words. It takes one or two readings sometimes to figure out what the witches mean; it is not surprising, therefore, that these "imperfect speakers" can easily bedazzle and confuse *Macbeth* throughout the course of the play. In Act 4, as the Weird Sisters throw ingredients into their cauldron, they chant "double, double, toil and trouble," a reminder that their speech is full of double meanings, paradox, and equivocation. The apparitions that the witches summon give a double message to *Macbeth*, knowing full well that he will only understand one half of their words. Famously, the apparitions warn him to fear no man born of woman, and that he will only fall when Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane. Although *Macbeth* himself has

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acknowledged that “stones have been known to move and trees to speak”, (III. Iv154), he takes the apparitions’ words at face value, forgetting to look for ways that their predictions could come true.

2. EQUIVOCATION ABOUT CHARACTERS, SCENES, AND IDEAS

Just as their words are confusing, the witches’ entire role in the play is ambiguous. They speak of the future, yet they seem unable to affect the course of the future. Banquo fears that the witches’ words will “enkindle unto the crown, “that they will awaken in Macbeth an ambition that is already latent in him (I. Iii132). And in fact this seems to be the case; as soon as the witches mention the crown, Macbeth’s thoughts turn to murder. The witches’ power over Macbeth is confined to suggestion and prophecy; they are the final push needed to drive him to his pre-determined goal. Are the witches therefore merely mouthpieces of fate? There is a connection between these oracular women and the Fates of Greek myth, and in fact the word “Weird” comes from an Old English word “wyrð,” which means “fate.” In Macbeth’s case, their prophecies serve only to suggest the future, not to affect it. In Banquo’s case, however, the witches seem to be able to affect the future as well as predict it, because unlike Macbeth, Banquo does not act on the witches’ prediction that he will father kings. Despite his inaction, the witches’ prophecy comes true. Their role in the story, therefore, is difficult to determine. Can they affect the future as well as predict it? Are they agents of fate or a motivating force? Why do they suddenly disappear from the play in the third act? These questions are never answered.

The ambiguity of the Weird Sisters reflects a greater theme of doubling, mirrors, and schism between inner and outer worlds that permeates the work as a whole. Throughout the play, characters, scenes, and ideas are doubled; for example, as Duncan muses about the treachery of one Thane of Cawdor in I. Iv, Macbeth enters:

There’s no art
To find the mind’s construction in the face.
He was a gentleman on whom I built
An absolute trust.
Enter Macbeth, Banquo, Ross, and Angus.
O worthiest cousin,
The sin of my ingratitude even now
Was heavy on me (I. 4 13-18).

Macbeth, who will soon betray Duncan’s trust even more than the earlier Thane, echoes the treacherous first Thane of Cawdor. As in all Shakespeare plays, mirroring among characters serves to heighten their

differences, and Macbeth is no exception. Thus Macbeth, the young, valiant, cruel traitor has a foil in Duncan, the old, venerable, peaceable and trusting king. Lady Macbeth, who casts off her femininity in her very first scene and claims to feel no qualms about killing her own children, is doubled in Lady Macduff, who is a model of a good mother and wife. Banquo’s failure to act on the witches’ prophecy is mirrored in Macbeth’s drive to realize all that the witches foresee.

Much of the play is concerned with the relation between inner and outer worlds. Beginning with the equivocal prophecies of the Weird Sisters, appearances seldom align with reality. Lady Macbeth, for example, tells her husband to “look like th’innocent flower, / But be the serpent under’t”(I.v76-77). Macbeth appears to be a loyal Thane, but secretly plans revenge. Lady Macbeth looks like a gentlewoman, but has been “unsexed” and swears herself to bloody deeds. Macbeth is also a play about the inner world of human psychology, as will be illustrated in later acts through nightmares and guilt-ridden hallucinations. This contrast between “being” and “seeming” is the fundamental definition of equivocation.

One of the most ambiguous aspects of the play is the character of Macbeth himself. He is unlike any of Shakespeare’s other characters. He knows the act of killing Duncan is morally wrong, and yet he swears he will do it. Yet unlike other Shakespearean vice-protagonists like Iago and Richard III, Macbeth is not entirely committed to the evil he wreaks. In I.v he agonizes over the idea of killing someone who loves him as much as Duncan does. He knows what is right and what is wrong, and yet he sees as his biggest flaw not a lack of moral values but a lack of motivation to carry out his diabolical schemes. In this he is like Hamlet, who soliloquizes numerous times about his inaction. However, unlike Hamlet, Macbeth does not have a good reason to kill, nor is the man he kills evil. Claudius is an objectively bad man and a murderer himself; the audience sympathizes with Hamlet and his desire to see Claudius dead. But Duncan is a good man, a trusting, sagacious and kind ruler who does nothing to deserve death. Macbeth is a character devoted to evil, and yet his soliloquies are so full of eloquent speech and pathos that audiences cannot help but sympathize with him. Thus at the heart of the play lies a tangle of uncertainty.

If Macbeth is indecisive, Lady Macbeth is just the opposite a character with such a single vision and drive for advancement that she cannot help but bring about her own demise. And yet her very ruthlessness is another form of ambiguity, for in swearing to help Macbeth realize the Weird Sisters’ prophecy, she must cast off her femininity. In a speech at the beginning of scene five, she calls on the spirits of the air to take away her womanhood:

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. Make thick my blood.
Stop up th'access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between
Th'effect and it. Come to my woman's breasts

And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring
ministers (I. V47-55)

Lady Macbeth sees "remorse" and "peace" as feminine virtues, and in order to void herself of such compassion she must be "unsexed." That she sees femininity as soft and kind is evident in the fact that she calls the waffling Macbeth womanish, telling him that only when he has murdered Duncan will he be a man. And whereas she wants to turn her mother's mild into "gall," she complains that Macbeth is " too full o'th' milk of human kindness" (I.v17). Later she reinforces the rejection of her femininity by claiming that she would go so far as to cast off all of the motherly sentiments that go along with it:

I have given suck, and know
How tender it is to love the babe that milks me
I would, while it was smiling in my face,
Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
And dashed its brains out, had I so sworn as you
Have done to this (I. Vii61-67)

3. EQUIVOCATION ABOUT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE WORLD OF REALITY AND THAT OF ILLUSION

As the play continues, the breach between the world of reality and that of illusion is the core of equivocation. One of the most compelling scenes in this play is the banquet scene haunted by Banquo's ghost. And one of the reasons for this scene's power lies in its blurring the boundaries between reality and the supernatural. Banquo's ghost appears twice at exactly the moment Macbeth mentions him. First, Macbeth announces to the guests that the feast is incomplete in Banquo's absence; as he says this, Banquo appears, sitting at Macbeth's

seat. He reappears as Macbeth makes a toast to Banquo in front of his guests. It seems that each time Macbeth thinks of Banquo, he has a vision of him. In this way, he seems more like the manifestation of an idea, a figment of the imagination, than a ghost; Lady Macbeth says as much when she pulls Macbeth aside, saying " this is the very painting of your fear. / This is the air-drawn dagger which you said / Led you to Duncan" (III. Iv74-76). Just as the spirit of Banquo invades the party, mixing the supernatural with the real world, his presence in the scene mixes the realm of ideas with the physical world in the same way as the " dagger of the mind " in Act two.

The equivocation theme continues in an amplified manner when the witches summon the " show of kings." Each king who appears looks " too like the spirit of Banquo," frightening Macbeth in their similarity, as if he is witness to a freakish line of clones, each perfectly resembling the ghost of the man he killed. This is equivocation to the extreme. As the eight kings appear, Macbeth notes that some carry " twofold balls and treble scepters," as if even the signs of their power have been doubled. And at the end of this show, the eighth king holds a mirror in his hand. This king, the eighth-generation descendant of Banquo, is James I himself, carrying a mirror perhaps to signal as much to the James I who watches from the audience. This mirror carries the effect of doubling into the audience as well; suddenly the play's James is doubled in the real James, creating confusion as to whether the world of the play or the world of the audience is reality. Once again, therefore, the boundary between imagination and reality, between fiction and fact, is blurred through the supernatural doubling in the play.

4. CONCLUSION

Thus beginning with the Weird Sisters in the very first scene, equivocation in all its permutations, from the doublespeak of the witches to the unnatural murder, is threaded throughout the fabric of this play. Furthermore, the use of equivocation in the play also gives us reader added appreciation of Shakespeare's supreme skills as a playwright and additional insight regarding his intentions as a dramatic artist.

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