

The Role of The Three Witches in Macbeth

By:

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Abstract:

The three witches play an integral role in Macbeth ; without their predictions. Macbeth never have destined to become king. In this research in chapter one deals with the major characters; Macbeth, lady Macbeth, and the three witches. After that in the chapter two, the supernatural elements in Macbeth. At last chapter three, shows the relationship between prophcy and Macbeth and the result of this research and the conclusion.

Keywords: Shakespeare, Macbeth, three witches, lady Macbeth, Magic prophcy, Duncan.

The Aim of this research

The aim of this research is to show in which way the plot of the play is connected with the three witches

Chapter One

1-1 Introduction

Shakespeare has introduced the supernatural elements in a number of his plays to cater to the public taste. In Macbeth , it appears in the form of the three witches, the ghost of Banquo and certain hallucinations. These forms of the supernatural and their role in Macbeth's tragedy may be stated briefly as follows. First, the three witches drive Macbeth on the bloody path of murder and bloodshed. The three witches appear in the early part of the play. They look strange as they have choppy fingers, skinny lips and, beards. They are called weird sisters' which mean the goddesses of destiny'. They are evil in behavior and their doctrine is fair is foul and foul is fair. Macbeth becomes the victim of their foul suggestions. They express three prophesies for him: that he will be the king, no one born naturally will kill him and he won't be killed till the forests walk. They also express the future that Banquo's children will be the descendants of the throne.

Macbeth then kills the king who is his guest and becomes the king. He then fears that Banquo's children will be his enemies in future. Therefore he kills Banquo but by doing so he sells his soul to the witches. The witches create over- confidence as well as a false sense of security in him. Macbeth believes the power and prophecies of the witches blindly. Soon they master the thoughts of Macbeth and lead him to his doom. Thus, the witches have a lion's parts in bringing out the tragic end of Macbeth.

Another form of the supernatural is the use of ghosts . Ghosts in the play serve the same dramatic purpose as is done by the witches. They give the play the charm of wonder, fear and mystery. The nature of the ghost in the play is subjective. It is Banquo's ghost. Macbeth fears that Banquo's children will inherit the throne. So, he gets Banquo killed. Then in the Banquo scene, the royal guests take their seats. One chair is vacant and Macbeth is asked to sit in it. But Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost sitting there. Only Macbeth can see the ghost and so others wonder at the behavior of Macbeth. According to some critics, Banquo's ghost is just the creation of Macbeth's imagination. Lady Macbeth too says:

"O Proper Stuff!

This is the very painting of your fear"

(Act 3, scene 4 , line 4)

There is one more ghost in the play. However, some critics think that it is the ghost of Banquo and Duncan. The use of this ghost further intensifies the tragic tone of the play.

The third form of the supernatural in Macbeth is the use of apparitions and hallucinations. They are as mysterious and fearful as the ghosts. One of the examples of the apparitions in the play is the air drawn dagger' seen by Macbeth before he murder king Duncan. It is the subjective creation. The dagger points to the bed- chamber at the old king. Some more apparitions are presented by the witches before the sight of Macbeth. They are frightening and hideous. Such apparitions include 'an armed head', a bloody child' a child with a tree in his hand' and such others.

Thus, the supernatural plays a vital role in the play. It is used in its purified form and has definite dramatic purpose. It makes the play charming, effective and intensively tragic.(Ibid)

1-2.The major characters

1-3. Macbeth:

He is such a short and concentrated play, with only two main characters , that it has been thought better to follow the development of the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth scene by scene through the play , instead of by separate character –studies as in the other plays (Carrington,1976:4). In Macbeth Shakespeare explores with the consequences of his desperate and bloody appliances to the inherent political diseases of autocratic government (Sanders, 1999: 157).

In Macbeth Shakespeare saw power (outside human life, and unable to act directly upon men) who want the rhythm of life broken, and strive to break it by promptings, by inarticulate crying which are misunderstood and prophecies which are misinterpreted. He saw these powers as parts of a devilish will in things, again which all that is upright in the soul of man is ever a barrier all this is set forth with the utmost haunting magical power. All feel that power even in cold print the words are marvelous. No man can hear them without knowing that Shakespeare as he wrote was at the heart of life. In that mood, which was perhaps brief, perhaps only the half of one day (for I have no doubt that at least half of Macbeth was written at a sitting), his mind became pure energy and its thoughts partook of the nature of pure energy: they became indestructible. (Romanes, 1924: 24).

Macbeth himself has had many uneasy feelings about the crime, but in the end it is he who, in effect tells his wife not worry.

"Be innocent of the knowledge Dearest chuck,

Till thou applaud the deed"

(Act 3 ,Scene 2 , Line 3)

In view of the witches prophecy concerning Banquo, Macbeth tries to make himself sure on the throne by plotting the death of Banquo and his son ,Fleance. The ruffians he hires are successful in murdering Banquo ,but Fleance escapes(Carrington,1976:1). Shakespeare's Macbeth is to all intents and designs an ambitious usurper, murderer and tyrant. He had thought about doing away the witches. When Macbeth tells his wife:-

"We will proceed no further in this business

*He hath honored me of late; and I have bought Golden
opinions from all sorts of people.*

Which would be worn now in their newest gloss,

Not cast aside so soon"

(Act 1 , Scene 7 , line 29)

This 'then' could only refer to time prior to the events enacted in the play. So, then, we have:-

1-Macbeth's own thoughts shared with his wife- touching the liquidation of Duncan.

2-The 'supernatural soliciting' by the weird sisters at the beginning of the play.

3-The provocation caused by Duncan hamming Malcolm as the prince of Cumberland.

4-The Oporto offered by a night at Macbeth's castle and

5-The persuasive vehemence of lady Macbeth's role in the affair. Shakespeare explains how "the words at the three witches great lie in courage him (Macbeth) here un to, but special lie his wife lay sore upon that was very ambitious, burning in unquenchable desire to bear the name at a queen" (Iyengar, 1986: 507-508).

The above explanation makes it clear that Macbeth's bloody deeds have much to do with the tragedy in the play. However, it cannot be said that Macbeth himself is wholly responsible for it. Fate and circumstances in the form of the witches and lady Macbeth also contribute a great deal to the tragic downfall of Macbeth. (Alexander, 2008: 93).

1-4. Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth is one of the sublime creations of Shakespeare. She plays a very significant role in the play. She is the heroine and Queen of Scotland.

Lady Macbeth is ambitious and incites her husband (Macbeth) into the crime. As a critic has said, in the bosom of lady Macbeth the passion of ambition has almost obliterated all the characteristics of human nature. However, we must remember that she is ambitious less for herself than for her husband. She never even thinks of what she will gain by the crown. Her ambitious nature is due to her love (Lott,1999:22)

When Lady Macbeth makes her first appearance in the play ,she is seen reading the letter from her husband in which he tells her “his dearest partner of greatness” of his success in the battle , the prediction of the witches and their partial fulfilment .she makes those wicked plans ,not for her own benefit ,but for her husband’s advancement .A ware of her husbands weakness , she is determined to further the schemes by using the whole force of her superior will to lead him into prompt action :

Hie thee hither ,

That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,

And chastise with the valour of my tongue

All that impedes thee from the golden round,

To have thee crown’d withal (Sen,1993:68)

Lady Macbeth is one of Shakespeare's most striking and fearsome characters. She is consumed by her ambition. She is instantly struck by the possibility of power, determined to chastise Macbeth and counteract his weakness. She is a mistress of euphemism also. She call upon the power of darkness to take away any female softness, and can hardly wait to persuade Macbeth to murder Duncan. She is sure of her power to do so. One more trait of lady Macbeth is that she has essentially feminine nature. Though

some critics have called her the 'fourth witch' and savage she is essentially a woman. Even when she instigates her husband for murder she shows her feminine qualities. Like a true woman she is not cruel by nature. (Hinton, 2007: 8).

Not only her husband's partner in crime, lady Macbeth is almost literally his alter ego or "other self". She at first adopts a masculine role, invoking the powers of darkness. Macbeth's guilty, started, fearful behavior suggests, if not femininity, at least the emotional sensibility traditionally associated with women. The confusion of traditional roles is one manifestation of the disruptive force of evil operating upon the hero. The very concept of manliness becomes associated with criminal and perverted acts, and "woman lines" is a term of opprobrium. Lady Macbeth assumes the burden of conscience. Husband and wife are so closely associated in evil that the one's madness is, in some sense, the other's as well.

Lady Macbeth serves the further function of bringing into the national and political arena at the play certain domestic and familial themes.

Lady Macbeth, then, contributes both to the psychological drama of crime and punishment and to the theme of natural growth and fruition that underlie the play's action.

Thus, lady Macbeth remains a sympathetic and pitiable character, though she is presented as an evil character. (Lawrence And Ratner, 1985: 208, 209).

1-5. The witches

A seventeenth-century audience might well have interpreted the weird sisters as literal agents of the devil, since belief in witchcraft was common in the period. At the opposite extreme, a modern audience may be tempted to interpret them as psychological projections of Macbeth's inner witches and fears. However, since Banquo is a witness, the witches must be to some extent "real". In a metaphoric sense, they are clearly representatives of evil in the universe: their plots against mortals suggest willful malice, while their appearances before Macbeth on the foggy heath and in the darkened cave signal moral obscurity and confusion. Thus, Shakespeare uses the

"machinery" of the weird sisters to show how character, meshing with external circumstances, produces tragic destiny and to suggest the unnatural mysterious quality of evil (Lawrence and Rather, 1985: 207, 208). The use of the supernatural is one of the features of Shakespeare's tragedies. In Macbeth too, the use of the supernatural is quite significant. One of its elements is the Witches. In fact, Macbeth is the only play by Shakespeare in which he has introduced the witches. The role of such a unique element may be discussed in brief as follows. There are three witches who have their queen, Queen Hecate and their attendant spirits like a toad and a cat. They have strange qualities. They can appear and disappear. They have their cauldron which they use to cast their spells. They symbolize all that is evil in nature. They symbolize death by their withered appearance with choppy fingers and skinny lips.

The witches play a vital role in bringing about the tragic downfall of Macbeth. Macbeth had an ambition of becoming the king. However, it is kindled by the meeting of the witches. If he did not meet them, the desire might have gone on sleeping at least for some near future or even forever.

The witches of Macbeth for the evil deeds of this play, and they surely play a key role in Macbeth decisions. (Ibid)

Chapter Two

2- The Supernatural Elements In Macbeth

The supernatural in Macbeth as in Hamlet , there is a distinct element of the supernatural which lends it a flavor of its own .Here it consists of :

2-1.The prophecy of witches

A link between Macbeth and the witches , it is significant that the witches comment to wards the end of the opening scene “Fair is foul and foul is fair ” is echoed in Macbeth’s opening remark in the play:”So foul and fair a day I have not seen ”.The strange coincidence evidently establishes a connection a kind of affinity between Macbeth and the witches,even before they meet.it also brings out the possibility that Macbeth , who has so far been referred to as a brave general in the heights of glory,has a somewhat

tainted soul and is ,therefore vulnerable to the witches machination(Sen,1993:374)

Much more than the other elements ,the witches introduce an element of supernatural mystery and fear into Macbeth. They are as Coleridge points out as true a creation of Shakespeare's as his Ariel and Caliban and wholly different from the representation of witches in the contemporary writers , and yet presented a sufficient external resemblance to the creatures of vulgar prejudice , to act immediately on the audience .The witches in the opening scene it is significant that the play opens with a brief meeting of the three witches .The scene is important in that it creates a sense of mystery and strikes the keynote of the play .The apparent confusion implied in their words “ Fair is foul and foul is fair” points to the general upheaval of order to which Scotland is led by Macbeth and which constitutes the main action of the play(Ibid:371).The play itself shows how great was his interest in words,for Macbeth's confidence rests in two forms of words ,one about men born of woman and the other about Birnam wood moving.He finds at last that the words without the spirit behind them have deceived him ,and when he realizes that he is trapped and doomed to die ,he curses the supernatural powers which have led him astray :

Be these juggling fiends no more believed,

That palter with us in a double sense ,

And break it to our hope (Act v.viii.19)

The effect of this atmosphere is marked with unusual strength in Macbeth .It is due to a variety of influences which combine with those just noticed ,so that , action and reacting the design of the witches ,the guilt in the hero's soul ,the darkness of the night,seem to emanate from one and the same source .This effect is strengthened by a multitude of small touches, which at the moment may be little noticed but stillleave their mark on imagination (Bradley,1966:278-279).

2-2.The appearance of the witches.

The witches are awaiting Macbeth on the heath as he returns from battle. He comes , accompanied by Banquo; the witches show no interest in Banquo. When pressed by Banquo to speak to him they say that he shall beget kings , though he be none. Soon after-wards a messenger from the king hails, Macbeth is ‘rapt’ and the idea of making himself king by disposing of Duncan occurs to him. The prelude to this is full of the trappings of witchcraft. Macbeth’s first words unconsciously echo the last words of the witches. When Macbeth is all hailed as king hereafter , he start like a guilty thing surprised .When the witches move to go Macbeth wants to know more , and when they have vanished he wishes that they had stayed .Then one of the prophecies has a swift and startling fulfilment and he is rapt.He cannot get the prophecies out of his mind and twice refers to them in asides to Banquo.all this is very important in deciding whether Macbeth had any thoughts of murder before he met the witches, and whether for their prey the witches can fasten only upon those who have lent their minds to evil suggestions and thus laid themselves open to their influence(Carrington,1976:20)

When we meet the witches again in Act I , we get to know of their physical aspects .They are withered and not dressed like earthly ,and yet they are bearded .They can at will vanish into air , can foresee the future ,and possess more than mortal knowledge. They are by no means the ordinary witches of popular superstition ,they are much more powerful beings ,resembling rather the “Goddesses of Devine “as Holinshed calls them. In Macbeth Shakespeare has indeed lent his Witches rare poetical grandeur and an awe to elevate them for above the conception of witches commonly accepted in his time(Sen,1993:372) .The supernatural element contribute to a sense of fate operating in Man’s life in Macbeth. At the same time , it is made clear that their effect would be different if Man did not succumb to the evil within him . The supernatural elements, however , give to the play a rich texture that raises the tragedy to a comic dimension. Man’s actions are not isolated but closely connected to various forces operating in the universe(Ibid,374)

2-3.The malice and power of the witches .

The witches represent the most important supernatural element of the play , but ‘witch’ is not a good word to denote them ,for they are much more powerful and more evil than the simple, stupid old women who as ‘witches’ were supposed by some to do harm to individuals through the use of magic powers. The word witch is in fact , used only once in Macbeth ,they embody evil and give to evil the respect which normal human beings give to good; for Macbeth they represent the bad forces struggling for his soul ; his conscience warns him against them, and knowing they are evil , he is free to make a choice(Bernard,1999:23). One will kill a swine for nothing ; another will have sailors ship in the tempest for an alleged offence of his “ rump-fed” wife .it has been rightly remarked that violation of natural laws is the very condition of their existence. But Shakespeare has endowed their powers with limitations. They may have power over nature , but that power is not absolute. Though a ship can be tempest tossed them ,it cannot be wrecked or lost. They may have power over a man’s soul but that power is not absolute either. It is only when a mortal mind is tainted that they can have an influence on it .They do not instill into Macbeth any evil that was not already in him .Macbeth reads into the prophecies a “ supernatural soliciting ” to murder and Lady Macbeth looks upon them as “ metaphysical aid ”.This is but wishful thinking ; the Witches in Macbeth neither solicit nor aid .It will also be a mistake to regard them as the instruments of punishment(Sen,1993:372).

2-4.The Ghost of Banquo.

Like Duncan too, Banquo trusts too readily in appearances; they are both too easily deceived into thinking all is well in Macbeth’s castle because its situation is attractive :

This guest of summer,
The temple –haunting martlet ,dose approve,
By his loved mansionry,that the heavens breath
Smell woingly here (Act I,vi:3)

When Macduff discovers that Duncan has been murdered, Banquo unlike Macbeth, expresses his grief simply and from the heart. But he does nothing, perhaps he is satisfied for the moment to watch events, and in any case he too is concerned in the witches' prophecies. But for this he is given no time. Macbeth quickly convinces two murderers that Banquo is the person who in secret makes them suffer cruelty and injustice, and when Banquo is returning with his son in the evening after a day away from the castle, he is murdered. Macbeth pretends that he is expected at the banquet arranged for that evening, and his Ghost, covered in blood, comes and sits in Macbeth's own chair. ص 17 لوتو وسط الورقة.

The most distinct suggestion of the supernatural in Macbeth comes from Banquo's Ghost. There has been much controversy over whether Banquo's Ghost is a reality or a case of hallucination. But the question becomes immaterial when we try to assess the dramatic value of the Ghost. What is important in this case is to find out whether Shakespeare has succeeded in producing in us an illusion about its reality. There is no doubt that we can see with Macbeth the uncanny apparition, the blood-blotched Ghost. Banquo's Ghost plays an important role in the action of the tragedy. The horror of its sight compels Macbeth to make many a compromising disclosure. It contributes a little also to the play's atmosphere of mystery and terror (Sen, 1993:373)

2-5. The unnatural portents.

A number of portents and prodigies occur on the night of Duncan's murder. Lennox describes that 'unruly' night in some detail:

*Our chimneys were blown down, and as they say,
Lamenting's heard the air, strange screams of death,
And, prophesying with accents terrible
Of dire combustion, and confused events,
New hatchings to the woeful time, the obscure bird
Clamor's the livelong night; some say, the earth*

Was feverous ,and did sake

(Act II,Sc.iii)

We are told how a falcon was killed by a ' mousing owl' and how Duncan's horses ' turned wild in nature ' and also ate each other. These portents suggest a topsy-turvy situation in nature and emphasise the naturalness of Macbeth's heinous deed in murdering Duncan who is at once his king ,kinsman and guest. The accounts of these supernatural happening also help to add to the atmosphere of horror in the play (Sen,1993:374)

Chapter Three

3-1 The Relationship Between Three Witches And Macbeth

Macbeth is tragedy of a man whose ambition leads him to pursue a path by fulfilling the prophecy. (Kashihara, 2010: 1) 21

Shakespeare's Witches are prophets who hail Macbeth, the general early in the play, and prophesy his ascent to king. Upon killing the king and ascending the throne of Scotland. Macbeth hears them ambiguously prophesy his eventual downfall. The darkly contradictory witches, their "filthy" trappings and supernatural activities, all set an ominous for the play.

Shakespeare's principal for the three witches is found in the account of king Duncan. The chronicles of England Scotland, and Ireland (1587). The future king Macbeth of Scotland and his companion Banquo encounter "three women in strange and wild apparel, resembling creatures of elder world" who hail the men with glowing prophecies and then vanish "immediately out of their sight. The common opinion was that these women were either the weird sisters, that is the goddesses of destiny, or else some nymphs prophecy by their necromantic science (Kenneth, 2002: 4) 22

The three witches represent evilness, darkness, chaos, and conflict, while their role is as agents and witnesses. Their presence communicates treason and impending doom. During Shakespeare's day witches were seen as worse than rebels' " the most notorious traitor and rebel that can be", not only

political traitors, but also spiritual traitors as well. Much of the confusion that springs from them comes from their ability to straddle the play's borders between reality and the supernatural. They are so deeply entrenched in both worlds that it is unclear whether they control fate, or whether they are merely its agents. They defy logic, not being subject to the rules of the real world. (Karin, 1989: 485)

In the play, the three witches represent darkness, chaos, and conflict while their role is as agents and witnesses. Their presence communicate treason and impending doom. (Perkins, 2009: 53).

Conclusion

Result show that Macbeth is night piece. Three witches and darkness has domination over the characters and the plot itself. The murders that are seen occur at night which makes us realize that the most horrible crime are committed in the darkness. The research shows that since Macbeth is a tragedy theme with the three witches, that is suitable to take place in the play which evaluates the plot with such horrible crimes

The use of the supernatural is one of the features of Shakespeare's tragedies. In Macbeth too, the use of the supernatural is quite significant. One of its elements is the witches. In fact, Macbeth is the only play by Shakespeare in which he has introduced the witches. The role of such a unique element may be discussed in brief as follows. There are three witches who have their queen. Queen Hecate and their attendant spirits like a toad and a cat. They have strange qualities. They can appear and disappear. They have their cauldron which they use to cast their spells. They can create storms. They are unnatural as they are women with beards. They use limbs of animals and human beings to prepare their charm. They symbolize death by their withered appearance with choppy fingers and skinny lips.

Holinshed calls the witches weird sisters which mean 'fatal women'. They are fatal as they can control fate. It is also the prophecy of the witches namely 'beware Macduff' that causes the death, of Macduff's wife and

children. The other prophecy uttered by the witches is that Macbeth will not be killed or anybody born of woman. One more prophecy of the witches is that Macbeth will not be vanquished until the Biran Wood stars waking. These prophecies of the witches certainly generates a false sense of security in Macbeth. Soon both the prophecies typically become true and Macbeth meets his tragedy. In the absence of the prophecies Macbeth might have properly organized his soldiers and avoided his tragedy.

Thus, the witches intensify the tragic atmosphere of the play. They contribute to the atmosphere of darkness, mystery and gloom which hang over the whole play. They also heighten the sense of fear, horror, and wonder. Their principle 'Fair is foul and foul is fair' reveals the fact.

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