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Bits of Macbeth: Figurative Language¹

Paradox

We might begin our brief examination of figurative language in *Macbeth* by focusing upon paradox: firstly because it is given additional weight of purpose by merit of its inaugural position, but also because the paradox is perhaps the most exigent of figurative devices, challenging the reader to participate creatively in an effort *make* sense.

Not only is paradox the first figurative device to be introduced, as we initially encounter the weird sisters, but the device is practised twice within the space of only a few lines: firstly there is the battle “ . . . lost and won,” (37) to be followed shortly by the famous “Fair is foul and foul is fair.” (37) Here, particularly in the latter oxymoronic example, we see acutely the power of the paradox, forcing us to seek a context in which the contradiction does not contradict.

The repeated use of paradox throughout *Macbeth* suggests that there is something in the device itself which seemed wholly appropriate to the content of the play: the paradox presents something which is not, says something which it does not say, concealing the truth from the superficial glance. Accordingly the paradox in itself, aside from what it might

¹This is a major rewrite. All sections have been either corrected, expanded or replaced in there entirety.

eventually render as the true meaning, underlines the deceptiveness of appearances. The theme of appearances is of course central to *Macbeth*, and is manifested not only in the recurring use of paradox, but also in the used clothes imagery—the masquerade of Macbeth—Lady Macbeth’s interest in appearances—the sleeping and the dead as pictures—the supernatural vision to name only a few.

But it is the answer to the “Foul is fair” paradox that points forward, like a witch withered finger, through the entire² play. And the answer is, simply stated, that things are not always as they would appear to be. This, in the terms of *Macbeth*, means not only deception and duplicity and double dealing and deceit, but also foulness becoming fair, as the death of the King leads to heaven and eventually to a new and, as we shall later see, more worthy royal line.

There can be little doubt then that introducing the theme of deception in the form of a paradox, where the words themselves attempt to deceive the reader, to conceal their true meaning behind the contradiction, is entirely becoming.

Lady Macbeth. That which hath made them drunk hath
made me bold;
What hath quenched them hath given me fire. (61)

Although there seems, at first glance, to be two paradoxes, the opening line actually offers no contradiction: it is the degree of drunkenness that can preclude boldness, not drunkenness itself. It is in the conclusion that the two opposites come together.

This paradox is quiet different from “Fair is foul,” offering no solution

²This is an assumption, since I have not actually read the “entire” play.
Play safe: read “much of.”

of definitive thematic value, but rather a word: “spirits.” As we see though, even this simpler paradox is no playful puzzle. Possessing hidden depth, the answer conjures up images of the weird sisters—since they are associated greatly with the ethereal world—from whence we might ask if Lady Macbeth works alone, or if her plea to the forces of evil was in some way answered. Also, the image of fire invoked here strengthens the sense of uncontrollability, of a man outside his own control; and ties in also with the alchemic imagery, showing Lady Macbeth involved, like Macbeth, in the impossible effort to transform human base corruption into a high and perfect form. Indeed, it could convincingly be argued that she is the essential catalyst in the process of change which we find in Macbeth, providing the energy that activates the process.

As Fate increasingly robs Macbeth of autonomy, forcing him forever towards disaster, then the association of Lady Macbeth with fire seems at least to define her as part of that Fate.

Exaggeration³

“More is thy due than more than all can pay” (48) There can be little doubt here that the king exaggerates his debt to Macbeth. Its significance

³I take such professorial comments as “Hmph”—as well as the remarkably low grade—to mean that this section in particular was seen as weak and imperfect. In the name of all weak and imperfect things, I declare that weakness and imperfection to be in the eye of the beholder. Since we cannot get it out with *Optrex*, this section has not only been rewritten but replaced. The original examples of exaggeration were the weak and imperfect “I heard the owl scream and the crickets cry,” and “I’ll drain him dry as hay.”

is largely utilitarian: Firstly, it is perhaps the strongest example of the king's inaptitude, showing a lack of political *savoir-faire*. This seems to be the result of a narrowness of vision which exclude the possibility of threat from one such as Macbeth. But it is also the final line of a speech which includes the self confessed sin of ingratitude. These, together, amount to more than that lack of political *connaissance*, but a lack of judgement which seems entirely at odds with the heavenly ordained nature of kingship. This then might be seen as a partial justification, on behalf of both God and contemporary royalty, for the murder, allowing, as it does, a more *worthy* head to take the crown. The inherent exaggeration of the debt—as expressed by the king—is therefore symptomatic of his exaggerated inaptitude; allowing the murder to be assessed as evil on the human level, but as fated on the heavenly.

But as a utilitarian device, it serves more than these two ends. What is perhaps more important is that it allows Macbeth to respond:

The service and the loyalty I owe,
 In doing it, pays itself. Your Highness' part
 Is to receive our duties: and our duties
 Are to your throne and state children and servants;
 Which do but what they should, by doing every thing
 Safe toward your love and honour. (48)

Macbeth here reveals himself aware of the *true* state and in doing so situates himself—in the world of difference that exists between the wrong wrought of ignorance or innocence and the wrong of corruption—clearly on the side of immorality. Notice the ensemble of the spheres stressed in the key words: “service,” “loyalty,” “duties,” “state children and servants.” Macbeth’s misdeeds prance through each of these circles. Notice also the repetition of “do” and “doing.” Thus, the course of the play, though

founded in doing and wrong-doing, is more a journey which examines the moral consequences of those acts.

The raven himself is hoarse
 That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
 That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here
 And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
 Of dearest 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
 Wherever in your sightless substances
 You wait on nature's mischief! Come, thick night,
 And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,
 That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
 Nor heaven peep through the blanket of dark,
 To cry "Hold, hold!" (51)

In this particularly long supplication we have an example of multiple exaggeration which, as a unified whole, produce what we might describe as exaggeration of tone.

To deal first with some individual examples: of initial interest is the exaggeration of ownership, with Lady Macbeth referring to the castle as "My" battlements. Though this might be partly justified in chauvinistic terms—home being the female domain—it does nevertheless, by virtue of the implied ownership, present a slightly masculine and authoritarian self-image. With this in mind, much of the remaining exaggeration is not so much a plea to the "spirits that tend to mortal thoughts" as to her own willpower. From this point of view the entire petition might be seen more as an almost diatribal soliloquy. Lady Macbeth's willpower, however, *is* limited, for she is ultimately unable to do the dastardly deed—murder. It is this significant weakness which, in great part, allows for her eventual

displacement, by Macbeth, as the primary active doer. It is interesting to note also Lady Macbeth's philosophy of appearances: realising both the need to control appearances—for purposes of deception—but also the essential superficiality of appearance—where, for example, she insists the sleeping and the dead are in appearance alike, are as pictures. The fact that it is appearance—the king's likeness to her father—which prevented her from committing the murder shows, as does this entirely exaggerated entreaty, that her power of wanting⁴ is stronger than her power of doing. This, of course, is at odds with the way she first *appears* to be. Further, the realisation of her true nature must be viewed in association with Macbeth's character, who provides virtually the mirror image, beginning, at least in his relations with his wife, inactively wanting the unspeakable—the crown—and finally doing the “undoable.” The initial appearance and eventual contrasting actuality of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth also ties in with the theme and imagery of “Foul is fair. . . .”

Lady Macbeth's exaggerated plea to be “unsexed” is, in a sense, a *fait accompli*. As already stated, there is a certain masculinity in her claim of ownership. It is her proclivity to action that bequeaths her authority; and willingness to act combined with authority amount to self granted masculine status. There is, doubtless, a certain balance between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth, in so much as Lady Macbeth is initially a woman exhibiting male resolve and willingness to do; and Macbeth—aside from the opening battle—is a male exhibiting female hesitation. The similarity between the two is underlined when Lady Macbeth utters, “Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark . . .” This is almost identical to

⁴Poetic licence here applied.

Macbeth's "Stars, hide your fires . . ." They are not only of like mind but, ultimately, of like morals. When her inability to act is finally realised, the prime instance being the murder of the king, then her authority and masculinity begin to dwindle. Lacking female compassion and masculine resolution, she is finally and literally unsexed.

Much of the exaggeration in this invocation is of an obsessive and unnatural sort: "The raven himself is hoarse," "Make thick my blood," "Come to my woman's breasts," and so on; and emphasises the sexual image conjured up in the "unsex me" exaggeration. If we now notice not the parts but the whole, there appears, as suggested earlier, an exaggeration of tone. Perhaps this can be more clearly described as a religious ebullience which bubbles over in the wild exaggeration of the pleas, as well as in the fundamentally extreme and evocative diction: "fatal," "mortal," "crown," "direst cruelty," "gall" "murd'ring ministers," "smoke of hell," "cry." Notice also the frantic urgency and spontaneity created by the frequent contractions, intensifying the sense of religious paroxysm. In the spiritual context that this exaggeration of tone and spontaneity creates, the weird sister's immediately spring to mind, representatives, as they are, of the only external power at which such a plea could be directed. Here then we have another example of Lady Macbeth's peculiar association with the weird sister's, not only in the supernatural context, but in that of gender, for they, like her, exhibit both male—at least in so much as they are bearded—and female characteristics.

Puns

Shakespeare makes use of simple puns for a variety of effects. "*King*. Fair and noble hostess, we are your guest tonight," (54) for example,

establishes primarily dramatic irony, or, to be more specific, tragic irony. Because the words are directed at a woman, Lady Macbeth, our chauvinistic tendencies render the initial sense of the word “fair” as pertaining to beauty. Also, this is a particularly Petrarchan word—if any word can be said to be particularly any body’s—which supplements our initial definition. But it is in reference to the second clause and particularly the word “guest” that the pun comes to light, for *guesthood* accommodates certain expectations, and it is in these expectations that the subordinate meanings of “fair” are born. We realise—where the King does not, hence the tragic irony—that Lady Macbeth is far from “fair,” which is to say just, honest, ethical.

Of course, “fair” serves not only in its punish aspect, but also as an associative device connecting, once again, Lady Macbeth to the “Fair is foul” weird sisters.

Lady Macbeth. [Reads] “They met me in the day of success; and I have learned by the perfect’st report they have more in them than mortal knowledge . . .” (50)

In this letter from Macbeth, the effect is not so much dramatic irony as a delicate probing of character. The pun is on the word “mortal.” The primary sense is “human”: the weird sisters are possessors of knowledge outside the human realm. The secondary sense, though: “causing death,” suggests at least an unconscious acknowledgement, on Macbeth’s part, that the prophesy not only means death, but will, since the knowledge is causing death, itself lead to both murder and Macbeth’s own spiritual and eventually physical death. There is a further pun in this same epistle: “Whiles I stood rapt in the wonder of it . . .” (50) This pun, in “Rapt,” makes use of the homonym. Because of the context established by the “mortal” pun, it presents Macbeth wrapped in the potential of the weird

sisters' prophecy as in a shroud.

Conceits ⁵

Whereas as paradox is intellectually demanding, the conceit has the additional quality of being aesthetically pleasing.

Captain. Doubtful it stood,
As two spent swimmers, that do cling together
And choke their art. (38)

The captain speaks of the initial battle from which the play draws its opening. The conceit, in this case, provides us with what seems to be an image far flung from the context of battle, but is really a simplified representation of what would otherwise be a throng of complexity and confusion: the two opposing armies are reduced to two individuals; the chaos of the battle field turns into the unity of water; the art of fighting becomes the art of swimming.

Since, as already stated, the conceit is much simpler than the reality it portrays, we can see with greater clarity the struggle for life as well as the fear of death.

This particular conceit though is noteworthy in that it serves the additional purpose of foreshadowing since it gives birth to a metaphor: the two swimmers, we realise, are Macbeth and his lady wife, who soon will struggle together in the waves of destiny, each pushing the other

⁵The definition of conceit used is not so much “extended metaphors and similes,” as defined on the question sheet, but rather “An unusually far-fetched or elaborate metaphor or simile presenting a surprisingly apt parallel between two apparently dissimilar things or feelings.” (Oxford Dictionary Of Literary Terms)

beneath the surface. In this respect, further imagery comes into being, “spent” becoming another instance of commercial imagery; but more importantly suggesting sexual imagery which is tied in with their increasing general impotence.

Lady Macbeth. . . . The sleeping and the dead
Are but as pictures. 'Tis the eye of childhood
That fears a painted devil. (63)

In this example the conceit is an extended and surprisingly appropriate metaphor. It reveals Lady Macbeth’s entrenchment in the physical world, the world of the here and now.

Although it is the sight of the corpse that scares Macbeth, Lady Macbeth does not differentiate between the sleeping guards and the dead king. This is not to say it is piety at work, nor gentleness of spirit. The consolatory, “Not dead but sleeping,” is far from her mind, for she defines death and sleep not as the beginning of a new life with God and a grace from God respectively, but as a witch-like (painted) *devil*.

In addition to the theme of appearances, what we see here is a carefully worded chastisement of Macbeth, which indirectly suggests that he is, in Lady Macbeth’s estimation, either a child at heart, or at least behaves like one. This is not the first such example; and it is in this assumed mother-image role that we see at least one method by which she initially establishes authority over her husband.

As far as this quotation refers only to Lady Macbeth, it seems to suggest not so much that belief in an immortal spirit is childish, but rather that the things of the immaterial world have neither significance nor powers in the material. The correlation between the dead and the living is as tenuous as that between a portrait and its subject.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth* :Toronto, Penguin Books. 1987.