Engl 345

## Asides and Soliloquies in Macbeth

Our latest Greenblatt reading provided valuable information regarding the "paradoxes of identity." In other words, the reader's belief, after being exposed to the use of certain literary artifices in the play, that characters possess a complex personality and continue to exist beyond their words and interactions, and as it were, outside of the play. An interesting question was then asked: What type of literary techniques effect this reaction in the reader?

The aside seems to be a tool of predilection in Macbeth. In 1.3.126, Macbeth speaks of his intrigue about the witches' message, not so much by questioning its supernatural origin but rather, its moral ambiguity. As any knight might, he is privileged to ascend in ran, yet with the promise of kingdom overwhelming him, he cannot but stare at the unacceptable thoughts of subversion arising within. Finally, he momentarily absolves himself by turning responsibility over to destiny. "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me without my stir."

It is through this aside that we can glimpse at Macbeth's crucial conflict. Good and evil clash in his repulsion at his own thoughts, which we now know contain thoughts of murder and desire for power. This conflict is relevant because it offers a portion of Macbeth's humanity which is seldom, if ever, recognized. He's tyrannical and a murderer, but once we delve in his private thoughts, we see that he suffers from a painful moral struggle and that his evil wasn't the mere result of ambition, but rather a complex development which contains despair, remorse, insanity, the unrelenting influence of his wife, and a haunting fear of being punished for his actions once he becomes king.

Another ingenious use of the aside or soliloquy, which are particularly adequate in times of conspiracy and infidelity, is to weave intricate relationships between characters, show contradictions which are essential to characterization, and create a dramatic irony. During the banquet, for example, Lady Macbeth scolds her husband for acting like a madman and nearly revealing their plot. Macbeth is meanwhile seeing Banquo's ghost. Her calculation and Macbeth's vision are depicted in the same scene, near the visitors, and dramatic irony is established when we become aware of their private concerns while the diners wonder what's occurring to their host and while Lady Macbeth herself wonders at Macbeth's actions. Banquo's soliloquy in the beginning of 3.1 foreshadows his future loss of allegiance to Macbeth and contradicts his reverent attitude when Macbeth is present. In 4.2.160, we read another of Macbeth's asides, though one which depicts more devilish intentions and readiness to act them out. Again, dramatic irony is set because the reader is aware that Macduff's wife and children have been murdered while he's oblivious to it. Later on, we know that the messenger who arrives during Macduff's dialogue with Malcolm is bearing some horrid news. It also indicates that Macbeth's evil thoughts are not to be openly expressed around noblemen, for they are too crude and inappropriate from a just, self-contained, and God-sent king. After all, Macbeth must hire murderers to carry his more secretive plots. He does not use soldiers.

ENGL 345
Professor Flores

A Murderer's Self-Deception: Macbeth

When I had read Macbeth previously, I had felt a great deal more sympathy for Macbeth because I felt he had been bullied and deceived into killing Ducan by the witches and his wife. After reading it again as well as discussion of it, this sympathy has faded, because I see Macbeth making a clear choice, and deceiving himself far more than being deceived. This change of view hinges on 1.3.121- 141, which became the pivot point of my changing understanding.

In this passage, Banquo says that evil forces often tell inconsequential truths in order to convince us of profound lies and bring us to ruin, then speaks to Ross and Angus. Macbeth ignores this and marks that the prediction of his kingship was preceded by two truths, and says that this strange encounter can't be good or bad. If it is bad, why would it give him encouragement and start with a truth: he is indeed Thane of Cawdor. If it is good, why would it suggest to him an act of murder so foul that it makes his hair stand on end and his heart beat too quickly. These things are brought on by something that is a mere imagining, just a thought, but shakes him to the core and incapacitates him to do more than speculate and turns his vision of the world upside-down.

"Two truths are told/As happy prologues to the swelling act/ of the imperial theme." It is interesting to note the theatrical references that Macbeth so immediately employs... prologues, acts, themes... it might reinforce the play as a play, or subvert the idea of history and succession as no more than a play.

"This supernatural soliciting/ Cannot be ill, cannot be good. If ill,/ Why hath it given me earnest of success/ Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor." Here "earnest" seems to mean a token or an object given in pledge rather than seriousness or intensity of manner, though those connotations still cling to the word. One gives a token or a pledge as a symbol of one's seriousness and intensity. Macbeth implies that this is an unanswerable question, that there is no possible way that this can be a wholly evil happening if it is begun with truth. This seems to me a willful disregard of Banquo's wisdom, as the latter has already presented a logical explanation: "And oftentimes to win us to our harm/ The instruments of darkness tell us truths,/ Win us with honest trifles to betray's/ In deepest consequence." Evil agents will begin with truth in order to convince us of lies and lead us to destruction. Macbeth does not seem to even take this into consideration, he wants to believe that there is good and truth in the prediction of his kingship, even if that means being intentionally blind at times.

"If good, why do I yield to that suggestion/ Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair/ And make my seated heart knock at my ribs/ Against the use of nature? Present fears/ are less than horrible imaginings./ My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,/Shakes so my single state of man that function/ Is smothered in surmise, and nothing is/ But what is not."

Macbeth calls it a suggestion, but nothing has suggested murder except for his own thought. The witches only predict that he will be king, not how it will come about. A more innocent mind might have merely thought that Ducan would name Macbeth his successor and therefore bring about the prophesy in an innocent, natural way. It is Macbeth's own desires and ambitions that make this instantaneous leap to treachery, but Macbeth tries to deny this. He is merely "yielding" to a suggestion that is being forced upon him, and outside force that causes his hair to stand on end and his heart beat too quickly. He says that the thought is just a thought, only an imagining, but one so frightening that it shakes him apart and prevents him from acting or doing anything but speculating... but is it really that he wants and excuse to dwell on this, rather than pushing it instantly out of his mind as he should. And is he truly that horrified and scared? Wouldn't that cause him to shut the thought out as quickly as possible?

Journal #2: Macbeth
25 September 2007

# Lady Macbeth: villain or victim?

What does it mean to be a female in one of Shakespeare's plays? I've explored this theme before, but still the feminist view is a road too easily taken. Some argue that Lady Macbeth is a villainess, a woman determined to reach the top and willing to drag her husband through murder and treachery to get there. Others say she is a victim that gets caught up in the whirlwind of Macbeth's ambitions. Which is the true woman behind the stately lady? The female who lies to her guests while her husband is having a delusional fit in the midst of a formal dinner, in an effort to save face? The wife who claims passionately that she would dash the brains out of her baby if it would make her a better leader, a woman worthy of ambition? The madwoman who washes her hands in air over and over, attempting to scrub free the stain that guilt has imprinted on her now fragile mind? How are these two reconciled? By the end of the play, Macbeth is alone, fighting off his foes with his only allies those that he has pressed into service under duress. Lady Macbeth has killed herself, after numerous restless nights, sleepwalking and talking to herself. By the end of the play, we feel sorry for her, we question the character that we had judged at the beginning, that devious lady who at first urged her husband towards murder. Yet this about-face is not completely out of the blue- after all, did Lady Macbeth not mildly, almost timidly voice some doubts on murdering their friend, Banquo? I see her as the poisoned voice in Macbeth's ear, yet she cannot be blamed solely for Macbeth's decision to kill King Duncan. After all, he is a Scottish Laird, he is a proven warrior on the battlefield, he has shown his valor and strength of character. There is no way that after just a few hours of urging by his poisoned tongued wife, Macbeth would go against his own strong judgment and decide to murder Duncan. He must have had some pretty strong leanings towards that treachery without his wife's teasing and taunting. Or is Shakespeare making a statement on the idea that men are never as confident as they appear, that the mere mention from a woman that a man might not be a "real man," is enough to persuade weak willed unconfident low self-esteemed males to do whatever the female wants? Somehow, I don't think Shakespeare viewed his fellow sex as such.

good questions

intriguing

Interesting and helpful critical insights on this topic.