

Macbeth as a Tragedy of the Marriage Relation

Mie Ishida

We see “in the heroes of Shakespeare’s tragedies principally ideal personalities who through various circumstances have got into tragical situations in which they perish.”¹ Macbeth’s vaulting ambition drives him to commit the first great crime, which causes one murder after another and finally his death. In the first great crime Lady Macbeth takes a major role. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth both look like villains, but in their ambition to gain the crown and in the murder of Duncan, they show perfect partnership. Macbeth is a brave soldier in battlefield and at home a common man and affectionate husband. Lady Macbeth is an ambitious woman and as a wife she does her best to help her husband. Knowing each other’s nature, they respect and depend upon each other. Because of their loyalty to each other, it may be said that they represent the ideal husband and wife.

In an attempt to satisfy each other’s ambition, the ideal couple commit a rash deed—the murder of Duncan. Psychologically and by her conduct, Lady Macbeth helps Macbeth. In the crucial situation they understand no more each other’s inner nature than their own, though they think that they know each other’s nature. They are not able to predict what consequence their evil ambition would bring to themselves and how the consequence would destroy their inmost heart. Craig says in An Interpretation of Shakespeare:

On the ground of this universal application, it presents the spectacle of a representative man and woman embarking on a sea of sin and error and encountering a shipwreck, not only as individuals, but also a husband and wife. Macbeth is thus a tragedy of the marriage relation as well as of the state. The guilt of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth ultimately separates them, they perish as individuals, each alone.²

Macbeth is called “brave Macbeth” and “worthy gentleman”. He is apparently honoured and trusted by everybody. To Lady Macbeth he is an affectionate husband as well as a brave soldier. When Thane of Cawder and the crown are hinted by the Witches and one of them comes to be true, Macbeth immediately writes to Lady Macbeth about it as if not only to please her but also to ask for

her help. Her reaction to the letter is excellent. She starts contemplating on how to do her best to help her husband for the ambition he expresses in his letter. She notices her husband's weakness: "It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness/to catch the nearest way" (I,v, 1.17-8). She decides to be heartless by killing her good nature and womanhood:

. . . Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full
Of direct 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, . . .

(I, v, 1.40-8)

She does not despise her husband's weakness, but she respects him and feels that he is honest and great enough to be king, and she is eager to help her affectionate husband to fulfil his ambition. If it were not for such a horrible crime, how ideal a husband and wife they would be!

The success of the first part of the Witches' prophecy influences Macbeth to work for the success of what he thinks is the second part of the prophecy—Macbeth becoming King. This shows the contrast between Macbeth and Banquo, for Banquo has little regard for the Witches' prophecy. At first Macbeth reveals purity or innocence, for he is overcome with the fear that the success of the first part of the Witches' prophecy will move him never-ceasing ambition to commit murder. He is startled with the fear at the thought of murder even if unconsciously:

. . . I am Thane of Cawdor:
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? . . .

(I, iii, 1.133-7)

About the prophecies Bradley says "merely symbolic representation of the unconscious or half conscious guilt in Macbeth himself"³ and Craig says "merely the utterance of the ambitious longings of Macbeth's own heart."⁴ When Duncan destroys Macbeth's hope by appointing his own son, Malcolm, to be Prince of Cumberland, Macbeth is driven to what he fears most—that his ambition would drive him to commit murder.

The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step

On which I must fall down, or else o'verleap,
For in my way it lies. Star hide your fires;
Let not light see my black and deep desires:
The eye wink at the hand: yet let that be
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.

(I, iv, 1.48-53)

Before going home to talk with Lady Macbeth, Macbeth sends a letter to her writing about the Weird Sisters and his new title. The letter also suggests a growing desire for the crown hinted by the Weird Sisters' prophecy. Thus we know that the ambition for the crown has been cherished between them, and it seems to us that Macbeth asks for support from his wife to fulfil the ambition and his wife willingly consents. Those two characters, a husband and wife, are fired by the same passion of ambition and are ready to support and love one another for the happiness that they think their actions will bring to their spouse.

Macbeth is a bold ambitious man in action and his imagination is extremely active. This active imagination of his shows his good nature. Bradley says that his imagination is the best part of his character, "something usually deeper and higher than his conscious thoughts," and he adds that "so long as Macbeth's imagination is active, we watch him fascinated; we feel suspense, horror, awe; in which are latent, also admiration and sympathy."⁵ Stopford A. Brooke sees that Macbeth's vigorous imagination creates "new aspects of anything to be done, or that has been done, which is at the root of his hesitations, his fears, his outbursts of agony."⁶ When Macbeth goes home with the unconscious desire to slay Duncan in order to gain the throne, he is welcome by Lady Macbeth, who has prepared herself to lift his weakness into strength and his fears into courage by casting off her natural womanhood. In the murder of Duncan, Lady Macbeth's heartlessness and rage of impulse are what is needed to encourage her husband to move to the rash deed. Macbeth is sensitive and has an active imagination, so he needs his wife's support to carry out his vicious deed. Using her womanly skills, Lady Macbeth persuades her husband and relieves him from the fear of failure by talking about the effect of wine upon the chamberlains and the scheme of using their dagger and marking them with Duncan's blood. Macbeth leaves the planning of the murder to his wife and she has a large share in the successful completion of the deed. This is a reflection of a weakness in Macbeth's character. Although Macbeth never talks about his plans to murder Duncan to his wife, nevertheless his wife knows his ambition. This reveals their closeness. After all, his ambition is so strong that it overcomes his imagination at the right moment to drive him to the first great crime. At that time Lady Macbeth believes that she is doing her best to help her husband. Brooke says, "it is plain that these two, even in crime, loved one another well, and had been closely knit together.

Macbeth knew her strength and loved her, before murder, more than she loved him.”⁷

When the murder of Duncan is discovered, Macbeth quickly kills the chamberlains without any help from Lady Macbeth, while she swoons to be carried out. When the murder has been done, her momentary great courage and cruelty end. Those were produced to kill her conscience and woman nature. With the shock of the discovery of the hideousness of the crime, her courage leaves her. About their contrasted reaction to the first crime, Brooke says that “in a man emotion rarely exists without thought being exercised upon it,”⁸ but that in a woman passion or intellect acts alone whenever either is dominant, that is, if her passion is dominant, it acts alone without any thought mixed up with it. Macbeth’s passionate desire to slay Duncan to gain the throne is accompanied by “an intellectual discussion of its reason, its difficulties, and its consequences,”⁹ so that he can move to the murder of the Chamberlains in order to hide the murder of Duncan. His ambition strengthened by his wife was sometimes abhorrent to his better nature, but once the ambition has won, his active imagination awakes fear. He is afraid of Banquo’s loyalty to the king as well as Banquo’s honesty and wisdom. Although he fears Banquo, his greatest fear is the prophecy that the throne shall go to Banquo’s descendants since he himself is childless. Campbell says in Shakespeare’s Tragic Heroes, Slaves of Passion, “At the very moment when the deed is committed, the wine of life is indeed drawn, and fear takes complete possession of the quality of souls. From the murder of Duncan onward, it is not ambition but fear that terrorizes its victims into action.”¹⁰ Motivated by fear and the pressing need of greater safety, Macbeth plans more murder. But now unlike before he rarely needs his wife’s help, and she takes little interest in another murder when she hears his intention. Her reaction is only “What’s to be done?”, though Macbeth says, “. . . but hold thee still:/ Things had begun make strong themselves by ill:” (III, ii, 1.54-5). Their strong cooperation in the killing of the king is the beginning of their separation and loss of glory, peace, and happiness.

Macbeth tries to kill his fear by having Banquo and his son, Fleance, put to death, but Fleance escapes, and this is the crucial turning point of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s tragic separation. The increasing fear makes Macbeth lose his self-control and contributes to his self-destruction. In the emergency of the banquet scene, Lady Macbeth makes a desperate effort by getting back her courage so that she may save her husband at least from an open disclosure. She makes her final effort to help her husband, but in this last deed we find that all of her ambitions for her husband have left her. She scolds her husband during the banquet scene, but it shows tenderness in her scolding. When Macbeth speaks of new deeds of blood, how greatly he has changed: “Strange things I have in

head that will to hand, / Which must be acted ere they may be scanned." (III, iv, 1.139-40), and "We are yet but young in deed." (III, iv, 1.144). Quoting Bradley's passages in Shakespearean Tragedy, "His imagination will trouble him no more,"¹¹ and "The whole flood of evil in his nature is now let loose."¹² Lady Macbeth seems to sicken at his bloody thought, and recognizing his horrible change, her conscience awakes and her remorse of what she has done to her husband begins to pierce her heart. Bradley also says that "there is a deep pathos in that answer which tells at once of her care for him and of the misery she herself silently endured"¹³ in regard to the scene of "You lack the season of all natures, sleep." (III, iv, 1.141). But after this she takes no part in her husband's deeds. The bond between them slackens and they perish. They believed that they understood each other, but in fact they did not. Macbeth did not know that his wife's momentary courage and strong will at the death of Duncan would be overcome by her good nature. Nor did she know that she would lose her courage. Lady Macbeth had no idea that her husband's weakness of over imagination would arouse the fear in him which would make him bold and heartless.

Macbeth himself goes to see the Witches and does not have any suspicion of their advice. Macbeth's imagination no longer prevents him from carrying out his evil deeds. He has lost all honour and fear of justice. All that remains is cruel courage and evil deeds. He murders Macduff's wife and children in a fit of anger: "This deed I'll do before this purpose cool:/ But no more sights!—" (IV, i, 1.154-5). The crueler Macbeth becomes in order to secure the future, the deeper the remorse pierces Lady Macbeth. She feels guiltier than her husband, because she urged him into the first crime, which she has realized is the cause of his destruction. Her heart is full of the gasliness of the past and at last she loses her senses. Her piteous agony of remorse is seen in the sleep-walking scene:

The Thane of Fife had a wife.
Where is she now? What, will these hands ne'er be
clean? No more o' that, my lord, no more o' that!
You mar all with this starting.

(V, i, 1.44-7)

Now Macbeth feels isolated, because his wife is mentally sick but also because he loses his loyal thanes and he is dreaded by everybody about him owing to his tyranny. His piteous despair of life is shown in the following lines:

I have lived long enough. My way of life
Is fall'n into the sear, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have . . .

(V, ii, 1.22-6)

Even his love for his wife is dulled and his discussion of her illness sounds cool and scornful, but in reality this rebuking of his wife is a reflection of his discontentment with his own life and his achievements. When he hears of his wife's death, his reason for living is gone and his life becomes meaningless: "Out, out, brief candle!/ Life's but a walking shadow, . . . It is a tale/ Told by a idiot, full of sound and fury,/ Signifying nothing." (V, v, 1.23-8)

Lady Macbeth's overwhelming ambition for her husband drives her to conspire to commit a murder and another spare of the momentary impulse enables her to rid herself of her guilt by putting end to her life. Macbeth's despair turns to fury and he fights desperately to deny his fear in the closing battle scene. With the lost of his friends and wife, Macbeth loses self-confidence in himself but nevertheless still relies on the Witches' prophecies: ". . . Laugh to scorn/ The pow'r of man, for none of woman born/ Shall harm Macbeth." (VI, i, 1.79-81) and "Macbeth shall never vanquished be until/ Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill/ Shall come against him." (VI, i, 1.92-4). When he finds that the Witches' prophecies were deceitful, he loses all faith in himself and death creates little fear in him. At the last moment he recovers something of his old brave spirit, but that is his last courage as a soldier and finally he dies completely isolated and despaired.

The ideal husband and wife, who have shown love and respect for each other have used their perfect cooperation for an evil purpose—their own selfish ambition. Their perfect cooperation enables them to murder Duncan. And with the completion of this deed, Lady Macbeth becomes remorseful and loses courage, whereas Macbeth gains strength from the treacherous deed and no longer needs his wife's support in the future murder. One spouse becomes stronger while the other weakens. Their perfect cooperation led to the successful murdering of Duncan, but it is the murdering of Duncan that causes their separation and destruction. When we hear Macbeth say "She should have died hereafter" (V, v, 1.17), it cannot fail to stir our pity for that perfect husband and wife, however cruel their deed may have been. About the contrasted effects of the crime on two characters in Shakespeare's Macbeth, Brooke says:

The reason of this astonishing change in the feeling and action of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, both moving in an opposite direction to that in which they moved before the murder, may be found in a general difference between man and woman; a sex-difference which, always existing in ordinary life, does not plainly appear until they are placed together in extraordinary circumstances, such as a sudden temptation or a strong impulse of passion.¹⁴

Notes

- 1 Levin Ludwig Schücking, "The Baroque Characters of the Elizabethan Tragic Hero", Annual Shakespeare Lecture, (London: British Academy, 1939), p.14.
- 2 Hardin Craig, (Columbia, Missouri: Lucas Brothers Publishers, 1949), p.56.
- 3 A. C. Bradley, Shakespearean Tragedy, Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, (London: Macmillan, 1932), p.341.
- 4 Craig, Opcit., p.257.
- 5 Bradley, Opcit., p.352.
- 6 Stopford A. Brooke, On Ten Plays of Shakespeare, (London: Achibald Constable and Company, 1905), p.199.
- 7 Ibid., p.205.
- 8 Ibid., p.212.
- 9 Ibid., p.213.
- 10 Lily B. Campbell, (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1952), p.223.
- 11 Bradley, Opcit., p.363.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid., p.376.
- 14 Brooke, Opcit., p.212.

Bibliography

The Primary Source

The Complete Signet Classic Shakespeare, new york: Harcourt Brace Jovanovick, 1972

The Secondary Sources

- Bradley, A. C. Shakespearean Tragedy, Lectures on Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, Macbeth, London: Macmillan, 1932.
- Brooke, A. Stopford. On Ten Plays of Shakespeare. London: Achibald Constable and Company, 1905.
- Campbell, Lily B. Shakespeare's Tragic Heroes, Slaves of Passion. New York: Barnes & Noble, 1952.
- Chambers, E.K. Shakespeare: A Survey. New York: Hill and Wang, 1958.
- Craig, Hardin. An Interpretation of Shakespeare. Columbia, Missouri: Lucas Brothers Publishers, 1949.
- Nicoll, Allardyce. ed. Shakespeare Survey. vol. 19. Cambridge: The University Press, 1970.
- Schücking, Levin Ludwig. "The Baroque Characters of the Elizabethan Tragic Hero" Annual Shakespeare Lecture. London: British Academy, 1939.