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## Depiction of Personal Power through Language in William Shakespeare's Macbeth

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### Abstract:

*The first most obvious term associated with Macbeth is vaulting ambition. The play on power and the abuse of it has been analysed at several levels. What has probably not looked into its deserving attention is the use of language to depict that power. It is the language that holds the ultimate power to create or destroy in the play. It is potent. Almost tangible in its nature and brings about drastic changes in the attitude of the characters it touches. Power here can be analysed from two points of view; power at the physical level-dealing with strength, dominance and aggression; power at the personal level-strains in relationships, emotions, family roles and their struggles (Theilacker 1).*

*Michael Foucault, the French postmodernist, said that "power is everywhere" and "comes from everywhere". Therefore power just isn't about what an individual holds in terms of physicality or a position. It is quite complex in its nature and has a lot of layers. Most of these layers build up to an individual's realization of how much power he holds in the society at large. It is a complex relationship that humans have. This paper is an attempt to look into this power through the play's figurative language and explore how personal power or*

*powerlessness affects the characters at large. The effect can be analyzed through the rise and fall of their language patterns.*

**Key words:** Power, Ambition, Language, Gender, Personal

## **PERSONAL POWER AND LANGUAGE**

Power is a supremely subjective term. What may tend to award unlimited power to one may not be as exciting to the other. In this context, it is extremely crucial to understand that the definition of power therefore varies from person to person. Personal power is not a universal definition of control or authority. It only displays one's perspective on the kind of dominance s/he enjoys and perhaps even abuses.

The first thing I wish to establish here is Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's definition of power as two separate individuals. Strangely (rather intentionally), the couple is tied by one common concept of power and that is the throne. They define absolute power as ruling. It's only that Macbeth isn't too sure initially if he wants to tread on that horrendous path to attain absolute power. Lady Macbeth, on the other hand, couldn't have been more "foul" and shrewd to achieve that goal. Hence, the first relationship that must be put under scrutiny in the play is theirs.

When Macbeth encounters the three witches he is immediately encouraged to think of himself as the natural successor to the throne. A moment that begins with disbelief and disgust (looking at the witches) immediately converts into a belief in destiny when he is awarded with the title of the Thane of Cawdor. What we get next is an array of soliloquies that represent his state of mind. From sounding like a ruthless assassin to a loyal server of the king, Macbeth is literally torn between what he wants and whether he must act on it or not. His definition of personal power is quite clear early on in the play, but what takes the story forward is the anticipation of

whether he will take the ultimate brutal step to acquire the throne. Take one of his most muddled soliloquies for example "If 'twere done...To our own lips" (Shakespeare Act I, Scene vii, ll. 1-12), it's clear that the protagonist is using language in order to sort out the complexities of his thoughts. His words do not nail down single ideas, but set up echoes and reverberations in which meaning slips away from the speaker, or returns in new and unwelcome forms (Mangan 194). Language in this speech is speaking Macbeth (Mangan 194).

Language of the soliloquy clearly depicts his absolute lust for power on one hand and his conditional state of mind on the other. He is consistent use of the word "if" indicates how he is seriously contemplating murder but isn't ultimately committing to anything for the moment. In his mind the distorted images and disintegration is clear through language. He is obsessed with the idea of gaining the ultimate power, but wants to do it without facing the consequences. As the soliloquy progresses we find images of power, violence, innocence, vulnerability and indecision all interwoven with each other.

On the other hand, Lady Macbeth is thoroughly aware of her husband's nature and knows he is "too full of the milk of human kindness" (Shakespeare Act I, Scene v) to act on the matter. Her call on spirits to "unsex her" is a classic example of not only her perception of physical power, but also how she feels weak at the physical level because she is a woman. Personally, she doesn't consider herself to be fit enough to carry out the act because of that. It is natural therefore that she questions Macbeth's manhood and tries to manipulate his idea of manliness in order to get him to achieve what both of them have been eyeing at. As if that isn't enough, her language is loaded with images of sacrilege after she has narrowed-down the definition of manhood for her own rhetorical purposes (Mangan 199).

I have given suck, and know  
How tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me:

I would, while it was smiling in my face,  
Have pluck'd my nipple from his boneless gums,  
And dash'd the brains out, had I so sworn,  
As you have done to this. (Shakespeare Act I, Scene vii, ll. 54-59)

This give and take on words and arguments continues until they reach to a final conclusion. One key thing to observe in the relationship of this couple is that their language and state of mind changes when they are with each other. Macbeth is confused and almost torn between his conscience and his lust for power when he alone debating between these two. The moment Lady Macbeth enters the scene, he seems unwittingly confident about his decisions. That's the kind of power she provides him. She manipulates him for sure, but at the probable unconscious level, he is manipulating her too.

What is important to notice about Lady Macbeth's relationship with Macbeth is only fully explored until the end of Duncan, may be also until the murder of Banquo (if one wants to take it further). After that she starts fading in the background as Macbeth dominates every major scene of the play. Her world already falls apart bit by bit after the murder of Duncan. Her madness signifies the disintegration and meaninglessness of the power that was now theirs and yet distant. The play is a representation of living and coping with emotional stress born out of guilt of the evil. While Lady Macbeth cracks under the pressure and dies eventually, Macbeth doesn't lose his sanity. Power has destroyed him and its effect can be found in his final soliloquy which is terrifyingly potent. In a sense Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are two twisted individuals who hail from two different schools of thought with a common desire for power. In their rise and eventual fall, they still stand by each other, never blaming or complaining, but being out run by fate.

This brings me to analyze fate and Macbeth's relationship with the other characters in context. Language is

the key here. Macbeth's desires are represented not only by him and his wife, but by the witches as well. Their function is to liberate his desires in the first place, by giving them a name (Mangan 202). The witches can either be seen as propellers of the action Macbeth wishes to execute; as deadly creatures or as messengers of his eventual fate. Why fate is associated with power and powerless all at once is because of the language of the witches and the subsequent interpretation of their words by the rest of the characters. This happens because of the appearances and the interpretations based on those.

Since the entry of the witches "Fair is foul, Foul is fair", we are thrown into a world where reason can fail and language can get tipsy at any given point. If one was to notice Macbeth's language after meeting the witches it is quite evident that words have begun to fail him and there is going to be linguistic crisis that probably all characters (especially Macbeth) are going to face later on. Initially both Macbeth and Banquo try to understand and analyze the entire speech of the witches. But later, Macbeth begins to interpret their words according to his convenience (Kesur 3). This is one of the primary causes for chaos. Because what seems to promise power to Macbeth in words hasn't been understood in its full extent.

Since Macbeth and his wife are childless, he begins to rule out every possibility of "other heirs" having a chance at the throne; all because of the prophecy that he interpreted his own way.

Ay, in the catalogue ye go for men;  
As hounds, and greyhounds, mongrels, spaniels, curs,  
Shoughs, water-rugs, and demi-wolves, are clept  
All by the name of dogs...  
Now, if you have a station in the file,  
Not I'th' worst rank of manhood, say't.  
(Shakespeare Act III, Scene I, ll. 91-94, 101-102)

Macbeth here uses the same technique of using "manliness" in order to instigate action against Banquo the way his wife used

one to kill Duncan. The childless Macbeth now is on a rampage to kill children. This is his attempt to fight the future and alter the fate that he has interpreted in the words of the witches. After consuming power, this is his attempt to conserve it. It begins with the murder of Banquo since the witches prophesied his "seed" as the heir to the throne. His son Fleance escapes. Macbeth who is also loaded by immense guilt sees Banquo's ghost haunting him at the banquet. This still doesn't deter him from murdering Lady Macduff and her son. As if this wasn't enough, Siward loses his life too! From a want for absolute power, the plot of the play shifts to all the means used to retain it. Slippery language and convenient interpretation is the only reason most of this happens. Take another prophecy of the witches for example.

"None of woman born Shall harm Macbeth...Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be, until Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill Shall come against him." (Act IV, Scene i, ll. 81-83, 91-95) Macbeth lays his trust in the prophecy and believes that he is imperishable. The slippery prophecy given by two apparitions evades him and he realizes the full extent of their meaning when he meets his end. Macbeth only chooses to focus on the prophecy by the second apparition which talks about his power and future since there is no man born without a woman. It is exactly because of the nature of his "unnatural birth" that Macduff is an exception to this prophecy. It's such an irony that Macbeth who feared being taken over by heirs met his end with the children. Malcolm, Donalbain, Fleance and ultimately Macduff all joined hands into bringing an end to him.

Fate that empowered Macbeth in the beginning of the play brought an end to his reign.

## **CONCLUSION**

Just like there are bold strokes of personal power and its influence on several characters in the play, similarly, physical

power is another arena that can be explored by aspiring scholars. The play works at the naturalistic and allegorical level. While the naturalistic side focuses on several supernatural elements associated with the play; I have looked into the allegorical perspective.

The psychological pressure, self doubt, nervousness and the overwhelming guilt are the four pillars at the allegorical level of the play. Naturally relationships play the most important role in this zone. While characters inspire and motivate each other (even if it is to do wrong), they don't take minutes to crumble the other human's sense of being. While Lady Macbeth held the kind of personal power that she exhibited towards Macbeth to encourage him to kill Duncan, she did it by questioning and taking a dig at his manhood off and on. Personal power also provides a mirror into the psychosis of each character in the play. Whatever they may seem like on the outside, it is what they are to each other within closed doors matters. Macbeth's soliloquies are poignant like that. They expose his most honest dreams and his fears in the mode to achieve them. It is this fear that is then thrown out by Lady Macbeth, for the time being, to resurrect Macbeth's vaulting ambition. The only way influence works is through language. And then it is this language that leads to his downfall when he manages to make sense out of the words of the witches in his own way. The language that once gave him promise for the future and allowed Lady Macbeth to influence him also brings down our tragic hero.

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