

## Macbeth's Fear of Fear

In his report of Macbeth's victory over the rebels, a sergeant emphasizes Macbeth's courage. Even when it looks like Fortune is smiling on the enemy, "brave Macbeth-- well he deserves that name-- / Disdaining Fortune" (1.2.16-17) plunges fearlessly into battle and wins the victory.

---

Just after Macbeth hears the witches' prophecies, Ross and Angus tell him that he has been named Thane of Cawdor. Upon hearing this, Macbeth goes into a trance-like state as he tries to sort things out. He tells himself that the witches' prophecies can't be bad, because they have foretold a truth. On the other hand, if the witches' prophecies are good, he asks himself, "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?" (1.3.134-137). "Suggestion" means "temptation," so Macbeth is asking himself why he feels himself giving into temptation, especially a temptation that makes his heart race and his hair stand on end. He goes on to reflect that "Present fears / Are less than horrible imaginings" (1.3.1137-38). He means that the fear that you feel in the face of actual danger is not nearly so bad as the fear of imagined danger. Apparently he's trying to talk himself into believing that the murder which he is tempted to do can't possibly be as frightening as he now feels it is.

---

When King Duncan announces that Malcolm is heir to the throne, Macbeth sees that as a roadblock, then says to the heavens, "Stars, 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" (1.4.50-53). He's thinking about committing murder. He wants his own eye to blind itself ("wink") while he's doing it, but he wants it done, even if his eye will be afraid to look at it afterwards. It doesn't appear that he's afraid of getting caught and being punished. His fear of murder seems to be like the fear of the sight of blood -- irrational and instinctual.

---

When she receives Macbeth's letter about the witches' prophecies, Lady Macbeth says to her absent husband, "Thou wouldst be great; / Art not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it" (1.5.18-20). She, like the witches, believes that foul is fair. Ambition "should" be accompanied by "illness." Yet she does not believe that Macbeth is really good. She says that he "wouldst not play false, / And yet wouldst

*wrongly win" (1.5.21-22)*. In her view, he's something of a coward, because he has that within him that tells him what he must do if he is to have the throne, but he's afraid to do it. She tells her absent husband that he should hurry home so that she can *"chastise with the valour of my tongue / All that impedes thee from the golden round" (1.5.27-28)*. In other words, she plans to nag him until he's ashamed of himself for being afraid to be bad. After all, it's only that fear that's keeping him from wearing the crown.

---

In the midst of a feast that he's giving for King Duncan, Macbeth steps aside to think about the murder he's planning. He says to himself, *"If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well / It were done quickly (1.7.1-2)*. That is, if everything could be over with as soon as Duncan is killed, then it would be best for Macbeth to kill him quickly. If only, Macbeth thinks, the assassination could be *"the be-all and the end-all--here / But here, upon this bank and shoal of time, / We'd jump the life to come" (1.7.5-7)*. Where Macbeth says "but here," we would say "just here" or "only here." In other words, Macbeth knows that he can get away with murder only here on earth. In the afterlife he will certainly be punished. He also knows that the afterlife is very long; it's like a boundless ocean, and our life is only a "bank or shoal" on the edge of that ocean. Nevertheless, if one murder could be the last murder, he would take his chances with the afterlife.

The problem is, it's not very likely to be "done when 'tis done," and Macbeth knows this, too. He knows that--as we say--what goes around comes around, that acts of violence are *"Bloody instructions, which, being taught, return / To plague the inventor" (1.7.9-10)*. Of course, Macbeth has good reason to be afraid. In a warrior society such as his, there would be plenty of kith and kin eager to avenge the murder of any man, even if he weren't a king.

To put it bluntly, Macbeth thinks that he's likely to get caught, and he's about to chicken out. Only at this point does he start thinking of other reasons that he shouldn't kill his king, and when his wife comes looking for him, he tells her he's decided not to do it. She responds by telling him that if he's going to go back on his word, he doesn't really love her, and he's a coward, no better than the *"poor cat i' the adage" (1.7.45)*, who wants a fish, but doesn't want to get its feet wet.

Macbeth tries to defend himself by saying, *"I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none" (1.7.46-47)*. Macbeth also asks what will happen if they fail, and his wife pooh-poohs the very idea, exclaiming, *"We fail! / But screw your courage to the sticking-place, / And we'll not fail" (1.7.61)*. She wins the argument.

---

After Macbeth murders King Duncan, he comes back to his wife with the bloody daggers in his bloody hands. She tells him that he must return and place the daggers with the King's grooms. Macbeth, however, is paralyzed with the horror of what he has done. He says, "I'll go no more: / I am afraid to think what I have done; / Look on't again I dare not" (2.2.47-49). This makes Lady Macbeth scornful of her husband. She takes the daggers from him and tells him that it's childish to be afraid of the sleeping or the dead. And she's not afraid of blood, either. She says, "If he [King Duncan] do bleed, / I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal / For it must seem their guilt" (2.2.52-54). With these bitter words, she goes to finish her husband's job for him.

When Lady Macbeth returns, she comments, "My hands are of your colour; but I shame / To wear a heart so white" (2.2.61-62). She means that her hands are red, too (because she has been busy smearing the King's blood on the grooms), but that she would be ashamed to have a heart as white as Macbeth's. A white heart is white because it has no blood, and the person with a white heart is a coward.

---

After Macduff discovers the body of King Duncan, he rushes out to announce the horror, and Macbeth rushes up to the king's chamber and kills the sleeping grooms. When Macduff asks him why he killed the grooms, Macbeth replies, "Who could refrain, / That had a heart to love, and in that heart / Courage to make's love known?" (2.3.116-118). No one asks just how much courage it takes to kill two defenseless men.

---

After he has murdered King Duncan and become king himself, Macbeth has a soliloquy in which he reveals that being king isn't enough; he needs to feel safe in the position, and he has reasons to fear Banquo: "To be thus is nothing; / But to be safely thus.-Our fears in Banquo / Stick deep" (3.1.47-49). He doesn't mention what we might think is the obvious reason for fearing Banquo—that Banquo heard the witches' prophecy and could suspect Macbeth of murder. He seems to fear Banquo on general grounds, because Banquo has "royalty of nature" (3.1.49), and courage, and wisdom. Macbeth says of Banquo, "under him, / My Genius is rebuked" (3.1.54-55). A man's "Genius" is his guardian spirit, but Macbeth isn't being particularly mystic here. He feels that Banquo is naturally superior to him, and just being near Banquo makes Macbeth feel ashamed of himself. For example, he recalls, Banquo defied the witches

and challenged them to speak to him. (In contrast, we should remember, the witches' prophecy put Macbeth into a kind of trance, a reverie of ambition and murder.)

---

After he has murdered King Duncan and become king, Macbeth arranges for the murder of Banquo, just to be safe. He says that he would rather see *"the frame of things disjoint [fall apart], both the worlds [heaven and earth] suffer"* (3.2.16), than continue to *"eat our meal in fear and sleep / In the affliction of these terrible dreams / That shake us nightly"* (3.2.17-19).

---

When Banquo's bloody ghost appears at Macbeth's royal banquet, Macbeth panics. He stares and speaks to the ghost, which no one else can see. His wife takes him aside, and asks, *"Are you a man?"* (3.4.57). He answers, *"Ay, and a bold one, that dare look on that / Which might appall the devil"* (3.4.58-59). His wife is not impressed. She exclaims sarcastically, *"O proper stuff!"* Then she tells him that *"This is the very painting of your fear: / This is the air-drawn dagger which, you said, / Led you to Duncan"* (3.4.59-62). She also tells him that he's making ridiculous faces, so that he reminds her of a woman telling a scary story that she heard from her grandmother. His fear is shameful because, *"When all's done, / You look but on a stool"* (3.4.66-67)

When the ghost appears again, Macbeth is determined to face it down. He tells it that he dares to do anything a man can do. He would not tremble if the Ghost should take the shape of a terrible beast. *"Or be alive again, / And dare me to the desert with thy sword; / If trembling I inhabit then, protest me / The baby of a girl"* (3.4.102-105). A "desert" doesn't have to have sand in it; it's just any deserted place where they could be alone and fight man to man. "Protest" means "proclaim," and "if trembling I inhabit" means "if I live inside a trembling body." Macbeth is daring the Ghost to come alive and fight. If it does, and Macbeth shows fear, then it can tell the world that Macbeth is a little doll-baby.

Macbeth's defiance seems to work, because the ghost leaves. Using the word "so" as we do when we say "so much for that," Macbeth expresses his satisfaction and asks his guests to stay seated: *"Why, so: being gone, / I am a man again. Pray you, sit still"* (3.4.106-107). But then, not realizing that he was the only one who saw the ghost, he tells his guests that he's starting to question himself because *"you can behold such sights, / And keep the natural ruby of your cheeks, / When mine is blanched with fear"* (3.4.113-115). He thinks that anyone would be frightened by such a sight, and he's wondering why he's the only one who feels fear. All of this just creates more

amazement in his guests, and Lady Macbeth gets them out of the room as quickly as she can, before they can ask too many questions.

---

Just before Macbeth goes to visit the witches, Hecate orders them to prepare to create illusions that will make Macbeth "spurn fate, scorn death, and bear / His hopes 'bove wisdom, grace and fear" (3.5.30-31). Hecate knows that fear is your friend, and that its opposite is dangerous, for "security / Is mortals' chiefest enemy" (3.5.32-33).

---

When the witches present the apparitions to Macbeth, it is their intention to lure him into the idea that he has nothing to fear. The first apparition cries "Macbeth! Macbeth! Macbeth! beware Macduff; / Beware the thane of Fife" (4.1.71-72). This is exactly what Macbeth was thinking even before he saw the apparition, but the second apparition tells him to "Be bloody, bold, and resolute; laugh to scorn / The power of man, for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" (4.1.81). Upon hearing this, Macbeth reasons that if "none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth," then he doesn't need to "beware Macduff." "Then live, Macduff," Macbeth says to himself, "what need I fear of thee?" (4.1.82). But in the next breath he changes his tune, saying, "yet I'll make assurance double sure, / And take a bond of fate: thou shalt not live; / That I may tell pale-hearted fear it lies" (4.1.83-85). Macbeth is going to murder Macduff, to make sure that fate keeps its promises. That way he can prove that he's not afraid of either fate or Macduff.

---

As Macbeth sits in the royal castle awaiting the battle with Malcolm's forces, he tries to persuade himself that he is not afraid. He swears that "Till Birnam wood remove to Dunsinane, / I cannot taint with fear" (5.3.2-3). And he says he's not afraid of Malcolm, either, because Malcolm is a boy who was born of woman. Believing himself protected by the witches' prophecies, Macbeth declares, "The mind I sway by [rule myself by] and the heart I bear / Shall never sag with doubt nor shake with fear" (5.3.9-10).

Then, when a frightened servant brings news of the approach of an army of ten thousand, Macbeth calls him names, and mocks him, and also says something revealing: "Death of thy soul! those linen cheeks of thine / Are counsellors to fear" (5.3.16-17). A counsellor is someone who gives advice, so "counsellors to fear" would

tell someone to be afraid. Macbeth feels that the boy's pale cheeks are telling him that he, too, should be afraid, and Macbeth is determined to not feel fear.

At the end of the scene, Macbeth is still telling himself that he is not afraid. He puts on his armor and rushes out, saying "I will not be afraid of death and bane, / Till Birnam forest come to Dunsinane" (5.3.59-60).

---

As the English and Scottish forces approach Dunsinane, Macbeth declares that the castle can withstand any siege, but his boasting is interrupted by "A cry of women within" (5.5.7, s.d.). While Seyton goes to investigate the noise, Macbeth congratulates himself on his own savageness, saying, "I have almost forgot the taste of fears" (5.5.9). There was a time, he says, when such a shriek in the night would have given him the chills and when a story of horror would have made his hair stand on end. But now, "I have supp'd full with horrors; / Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts, / Cannot once start [scare] me" (5.5.13-15).

However, when he receives the news that Birnam wood is moving, he seems to feel his courage waning. He says, "I pull in resolution, and begin / To doubt the equivocation of the fiend / That lies like truth" (5.5.42-44). However it's too late for him to do anything but fight on.

---

When Malcolm's forces attack, Macbeth's soldiers all switch sides as soon as they get a chance, and Macbeth has to fight alone. His only hope is the prophecy of the second apparition, so he says to himself, "What's he / That was not born of woman? Such a one / Am I to fear, or none" (5.7.2-4). At this point Young Siward enters, and asks Macbeth his name. Macbeth tells the boy that he doesn't really want to hear his name, because it will make him afraid. This show of arrogance, however, doesn't cow Young Siward, and they fight. Macbeth kills the boy, and exults in his own invulnerability: "Thou wast born of woman / But swords I smile at, weapons laugh to scorn, / Brandish'd by man that's of a woman born" (5.7.11-13).

---

In the last scene of the play, Macbeth boasts to Macduff, "I bear a charmed life, which must not yield, / To one of woman born" (5.8.12-13). Macduff replies, "Despair thy charm / And let the angel whom thou still hast served / Tell thee, Macduff was from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd" (5.8.16-19). Hearing this, Macbeth curses

Macduff, because what he has said has *"cow'd my better part of man"* (5.8.18). After this confession of fear, Macbeth curses the fiends who have lied to him and tells Macduff that he won't fight him. Macduff, however, doesn't give him much of a choice. He says, *"Then yield thee, coward, / And live to be the show and gaze o' the time"* (5.8.23-24). In other words, if Macbeth doesn't fight, he'll be taken captive and paraded around, so that everyone can jeer at the cowardly tyrant. Given this alternative, Macbeth chooses to fight.