Fear and Obsession in Macbeth

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“Good sir, why do you start, and seem to fear Things that do sound fair?”

Is it fear that makes man act to define his destiny or is it the act that makes man fear to define his destiny? Are the images in the conscience of man a reflection of his own fears in an unforeseen destiny or are images revelations of his desires in seeking his coveted fortune? In Macbeth, Shakespeare portrays two characters so filled with inner and external fears. Their colliding fears and acts outline their poignant moral corruption.

Macbeth’s fear makes him act to define his destiny. And in choosing an act, he fears the defining consequence of his destiny. He sees images which are musings of his very own fears of the present and the future. Images of the meditations in his desires to be what he fantasizes.

Macbeth’s first line, “So foul and fair a day I have not seen.” designates the moral conflict within himself - to be foul or to be fair in his intentions. The ambivalence in his heart creates the roots of his fear for the seen and the unforeseen. He dismisses his ambition, “Stands not within the prospect of belief,”. The denial of the prospect of achieving the crown only induces him to delirious heights and hostility. An obsession leading him to think of murdering Duncan himself.

—25—
"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 horrible imaginings  
My thought, whose murther yet is but fantastical,  
Shakes so my single state of man that function  
Is smother'd in surmise, and nothing is,  
But what is not."

His "present fears" nor his "horrible imaginings" did not finish his vicious fantasies. "Macbeth recognizes man's uncertain fear of a life beyond and of being asked to account his actions as a powerful impediment when it comes to making moral decisions." (Dieter Mehl) He is perplexed by the new title and turns fatalistic.

"Come what come may,  
Time, and the hour, runs through the roughest day."

In one situation however, he finds himself in quandary and conflict. He struggles with his desires and rationality. He thinks that if good fate is on his side, the crown will be his even without an evil act.

"If chance will have me king, why chance may crown me,  
Without my stir."

The turn of events makes him lose again that rationality and goodness. Macbeth's fear isn't focused now on the catastrophe the murder may bring him. His
fear at this moment is in failing to attain the prophecy and thus losing the chance to be king. He is at this point blinded by the reality of becoming Thane of Cawdor. The next act is to be king. There is a crucial need for him to be decisive before Malcolm is proclaimed heir to the throne. If Malcolm becomes king, he will lose his chance to be one. Malcolm’s appointment will move him a step behind the throne. His choice is to leap beyond Malcolm. The thought of getting the crown the fastest and easiest way was to murder Duncan. The act he chooses however floods him with fear. He struggles with himself. His rationality is challenged and so is his soul. But at this moment no matter what his fears are, he must act. His rationality is overwhelmed by his obsessive fantasies. He asks for darkness to shroud the denouement of his feat.

“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’s done to see.”

His eyes fear the execution of the act and it’s final scene. Here springs the relationship of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth with darkness. They’ve made a transaction with darkness for armor yet ironically it becomes their fear.

He discloses in his letter to Lady Macbeth that he “burn’d in desire” to know more about the prophecy. He reassures himself of his ambition by revealing his fanciful illusions to Lady Macbeth. He sends this message to his “dearest partner of greatness”. He emphasizes to “Lay it in her heart.” And by telling his wife, he gathers more strength. He knows she will be full of encouragement
and valor. It slightly diminishes his fear to tell his wife.

Upon reading Macbeth’s letter, Lady Macbeth relishes on the thought of being queen. She participates in the mirage. The same thought runs through her mind. She has laid the news in her heart. She must assume that role of being a “partner of greatness” and to greatness. She fears however that her husband’s nature will fail them. Her husband’s flaw weakens his conviction and passion. A flaw she recognizes as an impediment to the royal hope she strongly wants to achieve. Her obsession reveals itself. Thus the need to outweigh her husband’s fault.

“Yet I do fear thy nature.
It is too full o’th’ milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great,
Art not without ambition”

She determines to use all words to prevail and manipulate him to make quick the fulfillment of the prophecy. In two different places they stand with the same fear, fantasy and thought. Both are dominated by their ruthless and contemptuous lust for glory. The only course was to do “illness”.

“The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly,
“That woulds’t thou holily; wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win. Thou’dst have, great Glamis,
That which cries “Thus thou must do’ if thou

—28—
have it,
And that which rather thou dost fear to do
Than wishes should be undone. Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear
And chastise with valour of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have the crown withal.

Lady Macbeth is thrown in bizarre and savage eccentricism. She fears that her being a woman will halt the evil volition of her intentions. She divulges in her soliloquy her aim to commit the act. Her seeming resoluteness she feels is threatened by her own femininity. She further fears her own compassion and frailty will make her shrink. At this point she is soaked by lechery yet fears her own self. It is for this reason that she begs for spirits to transform her. Her speech gives a piercing description of her putrid qualities. She fears her husband’s cautions and so she soars in her dark ecstasy with her physical attributes, nature, night and hell. These transports she plays with are her very own fears.

"Come you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
That no compunctions 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 murth’ring ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on Nature's mischief! Come, thick Night,
And pall thee in dunnet smoke of Hell,
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes,
Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark,
To cry, "Hold, hold!"

Lady Macbeth advises Macbeth to look like "the
innocent flower, But be the serpent under't." She has
made plans in her mind on how to conduct the crime.
She shows influence on the plot and manages to urge
Macbeth to the whole affair. Again, she sees the
hesitation in Macbeth. Thus she impressively presents
herself and resolutely declares her plot.

"Only look up clear;
To alter favour is to fear.
Leave all the rest to me."

Macbeth's ponders deeper into his plans. This
time the fear of nemesis chokes him. He wishes that
whatever he does, ends there. He is nonsensical in his
argument. He fears that in time his act may be
discovered yet wish that justice and judgment have no
role to play. The poetry of his disorientation yields him
to recall the trust, virtues of the king. He debates with
himself. He tells Lady Macbeth, "We will proceed no
further in this business." His wife's fear reveals itself
once more inspite of her earlier bold assurances. She is
resolved and convicted to prevail on his "milk of human
kindness".

"Was the hope drunk,

—30—
Wherein you dress'd yourself? Hath it slept since?
And wakes it now to look so green, and pale,
And what id did so freely? From this time,
Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard
To be the same in thine own act and valour
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,
And live a coward in thine own esteem?
Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would,'
Like the poor cat i' the adage.

She is brutish in her persuasion. Comparative and erotic
in her reasons in love, valour, desire, ornament and self
assertion. Macbeth fears her reasons and schemes. He
asks, "If we should fail? Lady Macbeth viciously asserts
herself and rectifies his doubts.

Their dialogue divulge their desolated life.
Shakespeare intricately weaves their being childless to
symbolize the ravaged life of the two characters. This
deprivation wrings Lady Macbeth's loss of reverence for
life. This is most plain and clear when she uses in her
argument:

"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,"

Macbeth is convinced and chooses the "poison'd
chalice" for their own lips. Macbeth kills Duncan. His act
does not end there but goes further into senseless
manslaughter. Fear of being told and foiled.

Shakespeare shrouds his play with darkness, restless sleeps and tainted thoughts to show how fear defiles rationality. The couple’s definition of destiny is obscured by fog. Their senses are wrapped in filthy air.

The tragedy of Macbeth lies on an obsession. An “ornament” they fear they will never have. The desire that caused their own fears. Fear of each other and uneased by their weaknesses. The willful sensations explicitly show their excessive obsession. Their contemptuous act and impulsive obsessiveness are like lightning and thunder beaming yet short lived.