

A Comparison of Shakespeare's Use of Magic in Macbeth and the Tempest

I. Similarities and general differences

In these two plays Shakespeare presents a direct contrast in the way he explores man's relationship with God through his use of the supernatural. The two plays open in the same way. Both present magic as represented by and creating disorder in both the natural and human experience. The three witches indicate this in their first words:

"When shall we three meet again

In thunder, lightning or in rain?"

And in The Tempest a storm is indicated by the Bosun who says to Antonio:

"Keep your cabins: you do assist the storm" and soon after, "a plague upon this howling"

Macbeth's witches have used spells to make sure Macbeth and Banquo meet them in a dark wood and they use magic, temptation, trickery and illusion to create (or reflect) disorder in nature and a lack of self-control in the human characters. The first words Macbeth speak are

:

“So foul and fair a day I have not seen” as Macbeth asks the witches to stay and tell him more as if they are real even as they disappear. They have aroused his curiosity while Banquo asks if they have lost their reason...a far more balanced response to them.

Prospero creates confusion in man by creating a storm and by inference, uncertainty about where the passengers of the ship actually were physically and mentally.

In Act1 scene ii Ferdinand asks :*“where should this music be? I’th’air or th’earth?”* and in Act 2 scene i the actual nature of the island and the state of their clothing indicate the nobles are confused and disoriented as they hear different noises when they wake.

In both the idea of magic as being disorienting and unnatural is clearly understood by the audience. Mankind is disarmed and ready for reshaping by those who use magic to recreate the victims. However Macbeth’s magic brings deaths and the destruction of the relationship between man and God. In Act 2 scene ii Macbeth cannot say “amen” after the death of Duncan while Prospero’s moves towards showing man how to work together to build a better world and be closer to God. The wrongdoing is put right and allows love to happen.

In Macbeth the choices are always there to be made. Macbeth says just before the death of Duncan:

“We will proceed no further with this business”

but Macbeth is tempted through his own weakness and the urgings of his wife. Once on the path to evil, he must, as if trapped, move along a certain path which gets him further into evil, represented by the dagger he thinks he sees in Act2 scene i. It is this surrender of free will which is the vehicle for the evil and makes the decision to proceed even worse while the loss of free will. Prospero’s subjects lose free will by the magic but this is a vehicle for good and they had no choice in succumbing to the spell as Prospero uses Ariel to put a gentle spell of sleep on Antonio, Sebastian and Gonzales. When they wake up, Sebastian thinks he heard humming while Gonzalo thinks he heard *“a din to fright a monster’s ear”*. They didn’t have a choice as to what decisions to make so they are not responsible for the loss and fall under the spell of Prospero even before the storm, which he creates to “reel them in” and the disparity in what they imagine tells the audience the spell has taken. They rely on Prospero as man should trust in God (as they rely on the playwright to entertain and educate them).

However Prospero's purpose is to use man's innate goodness to create a path out of evil and into good and he restores the identity of each character without having destroyed it. In Act 2 scene i Gonzalo tells Antonio that

"It is foul weather in us all, good sir" and tells Sebastian he should forgive (a godly act) Antonio for taking Prospero's throne.

The witches plan is to use an innate piece of imperfection, ambition, to create a godless evil world. Prospero uses the innate moral conscience given by God to right wrongs.

From these openings, the nature and use of magic is very different. Having established that the plays open in "other worlds" outside the normal reality we live in daily, and that humans are needing guidance, Shakespeare takes the two plays in opposite directions to tell the same moral lesson.

II. Use of settings and colour

In Macbeth the main characters move from light into darkness. Macbeth's initial meeting with the supernatural is in shadows as Macbeth and Banquo move from the outdoor light after a battle into a deep wood. The witches cast a spell and Banquo asks how far it is to Forres...he is lost and on unsure ground. Fair is foul. From there the action takes place almost entirely in a dark stone castle at night, lit only with torches and candles. Lady Macbeth conjures up darkness:

"Come thick night,

And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell

That my keen knife see not the wound it makes

Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark"

creating a closed, quiet, senseless world, cut off from creativity and the ability to look outward as a social being. Throughout the play there are very few people in the castle (onstage) other than Macbeth and his wife. They seem imprisoned and alone in a place they

cannot escape. . Macbeth had his huge stone castle which he hardly ever leaves except to do battle or meet the witches while Prospero has his small cave and hardly ever goes into it, preferring to be out in the sparkling sun and sand.

In the Tempest the characters move from a dark storm to a sunlit island full of sounds, bright colours, imaginary beings which fill all the space in the scene and which are almost always moving, changing colour, flitting and flying about singing and chanting poetry. Caliban describes it as:

“The isle is full of noise

Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.

Sometimes a thousand twanging instruments

Will hum about mine ears” (Act2 scene iii)

Ariel sings her spells, sprites dance and there are sounds everywhere. Ariel’s song Act1 scene II reflects this. In Act 4 scene I there is a masque, a colourful spectacle of dance, song and drama within the play to joyously celebrate a betrothal, an event which marks an opening up of a new life together. All is upward and promising and delightfully fantastical. There are many creatures onstage at once, a diverse society all living together in harmony. This sets and continues the principle idea of the plays...that magic can be used for evil, to create and imprison people in darkness and dirt and result in disorder and Chaos, (the spell around the cauldron) or it can be used to lead people into using the full five senses, (all the potential a human is given by god), to find order and God’s light. Magic shows the potential way downwards into a hell or by revelation into greater self- knowledge and onto a godlier moral path which is the image of God and the prevention of Chaos. Both practitioners of magic create visions but the witches create one of death, the dagger and bloody bodies and frightening unnatural events (a moving wood), while the visions Prospero creates are of a bright open happy harmonious and constructive world for each of the characters.

III. Magic to define man's relationship with god

Macbeth meets his end in Act V, a satisfying end to someone who has dabbled in the black arts and because he was so weak, upset the natural order of things. Magic has brought death to Duncan, Lady Macbeth and Macbeth himself. Order is restored and a just recognition establishing a strong leadership is established.

Malcolm says:

"My thanes and kinsmen

Henceforth you shall be Earls, the first that Scotland

In such an honour named...

And what needful else

That calls upon us, by the grace of Grace

We will perform in measure, time and place."

This is the reasoned (measured) restoration of security and order all in God's kingdom which had been distorted. Likewise in the Tempest, magic brings the light of self-recognition, knowledge, a marriage, a secure future for Milan as God intended and freedom for the servant spirits. Prospero used magic just until his purpose was done. After Macbeth finishes, the evil is still "in the air" and ready to be used again whereas the magic in the Tempest is dismantled in Prospero's long speech Act 5 scene i

"Ye elves of hills, brooks, standing lakes and groves."

In this speech too the light of the sun/new day dissolves the

"darkness so their rising senses

Begin to chase the ignorant fumes that mantle

Their cleverest reason"

and we now rely on following God's example and our own true reality of intelligence without the need for the supernatural. Prospero's magic was there to correct a deviation from the right path and to lead man closer to god. The witches used it to lead away from god in

Macbeth. Prospero uses it to reveal truth and moral way whereas the witches use it to conceal the right moral way. The witches use magic to tempt and close off the senses by using weakness whereas Prospero uses it to open eyes and reveal god's creation in all its full sensual glory by using the intelligence and inherent, potential goodness in mankind. Prospero uses the assumed goodness in man as god's creation whereas the witches use imperfections and evil in man. Prospero uses magic to connect man and god where the witches use it to sever man and god.

IV. The Characters of the Practitioners of Magic

The character of evil in Macbeth is represented by three parts of the same evil with Lady Macbeth added later, almost as a Greek chorus. Lady Macbeth even chants her own spell and renounces her humanity .

"Come ye spirits

that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here

and fill me from the crown to the toe topfull

of direst cruelty"

and never leaves the darkness and stone "prison" again. She loses all her humanity and ability to use intellect and choice and eventually is so separated from God's moral goodness that she goes mad and commits suicide. Prospero, however, is alone in his planning and organizing of the other characters, almost as God's representative in a personal relationship. This is a direct reflection of the Protestant Reformation idea that a person's relationship with God should not be through levels of the clergy as the Catholic Church suggested but through a personal one-to-one with Him. It suggested the coming of the Age of Enlightenment and was a theme often occurring in Renaissance literature encouraging men to think for themselves. The witches unforgiving nature was to entangle Macbeth and his wife by playing on their weakness, ambition, which challenged God's order but Prospero's magic encouraged men to look at themselves honestly and make the right choice voluntarily. This is often shown in the character of Gonzalo. The witches confuse, tease and tempt Macbeth three

times but Prospero asks the castaways to open their eyes and follow the clear path to a proper personal relationship with god and his expectations by using experience and visions to learn (perhaps the visions were his own plays?) He then uses that Christian idea of forgiveness to heal enmity and restore order. Macbeth is led to a personal destruction in a repeatedly violent set of visions where the characters in the Tempest are led to redemption by gentle encouragement, natural conscience and honest self recognition.

V. Use of Props

The witches take their instruction without question from another one who is higher up the line of command whereas Prospero educates himself and uses his own human intellect to design the plot. He first conquers Sycorax, the witch and her son Caliban who remind us of Macbeth's witches and the concentration on the base, dirty, repulsive parts of creation, the Old Order. He calls Sycorax a blue eyes hag and Caliban speaks as the witches in Macbeth do:

"As wicked dew as o'er my mother brushed

With raven's feather from unwholesome fen

Drop on you both! A southwest wind blow on ye

And blister ye all o'er!"

and he is always being physically punished by pinches, pricks and pains. Where the witches use cauldrons full of ghastly things, Prospero uses books and the power of his own intellect in broad daylight to conjure up spells. The staff is there to administer the spells only. He does not dance around a reduction where everything is melted into one evil thing but casts spells which reveal individually to men and women the subtleties of a proper good human being. He uses natural elements to make the magic work...the four honest natural elements created by god, (air, earth, fire and water) light, dance, song and comedy, so that the magic is at one with God's nature and not combined into something horribly unnatural. This is best exemplified again in that long speech he makes in Act5 scene i when he drowns his book and breaks his staff, symbols of magic. He uses the natural world as he finds it and does not distort it as do the witches. He uses every part of the island...the sea, the woods, the air, the

rocks all open and visible to the light and air whereas the things the witches use are low, crawling, dirty and repulsive in the shadows. In the end he releases his spirits when all the court realise their mistakes and Antonio's ambition is shown to be wrong. The witches continue as if the evil is always just possible when you least expect it. This is a warning to beware of the tricky nature of evil.

VI. Personal growth, personal destruction and the future

Both Macbeth and Prospero are involved in the Divine Right of Kings and deal with the upset of God's order but in Macbeth, the supernatural is used to destroy that order while in the Tempest it is used to restore it by admission, honesty and forgiveness. . Further both show different relationships between the supernatural and mortal worlds. The witches are slaves to it, bound forever to use it in a very limited way to do harm but Prospero uses his own human gifts to make use of the supernatural in a very imaginative, controlled, careful, constructive and conscious way. Macbeth loses his expertise in war and his experience in leading men in battle through unintelligent evil choices but dies while the victims of Prospero's magic in the Tempest gain experience and become closer to god themselves through use of Prospero's god given intellect and learn good, godly governance for the future. Magic is not used for revenge but to right a moral and practical wrong through repentance and ensure a future closer to god.

Questions

1) The cauldron used by the witches in Macbeth represents

- a) god's universe b) chaos and disorder c) hope d) cooking

2) Both the witches and Prospero _____ their victims before they change them.

- a) blind b) put to sleep c) disorient and confuse d) freeze

3) Prospero uses Reason and Intellect to administer magic. We know this because he uses

- a) a staff b) a cloak c) a hat d) books

4) Prospero enslaves the spirits of the island until

- a) he rights the wrongs done against a godly world b) he feels like it c) he gets fed up with them d) Miranda convinces him to

5) The spirits are parts of

- a) a new world b) a known world c) nature and god's positive creation d) the imagination

6) The witches use _____ for their spells

- a) memories b) murder c) secrets d) unpleasant dark parts of nature

7) The witches use magic to _____ Macbeth

- a) tempt b) kill c) lead away from god d) all of these

8) Prospero uses magic to

- a) have fun b) do god's will c) punish the spirits d) entertain Miranda

9) The witches _____ Macbeth's sense of right and wrong

- a) destroy b) encourage c) uses d) ignore

10) Prospero _____ the visitors' sense of right and wrong

- a) destroys b) encourages c) uses d) ignores

Answers

1) b

2) b

3) d

4) a

5) c

6) d

7) d

8) b

9) a

10) c