

When the Battle's Lost and Won:
Equivocations Influence on Power
in
Williams Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

"All meanings, we know, depend on the key of interpretation."

- George Eliot

Equivocation is defined by The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary as "the using (a word) in more than one sense; ambiguity of meaning in words". The equivocation used in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* demonstrates how interpretation fuels ambition and a hunger for power. Macbeth becomes so entwined within the ambiguous language that he becomes consumed with his ambition. This ambition drives him to rid himself of anything that stands between him and achieving the power that he craves, even if it means losing the respect of others. His change in ambition is due to his interpretation of the witches' words and the words of the apparitions.

To fully understand the change in ambition and hunger for power, it is important to acknowledge how he was first perceived. When Macbeth is first introduced as the soldier who killed the traitor, Macdonwald, he is described as "brave" (I, ii, 18), "noble" (I, ii, 78) and a "worthy gentleman" (I, ii, 26) who is devoted to his country and its king. Due to his bravery and devotion, he is rewarded with a title. His actions and rewards show how pure his intentions were towards his country at the beginning of the play. At the time when the witches first suggest that Macbeth shall be king, he replies that "to be king/ Stands not within the prospect of belief" (I, iii, 76-77). This demonstrates that he had not *consciously* thought about the possibility and likelihood of becoming king. It only took a little bit of hope and assurance for this seed to grow into his conscious thoughts and affect his actions. By the end of the play, the same characters that would have flattered Macbeth at the beginning are now claiming him to be "treacherous" (IV, iii, 21), "sinful" (IV, iii, 264) and a "coward" (V, viii, 27). His thirst for power is what drove him to become a man that fit those characteristics.

The witches are the characters who are most notorious for playing with words and spinning their meaning. It is evident that with each meeting with the witches, Macbeth becomes

more drawn towards the prospect of power. The first time that Macbeth bumps into the witches and is promised the titles of "Thane of Glamis" (I, ii, 51), "Thane of Cawdor" (I, ii, 52) and that he "shal[l] be king" (I, ii, 53). His immediate reaction is to believe that it would never be possible to acquire all three of those titles. However, the certainty with which the witches made the predictions and their choice of words pushed his desire for power from his subconscious to his conscious thoughts. This seed grows in his mind, consumes him and drives him to seek out the witches. The second time, he "demand[s]" (IV, i, 66) predictions from the witches.

Although the witches themselves do not voice these predictions, they are still the puppet masters behind the apparitions that completely entangle Macbeth in a web of words and false hope.

Not only do the witches plant the idea of Macbeth taking power in the latter's mind but they also plant the fear of being usurped by any of Macbeth's friends, starting with one of his closest friends, Banquo. The witches present three paradoxes that Macbeth interprets as warnings that his power will be threatened. The last of the paradoxes is that Banquo "shal[l] get kings, though [he] be none" (I, iii, 70). Although this plainly says that Banquo will not seize power from Macbeth, he still sees Banquo as a threat who will play a large role in Macbeth's dethroning. The second paradox is that Banquo will be "not so happy, yet much happier" (I, iii, 69). Macbeth ignores the idea that this could mean that they will find happiness in different ways and jumps to an assumption that Banquo will begin as less happy and steal Macbeth's happiness. Similarly, the first paradox, that Banquo will be "lesser than Macbeth and greater" (I, iii, 68), is seen as a progression instead of comparing two different manners in which they would be great. It does not specify whether this is related to power or not but Macbeth assumes it is. The witches' original word-play made Macbeth obsessive. His obsession influenced his later interpretations, which then in turn influenced Macbeth's obsession with power once more.

Macbeth's desire and drive for power becomes even more intensified by the words of the apparitions. He considers the basic and literal sense of the messages, a thought process that limits his ability to reason as to how he *could* be defeated and build up the necessary defenses. The first apparition, telling Macbeth to "Beware Macduff" (IV, i, 81-82), is quite straightforward and literal. However, Macbeth does not consider the connection that this warning has with the other predictions; that Macduff will be the driving force behind Macbeth's foretold downfall through the methods outlined in the other predictions. The second apparition explains that "none of woman born/ shall harm Macbeth" (IV, I, 91-92). Ignoring the idea of a child being "from his mother's womb/untimely ripped" (I, viii, 19-20), Macbeth believes that this means that no person would be able to kill him. To set his hopes even higher, the third apparition claims that "Macbeth shall never vanquished be until/ Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill/ Shall come against him" (IV, i, 105-107). Assuming that trees cannot walk and ignoring that the trees may simply be made to look like they are moving, Macbeth's idea of invincibility becomes even more fortified. Because of Macbeth's feeling of invincibility, he assumes he cannot fail and becomes even more obsessed with his ambition for power.

The equivocation used in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* demonstrates how interpretation fuels ambition and a hunger for power. As George Eliot had pointed out, all meanings rely on interpretation. It was this interpretation that fed Macbeth's pride and ambition for power. This is shown by Macbeth's actions as a result of his interpretation of ambiguous predictions made by the witches and the apparitions. When facing his imminent defeat, Macbeth recognizes that he based his decisions off of the words of creatures "that [can] lie[...] like truth" (V, v, 50).