

### **‘Discuss Banquo’s role as a foil within the play Macbeth’ 2019 (mock)**

Banquo is, as defined by the witches, "lesser than Macbeth, and greater, not so happy yet much happier". It becomes evident through the text that Banquo assumes the role of a literary foil in relation to Macbeth. I believe, however, that he supersedes a mere reiterated archetype. Banquo displays his own complex thoughts, desires and behaviour, whether they be moral or immoral. While these traits may often contrast against those of the protagonist, Macbeth, it can be argued as to whether the two characters are perhaps more fundamentally comparable than is perceived upon first glance.

The initially dissimilarity between the two characters is their vulnerability to temptation, and is presented to us upon our initial introduction of Macbeth and Banquo. In the opening scene of the play both Macbeth and Banquo are spoken of as equally noble with Duncan referring to them in one breath as "our captains Macbeth and Banquo." However, their encounter with the three witches promptly shifts our perception of them. Macbeth encourages the "weird sisters" paradoxical equivocations by begging them to "stay you imperfect speakers, tell me more". Banquo, antithetically, is not as easily corrupted by these alluring promises of kingship, admitting that his "noble partner" is "rapt withal" and requesting that, to him, the witches should "speak not". Following their appearance, he refers to them as "instruments of darkness", making it explicitly evident that he is not at all tempted by this "supernatural soliciting" and thus, his role as a literary foil becomes apparent.

As it transpires, however, Banquo's morality wavers as the seed of ambition takes root in her mind. Similar to Macbeth, he no longer sleeps soundly, admitting to Fleance that he is struggling to restrain his "cursed thoughts" and is troubled by the witches, professing that he "dreamt last night of the three weird sisters." However, the most important thing to note here is that Banquo readily admits to being tempted by the witches prophecies. He calls on the "merciful powers" to help him fight these trouble thoughts and thus retains his nobility; Macbeth does not. He antithetically calls on darkness to hide his "black and deep desires". There is nothing inherently

wrong with temptation, but it is how one chooses to act on said temptation that matters. In this case, Banquo's role as a literary foil is highlighted in both of their actions and reactions.

Banquo's integrity is further reflected in his response to Macbeth's veiled political bribe for support in his unscrupulous rise to power, stating, "if you shall cleave to my consent when tis, it shall make honour for you". Banquo's reply seems to confirm his noble nature. He will not entertain any response that will compromise his honour or loyalty. He expresses his intention of keeping his "bosom franchises and allegiance clear.". Macbeth is fully aware that Banquo possesses an impervious moral conscience, admitting that he "hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour". As a literary foil, this places Banquo in a precarious position. He knows too much for Macbeth's comfort and is more than capable of acting out of morality rather than loyalty if he readies to confront his "noble partner". Macbeth admits that "there is none but he, whose being I do fear"

Perhaps it is due to this admitting of temptation that prevents Banquo from committing regicide, unlike Macbeth, whom, after vacillating pathetically finally succumbs to his "deep and dark desires". He does become morally compromised by the witches' prophecies to a slight degree, however. On learning of the murder, Banquo is appalled, vowing "again the undivulg'd pretence I fight of treasonous malice". Although he obviously suspects Macbeth as the culprit, admitting in his soliloquy "thou hast it now: King Cawdor, gleams all, as the weird women promised and I fear thou plaid'st most foully for it.", he does nothing about his suspicions. Rather, he appears willing to accept Macbeth's reign, saying "let your highness command upon me". Banquo's failure to take action against Macbeth may be due to the sheer loyalty of friendship, as he seems to be linked to "King Cawdor" with "a most indissoluble tie". In my opinion however, his silence is due to his personal selfish interest. Having seen the prophecies concerning Macbeth realised, he now hopes that the prophecy pertaining to his sons might also become reality admitting "may they not be my oracles as well and set me up in hope."

Like Macbeth, Banquo has become touched by the witches' evil and temptation, but his decline is cut short with an untimely death, brutally ordered by his own companion in arms. Prior to his death, however, we again witness his nobility and courage when he encourages his son Fleance to escape from the assassins.

Banquo's role as a foil, however, is ironically most notable beyond the grave, during his phantom appearance at the banquet for Macbeth's official coronation ceremony. When Macbeth tries to sit

on his throne he sees Banquo as he shakes "thy gory locks" in disapproval, thus leading him to guilt driven hysteria and to the realisation that he is "in blood, stepped in so far, that should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er." While Banquo may have been mere apparition similar to the "air-drawn dagger" as his wife suggested, the contrast between them is a stark reminder of Macbeth's moral deterioration, one that cannot be salvaged.

Thus, in conclusion, while Banquo may be perceived as merely an innocent man with a guilty conscience, it becomes evident that where Banquo's values are concerned, integrity and patriotism are eventually superseded by self-interest and ambition. I believe that although his morality never truly vanishes, it does gradually diminish in tandem with Macbeth; but while Macbeth resorts to murder, Banquo is guilty of a type of treasonous inaction. His role as a literary foil is often evident throughout the play, albeit his complex character transpires far beyond the archetype. Much like Macbeth, he displays both moral and immoral thoughts, desires and behaviour, and while these often highlight a contrast between the two, they are more comparable than is perceived upon first glance. Banquo is, as defined by the Witches, "lesser than Macbeth, and greater, Not so happy, yet much happier".