

Anna Everly

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Dr. Aimee Taylor

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### The Innocent Flower or the Serpent Underneath

Appearances can be deceiving. The trope which is too often true in life certainly applies in William Shakespeare's *The Tragedy of Macbeth*. Macbeth is a loyal thane who kills the king of Scotland under the influence of three witches' prophecies, a conniving wife, and his own ambition. The act leads to a downward spiral of death, blood, and violence as Macbeth becomes a paranoid tyrant before his ultimate downfall. The catalyst for the tragedy of events that unfolds is the three witches, who open the play with an atmosphere of foreboding and foreshadowing by stating, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (Shakespeare 1.1.10). This line introduces a powerful theme in *Macbeth* that influences the development of Lady Macbeth and Macbeth, who lie and deceive to attain and protect their positions of power, and the witches, who intentionally manipulate people and situations to suit their own will.

The phrase "fair is foul, and foul is fair" predicts that deception will run rampant in the play. Appearances will deceive; that which is bad might appear good while the good is perceived as bad. Mysterious events elicit "erroneous impressions" (Delaney 133) and leave characters to discern the truth, often inaccurately, on their own. Trickery runs amok, and the gap between words and deeds is exposed as words are regarded as "arbitrary signs that can vary with no consequences on reality" (Vernay 4). Words mean nothing to the deceptive characters in *Macbeth* who rarely convey their true intentions with their words. Opportunities are not what they seem;

the foul is fair and the fair is foul. Taking a closer look at the phrase “fair is foul, and foul is fair” reveals hidden literary devices that emphasize the phrase. The expression is primarily an example of alliteration; the letter “f” is repeated at the beginning of multiple words to make the sentence stand out to the audience. Secondly, the line is an example of a chiasmus, as “fair is foul” is mirrored to form “foul is fair,” emphasizing how the contradicting ideas are opposites of one other. Finally, the phrase is a paradox, begging the question of how something (or someone) could be both foul and fair at the same time since the words are antonyms by definition.

Nevertheless, the “fair is foul, and foul is fair” idea is restated multiple times throughout the play. Macbeth actually uses the words “foul” and “fair” to describe the aftermath of a bloody battle. He exclaims, “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (Shakespeare 1.3.38). The day is both good and bad: fair because it feels pleasant and the fighting has ended, but foul because many lives were lost in the battle. This idea is mentioned again when an old man discussing the aftermath of Duncan’s murder remarks, “God’s benison go with you, and with those that would make good of bad and friend of foes” (Shakespeare 2.4.41). The man suspects that the unnatural crime of Duncan’s murder will prompt some people to make themselves appear trustworthy even if they are not. Recognizing the coming dangers, he wishes God’s blessing on those who encounter lies. The theme appears yet again when Lady Macbeth suggests that she and Macbeth should “look like th’ innocent flower,/But be the serpent under ‘t” (Shakespeare 1.5.65-66) in the matter of Duncan’s murder. The idea of appearing to be a beautiful, harmless flower while actually preparing to be a deadly serpent in hiding perfectly depicts the theme of “appearances can be deceiving,” while simultaneously showcasing the deceitful tendencies of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Certain characters in *Macbeth*, namely Lady Macbeth, Macbeth, and the witches,

have no problem verbally confirming their intentions while actually carrying out the complete opposite. Unafraid to lie, manipulate, and scheme to get what they want, they have mastered the art of appearing fair while being foul.

Lady Macbeth effortlessly manipulates people and situations to get her way and influence others' perceptions of her. Even though she helped plot the king's murder and urged Macbeth to follow through with it, she pretends as if she is completely innocent with no knowledge of the event. When Duncan arrives at Inverness, Lady Macbeth greets him cordially, saying, "All our service/In every point twice done, and then done double,/Were poor and single business to contend/Against those honors deep and broad wherewith/Your Majesty loads our house" (Shakespeare 1.7.16-19). Playing the part of a good hostess, Lady Macbeth hospitably welcomes Duncan into her home; yet, in actuality, she is consciously leading him to be murdered. She "transforms her guest into her prisoner" from her position "commanding the doorway" (Lupton 372). Lady Macbeth plays the part of a dutiful hostess so that she can hide her true murderous intentions. She maintains her innocent act throughout the play and never allows anyone to see her true self. She refuses to be vulnerable or reveal her own doubts, even when Macbeth confesses similar sentiments. Lady Macbeth begins to feel guilt and regret over the murder of Duncan and remarks, "Tis safer to be that which we destroy/Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy [*Enter Macbeth*] ... Things without all remedy/Should be without regard: what's done is done" (Shakespeare 3.2.6-7,11-12). When she is alone, Lady Macbeth expresses remorse and discontent over what she has done; yet, when her husband arrives voicing similar misgivings, she becomes harsh and condescending in order to appear strong instead of vulnerable. Though Lady Macbeth is as double-natured as Macbeth, she complains about him

and refuses to empathize with him (Berryman 48). Her inability to reveal her true thoughts is a prime example of hiding one's true self in favor of a chosen outward appearance.

Equally guilty is Macbeth, who claimed the Scottish throne while concealing the blood on his own hands. Although he is responsible for many horrendous crimes, including the murder of Duncan, Banquo, and Macduff's family, he pretends to be an uninvolved, noble bystander. In Act 3, Macbeth throws a banquet for all his thanes, and, despite having just ordered a hit on Banquo, pretends to still expect Banquo to attend. Macbeth exclaims, "Were the graced person of our Banquo present--/Who may I rather challenge for unkindness/Than pity for mischance!" (Shakespeare 3.4.42-44). Macbeth knows what he did to Banquo, but he acts concerned in front of the thanes and hopes that Banquo simply decided to stay at home instead of attending the banquet. Macbeth is fully aware that his actions are malicious, yet he knowingly chooses evil (Greenblatt 2557). He then proceeds to attempt to fool everyone into believing that he is a worthy king, all the while aware of his villainy. Macbeth's lies run deep. Recognizing the severity of his dishonesty, he attempts to explain why he must continue to lie, but this just proves that even Macbeth knows that his actions are inexcusable. He confesses to the murderers hired to kill Banquo why he cannot allow people to know the truth and says, "I must not,/For certain friends that are both his and mine/... Masking the business from the common eye/For sundry weighty reasons" (Shakespeare 2.2.120-121,125-126). Macbeth's dishonesty is so obvious that he feels the need to make excuses to justify it. The irony is that deception itself contributes to Macbeth's downfall. Despite his paranoia regarding everyone else, he trusts the witches and "fails to guard himself against the prophecies of witches that actually lead him into more troubles" (Anand 76). Macbeth blindly trusts in the witches for guidance and believes that their

prophecies will protect him. However, this trust is misplaced because the witches lie to hide their true self, just like Macbeth.

Above all else, the witches in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* embody the theme that appearances can be deceiving by concealing their true intentions in order to bring their own will into fruition. They give Macbeth advice in the form of intentionally deceptive apparitions that manipulate him to play their games. As the witches hatch a plot with their leader Hecate, they divulge, "As by the strength of their allusion/Shall draw him onto his confusion" (Shakespeare 3.3.28-29). Although they technically tell Macbeth the truth, the witches intentionally present their predictions in such a way that Macbeth feels secure and confident in his position and does not alter his course to interfere with their plans for the future. The world of Macbeth is "presided over by enigmatic and terrifying forces" (Bloom 13), whether Macbeth realizes it or not. The witches control the story and facilitate Macbeth's demise while pretending to bring good news and promises of security. The witches' deception actually begins the moment that they meet Macbeth. They greet him with impressive titles and allude to his future glory without addressing any of the horrors that are to come with it. When Macbeth arrives at their camp, they exclaim, "All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!/All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!/All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!" (Shakespeare 3.3.28-29). The witches present these predictions like they are a blessing for Macbeth, when in reality they will only bring violence, sorrow, and death. Macbeth is "on his way to doom" (Anand 73) from the moment he meets them. The witches feed Macbeth's destructive ambition and cultivate his demise under the guise of prophesying great things in Macbeth's future. Their true intentions are far from what they appear to be.

The notion that appearances can be deceiving is a recurring theme throughout *The Tragedy of Macbeth* that is most evident through the character arcs of Lady Macbeth, Macbeth, and the witches. Audiences are warned to beware of deception and lies from the witches' incantation of "fair is foul, and foul is fair" in the opening scene through each variation and restatement of the infamous line until the end of the play. In the end, the truth is seen at last, and the lies of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, and the witches are unraveled and come crashing down in a tragic end. After all is said and done, it is clear that appearances are deceiving in *Macbeth*, and the words of Lady Macbeth, Macbeth, and the witches cannot be trusted. Villains never reveal their true colors until it is too late.

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