Macbeth Essay

Deception and manipulation through skillful wording and playing off base insecurities is one of the most prevalent concepts throughout William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. One of the early examples of manipulation through skillful wording is when Lady Macbeth convinces Macbeth that in order to become more of a man he needs to kill Duncan. Deceit is exemplified when Macbeth makes a fake show of emotion in front of Macduff following the discovery of Duncan’s body. The combination of both deceit and manipulation occurs when the witches use an apparition to convince Macbeth that no man with be able to slay him, thus giving him the overconfidence that ultimately leads to his death at the hands of Macduff. Throughout *Macbeth,* language is used by characters, with both good and ill intentions, to manipulate those around them and to achieve their own ends.

One key moment when language is used to manipulate occurs when Macbeth returns from battle to Lady Macbeth. At this point, they have a conversation about the possibility of Macbeth killing Duncan so that he can become king like the witches foretold. During this exchange, Lady Macbeth tries to appeal to Macbeth's insecurities and desire for power by saying, “to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man” (I.vii.56-57). She uses the word “man” deliberately. Already knowing that Macbeth is questioning his own manliness, Lady Macbeth proposes that if Macbeth where to kill Duncan then he would become much more of a man, that is, that he would be powerful and dominant. By implication, she suggests he is currently not manly and is powerless. She does this because she has a very cunning nature and she herself has a deep desire for power that she cannot fulfill as a woman. In fact, the ultimate goal of her deceptive words is to make herself queen without having having to kill Duncan herself. Lady Macbeth’s manipulation of Macbeth by playing on his insecurities sets the stage for more linguistic deception.

In the later half of Act Two, Macbeth himself uses words in a similar fashion to mislead. Following Macduff finding Duncan’s deceased body, Macbeth decides to make a large display of his sadness at the death of Scotland’s monarch. Macbeth begins his mourning of Duncan with, “Had I but died an hour before this chance, /I had lived a blessed time”(II.iii.107-108). Macbeth establishes his sorrow at the death of Duncan immediately by declaring that if he had died before hearing the news of Duncan’s murder then he would have had a blessed existence. But this is contrary to what Macbeth actually feels, since it was the death of Duncan that would bless him with the crown. He continues his deceitful mourning by saying, “for from this instant / There’s nothing serious in mortality” (II.iii.108-109). Macbeth declares that now that Duncan is dead, mortality is but a joke since a monarch like him should not have been killed in cold blood. But Macbeth was the one who took Duncan’s life, and thus if he truly believed it would make a joke of mortality, he would not have stabbed him. Instead Macbeth is actually revealing his true feelings about mortality, that mortality is not “serious” because he himself can control who lives or dies, but he shrouds it in the guise of a mournful speech. Macbeth then declares, “All is but toys. Renown and grace is dead”(II.iii.110). Macbeth builds on the idea of mortality not being serious by using the word “toys,” pointing to how insignificant life is. In addition, he once again makes it sound as if Duncan’s death has destabilized the two of the ideas people at the time held most revered: renown and grace. While renown and grace are lost in the course of Duncan’s death, the hidden irony of MacBeth’s speech lies in the fact that it was Macbeth who killed them because when he took Duncan’s life he was disrespecting the high renown of his king and had abandon his grace by murdering a sleeping guest in his own home. Macbeth’s whole speech following Duncan’s death is nothing more than a cleverly worded way of directing suspicion away from himself.

One final example of a cunning use of language occurs when Macbeth meets with the witches for the second time and they present him with three apparitions. At this point, the second apparition says, “Be bloody, bold, and resolute. Laugh to scorn / The power of man, for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (IV.i.90-92). While Macbeth takes the apparition’s statement at face value, it is actually much more complicated than it appears at first. The apparition’s statement deliberately leads Macbeth into faulty logic, since the assumption that Macbeth makes is that since all humans are born from a women, and “none of women born” can kill him, that the apparition is telling him that no human can kill him; but this actually just the witches’ way of making Macbeth arrogant in his position as monarch, inciting him to be “bloody, bold, and resolute”, even though ultimately he is slain by a human to the defiance of his interpretation. The witches want Macbeth to be arrogant because arrogance is one of man’s greatest enemies, and the witches’ whole purpose is to create chaos and lead people into positions where they are most vulnerable. They also tell him to laugh in the face of all of who doubt him because if he believes what others tell him then he may be humbled by a challenger to his right to rule. With Macbeth’s arrogance elevated to inconceivable levels, the witches successfully used the deception in their words to make Macbeth the cause of his own downfall.

Throughout *Macbeth* characters are manipulated and deceived by the words of others in order to commit deeds that they would not have done otherwise. While throughout the play , Macbeth may seem like the prime victim of linguistic treachery because of his manipulation at the hands of Lady Macbeth and the three witches, he also uses deceptive language to mislead others. Macbeth attempts to remove any possible suspicion of his killing Duncan by creating a scene when he learns of Duncan’s death. Macbeth’s display is itself the result of Lady Macbeth manipulating him into killing Duncan and the deceitful witches introduced the idea of killing Duncan to Macbeth who then brought the idea to Lady Macbeth. The entire narrative of *Macbeth* is driven forward by the manipulation and deception of characters by others in order to advance their own personal agenda.