**Semester 2**

The Character of Lady Macbeth

The effects of evil are much stronger and obsessive in Lady Macbeth than on Macbeth. “She deliberately chooses evil, her choice being more deliberate than her husband’s” (Muir lxvii). She embraces evil more spontaneously than her husband did. Macbeth thinks his “vaulting ambition” (Shakespeare, Macbeth I.VII. 27) stimulates him only, but it is his wife whose reprimands force him to shake off the unwillingness he had to commit murder. When she tells anything, she means it. She literally summons the powers of darkness to overpower her: Come, you spirits That tend in mortal thoughts, unsex me here, And fill me, from the crown to the toe, top-full Of direst cruelty! (Shakespeare, Macbeth I.V. 40-43) Evil can create perverse conceptions. To Lady Macbeth, the meaning of ‘Evil’ and ‘Good’ becomes wholly reversed. The Nature of Evil in Macbeth 189 attainment of the crown by hideous murder seems to her something glorious. She is so firm in her determination of the act that she cannot see it as but glorious. In her soliloquy she says about Macbeth: Yet do I fear thy nature; It is too full o’ the milk of human kindness To catch the nearest way; thou wouldst be great; Art not without ambition, but without The illness should attend it, what thou wouldst highly, Thou wouldst thou holily. (Shakespeare, Macbeth I.V.16-21) To Lady Macbeth, ‘ambition’ and ‘illness’ are terms of praise and ‘human kindness’ and ‘holily’ are terms of blame. In the words of Bradley: “Moral distinctions do not in this exaltation exist for her; or rather they are inverted: ‘good’ means to her the crown and whatever is required to obtain it, evil whatever stands in the way of its attainment” (Bradley 325).

Traces of Goodness in Lady Macbeth

But it is true that Lady Macbeth is not naturally deprived of consciousness (any more than Satan was). There is in her some trace of human feelings which accounts for her later failure. Her human feelings which lay way inside her, dormant, sometimes come out and make her weak. The labour she wields to subdue her husband’s resistance is also to subdue her own resistance to evil. Her weakness is revealed when she says: Had he not resembled My father as he slept, I had don’t. (Shakespeare, Macbeth. II.II.12-13) The excuse for not being able to murder Duncan as he resembled her father is baseless. She could never have done it. She needed wine to strengthen herself even to act as the accomplice. Evil engulfs everything and everyone, even a strong woman like Lady Macbeth. At the start of the play, Lady Macbeth seems to have a very strong character - almost stronger than Macbeth's - by the end she is reduced to being afraid of the dark. At the beginning she is Macbeth's “dearest partner of greatness” (Shakespeare, Macbeth I.V.11-12), but at the end she is his “fiendlike queen” (Shakespeare, Macbeth. V.IX.35). She has a lust for power, and it is her goading that leads Macbeth to seize the throne of Scotland by murdering Duncan. Lady Macbeth is unable, however, to confront the evil she has unleashed and is driven mad. She is often seen as a symbol of evil like the witches, but at the end she falls victim to evil just like her husband.

The Sleepwalking Scene

Lady Macbeth’s sleepwalking scene is a splendid demonstration of the fatal workings of evil upon a human mind. The sleepwalking shows that the murders weigh heavily upon her mind and allow her no rest, even in her sleep. Her conscience has become a source of torment to her, and she is afraid of darkness. The woman who had said that a little water would clear her and her husband of the deed of murder now says; “What, will these hands never be clean?” (Shakespeare, Macbeth. V.I.42) and “All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand” (Shakespeare, Macbeth. V.I.48-49). She also says in the course of her sleepwalking that nobody could have imagined that the old man, Duncan, had so much blood in him. In short, this scene shows the mental collapse of Lady Macbeth and demonstrates that evil has in it the seeds of self-destruction. When evil is let loose, it corrupts all creation, not only man and state, but the physical universe as well. Lenox’s speech which immediately follows Duncan’s murder shows that the physical universe has been thrown out of harmony: The night has been unruly; where we lay, Our chimneys were blown down; and, as they say, Lamentings heard in the air, strange screams of death, And prophesying with accents terrible. (Shakespeare, Macbeth II.III.55-58) The clamoring of the owls at night, the devouring of Duncan’s horses by each other, all these suggest something unnatural is going to happen. Even the natural phenomena such as the ravens’ crook, the sound of the crickets and the coming of the night seem to be foreboding. But this corruption in nature contains within itself the means of restoring harmony. The rebirth of good is implied in the working out of evil. Shakespeare uses the very perversion of nature to herald the downfall of the tyrant and to restore the physical universe to its natural state of perfection. For instance, Birnam Wood moves and Macduff turns out to be a child unborn of a woman.