

Status and Antithesis: the divine comedy of the sleepwalking scene and the objectively dramatic situation (V, i)

In the famous sleepwalking scene (V, i) of *Macbeth*, the examination of status could hardly be more intriguing. It is to be assumed that a doctor, although superior to the gentlewoman, is no match for a monarch when it comes to the question of status. It is of course the state in which Lady Macbeth enters the scene that alters the status relationship. Deferring to royalty by language, gesture, and proximity is now redundant, and the lower status participants are free to challenge these conventions by being themselves.

A number of performances simply have the queen inactively observed by the doctor and gentlewoman. This is to underutilise the scene's potential by some margin, as it is an interpretation that fails to consider the stakes of the lower status characters. The health of Lady Macbeth is very much in the interests of her appointed doctor. She is no ordinary patient. Furthermore, her husband, the tyrannical king, has appointed him. The king will demand a report on the nature of his wife's physical health. Although mental illness is a new phenomenon in the world of the play, the doctor has observed the condition of sleepwalking (lines 54-56). It is the malady that presents itself on this occasion that is the cause for such alarm. It will be deeply problematic, therefore, perhaps incriminating, for the doctor to deliver an account of his patient's mental illness, with its associations of guilt. Equally unpalatable is the prospect of the doctor's public admission of professional failure, or worse: the failure to prevent the queen from self-harm or suicide.

The conflict for the doctor can be condensed into a single sentence: *how does he successfully conduct his appointed duty?* To help Lady Macbeth in her current state is to learn too much – yet it will be tempting for the doctor to protract the scene for this very purpose. Then again, to merely protract the scene for the sake of eavesdropping is to fail in his appointed duty. In a similar vein, the livelihood of the gentlewoman hinges on the life of the monarch. She is an invested participant, and her role in the scene cannot be passive. She may even have an emotional investment to Lady Macbeth, the person. It is clear that Shakespeare has presented the perfect conundrum, the model idea of a captivating situation, and the complete conflict: in which status ebbs and flows and is rarely fixed or binary in the exchange. By extension, it

should be made known to participants that the scene is an *exemplar* for all good writing: that the difficulty or lack of a convenient resolution, the heightened stakes and investment in the scene's central problem, and the concern with ordinary people make it a fascinating investigation. Contrast the sheer impossibility of the scene (that the problem is insoluble, yet the participants must remain within it) with the simplistic understanding of situation, conflict, and resolution that is often demonstrated.

The question, then, of *how* the doctor and gentlewoman might actively participate can be considered by addressing the complex relationship between self-preservation and selfless action. The doctor may well fail in his ability to cure Lady Macbeth of her malady, but he will do what he can to prevent the woman's physical death, or injury – in spite of what she seems to be confessing. How close, for example, is she to burning herself with the candle? What is the geography of the scene? How familiar is Lady Macbeth with said geography given that she and her husband have only recently moved to Dunsinane from Inverness? How dark is it? The extent of the doctor and gentlewoman's involvement will be determined by a number of factors. One might imagine the doctor paying special consideration to the proximity of flame, face, and hair, while the gentlewoman frantically clears a path by moving aside furniture, and chairs, etc – then having to move them again when the wandering monarch changes direction. The scene, performed in this way, very much conveys the assumed status relationship between the three participants, and shows how in many cases high status is conferred. If, on the other hand, Lady Macbeth unconsciously threatens to walk into a wall or well-lit candelabra and the doctor and gentlewoman are impelled to use physical force to usher her on a different path or direction – the status relationship shifts, with the taboo of touching a monarch broken.

Extending this idea might consider the question of avoidance, in which the objectives of self-preservation and selfless action are perhaps confused. What if, for example, the doctor and gentlewoman are guiding Lady Macbeth away from the proximity of her husband – who happens to be in the adjoining room, or nearby? We are told that he is on the battlements; yet, given the nature and emotional state of the protagonist, this may not be relied upon. By now, Dunsinane is awash with fear. Let's not forget: Macbeth has murdered sleep and is rendered an insomniac by his acts of murder. Perhaps he will also know that his wife is a

threat from having heard her somnolent confessions. Might he have her killed? By separating the self-preservation component, there is the sense that the inferior subjects have the power to save the life of a queen, in part by saving her from herself. There is also the argument that knowledge is power, and that any successful attempt at saving her in this scenario will result in them learning more about Macbeth's gruesome deeds. However, if they fail in their attempt, and Lady Macbeth is exposed to the king in this way, the mutual discovery of her confession will be disastrous. Ironically, it is in this immediate action, despite her mental state and in spite of being disempowered by sleep – indeed, despite her very illness – that Lady Macbeth's status will trump all, threatening to expose both king and underlings, demonstrating that great scenes from great writers will often contain a fluidity of status, and that the idea of antithesis, in this case expressed by an individual who has no control of her actions or external senses, is a powerful dramatic principle that can challenge our assumptions about a scene.

When performed in this way the scene becomes, as it should – for this is the intention of great playwrights – objectively dramatic, **in which each character finds the situation difficult to endure, yet cannot avoid.**