Critical Analysis on the Concept of Fear in Macbeth

Along with his fear, his hope disappeared as well. What remains is despair, which Elizabethans defined as a sin against the Holy Spirit (Unterstenho?fer, p.171, l.1-4; p.194, l.17-19).

Besides, Macbeth himself has, paradoxically, still not realized in act four, scene one that his fear evokes these diverse horror images – such as, for instance, the trembling idea, the visionary certainty that Banquo's descendants will become kings or the fear that Macduff could become dangerous to him – and not the other way round, as he sees it (see Schücking, p.71, l.22-24). Since he does not really understand himself, he surmises that his gruesome visions trigger the fear in him. Though his greatest wish is to see no more ghosts (Macbeth, Act 4, Scene 1, l.154: “But no more sights.“), his conclusion is simply wrong since, after all, it is precisely because of the murder of Banquo that he has seen his ghost. According to his firm belief, his visions will only decline if he continues to harden – which certainly has to happen through further murders – until he senses no more feeling of moral scruple or fear while doing so. Only then, in his opinion, would he be free of both his fear as well as his troublesome appalling images. But especially in this way, he is about to unintentionally summon new horror visions.

Under the condition of a clear mind and 'normal' moral perceptions, however, his intention would be pointless from the very beginning and would cause quite the opposite because further murders committed out of fear would leave him with even more horror visions. His figment of Banquo's ghost is the best example for that. Nevertheless this theory no longer takes effect with Macbeth afterwards since, after the murder of Macduff's family, he has become so morally dulled that there seems to be no more space inside him for the 'better' feelings of any kind – such as, for example, moral, honor, conscience etc. - and, therefore, his imagination does not afflict him any longer.

Another irony in the composition of the figure of Macbeth lies in the fact that, even though he is initially described by all involved as the fearless, brave, daring and even exceedingly gruesome war hero, who according to the report of the “bleeding Captain” (see Macbeth, Act 1, Scene 2, ll.7-42) is used to the smell of smoking blood, severed limbs and piles of corpses and thus is an example of courage and a “lion” on the battlefield – but by no means depicted as a coward – he is still “in a perpetual state of fear” (Bloom, p.530, l.20). This “seems to be his fear of impotence, a dread related as much to his overwhelming power of imagination as to his shared dream of greatness with Lady Macbeth.” (Bloom, p.530, l.21-23).

Like many tyrants, Macbeth also transfers his fear onto his subjects through measures of massive use of violence and terror. After his murder of Duncan, he tries to free himself from his constantly haunting fear through murdering those that are 'threatening' to him (Banquo, opposition members or Macduff), but other than a merely briefly lasting alleviation – through the murder of Banquo, being the most feared by him – he achieves rather the opposite of his goal, which was to permanently secure himself1.

According to Jan Kott, Macbeth's fear is a reminder of the murders that took place and the fear of the need for new crimes (Kott, p.112, l.24-26). Nevertheless, one cannot readily agree with this view, since it does not really make sense; after all, Kott entirely neglects that even before

the regicide, Macbeth is in a state of constant fear. Afterwards, however, Kott's thesis appears quite plausible if one considers, for instance, Macbeth's murders of the servants, of Banquo, or his plan to kill Macduff, since all this actually happens out of his fear of having to commit new murders in order to cover up the first crime, or rather to secure his usurpation of the throne which is based on it. In some way, this also applies to the massacre of Macduff's family, whose murder Macbeth has ordered on impulse to punish him, for Macbeth sees himself forced to act in the form of bloody retaliation measures due to his fear of Macduff.

Supported by the prophecies from act four, scene one, which suggest his invincibility, he openly displays his fearlessness in the fifth act regardless of the adverse circumstances2: “[...] let them fly all; / Till Birnam Wood remove to Dunsinane, / I cannot taint with fear. What’s the boy Malcolm? / Was he not born of woman?” (Macbeth, Act 5, Scene 3, l.1-4). But this supposedly confident attitude of Macbeth seems just artificial and anything but convincing; in fact, it presents itself as his rage of despair rather than true fearlessness. Yet ultimately, he has no other choice but to put a good face on the matter and to artificially motivate himself with predictions that appear like his grip for the last straw.