Do the Witches, in fact have any power in the play ‘Macbeth’ throughout?

The forces of evil are always ready to ensnare man, but they have their limitations. They do not, indeed cannot, force man into evil; they can merely tempt man to choose to follow evil ways. Experiencing temptation is not sinful, but deliberately choosing to give in to temptation is an evil.

 **[“Have I not reason, beldams as you are,**

**Saucy and over-bold? How did you dare**

**To trade and traffic with Macbeth**

**In riddles and affairs of death?”]** (HECATE SCENE, Act 3, SCENE 5)

Macbeth deliberately chooses-not once but several times in the play-the evil path. In the portrayal of Macbeth we witness the destructive power of evil in the inner life of a man. It is not a simple, smooth downward progress; but involves turmoil and conflict between conscience and other desires, between good and evil impulses that work within man. At every stage of Macbeth’s degeneration we witness the choice being made deliberately; at the same time there is a sense of inevitability about Macbeth’s choices. The Witches merely prophecy certain things for Macbeth. They do not influence him in any concert manner. It is a fact that his ambition impels him towards “the swelling act of the imperial theme” but his conscience fills him with horror at the idea that has come to him about how to gain the throne.

The deterioration of Macbeth’s character illustrates the theme of conscience and its decline. From a brave soldier and noble person, Macbeth reaches a state when he is a soulless man, a beast chained to a stake and finally slaughtered like a beast. A fever in his blood keeps him away from conscience and urges him on to ceaseless action and to desperation. Love of power and the will to live are so powerful in him that he goes to the extent of challenging Fate...

TheWitches’predictions and their *partial fulfillment* at once engross him in the thought of kingship. His ambition makes him unscrupulous and the thought of murdering Duncan occurs instantly in his mind.

“And you all know, security

Is mortals’ chiefest enemy.” (HECATE SCENE, Act 3, SCENE 5)

Act-I Scene-I, a short scene introduces the readers to the theme of evil. As a scene of exposition, it creates the atmosphere and hints at a battle being fought and the keenness of the Witches to meet the protagonist. Even before human beings have been introduced, the witches and tumultuous, hostile weather suggest the part to be played by the supernatural. The two ambiguous lines, “When the battle’s lost and won” and “Fair is foul and foul is fair” are only a beginning to many more of such paradoxical and enigmatic statements. It may be noted that in the whole play there are nineteen scenes of darkness as against only seven of dusk and daylight. The atmosphere of darkness and terror continues through the play until in the last scene Macduff enters with Macbeth’s head indicating the ultimate end of the nightmare.

Macbeth’s ambition, aided by his wife’s instigation, is too strong for his conscience, which is ignored. As soon as he commits the murder he can again hear the disturbing protest of his deeper self. Conscience now gnaws at him and makes itself articulate in the form of unforgettable sighs and haunting sounds. Macbeth is now overwhelmed with a sense of futility of the crime and an equally strong sense of remorse.

“So foul and fair a day I have not seen.”

Macbeth is guilty of committing the most heinous crimes. Lady Macbeth, as if she were a fourth witch, encourages and influences him with valour of her tongue and the crime, which might otherwise have remained undone, is committed. Lady Macbeth, too, soon realizes the futility of the crown that they have obtained through crime and soliloquies. She suffers like her husband, the tortures of Hell, a glimpse of which we get in the sleep-walking scene.

‘Macbeth: “How now,you secret,black, and midnight hags!

What is’t you do?

All the Witches: A deed without a name.”’

Evil always works through deception. The evil within Macbeth responds to the evil outside when he believes the words of the Witches. The Witches offer Macbeth worldly prosperity, as evil must, in order to be attractive enough to tempt man, but the promises of evil are false; they are seeming or half-truths. Evil always create an atmosphere of uncertainty and false belief. Macbeth’ himself does not know how far the Witches’ prophecies are good or evil!

“Stay, you imperfect speakers. Tell me more.

By Sinel’s death, I know I am Thane of Glamis.

But how of Cawdor?”

Evil must deceive in order to prosper, if only temporarily, for deception ultimately is found out. While it is in sway it sets in motion ripples of ambiguity in which the innocent are perforce also caught. Thus Duncan calls, Macbeth as “noble”, “worthy” and so on, little knowing the reality beneath the appearance…the reality is given expression to by the porter’s macabre humorous quibbles on hell-gate!

‘“ I had thought to have let in some of all professions that go the primrose way to th’ everlasting bonfire. [Knock] Anon, anon. I pray you, remember the porter.” [Opens door]’

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s ‘voice what appear to be the most hospitable epithets while committing the most heinous of crimes against hospitality- the murder of a guest under their own roof. Thus before he commits the murder of Duncan he is troubled by the vision of the blood-stained dagger. He is later troubled by the hallucination of Banquo’s Ghost. Once again there is confusion between appearance and reality.

“Fair is foul, and foul is fair,

Hover through the fog and filthy air.”

Like all tragic heroes, Macbeth too is blind to reality. He believes implicitly in what the Witches say, it is on the basis of his belief in their words that he takes action and goes deeper into the quagmire till he reaches the point of no return. His belief in the Witches…The atmosphere of uncertainty let loose by one act of evil permeates everything and colours the vision of even the innocent and good characters. Thus Malcolm in his cautiousness puts on an appearance of vileness to test the reality of Macduff’s integrity. In case of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth when they welcome Duncan, we have evil masquerading as good to hide the truth.

“Come, we’ll to sleep. My strange and self-abuse

Is the initiate fear that wants hard use;

We are yet but young in deed.”

Gradually Macbeth discovers the unshakable truth of evil’s deception, but not before it has wrought deterioration of character in him. To him appearance is reality, but he has lost touch with the benevolent spirit, which gives meaning to life. The theme of false appearance is embodied in the very action of the play, so that Macbeth’s despairing recognition of mere ‘mouth-honour’ among his remaining followers echoes ironically his wife’s advice to be a serpent under the welcoming of Duncan. It is reinforced by the cloud of uncertainty that settles on Scotland during Macbeths’ despotism. After the murder of Duncan, the darkness that envelops the earth in daytime reinforces the disorder and equivocation in nature as aptly implied in the words of Rosse,Act II,SceneIV.

Evil works out its own destruction. It may create terrible disorder at first but Nature is able to restore harmony. The birth of good is heralded by the perversion of Nature itself. Birnam Wood moves and Macduff turns out to be a man “unborn” of a woman-these are symbolic devices to indicate that the very perversion of mature can herald the doom and destruction of one who initially caused that perversion. True honour and bravery are opposed to false honour and rashness. The repetition of words such as ‘duty’, and ‘service’ create a sense of an orderly social and political fabric which has been disrupted by Macbeth’s crime. Images of planting and seeing, of sleep, and of milk stand in contrast to the images of disorder implied by words like fear and blood and by contrast between appearance and reality. Evil is deceptive and seeks to lead astray.

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***Reference’, Words and Sentences from Critical Evaluations of Dr. Sen and Sraboni Ghosh, except setting, ideas and contextualized***. (RituparnaRayChaudhuri/Shehanaz)