MACBETH

Now does he feel his title "hang loose about him like a giant's robe upon a dwarfish thief."

To what extent does this late comment reflect Macbeth's true nature?

Macbeth's "true nature" is at times ambiguous. There seems to be a struggle within his mind between being the "worthy gentleman" that he is to begin with, and the "tyrant" he appears to become. Perhaps this ambiguity comes about because of Macbeth's moral weakness - the ease with which he is led into doing what he really doesn't want to do. This weakness tends to hide from view for a time the true character of Macbeth - a brave warrior at heart, but too easily led astray by the promise of wealth and power.

Even before we are introduced to Macbeth we hear reports of him which are very impressive. He is a brave and worthy warrior, dedicated to fighting for his king and country. The King himself has nothing but praise for him, dubbing him "Worthy", "Noble", and claiming to "love him highly." Obviously he is a greatly respected man. But already we glimpse another side to Macbeth's nature, although at this stage we relate it to his bravery. He has been involved in a bloody battle, with splitting members of the enemy "from the nave to th' chops". So he is no stranger to bloodshed and violence. Perhaps this hints that Macbeth does not shy from the spilling of blood especially when it is involved with protecting himself.

We also find that Macbeth is ambitious. He is "rapt" by the witches' words. His amazement seems to reveal that he has thought before of becoming king, and their words have brought these "things forgot" back to his mind. But his ambition at this stage has no evil thoughts to urge it on. "I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent, but only vaulting ambition." Lady Macbeth also confirms this characteristic with her words "Art not without ambition, but the illness should attend it." So it seems that without the temptation of becoming King of Scotland being within his reach, Macbeth is an honest man.

However, the role of being a "spur" to Macbeth is fulfilled by his wife, and his "ambition" is set in motion. We know the thoughts of the possibility of taking "th' nearest way" to becoming King have been in Macbeth's mind, but his honesty had caused him to push them aside. As he said earlier "if chance will have me king, why chance may crown me, without my stir." But Lady Macbeth has other ideas, and she knows well where Macbeth's weakness lies. He is very concerned with his true role of being a man. All she has to do is question his manhood, and Macbeth will do anything to prove himself. "I dare do all that may become a man" he says. This reveals an aspect of his own uncertainty about his true nature.

Surely on consideration he could have seen that his background as fearless soldier proved that he was "a man". Instead of seeing this and pointing it out to Lady Macbeth, he is blinded by his eagerness to ensure his image of manhood in her eyes.

His moral stand proves to be too weak to prevent him from carrying out the deed of ultimate treachery, but his behaviour after Duncan's murder proves he has a conscience, which is greatly disturbed by what he has done. Even before the actual murder his dislike for what he is going to do leads his mind to play tricks on him. The image of the murder weapon, a dagger hangs tauntingly in the air before his eyes. After the murder he feels alone, unable to associate with God and good things as "Amen stuck in (his) throat." He felt unable to ask for blessing, because he knew he had no right to it. He imagined voices crying "sleep no more." Already there is the promise that Macbeth's conscience will allow him no rest.
After Banquo's murder, Macbeth's tormented mind creates a ghost to haunt Macbeth, who knows in his sub-conscious that he has begun to do things which he doesn't want to do. His discomfort and guilt relating to the murder of Duncan are shown when he refuses to tell Lady Macbeth of his plans. "Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck."

Macbeth could not have really wanted to kill Banquo, the friend who had fought at his side. But his tormented mind and the already instilled sense of self preservation which we saw in his skill as a fighter, lead him to do it. As he says "to be thus is to be nothing, but to be safely thus."

Here again we see Macbeth's own uncertainty about his true nature. He appears unsure of his own power and safety, and begins to search desperately for the cause of his unrest. He comes to the conclusion that the danger to his safety lies with Banquo. But when his mind full of scorpions" gives him no rest even after this murder Macbeth carries out his most brutal act - the arrangement of the murder of Macduff's family. There was no logical need for this, evil or good. Macbeth is just so very uncomfortable, for now it seems he is nothing but a "dwarfish thief," and the title he has "stolen" hangs loosely about him.

So now it seems that Macbeth is nothing but a murderous fiend sparing nothing in his quest for safety and peace in his role as king. But this is a peace he can never have and he begins to realise this. He knows on-one who has acted so evily can ever be at peace. His conscience continues to torment him, and his loneliness increases. Obviously he is a human being, suffering for the things he has done. His old age is approaching and he knows he will not have "that which should accompany old age", no friends to love and honour him. He is "sick at heart", tired of having to continue in his evil to keep his title. As he says "I gin be weary of th', sun."

His "weariness" does not take away his boldness and bravery however. He fights the challenge from England himself, not like Malcolm who does not seem to be involved in any battles himself. True, at first he claimed "I'll not fight with thee", but again an appeal against his manhood convinces him to once again act. "Then yield thee, coward" says Macduff. But Macbeth "will not yield" and is consequently killed. The witches' promise that "none of woman born shall harm Macbeth" is no protection for "Macduff was from his mother's womb untimely ripped."

So Macbeth's acts of "great tyranny" and murder do not really reflect his true nature. They are unwilling acts, brought about through ambition, his own uncertainty, and the influence of his wife. At heart Macbeth is a brave, noble warrior, who is uncertain of himself and who is too easily led by a promise of power and wealth.