

MACBETH: A TRAGIC HERO

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Abstract:

Macbeth has been considered as Shakespeare's most profound and mature vision of evil. Wilson Knight calls the play a wrestling of destruction with creation. Derek Traversi considers the play to be a decisive orientation of Shakespeare's good and evil. Kolbe sees it as a picture of a special battle in a universal war and whose battleground is in the souls of Macbeth and his wife. The play is a study of evil in various manifestations and at various levels. Shakespeare firmly believed that evil destroys itself to give place to good and harmony at all levels. Macbeth, throughout the play, is presented as one above the ordinary beings, and as such, he fulfills the basic requirements of a tragic hero. Macbeth, as a tragic hero, is different from Hamlet, Othello, and Lear, who retain their goodness till the end. Indeed, in no other tragic hero of his has Shakespeare displayed so much understanding of the complexity of human nature as he has done in portraying the character of Macbeth. "There remains for our choice of person neither eminently virtuous nor just, nor yet involved in misfortune by deliberate vice or villainy but by some error or human frailty; and this person should also be someone of high fame and flourishing prosperity". Such a man would make an ideal tragic hero.

(Aristotle)

Antony and Cleopatra, Coriolanus, Cymbeline, Hamlet, Julius Caesar, King Lear, Macbeth, Othello, Henry VIth part I, II, III, VIII, King John, Richard I and Richard III - long runs Shakespeare's list of tragedies, Shakespeare's tragic heroes are all exceptional persons, standing high in society. Macbeth is Valour's minion, valiant cousin, 'Eagle' among 'Sparrows' lion among hares. Macbeth's fall is the result of his unscrupulous ambition.

Macbeth is led by ambitions to try and to rise above his position on the great chain of being and so faces damnation as Satan did. From the king's favourite, Macbeth becomes the villain. Aristotle explains such misfortune is visited upon the tragic hero 'not through vice or depravity but by some error of judgement'. This error, or Hamartia, refers to a flaw in the character of the hero, or a mistake made by the character.

At the beginning of the play we see the brief appearance of the three witches and move to a military camp where the Scottish king Duncan hears the news that his generals Macbeth and Banquo have defeated two separately invading armies - one from Ireland, led by the Rebel Macdonwald, and one from Norway.

Following this pitched battle with these strong forces, Macbeth and Banquo encounter the witches as they cross a moor. The witches prophesy that Macbeth will be made Thane (a rank of Scottish nobility) of Cowder and eventually king of Scotland. They also prophesy that Banquo, will beget a line of Scottish, although Banquo will never be the king himself.

The play also presents the conflicting character of Lady Macbeth. Upon receiving her husband's letter about the witches prophecies, she attempts to be like a man in order to be manly, the strength needed to gain additional social status as royalty. She appears very influential in her planning, and instigates her husband, when and how to kill King Duncan. She chides her husband for the procrastinating behavior, and ultimately fulfills his ambitions of killing the King.

"Macbeth is done upon a stronger and more symptomatic principle of contrast than any other of Shakespeare's plays...The whole play is an unruly chaos of strange and forbidden thing, where the ground rocks under our feet. Shakespeare's genius here took its full swing, and trod upon the farthest bounds of nature and passion."

(William Hazlith, characters of Shakespeare's plays) :

Hamlet, Macbeth. Othello and King Lear forms the great tragic quartet of Shakespeare's. Hamlet also treats the problems of regicide. It differs from Macbeth that it focuses from the stand point of the arrogates, not the dispossessed. Othello is similar to Macbeth in the context of strong husband-wife relationship based on mutual trust. Lady Macbeth is also a complex and frightening woman, yet like Madame Defarge in Dicken's A tale of two cities. Macbeth, the shortest of Shakespeare's tragedies, achieves its intensity by eliminating subplots, inessential character, focusing entirely on the regicide's ruinous aftermath on husband and wife. The difference between Macbeth, and other heroes in Shakespeare's tragedies is, that he is a villain. Hamlet is innocent. Othello is done by Iago's, machination and King Lear is an egoist. But Macbeth knowingly chooses evil and becomes dehumanized in the process. He treats Duncan's murder from the killer's perspective, thus anticipating the psychological dissection and guilt ridden expressions as employed by Fyoder Dostoevsky in Crime and Punishment. According to the critic Harold Bloom, Macbeth's protagonist culminates in the series of Shakespeare's grand negations: Richard III, Iago, Edmund, and Macbeth. Macbeth is a man who succumbs to evil and obliterates the humanity that he is compelled to suppress. He is the author's greatest psychological portrait of self destruction and evil.

Macbeth's plot elements are based on Holinshed's Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland (1587). The eerie sets the tone of moral ambiguity from the plays start, the three witches greeting Macbeth 'when the battle's lost and won' in a world in which 'fair is foul and foul is fair.' Fair being honour, nobility, duty and the foul being rank, ambition and bloody murder. Throughout the play nature reflects the disorder and violence of the action. Like Hamlet's ghost in Hamlet, the weird sisters are left purposefully ambiguous and problematic.

Macbeth and his wife decides Duncan's murder but still now, Macbeth is conscience stricken, thereby deciding to delay or prevent the murder. It is only through lady Macbeth's instigation, that the act is done. Conscience gnaws him making him feel guilt struck in the form of unforgettable sighs and haunting sounds. His speech after the discovery of the Duncan's murder.

"had i but died an hour before this chance

I had lived a blessed time, for, from this instance

There is nothing serious in mortality,

All is but toys: renown, and grace, is dead" and

"present fears,

Are less than horrible imaginings"

Macbeth, by his considerable intellectual and imaginative capacity understands what he knows to be true and right and his opposed devices and the frightful consequences. Macbeth's "spur" comes in the form of his wife who plays on her husband's self image of courage, virility to commit to the murder.

Most of the Shakespearean plays have two worlds - outer action (violence and treachery) and the inner world (ambitions and moral reasoning). Macbeth's first promotion, at the play's beginning- is gained through a sanctioned violence of killing traitors. There is a fragile movement at the beginning of the play, when the violence seems to have restored order. Ironically, Macbeth, whom his wife feared to be "too full of the milk of human kindness, to catch the nearest way" displays the same cold calculations that frightened him about his wife while lady Macbeth succumbs psychically to her own horrible imaginings. The blood in her tormented conscience that formerly could be removed with a little water is now a permanent noxious stain in which "All the perfume of Arabia will not sweeten" Macbeth reveals himself as an emotional and moral void. For Macbeth, life has lost all meaning, reflected in the following immortal lines.

"Tomorrow and tomorrow, and tomorrow Creeps in this petty pace from day to day To the last syllable of recorded time,

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools

The way to dusty death. Out, out brief candle life's but a walking shadow, a poor player

That struts and frets his hour upon the stage.

And then is heard no more. It is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing."

Time and the world that Macbeth aspired to rule are now empty and futile, employing the quoted metaphor as life being played by a poor player - and the player plays the role in life that is essentially pointless, melodramatic and futile.

Though incidentally connected with the vital action in the play, the witches play a very important role in the play, greatly contributing to the weirdness of the play. Through their simplicity and coarseness, they contribute to the spirit of the play. Shakespeare's Macbeth, from its very beginning, continuous under their evil shadow. This shadow ends with Macduff's entry with 'the usurper's cursed head.' The magnificence of Macbeth lies in the strange atmosphere created, attributed to the presence of the witches.

Soliloquy is a kind of "dialogue with the self" meaning speaking while one is alone. When a character, alone on the stage, is speaking aloud he is making a Soliloquy. Macbeth's asides after hearing the prophesies are in fact Soliloquies that amply reveal the secret going on in his mind and expose his character. The Soliloquies in Macbeth, as those in other Shakespearean play Macbeth function as an effective dramatic instrument of

illuminating characters and conflict, for accelerating the action, and for the evolution of its intended atmosphere.

Shakespeare's plays is unsettling, providing a thought experiment, teasing out the moral ambiguities of a society whose members see others in black and white, while permitting shadows of grey in themselves. A society which punishes treachery with sanctioned violence, but in which ambition paves the way to reach power via violence and treachery. It is the kingdom of Scotland riven by contending clans. It is England of 1606 reeling from the discovery of Gun Powder plot. It is our world of perpetual crisis. Crisis appeals to the human imagination because it offers to suspend the rules by which we normally operate. Crisis can, as Macbeth shows, make moral compromises appeal as "the nearest way" to increased power. It can make brutal measures seem necessary to retain it. Macbeth issues a warning for our times about the harm done to individuals and societies when they allow the will for power to drown out the inner voice of conscience.

The play concludes with order restored to Scotland, Macduff presenting Macbeth's severed head to Malcolm, the latter being hailed as a King. Malcolm may assent his control and diminish Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as "this dead butcher and his fiend like queen", but we know more than that. We know what Malcolm does not, that it will not be his loyal line but Banquo's that will eventually rule Scotland, and inevitably another round of rebellion and murder is to come. We also know in horrifying human terms the making of a butcher and a fiend who refuse to be so easily dismissed as aberrations.

References

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