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GRT MACBETH'S TRAGIC FLAW AND THE CAUSES OF HIS DISASTER



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Abstract: The play Macbeth is a fine example for failure which is caused by several agencies namely tragic flaw of the hero, fate, chance and accident, the ethos of the culture and in a way hero himself is responsible for his fall. The article examines how all these forces, within Macbeth and outside Macbeth, work against him and make him taste and succumb to failure.

The "Jonah" of the theatre, as the play is called, depicts how Macbeth expatiates upon what he cannot cease from doing. His partner in crime and life, Lady Macbeth is peerless alike in triumph and in defeat. The present article is also a study in knowing how Lady Macbeth, being the stronger partner in the beginning becomes weak later and Macbeth, weaker partner in the beginning becomes strong at the end and how it brings a change in their lives.

Keywords: Macbeth's Tragic , accident , Lady Macbeth , Tragic Flaw.

INTRODUCTION:

Normally, in any tragedy, the protagonist suffers because of a malicious villain and/or a small judgment of error on his part. The protagonist doesn't deserve the punishment he gets. So the audience pity him. But in Macbeth, Macbeth and his wife themselves are villains. They fully deserve the punishment they get. Actually, we should not pity them because of their villainy. Still we pity them because self preservation is common in all living things. There is no greatness in trying to preserve one's life. Thomas De Quincey in his essay "On Knocking at the Gate in Macbeth" says,

"This instinct (the instinct of self preservation) . . . Exhibits human nature in its most abject and humiliating attitude" So Shakespeare makes us see into the feelings, emotions, and mental suffering of Macbeths so that we experience pity and fear for them. De Quincey continues,

"The writer must throw the interest on the murderer. Our sympathy must be with him. . . in the murdered person, all strife of thought, all flux and reflux of passion and of purpose, are crushed by one overwhelming panic; the fear of instant death smites him with its petrific mace. But in the murderer, such a murderer as a poet will condescend to, there must be raging some great storm of passion-jealousy, ambition, vengeance, hatred – which will create a hell within him; and into this hell we are to look."²

Natural calamity kills people but people don't find fault with it because they accept that it is law of nature. For nature there is no right and wrong, "Fair is foul, and foul is fair"³. Similarly audience don't get angry with Macbeth because he is like a natural calamity. So we pity him even though he deserves his punishment.

Tragedy is one of many human efforts to explore the

problem of evil. And it is typical of tragedy to explore questions rather than to propound answers: if sermons explain evil in the declarative mood and legal statutes prohibit evil in the imperative mood, tragedy is an interrogative genre, full of questions. One question it nearly always asks is 'why?' Tragedy's central question is the one that often springs to people's lips when any terrible event occurs: why did this have to happen? So we are going to observe carefully why Macbeth fails.

CAUSES OF HIS DISASTER

Tragic Flaw

Tragic flaw is something in the tragic hero's character which accounts for the terrible things that happen to him. In ancient Greek, it was known as 'hamartia', a mistake in judgement leading to calamity and 'hubris', some outstanding quality or conspicuous behaviour that brings one to the attention of the jealous gods, who are thereby provoked to inflict disaster.

As for a tragic flaw, Macbeth is ambitious. Even before the witches spoke to Macbeth, he and his wife were brooding over the concept of usurping the throne. It looks as though what the witches profess is only the outside manifestation of Macbeths' inner self. By hook or crook they wanted to become king and queen. When they got a chance to kill the king Duncan, both of them suffer in their hearts but because of their ambition, they move forward. "Macbeth is "a peerless kinsman" "too full of the milk of human kindness", but he is possessed of "black and deep desires" that lead him to destruction."⁴

Macbeth's face and actions exhibit what is happening in his mind so Lady Macbeth tries to counsel him and hide his face from others.

Macbeth is abnormally imaginative and sensitive, for a murderer. He shows everything in his face. 'Why do you make such faces?' (3.4.66) demands his wife 'Your face is a book where men / May read strange matters', She tells him, advising him instead to 'Look like the innocent flower./But be the serpent under't' (1.5.60-4). And she continues, "'Tis safer to be that which we destroy/Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy/.....Things without all remedy/Should be without regard. What's done is done.'"⁵

Macbeth suffers for a crime before he even commits it, because he imagines it so thoroughly. Even a hideous reality disturbs him less than do 'horrible imaginings' and although murder is as yet only a fantasy, it shakes his psyche to the foundations, until he can no longer distinguish between fantasy and reality: 'Nothing is/But what is not' (1.3.134-41). For Macbeth imagination becomes more real than reality itself.

Lady Macbeth is less imaginative and doesn't start suffering until after a crime; but she is fully as sensitive as Macbeth. The fatal combination of lack of imaginative foresight and hypersensitive visual memory drive her to insanity and suicide.

Villains

Tragic disaster is brought not only by flawed heroes but also by villains like Iago and Claudius. Deliberate villainy and human malice often work against the protagonist. Sometimes rather than being particularized in one villain, human malice is distributed among members of a group. Villains are normally part of the 'outside forces' against which a hero contends.

In this tragedy Shakespeare collapses the villain role into the protagonist role. The Macbeths are villains-as-heroes. Macbeth is the clearest example of a Shakespearian departure from Aristotle's dictum that tragedy involves unmerited misfortune, since the Macbeths fully deserve their misery.

"The murderers are taken out of the region of human things, human purposes, human desires. They are transfigured: Lady Macbeth is unsexed; Macbeth has forgot that he was born of woman; both are conformed to the image of devils; and the world of devils is suddenly revealed."⁷

By putting them in the role of tragic heroes, Shakespeare seems to invite us to sympathize with them, guilty or not. Unlike a murder mystery, in which we see through the eyes of the law, here we view crime through the criminal's eyes, with a corresponding demand put upon us to understand how those criminals feel.

Fate

Another cause of disaster in tragedies is Fate. Under fate we can have the issues of the gods, the stars, the Goddess Fortune, chance and accident. All these forces are beyond the protagonist's control. In fact, the original meaning of 'disaster' was 'under the malign influence of the stars'. Today we have different notions of deterministic forces outside a person's control-the class system, global capitalism, oppressive governments, even a capricious stock market that can make or break an individual.

Though Macbeths are criminals, we can't heap all

blame on the Macbeths. Outside forces are at work as well, in forging the evil of the play. The three witches bring the Three Fates to mind. They may just be malicious old women, or they may be 'the goddesses of destiny'. Shakespeare often calls them the weird sisters, and 'weird' comes from the Anglo-Saxon 'Wyrð', meaning Fate. The presence of these supernatural agents in the play still suggests a complex interaction between human agency and a malign destiny.

Chance and Accident

Chance and accident, too, are pervasive in tragedy, and often seem to play into the hands either of human villains or an evil destiny. Soon after the witches tell Macbeth that he is going to be appointed as the Thane of Cawdor, immediately the message reaches him that he is appointed as the Thane of Cawdor. By chance it happens immediately. Similarly soon after the conspiring the plan to kill Duncan, he offers to come for supper which also happens by chance and so Macbeths are forced to take the advantage of the situation.

The Ethos of Protagonist's Culture

The ethos of a protagonist's culture might work against him. It may offer hostile elements. The culture of Macbeths valorizes violence and ambition over human values. Between the evil gore of murder and the good gore of battle described so graphically in the opening scenes there is a very fine line: the latter in some ways seems merely to set the stage for the former.

The concepts 'manliness' and being a 'man' have got a peculiar meaning in the culture of Macbeths. The play destabilizes simplistic thinking about men and women or about 'masculine' or 'feminine' character traits. Macbeth himself challenges Lady Macbeth's definition of manliness as innately violent, ambitious and murderous; he argues that gentleness and compassion are basic human values, not flaws of the effeminate. She taunts him, 'When you durst do it,/Then you were a man'. And tempts him with the prospect of becoming, if he murders the king, 'So much more the man'⁸ (1.7.49-51).

When Macduff is advised to 'let grief/ convert to anger', to sing a 'manly' tune by committing himself to revenge, he agrees that he must 'dispute it like a man', however, he insists, 'I must also feel it as a man', emotion, tears, are again not 'feminine' but human.

Heroes themselves are responsible for their fall

Aristotle thought that we cannot sympathize with a tragic hero who is an outright criminal. "Aristotle says that the tragic hero will most effectively evoke both our pity and terror if he is neither thoroughly good nor thoroughly bad but a mixture of both; and also that this tragic effect will be stronger if the hero is "better than we are", in the sense that he is of higher than ordinary moral worth."⁹

But Shakespeare thought that the audience can sympathize with a tragic hero who is a criminal. In Macbeth, he has villains as heroes. The Macbeths fully deserve their tragedy. It is the Macbeths who conspire and commit the sin of regicide. Macduff's wife and children are slaughtered by Macbeth and Banquo is unnecessarily killed by him because he is afraid that his children would take over the throne.

Both the Macbeths, like other tragic heroes, possess strongly individualized characters. Lady Macbeth displays a unique blend of murderous toughness, delicate squeamishness, and fear of her own tenderness. Macbeth possesses a complex individuality, suffering for a deed before he even does it, imagining actions in such vivid pictorial detail that it often verges on hallucination. Macbeth's senses are abnormally vigilant.

Lady Macbeth, initially the stronger partner, who pushes her husband to action, and holds him together when he keeps threatening to crack, ultimately breaks down first, driven to madness and probable suicide by nightmares in which she relives the murder. In a trance she says,

"Here's the smell of the blood still. All the
Perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this
Little hand"¹⁰

And that preternaturally sensitive man Macbeth grows brutalized, hardened almost beyond recognition. In the beginning he says,

"Let not light see my black and deep desires;
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see."¹¹

The man who once stared aghast at his murdered king's blood upon his hands now confesses he has 'almost forgot the taste of fears' (5.5.9). Now horror is merely 'familiar' amidst his 'slaughterous thoughts'. He can hardly even respond when he learns that the women are crying at the death of his wife: 'she should have died hereafter./There would have been a time for such a word.' (5.5.16-17) and he starts speaking about what is life as a philosopher. He says,

"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."¹²

The horror of their own deeds which destroys their individual personalities also destroys their marriage. The Macbeths, ironically one of the most close-knit of Shakespeare's married couples as the play begins, find that one of crime's lessons is that partners can't stay together in it. Macbeth doesn't tell Lady Macbeth about his plan to murder Banquo and Fleance: 'Be innocent of the knowledge, dearest chuck, /Till thou applaud the deed' 13 (3.2.46-7).

Nor does he consult her on his barbaric plan to exterminate Macduff's wife, children and servants; we are left to infer that she identifies with this poor murdered wife, as she murmurs in her sleep, 'the thane of Fife had a wife. Where is she now?' 14 (5.1.36-7)

CONCLUSION

Macbeth is among the best-known of William Shakespeare's plays, and is his shortest tragedy. Shakespeare uses Macbeth to show the terrible effects that ambition and guilt can have on a man who lacks strength of

character. The prediction that he will be king brings him joy, but it also creates inner turmoil. These three attributes—bravery, ambition, and self-doubt—struggle for mastery of Macbeth throughout the play. Macbeth has not a predisposition to murder; he has merely an inordinate ambition that makes murder itself seem to be a lesser evil than failure to achieve the crown.

We may classify Macbeth as irrevocably evil, but his weak character separates him from Shakespeare's great villains—Iago in Othello, Richard III in Richard III, Edmund in King Lear—who are all strong enough to conquer guilt and self-doubt. Macbeth, great warrior though he is, is ill equipped for the psychic consequences of crime. And so he fails.

Having known the reasons of Macbeth's failure, one can be careful in setting one's goals. One should be aware whether he deserves what he is aiming for. Shakespeare shows very clearly that it is justice and goodness that wins at the end. So one has to be aware of the means of his ends. If the means are immoral and bloody, surely he cannot reap the fruits of his labour.

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