

A Note on the Character of Macbeth

Arpan Adhikary

(Assistant Professor in English, Government General Degree College at Kaliganj, Nadia, W.B.)

By virtue of Shakespeare's nuanced character-portrayal, the eponymous protagonist of *The Tragedy of Macbeth* both embodies and manifests multifarious ethical and aesthetic paradoxes. As long as the historical account provided by Raphael Holinshed in his *Chronicles of England, Scotland and Ireland* (1577) is concerned, there is no denying of the villainous treachery of Macbeth. Shakespeare too primarily complies with Holinshed's account by depicting the protagonist of his play as a criminal who commits regicide and successively assassinates several innocent people like Banquo and Lady Macduff in an attempt to conceal his initial crime. While depicting Macbeth's villainy, the Bard not only deviates from the Aristotelian norms of tragedy by exhibiting Macbeth's '*hamartia*' or tragic error as a conscious and deliberate choice with his full awareness of its moral and legal consequences, but also distorts history by presenting Macbeth as a complete tyrant under whose reign Scotland "sinks beneath the yoke;/ It weeps, it bleeds, and each new day a gash/ Is added to her wounds." However, despite having thus problematized the attribution of the status of tragic hero on Macbeth, in the course of the play Shakespeare subtly foregrounds the protagonist's heroic attributes that survive the acid test of his villainy and underscore the profound dialectics of human nature.

Unlike the Aeschylian, Euripidean and Sophoclean tragic heroes, Macbeth is by no means a victim of the adversity of Fate; nor does he have any '*hubris*' in the Aristotelian sense of the term. Being a shrewd judge of himself, even at the moments of bewilderment and quandary Macbeth does not lose his sense of rationality with which he measures his capabilities and foibles. Though tempted, Macbeth is not fully won over by the ambiguous prophecy of the witches as he acknowledges, "This supernatural soliciting/ Cannot be ill, cannot be good." With this awareness, he realizes the ethical neutrality of the prophecy and his own moral responsibility in implementing the same. Never for a moment does he try to shirk the responsibility of his own choice of "the primrose way to th'everlasting bonfire." Macbeth's unflinching commitment to his moral responsibility attributes upon him a certain heroic dignity notwithstanding his unheroic criminality.

The ethical dichotomy of Macbeth's character is nicely summarized by Lady Macbeth when she describes her husband as one who "wouldst not play false,/ And yet wouldst wrongly win", and one who is "too full o'th'milk of human kindness/ To catch the nearest way." Macbeth himself is also aware of this dialectical nature of his, and it is what complicates his character all the more resisting easy categorization. It is worth noticing that Macbeth's criminal instinct always at war with his moral integrity, and the constant clash between his moral and instinctive selves destabilizes him, so much so that the mere "suggestion" of the "horrid image" of regicide frightens the valiant soldier who can create "strange images of death" in the battlefield. The thought of such a heinous crime shakes his

“single state of man” causing his “function” to be stifled by frightened speculation. The fusion of his moral cowardice and indomitable criminal instinct is made more explicit when, before going to murder King Duncan, Macbeth says: “The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be/ Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.” After the assassination, the moral coward in Macbeth tries in vain to alienate himself from his crime by saying “To know my deed ‘twere nest not know myself”. It is the agonizing futility of his effort to reconcile the innate dichotomy of his character that endows Macbeth with the stature of a tragic protagonist.

Tormented by unbearable anxiety and mortification, Macbeth tries to distance his moral self from the criminal one, but neither does he forget his responsibility for his deeds, nor does he turn a blind eye to the inevitability of his downfall. His pragmatic acceptance of the consequences of his deeds certainly has a heroic quality. In his first soliloquy Macbeth considers both the mundane and the afterlife consequences of the crime he is about to commit, but finally succumbs to, while anticipating the failure of, his “Vaulting Ambition, which o’erleaps itself/ And falls on th’other”. His awareness of the nature of his ambition as well as of the human inefficacy in controlling such reckless aspiration, and its probable outcome elevates his personality well above that of a petty murderer. After the discovery of the regicide, Macbeth hypocritically says, “Had I but died an hour before this chance,/ I had lived a blessed time”; but this statement has a strong ironical undertone, and taking into consideration his earlier dilemma, this sounds like an honest, unambiguous confession from a sinner who has realized the gravity of his sin. Towards the end of his life, he realizes more painfully that in his old age he is justly devoid of “honour, love, obedience, troops of friends” and is surrounded only by self-invited falsities and adversities that make life seem “a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/ Signifying nothing.” Such stoical realization of the absurdity of human condition adds to Macbeth’s character a philosophical profundity rare among conventional tragic heroes. His real battle is within his own psyche, between his two selves – the criminal and the philosophical; and it is his painful and conscious endurance of the struggle, and calm acceptance of the failure therein that bear testimony his heroic prowess.

-
- ❖ Students are advised to study the text thoroughly and to consult authentic reference books and articles for better comprehension, and not to memorize this study material blindly.
 - ❖ Any kind of unfair use, adaptation or circulation of this study material is strictly prohibited.
-