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MACBETH AND HIS PROBLEMS

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ABSTRACT

There are two opposed worlds in "Macbeth"— rational and irrational. Macbeth's tragedy begins when he begins to apply the standards of the irrational world in the rational one where he lives. The rational world is marked by complexities, uncertainties and inter-dependences of events. Heroism, in this world, consists in confronting these. The irrational world is characterized by simplicities, certainties and isolation of events. Macbeth loses his heroism and becomes fear-stricken when, undeservingly, he acquires certain knowledge about a few unrelated events of his future life. Having tasted "certainty" of the irrational world, Macbeth becomes more and more troubled by the uncertainties of the rational world and his fear is aggravated and heroism disappears more and more. He turns out to be a divided personality as he lives in one world and abides by another. His reason and imagination don't work as parts of a unified sensibility. Imagination makes him more frightened and less heroic. He regains his long-lost heroism only in the end fighting against fear and with a complete realization of his errors.

Keywords: Rational, irrational, uncertainty, heroism, fear, imagination

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INTRODUCTION

"Most heterogeneous ideas were yoked by violence together" (Johnson, 18) in Macbeth's mind and they didn't proceed towards resolving the contradictions and, thereby, towards forming any united whole—good or bad, positive or negative, fair or foul. Macbeth's receptive consciousness accumulated these mutually exclusive ideas from two entirely different worlds quite opposed to each other. Thus comprehension of these two worlds is a pre-requisite for penetrating into Macbeth's mind, his problems and his tragedy.

The Two Worlds

For our convenience let us term these two worlds as "the rational world" and "the irrational world". Duncan, Macbeth, Macduff and the other Scottish characters live in the first and Hecate, the three witches, Graymalkin and Paddock are the dwellers of the second. The course of life in the first, that is, the rational world, is complex, varied and marked by uncertainties and human heroism here consists in confronting these complexities, varieties and uncertainties. Macbeth's prowess and dauntlessness exhibited in the battlefield is

emphasized time and again and others endow him with honour of a warrior primarily because dauntless he admirably confronts the physical uncertainties of the battleground. Thus, in the rational world, the worth of humanity lies in such courageous confrontations with all sorts of odds and uncertainties_ courage in both physical and spiritual senses.

But, in the irrational world inhabited by the witches, things are certain, undisturbed, simple, regular and monotonous. They promise to meet each other after the struggles and uncertainties of the rational world get over.

First witch: when shall we meet again?

In thunder, lightening, or in rain?

Second Witch: When the hurly-burly's done

When the battle's lost and won. (Alexander, 999)

Unlike Banquo or Macbeth, they are all certain about the time or place of their appointment. The certainty of "Fair is foul and foul is fair" (Alexander, 999) is immediately opposed by the uncertainty and ambiguity of Macbeth's "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (Alexander, 1000). For the witches, "fair" replaces "foul" and "foul" does "fair" whereas for Macbeth "foul" and "fair" are juxtaposed and one cannot be distinguished from the other. Thus the witches "can look into the seeds of time" (Alexander, 1001) _ it doesn't matter whether the seeds are precious or worthless, beneficial or troubling. These agencies of the nether world look into three specific points of time in Macbeth's life and would speak no further.

The Tragic Implications of the Intervention of the Irrational World

The interception of Macbeth's correspondence with life and the world around him by the ideas, values, and knowledge of the irrational world was fatal to him. It was fatal at least in two ways _first; he arrived at the knowledge of a few random and isolated facts about his future and this gain of him is without pain, without labour and struggle which means that he doesn't deserve this knowledge according to the standards of the rational world where he lives. This undeserved knowledge makes a coward of Macbeth as this knowledge replaces what is heroic in life, that is, to fight against and live with the uncertainties of life. Secondly, from this moment onward, therefore, Macbeth is discomfited with any sort of uncertainties_ physical, mental, psychic or whatsoever. From this moment of surrendering to the standards of the irrational world of the witches, Macbeth would continue to be haunted by a fear for uncertainty from which he would recover and regain his warrior-honour only in the end.

Aggravation of Tragedy

But, the matters would not stop here. Once the prophesies of the witches are taken seriously, a number of problems pop up for Macbeth who lives in the rational world of uncertainties. For the witches, the prophesies are enough, but the rational human world demands more. In this world, things are interconnected and over-determined by one another, one issue giving way to so many others. Nothing, even the prophesies, can stand here in isolation; here the gaps are sought to be filled in; life is a continuous and complicated process here giving rise to all sorts of permutations and combinations. The witches' isolated prophesies are, therefore, regarded in this world as "imperfect speaking". "Stop thou imperfect speakers" (Alexander, 1001)_Macbeth said. But, the imperfect speakers would not stay precisely because they are not troubled by such imperfection of speaking.

But, Macbeth is troubled. He realizes that his life is not a simple summation of three incidents suggested by the three prophesies, nor the incidents themselves can stand independent of other issues of this world_ moral, ethical, spiritual, political and so on and so forth. Thus the contesting standards of these two opposed worlds wage a dubious war in Macbeth's mind the consequence of which is uncertain:

"This supernatural soliciting

Cannot be good, cannot be ill." (Alexander, 1002)

Not that Macbeth is intellectually unaware of this uncertainty. Yet he appears innocent of the root cause of this uncertainty and truly does not possess enough courage to confront this uncertainty. His imaginations are only "horrible imaginings" (Alexander, 1002). His imagination and intellect don't form parts of an integrated

consciousness; his divided aims and contradictory values cannot conceive any unification of sensibilities and this explains why he can't arrive at any well-defined, well-constructed resolution. "Most heterogeneous ideas were yoked by violence together" and this leaves him incapable of becoming either a Santiago or an Iago, making him all the more universal and all the more tragic.

Thwarting the Means of Deflecting Tragedy

Yet, Macbeth had potentialities to deflect tragedy by devising better resolution and realizing them. For achieving this, the best way in the rational world is to hold deliberations based on reason. The prophesies of the witches are no outcomes of such rational deliberations; "They can look into the seeds of time" not as the results of any application of reason and deliberation. Macbeth's discussion with himself is not rational, rather imaginative and haunted by fear. Two times he sought discussions with his fellow humans_ once with Banquo and once with Lady Macbeth. But, he and Banquo failed to open their "free hearts to each other" (Alexander, 1002) and Lady Macbeth also intrudes violently on his "we will speak further" (Alexander, 1004) and terminates the required deliberation. Thus, Macbeth's hamartia lies in his inability to listen to the voice of reason and conscience while he gives ear to the "imperfect speaking". Hence his downfall.

Irrational Fear

Now Macbeth turns into a fear-stricken man_ a man horrified by the uncertainties of life. What is more, so succumbed is he to the irrationalities of the world of the witches that he begins to be frightened by even certainties predicted in favour of Banquo by the "imperfect speakers". Already infected by irrationalities, Macbeth now loses all rational abilities for seeing into the heart of things. He, who once trusted and was guided by the prophesies, now attempts to thwart the prophesies that spoke well of Banquo and his posterity. His irrational and fear-stricken reasoning suggested to him that the only way left for Banquo's posterity to rule is to slaughter him. Therefore, he plots the murder of Banquo and his son_ an attempt to make ineffectual the very prophesies which made him ambitious and by dint of which he hopes to thrive.

Imagination's Push towards Irrationality

A. C. Bradley is in the wrong when he says, "His imagination is thus the best of him, something usually deeper and higher than his conscious thoughts; and if he had obeyed it he would have been safe", (Bradley, 292.) while actually it is the most troubling part. His excessive, boundless imagination dissociated from his intellect and reason, always fortifies his fear, senses of perplexity and bewilderment. His imagination always gives birth to horrible hallucinations like the "dagger" and the ghost of Banquo which guide him to irrational actions_ the first shoved him into Duncan's chamber and the second impelled him to visit the irrational world of the witches once more. Or, it engages him in poetic exaggerations like "will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?" (Alexander, 1007) which aggravates his fear, makes him nervous, mars his clear-sightedness and, above all, slackens his rational thought which is the only solution to his dilemma. Thus, instead of being a unifying faculty in him, imagination clouds the possibility of such unification between itself and his rational faculty.

Revisiting the Witches

At this juncture, Macbeth goes to the witches once more. His mind is comparable to the witches' cauldron_ like the ingredients of the cauldron the elements of Macbeth's mind are also in a chaotic and disordered state. But, Macbeth doesn't possess the negative capability of being in uncertainties and in disorder. So, he goes to the witches "to know by the worst means, the worst." (Alexander, 1014) He is told that he is right in fearing Macduff. He is told to fear nothing as none of woman-born can harm him. Macbeth feels that these two statements are at variance with each other but he, infatuated with the promises, suspects no double meaning. How can he? He is now out of the territory of reason. The old, obsessive, irrational thought makes a return to him_ "For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind?" (Alexander, 1011) and so, in spite of all securities promised to him, there returns his inward, tormenting fear.

Another Irrational Act

But, what is there behind Macbeth's decision to kill Macduff's wife and children? Fear? He had cause enough to fear Macduff, and Macduff alone. Then what on earth is the justification for the murder of "his wife,

his babes and all unfortunate souls/ that trace him in his line"? (Alexander, 1017) The only explanation left with us is that this is an act by one who is guided by irrationality and, of course, by vengeance which is yet another form of irrationality. The Macbeth-medium facilitates the irrational, unnatural world to break into the natural, domestic world, and to disturb, disrupt and destroy it.

His Realisation

Towards the end, Macbeth realizes the futility of his power, position and imperial glory which he found impossible to enjoy and which he could not really possess in the real sense of the term. It dawns to his agonized mind that the homely life in the rational world comprising of "honour, love, obedience and troops of friends" (Alexander, 1023) recedes from him never to come back. Not that he doesn't know that this happens because of his unheroic fear for the uncertainties and undue yearning for the certainties. Thus his adherence to the standards of the irrational world pushed him away from the rational one and his realization of this truth, in turn, alienated him from the irrational world too. This loss of both these worlds made Macbeth highly tragic. Now dies Lady Macbeth and with her die all Macbeth's hopes for domestic happiness. Incapable of reacting normally to this loss, he realizes that he has no right to grieve for any loss as he is no "possessor" of anything in the actual sense of the term. A possessor has every right to lament over the loss of what he possesses. But, what is there for Macbeth to lament over?

But, at this very moment of his bankruptcy, Macbeth appears to be philosophically pathetic and pathetically sublime. He longs for his wife's death on a later date, possibly, in order that his wife can witness his last battle in life_battle where he expects to win over his fear and emerge heroic. He anticipates his own death but counts himself insignificant_one who shrank from playing his role as it was expected of him_a poor player is he! He evaluated his own life as a "tale told by an idiot" (Alexander, 1025) since like a foolish story-teller, he also fails to make his life an artistic whole unifying all diffused and disparate elements and resolving all its contradictions; like an idiot's tale his life is also far from being well-knit, it also doesn't have that well-defined moral and artistic aim and purpose which is the hallmark of a well-constructed story.

Restoration of Macbeth's Heroism

But, before drawing his final breath, Macbeth needs to restore his earlier honour of a warrior. This he can do fighting against his arch-enemy, that is, fear_fear for the uncertainties. "Supped full with horrors" (Alexander, 1024) he is now vehemently marshalling against it. "Hang those that talk of fear" (Alexander, 1023)-he commands. Again:

"The mind I sway by and the heart I bear

Shall never sag with doubt nor shake with fear." (Alexander, 1023)

This reawakened courage slackens its grip again for a moment when Macbeth learns that Macduff is not woman-born. But, his fear doesn't take time to disappear; soon Macbeth recaptures his courage, and begins his bold, final fight and dies heroic. Cleanth Brooks is right to assert that in this final human defiance of fate, Macbeth is truly tragic. "For it is not merely his great imagination and his warrior courage in defeat which redeem him for tragedy...rather, it is his attempt to conquer the future, an attempt involving him, like Oedipus, in a desperate struggle with fate itself." (Brooks, 39)

Conclusion

Macbeth, then, will always remain a great tragic character of world literature by virtue of his restoration of human dignity at all levels_physical, moral, spiritual. Only for the time being his heroism was eclipsed as a consequence of his temporary failure to overcome fear, his surrender to the calls of the irrational world and his failure to arrive at well-defined, heroic decisions. Here lies his greatness; a lesser man would have found it impossible to recover like him after having been subjected to the contradictory experiences of the two opposed worlds. Caroline Spurgeon's analysis of the concerned dress-imagery in Macbeth is misleading. She identifies Macbeth with an insignificant, ignoble personality "encumbered and degraded by garment unsuited to him" (Spurgeon, 326), his new titles being "a giant's robe upon a dwarfish thief." (Alexander, 1023) But, this comment is of Angus, Macbeth's enemy, who can't delve deeper into Macbeth's potentialities and spiritual sublimities. Angus, and Mrs Spurgeon, who sees through the eyes of Angus, find

Duncan "a giant" who, according to them, is far greater than Macbeth,. But, how can Duncan and the others do, know, experience and realize what Macbeth does, knows, experiences and realizes?

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