

# **Character of Macbeth/ Is Macbeth a Villain or a Hero? / Is Macbeth more Sinned against than Sinning Himself?**

[BA (Hons.), Part-2, Paper-III]

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Ever since the conception of the phrase ‘more sinned against than sinning’ by Shakespeare, the judgement of a tragic hero in its light has become a convention. And whereas most of the tragic heroes have received appraisals in favour of this phrase, it is Macbeth who, with his almost Satanically contradictory qualities, leaves the audience with a peculiar impression of being both a villain and a hero, both the sinner and the sinned against. In the play itself, Macbeth calls him ‘Great tyranny’ and ‘hell-hound’, and, at the same time, others are high in praise of him! The chief reason behind these contradictions in the play itself is that the playwright has wanted to see his Macbeth rather as, to use E.M. Forster, a ‘round’ character, neither too good nor too bad, neither saintly or beastly, an Aristotelian ‘intermediate kind of personage’. The effect is that the audience’s sympathy for Macbeth rises to fall, and falls to rise again.

Macbeth, at the very outset, is rather ‘preeminently virtuous and just’ (*Poetics*, Aristotle), a cynosure of all eyes and in ‘golden opinions’ of everyone. The Captain calls him ‘brave Macbeth’, ‘Valour’s Minion’, ‘Bellona’s bridegroom’, a skilled general fighting in the

king's cause. Even the King is in all praises for this 'peerless kinsman', 'the worthiest cousin' of his, and exclaims, 'in his commendations I am fed'. But the most familiar and closet of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth throws the brightest light on the inner being of this valiant person who reveals in painting 'strange images of death'. This man is rather 'too full of the milk of human kindness/ To catch the nearest way', i.e., his very nature is an impediment to any murderous design.

It is Lady Macbeth who first sheds light on the highly vacillating nature of Macbeth, a being torn dreadful thing/ And the first motion', comes 'a phantasma or a hideous dream'. In the battle between the serpentine desires and flowery means, the latter has always triumphed, and that is why now the Witches' prophecy lands him into a terrible moral dilemma. His 'function/Is smothered in surmise', the 'horrid image 'of regicide 'doth unfix [his] hair' and 'his single state of man' is shaken. He is torn between whether he should guard the king and his quest as the latter's subject and kinsman or bear the knife himself. Ultimately he finds that his ambition is a mere 'Vaulting ambition which o'erleaps itself/ And fall on the other. He decides, 'We will proceed no further in this business.'

Yet, Macbeth is spurred on towards murder, and not by any inner drive, but with the inciting of external agencies. The Witches only harped his latent ambition of kingship and his forgotten design of murdering the king. That Macbeth harboured this secret ambition and design in the past is evident in his immediate raptness in himself at the Witches' prophecy. He has already decided for assassination when Malcolm is announced the crown prince. 'Stars, hide your fires,' he says, intending the murder at night. Yet, he intends the murder only to shrink the intention. Lady Macbeth also exhorts him by saying that he was 'more than man' in harbouring the 'enterprise', but 'Not time, nor place/Did then adhere, and [he] would make both'.

**....To be continued...**