

Use of Irony in *Macbeth* (Part-1)

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

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Derived from the Greek word *ieron*, meaning 'dissembler', irony refers to the dissembling of the intended meaning behind the visible one. Shakespeare has extensively used this literary device to achieve special effect in his *Macbeth*. 'I know no other tragedy that so teems with these peculiar whispers (as I call them) of reminiscent irony,' says Arthur Quiller-Couch in *Shakespeare's Workmanship* while making comments on the extensive use of irony in retrospect in *Macbeth*. But, though the play is replete with irony of this kind, Shakespeare has also made certain use of verbal irony here. In the play some characters are deliberately ironical, making veiled hints of some attitude, thereby giving rise to verbal irony. Also, the playwright himself shares some knowledge of the past, present or the future with the audience, of which the characters are ignorant, thus giving rise to tragic irony.

Verbal irony or rhetorical irony, as in the famous Forum speech of Antony in *Julius Caesar*, is used in *Macbeth* extensively in only one scene, i.e., the semi-choric Act III, Scene VI, where Lennox speaks to another Lord over the state of affairs after suspicions begin to loom large over Banquo's death. Lennox thinks, 'Things have been *strangely* borne.' Duncan, so 'pitied of Macbeth,' is now dead, and Banquo, who 'walked too late,' was killed by Fleance, for Fleance fled! So the lesson Lennox derives from Banquo's murder is that

‘Men must not walk too late,’ because the ‘monstrous’ son or sons will kill him! Lennox then remembers Macbeth’s rage of Achilles in which he tore the delinquents, the chamberlains, and Lennox thinks that it was ‘*nobly done*’, and ‘*wisely, too.*’ So *noble* was Macbeth’s rage that the fugitive princes as also Fleance would, had they been under his key, have known ‘What ‘twere to kill a father’! Lennox’s mask of irony falls when he directly calls Macbeth a tyrant and ‘a hand accursed’. He fears saying too much of ‘broad words’, yet his irony hits the bull’s eye with deadly force.

The Second and the Third Apparitions, the ‘bloody child’ and the ‘child crowned,’ also play verbal jugglery with Macbeth. The Second Apparition’s prophecy, ‘none of woman born/ Shall harm Macbeth,’ has a double sense: it means ‘normally born,’ and its appearance as a ‘bloody child,’ interpreted as the baby Macduff born by Caesarean section, portends Macbeth’s end. The Third Apparition’s prophecy that Macbeth is imperishable till ‘Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane hill/ Shall come against him’ is also replete with verbal jugglery. The forest boughs may at least be borne in hand, and Malcolm does so, as the ‘child crowned, with a tree in his hand’ portends. In both these cases the irony of the Apparitions is beyond Macbeth’s ken.

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