

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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Thus, he lacked courage, and here comes Lady Macbeth to ‘screw [his] courage to the sticking place.’ Yet, after the murder, the wrecked conscience of Macbeth comes poetically out of him. He dreads his bloody hands: ‘this my hand will rather/The multitudinous seas incarnadine ...’ He repents that in murdering an innocent sleeping person he has murdered his own sleep. In desperation he cried out, ‘To know my deed, it were best not to know myself.’

But once the tiger tastes the warmth and salt of blood, he turns into a dealer in blood. Macbeth, as the trauma of Duncan’s murder is relieved, crosses the Rubicon of crime and becomes an unmitigated villain. He revels in the blood of his kinsmen and subjects: ‘Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill’. He defends his blood-bath in ‘I am in blood/Stepped in so far that should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as going over.’ He even wants ‘the frame of things disjoint,’ which, as Dr. Johnson remarks, is ‘the utmost extravagance of determined wickedness.’ The coaxing of the Apparitions makes him

perform his evil designs 'before this purpose cool.' It is no wonder that this man of *idee fixe* would misconstrue the verbal jugglery of the Witches who raise in his a false sense of security. He reached his murdering climax with the killing of Lady Macduff and her innocent children.

Yet the last stage of this hardened criminal extracts a measure of sympathy. A profound self-pity humanises the villain who has not only seen blood but also the ups and downs of life and the loneliness of old age: 'I have lived long enough: my way of life/Is fallen into the sea the yellow leaf.' The same poetic man who uttered emotional rhapsodies in a moral conflict, now vents his feelings again when he becomes self-conscious: 'I have almost forgot the taste of fears.' The death of his dearest, Lady Macbeth, makes him realise the meaninglessness of life and the fruitlessness of human exploits: a 'brief candle', and 'a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury/Signifying nothing.' Confidence on his own invulnerability is immense, yet he decides to fight till his flesh is hacked from his bone. He refuses to die like a Roman fool and readies himself to fight back: 'Blow wind! Come wrack! /At least we will die with harness on our back.' He sings his Swan song.

Macbeth is thus neither the imitable hero nor a detestable, incorrigible villain. A mixture of warring element, he leaves the reader and audience in a curious dichotomy so that they also, like him, are torn between sympathy and antipathy.