

The noble macbeth: an aristotelian tragedy

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Tragedy is a serious play in which the main character is characterized to have some psychological weakness, thereby going through a series of misfortunes that lead to his destructive end. Aristotle in his Poetics posited that catharsis is the defining feature and definitive end of any tragedy; to quote him he wrote

“ Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude...through pity [eleos] and fear [phobos] effecting the proper purgation [catharsis] of these emotions” Book 6. 2). Furthermore, according to him, tragedy is the complete re-making of a significant moral act. William Shakespeare’s Macbeth rightly fits Aristotle’s criteria of making a successful dramatic tragedy and aptly exemplifies the main principles of the making of this genre.

The plot for Aristotle is the “ soul of the tragedy” and so his Poetics is devoted mostly to discussing the requirements, expectations and the development of a good one. For him, plot must be a replica of a noble and complete action. The complete action required by Aristotle, that is a beginning, middle, and an end action, is satisfied by Macbeth’s respective placements of the tragedy. Thus, Aristotle states more in his Poetics the different parts to a tragedy: Prologue, Episode, Exodus, Choric songs and the last part which is divided into two: Parodos and Stasimon. All of these are found in Macbeth except for the Choric songs; despite this lack, the play may still be considered Aristotelian for the most part because it still adheres to Aristotle’s fundamentals of the plot: that the actions and episodes are arranged into a ‘ casually connected’, seamless whole. The elements of action are exposition, inciting action, rising action, turning point or climax,

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falling action and the denouement. Macbeth adheres to all these elements while presenting a new question every now and then to keep the audience's interest. This important part that keeps the audience in attention is known as dramatic tension.

The three witches supply the activating circumstance necessary to comply with Aristotle's requirement for a complete action: a disclosure and a reversal of action. Macbeth, together with Banquo, meets the three witches who possess mystic powers to predict the two men's fate or future. The wicked sisters' role is to act as the forces of fate, leading Macbeth on to his own eventual destruction. Still the prophecy stimulates Macbeth to desire for the kingship; it is this ambition that leads him to his destruction or downfall. When the audience finds out something concealed from them before that is able to contribute in putting the pieces together, the point of disclosure is now attained. This is also known as the point of realization. In Act V, Scene 1, Lady Macbeth is found sleep walking, uttering words of reassurance she gave her husband after they murdered Duncan and Banquo: "What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to accompt?" (lines 40-2) and "I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried" (lines 66-7).

The audience now realizes that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are accomplices to the crime which later on sought justice and eventually causing the downfall of the culprits. With Macduff killing Macbeth the audience witnesses the last principle for Aristotelian complete action which is the reversal of action. Macbeth is characterized as driven by his corrupt ambition, a noble who will beat all odds to satisfy his deepest desire and fulfill his ambition of

becoming king even if it means employing evil plots along the way. In the end his own ambition has led to his downfall, his death. Similarly with the other lives he took he is murdered and deceived. So far, a complete action is present in the play, a noble and moral action which creates the foundation of the plot. However, what is noble in this act? This noble action may be hinted from an issue of the culture of Shakespeare's time. The play was written during the Elizabethan era when ambition was highly regarded a pious and admirable quality, one of nobility. Essentially, therefore, the plot of Macbeth, as an imitation of action is one of a noble and complete action.

On the other hand, irony is another important element in Aristotelian tragedy and many ironic statements can be found in the play. One of which is Macbeth's murderous act itself, which can be due to his tragic flaw (hamartia) which is his ambition. It is to be recalled that Macbeth's ambition, encouraged by his wife, has brought about her death and when Macbeth learns of this dreadful thing the words he speaks attest to the grief and despair he feels, even ironic. He brands life as a pathetic, strutting actor whose moment on stage is but brief. Furthermore, he utters: "It is a tale/ Told by an idiot full of sound and fury/ Signifying nothing" (Act V, Scene v, lines 26-8).

In his speech he says that life is meaningless which is contradicted by the play as a whole. At that moment Macbeth had just been recompensed for his evil acts, and the fact that he and his wife are punished for their crime manifests the presence of a higher good which also gives a higher meaning to life. Macbeth ironically embodies ambition and murder. Another related

angle that brings this close to an Aristotelian tragedy is the playwright's use of dramatic irony with its integral stylistic component: diction. Aristotle emphasized that tragedies are to be presented in elevated, non-everyday language to alert the audience that what they are about to witness is something of a serious nature. The Encarta World English Dictionary defines dramatic irony " as the irony arising from a situation, in which the audience has a fuller knowledge of what is happening in a drama than a character does" so this involves the audience's attention and draws their attention closer to the play. This is exemplified in the play when King Duncan and his party arrived at Macbeth's castle they are unaware of the evil plans being plotted against them. Their mood, lighthearted and joking, is totally ironic to the audience since it knows what Macbeth is really up to as evidenced also by Macbeth's discourtesy of not greeting his guests honorably. Still the dramatic irony is heightened with Duncan's abiding admiration for Macbeth as he said: " Conduct me to mine host: we love him highly/ And shall conduct our graces towards him."

In the last part of the play, it is also enriched by dramatic irony: Macbeth has become monstrously desperate and pathetic. Troops were sent to overthrow him with his own troops deserting him, yet he still places his confidence on the witches whose prophecy got the better of him in the end. Although he sees his doom already he can not accept it; he continues to fight by talking about his charmed life too. His failure or refusal to see what is clearly obvious makes the end of the play even more gripping than the beginning. Aristotle goes on to suggest that the noble and complete action must be an imitation of fearful and pitiable conditions. In relation to this, Aristotle asserts

in his Poetics that “ A perfect tragedy should be arranged not on the simple but on the complex plan. It should imitate actions which excite pity and fear, this being the distinctive mark of tragic imitation. It follows that the change of fortune presented must not be the spectacle of a virtuous man brought from prosperity to adversity, for this moves neither pity nor fear, it merely shocks us...for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, and fear by the misfortune of a person like ourselves...there remains, then, the character between these two extremes- that of a man who is not eminently good and just, yet whose misfortune is brought about not by vice or depravity, but by some error or frailty. He must be one who is highly renowned and prosperous...”

Lastly, still in his Poetics, Aristotle describes the characteristics of a tragic hero, “ the character between these two extremes...:” basically a good man of an elevated status of which Macbeth clearly is at the beginning of the play as evidenced in the first act i. e. when his courage was greatly praised, his exploits highly admired by King Duncan, and he was referred to as ‘ brave Macbeth’ and ‘ noble Macbeth’. One of the characteristic natures of the tragic hero according to Aristotle is the reversal of fortune wherein the hero undergoes a change of circumstances from prosperity (emotional and/or material) to adversity, known as the tragic fall brought about by some hamartia, roughly translated as ‘ error in judgment’ or ‘ tragic flaw’, that is some aspect of the hero’s character which is praiseworthy but in itself is also destructive. In Macbeth’s case his tragic flaw which led to his downfall is his ambition.

Many playwrights including Shakespeare consider Aristotle's Poetics as the rule of thumb for a well-written tragedy. For Aristotle, the plot is the most important element of a tragedy because all the other elements, such as character, diction, and thought, stem from the plot's good foundation.