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Interpretive Test

Macbeth-Aristotelian Tragedy?

The definition of tragedy in an excerpt from Aristotle's "Poetics" is the re-creation, complete within itself, of an important moral action. The relevance of Aristotle's Poetics to Shakespeare's play Macbeth defines the making of a dramatic tragedy and presents the general principles of the construction of this genre.

Aristotle's attention throughout most of his Poetics is directed towards the requirements and expectations of the plot. Plot, 'the soul of tragedy', Aristotle says, must, be an imitation of a noble and complete action. In Macbeth, Shakespeare provides a complete action, that is it has what Aristotle identifies as a beginning, a middle, and an end. These divisible sections must, and do in the case of Macbeth, meet the criterion of their respective placement. In an excerpt from Aristotle's "Poetics" it states:

"The separate parts into which tragedy is divided are: Prologue, Episode, Exodus, Choric songs, this last being divided into Parodos and Stasimon. The prologos is that entire part of a tragedy which precedes the Parodos of the Chorus. The Episode is that entire part of a tragedy which is between complete choric songs. The Exodus is that entire part of a tragedy which has no choric song after it. Of the Choric part the Parodos is the first undivided utterance of the Chorus."

Shakespeare follows this precise arrangement of parts to tell his story of Macbeth. Macbeth is divided into five acts. It contains a Prologue, Episode, Exodus, Parodos and Stasimon, but is the only one of Shakespeares plays that does not include Choric songs. This does not dismiss Macbeth as a tragedy in the Aristotelian sense, because it still follows Aristotle's fundamental component of a plot. That the arrangement of actions and episodes arrange themselves into a 'causally connected', seamless whole. The ideal arrangement of action into a plot is: Exposition, Inciting Action, Rising Action, Turning Point (Climax), Falling Action, and Denouement. Macbeth follows each of these steps while introducing a new question every moment that keeps our interest. That is called dramatic tension, a very important part of a tragedy: to keep the audiences attention at all times.

To make Macbeth's plot a complete action, according to Aristotle, the story must contain an activating circumstance, a disclosure, and a reversal of action. The activating circumstance in Macbeth is the three witches. Macbeth and Banquou meet three witches that posses supernatural powers and predict the two men's futures. It is part of the wicked sisters' role in the play to act as the forces of fate. These hags lead Macbeth on to destroy himself. Their predictions are temptations of Macbeth's. They never tell Macbeth he has to do anything, and nothing the witches did forced him to commit the murderous acts he did. But their prophecies stimulated his desire for kingship and intensified his ambition which is the characteristic that led to his downfall. The disclosure is the point in the play in which the audience finds out something they did not know before, that enables them to put the pieces of the tragedy together. It's the point of realization. In Act V scene 1, Lady Macbeth is found sleep walking muttering the lines of reassurance she gave her husband after they murder of Duncan and Banquou, "What need we fear who knows it, when none can call our power to accompt?" (lines 40-42) and "I tell you yet again, Banquou's buried" (lines 66-67). The plot of the tragedy unfolded for the audience in that scene and it becomes apparent that it was

Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's own evil actions that destroyed themselves. The last guideline of an Aristotelian complete action is the reversal of action. This occurs when Macduff kills Macbeth. Throughout the play Macbeth, driven by his corrupt ambition, went after what he desired most. Even subjecting himself to evil sins, but it is at the very end where his own ambition kills him. Macbeth's life ends in the same way he took the other lives, through murder and deception. Stated above, Aristotle says, the plot of a Tragedy must be an imitation of a noble and complete action. Macbeth follows Aristotle's expectations of a complete action. Shakespeare's Macbeth also contains a noble and moral action that creates the foundation of the plot. Whether Shakespeare provides a noble action, however, is an issue of the culture of his time. Macbeth was written during the Elizabethan age where ambition was highly regarded. Ambition was and is a pious and admirable quality, one of nobility. So essentially the imitation of action, the plot, of Macbeth is one of a noble and complete action.

In accordance with Aristotle's expectations of a Tragedy, containing a noble and complete action, irony is one of the most important elements when imitating an action. In Shakespeare's Macbeth there are many ironic statements regarding the action of murder due to Macbeth's hamartia (tragic flaw), which is his ambition. Macbeth's hamartia (ambition) encouraged by Lady Macbeth resulted in her death and when Macbeth hears of her death his words are inspired by grief and despair and full of irony. He calls life a pathetic, strutting actor briefly on a stage, and then says: "It is a tale/ Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury/ Signifying nothing" Act V, scene v, lines 26-28. Macbeth's speech says that life is meaningless, but the play as a whole says just the opposite. Macbeth's utter despair at that moment is a result of his evil deeds. The very fact that he and Lady Macbeth are punished for their wickedness is proof of a higher good which gives meaning to life. In Macbeth the action of murder and ambition are often referred to in an ironic manner (shown above) but what draws this play so close to Aristotle's definition of a tragedy is Shakespeare's use of dramatic irony. Integral to Aristotle's notion of tragedy was its stylistic component: its diction. Aristotle stated that tragedies are to be written in elevated, non- everyday language to alert the audience to the seriousness of what they are about to see. Dramatic irony is a very poignant example of this theory. Dramatic irony is present when the audience knows something the characters, or some of the characters, do not, this involves the audience and draws their attention. When Duncan and his party arrive at Macbeth's castle, they are unaware of the wicked plans that are being made. Their lighthearted, joking mood is ironic to us, because we know what they are really walking into. The scene-by-scene analysis for Act I scene vi, details the use of dramatic irony when Duncan realizes that Lord Macbeth isn't there to greet him, which is very discourteous but still treats Macbeth with great admiration, "Conduct me to mine host: we love him highly/And shall conduct our graces toward him." Meanwhile Macbeth is plotting King Duncan's murder. Dramatic irony enriches the last act of the play. Macbeth has become a monster, but he's also become a pathetic figure. His desperation is obvious. Ten thousand troops are on their way to overthrow him; his own troops are deserting. And he places his confidence in the weird sisters- the hags whose suggestion that he would be king got him into this disaster! We can see that he is doomed, but he cannot. He fights on, talking about his "charmed life." His failure (or refusal) to see what is obvious to us makes the end of the play much more powerful than it would be otherwise.

Aristotle further states that the noble and complete action must be an imitation of fearful and pitiable incidents. It is important to define fearful and pitiable action in Aristotle's own words before continuing to support a later point.

Aristotle states;

"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. Nor that of a bad man passing from adversity to prosperity, for nothing can be more alien to the spirit of tragedy; it possesses no tragic quality, it neither satisfies the moral sense, nor calls forth pity or fear. Nor should the downfall of the utter villain be exhibited. A plot of this kind would doubtless, satisfy the moral sense, but it would inspire neither pity nor fear, for pity is aroused by unmerited misfortune, and fear by the misfortune of a person like ourselves. Such an event, therefore, will be neither pitiful nor terrible. 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..."

According to Aristotle, the expectation of a tragedy consists of the arousal of the emotions of pity and terror in the audience. He also states that "pity and fear are related to action and character." We have already detailed the correlations between the plot (action) in Macbeth and Aristotle's "Poetics", now, we must determine if the character Macbeth is a tragic hero according to Aristotle's "The Essential Nature of Tragedy".

In Aristotle's "Poetics" he describes the attributes of a tragic hero. In the excerpt above it mentions "...the character between these two extremes...". Basically a good man of elevated stature: if he's evil, his fall won't be pitiable or tragic. If he's a commoner, his fall won't be grand enough. The figure of Macbeth seems to resemble this position. In the beginning of the play there is strong evidence that Macbeth is a good man. In Act I, Scene ii his courage is highly praised. The bloody soldier obviously admires his captain, and Duncan is moved when he is told of Macbeth's exploits. Shown in such diction as "brave Macbeth" and "noble Macbeth". One of the essential natures of a tragic hero according to Aristotle's definition of tragedy is the Reversal of Fortune. The hero must undergo a change of fortune from prosperity (emotional and/or material) to adversity. This reversal is also known as a tragic fall. Aristotle continues, this reversal must come about not by chance or as deserved retribution for evil deeds, but from some hamartia, variously translated as 'error in judgment' or 'tragic flaw': that is, some aspect of the hero's character that in itself is praiseworthy—but in excess, destructive. Macbeth gains sympathy from the audience due to his demeanor in the beginning of the play. He relates to the listeners from his reaction to the witc

