

CLAUDIUS AND MACBETH: A COMPARISON BETWEEN A VILLAIN AND A TRAGIC-HERO

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***Abstract:** This article compares Claudius with the tragic hero Macbeth. It brings out the astonishing similarities between them though they are generally considered as poles apart from each other. These tragic characters are driven by the ambition to become the head of their land and it creates havoc for them and others who are involved in their personal and public life. The positive qualities of Claudius and Macbeth can make the readers feel that they deserve kingship. They are true to themselves and feel guilty for their murderous act. They have similar flaws, hubris, insolence and bravado.*

***Keywords:** tragedy, tragic villain, tragic hero, tragic flaw, Shakespeare, Macbeth, Claudius, ambition, hubris, insolence, murder, perspectives*

A comparison of the tragic-figure Claudius with the established tragic hero Macbeth proves that Shakespeare presented no absolute villains but represented men of real world who are neither completely villainous nor completely good but a mixture of positive and negative qualities. *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* deal with the desire for royal power and its aftermaths. This comparative study takes us to the possible corollary that a tragic villain can possess qualities that can be on par with the tragic-heroes. Being hero-villains, Macbeth and Claudius exhibit similarities. Both are tyrants, usurpers, murderers, aspiring, ambitious, courageous and treacherous. Though Richard III can also be compared with Macbeth and Claudius, Shakespeare's presentation of that character projects more of his villainous nature than of his heroic qualities because he is cruel from nature and constitution. But Macbeth and Claudius become villains because of the accidental circumstances (Homchaudhuri 240). Macbeth's epileptic nature, fear of death and also the fear of

exposure of his dark secrecy of the regicide diminishes his heroic grandeur. On the other hand, Claudius is cool and composed though he also bears in his heart, a dark secrecy of the brutal fratricide. Both of them have their ladylove and they act as direct or indirect boosting power behind their deeds. In order to possess Gertrude and the royal power, Claudius commits fratricide. Lady Macbeth enhances Macbeth's motive to attain royal power by bracing up his confidence and courage to commit regicide. Macbeth and Claudius are outstanding individuals. Other characteristics cast light on them and vice versa. They are magnanimous, lofty and elevated. They rise above the common ranks of mankind. Macbeth wins the battle for King Duncan against the army of Macdonald, Ireland and Norway. His performance in the battle field is exceptional and it is intimated to Duncan through the captain's words that the brave Macbeth split the traitor Macdonald from his navel to his jawbone. That is why Duncan, in his welcoming speech to Macbeth, addresses him as noble and says that he feels guilty for not thanking Macbeth sufficiently because Macbeth has done so much for him so fast that it has been impossible to reward him properly. So, in order to reward him, Duncan decides to visit Macbeth's castle, apart from providing him the title of the Thane of Cawdor. Thus Macbeth is portrayed as lofty, elevated and also above the common ranks of mankind. Similarly, in the opening scene of *Hamlet*, Claudius is presented as lofty and elevated in his office of kingship. He is outstanding in handling the young Fortinbras with diplomacy and avoids the possibility of a war. He justifies his marriage with his former sister-in-law Gertrude by announcing that it is done on the advice of the court. Macbeth and Claudius are distinguished by their drive and ambition. They are disturbingly single-minded. At least in some moments, the readers tend to approve of whatever ambition they have conceived. Macbeth identifies ambition as the only driving force that motivates him: "I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition" (*Mac.1.7.25-26*). Claudius' soliloquy reveals that the crown is his ambition but he is

also in great need of Queen Gertrude: “I am still possessed / Of those effects for which I did the murder: / My crown, mine own ambition, and my queen” (*Ham.3.3.54-56*). Macbeth and Claudius possess strong will. They show determination in action and fortitude in the face of the inevitable and pursue their ambition with resolution. When Macbeth realises that everything has turned against him and ten thousand soldiers of the English army led by Malcolm, Siward and Macduff, is marching towards his palace, he prefers to fight rather than give up. His fortitude and determination in action is revealed through the following words: “I’ll fight till from my bones my flesh be hacked” (*Mac.5.3.34*) and “I will not yield, / To kiss the ground before young Malcolm’s feet” (*Mac.5.8.28*). Claudius’s fortitude is revealed when Hamlet stabs him with a poisoned sword. He says: “O, yet defend me, friends. I am but hurt” (*Ham.5.2.325*). Macbeth and Claudius have natural authority. When Macduff enquires the reason for Macbeth murdering the guards of King Duncan, Macbeth authoritatively replies that his violent love outruns reason:

Who can be wise, amazed, temp’rate, and furious,
Loyal and neutral, in a moment? No man.
Th’ expedition of my violent love
Outrun the pauser, reason. (*Mac.2.3.104-107*)

Claudius with great authority manages the external affairs of his country. He sends a letter to the uncle of young Fortinbras, demanding the suppression of young Fortinbras’s plan to invade Denmark. When he sends his subordinates Cornelius and Voltimand as ambassadors to Norway, he asserts his authority over them: “Giving to you no further personal power / To business with the king more than the scope / Of these dilated articles allow” (*Ham.1.2.36-38*). Macbeth and Claudius possess a degree of seriousness and they also think hard. There is an intellectual excitement about their language. They seize on an idea, pause, repeat it and commend on it. They are noble and have outstanding moral qualities. They are consistently called noble even by their enemies. Their nobility

is found in the purity of their motives. To Macbeth, ambition is the factor that leads him to commit murder. Though he wants to commit the murder, his mental agencies like thoughts and speculations are stifling him to act. He feels that Duncan’s virtues as ‘trumpet-tongued’ angels preach the brutality of his murder. His motive is pure because his ambition is never the murder of Duncan but the possession of royal power. He finds it as the only way towards the crown. He is aware that, to achieve the throne he destroys a fatherly figure with all the noble qualities. He thinks that it is his duty as a kinsman, subject and host to protect the King. His nobility is clear when he contemplates on Duncan’s double trust in him:

He’s here in double trust:
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,
Who should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself. (*Mac.1.7.12-16*)

Claudius feels guilty of fratricide. But there is no other way for him to achieve the crown since prince Hamlet is the next heir. If he has not committed that hideous murder, he would have remained far away from the crown and the queen. His ambition forces him to take the only possible way, i.e. the murder of King Hamlet, to achieve it. He feels the prick of conscience whenever he thinks about the fruits of his actions. He can never give up the benefits but at the same time he is aware of the brutality of his crime: “Oh, my offence is rank. It smells to heaven. / It hath the primal eldest curse upon’t, / A brother’s murder” (*Ham.3.3.37-39*).

Macbeth and Claudius have the imagination of a poet. Macbeth’s towering imagination is apparent when he says: “Oh, full of scorpions is my mind” (*Mac.3.2.37*). When he realises that Banquo’s son Fleance has escaped from the murder attempt, his poetic imagination portrays the danger in it by calling him a worm without teeth but capable of becoming a venomous serpent: “There the grown serpent lies. The worm that’s fled / Hath nature that in time will venom breed; / No teeth for th’ present” (*Mac.3.4.29-31*). Claudius’s soaring imagination is revealed when he prays for

forgiveness for his foul murder: “Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens / To wash it white as snow?” (*Ham.3.3.46-47*). He thinks about the intensity of his fetid crime: “Oh, my offence is rank. It smells to heaven” (*Ham.3.3.37*).

Macbeth and Claudius exhibit courage to pursue their desires. Both have grandeur in their own way. They have superiority over other characters. They outshine others because of their personal qualities such as integrity, sincerity and commitment. Both of them have strong devotion to God, their country, action and wife. Thus as tragic characters, they are outstanding figures surpassing all others. They have apparently inexhaustible energy, unshakable will, natural authority, committed seriousness, rare nobility, towering imagination, courage and grandeur. They experience an inner fall in which the mind or soul falls from reason and grace into wilderness and triviality. Their fall is the public fall because being kings, they are of high status and their decline is social, though they are isolated. Their fall brings down the nation, especially in the case of Claudius because none is remaining in his royal family as an heir and Fortinbras, the prince of Norway comes to the throne. In Macbeth’s case the true royal heir regains the power. The bodies littering the stage at the close of the two tragedies is a consequence of the fall of the mighty. Macbeth is the direct reason for the death of Duncan, Banquo, Lady Macduff and her child. He becomes the indirect reason for the death of his wife, Lady Macbeth. Similarly, Claudius is the direct reason for the death of the King Hamlet, but becomes the indirect reason for the death of Polonius, Ophelia, Laertes, Gertrude and Prince Hamlet. Macbeth and Claudius have mental agony that goes beyond their physical pain. Macbeth’s mental agony leads to hallucination, sleeplessness and nightmares. This is evident in the following speeches:

Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Are thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but

A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
I see thee yet, in form as palpable
As this which now I draw. (*Mac.2.1.33-41*)

Nature seems dead, and wicked dreams abuse
The curtained sleep. (*Mac.2.1.50-51*)

Ere we will eat our meal in fear, and sleep
In the affliction of these terrible dreams
That shake us nightly. Better be with the dead,
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace,
Than on the torture of the mind to lie
In restless ecstasy. (*Mac.3.2.19-24*)

Claudius does not have any hallucination, but he undergoes suffering, isolation, and exclusion. Like Macbeth, Claudius too has no reliable associate and he alienates himself from others. He is reluctant to unravel his mind even to his wife Gertrude. Similarly, when the play progresses Macbeth is also reluctant to reveal his mind even to his wife. Thus they develop a gap between themselves and others. In the beginning, Claudius isolates himself from others and at the end he is isolated by others though he pleads for help: “Oh, yet defend me, friends. I am but hurt” (*Ham.5.2.325*). Their exclusion is a violation of human belonging and their isolation torments their mind. Macbeth regrets that he cannot have loyal friends, love, honour and obedience:

My way of life
Is fall’n into the sere, the yellow leaf,
And that which should accompany old age,
As honor, love, obedience, troops of friends,
I must not look to have, but, in their stead,
Curses, not loud but deep, mouth-honour, breath
Which the poor heart would fain deny and dare
not. (*Mac.5.3.24-30*)

Macbeth and Claudius recognise the moral, natural, political and religious laws that limit them. They prove that they are wrong

because they violate these rules. Thus they fulfil the condition of tragedy, which starts when someone of outstanding qualities chooses to do what is wrong. In wrong doing, they as tragic figures, deliberately defy the laws of life. They have flaws, hubris, insolence and bravado as their characteristics. They are excessively ambitious and this can be seen as a moral blemish in an otherwise noble life.

Macbeth claims that he has already travelled so far into the river of blood, so that the immediate returning to the bank of righteousness would be as difficult as continuing to the other side. Though Macbeth wishes to keep righteousness in his side, the future chain of murders he commits makes him a hardened criminal. On the contrary to this, Claudius is very much aware that he should not commit any murder or mistake in the future. That's why he doesn't have the thought to murder the heir prince Hamlet initially, though Hamlet proves to be a threat in many ways. He thinks of prince Hamlet as his own son in the beginning. But later he doubts that Hamlet's madness has something more in it. He postpones his plan to do something against Hamlet until Hamlet kills Polonius. Moreover, there is decency in his plotting against Hamlet because he arranges a duel between Laertes and Hamlet.

Macbeth contemplates murder and anarchy and his mind symbolises it. He suffers a state of division due to conflicting impulses for and against murder. But Claudius never shows this wavering nature. He thinks a lot to take a decision and once the decision is taken, his mind never retrieves from it. Claudius decides to plot against prince Hamlet only after the prince becomes a serious threat to all. Macbeth suspects many people around him and tries to abolish whomever he doubts. This unravels a psychological abnormality rather than bravery. His inner disharmony is reflected in his words. His 'state' is shaken from its normal balance of faculties and thus he becomes the reason for anarchy. But Claudius strives to avoid disorder to the possible extent.

Macbeth's vague mental suggestions attain rapid growth by the influences of witches and his ambitious wife. But no external faculties influence Claudius. Macbeth used to meditate in solitude

concerning his proposed act and tries to get his motives clear. He got his reasons and motives hopelessly wrong and does not understand himself. Unlike Macbeth, Claudius always has control over his mind. He reasons out his mind so perfectly and realises that he fears his conscience. But Macbeth's conscience revolts from the crime and persuades him for abstention repeatedly, though he is unable to obey it. Macbeth stood for contest, destruction, and disorder in the outer world and also in the reader's mind, by mirroring the contest, destruction, and disorder in his soul. On the contrary, Claudius exhibits love, kindness, diplomacy and stability. The atmosphere of *Macbeth* is gloomy, black, and fearful essentially due to the murderous and destructive nature of the actions of Macbeth. But the ambience in the play *Hamlet* is different. It portrays love, family relationship, good politics and murder. The way Claudius commits the murder is not hideous that of Macbeth. King Hamlet's physique is not deformed through blood shedding execution and an impression is created that the old king's death is spontaneous. But Macbeth repeatedly stabs the noble king Duncan and deforms his physique. Death and destruction causes unnatural disharmony in Macbeth's soul, whereas Claudius's soul is tormented only because of the guilty conscience created by fratricide. Macbeth starts destruction and continues it till the end of his life but Claudius tries to construct after destroying the life of his brother. But fate played a vital role - or we may call it poetic justice - in destroying the good in Claudius for the brutal sin he has committed to become the king.

The comparative study between the tragic villain Claudius and the tragic hero Macbeth shows that there is no significant difference between them and the traditionally seen villain also possesses the qualities of a tragic hero. Wilson Knight strongly supports this type of contrastive interpretations. He ascertains that it is possible and legitimate in an objective drama. He advises that readers "should be equally prepared to adopt the viewpoint of either side to avoid biased interpretation"(2003:43). It is evident

that re-reading of several Shakespearean canonized texts is possible and one could obviously look for counter perspectives embedded in the Shakespearean plays.

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