

Julius Caesar and Macbeth

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THE Shakespearean tragedies, *Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth*, offer many chances for profitable comparisons. Before examining special passages, let us consider their general plots. The initial motive of each is championed by a team of two. In the one play, Cassius and Brutus work for the assassination of Caesar in order that they may put into effect their own programme of government in Rome. Cassius in addition has a lust for power. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth murder Duncan that they may rule as King and Queen of Scotland. In *Julius Caesar* the weak partner in the conspiracy is Brutus, who has almost perfect self-control, but who does not understand the practical aspects of the situation in the world of men; in the Scotch play the weak colleague in crime is Macbeth, who knows the world of men well enough, but who loses his self-control the moment that he gives way to his wife's taunts. Not even she is able to stop him, when she has once started him on the path of wrong through intensifying his reckless ambition by her own heartless urge. In the Roman tragedy, Antony turns the tables on the conspirators, and later joins with Octavius and Lepidus in a triumvirate which overwhelms the revolutionary forces. In *Macbeth*, the Thane of Fife holds a position which at first is more passive than that of Antony, but which is very similar. Octavius and Lepidus are matched by Malcolm and Old Siward. In this play the counterplot does not begin to move so evidently or so rapidly, but Macduff is nevertheless its hinge in the one case, as Antony is in the other. Largely on account of the lack of agreement between Brutus and Cassius, the power of the conspiracy weakens and fails. There is a similar lapse of harmony between Macbeth and his wife as the action progresses, but the chief disintegration occurs within Macbeth himself. After losing his self-respect and his friends, he wilfully pins his faith to the hocus-pocus of the Witches and cannot resist the apparition with success. In each play the counterplot decides the issue by victory on the field of battle.

The fact that hatred of the triumphant Caesar is a characteristic of one of the political parties in Rome, is made very evident in the opening scene of the old-world tragedy. The Tribune Flavius insists that the public statues, hung with garlands in honour of the mighty conqueror, be stripped of their decorations. But although we are given this bias at the outset, we do not feel quite sure of the initial motive starting the action of the play until the next scene. In this Brutus shows that something preys upon his mind; and when he and Cassius hear a great sound of voices, he exclaims:—

"What means this shouting? I do fear the people choose Caesar for their king."

Cassius:

"Then must I think you would not have it so."

Brutus:

"I would not, Cassius; yet I love him well," etc.

We now definitely judge that trouble is in store for Caesar, and are not surprised to find Cassius using all his powers of persuasion that he may bring Brutus into action. When Brutus has departed, with the promise that he will carefully ponder the words just spoken to him, Cassius breaks forth in exultation:—

"Well Brutus, thou art noble; yet, I see,
Thy honourable metal may be wrought
From that it is disposed: therefore it is meet
That noble minds keep ever with their likes;
For who so firm that cannot be seduced?
Caesar doth bear me hard; but he loves Brutus:
If I were Brutus now, and he were Cassius,
He should not humour me. I will this night
In several hands, in at his windows throw,
As if they came from several citizens,
Writings all tending to the great opinion
That Rome holds of his name; wherein obscurely
Caesar's ambition shall be glanced at:
And after this let Caesar seat him sure;
For we will shake him, or worse days endure."

The parallel passage in *Macbeth*, in which Lady Macbeth summarizes her husband's character and determines that he, at her bidding, shall take all action necessary to secure the crown, will at once suggest itself to every reader:—

"Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be
What thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature;
It is too full o' the milk of human kindness
To catch the nearest way: thou wouldst be great;
Art not without ambition, but without
The illness should attend it: what thou wouldst
highly,
That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false,
And yet wouldst wrongly win: thou'dst have, great
Glamis,
That which cries, 'Thus must thou do, if thou have
it';
And that which rather thou dost fear to do
Than wishest should be undone. Hie thee hither,
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,
And chastise with the valour of my tongue
All that impedes thee from the golden round
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem
To have thee crown'd withal."

Briefly calling attention to the fact that Macbeth, in spite of Banquo's warning, becomes intensely interested in the words of the Witches, whereas Caesar refuses to heed the shrill voice of the Soothsayer, let us pass to one