

Corruption of Power and Moral Disintegration in *Macbeth*

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Abstract

This research paper explores the themes of corruption and moral disintegration in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, analysing how ambition, power, and guilt contribute to the moral decay of the characters and the broader societal implications of their actions. The play serves as a profound commentary on the nature of ambition, ethical boundaries, and the corrupting influence of unchecked power. Through the lens of Macbeth's rise and fall, this paper investigates the psychological implications of moral disintegration as it unfolds within the characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, and examines how their culpability leads to a larger commentary on the societal consequences of corruption. By employing textual analysis and contextual historical perspectives, this study aims to demonstrate how Shakespeare's work resonates with contemporary issues of morality and ethical behaviour, suggesting that the timeless themes of *Macbeth* provide critical insights into the nature of corruption and its consequences in any era.

Keywords: Corruption, Power, Moral disintegration, Ambition, Macbeth

Introduction

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is a play about uncontrollable ambition that ultimately turned into madness. The play studies the tragic downfall of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, whose only desire was the throne—the pursuit of which led them to betrayal, tyranny, guilt, and immense psychological torment. At first, Macbeth is introduced as a courageous warrior and praised by King Duncan as “noble Macbeth” (1.2.67) but the witches' prophecy ignites a dangerous

spark of ambition in him. Macbeth and his wife both succumb to their desires and commit numerous atrocities. The themes of guilt, paranoia and moral decay are quite prevalent throughout the play as the narrative unfolds and Macbeth gradually ascends to power with the help of Lady Macbeth's ruthless determination. The play delves into the complexities of human psyche and stands out as one of Shakespeare's darkest and most psychologically intense plays. The pursuit of power in *Macbeth* is not shown as something noble or praiseworthy because it isn't accompanied by moral restraint. Shakespeare highlights the corruption with intense imagery—blood, darkness and natural disorder. The lust for power turns Macbeth into a tyrant and leads Lady Macbeth to despair and madness. This essay contends that Macbeth's downfall was the result of his own actions, rejecting the notion that fate played any role in his ruin.

As the play begins, we hear of Macbeth's battlefield valour but physical courage alone cannot carry the weight of consuming ambition that Macbeth held. He can be classified as a tyrant but his character was weak enough to not conquer guilt and self-doubt. The role of Lady Macbeth was very important in order to push him to do the evil deeds. Her unwavering resolve and merciless determination acted as a major catalyst in their plans of regicide. While the influence of the witches' prophecies on Macbeth was great, they never made him do anything. Macbeth's reaction to the prophecy demonstrates that his ambition was already present—but just inside a cage of loyalty and honour: "Why do I yield to that suggestion, / Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair / And make my seated heart knock at my ribs" (1.3.134–136). Critics like Harold Bloom also argue that the witches act as "mirrors of Macbeth's own desires," reflecting his hidden yearning. He could have easily disregarded the prophecy like Banquo, who remained indifferent to them but he immediately conceived thoughts of murder, which makes him no innocent man. Initially, he considers the possibility

of fate, wondering whether he should act upon it or not: “If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me / Without my stir” (1.3.147–148). It is clear that he is tempted by the idea of murder but Macbeth momentarily considers leaving the outcome to fate because of his morality, loyalty and honour.

However, Lady Macbeth turns his ambition into action. When she receives her husband’s letter, she fears that her husband is “too full o’ th’ milk of human kindness / To catch the nearest way” (1.5.15–16). She questioned his manhood: “When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man” (1.7.49–51) and manipulated Macbeth to kill Duncan—which marks a point of no return. Once the crime is committed, he gets trapped into a cycle of violence and bloodshed. Although an interesting point to note here is that, after killing Duncan, Macbeth *did* feel some sort of guilt. As a soldier, Macbeth had always been loyal towards the crown. He admitted that Duncan was a good and just king. So naturally, when he murdered his own king in his sleep, he was bound to feel some remorse. He may not have understood his own emotions at that time as he said, “Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?” (2.2.60–61). This metaphor reflects the horror that he feels after he committed the crime. Subsequently, this guilt transforms into fear—fear of losing power. Lady Macbeth on the other hand, mocks her husband and says, “A little water clears us of this deed” (2.2.66), unaware of the fact that she would be meeting the exact same fate.

The next time we hear from the witches is when Macbeth seeks them out himself, which stands in sharp contrast from before. They prophesy and give him advice but it is important to note here that Shakespeare never once implied that Macbeth’s actions were a result of any external force. Banquo’s murder, the massacre of Macduff’s family and all the other evil

doings were his own. Even when he realised and cursed the witches for deceiving him, he never put blame on them. Lady Macbeth on the other hand, calls upon the spirits to let go of any remaining femininity she has left in herself: “unsex me here, / And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull / Of direst cruelty” (1.5.40–42). Her strong resolve to become the queen overpowers her and she is willing to abandon all compassion and tenderness to achieve that dream.

The further they advance in their schemes, the more the carnage grows, and soon a haunting sense of guilt and remorse consumes them. In order to secure his throne, Macbeth murdered his way into the palace but from there, the audience could sense a slow disintegration of their psyche. Macbeth finally realises the mental consequences of his atrocities as he tells his wife, “O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!” (3.2.36). Lady Macbeth becomes deranged after the famous banquet scene (3.4) where Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo. She is seen hallucinating and obsessively washing her hands: “Out, damned spot! out, I say!—One, two; why, then ’tis time to do’t. Hell is murky” (5.1.30–31). This breakdown, which she had previously mocked Macbeth for, symbolises her gradual descent into madness. Shakespeare’s view of unchecked power as corrosive is highlighted here. The conscience that both the characters tried to suppress and neglect unleashes, and they can no longer bear the strain of their guilt. It shows us how even the most determined individuals can be brought to ruin due to moral corruption. In the earlier scenes, Lady Macbeth is seen as rather inhumane or a “fiend-like queen” as Malcolm calls her, but the nightmares and her sleep walking episodes ultimately wear off her strong resolve and callousness. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth get destroyed politically as well as spiritually.

Shakespeare employs recurring symbols like blood, to underscore the relationship between power and moral decay. The blood motifs recurs throughout the play and by the final act Macbeth says that he is “in blood / Stepp’d in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o’er” (3.4.136–138). Returning to virtue seemed almost impossible to him. Darkness is employed as a nasty atmosphere which brooded the moors of the place and all evil doings took place at night. Both the perpetrators concealed their crimes in the darkness of nights. Macbeth similarly invokes darkness to shield him from divine judgment: “Stars, hide your fires; / Let not light see my black and deep desires” (1.4.50–51). Strange omens plague the land after Duncan’s murder, depicting natural disorder— horses eat each other, the earth shakes, and darkness covers the day (2.4). Scotland becomes a symbol of suffering at the hands of Macbeth’s tyranny. Ross describes it as a land where “sighs and groans and shrieks that rent the air / Are made, not mark’d” (4.3.168–169).

Macbeth’s initial actions were driven by ambition but his subsequent murders of Banquo, Fleance and Macduff’s family were all done in the fear of losing power. He gets alienated even from his wife, who once encouraged his killings and transforms into a monster or a “butcher” (5.9.36). Macbeth, maddened by the prophecy, takes the foreground and his wife retires. In the last words of the play, Malcolm tells us that it is believed that she committed suicide. Macbeth’s chilling response to her death further highlights his detachment and unhinged state of mind: “She should have died hereafter; / There would have been time for such a word / Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day” (5.5.17-20). Macbeth speaks of her death with apathy, the man who once shared a close and passionate bond with his wife. He strayed too far from reason and rationale. Even till the end of times, he held on to the witches’ prophecy, believing himself to be invincible because of their cryptic reassurances: “none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth” (4.1.80–81).

When he encounters Macduff, Macbeth boasts of his invincibility: “Let fall thy blade on vulnerable crests; / I bear a charmed life, which must not yield / To one of woman born” (5.8.11-13). However, when Macduff reveals that he was “from his mother’s womb untimely ripp’d” (5.8.15–16), Macbeth’s illusions shatters. He relied upon the supernatural so much that it led to his untimely downfall.

For the sake of comparison, it is worth examining another of Shakespeare’s play. A similar theme occurs in *King Lear*. Lear misused his power to divide his kingdom and it ultimately led to chaos and suffering. But Lear’s story is one of redemption. He learnt humility and love through that, whereas Macbeth went crazier with every murder. His plots darkened and he became increasingly hardened which erased any humanity he had in himself. This shapes the way he meets his end.

Unlike Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare gives Macbeth a tragic and heroic death. He faces death with a soldier’s resolve: “I will not yield, / To kiss the ground before young Malcolm’s feet, / And to be baited with the rabble’s curse” (5.8.27-29). This defiance was not strength—it was pride and the nature of a warrior. The courage shown by Macbeth in his final moments was a mere shadow of his former nobility. The death of Macbeth serves as a dramatic culmination and presents fate not as an inescapable force but something that becomes self-fulfilling. The very prophecies he trusted became the instruments of his destruction. The end conveys to the audience that free will, when accompanied with greed and moral weakness can never lead you to greatness. Macbeth himself, by the end of the play—just before his death—is seen in an existential crisis. He seems weary of life and it reveals the emotional emptiness that he feels because of all the bloodshed. He declares that life is but “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing” (5.5.26-28). This theme is central to the play. The coupe

neither brought him satisfaction nor made him a king. The corruption of power isolated Macbeth so much that, in the process of acquiring kingship, he lost everything—his morals, his sanity, his wife, and in the end, his life.

Shakespeare's tragedy, thus, stands as a timeless warning that ambition without integrity is a path to self-destruction. And in this case, it not only brought about Macbeth and his wife's death but also destroyed Scotland. The place, as vividly described, was metaphorically "bleeding" (4.3.39) under his tyrant rule: "Each new morn new widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows strike heaven on the face" (4.3.4–6). After his death, Malcolm, the rightful heir of the throne, became the king and restored peace. In his speech he said, "We shall not spend a large expense of time, before we reckon with your several loves, and make us even with you." (5.9.26–28). Macbeth's death was essential to restore natural order in the kingdom. With Malcolm's crowning, Scotland no longer lived under fear and oppression.

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