

Olivia Navarro

Mrs. Graning

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Macbeth

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* explores the destructive effects of ambition that leads to the downfall of many characters mentally and physically. Macbeth is the Thane of Glamis who one day meets witches that tell him “prophecies” that he will be king which he believes will come true, but first he has to take care of a few things that are standing in his way. Being so filled with ambition and greed, Macbeth, with the influence of Lady Macbeth, kills Duncan who was the king of Scotland. After killing Duncan, Macbeth is crowned king, but is told another “prophecy” that his best friend, Banquo’s children will be kings. To keep the throne to himself Macbeth kills Banquo and his whole bloodline. Through the paranoia caused by these terrible actions Macbeth and Lady Macbeth go into a downward spiral which in turn leads to their downfall. In *Macbeth*, ambition is portrayed as powerful but also dangerous if used with the wrong intentions, which is seen through Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s extreme need for power that eventually leads to their downfall.

From the beginning of the play the witches put the possibility of being king in Macbeth’s head, which out of greed for power leads him to thinking of doing things he normally wouldn’t. After meeting the witches Macbeth goes home to tell his wife of the prophecies, and she tries to

convince him to kill Duncan but Macbeth refuses, because he knows it's wrong. Since Macbeth wouldn't budge, before Lady Macbeth goes to bed that night and she prays to the spirits that they could "unsex" her when she says this line:

Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to the toe topful
Of direst cruelty! (Shakespeare 1:5:37-40).

Lady Macbeth prays this so that they might remove her femininity from her so she could go through with this cruel action since her husband won't. The next day when Lady Macbeth finds out Duncan is coming to stay at the castle she eventually convinces Macbeth to kill Duncan so they can get the throne. Lady Macbeth shows her convincing power over Macbeth to commit the murder by questioning his manhood through the line, "When you durst do it, then you were a man" (Shakespeare 1:7:49). Through the manipulating power of his wife Macbeth commits a gruesome crime that will forever haunt him.

Macbeth was scared to commit murder in the beginning, but throughout the story it becomes easier for him to hurt people which shows his ruthless ambition for more and more power. Macbeth commits his second murder when he hires three murderers to kill Banquo, who was his best friend. Macbeth talks of the reasons to kill Banquo in the lines, "But to be safely thus. Our fears in Banquo / Stick deep, and in his royalty of nature / Reigns that which would be fear'd. 'Tis much he dares" (Shakespeare 3:1:48-50). By killing his best friend Macbeth shows that he will do anything it takes to keep the throne. Macbeth's next kill betrays Macduff who is a

loyal Thane in Duncan's service. While Macduff is away at war Macbeth gets the murderers to kill his wife and son:

What you egg!

Young fry of treachery!

He has kill'd me mother:

Run away, I pray you, (Shakespeare 4:2:80-83).

The killing of this child, and his mother shows even more Macbeth's careless attitude towards life. Macbeth has become desensitized and less paranoid while Lady Macbeth is now the paranoid one.

While Macbeth is away fighting on the battlefields Lady Macbeth is at the castle, spiraling into deeper paranoia. Lady Macbeth's gentlewoman has observed her sleep walking and talking about the murders which shows the guilt she's feeling for the things she has done. "Wash your hands, put on your nightgown, look / not so pale. I tell you yet again, Banquo's buried; he cannot come / out on's grave" (Shakespeare 5:1:51-53). Macbeth, on the other hand, has moved past the paranoia he felt in the beginning, and has not let it stop his desire for more power. The witches give Macbeth a prophecy saying, "Be bloody, bold, and resolute: laugh to scorn / The pow'r of man; for none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth (Shakespeare 4:1:79-81). Macduff wants to fight Macbeth to get revenge for the killing of his family, and this prophecy which means no man born of woman can harm Macbeth gives Macbeth the confidence to fight Macduff because he thinks nothing will happen to him. What Macbeth doesn't know is that Macduff was born by a caesarean section which means he was not naturally born. As a result he is able, and does defeat and kill Macbeth.

In *Macbeth*, ambition is portrayed as powerful but also dangerous if used with the wrong intentions, which is seen through Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's extreme need for power that eventually leads to their downfall. Macbeth's ambition, along with the witches' prophecies, makes him overly confident which leads to his death during his fight with Macduff. Ambition can be good, but when Macbeth lets it control himself it brings him and everyone around him down.

Works Cited

Shakespeare, William. *Macbeth*. Edited by Barbra A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, Folger Shakespeare Library, 2004.

Shakespeare Birthplace Trust. "Macbeth." *Shakespeare's Plays*, Shakespeare Birthplace Trust, <https://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare/shakespedia/shakespeares-plays/macbeth/> . Accessed 2, February 2025.