

# Ambition overrides morality in macbeth

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A good leader is ambitious, levelheaded, and morally sound. A good leader keeps his own wants at bay for the good of the people he is leading, while allowing his ambition to garner the ultimate good rather than selfish, immoral aims. A good leader is able to maintain both his ambition and morality so that they work together rather than against each other.

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* illustrates what happens when a leader's ambitions are at odds with his morality, leading to tyranny and murderous impulses.

Macbeth's ambitious nature completely overrides his moral nature, which is the main source of conflict throughout the play.

Macbeth's ambitious nature shows in the first act when he and Banquo encounter the witches, who prophecy that Macbeth will be heralded as the thane of Cawdor in addition to his title as thane of Glamis (1. 3). Upon realizing the truthfulness in the words of the witches, Macbeth is entranced with the other part of their prophecy claiming he will be king.

He is concerned at first, showing his modesty and concern for the former thane of Cawdor, but soon it is obvious that the witches' foretelling has him wondering whether he really will be king, and the inklings of greedy ambition begin to show. "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me, / without my stir" (1. 3. 156-157).

Here Macbeth is entertaining the idea of being king without having to do much to attain the title, leaving it to fate. This aside shows his ambition trickling forward, while his friends and admirers see him as shocked and humbled at being crowned the thane of Cawdor. Thus arise the beginnings of

the central conflict in Macbeth. The conflict gains momentum in the following scene when Macbeth visits the king, Duncan, at his castle in Forres.

With the seed in Macbeth's head about being king, tension starts to build. Duncan benignly welcomes Macbeth and Banquo back from battle, praising them highly and telling both about his son Malcom, "The Prince of Cumberland" (1. 4. 48), of whom Macbeth says, "that is a step/On which I must fall down, or else o'er-leap,/For in my way it lies" (1. 4. 58-60). The seedling has germinated into sinister ambition, which in itself would be of little concern were Macbeth a flat character, except in the same aside Macbeth says, "Let not light see my black and deep desires" (1. 4. 61).

Macbeth knows deep down that the power he desires and the way in which he desires it should not be made known to his friends and allies, and not to the king, especially. It would be treasonous; the same reason the former thane of Cawdor was demoted and squashed by Duncan's orders. The conflict starts to bubble. Lady Macbeth's role in the play serves to give the chain of events a faster turn, for Macbeth himself would be more like Hamlet without her. In her heart she desires the throne as much as Macbeth does, and she knows that such desire is unbecoming of a lady in the times.

The fifth scene in the first act, introducing Lady Macbeth, heightens the tension evident from the start of the play. She knows Macbeth is, though a valiant warrior on the battlefield, not strong enough to seize what he wants when he wants it, and therefore she knows she will have to wait unless she goads him into taking action. She knows he is capable of seizing the throne, but she knows that at the same time his conscience would prevent such

action, “ Hie thee thither,/That I may pour my spirits in thine ear,/And chastise with the valor of my tongue/All that impedes thee from the golden round” (1. . 14-16). Tension builds further when Lady Macbeth discovers that the king will be visiting Inverness. When learning that the king plans to leave the following day, she tells Macbeth, “ O! never/shall sun that morrow see” (1. 5. 58-59). Knowing Macbeth needs coaching for this action against the king she says, “ look like the innocent flower,/But be the serpent under’t” (1. 5. 63-64). The audience is able to see Macbeth from another angle, from that of his wife’s, who as his wife should know him better than anyone else.

The audience sees that though she believes he is capable of seizing the throne, she also knows that he will not commit such an act on his own. Such a perspective on Macbeth deepens the conflict he will later have with himself upon murdering the king, and the conflict he will later encounter when she commits suicide over her guilt in coaching her husband to such an act. When the king, Duncan, arrives at the castle, the conflict reaches ultimate tension when he converses with Lady Macbeth. Knowing what she is thinking, the audience witnesses ultimate treachery as she welcomes the king and his servants into Inverness.

Macbeth’s absence in this scene makes the tension all the more evident as the audience wonders alongside Duncan, “ Where’s the Thane of Cawdor? ” (1. 6. 27). What is Macbeth up to? The king praising a man who covets his throne turns the conflict from a germinated seedling into a plant with roots, and the audience knows that it will push through the ground before long when Duncan says to Lady Macbeth, “ Give me your hand; conduct me to

mine host: we love him highly” (1. 6. 37-38). The conflict, now firmly rooted, begins to push up in the next scene with Macbeth contemplating what it is he and Lady Macbeth have talked about.

Referring to Duncan, “ 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” (1. 7. 14-18). Clearly Macbeth’s morality is troubled by the proposed action of killing the king in order to attain the throne. He knows how treacherous such an action is, especially by someone whom the king trusts and respects. Yet Lady Macbeth quickly quashes his moral doubt by challenging his manhood, asking, “ Art thou afeard/To be the same in thine own act and valor/As thou art in desire? (1. 7. 45-47). Her challenge to his manhood reveals Macbeth’s inner conflict to be a man of honor and do all in his power to acquire such honor. The scene ends with Macbeth’s inner conflict—his ambition versus his morality—settled, “ False face must hide what the false heart doth know” (1. 7. 95). Conflict between ambition and morality in Macbeth heightens when the audience meets Banquo’s son in the second act. The witches’ prophecies in the first act must here be remembered, “ Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none” (1. 3. 71).

Banquo, reminding Macbeth of the encounter, provides more steam for the conflict to grow, as the prophecies imply that though Macbeth will someday be king, so at last will someone from Banquo’s family. Such an implication further implies that there will be conflict between Macbeth and Banquo, for Macbeth is already covetous of the throne, and indeed it sets up the scene

when Macbeth orders Banquo and Fleance to be murdered in the first scene of the third act. Macbeth's ambition begins to override his morality in the third act, as he becomes paranoid and suspicious of everyone.

Having killed for the throne, it is no surprise that Macbeth begins to look over his shoulder and point fingers, especially at the one with whom he experienced the witches' prophecies. The death of Banquo in the third scene of the third act fully shows how far Macbeth is willing to go to keep the throne, and his ambition guides all of his actions with no concern for the moral nature his actions call into question. After the king has been murdered, and the people find out, and Macbeth is crowned king, the coveted position begins to drive Lady Macbeth mad. She sleepwalks about the castle washing imagined bloodstains on her hands and clothes.

Her spiraling madness, the root of which is guilt at her actions, escalates the conflict further, as she is the rock behind Macbeth. Her strength gave him strength, and with her strength dwindling because of guilt, Macbeth is surely not far behind. Were it not for Lady Macbeth's remorse, Macbeth would probably have ruled Scotland longer than stated during the course of the play. The role reversal boasts the conflict louder, as Lady Macbeth becomes more and more like Macbeth was at the start of the play, and Macbeth becomes more and more like his wife was in the beginning.

Banquo's ghost serves to show the remnants of Macbeth's morality, whatever may be left. He appears and sits in Macbeth's seat at the feast he was supposed to have attended before he was murdered, foreshadowing the truthfulness in the witches' prophecies. This forces Macbeth to seek help

from the witches' fortunetelling abilities, who warn him against Macduff, and who turn out to be right, again. The death of Macduff's son at the hand of Macbeth's hired murderers is further proof of Macbeth's overriding ambition to remain king.

The conflict between the two is nearly over, ambition having won out, but breeding further conflict between Macbeth and the rest of the world, which learns of his deeds and arrives in Scotland to take the country away from his tyrannical hands. The final act reveals the inaptitude of Macbeth as a leader, as a king of a nation. Jealous and raging, he snaps at his servants and disregards the reports on his wife's health. The onslaught of ten thousand soldiers creeping up invokes the warrior he was originally, which was the seat of Macbeth when he remained noble at the beginning of the play.

Conflict in Macbeth himself between his ambition and his morality finally resolved, the audience sees a tyrant for what he is: covetous, careless, and unreasonable. Macbeth was king for a short while because he got in his own way, burning bridges fast and making enemies of friends who once held him dear. His apparent careless reaction to his wife's suicide further reveals how his morality finally lost the battle against his ambition, for at the beginning Macbeth and his lady were firmly in love with each other.

He allowed his ambition to rot away his ties to his friends, his king, and finally his wife, and he dies in the seventh scene alone and raging against the sons of Duncan and against Macduff. Macbeth is a complex character because of his desire for power and because of the conflicting morality in his nature. Macbeth shows the audience what results when a person allows their

ambition to rule their being without the balance of morality, when actions are carried forth without the question asked, “ Is this morally justified? Though Macbeth at first asked himself such a question, he allowed the goading of his wife to act on without questioning whether her actions were morally justified, and thus morality, once left behind, will be forever lost. The slippery slope Macbeth used in justifying one murder turned into justifying many murders in the name of power. The conflict between his ambition and his morality drove the play from the first to the final act, and without such a conflict, the play would not have garnered such momentum.