

To what extent is  
macbeth wholly  
responsible for his  
ruin



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From the instant Macbeth stabs Duncan he can never rid himself, those close to him and the 'Divine Scotland' of the multitudinous scenes of carnage.

Macbeth is the darkest and most brooding of all Shakespeare's texts, from his first encounter with the witches he plunges into a world of ruthless ambition, murder and an ongoing nightmare until his final, untimely however inevitable fate of destruction and demise. In order to understand how Shakespeare intended his audience to react to and interpret the themes in the play and on whom he intended the blame for the disruption to be placed, I must analyse it from a number of different aspects.

I must firstly gain an understanding of Jacobean themes to help me to understand the audience's reaction and also observe the beliefs surrounding supernatural activities at the time. Especially those of James I, the King at the time as it is widely known of his strong beliefs that Shakespeare would inevitably be aiming to satisfy. My essay will quantify the extent of the damage Macbeth's actions caused at different stages of the history of political Scotland and will analyse his thinking which displays such psychological themes displayed as a ruler/husband/warrior.

Also, looking at the stagecraft from the era and also the modern day interpretation of the play in the form of a film (Roman Polanski, 1971, VHS CC7519, Columbia Pictures), the structure and dramatic devices. The proposition of being King obviously proved too powerful an allure for Macbeth, his overriding inhibitions played on his conscience and under the events of the story, a underlying force and mysterious emotions/convictions drove the characters towards their actions. It is undisputed that Macbeth caused himself, those around him and Scotland a great deal of destruction.

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He caused his own death, his actions drove his wife to suicide, and he killed numerous people and plunged Scotland into a never-ending cycle of fear. But, the main question to be asked is, to what extent is this Macbeth's fault? Lady Macbeth undoubtedly had great ambition for herself and her husband and was a very astute woman, with a ruthless manner. She forced knowledge of sacrilegious acts inside her and communicated with the devil. It can't however, go unnoticed that before Macbeth encountered the witches he and his wife led perfectly normal lives and so, supernatural or not the witches had some sort of affect on Macbeth's actions.

From the instant Macbeth stabs Duncan, he burdens himself with the inevitable fate of an untimely demise. However, not only does he cause his own downfall but that of those around him, his wife, Lady Macbeth for example. A vast dark cloud of fear, misery and cold-blooded murder sweeps political Scotland, causing the people to be thrown into turmoil and a complete disruption of the divine unity. The play begins by quelling rebellion in Scotland and sparks tremendous commotion amongst the country and its people, as they fear for their lives as they lie in the way of Macbeth's merciless pathway to power.

Thanes and others high up on the political ladder were particularly under threat. The dramatic imagery used throughout the play shows the huge destruction (V, v). Macbeth's strive for power affects every aspect of his life and his once strong motivation eventually led to his destruction. As the play intensifies, we see Macbeth's personal tragedy. A once great man, with potential nobility, greatly admired in Scotland for his fearless bravery. During

the battle, against 'the merciless Macdonwald', Macbeth is recognised for his ruthlessness and audacity.

When the Thane of Cawdor is found to be a traitor and executed, Duncan ironically chooses his 'valiant cousin, worthy gentleman', Macbeth to replace him. Little does Duncan know, he has just caused his own personal downfall, he decided to lay his personal trust in a man whom would later become his killer. Following Duncan's murder, Macbeth realises that the murder has put him in control of demon forces; he mentions many things in the semantic field of the supernatural and he describes voices that talk to him; 'How is't with me, when every noise appals me? '.

He has become the enemy of mankind. It is hard to know whether or not these forces are a figment of his imagination or in fact a genuine and powerful supernatural force. He recognises the conscious acts, which torture and essentially reduce him to a 'human individual'; qualities that are preventing him gain victory and become essentially invincible. His ambition to demolish these qualities overrides human inhibitions and the conscience of this good man. This inescapable bond keeps Macbeth 'simply human' and spurs him on in his fight to demolish these parts of him.

Macbeth has a 'vaulting ambition', that appears to grow after every victory (i. e. Duncan ; Banquo ; Macduff's family). As Macbeth's ambition increases, the divine Scotland suffers increasingly and the strain and the country and its people becomes apparent. The ruin that he causes himself is passed down through the political ladder of Scotland and pushes the entire country into a vicious circle of death and mental destruction. Macbeth's castle acts

as a microcosm for Scotland and it's people and symbolises the conundrum that they are enduring.

The castle could be described as the gateway to hell, with the people living within it being interpreted as representatives for different groups of people in Scotland. Macbeth being the devil, who is bringing corruption and evil. Macbeth's captains and leading men represent the Thanes and Lords of Scotland. Lady Macbeth represents the turmoil and death affecting the families of the main figures in 11th century political Scotland and Macbeth's servants show the difficult position of the civilians. They are torn between what is morally correct; regicide was deemed the most scandalous breach of law in the country at the time.

The ruling sovereign had the divine right of kings meaning that Macbeth was a fallible monarch. However, on the other hand, he was their King and they were expected to show a ruler unconditional respect. Macbeth will stop at nothing to gain position as King of Scotland. Having been spurred on by his wife's cajoling and the witch's prophecies. The folie a deux shared between Lady Macbeth and her husband is a huge part of the play. Had it not been for her encouragement and his capability to carry out the task, the deliberations leading to the murders may never have occurred and thus Duncan would have kept his life.

Macbeth sets out in his plight for leadership, allowing nothing to get in his way. Having Murdered Duncan, he gains kingship and forces Donalbain and Malcolm, Duncan's sons, both heirs to the throne to flee to England for fear of their own lives: ' What should be spoken here... seize us... let's away...

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tears are not yet brewed'. Macbeth's misery and eventual downfall is caused by his own insecurities, that have resulted from his murder of Duncan and his own misguided determination to take control of his future. As soon as the deed has been done, Macbeth experiences guilt, fear and regret, ' I have done the deed.

Didst thou not hear a noise? '. His language is immediately negative, not the speech a man of victory would normally use ' sorry'. He expresses his fear of being caught and begins to fret as to whether or not the guards, having drunk their ' drugged... possets' had in fact been able to ' seen me with these hangman's hands'. In a desperate and ruthless attempt to ensure his innocence is recognised, Macbeth addresses Banquo. Is he trying to bribe him? ' If you shall cleave to my consent, when 'tis, I shall make honour of you'.

Macbeth starts to crack under the pressure of his conscience almost immediately after he has committed his first murder, one cannot possibly imagine the monster that he later turns into. He expresses his angst to Lady Macbeth about the voices he claims to have heard. Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth of the voice he heard ' Sleep no more! Macbeth does murder sleep'. This could be interpreted as a strength – the last time Macbeth is seen with a conscience and considered sane, or is he is already demonstrating weaknesses and signs of an untimely fate to the audience?

The latter I feel is the more likely. The speed of his demise is emphasised in the play because of the rapidity of events, a decade of Scotland's heritage is condensed into a three hour script. At this point, Lady Macbeth has shown no

sign of weakness in her character and supports Macbeth and encourages him. The blood stains on Macbeth's hands cause his paranoia and he scrubs them clean, determined not to leave a trace through fear of capture; ' And wash these filthy witness from your hand'.

The fear that Macbeth possesses of being caught, and his hatred of the sight of blood on his hands means that he'll never carry out another murder again, he is fearful, horrified and overwrought; ' Wake Duncan with thy knocking. I would thou couldst'. In (II, iii) the porter is effectively a representative of Macbeth's situation. In the same way in which the porter was drunk, ' Faith sir, we were all carousing till the second cock. And drink sir, is a great provoker of three things' and unable to fulfil his duties, Macbeth was influenced and failed to be a true Thane and stand by his King.

Macbeth has obviously gained more confidence and is in a calmer state as he attempts to act innocent and unawares in front of his peers, in an attempt to proclaim his innocence, ' Lennox, what's the matter'. However, towards the end of scene iii, Macbeth shows more signs of weakness as his speech becomes more stilted, he appears to be desperately attempting to sound surprised and anxious having been informed of Duncan's death an attempt to cover up his tracks through immense dread of being caught. ' O yet I do repent of my fury, that I did kill them'.

By (II, vi) the balance has shifted from ' worthy gentleman' Macbeth to ' the good Macduff'. This once more adds to Macbeth's fear of capture and angst of unpopularity. Macbeth finds it suspicious that Macduff is returning home to Fife as opposed to staying for Macbeth's coronation and enhances his

fear. In (III, I), when Banquo accuses Macbeth of winning but 'thou play'st most foully for't', tension rises in Macbeth's castle, we see his demise and degeneration as a moral and good human being as he plots in cold blood against a good man and his innocent child (Banquo and Fleance).

Macbeth uses his evil and wicked ways to encourage two men to carry out the murders for him. He spurs them on by blaming Banquo for their failed careers and lack of promotion, when actually this is all down to Macbeth. He blames others for his faults, yet another sign of his lack of morals. Support from those around you is a very important part of the play, without the support of Lady Macbeth, the murders may never have been committed, and when Macbeth admits that his friendship with Banquo has ended, he admits that he is starting to weaken.

To be thus is nothing, But to be safely thus', even though he is now King of Scotland, as he wished, he has realised that it means nothing unless he can feel safe – something we learn he will never feel, this lack of safety is what leads him to his extinction. Macbeth has developed a nihilistic view with no depth of emotion, it is as if he no longer has emotion, he is simply a murderer, who won't stop until he can get what he wants. Macbeth has initiated a circle of not feeling/being safe and giving inspiration to others to assassinate him by starting it means he can never live in peace (i. e. ever sleep for fear of being murdered – 'Macbeth does murder sleep').

It is this fear that forces him to murder anyone he sees as a threat to his life (e. g. Banquo). Macbeth's actions have caused him a breakdown of relationships, his 'folie a deux', Lady Macbeth, a life partner and



unconditional supporter begins to crumble as Lady Macbeth loses her initial confidence and becomes mentally ill. He is petrified of a revolt from the people of Scotland; 'To be thus is nothing but to be safely thus' and scared of the plans of his surrounding Thanes and Malcolm and Donalbain (with the support of the English).

He distances everyone from himself in an attempt to disguise his actions, he fails to inform Lady Macbeth of his plans to kill Banquo, 'Be innocent of knowledge dearest chuck'. At the Banquet, where all the Thanes and noblemen of Scotland are present, Macbeth turns into a gibbering wreck and has to be calmed and reassured by his wife and she informs everyone 'my lord is often thus' and asks them to 'But go at once'. Macbeth describes himself as 'cabined, cribbed, confined'; this alliteration is a metaphor for his personal realisation that his life here forward will be a never-ending cycle of him having to murder to survive.

Until (III, iv), people suspect, but nobody is positive that Macbeth is to blame for the murders and destruction, however, by the end, people are virtually positive they are down to him. (III, vi) further encourages Macbeth's ruination of himself, in his country and thane's eyes. Lennox acts as representative of all the thanes of Scotland and confirms that 'The gracious Duncan was pitied of Macbeth – marry he was dead'. Macbeth's suspicious behaviour of showing great favour towards Duncan, after his death has been recognised by the thanes. The scene is set in another Scottish castle, representing other homes throughout Scotland.

The fear expressed by Lennox shows the shadow of fright under which Scotland is living. This fear makes everybody unable to relax, in addition to murdering his own sleep, Macbeth has killed everyone else's as well; 'sleep to our nights, free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives'. As Macbeth's ruination and that of divine Scotland grows worse, Macduff's progress as a good man/potential saviour becomes obvious. Macbeth notices Macduff's increase in political strength and, in his pledge for safety, decides to prevent him gaining any more power.

The last few lines of the scene, signify the state of Scotland, 'May soon return to this our suffering country, Under a hand accursed'. (III, vi) shows the contrast between Scotland and England and emphasises the evil that has swept Scotland. It highlights how the King of England (Edward the Confessor) is a wonderful monarch, appointed by divine right. This is opposed to Macbeth, who is King due to brutal behaviour and has been appointed by witches (is this their way of spreading evil and becoming more powerful, in an attempt to overrule God? ).

Most pious Edward with such grace... oly King... malevolence of fortune nothing'. You will notice when reading this scene that there is a positive semantic field surrounding Edward, as opposed to Macbeth. He is associated with blood, evil and negativity. Real irony and sarcasm surrounds Macbeth's persona in this scene, 'Marry he was dead', the variations in intonation are necessary to bring out Lennox's sarcasm and irony. In (V, i) Macbeth, desperate for some sort of reassurance of his power, revisits the witches. His fearless attitude is emphasised when he shows the witches no respect as he addresses them 'midnight hags'.

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When the witches tell him to 'Beware Macduff; Beware the Thane of Fife' it is hereafter that Macbeth plans the unthinkable and sends murderers to kill Macduff's entire virtuous household. He informs Lennox that 'the castle of Macduff I will surprise, Seize upon Fife, give to the edge o' th' sword His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls That trace him in his line'. Having realised the threat that Macduff poses to him, Macbeth wishes to stop any of his lineage gaining royal privilege, so he uses the only way he knows how and does so in a very unrelenting manner.