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## The Recalcitrance of the Tragic Hero in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

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<b>Keywords:</b> -Recalcitrance - Tragic Hero - <i>Macbeth</i> =Shakespeare.	<b>Abstract:</b> Stated by Aristotle in his <i>Poetics</i> , tragic flaw is one of the main characteristics of the tragic hero, a weak point within his personality that leads him to commit fatal mistake during the events and that is what causes his decline. In Shakespeare's <i>Macbeth</i> , the tragic hero, Macbeth, is motivated to embrace evil and to be criminal for he is not immune in the opposite of his diseased will to extort the throne. Under the influence of this flaw, Macbeth degenerates from a respected man of great honour to an isolated murderer and then to the expected conclusion, death. The aim of this research is to examine the recalcitrance, one's illegitimate ambition, as Macbeth's tragic flaw in depth throwing much light on its significant role in bringing about the idea of treason, killing king Duncan, in Macbeth's mind and, then, committing the crime.
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### جموح البطل المأساوي في مسرحية ماكبث لوليم شكسبير

**الخلاصة:** أن من بين أهم خصائص البطل المأساوي، حسب أرسطو، هو العيب المأساوي المتمثل بنقطة الضعف في شخصية هذا البطل والذي يقوده إلى ارتكاب خطأ قاتل أثناء سير الأحداث ويؤدي بالنتيجة إلى سقوطه. البطل المأساوي في مسرحية شكسبير ماكبيث لم يكن محصن ضد الرغبة المريضة للاستيلاء على عرش الملك بطريقة غير شرعية وهذا ما جعله ينحدر باتجاه نهايته المأساوية وهي الموت. إن الهدف من هذا البحث هو التركيز على الجموح باعتباره العيب المأساوي لبطل هذه المسرحية والذي جعله يفكر بالخيانة وقتل الملك لأخذ مكانه.  
الكلمات المفتاحية: الجموح، البطل المأساوي، ماكبث. شكسبير

## Introduction

*Macbeth* is the tale of Macbeth's mutiny and deterioration. Shakespeare sheds light on the greatness of the hero early even before his appearance for the reason that he aims to make his tumble poignant. The magnificence of Macbeth is established, and then he is tempted and falls towards his tragic end.

"*Macbeth* is a statement of evil." <sup>1</sup> It appears as if it "defines a particular kind of evil, the evil that result from a lust for power." <sup>2</sup> The main focus is made on malice. The vicious characters play roles more entertaining than that played by benevolent. It is really a demonstration of a complex vision of viciousness that gives the effect that the witches endlessly roam the community looking for someone who has the readiness to defy the functioning laws. The witches appeal to the illegitimate ambition of a person like Macbeth for being the aperture that can be exploited to reach one's mind.

The witches exert their influence through the deepest will of human beings aiming to manipulate those who listen to them for they want to violate the order of nature so as to gain illegal position and that is what represents Macbeth's great misdeed. He unrightfully usurps the kingship and this is the reason that enables evil to diffuse to the whole of the country.

Macbeth, at the beginning of the play, is introduced as a patriotic champion and is later appointed as a Thane of Cawdor for being a man of great honourable conduct in the eyes of the royalty. The King orders that the treacherous Thane of Cawdor should be executed and that Macbeth be rewarded to occupy his position. "Go pronounce his present death. And with his former title greet Macbeth." <sup>3</sup> At the end, Macbeth becomes totally isolated. He loses everything including his own life. His loss of things that have made him a great

man who has been loaded with honours comes as a result of his imprudent choice. He chooses to succumb to his illegal ambition

Macbeth is rewarded to hold a sublime office, but he is not satisfied. In order to understand the reason that makes Macbeth unhappy with the high social position that he has occupied one has to deal with Macbeth's vulnerability in front of his diseased ambition that makes him think to go beyond the natural order of the universe, a strict hierarchical system of certain rules according to which one has not to abandon his or her place in the chain, and that is what leads him to be gripped in the hands of evil. This means that to kill the king in order to occupy his position is to disturb the natural order. The unnatural replacement of Duncan by Macbeth turns on a state of disorder. One murder leads to another and that is why the country "sinks beneath the yoke; it weeps, it bleeds: and each new day a gash is added to her wound." (IV.iii.39-41)

The authorization to perform moral guilt, as Germaine Greer says, involves grave matter, full knowledge, and full consent. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare creates the character that has the ability to achieve all these elements. Macbeth is capable "of carrying out the act, of knowing exactly how heinous his crime is, and of sticking to it once done." <sup>4</sup> Macbeth's vulnerability to the prophecies of the witches guides him to commit his crimes. His illegitimate ambition is provoked by the witches who put the suggestion into Macbeth's mind.

### **Macbeth: the Inner Flaw and the Great Exterior Defiance**

The interaction between Macbeth and the witches is of vital role in designing Macbeth's thinking about his own life before and after Duncan's murder. The witches enumerate three prophecies to Macbeth:

First Witch: "All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Glamis!

Second Witch: All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!

Third Witch: All hail, Macbeth that shall be king hereafter!”  
**(I.iii.48-51)**

These prophecies become a powerful force in directing the events of the play. At the moment that Duncan's messenger joins Macbeth to tell the order of appointing him Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth comments saying, “Two truths are told. As happy prologues to the swelling act, Of the imperial theme.” **(I.iii.128-30)** This situation represents a turning point in the events for giving the witches a sort of vigour of prophecy.

The witches, who have no authority to force their will upon others, can appeal to an already existing drift to direct one's desire towards an exact event. They make their appeal to Macbeth's and Banquo's desires aiming to direct their own future. Banquo, on the one hand, is powerfully enticed by them but “his reaction to the prophecies of the witches is very different to Macbeth's.”<sup>5</sup> He puts in his consciousness the fact that he has to protect his honour and his social position. Banquo is able to keep his moral caution away from his desire. For being vulnerable, Macbeth, on the other hand, cannot act in accordance with this awareness. He seizes upon the idea that he has just been made Thane of Cawdor. He uses this news as an excuse to satisfy himself about what he wants to believe that the witches tell him the truth. He says:

Macbeth: “This supernatural soliciting  
Cannot be ill; cannot be good. If ill,  
Why hath it given me earnest of success?  
Commencing in a truth? I am Thane of Cawdor.” **(I.iii.131-34)**

The witches appeal to what Macbeth wants to believe. They do nothing to make him accept what they have said. They do not tell him a plan in order to achieve their prophecies. They give no tip about Duncan's murder. In his book, *Macbeth*, John Harvey confirms that "they never tell Macbeth any lies; they

only allow him to deceive himself. External evil takes advantage of internal weakness." <sup>6</sup> As a result, the witches cannot be the origin of the idea of the crime. They suggest to such idea, but they do not create it. The witches offer no specific recommendations about the immediate action that Macbeth must do, but they influence him by addressing secret desires within himself leading him to behave in accordance with their suggestion.

It is true that Macbeth is responsible for making his final decision, but the play would be largely different if Macbeth is fortified against the prophecies. The idea is put in his mind with the help of the witches and that is why he begins to think about the killing of the king. Although the witches have influenced Macbeth, they are not responsible for Macbeth's behavior. They are responsible for introducing the idea which fires his illegitimate ambition and leads to an unnecessary chain of events.

As Duncan's chief champion, Macbeth's career has been ruled by loyalty. As soon as the idea of being the king arises in his mind, he is corrupted and is no longer trustworthy because his mind is filled up with evil and deceit. A fact that cannot be denied is that with Macbeth's help the king has overcome all his enemies. But the pretext of defeating Duncan's enemies is not an acceptable reason that makes Macbeth think of kingship for him without illegal imagination that leads him to achieve the murder. That is why he already feels guilty when he says, "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me, without my stir." (I.iii.45) As a result, A.N. Jeffares's idea about Macbeth's reaction towards the prophecies is difficult to be acceptable. He compares Macbeth to a female bird which sits on her eggs. He says, "Macbeth broods on their words in a way suggestive of his eventual action." <sup>7</sup>

Although a part of Macbeth is fascinated with the possibility of being king, it is not completely clear from where this desire comes. It is admitted that the



dagger which I see before me. The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.” (II.i.33-35) Macbeth's decision to achieve the deed is marked by a curious indecision. He is never satisfied about what he really wants to do. When he goes to accomplish the crime, he starts hallucinating the sight of a dagger leading him towards the deed. He is filled with the sense of horror and that is what reflects the fact that Macbeth is in the grip of his imagination.

Macbeth has freely chosen to embrace evil in his imagination. That is why; to say that Macbeth is vulnerable towards the thought of getting the kingdom is quite correct. But one cannot describe him as a weak man as A. N. Jeffares does. He says:

“Fundamentally Macbeth is a weak man; after vacillating and deciding to abandon the idea of killing the king, he is finally forced into Murdering Duncan by his wife.”<sup>10</sup>

No one can deny the great influence of Macbeth's wife. “Her eyes are fixed upon the crown and the means to it.”<sup>11</sup> She is of strong desire to get the throne, “but not for herself for her husband.”<sup>12</sup> She continually encourages Macbeth to carry out the murder. Stephen Siddall, who believes that women can be influenced by evil easier than men, compares Lady Macbeth to Eve. He states, “when Satan, disguised as a spirit, first tempted Eve, who then tempted Adam.”<sup>13</sup> But Macbeth is not weak to the point that he is forced by his wife to kill the king. Macbeth is, “a wanton murderer, and his offence is aggravated, not diminished, by his own realization of its significances.”<sup>14</sup> Macbeth is well known as a fearless warrior and champion in the battle field. The king himself willingly honours him as brave and trusted, he calls him “valiant cousin” and “worthy gentleman.” (I.ii.24)

Macbeth's good nature is soon defeated by his diseased ambition when the king makes Malcolm, his son, the prince of Cumberland. Macbeth kills his

guest, Duncan, while he is staying at his castle. Macbeth, who has overcome by evil, is able to gain the kingship. But he feels bad. He wishes that he had not killed the King. He says:

Macbeth: “Had I but died an hour before this chance,  
I had liv'd a blessed time; for, from this instant,  
There's nothing serious in mortality—  
All is but toys; renown and grace is dead;  
The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees  
Is left this vault to brag of.” **(II.iii.91-96)**

Macbeth reaches the conclusion that the assassination is imperfect and as a result he has to deal with many potential personal conflicts. He feels unsafe believing that Banquo will work to influence the minds of the people against him as reflected in the following speech, “But to be safely thus. Our fears in Banquo.” **(III.i.47)**

Macbeth thinks that Duncan's death is not enough to secure the crown for him. It is only by further crime that he can maintain what he has obtained by the first one. As a method to rid himself out of Banquo and to ensure his position on the throne, Macbeth decides to kill Banquo and his only son, Fleance, for the reason that Fleance was predicted to be the king of Scotland. He uses others to carry out his plans. Later, Macbeth receives bad news. Banquo is killed, but Fleance is able to escape. This event represents the climax of the play after which the forces against Macbeth become more and more powerful. Banquo's ghost arouses terror within Macbeth. This terror is not so much a trace of moral compunction. It is a result of his knowledge that his crimes are not a part of the past. The appearance of the ghost indicates the failure of Macbeth's strategy of committing murders. But he goes in sinking to his destructive bestiality.





And let the angel whom thou still hast serv'd  
Tell thee Macduff was from his mother's womb  
Untimely ripp'd." (V.viii.13-16)

## Conclusion

Being an ambitious soldier, Macbeth is able to rise to be a great military leader. As patriotic command who expresses superior bravery in defending the fame of his country, he is rewarded to occupy a high social status and that is why it is not acceptable to state that mere ambition is Macbeth's tragic flaw. Ambition can be simply defined as a strong longing to accomplish rightful aims such as prosperity in business and alike. The man who tries to pass the Great Chain of Being and to occupy one's legal position cannot be described ambitious. He is, with no doubt, recalcitrant. As a result one has to decide that Macbeth's tragic flaw is vulnerability. He is vulnerable in the presence of his illegitimate will and that is what guides him to commit fatal mistake incarnated by Duncan's murder. For being imperfect crime, Macbeth is thrown into an inescapable process of killing. He expects that each murder will solve his problem. This process drives him to be isolated as a villain. Finally, Macbeth realizes that he is vulnerable and the forces of evil do not serve men.

## Notes

1. L. C. Knight. "How Many Children Had Lady Macbeth," in *Shakespeare: Text and Performance* Ed., by Richard Danson Brown and David Johnson (Great Britain: Macmillan Press Ltd., 2000), p. 119.
2. L. C. Knight. "King Lear and the Great Tragedies," in *The Pelican Guide to English Literature: The Age of Shakespeare* Ed., Boris Ford ( Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1955), p. 241.

3. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Ed., by R. B. Kennedy (Great Britain: Collins Clear-Type Press, 1982), p. 33. Subsequent references to this play will be to this edition
4. Germaine Greer, *Shakespeare* (Oxford: O.U.P. 2000), p. 69.
5. William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, Ed., by A.N. Jeffares (Beirut: York Press, 2000), p. xx.
6. John Harvey, *Macbeth* (Oxford: Alden Press, 1960), p. 19.
7. Jeffares, p. xx.
8. Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1951), p. 111.
9. Dieter Mehl, *Shakespeare's Tragedies* (Cambridge: C.U.P. 1986), p. 111.
10. Jeffares, p. x1x.
11. A. C. Bradley, *Shakespearean Tragedy* (London: Macmilan and Company Ltd., 1904), p. 308.
12. Graham Handley, *Macbeth: Brodie's Notes* (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1985), p.64.
13. Stephen Siddall *Shakespeare: Macbeth* (Cambridge: C.U.P., 2002), p. 73
14. John Middleton Murry, *Shakespeare* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1951), p. 194.

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