

1: Ambition

Read the following extract from Act 1 Scene 5 of *Macbeth* and then answer the question that follows.

At this point in the play, Lady Macbeth is speaking. She has just read Macbeth's letter telling her about his meeting with the three witches.

LADY MACBETH

Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be What thou art promis'd; yet do I fear thy nature, It is too full o'th'milk of human kindness To catch the nearest way. Thou wouldst be great, Art not without ambition, but without	5
The illness should attend it. What thou wouldst highly, That wouldst thou holily; wouldst not play false, And yet wouldst wrongly win. Thou'dst have, great Glamis, That which cries, 'Thus thou must do' if thou have it; And that which rather thou dost fear to do,	10
Than wishest should be undone. Hie thee hither, That I may pour my spirits in thine ear And chastise with the valour of my tongue All that impedes thee from the golden round, Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem To have thee crown'd withal.	15

Starting with this speech, explore how Shakespeare presents ambition in *Macbeth*.

Write about:

- how Shakespeare presents ambition in this speech
- how Shakespeare presents ambition in the play as a whole.

1: The Essay

In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare presents ambition as the tragic flaw that causes Macbeth's downfall. In the extract, Lady Macbeth questions Macbeth's *lack* of ambition and she resolves to persuade him to seize the throne. Later, Shakespeare shows how Macbeth's ambition is encouraged by the Witches' prophecies and by his own desire for power as we see him transformed from a loyal subject, to a murderous tyrant, to a defeated usurper. Performed before King James VI and I in 1606, the play suggests, presumably to the satisfaction of the king, that ambitious rebels against divinely appointed kings should expect gruesome punishment.

In Lady Macbeth's soliloquy, Shakespeare presents ambition as something that Macbeth lacks, suggesting that Lady Macbeth aims to manipulate Macbeth to take action. Alone, Lady Macbeth speaks her true thoughts aloud, fearing that Macbeth is "too full o'th'milk of human kindness to catch the nearest way" to the throne (1.5.16-17). The milk symbolism is an insult, suggesting that Lady Macbeth feels that her husband is too feminine. Ambition, here, is clearly linked to ideas about masculinity and the original audience may well have been shocked to see a female character transgressing traditional stereotypes of female behaviour. Lady Macbeth then argues that ambition requires "illness", in order to bear fruit (1.5.19). She appears to believe that masculine cruelty is necessary to be great and, indeed, later calls on supernatural power to "unsex" (1.5.40) her and make her cruel. This is perhaps an echo of Machiavelli's notorious advice to princes that vice should be used in order to get and retain power. Lady Macbeth concludes by resolving to give Macbeth her qualities through the power of her rhetoric: "I may pour my spirits in thine ear." (1.5.25) The metaphor presents persuasion as a fluid, filling Macbeth's head with something unnatural and deadly.

Although Lady Macbeth dismisses Macbeth's lack of ambition, Shakespeare presents ambition as an important motivation for Macbeth. Soon after meeting the Witches, Banquo notices that Macbeth is "rapt" (1.3.55 and 1.3.141). Macbeth seems to be already imagining his royal future. Later, when Duncan proclaims Malcom as his heir, Macbeth reveals his "black and deep desires" (1.4.51). Whispering to himself, he uses imagery of darkness to emphasise how disturbing his ambition is and to reveal his plan to "overleap" (1.4.48-49) Malcolm. This access to Macbeth's thoughts sets up a dramatically ironic scene where Macbeth simultaneously proclaims his loyalty and signals his treachery. However,

Macbeth is never firm in his resolve and almost abandons the murder noting that his “vaulting ambition o'erleaps itself.” (1.7.27-28) Here he imagines ambition as a horse failing to jump a fence. This wavering is ended by Lady Macbeth's mockery (“Wouldst thou...live a coward?” [1.7.41-43]) and we see that, without her ambition, Macbeth's ambition may have withered away. This reflects the source, *The Chronicles of Scotland*, in which the killing of Duncan is a product of both Macbeth's ambition and Lady Macbeth's “unquenchable desire” to be queen (p102).

Shakespeare later presents ambition as a character flaw that causes Macbeth's downfall. Upon becoming king, Macbeth mourns his “fruitless crown.” (3.1.62). This ambition to father a dynasty, expressed using metaphors of infertility, causes him to plot to have Banquo and his son Fleance, prophesied by the witches to “get kings” (1.3.65), killed. Their continued existence eats away at Macbeth and he exclaims: “full of scorpions is my mind.” (3.2.36) This metaphor suggests that Macbeth is poisoned by his ambition and that it is causing him pain and indeed, when Macbeth learns that Fleance has escaped he cries out: “then comes my fit again.” (3.4.21) This is the beginning of Macbeth's downfall. Later, as the army advances, Macbeth reaches a moment of nihilistic realisation proclaiming that life is “a tale told by an idiot...signifying nothing.” (5.5.25-27) Shakespeare shows that ambition leads only to destruction and meaninglessness. The arrival of the rightful heir represents a return to the correct “measure, time and place,” (5.9.40) and perhaps reflects contemporary discussions about the Divine Right of Kings; Macbeth's ambition causes him to outrage God and he receives his just punishment.

Thus, in *Macbeth*, Shakespeare presents ambition as a disruptive force that undermines duty and loyalty, usurps legitimate leaders and leads, ultimately, to the just death of the usurper. Moreover, ambition is presented as an illness and as a character flaw that brings about the tragic hero's destruction. Then, as in many other tragedies, a new equilibrium of peace and good order dawns. Though twenty-first century audiences may have a more positive view of ambition, the play still resonates as a powerful depiction of how excessive ambition and absolute power can corrupt previously virtuous people.

1: Essay Writing Checklist

As you read, check how many of the recommendations below are followed by the essay. Then, use the checklist to help you write your own essay.

Remember that these are *recommendations* from an experienced teacher, not *requirements*. Allow them to help and guide you, but don't allow them to trap you; if you have a different idea and feel confident about it, then give it a go!

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| <input type="checkbox"/> Use wording of question in answer – “Shakespeare presents.” | <input type="checkbox"/> Refer to effect on audience. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Use Intro and Conclusion to help structure essay as argument. | <input type="checkbox"/> Use relevant subject terminology. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Use topic sentences to open each main paragraph. | <input type="checkbox"/> Connect to context when text was written, where relevant: Jacobean era. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Close focus on extract. | <input type="checkbox"/> Connect to context when text is set, where relevant: early medieval Scotland. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Focus on elsewhere in the play. | <input type="checkbox"/> Connect to literary context, where relevant: history of the genre of tragedy. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Use short, precise quotations to support interpretations. | <input type="checkbox"/> Connect to original and 21 st century audience context, where relevant. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Close analysis of language, especially aspects of poetry. | <input type="checkbox"/> Focus on minor character(s), where relevant. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Close analysis of form, especially aspects of performance. | <input type="checkbox"/> Use accurate spelling, punctuation and grammar. |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Close analysis of text structure, especially aspects of tragedy. | <input type="checkbox"/> Write c450-c750 words. |