

## Corruption, Manipulation and Abuse of Power in Shakespearean Tragedy *Macbeth*

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### Abstract:

*When individuals come to a position of power, the definition of control becomes a new one and changed. It becomes easier to obtain and it literally corrupts their minds. Corruption is something that is motivated by greed and fraud. It's a very threatening personality that controls and destroys people's lives and makes them the kind of person other people don't want to associate with. The reason why corruption has become a global problem is that it's rational to be greedy or wanting for more, but soon after it gets out of control then there is a corrupted person who in order to change would have to step down from power and become a person who doesn't control.*

*The present paper is an attempt to show the corruption of power in Shakespearean tragedy Macbeth. In Macbeth there are many examples of corruption. Macbeth becomes corrupt through power that he gains. Macbeth kills his way to the top, spurred on by his insanely ambitious wife, who in the end is driven to insane suicide by the shame and corruption of the very power she sought. The play shows that even someone who starts out like Macbeth and does not crave power will do terrible things to gain authority and power.*

**Key words:** Power, Lust, Fear, Ambition, Manipulation, Corruption

### Introduction

Former United States President, John F. Kennedy, referred to

the acquisition of power through immoral behaviour in his inaugural speech. He stated, "In the past, those who foolishly sought power by riding on the back of the tiger ended up inside" (1961). Kennedy does so to explore the concept of power and greed resulting in corruption. Power allows people to have control over other beings in this temporary realm. Many people yearn to have this element to create a world fit for them. The drive for power appears to be a deep-seated aspect of human nature. It is likely related to the survival instinct- both to stay alive and procreate. When individuals come into a position of power, their definition of control is altered. Control becomes easier to obtain and it literally corrupts their minds. Their personality becomes threatening and they can essentially control others' lives through evil. A powerful person is likely to be in situations where they are able to acquire their desires by simply lying, bribing, stealing and sometimes killing. People in power feel that they can do anything when they are in power for a long period of time.

Corruption of power is something brought upon by greed to obtain what one desires. The problem of corruption has been seen either as a structural problem of politics or economics, or as a cultural and individual moral problem. The definition of corruption consequently ranges from the broad terms of "misuse of public power" and "moral decay" to strict legal definitions of corruption as an act of bribery involving a public servant and a transfer of tangible resources. The encyclopedic and working definition used by the World Bank, Transparency International and others is that corruption is *the abuse of public power for private benefit (or profit)*. An updated version with the same elements is the definition by Mushtaq Khan, who says Corruption is "*behaviour that deviates from the formal rules of conduct governing the actions of someone in a position of public authority because of private-regarding motives such as wealth, power, or status*" (1996, 12). Corrupted people are driven to get more; nothing else matters except what they seek

to gain. Anyone who has been infected by corruption will display noticeable differences in their behaviour. They may act like the Devil himself or commit to carrying out things they normally wouldn't do. Corruption will usually be a result of a desire, pursuit or possession of power. In the book *Macbeth*, this is an element of man vs. nature because Macbeth goes against the natural order of things, thus causing his own self-destruction because he is not fit to govern the nation of Scotland. John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton expressed his opinion in a letter to Bishop Mandell Creighton, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are always almost bad men." ([1887] 1907) is clearly suitable for Shakespeare's classical tragic protagonist Macbeth.

### **Corruption in Action**

The stage directions indicate that the play begins with a storm, and malignant supernatural forces immediately appear in the form of the three witches. From there, the action quickly shifts to a battlefield that is dominated by a sense of the grisliness and cruelty of war. In his description of Macbeth and Banquo's heroics, the captain dwells specifically on images of carnage: "he unseam'd him from the nave to th' chops," (Shakespeare 2007, 4) he says, describing Macbeth's slaying of Macdonwald. The bloody murders that fill the play are foreshadowed by the bloody victory that the Scots win over their enemies. Our initial impression of Macbeth, based on the captain's report of his valor and prowess in battle, is immediately complicated by Macbeth's obvious fixation upon the witches' prophecy. Macbeth is a noble and courageous warrior but his reaction to the witches' pronouncements emphasizes his great desire for power and prestige. In the beginning of the play Macbeth meets the witches; from this moment in the play onwards Macbeth has an insatiable lust for power. The witches predict that three events will happen, they predict he will be Thane of Glamis, then

Thane of Cawdor but the last shocks him the most “all hail Macbeth, that shalt be King hereafter”(7).

Macbeth immediately realizes that the fulfillment of the prophecy may require conspiracy and murder on his part. He clearly allows himself to consider taking such actions, although he is by no means resolved to do so. His reaction to the prophecy displays a fundamental confusion and inactivity: instead of resolving to act on the witches' claims, or simply dismissing them, Macbeth talks himself into a kind of thoughtful stupor as he tries to work out the situation for himself. Lady Macbeth emerges and drives the hesitant Macbeth to act; she is the will propelling his achievements. Once Lady Macbeth hears of the witches' prophecy, Duncan's life is doomed.

Macbeth contains some of Shakespeare's most vivid female characters. Lady Macbeth and the three witches are extremely wicked, but they are also stronger and more imposing than the men around them. Shakespeare has the witches speak in language of contradiction. Their famous line “Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (Shakespeare 2007, 3) is a prominent example, but there are many others, such as their characterization of Banquo as “lesser than Macbeth, and greater” (8). Such speech adds to the play's sense of moral confusion by implying that nothing is quite what it seems. Interestingly, Macbeth's line in the play “So foul and fair a day I have not seen” (7) echoes the witches' words and establishes a connection between them and Macbeth. It also suggests that Macbeth is the focus of the drama's moral confusion.

Macbeth, at the beginning of the play, seems like the sort of person who wouldn't commit the act of murder as he has a conscience. Macbeth was not ready to kill King Duncan as Duncan has given him many opportunities. But Lady Macbeth convinced him by claiming that she would never have broken a promise like this,

“How tender 'tis to love the babe who milks me:  
I would, while it was smiling in my face,

Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums  
And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn  
As you have done to this". (Shakespeare 2007, 20)

Here Lady Macbeth is saying that if she had taken up a task such as this one, she would have murdered her own baby rather than break a promise such as this one. This shows that Lady Macbeth is the one that manipulates Macbeth to commit the crime. Lady Macbeth looks like the innocent flower, but there is the serpent under it. Lady Macbeth's attitude towards power is somewhat similar to Macbeth's. When Lady Macbeth reads the letter from her husband telling her about the witches, it can be clearly seen that she will be willing to risk anything to see Macbeth king. Her opinion about murder is that if it helps her to get what she wants, she's in favour of it. Therefore Macbeth agrees to go along with Lady Macbeth's evil plan and performs the dastardly deed of killing the King (Duncan). Despite the fact that Macbeth is appalled by his deed, he still goes on to kill more people in order to secure his position. Macbeth forgets about his friends and the value of their friendships and is willing to, and does kill them if it means his position as king isn't secure, or won't be secure.

### **War with future**

Macbeth's crime is opposed to the order and harmony of the universe. This is supported by the imagery of planting and husbandry, of feasting and conviviality, by the pleasant evocation of the calmness and beauty of nature as Duncan and Banquo enter the castle walls. Duncan himself stands for the fruitful aspects of nature: he is like Timon the source of the goodness of life, of all that Macbeth may hope to attain: "I have begun to plant thee, and will labour / To make thee full of growing..." (Shakespeare 2007, 13) The murder of Duncan strikes at all which makes life good, fruitful, beautiful; Macbeth cuts off the source of his own being, and this is echoed in Lady

Macbeth's "...Had he not resembled / My father as he slept, I had done it" (24). This line, upon which so many fantastic theories have been spun, is not primarily a literal-statement; it is a choral commentary to emphasize the father symbolism with which Duncan is endowed. Macbeth's crime is a blow against nature's unity and peace, a hideous dissertation of all creative, family, and social duties, all union and concord: this is the bond he breaks, 'the great bond' that keeps him 'pale'. By killing Duncan, Macbeth destroys the natural order of things and brings Scotland to utter chaos.

Macbeth has not only vaulting ambition for himself, but he is also ambitious to found a dynasty of kings. This makes him war with the future. His war with future is symbolized by the child or baby, and baby-images recur with great frequency and the witches show him apparitions of two children, and a number of kings, who are the descendants of Banquo. Therefore, he decides to wage a war against the future and defeat the prophecy of the witches. "Psychologists refer to this as the paradox of power. Once the person rises to power, instead of being polite, honest and outgoing, they become impulsive, reckless and rude"(Lehrer 2011). Banquo is brutally murdered but his son Fleance escapes, thus symbolising the truth that the future would always elude him and so to war with future is futile. However, he fails to realise this truth and the murder of Macduff's wife and children soon follows. He rushes on his bloody career till the very end. He and his Queen both dies childless, defeated by the future.

It could be said that the once kind Macbeth can blame his future corruption on his wife and the three witches. The incantatory quality of the weird sisters' verse can be felt even in a single couplet: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair, / Hover through the fog and filthy air (Shakespeare 2007, 3). It reflects that Macbeth is a free agent who need not have yielded to the witches hints: certainly he harbors within him what they presented before him. Yet, he has not been ensnared: the charm

has been wound up, and if he is the tyrant, viewed another way he is the victim of infernal tyranny. This second view of Macbeth as victim, finds support from Shakespeare's other tragedies and even in his use of the word 'tragedy'. The Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* are part of his mysterious inscrutable surrounding. They have the traditional petty malice of witches, and they acknowledge 'masters', but they also have properties not associated with witches: they vanish like bubbles and they speak authoritatively.

He initially believes that in seizing the highest authority, and therefore a considerable amount of power, he would gain immeasurable amounts of happiness; unfortunately, this is evidently not the case. Macbeth not only gains nothing, but also loses everything in his life which at first made him happy: society's respect, his wife, peace of mind and the benefits of relatively sound moral values. Macbeth himself acknowledges that his

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more; it is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing. (Shakespeare 2007, 79)

While Macbeth's nihilistic views are not applicable to society in general, they are significant to his immediate situation in that he realizes that he has become the witches' puppet. Furthermore, Macbeth understands the situation and the possibility of death in his near future; therefore, considering that his life's purpose has become retaining his position as the King of Scotland, it is not surprising that he now views life in this way.

## **Manipulation and Lack of Will Power**

In William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* many characters use manipulation in very much the same way as politicians do in

the society. The characters in *Macbeth* use manipulation in order to ensure that they get what they want.

One such character who uses manipulation in order to get what she wants is Lady Macbeth. Lady Macbeth manipulates Macbeth, her husband, into killing King Duncan. When she hears of the witches prophesy of Macbeth becoming king, she believes that Macbeth needs to kill Duncan if he wants to be king and she queen. When Lady Macbeth tries to convince Macbeth to do this, at first, he does not want to do it. He believes that Duncan is a good king and so Macbeth has no need to kill him. Macbeth also states, when Duncan is visiting Macbeth's castle,

He's here in double trust:  
First, 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. (Shakespeare 2007, 18-19).

Macbeth expresses his action of killing Duncan would be unjustified because as a host, Macbeth is supposed to protect Duncan for murder, not to kill him. Lady Macbeth responds to this by questioning Macbeth's bravery and masculinity. She questions,

..... Art thou afeard  
To be the same in thine own act, and valour,  
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that  
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,  
And live a coward in thine own esteem?"

(Shakespeare 2007, 19)

With these insults, Lady Macbeth manipulates Macbeth into killing Duncan. With Duncan dead, Macbeth becomes king, and Lady Macbeth becomes queen just as she wanted.

Later in the play, Macbeth also uses manipulation in order to get what he wants. Realizing that all of the witches' prophecies have come true except the prophecy that Banquo's

children will become kings, Macbeth becomes suspicious that Banquo may try to kill him and become king. In order to ensure that this does not happen, Macbeth hires two murderers to kill Banquo and his son while they are out riding. Macbeth manipulates them into believing that Banquo is their enemy. In one of their meetings, Macbeth says to the two murderers,

Know that it was he, in the times past,  
Which held you so under fortune,  
Which you thought had been our innocent self.

...

Are you so gossell'd, to pray for this good man,  
And for his issue, whose heavy hand  
Hath bow'd you to the grave, and beggar'd  
Yours for ever? (Shakespeare 2007, 37-38)

In these lines Macbeth blames the two murderer's poverty on Banquo and questions why they would pray for someone who made them beggars. After these lines, the murderers agree to kill Banquo, and they eventually do so. Macbeth manipulates the two murderers in order to feel secure that Banquo would not kill him to become king. Both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth use manipulation in order to get what they desire. These two characters show that William Shakespeare knew just how strong a manipulative person can be.

Besides his 'vaulting ambition', Macbeth also has a weakness of will. That is why he yields to the suggestion of the witches, and Lady Macbeth, called, "the fourth witch", is able to overcome his resistance by "the valour of her tongue". Lady Macbeth displays far greater strength of will than Macbeth. Macbeth is hesitant to kill his relative and guest, Duncan. He is surrounded by doubt and guilt but Lady Macbeth has no such doubt. She does not need "supernatural soliciting" to inspire her. She determines the course of action to be adopted the moment she gets Macbeth's letter. She stays firm on the course till her ambition is reached. "Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be / What thou art promised" (Shakespeare 2007, 14).

She utters immediately after reading the letter. Her greetings on meeting Macbeth show clearly that she has formulated a clear-cut plan to make Macbeth the king of Scotland. She shows the strength of her will especially when Macbeth asks her what “if we should fail?” Her reply, “We fail! / But screw your courage to the sticking place / And we will not fail...” (20) is typical of her and her unrelenting determination. She has an abundance of energy and even invokes the spirits to unsex her so that she can commit the murder successfully. It is by personal appeals, and through sheer force of will that she impels Macbeth to the deed. Her passionate courage is the sole motivation that inspires Macbeth to commit the murder.

His remorse at the deed, his sense of futility is clearly brought out when he says: “Had I but died an hour before this chance, / I had lived a blessed time; for from this instant / There is nothing serious in mortality (Shakespeare 2007, 30). The other murders of his are a logical corollary of the first one. He suffered from a sense of insecurity, and fear of retaliation. His sleepless torture would vanish, he thought, if only he had no cause for fear. Power further corrupts Macbeth into losing all humanity and makes him become a butcher, who has no emotions and only wants to kill more. Macbeth fears the loss of power, and no longer possesses any conscience. On the basis of the first prophecy, he decides to kill Banquo and his son. For the council with the three witches makes him to take more steps in blood as he arranges the murder of Lady Macduff and her child. Such an unquenchable thirst for blood turns Macbeth into a butcher like tyrant who has lost support of all the loyals of Scotland and makes the further battle with Macduff, who comes to take revenge. Macbeth has to pay such an authority with his own life.

## **Conclusion**

Macbeth has been able to kill someone who was near him, and

who trusted him. He conjures the courage to kill the King but after this event people are merely removable obstacles in his ultimate conquest for victory. This shows that power has corrupted and enabled him to murder another human. This is the beginning of his demise. Macbeth is crowned King, his hubris is clearly shown in the way that after he becomes King, he becomes even more bloodthirsty and is able to dispose of people without consulting Lady Macbeth-his beloved wife. This is proved when Banquo and his children are murdered. At the begging of the play, Macbeth and Duncan are very good friends. It is only when Macbeth hears "Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none" (Shakespeare 2007, 8) from the witches that he begins to be wary of Banquo. He is told by the witches that he will be King. However, Macbeth's children will not become Kings. As King, he orders the deaths of Banquo and his son, an act which again would have been unthinkable before he was King. Once again, this action proves that absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Power has corrupted him to such an extent that he has hallucinations. This is a strong element of his demise, people are now apprehensive about Macbeth and his actions and some are beginning to suspect him. Perhaps the words that give Macbeth the most power, and certainly confidence are from the witches, they say "...none of a woman born shall harm Macbeth" (Shakespeare 2007, 55). This gives Macbeth a tremendous amount of self-assurance boost and he becomes arrogant and completely corrupt; he thinks he is invincible. This is a contributory in his downfall especially when he finds out that Macduff is caesarean born. The witches are also a part of Macbeth's downfall they say "Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until / Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill / Shall come against him" (56). Such an event like this was thought to be impossible; the witches give him sheer confidence and the feeling of being indomitable by telling him that only when a forest moves towards his castle he can be harmed.

Macbeth says “Till Birnam wood remove to Dunsinane, / I cannot taint with fear...” (75) proving that he thinks he is invincible.

To conclude, Acton’s opinion “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely” ([1887] 1907) sums up Macbeth. From the very first time he sees the witches he becomes corrupt, nothing is adequate for him; as he discards anyone standing in his way. Becoming King also means he has absolute power. Once King, Macbeth becomes everyone’s enemy, he is convinced he is invincible which leads to his inevitable downfall and demise. To be brief, it is Macbeth’s fate to be tempted by the power of the throne. His ambition for power makes him susceptible to make him lose all humanity. All in all, Macbeth is created by power, tempted by power, crazed by power and finally destroyed by power.

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