ambition in *Macbeth*

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Like all of Shakespeare's tragedies, *Macbeth* features a protagonist with a tragic flaw. Ambition—coupled variously with cruelty, caprice, and overconfidence—both propels Macbeth to the throne of Scotland and proves to be his undoing.

Even before the opening scene, Macbeth has had his eye on the crown. When the three Weird Sisters hail him as king, he "starts" nervously because he is shocked to hear his own treasonous thoughts spoken aloud (1.3.51). Compare his reaction to that of Banquo, who neither fears nor revels in the witches' words. Macbeth is entranced by their prophecy because it is exactly what he hoped to hear. He begs them in vain to offer more details about his rise to power. Moments later, when he is named Thane of Cawdor, he assumes that this new title is simply a prelude to the kingship, a "prologue to the swelling act of the imperial theme" (1.3.129–130).

But at first Macbeth possesses only impotent ambition. Cautious and worried that haste will lead to waste, he lacks the will to make his rise to power a reality. He often employs images of leaping and falling to visualize his fear of failure. The most famous such image—of "Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself / And falls on th' other" (1.7.27–28)—shows a clumsy horseman, who, having tried to quickly jump into his saddle, ends up on the other side of the horse instead.

Soon enough, Macbeth will find the "spur" he needs to "prick the sides of [his] intent" (1.7.25–26) in Lady Macbeth. Like her husband, she responds to the news of their impending royalty with rapture. Unlike him, Lady Macbeth's desire for power is matched by a murderous determination to achieve it. She associates ambition with both masculinity and cruelty, and she calls upon evil spirits to take away from her such feminine virtues as mercy and tenderness, which would only be a hindrance in their quest for the crown. When Macbeth balks at her plot to kill Duncan at Inverness, she upbraids him as a coward and less than a man.

After the murder, Macbeth turns into a tyrant who no longer needs his wife's fiendish instigation. One murder leads to another until he imagines himself as so deep in a stream of blood that to wade across would be no more gruesome than to retreat the way he came. Macbeth is also an imposter who wears the robes of state poorly—at times, it seems, literally: He is often described as wearing clothes that do not fit, like a dwarfish thief in giant's clothes. His ambition amounts to avarice, for in seizing the kingship he has stolen something that he was never meant to have. During his reign, Scotland falls victim to famine and civil war.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's increasingly disordered mental states reflect the degeneration of the state at large. Belatedly, they discover that their ambitions and struggles will intensify rather than end with Duncan's death, for once they have usurped the throne, they are ever after at pains to defend it: "To be thus is nothing, / But to be safely thus" (3.1.49–50). Their paranoia and hysteria mount until the price of pursuing their ambitions becomes so high that they are envious of the king they dispatched to an early grave, where Duncan is at least safe beyond all worry and harm.

In desperation, Macbeth seeks out the three Weird Sisters. Again, he misinterprets their ambiguous and misleading predictions in order to find the message he wants to hear—that he is invincible. Casting aside any last traces of caution, he declares that "from this moment / The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand" (4.1.146–148). His first impulse is to kill Macduff's family; accordingly, he orders it to be done before there is a chance for his anger to
cool. He also rashly ignores the advice of the few people still on his side, turning away both the Doctor and Seyton, the conspicuously named manservant who tries to bring Macbeth the latest military intelligence about the enemy's progress.

Macbeth's overconfidence leads to disaster, and in the end, his pursuit of ambition beyond the laws of God and man comes to nothing. He would have done well to remember his own words earlier in the play: "I dare do all that become a man, he that dare do more is none" (1.7.47–48).


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