

Throughout history, it is apparent that man's thoughts invariably gravitate towards greed, ambition, jealousy and violence, and its cyclical nature answers what it means to be human. The famous playwright, William Shakespeare, captures this dark side of humanity through dramatic poems and plays such as the legendary tragedy of 'Macbeth', written in 1606. It is a tale of a tragic hero which illustrates a series of wrongdoings that lead to their catastrophe and the consequences of being too ambitious. Its themes of ambition and violence still echo through contemporary society because people are naturally inclined to these aspects of human nature. These themes insinuate just accurate and almost prophetic Macbeth embodies the ethical and political values of contemporary society.

Firstly, the theme of ambition presented in Macbeth echoes through contemporary society. It draws parallels to individuals who, through attaining social prominence, became consumed by blind ambition leading them to commit atrocities regardless of the moral and ethical outcomes - Adolf Hitler. He believed that the German race was the superior race and considered Jews to be inferior. During his autocracy, he proposed to unite all Germans and exclude other races. He became prolific in spreading anti-Semitism and Nazi propaganda, which led to the genocide of 5.5 million European Jews, known as the Holocaust. Similarly, The Three Witches prophesy Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor and also King. "Hail to thee, thane of Glamis! Hail to thee thane of Cawdor! All hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter!" The use of the anaphoric on 'hail to thee' is delivered in an almost ceremonial air, which emphasises Macbeth's future kingship and is a foreshadowing of the temptations that lie ahead of him. At this point, Macbeth stands at a metaphorical crossroad where each path can lure him to pursue greater power. His conscience becomes troubled, saying "If good, why do I yield to that suggestion whose horrid image doth unfix my hair and make my seated heart knock at my ribs against the use of nature?" Macbeth is liking the idea of becoming King but is not willing to murder King Duncan. Shakespeare personifies Macbeth's 'seated heart' to knock at his ribs. The modern version translates as "my heart pound inside my chest", however, Shakespeare's version produces stronger visual imagery which is more fitting to represent ideas of power and ambition.

Later in the act, Lady Macbeth criticises his humble nature which is preventing him from becoming a dominant ruler. "Yet I do 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 the illness should attend it." Here, Shakespeare uses an idiom to describe Macbeth's aptitude for showing kindness and empathy. Of course, Lady Macbeth is urging him to seize the throne if he could submit to her plans on assassinating King Duncan. Macbeth's conscience is being tried at this point, indicating that even women are no different to men who are also inclined to naturally desiring more power. He would weigh the consequences if he were to carry out Duncan's murder and responds: "I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent, but only vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself and falls on th' other." Macbeth having no 'spur' refers to a horse rider's spur; a metallic attachment fitted on their boots used to direct the horse to gallop forwards. It signifies that he has no motivation to murder the King, but his "vaulting ambition" or the intense desire for power would become his reasoning to do just so. Likewise, it is evident such as the account of Hitler, that gaining power in contemporary society reflect the theme of ambition in Macbeth.

Secondly, Shakespeare knows that man's thoughts invariably gravitate towards violence. It is the play's enduring power which allows it to embody the ethical and political values of contemporary society. For example, Rwanda's history of tension between the two tribes, Hutu and Tutsi, brought about a cycle of murder and hatred amongst themselves. Upon the Hutu gaining political power, the Rwandan Genocide ignited on April 7, 1994. It lasted for 100 days, accumulating deaths of 1 million Tutsis. It was easily achieved with the aid of immigration cards that specified a person's tribe, which allowed the Hutus to identify and murder them on sight. A fitting quote is when the bloodied Captain describes how Macbeth seamlessly defeated the former thane of Cawdor in the battlefield: "For brave Macbeth... Like valor's minion carved out his passage... unseamed him from the nave to th' chops, and fixed his head upon our battlements." By comparing Macbeth as a 'valor's minion', Shakespeare implies that Macbeth is the personification of bravery. There is also a notion that murder and bloodshed were honourable to the Scottish warrior culture. The Captain continues to report, "As cannons overcharged with double cracks, so they doubly redoubled stroked upon the foe. Except they meant to bathe in reeking wounds, or memorize another Golgotha". The repetition of "double" places emphasis on the desire for blood and the will to fight for their country. Golgotha is also a biblical allusion to where Jesus was believed to be crucified, just outside the walls of Jerusalem.

Moreover, the English rendition of Golgotha is Calvary, which is spelled similarly to cavalry – knights on horseback, which acts as a homonymic play-on-word to 'cavalry'. There is also Lady Macbeth's soliloquy which mentions 'blood' and wanting masculine qualities for the sake of capturing the crown. "Come, you spirits that tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here... make thick my blood. Stop up the access and passage of remorse." Blood becomes the recurring motif for the theme of violence throughout the play, as violence invariably portrays some degree of bloodshed. Therefore, the murders and warrior culture portrayed in Macbeth mirrors the ethical and political values of contemporary society, such as the Rwandan genocide that involved slaughter, bloodshed and the same recurring blood motif that is inseparable and always linked to the theme of violence.

In conclusion, themes of ambition and violence portrayed in the tale of Macbeth reflects just how unmistakable William Shakespeare was in embodying the ethical and political values of contemporary society. Accounts of individuals attaining social prominence and abusing it to fulfil unethical goals such as Adolf Hitler and the hatred between the Tutsi and Hutu during the Rwandan Genocide are just examples of what ambition and violence can conceive. These two aspects of human nature go hand-in-hand. Ambition motivates violence, and with violence come motifs of blood. During a Q&A session in the Pop-up Globe Theatre in October 2018, a panel member, Gregory Miles, comments on people who go to overwhelming lengths to gain power, which leads to them in a state of anagnorisis and their ultimate catastrophe shortly after. "But then they are left with the awful consequences of having to rule, which everyone thinks it's lovely to wear the crown, but people find very quickly that it's both very heavy as an item and also quite hollow". Ambition became the downfall of the once valiant and humble warrior, Macbeth, who ironically, was slain by his former right-hand man, Macduff. It is these themes of ambition and violence that give the tragedy of Macbeth its enduring power to keep on embodying the ethical and political values of contemporary society.