

**'Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* still embodies the ethical and political values of contemporary society.'**

The famous tragedy *Macbeth*, by William Shakespeare, still holds substantial literary value within today's society, exploring themes of power, gender, and human nature. These relevant concepts are a defining factor of the timelessness of the play *Macbeth*, which was valued by 1600s audiences as well as the audiences of today. As well as employing such universal themes, *Macbeth* also serves as a cautionary tale, warning audiences of the dangers of power and ambition- both considered 'good' in moderation but potentially destructive if they contravene societal ideas of morality.

Shakespeare's exploration of human nature is evident throughout the play *Macbeth*. As A.C. Bradley states, "Macbeth's deed is done in horror, and without the faintest desire or sense of glory." He suggests that the carefully constructed characters in the play are partially responsible for the continued success of *Macbeth*. Bradley implies that the audience can connect with these characters primarily because they are not inherently evil, instead many are representative of human nature. Macbeth and his wife are multifaceted, becoming wracked with guilt over the crimes they have committed. This guilt eventuates to the demise of Lady Macbeth, as shown by the powerful metaphor of constantly washing her hands while sleepwalking- "What, will these hands ne'er be clean?"

Throughout *Macbeth*, personal ethics are sacrificed in the rise to power, a concept still prominent in contemporary society, and this is one of the reasons Lady Macbeth felt such immense guilt despite not actually committing the crime- as well as disrupting the Elizabethan Great Chain of Being, she knew she had broken her own moral code. One could argue that the fundamental values of society have not advanced since the play was written. We are still raised with different morals, ethics, and beliefs. Human nature still craves power, and in trying to reach it, people often put their personal values aside, just as Lady Macbeth did. Shakespeare's shockingly accurate representations of human nature show this, and contribute to *Macbeth's* pertinence in modern society.

As power grows, so does the desperation for more. This is shown in *Macbeth* when the first part of the witches' prophecy is proven to be correct- and Macbeth becomes enthralled with the idea of becoming king. In an aside, Macbeth states: "Two truths are told, As happy prologues to the swelling act, of the imperial theme", foreshadowing which refers to his crowning as king. This is significant because prior to his introduction to the witches, Macbeth was depicted as the epitome of loyalty- a noble soldier widely acclaimed for his excellency in battle. His sword is even depicted as "brandished steel, Which smoked with bloody execution", Shakespeare's use of imagery highlighting the importance of violence relating to one's 'manhood'. Macbeth is also described as "rapt" by Banquo when the first part of the prophecy proves true, and he is promoted to Thane of Cawdor. However, the suggestion of potential kingship that "doth unfix my hair, and make my seated heart knock at my ribs" illustrates how power changes Macbeth from a noble, loyal soldier to a man consumed with the thought of gaining more power and prestige. As Macbeth's power grows, so does his corruption. Macbeth is reluctant to kill Duncan, but once the deed is done, he continues to commit various crimes to hide the first, deciding that he is "in blood, stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er." Shakespeare's use of vivid imagery and metaphor depicts the hopelessness Macbeth feels

regarding Duncan's murder. By killing Banquo, one of his closest friends, Macbeth demonstrates how the power he has achieved has brought him nothing but paranoia-exclaiming, when he sees Banquo's ghost at the banquet; "Never shake/ Thy gory locks at me!" Macbeth's hunger for more power is what drives the play, ultimately leading to his downfall. However, it is probable that Shakespeare is not trying to convey that power corrupts, instead implying that the desire to attain power, particularly in an immoral way, can lead to one's downfall.

Throughout the play *Macbeth*, Shakespeare challenges traditional gender roles, implementing strong female characters such as Lady Macbeth and the witches. At the time of the play, men were generally depicted as having more physical power than women, yet the witches are some of the influential and deceptive characters in the play, mostly due to their "supernatural soliciting". The imagery used in Lady Macbeth's famous soliloquy "Unsex me here/And fill me from the crown to the toe topfull/ Of direst cruelty" emphasises the political beliefs of the time, regarding gender. By giving Lady Macbeth such stereotypical masculine qualities, Shakespeare reverses the gender expectations of the time period, as well as foreshadowing the current increased acceptability of women holding power. Lady Macbeth is seen as one of the most ruthless, ambitious characters, even stating that if she had a child, she would "Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums/ And dashed the brains out". This vivid and disturbing imagery highlights the brutality of Lady Macbeth, despite her gender. Because of the time period in which the play was written, Lady Macbeth could not rise to power herself, as she was a woman, and is instead seen actively manipulating her husband, impugning his manhood as encouragement to kill Duncan; "When you durst do it, then you were a man." Lady Macbeth's power is not overt, rather she uses her influence over her husband to achieve her goal. Shakespeare's portrayal of gender as a defining factor of human nature transcends time and reinforces Macbeth's importance in contemporary society.

*Macbeth* is a powerful play with strong themes of human nature, gender and power, and despite being written in the 1600s, it is still appreciated by modern audiences. Its universal themes and memorable, unquestionably human characters contribute to its predominance in modern society. The play explores values still embedded in the societal structure of today, and sounds a warning, not to let power, or a need for power, dictate your actions. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* captures the essence of human nature, and therefore ensures *Macbeth's* continued relevance in society.

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