
Macbeth and Satan-The pioneers of wedging ambition

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Article Received: 12/05/2025**Article Accepted:** 14/06/2025**Published Online:** 16/06/2025**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2025.18.06.265

Abstract: The world had been a mute spectator to men falling; falling from great heights after riding a wave of glory, fame and power. This paper aims to underscore the intellectual perception of the play highlighting the rapidity of Macbeth's action with which he forges a tryst with destiny. In many ways 'Macbeth' is Shakespeare's maturest and most daring experiment in tragedy'. The Macbeth couple's ambition, calculation, and criminality are perfectly at home in this moral chaos and political turmoil. The destruction of Macbeth is cast in the pattern of the fall of Satan himself as in *Paradise Lost*, and the play is full of analogies between Satan and Macbeth. Sir Walter Raleigh states that the desire to rule belongs to the nobler part of reason. The action is tragic in the highest degree, for it involves a nation as well as a man.

Keywords: Glory, intellectual perception, destiny, ambition, analogies between Satan and Macbeth.

Introduction:**Macbeth and Satan-The pioneers of wedging ambition.**

Men rise and fall like winter wheat: The world had been a mute spectator to men falling; falling from great heights after riding a wave of glory, fame and power. These are men, who had signed a tryst with destiny to be upheld as symbols of honour, not to lose, not to yield but bear a stamp of greatness on the canvass of the world. Whoever had not failed or fallen hadn't gone in praise, they remained 'unsung heroes.

There is a tide in the affairs of men
Which, taken at the flood, leads on to fortune;
Omitted, all the voyage of their life
Is bound in shallows and in miseries.
On such a full sea are we now afloat;
And we must take the current when it serves,
Or lose our ventures.

(*Julius Caesar. Act i.Sc.3*)

'*Macbeth* is one such man who falls down from his over-vaulting ambition. In many ways 'Macbeth' is Shakespeare's maturest and most daring experiment in tragedy' (Ribner,1959) This is a proposition that had long been contented, upheld and justified to a larger extent, for, in this play, Shakespeare sets out to operate evil in all its dimensions, which is unleashed by one man's sinful moral choice.

Before really calling it a sinful moral choice, we may carefully examine the validity of the statement, foreshadowing the short comings of calling it a moral choice. The sinister and sombre mood of the play, that the playwright brings in with his attention, showing evil both in intellectual and emotional terms using all of the devices of poetry, and most notably the images of blood and darkness which so many commentators have described, would turn it into an intellectual exploration of heightened sensibility and over-vaulting ambition of the tragic hero. (Ribner, 1959)

This paper then aims to underscore the intellectual perception of the play highlighting the rapidity of Macbeth's action with which he forges a tryst with destiny. For this, Shakespeare, as recompense, shows his hero, who out-smarts the play-wright's reliance not upon audience identifying with his hero, but rather upon an intellectual perception of the total play showing inclination towards his hero. Macbeth is a closely knit, unified construction, every element of which is designed to support an intellectual statement, to which, action, character, and poetry all contribute. (Ribner, 1959)

The idea which governs the play is primarily explicit in the action of the central character, Macbeth himself; his role is cast into a symbolic pattern which is of course a contemplation of Shakespeare's view of evil's operation in the world (Campbell,1948). However, the play ends with a sense of reconciliation which affirms the kind of meaning in the world with which great tragedy must end. (Meyers, 1956.)

Macbeth, unlike the earlier tragic-heroes seeks little sympathy and there can be a little doubt of the final damnation of "this dead butcher and his fiend-like queen" (V. viii. 69). There is a sense of goodness viewed in Macbeth by the audience and that Macbeth is destroyed by counter forces, which he himself set in motion. But the counter forces are just an aid to the realisation of his ambition, a mere mechanism employed in the achievement of his goal. Thus, the fulcrum of the play is Macbeth and how he pre-empts much of the plays action.

The destruction of Macbeth is cast in the pattern of the fall of Satan himself as in *Paradise Lost*, and the play is full of analogies between Satan and Macbeth. (Parker,1953). Like Satan, Macbeth is from the first entirely aware of the evil he embraces, and like Satan he can never renounce his free-willed moral choice, once it has been made. It is thus appropriate that the force of evil in Macbeth be symbolized by Satan's own sin of ambition. Well, if we call it a sin then, aiming high in life and aiming to rise high, harnessing the potential to pole-

vault and grasp the exceeding power to be a name and to rule is in the kernel of the very seed of any ambitious man.

As Anderson rightly observes “Ambition is in itself a tall and stately Quality, and none but great Souls are capable of giving it Reception. . . . For Ambition is a Vice not suited to mean and little Soul (Anderson, 1963). In his *History of the World*, Sir Walter Raleigh states that the desire to rule belongs to the nobler part of reason. (Raleigh, 1614).

The Macbeth couple’s ambition, calculation, and criminality are perfectly at home in this moral chaos and political turmoil. After hearing the Mountain Spirit’s prophecy, Banquo asks rhetorically: “Who does not crave for high position and thick state pension?” This common ambition is reinforced by Lady Macbeth:

**Lo! The sun sets and the moon rises—
The wheel of fortune is spinning constantly.
It’s time for all men of courage to compete,
But only the strongest procures sovereignty.**

In a world dominated by the law of the jungle, the Macbeth couple’s usurpation is naturalized. No supernatural agent, it seems, is needed to tempt them into sin.

The Satan depicted by Milton in the first two books of *Paradise Lost* is indeed a magnificent figure. He dominates these opening episodes, towering above the other fallen angels like a colossus. We read about “His mighty stature.” (Bk. II). He is depicted as a great leader and an extremely courageous warrior. His courage is manifest throughout Book IV as he is the only one from a multitude of demons who dares enter the forbidden territory. In the first two books, he shows great eloquence as an orator and succeeds in rallying the fallen angels, binding them to a common cause (Mayo, 1984).

Willard Farnham, for example uses “Satan” as a meaningful, but essentially rhetorical label to describe Macbeth as the hero of “a morality play written in terms of Jacobean tragedy.” He does not consider Shakespeare’s characterization as deliberately Satanic, but remarks that “Among the deeply flawed but noble heroes of Shakespeare’s last tragic world, Macbeth is the only one who deliberately, after a soul struggle takes evil to be his good. Among them he is the only Satan.

Satan in *Paradise Lost* appears to have the makings of a Byronic hero. The idea of subjugation is totally obnoxious to him: “Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven” (Bk. I, ll. 262). In his apostrophe to the Sun (Bk. IV), Satan discloses that any submission on his part can only be “feigned”. A rebel, he is ready to shake his fist at the establishment and engage in a confrontation against adversity. There is tendency for the reader or audience at a play to side with the underdog. This natural feeling predisposes the reader to commiserate with the fate of a fallen angel who reveals the courage to attempt to defy overwhelming, nay impossible, odds.

Satan therefore arouses sympathy and the 'anti-establishment' spirit which he imparts as he rallies his battered troops may have appealed to the likes of Milton and fellow Cromwellians who, very much like Satan, sought to overthrow the existing order (Mayo, 1984).

Macbeth's extraordinary powers of imagination have been amply commented upon. Imagination itself, however, cannot be viewed as a cause of man's destruction within any meaningful moral system. Shakespeare endows Macbeth with this ability to see all of the implications of his act in their most frightening forms even before the act itself is committed as an indication of Macbeth's initial strong moral feelings. Bradley wisely recognized the "principle of morality which takes place in his imaginative fears". Imagination enables Macbeth emotionally to grasp the moral implications of his crime, to participate imaginatively, as does the audience, in the full horror of the deed. Macbeth is entirely aware of God's moral system with its "even-handed justice", which "commends the ingredients of our poison'di chalice/ To our own lips" (I. vii.io-i2).

In Act I, Shakespeare presents forces at work upon Macbeth and, with a knowledge of human psychology, depicting a moral struggle in which the ambition hitherto held in check becomes a fire fed by the fuel heaped upon it.

Macbeth, through love of self, sets his own will against that of God, chooses a lesser finite good-kingship and power-rather than a greater infinite one. Shakespeare in Macbeth's moral choice is offering a definition of evil in fairly traditional terms. The ambitious man will strive to rise higher on the great chain of being than the place which God has ordained for him. To do so, he must break the bond which ties him on the one hand to God and on the other to humanity. Immediately before the murder of Banquo, Macbeth utters lines which often have been misinterpreted by commentators:

**Come seeling night,
Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day;
And with thy bloody and invisible hand
Cancel and tear to pieces the great bond
Which keeps me pale! (LIL. ii. 46-50)**

The "great bond" has usually been glossed either as the prophecy of the witches or as Banquo's lease on life, neither of which is very meaningful within the context of the passage. The bond, as Wilson Knight has perceived (Wilson, 2003.) can only refer to the link which ties Macbeth to humanity and enjoins him to obey the natural law of God.

Holinshed states that if Macbeth "had not been somewhat cruel of nature" he might have been thought "most worthy the government of a realm." According to Holinshed, Macbeth did not murder Duncan secretly but rather slew him after confiding in his "trusty friends" (Banquo was "the chiefest") and receiving their promise of aid. He ruled well for ten years before, through fear of Banquo (who had heard the prophecy of the witches), he launched

into crime. Shakespeare gives no hint of an early tendency in Macbeth toward cruelty or of a period of successful rule. Nor does he assign to Lady Macbeth, as does Holinshed, an "unquenchable desire to bear the name of queen." Through alteration and selection, he produced a spectacle of ambition and tyranny that in both effectiveness and scope transcends all other plays of its type.

Francis Bacon quotes in this connection: "the standing is slippery." The "horrid sights" Macbeth sees were for the Elizabethan the typical fruits of yielding to ambition rather than effects of "moral cowardice." The play is not "really a study in fear . . . against the background of its opposite," nor is it primarily "a study in the ravages of external and internal evil." It should be looked upon first as a vivid portrayal of the way in which, under favorable circumstances, ambition may undermine a noble character and immediately afterward drive him through fear to a tyranny that results in "brutishness" and certain destruction.

Miss Campbell is right when she states that from the murder of Duncan onward it is not ambition but fear that motivates action. The shift is basic in traditional pattern. It is not fear as a passion that is being "anatomized" from this point on, however, but rather the consequences of yielding to ambition. Quite properly, what Shakespeare says of fear follows traditional thought associated with this passion.

The action is tragic in the highest degree, for it involves a nation as well as a man.

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