

Sakib Ahmed

Ms. Mazzurco

European Literature Period 4

October 17, 2015

The Rationality of Ambition

If you desire something, would you sacrifice logic and reason to obtain it? Will you give up your needs for your ambitions? William Shakespeare's tragedy, *Macbeth*, takes readers through a journey which has them constantly asking themselves these questions. Macbeth's biggest enemy is himself, as he frequently gives in to what he wants, rather than what he should do. This ultimately leads to Macbeth's downfall, from once a great individual, to now a tragic hero. Readers often ask, what has Macbeth done to stimulate such a drastic change in his character? It can be supported that, because of his interaction with the supernatural, our protagonist turns from someone that no longer is driven by rationality, but rather ambition.

Prior to Macbeth's knowledge of the supernatural, he had no intention of becoming a king. When *Macbeth* was written, society followed the Great Chain of Being. This was the belief that whatever social class someone was born in, they stayed in. Macbeth is predestined as an excellent soldier, not rising in nobility and becoming Thane of Cawdor. He had no plan to oppose the Great Chain. However, once he meets the witches for the first time, they tell him differently. As soon as they feel his presence, they shout, "All hail, Macbeth! Hail to thee, Thane of Cawdor!/All hail, Macbeth that shalt be king hereafter!" (1.3.52-53). While Macbeth does not realize this himself, the audience is aware of his growing ambition. The witches' prophecies are his outlet to express his hamartia. Coupled with Lady Macbeth's persistence of

believing the witches' words, this becomes the start of an inescapable path, in which Macbeth gives in to his desire.

While Macbeth is used to executing soldiers on the battlefield, the idea of him slaughtering his king is not something that has ever resonated with him. Macbeth's initial interaction with the three witches, as well as Lady Macbeth's tenacious behavior, escalate his compulsiveness to murder Duncan, which feeds his increasing ambition. Macbeth's desire to become a man in the eyes of Lady Macbeth, as well as fulfill the witches' prophecies, inadvertently lead him to give up his own definition of what is man. That is, an honorable and rationale individual. By agreeing to slay Duncan, Macbeth is exemplifying fortitude in the eyes of Lady Macbeth. To the audience however, Macbeth is only showing increased uncertainty. As Macbeth approaches Duncan's quarters, it is clear to readers that Macbeth is beginning to contemplate as to whether or not he is making the right decision. He is no longer given a choice, as the supernatural chimes in and clouds his reasoning. Suddenly, Macbeth sees "a dagger of the mind, a false creation/Proceeding from the heat oppressed brain?" (2.1.51-52). Macbeth confusingly grabs at this manifestation of his thoughts, grabbing the dagger hanging on his waist. When he stops seeing these supernatural hallucinations, he sees a bloody Duncan, dead and lying before him. Macbeth is crowned king immediately and the prophecies that were foreseen have become reality. Macbeth is mortified at what he's done. On the other hand, he realizes that his ambitions have proved in his favor. As a result of this, his ambition only grows, leading him to make even more blunt choices.

Macbeth has become so reliant on the prophecies foretold upon him by the end of the play, that he gives up his own thought process to fulfill his empowering ambition. With

Macbeth's power gone to his head, he does not think twice before murdering innocent individuals. This stems from the fact that Macbeth's original prophecy of becoming king came true, so now he believes every word from the witches' mouths. Especially what the second apparition tells him, "be bloody, bold, and resolute. Laugh to scorn/The power of man, for none of woman born/Shall harm Macbeth" (4.1.90-93). Macbeth's ambitions speak greater than his rationality, and he wholeheartedly believes in what the apparition has prophesied. He increasingly devotes himself to becoming bloodier and resolute. Since "none of woman born/shall harm Macbeth", he's also fooled himself into thinking he can never be defeated. Macbeth no longer needs the help of Lady Macbeth to commit crime, as he calls the shots now. To the audience, his growing ambition from the beginning of the play has metamorphosed into a faltering hamartia which will clearly lead to his downfall.

With the exception of Shakespeare, no one will ever figure out what exactly Macbeth was thinking. We can however, analyze the text and provide an explanation for why he perpetrated his actions. His interaction with the supernatural led to his change in character and his destiny. Macbeth may have become Thane of Cawdor even if he had never met the witches, because it was predestined. Macbeth may have always been as ambitious as the play portrays him to be, because it's not clear what happened before the play begins. He gave in to what he wanted, and this led to his death. Inevitably, the most important thing is to look back at *Macbeth* and consider, is Macbeth's character so different from the beginning of the play? Did the supernatural forge Macbeth's ambitious personality, or did they simply awaken it?