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WHO IS TO BLAME FOR THE OUTCOME OF *MACBETH*

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Abstract: This paper explores the attribution of blame for the tragic outcome in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. While Macbeth's unchecked ambition plays a central role, the responsibility is shared among several other figures and forces, including supernatural agents, Lady Macbeth, and King Duncan. Drawing on close textual analysis, literary devices, historical context, and intertextual references, the study argues that Shakespeare deliberately constructs a multilayered view of culpability, reflecting the political and metaphysical anxieties of the Jacobean era. The complexity of blame in *Macbeth* mirrors the early 17th-century tensions between free will and fate, individual agency and cosmic order.
Keywords: Tragedy; Ambition; Supernatural; Responsibility; Jacobean context; Moral conflict

1 INTRODUCTION

Shakespeare's Macbeth stands as a quintessential example of tragic drama that interrogates the nature of human agency, morality, and destiny. The play raises enduring questions: Who is ultimately responsible for the tragedy? Can the blame be solely placed on Macbeth, or is the culpability dispersed among other characters and unseen forces? Scholars have long debated the distribution of blame, and this paper contributes to that discourse by analyzing the roles of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, the witches, and King Duncan. In doing so, it seeks to illuminate how Shakespeare engages with political ideology, religious cosmology, and psychological depth to complicate notions of responsibility.

2 MACBETH'S AMBITION AND MORAL DISINTEGRATION

Macbeth's internal conflict is the most visible driver of the play's tragic outcome. At the start, he is lauded for his valor and loyalty—traits expected of a noble Thane. However, his vaulting ambition and moral equivocation set the stage for his downfall. Shakespeare uses jagged iambic pentameter to reflect Macbeth's psychological fragmentation, as seen in:
"I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself / And falls on the other."
This metaphor encapsulates Macbeth's awareness of his moral overreach. His reliance on metaphor and dark diction—"Stars, hide your fires; Let not light see my black and deep desires"—reveals a man torn between conscience and aspiration. His decision to proceed with regicide, even while fully aware of the consequences, suggests a conscious surrender to ambition, making him largely accountable for the play's tragic trajectory. If he was less ambitious, he could choose not to be seduced by the witches' prophecies or by Lady Macbeth's provocations.
Furthermore, Macbeth's gradual alienation from his humanity is mirrored in his increasing reliance on euphemism and abstraction to describe violence—"the deed," "the business," "the affair"—rather than naming murder directly. This linguistic evasion reflects the moral corrosion that ambition inflicts upon him. As scholars like Greenblatt have noted, Macbeth's use of language becomes progressively fragmented and brutal, paralleling his psychological descent. His shift from "If it were done when 'tis done" to the cold assertion that "Things bad begun make strong themselves by ill" underscores his evolving complicity and internal justification of evil.

3 THE WITCHES AND SUPERNATURAL MANIPULATION

However, Macbeth should only be attributed part of the blame as we also have to consider supernatural forces, Duncan, and Lady Macbeth. By making it uncertain who to blame, Shakespeare may have been reflecting conditions in England when the Jacobean court had many ambitious courtiers competing for power and favour. Most notably was the threat of a Catholic conspiracy to overthrow James that was exposed in the Gunpowder Plot. Such conspiracies made it difficult to attribute blame to one person. The popular belief that dark supernatural forces were able to disrupt order in society, as James himself considered witchcraft as a serious threat to him, added a layer of complexity.
From the first scene of the play, supernatural powers target Macbeth's weakness. This is indicated when the weird sisters plan to be "on the heath" to "meet with Macbeth". Then in Act 1 Scene 3, they influence Macbeth and Banquo through their predictions "All hail Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter!" To reflect their supernatural nature, Shakespeare uses haunting, trochaic rhythms associated with Black Magic spells or incantations that are distinct from the iambic pentameter that is commonly used in the rest of the play. An example is: "The weird sisters, hand in hand, Posters of the sea and land, Thus do go about, about". Additionally, the tone of their language is prophetic and ominous. Their indication that Macbeth should be "Thane of Cawdor" and "king hereafter" ignites his ambition for power so it can be argued that the witches are to be blamed for the outcome of the play by planting the seed in Macbeth's mind. Their culpability is further endorsed when they tell Banquo his "descendants will be king". Macbeth realizes that Banquo may threaten him in his path to kingship and the bond between the two warriors is broken. The intentionally

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ambiguous oxymorons pronounced by the witches to Banquo that he is "lesser than Macbeth but also greater" as well as "not as happy as Macbeth yet much happier" adds to Macbeth's internal conflict. From this moment on, Macbeth's character is always split between his outside appearance and inner torment and this crucially influences the rest of the play. An example of this is when he says "If good, why do I yield to that suggestion" of "whose horrid image doth unfix my hair and make my seated heart knock at my ribs". By igniting Macbeth's ambition and internal conflict, they could be attributed the blame for the outcome of the play. It should be noted that in Holinshed's Chronicles (an inspiration for the play) the witches were originally called the "goddesses of destine" but Shakespeare changed them to be less dramatically powerful and persuasive in the play in order to appeal to the audience and King James, who in his book Daemonologie showed his hatred of witches. It is also important to note that the witches are merely servants of a higher power represented later by Hecate so blame really lies with the anonymous invisible powers of darkness that work through the witches to disrupt order in a Christian kingdom. Their intention to bring disorder to the realm would have been understood by Shakespeare's audience who believed in The Great Chain of Being and the Divine Right of Kings in an ordered world.

4 LADY MACBETH'S PROVOCATION AND GUILT

Lady Macbeth's persistent insistence pushes Macbeth to kill Duncan and consequently means she could also be blamed for the outcome of the play. In the play, we see countless acts of persuasion like when she tells Macbeth to "screw your courage to the sticking-place."

Shakespeare's use of metaphor as Lady Macbeth compares courage to a firmly secured screw conveys that once Macbeth's courage is firmly in place, it could become a driving force to help them achieve their ambition. Though Macbeth is seen as hesitant through his inner turmoil, this piece of advice may have persuaded him to make decisions that would largely influence the play. Additionally, by telling Macbeth "what's done is done" after the first murder, we see Lady Macbeth devoid of guilt or troubled by her conscience. By convincing Macbeth to kill Duncan, which would then heavily influence the play, without remorse, she could be attributed the blame for the outcome of the play.

Her early resolve—"a little water clears us of this deed"—is steeped in irony, as water, traditionally symbolic of purification in Christian theology, is rendered meaningless in face of spiritual corruption. Her practical detachment contrasts with Macbeth's philosophical brooding, suggesting that she initially possesses a stronger resolve.

By convincing Macbeth to kill Duncan, without remorse, she could be attributed the blame for the outcome of the play. However, her descent into madness later in the play reveals that guilt cannot be indefinitely repressed. In the sleepwalking scene (Act 5, Scene 1), her obsessive hand-washing—"Out, damned spot!"—and fragmented syntax underscore the psychological toll of suppressed guilt. Shakespeare uses prose instead of verse here, signaling her mental disintegration and social alienation.

However, her influence wanes as Macbeth grows more autonomous in his descent. This shift is evidenced in Act 3 onwards, where Macbeth no longer consults her before arranging Banquo and Fleance's murder, indicating that the initial provocation has given way to independent tyranny. This narrative shift complicates the distribution of blame, as Lady Macbeth becomes a symbol of guilt and psychological collapse—ultimately losing agency in both her marriage and the plot. Her iconic sleepwalking scene reveals the subconscious moral reckoning that Macbeth resists. Thus, Lady Macbeth begins as a co-author of evil, but ends as its first casualty.

5 DUNCAN'S NAIVETY AND POLITICAL BLINDNESS

Duncan also plays a significant role in shaping the play through his naivety. In Act 1 Scene 4, Duncan states that "there's no art to find the mind's construction in the face" because Macdonwald, a traitor and the previous Thane of Cawdor "was a gentleman on whom" he "built an absolute trust". Shakespeare's use of imagery suggests that Duncan has put time and effort into the relationship. This reflects his poor judgement and foreshadows Macbeth's eventual betrayal. When Duncan calls Macbeth "worthiest cousin" and adds "more is thy due than more than all can pay", the audience would understand the deeply ironic significance of these words. Shakespeare's use of dramatic irony heightens Duncan's naivety because the audience knows what Macbeth is concealing. Duncan's blind belief that Macbeth is a loyal and worthy kinsman leads to his death in Macbeth's castle which then largely influences the rest of the play. Duncan's failure is not merely personal but political. As a monarch, he symbolizes the stability of the realm. His inability to detect disloyalty exposes the vulnerability of a political system that relies heavily on personal bonds rather than institutional checks. By portraying Duncan as overly trusting and ceremonially generous—"Only I have left to say, more is thy due"—Shakespeare criticizes a court culture based on flattery and reward, not merit or prudence.

Moreover, Duncan's tragic flaw could be linked to the Renaissance ideal of the 'divine king'—a figure believed to rule by God's grace and to possess innate discernment. His misjudgment thus serves as a dramatic warning: even divinely sanctioned kings are fallible, and political order is fragile.

Shakespeare may have portrayed Duncan in this light to warn James I of appointing individuals around him, as court politics during the Jacobean era were rife with patronage and betrayal. By making Duncan's murder occur within the sanctuary of Macbeth's own home, Shakespeare deepens the thematic violation—not just regicide, but a breach of hospitality, kinship, and sacred order.

Thus, Duncan's role in the tragedy is not simply that of a passive victim but that of a flawed king whose idealism enables the usurper's rise. In highlighting Duncan's political blindness, Shakespeare enriches the tragic fabric of the play and distributes responsibility across the hierarchy of power.

6 DISTRIBUTED RESPONSIBILITY AND JACOBEAN CONTEXT

By making the attribution of blame ambiguous, Shakespeare mirrors the complex political realities of Jacobean England. The Gunpowder Plot of 1605, still fresh in public memory, exemplified how conspiracy and ambition could threaten the social order. Shakespeare's audience would have recognized the danger of undermining the "Divine Right of Kings" and the "Great Chain of Being." In this context, Macbeth's regicide is not only a personal crime but a cosmic rupture.

Furthermore, Shakespeare's use of ambiguity in blame reflects the epistemological uncertainty of the time. Who can truly judge intent and agency in an age of court intrigue, masked ambition, and divine rhetoric? As John Alvis (2020) suggests, Macbeth dramatizes not only a fall from grace but a systemic failure of political perception and moral clarity. Macbeth is not a lone villain but a product of a society already infected by duplicity, ambition, and occult fascination.

The witches, Lady Macbeth, Duncan, and Macbeth himself thus embody different aspects of a broader cultural and political ecosystem in crisis. The witches symbolize the external pressures of fate, temptation, and the subversion of natural law; Lady Macbeth represents internalized ambition and gendered power struggles; Duncan, a benevolent yet blind ruler, embodies the weaknesses of hereditary monarchy; and Macbeth, torn between personal aspiration and political reality, becomes the tragic medium through which all these tensions explode.

In this sense, blame in Macbeth is not linear but systemic. The tragedy unfolds not because of one villain's malice but due to the convergence of multiple fractured forces: moral frailty, political instability, esoteric belief, and metaphysical disorder. Shakespeare offers a grim portrait of what happens when ambition is uncoupled from virtue and when institutions fail to regulate private will.

This distribution of guilt anticipates modern political tragedies, where no single figure bears full culpability and collective failure generates catastrophe. Whether interpreted through a classical Aristotelian lens or modern structuralist critique, Macbeth resists simplification. It invites audiences to reflect on how individuals both shape and are shaped by the political, supernatural, and psychological contexts they inhabit.

7 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Macbeth's ambition obviously seems to the Shakespearean and contemporary audience alike as the catalyst for the events of the play which would then need to be restored by the same moral and spiritual rules of the Jacobean era that he goes against. Conversely, supernatural forces working through the witches, Duncan's naivety, and Lady Macbeth's continuous insistence should also partly be attributed the blame for the outcome of the play. Shakespeare's dramatization of moral failure and metaphysical disorder offers a rich commentary on power, responsibility, and human weakness. Ultimately, Macbeth serves not as a simple tale of villainy but as a tragic meditation on the complexity of blame.

The play's structure ensures that each act of violence generates ripples across private and public spheres, reminding audiences that personal ambition always carries political cost. In light of contemporary interpretations, Macbeth remains an enduring examination of how individual choices interface with historical forces, religious beliefs, and psychological instability. Shakespeare offers no final verdict—only a moral landscape in which guilt circulates, lingers, and ultimately consumes.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

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