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### Cover Page Footnote

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## Macbeth's Political Imagination: The Struggle for Kingship in *Macbeth*

مخيلة مكبث السياسية: الصراع من أجل الملكية في مسرحية مكبث

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### Abstract

Ambition and regicide are two types of evil examined very closely in William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. Hence, ambition is seen in the play as a sin, an attempt to jump the natural order and make a new one, a desire so intense it can lead a person into the hands of evil. Regicide, according to medieval European conventions, is to kill God's anointed king, and so likewise to disrupt the natural and divine order. Macbeth's illegal and immoral kingship brings death, destruction, and suffering to Scotland, whilst the good kingship of Duncan and Malcolm brings victory and happiness; the contrast is deliberate. This study offers a critical analysis of the complicated issue of kingship in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. It tries to analyze the brutal nature of the struggle for monarchy as portrayed in this tragedy. Macbeth's regicide is discussed from its different angles, taking into consideration the main critical views produced on this issue. The method used throughout the work can be described mainly as textual and analytical relying on the text of the play as a primary source and other secondary sources casting additional light on the topic under discussion.

**Keywords:** Macbeth, Regicide, Ambition, Kingship, Tragedy, Political Imagination.

### ملخص

الطموح والقتل هما نوعان من الشر تمت دراستهما عن قرب في مسرحية وليام شكسبير مكبث. وقد نظر إلى الطموح في هذه المسرحية بكونه خطيئة، ومحاولة للقفز فوق النظام الطبيعي وصنع نظام جديد، ورغبة شديدة للغاية يمكن أن تقود الشخص إلى أحضان الشر. القتل هو قتل ملك سمح به الله، وبالمثل هو تعطيل النظام الطبيعي والإلهي. إذ تجلب ملكية مكبث غير الشرعية وغير الأخلاقية الموت والدمار والمعاناة إلى اسكتلندا، بينما تجلب الملكية الجيدة لدانكان ومالكولم النصر والسعادة؛ والتباين هنا مقصود. تقدم هذه الدراسة تحليلاً نقدياً لقضية معقدة هي الملكية في مسرحية مكبث لشكسبير. وتعمل

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على تحليل الطبيعة الوحشية للصراع من أجل الملكية كما صورت في هذه المأساة الشكسبيرية. ونوقشت عملية قتل مكبث من زواياها المختلفة، مع الأخذ في الحسبان الآراء النقدية الرئيسة التي كتبت حول هذه المسألة. ويمكن وصف الطريقة المستخدمة عبر العمل بشكل أساسي بكونها نصية وتحليلية تعتمد على نص المسرحية كمصدر أولي ومصادر ثانوية أخرى تلقي ضوءاً إضافياً على الموضوع قيد المناقشة. الكلمات المفتاحية: شخصية مكبث ، القتل ، الطموح ، الملكية ، المأساة في مكبث ، المخيلة السياسية.

### Theoretical Background to Shakespeare's treatment of the issue of Kingship:

The Elizabethan attitude to kingship and struggle for monarchy differed in several major respects from the modern attitude taken towards those who have responsibility for government. There was a religious element in this issue, as well as a political one, and the concept of the 'divine right of kings' needs to be understood before several of the comments and attitudes found in Shakespeare's plays, especially the chronicles and tragedies, can be understood. This concept stated that God was only responsible for the appointment of a person to kingship, operating as he did through the hereditary principle: the King held his office from God, and was not appointed by other humans. Therefore, an attempt to remove a King or to usurp his right was not merely a crime against human law, but a crime against God, and it means an attempt to decide something that only God could decide. Usurpation or the murder of a monarch is thus a huge sin and crime against Nature in Shakespeare. The idea that the King or Queen held his or her office from God was carefully fostered by monarchies through the ages, not least of all Elizabeth I, for the obvious reason that it was an added protection against rebellion and gave moral justification for their attempts to resist any attack on their throne. There was also a political element in the principle, in that once it was shown that a reigning monarch could be removed from the throne, a precedent would be created that could easily lead to chaos and civil war. Shakespeare's support for properly-constituted monarchs – even if they are weak at the job of government – indicates a support for stability as well as for kingship (Martin Stephen, Philip Franks, 1984, p. 32).

Shakespeare's tragedies are considerably the best known of all his plays. Four in particular have become known throughout the world: *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*. Various attempts have been made to define tragedy, but there is no comprehensive effective definition. Aristotle attempted a definition of tragedy in his *Poetics* (330 BC), and this is often used as a base from which to define tragedy. Some of Aristotle's tents are still useful in helping us to come to a definition of Shakespearean tragedy, or perhaps more usefully a feeling for its essential elements. Aristotle stated that the tragic hero was someone who was

neither exceptionally evil nor exceptionally good. This tragic hero starts the play as prosperous and happy, and is high-born, usually a king or an aristocrat; he is moved from happiness to misery and eventual death through some fault or weakness in his part, the so-called 'tragic flaw'. The effect of tragedy in Aristotle's view was to arouse the emotions of pity and fear, and then to purge them from the audience, and the play, by the action. Shakespeare's tragedies adhere to most of these principles – but certainly not all. *Macbeth*, for instance, can be seen as a tragedy of ambition, and ambition is obviously Macbeth's 'tragic flaw'. He begins the play as a noble figure: he has fought magnificently for the king, the saintly Duncan, against rebels. But he soon departs from the noble, the Aristotelian model, and become infected and debased by the evil of ambition which eventually reveals his essential weakness. The combination of three witches prophesying that he will be king, his wife prompting him to murder Duncan, and Duncan's decision to spend a night at Macbeth's castle at the very time when the pressure to murder Duncan is greatest proves too much for Macbeth. He kills Duncan, and then suffers agonies until he is finally killed by a nobleman whose family Macbeth massacred when he was king. As do the 'history plays' and *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, *Macbeth* confirms that usurpation is a major sin, punishable by turmoil for the country and death for the usurper (p. 43).

This study offers a critical analysis of the issue of kingship in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. It presents several different points relevant to the issue of kingship such as: the king as God's choice and representative on earth, the difference between tyranny and honorable kingship, the brutal crime of regicide, the ambition to seize kingship, the acute struggle for monarchy, the chaos and destruction that result from the struggle over the throne and other relevant conflicts. A great deal of critical works have been produced on the issue of kingship, in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, from different angles. This research tries to make use of the most relevant and recent of these critical works. These works are mainly in form of critical studies, that is, books, and research papers written on the different aspects of the issue of kingship. For example, Shweta Bali's essay, "Mechanics of Madness in Hamlet, Macbeth and King Lear" (2014), examined the effect of madness on the kingship in Macbeth. David Blythe, in his article, "Shakespeare's Macbeth" *The Explicator* 48.3(1990), states (179) that the regicide is a symbol of the cosmic wrath caused by Macbeth. While Russell Willers in his, "Models of Kingship: Shakespeare's Depictions of the Relationship between the Sovereign and the Realm in *Henry V* and *Macbeth*" *Research Gate* (2008, 2009), argues (303) that Macbeth is an unsuccessful and oppressive king because a king should work for the good of his country, not for the suffering of it. Moreover, in his study, Heiner Zimmermann, "Macbeth and Hercules" *Renaissance Studies* 20.3(2006), states that the play ends with the

triumph of good over evil. Malcolm becomes the new king of Scotland and restores Duncan's lineage to the kingship. Hence, "Macduff's killing of Macbeth restores justice and installs hereditary kingship in Scotland" (Zimmermann 377). The final speech in the play, "My thanes and kinsmen, / Henceforth be earls" (5.8.63-64), symbolizes James' plans to unify England. Malcolm appears as an ideal king who also decides to recall everyone fled "the snares of watchful tyranny" (5.8.68).

As for more extensive studies, Alexander Leggatt's book, *Shakespeare's Political Drama* (1988), stressed the political interest and the idea of kingship in *Macbeth*. Richard Dutton and Jean E. Howard, *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works: The Tragedies*, volume 1 (2003), examined the idea of kingship in *Macbeth* and how some characters fight fiercely to grab kingship. David Armitage, Conal Condren and Andrew Fitzmaurice, *Shakespeare and Early Modern Political Thought* (2009), focused on Shakespeare's thoughts as regards the idea of kingship. David Bevington, *Shakespeare's ideas: More Things in Heaven and Earth* (2008), focused on Shakespeare's ideas on politics and political Theory. Leon Harold Craig, *Of Philosophers and Kings: Political Philosophy in Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear* (2001), discussed how someone some philosophies of kingship in *Macbeth* and *King Lear*. Sidney Lamb, *Shakespeare's Macbeth* (2000), discussed the play's penetrating exploration of human kingship and Shakespeare's exploration of the themes of kingship. In this book, Lamb examined the idea that the king is God's emissary on Earth and that kingship is passed patrilineally through the father. The views expressed in these works are so various, but the most pertinent among them will be consulted. The research will be carried out through a textual and analytical outlook, and the arguments and counter-arguments will be clearly presented.

## Discussion:

To discuss the issue of kingship in *Macbeth*, it is important to throw an outlook on the historico-political background of the play. Shakespeare relied upon the historical events of monarchy of Scotland in the eleventh century in order to create the events of *Macbeth*. The historical Macbeth lived in the eleventh century during the years (1005-1057). He usurped the throne of Scotland from his cousin and king, Duncan, through civil war. Being, "a grandson of King Malcolm II, Macbeth did have a claim to the throne of Scotland" (Grosz and Wendler, 2006, p. vi). Certain differences can be found between the actual Macbeth and Shakespeare's Macbeth. The actual Macbeth achieved his ambition of kingship by a civil war, not by a regicide, and King Duncan died in a battle, not by a treachery. King Duncan's age was also similar to Macbeth's. Moreover, Macbeth reigned the throne of Scotland for about

fifteen years (1039-1054) wisely and peacefully, and he eventually was killed by Prince Malcolm's invasion of Scotland with the English armies. Shakespeare used those historical events to explore the themes of kingship, human nature and evil in his tragic play. Since as those acts were so violent and bloody, no wonder then that Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is to be found as a violent and bloody tragedy.

*Macbeth* was written in 1606, after King James VI of Scotland assumed the throne of England. James' ascension to the English throne was the main event which affected Shakespeare at that time. After James inherited the throne, he became the patron of Shakespeare's writings. His patronage helped Shakespeare and gave him the "opportunities to perform at court and financial assistance when the theatres were closed because of plague" (Lamb, 2002, p. 20). It may be said, thus, that *Macbeth* came as praise for James for his patronage although some critics believe that it included a criticism for him. Hence, the play is full of allusions to James and the political events through that time. For example, it reflected certain issues that had a great importance for James such as "witchcraft, the question of equivocation in the swearing of oaths, the ability- or inability- of the monarch to cure the king's evil (scrofula), and his own regal ancestry through Banquo" (Hadfield, 2004, p. 82).

*Macbeth* is set in a society headed by God's choice and representative on earth, the king. As James argued in his treatises, *Basilikon Doron* and *The Trew Law of Free Monarchies*, a king was considered as "God's Lieutenant in earth" (p. 82). He argued that because a king is divinely appointed, he should be unquestioned and that rebellion, even against tyrants, is forbidden. A king needs loyalty of people in order to spread God's message of goodness and awareness on earth. For James, kings must be obeyed by populace regardless of their actions. He also claimed that "a king could never be deposed by the people as all kings rule as part of God's divine plan" (p. 84). In *Macbeth*, the king is betrayed and killed. In this context, regicide and rebellion are against James' concepts that forbid treachery and insurgency against a king. The rules of hospitality are also broken and friendship loses its rules of loyalty. Marital life is exploited to make brutal plots of assassination. Thus, *Macbeth's* plot and setting are quite different from any other tragedy. It is the shortest tragedy of Shakespeare and is his most violent play. Besides, it represents one of the difficult challenges to Shakespeare because it was written under the reign and supervision of King James I of England as well as the political events that prevailed at that time. Lamb in his book, *Shakespeare's Macbeth* explains:

The event that had the biggest impact on the 1606 production of *Macbeth*- and which may have been responsible for Shakespeare writing this play- is the ascension of King James VI of Scotland to the English throne, thus becoming King James I of England. In May 1603, shortly after he became king, James

became the personal patron of Shakespeare's acting company, causing it to change names from the Lord Chamberlain's Men to the King's Men. (p. 20)

*Macbeth* is mainly concerned with the issue of conflict for kingship. Shakespeare was so interested in that issue, as it also appears in *Hamlet* and *King Lear*. Main characters involved in that issue should be discussed, but two of them should be given a great emphasis, Macbeth himself and King Duncan. Both characters are considered as prominent examples to explore the large oppositeness among kings, the ideal king, Duncan, versus the corrupt king, Macbeth. The play is also concerned with the struggle for monarchy and the destructive results of the ambition of kingship.

The illegal ambition to usurp the throne is the major source of the tragic events in the play, from the beginning until the end. The three weird Witches are the main motives that rouse that ambition inside Macbeth's mind to usurp the kingship. Lady Macbeth is another major source that makes Macbeth commit an ugly crime, regicide, in order to achieve his ambition. He is excitably ambitious and his illegal ambition gradually motivates and encourages him to commit a number of brutal actions. In this regard, his ambition to get kingship transfers him from a brave leader to a tyrant. Those factors are the major things that Shakespeare used in order to portray the brutal nature of kingship and the chaos and destruction that result from the struggle for monarchy.

The events of the play occur during the reign of King Duncan, king of Scotland. During that time, Macbeth appears as one of the king's statesmen because he is a brave leader who achieves many victories for the king. Thus, Macbeth achieves high stature and place near the king, but his illegal ambition of kingship makes him blind and a usurper who assassinates the legitimate king in order to achieve his ambition. Here, ambition for Macbeth is "an obsession with what might be so intense that it makes what is almost unreal, and certainly worthless, by comparison" (McAlindon, 1996, p. 215). Hence, the best consideration for *Macbeth* is as a tragedy of illegal ambition: the desire for greatness. He blindly believes the witches' prophecies, so many ugly acts are committed as the results of those prophecies. They enkindle his ambition and generate the regicidal action. He becomes preoccupied with thinking in the witches' prophecy and that he will become the king of Scotland. In this respect, to seize the kingship, Macbeth has two choices: "he must decide between waiting patiently for the prophecy to come true or killing the current king, Duncan, and forcing it to come true" (Lamb, p. 18). Here, because of his "Vaulting ambition", he chooses the remorseless choice, his regicide of the king.

Shakespeare used the Witches as an allusion to James' interest to invest in the equivocation and issues of the supernatural. In his work, *Daemonologie*,



James discussed the relation of the witches to Satan and that "the purpose of witches was to harm the king; thus, witchcraft was considered treason" (p. 22). In *Macbeth*, the playwright portrayed that idea through the role of the Witches in killing King Duncan and usurping his monarchy. James also claimed that the "witches were agents of the Devil who could bestow prophecies" (p. 22). Those prophecies are clearly portrayed in *Macbeth*. The First Witch calls him by his real name, Macbeth, and his official title, Thane of Glamis: "All hail Macbeth! Hail to thee. Thane of Glamis" (1.3.48). The Second Witch increases Macbeth's wonder when it calls him by the "Thane of Cawdor" because he does not have that title. The Third Witch calls him by the most wonderful title, the future king. Here, what the Third Witch says is unbelievable for Macbeth because he knows that he cannot be the king because the current king, Duncan, has two heirs to the throne, Malcolm and Donalbain. The Witches also tell Banquo another prophecy that later causes troubles for Macbeth, that his offspring will be kings of Scotland forever. On the other hand, Shakespeare's portrait of the witches may appear as a criticism of James because the English people, unlike the Scottish people under James' reign, at that time did not believe much in the existence of the witches. Thus, "the presence of a king who believed in witches caused a stir in England" (Lamb, p. 22).

In Macbeth's castle, Duncan appears as an easy prey for Macbeth because Duncan thinks that he is in double trust, as a king and a guest. On the other hand, Macbeth may be seen as innocent. An act of his innocence appears in his hesitation to kill the king because he is fully conscious that killing the king is a brutal sin. In this regard, there are many reasons inside Macbeth's mind that prevent him from killing the king and that reflects his righteousness. Macbeth begins thinking that the king is his cousin who appreciates and loves him. The king is God's choice on earth so any one who hurts him will receive God's punishment and damnation. The king is also his guest so he must protect him not kill him. Macbeth says:

He's here in double trust;  
First, as I am his kinsman and his subject,  
Strong both against the deed; then, as his host,  
Who should against his murderer shut the door,  
Not bear the knife myself. (1.7.12-16)

Those thoughts make Macbeth hesitate in killing the king, but, at the same time, he cannot control his desire for kingship. Lady Macbeth also encourages him to kill the king, and she insists on him to seize the monarchy. Here, her words that persuade Macbeth to kill the king reflect a contradiction inherent in the patriarchal society at that time. Although women had commonly no role in

the political life, they could be politically dangerous on the stability of the country in which they tried "to achieve covertly what has been denied to them overtly" (Howell, 2008, p. 12). Shakespeare portrayed that issue through Lady Macbeth's advice to her husband to be like a flower that hides a dangerous snake under it: "look like the innocent flower, / But be the serpent under't" (1.5.65-66). Moreover, Lady Macbeth exceeds her persuasion to Macbeth by rhetoric into destroying his faith in himself: "When you durst do it, then you were a man; / And, to be more than what you were, you would / Be so much more the man" (1.7.49-51).

Lady Macbeth, who knows her husband's inherent kindness, proves another aspect of Macbeth's innocence. When she receives the letter that tells her about the three Witches, she appears afraid that Macbeth's kindness may spoil that prophecy: "It is too full o' the milk of human kindness" (1.5.17). Evidence of Macbeth's innocence and kindness can be found at the beginning, but his wife's ambition to be the queen destroys everything that may prevent him from achieving that ambition. However, Macbeth is not completely innocent and Lady Macbeth is not completely guilty with regards to killing the king. The evidence is apparent in Act 1. There, "before her first appearance, Macbeth has already considered the crime as an actual possibility and he has been changed by the witches' prophecy more than his wife can be aware" (Mehl, 1999, p. 113). Hence, the seeds of evil are found in Macbeth before his wife's encouragement, but what she does is a refreshment for his thoughts. Another evidence appears when he commits several crimes in order to save his kingship.

Macbeth's crime is the most wicked action that he commits in the play in order to achieve his ambition of kingship. Any crime should be damned, but his crime is the most damned because he kills the king, God's choice and representative on earth. Under the divine right tenet, killing the king was considered as the most damned crime. Here, Shakespeare used Macbeth's regicide as a symbol to the infamous Gunpowder Plot, an attempt to assassinate King James in 1605. Shakespeare wanted to reflect the amount of transgression against the king committed in that crime. In the play, some allusions to the Gunpowder Plot can be read. Porter's speech, in Act 2, scene 3, has allusions to the Gunpowder plotters. Among those plotters was "the Superior of the English Jesuits, Father Henry Garnet" (Braunmuller, 1997, p. 5). Garnet, who adopted the school of equivocation, is portrayed in Porter's speech: "here's an equivocator, that could / swear in both the scales against either scale..." (2.3.8-9). Garnet also used the name "Farmer" that is also portrayed in his speech: "Here's a farmer, that hang'd / himself on th' expectation of plenty" (2.3.4-5).

Shakespeare portrayed the deformity of regicide through the extraordinary things that happen unintentionally during of the crime. Macbeth reports that during his crime, one of the king's servants smiled, while he was sleeping, and the other cried "crime". After that, they woke up and began to pray and then they returned to sleep. Those strange actions reflect the amount of the desecration of regicide because a king was seen as the link between God and people. Killing the king, then, leads to break that link. Thus, Macbeth's crime appears as an act of profanation that causes chaos and darkness to the people and country. Such unusual events constitute an apparent evidence of Macbeth's profanation. Another act of God's curse on regicide appears through Macbeth's inability to say "Amen" in spite of his necessary need for it.

During the acts of the crime, a sign of Duncan as an ideal king appears distinctly. Lady Macbeth is unable to kill him because of the innocence that she sees in him. Moreover, after killing the king, Macbeth's is overwhelmed by sorrow and regret. Macbeth realizes that he has killed an innocent and kind person. He wishes if he did not commit that crime because he thinks that the life with that person is better. Thus, the playwright portrays Duncan as an ideal king in many acts and as a good example for kings. On the other hand, Macbeth is portrayed as an example of the tyrant king. This occurs through Macbeth's dependence on committing heinous crimes and using spies and assassins in order to protect his sovereignty. For example, Act 3, scene 6 describes Macbeth as a tyrant king who is very different from the ideal king, Duncan. There, Lenox reveals the bad nature of Macbeth: "The gracious Duncan / Was pitied of Macbeth; marry, he was dead" (3.6.3-4).

In Elizabethan England, a sense of hierarchy permeated all societal levels. It was generally believed that every existing thing in the universe, whether animate or inanimate, has a specific location in a hierarchical order ordained by God. They believed that God was at the top of that hierarchy and the angels came after him. On earth, they thought that kings were at the top because they were considered as God's representatives whose duties were to spread God's message. It was also believed that there is "a relationship between order on earth, the so-called microcosm, and order on the larger scale of the universe, or macrocosm" (Went, 2000, p. 91). Thus, God's choice on earth, the king, was the symbol of God's order on earth. Any attempt to violate that choice was seen as an attempt to destroy God's order on earth. Any attempt to hurt monarchies was also considered as a breakage of that order and as a rebellion against God. Thus, any attempt to violate that divine hierarchy would provoke God's damnation and punishment. In the play, when Macbeth kills Duncan, he transgresses against the will of God and Macbeth, accordingly, suffers God's punishment.



a "Lord's anointed Temple" (2.3.68) and as "a most sainted King" (4.3.109). Even when Macbeth prepares to kill him, he describes Duncan as an ideal king who has the qualities of honorable kingship. Lady Macbeth also cannot kill him because she sees him as her father. Hence, "Duncan makes treason a challenge- he is a grateful leader and a father figure" (Lemon, 2008, p. 74). On the contrary, Macbeth's presentation as a king is more negative than Duncan's. He shifts from a brave army general to a tyrant. He is described as "an untitled tyrant bloody-scepter'd" (4.3.104) and as "Devilish" (4.3.117).

The difference between Macbeth and Duncan appears also through the conversation between Macduff and Malcolm in Act 4, scene 3. They compare tyranny to honorable kingship. In this regard, a political act can be seen apparently in which "so fascinated was James I in the notion of what makes a good king that he himself had written (in 1599) a handbook on good government, the *Basilikon Doron*. Some of these ideas of good kingship are listed by Malcolm" (Went 8). According to Malcolm, the ideal king, as Duncan, has to bring order and justice to the kingdom. We know that Duncan used to provide order and justice to Scotland. For example, Duncan, at the beginning of the play, performs those qualities by punishing evil, the treachery of the previous Cawdor, and rewarding good, the heroism of Macbeth and the generosity of his wife. Moreover, Malcolm gives a list of the kingly virtues that may be found in Duncan, not in Macbeth:

The king-becoming graces,  
As justice, verity, temperance, stableness,  
Bounty, perseverance, mercy, lowliness,  
Devotion, patience, courage, fortitude,  
I have no relish of them, but abound  
In the division of each several crime,  
Acting it many ways. (4.3.91-97)

The key question to be asked here is that whether those virtues are embodied in the character of Duncan or Macbeth. Malcolm does not refer to a specific king, but he states the general features that the ideal king should have. In the play, those virtues are found in the character of Duncan rather than Macbeth: "Macbeth lacks all these kingly virtues, but his greatest vice is his impulse to lie- even to his own conscience- in his pursuit of power" (Went 8). In the play, Duncan is known as the king, whereas Macbeth is referred to as the tyrant. Duncan rules Scotland with love for his country while Macbeth usurps the throne to achieve his political ambition and desires. Duncan brings order and justice to Scotland whereas Macbeth, on the contrary, brings chaos and disorder, through the unnatural things that happen after his regicide such as the awful

weather and the other extraordinary events. Thus, Macbeth does not bring any form of justice, but rather he depends on committing crimes, Duncan, Banquo and Macduff's family, and on spreading spies in the country. With regard to the virtues mentioned by Malcolm, it may be seen that Macbeth does not have any of them except for one, "courage". His fall at the end of the play is because he "is caught in the paradox that his success contains the seeds of his failure" (McLuskie, 2005, p. 394). Here, although Macbeth and his wife have the ability to usurp the kingship, they do not have the ability to manage that kingship because it is beyond their abilities.

### Conclusion:

In conclusion, Duncan remains the ideal king who does his best for the common good of his subjects and kingdom while Macbeth turns a tyrant who exploits the power of monarchy for the good of himself. *Macbeth*, for instance, can be seen as a tragedy of ambition and regicide, and this is the hero's 'tragic flaw' that brings about his downfall. He begins the play as a noble figure: he has fought magnificently for the king, the saintly Duncan, against rebels. But he soon departs from the noble, and become infected and debased by the evil of ambition which eventually reveals his essential weakness. The combination of three witches prophesying that he will be king, his wife prompting him to murder Duncan, and Duncan's decision to spend a night at Macbeth's castle at the very time when the pressure to murder Duncan is greatest proves too much for Macbeth. He kills Duncan, and then suffers agonies until he is finally killed by a nobleman whose family he massacred when he was king. As do the histories, *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, *Macbeth* confirms the Elizabethan outlook that usurpation is a major sin, punishable by turmoil for the country and death for the usurper.

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