
The Use of Sickness as a Metaphor of Ambition in Macbeth, a Play by William Shakespeare

In Shakespeare's play Macbeth, Macbeth is given a prophecy by three witches saying that he will become king. With high ambitions, Macbeth murders his king and becomes king himself. As king, Macbeth rules with tyranny and Scotland falls to a "sickness". Throughout the play, Shakespeare uses sickness as a metaphor for Macbeth's ambition.

Evidence of Macbeth's sickness shows when the three witches prophesize that Macbeth will be thane of Cawdor and king. Banquo laughs at the prophecy when the witches tell him that his sons will be kings. Macbeth reacts differently; he was afraid because he was already thinking about the idea of being king. Macbeth's sickness of ambition also shows when Malcolm is named the successor to the throne. Macbeth says "The prince of Cumberland! That is a step on which I must fall down, or else o'erleap, for in my way it lies. stars, hide your fires; let not light see my black and deep desires. The eye wink at the hand, yet let that be which the eye fears, when it is done, to see" (1.4. 50-55). He shows his violent tendencies by saying that he wants to be king even though Malcolm is in his way. He says that in order to be king, he has to do something terrible which he will do.

Macbeth's ambition leads him into murdering his king Duncan in order to be king himself. Macbeth's illness is released when he murders Duncan and his guilt and fear causes him to become more ambitious. In order to secure his position as king, he is willing to murder anybody who will threaten his position. His sickness of ambition spreads onto the country of Scotland where Macbeth rules with tyranny and the country "weeps, bleeds, and each new day a gash is added to her wounds" (4.3. 41-42).

Shakespeare compares Macbeth and Scotland's sickness to King Edward and England's health. Macbeth's overly ambitious nature made him a tyrant and as a result, Scotland falls to a disease. Contrasted to Macbeth, King Edward of England has the virtues of a good king. He is blessed with the power of healing and he uses it to heal the sick people of his country. Macbeth seems to realize that he is the cause of Scotland's disease when he says "I have lived long enough. My way of life is fall'n into the sere, the yellow leaf" (5.3. 24-25). By saying that he is tired of living, he is saying that he is tired of the sickness he caused in Scotland.

Shakespeare uses sickness as a metaphor for Macbeth's ambition. Evidence of Macbeth's ambition appears early in the play when Macbeth reacts to the witches prophecy with fear, revealing that he was already thinking about the idea of being king. His sickness was released a

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spreads to Scotland when he murders Duncan, becomes king, and rules with tyranny as a result of his guilt and fear. Towards the end of the play, he recognizes that he himself is the illness that plagues Scotland and says he is tired of living with the sickness he had imposed on Scotland.

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