

Edexcel English Literature GCSE

Macbeth: Themes Abuse of Power and Kingship

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Abuse of Power and Kingship

With the unexpected ascension of James I to the throne, the question of **what makes a good king** was a popular topic in England. The country was very much **divided** about how it should be run. There was the **ongoing religious conflict** between Protestants and Catholics. Some were pleased for James to be king but others were not. In Macbeth, Shakespeare compares different characters and their approaches to their reigns. Some are successful and others aren't, which could be Shakespeare's way of demonstrating which qualities he felt were the most important in a good monarch.

Kingship and power are **intrinsically linked** within the play. The possibility of **ascending the throne** is the driving force behind the motivations of many of the characters (much like in Game of Thrones).

Shakespeare **contrasts** the way the characters behave towards this possibility of power, and also how characters act once they gain power. He contrasts the behaviour of a righteous and just king (Duncan) with one who is violent and abuses his power (Macbeth). When studying the play it's important to consider why Shakespeare does this.

Duncan

Duncan possesses all the qualities of a great king: he is **noble, nurturing, responsible, and a strong leader**. His successful reign emphasises how **disastrous** Macbeth is as a king.

Benevolent ruler

Duncan is shown to be a **just and benevolent** (kind) ruler, demonstrating important aspects of kingship by telling his court, "**Signs of nobleness like stars shall shine / On all deservers,**" (1.4), meaning he is willing to **reward** all those who do good. It can be interpreted that he is saying that **virtue** and **nobility** are **visible** traits in a person, distinguishing them from others. The **simile "like stars shall shine"** connotes **divine power**, implying they will be rewarded in the afterlife as well as now. It aligns "**deservers**" with God.



<http://www.margutte.com/?p=21507>

Duncan is portrayed as someone who is **invested** in his followers, as he says, "**I have begun to plant thee and will labour / To make thee full of growing,**" to which Banquo replies, "**There if I grow, / The harvest is your own,**" (1.4). He is dedicated to



self-improvement and the **success of others**. The **semantic field of agriculture** connotes new life and nourishment, presenting Duncan as **nurturing** and **considerate**.

Duncan is such a successful monarch that even those who seek to kill him admire the way he rules. Macbeth outlines Duncan's **honourable qualities**: he "*Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been / So clear in his great office, that his virtues / Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued, against / The deep damnation of his taking-off,*" (1.7). Thereby acknowledging that Duncan is a **good king**.

Fair

Shakespeare shows how Duncan governs **fairly** to do what is best for his country.

- He rewards those who do good, telling Macbeth, "**More is thy due than more than all can pay**," (1.4).
- At the same time, he **punishes traitors**, ordering the execution of the Thane of Cawdor for his acts of **treason**: "**Go pronounce his present death / And with his former title greet Macbeth**," (1.2).

This exchange of "**title[s]**" at the beginning of the play presents the audience with a country that is **stable and balanced**. Duncan's court appears to be the **pinnacle of justice**.

However, this scene also foreshadows Macbeth's betrayal.

Produces an Heir

The Jacobean audience would have known the trouble that a monarch dying without an heir would have created. Elizabeth I died **without an heir** which resulted in a big change to the

way Britain was ruled by her successor. By providing the country with an heir, Duncan was ensuring **political stability and security**. He announces that his son Malcolm will be his heir-apparent: "**We will establish our estate upon / Our eldest, Malcolm**," (1.4).

Shakespeare thus establishes Duncan as a **trustworthy King** and provides a vision of the safe future. Obviously this is ruined by Macbeth.



<https://www.needpix.com/photo/download/752060/shakespeare-king-duncan-ancient-classic-romeo-magnifier-english-hamlet-history>

Too trusting?

It seems that Duncan is too **trusting** and **dependent** on others to be a perfect king. Rather than leading his men into battle he trusts others to do so for him, and he relies heavily on his Thanes to help **Maintain order**.

When he reflects on the previous Thane of Cawdor's death, he says, "**There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face. / He was a gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust**," (1.4). He had placed his confidence in a man who betrayed him to foreign armies, suggesting he has a **poor judge of character**. There is some **dramatic irony** in this statement, for Macbeth is plotting to murder him.



Doesn't learn from his mistakes

Macbeth is another one of Duncan's trusted Thanes and is called his "**valiant cousin, worthy gentleman**" (1.2). This means **the betrayal repeats itself** and Duncan doesn't learn from his mistakes.

However, the line "**There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face**" implies it is **impossible to see through someone's deception**. Shakespeare suggests **the evil and treachery of others** makes it impossible for a king to be wholly good. Kindness and respect are **vulnerable to deceit**. In theory, Duncan would be the perfect king, but in reality **he cannot contend with the wickedness of his peers**.

Macbeth

At the start of the play Macbeth has the ideal qualities of a noble king. The Captain calls him "**brave Macbeth**", "**Bellona's bridegroom**", and "**Valour's minion**" (1.2), proving how admired and impressive Macbeth is. "**Brave**" and "**valour**" both imply that he has a **strength of character** beyond being good in battle which would be **ideal** as a leader. This makes it ironic that he later commits the **cowardly** act of murdering Duncan in his sleep.

Ascension to the throne

But these **noble traits** seem to disappear. As Macbeth becomes closer to the throne he becomes more **corrupt**. By the time he kills Duncan and takes the throne his transformation is so complete it is too late for him to go back to being the noble Macbeth we were introduced to at the start of the play.

From this point on, the audience

are able to see the **direct**

contrast between the way

Duncan and Macbeth rule

Britain. Macbeth is the **least**

successful king in the play.

Even his ascension to the

throne is **unrighteous**, as he

gets there on the back of murder, lies, and betrayal. He is not the rightful heir. He doesn't care for Scotland, only for himself. Through his time on the throne, Shakespeare explores

how **power corrupts the minds of men**, and how **impactful** a king's reign is on his whole country. He studies what it would truly be like to have a tyrant on the throne and how power draws out people's **violent natures**.



https://www.whatsonstage.com/york-theatre/reviews/macbeth-shakespeares-rose-theatre_47036.html

Macbeth is the **complete opposite** of Duncan, both in the way he came to be king but also in the way he rules. Shakespeare uses this play to explore the impact of a King's reign on his country.



Callous leadership

The audience is not given much insight into other peoples' opinions of Macbeth's leadership. However, as the soldiers prepare for battle, we hear reports of how "**those he commands, move only in command, / Nothing in love**" (5.2), and "**none serve him but constrained things / Whose hearts are absent too**" (5.4). This shows how unsuccessful he has been at maintaining order and trust in his people. His country has no "**love**" or "**heart**" which is representative of his own callous nature.

Macbeth acknowledges his ability to control others using violent means by saying that "**I could with my barefaced power sweep him from my sight, / And bid my will avouch it, yet I must not,**" (3.1) when pondering what to do about Banquo. "**Barefaced**" implies he could be **shameless** and **outright** in his murderous ways, while "**sweep him from my sight**" connotes a **godlike control** over reality.

No heir

Macbeth's poor kingship is solidified by his **lack of lineage and heirs**. It is evident he feels **emasculated** by his inability to produce an heir, this is represented through his jealousy of Banquo and resentment of the Witches.

Remembering the Witches' prophecy for Banquo, he complains, "**They hailed him father to a line of kings. / Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown / And put a barren sceptre in my gripe, / Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand, / No son of mine succeeding,**" (3.1). He **resents** Banquo because his sons will be kings, and he resents the Witches for 'making' him king without **successors**.



<https://theconversation.com/hugo-weaving-reveals-macbeths-weakness-and-his-unhappiness-28158>

The Death of a King

The reaction to Duncan's death compared to Macbeth's death is **reflective of how both kings ruled**, and how they were viewed by their country. The impact each death has on the environment expresses Shakespeare's views on kingship and tyranny. He believed a good monarch was needed to provide **stability, security, and progress**.

Duncan

Duncan's death seems to bring about a sort of **apocalyptic chaos**, showing how atrocious and distressing his murder is. The way the **atmosphere** is described even before Duncan's death has been discovered implies that even the nature is affected by his murder. Lennox reports, "**The night has been unruly [...] Lamentings heard i'th'air, strange screams of death / And prophesying with accents terrible / Of dire combustion and confused**



events, / New hatched to th'woeful time. The obscure bird / Clamoured the livelong night. Some say, the earth / Was feverous and did shake," (2.3).

- Lexis from the **semantic field of chaos and destruction**, such as “**dire combustion**”, “**clamoured**”, and “**shake**”, reflects how Duncan’s murder has **gone against nature**. It may also symbolise **God’s anger and wrath** at being defied by Macbeth.
- Moreover, “**feverous**” connotes **disease**, suggesting Macbeth’s deed has **brought sickness to the land**.
- “**Lamentings**”, “**strange screams of death**”, and “**prophesying**” are references to the murder and the Witches, echoing the grief and “**tears**” Macbeth predicted in 1.7.

Once the king’s body is discovered, Ross observes, “*By th' clock 'tis day / And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp. / Is't night's predominance, or the day's shame, / That darkness does the face of earth entomb / When living light should kiss it?*” (2.4).

Duncan’s death has had a

permanent effect on the weather and the daylight.

- The “**dark night**” symbolises the **wickedness** that now dominates the world.
- The reference to “**th' clock**”, “**day**” and “**night**” implies **time itself has stopped**.
- The **semantic field of death and murder**, “**strangles**”, “**entomb**”, “**living**”, proves Duncan’s death has impacted the whole world, so that everything is **murderous or tainted by decay**.



<https://jyllands-posten.dk/kultur/anmeldelser/teater/ECE9869010/en-delig-en-fremragende-dansk-macbeth/>

Shakespeare suggests that Duncan’s death **disrupts the whole natural order**. The Old Man remarks to Ross, “*Tis unnatural, / Even like the deed that's done. On Tuesday last, / A falcon tow'ring in her pride of place / Was by a mousing owl hawked at and killed,*” (2.4). “**Like the deed that's done**” implies the state of the world has altered to **mirror** the murder. Just as a good monarch improves the health of his whole country, the death of a good monarch takes the whole country into **decay and disrepair**.

- The “**falcon**” is a mighty bird of prey, symbolising Duncan, while a “**mousing owl**” is a less impressive predator who would normally be inferior to the falcon. The incident is therefore an **omen** of what was to come, with Macbeth wrongfully killing the king, who is above him in the natural **Divine Order**.

Duncan’s corpse is described with **allusions to piety and royalty**, reflecting how the death of a king is the death of **God’s chosen representative on earth**. Macduff describes the crime scene, “**Confusion now hath made his masterpiece: / Most sacrilegious murder**



hath broke ope / The Lord's anointed temple and stole thence / The life o'th'building,"
 (2.3).

- The adjective “**sacrilegious**” alludes to the **Divine Right of Kings**. Duncan’s body is described as “**The Lord's anointed temple**”, conveying his **sanctity and importance**.
- By presenting Duncan’s corpse as a “**temple**” made of “**silver**” and “**gold**”, Shakespeare implies he wasn’t human. This means the qualities of a good king go beyond his mind. **A good king can be identified from his very form and essence.**

Macbeth

In contrast, Macbeth’s death is **celebrated** by his subjects, and presented as a moment of **liberation** for Scotland. While Duncan is portrayed with **angelic** and **godlike** descriptions, Macbeth is referred to as a “**hell-hound**” (5.8) and a “**dead butcher and his fiend-like queen**” (5.9). These all connote the **Devil**.

- “**Hound**” **dehumanises** him, suggesting he is savage and brutish. Alternatively, it implies he was a **slave** to violence or to his master, the Devil.

Macbeth has lost his noble titles and is universally hated - a stark contrast from his reputation at the beginning of the play.

Macduff

As a **loyal statesman** and the only one who can kill Macbeth, Macduff is able to speak out about **how the country should be run**. He is **unapologetic** in his criticism of Macbeth and only wants the best for his country. Though he kills Macbeth, he doesn’t take the crown for himself, instead **respecting God’s will** and giving it back to the heir-apparent.



https://digitaledition.chicagotribune.com/tribune/article_popover.aspx?guid=db8c8520-d413-43ce-ae64-0ec6e41ccb5

Patriotic

Throughout Act 4 Scene 3, Macduff expresses what it is to be a good king, and mourns for his country’s loss. He weeps, “**Bleed, bleed, poor country. / Great tyranny, lay thou thy basis sure, / For goodness dare not check thee,**” showing how **patriotic** he is.

- The phrase “**bleed, bleed**” **personifies** Scotland, portraying it as a wounded body. This reinforces the idea that the way a monarch rules a country impacts the whole land to its

core. The image of blood **contrasts** with the living, nurtured “**harvest**” Duncan created.

- Furthermore, the phrase “**For goodness dare not check thee**” shows how “**tyranny**” is allowed to **thrive unchallenged** because of the **power** that comes with it and the fear it **instills** in others.



When he hears Malcolm lie about his flaws, he cries out, **"Fit to govern? / No, not to live. - O nation miserable! / With an untitled tyrant, bloody-sceptred, / When shalt thou see thy wholesome days again? (4.3)"**. Macduff is **dismayed** by the fate of his country because of the king who rules it. He suggests the country is "**miserable**" because it is governed by a **usurper** who went against the will of God.

Moreover, the **rhetorical question** and answer he supplies, "**Fit to govern? / No, not to live,**" implies being an **inadequate, corrupt king is a crime worthy of death.**



<https://www.edp24.co.uk/going-out/national-theatre-macbeth-norwich-theatre-royal-1-5623105>

Macduff presents **greed** and **unchecked ambition** as **bad qualities in a monarch**, saying, **"Boundless intemperance / In nature is a tyranny; it hath been / Th'untimely emptying of the happy throne / And fall of many kings,"** (4.3). Though he is discussing Malcolm's supposed greed, this wise statement can also be applied to Macbeth, and predicts his death.

- Saying it is a "**tyranny**" acknowledges how people **will go to any lengths possible to satisfy their desires if they lack restraint**.
- "**Th'untimely emptying of the happy throne**" may imply that **even good kings can be corrupted by power**, so that they lose their noble qualities and the throne is no longer "**happy**". It may also express how **treason** and **regicide** (killing the king) are the results of other men's **greed**, as was the case with Macbeth and Duncan.

Malcolm

Ascension to the throne

Malcolm finally takes his **rightful place on the throne** at the end of the play, with a speech that shows he possesses the same **wisdom** and **compassion** as his father did. Though he is pure and youthful, a **symbol of hope**, he is not as naive or gullible as his father. However, we must remember that he chose to run away after his father's murder which could be seen as a **sign of cowardice**. Is Malcolm the best example of kingship we see in the play?

Traits of a noble king

Malcolm's **wisdom** and **shrewd perception** are demonstrated when he checks that Macduff isn't a spy sent by Macbeth. He suspects Macduff of "**offer[ing] up a weak, poor, innocent lamb / T'appease an angry god,**" (4.3). The **metaphor** of **ritual sacrifice** conveys Macbeth's **bloodthirst, unruly power**, and **warped sense of his own importance**.



- The **juxtaposition** between Malcolm as an “*innocent lamb*” and Macbeth as an “*angry god*” reveals the **advantage** Macbeth has as king, leading to a **severe power imbalance**.
- It also makes the **moral differences** between them clear, with Malcolm **condemning** Macbeth for being a **violent, vengeful ruler**.

He notes, “**A good and virtuous nature may recoil / In an imperial charge,**” proving he is aware of power’s ability to **corrupt** even the **most moral of men**. Shakespeare suggests it is important to be **mindful** and **suspicious** of those in power, ensuring they are not taking advantage of their position to punish those below them.

Patriotic

Shakespeare portrays Malcolm as the **epitome of a pure, honest, and dedicated king**. Like Macduff, he worries for Scotland’s future, saying, “*I think our country sinks beneath the yoke; / It weeps, it bleeds, and each new day a gash / Is added to her wounds,*” (4.3). The **personification** of Scotland again **emphasises** its **importance** to Malcolm, treating it as a **loved one** or vulnerable person, and reflects how a country can suffer in the same way a person can.

Development of the Theme

The idea of **kingship** and what it takes to be king is introduced as soon as the Witches give their prophecy to Macbeth. Kingship can be seen as the **destination** or goal of all the action in the play.



<https://entertainment.time.com/2010/08/13/top-10-movie-duels/slides/macbeth-vs-macduff-macbeth/>

The political action surrounding the monarchy is an allegory for Britain’s own history and current climate. Kingship is associated with violence and chaos, but also order and justice. **It all depends on who is in charge**. It could be argued that who is king isn’t relevant to the main purpose of the play’s plot. It is the **push and pull for power** between opposing sides that drives the plot forward.

In the play, Shakespeare presents us with **four examples of kings**: Duncan,

Macbeth, Malcolm, and Edward of England. We never see Edward in person, but we hear of his **virtues** and how he heals the sick in his own country. He also kindly offers an army to help overthrow Macbeth.

The chaos and unrest of Scotland therefore unfolds in the **foreground** of England’s **stable peace**. To a certain degree, each king is an **archetype** of a certain kind of ruler. Shakespeare’s messages about kingship are as evident in the **differences** between them as



they are in the actions of the kings themselves. For example, Malcolm's **wariness** has more successful results than his father's gullibility, while Macbeth's "**butcher**" persona breeds a different **atmosphere** to Edward's merciful healing.

