WAGOLL

In ‘Macbeth’, Lady Macbeth and Macbeth have an unquenchable desire for power. It is their ambition and greed for power that spurs them to commit heinous acts in order to gain paramount power. Instead of nurturing their ambition and using it to succeed, it becomes each characters’ hamartia, and arguably is the cause of Lady Macbeth’s demise and Macbeth’s defeat.

The extract features a fragment of Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy at the start of the play. Here we see how Lady Macbeth’s ambition feeds her desire for pivotal power and has the capacity to immediately corrupt her. Shakespeare’s use of repetition in Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy, stating “thou wouldst” conveys how Lady Macbeth’s ambition causes her to instantly think of the possible hegemony she can have over others. Whilst at first the Shakespearean audience could believe that Lady Macbeth’s ambition is nurturing healthy desire for success, this viewpoint is swiftly thwarted as Lady Macbeth believes that an “illness should attend it”. Shakespeare’s use of the noun “illness” would make the Shakespearean audience profoundly fear Lady Macbeth; it not only associates her with evilness and corruption but foreshadows her hubristic actions later in the play. The Jacobean society had a homogeneous Christian belief system, so here when Lady Macbeth talks about “illness”, fear would be evoked within the Shakespearean audience as they realise Lady Macbeth’s ambition is ultimately going to cause her to defy God.

The idea that ambition causes Lady Macbeth to commit hubristic acts in order to gain power is further supported in the extract. In her soliloquy, Lady Macbeth is proposing to the audience that she is going to “chastise [Macbeth] with the valour of [her] tongue”. Shakespeare’s use of the verb “chastise” further supports the idea that Lady Macbeth’s ambition causes her to sin. “Chastise” could be a referent to the condemnation that God will feel towards Lady Macbeth’s actions whilst Shakespeare’s reference to Lady Macbeth’s tongue cold be perceived by the Jacobean audience as being a metaphorical Biblical reference, making her tongue comparable to the serpent that corrupted Adam and Eve. This could further make the Shakespearean audience be profoundly fearful of Lady Macbeth as they will associate her with sin and corruption. It could be argued that Shakespeare personifies Lady Macbeth’s tongue as having valour to not only convey that ambition lowers Lady Macbeth’s inhibitions and makes her act more courageously, but to also throw into relief that Lady Macbeth is an unconventional character. In Jacobean England, women were supposed to be weak and subservient therefore by Shakespeare insinuating that Lady Macbeth is a brave character, the Jacobean audience would be shocked. Alternatively, a feminist audience may respect Lady Macbeth for not being complicit in her subjugation and subverting the stereotype that women were supposed to be weak and subservient. Shakespeare shows through Lady Macbeth’s character that not only does ambition have the power to corrupt someone but that it can cause you to become more powerful as seen with Lady Macbeth. Shakespeare could use the theme of ambition as a warning to the Jacobean audience to nurture your ambition rather than let it taint you.

The idea that ambition has the power to corrupt a character is reinforced later in the play when Lady Macbeth and Macbeth are discussing regicide. Lady Macbeth questions her husband asking him, “What cannot you and I perform upon th’unguarded Duncan?” Here, Shakespeare’s use of an interrogative sentence not only conveys that Lady Macbeth is an immensely powerful woman as she unconventionally questions her husband, but additionally highlights the extent to which Lady Macbeth’s ambition has tainted her. Her ambition to become queen has overridden her moral obligation. This is conveyed through Shakespeare’s use of the adjective “unguarded” throwing into relief that Lady Macbeth’s ambition is fuelling her desire to commit heinous acts even on vulnerable people such as the king when he is “unguarded”. This could make the audience detest Lady Macbeth as she is letting her ambition take control of her so much that she is prepared to commit the worst crime of all – regicide. In Jacobean England, killing the king was believed to be the worst crime of all as people believed in the ideology of the Divine Right of Kings – that God had chosen the king. Therefore, if you killed the king, you ultimately were defying God.

Furthermore, at the end of the play, the audience sees how ambition has tainted Macbeth. He states that “vaulting ambition o’verleaps itself and falls”. Shakespeare personifies ambition to insinuate that ambition is like a feral animal that cannot be tamed. This could make the audience feel sympathetic towards Macbeth as they are persuaded to feel he could not control his actions. Additionally, Shakespeare’s use of a declarative sentence could foreshadow the end of the play where he is defeated and killed by Macduff. This could make the Jacobean audience feel sympathy towards Macbeth as he knows the inevitability of his tragic fate. Moreover, Macbeth’s statement during his soliloquy mirrors the structure of the tragedy; Macbeth’s ambitions for power caused him to gain more power and become king, however he will fall when he is killed at the end due to his ambition causing him to become an “abhorred tyrant”. Shakespeare’s use of the adjective “abhorred” and noun “tyrant” conveys how ambition has caused Macbeth to become a callous man who is prolifically detested.

Overall, Shakespeare presents ambition as something which can corrupt a character and lead to an inevitably tragic fate for them. He uses Lady Macbeth and Macbeth as antimodels for people with an immense amount of ambition; their insatiable greed and ambition for power ultimately causes their deaths.