WAGOLL

In his play ‘Macbeth’, Shakespeare presents ambition as a powerful driving force which, when acted upon, leads to the direst of consequences. Through the characters within his play, he magnifies a simple truth: ambition can make monsters out of the best of men.

To begin with, in the speech, Shakespeare portrays the ambition of Lady Macbeth as unnatural and malign in purpose as she sinisterly states that she will “pour” her “spirits” in Macbeth’s “ear”. To a Jacobean audience, this would immediately have negative connotations as women during 1606 should have been motherly, submissive and nurturing. The noun “spirits” might evoke the audience into remembering the witches and Lady Macbeth’s association with the supernatural would be believed to have terrible ramifications. Moreover, the verb “pour” and the reference to Macbeth’s “ear” could suggest a possible link between her and Claudius from ‘Hamlet’ who, in his violent ambition, poured poison into the king’s ear in order to obtain the crown. Similarly, this might infer Lady Macbeth is equally duplicitous and that her ambition will ultimately betray her.

In the speech, she states that Macbeth is too “full o’ th’ milk” of “human kindness” and because of this, he will not succeed. Here, it is evident to the audience that she believes the “golden round” can only be obtained through callousness and ruthlessness. Shakespeare emphasises Lady Macbeth’s ambition as an almost demonic emotion as she references “fate and metaphysical aid”. At this point, the Jacobean audience are well aware that Lady Macbeth’s ambition is leading her against the natural order as she reveals her cold-blooded inner-self.

Ironically, there is some truth in what Lady Macbeth utters in her soliloquy as she says Macbeth could “be great” not “without ambition” but “without the illness” that proceeds from it. Shakespeare accentuates to his audience that ambition, in itself, is not a sinful thing, but that often it is the lengths to which men will go to to see the fruits of their ambition that is, ultimately, destructive. He portrays ambition in this light as during 1606, there was much social upheaval with the newly crowned King James I. It was a time of great uncertainty, and with the 1605 Gunpowder Plot that had recently occurred, Shakespeare wished to dissuade the “ambitious” ones in society from perhaps revolting against the monarch.

Moreover, Shakespeare uses the character of Macbeth to truly convey the consequences of ambition. At the beginning of the play, the eponymous Macbeth is portrayed as the archetypal male who, after leading the Scottish to victory against the Norwegians is described as “valour’s minion”. To a Jacobean audience, he is presented with heroic attributes. However, there is a sudden shift in his nature after the first of the witches’ prophecies prove true. In his aside, he admits that “the greatest is behind”. The growing seed of his ambition is further evidenced when he acknowledges his “black desires”, calling on heaven and the stars not to see the root of evil sprouting.

Macbeth nobly attempts to assuage his ambition and find contentment with where he is, well aware that his “vaulting ambition” would “overleap itself”. However, after Lady Macbeth exerts her dominance (and freedom outside the patriarchal system), he weakly complies, abandoning his onus to the Scottish crown by committing regicide. By the time he states, “I have done the deed” in act 2 scene 2, the Jacobean audience would almost entirely loath him, certain that the once “noble” and “worthy” Macbeth would face damnation for his treachery, stemming from his ambition.

In the final acts of the play, the rift in Macbeth’s character is truly evident. He is a fallen hero, known solely as a “butcher” and a “tyrant”, hated by the people and the thanes. Subsequently, Shakespeare highlights his descent into derangement and paranoia as a consequence of his ambition. Macbeth, deeply regretful over Duncan’s murder, and haunted by his extensive guilt, exasperatedly tells Lady Macbeth his mind is “full of scorpions”. To the audience, “scorpions” would have been symbols of poison, treachery and death – a bad omen even. Shakespeare uses this to magnify Macbeth’s spiralling decline into insanity. Not only does he lack “sleep” and face plagues of hallucinations, he is haunted by Banquo’s ghost after he has him savagely slaughtered. He comes to a grim realisation (after visiting the witches) that the “blood-bolter’d Banquo smiles” upon him. Shakespeare uses the plosives to emphasise that as a result of his ambition, he will never be free of those he has slain but rather they shall be “forever knit” with an “indissoluble tie” (something which Banquo had stated in his loyalty to the crown).

Finally, Shakespeare encapsulates the idea of ambition leading only to ruin by presenting Lady Macbeth as a senile, weak woman in thorough need of redemption from God. Not only does she sleep walk, she is riddled with hallucinations and piteously states, “yet here’s a spot”. From a feminist point of view, a contemporary audience might feel sorry for her – seeing no harm in women having ambition whereas a Jacobean audience would feel only a sense of justice. Shakespeare shows that, ultimately, ambition (when acted upon) can be fatal but eventually everybody will have their comeuppance as all ill will “returns to plague the inventor”.