



## The Role of Ambition and Power in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: A Special Focus on the Character of Lady Macbeth

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the themes of ambition and power in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, with a special focus on Lady Macbeth. As one of Shakespeare's most famous and controversial female characters, she plays a central role in shaping the play's tragic course. The study examines how her ambition, manipulation, and later struggle with guilt form the moral and emotional core of the tragedy. Drawing on Aristotle's theory of tragedy, it discusses concepts such as hamartia, hubris, peripeteia, anagnorisis, and catharsis to trace Lady Macbeth's journey from a strong instigator to a broken and tormented figure. The analysis also considers the gendered nature of power in the play, showing how Lady Macbeth challenges traditional expectations by adopting traits of masculinity, only to be destroyed by her own conscience. Through close reading of the text and engagement with critical views, this paper argues that Lady Macbeth's ambition is both a personal drive and a destructive force that unsettles moral and political order. By combining classical tragedy with feminist and thematic perspectives, the study highlights Lady Macbeth's complexity and shows how her ambition contributes not only to Macbeth's downfall but also to her own tragic fate. Ultimately, Shakespeare presents a timeless warning about the dangers of unchecked ambition and the thirst for power.

**Keyword:** Lady Macbeth, Ambition, Power, Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy, Gender Roles

### Introduction

William Shakespeare (1564-1616), often called the greatest dramatist of the English language, was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. By the late 1580s, he had relocated to London, marking the beginning of a remarkable career as an actor, playwright, and poet (Greenblatt, 2004, p. 12). Over his lifetime, he produced 39 plays, 154 sonnets, and two long narrative poems, works that deeply shaped English literature and continue to influence global literary traditions (Shapiro, 2005, p. 21). His tragedies, *Hamlet*, *King Lear*, *Othello*, and *Macbeth*, are especially renowned for their exploration of ambition, power, and the destructive consequences of human weakness.

Shakespeare's plays often reflect the political anxieties of the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras, particularly issues of monarchy, succession, and authority (Greenblatt, 2004, p. 22; Shapiro, 2005, p. 144). In *Hamlet*, ambition appears in Claudius's ruthless usurpation of the throne, while in *King Lear*, ambition drives deceit and betrayal among Lear's daughters (Dollimore, 2004, p. 79; McLuskie, 1987, p. 91). These recurring themes of ambition and power reveal Shakespeare's deep concern with how personal desire disrupts moral and social order.

Among his tragedies, *Macbeth* stands out as one of the most powerful. It tells the story of a brave Scottish general whose ambition and greed for power lead to his downfall. Yet, the tragedy is not only about Macbeth himself. His wife, Lady Macbeth, is central to the play's trajectory, driving him to seize the crown and shaping the course of events. Lady Macbeth emerges as one of Shakespeare's most striking female characters, clever, bold, and ambitious. At the beginning, she appears stronger than her husband, planning and manipulating with chilling precision. When she urges him to "look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under't" (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1997, 1.5.63–64), she shows both her intelligence and her dangerous ability to disguise evil intentions beneath a gentle exterior.

Yet ambition and power come with heavy consequences. Once Macbeth becomes king, fear and paranoia consume him, leading to further violence. Lady Macbeth, too, begins to crumble under guilt. Her famous sleepwalking scene, in which she tries to wash away, imagined bloodstains "*Out, damned spot! Out, I say!*" (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1997, 5.1.30) reveals the psychological cost of her ambition. The woman who once appeared fearless becomes broken and vulnerable, undone by her conscience.

This paper examines these two central themes, ambition and power, through the character of Lady Macbeth. It asks: What fuels her ambition? How does her desire for power shape her relationship with Macbeth? Why does she ultimately lose her mind? To answer these questions, the study draws on Aristotle's theory of tragedy, which explains how a noble figure falls due to a tragic flaw, or hamartia. In this case, ambition acts as the fatal flaw for both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. According to Aristotle, tragedy should evoke pity and fear, leading to catharsis, or emotional release (Aristotle, trans. 1996, p. 15). Macbeth captures this perfectly: both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth begin as strong, intelligent figures, but their unchecked ambition leads to fear, madness, and death.

Lady Macbeth's role is particularly striking because she challenges traditional expectations of women in Shakespeare's time. While women were usually portrayed as gentle and nurturing, she is bold, ruthless, and even invokes spirits to "unsex me here" (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1997, 1.5.39), rejecting femininity to pursue power. However, despite her strength, she cannot escape guilt and ultimately falls victim to her own ambition.

In short, this research explores how ambition and power drive the tragedy in *Macbeth*, with special focus on Lady Macbeth's character. Her story is not only about murder and madness but also about the universal human desire for control, success, and recognition. At the same time, it is a warning about the dangers of ambition when it goes too far. Lady Macbeth's rise and fall make her one of Shakespeare's most unforgettable and tragic figures.

### Objectives of the Study

- To explore how ambition shapes the character and actions of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.
- To examine Lady Macbeth's role in influencing Macbeth's decisions and the tragic events of the play.
- To analyze Lady Macbeth's psychological downfall caused by guilt and inner conflict.
- To apply Aristotle's theory of tragedy to Lady Macbeth's character and evaluate her as a tragic figure.
- To understand how Lady Macbeth challenges traditional gender roles through her desire for power.

### Research Questions

- How is ambition portrayed through the character of Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*?
- What role does Lady Macbeth play in influencing Macbeth's rise to power and eventual downfall?
- How do ambition and the desire for power affect Lady Macbeth's mental and emotional state throughout the play?
- In what ways does Lady Macbeth's character reflect the traits of a tragic figure according to Aristotle's theory of tragedy?
- How does Shakespeare use Lady Macbeth to explore the relationship between gender, power, and morality in a patriarchal society?

### Limitations of the Study

While this study explores the themes of ambition and power in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* with a focus on Lady Macbeth, several limitations must be acknowledged.

Firstly, the analysis centers mainly on Lady Macbeth. As a result, the ambitions and psychological changes of other key characters, such as Macbeth himself, the witches, and Banquo, are not examined in detail, even though they also shape the play's themes. Second, the study relies primarily on the original literary text and does not extend to modern film adaptations, stage performances, or cross-cultural versions of *Macbeth*, which could offer additional perspectives. Secondly, the theoretical framework is based mostly on Aristotle's theory of tragedy. While this provides a classical lens for understanding character flaws and tragic structure, other approaches, such as feminist criticism, psychoanalytic theory, or postcolonial studies, are not explored in depth due to the limited scope of this paper. Thirdly, the research does not examine the historical or political background of Shakespeare's time, including the reign of King James I or the real-life story of the historical *Macbeth*, both of which could add further insight. Fourthly, the study relies largely on secondary sources available during the writing process. Some recent international scholarship or works published in languages other than English may not be included due to accessibility issues. Finally, the analysis is confined to English-language criticism, which leaves out global interpretations of Lady Macbeth's character. Finally, because of word and time limits, not all literary elements, such as imagery, rhythm, or Shakespeare's poetic techniques, could be analyzed in detail.

Despite these constraints, the research makes a meaningful contribution by providing a focused exploration of Lady Macbeth's ambition, power, and psychological decline, ensuring her role remains central in scholarly discussions of Shakespearean tragedy.

### Literature Review

The tragedy of *Macbeth* has long been one of the most studied plays in the Shakespearean canon, and the character of Lady Macbeth, in particular, has drawn significant critical attention for her complexity, ambition, and role in the play's moral and political downfall. This chapter reviews the works of fifteen prominent critics and scholars who have explored various dimensions of ambition, power, and gender dynamics in *Macbeth*. By engaging with these interpretations, this review situates the present study within the existing body of scholarship and clarifies how it aims to extend and differentiate its approach.

A.C. Bradley (1904) provided one of the earliest and most influential character analyses of Lady Macbeth, portraying her as a dominant and ambitious woman whose will overpowers

her husband's moral hesitation. Bradley viewed her as the chief instigator of Duncan's murder, a figure whose determination represents the dangerous extremes of human ambition. However, his reading tended to simplify her later emotional collapse, framing it primarily as a natural consequence of guilt.

Cleanth Brooks (1947) approached the play from a New Critical perspective, focusing on the paradoxes and tensions inherent in ambition. Brooks saw Lady Macbeth's strength and subsequent breakdown as essential to Shakespeare's tragic design, where power inevitably unravels under the weight of moral corruption. His close reading emphasized the interplay between language and moral decay.

Stephen Greenblatt (2004), adopting a New Historicist perspective, connected Lady Macbeth's ambition to the political anxieties of the Jacobean era, particularly the fear of female influence in royal politics. He interpreted her manipulation of Macbeth as reflecting contemporary debates over legitimacy, succession, and the divine right of kings.

Harold Bloom (1998) described Lady Macbeth as one of Shakespeare's most "terrifying" creations, not because of her evil alone, but because of her eloquence and emotional complexity. Bloom's reading highlighted the seductive quality of her ambition and the tragic irony of her ultimate weakness.

Jonathan Dollimore (1984), in his political reading of Renaissance drama, argued that *Macbeth* reveals how power corrupts by destabilizing personal identity. Lady Macbeth, in his view, represents the way personal ambition is inevitably entangled with broader systems of authority and control.

The present study differs from previous works in that it seeks to combine feminist, psychological, and political analyses into a holistic understanding of Lady Macbeth's ambition and power. While earlier critics have emphasized either her gendered transgression, her moral corruption, or her political symbolism, this paper will investigate how all these elements interact to produce a uniquely tragic figure whose rise and fall mirror the destructive potential of unrestrained ambition within both personal and political realms. This integrative approach aims to bridge gaps between thematic, historical, and feminist readings, offering a more comprehensive picture of Lady Macbeth's role in the tragedy.

### **Research Methodology**

This research is qualitative in nature. That means it is not based on numbers or data, but on reading, understanding, and analyzing texts, especially Shakespeare's play *Macbeth*. The main goal is to explore how ambition and power are presented in the play, with special attention to the character of Lady Macbeth. The study does not use any laboratory experiments or fieldwork, but focuses on deep reading and interpretation of the literary text and critical opinions.

To do this, the paper has used the textual analysis method. This means closely reading the text of *Macbeth* and looking at how language, actions, and dialogue show ambition and power. It also examines famous quotations, key scenes, and changes in Lady Macbeth's character throughout the play. For example, her strong ambition is clear when she says, "unsex me here" (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1997, 1.5.39), which shows her desire to leave behind her womanly nature to gain power.

In addition to reading the original play, it also uses secondary sources such as books, articles, and research papers written by other scholars. These help to understand how critics have interpreted Lady Macbeth's role in the tragedy. It compares different views and tries to find out how ambition and power are linked to her rise and fall. All references are cited following the APA6th edition citation style.

### **Lady Macbeth and the Role of Ambition and Power in Shakespeare's *Macbeth***

Lady Macbeth is one of the most complex and powerful female characters in Shakespearean tragedy, standing out in *Macbeth* as more than a supportive wife or passive figure. She actively shapes the play's events by challenging Jacobean gender norms that expected women to remain quiet and submissive. From the moment she appears, Lady Macbeth shows a refusal to accept such limitations, even calling on supernatural powers to "unsex" her and fill her with cruelty so she can embrace traits of strength, ruthlessness, and determination usually linked with men (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1997, 1.5.42). Since political authority in the play lies almost entirely with men, she exerts her power through psychological manipulation, using her understanding of Macbeth's weaknesses to push him toward Duncan's murder. Yet her dominance is not absolute, for she still operates within the framework of marriage, influencing her husband's choices rather than acting directly in the political sphere. This tension makes her both remarkable and constrained: she defies gender expectations by driving the plot forward, but her authority depends on Macbeth. Through her ambition and influence, Lady Macbeth becomes central to Shakespeare's exploration of power, gender, and the destructive consequences of unchecked desire.

### **Lady Macbeth's Influence on Macbeth's Ambition**

Lady Macbeth plays a decisive role in shaping Macbeth's ambition, transforming his hesitant thoughts into ruthless determination. Although *Macbeth* entertains the witches' prophecy of kingship, his natural caution and loyalty hold him back from action until Lady Macbeth intervenes. She fuels his ambition by reframing the throne as attainable, using emotional and psychological manipulation to overcome his doubts. Most strikingly, she challenges his masculinity, declaring that he would only be a man if he dared to act, which forces Macbeth to equate ambition with pride and identity. When Macbeth expresses doubts about killing King Duncan, she challenges his courage and masculinity, saying, "When you durst do it, then you were a man" (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1997, 1.7.49). By presenting Duncan's murder as a logical step toward greatness rather than a moral crime, she strips away his hesitation and plants the seeds of his downfall. Her chilling claim that she would kill her own child for power underscores her willingness to glorify ambition above all else. Yet once Macbeth secures the crown, the balance of power shifts, and his ambition grows beyond her control, driving him into paranoia and unchecked violence. In this way, Lady Macbeth's early influence proves both vital and tragic; without her, Macbeth might never have acted, but with her, his ambition spirals into chaos that consumes them both.

### **Lady Macbeth's Descent into Guilt and Madness**

Lady Macbeth undergoes one of the most striking downfalls in Shakespearean tragedy, moving from a figure of fearless ambition to one consumed by guilt and madness. At the beginning, she stands as the driving force behind Macbeth's rise, urging him to murder Duncan and even calling on spirits to "unsex" her so she can act without compassion (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1997, 1.5.39–41). She appears unmoved by bloodshed, dismissing Macbeth's fears with the claim that "a little water clears us of this deed." Yet, as the crimes pile up, her confidence fades (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1997, 2.2.66). The guilt that she once believed could be washed away begins to seep into her mind, slowly breaking down her

strength. The woman who once manipulated Macbeth into action becomes a silent and troubled figure, isolated from him as he pursues power on his own.

This inner collapse reaches its most haunting expression in the famous sleepwalking scene, where Lady Macbeth rubs her hands frantically and cries, “Out, damned spot!” as though trying to wash away Duncan’s blood (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1997, 5.1.30). The image reveals her inability to escape the psychological weight of guilt, a torment that corrodes her mind and strips away her earlier boldness. Unlike Macbeth, who responds to guilt with more violence, Lady Macbeth turns inward and is undone by remorse, her mind unraveling until she can no longer control her own words or actions. Her eventual suicide marks the tragic end of a character who once believed she could control fate, only to be destroyed by the very ambition she embraced. Through her descent, Shakespeare offers a profound warning about the destructive consequences of unchecked desire and moral corruption, showing that no strength, whether personal or psychological, can withstand the relentless grip of guilt.

### **Aristotelian Dimensions of Tragedy in Lady Macbeth’s Character**

Aristotle’s *Poetics* provides a useful framework for understanding Lady Macbeth as a tragic figure in *Macbeth*. Her hamartia, or tragic flaw, lies in her overwhelming ambition and moral weakness, which drive her to push Macbeth toward regicide and set the tragedy in motion. Her hubris is revealed in her belief that she can control fate and suppress her conscience, even calling on spirits to “unsex” her and fill her with cruelty. Yet this pride leads to her peripeteia, or reversal of fortune, as she gradually loses influence over Macbeth and is consumed by guilt. The sleepwalking scene reflects her anagnorisis, a painful recognition that her ambition has destroyed her peace of mind and left her powerless. Ultimately, her madness and death evoke Aristotle’s notion of catharsis, inspiring pity and fear in the audience (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1997, 5.1). Through Lady Macbeth, Shakespeare shows how unchecked ambition and pride can unravel even the strongest character, turning her from a figure of control into one of tragic ruin.

### **Hamartia in Lady Macbeth**

Lady Macbeth’s hamartia, or tragic flaw, lies in her relentless ambition and disregard for morality. From the beginning, she is determined to see Macbeth crowned king, even if it means resorting to murder. Her invocation to the spirits to “unsex” her and fill her with cruelty shows her belief that power requires abandoning compassion and humanity (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1997, 1.5.39–41). This flaw drives her to manipulate Macbeth, questioning his manhood and urging him to prove himself through regicide (1.7.49). Her overconfidence in controlling both her husband and their destiny reflects the hubris Aristotle described as central to tragedy (Aristotle, trans. 1996, 1450a). Yet her ambition blinds her to the lasting consequences of their crime, particularly the weight of guilt that cannot be escaped. Lady Macbeth’s flaw makes her both powerful and vulnerable, a deeply human figure whose downfall evokes the pity and fear central to Aristotelian tragedy (1451a).

### **Hubris in Lady Macbeth**

Lady Macbeth embodies the Aristotelian idea of hubris, or excessive pride, through her overconfidence in her ability to control fate and suppress conscience. She believes she can shape Macbeth’s destiny and remove all weakness from herself, as seen in her invocation to the spirits to “unsex” her and fill her with cruelty (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1997, 1.5.39–42). Her pride lies in the conviction that she can reject the limits of morality and gender, assuming a power beyond human control. This hubris is also evident when she dismisses the murder of

Duncan with the claim that “a little water clears us of this deed” (2.2.66), showing her belief that guilt can be easily erased. She even manipulates Macbeth’s sense of manhood, asserting dominance over him with the taunt, “When you durst do it, then you were a man” (1.7.49). Yet her pride blinds her to the psychological consequences of their crime, leaving her vulnerable to guilt and madness. In the end, her hubris collapses, proving Aristotle’s idea that excessive pride leads inevitably to downfall.

### **Catharsis and the Emotional Impact of Lady Macbeth’s Tragedy**

Aristotle’s idea of catharsis, the emotional release of pity and fear, is powerfully realized through Lady Macbeth’s tragic journey. At first, her ambition and ruthlessness inspire awe and even fear, but as she unravels under the weight of guilt, the audience begins to feel pity for her suffering. Her sleepwalking scene, where she obsessively tries to wash away imagined bloodstains, becomes the key moment of catharsis, exposing her vulnerability and the inescapable torment of conscience (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1997, 5.1). This transformation from strength to helplessness reveals her humanity, making her downfall emotionally gripping. Her implied suicide deepens the effect, reminding the audience that unchecked ambition and pride can destroy not only kingdoms but also the individual soul. In this way, Lady Macbeth’s fate fulfills Aristotle’s vision of tragedy, leaving the audience both shaken and morally awakened.

### **Findings**

This study reveals several important findings regarding the role of ambition and power in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*, especially through the character of Lady Macbeth. These findings highlight how Shakespeare uses Lady Macbeth not only as a catalyst for Macbeth’s actions but also as a complex figure embodying the dangers and consequences of unchecked ambition.

Firstly, Lady Macbeth’s ambition is the primary driving force behind the initial murder of King Duncan. Her strong desire for power and willingness to challenge traditional gender roles enable her to manipulate Macbeth, pushing him beyond his moral hesitation. This demonstrates that ambition in *Macbeth* is not limited to the male protagonist but is shared and even initiated by Lady Macbeth, emphasizing the play’s exploration of power dynamics within gender (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1997, 1.5.39-41). Secondly, Lady Macbeth’s manipulation of masculinity reveals how ambition can intersect with societal expectations of gender. By questioning Macbeth’s manhood, she uses gender norms to pressure him into committing regicide. This strategy shows how gender can be weaponized within personal and political ambitions, illustrating Shakespeare’s nuanced portrayal of gender and power (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1997, 1.7.49). Thirdly, Lady Macbeth’s reversal of gender roles is a significant aspect of her character. Her adoption of traditionally masculine traits such as ruthlessness and dominance challenges Elizabethan views of femininity, complicating her identity and agency. However, this reversal is unstable and ultimately unsustainable, as her guilt and madness reveal the psychological costs of rejecting one’s natural self (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1997, 5.1). Finally, Lady Macbeth’s descent into guilt and madness evokes catharsis for the audience, fulfilling Aristotle’s aim of tragedy to evoke pity and fear. Her mental collapse and implied suicide serve as a powerful warning about the consequences of unchecked ambition and the violation of moral boundaries (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1997, 5.1).

### Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations can be made for future research, literary studies, and educational practice related to Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and the themes of ambition, power, and gender:

Firstly, researchers should continue to examine how Shakespeare portrays gender roles and power, not only in *Macbeth* but across his plays. Lady Macbeth's character offers rich material to study how ambition interacts with societal expectations of gender, and such analysis can deepen our understanding of gender politics in Renaissance literature. Secondly, future studies could compare Lady Macbeth with other Shakespearean tragic figures, such as Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff, or even tragic female characters in other works, to explore how ambition and morality shape their fates differently. This can reveal diverse perspectives on power and tragedy in Shakespeare's oeuvre. Thirdly, given the continued popularity of *Macbeth*, applying Aristotle's concepts of tragedy to modern film, theater, or literary adaptations can provide new insights. This approach can help audiences appreciate the timeless nature of tragic themes and how they resonate in contemporary contexts. Finally, interdisciplinary research combining literature and psychology could explore the mental and emotional effects of ambition and guilt as portrayed in Lady Macbeth's character. Such studies might provide valuable insights into human behavior and contribute to fields such as psycho-literary criticism or even clinical psychology.

### Conclusion

This paper has examined the role of ambition and power in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* with a special focus on Lady Macbeth, revealing how her ambition, manipulation, and psychological collapse embody the destructive consequences of unchecked desire. At the beginning, she stands out as a commanding and ambitious figure who defies gender expectations by pushing Macbeth toward regicide and transforming prophecy into reality. Yet, as the play unfolds, her confidence unravels under the weight of guilt, showing how ambition that lacks moral restraint inevitably leads to ruin. Shakespeare's portrayal of her as both instigator and victim creates a character arc that is both complex and deeply tragic.

By applying Aristotle's framework of tragedy, hamartia, hubris, peripeteia, anagnorisis, and catharsis, this study has shown how Lady Macbeth fits into the classical model of a tragic figure. Her hamartia, or overpowering ambition, and her hubris, or excessive pride, set the stage for her downfall. The reversal of fortune occurs as her conscience begins to dominate her, leading to recognition of her moral failure in the sleepwalking scene and culminating in her tragic death. This arc evokes pity and fear in the audience, fulfilling Aristotle's concept of catharsis. Her journey not only underscores the destructive force of ambition but also demonstrates how personal flaws can reverberate beyond the private sphere to destabilize an entire kingdom.

Finally, Lady Macbeth remains a timeless figure because Shakespeare weaves together themes of ambition, morality, and gender into her character. Her challenge to traditional femininity, her dominance over Macbeth, and her eventual collapse reveal the tensions between personal desire and societal expectations. In combining feminist perspectives with Aristotelian theory, this paper has highlighted how Lady Macbeth serves as both a cautionary tale and a mirror of human vulnerability. Her story reminds us that ambition without conscience brings destruction, not only to the self but also to the larger moral and political order, making her one of Shakespeare's most powerful tragic creations.

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