

A Study on the Causes of Macbeth's Downfall

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Abstract

Macbeth, as one of Shakespeare's four great tragedies, has a very profound influence on the development of English literature. In this article, the author analyzes the internal and external causes why Macbeth, once a brave warrior fighting for his country, betrayed his King and was finally killed.

Keywords: Macbeth; Downfall; Internal causes; External causes

Macbeth, as one of Shakespeare's four great tragedies, has a very profound influence on the development of English literature. Macbeth was once a brave warrior fighting for his country, but he finally betrayed his King and was killed. What causes his downfall? There are many comprehensive factors that can be divided into two main types: the internal causes and the external ones.

The internal causes that lead to Macbeth's downfall originate from Macbeth's physical and mental activities, which contains his preeminent fighting ability, the inflation of his deep dark desire to throne and power, his weak willpower to stick to his moral bottom line, lack of political strategies and the tragic flaw.

1. Macbeth's preeminent fighting ability

At the very beginning of this tragedy, Macbeth showed up as a very brave and splendid warrior who had won high praises from King Duncan and the sergeants. The sergeant described him with "As sparrows eagles, or the hare the lion. If I say sooth, I must report they were as cannons overcharg'd with double cracks" (Drape, 1941, p.12). He thought of Macbeth as a cannon, who never treated back and was always full of cracks. For Macbeth, this constituted the subject guarantee of his regicide (Liu, 2008, p.110). Although it seems somewhat far-fetched as a cause of Macbeth's corruption, imagine that if he were not good at fighting, even if he had the courage, there would be little possibility for him to successfully murder King Duncan, and he might not come up with the dark plan, then the whole story wouldn't happen. Therefore, Macbeth's preeminent fighting ability is one of the indirect internal cause for his final tragedy.

2. The inflation of Macbeth's deep dark desire to throne and power

Although Macbeth was not born an evil man, in his id there lied secretly his appetency of "original sin", and these items once be provoked and resurged, his craziness would burst out of control (Jiang, 2011, p.109). Actually, Macbeth was once very loyal to his king. When King Duncan praised him for his contribution in the battle, he treated the honor as the duty of a warrior, and King Duncan should receive his contribution naturally. However, deep in some corner of his heart, his evil intentions had sprouted with the temptation of his wild ambition. After his promotion to Thane of Cawdor, the witches' two prophecies had been tested, then the intention of killing emerged vaguely and dimly in his head. He was willing to be the king, but he also knew

clearly in his heart that he could not be a king in a legitimate way; he had to kill the king. When Macbeth knew that King Duncan would pass his throne to his elder son Malcolm, he immediately realized that Malcolm was a barrier to satisfy his desire of being a king, “The prince of Cumberland! That is a step, on which I must fall down, or else o’er-leap, for in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires; let not light see my black and deep desires” (Chen, 2007, p.1.4). Here Macbeth already knew his own “black and deep desires”. Till now, Macbeth’s potential dark desire and conspiracies had been stimulated, which became the main reason that led to his downfall all the way step by step.

3. Macbeth’s weak willpower to stick to his moral bottom line

Macbeth’s willpower was too weak to stick to his moral bottom line. At first, when Macbeth hadn’t lost himself in his wild ambition, he was his king’s trusted Macbeth. He was aware that Duncan’s coming to his house was “in double trust: first, as I am his kinsman and his subject—strong both against the deed; then, as his host, who should against his murderer shut the door, but bear the knife myself” (Chen, 2007, p.1.7). He knew exactly what he was supposed to do and what his identity was, although he had already been influenced by his deep dark desire. However, his wife would not allow him to be stopped by his conscience on the way to his “success”. She knew about him too clearly, and in order to make Macbeth conduct her plan, she teased and threatened him with love and the cowardice that a soldier should avoid (Liu,108), “From this time such I account thy love. Art thou have that which thou art in desire? Would thou have that which thou esteem’st the ornament of life, and live a coward in thine own esteem, letting ‘I dare not’ wait upon ‘I would’, like the poor cat I’ th’ adage?”(Chen, 2007, p.1.7) Hearing his wife’s words, he made up his mind not to be such a coward in his wife’s eyes and wanted to be a “real man”, so he told his wife that “I am settled, and bend up each corporal agent to this terrible feat. Away, and mock the time with fairest show; false face must hide what the false heart doth know.” (ibid, 2007, p.1.7) This sudden change of his mind vividly debunked his weak willpower when facing his wife’s threats and discrimination. Later in his struggle for the throne and fight against Macduff, he became Bloody Macbeth. When he was scheming the murder of Banquo and Banquo’s son Fleance, he told his wife “till thou applaud the deed” “things bad begun make strong themselves by ill” (ibid, 2007, p.3). Till now, he had transformed his role in this murder from a passive one to an active one. In the left part of his tragedy, he manipulated the whole conspiracy with the help of his wife. Finally, before his death, he became a completely mentally alone and fearless man. He was so fearless that he claimed, “I have almost forgot the taste of fears. The time has been my senses would have cool’d to hear a night-shriek, and my fell of hair would at a dismal treatise rouse and stir as life were in’t. I have supp’d full with horrors; direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts, cannot once start me” (ibid, 2007, p.5). To this point, he had thoroughly tossed his conscience far behind. We may infer that if Macbeth’s willpower could be stronger, he might not be driven by the desire or influenced by his wife or the witches’ prophecies and tread on this villainous road.

4. Macbeth’s lack of political strategies

Although Macbeth successfully despoiled the throne from King Duncan with his cunning methods, he didn’t know how to maintain his status. He was aware of the threat from Banquo, so he sent the murderers to kill Banquo and his son Fleance. The murderers did kill Banquo, however, they didn’t manage to kill Fleance. Macbeth foresaw the potential danger of Fleance’s fleeing away, unfortunately, he just let Fleance flee away instead of going on his murder, which did become a threat to him later in Malcolm’s intrusion. Another potential danger he did not deal well with was Macduff. The witches had told him to be cautious about Macduff, but he

didn't send armies or murderers to kill Macduff. Even when facing Macduff directly, he was still over-confident that no one born by a woman could kill him, "But swords I smiled at, weapons laugh to scorn. Brandish'd by man that's of a woman born" ((ibid, 2007, p.6). While Macduff exactly matched with this condition, and this directly causes his death.

In addition to the above internal causes, there are some external causes leading to Macbeth's downfall. For example, his promotion to Thane of Cawdor, King Duncan's trust to him, the supernatural power of three witches, his errors in judgement, Lady Macbeth and forces out of his control.

5. Macbeth's promotion to Thane of Cawdor

When Macbeth were not Thane of Cawdor, he had fought in the war as his country's hero, and his achievements made him qualified to be promoted to Thane of Cawdor. This promotion attested those witches' words and hence triggered Macbeth to prove the final prophecy about the crown. Macbeth thought after his promotion, "Two truths are told, as happy prologues to the swelling act of the imperial them... If good, why do I yield to that suggestion whose horrid image doth unfix my hair and make my seated heart knock at my ribs against the use of nature?" (Chen, 2013, p.3). Since two of the witches' prophecies had been proved true, he wanted to prove the last one about the throne, so he tried every means conceivable to realize the King prophecy about him. As a consequence, he got trapped in endless killings, he had to do all he can to protect his original crime from being discovered by committing more crimes, like what he said, "I am in blood stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as go o'er" (ibid,2013, p.4). Therefore, Macbeth's promotion to Thane of Cawdor along with three witches prophecies were one of the external causes of Macbeth's downfall.

6. King Duncan's trust to Macbeth

Except for his promotion, the king's trust to Macbeth, to some extent, also caused Macbeth's downfall in an objective way. After the victory of the war, King Duncan had praised Macbeth. Although Macbeth responded with his loyalty to the king that everything he had done was his duty, he changed his idea soon after knowing the prophecies about his fate from the witches. King Duncan told Macbeth that nothing could be satisfactory enough to award Macbeth, which in other words could be understood as "Macbeth deserved the best in the world". What is the best thing for Macbeth in the world? Of course, the throne. Because of King Duncan's trust and gratitude to Macbeth, he gave Macbeth a chance to murder him—he offered to Inverness, where Macbeth lived and bind them further to Macbeth. What a perfect chance for Macbeth to murder King Duncan! In his house! Invisibly King Duncan created an objective condition for Macbeth's conspiracy, the beginning of his downfall.

7. Supernatural power of the three witches

The three witches' prophecies is the blasting fuse of this whole bloody tragedy. They "tempt Macbeth into corruption with accurate foresight, and he ironically lays claim to the nation's highest seat at the cost of his emotional and moral health, which in turn weakens the nation that he rules" (Farrar, 2014, p.196). In scene I of act I, the very beginning of this tragedy, the three witches' appearance had confused right and wrong with their words "fair is foul, and foul is fair", which indicated Macbeth's morality loss in his crime and presented the malignant regression to mind's primitive state. In the conversation between the three witches and Macbeth, the three witches called Macbeth with three different titles one after another, "Thane of Glamis" "Thane of Cawdor" "King hereafter" (Chen, 2013, p.1.3). They told Banquo about his future:

FIRST WITCH. Lesser than Macbeth, and greater.

SECOND WITCH. Not so happy, yet much happier.

THIRD WITCH. Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none. (ibid, 2013, p.1.3)

These prophecies foreshadowed Macbeth's murder to his trusted follower Banquo, because he didn't want Banquo's heirs to be the king after him especially under the circumstance that he was the one to risk killing the King. Macbeth didn't want to leave the throne he robbed at the risk of his life to the non-consanguinity Banquo's heirs, so he pretended to be friendly with Banquo, but underneath his beautiful skin, there is a relentless heart (ibid, 2013). The two predictions of three witches led Macbeth to the way of crime, or rather, the witches are not someone leading Macbeth, but the reflection of Macbeth's inner heart (Chen, 2007, p.33-34).

8. Error judgement caused by three witches

After Macbeth successfully became the king as he wished, three witches appeared again. They told Macbeth he would never be defeated because "none of woman born shall harm Macbeth" or unless one day "Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane Hill shall come against him" (William, 2012, p.4.1). These two prophecies were actually the direct cause for Macbeth's failure and downfall in his political area, because they made Macbeth arrogant and think himself undefeatable based on the fact that men were all born by women and Great Birnam wood seemed impossible to move towards high Dunsinane Hill. In the battle against Macduff, he insisted blindly that nobody could harm him, and he had nothing to fear. Knowing the revenge and intrusion of Malcolm, Macbeth told his attendants that "Bring me no more reports, let them fly all. Till Birnam Forest come to Dunsinane I cannot taint with fear. What's the boy Malcolm? Was he not born of woman? The spirits that know all mortal consequences have pronounced me thus: 'fear not, Macbeth; no man that's born of woman shall ever have power upon thee'" (ibid, 2012, p.5.3). He said to the doctor of his wife, "I will not be afraid of death and bane till Birnam Forest come to Dunsinane" (ibid, 2012, p.5.3). Macbeth treated the witches' words as his shield; he firmly believed that those conditions that the witches assumed would never happen at all. However, those seemingly impossible things did happen unexpectedly, and Macbeth was killed consequently. Therefore, if Macbeth hadn't been influenced by three witches' prophecies, he might fight against Macduff with his own strength, not being arrogant. There might be some chance for him to live and continue to be a king.

"While the sisters serve as Macbeth's gateway to corrosive depravity, Lady Macbeth becomes his guide." Both the witches and Lady Macbeth matter severely in Macbeth's downfall, said Farrar (2014). Draper has mentioned in his article "The Psychoanalytic Review" that "The cholera of Lady Macbeth is fundamental in the motivation of the tragedy: without her vehement and ready-witted urging, the vacillating thane would hardly have killed his sovereign liege, calumniated Malcolm, and so won the throne" (Farrar, 2014, p.485). Lady Macbeth is like the fire, while Macbeth is like a match. Without the fire, the match means nothing. Once the fire touched the match's inflammable, the match could set a big horrible fire and burn the whole country. When Macbeth was still hesitating about their evil murder plan, Lady Macbeth tried to trigger his inner desire; she wanted to wake up Macbeth's evilness. Later in the story, when Macbeth was thinking about the king's moral merits and contribution to the whole country, he was worried that all of the king's virtues would be gone with his death. In addition, if they failed in the murder, the consequence was death and notorious name, so he said to his wife "we will proceed no further in this business" (William, 2012, p.1.7). However, his wife was very tough and firm. She scolded Macbeth for his cowardice. She convinced Macbeth with the example of herself and showed Macbeth how brutal a woman could be to an innocent baby. What a cruel and coldblooded woman she is! Then Macbeth finally made up his mind to kill King Duncan--"I am settled, and bend up each corporal agent to this terrible feat" (ibid, 2012, p.1.7). After murdering the king, Macbeth became obsessed with his religious

complex, he felt guilty. Macbeth did have conscience at that time, because he knew exactly what crime he was committing. However, his conscienceless wife said to him, “Consider it not so deeply” “My hands are of your color, but I shame to wear a heart so white” (ibid, 2012, p.2.2). She was ashamed to be innocent! In this case, we can say that Lady Macbeth is the anesthetic of Macbeth’s conscience, gradually making Macbeth trapped in his crime.

9. Forces beyond his control: Macduff’s mother ripped him untimely

According to three witches’ predictions, only a man who was not born by a woman can hurt and kill Macbeth, “Laugh to scorn the pow’r of man, for none of woman born shall harm Macbeth” (ibid, 2012, p.4.1). Logically it’s impossible that someone was not born by a woman, while the unspoken words are someone who is ripped untimely could kill him. However, Macbeth didn’t find out those unspoken words behind it. The way that Macduff was born is just a force beyond control to Macbeth; also, it’s a force that cannot be changed. With this force beyond his control, Macbeth could hardly survive in the battle against Macduff.

Basing on the above analysis, we can safely come to the conclusion that without those internal causes like his endless greedy desires for fame and throne, he might stay as loyal to his king as before; without those external causes like his wife, three witches and others, he might be able to stick to his moral bottom line.

For us modern human beings, the tragedy *Macbeth* can be an enlightenment to us that we should prevent ourselves from being affected by those harmful external or internal factors and stand firmly at the bottom line of our morality, otherwise we may encounter the downfall both in our morality and in our career.

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Biography

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