

Comparative Analysis of Ambition in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*

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Abstract: The play *Macbeth* is a Tragedy written by Shakespeare in the Elizabethan Age while Milton's *Paradise Lost* is an epic poem of 12 Books written in the Puritan Age. This work compares and contrasts the parallels in situations and settings between Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Additionally, although one is a play and the other is a poem, both texts are shown to resemble in the plot as well as the particular personality traits of their characters. A deeper deconstruction of some of these, with particular emphasis on the trait and the effects of 'ambition', are analysed in this work. Starting from a low point at the beginning of the respective texts, its characters' ambition drives them to commit more and more heinous crimes lead them down a path of destruction and death. Their tricks and manipulations further fuel their unchecked lust for power until they lose all perspective of morals, ethics, honour and values, making them not only the Anti-Heroes, but, in fact, the Villains in their own stories.

Keywords: English Literature, Comparative Literature, Shakespeare, Milton, Tragic Hero, Anti-Hero

Methods: A Critical Psychoanalytic approach, as presented by Foucault (Kelly, 2020), is used to analyse the particular characteristics and choices made by the characters in both the texts. This would help in delving deeper into the character traits and personalities of these characters to show why they chose to undertake the actions that they did. This approach is used to analyse fictional characters in terms of 'their psychological reality' (Hossain, 2017). Additionally, while Foucault is ambivalent in his opinion of the Freudian Psychoanalytical Criticism Approach, he claims that adding 'existential phenomenology' would better explain 'certain dimensions of the human experience' (Kelly, 2020). In other words, the characters in a text have their own 'unconscious internal states that motivate [their] overt actions' (Sollod, 2008). Therefore, a critical study of these characters and their motivations – *Macbeth*, *Lady Macbeth* and *Satan* – would help better understand the follies of ambition and the imprudence of excessive pride.

1. Introduction

Macbeth is a Tragedy written by Shakespeare in the Elizabethan Age while Milton's *Paradise Lost* is an Epic of 12 Books written in the Puritan Age. Although the forms of both these texts are different – one is a play while the other is a poem, both texts are shown to correspond in plot and in particular personality traits within their characters. A deeper deconstruction into these, with emphasis on the effects of 'ambition' are analyzed in this work showcasing the character's tricks and manipulations which further fuel their unchecked lust for power until they lose all reason, rationale, honor and values, making them not only the Anti-Heroes, but also the Villains in their own stories.

Although there are a number of these similarities, this work will focus on:

- (a) The *in medias res* setting in both the texts where the tale begins with the Aftermath of a battle. This sensitises the audience of a sudden change in the status of the protagonist in the context of their hierarchy while also introducing the idea of ambition of the protagonist. Whether the character has been victorious or if he has tasted defeat, the character now wants to climb higher than their current status.

- (b) The introduction of the protagonists through the eyes of secondary characters which highlights the social standing of the main characters while also emphasising the admiration, respect and adoration their peers and colleagues feel for the protagonist at the beginning of the texts.
- (c) Unchecked ambition playing a vital role in the eventual downfall of each of the characters. This is even more poignant when put in the context of the characters' positions prior to their choices down the path of greed and dishonor. It can be seen that although they had plenty, they were ambitiously hunting for more power.
- (d) Manipulation of surrounding characters through their powers of oration, striking a deep conviction in the very beings of all those who heard them.
- (e) The characters losing all their sense of honor and duty by attempting (and committing) patricide and regicide respectively and
- (f) the eventual Fall of the characters involved in this blind, ambitious drive for power.

By critically analysing the above, we see that excessive pride and ambition lead to a Fall, the evidence for which is laid out through the actions and reactions of these characters and their ultimate consequences.

Although they are written in different times and their respective formats were different (a play and an epic respectively), both these stories warn the audience of the follies of unchecked ambition. Starting from a low point at the beginning of the respective texts, these characters' ambitions drive them to commit more and more heinous crimes which lead them down a path of destruction and death.

2. Literature Review

Macbeth is a Tragedy written by Shakespeare in the Elizabethan Age while Milton's Paradise Lost is an Epic of 12 Books written in the Puritan Age. Although the forms of both these texts are different – one is a play while the other is a poem – scholars over the years have found a number of similarities between the characters of Macbeth and Satan, as depicted in the respective texts (Shakespeare, 2016; Milton, 2003; Öztürk, 2009; Hill, 1989; Siegel, 1955). Particularly, that Satan in Paradise Lost, which was published in 1667, was directly influenced by the Bard's Macbeth, which was written more than forty years prior (Öztürk, 2009). In fact, Hill (1989) asserts that Milton may have conceptualised Satan based on the characterisation of Macbeth. Some scholars claim that Satan may have been a mixture of Macbeth and Dr. Faustus (Milton, 2003), while more still claim that Macbeth himself can now be seen as a combination of Macbeth, Judas and Lucifer (Siegel, 1955).

Some scholars even claim that it is Lady Macbeth who constantly coaxes and cajoles Macbeth into action (Öztürk, 2009) – first into killing King Duncan and then onto ascending the throne of Scotland. It is, in fact, her ambition which leads both husband and wife down a perilous journey. However, scholars have claimed that she was simply forcefully persuasive (Coursen, 1967), had a troubled, fanciful mind (Kocher, 1954), and that she suffered from hysteria (Levin, 2002). Her mental state notwithstanding, Lady Macbeth's greatest contribution to the play, according to scholars, is simply to convince her husband, the Man, to procure more power (Levin, 2002; Coursen, 1967; Kocher,

1954). It is clear that this manipulation would only be possible if Lady Macbeth herself was full of conviction and ambition (Munro, 1887; Haque et al., 2021). Thus, it is then Lady Macbeth who would be comparable to Satan, it would be Lady Macbeth who would be the inspiration for the greatest depiction of the Fallen Angel in Epic poetry. The only difference between them, then, would be their respective genders.

However, Lady Macbeth believes, due to her atrocious actions, she is left childless and barren which leads her down a path of guilt, remorse and regret (Phillips, 2013). Satan, obviously, has no similar revelation. With Macbeth continuing on the path of his wife's ambition, it has been argued that Milton's Satan is a combination of both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (Carpenter, 2015; Chamberlain, 2005). While Macbeth's metaphorical 'fall' began with the ambition and instigation of Lady Macbeth, it was Macbeth who carried out a majority of the actions, not even feeling guilt or remorse for his actions until the very end. It can thus be concluded that Milton's Satan is a combination of the situational direction and characteristic traits prevalent in both Lady Macbeth and Macbeth. These parallels can be seen in both the Plot, the Characterisations, as well as the choices that both the Macbeths and Satan make on their quest for power and recognition.

3. Parallels in Plot

3.1. Aftermath of Battle

Characters of a text are influenced by the external universe that they reside in (Hossain, 2017). Both Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Milton's *Paradise Lost* begin from the aftermath of battles. Macbeth, a simple Captain, heralded a victory for his King (Shakespeare, Act 1, Scene 2, Lines 11-25), while Duncan had also recently defeated the Norwegians (Shakespeare, Act 1, Scene 2, Lines 64-65). When news of Macbeth's valour was related to him, an elated King Duncan gave Macbeth the title of Thane of Cawdor (Shakespeare, Act 1, Scene 2, Lines 72-74), the first prominent promotion for Macbeth at the hand of the King himself.

On the way back to his King, Macbeth and Banquo also happen upon three old women who claim to be witches and go on to foretell both their fortunes (Shakespeare, Act 1, Scene 3, Lines 67-70). Here, they predict Macbeth would reach greater heights and would eventually become the King (Shakespeare, Act 1, Scene 3, Line 50-52):

“First Witch. All hail, Macbeth! hail to thee, thane of Glamis!

Second Witch. All hail, Macbeth, hail to thee, thane of Cawdor!

Third Witch. All hail, Macbeth, thou shalt be king hereafter!”

When Lady Macbeth receives news of this encounter from her husband, she is convinced that her husband is too full of the 'milk of human kindness' (Shakespeare, Act 1, Scene 5, Lines 18-21) to act upon this prophecy and do the deeds that need to be done to achieve these great heights. It is here that she decides to 'pour [her] spirits into [his] ear' (Shakespeare, Act 1, Scene 5, Line 27). However, after having convinced her husband to kill his King, a guilt-ridden Lady Macbeth eventually falls to her own demise.

Similarly, at the beginning of *Paradise Lost*, Satan and his followers have just been cast out of Heaven after having lost the battle against God, the archangel Michael and the angels of Heaven. Although it was Satan's disobedient, vain and greedy nature which led

Satan have the drive to search for the meaning of their existence (Chakraborty et. al, 2022). Their greed and ambition lead them into manipulating the people who believe in them – Macbeth by Lady Macbeth and the other fallen angels in Pandemonium by Satan. Additionally, all three of them are great orators, able to convince their supporters to move in any direction (Milton, Book 1; Lines 105-108) and all three face an iconic Fall. Macbeth’s will to go on, his belief that he is doing no wrong and the prophecy that only a man not “of woman born” (Shakespeare, Act 4; Scene 1; Line 80) could kill him (Chakraborty et. al, 2022) are the backbone to his confidence and dazzling speeches. Similarly, Satan too believes that it was he who was the one who was wronged, that he is owed a victory. He believes that his will is unconquerable, that Heaven’s victory is not his defeat and that no power can stop him from achieving his goals.

4.1. Ambition

From the very first introduction of Lady Macbeth in *Macbeth* and Satan in *Paradise Lost*, it can be seen that both these characters have tremendous ambition. They share a hunger for power which leads them to reach for above and beyond what they otherwise deserve (Öztürk, 2009; Munro, 1887). Lady Macbeth knows that her husband is also ambitious, but she also knows that it is not in his nature to harm those around him – that he is a good man. She is not satisfied with the title of a mere ‘Thane’ bestowed upon Macbeth as she would like to be the Queen herself. She therefore goads Macbeth into making a vow to kill Duncan while he is at their home as a guest for the night. When he hesitates, she begins to insult Macbeth, going so far as to say that Macbeth would not ‘dare’ do the deed as he was too cowardly (Shakespeare, Act 1; Scene 7; Lines 43-44) and promises him male heirs if he is successful in committing the deed (Shakespeare, Act 1; Scene 7; Line 73). The Lady takes the visit by the King as an opportunity for her husband – and herself – to climb the social ladder by killing Duncan and installing Macbeth as the new King. However, in her quest for power, she turns the good man she loves into a monster just like her when she says (Act 1; Scene 7; Lines 69-72):

*“What cannot you and I perform upon
The unguarded Duncan? what not put upon
His spongy officers, who shall bear the guilt
Of our great quell?”*

Macbeth, too, is not without ambition, according to Lady Macbeth (Shakespeare, Act 1, Scene 5, Line 20). He simply lacks the calculated brutality that is necessary for the initial first step to start upon the journey for greater authority. However, once he is directed by his wife to kill Duncan, he goes above and beyond to also kill the two guards outside the late King’s door to blame the murder on them (Shakespeare, Act 2, Scene 3, Lines 12-13), losing all sense of justice and right. Afterwards, when he is King, Macbeth’s own rational thinking goes away as he tries to keep his seat of power. Once he learns of those around him who may be plotting a coup, he stops at nothing to bring the ‘traitors’ to a stop. In this endeavour, he sends assassins to murder all those who would harm him, even murdering women and children (Shakespeare, Act 4, Scene 3, Lines 205-208).

Paradise Lost begins with the consequences of Satan's excessive ambition. As mentioned before, Satan had led an army of his followers in a fight against God as he wanted to be equal to, if not surpass, God. Even once he is cast out and thrown into Hell, he declares that it is "Better to reign in Hell than serve in Heav'n" (Milton, Book 1; Line 263). He is undeterred in his drive and goal, claiming that the Fallen Angels have something that the forces of Heaven will never have – their freedom and "unconquerable will" (Milton, Book 1; Line 105-108):

*"What though the field be lost?
All is not lost; the unconquerable Will,
And study of revenge, immortal hate,
And courage never to submit or yield:"*

He is determined to collect his peers in another attempt to defeat God. With his cunning and guile, he also possesses a snake and sneaks into Paradise to taint the most prized creations of God. He also sends Death and Sin to Earth to live beside Adam and Eve and to wreak havoc among all mankind for all eternity. Even as he returns to Hell and his Demons begin to hiss at him as they had been turned into snakes as punishment for his actions, he believes that he has done no wrong. In fact, he calls this another one of his 'victories' and waits for another opportunity to 'attack' God and His followers anew.

4.2. Manipulation through Oration

Lady Macbeth's speeches are a prime example of the masterful use of words to persuade another to undertake actions they are loathe to do, second only in the Bard's work to, perhaps, Shakespeare's Iago. Although she initially tells Macbeth to simply stay still and host the unaware King Duncan while she conjures her plan, she later entwines him into the very centre of her deceit. Whenever Macbeth is seen to become hesitant, Lady Macbeth is ready to launch into a paraphernalia of encouragement and remarks or, indeed, into a volley of insults and coaxing to convince Macbeth to carry out the deed. She welcomes Macbeth from the war in the following lines, ready with a plan of action (Shakespeare, Act 1; Scene 5; Lines 55-59):

*"Great Glamis! worthy Cawdor!
Greater than both, by the all-hail hereafter!
Thy letters have transported me beyond
This ignorant present, and I feel now
The future in the instant."*

She uses power, fame, fortune and even herself as bait for Macbeth to ascend to the throne (Shakespeare, Act 1; Scene 7; Lines 47-59). When coaxing and cajoling would not work, she would stoop to insult and demean her husband. She goes on to declare that she would do all the necessary deeds herself were she a man (Shakespeare, Act 1; Scene 5; Lines 41-44), further belittling an already resigned Macbeth.

Satan, as depicted by Milton, is the epitome of charm, cunning, guile and manipulation. While his statements may be lies, the words he uses, full of confidence, convinces his kinsmen of their weight and assumed truth. At the lowest point of their immortal lives, when they are all writhing in agony in the liquid fires of Hell, all the Fallen turn to Lucifer to look for guidance (Milton, Book 1; Lines 153-155). Lucifer, seeing this opportunity,

convinces the beaten angels that this was not a defeat. He brings hope to a defeated and miserable lot by heaping them with praises for their valour and courage to go against such a great enemy. According to Lucifer, they would arise again to exact revenge upon God as they were full of 'immortal hate' and as their will to fight was unconquerable, they would surely never yield or submit to defeat (Milton, Book 1; Lines 185-191).

In this way, Satan manipulates the few who would seek to follow him into committing further atrocities. They create their own 'Kingdom' at the centre of Hell and call it Pandemonium (Milton, Book 1; Lines 254-263):

*"The mind is its own place, and in it self
Can make a Heav'n of Hell, a Hell of Heav'n.
What matter where, if I be still the same,
And what I should be, all but less than he
Whom Thunder hath made greater? Here at least
We shall be free; th' Almighty hath not built
Here for his envy, will not drive us hence:
Here we may reign secure, and in my choyce
To reign is worth ambition though in Hell:
Better to reign in Hell, then serve in Heav'n."*

From here, he reminds his comrades to keep the fires of hate and revenge burning within them. Further, Satan is able to use his beguiling oration to convince Eve to take a bite out of the Fruit of Knowledge. He claims that knowledge in any form should not be 'forbidden' as 'knowing' was not a sin.

4.3. Regicide and Patricide

When Lady Macbeth first hears of the prophecy foretold by the three witches, she is adamant to become the Queen (Shakespeare, Act 1; Scene 5; Line 31). She manipulates Macbeth by persuading, insulting and even threatening him. She is so convinced of the fruits of her labour that she ignores the end of the Prophecy which foretells a particularly gruesome doom for her husband. Undeterred, Lady Macbeth's ambition, her drive for fame and fortune makes them both commit Regicide (Shakespeare, Act 2; Scene 1; Lines 62-64):

*"I go, and it is done; the bell invites me.
Hear it not, Duncan; for it is a knell
That summons thee to heaven or to hell."*

Similarly, Satan wanted to rebel against, become equal to, and even surpass God. He was unsatisfied with the ways of God and decided that his own ways were superior (Milton, Book 1; Lines 637-642). Satan was also not in favour of God creating Humans with, as he assumed, more care than He did the Angels (Milton, Book 1; Lines 652-654). He thus instigates his brethren to attack Heaven (Milton, Book 1; Lines 661-669):

*"For who can think Submission? Warr then, Warr
Open or understood must be resolv'd.
He spake: and to confirm his words, out-flew
Millions of flaming swords, drawn from the thighs
Of mighty Cherubim; the sudden blaze*

*Far round illumin'd hell: highly they rag'd
Against the Highest, and fierce with grasped arms
Clash'd on thir sounding Shields the din of war,
Hurling defiance toward the vault of Heav'n."*

Satan was also convinced that God was paying more attention to these new creations as He loved them more than the Angels. It was for these reasons that Lucifer decided to taint all His creations and to overthrow God from His Heavenly abode, as he was jealous that God would then favour Man 'equal to the Sons of Heaven', the Angels (Milton, Book 1; Line 654). Since all Angels are 'children of God', this is akin to attempting Patricide. Once his attempts are foiled and he and his followers are into Hell, Satan sees this as an opportunity to rise again in an attempt to attack God again sometime in the future. As he says to his Fallen brethren, "Better to reign in Hell than to serve in Heav'n", Satan was never one to follow orders or, indeed, anyone (Milton, Book 1; Line 263).

4.4. The Fall

There are two major types of 'Falls' depicted in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The first is a literal fall from a great height, and the second is a fall in morality, in values and in honour. The first type mentioned above is the literal fall of Lady Macbeth from a window in the Castle.

After having planned and committed heinous crimes against the State and its people, Lady Macbeth feels regret and remorse (Shakespeare, Act 5; Scene 1; Lines 79-83). She feels as though the blood of those she has killed cannot be washed away from her hands (Shakespeare, Act 5; Scene 1; Lines 54-59). She can also hear a knocking sound, which seems to follow her wherever she goes (Shakespeare, Act 5; Scene 1; Lines 73-75). Additionally, she sees, hears and feels these things while she sleeps, and thus is tormented both when she is awake and when she slumbers. Although the Lady experiences this for an amount of time beforehand due to guilt and remorse, the fall itself is sudden and abrupt (Shakespeare, Act 5; Scene 5; Line 16).

On the other hand, there is a slow and deliberate decay in morals and values as Macbeth, the Captain, the Thane and then the King, slowly leaves reason and honour behind. In order to rise in the social hierarchy, he loses that which is most respected in any society. He kills his King in his own home, he murders two guards in cold blood and goes on to assassinate not only Macduff's progeny, but also Lady Macduff, all in an attempt to maintain his seat and secrets. This slow devolution is beautifully showcased in the five acts of the Shakespearean Tragedy, especially as Macbeth, who was once a man of dignity and honour, does not even repent his actions until his death (Shakespeare, Act 5; Scene 8; Lines 27-33):

*"I will not yield,
To kiss the ground before young Malcolm's feet,
And to be baited with the rabble's curse.
Though Birnam wood be come to Dunsinane,
And thou opposed, being of no woman born,
Yet I will try the last. Before my body
I throw my warlike shield."*

The iconic Fall of the Angels at the beginning of *Paradise Lost* is not the only time that Milton depicts a 'Fall'. True, it was the punishment for rebelling against God and His forces, and it is also true that this rebelling was due to Satan's ambition, greed and insecurities. However, the second Fall came when Satan knowingly went from Hell into Paradise to tempt Eve. It was at Lucifer's bidding that the innocent Eve took a bite of the Forbidden Fruit. It was only when a naive Eve was persuaded by the evil words of the Devil that she sought to gain more Knowledge (Milton, Book 4; Lines 515-518). It was this action of tainting and polluting a pure and innocent being that caused the second *moral* Fall of Lucifer (Milton, Book 9; Lines 549-550). It was for this reason that God not only punished Adam and Eve for not listening to His decree but also punished all the demons in Pandemonium as well. The followers of Satan and Satan himself were all turned into snakes, mere wordless beasts that would crawl on their chests, making no more than hissing sounds for all eternity (Milton, Book 10; Lines 501-509):

" *Ye have th' account*
Of my performance: What remains, ye Gods,
But up and enter now into full bliss.
So having said, a while he stood, expecting
Thir universal shout and high applause
To fill his eare, when contrary he hears
On all sides, from innumerable tongues
A dismal universal hiss, the sound
Of public scorn;"

5. Conclusion

Macbeth is a Shakespearean tragedy written in 1623. Milton's *Paradise Lost* was published in 1667. We have seen the character Satan shares a number of similarities in the choices and personality traits with both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (Öztürk, 2009; Milton, 2003; Siegel, 1955). Particularly, Satan is seen to be a combination of Shakespeare's Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (Carpenter, 2015; Chamberlain, 2005; Öztürk, 2009; Munro, 1887; Haque et al., 2021).

According to scholars, the 'psychodynamics' of the characters represented within a literary text help audiences experience accounts of situations they would otherwise not have access to (Kelly, 2020; Hossain, 2017; Sagimin *et al.*, 2019; Sollod, 2008). A Critical Psychoanalysis of the above classical Literary texts show how excessive pride and ambition lead to a Fall, the evidence for which is laid out through the actions and reactions of these characters and their ultimate consequences.

Although they are written in different times and their respective formats were different (a play and an epic respectively), both these stories warn the audience of the follies of unchecked ambition. Starting from a low point at the beginning of the respective texts, these characters' ambitions drive them to commit more and more heinous crimes which lead them down a path of destruction and death. Their tricks and manipulations further fuel their unchecked hunger for power until they lose all sense of good morals, ethics,

honour and values, making them not only the Anti-Heroes, but also the Villains in their own stories.

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