

# Shakespeare's Macbeth - Why does Macbeth Murder Duncan?

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Why does Macbeth Murder Duncan?

In Shakespeare's play Macbeth, the lead character of the same name is not sufficiently happy with the high social position he occupies and the honored status he has acquired. Viewing the play simplistically, one may conclude that Duncan is murdered due to the ambition of [Macbeth](#). Ambition is a sin, of course, and therefore Macbeth is punished for his sins. If one does not care to probe more deeply, this evaluation of the play is almost entirely satisfactory, because it is very simple and neat. Yet, this approach converts the work from an extraordinarily complex study of evil into a straightforward morality play and closes off discussion of the most interesting aspects of the play.

Now, there is some evidence for the charge of ambition. Macbeth does want to become king, and he refers to that desire as ambition ("I have no spur/ To prick the sides of my intent, but only/ [Vaulting](#) ambition which o'erleaps itself/ And falls on th'other" (1.7.25-28). But we need to be careful here not automatically to take a character's own estimate of his motivation for the truth, or at least for a completely adequate summary statement of all that

needs to be said. We need to "unpack" just what that concept of ambition contains in the character to whom we apply it.

For a fascinating aspect of Macbeth's motivation is that he is in the grip of something which he does not fully understand and which a part of him certainly does not approve of. This makes him very unlike Richard Gloucester, who announces his plans with glee and shows no scruples about what he has to do (quite the reverse: he looks forward to doing away with his next victim and invites us to share his [delight](#)). Clearly a part of Macbeth is fascinated with the possibility of being king. It's not entirely clear where this desire comes from. The witches (whom we will discuss later) put the suggestion into the play, but there is a strong hint from Lady Macbeth that she and her husband have already talked about the matter well before the play begins ("What beast was't then/ That made you break this enterprise to me?" (1.7.48-49). In that case, the appearance of the witches may be, in part, a response to some desire in Macbeth.

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