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HOW POWER CORRUPTS IN SHAKESPEARE'S MACBETH AND CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE'S DOCTOR FAUSTUS: AN ANALYSIS

RECEP ÇAĞDAŞ

Department of English Language and Literature
The Graduate Institute of Social Sciences
Istanbul Aydin University, Turkey



RECEP ÇAĞDAŞ

ABSTRACT

From past to present, many leaders, politicians, scientists, or even common people have experienced and tasted the absolute power. At the very beginning of this ownership, everything seemed usual and innocent. However; it has been observed that people who have absolute power fell into error thinking that corruption of power would never give rise to their end. The objective of this essay is to examine the reasons behind two literary protagonists of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*' downfall. The major characters of these two books and other real life cases show that how the notion of having absolute power ends up with catastrophe and destruction. *Macbeth* and *Doctor Faustus* illustrated different types of power: The first one is related to the political authority and the other one is connect to knowledge. The paper also highlights how these tragic downfalls stem from human weaknesses. We also examined how a common person could turn out to be a villain or how he could destroy the values of the society and himself for the sake of obtaining absolute power. With the help of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* and Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*, we would explore how power corrupted absolutely in case the absolute power was in the hands of wrong people.

Key Words: Absolute, Corrupt, Downfall, Power, Weakness

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Power can lead to corruption at every stage of life throughout history and the corruption caused by power never remains confined to a person or an institution. Power can be abused or exploited in any human interaction that could take place among family, school or any other segment of society. The abuse of power can also infiltrate into politics or bureaucracy. Corruption of power is somehow related to character formation with which one displays a frailty. It is believed that a strong-willed person cannot be overwhelmed by his own truth. People who have power are less prone to consider and appreciate others' opinions. It has also

been approved that powerful people are less calm, and focus on results instead of seeing small details. Besides, a powerful person sees himself/herself always right and assumes that they have the authority to change or break the rules. People in power gradually focus on their egocentric desires rather than taking others' considerations into account.

Every human being has some desires to fulfill in order to create a world in which they have the final say. Everyone inevitably wants to have more power than others, and this goal which is the most difficult one to reach stands at the top of the

list of the desires. Power is the climax of our desires and we believe that we can get the things that others don't have through the magic of power. Power is something like a magic wand that we aspire to have, convinced that we can change everything we want when we have it. It is the power, which makes us so blind that we do not see the flowers we trample on. It reveals the real identity each of us holds in our hidden world.

Abraham Lincoln¹ points out in one of his inaugural speech that: "Nearly all men stand adversity but if you want to test a man's character, give him power." In such a case, if we manage to act normally, as everyone expects, then this means, we do not permit power to make us react differently. This enables us to understand the real side of the man if there comes out opposite actions. Since we cannot know how to behave as we have never experienced it before. So long as it does not change the core of man, then everything goes normal and we do not let the power control us. We control the power indeed. Once human being gets the power, he does not see anything around him/her. Man is greedy and always wants more, never being satisfied or contented with what they have. This desire turns into a passion which is ready to explode. Man enslaved by power turns into a machine programmed to do anything to reach their aim. His/her passion is the final altitude which his soul wants to ascend to. His passion directs him instead of his mind. So, he is locked in his power and imprisoned in the dungeon of his/her self.

J.F. Kennedy² makes this clear in his address to *The UN General Assembly* with following lines: "We have the power to make this the best generation of mankind in the history of the world or to make it last" (September 20, 1963). During the history absolute power gave rise to massacres and genocides. It is because of the fact that the leaders seeking absolute power might have been abused by their power. They could not control their power preparing their pitiful end. Their conscience never came into play. The seed of passion grew permanently. Lord Acton indicates his *Essay on*

Freedom and Power that:

I cannot accept your canon we are to judge Pope and King unlike other man with a favourable presumption that they did no wrong. If there is any presumption, it is the other way, against the holders of power increasing as the power increases. Historic responsibility has to make up for the want of legal responsibility. All power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority; tendency or certainty of corruption by full authority. There is no worse heresy than that the office sanctifies the holder of it (364).

History is full of bad examples depicting corruption of power. II. Leopold, King of Belgians, had gained the notoriety of inhuman treatment and massacre towards the Congo people. Lenin and Stalin also set a cruel example having killed many people for the sake of their ideologies. Power surely not always associated with homicide to take place of another or be superior to others. Corruption of power can be evaluated under economic terms, as well. Rick Lash touches upon this illegal application that Senators of Canada have come under scrutiny and \$1 million worth of inappropriate expense were acquired illegally. It has also been found out that FIFA officials were indicted for allegedly taking \$150 million in bribes while awarding FIFA broadcast rights.

As for the major characters in the plays of English literature, they are obsessed with the power that transformed them to the victims of their inner world. Most strikingly, we can easily see this in Shakespeare's literary play *Macbeth*. Saifullah Islam states in his essay called *Nature of Evil in Macbeth* that: "His passion for power and his instinct of self-assertion are so vehement that no inward or outward misery could persuade him to relinquish the fruits of crime, or to advance from remorse to penitence" (185). His desire for power drives him to his downfall. His lust for power converts him into a more abusive character. As opposed to what he thought, he becomes weaker, indeed. He tries to get the ultimate power but he loses his way. Contrary to the expectations he cherished, he deteriorates as he

¹The 16th president of the United States of America (1809 – 1865)

²The 35th president of United States of America

gets the power. We can easily observe at the very beginning of the play that how power, the very thought of being more powerful, corrupted Macbeth. After the prophecies, witches say to Macbeth that: "all hail, Macbeth, that shalt be king hereafter" corruption begins to spread throughout his blood (33). Person like Macbeth who has tendency to have power or to be easily manipulated by others creates his own set of rules and interprets them according to his interests. This is why Macbeth and his wife misconstrue the prophecy and murder King Duncan. He gradually turns into a villain who plots to kill the king. Such a regicide is the most visible corruption for a patriot who defends his country against enemies. His power makes Macbeth more paranoid. However, he is not aware of this fact. In addition, the fear that he would lose this power results in killing Banquo. "Our fears in Banquo stick deep" (116). So, he killed his friend lest his power would be taken away. Then Macbeth directed his corruptive actions toward Macduff, "the thane of Fife" sending murderers to kill his wife and sons. In this scene, he starts to show his vice actions and nasty plans: "From now on, every deed that my mind imagines will be carried out by my hand at once" (177). Macbeth is in a tremendous mutability so that power became *sine qua non*³ for him. In the course of his life, Macbeth is in pursuit of immortalizing his power via his vice actions even at the cost of killing innocent people. He does not only ruin the reputation he has at the very beginning of the play but also destroys his life not to lose his power. He does not get satisfied with the power he holds in his hands.

Lady Macbeth is also obsessed with the power. Besides the witches, she triggered Macbeth to kill the king and fan the flame in Macbeth as well. Namely, she insulted his manliness to make him carry out the evil actions. But, this gave rise to her downfall. Power dragged Macbeth to dead end as is everybody else who sacrifices all their merits. Shakespeare shows us the outcome of such greedy actions. Bhupendra Nandlal Kesur states in his *Corruption, Manipulation and Abuse of Power in Shakespearean Tragedy Macbeth* that:

³it refers to an indispensable and essential action, condition, or ingredient

While Macbeth's nihilistic views are not applicable to society in general, they are significant to his immediate in that he realizes that he has become the witches' puppet. Furthermore, Macbeth understands the situation and the possibility of death in his near future; therefore, considering that his life's purpose has become retaining his positions as the King of Scotland, it is not surprising that he now views life in this way (5566).

As for Christopher Marlow's character Dr. Faustus, he is dissatisfied with the knowledge he has. Knowledge for him means power. For this reason, he does not hesitate to leave all his virtue aside. His power leads him to exchange knowledge with power. Initially, he shows the first sign having a pact with Mephistopheles: "Go forward, Faustus, in the famous art/wherein all nature's treasury is contained/Be thou on earth as Jove is in the sky/lord and commander of these elements" (5). Faustus is in search of a sparkle that takes him to the power. After having a pact with Mephistopheles, he takes first step in the corruption of power. His intellectual ways of life turns into pleasure: "Sweet Helen make me immortal with a kiss/let me have a wife, the fairest maid in Germany, for I am wanton and lascivious, and cannot live without a wife" (17).

In the course of play, the reader gradually witnesses the deterioration of Faustus, and feels disgrace towards Faustus for his actions. Faustus's philosophy that "*cogito ergo sum*"⁴ takes the place of this statement: "I have power therefore I am". The evil inside him comes into play instead of his sound wisdom. Faustus becomes so blind that he does not hear the warnings of "Good Angel" and commits the Cardinal Sins⁵: "O, Faustus, lay that damned book aside/And gaze not on it, lest it tempt thy soul/And heap god's heavy wrath upon thy head/Read, Read the Scriptures:-that is blasphemy" (5). Faustus is, in a way, aware of the fact that his good or misdeed will be rewarded or punished but he is incapable of

⁴*Cogito ergo sum* (French: *Je pense donc je suis*; English: *I think, therefore I am*) is a philosophical Latin statement proposed by René Descartes

⁵Anger, greed, sloth, pride, lust, envy, gluttony

thinking logically. "If heaven was made for man, 'twas made for me /I will renounce this magic and repent" (18). However, he digs his own grave with his bad choices.

In conclusion, depending on the purpose, power disgrace or elevate people. A person's destiny is relevant to the handling of power. As long as a person indicates weakness towards power, corruption of power attributes to the person. Even so, it is a matter of question whether power or person himself/herself induces corruption. Both Macbeth and Faustus are victims of their own passion. They all taste the irremediable consequences of power.

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