

***Macbeth* by William Shakespeare: MIT Essay Assignments**

1. Try applying any aspect of Aristotle's theory of tragedy to *Macbeth* and discuss its applicability or its inapplicability to the work in question in some way that illuminates the meaning of the work in question.

2. This topic is a difficult one. Both *Oedipus* and *Macbeth* deal with characters to whom a prophecy is given which comes true; and each nearly brings ruin to their respective domains. In a sense, both are "tragedies of fate." But questions can be nonetheless raised in each case about whether the fate that overtakes the title character is inevitable. Discuss the two plays and the role of prophecy within them in any fashion that seems to you fruitful for understanding the plays when compared with one another. It will probably be useful in writing on this topic to bear in mind *Macbeth* I.3, 148-9: "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me/ Without my stir."

3. Another version of this difficult comparison: One might say of *Oedipus* that he is what he does and there is no change in his character; it is rather that the values placed upon his extraordinary nature have been reversed (from positive to negative) by learning something about what he has done. In *Macbeth*, every action taken by Macbeth has an immediate effect on him, so that, step by step, the courageous warrior becomes the guilt-crazed monster of the "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" soliloquy.

4. Try exploring the following: Many scholars have observed that the audience in Greek tragedy was most closely identified with the chorus (we talked about the reasons for holding this view in class) and not with the monumental figures representing the mythological characters. Accordingly, those in the audience knew that they would never be as *consequential* in life as *Oedipus* (he is king and savior and seer and, as the chorus says, the most godlike of men, although not a god), and if they can say to themselves in response to the play, "I hope nothing like that ever happens to me," they would nonetheless know that since they are not so consequential, the chances are slim that they will be visited by such spectacular misfortune. Watching *Macbeth*, however, every member of the audience knows that although he or she is not "valor's minion," nonetheless the possibility of becoming a *Macbeth* exists in his nature. Thus the poet Rudyard Kipling wrote about two children:

... how at Bankside, a boy drowning kittens
Winc'd at the business; whereupon his sister
Lady Macbeth aged seven -- thrust 'em under,
Somberly scornful.

You can't imagine anyone invoking *Oedipus* in this way.

5. Like *Oedipus*, *Macbeth* seeks to confirm or disconfirm his worst fears; *Oedipus* consults the old shepherd, *Macbeth* the three witches, and each is urged not to seek to know. "Shall Banquo's issue ever reign in this kingdom?" asks *Macbeth* (4.1), and the witches cry "Seek to know no more". Why do the forces of evil try to warn him off? Have they got his interests at heart? What does this say about their character? What does it say about *Oedipus* and *Macbeth* that they both insist upon this knowledge? Are they alike here or different?

6. Discuss the often-noticed alteration between *Macbeth* and *Lady Macbeth* (namely, before the murder of *Duncan* he seems weak, she stirs him on in the name of his manhood and his courage; afterwards, she seems to collapse, while he grows more steadfast in the face of horrors). Note the relevance of this alteration (as you have interpreted it) to other themes in the play.

7. There is a lot of talk about time in *Macbeth*, from *Lady Macbeth's* "Thy letters have transported me beyond/ This ignorant present, and I feel now/ The future in the instant", through *Macbeth's* talk of "jumping the life to come" (1.7), to the final "tomorrow and tomorrow" speech and *Macduff's* final, exultant "The time is free". Likewise, there is much about dying well: from the death of the Thane of *Cawdor*, *Macduff's* mention of *Duncan's* queen, who "Of t'ner upon her knees than on her feet,/Died every day she lived," to *Seward's* talk at the end of the play about the death of his son. Take any three passages from either *Macbeth*, discuss their context and the relevance of the themes they suggest to the central concerns of the play.