

**Harvard University Extension School/ E-130 Shakespeare and Modernity; Final Exam Essay**  
**Author: Jens J. Reinke**

‘Fit to govern?’ Macduff’s bewildered question looms heavily over all of *MACBETH*. Using no fewer than three characters from that play, discuss the idea of ‘fitness to govern.’ What are the criteria of such fitness? How do characters in *MACBETH* show, or fail to show, such qualification?

Although the question of ‘good governance’ is one of recent times, it has always been in discussion. The monarchic system of succession via birth is flawed by its very nature. People who are absolutely inapt to govern can get power in a state. Since this is the case, the question has to be asked which characteristics are necessary or desirable in a monarch. One of the best plays of Shakespeare to examine this topic is certainly *MACBETH*, as it includes the striving for power of several of its protagonists. It should be said at the beginning of this essay that my impression is that both of the characters who bear the name of the play are ‘unfit to govern’ by their character traits. If one thinks in very general terms what should be expected from a leader, qualities like truthfulness, benevolence, farsightedness, fairness and a devotion to this position come into one’s mind.

However, if one looks at Macbeth, we see him as someone who is easily impressed and who is influenceable by the prophecy of the witches, which could be read as a modern political leader who is impressible through lobbying, or even worse: Religious or occult previsions. Macbeth sticks to the thought of getting to power (or, more correctly: he is being made to stick by Lady Macbeth) and is willing to agree to do everything to become the new king. He murders the old king and (at first) does not seem to display any doubts about his deeds. However, Macbeth is a brutish person for whom the use of violence is a legitimate tool of exercising power; he becomes not only the new king but also a tyrant, a fact that ultimately causes his defeat.

His wife, Lady Macbeth, is different from him, as her ways of getting to power are more artful and well thought-out. And although she is successful in convincing her husband to kill King Duncan, her style of leadership, though more sophisticated, is somewhat similar to Macbeth’s: she has an enormously strong will to get the power in Scotland and she uses everything that seems to be necessary in order to reach her goals, which includes crime and violence. Her style of leadership therefore can be characterized as sophisticatedly tyrannical and totalitarian – until the point she breaks down, discovers her conscience and drifts into insanity and suicide.

King Duncan is crafted to be the anti-Macbeth, as he is depicted as being empathetic, bountiful and enlightening. Although he can be objurgated for not recognizing Macbeth’s and Lady Macbeth’s

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intrigue, he is the representative of the 'old and good' Scotland, in which everything was in good order. His style of leadership is therefore worth pursuing, but without this certain level of naivety that causes his vulnerability. He is a figure that holds the nation together which becomes obvious when after his death chaos and violence breaks out.