

Macbeth

Study Guide by Course Hero



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👁 Book Basics

AUTHOR

William Shakespeare

YEAR WRITTEN

c. 1606

GENRE

Tragedy

ABOUT THE TITLE

As the main character in the play, Macbeth has the title role.

The simplicity of the single-word title belies the intricacy of the play and its main character, however. Plot details and character details unfold side-by-side in *Macbeth*. Powerful yet weak, courageous yet afraid, the character of Macbeth has layers of complexity and influence that make him bigger than life or any title.

⌚ In Context

Historical Influences

Scholars do not list *Macbeth* among Shakespeare's history plays, which include *Henry V* and *Richard II*, but there is a historical basis for the play. The actual Macbeth ruled Scotland from 1040 until 1057 and killed his predecessor, Duncan I. However, this killing took place on a battlefield near the Scottish town of Elgin, rather than under Macbeth's own roof. Macbeth later married the granddaughter of another king, Kenneth III, and defeated Duncan I's father in battle in 1045. Historians characterize the real Macbeth as a fair and law-oriented king who encouraged the spread of Christianity in Scotland. This description, too, is a sharp contrast with the "tyrant" of Shakespeare's play, who is obsessed with occult visions and prophecies.

Macbeth fought against Siward, Earl of Northumbria, when Siward attempted to bring Duncan I's stepson Malcolm to the Scottish throne in 1054. However, Macbeth rebuffed this challenge and ruled three more years before Malcolm defeated him at the Battle of Lumphanan to become Malcolm III.

Shakespeare's version of Scottish history was likely inspired by one of his own contemporaries, Raphael Holinshed, who published his *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* in 1577. Holinshed's version includes the witches, or weird sisters,

and makes Banquo a coconspirator with Macbeth. The House of Stuart, James I's family line, claimed Banquo among its ancestors, which explains why Shakespeare changed Banquo into the tragic victim of his friend's treachery and why the play emphasizes Banquo's role as the father of many kings.

The play includes other elements arguably designed to appeal to James I. Macbeth is defeated by a unified army of English and Scottish soldiers, significant because James I was the king who united England and Scotland under one crown. The defeat of the usurper is important as well, because James I was the target of a number of plots early in his reign, most notably the Gunpowder Plot. Finally, James I was known for his opposition to witchcraft and the supernatural. He presided over a few witch trials and, while king of Scotland, published a paper called "Daemonologie," which claims witches are a serious threat to Scotland. Accordingly, the witches in *Macbeth* are presented as a malicious force bent on creating chaos in the land.

Reception

Even though the witches were written in a way that reflects James I's views on witchcraft, the devoutly Christian king banned the play from performance for five years. This is the same James I who commissioned the first English translation of the Bible in 1604, and he may have objected to the play's use of allegedly authentic witches' incantations in the dialogue.

The king may not have been the only one to object to the witchcraft in the play. Legend has it that a coven of witches cursed *Macbeth* after its early performances, ostensibly because they didn't want their secret incantations going public. Whether or not this story is true, a superstition took hold in the theater community that forbade performers and crew members from speaking the play's name aloud. Even today, many performers refer to the work as "the Scottish Play" in an effort to keep the curse at bay.

There have been notable instances of bad luck associated with performances of *Macbeth*, such as falling equipment and actors falling from the stage. One of the best-known instances was a 1849 riot in New York City's Astor Place, which was sparked by fans of two different actors performing the title role in different venues. Twenty-two people were killed during the riot. Despite these incidents, *Macbeth* has remained one of Shakespeare's most popular and frequently performed works.

Author Biography

William Shakespeare was born in Stratford-upon-Avon, England. Although his birth date was not recorded, he was baptized on April 26, 1564, meaning he was likely born in the preceding week. His birthday is celebrated on April 23. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, and they had two daughters and a son, the latter of whom died in childhood.

As the primary writer and a performer with the Lord Chamberlain's Men theater company, Shakespeare was well established in London theater when James I, formerly James VI of Scotland, became king of England in 1603. The Lord Chamberlain's Men had enjoyed success under Elizabeth I's reign, and when James I was crowned, the king formally took the company into his service. The company then changed its name to the King's Men. The actors attended James I's coronation ceremony as honored guests and performed frequently for the court.

In 1605 conspirators tried to assassinate the king in an incident known as the Gunpowder Plot. Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth* shortly afterward, in about 1606 or 1607, and wove allusions to the attempted regicide into his play. Shakespeare and his family may have known some of the Gunpowder Plot conspirators, and his cautionary tale about treason may have been meant to disavow any connection to such misdeeds. In addition to the Gunpowder Plot, Shakespeare arguably built numerous other references to James I and to contemporary history into *Macbeth*, his one and only Scottish play.

At some point between 1613 and 1616, Shakespeare returned to Stratford. His theater career and investments had made his family financially comfortable. Shakespeare died in Stratford on April 23, 1616, and was buried in Holy Trinity Church on April 25, 1616.

Characters

Macbeth

Macbeth is a Scottish nobleman who holds three successive titles in the play. Initially serving as Thane of Glamis, he meets three witches who prophesy he will be awarded the title of

Thane of Cawdor and later become king of Scotland. When King Duncan makes him Thane of Cawdor as a reward for his role for putting down a rebellion, Macbeth decides the witches must be correct. He kills Duncan and takes the crown for himself. He then has his friend Banquo killed, as Banquo was the only other person to know the prophecy. When the other thanes become suspicious, they help Duncan's rightful heir raise an army and defeat Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth

When Lady Macbeth hears of the witches' predictions, she helps her husband murder Duncan and take the throne. Abandoning the characteristics expected of a woman in her position (though she has no problem using them when it suits her purpose), she claims to feel no guilt about the murders that she and Macbeth have committed. She encourages Macbeth to let go of his guilt as well. However, it becomes clear that she still feels guilty, and the memory of Duncan's murder slowly drives her insane.

Witches

The sisters in this malevolent trio act as the catalyst for the play's action. The predictions they give Macbeth spark his thoughts of becoming king. They meet twice with Macbeth, and it becomes clear during a meeting with their goddess, Hecate, that they are not working in Macbeth's best interests, as they show him visions that are incomplete and lead to his demise.

Banquo

Banquo is a friend and thane who fights alongside Macbeth in the battle to put down Macdonald's rebellion. He is with Macbeth when the witches first appear, and they predict that Banquo will never be king but that his descendants will be. He also hears them predict Macbeth's rise to the throne. Later, this makes him suspicious of Macbeth's role in Duncan's murder, and Macbeth knows this. Based on this knowledge and the prediction about Banquo's descendants, Macbeth decides Banquo is a threat and has him killed.

Macduff

Macduff is the Thane of Fife and a loyal follower of King Duncan. He has suspicions about Macbeth's role in Duncan's death, as seen in his refusal to attend Macbeth's coronation. Later, he tracks Duncan's son Malcolm to England and convinces him to return to Scotland to fight for his birthright and save the country. The cost of his loyalty, though, is his wife and child, whom Macbeth murders while Macduff is away. When Macduff encounters Macbeth on the battlefield, Macduff is the one to kill him.

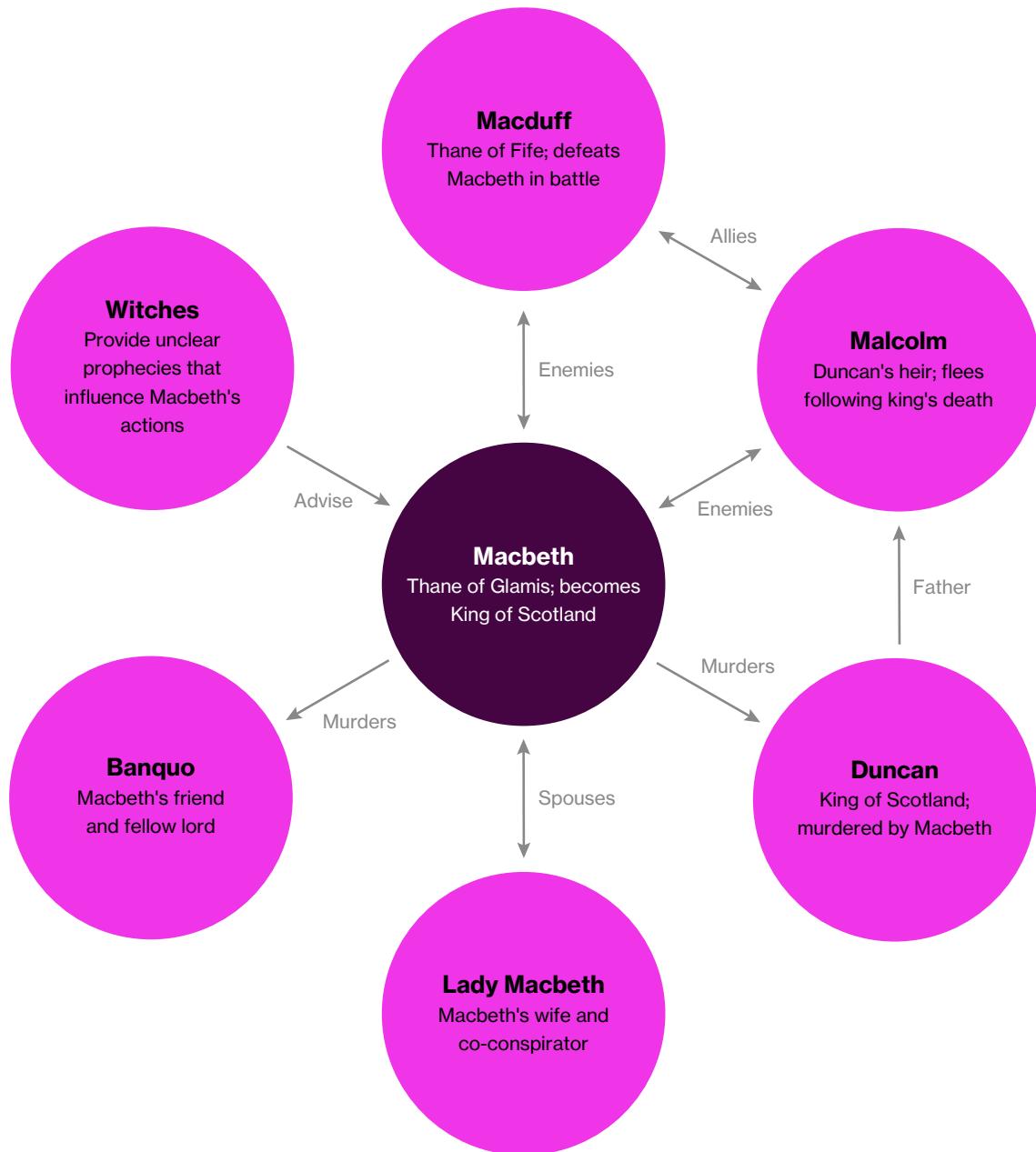
Duncan

Duncan is, by all accounts, a good, respectable king. He inspires loyalty in his thanes and rewards them for this, giving Macbeth a new title to honor his performance in battle. After he is murdered, the thanes and lords mourn him and avenge him by uniting against Macbeth.

Malcolm

Malcolm is King Duncan's older son. Fearing that he and his brother might also be killed—or accused of their father's murder—he flees to England. He has fears about returning to challenge Macbeth but overcomes them when Macduff convinces him how much his country needs him. With an army of 10,000 English soldiers and a thirst for revenge, he returns to Scotland to claim his rightful place as king.

Character Map



● Main character

● Other Major Character

● Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
Macbeth	Macbeth is Thane of Glamis, then Thane of Cawdor. He ascends to the throne of Scotland by murdering the king. His treachery becomes his undoing.
Lady Macbeth	Lady Macbeth is Macbeth's wife. She encourages and enables his ambitions but is driven mad by her own suppressed guilt.
Witches	The three witches—also known as the weird sisters—collectively make predictions that drive Macbeth's ambition and bring about his defeat.
Banquo	Banquo is a Scottish thane and a friend of Macbeth's. Macbeth kills him when he becomes a threat.
Macduff	Macduff is the Thane of Fife. He suspects Macbeth from the beginning and eventually defeats him in battle.
Duncan	Duncan is the king of Scotland. Macbeth kills him to obtain the crown, despite Duncan showing him much favor.
Malcolm	Malcolm is King Duncan's older son. He flees to England following his father's murder and returns with an army to defeat Macbeth.
Angus	Angus is a Scottish thane who suspects Macbeth of foul play and rises against him.
Caithness	Caithness is a Scottish thane who suspects Macbeth of foul play and rises against him.
Captain	The Captain is a soldier who reports to King Duncan that Macbeth has defeated the rebel Macdonwald.

Donalbain	Donalbain is King Duncan's younger son. He flees to Ireland after his father is killed.
English Doctor	The English Doctor visits the castle of Edward, king of England. He tells Malcolm that Edward will be meeting with a group of sick people, as he is able to heal them with his touch.
First Apparition	The First Apparition is of an armed head; it warns Macbeth to be wary of Macduff, the Thane of Fife.
First Murderer	The First Murderer is one of Macbeth's henchmen. He kills Banquo and Macduff's wife and son.
Fleance	Fleance is Banquo's son. He escapes the killers and flees Scotland after his father's murder.
Gentlewoman	The Gentlewoman is a servant, or lady-in-waiting, to Lady Macbeth. She consults a doctor regarding Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking.
Hecate	Hecate is the goddess of magic and witchcraft. She berates the witches for advising Macbeth without consulting her.
Lady Macduff	Lady Macduff is Macduff's wife. She is murdered by Macbeth's henchmen.
Lennox	Lennox is a Scottish thane. He suspects Macbeth of foul play and rises against him.
Macduff's Son	The Son of Macduff is murdered by Macbeth's henchmen.
Menteith	Menteith is a Scottish thane. He suspects Macbeth of foul play and rises against him.
Old Man	The Old Man discusses ominous omens with Ross on the day following King Duncan's murder.

Porter	The Porter is a servant to Macbeth. He provides light relief as he speaks with Macduff about the things that drink provokes.
Ross	Ross is a Scottish thane who suspects Macbeth of foul play and rises against him.
Scottish Doctor	The Scottish Doctor consults with Lady Macbeth's lady-in-waiting about Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking.
Second Apparition	The Second Apparition is of a blood-covered child. It assures Macbeth that no one "born of woman" can harm him.
Second Murderer	The Second Murderer is one of Macbeth's henchmen. He kills Banquo and Macduff's wife and son.
Seyton	Seyton is a servant of Macbeth's who announces the death of Lady Macbeth.
Siward	Siward is an English earl and kinsman to Malcolm. He helps him raise an army to defeat Macbeth.
Third Apparition	The Third Apparition is of a crowned child holding a tree. It tells Macbeth that the only way he may be defeated is if Birnam Wood moves to Dunsinane Hill.
Third Murderer	The Third Murderer is one of Macbeth's henchmen. He kills Banquo and Macduff's wife and son.
Young Siward	Young Siward is Siward's son and an English soldier. He is killed by Macbeth in the final battle.

(The title of thane was awarded to men favored by the king who were also given land, usually for proven loyalty. Military service to the king was expected of thanes.)

The play's action begins when King Duncan's forces engage in a battle to defeat a rebellion started by a lord named Macdonwald, who enlists the help of the King of Norway. Macbeth, duty-bound to defend his king, fights honorably in this battle and captures another supporter of the rebellion, the Thane of Cawdor. As Macbeth and his friend Banquo travel home from the battle, they meet three witches. These women predict Macbeth will be the next Thane of Cawdor and that he will become king of Scotland. In addition, they prophesy that Banquo's descendants will inherit the throne in years to come.

After the king executes the Thane of Cawdor for treason, he gives the thane's title and lands to Macbeth, which leads Macbeth to believe the witches' predictions. He sends word of these developments to his wife, and Lady Macbeth immediately begins plotting Duncan's demise, which is made easier when Duncan comes to visit Macbeth's castle. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth then start scheming in earnest against Duncan.

While Duncan dines at their castle, Macbeth confers with his wife and raises objections to the murder; his wife dismisses them with scorn. By conversation's end, Macbeth is ready to kill the king. Lady Macbeth takes the lead in plotting the murder. She gets Duncan's guards drunk, and they are unconscious when Macbeth enters Duncan's chamber and kills him. He returns to his own rooms with the daggers in his blood-stained hands. Lady Macbeth goes back to plant the weapons and frame the guards. The following morning, Duncan's body is discovered, and the lords are thrown into an uproar. Macbeth kills the guards before they can speak. He claims to have done this in his rage at Duncan's death. Fearing for their own safety, Duncan's sons flee the country, so Macbeth implicates them in Duncan's murder as well. Macbeth is crowned king of Scotland, while the other thanes speculate about strange events and dark times.

Meanwhile, remembering the witches' predictions, Banquo grows suspicious of Macbeth. Recognizing that Banquo knows he had motive to kill Duncan, and vexed by the thought that Banquo's descendants will reign after him, Macbeth hires murderers to assassinate Banquo and his son Fleance. At a banquet the same night, Macbeth has a vision of Banquo's ghost, and the other lords are alarmed by his erratic behavior.

Plot Summary

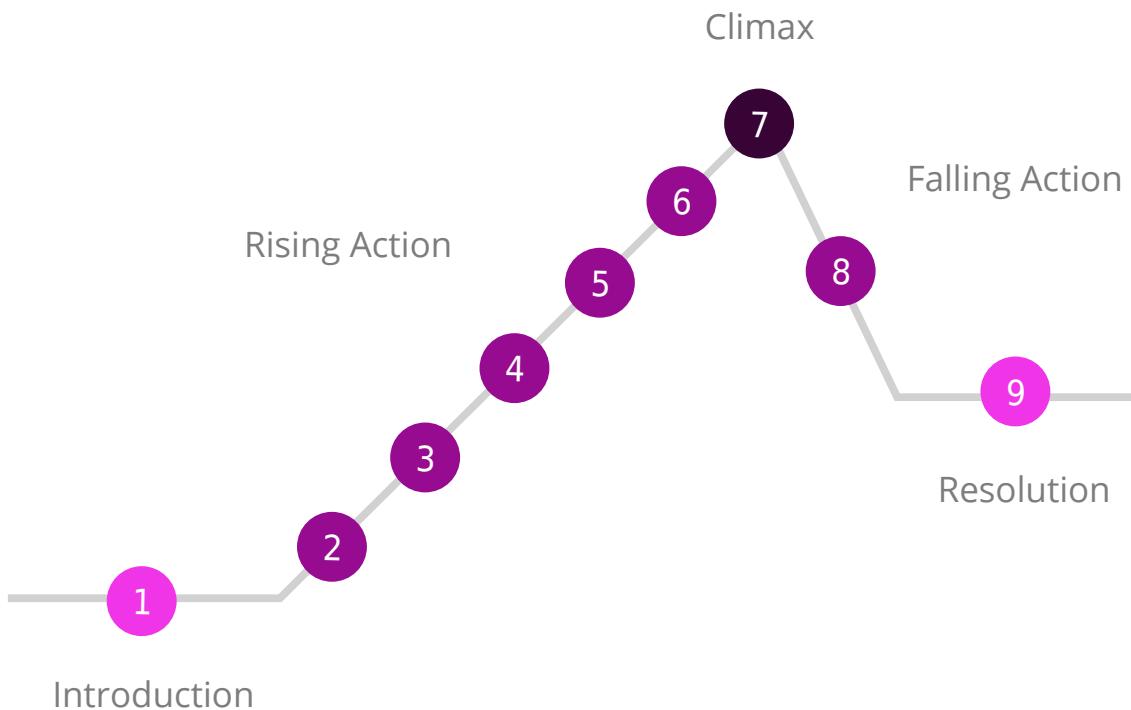
Set in medieval Scotland, *Macbeth* traces the rise and fall of the title character as he gains and loses the throne of Scotland. As the play opens, Macbeth is described as the Thane of Glamis, indicating that he is a Scottish nobleman.

Lady Macbeth makes excuses for her husband as best she can, but the seeds of suspicion are sown. Macbeth seeks another meeting with the witches to plan his next move.

At Macbeth's second meeting with the witches, they make three predictions about his future. First, they tell him to beware of Macduff, who has been suspicious of Macbeth since Duncan was killed. Second, they tell him that no man born of woman shall harm him. Third, they say he will be secure until Great Birnam Wood, a nearby forest, comes to Macbeth's castle at Dunsinane Hill. Macbeth, believing the last two predictions are impossible, assumes he is safe. In the meantime, Macduff travels to England to find Malcolm, Duncan's oldest son, and convince him to head back to Scotland to fight for his rightful throne. Macbeth takes this opportunity to send assassins to Fife, where they murder Macduff's wife and son. Macduff is successful in his mission, though, and Malcolm agrees to return to Scotland with an English army of 10,000 men.

Around the time Macbeth begins losing his grip on power, Lady Macbeth loses her grip on reality. She is under a doctor's care because of persistent sleepwalking and hallucinations brought about by her memories of Duncan's murder. The Scottish lords and thanes have united against Macbeth, calling him a tyrant; they are prepared to join with Malcolm's army when it arrives. The Scottish and English armies meet at Great Birnam Wood and use tree branches as camouflage to approach Dunsinane Hill. While Macbeth prepares for the onslaught at Dunsinane, he learns his wife has died. One of his servants then tells him Birnam Wood appears to be moving toward them. This rattles Macbeth because it fulfills one of the witches' prophecies. Still, he engages in battle, relying on the witches' assurance that no man born of woman will cause him harm. When he meets Macduff on the field, however, he learns Macduff was delivered by surgery, rather than by conventional birth. Macduff kills Macbeth, and Malcolm claims his throne.

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. Witches say Macbeth and Banquo's sons will be kings.

Rising Action

2. Macbeth, Lady Macbeth kill Duncan; Macbeth becomes king.

3. Seeing Banquo as a threat, Macbeth has him killed.

4. Witches' additional prophesies make Macbeth feel invincible.

5. Macduff induces Duncan's son Malcolm to fight for Scotland.

6. Lady Macbeth loses her mind and dies.

Climax

7. Malcolm leads troops into battle against Macbeth.

Falling Action

8. Macduff kills Macbeth on the battlefield.

Resolution

9. Malcolm takes his place as rightful King of Scotland.

Timeline of Events

Day 2

Duncan names Macbeth the new Thane of Cawdor.

Coronation

Macbeth becomes king and orders the murder of Banquo.

Day after banquet

Macbeth meets witches again; their prophecies make him too confident.

Some months later

Lady Macbeth is insane from guilt; she dies.

Same day

Macduff kills Macbeth in battle; Malcolm ascends to Scottish throne.

Night 1

After a rebellion, Macbeth and Banquo meet witches who predict Macbeth will be king.

Some days later

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth plot assassination and Macbeth kills Duncan as he sleeps.

Night of Banquo's murder

Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost at banquet; lords become suspicious.

Some weeks later

Macduff convinces Malcolm to return and fight. Macbeth has Macduff's family killed.

Next day

Malcolm leads English and Scottish troops to battle with Macbeth.

Q Scene Summaries

Act 1, Scene 1

Summary

Three witches gather in an outdoor location while a storm brews. They agree to meet again after a battle, also brewing, takes place. Following this battle, they will greet Macbeth. Once this meeting is arranged, they disappear from the scene, called away by Graymalkin and Paddock—their familiars, or spirits that assist them in doing evil.

Analysis

Although the witches appear in only four scenes, they are catalysts for the action in the play, and they set up the dark mood that hangs over events that follow. While their motivations for choosing Macbeth as the focus of their activities and their instrument in destabilizing the ruling order is never made clear, they seem to relish the prospect of the upcoming battle and chaos, calling it "hurly-burly." This old-fashioned British term might bring to mind any sort of chaotic scuffle, so in this context it covers all of the duplicitous activities unfolding, as well as the actual warfare at hand. The witches summon thunderstorms with their meeting, which also reflects their ominous intentions and the play's mood. The mood of malevolence that hangs about the witches is enhanced when two of them reference their familiars by their pet names. Graymalkin is a cat—likely a gray one—and Paddock is a toad. Here, Shakespeare alludes to the common belief that witches use animals as familiars, or messengers between themselves and the devil. Their last chant—"fair is foul, and foul is fair"—reflects a disregard for fairness or goodness and a preference for that which is foul or evil.

Act 1, Scene 2

Summary

Macdonwald, a lord from the Western Isles of Ireland and the Outer Hebrides, has joined with the Norwegian king to start a rebellion against King Duncan in Scotland. The Captain—an unnamed wounded officer—reports to Duncan and Malcolm, the king's older son, about the state of the battle at the time he left it, saying that Macbeth fought his way through the melee until he could find Macdonwald and kill him. Duncan is pleased by this news, but the Captain also tells him that Norwegian reinforcements have arrived and that Macbeth and Banquo continue to fight. At this point, the Captain leaves to have his wounds attended to. The Scottish thanes Ross and Angus arrive to say that Norway attempted to take control of Fife, aided by the Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth pressed on, won the battle, and captured the Thane of Cawdor. Duncan is pleased and plans to reward Macbeth by making him the new Thane of Cawdor. He tells Ross that the existing thane will be executed.

Analysis

The battle Macbeth fights here plays an important part in establishing his character before he meets with the witches and hears their prophecies. This isn't just any battle he's fighting—it's an attempt to overthrow the king. As a thane, Macbeth has pledged his loyalty to the king, and he goes above and beyond in battle to satisfy that oath and defend the crown. He isn't simply doing his part in the battle, either. He actively pursues and kills the lord who allied himself with Norway. Then, even after Norway has a toehold in Fife, Macbeth beats back those forces and pursues the other thane who betrayed their king. Macbeth is clearly driven by the glory of the battlefield and is a fierce fighter who doesn't shy away from violence, but in this scene, his ambition serves his fierce loyalty to his king. While this portrait of Macbeth provides sharp contrast to the scheming traitor who emerges after he meets the witches, it also provides continuity by depicting Macbeth as a relentless opponent. In the play's final scene, Macduff will pursue Macbeth through battle in the same way Macbeth pursued Macdonwald and the Thane of Cawdor, providing additional emphasis on how far Macbeth will fall.

Act 1, Scene 3

Summary

The witches meet, as arranged, on a heath, where they encounter Macbeth and Banquo as they make their way home from the battle against Norway. Banquo notices them first and wonders if they are really women; he thinks they have beards. The witches hail (salute) Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and "King hereafter." Their greeting to Banquo is far less clear. Comparing him to Macbeth, they say he is both lesser and greater, less happy and happier. In addition, they declare that his descendants will be kings. Macbeth asks how they have come by this information and why they have stopped the men with these fanciful prophesies. Rather than answer, the witches vanish. After the witches disappear, Macbeth and Banquo make jokes about what they said and question their own sanity.

Banquo and Macbeth then talk about the witches' predictions. Ross and Angus arrive to congratulate Macbeth on his victory over Norway and declare him the new Thane of Cawdor. Because the Thane of Cawdor is still alive, Macbeth protests, but Ross and Angus declare Cawdor a traitor who, through treason, has forfeited his title and probably his life. Banquo and Macbeth talk privately about how this first prediction has come true and wonder if the others will as well. Macbeth accepts his new title and thanks Ross and Angus.

Analysis

When they meet the witches for the first time, Macbeth and Banquo seem repulsed by them. They don't fit the two men's expectations of what women should look like, which makes the men suspicious. Furthermore, both men seem to dismiss the predictions they make. Macbeth protests that the Thane of Cawdor still lives, meaning Macbeth himself cannot become Thane of Cawdor. Furthermore, the prospect of Macbeth's becoming king seems completely ludicrous.

Only after Ross and Angus deliver the message that Duncan has declared Macbeth the new Thane of Cawdor do Macbeth and Banquo begin to put stock in the witches' words. Macbeth's ambition begins to take root, and perhaps it was this quality that drew the witches to him. They have declared

Banquo will be greater and happier than Macbeth in the long run, which is true. Banquo will die before his time, but he will die with honor and the respect of his peers and leave a legacy behind, while Macbeth will die in disgrace with no heirs. Banquo lacks the ruthless ambition that will soon emerge in Macbeth, so he does not take action to try to make the prophecies come true. Thus, his destiny unfolds naturally. In contrast, once Macbeth accepts the prophecies as truth, he allows them to influence his every decision. His destiny unfolds as predicted, but with terrible consequences.

Act 1, Scene 4

Summary

Duncan confirms the execution of the Thane of Cawdor. Malcolm says he heard that Cawdor died honorably by confessing his treason and repenting before he died. Duncan grieves the betrayal, praises Macbeth for his loyalty, and gives him Cawdor's title and lands. Macbeth swears loyalty to the king, but privately he calculates how many people now stand between him and the throne.

Analysis

The description of Cawdor's death here is a moment that will later stand in sharp contrast with Macbeth's own end. Cawdor feels remorse for what he has done, so even though he is executed, the king recognizes his honor and grieves the betrayal and loss. Cawdor's death is not cause for celebration. Now that Cawdor is dead and the king has confirmed Macbeth's new title, Macbeth is altered—either the witches' prophesies have taken hold of him, or his own ambition has fully revealed itself. Either way, he has accepted their predictions as truth and begins quietly plotting his way to the throne.

Act 1, Scene 5

Summary

Lady Macbeth reads a letter from her husband announcing his new title and telling her about the witches' prediction that he will be king. She is ready to do what she must to make that prediction come true but wonders if her husband is strong enough to do the same. She receives word that Duncan will be visiting the castle the same night and begins plotting, asking the spirits to give her the daring and strength of a man to help her carry out her plan. Macbeth arrives ahead of the king, and Lady Macbeth urges him to eliminate Duncan. Macbeth puts her off, saying they will discuss this later, but she tells him to leave the planning to her.

Analysis

From the moment she is introduced, it is clear that Lady Macbeth is more assertive than her husband. Her ambition does not need to be coaxed into action. Hearing about the witches' predictions, she does not question them for a moment and knows exactly what must be done to win the crown. She rejects the expectations of her sex and makes the first of many speculations about her husband's manliness, saying he may be "too full o' th' milk of human kindness" to move against Duncan. Milk, of course, is produced by women to feed their children. Lady Macbeth returns to this motif when she invokes the spirits—something she has in common with the witches—to exchange her milk for gall, a substance associated with anger. When Macbeth arrives, she is already primed to commit murder, and she takes charge when he hesitates.

Act 1, Scene 6

Summary

Duncan and his sons, along with Banquo and the other lords, arrive at Macbeth's castle. Duncan admires the castle and receives Lady Macbeth's greetings and hospitality.

Analysis

This brief scene serves the practical purpose of getting Duncan to Macbeth's castle to advance the plot. At the same

time, it underscores the heinous nature of Lady Macbeth's plotting. She smiles and provides warm hospitality to a guest in her home, knowing that she will take that hospitality away at knifepoint while the guest sleeps under her roof.

Act 1, Scene 7

Summary

As the servants prepare a banquet to honor the king, Macbeth debates with himself and shores up his courage to kill Duncan. However, he begins to have second thoughts and goes as far as telling his wife they will "proceed no further," citing the honors Duncan has granted him. She responds by questioning his courage and his manhood and asks why he told her about the witches if he didn't want to become king. She assures him their plan will succeed if Macbeth does what he is supposed to do. She explains the details, saying she will get Duncan's guards drunk and Macbeth will stab Duncan in his sleep. Convinced at last, Macbeth praises his wife's nerve. He is ready.

Analysis

Macbeth's soliloquy at the start of the scene reveals him as a deeply divided character. He is aware of the ethical duties of host and subject, and yet he is ready to violate those principles; he is fearful of the uncontrollable consequences of murder, and yet he is eager to reap murder's benefits. The exchange between Macbeth and his wife presents her as the architect of the assassination plot and Macbeth as divided—sometimes a coconspirator, other times a skeptic. Macbeth attempts to dissuade Lady Macbeth by reminding her how well Duncan has treated him. She pushes the plan forward here, circling back to her doubts about Macbeth's manhood and saying that he owes more loyalty to her than to the king. She illustrates this point by saying she would rather kill her own child than break the oath that Macbeth has made to go through with this plot, another rejection of the nurturing feminine ideal. Macbeth remarks that his wife's personality is a better inheritance for sons than daughters. She has him wound up again to commit "this terrible feat."

Act 2, Scene 1

Summary

Banquo and Fleance have a short talk while on the night's watch. Banquo has a bad feeling about this night and can't sleep. They hear a noise that causes Banquo to draw his sword, but it is Macbeth. He assures Banquo that he has not been thinking about the witches' predictions but says the two of them can talk about it later. Macbeth then encourages Banquo and Fleance to get some rest and sends his servant away as well. Once alone, Macbeth reflects on his plan and on the subjects of sleep, death, and evil deeds. He contemplates his dagger, first seeing it as a vision, then as a real weapon that he draws from his belt. He hopes he will be able to carry out his plan, and when he hears a bell in the distance, he moves on to Duncan's chamber.

Analysis

The conversation between Banquo and Fleance is one of many in the play where the characters talk about bad omens and ill feelings about events yet to come. The dramatic irony in this scene is that Banquo is startled when Macbeth appears, but once he identifies Macbeth, he puts his sword away. Banquo does not know what the audience knows, which is that Macbeth's development from an honorable individual to a lying and dangerous character is well under way. He is the one they should be guarding against, but Banquo and Fleance have no way of knowing that, especially when Macbeth lies and tells Banquo he hasn't thought about the witches.

Once Macbeth is alone with his thoughts and away from his wife's goading presence, his conscience provokes yet another moment of hesitation. He sees a vision of his dagger; whether this vision is the result of supernatural influence or a manifestation of his guilty conscience is unclear, even to Macbeth. He observes that the vision points his way to Duncan, but when the dagger shows bloodstains, Macbeth determines the vision is a product of his anxious mind. He decides he must act before he talks himself out of committing the deed. Observing that the hour is ripe for the murder and that the ringing bell is inviting him to strike, he decides the bell is Duncan's death knell and approaches the king's chamber.

Act 2, Scene 2

Summary

Lady Macbeth feels energized and emboldened by the excitement of the night's events, although an owl's hoot startles her as she waits for Macbeth to return. When she hears him at the door, she wonders if something has gone wrong. She notes that she would have killed Duncan herself had he not resembled her sleeping father. When she lets Macbeth in, he carries two daggers, and his hands are bloodstained. He confirms he has killed Duncan. He then relays that, after the murder, he overheard two men waking in another room, one of whom cried out, "Murder!" as he woke. The men then said a short prayer and fell asleep again. Macbeth dwells on the fact that he could not say "amen" when he overheard the men's prayer, even though he needed a blessing.

Lady Macbeth tells her husband that they shouldn't think too much about the murder, but Macbeth continues to worry. He says he heard voices that said he and his house would "sleep no more." She tells him again not to think about it, lest he drive himself insane. Then she sends him to wash his hands and notices he still has the daggers, which he was supposed to leave with the guards to incriminate them in the murder. Macbeth refuses to return to Duncan's room, so Lady Macbeth goes back instead.

While she is gone, Macbeth hears the sound of knocking and worries about being discovered. When Lady Macbeth returns, her hands are bloody, but she says her conscience is clear. The knocking continues, and Lady Macbeth realizes it is someone at the castle gate. She says they should wash and get in bed so they appear to have been sleeping. Macbeth expresses a final note of regret, saying he wishes the knocking could wake Duncan.

Analysis

Lady Macbeth's words and actions illustrate her investment in the plot and paint her as the brains behind this operation. Again rejecting a traditional feminine role, she says she has been drinking with Duncan's guards; the drink put them to sleep, but it made her feel bold. She even admits that she considered committing the murder herself, although her reason

for restraint—Duncan's resemblance to her own father—reveals a sliver of the guilt that she denies feeling. When she realizes that Macbeth has botched his part of the job and brought the daggers back with him, she takes action with ruthless efficiency and returns to the scene of the crime to plant the evidence, but not before scolding her husband and delivering another strike at his manhood for being "infirm of purpose."

Macbeth is finding it difficult to deny his guilt. He fixates on having overheard a man in another room cry out, "Murder!" This is the first sign of the tormenting burden that this murder will be, though he will go on to other acts of murder. He then worries about not having been able to pray silently with the men he overheard and wonders why he could not speak the word "amen." While it is an instance of dramatic irony that Macbeth feels he needs, or deserves, a blessing after committing a murder, this fixation with the word—as well as the voices he hears cursing his house—implies he is concerned about the state of his soul. It is unclear whether these voices are supernatural, the products of his own guilt, or both, but they accurately predict the downfall that awaits Macbeth.

Act 2, Scene 3

Summary

A hungover porter answers the knocking from the previous scene and finds Macduff and Lennox at the gate. Macbeth arrives wearing his dressing gown and says the king is not yet awake. Macduff goes to wake the king, who had asked to be roused early. While they wait, Lennox describes a night of unruly weather with strong winds and sinister voices in the air. Macduff returns to say the king has been murdered. He goes to wake the castle while Macbeth and Lennox hurry to Duncan's room.

Lady Macbeth comes to see what is going on, and Macduff tells her it is too gruesome for a woman to hear about. At this moment, Banquo arrives, and Macduff tells him what has happened. Lady Macbeth, still in the room, seems shocked. Macbeth and Lennox return with Ross, just ahead of Malcolm and Donalbain. Macbeth confirms the king is dead, and Lennox adds that they found the guards with bloodied faces and daggers lying on their pillows. Macbeth says he killed them in a

fury after finding the dead king, and Macduff asks why. Macbeth says he did it out of love for Duncan. At this moment, Lady Macbeth appears to faint, and everyone goes to her aid, except Malcolm and Donalbain. The brothers decide they may be the assassin's next target and decide that they must leave Scotland. Malcolm will travel south to England, and Donalbain will depart for Ireland.

Analysis

The porter's description of his night's drinking includes some jokes about how drink affects sexual performance, which provides a comic mirror image to Lady Macbeth's near-constant questioning of her husband's manhood. Likewise, Lennox's small talk mirrors the conversation Banquo and Fleance had in the previous scene, in which they observed the night's strange mood.

Macbeth reacts to the news of Duncan's murder with predictable outrage, claiming to have been so overcome with emotion that he killed the guards right away. Of course, he actually killed them so they would have no chance to deny the assassination or talk about Lady Macbeth giving them drink, which might cast suspicion in her direction. The other thanes and lords seem satisfied by Macbeth's reaction, but Macduff's single question about killing the guards—"Wherfore did you so?"—reveals his doubt, however small, about Macbeth's story. Macduff knows dead guards can provide no information about who was behind the killing.

Lady Macbeth shows in this scene that while she privately rejects the expectations for her gender, she will happily play the part to suit her ends. Macduff's comment that the talk of murder is not suitable for her ears is an example of dramatic irony, considering she planned said murder. She seems to realize that Macbeth's claim of love for Duncan as the motive for killing the guards is overstated and recognizes the doubt framed in Macduff's single question, which is why she fakes a fainting spell just as Macbeth finishes his declarations. She clearly does not want her husband to answer more questions. Her ruse works, as all the men in the room rush to her aid, except Malcolm and Donalbain.

Malcolm also seems to suspect Macbeth in his father's death, as he and his brother decide not to meet with the thanes to investigate further. Malcolm says that a treacherous man can easily show emotions he doesn't feel, a comment which could

be aimed at any of the thanes but seems a direct dig at Macbeth's overly passionate speech.

Act 2, Scene 4

Summary

Ross talks to an old man about bad omens and a seeming impenetrable darkness since the king's murder. Ross addresses the man as "father," although this could be a term of respect for the man's age. Ross says the king's horses ran wild and escaped their stable after their master's death. The old man says the horses ate each other. Macduff arrives, and Ross asks him if anything new has been discovered about the culprits. Macduff says Duncan's sons are suspects in the murder, as they have fled the country. He adds that Macbeth has left for Scone, where he will be crowned king, and that Duncan's body is on its way to burial. Macduff will return to his home in Fife rather than attend the coronation, but Ross sets out for the ceremony.

Analysis

While the witches are not present in the scenes surrounding Duncan's murder, their sinister nature is echoed in the many references to strange events and weather; the portents refer not only to the witches, but also to regicide as a disturbance of order. Ross makes an observation about the eerie mood enveloping the country, which Banquo and Lennox observed previously. When Macduff arrives with the news that Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, have left Scotland, he says suspicion has been put upon them. This choice of words is telling because it implies that Macduff himself does not necessarily see them as suspects. His choice not to attend Macbeth's coronation reveals his distaste for the new king and also hints toward his suspicions.

Act 3, Scene 1

Summary

Macbeth has been crowned king, and Banquo stands alone to contemplate how this follows the witches' prediction. He has suspicions about Macbeth's role in Duncan's death and considers his own part of the prophecy—that he, Banquo, will father many kings.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, with lords and attendants in tow, interrupt Banquo's reflections. They call him their "chief guest" and ask how long he plans to stay with them. Banquo tells them he and Fleance plan to leave the castle in the afternoon to go riding, but he promises to return in time for the banquet. Before Banquo leaves, Macbeth adds fuel to the rumors about Malcolm and Donalbain, saying they have lied their ways into the courts of England and Ireland.

After Banquo departs, Macbeth has two new visitors at the gate. While he waits for them to enter, he considers Banquo's part of the witches' prediction—that Banquo's descendants will rule Scotland. This stirs envy in Macbeth; furthermore, Banquo, if he has guessed the truth, may present an immediate threat. The solution arrives in the form of Macbeth's visitors, two murderers that Macbeth hires to kill Banquo and Fleance on their return home that night.

Analysis

Even though Banquo suspects Macbeth may have had a hand in Duncan's murder, he is oddly unconcerned about his own safety. He freely tells Macbeth the details of his plan to go riding in the afternoon, including his son's plans to accompany him. Because he spends some time thinking about what the witches said about his role as the father of kings, perhaps he believes this gives him protection from harm, or perhaps he is simply reluctant to begin treating his friend Macbeth as an enemy.

The prophecy about Banquo troubles Macbeth as well. He frets that the fates have given him a "fruitless crown," because he has no heirs of his own. He feels cheated by the possibility that he has taken the throne only to have it taken from him by one of Banquo's descendants. Because he does not know how Banquo's descendants might get to the throne, he feels threatened. Furthermore, Macbeth reflects that if the prophecy about Banquo is fulfilled, it means he has committed murder and imperiled his soul only for the benefit of Banquo's

descendants. And Banquo, by guessing the truth, may present an immediate threat. In hiring the murderers to kill Banquo, the full extent of Macbeth's change is revealed. Although he is increasingly horrified by his own acts, his behavior becomes even more rash. Before and even after killing Duncan, Macbeth experienced periods of doubt and deliberation about the act and needed his wife to press him forward. In dealing with the murderers, he experiences no such hesitation and does not consult his wife, instead letting his ambition guide him completely. Although he is unwilling to do the killing himself, he seems comfortable with ordering the death of his friend now that he has the power to do so.

Act 3, Scene 2

Summary

Lady Macbeth confirms that Banquo has left the court and encourages Macbeth to bury any guilt he still has about Duncan. He counters by describing his fears about Banquo and Fleance. He hints to her that he plans to eliminate the threat they present, but he will not tell her more until the deed is accomplished.

Analysis

Lady Macbeth's role in her marriage has changed somewhat. Her comment as she waits to speak to Macbeth shows that they are not entirely happy now that they have the crown, but her interpretation of his moods also shows that the two are communicating less. She once again tells him to stop worrying about Duncan's murder, which is not what Macbeth is worried about at this point. He does reveal to her that his preoccupation is more about the threat that Banquo poses to their position, but he does not share the details of his plans. This secrecy, although it is thin, represents a departure from their previous relationship, in which they made plans together.

Act 3, Scene 3

Summary

Macbeth's hired murderers prepare to ambush Banquo and Fleance along a darkened road. They attack and kill Banquo when the two arrive, but Fleance escapes. The murderers set off to inform Macbeth.

Analysis

Even though Macbeth has initiated forceful action to try to stop Banquo's offspring from taking the throne, Fleance's escape allows the witches' prophecy to remain possible. The outcome of Macbeth's attempt illustrates that he cannot "trammel up the consequences," as he had longed to in Act I; that is, he cannot control all that happens as a result of his fateful act of regicide. Fleance's escape also suggests that perhaps the witches' prophecies originate from a supernatural force that Macbeth cannot control.

Act 3, Scene 4

Summary

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth host a banquet for the lords at court. As the king and queen greet their guests, one of the murderers arrives with blood on his face. Macbeth talks to him, and the murderer tells him that Banquo is dead but that Fleance escaped. Macbeth decides to pursue Fleance later; he returns to the banquet.

During the banquet, Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost enter and sit in his own place at the table. The others do not see the ghost, so they are confused when Macbeth asks which of them has "done this" (placed Banquo's ghost at the table). The lords think Macbeth is ill when he addresses the ghost directly. Lady Macbeth tries to cover for him, but she scolds him for being unmanly and letting his fear and guilt get the better of him. Macbeth speaks again to the ghost, and the ghost leaves. Macbeth then tries to cover up by proposing a toast to Banquo.

Shortly after, the ghost returns, and when Macbeth sees it again, he orders it to leave. By this point, his behavior has ruined the banquet. Even though the ghost leaves and Lady

Macbeth makes more excuses for Macbeth, saying he is ill, the party breaks up. After the lords leave, Macbeth tells his wife he fears Banquo's revenge and asks why Macduff didn't attend the banquet. Both these events, the ghost and Macduff's absence, make Macbeth nervous, so he resolves to visit the three witches the following day.

Analysis

Macbeth is confident in his actions when he sends the murderers to pursue Banquo, and that confidence continues even after the murderer tells him Fleance has escaped. Although Macbeth has not yet eliminated the threat of Banquo's offspring, which makes him nervous, he is thankful to know that Banquo can't expose him now. He plans to go after Fleance again later. However, Macbeth's confidence evaporates entirely upon seeing Banquo's ghost seated at his table. He is so undone, he forgets who is watching and talks to the ghost, denying to the apparition that he had anything to do with its death.

Lady Macbeth believes the vision is like the dagger Macbeth saw before he stabbed Duncan—a product of his fear and doubt. She scolds him for his lack of courage and compares these visions to a grandmother's fireside story. However, like the dagger, it is unclear whether this is a figment of Macbeth's mind or a supernatural influence. Lady Macbeth was willing to believe in spirits and the witches' prophecies when they suited her, but now that those same spirits are creating inconvenience for her, she prefers to think of them as products of her husband's weakness. His weakness forces her to take charge by making excuses for Macbeth's illness, but even as she does so, she can tell their position is slipping.

Act 3, Scene 5

Summary

The witches convene with their goddess Hecate, who is angry that they have been dealing with Macbeth without her advice. She thinks he is a bad man, but she agrees to meet with the witches and Macbeth the next day at the pit of Acheron. She plans to show him visions that will lead him to his undoing.

Analysis

Hecate thinks Macbeth is unworthy of the attentions the witches have shown him. They have helped him become king, even though she thinks he is undeserving of their help and only interested in himself. She says she plans to create havoc for Macbeth by further playing on his ambition in additional visions. As in most good dramas in which the plot is sparked by a prophecy, Macbeth will attempt to flout or evade the prophecy, and Hecate knows this. Because Hecate seems unnecessary to the plot, many critics have argued that her scenes were not written by Shakespeare.

Act 3, Scene 6

Summary

Lennox meets with another thane and talks about the strange events and suspicious deaths that have taken place recently. He mentions Duncan's murder, Banquo's killing, and Fleance's departure. The sons may be accused of killing their fathers, he asserts, because Malcolm, Donalbain, and Fleance all fled after the murders. He talks about Macbeth killing Duncan's guards, and it becomes clear he suspects Macbeth is behind all the killings. Both men refer to Macbeth as a tyrant. The other lord tells Lennox that Malcolm has been accepted into the English court and that Macduff is on his way there to find him and ask the English king for an army to depose Macbeth. Macbeth has also heard all of this and may be preparing for battle, so the two pray for Macduff's success.

Analysis

When Lennox talks about Macbeth's grief for Duncan and his actions against Duncan's guards, his tone is sarcastic. Banquo's death has caused Lennox and the other lords to notice a pattern—the people Macbeth professes to love somehow keep winding up dead. The conversation raises the question of whether Macbeth might have gotten away with his plot if he had left Banquo alone. Instead, suspicions are high; Macbeth's lords call him "tyrant" behind his back and have begun making plans to get rid of him.

Act 4, Scene 1

Summary

The witches meet at the pit of Acheron and brew a spell in their cauldron to create trouble, likely for Macbeth. Hecate arrives and praises their efforts, and then Macbeth appears. During his visit with the witches, three apparitions rise from the cauldron, each one giving Macbeth information about his future. The first is a helmeted head that warns Macbeth to beware of Macduff. Macbeth gives thanks for the warning. The second is a bloodied child who assures Macbeth that "none of woman born shall harm Macbeth." At this, Macbeth decides Macduff isn't a threat, but he plans to kill him anyway, just to be safe. The third apparition is another child. This one wears a crown and holds a tree in its hand. It says Macbeth will hold the throne until Great Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill. Because the movement of an entire forest doesn't seem possible, Macbeth takes reassurance from this omen as well.

After the last apparition, Macbeth demands to know more, but the witches tell him to seek no more answers. He threatens them with a curse, and as the cauldron sinks into the earth, a procession of eight kings and Banquo's ghost enter the scene. Macbeth speaks to them, though they do not respond, and he understands from the ghost's smile that this vision is Banquo and his descendants, all kings. The final king holds a mirror, in which Banquo's line seems to stretch to infinity. Macbeth is upset, so the witches make music and dance to cheer him, and then they vanish.

Lennox arrives moments later with word that Macduff is in England. Macbeth decides to take this opportunity to ambush Macduff's castle at Fife. He plans to murder Macduff's family and servants, showing no mercy.

Analysis

The visions at the center of this scene renew Macbeth's confidence in his future. Because the witches' previous predictions have fed his ambition and given him everything he wanted, he does not pause to think that these visions may be incomplete or that the witches may not be working in his best interests. Instead, he reads the visions at face value. Thinking that the final two messages—that no one born of woman can

cause him harm, and that he will not lose in battle until a forest moves to a hill—assure his victory, he ignores the first message that emphasizes Macduff as a threat. With an arrogance derived from the second and third visions, he orders an attack on Macduff's castle, showing how he has changed, perhaps under the twin burdens of power and guilt. His attack on Macduff's castle is avaricious, vindictive, and rash.

Macbeth is visibly distressed by the vision of Banquo's descendants in a long line of kings; this prediction has been plaguing him for some time. However, he makes no immediate plans to locate or eliminate Fleance. Instead, he focuses on Macduff's family, providing additional evidence that he is acting on emotion rather than deliberation. He says as much when he declares that he will now immediately act on his thoughts: "The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand." He believes he is able to adopt this approach because the second and third visions protect him, but again his ambition and arrogance are driving him to pick and choose—to believe the prophecies he likes, rather than observing them carefully as a whole. He has information about his destiny but no true understanding of it, which leads him to act rashly.

Though it is Malcolm, not Fleance, who becomes king at the end of *Macbeth*, Shakespeare likely added the detail about Banquo's role as the father of many kings in order to flatter James I, whose family claimed the real-life Banquo among its ancestors.

Act 4, Scene 2

Summary

Lady Macduff, her son, and the Thane of Ross are in the castle at Fife. Lady Macduff is angry at her husband for leaving. His absence makes them look like traitors, and she is unprotected. Ross attempts to comfort her and convince her that this is all for the greater good, but then he leaves. Lady Macduff requests that her son tell her what he would do if his father were dead; she then pretends this is the case. The boy doesn't believe her because she isn't crying or planning to remarry. Suddenly a messenger arrives and advises the family to vacate the castle immediately, but Lady Macduff is confused because she has done nothing wrong and doesn't know where she would go. Before she can think any further, Macbeth's hired

murderers arrive and kill her son. She runs, but the murderers pursue her.

Analysis

Under the circumstances, Lady Macduff has every right to be angry with her husband for leaving their castle unprotected. Killers are on their way to attack. Lady Macduff's troubled emotions result in a somewhat cruel conversation with her son in which she asks the child what he would do if his father were dead. In fact, it is the child's mother and the child himself who meet their end only moments later.

Macduff's son is clever and prophetic in his own way. At no point does the boy buy his mother's ruse that his father is dead, and he answers her cheekily with unassailable logic, pointing out that she isn't behaving as a widow might. The child asks if his father is a traitor, and the mother says that Macduff is a traitor because he swears and lies. Again, she is venting her anger at her husband for leaving them, even though it was for the greater good. Macduff may be a traitor to a false king, but he is loyal to the true monarchy, which is why he is away now. The son is again clever about the fate of traitors; he says those who cheat and lie far outnumber honest men, and so traitors should have no trouble defeating the honest men. This certainly has been the case in *Macbeth* so far.

Act 4, Scene 3

Summary

Macduff finds Malcolm at the palace of King Edward the Confessor in England. They mourn Duncan's death and share their suspicions about Macbeth's hand in it. Malcolm fears returning to Scotland to claim his throne, but he is moved by the fact that Macduff left his wife and child to come to England, a sign of the matter's grave importance. However, not yet fully convinced, Malcolm confesses to being a lustful and greedy man—a false claim made in an effort to dissuade Macduff. Macduff doesn't seem to think these flaws are so terrible. Malcolm adds that he has no virtues to balance his vices, and Macduff falls into despair for Scotland. At this, Malcolm is moved further; he says he lied about his faults and agrees to follow Macduff to save Scotland. A doctor

approaches and tells them the king will be out soon. The king is tending to a group of sick people, the doctor says, and is able to heal the sick with his touch. Malcolm explains to Macduff how he has seen the king use a touch and a prayer to cure many people of "the Evil" (a reference to scrofula, a tuberculosis infection of the lymph nodes in the neck).

Ross then joins the meeting with news of Scotland, saying the country is in a sorry state. When Macduff inquires about his family, Ross is evasive and instead asks Malcolm to help. Malcolm tells him he will return with an English army of 10,000 men from his uncle Siward. Macduff again asks if Ross has news of his family, and Ross finally tells Macduff that an ambush on the castle left his wife, child, and servants dead. Macduff has trouble absorbing this news, asking Ross to repeat the details more than once. Malcolm says that avenging their deaths will help Macduff's grief. Macduff blames himself for leaving his family unguarded, and Malcolm again encourages Macduff to use his feelings to fuel the coming battle. They set off for Scotland.

Analysis

Both Malcolm and Macduff appear somewhat desperate when they meet. Malcolm is desperate not to return to Scotland, spinning tales about his debauchery, perversion, and greed to convince Macduff that he's not fit to take up his father's crown. Macduff is so desperate to rid his homeland of Macbeth that he dismisses Malcolm's tales as inconsequential. Because Macduff clearly thinks a perverted spendthrift would be better on the throne than its current occupant, Malcolm understands how bad things must be in Scotland and how bad Macbeth must be as king. Finally, Malcolm takes up the challenge before him, and he does so with amazing gusto. When Macduff is crushed by the news about his family, Malcolm tries to spin it in a positive way, saying Macduff can use this loss to fuel him in battle against Macbeth. He does not mean to appear insensitive.

In a diversion from the main action of the scene, an English doctor approaches, and Malcolm inquires after the whereabouts of King Edward. The doctor replies that the king will come out shortly. The king in question is Edward the Confessor, and the moment may appear a little out of place, but it relates to Macduff and Malcolm's conversation about what a king should be. The doctor's announcement leads them to discuss a particularly ideal king, one who heals the sick and

drives out evil. The fact that Edward is currently tending to a group of people with his healing hands emphasizes his contrast to Macbeth, who has bloody hands.

Act 5, Scene 1

Summary

A doctor speaks with one of Lady Macbeth's attendants. The attendant describes Lady Macbeth sleepwalking at night, sometimes writing and sealing letters before going back to bed. They see her enter the room holding a candle; she has requested that a candle be at her side at all times. She rubs her hands together as if to wash them. Although the doctor and attendant don't know the details, they understand that she has seen or done something terrible. In her haze, she is remembering Duncan's murder, talking about bloodstains on her hands that will not wash away, rambling about how "we" have nothing to fear, and wondering at how much blood was in the old man. Then, without the doctor or attendant understanding, she appears to be talking to Macbeth—scolding him for his guilt about Banquo and telling him to get to bed. The doctor says her illness is beyond his help and tells the attendant to keep her calm. He suspects the truth behind what she is saying, but he does not want to say it aloud.

Analysis

Hundreds of years before psychotherapy became a common practice, *Macbeth* demonstrated the dangers of repressed guilt. In earlier scenes, Lady Macbeth warns her husband against dwelling on his murder of Duncan, lest the guilt drive him to madness. In contrast, Lady Macbeth denies her guilt, justifies their actions, and expresses no hesitation or regret. At this point in the play, the memories of Duncan's murder haunt her dreams, driving her to sleepwalk and hallucinate; she reenacts the murder and attempts to wash imaginary blood from her hands.

Macbeth has now adopted the hardened ambition and rash quickness to action that were once his wife's domain. He orders the death of his friend without hesitation. In addition, he orders the deaths of Macduff's family and servants, all innocents, without a moment's hesitation. Furthermore, even

though his wife is gravely ill, he appears to have abandoned her to the care of doctors and servants. This is the first appearance Lady Macbeth has made since the banquet and the first in which she appears without any interaction with her husband, which implies Macbeth's ambition and preoccupation with preserving his power have overshadowed his love for his wife.

Act 5, Scene 2

Summary

In the countryside near Dunsinane, the lords Caithness, Menteith, Lennox, and Angus meet with a number of soldiers. Menteith says English troops are on their way, led by Malcolm and Macduff. Angus says they will join these troops near Birnam Wood, and Lennox confirms that Donalbain is not with Malcolm and the English army. They then discuss Macbeth, who is fortifying the castle at Dunsinane. They speculate that he cannot hold his position, as the troops that will follow him are moved only by orders, not by love or true loyalty. The thanes and their soldiers march on toward Birnam to meet the English army and Malcolm, whom they see as the rightful heir to the Scottish crown.

Analysis

With the other lords against him and the English army on its way, Macbeth's final defeat looms, just as prophesied by the witches. The armies will meet at Birnam Wood, whose move to Dunsinane Hill was prophesied as a danger to Macbeth. While the precise method by which the forest will move is not yet clear, the troops are marching at the edges of Macbeth's destiny.

As the thanes speculate about Macbeth's unstable mind, his guilt, and the lack of loyalty among his troops, they gain conviction that they and Malcolm will succeed in healing their sickly country. By shedding their blood to drown the weeds—Macbeth—they will purge Scotland of the source of its illness.

Act 5, Scene 3

Summary

In the castle at Dunsinane, Macbeth runs through the predictions from the visions the witches showed him. The forest cannot move, and Malcolm was born of a woman, so Macbeth believes the prophecies protect him from harm. When a servant enters to announce the English army has arrived in the country, he responds with anger and sends the servant away. Left alone, he ruminates that he has moved nearly into old age without the love, honor, and friends that should surround him now. Calling out for his servant, Seyton, he resigns himself to an early death. When Seyton confirms the arrival of the English army, Macbeth asks him to bring his armor. While Seyton fetches the armor, Macbeth talks to the doctor about Lady Macbeth's condition. The doctor says she is not sick in body but in mind, and Macbeth commands him to cure her. The doctor says she has to cure herself, and Macbeth decides that all medicine is nonsense. He puts his armor on and prepares for battle, reciting the prophecy about Birnam Wood and Dunsinane. The doctor decides to get as far from Dunsinane as possible.

Analysis

Even as Macbeth runs through the prophecies, his belief in their protective power blinds him to the instability of his actual situation; the thanes have defected, his troops are loyal in name only, and enemy armies are gathering nearby. He believes so strongly that the witches have given him a complete and true vision of his future that he takes no preventive action when he learns 10,000 troops have arrived in Scotland. Nonetheless, though he seems assured of his safety, he is less so in his happiness. He reflects that he has nothing he would expect to have as he ages—not honor or love or obedience or friends. His ruminations on his lack of love or friendship, on his having only "mouth-honor," are the culmination of his own unwitting prophecy in Act I—having murdered his king, nothing but "the lees," the dregs, of life are left to him. He thinks that, though he's still breathing, his heart would not care if he simply stopped and died. Here, Shakespeare inserts some verbal irony as Macbeth desperately calls again for a servant named Seyton—a

wordplay on Satan.

Macbeth's concern for his wife's condition appears detached in his conversation with the doctor. He still does not interact with her directly. She does not appear in this scene, and Macbeth's talk with the doctor gives no indication that Macbeth has seen her or has plans to do so. There is some emotion evident in his orders to the doctor to make her well, but this urgency speaks to Macbeth's inability to deal with her as she is. He becomes angry when the doctor suggests Lady Macbeth must cure herself, possibly because that course might also require her husband's support, and Macbeth has no time for that.

Act 5, Scene 4

Summary

The Scottish army and the English army, with all the lords and thanes attending, meet at Birnam Wood. Malcolm instructs each of the soldiers to cut a tree limb and carry it as camouflage on the march to Dunsinane, which will allow them to conceal their numbers from Macbeth.

Analysis

Here, the full ambiguity of the witches' words becomes evident. Birnam Wood can indeed move across the countryside to Dunsinane Hill, or at least the wood can appear to move. This is a military strategy, and Macbeth—as a seasoned warrior—might have thought of such a possibility had he allowed himself to question the prophecy at any point. Because Macbeth did not think of this contingency, the plan also illustrates Malcolm as a superior strategist.

Act 5, Scene 5

Summary

Still in the castle at Dunsinane, Macbeth has convinced himself that he and his men have a good chance in battle. From another room, he and Seyton hear women crying. Seyton

leaves to see what is going on and returns to announce that the queen is dead. Macbeth is stunned and says that she "should have died hereafter," a statement that could mean she would have died later anyway or that she shouldn't have died now but later. He reflects on how short life really is and how it seems meaningless. Then a messenger arrives to announce Birnam Wood appears to be approaching the castle. Macbeth threatens to hang the messenger if he is lying, but now Macbeth feels fear about the upcoming battle.

Analysis

Based on the evidence available, Macbeth has not seen his wife since her madness began, and he is not with her when she dies. When he receives word of her death, he appears saddened by the shortness of her life and seems to despair about the worth and meaning of life in general. Depending on its performance, the speech can show Macbeth as callous toward his wife's death (she would have died anyway) or he may be seen as wishing Lady Macbeth had held on longer because, with battle looming, he has no chance to mourn for her. Contemplating his future without his wife, he sees the years ahead of him as a series of ephemeral and meaningless days trailing to a dusty death. It is unclear how much of this existential crisis is caused by Lady Macbeth's passing and how much is motivated by Macbeth's own dwindling fortunes. Although the soliloquy is moving, he almost immediately moves on when the message arrives about Birnam Wood traveling toward Dunsinane; self-interest trumps grief.

Act 5, Scene 6

Summary

Only three short speeches long, this scene nevertheless brings the play to the brink of war. Malcolm, his uncle Siward, Macduff, and the army approach Dunsinane. Malcolm declares that they are near enough to their target to abandon the branches they have used for camouflage. The men wish one another well for the battle, and the war begins.

Analysis

Birnam Wood has now come to Dunsinane Hill, and the participants are eager for the fight to begin. Malcolm again displays his leadership and diplomacy as he gives his uncle Siward the honor of leading the battle's first charge.

Act 5, Scene 7

Summary

In the midst of battle, Macbeth finds himself cornered, but he continues to fight. He takes some comfort in the prophecy that no person born of woman can do him harm. Siward's son finds Macbeth, and Macbeth kills him, declaring that the young man must have been born of woman. Macbeth flees before Macduff arrives. Macduff pursues Macbeth, while Siward and Malcolm make their way toward the castle.

Analysis

Even though the prophecy about Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane Hill has not played out as he had thought it would, Macbeth continues to place faith in the second vision's words: none born of woman can harm him. Perhaps, with the battle upon him, he has no time to consider other possible meanings, but his clinging to this vision represents his continued blind allegiance to what he believes is his destiny. He takes his ability to kill Siward's son as proof that the remaining prophecy is true, still driven by arrogance even as the battle rages around him.

Act 5, Scene 8

Summary

Macduff catches up with Macbeth on another part of the battlefield. Macbeth still thinks there is a way out, so when Macduff appears, Macbeth tells him that he has already killed Macduff's family and that Macduff is next. Macbeth brags about his charmed life, saying none born of woman can hurt

him. Macduff tells Macbeth that he was not "of woman born" in the usual way; instead, he was cut from his mother's womb. At this news, Macbeth doesn't want to fight, but he will not yield when Macduff tells him to do so. They fight, and Macduff kills Macbeth.

There is a retreat, and then Malcolm, Ross, Siward, and the rest of the thanes and soldiers enter the scene with colors flying. Malcolm regrets the losses of the day. Siward learns his son was killed but that he died honorably, which makes Siward happy. Macduff arrives with Macbeth's head on a pike—the standard treatment for traitors of the time. Macbeth's head is treated as a trophy and as a caution to other would-be traitors. Macduff and the others hail Malcolm as king. Malcolm assumes his title and awards the thanes by naming them all as earls, the first time this title has been used in Scotland. He decides to send word to the exiles still abroad, such as Donalbain and Fleance, that they may come home. It is now safe to return, as Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are both dead. Malcolm believes that Lady Macbeth took her own life.

The new king extends thanks to one and all and invites everyone to his upcoming coronation at Scone.

Analysis

It turns out the "none of woman born" prophecy was extremely technical about the mechanics of childbirth. The prophecy, in the end, seems more like an empty taunt than a promise of a special destiny, as Macbeth turns out to be as mortal as anyone. Having based crucial decisions on the witches' predictions, he finds that all their prophesies were misleading and that he might have been better off had he never encountered the "weird sisters."

Even when Macbeth has run out of protective prophecies and knows he is likely beaten, he refuses to yield to Macduff. He is, in some senses, the same relentless opponent he showed himself to be in the reports from Act I, but now his efforts are in the service of nothing, as his "fruitless crown" is on the point of being torn from him.

Triumph and sadness mingle as Malcolm and his thanes capture the castle. Malcolm has matured through battle, evolving from a green prince to a seasoned monarch. He is upset that not all their friends have survived. But, observing the heroic code, they all put a brave face on the situation.

The men find comfort in Macduff's war trophy, the gory head of their former friend Macbeth—this dead butcher and cursed usurper. Macduff and the others are heartened as they hail Malcolm, the new and rightful king of Scotland.

“, Quotes

"Come, you spirits/That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me here,/And fill me from the crown to the toe top-full/Of direst cruelty."

—Lady Macbeth , Act 1, Scene 5

Lady Macbeth calls on the spirits to make her less like a woman and fill her with the cruelty of a man in order to carry out her plan to murder Duncan when he arrives at her castle.

"Bring forth men-children only,/For thy undaunted mettle should compose/Nothing but males."

— Macbeth , Act 1, Scene 7

After Lady Macbeth encourages him to go through with Duncan's murder and take the crown, Macbeth declares that her temperament is most suited to male children. This statement is also an example of situational irony because the Macbeths have no children, nor will they live to have children later.

"Is this a dagger which I see before me,/The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch/thee./I have thee not, and yet I see thee still."

— Macbeth , Act 2, Scene 1

Before he goes to kill Duncan, Macbeth hallucinates a dagger like the one he carries with him. The immaterial thing persists; Macbeth sees it though he can't touch it. This is a vision that represents his guilt and hesitation about committing the murder, although he finds his real dagger and resolves to go through with the act.

"From this instant/There's nothing serious in mortality./All is but toys. Renown and grace is dead./The wine of life is drawn, and the mere lees/Is left this vault to brag of."

— Macbeth , Act 2, Scene 3

Macbeth is lamenting the loss of Duncan. From this moment on there's nothing meaningful in life. Mere toys are all that is left, along with the dregs of "the wine of life." Shakespeare uses verbal irony here. The audience and Lady Macbeth know the truth, but the other characters are unaware that Macbeth, the murderer, stands in their midst.

"To be thus is nothing,/But to be safely thus. Our fears in Banquo/Stick deep, and in his royalty of nature/Reigns that which would be feared. 'Tis much he/dares,/And to that dauntless temper of his mind/He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valor/To act in safety. There is none but he/Whose being I do fear; and under him/My genius is

rebuked, as it is said/Mark Antony's was by Caesar."

— Macbeth , Act 3, Scene 1

Macbeth reflects that although he's now king, his reign is meaningless if he is not safe. He is now suspicious, afraid, and envious of Banquo. Macbeth believes that Banquo is fearless, daring, and wise enough to act against him "in safety." His envy comes to the fore later in the speech when he refers to the witches' prophecy for Banquo as "father to a line of kings" and laments that he has killed Duncan "for Banquo's issue" (heirs). Shakespeare employs a historical allusion here, as Macbeth now feels that his guiding spirit (genius) must be as dejected as the guiding spirit of Mark Antony, who was defeated by Octavius Caesar.

"Naught's had, all's spent,/ Where our desire is got without content./'Tis safer to be that which we destroy/ Than by destruction dwell in doubtful joy."

— Lady Macbeth , Act 3, Scene 2

As she waits for Macbeth to come speak with her, Lady Macbeth reveals a sliver of guilt about how they have come to power. She knows he has been brooding and she thinks that taints the joy they should have as king and queen. It would have been better not to have the throne than be miserable now.

"Double, double toil and trouble;/Fire burn, and cauldron bubble."

— Witches , Act 4, Scene 1

As the witches prepare to meet with Macbeth and provide him more prophecies they cook up a noxious spell. While they add ingredients, they utter the evil enchantment: "Double, double toil and trouble." Because they are expecting Macbeth, the meaning of the enchantment can be read as calling down twice the work and woe on Macbeth's head. He has already doubled the work—killing Banquo in addition to Duncan and his guards. He soon will add to his toil the deaths of Lady Macduff, her son, and servants. Through this heinous toil Macbeth is bringing more trouble for himself, just as the witches are literally stirring double the toil and trouble for him in their cauldron.

*"Then the liars and swearers are
fools, for there/are liars and
swearers enough to beat the
honest/men and hang up them."*

— Macduff's Son , Act 4, Scene 2

When Lady Macduff tells her son honest men must punish (by hanging) liars and swearers, the son observes that there are enough dishonest men in the world to beat the honest ones. His statement captures the state of Scotland at this time as the bad guys—Macbeth and his wife—seem to be winning. It appears all the more true when the child and his mother are murdered moments later by Macbeth's men.

*"What need we fear/who knows it,
when none can call our power
to/account? Yet who would have
thought the old man/to have had
so much blood in him?"*

— Lady Macbeth , Act 5, Scene 1

In the depths of her madness Lady Macbeth's words show the conflict between her guilt and her ambition. Talking to her husband, even though he isn't there, she questions who could

hold them responsible for Duncan's murder now that they are king and queen. At the same time she expresses wonder as she remembers the blood and horror of the murder scene.

*"Life's but a walking shadow, a
poor player/That struts and frets
his hour upon the stage/And then
is heard no more. It is a tale/Told
by an idiot, full of sound and
fury,/Signifying nothing."*

— Macbeth , Act 5, Scene 5

With his defeat looming, Macbeth receives the news that Lady Macbeth has died. He is saddened and reflects on how life is too short, makes no sense, and in the end has no meaning.

*"Despair thy charm,/And let the
angel whom thou still hast served/
Tell thee Macduff was from his
mother's womb/Untimely ripped."*

— Macduff , Act 5, Scene 8

When Macbeth meets Macduff on the battlefield, he boasts about the prophecy he thinks makes him invincible. Macduff delights in telling him about how his own birth, essentially a Caesarian section, satisfies the prophecy and makes Macbeth vulnerable. Macbeth realizes he has misread the witches and his time is up.

Symbols

Blood

Blood represents the guilt Macbeth and Lady Macbeth share. When Macbeth returns from killing Duncan, his hands are covered with blood, which marks his actions. Lady Macbeth also stains her hands when she returns the daggers to the scene of the crime. For her, the symbolism becomes more permanent, as she hallucinates blood on her hands during the throes of her madness later in the play.

Ghosts

Ghosts represent the way past actions come back to haunt the present and future, as when Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost seated at the banquet table. It is unclear whether the ghost is actually Banquo or a figment of Macbeth's guilt-ridden imagination. Later, when Banquo's ghost appears again, this time with the witches, he is leading a line of kings—his descendants—which demonstrates that his death will give rise to future monarchs who will rule Scotland.

Storms

The storms that rage in *Macbeth*—whenever the witches appear and on the night Duncan is murdered—are symbols of Scotland's unrest, both politically and socially. They also display Shakespeare's belief in "the great chain of being," a symbiotic relationship between a divinely appointed ruler, the people, and all of nature. Shakespeare uses storms and other natural disasters in *Macbeth* and other plays (*Julius Caesar*, for example) to foreshadow adverse actions planned against a ruler.

The thunder and lightning that accompany the witches' meetings reflect their intentions regarding Macbeth. Their predictions do Macbeth no favors, and his adherence to them leads to his own demise.

Themes

Ambition

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are driven to kill in the name of satisfying their ambitions. Lady Macbeth is particularly susceptible to the lure of power. Once the witches introduce the idea that Macbeth could be king, it is Lady Macbeth whose thoughts immediately turn to murder, and she plots accordingly. She is the one who pushes Macbeth to take part in killing Duncan. Once he has the throne, Macbeth works on his own to keep it, killing Banquo because he is a perceived threat. This second murder is the one that really arouses the suspicions of the other thanes and lords, which demonstrates how Macbeth's ambition becomes his undoing.

Gender Roles

Much of the action in the play is driven by women who do not act in conventionally feminine ways. Lady Macbeth defies the expectations of her gender with her ruthless actions. She asks the spirits to "unsex" her so she can carry out her part in Duncan's killing, and when Macbeth expresses any sign of doubt or guilt, she consistently attacks him for being unmanly. At the same time, she uses the expectations the other thanes and lords have for women—delicacy and sensitivity—when Macbeth is in trouble, feigning a fainting spell to create a distraction. Lady Macbeth's ultimate descent into madness serves as the punishment for her actions.

Destiny versus Free Will

After the three witches introduce their prophecy that he is to become king, Macbeth takes to the suggestion with alarming speed. Until this point, he is loyal to King Duncan and has just fought in battle to stop a rebellion against the king and bring one of the perpetrators, the Thane of Cawdor, to justice. When

Macbeth is awarded Cawdor's former title, he chooses to believe the rest of the prophecy; from then on, a lust for power and revenge appears to drive his actions. In this sense, he exerts his will in service of the prophecy. The same can be said of Macbeth's belief in the other visions that "predict" his invincibility. His belief in destiny causes him to act rashly and directly leads to his destruction.

Throughout the play, Shakespeare demonstrates that exercising free will has its consequences. Although the prophesies serve as a powerful catalyst for their actions, both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth show that their minds are divided in their pursuit of power. Lady Macbeth, initially firm in her resolve to act and to influence her husband's actions, eventually becomes racked with guilt, which manifests in hysteria and bizarre actions (her incessant handwashing and sleepwalking). Macbeth, initially goaded by his wife, freely chooses to follow her directives and then begins acting on his own, as when he orders killers to dispatch Banquo, Fleance, and Macduff's family. Macbeth's acts deliver the rewards he seeks (the kingship and power), but guilt gnaws at him, as seen in his fight with Macduff, when he reveals, "My soul is too much charged / with blood of thine already" (Act 5, Scene 8).

Loyalty

In the end, the thanes and lords who remained loyal to Duncan and his bloodline are rewarded. Malcolm is able to retake the throne and call his brother and Fleance back from exile. Macduff does lose his family, but he is allowed to avenge them when he kills Macbeth. Macduff also keeps his own life and title. Even Banquo will have a line of kings descended from him as his legacy. Macbeth's treachery, however, is punished by his death, but even before that, he loses the trust and faith of his people. Lady Macbeth—whose repressed guilt pushes her into insanity—precedes her husband in death.

Glossary

Birnam Wood: A Scottish forest near the town of Perth in eastern Scotland, about 12 miles from Dunsinane.

Cawdor: A village and castle in northern Scotland, near Inverness.

Colmekill: An island off the western coast of Scotland, better known as Iona.

Dunsinane: The highest point in the Sidlaw Hills, located near Perth in eastern Scotland. Ruins of an ancient fort can be found at the peak.

Earl: A ranking under the feudal system, lower than a marquis but higher than a viscount. In Anglo-Saxon times, an earl was assigned large divisions of the country to protect for the king.

Feudal: The medieval hierarchy of government, with the king at the top and various other governing ranks of nobility below him.

Fife: A town and country area on a peninsula in eastern Scotland, not far from Forres and Glamis.

Forres: A small town in northeastern Scotland. One of the country's oldest settlements, it is 27 miles northeast of Inverness.

Glamis: A castle and village in eastern Scotland.

Lord: A landowner under the feudal system who held some command over others but was also accountable to other nobility, including the king.

Scone: A Scottish village near the town of Perth and home of the Stone of Scone, the traditional seat of coronation for all Scottish kings. The stone was moved to Westminster Abbey in London in 1296, where it rested under the Coronation Chair. Today it resides at Edinburgh Castle. When James I assumed the throne in 1603, his crowning was said to have fulfilled a prophecy once attached to the stone, which declared that the Scots would someday rule.

Thane: A title under the feudal system, similar to a lord. Thanes could be born to their title or earn the title. A "king's thane" was part of a subclass of thanes who answered directly to the king, as seems to be the case with the thanes in *Macbeth*.

📖 Suggested Reading

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