

# Plot Summary

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The main events of a play or a novel - from the opening scene to the end of the story - make up its plot. This plot summary gives you an outline of all the important events in the play *Macbeth*.

The play opens on a 'blasted heath' or desolate wasteland somewhere in Scotland, where three witches are planning when, and under what circumstances, to meet again. They arrange to meet with a man called Macbeth. The witches meet with him, as arranged, as he is riding home from battle with his fellow general and close friend, Banquo. They greet him and pronounce him Thane of Cawdor and 'King hereafter'. Banquo is told that he will be father of kings. They then evaporate into thin air.



Immediately after this, a messenger, Ross, arrives on the scene and tells Macbeth that King Duncan has made him Thane of Cawdor in recognition of his valour in battle. Macbeth writes a letter to his wife at their Inverness castle informing her of the events. She immediately sets plans in motion to secure the throne for him. She persuades her husband to kill Duncan that night when he comes to visit. After much goading by his wife, Macbeth murders King Duncan in his sleep.

He returns with the dagger to his wife and tells her he cannot face putting it back in the murdered king's chamber. Lady Macbeth replaces the dagger and covers the king's drugged guards with his blood.

Macduff, a nobleman, arrives at the castle and discovers the dead king. Suspicion falls on the king's guards and Macbeth quickly kills them on pretext of being incensed by this. Macduff is not fooled by this. The king's sons Malcolm and Donalbain become suspicious of the whole business and flee. Macbeth is crowned king at Scone, but he has worries about Banquo's loyalty to the dead king, so he has him killed by hired assassins. Banquo's son Fleance escapes the ambush with his life.

Banquo's ghost turns up at the banquet later that night to haunt Macbeth. Macbeth's behaviour is bizarre. He is the only one who can see the ghost. It causes embarrassment to his wife, who ends the feast after making excuses for him.

Macbeth rules Scotland with a rod of iron, but he is still insecure. He knows he has to watch his back against some serious enemies. He consults the witches again. They call up apparitions or ghosts to tell him what is in store for him. Rather than this reassuring him, Macbeth is even more rattled by their revelations. He takes some comfort from the predictions that 'none born of woman' can harm him physically, and he cannot be defeated until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill. He resolves to put all his enemies to the sword, starting immediately with Macduff's wife and children.

In England, Macduff hears of these atrocities and joins forces with Malcolm against Macbeth. Meanwhile, back in Scotland, guilt is slowly eroding Lady Macbeth's mind, driving her mad. She takes to sleepwalking and reliving her memories of the aftermath of King Duncan's murder. Macbeth feels secure in the witches' reassurance that he cannot be harmed or defeated. When informed of his wife's illness, he does not appear perturbed. Lady Macbeth commits suicide, and when told of her death, he takes it in his stride, and appears preoccupied with his preparations for battle against Macduff's approaching army, camouflaged by branches from trees in Birnam Wood to resemble a walking forest.

During the battle, Macbeth realises the true significance of the witches' predictions. He challenges Macduff, who tells him that he was delivered by caesarean section, not born in the natural way. Macduff kills Macbeth and presents his head as a trophy to Malcolm, the new king of Scotland.

# Act 1

## Act 1, Scene 1

*Location: 'Open country', a deserted forest or hill in Scotland*

### Summary

The three witches meet on a stormy night out in the open country to discuss when they should meet with Macbeth.

### Analysis

The opening scene of *Macbeth* is very short but it introduces us to three of the most important and influential characters of the play - the three witches. The witches' physical presence in the play is very small but they remain a constant and influential presence throughout.

This first short scene establishes the witches' connection to Macbeth, the subject of the play, who they plan to meet. It makes the audience curious to discover who he is and also what is 'the hurlyburly' (I, i, 3) that the witches have been discussing. With this device, Shakespeare creates dramatic irony, in that he equips the audience with knowledge that Macbeth does not have and will never have throughout the action of the play, namely that the witches have an evil plan for him.

### Setting

The scene is set in 'the open country' in a storm and provides a prime example of pathetic fallacy, the device in which writers use the weather to reflect the mood or emotion of the scene. For example:

*When shall we three meet again,  
In thunder, lightning or in rain?*

(I, i, 1-2)

This dark and murky weather alerts the audience to the fact that the story will be dark and supernatural.

### Stage directions

Thunder is noted in the stage directions in this and all of the scenes featuring the witches, and the witches themselves often refer to the bad weather conditions.

### Language and style

The witches always appear as a group and are never differentiated between. Their speech mirrors this. Each witch speaks a line, which is continued by the next witch to create a continuous rhyme. In addition, they sometimes speak in unison as if they know what the others are thinking. This enhances their paranormal quality.

The witches' language is a type of rhythmic incantation and it appears in stark contrast to the mannered speech of noblemen that is adopted by most of the other characters in the play. It is also full of riddles and paradoxes, such as '... when the battle's lost and won' (I, i, 4), that leave the audience in no doubt that they are watching evil and subnormal creatures with their own bizarre values and morals. The witches refer to their two familiars, Graymalkin and Paddock, and appear to answer their calls. This, in itself, is enough to secure the audience's impression of them as witches.

### Debate Prompts

1. Why do you think Shakespeare chose to open the play with the witches, rather than Macbeth?
2. What is the effect of this first scene? What impressions does it make on you, the audience?
3. What is the effect of the way the witches speak?

# Act 1, Scene 2

*Location: A soldier's camp near Forres*

## Summary

The audience is introduced to King Duncan and his three sons. King Duncan hears from several soldiers of Macbeth's bravery in battle and decides to make Macbeth Thane of Cawdor.

## Analysis

As the scene opens, King Duncan and his sons meet a wounded officer and ask him for news of the battle. The officer tells them that Macbeth fought a close battle with Macdonald and the rebellious Scottish and Irish forces that he led, but that Macbeth was victorious. Macbeth then killed Macdonald.

The audience learns that Macbeth is related to King Duncan: 'O valiant cousin! Worthy gentleman!' (I, ii, 24). This also shows that, at this point in the play, Macbeth is held in high regard by Duncan.

The officer explains that the army immediately faced a new threat from the Norwegian king, who launched a fresh attack. Macbeth and his fellow captain Banquo were not afraid and they fought wholeheartedly and violently to defeat their enemy. The officer is too weak from his wounds to finish his story and so Duncan sends him away to be attended to by doctors.


Angus and Ross enter the stage and they are able to give King Duncan the news that he has been waiting for. They have come from the battle and inform Duncan that Macbeth has led his army to victory. The Norwegian king has been fined and forced to retreat. They also mention that the Thane of Cawdor has betrayed Duncan by fighting on the Norwegian side.

## Characterisation

In this scene, Macbeth is portrayed as a brave and loyal soldier. Duncan decides that the Thane of Cawdor should be killed and that his title should be conferred upon Macbeth as a reward for his courage and his loyalty: 'What he [the Thane of Cawdor] hath lost, noble Macbeth hath won' (I, ii, 67). This is an important quotation because the audience will later realise that when Macbeth becomes the Thane of Cawdor, he is as disloyal as his predecessor and pays for it with his life. The audience is reminded of how Macbeth has changed throughout the action of the play and how treachery cannot go unpunished.

## Context

This scene provides the audience with an introduction to the social context of the play. This is a society that is constantly at threat from external forces, at a time when wars were fought on bloody battlefields. Men gained wealth, power and status from their prowess in battle and paid with their life for their misdemeanours. The audience also learns that the play is set in Scotland, which was important at the time it was written because King James I had just come to the throne, having previously reigned as King James VI of Scotland. Shakespeare portrays Scottish people as brave, loyal and nationalistic. He also includes characters from Scottish history, including Banquo.



**Debate Prompt**

*Read this scene again. Find some quotations that show Macbeth in a good light at this point in the play.*

*Why do you think Shakespeare has chosen to portray Macbeth as a brave and loyal soldier at the start of the play?*

# Act 1, Scene 3

*Location: A heath near Forres*

## Summary

Macbeth and his friend, Banquo, meet the three witches on the heath as they return from battle. The witches make three predictions for each of them and Macbeth begins to wonder what the future might hold for him.

## Analysis

Once again, the three witches enter the stage to the sounds of thunder. They boast of their evil powers and discuss their activities since the last meeting. The third witch alludes to the limits of their power: 'Though his bark cannot be lost, / Yet it shall be tempest-tossed' (I, iii, 24-25). She is talking about a sailor that she wishes to upset. She means that while she cannot make the boat disappear, she can make his journey very unpleasant. Remembering the limits of the witches' power is important as the play progresses.



A drum roll announces the approach of Macbeth and so the witches recite another incantation to prepare their spell. Macbeth speaks his first line of the play: 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen' (I, iii, 38). This is the first indication that the witches have some kind of power over Macbeth. Even at this early stage in the play, he is unknowingly echoing their words.

It is Banquo who first notices the witches and he is clearly suspicious of them. He notes that they 'look not like th' inhabitants o' th' Earth' (I, iii, 41) and describes them using various unflattering adjectives. He questions whether they are alive and whether they understand what he is saying. Macbeth instructs them to speak and they proceed to hail him as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor and king 'hereafter'.

Banquo notices that Macbeth has gone quiet and appears to be lost in thought. He believes that Macbeth is afraid of the witches and wonders why he would be afraid of such nice predictions. He challenges the witches to make a prediction about his future and the response is as follows:

*Lesser than Macbeth and greater.*

*Not so happy, yet much happier.*

*Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.*

(I, iii, 65-67)

This prediction seems to bring Macbeth back to reality and he demands more information. He has inherited his title as Thane of Glamis, but how can he become the Thane of Cawdor or king? At this stage, Macbeth does not know that the Thane of Cawdor has betrayed Duncan. Macbeth addresses the witches in a way which suggests that he has some power over them and continues to do so throughout the play. However, even in this first instance, they ignore his demands and disappear.

Banquo and Macbeth confirm what they have been told and wonder whether they have been hallucinating, before hearing the approach of Ross and Angus. Ross and Angus bring the news that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor, thus confirming the witches' first prophecy. Macbeth questions how this is possible, while Banquo is wondering how the witches knew this. With confirmation of the news, Macbeth appears to have been won over by the witches:

*[Aside] Glamis, and Thane of Cawdor!*

*The greatest is behind. Thanks for your pains.*

*[Aside to BANQUO] Do you not hope your children shall be kings,*

*When those that gave the thane of Cawdor to me*

*Promised no less to them?*

(I, iii, 116-120)

## Characterisation

We learn a lot about Macbeth and Banquo's personalities from this encounter with the witches. As soon as Macbeth finds out that the witches' first prediction for him (that he will be made Thane of Cawdor) has come true, he seems to unquestioningly believe the witches' words, forgetting that there was ever any reason to doubt them. However, Banquo continues to be wise and suspicious. He notes that evil beings often tell us half-truths that lead to our destruction. He leaves the stage to talk with Ross and Angus, leaving Macbeth to contemplate how he can make the next prediction happen. He already has evil thoughts, mentioning 'murder' in this soliloquy.

Banquo notes Macbeth's strange behaviour and suggests that it is because of his shock at receiving the new title. Before exiting the stage, Macbeth and Banquo agree to think about what they have experienced and to meet later to discuss it.



### Debate Prompts

1. *Why do you think Macbeth is so interested in Banquo's prophecy? Are there any ways in which Banquo's prophecies could later affect Macbeth?*
2. *Why do you think Shakespeare chose to inform the audience of Macbeth's reward before telling Macbeth himself?*



*Macbeth and Banquo meeting the witches on the heath*  
by Théodore Chassériau



# Act 1, Scene 4

*Location: Duncan's palace at Forres*

## Summary

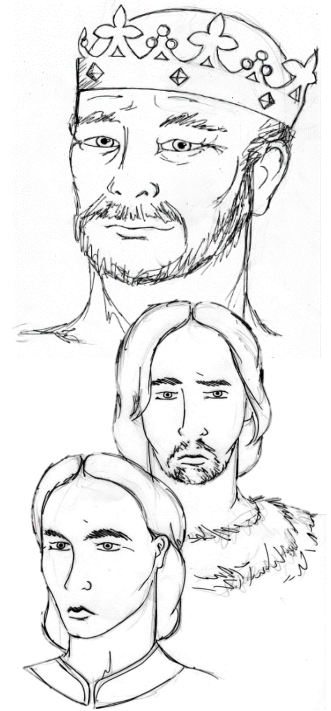
King Duncan welcomes Macbeth and Banquo back from battle and makes Macbeth Thane of Cawdor.

## Analysis

A trumpet announces the arrival of King Duncan and his sons and they discuss the fate of the Thane of Cawdor. Duncan remarks that it is difficult to judge men's thoughts by their appearance and expression: 'There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face' (I, iv, 11-12). He goes on to say that the Thane of Cawdor was 'a gentleman on whom I built / An absolute trust' (I, iv, 13-14). The audience will come to wonder whether Duncan is a bad judge of character, or whether none of his thanes are worthy of trust.

Macbeth enters with Banquo, Angus and Ross. Duncan takes the opportunity to thank Macbeth for his efforts and also notes that Banquo deserves 'no less than Macbeth'. Duncan names Macbeth as Thane of Cawdor and Malcolm as the Prince of Cumberland, the heir to the throne. Macbeth realises that Malcolm is now an obstacle in his quest to become king and his words reveal his growing ambition:

*The prince of Cumberland! That is a step  
On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,  
For in my way it lies.*



(I, iv, 49-51)

Duncan invites himself to Macbeth's castle to celebrate these appointments and so Macbeth goes ahead to inform his wife. Duncan and Banquo continue to discuss Macbeth's merits before they leave the stage, following Macbeth to his castle in Inverness.



### Debate Prompt

*Do you think that the witches are to blame for Macbeth's ambition to become king, or is Macbeth responsible for his own thoughts and actions?*

# Act 1, Scene 5

*Location: Macbeth's castle at Inverness*

## Summary

Macbeth is reunited with his wife, Lady Macbeth, at their castle. Lady Macbeth has heard about the witches' predictions from a letter Macbeth has written her, and she is now determined to kill King Duncan. She tells Macbeth of her intentions and says that she will take care of everything herself.

## Analysis

Lady Macbeth appears on stage for the first time reading a letter from Macbeth. She reads about the witches' prophecies and of Macbeth's latest title.

## Characterisation

Lady Macbeth notes that Macbeth could become king but she is worried that while he is ambitious, he lacks the mean streak required to fulfil his dreams:

*Glamis thou art, and Cawdor; and shalt be  
What thou art promised. Yet do I fear thy nature;  
It is too full o' th' milk of human kindness  
To catch the nearest way: thou wouldst be great,  
Art not without ambition, but without  
The illness should attend it.*

(I, v, 14-20)

Lady Macbeth believes that he wants to achieve greatness only through noble means and plans to persuade him otherwise. Her words tell us that Macbeth has an honourable side and some desire to be a good man. They also tell us that Lady Macbeth is more ruthless than her husband. She is confident that she will be able to manipulate him to do as she wishes.

A servant interrupts Lady Macbeth to tell her that the king is coming to the castle and that Macbeth is on his way too. Lady Macbeth is very happy with this arrangement and begins a soliloquy that makes clear her intention to kill Duncan. She notes the need to 'unsex' (I, v, 40) herself. By this, she means that she wants to be more like a man and less like a woman - she wants to be strong, ruthless and cruel so that she can commit murder. Lady Macbeth is, like the witches, not a typical woman.

Macbeth arrives and is immediately told of the murderous plan: 'Look like th' innocent flower, / But be the serpent under 't' (I, v, 64-65). Here, she is instructing Macbeth to look innocent and concerned about Duncan's fate, even though he is responsible. This continues the theme of deceptive appearances - deception and trickery come naturally to Lady Macbeth.

Macbeth does not argue with her or question her instructions. They plan to discuss the matter further but Lady Macbeth informs him that she will take care of everything, as long as he remains outwardly happy and peaceful to their guests. Macbeth's compliance suggests that his wife is the more powerful character in this marriage.



### Debate Prompt

*Is Lady Macbeth an entirely evil character? Are there any ways in which she could be described as strong and brave?*



# Act 1, Scene 6

*Location: In the grounds of Macbeth's castle at Inverness*

## Summary

King Duncan and his men arrive at Macbeth's castle and are welcomed by Lady Macbeth.

## Analysis

### Setting

King Duncan arrives at the castle accompanied by his sons, Banquo, Macduff, Ross and Angus. They discuss how nice Macbeth's castle is and how they have always liked it. Banquo observes that the castle is always surrounded by birds and suggests that this is because they like to be in clean air, with pleasant surroundings: 'Where they most breed and haunt, I have observed, / The air is delicate' (I, vi, 9-10). This comes in stark contrast to the 'filthy air' (I, i, 12) that is continually referred to by the witches.

Lady Macbeth enters and Duncan thanks her for her hospitality and apologises for the inconvenience of their arrival. She remarks that her hospitality is due to her gratitude for Macbeth's new wealth and status. She tells them that they should make themselves at home and enjoy her castle. The men wonder where Macbeth is and ask to be taken to him.

### Theme - appearance and reality

Duncan's naivety and Lady Macbeth's skilfulness at playing the welcoming hostess are underlined in this scene, as is the theme of the gulf of difference between appearances and reality. It is worth remembering that Lady Macbeth's success in playing the hostess is indicative of her awareness of what is good and right. She knows the right things to say to Duncan because she knows that they owe a lot to his generosity, and yet she is still intent on her plot to kill him. Her real feelings are very different indeed from the feelings that she shows towards her guests. Lady Macbeth appears to have no problems with her conscience at this point in the play.

### Context

In both this scene and Scene 7, we are invited to consider gender roles and appropriate relationships between man and wife. The different interpretations of these interactions are particularly useful for us when considering the role of women in society at different times in history. Lady Macbeth's behaviour towards King Duncan is also telling of what the socially acceptable behaviour for women was at the time the play was written. She is an interesting character because she knows how she is meant to behave and does her best to pretend to, but underneath she is far from conventional.



### Debate Prompt

*What are the dramatic effects of these differences between appearance and reality? What effect do they have on the audience?*

# Act 1, Scene 7

*Location: Macbeth's castle at Inverness*

## Summary

Macbeth has doubts about the plan to murder King Duncan and expresses these to his wife. Lady Macbeth mocks and belittles him, suggesting that he is not a real man unless he goes through with the plan as agreed. In the end, Macbeth agrees to do as his wife says, and carry out the plot to murder the king.

## Analysis

Macbeth enters the stage alone and considers his wife's suggestions. He admits that he would kill Duncan if he could be sure that he would not be punished for it, but he knows that this is not the case. Macbeth notes that Duncan trusts him not only as a subject but also as a member of his family. In addition, Duncan is his guest and so Macbeth should be protecting him from murder, not plotting to murder him himself. Macbeth realises that Duncan is a noble and honourable king, who would be sorely missed by his subjects. Macbeth realises that only his ambition is spurring him to kill Duncan: 'I have no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself / And falls on th' other' (I, vii, 25-28). He means that his senses tell him it is the wrong thing to do and he knows that excessive ambition can lead to downfall.

Lady Macbeth enters and tells Macbeth that the king is wondering where he is. Macbeth immediately explains to her that he cannot go on with the plan. She chastises him for his cowardice. Macbeth argues that he can only do what it is proper to do to become king: 'I dare do all that may become a man; / Who dares do more is none' (I, vii, 46-47). At this point, he suggests that it is unmanly to become king using underhand tactics.

Lady Macbeth argues that he was in fact a man when he was willing to do whatever was required to become king, not doing so would make him a coward. She suggests that she would never go back on such a plan. Lady Macbeth explains to Macbeth how they could kill Duncan and get away with it. They plot to frame some servants and, with a seemingly foolproof plan in place, Macbeth agrees to do it:

*I am settled, and bend up  
Each corporal agent to this terrible feat.  
Away, and mock the time with fairest show.  
False face must hide what the false heart doth know.*

(I, vii, 80-83)



## Debate Prompts

1. What is the dramatic effect of Macbeth's battle with his conscience?
2. Why do you think Macbeth decides to go through with it? Do you think he is trying to please his wife, or is he following his own ambition?

# Act 2

## Act 2, Scene 1

*Location: Macbeth's castle at Inverness*

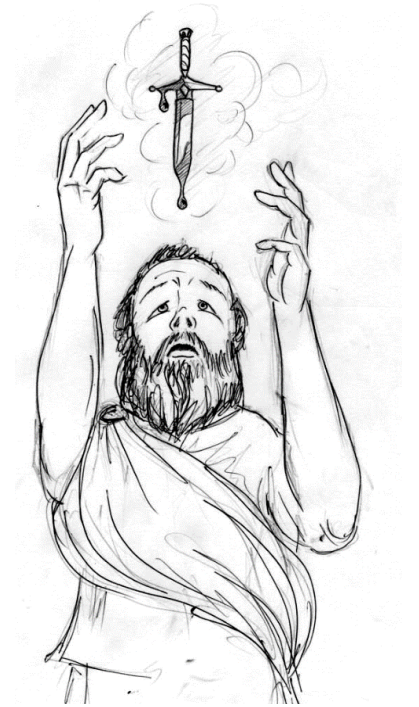
### Summary

Banquo and his son, Fleance, are awake late at night when they encounter Macbeth walking through the castle. They talk briefly about the three witches before Macbeth prepares himself for the gruesome task that he has agreed to carry out - the murder of the king.

### Analysis

Banquo arrives on stage with Fleance. He is tired and cannot sleep. He is interrupted and startled by Macbeth and a servant. Banquo tells Macbeth that the king is already sleeping but has sent him to give a diamond to Lady Macbeth to thank her for her hospitality. Banquo mentions the witches, who have interrupted his dreams. Macbeth lies to Banquo by telling him that he no longer thinks of the witches. He then contradicts himself by saying that Banquo should stick close to him in order to reap rewards when he is the king. Banquo appears to have some inkling of Macbeth's bad intention. He says:

*So I lose none  
In seeking to augment it, but still keep  
My bosom franchised and allegiance clear,  
I shall be counselled.*



(II, i, 26-29)

He means that he will stay loyal to Macbeth, as long as he is behaving honestly and morally. Banquo and Fleance exit and Macbeth sends his servant to bed. Macbeth is left alone to give his famous dagger soliloquy: 'Is this a dagger which I see before me...' (II, i, 34). In this speech, he hallucinates and sees a bloody knife in front of him, leading him to Duncan's bedroom. He considers whether he is hallucinating because of what he is about to do and repeatedly wonders why he can see the dagger but cannot touch it. He continually asks whether his eyes are playing tricks on him. This speech shows Macbeth's turmoil about what he is about to do. The audience is left to wonder whether Macbeth is seeing things because of the pressure he is under or whether perhaps the witches are responsible for the vision, as they attempt to encourage Macbeth to commit the bloody deed.

### Language and style

The lines 53-57 convey vividly Macbeth's personification of murder as a withered creature creeping towards his victim:

*... withered murder,  
Alarumed by his sentinel, the wolf,  
Whose howl's his watch, thus with his stealthy pace,  
With Tarquin's ravishing strides, towards his design  
Moves like a ghost.*

(II, i, 53-57)

This metaphor may in turn be linked with the role of the witches throughout the play. He forces himself to hurry because the more he talks, the more worried he becomes: 'Words to the heat of deeds too cold breath gives' (II, i, 62). Macbeth's language shows his increasing anxiety and fear.

A bell rings and Macbeth takes this as his invitation to act. Duncan's fate is sealed with one simple sentence: 'I go and it is done, the bell invites me' (II, i, 63). The bell informs Macbeth that the servants are now asleep. He takes it as the moment to make his final decision.

# Act 2, Scene 2

*Location: Macbeth's castle at Inverness*

## Summary

Macbeth has murdered King Duncan and is already beginning to feel guilty and afraid. Lady Macbeth tells him to stop being a coward and to wash the blood from his hands while she returns the daggers to the king's room.

## Analysis

Lady Macbeth enters the stage and remarks: 'That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold' (II, ii, 1). She is referring to the alcohol that she has given to Duncan's servants to make them fall asleep. Lady Macbeth has drunk a little of it to make her brave and ready for the night ahead. She seems excited about Duncan's murder and entertained by the irony of the guards, who are drugged to such an extent that it is impossible to tell whether they are living or dead. She hears a noise from offstage and worries that her husband has been interrupted in his task. She had wanted to murder Duncan herself.

Macbeth enters and announces: 'I have done the deed' (II, ii, 15) before asking 'Didst thou hear a noise?' (II, ii, 15). He is already paranoid about what he has done, wondering who is sleeping in the chambers next to Duncan's. Macbeth tells Lady Macbeth that the servants woke up while he was in the room, but muttered their prayers and went back to sleep. Macbeth struggled to say 'Amen' and then began to hear voices:

*... it cried 'Sleep no more!' to all the house.  
'Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor  
Shall sleep no more. Macbeth shall sleep no more.'*

(II, ii, 40-42)

This threat will haunt Macbeth throughout the rest of the play.

## Characterisation

Macbeth is clearly traumatised by what he has just done, suggesting that he is keenly aware of the horrific nature of his actions. Lady Macbeth takes control of the situation with sensible and practical instructions. She tells him to wash his hands and chastises him for bringing the daggers back to his chamber with him. Lady Macbeth seems to be much calmer, braver and more ruthless than Macbeth at this point in the play.

## Theme - guilt

Macbeth refuses to return to Duncan's chamber because he cannot bring himself to look again upon the crime he has committed, showing that he feels a measure of guilt. Lady Macbeth angrily agrees to take the daggers back to the scene of the crime. She exits the stage, while a knocking is heard. Macbeth is terrified of the noise and disgusted by the blood on his hands. He asks, 'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?' (II, ii, 59-60) and decides that it will not. He means that he will never be able to wash away the guilt of Duncan's murder and this metaphor of blood-stained hands will continue throughout the play. Lady Macbeth returns and calls him cowardly for his feelings - however, later in the play she is the character who becomes deranged by her actions and unable to live with them, while Macbeth hardens himself to his feelings of guilt. Lady Macbeth confesses that she would have killed Duncan herself but was unable to because he reminded her of her father - perhaps this is a rare acknowledgement of some degree of a guilty conscience in Lady Macbeth.



### Debate Prompt

*Do you think Lady Macbeth is as calm as she would like the audience and Macbeth to believe? What makes you think she is or is not?*

# Act 2, Scene 3

*Location: Macbeth's castle at Inverness*

## Summary

Macduff arrives early at the castle to wake King Duncan and discovers the murder. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth feign shock and grief, and Macbeth admits to killing the guards in his rage. King Duncan's two sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, decide to flee as they don't know who they can trust.

## Analysis

A porter appears on the stage. He is clearly drunk and conducts an imaginary conversation, as if he were the gatekeeper to hell. This delays his ability to answer the knocking and frustrates the visitors, who continue to knock loudly. Eventually, the door is opened to Macduff and Lennox who question why he took so long to answer. The porter admits that he has been drinking and gives a comical speech about the effects of drink. Macbeth arrives, as if he has been woken by the knocking. Macduff informs him that he is here to wake Duncan, who requested to be woken early, and leaves the stage to do so. Lennox tells Macbeth about the bad weather the previous night, before Macduff returns to the stage with terrible news:

*Most sacrilegious murder hath broke ope  
The Lord's anointed temple, and stole thence  
The life o' th' building!*

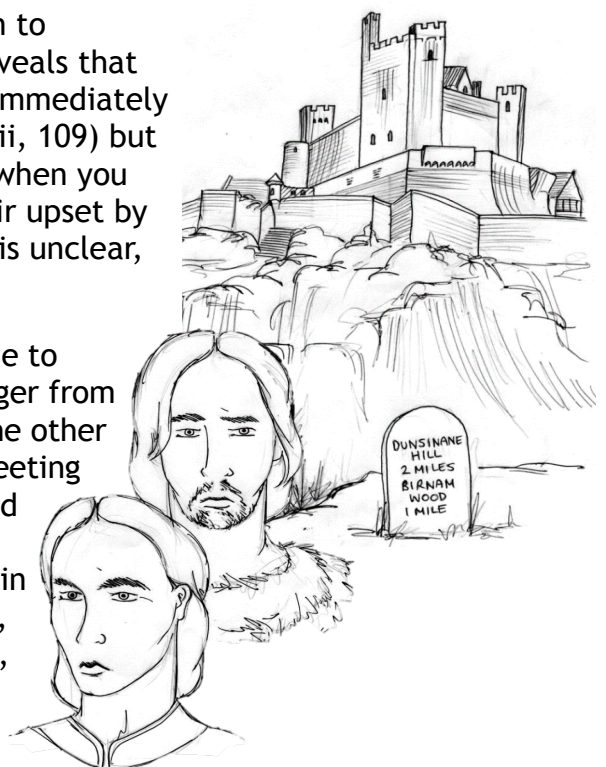
(II, iii, 69-71)

He confuses his friends by referring to Duncan's body as 'the Lord's anointed temple' (II, iii, 70), but this refers to the belief in the divine right of kings. During the reign of James I of England, the time this play was written, there was a general belief that kings were awarded their right to rule by God. Because of this, any attack on the king was considered to be an attack on God's will.

Macduff tells his friends to see for themselves, while he wakes the rest of the castle. Lady Macbeth enters and demands to know what is going on. Macduff won't tell her because he fears that it will kill her but quickly changes his mind when Banquo arrives on the stage. Macduff's unwillingness to tell Lady Macbeth of Duncan's death highlights perceptions of women at the time as being emotionally weaker and more sensitive than men.

All of the key characters return to the stage and explain to Malcolm and Donalbain what has happened. Macbeth reveals that he killed the guilty servants in a fit of rage. Macduff is immediately suspicious, asking Macbeth 'Wherefore did you so?' (II, iii, 109) but Macbeth claims that it is not possible to think logically when you are so upset. Lady Macbeth adds to the pretence of their upset by fainting. Whether this is a genuine swoon or deliberate is unclear, but it certainly works on this level.

Malcolm and Donalbain quietly discuss matters and decide to leave the castle quickly, fearing that they may be in danger from their supposed friends. They are left alone on stage as the other men retire to their chambers to dress properly before meeting to solve this 'treasonous malice' (II, iii, 134). Malcolm and Donalbain decide to leave Scotland until they can decide who is to blame for their father's death. At this moment in time, they feel unable to trust anybody. Donalbain notes, 'The near in blood, / The nearer bloody' (II, iii, 142-143), meaning that their closest relatives are probably the biggest threat to them.



## Context

Malcolm and Donalbain's fears for their lives highlight the differences between the society of Shakespeare's day and present-day society. Today we would rely on the police to find who was responsible for a murder and we would trust societal bodies to ensure that good triumphs over evil, that order is restored and that individuals are protected. Malcolm and Donalbain are forced to take things into their own hands. This scene also reveals much about the attitude towards kingship in Shakespeare's day.

The horrified reaction to King Duncan's death is indicative of the status of the king at the time the play was written. In addition, Shakespeare was a particular favourite of the various monarchs that his career encompassed and so it was important that a great deal of respect was shown for kingship.



### **Debate Prompt**

*Do you think Lady Macbeth actually fainted? Why / why not?*



# Act 2, Scene 4

*Location: Inverness – Outside Macbeth's castle*

## Summary

Ross, an old man and Macduff discuss recent events. Macduff tells Ross that the king's sons have fled, suggesting that they might be guilty of the murder, and tells him that Macbeth is about to be crowned the new king of Scotland.

## Analysis

### Setting

Ross enters the stage accompanied by an old man. They discuss King Duncan's murder and also the terrible weather. The old man suggests that the weather is 'unnatural, / Even like the deed that's done' (II, iv, 10-11), making a direct comparison between the weather and the unusual events. This is built upon with accounts of other bizarre and unnatural events that have taken place in the last few days. These supernatural events remind the audience of the supernatural presence that remains throughout the whole of the play. Shakespeare highlights the unnatural and grotesque nature of the king's murder by reflecting it in the unnatural weather and strange events in nature.

Macduff enters the stage and they discuss Duncan's death. Macduff suggests that the king's servants were paid to commit the crime and that 'suspicion of the deed' (II, iv, 27) falls on Malcolm and Donalbain because they have mysteriously fled Scotland. The men admit that it seems a strange thing for them to do.

Macduff informs the men that Macbeth has been named as the new king and is on his way to Scone to be crowned, while Duncan's body has been placed in his ancestral tomb. Macduff is on his way back to his family in Fife but Ross decides to go to the coronation in Scone.

The scene ends with the three men discussing the future of Scotland. It is clear that they see Macbeth's reign as a new phase in Scottish history and one that they are worried about. Macduff says, 'Lest our old robes sit easier than our new!' (II, iv, 38), meaning that he hopes things will start to improve.



Macbeth preparing to murder King Duncan



### Debate Prompts

1. Who or what do you think is responsible for the unusual events discussed in this scene?
2. Why do you think Shakespeare uses chaos in nature to reflect chaos in the plot? Do you think it is an effective device?
3. How would you describe the relationship between Macbeth and Macduff, at this and other points in the play?



# Act 3

## Act 3, Scene 1

*Location: The Royal Palace at Forres*

### Summary

Banquo begins to have suspicions about Macbeth and Macbeth fears the prophecy that the witches gave Banquo, namely that his sons would be kings. Macbeth persuades hired assassins to agree to murder both Banquo and Fleance.

### Analysis

Banquo enters the stage thinking about the witches' prophecies. He notes that Macbeth has now fulfilled their prophecies for him but he fears that Macbeth 'played'st most foully for 't' (III, i, 3). Banquo wonders whether the prophecy that the witches made for him will come true.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth enter as king and queen, accompanied by Lennox, Ross and various other lords and ladies. Banquo stops what he has been saying and does not share his thoughts with the others. Macbeth and his wife address Banquo as their 'chief guest' (III, i, 11) and suggest that they couldn't enjoy their celebrations without him. They invite him to a banquet that evening and query his activities for the rest of the afternoon. Banquo tells them that he will be out riding all afternoon but will return before the feast. Macbeth asks if Fleance will go with him, Banquo confirms that he will and then Banquo departs. Macbeth instructs the rest of his guests to do as they please until the banquet and they all depart, leaving Macbeth alone with one of his servants.

The servant informs Macbeth that the men that they have previously discussed are waiting outside the castle. Macbeth sends the servant to bring them to him, while he ponders why he is so fearful of Banquo. He wonders whether Banquo's prophecy will come true and, if it does, bemoans the fact that 'For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind' (III, i, 64). He means that he has killed Duncan and tortured his mind, just so that Banquo's sons can be king. This angers Macbeth and he resolves to fight it.

The servant returns to the stage with two murderers. It becomes apparent that Macbeth has persuaded these men that Banquo is responsible for a catalogue of wrongs done to them. Like Lady Macbeth did to him, he goads the men into thinking that letting Banquo get away with it makes them cowardly. Macbeth explains that he cannot kill their mutual foe because of his position and also because of the friends that he shares with Banquo. It is, therefore, their responsibility to kill him. The murderers agree to help Macbeth and are instructed to kill both Banquo and Fleance, when instructed, and to do it that night away from the palace. The murderers leave the stage, closely followed by Macbeth.

### Characterisation

Significantly, although Lady Macbeth is present in the first part of this scene, she says nothing and appears to have deferred responsibility to her husband now she has achieved her goal of becoming queen. Macbeth is now making plans and taking murderous action alone, without his wife's advice or guidance. Now that he has been made king, as the witches foretold, he has become more confident and more arrogant.



#### Debate Prompts

1. *How is Banquo's impression of Macbeth changing? And how does his behaviour show this?*
2. *What is Lady Macbeth's role in this scene? What do you think she is thinking or feeling at this point?*

# Act 3, Scene 2

*Location: The Royal Palace at Forres*

## Summary

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth discuss their troubled minds following the murder of Duncan. They agree to put on a good show at the banquet later and Macbeth hints that he will commit a further dark deed - he does not share the details of this with Lady Macbeth, however.

## Analysis

Lady Macbeth discusses Banquo's whereabouts with a servant. She sends the servant to summon Macbeth and begins to consider what they have done:

*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.*

(III, ii, 5-8)

With this speech, she seems to suggest that it is better to be murdered than to murder someone and then be so troubled by the guilt. This refers to her concern for her husband's state of mind. This concern for Macbeth shows a side to Lady Macbeth that the audience has never seen before but she remains able to take control of her emotions and urges Macbeth to do the same.

## Theme - guilt

Macbeth appears and Lady Macbeth tells him off for being unhappy, telling him 'what's done is done' (III, ii, 13). Macbeth discusses their nightmares and emotional torment. He cannot sleep and discusses how Duncan can now sleep peacefully but he cannot. He fears that what he has gained will be taken away from him, perhaps due to his knowledge of how easily someone else could murder him, just as he murdered Duncan. The witches are still present in his mind and his language is full of reference to them and images of the dark and supernatural. Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth appear to be upset that the murder of Duncan has not achieved their happiness; in fact it has made them unhappy. They then change the subject and begin to discuss the night ahead.

They agree on the need to put on brave faces for their guests and Macbeth instructs his wife to pay particular attention to Banquo. He does not involve her in the plan to kill Banquo. She is wise enough to suspect what Macbeth has planned but he does not tell her, preferring her to 'Be innocent of the knowledge' (III, ii, 48).

## Characterisation

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's interaction in this scene suggests that they have a strong emotional bond. Lady Macbeth is concerned for Macbeth's emotional well-being and Macbeth tries to protect his wife's 'innocence' by not telling her about his plans for further murder. He also uses affectionate language towards her, calling her 'love', 'dear wife' and 'dearest chuck'.



### Debate Prompt

*How do you think Macbeth has changed from the start of the play? Has becoming king been a good thing for him, or not?*

# Act 3, Scene 3

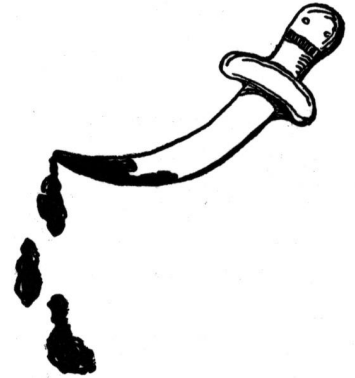
*Location: A field near to the royal palace*

## Summary

The murderers attack and kill Banquo, as Macbeth has instructed - but Fleance escapes.

## Analysis

The murderers enter the stage and are joined by a third man. They wonder whether they should trust this third man but he explains that he has been sent by Macbeth. The men discuss when Banquo will come and then hear him in the distance. The audience hears Banquo shouting offstage: 'Give us a light there, ho' (III, iii, 9). It is important to remember that, once again, evil is occurring under the cover of darkness. In addition, Banquo seems to realise the dangers that could exist in the darkness.



Banquo and Fleance enter the stage. Banquo makes a remark about the weather and is then attacked by the murderers. The rain is mentioned and one of the murderers says 'let it come down' (III, iii, 19), promoting the links between bad weather and evil. Banquo realises that he has been set up and urges his son to flee. Banquo is killed but Fleance escapes.

The murderers realise that they have failed in part of their task but retire to the castle to tell Macbeth that Banquo has been killed.



### Debate Prompt

*Why is it significant that Fleance escaped? Can you predict the outcome of the play using this knowledge?*

# Act 3, Scene 4

*Location: A banquet hall in the royal palace*

## Summary

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth welcome lords and noblemen to a banquet. Macbeth learns that Banquo has been murdered and Fleance escaped. He then sees the ghost of Banquo at his seat and reacts with fear and horror. Lady Macbeth tries to explain Macbeth's strange behaviour but eventually, as Macbeth begins shouting at the ghost, she sends their guests away.

## Analysis

Macbeth enters the stage, which has been set up like a banquet hall. He enters with his wife and various lords and noblemen. He addresses the guests before the first murderer arrives at the door. The murderer tells Macbeth of Banquo's death, but also informs him that Fleance has escaped. Macbeth is glad that Banquo has been killed but worries about Fleance, although he notes that:

*... The worm that's fled  
Hath nature that in time will venom breed;  
No teeth for 'th present.*

(III, iv, 29-31)

He means that while Fleance has the potential to pose him problems, he will not do so at the current time. Macbeth knows that he has some time to decide what to do about Fleance.

The murderer exits and Lady Macbeth summons Macbeth back to the table. Just as Macbeth is invited to sit down, Banquo's ghost enters the room and sits in Macbeth's place. When Macbeth sees the ghost he reacts badly, wondering who is to blame for it. He then starts talking to the ghost. Ross suggests that Macbeth is unwell and invites the guests to leave but Lady Macbeth assures him that Macbeth is just experiencing a fit, such as he has suffered from since birth, and invites the guests to ignore Macbeth until the fit passes.

Lady Macbeth assures him that there is no ghost; she tells him: 'This is the very painting of your fear' (III, iv, 61), meaning that it is a hallucination caused by his fear. Once again, she tells him to stop being a coward and to put on a brave face. Macbeth does not believe her and continues to speak to the ghost, who then vanishes. Macbeth is forced to compose himself and addresses his guests, confirming Lady Macbeth's diagnosis of his strange behaviour.

Banquo's ghost reappears and returns to Macbeth's seat. On seeing it, Macbeth shouts at it and demands that it returns in any other form. He claims that he is not afraid of anything, only the form that this spirit chooses to take. When the ghost vanishes again, Macbeth addresses his guests as if they have seen it too. Lady Macbeth asks the guests to leave quickly, telling them that their questions make him worse. She is worried that Macbeth will say something incriminating. When they have all left, Macbeth discusses his plans with his wife. He wants to know why Macduff has refused to visit them, wondering if he is suspicious of Macbeth. He also plans to go to see the three witches again.



*Macbeth seeing the ghost of Banquo*  
by Théodore Chassériau

## Theme - the supernatural

In this scene, Macbeth is again strongly affected by some kind of supernatural force. The influence of the witches can be felt throughout the whole play. Macbeth appeared to be goaded into killing Duncan by a vision of a floating dagger; in this scene he is forced into undignified and eccentric behaviour in public by the appearance of a ghost. Are these visions the result of Macbeth's troubled mind, or the work of the witches?



### Debate Prompt

*Which crime do you think is worse: the murder of King Duncan or the murder of Banquo? Give reasons for your answer.*

# Act 3, Scene 5

*Location: A deserted heath*

## Summary

The three witches meet with their queen, Hecate. They plan another meeting with Macbeth.

## Analysis

There is a crash of thunder and then the three witches enter the stage with Hecate. She is angry with them for their dealings with Macbeth. In particular, she is angry with them for choosing Macbeth as their target. She calls him ‘... a wayward son, spiteful and wrathful...’ (III, v, 11-12). It is interesting that somebody as evil as Hecate still finds fault with Macbeth’s behaviour.

She is not happy that the witches have not included her in their dealings with Macbeth and instructs them to meet with him again. She does not specify what she will do to him, but the audience is aware that something dreadful will happen to Macbeth.

## Language

Hecate is summoned away by singing off stage. The three witches leave the stage too, fearing her return. Once again, the witches speak in rhyming couplets, like an incantation, reinforcing their difference to the mortals in the play.



### Debate Prompt

*At this point in the play, do you think Macbeth is responsible for his own actions, or is he the victim of the witches’ evil plotting? Give reasons for your answer.*

# Act 3, Scene 6

*Location: Near to the Royal Palace at Forres*

## Summary

Lennox and another Scottish lord discuss what has happened in Scotland: Macduff has fled to England where he is joining forces with the English King and Duncan's son, Malcolm. War looks likely. Lennox hopes that Scotland will soon be rescued from the tyrannical rule of Macbeth.

## Analysis

Lennox enters the stage with another lord and they discuss the events of the play, allowing the audience to hear how Macbeth's actions are being perceived beyond the castle. We learn that the murder of Banquo has been blamed on Fleance because he has now fled Scotland. Lennox's words appear to be in support of Macbeth's handling of the murders of Banquo and Duncan but it is unclear whether there is disbelief in what he says: 'Was not that nobly done? Ay, and wisely too' (III, vi, 14). He suggests that Macbeth had to kill the guards because people could not bear to hear them deny what they had done. His staunch and perhaps excessive defence of Macbeth could be seen as a subtle way of expressing his concerns.

The lord informs Lennox that Malcolm is with the king of England and that Macduff has gone there too, to request the king of England's help in a battle against Macbeth. Macbeth has heard the news of Macduff's plans and is preparing for war.

Macbeth has summoned Macduff to Scotland but Macduff refused to go. Lennox tells the lord that he hopes Macduff returns to free Scotland sooner rather than later. He refers to Macbeth as a 'tyrant'.

## Context

This scene shows how Macbeth's society has descended into suspicion and confusion - this is something that present-day audiences can easily identify with. When something bad has happened and the culprit is unknown, it is impossible to know who is trustworthy and who is not. It is easy to attach blame to the wrong person or people and this is a feature common in contemporary news stories, television and cinema.



# Act 4

## Act 4, Scene 1

*Location: A cavern in a deserted place*

### Summary

Macbeth meets with the three witches and their queen, Hecate. The witches show Macbeth three apparitions as clues to what the future holds. Macbeth is comforted by some of these, and alarmed by others.

### Analysis

#### Setting

Thunder strikes and the three witches enter the stage, which has been set up to look like a cavern. There is a boiling cauldron in the centre of the stage. Again, the setting of the scene highlights the evil intentions of the witches. This is one of the most famous and powerful scenes of the play and centres around the three witches casting a spell for Macbeth. The fantastical ingredients put into the cauldron are sickening and grotesque, like the witches themselves, who Macbeth has chosen as advisors.

The most powerful of all evil spirits, Hecate, is there to oversee the arrival of Macbeth. She arrives with three other witches and together they sing a song. Macbeth's presence is foretold by the couplet:

*By the pricking of my thumbs,  
Something wicked this way comes.*



(IV, i, 59-60)

### Characterisation

It is interesting to note that Macbeth is not referred to by his name but as a 'wicked thing'. Macbeth has become as wicked and evil as the witches but he is oblivious to his demise. He is so deluded and self-obsessed that he seems to believe he is important enough to command the respect of the witches, even though his greeting implies he has no respect for them. Macbeth demands answers from the witches, who offer him the chance to get answers from their masters. This plays to Macbeth's arrogance, making him feel worthy of dealing with the most important people.

The first of three apparitions appears; it is an armed head and Macbeth is warned to beware Macduff. This merely confirms his previous instinct. Macbeth commands that the apparition stays but leaves.



First apparition: an armed head

The warning given by the next apparition, a bloody child, is that Macbeth need not fear anyone born of a woman. This puts Macbeth's mind at rest a little but he resolves to kill Macduff anyway, just to settle himself.

The third apparition is a crowned child, carrying a tree. It tells him that he will not be defeated 'until Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him' (IV, i, 107-108). Macbeth takes this cryptic message as a confirmation of his own invulnerability but still he demands to know the answer to the question that is burning in his mind: will Banquo's children become kings?

The witches tell Macbeth 'Seek to know no more!' (IV, i, 118) but he is insistent and even curses them for denying him this knowledge. It is strange that Macbeth thinks that he could curse

these already cursed creatures. When Macbeth's wishes are met, eight kings walk across the stage followed by the ghost of Banquo. Macbeth is furious, he turns on the witches because they didn't give him the answers he wanted to hear but this makes little impression on them and they simply vanish, refusing to meet any more of his demands. This provokes

him to exclaim 'damn'd be all that trust them' (IV, i, 155). This is very poignant because Macbeth does not listen to his own advice, so blinded is he to what he has become.

## Context

The witches fail to give Macbeth the answers that he is looking for and he loses his temper with them. He seems to believe that he has the power to order them to do things and this provides us with a reminder of the social order in Shakespeare's day. It should also provide contemporary audiences with food for thought. Should groups or individuals that exist outside of mainstream society be expected to follow accepted codes of behaviour?

By this point, Lennox has entered the stage with news that Macduff has fled to England. Macbeth is annoyed that he did not kill Macduff as soon as he thought of it but decides to have his family and servants killed as soon as possible. Now we can see (if we hadn't noticed before) that Macbeth has no restraint or forethought for the consequences of his actions. He does not care if he is a good king; simply that he *is* king.



Second apparition: a bloody child



Third apparition: a crowned child

## Debate Prompt

Macbeth mistakenly believes that he can control the witches. Can you find other examples of people/events that Macbeth mistakenly believes he is in control of?

# Act 4, Scene 2

*Location: Macduff's castle at Fife*

## Summary

Lady Macduff fears for her safety and asks Ross why her husband has left her alone with the children. Soon after Ross leaves, murderers arrive and brutally murder Lady Macduff's son. The scene ends as Lady Macduff runs for her life.

## Analysis

This scene opens with Lady Macduff and her son in deep discussion with Ross. Lady Macduff is annoyed that Macduff has fled to England, leaving her and her son alone. Ross tries to defend him but she will not accept that it was wise for him to leave. If he feared for his safety, surely they are in danger too? Ross tries to reassure Lady Macduff but suggests that she leaves the castle. He then leaves the stage. Lady Macduff observes that 'Our fears do make us traitors' (IV, ii, 4), because they are no more trusting, loyal subjects of their king, instead they are afraid of him and fear his unpredictable behaviour.

Lady Macduff tells her son that his father is dead but he does not believe her, as she is not weeping. Her son asks various questions about treachery and crimes before coming to the conclusion that 'there are liars and swearers enough to beat the honest men and hang up them' (IV, ii, 58-59).

Just then a messenger appears informing Lady Macduff that she and her son are in danger. The messenger leaves and Lady Macduff wonders why she should leave when she has done nothing wrong. She realises that with the current state of the country, being innocent is not necessarily enough, but it is too late... the murderers enter the room.

The murderers ask where Macduff is and both Lady Macduff and her son are rude to them. Macduff's son is killed and Lady Macduff exits the stage, followed by the murderers.

## Context

Lady Macduff's presence in the play reminds the audience of the more socially acceptable female character. She is helpless and powerless. She has no control over her fate, no control over her husband's actions and makes no attempt to save herself from death. It is interesting to see how the behaviour of this ideal female character is altered in more modern adaptations of the play, in order to fit with the conventions of the day.

## Characterisation

The slaughter of Macduff's innocent family is a new low in Macbeth's violent behaviour. It demonstrates just how brutal Macbeth has become and suggests that he is out of control. He is acting out of anger and desperation with no rational thought or consideration for consequences.



### Debate Prompt

*This scene provides a domestic viewpoint on the action of the play. Why do you think Shakespeare has added this scene at this point in the play?*

# Act 4 Scene 3

*Location: The royal palace in England*

## Summary

Macduff and King Duncan's son, Malcolm, meet at the English court. They test each other's loyalties and when they finally agree to trust each other they discuss a joint attack against Macbeth who, they feel, is destroying Scotland. Macduff hears from Ross the terrible news that his wife and children have been brutally murdered and he vows to avenge their deaths.

## Analysis

Malcolm and Macduff enter the stage. The audience have just witnessed the murder of Macduff's family but he is not yet aware of it. The men discuss the situation in Scotland in the most unflattering terms: 'It weeps, it bleeds, and each new day a gash / Is added to her wounds' (IV, iii, 40-41).

The two men feel that Macbeth's tyranny is ravaging Scotland and they do not know what to do about it. It is clear that the two men do not know whether to trust each other. The dishonesty Macbeth has used to gain power has created an atmosphere of fear where nobody is able to trust another, so Malcolm feels the need to test Macduff's loyalty before he can accept him as a follower. He pretends to be a man as unfit to rule Scotland as Macbeth himself: lustful, greedy and jealous. Only when Macduff expresses his horror and regret that the son of such a good king and queen as Duncan and his wife should not be a more worthy candidate for leadership, does Malcolm reveal his true feelings and his plans to fight Macbeth.

Both have been honest and good men in the past but both men are usually loyal to the king. Malcolm points out that 'A good and virtuous nature may recoil / In an imperial charge' (IV, iii, 19-20). By this he means that honest men do dishonourable things because they have been ordered to by their king. How can he trust that Macduff is not working for Macbeth? Eventually, the men agree to trust each other and fight together against the tyrant, Macbeth.

## Context

When Malcolm and Macduff meet to discuss the fate of Scotland under its new king, the audience are reminded of the differences between Shakespeare's society and their own. The men go to great lengths to stress their allegiances to Scotland, before they begin to plan Macbeth's downfall. They insist that they are usually loyal to the king but cannot stand by and let Macbeth destroy their country. Such patriotism and respect for the monarchy would be much less valued in today's society, but in Shakespeare's day it was very important. This exchange would have been particularly appealing to King James.

Ross enters the stage and Macduff enquires about the fate of his family. Ross tells him that they were 'at peace' (IV, iii, 179) when he left them but eventually admits that he has since heard news that the castle has been attacked and Macduff's family have been slaughtered. Malcolm, perhaps insensitively, suggests that Macduff deals with the grief by taking revenge: 'Let's make us med'cines of our great revenge, / To cure this deadly grief' (IV, iii, 214-215).

He suggests that avenging their deaths and taking back Scotland will be the best cure for Macduff's grief and they leave the stage to meet with King Edward of England and plan their attack.



### Debate Prompt

*Do you think Malcolm would make a good king? Why, or why not?*

# Act 5

## Act 5, Scene 1

*Location: A room in Dunsinane Castle*

### Summary

A doctor has been called to attend to Lady Macbeth, who has started to walk in her sleep and speak strangely of her nightmares.

### Analysis

The scene opens with a gentlewoman and a doctor, who are discussing the condition of Lady Macbeth. We learn that 'since his majesty went into the field' (V, i, 4) Lady Macbeth has been sleepwalking and talking in her sleep about things that the gentlewoman could not repeat. As they continue to discuss it, Lady Macbeth enters the room. Lady Macbeth re-enacts conversations that she had with her husband on the nights of Duncan and Banquo's murders. These are overheard by the doctor and the gentlewoman:

*Out, damned spot! out, I say! One – two – why, then 'tis time to do 't.  
- Hell is murky! - Fie, my lord, fie, a soldier, and afeard? 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?*

*[...] The thane of Fife had a wife - where is she now?  
What, will these hands ne'er be clean?—No more o' that,  
my lord, no more o' that; you mar all with this starting*



(V, i, 23-33)

She repeats the statement she made to Macbeth earlier, that: 'what's done cannot be undone' (V, i, 65), but now this has a hollow ring to it as we have seen the effect it has had on the lives of everyone involved. Where it previously appeared to suggest that they should carry on with their lives as normal, it now seems to suggest that they can never be normal again.

The doctor explains that 'Unnatural deeds / Do breed unnatural troubles' (V, i, 69-70), meaning that Lady Macbeth's strange behaviour has been caused by something unnatural. In Shakespeare's time, sleepwalking was considered a highly abnormal activity. The doctor suggests that he cannot help her and that Lady Macbeth needs a priest to unburden her mind: 'More needs the divine than the physician' (V, i, 72). He recommends that the gentlewoman keep a close eye on Lady Macbeth and remove anything that she might use to cause herself harm.

### Characterisation

Lady Macbeth has been absent from the action of the play for some time. The audience can see a clear degeneration in her state of mind, especially by her compulsion to wash her hands, and a clear change in her role in her marriage as well as in the play. It is interesting to note that the doctor and gentlewoman speak in prose, rather than the formal speech of the nobility, and that Lady Macbeth does the same.



#### Debate Prompts

1. In what ways could you argue that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth have swapped roles in the play?
2. What do you think will happen to Lady Macbeth?

# Act 5, Scene 2

*Location: The countryside somewhere near Dunsinane castle*

## Summary

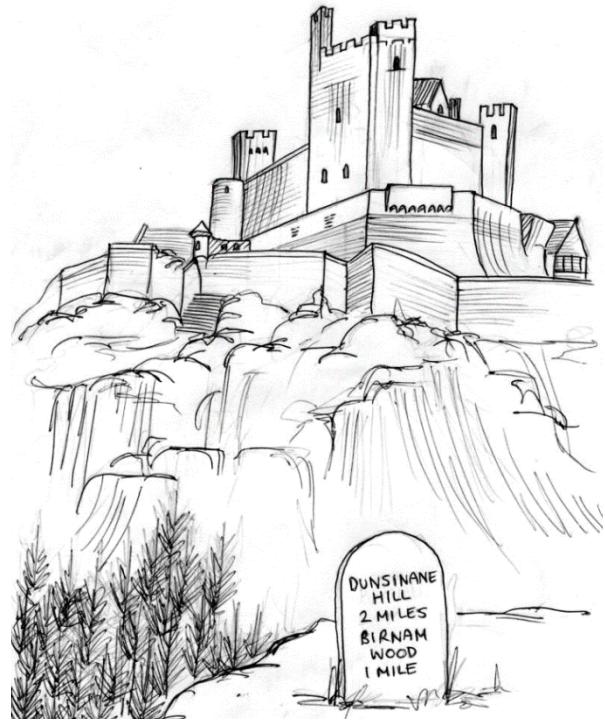
Soldiers march towards Dunsinane, preparing for battle against Macbeth.

## Analysis

Mentieth, Caithness, Angus and Lennox enter the stage, alongside soldiers carrying flags. They discuss the imminent arrival of Malcolm. It is now common knowledge that Macbeth was responsible for the various murders that have taken place: 'Now does he feel / His secret murders sticking on his hands' (V, ii, 16-17). This quotation is particularly relevant because the image of having blood on one's hands is one that is used by both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth earlier in the play.

Malcolm and Macduff have brought an army from England and are aided by Malcolm's English uncle, Siward. Menteith remarks:

*Revenge burn in them, for their dear causes  
Would to the bleeding and the grim alarm  
Excite the mortified man.*



(V, ii, 3-5)

He means that the men are desperate for revenge and that the wrongs that have been done to them would be enough to raise the dead back to life, in order to wreak revenge. Interestingly, the men note that Donalbain is not with his brother.

They discuss the fact that Macbeth is fortifying his castle and question his state of mind. They all agree that he is out of control. It is interesting to see that not all of Scotland has turned against Macbeth. Macbeth still has followers, but they 'move only in command / Nothing in love' (V, ii, 19-20). He is hanging on to his kingship by a thread, with only his belief in the witches' prophecies to keep him feeling confident in his victory.

## Structure

This scene, and the scenes that follow, are very short. The sudden changes of setting and character and the fast-paced action all build tension and add to the sense that events are moving quickly and building towards a final climax.



### Debate Prompt

*Are there any points in this scene when the audience may realise what is going to happen? (Particularly in relation to the witches' prophecies.)*

# Act 5, Scene 3

*Location: A room in the castle at Dunsinane*

## Summary

Macbeth hears that a huge army is approaching the castle. He talks to the doctor about Lady Macbeth's illness and then he prepares himself for the battle that lies ahead.

## Analysis

Macbeth is on stage, accompanied by a doctor, attendants and a servant. He knows of the incoming attack but insists that he has nothing to fear because of what he has learned from the witches' prophecies. Macbeth's men clearly do not know what he is talking about and hence Macbeth is a very isolated character in this scene. His men seem to fear him and the unfortunate servant who has to give him the news that an army of 10,000 men has gathered to fight him wears a 'goose look' (V, iii, 12): in other words he is obviously terrified. Macbeth puts on his armour and says: 'I'll fight till from my bones my flesh be hacked' (V, iii, 31) - he will fight until there is no flesh left on his body.

Macbeth asks the doctor about his wife's health. The doctor advises him that she is not ill, merely troubled by images that are stopping her from sleeping. Macbeth's reaction is bizarre:

*Cure her of that.  
Canst thou not minister to a mind diseased,  
Pluck from the memory a rooted sorrow,  
Raze out the written troubles of the brain  
And with some sweet oblivious antidote  
Cleanse the stuffed bosom of that perilous stuff  
Which weighs upon the heart?*

(V, iii, 38-44)

Macbeth does not accept what the doctor tells him. As we can see from the quotation above, Macbeth demands that the doctor find her a cure. Macbeth seems to believe that he even has the power to control science!

Macbeth does nothing to help his wife. Instead, he puts on his armour and prepares to lead his men into battle with Malcolm. The men are clearly terrified.



### Debate Prompt

*Why do you think Macbeth continues to believe in what the witches have told him, even now when his situation appears to be quite desperate?*



# Act 5, Scene 4

*Location: In the countryside near to Birnam Wood*

## Summary

Malcolm's soldiers decide to use branches cut from the trees of Birnam Wood to camouflage themselves as they approach Dunsinane castle.

## Analysis

The key figures in the fight against Macbeth appear on stage. We learn that they are at Birnam Wood. Malcolm gives the following order to his men: 'Let every soldier hew him down a bough / And bear 't before him' (V, iv, 4-5). He means that all of his men should take branches from the trees and use them to conceal themselves from Macbeth. In this way, Macbeth's spies will have no idea how many of them are there and ready to attack him.



### Debate Prompt

*What is the significance of Malcolm's order to cut down the branches?  
What do you think will happen next?*

# Act 5, Scene 5

*Location: Inside the castle at Dunsinane*

## Summary

Lady Macbeth commits suicide and Macbeth is told that Birnam Wood is approaching Dunsinane.

## Analysis

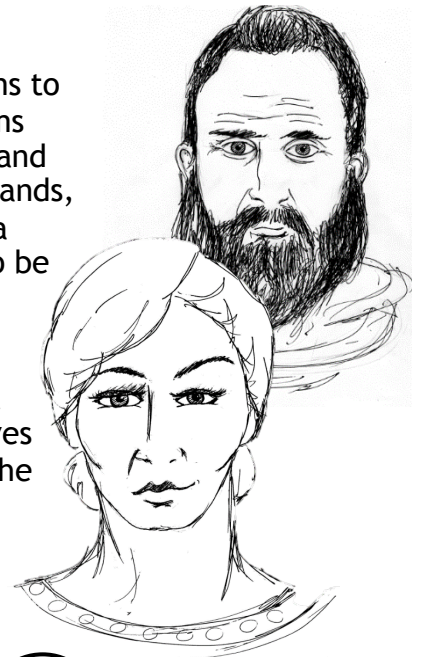
Macbeth instructs his men to decorate the castle with flags. He says that he would have been able to meet the attacking forces outside of the castle, if so many of his men had not turned against him. He still does not realise that the revolt of so many men might be an indicator that he is in the wrong!

They hear the sound of a woman crying and Macbeth remarks that it is not easy to scare him now that he has experienced so many horrors: 'I have supp'd full of horrors / Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts, / Cannot once start me' (V, v, 13-15). We learn that the cry was Lady Macbeth committing suicide.

## Characterisation

Lady Macbeth's death inspires Macbeth to make a long speech. He seems to have developed a very philosophical approach to life and death. It seems that he is no longer afraid or interested in the difference between life and death. Having experienced the power of having somebody's life in his hands, Macbeth seems to have concluded that life is meaningless: 'Life is but a walking shadow [...] signifying nothing' (V, v, 24-28). Macbeth might also be expressing his feeling that life without his wife is meaningless - what, after all, has all this murdering been for?

Macbeth has very little left to fight for, aside from the conviction that this battle is preordained. However, at this critical moment, he receives a message that Birnam Wood is advancing towards the castle. This is the last thing Macbeth wants to hear and it is greeted with threats and remonstrations from him, although they amount to little as there is a definite sense that Macbeth's time has come.



### Debate Prompts

1. *What is the effect of Lady Macbeth's suicide?*
2. *Why do you think Macbeth continues his preparations for battle, despite Lady Macbeth's death?*
3. *Macbeth seems to claim that he is now fearless. To what extent do you agree?*

# Act 5, Scene 6

*Location: In front of the castle at Dunsinane*

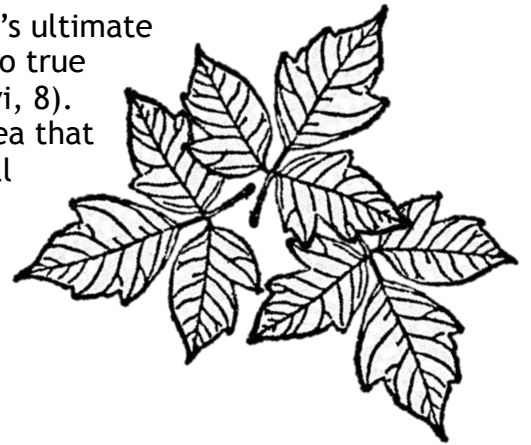
## Summary

The attacking army arrives at Dunsinane and the soldiers throw aside their branches, ready to fight.

## Analysis

The attacking forces are instructed to throw down the branches and reveal themselves to Macbeth: 'Your leafy screens thrown down / And show like those you are' (V, vi, 1-2). This is done to surprise Macbeth with the extent of the oncoming attack. Macbeth did not predict the size of Malcolm's army. It is decided that Siward and his son will lead the first attack and that Malcolm and Macduff will follow. Trumpets are sounded to announce their attack.

This short scene brings us to the climax of the play and Macbeth's ultimate demise. Siward's words as he goes into battle provide insight into true bravery and ambition: 'Let us be beaten if we cannot fight' (V, vi, 8). Here, he cements an idea put forward earlier by Banquo, the idea that he will take the fate that he deserves. If he earns victory, he will take its spoils. If he does not, he wishes to be defeated.



# Act 5, Scene 7

*Location: Somewhere on the battlefield*

## Summary

The battle is raging. Macbeth kills Young Siward. Macduff vows to kill only Macbeth.

## Analysis

Macbeth knows that his first fight is imminent and he clings on to the witches' prophecy that no man born of a woman can hurt him. It is strange that Macbeth continues to believe in the witches when their earlier prophecy has just been exposed as a clever trick.

Young Siward enters Macbeth's room and, after a short exchange, Macbeth kills him and then exits the stage.

Macduff enters and is clearly looking for Macbeth and only Macbeth. He is a mightier adversary and Macbeth has been warned to be afraid of him. Macduff says: 'Either thou, Macbeth, / Or else my sword with an unbattered edge / I sheathe again undeeded' (V, vii, 19-21).

He will fight Macbeth and, if he is not able to find him, he will put away his sword unused. Macduff does not want to find Macbeth's men who have been coerced or paid to fight for him. He leaves the stage.

Malcolm and Siward enter and give the report that the castle has already been surrendered and that some of Macbeth's men have changed sides. The battle is almost over. They exit the stage, as if entering the castle.



### Debate Prompt

Why do you think Macbeth clings on to the witches' prophecy about 'no man of a woman born' (IV, i, 80)?

# Act 5, Scene 8

*In some versions of the play, Scenes 7 and 8 are together in one scene*

*Location: Somewhere on the battlefield*

## Summary

In the final scene of the play, Macduff confronts Macbeth and eventually kills him. He brings Macbeth's head to Malcolm and his soldiers and he declares Malcolm to be the new king of Scotland.

## Analysis

Macbeth's opening lines seem to suggest that he knows that he has no hope of success now:

*Why should I play the Roman fool and die  
On mine own sword? Whiles I see lives, the gashes  
Do better upon them.*

(V, vii, 31-33)

He explains that he will not commit suicide because while any of his enemies are still alive, his sword is better used to attack them.

Macduff arrives and Macbeth admits that Macduff is the only man that he fears. Nonetheless, he tells Macduff that there is no point fighting because Macduff will not be able to harm him, citing the witches' prophecy as his evidence. Macduff dramatically reveals that he was not born of a woman and finally the audience can make sense of everything!

Macbeth finally realises that the witches have tricked him, and he refuses to fight Macduff. Macduff taunts him with thoughts of what they would do with a tyrant such as Macbeth, who decided to surrender. It seems that Macduff does not want him to surrender. Macbeth is roused to fight again and remarks: 'I will try to last' (V, vii, 62) - he will fight to the end.

The two men begin to fight and exit the stage fighting. They return to the stage, still fighting, and Macbeth is killed.

Malcolm, Ross, Siward and various other thanes enter the stage. They discuss the missing men and wish that all had survived to see their victory. Siward is informed that his son has been killed. His reaction to the death is strange - he does not seem to feel sorrow but instead is comforted by the way in which his son died, fighting bravely.

Macduff enters, carrying Macbeth's head; he hails Malcolm King of Scotland. In celebration, Malcolm names all of his thanes as earls, noting that Scotland has never had earls before. He invites them all to his coronation.



### Debate Prompts

1. *Why do you think Macduff goads Macbeth into fighting for his life?*
2. *Do you think that Macbeth was ultimately the victim of the witches' cruel trick or fully responsible and guilty for the course of action that he chose?*

# Characters: Who are they?

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**Macbeth** is the lead character in the play. He is a relative of the king and is a very good soldier. At the start of the play he holds the title Thane of Glamis, and he quickly becomes Thane of Cawdor and eventually king. He is an ambitious character with a strong desire to become king. This desire is exploited by the witches, who tempt him with false promises. This, alongside the coercion of his wife, provokes Macbeth into killing the king, killing his own best friend and killing a succession of other characters. Eventually Macbeth's wrongdoings are found out and the people of Scotland turn against him. The witches have tricked him into believing that he is invincible and so Macbeth does not fear their attacks. However, in the final scenes Macbeth realises that he has been tricked. He is killed by Macduff in the final scene of the play.

**Lady Macbeth** is Macbeth's wife. She is a strong, ambitious and feisty woman. She has big ambitions for her husband and encourages him to do whatever it takes to reach his goal. She is very good at pretending to be a wonderful hostess, adoring subject and loyal wife, but she is in fact a very vicious and heartless character. She goads Macbeth into committing Duncan's murder. As the play progresses, Lady Macbeth is wracked with guilt over what she has done. She descends into madness and is seen sleepwalking, talking in her sleep and obsessively washing her hands. In Act 5 she commits suicide.

**The Witches** are the most famous characters of the play. They are three haggard and unkempt creatures, who look like bearded women. They give prophecies about Macbeth's future and ultimately plant the seeds that will lead to his downfall. Later they summon apparitions that lull Macbeth into a false sense of security about his future as king. The witches are evil characters but there are limits to their power. They can control the weather but they cannot control people's actions. They can trick people and persuade people but ultimately Macbeth's behaviour is his own decision. **Hecate** is their queen.

**Banquo** is Macbeth's best friend. He helps Macbeth to lead Duncan's troops in battle. He has a son called **Fleance**, who he is very close to. Banquo is with Macbeth when they first encounter the witches. Banquo is interested to hear what the witches have to say but unlike Macbeth he leaves his future to fate. Banquo is told that he will not be king but that his sons will provide a line of kings. Macbeth decides that Banquo and his son must be killed to ensure that they do not steal his crown and produce that line of kings. Banquo is killed but Fleance manages to escape.

**Macduff** is another nobleman. He becomes important later in the play when the witches tell Macbeth that Macduff is the only one that he should fear. Macbeth responds by sending men to kill him and his family. Fortunately, Macduff has managed to flee Scotland, although his family are not so lucky. In the final scene Macduff avenges his family's death by killing Macbeth. He reveals that he was born by caesarean section and henceforth he was not born 'of a woman', as the witches had prophesised.

**Duncan** is the king of Scotland at the start of the play. He is well liked but seems to be a bad judge of character. At the start of the play he has been betrayed by the Thane of Cawdor. Shortly afterwards, he is killed by Macbeth. He has two sons, **Donalbain** and **Malcolm**, who are initially blamed for Duncan's death. They flee Scotland and return later to defeat Macbeth.

**Angus, Ross and Lennox** are all Scottish noblemen. They provide examples of the correct way for noblemen to behave. They also help to move the action along by serving as messengers for other characters or the audience.

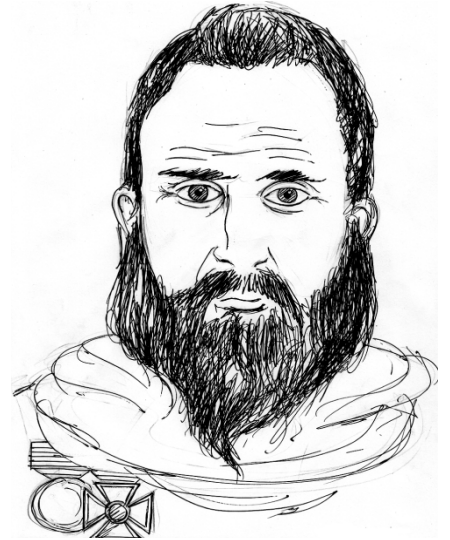
# Characterisation

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By 'characterisation', we mean all of the different ways in which the writer creates convincing and realistic characters. In a play such as *Macbeth*, characterisation is achieved through what the characters say and what they do. Skilful characterisation means that as the audience watches the play they can believe in the characters and share in their joys and sorrows.

## Macbeth

Macbeth is the lead character in the play. He lives in a castle in Inverness with his wife Lady Macbeth. He is a relative of King Duncan and has the title Thane of Glamis. At the beginning of the play, he is on his way back from leading Duncan's army in battle, with the help of his friend Banquo. On his way back from battle, he and Banquo meet three weird women, who prophesy that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor and then king. Macbeth is a very ambitious character and these prophecies appeal to his ambition.



Macbeth writes to his wife about the prophecies and she becomes intent on bringing him to the throne as soon as possible. She makes a plan to help him secure the throne by killing Duncan and goads Macbeth into carrying out the plan.

In the lead-up to the murder, Macbeth hallucinates and visualises the murder weapon. He takes it as a sign that he should commit the murder and stabs Duncan in his sleep.

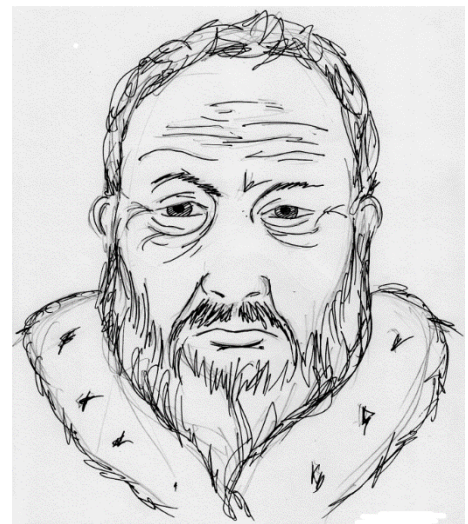
After the murder, Macbeth is forced to lie to all of his closest companions. He is haunted by the witches, who planted the seeds of his downfall. They tell him that: 'Macbeth had murdered sleep / Macbeth shall sleep no more.' Macbeth does not sleep and becomes increasingly troubled and confused as a result of this.

Becoming king does not make Macbeth happy because his wrongdoings mean that he must always be wary of others. His well-meaning and moral friends, i.e. Banquo and Macduff, get in the way and cause him troubles.

Banquo has to be eliminated because the witches said that his children would become king. Later, Macbeth also kills Macduff's family. Unfortunately, Banquo's son Fleance and Macduff manage to get away. Banquo comes back to haunt Macbeth and further disrupts his sanity. His wife, Lady Macbeth, cannot cope at all and she goes mad and commits suicide.

Macbeth lives on, safe in the knowledge of the witches' prophecy that 'None of woman born shall harm Macbeth'. They also prophesise that he will not be defeated until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill.

Eventually, the Scottish armies turn against Macbeth, led by Macduff and Fleance. They besiege his castle at Dunsinane by disguising themselves with branches from the trees of Birnam Wood. In this way, Birnam Wood does come to Dunsinane Hill. The witches' other prophecy had warned Macbeth of Macduff. He had been born via caesarean and, therefore, was technically not of woman born. Macbeth was unaware of this and he is killed by Macduff.





## Lady Macbeth

Lady Macbeth is Macbeth's wife. She lives with him in their castle at Inverness. She is proud of her husband's success as a soldier and of his title of Thane of Glamis. However, when she learns of the witches' predictions, she becomes intent on securing the throne for Macbeth.

Lady Macbeth does not believe that Macbeth has the mental toughness to kill the king or even plan to kill him. He has killed many in battle but only because he had the backing of the law of the land and he knew it was the right thing to do. She believes that she must provide the strength to get the job done.

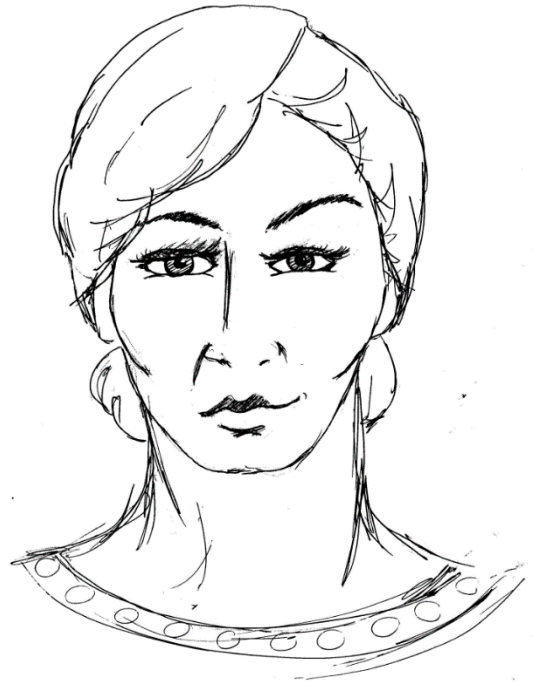
As luck or coincidence would have it, Duncan visits her castle the day that Lady Macbeth decides to kill him. She makes him very welcome and is the perfect hostess. He is so grateful for all of her little attentions that he gives her a beautiful present - a massive diamond. This does not affect Lady Macbeth's feelings or her plans. She knows what has to be done. She knows that her husband would make a good king and so she has to get Duncan out of the way.

Lady Macbeth believes that it is her duty as his wife to support Macbeth in any way that would help him to fulfil his potential. She goads him into killing Duncan and does everything in her power to make sure that he has the strength to do what he has to do. She hatches the plan and drugs Duncan's servants. She even holds a dagger over the sleeping Duncan but cannot go through with it because Duncan looks so much like her father when he sleeps.

After killing Duncan, Macbeth is wracked with guilt and cannot concentrate on the rest of the plan. Lady Macbeth takes control by cleaning him up and planting the daggers on the drunken servants.

Lady Macbeth eventually gets her way and she and her husband are crowned king and queen at Scone. They plan a big banquet at their castle at Dunsinane and invite all of the important people to celebrate with them. When Macbeth realises that Banquo has not arrived, he begins to behave strangely. He talks to the empty stool which had been reserved for Banquo and Lady Macbeth fears that he will discuss what has happened to Banquo. He becomes so confused that Lady Macbeth is forced to make excuses for him and asks their guests to leave. Lady Macbeth does not learn of Banquo's death until sometime later.

Lady Macbeth's early strength is slowly worn down by the guilt of her part in the horrific events. She feels tainted by the murder and, while she can keep busy in the day, her nights are haunted by the horror of what she has done. She sees bloodstains on her hands and washes them continually, unable to remove the stain of Duncan's blood. She sleepwalks, has nightmares and is unable to rest. A doctor tries to help her but it does no good. Her sickness is locked up in her mind, along with her dreadful secret. She cannot live with the guilt any longer and decides to end her life.





## Banquo

Banquo is a general in King Duncan's army and a close friend of Macbeth. They fight together to defeat a rebel army and their success delights King Duncan. On their way back from this campaign, Banquo and Macbeth meet three strange women who want to talk to them. These women tell Macbeth that he will become Thane of Cawdor and then king. Banquo challenges them by asking for a prophecy for himself. They answer in riddles, telling him that he will be:

*Lesser than Macbeth and greater!  
Not so happy but much happier.  
Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.*



(I, iii, 65-67)

Banquo is not amazed by the witches in the same way that Macbeth is. He is intrigued but does not dwell on their prophecies. However, when Macbeth is made Thane of Cawdor he becomes troubled by thoughts of the witches. Banquo broods over the riddles and finds it hard to sleep at night. His thoughts become dark and he prays for them to stop.

Banquo has a son called Fleance, who he is very close to. They are at the castle on the night of Duncan's murder. Eventually, Macbeth becomes king and invites Fleance and Banquo to a celebratory banquet. On their way to the banquet, they are ambushed by three men. Banquo realises that they have been set up and shouts at Fleance to run for his life. Banquo is killed but Fleance manages to escape.

Banquo appears at the banquet as a ghost but only Macbeth can see him. He reaches into Macbeth's mind and shows him the errors of his murderous ways. Banquo also appears on the heath, summoned by the three witches to show Macbeth the eight kings that come from his line. He proves to Macbeth that he should never have meddled with the evil spirits and that he should never have thought that he could control them. Early in the play, Banquo makes a remark that accurately predicts what will happen in the scenes that follow:

*The instruments of darkness tell us truths  
Win us with honest trifles, to betray 's  
In deepest consequence.*

(I, iii, 126-128)

His perceptiveness and level-headedness allow him to avoid falling foul of this trap.

## Fleance

Fleance is Banquo's son and is very close to his father. He becomes a threat to Macbeth when the witches predict that Banquo will never be king but that his offspring will produce a line of kings. When Macbeth plots to kill Banquo, he orders the murderers to kill Fleance too. In the heat of the moment, Fleance manages to escape. When Macbeth is informed, he is worried about how Fleance will get revenge but knows that it will take time for Fleance to build himself up to an attack: 'the worm that's fled / Hath nature that in time will venom breed, / No teeth for the present' (III, iv, 28-30). He means that they do not need to worry about Fleance for now.



As predicted, Fleance flees the country. His whereabouts are unknown at the end of the play and the audience are left to wonder whether he does go on to become king of Scotland.

## King Duncan

Duncan is the king of Scotland. His army have been defending Scotland against rebel forces and the attacks of the Norwegian king. They are led by Banquo and Macbeth, who also happens to be Duncan's cousin. Duncan hears how hard Macbeth and Banquo fought against the rebels and is eager to reward them. When he learns that the Thane of Cawdor has betrayed him in battle, he decides to confer his title and lands to Macbeth.

Duncan is not the best judge of character. He has wrongly trusted the Thane of Cawdor as a loyal servant and, despite his treachery, is no more careful when choosing his replacement. Duncan's poor judgment results in his death.

Duncan has two sons, Malcolm and Donalbain. They accompany him to Macbeth's castle, alongside some noblemen, to celebrate Macbeth's success and new title. Duncan likes Macbeth's castle and compliments the clean air and pleasant scenery. He is won over by Lady Macbeth's hospitality and is so pleased with her that he gives her a diamond as a gift. After the day's entertainments, Duncan retires to his bed, guarded by his grooms. He is killed in his sleep by Macbeth.

## Macduff

Macduff is a Scottish nobleman with the title Thane of Fife. He had a difficult birth and so was delivered by caesarean section.

Macduff accompanies Duncan to Macbeth's castle. He leaves Duncan at the castle because he has other business to attend to. When he returns in the morning with Lennox, another nobleman, it takes him a long time to gain access to the castle. It seems that the porter is suffering after a night of heavy drinking. Macduff asks to see the king and is told that he is still sleeping. The king had asked Macduff to wake him early and so Macduff goes to his chamber, where he finds Duncan murdered and drenched in his own blood. The king's servants lay sleeping and one of them is holding a dagger.

Macduff raises the alarm and Macbeth quickly arrives on the scene. Macbeth blames the guards and kills them, before discovering that Duncan's sons have run away. With Duncan's heir missing, there is no choice but to make Macbeth king. Macduff is unable to attend the coronation and proceeding banquet because he wants to return to his wife and children in Fife.

Back in Fife, Macduff learns of Banquo's murder and the suspected culprit. He decides to leave his family and to go to England to join Malcolm's campaign against the murderous Macbeth. While in England, he hears that his wife and babies have been murdered too. This strengthens his resolve to bring Macbeth to justice.

At Birnam Wood, Macduff and Malcolm join forces with others who hate Macbeth. They march on Macbeth's castle at Dunsinane Hill, disguising their soldiers with branches and leaves. From a distance, they look like a walking wood. When they arrive at the palace, Macbeth is ranting and raving that no man born of woman can harm him. He has no idea how Macduff was born. Macduff kills him and presents his head to Malcolm and the soldiers.



## Lady Macduff

Lady Macduff is the wife of Macduff, the Thane of Fife. She lives with him and their children in a castle in Fife. Macduff is always away on the king's business, so Lady Macduff is often left at home alone with the children.

Her husband is the one to discover Duncan's body. He is also the first person to suspect that Macbeth may have had something to do with the murder. Her husband returns to Fife after Duncan's funeral but does not stay long. He has to join Malcolm in England to raise an army against Macbeth. Lady Macduff is upset by her husband's decision. She feels that he isn't taking care of her or their children. If Scotland is such a dangerous place, surely they need him there to protect them. Ross, another nobleman, tries to reassure Lady Macduff that everything will be okay but she is unconvinced.



Lady Macduff sits alone with her son, who does his best to raise her spirits. Macduff has been branded a traitor by Macbeth and is to be executed on his return to Scotland. She worries what this will mean for her and her children. Suddenly, an unfamiliar man appears and tells her to run for her life, taking the boy with her. Lady Macduff chooses not to flee, she has done nothing wrong, and shortly afterwards her son is killed in front of her. She is unable to flee and her own death comes just moments later.

## The Witches

The three witches are united in their evil. They are devoted to Hecate, their goddess, the ruler of night and of all evil. Their mission is to lure people away from goodness and tempt them with wrongdoing. They enjoy making mischief and controlling people's lives. The witches have the ability to tell the future. They speak in a way that tricks people into misunderstanding them.

People believe that the witches can control the elements: earth, air, fire and water. They can make storms brew, causing ships to capsize and sailors to perish. They can also cause earthquakes and strong winds.

The witches meet on the blasted heath, where they can make their spells and will not be disturbed. They speak in rhyme and often repeat themselves; this enhances their supernatural status.

The three witches target Macbeth, perhaps because they knew of his weak character, immoral wife or deep-rooted ambition. True to form, he falls victim to their temptations. When they give him their prophecies, they do not tell him how to achieve these things.

When Macbeth becomes king, he goes to visit the witches in their coven. They refer to him as 'something wicked' rather than his name because he is no longer any less evil than them. The witches make three spirits talk to Macbeth. One is an armoured head that advises Macbeth to beware the Thane of Fife. The next is a child covered in blood. It tells Macbeth that no man born of a woman can harm him. This purposely leads Macbeth to believe that he is invincible. Finally, the witches make Macbeth visualise a child with a crown on his head. The child is holding a tree and tells Macbeth that he will not be beaten until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill. Again, this makes Macbeth feel safe.

## Hecate

Hecate is the queen of the witches. She appears in the third act of the play to chastise the witches for not involving her in their dealings with Macbeth. She reappears in Act 4, Scene 1 to commend them for the spell that they have brewed and leads them in a bizarre song and dance.

## Malcolm

Malcolm is the eldest son of King Duncan of Scotland. He has a younger brother called Donalbain. After the battle at the beginning of the play, Malcolm is given the title Prince of Cumberland. This means that he is the heir to the throne.

Malcolm goes with Duncan to Macbeth's castle to honour the new appointments. When Duncan is killed, Malcolm and his brother do not know what to do. The guards appear to be responsible but Macbeth kills them before they can be questioned. Malcolm and Donalbain feel very isolated and in danger. They do not know who to trust, as anybody around them could be an enemy. Donalbain tells Malcolm that he feels that: 'there's daggers in men's smiles' (II, iii, 142). This suggests that he knows that one of their supposed friends is to blame for their father's death.

Malcolm and Donalbain decide that their best course of action is to get out of Scotland and think about what to do next. They do not tell anybody where they are going or why and so suspicion falls on them for their father's murder. Malcolm goes to England, while Donalbain goes to Ireland.

Their departure leaves Macbeth as the next in line for the throne. He becomes King of Scotland and begins a brutal reign of terror. After some time, the thanes of Scotland seek out Malcolm and beg him to help them defeat Macbeth. Malcolm is still unsure of who to trust and so he puts on an act to deceive them all. He pretends to be as immoral as Macbeth himself. Macduff is so upset by this act that he

says: 'O my breast! Thy hope ends here' (IV, iii, 113-114). If he cannot trust Malcolm, he has no chance of succeeding. Eventually, Malcolm and Macduff agree to trust each other and Macduff becomes a general in Malcolm's army.

Shortly after Macduff's arrival in England, Ross arrives with the horrible news that Macbeth has attacked his castle in Fife. Macduff's family and servants have all been killed. Macbeth swears to avenge their deaths and Malcolm is happy to help.

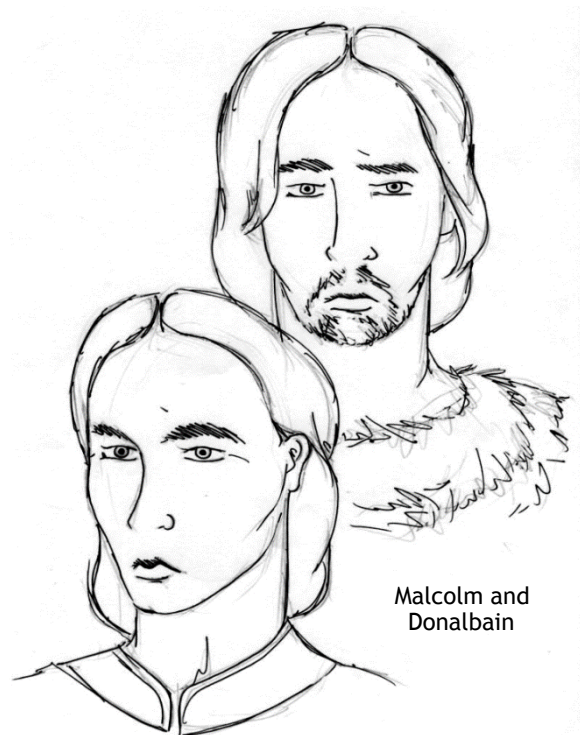
After beating Macbeth, Malcolm becomes king of Scotland. He invites all of Scotland's exiles to return and shows his gratitude to the loyal thanes by promoting them all to the rank of earl.

## Donalbain

Donalbain is King Duncan's son, the younger brother of Malcolm. He flees to Ireland after Duncan's death and is temporarily thought to be responsible for the murder. He does not return to Scotland to help his older brother defeat Macbeth.

## Ross

Ross is related to Macduff and is another Scottish nobleman. He is not heavily involved in the action of the play but acts as a messenger. Firstly, he brings the news of Macbeth's success in battle and later brings news about the fate of Macduff's family. It is also Ross who warns Lady Macduff about the threat to her and her family. Ross seems to be a noble and honourable man. He struggles to communicate his feelings and leaves Lady Macduff alone after informing her of the dangers that she might face. When he is called upon to tell Macduff about the fate of his family, Ross struggles. He tells Macduff that they were 'well at peace' (IV, iii, 179) when he left them, which would lead Macduff to believe that they are alive. In the space of a few lines, he goes on to tell Macduff that they have been 'savagely slaughtered' (IV, iii, 205). It is interesting to consider why Ross does this and what effect this has on the audience.



Malcolm and Donalbain

# Settings and Props

There is not much detail in *Macbeth* about settings and props, which is why it is such a good play to adapt to different eras in history. Most of the action takes place in castles, which reminds us of the power wielded by the main characters in the story. The rest of the scenes are set on battlefields and out in the Scottish countryside, in stormy weather. These dark, wet and stormy conditions represent the evil that runs through everything in the form of the witches and Macbeth's terrible and murderous desires.

## The witches

Shakespeare's stage directions tell us that there is 'thunder and lightning' as the play opens with the three witches on the stage. This sets the tone for the rest of the play. In Scene 3, the stage directions say, 'The heath: thunder' as the witches appear again. The wild and stormy weather that accompanies the witches reflects the unnatural and wild appetites for evil that the witches possess. It is important to remember that many people in Shakespeare's audience would have believed in witches and been afraid of them. The opening scenes, with a darkened stage, the sound of thunder and the appearance of three hags dressed in rags would have been genuinely sinister and frightening.



The scenes involving the witches use many props, which help to emphasise the witches' fantastical and nightmarish qualities. In Act 4, Scene 1, when the witches meet Macbeth to show him the apparitions, the stage directions specify that a cauldron is on the stage. This is an important prop and helps to create a powerful and memorable scene, as the witches dance around it and toss the disgusting ingredients for their spells into it. A director can really highlight the otherworldly, gruesome and sinister aspects of the witches in this scene by using props to represent these items: 'Eye of newt, and toe of frog...'.

Props can also be used to great effect later in this scene, when the witches show Macbeth a series of apparitions: the first apparition is an 'armed head', the second 'a bloody child' and the third 'a child crowned with a tree in his hand'. Skillful and creative use of props here should emphasise the strangeness of these sights and their mystical and prophetic nature.

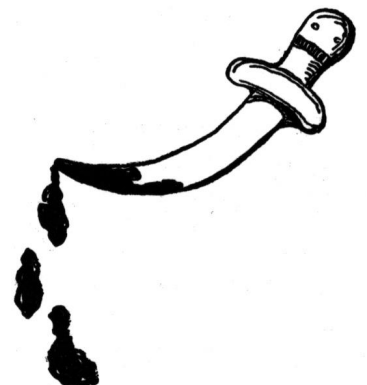
## Daggers

Daggers play a very important role in *Macbeth*, acting as symbols for evil and deception as well as instruments of murder. In Act 2, Scene 1, just before Macbeth murders King Duncan, he sees a dagger floating in the air before him, and says,

*'Is this a dagger which I see before me,  
The handle toward my hand?'*

(134-35)

Macbeth wonders whether the dagger is real or just a figment of his imagination. He points out that the dagger looks just like the one he intended to use and is pointing the way to King Duncan. As he watches it, he sees splashes of blood develop on its blade. This dagger is vitally important in the development of the plot - it's almost as though Macbeth finally decides to commit murder because the dagger 'tells him to'. It has an air of magic and mystery about it just like the props in the witches' scenes. The scene can be played with an actual dagger suspended from the ceiling so that we see what Macbeth sees, or Macbeth can be talking to thin air, as though the dagger is just in his imagination.



In the following scene, Macbeth murders King Duncan using the two daggers that belonged to Duncan's guards. Instead of leaving the daggers by Duncan's body, he brings them back to Lady Macbeth, who reproaches him,

*'Why did you bring these daggers from the place?  
They must lie there. Go carry them and smear  
The sleepy grooms with blood'*

(51-53)

Macbeth is unable to face the scene of his crime again and so Lady Macbeth takes the daggers back and wipes blood from them on the guards so that they will be blamed for the murder. The daggers inspire horror in Macbeth once he has used them to stab Duncan and he is unable to think straight. To Lady Macbeth, however, the daggers are simply the means by which the blame can be shifted onto someone else. The way that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth view the daggers tells us much about their characters and their states of mind at this point in the play.



# Themes

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The theme of a play is what the play is really all about, once we dig below the surface of the events. Certain topics will be explored in a play - they will crop up again and again, and the actions and events of the play might make the audience consider these topics in a new light. These topics are the themes of the play.

## Ambition

One of the overriding themes of *Macbeth* is ambition and the dangers of unrestrained ambition. It has been suggested that the play was written to educate the audience of these dangers. Excessive ambition causes the downfall of the lead characters of the play and is regarded as Macbeth's fatal flaw.

Shakespeare does not suggest that all ambition is bad, as Banquo is clearly ambitious for his sons when he hears the witches' prophecies. However, Banquo will only pursue his ambition within the constraints of what is good and right. When Macbeth suggests that Banquo should stick close to him so that he will benefit when Macbeth is crowned king, Banquo says:

*So I lose none  
In seeking to augment it, but still keep  
My bosom franchised and allegiance clear,  
I shall be counselled.*

(II, i, 26-29)

Here, Banquo makes clear that he is not willing to do anything underhand to help Macbeth achieve the title. He will only do what he can do while keeping a clear conscience. This presents the stark contrast between the two characters and the reason why Banquo would perhaps have been a more worthy contender for the throne.

Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's downfall is due to the fact that their ambition never falters. They will achieve their dreams by all means necessary. The problem is that once they have allowed their ambition to overrule their morals, there's no turning back. For Duncan's murder not to be in vain, Macbeth must continue to kill other threats to his kingship. Macbeth, himself, notes that he has done so many bad things that trying to be good again would be as hard as carrying on being bad:

*... I am in blood  
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,  
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.*

(III, iv, 137-139)

He seems to suggest that there is no difference between committing one murder and committing five murders. However, there will always be threats to a king's stability and security. It is not feasible to kill all of these threats just in case.

Macbeth becomes a tragic hero because he knows that killing Duncan is the wrong thing to do and he battles with his conscience about it. At the start of the play, he seems to have a decent character and he seems to have morals and values. Lady Macbeth notes this, worrying that while Macbeth has ambition, he is 'without / The illness should attend it' (I, v, 18-19). Unfortunately, Macbeth decides to go against what his conscience is telling him and sets out to kill Duncan. He admits that his only motivation is ambition:

*I have no spur  
To prick the sides of my intent, but only  
Vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself,  
And falls on th'other..*

(I, vii, 25-28)

The final lines of this quotation show that Macbeth is aware of the dangers of ambition. He means that ambition makes people get ahead of themselves and causes them to trip.



This comment on ambition is also taken up by Ross in Act 3, Scene 4: 'Thriftless ambition, that will ravin up / Thine own life's means!' (II, iv, 28-29). At this stage in the play, he is not referring to Macbeth. It is believed that Malcolm and Donalbain are responsible for Duncan's death and so they are the characters who are demonised for their actions, which are ' 'gainst nature'. However, these comments would be a little different if the true culprit were known.

Macduff is another stark contrast to Macbeth because, like Banquo, he has no personal ambition. His ambition is for the greater good of his family and his country. In the final scene, his only desire is to kill Macbeth. He does not want to take his title, he does not want any reward, he just wants to avenge his family's deaths and create a brighter future for Scotland:

*Either thou, Macbeth,  
Or else my sword, with an unbatter'd edge,  
I sheathe again undeeded.*

(V, vii, 19-21)

However, even Macduff shows the audience the dangers of ambition. Had Macduff remained at home with his wife and children, ignoring his ambition to defend and protect Scotland, perhaps he could have done a better job of defending his family.

This important theme is still relevant to us today. In today's society there are probably very few people with a genuine ambition to become king, but nonetheless we all face dilemmas similar to Macbeth's in our everyday lives. Should we work hard and hope to earn rewards, promotions and status, or should we cut corners to achieve our goals? Is it worth cheating on a test or is it better to just do some more revision? Should we work as a team alongside our friends, or should individual success be the only motivation? The themes that Shakespeare's works discuss are themes that will always play a part in society. For these reasons, it is very easy for modern-day audiences to connect with Shakespeare's plays.



### **Debate Prompt**

*Do you think that Macbeth shows any positive sides to being ambitious?*

## The Supernatural

At the time that *Macbeth* was written and first performed, most members of the audience would have believed in the supernatural and they would have been very afraid of it. In particular, there was a strong belief in witchcraft and it was legitimised by the rulers of the day, who were willing to execute those accused of witchcraft. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare exploits those fears to captivate his audience.

He opens the play with the three witches and sets the scene of darkness, confusion and supernatural events that will be present throughout. It is important to remember that while we, as readers of the play, can read the character list and headings that tell us that these characters are witches, an audience would have no idea who or what these characters were. The witches speak rhythmically in the way that it was believed witches spoke: 'Double, double toil and trouble; / Fire burn, and caldron bubble' (IV, i, 10-11). This would have sounded very sinister to Shakespeare's contemporaries. Their spell-casting around a cauldron with the help of their familiars provides a very stereotypical view of witches to a modern-day audience, but this is not necessarily the case for the audience of the day.

Supernatural events are fundamental to the plot of *Macbeth*. The action of the play would not have happened without the witches' supernatural meddling at the start. In addition, the witches' reappearance and their apparitions are necessary to move the play along. In particular, there are four main supernatural occurrences in the play: the witches' first appearance, the dagger that Macbeth visualises in front of him, the appearance of Banquo's ghost and the witches' reappearance accompanied by the apparitions.

In addition, *Macbeth* features various unnatural events that could be attributed to supernatural causes. It is up to the audience to decide who or what is to blame. This is particularly true of the unnatural weather conditions that are a feature of the play. Early in the play we learn that the witches can control the weather, so it is no surprise that the audience might blame them for the bad weather that hosts all of the key events of the play. In addition, the characters make reference to supernatural forces. Lady Macbeth requests that spirits 'unsex' (I, v, 40) her so that she is able to kill Duncan. If this were possible, it is certainly not normal or natural. Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking should also be considered as a supernatural element to the play. At the time that Shakespeare was writing, it was considered to be supernatural and abnormal. The audience would have been terrified to see Lady Macbeth walking across the stage as if she were awake, knowing that she was actually asleep.

We only have to think about the popularity of modern-day horror films to realise that a fascination with the supernatural is something that has remained constant throughout the past 400 years. However, in some more modern interpretations the witches have been portrayed as homeless or travelling women, rather than supernatural characters. This is interesting because it shows that the fundamental issue that Shakespeare is exploring is fear of the unknown, rather than the supernatural. Historical research has shown that while hysteria about witchcraft was common in Shakespeare's day, it was usually targeted at women who had chosen to adopt alternative lifestyles or beliefs: these included women who had decided not to marry; older widows who did not socialise with their neighbours; women who helped others with unexplained medical remedies, particularly midwives; those with mental illness; and those with unacceptable religious, social or political beliefs. If we take into consideration modern-day examples of perceived threats to the good of society, it is easy to draw comparisons. Some readers or audience members may blame the witches for Macbeth's downfall but they didn't actually do very much, did they?

## Gender and Aggression

Issues of gender and gender roles are brought up time and time again in *Macbeth*. There appears to be a general belief that masculinity should be associated with aggression and violence, while femininity should be devoid of this. In part, the play reflects the accepted gender roles of the time. However, Shakespeare's female characters seem to go far beyond what was considered inappropriate behaviour for women.

Far from the early seventeenth century ideals of beautiful, dignified and obedient women, the three witches encompass all that is evil in the play. On meeting them, Banquo is confused by their appearance: 'You should be women, / And yet your beard forbids me to interpret / That you are so' (I, iii, 45-47). The witches look like women but they have beards and so Banquo doesn't know what to think. The witches are among the most evil and aggressive characters in the play, deliberately going out of their way to cause death and destruction. It is interesting that Shakespeare chooses to reflect their unfeminine behaviour with an unfeminine appearance. This is often added to in stage productions of the play, when the witches often appear naked or in a state of undress. This definitely does not fit with ideals of prim and chaste ladies.

Lady Macbeth also begins the play in a wholly unfeminine role. The extent of her evil and aggression is bettered only by the supernatural witches. On hearing of the witches' prophecies, she is not supportive or concerned for her husband or his wishes. Instead, she immediately makes her own plan and is determined that her husband should follow it:

*Hie thee hither,  
That I may pour my spirits in thine ear  
And chastise with the valor of my tongue  
All that impedes thee from the golden round,  
Which fate and metaphysical aid doth seem  
To have thee crowned withal.*

(I, v, 24-29)

She wants Macbeth to hurry home so that she can persuade him to actively pursue his royal title. When she learns that Duncan will accompany him to the castle, she immediately decides that Duncan should be killed, referring to his 'fatal entrance' (I, v, 38) to her castle. Her independent thought, assertiveness and desire to change the ideas of her husband would not have been palatable to a seventeenth-century audience. Her cold-heartedness and aggression would have been even less acceptable!

Lady Macbeth seems to be aware that her thoughts and behaviour are not fitting for her gender. She asks spirits to 'unsex' (I, v, 40) her so that she can be consistently cruel and aggressive. She makes reference to childbirth and asks her mother's milk to be turned poisonous, completely subverting her maternal role. She comes back to this in Act 1, Scene 7, when she suggests that she would have 'dashed the brains out' of her own child, if she had promised Macbeth that she would do so. This is a horrendously unfeminine thing to even talk about hypothetically. It would almost certainly have shocked and horrified the audience.

Lady Macbeth appears to believe in traditional gender roles when it suits her. She uses notions of masculinity to goad Macbeth into killing Duncan: 'When you durst do it, then you were a man' (I, vii, 49). She says that Macbeth was a man when he decided to kill Duncan but he is not a man now that he has decided not to. This is later adopted by Macbeth, who challenges the murderers to kill Banquo by telling them that they are not manly.

Macbeth is aware that Lady Macbeth's behaviour is most unfeminine. He tells her that she should not bear female babies: 'Bring forth men-children only' (I, vii, 73). The implication here is that Macbeth would not want to have daughters with Lady Macbeth's character traits.

Lady Macbeth and Macbeth's relationship is the opposite of what was socially acceptable in the seventeenth century. She is controlling him and he obeys her. By the end of the play, their gender roles have reverted back to what is socially acceptable. Macbeth is strong (albeit deranged) and resolute, whereas Lady Macbeth is feeble, weak and unable to cope. She does not appear with her

husband, she plays no part in his decisions and he shows very little care for her or what she thinks of him.

It is also important to remember that in Shakespeare's time women were not allowed to perform on stage. This meant that all of the female roles were played by men. This might provide some explanation for Shakespeare's preoccupation with gender - he wanted to make sure that his audiences remembered which characters were meant to be women!

The theme of gender and aggression is another interesting one that is very relevant today. Discussion about the appropriate roles for men and women is universal in every society, no matter what the time or the place. In Shakespeare's day Lady Macbeth was considered unfeminine for her strong will, ambition and her desire to tell her husband what to do. Do you think that her character is acceptable in modern British society? Lady Macbeth and Lady Macduff are compared and contrasted as opposing examples of femininity. By comparing how these characters are portrayed in adaptations from different times, we can gain useful insight into the desired role of women at that time.



*Lady Macbeth* by George Cattermole



### **Debate Prompt**

*Compare Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's relationship with that between Macduff and Lady Macduff. How do they compare with seventeenth-century ideas about relationships between husbands and wives?*

## Appearance and Reality

The theme of the differences between appearance and reality is present throughout the play and emerges in the very first scene: 'Fair is foul, and foul is fair / Hover through the fog and filthy air' (I, i, 11-12). The paradoxical language here suggests that things are not always what they seem. How can something that is fair be foul? Equally, if something is foul, how can it be fair? In addition, these references to the fog and filthy air bring in the idea of bad visibility and they will resonate throughout the play. All of the main action occurs under the cover of darkness and there are frequent references to storms and bad weather.

In Act 1, Scene 3, Macbeth mirrors this early speech by the witches: 'So foul and fair a day I have not seen' (I, iii, 38). This is confusing for the audience. Is this Macbeth speaking or are the witches possessing him or controlling him in some way? Whatever the reason, things do not appear to be what they seem. On a more obvious level, the characters make reference to the fact that appearances can be deceptive:

*There's no art  
To find the mind's construction in the face:  
He was a gentleman on whom I built  
An absolute trust.* (I, iv, 12-15)

Here, Duncan remarks that it is hard to judge a book by its cover, as he had always trusted the treacherous Thane of Cawdor. However, the events that follow do more to suggest that Duncan is a very bad judge of character, in general.

In addition, some of the characters deliberately use their appearances to deceive others. Lady Macbeth instructs Macbeth to purposefully hide his true thoughts: 'look like th' innocent flower but be the serpent under 't' (I, v, 64-65). This is something that Macbeth takes on board, later telling himself to hide his true feelings: 'False face must hide what the false heart does know' (I, vii, 83). The big question is whether Macbeth wants his false face to trick others, or whether he needs to trick his own heart.

The various incidences of visions, dreams and hallucinations also contribute to the theme of appearance and reality. In his famous dagger speech, Macbeth asks: 'Is this a dagger I see before me?' (II, i, 34). He wonders why he can't touch the dagger but he can still see it: 'I clutch thee not and yet I see thee still' (II, i, 36). The audience does not know who or what is responsible for conjuring this image either. Is Macbeth's conscience and imagination creating the image? Or are the witches somehow responsible?

Lady Macbeth's final scene provides interesting additional evidence for the theme of appearance and reality. She is witnessed sleepwalking and the doctor notes that it seems that she is awake but in reality she is still sleeping. Lady Macbeth enters the stage appearing to be awake and proceeds to carry out various tasks and conversations, as if she were awake. Witnessing this would've been particularly disturbing for the audience when the play was written because sleepwalking was considered to be supernatural and dangerous.

The whole notion of appearance and reality is important when we remind ourselves that this is a play. Despite what the audience is seeing in front of their eyes, none of the events are actually happening. Everything is not as it seems. It is all just a story. Macbeth makes reference to the theatre in his final scene when he says:

*Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more.* (V, v, 24-26)

He suggests that life is just like the theatre, nothing is really how it seems.

# Ideas and messages

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The idea or the message of a play is what the writer might have wanted his audience to learn from watching the action unfold. There are several important messages or ideas in *Macbeth*:

## **Kings are divinely appointed and it is a crime against God to challenge this**

In Shakespeare's time, it was believed that kings were appointed by God. To challenge, depose or murder a king was considered to be a crime against God and nature. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare presents us with a man who murders a king for reasons of personal ambition - and the whole of nature rebels against his act. On the night of the murder, there is terrible stormy weather and Lennox speaks of horrendous and unnatural occurrences, such as 'Lamentings heard i' th'air, strange screams of death' and he notes that, 'the earth/Was feverous and did shake'. The action of the rest of the play brings *Macbeth* to the edge of madness and eventually to his death. The message is clear: you cannot murder a king without being terribly punished.



## **Excessive ambition that is not tempered by a moral sense will lead to disaster**

*Macbeth*'s fatal flaw is his ambition. He wants to be king so badly that as soon as the witches plant the idea in his mind, he begins to plot murder. His ambition blinds him to all notions of right or wrong and prevents him from seeing the consequences of his actions. As a result, he slides further and further into a spiral of violence and tyranny - which, ironically, does not even make him happy. Shakespeare warns us against excessive personal ambition. The admirable men in his play are those such as, *Macduff* and *Malcolm* who fight for the good of their country rather than their own power.

## **A natural sense of order and justice will always prevail in the end**

Although *Macbeth* becomes king and rules over Scotland like a tyrant for a while, his power is short-lived because it is undeserved. Shakespeare shows us that there is no escaping the 'right' and the correct way for things to be done. The murder of *Duncan* upsets everything temporarily but order is restored at the end of the play as *Malcolm* claims the Scottish crown and *Macbeth* is killed.



# The Writer's Use of Language

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Shakespeare uses vague, confusing and sometimes paradoxical language to create chaos and uncertainty in *Macbeth*. 'Fair is foul and foul is fair' (I, i, 11) is a particularly good example of Shakespeare's use of contradictory language to show the supernatural elements of the play. By making the witches talk in riddles, Shakespeare informs his audience that they are not of this world. In addition, this confusing language allows the action of the play to take place. If the witches had spoken to Macbeth using clear and certain language, perhaps he would never have fallen foul of them. When one of the apparitions tells Macbeth that he will not be defeated 'until/ Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him' (IV, i, 106-108), it is likely that the audience (like Macbeth) takes this as the witches' confusing way of telling him that it will never happen. They will later learn that this is not the intended meaning.

Throughout the play, the language used is often dark, sinister and even quite revolting. As well as being one of Shakespeare's most violent plays, it is also one of the goriest. While violent events are often completed offstage, Shakespeare does not shy away from describing the gruesome details of their outcome: 'unseam'd him from the nave to the chaps' (I, ii, 22).

Shakespeare also uses language to create images of sickness and disease. Guilt becomes a sickness and Macbeth calls upon the doctor to cure Lady Macbeth of hers: 'find her disease, / And purge it to a sound and pristine health' (V, iii, 50-51). In addition, sickness and disease is used as a metaphor for evil and corruption. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth are a corrupting force. Their actions have corrupted the stability of Scotland and consequently Scotland is referred to as if it were suffering from some kind of illness. In Act 4, Scene 3 Malcolm says:

*I think our country sinks beneath the yoke;  
It weeps, it bleeds; and each new day a gash  
Is added to her wounds.*

(IV, iii, 39-41)

In addition, blood is used as a recurring symbol of guilt. As soon as Duncan is murdered, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth struggle to cleanse themselves of the guilt attached to what they have done. They use images of blood to describe their guilt. In Act II, Scene ii Macbeth wonders: 'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood / Clean from my hand?' (II, ii, 59-60) and he goes on to conclude that it will be impossible to clean the blood away. In her final scenes, Lady Macbeth asks, 'What, will these hands ne'er be clean?' (V, i, 41) and concludes that no amount of perfume will be able to wash away the smell of blood. Shortly after these comments, Lady Macbeth commits suicide.

Repetition is another device used by Shakespeare to convey his ideas to his audience. As previously mentioned, the image of blood on one's hands is picked up continually throughout the play. In addition, there is regular reference to sleep and the effects of sleep: 'Glamis hath murdered sleep, and therefore Cawdor / Shall sleep no more - Macbeth shall sleep no more!' (II, ii, 41-42). This is just a brief example of the references to sleep, which are particularly frequent in Act II, Scene ii.

## Tone

*Macbeth* is thought to be one of Shakespeare's darkest tragedies. The play is constantly dark, miserable, sinister and wicked. Most of the play is performed under the cover of darkness. When the stage directions refer to the weather, it is almost certainly bad weather. The sky is dark, the air is thick and the wind is howling. It sets the tone for the action of the play.

Even the brief, vaguely funny bits of the play are not without a dark and sinister element. For example, the porter's funny speech when he is opening the door is full of dramatic irony. He imagines that he is the gatekeeper to hell and he isn't far wrong. Macbeth's castle is quite hellish at this point in the stage of the play.



## Style

Most of the characters in Macbeth speak in **iambic pentameter** or **blank verse**. It does not rhyme but gives a poetic quality to their speech. As in all of Shakespeare's plays, this type of speech is reserved for the nobility. The word iambic refers to the fact that the rhythm is made up of an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. For example Mac-BETH. Pentameter refers to the fact that there are five instances of this in each line. It should create a 'Da-DUM, Da-DUM, Da-DUM, Da-DUM, Da-DUM' rhythm.

The characters of lower status do not speak in this way. Their speech is written in **prose**, which comes in stark contrast. The porter speaks in this way, as do the doctor and gentlewoman. Prose is the written form of ordinary language. Characters who speak in prose, speak the way we would!

The witches have their own completely separate type of speech. It is called **rhyming trochaic tetrameter** and basically means that they speak in a sing-song rhyme. Trochaic means that the rhythm is made up of trochees. Trochees create rhythm with a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable, e.g. DUM-da. Tetrameter means that there are four of these trochees; for example, DUM-da, DUM-da, DUM-da, DUM-da.

They also use **rhyming couplets**, which means that the lines are grouped in pairs and the endings of these pairs of lines rhyme:

*When shall we three meet again  
In thunder, lightning or in rain?*

(I, i, 1-2)

It has been suggested that this is how seventeenth-century audiences believed witches did talk. So while it sounds odd and perhaps a little sinister to us, it would've sounded terrifying to the audience of the day.

# Form

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The form of a text is the type of text it is: for example, a novel, a poem or a play. Each form of text has certain features and conventions - for example, many novels are divided into chapters and most are written in the first or third person.

Macbeth is a play. To be more specific, it is a tragedy. A tragedy is a play in which the central character has a flaw in their personality that eventually leads to their downfall - a tragic play does not usually end well for the main character, and it often ends with their death. As a play, and a tragedy, Macbeth uses particular conventions of tragic drama that it is important to understand.

## Tragic flaw

Macbeth's tragic flaw is his ambition: an ambition that knows no bounds and is not limited by normal moral conventions. He is so desperate to be king that as soon as the witches plant the idea in his mind with their prophecy, he starts to consider murder. Most people would not take this any further but, with no regard for the consequences, Macbeth and his wife turn their murderous thoughts into reality. Macbeth then appears to lose all grip on reality and moral sense and his crimes become more senseless and barbaric still: first the murder of his friend, Banquo, and then the slaughter of the innocent Lady Macduff and her children. As with all tragedies, Macbeth's flaw leads to his downfall - eventually, an army rises up against him and he is killed by Macduff, seeking revenge for the deaths of his loved ones.

## Dramatic irony

Dramatic irony occurs in a play when the audience becomes aware of a situation that is not apparent to the characters in the play. It is frequently used in tragic drama. There are several examples of dramatic irony in Macbeth. We learn in Act 1, Scene 5 that Lady Macbeth intends to murder the king, as she says,

*Come, thick night,  
And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell,  
That my keen knife see not the wound it makes*

(49-52)

In the following scene, King Duncan arrives at Macbeth's castle and is greeted warmly by Lady Macbeth. The audience knows that Lady Macbeth plans to murder King Duncan but King Duncan is completely unaware of this. Lady Macbeth's welcome sounds false and hollow to the audience as a result and we feel deeper sympathy for King Duncan as we consider the fate that awaits him and that he suspects not.

## Stage directions and props

When studying a play, it is important to remember that it was written to be performed and watched rather than read. Stage directions are the playwright's way of telling directors and actors how to perform certain sections of the play to have the desired effect on the audience (see Settings and Props on page 43). For example, Shakespeare has included stage directions to stipulate that there should be thunder every time the witches appear on stage. This is important - the stormy weather emphasises the darkness and the evil of the witches and creates a frightening and foreboding atmosphere. In Shakespeare's day, this would have been very unsettling for the audience. In a play there are no lengthy descriptions or explanations to tell us how characters feel - we must analyse the speech and the actions of the main characters and use stage directions to gain more insight.

# Structure

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**Structure refers to the manner in which the action of the play has been organised or divided up so that it holds the attention of the audience and can easily be followed and understood.**

The play is divided into five acts, each of which is split into various scenes. It follows the action of the play chronologically, without showing flashbacks or simultaneous scenes happening in different places.

The only slight interruptions to the action are the dreams and hallucinations of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Some of the major events in the play happen 'off stage' and the audience does not actually see them happen: for example, the murder of King Duncan and Lady Macbeth's suicide.

The play begins and ends with a civil war, which gives the impression that events have gone full circle. It is also ironic that Macbeth begins the play fighting against rebellious thanes and ends with the thanes fighting against him.

It follows the standard structure of a Shakespearean tragedy:

- In Act 1, the circumstances are set and we are made aware of the setting. The key characters, the key conflicts and the flaw that will lead to our hero's downfall are all introduced.
- In Act 2, the intensifying action develops, as the conflict grows and the problem becomes more complicated. The inevitability of Macbeth's eventual downfall becomes more and more apparent but he is still powerful and actively doing bad things, including murdering Duncan.
- In Act 3, Macbeth reaches a crisis point, from which he cannot return, as he has his friend Banquo murdered. There is a reversal in his fortunes. His power declines while people begin to openly oppose him and plan to get rid of him. His feelings of guilt weigh heavily on his mind.
- In Act 4, we see the beginnings of a resolution - an opposing force begins to build against Macbeth, who is left isolated after the barbaric murder of Lady Macduff and her children and the increasing madness of Lady Macbeth.
- In Act 5, we have the final disclosure as all the loose ends are tied up. The opposition strengthens and manages to defeat Macbeth. There is some recognition that the hero was once great... therefore, we cannot wholly celebrate his death. The rightful heir, Malcolm, claims the throne.

Shakespeare structures the play in such a way as to create unbearable tension and then allow the tension to diffuse with temporary breaks from the action. For example, the first two acts build up the tension as we move closer to the murder of Duncan but the tension is broken when morning comes and the porter provides a light-hearted interlude.

In Act 5, as the action escalates towards the climax and the final defeat of Macbeth, the scenes become very short, switching between the invading armies and Macbeth, who prepares himself within the castle walls. This gives the impression of events moving very quickly, all headed towards a foregone and inevitable conclusion.

# Context (Not assessed in the exam, but useful to know)

## Who was William Shakespeare?

William Shakespeare was born in April 1564 in Stratford-upon-Avon. The exact date is unknown but it is traditionally celebrated on St George's Day, 23<sup>rd</sup> April. He was one of the eight children of John Shakespeare and Mary Arden. Shakespeare's family was not wealthy but his father was well known in the town. It is believed that the young Shakespeare was educated at the Kings New School in Stratford but he left school at a young age to find employment.

Aged just eighteen, he married Anne Hathaway in a hurried ceremony in Stratford-upon-Avon. Six months later Anne gave birth to the couple's first child, a daughter that they called Susanna. Two years later, the family was completed with the birth of twins, Hamnet and Judith.



In 1588, Shakespeare moved to London and quickly found work at the Swan Theatre. He also began writing plays and his first play, *Henry VI*, was performed in 1592. It is believed that Shakespeare wrote something in the region of 37 plays and 153 sonnets throughout his career. Some people suggest that Shakespeare did not write his plays and that his name was attributed to the works of another writer who, for various suggested reasons, preferred to remain anonymous. Nonetheless, there is no hard evidence to back up these theories and we will probably never know for certain. *Macbeth* was written in between Shakespeare's writing of *Richard III* and *Hamlet*.

When Shakespeare's plays were first written they did receive some criticism because he was not as well educated as many playwrights of the day. However, they succeeded in attracting audiences from the lowest echelons of a class-ridden society, all the way up to the noblemen and monarchs, and continue to do so. By studying Shakespeare's plays, we can gain insight into the lives of his contemporaries.

Eventually, Shakespeare's plays proved to be so popular with London audiences, that Shakespeare's theatre company raised the funds to build their own larger theatre called The Globe. They were also very popular with the royal families and Shakespeare was the favourite of both the monarchs of his career, Elizabeth I and James I. James I was so impressed with Shakespeare that he allowed the theatre company to be known as the King's Men.

William Shakespeare died on 23<sup>rd</sup> April 1616, the day that is claimed to be his 52<sup>nd</sup> birthday. He was survived by his wife and daughters. His son Hamnet had died some years earlier, aged just eleven years. At the time of his death, Shakespeare had retired from writing and was enjoying a comfortable retirement funded by the success of his works. However, even he would not have predicted that his writing would still have such popularity and significance 400 years later! Numerous phrases and expressions that have found their way into everyday language can be traced back to Shakespeare's works. In addition, images that are first found in Shakespeare's works can be found again and again in later works.

## ***Macbeth***

*Macbeth* is one of Shakespeare's shortest plays and is generally considered to be one of Shakespeare's less complicated works. It is a tragedy and details the downfall of a Scottish thane who allows the prophecies of three witches to corrupt his character, driving him to murder and evil and his wife to madness. The play is a warning of the dangers of excessive ambition. It also provides insight into seventeenth-century ideas about the supernatural. It is one of Shakespeare's most well-known works and is a favourite of many.

*Macbeth* is believed to have been written in 1606, during the reign of James I. This is evident from the Scottish setting of the play, as James I was also James VI of Scotland. In addition, both Macbeth and Banquo are historical figures with links to Scotland and various aspects of the plot are believed to have been taken from events in Scottish history. It is the only one of Shakespeare's plays to have been set in Scotland. Even the fact that it was such a short play is believed to have been for King James's pleasure. It has been suggested that James I did not enjoy long plays and so Shakespeare altered his work accordingly.

James I was a strong believer in the divine right of kings, a theory that was popular in the seventeenth century, which suggested that a king's right to his title was bestowed upon him by God. Consequently, any attack or threat to the king constituted an attack on God's will. Similar ideas about the right to kingship are explored in *Macbeth*. Macbeth's intention to disrupt the natural progression of kings is the root of his downfall.

The supernatural and sinister side of *Macbeth* is one of the main reasons for its popularity and, again, it was believed that this aspect of the play was included to please King James, who was fascinated by witches. *Macbeth* features the famous three witches and the goddess of witches, Hecate. In addition, audiences of the play witness various supernatural acts including spells cast, the appearance of apparitions and also the appearance of ghosts. It is important to note that seventeenth-century audiences did believe in witchcraft and, therefore, the supernatural elements of the play would have been far more concerning at the time that the play was written. Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking would have been viewed as a supernatural act and the speeches and incantations of the witches would have terrified audiences. It is significant that Shakespeare chose to feature witches rather than more overtly evil characters. Witches are not inherently bad, they are merely women who have been corrupted by evil. This is, perhaps, the most terrifying aspect of the play, how a previously good and noble person can so quickly descend into evil. As the play progresses, Macbeth becomes increasingly tied to the witches and to committing more evil deeds. By the end of the play, he has no free will at all. He is little better than the witches.

The play itself is surrounded by myths and superstition and some people believe that it is cursed. It is believed that actors and theatre companies staging productions of *Macbeth* will suffer from inexplicable bad luck and various examples of this bad luck can be provided. For example, it is said that the young boy cast as Lady Macbeth in the first performance of the play became mysteriously ill and died. More recently, a 1971 production in New York suffered two robberies and seven fires. It is even suggested that Abraham Lincoln was reading *Macbeth* aloud to friends, shortly before his assassination.

It is thought to be unlucky for actors to refer to the play as *Macbeth* unless they are actually on stage, and so alternative titles, including 'The Scottish Play' or 'The Bard's Play', are used. It is not wholly clear where these superstitions came from but if seventeenth-century superstitions are taken into account, it is no surprise that actors were fearful about the play. It has been suggested that real witches were unhappy with their portrayal in the play and so they decided to place a curse on it. Alternatively, others suggest that the witches' incantations included were real spells with real magical consequences. One more logical explanation that has been offered for the emergence of the *Macbeth* curse is that it became associated with failing or failed theatre companies. This was because struggling seventeenth-century theatre companies tried to salvage their reputation and ticket sales by performing a safe and certain crowd pleaser, *Macbeth*. Invariably, this wasn't always enough to turn their fortunes around and so people began to notice that *Macbeth* was often the final play performed before companies collapsed. Over time, this association grew to the popular perception that performing *Macbeth* brings bad luck.

# Glossary

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<b>Act</b>	a section of a play - in Macbeth, there are five acts
<b>Apparition</b>	a vision or a ghost
<b>Blank verse</b>	verse written in iambic pentameter but that does not rhyme
<b>Character</b>	one of the people in the story being told
<b>Context</b>	factors in society that affect how people interpret a play
<b>Dramatic irony</b>	when the reader or audience is aware of a situation that a character in the play is not aware of; this adds another layer of meaning to the words and actions of the character
<b>Extract</b>	a short section taken from a text
<b>Form</b>	the format of a text (novel, poem or play)
<b>Iambic pentameter</b>	a line that contains five iambs; an iamb is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable
<b>Idea</b>	what the writer might have wanted his audience to learn from his play
<b>Plot</b>	the main events of a play or novel
<b>Prop</b>	an object or item used on the stage to add meaning
<b>Prophecy</b>	a prediction about what will happen in the future
<b>Prose</b>	the written form of ordinary language
<b>Rhyming couplet</b>	a pair of lines that rhyme
<b>Scene</b>	a section of a play; each act is divided into several scenes
<b>Setting</b>	the location of the action in a play
<b>Soliloquy</b>	a speech in which a character speaks his or her thoughts aloud
<b>Stage direction</b>	instructions that a playwright writes to help directors and actors to stage the play
<b>Structure</b>	how the action of the play is organised or divided up to help the reader or the audience to understand it
<b>Style</b>	the way that a writer writes: choice of words and sentence structure, etc.
<b>Symbol</b>	a thing which stands for, or represents, something else - particularly an idea or value
<b>Thane</b>	a Scottish lord
<b>Theme</b>	what the play is all about; a topic that is explored in a piece of writing
<b>Tragedy</b>	a play in which the main character has a tragic flaw leading to his or her downfall; usually has a sad ending
<b>Tragic hero</b>	the hero of a tragedy
<b>Trochaic tetrameter</b>	a line with four trochees; a trochee is a stressed syllable followed by an unstressed syllable.