**Character of Macbeth – Acts 1-4: important quotations**

**I, VII - I have no spur to prick my ambition**

“If it were done when ’tis done, then ’twere well

It were done quickly… I have no spur

To prick the sides of my intent, but only

Vaulting ambition which o’erleaps itself

And falls on th’other.”

In this soliloquy, which is found in Act 1, scene 7, lines 1–28, Macbeth debates whether he should kill Duncan. When he lists Duncan’s noble qualities (he “[h]ath borne his faculties so meek”) and the loyalty that he feels toward his king (“I am his kinsman and his subject”), we are reminded of just how grave an outrage it is for the couple to slaughter their ruler while he is a guest in their house. At the same time, Macbeth’s fear that “[w]e still have judgement here, that we but teach / Bloody instructions which, being taught, return / To plague th’inventor,” foreshadows the way that his deeds will eventually come back to haunt him. The imagery in this speech is dark—we hear of “bloody instructions,” “deep damnation,” and a “poisoned chalice”—and suggests that Macbeth is aware of how the murder would open the door to a dark and sinful world. At the same time, he admits that his only reason for committing murder, “ambition,” suddenly seems an insufficient justification for the act. The destruction that comes from unchecked ambition will continue to be explored as one of the play’s themes. As the soliloquy ends, Macbeth seems to resolve not to kill Duncan, but this resolve will only last until his wife returns and once again convinces him, by the strength of her will, to go ahead with their plot.

**II,i – Is this a dagger**

*"Is this a dagger which I see before me..." - Macbeth (II, i, 33)*

Macbeth has made his decision to kill the King and take the crown as his own. Inspired in part by his own ambition, the decision to murder Duncan is aided by the prophecies of the Witches as well as the insistent urging of his wife. Still, Macbeth is wracked with guilt over what he is about to do, and his mind races with thoughts of such evil action. He begins to hallucinate and sees a bloody dagger in the air, which will be his instrument of murder. He goes on to comment on the wickedness of the world, thoughts which are interrupted by the ringing of the bell, a signal from Lady Macbeth that Duncan's guards are drugged and sleeping. He goes off to complete the dire deed. Shakespeare's Macbeth is notable for hallucinations, terrifying dreams, witches, prophecies and all of the combining forces of nature which lead to chaos and murder in the gloomy countryside of Scotland.

**II,ii - Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood Clean from my hand?**

“Whence is that knocking?—

How is’t with me, when every noise appals me?

What hands are here! Ha, they pluck out mine eyes.

Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood

Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather

The multitudinous seas incarnadine,

Making the green one red.”

Macbeth says this in Act 2, scene 2, lines 55–61. He has just murdered Duncan, and the crime was accompanied by supernatural portents. Now he hears a mysterious knocking on his gate, which seems to promise doom. (In fact, the person knocking is Macduff, who will indeed eventually destroy Macbeth.) The enormity of Macbeth’s crime has awakened in him a powerful sense of guilt that will hound him throughout the play. Blood, specifically Duncan’s blood, serves as the symbol of that guilt, and Macbeth’s sense that “all great Neptune’s ocean” cannot cleanse him—that there is enough blood on his hands to turn the entire sea red—will stay with him until his death. Lady Macbeth’s response to this speech will be her prosaic remark, “A little water clears us of this deed” (2.2.65). By the end of the play, however, she will share Macbeth’s sense that Duncan’s murder has irreparably stained them with blood.

**VI The firstlings of my heart shall be the firstlings of my hand**

“MACBETH Time, thou anticipatest my dread exploits:

The flighty purpose never is o'ertook

Unless the deed go with it; from this moment

The very firstlings of my heart shall be

The firstlings of my hand. And even now,

To crown my thoughts with acts, be it thought and done:

The castle of Macduff I will surprise; 150

Seize upon Fife; give to the edge o' the sword

His wife, his babes, and all unfortunate souls

That trace him in his line.”

The interest in this act centres around Macbeth's relation to Macduff, who has been already pointed out as his sole opponent among the Scottish nobles. In the first scene, Macbeth is warned against him by name and resolves to put him to death; in the second, assassins, who have come too late to find him in his castle, massacre by Macbeth's orders his entire household; in the third we find him in England stirring up Malcolm to war against the tyrant, receiving the terrible news of the slaughter of his wife and children, and vowing revenge upon their murderer. We see less of Macbeth in this act than in any other, but we see enough to show us how, by this time, he has wholly given himself over to evil.