

## Macbeth



## INTRO

## BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Shakespeare's father was a glove-maker, and Shakespeare received no more than a grammar school education. He married Anne Hathaway in 1582, but left his family behind around 1590 and moved to London, where he became an actor and playwright. He was an immediate success: Shakespeare soon became the most popular playwright of the day as well as a part-owner of the Globe Theater. His theater troupe was adopted by King James as the King's Men in 1603. Shakespeare retired as a rich and prominent man to Stratford-upon-Avon in 1613, and died three years later.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Queen Elizabeth died in 1603, King James of Scotland became King of England. James almost immediately gave his patronage to Shakespeare's company, making them the King's Men. In many ways, *Macbeth* can be seen as a show of gratitude from Shakespeare to his new King and benefactor. For instance, King James actually traced his ancestry back to the real-life Banquo. Shakespeare's transformation of the Banquo in Holinshed's *Chronicles* who helped murder Duncan to the noble man in *Macbeth* who refused to help kill Duncan is therefore a kind of compliment given to King James' ancestor.

## RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Shakespeare's source for *Macbeth* was Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland*, though in writing *Macbeth* Shakespeare changed numerous details for dramatic and thematic reasons, and even for political reasons (see Related Historical Events). For instance, in Holinshed's version, Duncan was a weak and ineffectual King, and Banquo actually helped Macbeth commit the murder. Shakespeare's changes to the story emphasize Macbeth's fall from nobility to man ruled by ambition and destroyed by guilt.

## KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Tragedy of Macbeth*
- **When Written:** 1606
- **Where Written:** England
- **When Published:** 1623
- **Literary Period:** The Renaissance (1500 - 1660)
- **Genre:** Tragic drama
- **Setting:** Scotland and, briefly, England during the eleventh century

- **Climax:** Macbeth's murder of Duncan

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Shakespeare or Not?** There are some who believe Shakespeare wasn't educated enough to write the plays attributed to him. The most common anti-Shakespeare theory is that Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, wrote the plays and used Shakespeare as a front man because aristocrats were not supposed to write plays. Yet the evidence supporting Shakespeare's authorship far outweighs any evidence against. So until further notice, Shakespeare is still the most influential writer in the English language.



## PLOT SUMMARY

Norwegians, aided by Scottish rebels, have invaded Scotland. The Scots successfully defend their country and their beloved king, **Duncan**. One Scotsman in particular, **Macbeth**, Thane of Glamis, distinguishes himself in fighting off the invaders. After the battle, Macbeth and his friend **Banquo** come upon the **weird sisters**, three witches who prophesy that Macbeth will become Thane of Cawdor, and one day King. They further prophesy that Banquo's descendants will be kings. The men don't at first believe the witches, but then learn that the old Thane of Cawdor was actually a traitor helping the Norwegians, and that Duncan has rewarded Macbeth's bravery on the battlefield by making him Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth immediately fantasizes about murdering Duncan and becoming king, but pushes the thought away. Later that day, Duncan announces that his eldest son, **Malcolm**, will be heir to his throne. As Macbeth begins to succumb to his ambition, Duncan decides to spend the night in celebration at Macbeth's castle of Inverness.

**Lady Macbeth** receives a letter from her husband about the prophecy and Duncan's imminent arrival. She decides her husband is too kind to follow his ambitions, and vows to push him to murder Duncan and take the crown that very night. Macbeth at first resists his wife's plan, but his ambition and her constant questioning of his courage and manhood win him over. That night they murder Duncan and frame the men guarding Duncan's room. The next morning, **Macduff**, another Scottish thane, discovers Duncan dead and raises the alarm. Macbeth and Lady Macbeth pretend to be shocked and outraged. Macbeth murders the guardsmen of Duncan's room to keep them silent, but says he did it out of a furious rage that they killed the king. Duncan's sons think they may be the next target, and flee. Macbeth is made king, and because they ran, Duncan's sons become the prime suspects in their father's murder.

Because he knows the witches' prophecy, Banquo is suspicious of Macbeth. And because of the prophecy that Banquo's line will reign as kings, Macbeth sees Banquo as a threat. Macbeth gives a feast, inviting many thanes, including Banquo. Macbeth hires two **murderers** to kill Banquo and his son **Fleance** as they ride to attend the feast. The men kill Banquo, but Fleance escapes. At the feast, Macbeth sees Banquo's ghost, though no one else does. Macbeth's behavior and the death of Banquo make all the thanes suspicious. They begin to think of Macbeth as a tyrant. Macduff refuses to appear at the royal court at all, and goes to England to support Malcolm in his effort to raise an army against Macbeth.

Macbeth visits the three witches to learn more about his fate. They show him three apparitions who tell Macbeth to beware Macduff, but also that no "man born of woman" can defeat him and that he will rule until Birnam Wood marches to Dunsinane (a castle). Since all men are born of women and trees can't move, Macbeth takes this to mean he's invincible. Yet the witches also confirm the prophecy that Banquo's line will one day rule Scotland. To strengthen his hold on the crown, Macbeth sends men to Macduff's castle to murder Macduff's family. Meanwhile, in England, Macduff and Malcolm prepare to invade Scotland. When news comes to England of the murder of Macduff's family, Macduff, weeping, vows revenge.

While the English and Scottish under Malcolm march toward Dunsinane, Lady Macbeth begins sleepwalking and imagining blood on her hands that can't be washed off. Macbeth has become manic, cruel, and haughty—many of his men desert to Malcolm's side. In Birnam Wood, Malcolm and his generals devise a strategy to hide their numbers—they cut branches to hold up in front of them. As Macbeth prepares for the siege, Lady Macbeth dies, perhaps of suicide. Macbeth can barely feel anything anymore, and her death only makes him give a speech about the meaninglessness of life. Then Malcolm's forces appear looking like a forest marching toward the castle. Malcolm's forces quickly capture Dunsinane, but Macbeth himself fights on, mocking all who dare to face him as "men born of woman." But Macduff reveals that he was "untimely ripped" from his mother's womb (a caesarean section). Macduff kills Macbeth, and Malcolm is crowned as King of Scotland.

destroys himself. What's perhaps most interesting about Macbeth is that he senses the murder will lead to his own destruction even before he murders Duncan, yet his ambition is so great that he *still* goes through with it.

**Lady Macbeth** – Macbeth's wife. Unlike her husband, she has no reservations about murdering **Duncan** in order to make Macbeth King of Scotland. She believes that a true man takes what he wants, and whenever Macbeth objects to murdering Duncan on moral grounds, she questions his courage. Lady Macbeth assumes that she'll be able to murder Duncan and then quickly forget it once she's Queen of Scotland. But she discovers that guilt is not so easily avoided, and falls into madness and despair.

**Banquo** – A Scottish nobleman, general, and friend of **Macbeth**. He is also the father of **Fleance**. The weird sisters prophesies that while Banquo will never be King of Scotland, his descendants will one day sit on the throne. Banquo is as ambitious as Macbeth, but unlike Macbeth he resists putting his selfish ambition above his honor or the good of Scotland. Because he both knows the prophecy and is honorable, Banquo is both a threat to Macbeth and a living example of the noble path that Macbeth chose not to take. After Macbeth has Banquo murdered he is haunted by Banquo's ghost, which symbolizes Macbeth's terrible guilt at what he has become.

**Macduff** – A Scottish nobleman, and the Thane of Fife. His wife is **Lady Macduff**, and the two have babies and a **young son**. Macduff offers a contrast to **Macbeth**: a Scottish lord who, far from being ambitious, puts the welfare of Scotland even ahead of the welfare of his own family. Macduff suspects Macbeth from the beginning, and becomes one of the leaders of the rebellion. After Macbeth has Macduff's family murdered, Macduff's desire for vengeance becomes more personal and powerful.

**King Duncan** – The King of Scotland, and the father of **Malcolm** and **Donalbain**. **Macbeth** murders him to get the crown. Duncan is the model of a good, virtuous king who puts the welfare of the country above his own and seeks, like a gardener, to nurture and grow the kingdom that is his responsibility. Duncan is the living embodiment of the political and social order that Macbeth destroys.

**Malcolm** – The older of **King Duncan**'s two sons, and Duncan's designated heir to the throne of Scotland. Early in the play, Malcolm is a weak and inexperienced leader, and he actually flees Scotland in fear after his father is murdered. But Malcolm matures, and with the help of **Macduff** and an English army, Malcolm eventually overthrows **Macbeth** and retakes the throne, restoring the order that was destroyed when Duncan was murdered.

**Weird Sisters** – Three witches, whose prophecy helps push **Macbeth**'s ambition over the edge, and convinces him to murder **Duncan** in order to become King. The witches'



## CHARACTERS

**Macbeth** – **Lady Macbeth**'s husband and a Scottish nobleman, the Thane of Glamis. He is made Thane of Cawdor for his bravery in battle, and becomes King of Scotland by murdering the previous King, **Duncan**. As **Macbeth** opens, Macbeth is one of the great noblemen in Scotland: valiant, loyal, and honorable. He's also ambitious, and while this ambition helps to make him the great lord he is, once he hears the **weird sisters**' prophecy Macbeth becomes so consumed by his desire for power that he becomes a tyrannical and violent monster who ultimately

knowledge of future events clearly indicates that they have supernatural powers, and they also clearly enjoy using those powers to cause havoc and mayhem among mankind. But it is important to realize that the witches never compel anyone to do anything. Instead, they tell half-truths to lure men into giving into their own dark desires. It's left vague in **Macbeth** whether Macbeth would have become King of Scotland if he just sat back and did nothing. This vagueness seems to suggest that while the broad outlines of a person's fate might be predetermined, how the fate plays out is up to him.

**Fleance** – Banquo's teenage son. **Macbeth** sees him as a threat because of the weird sisters' prophecy that Banquo's descendants will one day rule Scotland.

**Lady Macduff** – The wife of **Macduff** and the mother of Macduff's children (and the only female character of note in the play besides **Lady Macbeth**). She questions her husband's decision to leave his family behind when he goes to England to help **Malcolm** save Scotland from **Macbeth**.

**Young Macduff** – Macduff's son, still a child.

**Lennox** – A Scottish nobleman.

**Ross** – A Scottish nobleman.

**Angus** – A Scottish nobleman.

**Donalbain** – King **Duncan**'s younger son and **Malcolm**'s brother.

**Murderers** – Men hired by **Macbeth** to kill **Banquo** and **Fleance**.

**Porter** – The guardian of the gate at **Macbeth**'s castle.

**Hecate** – The goddess of witchcraft.

**Gentlewoman** – **Lady Macbeth**'s attendant.

**Siward** – A warlike English lord.

**Young Siward** – **Siward**'s son.

**King Edward** – The King of England. He is so saintly his touch can cure the sick.

**Captain** – A captain in the Scottish Army.

**Seyton** – **Macbeth**'s servant.

**Old Man** – An elderly fellow who sees some strange things happen the night **Macbeth** murders **Duncan**.

**English Doctor** – An English doctor.

**Scottish Doctor** – The doctor **Macbeth** assigns to cure **Lady Macbeth** of her madness.

## 1 AMBITION

*Macbeth* is a play about ambition run amok. The **weird sisters'** prophecies spur both **Macbeth** and **Lady Macbeth** to try to fulfill their ambitions, but the witches never *make* Macbeth or his wife do anything. Macbeth and his wife act on their own to fulfill their deepest desires. Macbeth, a good general and, by all accounts before the action of the play, a good man, allows his ambition to overwhelm him and becomes a murdering, paranoid maniac. Lady Macbeth, once she begins to put into actions the once-hidden thoughts of her mind, is crushed by guilt.

Both Macbeth and Lady Macbeth want to be great and powerful, and sacrifice their morals to achieve that goal. By contrasting these two characters with others in the play, such as **Banquo**, **Duncan**, and **Macduff**, who also want to be great leaders but refuse to allow ambition to come before honor, Macbeth shows how naked ambition, freed from any sort of moral or social conscience, ultimately takes over every other characteristic of a person. Unchecked ambition, *Macbeth* suggests, can never be fulfilled, and therefore quickly grows into a monster that will destroy anyone who gives into it.

## 2 FATE

From the moment the **weird sisters** tell **Macbeth** and **Banquo** their prophecies, both the characters and the audience are forced to wonder about fate. Is it real? Is action necessary to make it come to pass, or will the prophecy come true no matter what one does? Different characters answer these questions in different ways at different times, and the final answers are ambiguous—as fate always is.

Unlike Banquo, Macbeth acts: he kills **Duncan**. Macbeth tries to master fate, to make fate conform to exactly what he wants. But, of course, fate doesn't work that way. By trying to master fate once, Macbeth puts himself in the position of having to master fate always. At every instant, he has to struggle against those parts of the witches' prophecies that don't favor him. Ultimately, Macbeth becomes so obsessed with his fate that he becomes delusional: he becomes unable to see the half-truths behind the witches' prophecies. By trying to master fate, he brings himself to ruin.

## 3 VIOLENCE

To call *Macbeth* a violent play is an understatement. It begins in battle, contains the murder of men, women, and children, and ends not just with a climactic siege but the suicide of **Lady Macbeth** and the beheading of its main character, **Macbeth**. In the process of all this bloodshed, *Macbeth* makes an important point about the nature of violence: every violent act, even those done for selfless reasons, seems to lead inevitably to the next. The violence through which Macbeth takes the throne, as Macbeth himself realizes, opens the way for others to try to



## THEMES

In LitCharts each theme gets its own color and number. Our color-coded theme boxes make it easy to track where the themes occur throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, use the numbers instead.

take the throne for themselves through violence. So Macbeth must commit more violence, and more violence, until violence is all he has left. As Macbeth himself says after seeing Banquo's ghost, "blood will to blood." Violence leads to violence, a vicious cycle.

#### 4 NATURE AND THE UNNATURAL

In medieval times, it was believed that the health of a country was directly related to the goodness and moral legitimacy of its king. If the King was good and just, then the nation would have good harvests and good weather. If there was political order, then there would be natural order. *Macbeth* shows this connection between the political and natural world: when **Macbeth** disrupts the social and political order by murdering **Duncan** and usurping the throne, nature goes haywire. Incredible storms rage, the earth tremors, animals go insane and eat each other. The unnatural events of the physical world emphasize the horror of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth's acts, and mirrors the warping of their souls by ambition.

Also note the way that different characters talk about nature in the play. Duncan and **Malcolm** use nature metaphors when they speak of kingship—they see themselves as gardeners and want to make their realm grow and flower. In contrast, Macbeth and **Lady Macbeth** either try to hide from nature (wishing the stars would disappear) or to use nature to hide their cruel designs (being the serpent hiding beneath the innocent flower). The implication is that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, once they've given themselves to the extreme selfishness of ambition, have themselves become unnatural.

#### 5 MANHOOD

Over and over again in *Macbeth*, characters discuss or debate about manhood: Lady Macbeth challenges Macbeth when he decides not to kill Duncan, Banquo refuses to join Macbeth in his plot, Lady Macduff questions Macduff's decision to go to England, and on and on.

Through these challenges, *Macbeth* questions and examines manhood itself. Does a true man take what he wants no matter what it is, as **Lady Macbeth** believes? Or does a real man have the strength to restrain his desires, as **Banquo** believes? All of *Macbeth* can be seen as a struggle to answer this question about the nature and responsibilities of manhood.

## VISIONS AND HALLUCINATIONS

A number of times in *Macbeth*, **Macbeth** sees or hears strange things: the floating dagger, the voice that says he's murdering sleep, and **Banquo's** ghost. As Macbeth himself wonders about the dagger, are these sights and sounds supernatural visions or figments of his guilty imagination? The play contains no definitive answer, which is itself a kind of answer: they're both. Macbeth is a man at war with himself, his innate honor battling his ambition. Just as nature goes haywire when the normal natural order is ruptured, Macbeth's own mind does the same when it is forced to fight against itself.

## BLOOD

Blood is always closely linked to violence, but over the course of *Macbeth* blood comes to symbolize something else: guilt. Death and killing happen in an instant, but blood remains, and stains. At the times when both **Macbeth** and **Lady Macbeth** feel most guilty, they despair that they will never be able to wash the blood—their guilt—from their hands.

## SLEEP

When he murders **Duncan**, **Macbeth** thinks he hears a voice say "Macbeth does murder sleep" (2.2.34). Sleep symbolizes innocence, purity, and peace of mind, and in killing Duncan Macbeth actually *does* murder sleep: **Lady Macbeth** begins to sleepwalk, and Macbeth is haunted by his nightmares.



## QUOTES

The color-coded and numbered boxes under each quote below make it easy to track the themes related to each quote. Each color and number corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

### ACT 1, SCENE 1 QUOTES

Fair is foul, and foul is fair;  
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

- Speaker: Weird Sisters
- Related themes: Nature and the Unnatural
- Theme Tracker code:



### ACT 1, SCENE 3 QUOTES

And oftentimes, to win us to our harm,  
The instruments of darkness tell us truths,  
Win us with honest trifles, to betray's  
In deepest consequence.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **red text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

- Speaker: Banquo
- Mentioned or related characters: Macbeth, Weird Sisters
- Related themes: Ambition, Fate, Violence, Manhood
- Theme Tracker code:

1 2 3 4 5

### ACT 1, SCENE 4 QUOTES

Stars, hide your fires!  
Let not light see my black and deep desires.

- Speaker: Macbeth
- Related themes: Ambition, Violence, Nature and the Unnatural, Manhood
- Theme Tracker code:

1 2 3 4 5

### ACT 1, SCENE 5 QUOTES

Look like the innocent flower,  
But be the serpent under it.

- Speaker: Lady Macbeth
- Mentioned or related characters: Macbeth
- Related themes: Violence, Nature and the Unnatural
- Theme Tracker code:

1 2 3 4 5

Come, you spirits  
That tend on mortal thoughts! unsex me here,  
And fill me from the crown to the toe, top-full  
Of direst cruelty; make thick my blood,  
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,  
That no compunctious visitings of nature  
Shake my fell purpose, nor keep peace between  
The effect and it! Come to my woman's breasts,  
And take my milk for gall.

- Speaker: Lady Macbeth
- Related themes: Ambition, Violence, Nature and the Unnatural
- Theme Tracker code:

1 2 3 4 5

### ACT 1, SCENE 7 QUOTES

I dare do all that may become a man;  
Who dares do more, is none.

- Speaker: Macbeth
- Related themes: Manhood
- Theme Tracker code:

1 2 3 4 5

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

- Speaker: Macbeth
- Related themes: Ambition, Violence, Manhood
- Theme Tracker code:

1 2 3 4 5

Macbeth: If we should fail.  
Lady Macbeth: We fail?  
But screw your courage to the sticking-place,  
And we'll not fail.

- Speaker: Macbeth, Lady Macbeth
- Related themes: Ambition, Manhood
- Theme Tracker code:

1 2 3 4 5

### ACT 2, SCENE 1 QUOTES

Is this a dagger which I see before me,  
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee;  
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.  
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible  
To feeling as to sight? or art thou but  
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,  
Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?  
I see thee yet, in form as palpable  
As this which now I draw.

- Speaker: Macbeth
- Related themes: Violence, Nature and the Unnatural
- Theme Tracker code:

1 2 3 4 5

## ACT 2, SCENE 2 QUOTES

Methought I heard a voice cry, Sleep no more!  
 Macbeth does murder sleep, — the innocent sleep;  
 Sleep, that knits up the ravell'd sleeve of care,  
 The death of each day's life, sore labor's bath,  
 Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,  
 Chief nourisher in life's feast.

- Speaker: Macbeth
- Related themes: Violence, Nature and the Unnatural
- Theme Tracker code:



## ACT 3, SCENE 2 QUOTES

Nought's had, all's spent  
 Where our desire is got without content.

- Speaker: Lady Macbeth
- Related themes: Ambition, Violence, Nature and the Unnatural
- Theme Tracker code:



## ACT 3, SCENE 4 QUOTES

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

- Speaker: Macbeth
- Related themes: Violence
- Theme Tracker code:



## ACT 4, SCENE 1 QUOTES

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

- Speaker: Weird Sisters
- Mentioned or related characters: Macbeth
- Related themes: Ambition, Violence, Nature and the Unnatural
- Theme Tracker code:



## ACT 5, SCENE 1 QUOTES

Out, damned spot! out, I say!

- Speaker: Lady Macbeth
- Related themes: Violence, Nature and the Unnatural
- Theme Tracker code:



## ACT 5, SCENE 5 QUOTES

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow  
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
 To the last syllable of recorded time;  
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
 The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
 Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
 That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
 And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
 Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
 Signifying nothing.

- Speaker: Macbeth
- Related themes: Ambition, Violence, Nature and the Unnatural, Manhood
- Theme Tracker code:



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded and numbered boxes under each row of Summary and Analysis below make it easy to track the themes throughout the work. Each color and number corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

### ACT 1, SCENE 1

As a storm rages, **three witches** appear, speaking in rhyming, paradoxical couplets: "when the battle's lost and won" (1.1.4); "fair is foul, and foul is fair" (1.1.10). They agree to meet again on the heath (plain) when the battle now raging ends. There they'll meet **Macbeth**.

*The witches' rhyming speech makes them seem inhuman, ominous, and paranormal, which, in fact, they are.*



## ACT 1, SCENE 2

At a military camp, **King Duncan** of Scotland, his sons **Malcolm** and **Donalbain**, and the Thane of **Lennox** wait for news of the war. A **captain** enters, covered in so much **blood** he is almost unrecognizable. The captain tells them of the state of the battle against the invading Norwegians and the Scottish rebels Macdonald and the Thane of Cawdor. Two Scottish nobleman have been especially brave, **Macbeth** (the Thane of Glamis) and **Banquo**. Macbeth killed Macdonald ("unseemed him from the nave to th' chops" (1.2.22)).

*The blood covering the captain makes him an unrecognizable monster, just as Macbeth, who in this scene is described as a noble hero who is brave and loyal to his king, will be transformed into a monster as he becomes "covered" with the metaphorical blood of those he kills to achieve his ambitions.*



The Thane of **Ross** arrives, and describes how **Macbeth** defeated Sweno, the Norwegian King, who now begs for a truce. **Duncan** proclaims that the traitorous Thane of Cawdor shall be put to death, and that **Macbeth** shall be made Thane of Cawdor.

*Duncan rewards and trusts his subjects. This is the opposite of personal ambition. Ironically, though, he replaces one traitor with a much worse traitor.*



## ACT 1, SCENE 3

On the heath the **witches** appear. They call themselves the "weird sisters" (1.3.30) and brag of their dread and magical deeds such as killing swine and cursing a sailor to waste away.

*The witches are established as both wicked and magically powerful.*



**Macbeth** and **Banquo** enter. The **witches** hail Macbeth as Thane of Glamis, Thane of Cawdor, and "king hereafter" (1.3.47). Banquo asks Macbeth why he seems to fear this good news, then questions the witches about his own future. They say that Banquo is "lesser than Macbeth and greater" (1.3.63) because though he'll never be king, his descendants will.

*Does the fear Banquo notes in Macbeth signal that Macbeth's doomed struggle against his ambition starts the instant he hears the prophecy?*



**Macbeth** asks how the **witches** know this information. But the witches vanish, making the two men wonder if they could have imagined the whole thing. Just then, **Ross** and **Angus** enter. They tell Macbeth that the old Thane of Cawdor was a traitor and that **Duncan** has made Macbeth the new Thane of Cawdor.

*The prophecy is fulfilled and the witches' power is proved to be genuine. The traitorous old Thane of Cawdor is replaced by Macbeth.*



**Macbeth** and **Banquo** are shocked. Macbeth asks Banquo if he now thinks that his children will be king. Banquo seems unsure, and comments that "instruments of darkness" sometimes tell half truths to bring men to ruin.

*Banquo guesses the witches' plot exactly. This means that when Macbeth chooses to believe the witches and act, he knows the risks.*



As **Banquo** talks with **Ross** and **Angus**, **Macbeth** ponders the prophecy. If it's evil, why would it truly predict his being made Thane of Cawdor? If it's good, why would he already be contemplating murder, a thought that makes "my seated heart knock at my ribs" (1.3.134-136)? Macbeth feels that he's losing himself, and hopes that if fate says he'll become king, he won't have to act to make it happen.

*Macbeth is already thinking about killing Duncan, but the thought terrifies him: he's struggling against his ambition. His thoughts about fate are classic: does fate happen no matter what, or must one act?*



**Ross** and **Angus** think **Macbeth's** reverie is caused by becoming Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth and Banquo agree to speak about the witches' prophecy later.

*This exchange with Banquo is the last time Macbeth is honest in the play.*



## ACT 1, SCENE 4

At a camp near the battlefield, **Malcolm** tells **Duncan** that the old Thane of Cawdor confessed and repented before being executed. Duncan notes that you can't always trust a man by his outward show. **Macbeth**, **Banquo**, **Ross**, and **Angus** enter. Duncan says that even the gift of Cawdor is not as much as Macbeth deserves. Macbeth responds: "The service and loyalty I owe, in doing it, pays itself" (1.4.22).

*Deeply ironic that just as Duncan comments about how you can't trust people's outward shows, Macbeth enters. Duncan's great strength as a king is his trust in his people and his thanes, but it also makes him vulnerable to treachery.*



**Duncan** is pleased. He says: "I have begun to plant thee, and will labour to make thee full of growing" (1.4.28-29). Next, he announces that **Malcolm** will be heir to the Scottish throne (the kingship was not hereditary in Scotland at that time). Duncan then adjourns the meeting and decides to spend the night at Inverness, **Macbeth's** castle.

*Duncan thinks of his role as King in terms of what he can give. He's like a gardener in nature; putting his country above his own desires...*



**Macbeth** goes ahead to prepare for the King's visit, but notes that **Malcolm** now stands between him and the throne. He begs the **stars** to "hide your fires, let not light see my black and deep desires" (1.4.51).

*...Macbeth, in contrast, thinks in terms of what he can take. This makes his relationship with nature adversarial.*



## ACT 1, SCENE 5

At Inverness, **Lady Macbeth** reads a letter in which **Macbeth** tells her of the witches' prophecy. Lady Macbeth worries Macbeth is too kind and honorable to fulfill his ambition and the prophecy. She decides to question his manhood to make him act.

*Lady Macbeth is established as power-hungry. She sees honor as a weakness, and knows how to push her husband's buttons: question his courage.*



A servant enters with news that **Duncan** will spend the night, then exits. **Lady Macbeth** says Duncan's visit will be fatal, and calls on spirits to "unsex me here... and take my milk for gall" (1.5.39-46).

*In order to murder Duncan, Lady Macbeth not only renounces her womanhood, she literally asks to be turned into an unnatural fiend!*



**Macbeth** enters, and says **Duncan** will spend the night and leave the next day. **Lady Macbeth** says Duncan will never see that day. She counsels **Macbeth** to look like an "innocent flower," but be the viper hiding beneath it (1.5.63). Macbeth remains unconvinced. Lady Macbeth tells him to leave the plan to her.

*Macbeth is still struggling against his ambition. Lady Macbeth's advice on how to hide one's true intentions involves exploiting nature. (Note: in the Garden of Eden, the devil hid himself in the form of a snake.)*



## ACT 1, SCENE 6

**Duncan**, **Malcolm**, **Donalbain**, **Banquo**, **Lennox**, **Macduff**, **Ross**, and **Angus** arrive at Inverness. Duncan comments on the sweetness of the air. Banquo notes that martlets, a species of bird that usually nests in churches, have nested in the castle.

*Ironic that Duncan thinks the castle where he'll be murdered is beautiful. Also shows what beauty Macbeth loses when he gives in to his ambition.*



**Lady Macbeth** warmly greets the **King** and the thanes, though **Macbeth** is nowhere to be seen.

*At this point, the planned murder weighs more on Macbeth than on Lady Macbeth.*



## ACT 1, SCENE 7

**Macbeth**, alone, agonizes about whether to kill **Duncan**. He'd be willing to murder Duncan if he thought that would be the end of it. But he knows that "bloody instructions, being taught, return to plague the inventor" (1.7.10). Also, Macbeth notes, Duncan is a guest, kinsman, and good king. He decides ambition is not enough to justify the murder.

*Macbeth wrestles with his ambition and wins! He knows that murdering Duncan will only end up leading to more bloodshed, and ruin his honor, which he prizes.*





**Lady Macbeth** enters, asking where he's been. **Macbeth** tells her they won't murder **Duncan**. She questions his manhood. Macbeth replies: "I dare do all that may become a man; who dares do more is none" (1.7.46-47). But Lady Macbeth continues: she says she has nursed his baby, but if she'd known her husband was such a coward she'd have rather "dashed [the baby's] brains out" (1.7.56).

*Lady Macbeth and Macbeth debate about manhood and courage. She says it's taking what you want. He says it's the power to put responsibility before selfishness, the power to not take what you want.*



**Macbeth** asks what will happen if they fail. **Lady Macbeth** assures him they won't fail if they have courage. She outlines the plan: she'll give **Duncan's** bedroom attendants enough wine to ensure they black out from drunkenness. Then she and Macbeth will commit the murder and frame the attendants. Macbeth, impressed by her courage, agrees.

*Lady Macbeth's tragedy is that she doesn't realize that murdering Duncan will torment and ultimately destroy her. Macbeth's tragedy is more profound: he does realize it, and still gives in to his ambition.*



## ACT 2, SCENE 1

It is after midnight in Inverness. **Banquo** talks with his son **Fleance** and notices the **stars aren't shining**. He prays for angels to "restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature gives way to in repose" (2.1.7-8).

*Banquo is also struggling against ambition. Earlier Macbeth begged the stars to hide (1.4.51). They have.*



**Macbeth** enters. **Banquo** tells Macbeth his **sleep** has been troubled by dreams of the **weird sisters**. Macbeth claims never to think about them. But he suggests they talk about the witches soon, and adds that if Banquo supports him when the time comes he'll reward and honor Banquo for it.

*Banquo is open about the troubling "dreams" the witches have inspired in him. Macbeth, who has decided to act on his own selfish ambition, is not.*



**Banquo** says he'll be receptive to what **Macbeth** has to say provided he loses no honor in seeking to gain more. Banquo and **Fleance** head off to bed.

*Banquo believes true manhood means acting honorably—just what Macbeth used to believe.*



Alone, **Macbeth** sees a **bloody dagger** floating in the air. He can't grasp it, and can't decide whether it's a phantom or his imagination. "**Nature seems dead**" to him (2.1.50).

*As Macbeth gets closer to the murder, nature starts to go haywire.*



Offstage, **Lady Macbeth** rings the bell to signal that **Duncan's** attendants are asleep.

*Interesting that in Macbeth, most of the violence happens offstage.*

**Macbeth** goes to murder Duncan.



## ACT 2, SCENE 2

**Lady Macbeth** waits in agitation for **Macbeth** to do the deed. She comments that had the sleeping **Duncan** not looked like her father she'd have killed him herself.

*Lady Macbeth isn't completely cold-blooded, foreshadowing her future feelings of guilt.*



**Macbeth** enters. He's killed **Duncan** and Duncan's attendants. His hands are **bloodstained** and he's upset that when one of the attendants said "God bless us" in his sleep, he was unable to say "Amen." He also thought he heard a voice say "Macbeth does murder **sleep**" (2.2.34).

*Bloodstained hands and sleeplessness: symbols of guilt. Macbeth is anguished: he knows the consequences of this murder.*



**Lady Macbeth** soothes him and tells him to wash his hands, but notices he's still carrying the daggers he used to kill **Duncan**. **Macbeth** refuses to return to the scene of the crime. Lady Macbeth, furious, runs off to plant the daggers on the attendants.

*Compare Macbeth's nervousness to Lady Macbeth's calm, collected behavior.*



A knock sounds, terrifying **Macbeth**. He worries that not all the water in the world could wash the **blood** from his hands.

*The knock at the door parallels the "knocking" of Macbeth's heart in scene 1.3.*



**Lady Macbeth** returns, her **hands now as bloody** as **Macbeth's**. But she's calm, and identifies the 'mysterious' knocking as someone at the south entrance. She says: "a little water clears us of this deed" (2.2.65), and tells Macbeth to go and put his nightgown on so no one will suspect them.

*Lady Macbeth is calm. She identifies the "mysterious" knocking as someone at the South entrance. But she is naïve, thinking water can wash away her guilt.*



**Macbeth** wishes that the knocking could wake **Duncan**.

*Macbeth shows remorse.*



## ACT 2, SCENE 3

A **porter** goes to the answer the door, joking to himself that he is the doorkeeper at the mouth of hell, and mocking whoever might be knocking to get into hell. At the door are **Macduff** and **Lennox**. Macduff good-naturedly asks what took so long. The porter blames drunkenness, and makes a series of jokes about alcohol and its effects on men.

*The Porter provides a moment of ironic comedy. He imagines he's guarding hell, but with the murder of Duncan he really is guarding a hellish place.*



**Macbeth** enters, pretending to have just woken up. **Macduff** asks if the King has woken yet: **Duncan** had asked to see Macduff early that morning. Macbeth points out where Duncan is sleeping, and Macduff goes off to wake him.

*Introduction of Macduff, and contrast between Macbeth's lying and treachery with Macduff's openness and loyalty.*



As they wait for **Macduff** to return, **Lennox** describes the terrible storm that raged the previous night and sounded like "strange screams of death" (2.3.52).

*The unnatural act of killing Duncan has caused havoc in nature.*



**Macduff** cries out in horror and runs onstage. **Macbeth** and **Lennox** ask what happened, then run to **Duncan's** chamber. **Banquo**, **Malcolm**, and **Donalbain** wake. **Lady Macbeth** enters, pretending not to know what happened, and expressing horror when Macduff tells her of the murder. Macbeth returns, and wishes he had died rather than have to see such a thing. Malcolm and Donalbain enter and ask what's happened. Lennox tells them that Duncan was murdered by his drunken attendants.

*Everyone is being "natural" and honest in their grief except Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. They are the snakes hiding behind the "innocent flower." Everything they do now must protect their secret. This secrecy becomes their defining trait, warping them.*



**Macbeth** wishes aloud that he hadn't killed the attendants. When **Macduff** asks why Macbeth did kill the attendants, Macbeth says he was so furious that they had murdered the **Duncan** that he couldn't control himself. **Lady Macbeth** faints.

*Macbeth killed the attendants to keep them quiet. Does Macduff suspect already? Lady Macbeth faints to head off further questioning.*



The thanes agree to meet in the hall to discuss what's happened. **Malcolm** and **Donalbain**, though, remain behind. They realize that one of the thanes is probably the murderer and fear that they'll be the next targets. They decide to flee: Malcolm to England and Donalbain to Ireland.

*Malcolm and Donalbain realize any one of the thanes could be faking his grief. The unnatural hides itself by looking natural.*



## ACT 2, SCENE 4

**Ross** and an **old man** stand near Macbeth's castle. They discuss the unnatural portents just before and after Duncan's murder: darkness during the day, owls killing hawks, horses eating one another.

*Further havoc in nature caused by the murder of Duncan and destruction of the natural order.*



**Macduff** enters. He says it seems **Duncan's** attendants did commit the murder, and that because **Malcolm** and **Donalbain** fled they likely were behind the plot.

*Macbeth's plot worked! If he could be a good and virtuous King, perhaps it will all turn out well...*



**Macduff** then says **Macbeth** has been made king, and that he has already gone to Scone for the coronation. **Ross** heads to the coronation. But **Macduff** returns to his own castle at Fife.

*...but does Macduff suspect him already? It isn't clear. But the paranoid Macbeth must think he does: violence creates fear which leads to violence.*



### ACT 3, SCENE 1

In the royal palace of Forres, **Banquo** states his suspicion that **Macbeth** fulfilled the **witches'** prophecy by foul play. But he notes that since the prophecy came true for **Macbeth**, perhaps it will come true for him as well.

*Banquo suspects Macbeth, but it is his own ambition—the possibility that the prophecy might be true for him too—that occupies his mind.*



**Macbeth** enters, with other thanes and **Lady Macbeth**. He asks **Banquo** to attend a feast that evening. **Banquo** says he will, but that meanwhile he has to ride somewhere on business. **Macbeth** asks if **Fleance** will be riding with him. **Banquo** says yes, then departs. Once he's alone, **Macbeth** sends a servant to summon two men. As he waits for them to arrive, he muses if the **witches'** prophecy is true, then **Banquo's** descendants will be king, and he'll have murdered **Duncan** for nothing.

*Macbeth wants to kill Banquo because he resents Banquo's honor and because the prophecy makes Banquo a threat. Also, Macbeth's guilt at murdering Duncan makes him want that murder to be "worthwhile." Macbeth's guilt about one crime pushes him to commit another.*



The two men (identified in the stage directions as "**murderers**") enter. **Macbeth** tells them it's **Banquo's** fault they're poor, then questions their manhood for bearing such offenses. The **murderers** agree to kill **Banquo** and **Fleance**.

*Macbeth uses the same methods to get the murderers to kill Banquo and Fleance that Lady Macbeth used against Macbeth: he questions their manhood.*



### ACT 3, SCENE 2

After sending a servant to fetch **Macbeth**, **Lady Macbeth**, waits, and muses that she has what she desires but isn't happy.

*First indication that all is not well with Lady Macbeth.*



**Macbeth** enters. She asks why he spends so much time alone. **Macbeth** responds: "We have scorched the snake, not killed it" (3.2.15). He fears someone might try to kill him as he killed **Duncan**, and seems envious of **Duncan's** "**sleep**" (3.2.25).

*In order to keep power built by violence, more violence is always needed. Macbeth knew this would happen; he's caught in the vicious cycle of violence...*



**Lady Macbeth** reminds him to be "bright and jovial" at the feast. **Macbeth** tells her to act the same. But then **Macbeth** moans, "O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife!" (3.2.37) because **Banquo** and **Fleance** are still alive.

*...and that vicious cycle begins to take a psychological toll on Macbeth.*



**Macbeth** says that before the night is through there shall be a "deed of dreadful note" (3.2.45), but adds that she's better off being innocent until she can applaud what has happened.

*Macbeth tries to protect Lady Macbeth: traditional male-female roles.*



### ACT 3, SCENE 3

The **two murderers** lie in wait a mile from the royal castle. A **third murderer** joins them, sent by **Macbeth**.

*The Third Murderer is an unsolved mystery. No critics know who he is or why he's there.*



**Banquo** and **Fleance** enter. The **murderers** attack. **Banquo** is killed, but **Fleance** escapes. The **murderers** return to the castle to tell **Macbeth** what's happened.

*Macbeth's effort to control fate seals his doom. Fleance lives and Banquo's death makes the Thanes suspicious.*



## ACT 3, SCENE 4

**Macbeth** bids all the lords welcome to the feast. Just at that moment, he notices that one of the **murderers** is standing at the door. The murderer tells Macbeth that **Banquo** is dead but **Fleance** escaped. Macbeth comforts himself that Fleance will not be a threat for quite some time.

*Macbeth learns that his first attempt to control fate has failed.*

1 2 3

**Lady Macbeth** calls to **Macbeth** and asks him to return to the feast and sit. But Macbeth doesn't see an empty seat at the table. When Lennox gestures at a seat, saying it's empty, Macbeth sees **Banquo's ghost** sitting there. Macbeth alone can see the ghost. He astonishes the thanes by shouting at the empty chair.

*Is Banquo's ghost real or a figment of Macbeth's guilty mind? The uncertainty emphasizes that Macbeth's fate is part of him, caused by his character: his ambition and guilt.*

2 3 4

**Lady Macbeth** tells the thanes not to worry, that since childhood **Macbeth** has suffered fits. She pulls Macbeth aside and once again questions his manhood. The ghost disappears. Macbeth rambles about murders and spirits risen from the grave until Lady Macbeth reminds him of his guests. He echoes her story about his fits, then leads a toast to the missing **Banquo**.

*Macbeth and Lady Macbeth continue to try to lie to keep their secrets and hold on power, but these lies become less and less effective as guilt about the violence they have committed begins to effect them.*

2 3 4 5

The **ghost reappears** and **Macbeth**, terrified, starts shouting at it. **Lady Macbeth** tries to play down her husband's strange behavior. The ghost again disappears. Macbeth is amazed that everyone could be so calm in the face of such sights. When **Ross** asks what sights, Lady Macbeth steps in and asks the guests to leave at once. The thanes exit.

*Macbeth has become so warped he cannot tell the unnatural from the natural anymore. Lady Macbeth sees lying is useless and chooses isolation: she tells the thanes to leave.*

4

**Macbeth** tells **Lady Macbeth**: "**Blood will have blood**" (3.4.121), and asks what Lady Macbeth makes of the fact that Macduff does not appear at the royal court. He decides to visit the **weird sisters** to find out more about his fate.

*Macbeth's desperation to keep power motivates him to visit the weird sisters. He has sacrificed everything for his ambition...*

1 2 3

He says: "I am in **blood** / Stepped in so far" (3.4.135) that turning back is as difficult as continuing on.

*... now ambition and violence are all he has left, and he knows it.*

1  3

## ACT 3, SCENE 5

The **weird sisters** meet with **Hecate**, the goddess of witches. She rebukes the sisters for meddling with **Macbeth** without first consulting her. But she says she'll help them when Macbeth comes to see them tomorrow. She says that they'll show him visions that will give him confidence and "draw him to his confusion" (3.5.29).

*Many productions of Macbeth cut this scene. It introduces Hecate, and establishes that the witches truly are out to get Macbeth. Many productions of the play prefer to keep the witches' motivations more vague.*

2  4

## ACT 3, SCENE 6

**Lennox** and another lord talk sarcastically about **Macbeth** and the too great similarities between the murders of **Duncan** and **Banquo**, with **Donalbain** and **Malcolm** accused of the first and Fleance blamed for the second.

*Macbeth's murder of Banquo, committed to control his fate, has had the opposite effects. Now the thanes see Macbeth for what he is: a tyrant.*

1 2 3

**Macduff**, the lord says, has gone to England to meet with **Malcolm** and try to get the English King **Edward** and his lords to gather an army to help them defeat **Macbeth**. The rumor is that Macbeth sent a messenger to Macduff. Macduff rebuffed the messenger, who turned his back as if to say that Macduff would pay for that decision.

*Compare Macduff and Macbeth: Macbeth will do anything for personal power; Macduff will do anything to save his country.*

1  3

Both men hope **Macduff** remains safe and soon returns with the armies of **Malcolm** and England to free Scotland from **Macbeth**.

*Ambition has made Macbeth a violent tyrant who holds the throne only through fear.*



## ACT 4, SCENE 1

In a cavern, the **weird sisters** throw awful ingredients such as "eye of newt and toe of frog" (4.1.14) into a cauldron full of a boiling brew. **Hecate** arrives, and all dance and sing. One witch cries out "Something wicked this way comes" (4.1.62): **Macbeth** enters. He commands the witches to answer his questions.

*There is a resemblance between Macbeth and the witches now. All are wicked, all are unnatural.*



The **witches** conjure up three apparitions. First, a floating head appears and tells **Macbeth** to beware **Macduff**.

*The head symbolizes either Macduff's rebellion or Macbeth's fate.*



Next, a bloody child appears. The child says that "no man of woman born / Shall harm **Macbeth**" (4.1.95-96).

*The bloody child symbolizes Macduff's birth by caesarian section.*



Finally, a child wearing a crown and holding a tree appears. It says that **Macbeth** will not be defeated until Great Birnam Wood marches to Dunsinane Hill. Macbeth is pleased: since forests don't march, he must be invincible!

*The child with crown and tree symbolizes Malcolm.*



**Macbeth** wants to know one more thing: will **Banquo's** heirs have the throne? The **witches** perform a final conjuring. Eight kings appear walking in a line, the eighth holding a mirror, and all of them followed by Banquo's ghost. Macbeth, furious at this sign that Banquo's heirs will get the throne, demands answers. But **Hecate** mocks him and the witches vanish.

*The king holding the mirror symbolizes King James who ruled England when Shakespeare wrote Macbeth, and whose family traced its ancestry back to Banquo.*



**Lennox** enters. He brings word that **Macduff** has fled to England. In an aside, **Macbeth** scolds himself for failing to kill Macduff when he wanted to earlier. He vows in the future to act on every impulse, and decides to attack Macduff's castle and kill anyone connected to him: servants, wife, and children.

*Ambition and fear have pushed Macbeth that final step: he is no longer targeting just his political enemies, but also their innocent families. Macbeth is now truly a monster.*



## ACT 4, SCENE 2

At Fife (**Macduff's** castle), **Lady Macduff** is angry. She demands to know why Macduff has gone to England, leaving her behind. She thinks Macduff is a coward. **Ross** says Macduff's flight could result from wisdom, not fear.

*Another debate about manhood. Does a real man sacrifice the safety of his family for the good of his country?*



After **Ross** leaves, **Lady Macduff** turns to her son. She tells the boy that his father is dead. The boy doesn't believe her, but asks if his father is a traitor. Lady Macduff says yes, Macduff is a traitor: a man who swore an oath and broke it and now must hang. The boy thinks if traitors allow themselves to be hanged they must be fools, since there are undoubtedly more traitors than honest men in the world.

*Macduff's son is wise beyond his years, noting that those who put themselves above society far outnumber those who put the common good above their own selfish ambitions.*



A servant bursts in to warn of coming danger, then rushes out. Before **Lady Macduff** or her children can run, **murderers** enter the chamber, stab **Macduff's son**, and chase Lady Macduff offstage.

*Macbeth has ordered the murder of the innocent. His loss of humanity is complete, and the seeds of his self-destruction are sown.*



## ACT 4, SCENE 3

In England, near the palace of **King Edward**, **Macduff** urges **Malcolm** to quickly raise an army against **Macbeth**. But Malcolm says Macduff might actually be working for Macbeth, a suspicion heightened by the fact that Macduff left his family behind and unprotected in Scotland.

*Why does Macduff leave his family behind when he goes to England? Does he underestimate Macbeth's depravity, or has he put too much emphasis on country at the expense of family?*

**Malcolm** then adds that he delays attacking **Macbeth** because he fears that he himself would perhaps be even a worse ruler. Malcolm describes himself as so lustful, vicious, and greedy that he makes Macbeth look kind.

*Macduff proves that his morality and love of country is greater than his ambition.*

**Macduff** cries out in horror, and says he will leave Scotland forever since there is no man fit to rule it. Malcolm then reveals that none of his self-description was true: it was a trick to test Macduff's loyalty. Malcolm now believes that Macduff is loyal to Scotland and not Macbeth, and that he has an army of ten thousand men commanded by the English Lord **Siward**, ready to invade Scotland.

Just then an **English doctor** enters. **Malcolm** speaks with the doctor, then tells **Macduff** that **King Edward** of England is so saintly that he can cure disease.

*In contrast to Macbeth, Edward is so virtuous his touch restores order to nature: it heals.*

**Ross** enters. He tells **Malcolm** that if he invaded the Scottish people would line up to join his army against **Macbeth**. Finally, **Ross** tells **Macduff** his family has been murdered. Macduff cries out in anguish. Malcolm tells him to fight it like a man. Macduff responds that he must also "feel it like a man" (4.3.223). But they agree that Macduff's anger and grief should be used to fuel his revenge.

*True manhood, Macduff realizes in his moment of anguish, involves not just strength, honor, and loyalty, but also emotion, feeling, and love.*

## ACT 5, SCENE 1

It is night in **Macbeth's** castle of Dunsinane. A **doctor** and a **gentlewoman** wait. The gentlewoman called the doctor because she has seen **Lady Macbeth** **sleepwalking** the last few nights, but she refuses to say what Lady Macbeth says or does.

*When he killed Duncan, Macbeth thought he heard a voice say he had murdered sleep. Well, he did: Lady Macbeth's sleep.*

**Lady Macbeth** enters, holding a candle, but asleep. Lady Macbeth keeps **rubbing her hands as if to wash them** while saying "out, damned spot" (5.1.30). Then Lady Macbeth seems to relive her attempt to convince **Macbeth** to kill **Duncan**, concluding with the words: "Yet who would have thought the old man to have had so much **blood** in him" (5.1.33-34)?

*Lady Macbeth, who once naively thought she could just wash her hands and forget Duncan's murder, is now sleepwalking and so full of guilt that she imagines her hands are always covered in blood.*

The horrified **doctor** and gentlewoman watch as **Lady Macbeth** then relives conversations with **Macbeth** after the murder of **Banquo** and hears an imaginary knocking and rushes off to bed. The **doctor** says the disease is beyond his power to cure, and that "unnatural deeds do breed unnatural troubles" (5.1.61-62). He also says he dares not speak about what he's just witnessed.

*Lady Macbeth's guilt makes it impossible for her to hide the horrors that she and Macbeth have committed. Her conscience is rebelling against the unnatural fiend that ambition has turned her into.*



### ACT 5, SCENE 2

**Lennox** and other Scottish lords and soldiers discuss the situation: **Malcolm** and his army are at Birnam Wood. **Macbeth**, in a constant rage verging on madness, is fortifying the stronghold of Dunsinane.

*With the mention of Birnam Wood and Dunsinane, the audience can see that Macbeth's fate is approaching.*



The lords agree that **Macbeth** is tormented by his terrible actions, and that those who follow him do so out of fear, not love. The lords ride to join **Malcolm**.

*Macbeth's efforts to maintain power through violence have, in fact, turned people against him and made him weak.*



### ACT 5, SCENE 3

**Macbeth** dismisses all reports about **Malcolm's** army, saying he'll fear nothing until Birnam Wood marches to Dunsinane and mocking Malcolm as a man born of woman. He shouts for his servant **Seyton** to bring his armor, then muses how sick at heart he feels, how withered his life has become.

*Macbeth is fearless because of the prophecies, but he seems to wish he weren't. He knows his life is awful, but he's so gripped by ambition that he can't turn back.*



He asks the **doctor** about **Lady Macbeth**, then commands that the man cure her. In an aside, the doctor says that if he could escape Dunsinane, no fee of any size could bring him back.

*Macbeth seems totally out of touch with reality. He is a man warped beyond any semblance of humanity.*



### ACT 5, SCENE 4

In Birnam Wood, **Malcolm** walks with **Macduff**, **Siward**, **Young Siward**, and others Scottish and English lords. Malcolm gives orders that to hide the size of their army, all soldiers should cut a branch from a tree and hold it upright as they march.

*The first block in Macbeth's fate falls into place: Birnam Wood will march on Dunsinane.*



### ACT 5, SCENE 5

**Macbeth** laughs at the coming army, but seems bored by his lack of fear. Suddenly, a woman cries out. **Seyton** investigates, and returns with news that **Lady Macbeth** has died. Macbeth gives a speech about life: "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow / Creeps in this petty pace from day to day," concluding that life "is a tale / told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / signifying nothing" (5.5.18-27).

*Macbeth has become so numb because of his own terrible actions that he can't even react when his wife dies. All he can do is comment on how meaningless life is.*



A servant rushes in with news that Birnam Wood is marching toward Dunsinane. **Macbeth** rushes to see for himself, and realizes the witches tricked him. He feels fear for the first time, calls to raise the alarm, and says that at least he'll die fighting.

*The prophecy gives Macbeth courage, but also makes his life empty. He almost seems to look forward to dying.*



### ACT 5, SCENE 6

**Malcolm** orders his men to throw down the branches they carry. The first charge against Dunsinane commences under **Siward** and **Macduff**.

*The very quick and sudden scenes in the second half of Act 5 capture the chaos of battle.*



### ACT 5, SCENE 7

In the fighting, **Macbeth** encounters and fights **Young Siward**. Though Young Siward is brave, Macbeth quickly kills him and says in a mocking tone that he fears no man of woman born.

*A reminder of the second half of the prophecy protecting Macbeth.*



### ACT 5, SCENE 8

**Macduff** searches for **Macbeth**, vowing to kill him to avenge his family.

*Emphasis on Macduff's need for revenge against Macbeth. The play is building suspense.*



### ACT 5, SCENE 9

**Malcolm** and **Siward** meet. They have easily captured the castle because **Macbeth's** men barely fight back.

*Macbeth's men don't even fight for him. His rule is utterly hollow.*



### ACT 5, SCENE 10

**Macbeth** and **Macduff** meet. Macbeth says he has avoided fighting Macduff because he has too much blood on his hands already.

*It's unclear if Macbeth is being honest or if he's baiting Macduff.*



They fight. **Macbeth** mocks **Macduff**, saying his effort is wasted: no one of woman born can beat Macbeth. But Macduff replies that he was "untimely ripped" from his mother's womb" (5.10.16).

*The second block of Macbeth's fate slides into place.*



**Macbeth**, suddenly fearful now that the prophecy has turned against him, refuses to fight him. But **Macduff** calls Macbeth a coward and says that Macbeth will be mocked across Scotland if he surrenders. Despite certain death, Macbeth attacks. Macduff kills him.

*Macbeth dies as he lived—a slave to ambition. Lady Macbeth convinced him to sacrifice his honor by questioning his courage, now Macduff gets Macbeth to fight for a lost cause to prove his courage.*



### ACT 5, SCENE 11

**Malcolm**, **Siward**, **Ross**, and others enter. Ross tells Siward of **Young Siward's** death. Siward asks if his son died from wounds on the front or back. Ross replies the front. Siward is content, denying Malcolm's comment that his son is worth more mourning than that.

*Siward is an ambiguous part of an otherwise happy ending. Siward prizes strength and courage above all things, even love for his family. Might he one day become another Macbeth?*



**Macduff** enters, carrying **Macbeth's** severed head. He proclaims **Malcolm** to be King of Scotland and swears his loyalty.

*Macduff shows his loyalty to King and country.*



**Malcolm** accepts the thanes' loyalty and makes them all earls (a higher rank). He pledges to "plant" a new peace, and to heal the wounds **Macbeth** and his "fiend-like queen" (5.11.35) inflicted on Scotland.

*Malcolm returns Scotland to political order, as his use of nature metaphors shows. Malcolm wants to make his country great, not himself.*



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