

# *Macbeth*

## *The Tragedy of Macbeth*

By

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## Introduction

*Macbeth* full title *The Tragedy of Macbeth*) is a tragedy by William Shakespeare; it is thought to have been first performed in 1606. It dramatises the damaging physical and psychological effects of political ambition on those who seek power for its own sake. Of all the plays that Shakespeare wrote during the reign of James I, who was patron of Shakespeare's acting company, *Macbeth* most clearly reflects the playwright's relationship with his sovereign. It was first published in the Folio of 1623, possibly from a prompt book, and is Shakespeare's shortest tragedy.

A brave Scottish general named Macbeth receives a prophecy from a trio of witches that one day he will become King of Scotland. Consumed by ambition and spurred to action by his wife, Macbeth murders King Duncan and takes the Scottish throne for himself. He is then wracked with guilt and paranoia. Forced to commit more and more murders to protect himself from enmity and suspicion, he soon becomes a tyrannical ruler. The bloodbath and consequent civil war swiftly take Macbeth and Lady Macbeth into the realms of madness and death.

Shakespeare's source for the story is the account of Macbeth, King of Scotland, Macduff, and Duncan in Holinshed's Chronicles (1587), a history of England, Scotland, and Ireland familiar to Shakespeare and his contemporaries, although the events in the play differ extensively from the history of the real Macbeth. The events of the tragedy are usually associated with the execution of Henry Garnet for complicity in the Gunpowder Plot of 1605.

## Key Facts

**Full Title** · *The Tragedy of Macbeth*

**Author** · William Shakespeare

**Type Of Work** · Play

**Genre** · Tragedy

**Language** · English

**Time And Place Written** · 1606, England

**Date Of First Publication** · First Folio edition, 1623

**Publisher** · John Heminges and Henry Condell, two senior members of Shakespeare's theatrical company

**Tone** · Dark and ominous, suggestive of a world turned topsy-turvy by foul and unnatural crimes

**Tense** · Not applicable (drama)

**Setting (Time)** · The Middle Ages, specifically the eleventh century

**Setting (Place)** · Various locations in Scotland; also England, briefly

**Protagonist** · Macbeth

**Major Conflicts** · The struggle within Macbeth between his ambition and his sense of right and wrong; the struggle between the murderous evil represented by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth and the best interests of the nation, represented by Malcolm and Macduff

**Rising Action** · Macbeth and Banquo's encounter with the witches initiates both conflicts; Lady Macbeth's speeches goad Macbeth into murdering Duncan and seizing the crown.

**Climax** · Macbeth's murder of Duncan in Act 2 represents the point of no return, after which Macbeth is forced to continue butchering his subjects to avoid the consequences of his crime.

**Falling Action** · Macbeth's increasingly brutal murders (of Duncan's servants, Banquo, Lady Macduff and her son); Macbeth's second meeting with the witches; Macbeth's final confrontation with Macduff and the opposing armies

**Themes** · The corrupting nature of unchecked ambition; the relationship between cruelty and masculinity; the difference between kingship and tyranny

**Motifs** · The supernatural, hallucinations, violence, prophecy

**Symbols** · Blood; the dagger that Macbeth sees just before he kills Duncan in Act 2; the weather

**Foreshadowing** · The bloody battle in Act 1 foreshadows the bloody murders later on; when Macbeth thinks he hears a voice while killing Duncan, it foreshadows the insomnia that plagues Macbeth and his wife; Macduff's suspicions of Macbeth after Duncan's murder foreshadow his later opposition to Macbeth; all of the witches' prophecies foreshadow later events.

## Characters

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- Duncan – king of Scotland
- Malcolm – Duncan's elder son
- Donalbain – Duncan's younger son
- Macbeth – a general in the army of King Duncan; originally Thane of Glamis, then Thane of Cawdor, and later king of Scotland
- Lady Macbeth – Macbeth's wife, and later queen of Scotland
- Banquo – Macbeth's friend and a general in the army of King Duncan
- Fleance – Banquo's son
- Macduff – Thane of Fife
- Lady Macduff – Macduff's wife
- Macduff's son
- Ross, Lennox, Angus, Menteith, Caithness – Scottish Thanes
- Siward – general of the English forces
- Young Siward – Siward's son
- Seyton – Macbeth's armourer
- Hecate – queen of the witches
- Three Witches
- Captain – in the Scottish army
- Three Murderers – employed by Macbeth
- Third Murderer
- Two Murderers – attack Lady Macduff
- Porter – gatekeeper at Macbeth's home
- Doctor – Lady Macbeth's doctor
- Doctor – at the English court
- Gentlewoman – Lady Macbeth's caretaker
- Lord – opposed to Macbeth
- First Apparition – armed head
- Second Apparition – bloody child
- Third Apparition – crowned child
- Attendants, Messengers, Servants, Soldiers

## Plot

### **Act I**

The play opens amid thunder and lightning, and the Three Witches decide that their next meeting will be with Macbeth. In the following scene, a wounded sergeant reports to King Duncan of Scotland that his generals Macbeth, who is the Thane of Glamis, and Banquo have just defeated the allied forces of Norway and Ireland, who were led by the traitorous Macdonwald, and the Thane of Cawdor. Macbeth, the King's kinsman, is praised for his bravery and fighting prowess.

In the following scene, Macbeth and Banquo discuss the weather and their victory. As they wander onto a heath, the Three Witches enter and greet them with prophecies. Though Banquo challenges them first, they address Macbeth, hailing him as "Thane of Glamis," "Thane of Cawdor," and that he will "be King hereafter." Macbeth appears to be stunned to silence. When Banquo asks of his own fortunes, the witches respond paradoxically, saying that he will be less than Macbeth, yet happier, less successful, yet more. He will father a line of kings, though he himself will not be one. While the two men wonder at these pronouncements, the witches vanish, and another thane, Ross, arrives and informs Macbeth of his newly bestowed title: Thane of Cawdor. The first prophecy is thus fulfilled, and Macbeth, previously sceptical, immediately begins to harbour ambitions of becoming king.

King Duncan welcomes and praises Macbeth and Banquo, and declares that he will spend the night at Macbeth's castle at Inverness; he also names his son Malcolm as his heir. Macbeth sends a message ahead to his wife, Lady Macbeth, telling her about the witches' prophecies. Lady Macbeth suffers none of her husband's uncertainty and wishes him to murder Duncan in order to obtain kingship. When Macbeth arrives at Inverness, she overrides all of her husband's objections by challenging his manhood and successfully persuades him to kill the king that very night. He and Lady Macbeth plan to get Duncan's two chamberlains drunk so that they will black out; the next morning they will blame the chamberlains for the murder. They will be defenceless as they will remember nothing.

### **Act II**

While Duncan is asleep, Macbeth stabs him, despite his doubts and a number of supernatural portents, including a hallucination of a bloody dagger. He is so shaken that Lady Macbeth has to take charge. In accordance with her plan, she frames Duncan's sleeping servants for the murder by placing bloody daggers on them. Early the next morning, Lennox, a Scottish nobleman, and Macduff, the loyal Thane of Fife, arrive. A porter opens the gate and Macbeth leads them to the king's chamber, where Macduff discovers Duncan's body. Macbeth murders the guards to prevent them from professing their innocence, but claims he did so in a fit of anger over their misdeeds. Duncan's sons Malcolm and Donalbain flee to England and Ireland, respectively, fearing that whoever killed Duncan desires their demise as well. The rightful heirs' flight makes them suspects and Macbeth assumes the throne as the new King of Scotland as a kinsman of the dead king. Banquo reveals this to the audience, and while sceptical of the new King Macbeth, he remembers the witches' prophecy about how his own descendants would inherit the throne; this makes him suspicious of Macbeth.

### **Act III**

Despite his success, Macbeth, also aware of this part of the prophecy, remains uneasy. Macbeth invites Banquo to a royal banquet, where he discovers that Banquo and his young son, Fleance, will be riding out that night. Fearing Banquo's suspicions, Macbeth arranges to have him murdered, by hiring two men to kill them, later

sending a Third Murderer. The assassins succeed in killing Banquo, but Fleance escapes. Macbeth becomes furious: he fears that his power remains insecure as long as an heir of Banquo remains alive.

At a banquet, Macbeth invites his lords and Lady Macbeth to a night of drinking and merriment. Banquo's ghost enters and sits in Macbeth's place. Macbeth raves fearfully, startling his guests, as the ghost is only visible to him. The others panic at the sight of Macbeth raging at an empty chair, until a desperate Lady Macbeth tells them that her husband is merely afflicted with a familiar and harmless malady. The ghost departs and returns once more, causing the same riotous anger and fear in Macbeth. This time, Lady Macbeth tells the lords to leave, and they do so.

#### **Act IV**

Macbeth, disturbed, visits the three witches once more and asks them to reveal the truth of their prophecies to him. To answer his questions, they summon horrible apparitions, each of which offers predictions and further prophecies to put Macbeth's fears at rest. First, they conjure an armoured head, which tells him to beware of Macduff (IV.i.72). Second, a bloody child tells him that no one born of a woman will be able to harm him. Thirdly, a crowned child holding a tree states that Macbeth will be safe until Great Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane Hill. Macbeth is relieved and feels secure because he knows that all men are born of women and forests cannot move. Macbeth also asks whether Banquo's sons will ever reign in Scotland: the witches conjure a procession of eight crowned kings, all similar in appearance to Banquo, and the last carrying a mirror that reflects even more kings. Macbeth realises that these are all Banquo's descendants having acquired kingship in numerous countries. After the witches perform a mad dance and leave, Lennox enters and tells Macbeth that Macduff has fled to England. Macbeth orders Macduff's castle be seized, and, most cruelly, sends murderers to slaughter Macduff, as well as Macduff's wife and children. Although Macduff is no longer in the castle, everyone in Macduff's castle is put to death, including Lady Macduff and their young son.

#### **Act V**

Meanwhile, Lady Macbeth becomes racked with guilt from the crimes she and her husband have committed. At night, in the king's palace at Dunsinane, a doctor and a gentlewoman discuss Lady Macbeth's strange habit of sleepwalking. Suddenly, Lady Macbeth enters in a trance with a candle in her hand. Bemoaning the murders of Duncan, Lady Macduff, and Banquo, she tries to wash off imaginary bloodstains from her hands, all the while speaking of the terrible things she knows she pressed her husband to do. She leaves, and the doctor and gentlewoman marvel at her descent into madness. Her belief that nothing can wash away the blood on her hands is an ironic reversal of her earlier claim to Macbeth that "[a] little water clears us of this deed" (II.ii.66).

In England, Macduff is informed by Ross that his "castle is surprised; wife and babes / Savagely slaughter'd" (IV.iii.204–05). When this news of his family's execution reaches him, Macduff is stricken with grief and vows revenge. Prince Malcolm, Duncan's son, has succeeded in raising an army in England, and Macduff joins him as he rides to Scotland to challenge Macbeth's forces. The invasion has the support of the Scottish nobles, who are appalled and frightened by Macbeth's tyrannical and murderous behaviour. Malcolm leads an army, along with Macduff and Englishmen Siward (the Elder), the Earl of Northumberland, against Dunsinane Castle. While encamped in Birnam Wood, the soldiers are ordered to cut down and carry tree limbs to camouflage their numbers.

Before Macbeth's opponents arrive, he receives news that Lady Macbeth has killed herself, causing him to sink into a deep and pessimistic despair and deliver his "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow" soliloquy (V.v.17–28). Though he reflects on the brevity and meaninglessness of life, he nevertheless awaits the English and fortifies Dunsinane. He is certain that the witches' prophecies guarantee his invincibility, but is struck with fear when he learns that the English army is advancing on Dunsinane shielded with boughs cut from Birnam Wood, in apparent fulfillment of one of the prophecies.

A battle culminates in Macduff's confrontation with Macbeth, who kills Young Siward in combat. The English forces overwhelm his army and castle. Macbeth boasts that he has no reason to fear Macduff, for he cannot be killed by any man born of woman. Macduff declares that he was "from his mother's womb / Untimely ripp'd" (V.8.15–16), (i.e., born by Caesarean section) and is not "of woman born" (an example of a literary quibble), fulfilling the second prophecy. Macbeth realises too late that he has misinterpreted the witches' words. Though he realises that he is doomed, he continues to fight. Macduff kills and beheads him, thus fulfilling the remaining prophecy.

Macduff carries Macbeth's head onstage and Malcolm discusses how order has been restored. His last reference to Lady Macbeth, however, reveals "'tis thought, by self and violent hands / Took off her life" (V.ix.71–72), but the method of her suicide is undisclosed. Malcolm, now the King of Scotland, declares his benevolent intentions for the country and invites all to see him crowned at Scone.

Although Malcolm, and not Fleance, is placed on the throne, the witches' prophecy concerning Banquo ("Thou shalt get kings") was known to the audience of Shakespeare's time to be true: James VI of Scotland (later also James I of England) was supposedly a descendant of Banquo.

## Theme and Motif

*Macbeth* is an anomaly among Shakespeare's tragedies in certain critical ways. It is short: more than a thousand lines shorter than *Othello* and *King Lear*, and only slightly more than half as long as *Hamlet*. This brevity has suggested to many critics that the received version is based on a heavily cut source, perhaps a prompt-book for a particular performance. This would reflect other Shakespearean plays existing in both Quarto and the Folio, where the Quarto versions are usually longer than the Folio versions. *Macbeth* was first printed in the First Folio, but has no Quarto version – if there were a Quarto, it would probably be longer than the Folio version. That brevity has also been connected to other unusual features: the fast pace of the first act, which has seemed to be "stripped for action"; the comparative flatness of the characters other than Macbeth; and the oddness of Macbeth himself compared with other Shakespearean tragic heroes. A. C. Bradley, in considering this question, concluded the play "always was an extremely short one", noting the witch scenes and battle scenes would have taken up some time in performance, remarking, "I do not think that, in reading, we *feel* *Macbeth* to be short: certainly we are astonished when we hear it is about half as long as *Hamlet*. Perhaps in the Shakespearean theatre too it seemed to occupy a longer time than the clock recorded."

### **As a tragedy of character**

At least since the days of Alexander Pope and Samuel Johnson, analysis of the play has centred on the question of Macbeth's ambition, commonly seen as so dominant a trait that it defines the character. Johnson asserted that Macbeth, though esteemed for his military bravery, is wholly reviled.

This opinion recurs in critical literature, and, according to Caroline Spurgeon, is supported by Shakespeare himself, who apparently intended to degrade his hero by vesting him with clothes unsuited to him and to make Macbeth look ridiculous by several nimisms he applies: His garments seem either too big or too small for him – as his ambition is too big and his character too small for his new and unrightful role as king. When he feels as if "dressed in borrowed robes", after his new title as Thane of Cawdor, prophesied by the witches, has been confirmed by Ross (I, 3, ll. 108–09), Banquo comments:

"New honours come upon him,  
Like our strange garments, cleave not to their mould,  
But with the aid of use" (I, 3, ll. 145–46).

And, at the end, when the tyrant is at bay at Dunsinane, Caithness sees him as a man trying in vain to fasten a large garment on him with too small a belt:

"He cannot buckle his distemper'd cause  
Within the belt of rule" (V, 2, ll. 14–15)

while Angus, in a similar nimism, sums up what everybody thinks ever since Macbeth's accession to power:

"now does he feel his title  
Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe  
upon a dwarfish thief" (V, 2, ll. 18–20).

Like Richard III, but without that character's perversely appealing exuberance, Macbeth wades through blood until his inevitable fall. As Kenneth Muir writes, "Macbeth has not a predisposition to murder; he has merely an inordinate ambition that makes murder itself seem to be a lesser evil than failure to achieve the crown." Some critics, such as E. E. Stoll, explain this characterisation as a holdover from Senecan or medieval tradition. Shakespeare's audience, in this view, expected villains to be wholly bad, and Senecan style, far from prohibiting a villainous protagonist, all but demanded it.

Yet for other critics, it has not been so easy to resolve the question of Macbeth's motivation. Robert Bridges, for instance, perceived a paradox: a character able to express such convincing horror before Duncan's murder would likely be incapable of committing the crime. For many critics, Macbeth's motivations in the first act appear vague and insufficient. John Dover Wilson hypothesised that Shakespeare's original text had an extra scene or scenes where husband and wife discussed their plans. This interpretation is not fully provable; however, the motivating role of ambition for Macbeth is universally recognised. The evil actions motivated by his ambition seem to trap him in a cycle of increasing evil, as Macbeth himself recognises:

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

While working on Russian translations of Shakespeare's works, Boris Pasternak compared Macbeth to Raskolnikov, the protagonist of Crime and Punishment by Fyodor Dostoevsky. Pasternak argues that "neither Macbeth or Raskolnikov is a born criminal or a villain by nature. They are turned into criminals by faulty rationalizations, by deductions from false premises." He goes on to argue that Lady Macbeth is "feminine ... one of those active, insistent wives" who becomes her husband's "executive, more resolute and consistent than he is himself." According to Pasternak, she is only helping Macbeth carry out his own wishes, to her own detriment.

### **As a tragedy of moral order**

The disastrous consequences of Macbeth's ambition are not limited to him. Almost from the moment of the murder, the play depicts Scotland as a land shaken by inversions of the natural order. Shakespeare may have intended a reference to the great chain of being, although the play's images of disorder are mostly not specific enough to support detailed intellectual readings. He may also have intended an elaborate compliment to James's belief in the divine right of kings, although this hypothesis, outlined at greatest length by Henry N. Paul, is not universally accepted. As in Julius Caesar, though, perturbations in the political sphere are echoed and even amplified by events in the material world. Among the most often depicted of the inversions of the natural order is sleep. Macbeth's announcement that he has "murdered sleep" is figuratively mirrored in Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking.

*Macbeth's* generally accepted indebtedness to medieval tragedy is often seen as significant in the play's treatment of moral order. Glynne Wickham connects the play, through the Porter, to a mystery play on the harrowing of hell. Howard Felperin argues that the play has a more complex attitude toward "orthodox Christian tragedy" than is often admitted; he sees a kinship between the play and the tyrant plays within the medieval liturgical drama.

The theme of androgyny is often seen as a special aspect of the theme of disorder. Inversion of normative gender roles is most famously associated with the witches and with Lady Macbeth as she appears in the first act. Whatever Shakespeare's degree of sympathy with such inversions, the play ends with a thorough return to normative gender values. Some feminist psychoanalytic critics, such as Janet Adelman, have connected the play's treatment of gender roles to its larger theme of inverted natural order. In this light, Macbeth is punished for his violation of the moral order by being removed from the cycles of nature (which are figured as female); nature itself (as embodied in the movement of Birnam Wood) is part of the restoration of moral order.

### **As a poetic tragedy**

Critics in the early twentieth century reacted against what they saw as an excessive dependence on the study of character in criticism of the play. This dependence, though most closely associated with Andrew Cecil Bradley, is clear as early as the time of Mary Cowden Clarke, who offered precise, if fanciful, accounts of the predramatic lives of Shakespeare's female leads. She suggested, for instance, that the child Lady Macbeth refers to in the first act died during a foolish military action.

### **Witchcraft and evil**

In the play, the Three Witches represent darkness, chaos, and conflict, while their role is as agents and witnesses. Their presence communicates treason and impending doom. During Shakespeare's day, witches were seen as worse than rebels, "the most notorious traitor and rebell that can be." They were not only political traitors, but spiritual traitors as well. Much of the confusion that springs from them comes from their ability to straddle the play's borders between reality and the supernatural. They are so deeply entrenched in both worlds that it is unclear whether they control fate, or whether they are merely its agents. They defy logic, not being subject to the rules of the real world. The witches' lines in the first act: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair: Hover through the fog and filthy air" are often said to set the tone for the rest of the play by establishing a sense of confusion. Indeed, the play is filled with situations where evil is depicted as good, while good is rendered evil. The line "Double, double toil and trouble," communicates the witches' intent clearly: they seek only trouble for the mortals around them. The witches' spells are remarkably similar to the spells of the witch Medusa in Anthony Munday's play Fidele and Fortunio published in 1584, and Shakespeare may have been influenced by these.

While the witches do not tell Macbeth directly to kill King Duncan, they use a subtle form of temptation when they tell Macbeth that he is destined to be king. By placing this thought in his mind, they effectively guide him on the path to his own destruction. This follows the pattern of temptation used at the time of Shakespeare. First, they argued, a thought is put in a man's mind, then the person may either indulge in the thought or reject it. Macbeth indulges in it, while Banquo rejects.

According to J. A. Bryant Jr., Macbeth also makes use of Biblical parallels, notably between King Duncan's murder and the murder of Christ:

No matter how one looks at it, whether as history or as tragedy, Macbeth is distinctively Christian. One may simply count the Biblical allusions as Richmond Noble has done; one may go further and study the parallels between Shakespeare's story and the Old Testament stories of Saul and Jezebel as Miss Jane H. Jack has done; or one may examine with W. C. Curry the progressive degeneration of Macbeth from the point of view of medieval theology.

## **Character Analysis Macbeth**

Macbeth is introduced in the play as a warrior hero, whose fame on the battlefield wins him great honor from the king. Essentially, though, he is a human being whose private ambitions are made clear to the audience through his asides and soliloquies (solo speeches). These often conflict with the opinion others have of him,



which he describes as "golden" (I:7, 33). Despite his fearless character in battle, Macbeth is concerned by the prophecies of the Witches, and his thoughts remain confused, both before, during, and after his murder of King Duncan. When Duncan announces that he intends the kingdom to pass to his son Malcolm, Macbeth appears frustrated. When he is about to commit the murder, he undergoes terrible pangs of conscience. Macbeth is at his most human and sympathetic when his manliness is mocked and demeaned by his wife (see in particular Act I, Scene 7).

However, by Act III, Scene 2, Macbeth has resolved himself into a far more stereotypical villain and asserts his manliness over that of his wife. His ambition now begins to spur him toward further terrible deeds, and he starts to disregard and even to challenge Fate and Fortune. Each successive murder reduces his human characteristics still further, until he appears to be the more dominant partner in the marriage. Nevertheless, the new-found resolve, which causes Macbeth to "wade" onward into his self-created river of blood (Act III, Scene 4), is persistently alarmed by supernatural events. The appearance of Banquo's ghost, in particular, causes him to swing from one state of mind to another until he is no longer sure of what is and "what is not" (I:3,142).

But Macbeth's *hubris* or excessive pride is now his dominant character trait. This feature of his personality is well presented in Act IV, Scene 1, when he revisits the Witches of his own accord. His boldness and impression of personal invincibility mark him out for a tragic fall.

## Character Analysis Lady Macbeth

Macbeth's wife is one of the most powerful female characters in literature. Unlike her husband, she lacks all humanity, as we see well in her opening scene, where she calls upon the "Spirits that tend on mortal thoughts" to deprive her of her feminine instinct to care. Her burning ambition to be queen is the single feature that Shakespeare developed far beyond that of her counterpart in the historical story he used as his source. Lady Macbeth persistently taunts her husband for his lack of courage, even though we know of his bloody deeds on the battlefield. But in public, she is able to act as the consummate hostess, enticing her victim, the king, into her castle. When she faints immediately after the murder of Duncan, the audience is left wondering whether this, too, is part of her act.

Ultimately, she fails the test of her own hardened ruthlessness. Having upbraided her husband one last time during the banquet (Act III, Scene 4), the pace of events becomes too much even for her: She becomes mentally deranged, a mere shadow of her former commanding self, gibbering in Act V, Scene 1 as she "confesses" her part in the murder. Her death is the event that causes Macbeth to ruminate for one last time on the nature of time and mortality in the speech "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow" (Act V, Scene 5).

## Character Analysis Duncan

The king of Scotland should be a figurehead of order and orderliness, and Duncan is the epitome, or supreme example, of this. His language is formal and his speeches full of grace and graciousness, whether on the battlefield in Act I, Scene 2, where his talk concerns matters of honor, or when greeting his kind hostess Lady Macbeth in Act I, Scene 6. Duncan also expresses humility (a feature that Macbeth lacks) when he admits his failure in spotting the previous Thane of Cawdor's treachery: "There's no art to find the mind's construction in the face" (I: 4,11).

Most importantly, Duncan is the representative of God on earth, ruling by divine right (ordained by God), a feature of kingship strongly endorsed by King James I, for whom the play was performed in 1606. This "divinity" of the king is made clear on several occasions in the play, most notably when Macbeth talks of the murdered

Duncan as having "silver skin lac'd with . . . golden blood" (Act II, Scene 3). The importance of royal blood, that is, the inheritance of the divine right to rule, is emphasized when, in the final scene, Duncan's son Malcolm takes the title of king, with the words "by the grace of Grace / We will perform."

## Character Analysis Macduff

Macduff is the archetype of the avenging hero, not simply out for revenge but with a good and holy purpose. Macduff is the character who has two of the most significant roles in the play: First, he is the discoverer of Duncan's body. Second, the news of the callous murder of his wife and children (Act IV, Scene 3) spurs him toward his desire to take personal revenge upon the tyrannical Macbeth. When he knocks at the gate of Macbeth's castle in Act II, Scene 3, he is being equated with the figure of Christ, who before his final ascension into Heaven, goes down to release the souls of the damned from hell (the so-called "Harrowing of Hell").

Like Macbeth, Macduff is also shown as a human being. When he hears of the death of his "pretty chickens," he has to hold back his emotions. Even when (in Act IV, Scene 3) Malcolm urges him to "Dispute it like a man," Macduff's reply "I will do so. But I must also *feel* it as a man" enables the audience to weigh him against Macbeth, an unfeeling man if ever there was one. In the final combat between hero and anti-hero, this humanity is recalled once more when Macduff cries out, "I have no words; my voice is in my sword." It is his very wordlessness that contrasts with Macbeth's empty rhetoric.

## Character Analysis Banquo

Banquo's role in the original source for *Macbeth* was as Macbeth's co-conspirator. In Shakespeare's play, he is depicted instead as Macbeth's rival; the role of fellow plotter passed to Lady Macbeth. Like Macbeth, Banquo is open to human yearnings and desires: He is, for example, just as keen to hear what the Witches have in store for *him* in Act I, Scene 3. He is kept from sleep by his dreams of the Witches (Act II, Scene 1). And in his soliloquy at the start of Act III, Scene 1 — "Thou hast it now . . ." — there is more than a hint of resentment and, possibly, of the same naked ambition that leads Macbeth astray. Nevertheless, Banquo is a sympathetic figure for several reasons. First, he is ignorant of what the audience knows concerning the murder of the king and of his own impending doom. Second, he is a father whose relationship with his son is clearly an affectionate one.

## Character Analysis Malcolm

With his brother Donalbain, Malcolm quickly ascertains the danger of remaining in Scotland and flees the country (Act II, Scene 3). By the time he reappears, in Act IV, Scene 3, he has won the support of Edward the Confessor (king of England), he has mobilized troops under Northumberland and Siward, and (to borrow a phrase from *King Lear*) he is "every inch a king."

If Macduff is the stereotypical revenger, Malcolm is the embodiment of all that is good in kingship, and this is seen particularly in Act IV, Scene 3, in which he tests the allegiance of Macduff. His testing of Macduff, although dramatically longwinded, is psychologically accurate. By pretending to be what he is not, he hopes to coax from Macduff a confession of his loyalty. This feature of his character — playing a part in order to strengthen the prospect of good — is in stark contrast to Macbeth, who plays a part in order to advance his own evil. In the final scene of the play, Malcolm is presented as the future king. His use of the phrase "by the grace of Grace" indicates the importance that he attaches to the service of good and reminds the audience of his direct descent from one who ruled by divine right, as opposed to Macbeth, who usurped the throne. Like his father Duncan, Malcolm is the representative of order.

## The role of Three Witches

The **Three Witches**, also known as the **Weird Sisters** or **Wayward Sisters**, are characters in William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* (c. 1603–1607). They hold a striking resemblance to the three Fates of classical mythology, and are, perhaps, intended as a twisted version of the white-robed incarnations of destiny. The witches eventually lead Macbeth to his demise. Their origin lies in Holinshed's Chronicles (1587), a history of England, Scotland and Ireland. Other possible sources, aside from Shakespeare's imagination, include British folklore, such contemporary treatises on witchcraft as King James VI of Scotland's Daemonologie, the Norns of Norse mythology, and ancient classical myths of the Fates: the Greek Moirai and the Roman Parcae. Productions of *Macbeth* began incorporating portions of Thomas Middleton's contemporaneous play *The Witch* circa 1618, two years after Shakespeare's death.

Shakespeare's witches are prophets who hail Macbeth, the general, early in the play, and predict his ascent to kingship. Upon killing the king and gaining the throne of Scotland, Macbeth hears them ambiguously predict his eventual downfall. The witches, and their "filthy" trappings and supernatural activities, set an ominous tone for the play.

The Three Witches first appear in Act 1.1 where they agree to meet later with Macbeth. In 1.3, they greet Macbeth with a prophecy that he shall be king, and his companion, Banquo, with a prophecy that he shall generate a line of kings. The prophecies have great impact upon Macbeth. As the audience later learns, he has considered usurping the throne of Scotland. The Witches next appear in what is generally accepted to be a non-Shakespearean scene, 3.5, where they are reprimanded by Hecate for dealing with Macbeth without her participation. Hecate orders the trio to congregate at a forbidding place where Macbeth will seek their art. In 4.1, the Witches gather as Hecate ordered and produce a series of ominous visions for Macbeth that herald his downfall. The meeting ends with a "show" of Banquo and his royal descendants. The Witches then vanish.

The Three Witches represent evil, darkness, chaos, and conflict, while their role is as agents and witnesses. Their presence communicates treason and impending doom. During Shakespeare's day, witches were seen as worse than rebels, "the most notorious traitor and rebel that can be". They were not only political traitors, but spiritual traitors as well. Much of the confusion that springs from them comes from their ability to straddle the play's borders between reality and the supernatural. They are so deeply entrenched in both worlds that it is unclear whether they control fate, or whether they are merely its agents. They defy logic, not being subject to the rules of the real world.

The witches' lines in the first act: "Fair is foul, and foul is fair / Hover through the fog and filthy air" are often said to set the tone for the remainder of the play by establishing a sense of moral confusion. Indeed, the play is filled with situations in which evil is depicted as good, while good is rendered evil. The line "Double, double toil and trouble," (often sensationalised to a point that it loses meaning), communicates the witches' intent clearly: they seek only to increase trouble for the mortals around them.

Though the witches do not deliberately tell Macbeth to kill King Duncan, they use a subtle form of temptation when they inform Macbeth that he is destined to be king. By placing this thought in his mind, they effectively guide him on the path to his own destruction. This follows the pattern of temptation attributed to the Devil in the contemporary imagination: the Devil was believed to be a thought in a person's mind, which he or she might either indulge or reject. Macbeth indulges the temptation, while Banquo rejects it.

Several non-Shakespearean moments are thought to have been added to *Macbeth* around 1618 and include all of 3.5 and 4.1.39–43 and 4.1.125–32, as well as two songs.

## Famous Quotes

Shakespeare coined many popular phrases that are still commonly used today. Here are some examples of Shakespeare's most familiar quotes from *Macbeth*. You just might be surprised to learn of all the everyday sayings that originally came from Shakespeare!

"Fair is foul, and foul is fair." (*Act I, Scene I*)

"When the battle's lost and won." (*Act I, Scene I*)

"When shall we three meet again in thunder, lightning, or in rain? When the hurlyburly 's done, When the battle 's lost and won." (*Act I, Scene I*)

"If chance will have me king, why, chance may crown me." (*Act I, Scene III*)

"Nothing in his life became him like the leaving it; he died as one that had been studied in his death to throw away the dearest thing he owed, as 't were a careless trifle." (*Act I, Scene IV*)

"Yet do I fear thy nature; It is too full o' the milk of human kindness." (*Act I, Scene V*)

"Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under't." (*Act I, Scene V*)

"I dare do all that may become a man; Who dares do more is none." (*Act I, Scene VII*)

"Screw your courage to the sticking-place." (*Act I, Scene VII*)

"I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent, but only vaulting ambition, which o'erleaps itself, and falls on the other." (*Act I, Scene VII*)

"Is this a dagger which I see before me, The handle toward my hand?" (*Act II, Scene I*)

"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" (*Act II, Scene II*)

"There's daggers in men's smiles." (*Act II, Scene III*)

"What's done is done." (*Act III, Scene II*)

"By the pricking of my thumbs, Something wicked this way comes." (*Act IV, Scene I*)

"Double, double toil and trouble; Fire burn, and cauldron bubble." (*Act IV, Scene I*)

"Out, damned spot! out, I say!" (*Act V, Scene I*).

"All the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand." (*Act V, Scene I*)

"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." (*Act V, Scene V*)

"I bear a charmed life." (*Act V, Scene VIII*)

## Character Map

