THE CHARACTERS

DUNCAN, King of Scotland
MALCOLM
DONALBAIN
MACBETH
BANQUO

MACDUFF
LENNOX
ROSS
MENTEITH
ANGUS
CAITHNESS

FLEANCE, Banquo's son

LADY MACBETH
LADY MACDUFF
BOY, Macduff’s son

SIWARD, Earl of Northumberland, and commander of the
    English army
YOUNG SIWARD, his son

A CAPTAIN
A PORTER
AN OLD MAN
AN ENGLISH DOCTOR
A SCOTTISH DOCTOR
A GENTLEWOMAN, attending on Lady Macbeth
SEYTON, an officer attending on Macbeth
Three WITCHES
HECATE
THE GHOST OF BANQUO, and other apparitions

Lords, Gentlemen, Officers, Soldiers, Murderers,
    Attendants, and Messengers
The main characters

Macbeth

(a) The historical Macbeth
The historical Macbeth was the ruler of Moray and Ross, and became King of Scotland when he murdered King Duncan in 1040. His only claim to the throne was through his wife, who was called Gruach. He reigned for 17 years, and his reign is said to have been prosperous. Various attempts were made by the royal family to regain the throne. The first attempt by Malcolm and Siward is 1054 failed, but in 1057 they succeeded and killed Macbeth.

(b) Macbeth in Shakespeare's play
Shakespeare concentrates the events into a much briefer span of time, or what is intended to seem very brief. He also does not show Macbeth's reign as prosperous but as a reign of terror. Macbeth emerges as a divided man – on the one hand, he has a moral code which recognises his duties as host, subject and kinsman to Duncan, but on the other hand, his burning ambition to be king leads him to act against his better nature. He is never happy or secure on his throne, but always restless, and the more he does to try to make himself safe, the more he puts himself in danger. He is physically brave in battle, but guilt and perhaps superstition make him afraid to re-enter the murder-room to replace the daggers. He has rebelled first of all against his own moral nature, and his guilt produces hallucinations. He swings from one mood to another – confidence, gullible superstition, anger, despair, apathy, recklessness. He is increasingly isolated, the least likeable of Shakespeare's tragic heroes, and is punished by his own nature before being punished by others.

Lady Macbeth

(a) The historical figure
The daughter of the eldest son of King Kenneth IV. She had a son by her first husband, the Thane of Moray. Holinshed in his Chronicles says that she "was very ambitious, burning in unquenchable desire to have the name of a queen". Shakespeare also uses the character of Donwald's wife, who bribed servants to kill King Duff.

(b) Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth
A very determined and ruthless woman, with a shrewd insight into the kindness (which she sees as weakness) in her husband's character. Practical and cunning, she is also able to be superficially charming when the occasion demands it. Quick-thinking and sharp-tongued. Almost able to kill Duncan herself, except that the sleeping king reminded her of her own father – the first sign of human compassion in Lady Macbeth. She too represses the better side of her nature, and the pressure of this repressed awareness of her guilt leads to sleepwalking, near-madness and death.
Duncan
King of Scotland. Shakespeare portrays him as a strong, kindly man, gentle and polite, and trustful. He recognises the talents of others. He enjoys good company. He is modest. He is deceived not because he is a fool, but because, good himself, he suspects no evil in others - and, tragically for him, he does not learn from his mistake in having trusted the former Thane of Cawdor.

Malcolm
Shrewd and purposeful, not only in going to England to gain the support which will eventually put him on the throne of Scotland, but also in testing Macduff before trusting him. A clever military leader - e.g. when he tells his men to cover themselves with branches from Birnam Wood in order to conceal their numbers - he is also brave and capable in the battle itself. He recognises the duties of a king towards his subjects, honouring those who deserve it and promising punishment for the agents of the dead dictator, Macbeth.
Donalbain

Does not appear in the latter part of the play, but is fairly important, though briefly, in the scene where the murder of Duncan is revealed — when Malcolm wishes to speak out, Donalbain advises caution, in case the murderer is (as indeed he is) close by. Malcolm seems slightly more impetuous here, and quickly learns from his brother.

Banquo

Courageous both in battle and when he challenges the witches afterwards. He is also a man of integrity — in Act Two, scene I Macbeth wants Banquo to meet him later and help in some way that is not yet specified, promising that he will profit by doing so. Banquo, however, says he is only prepared to help if it does not tarnish his honour, his sense of right and wrong. Banquo is more cautious than Macbeth regarding the witches, suspecting evil powers, and less ambitious for himself than curious about the future. He shares Duncan’s trusting nature in response to the apparently pleasant atmosphere in and around Macbeth’s castle, but he carries a sword there at night, which perhaps shows his growing suspicion of Macbeth.
Macduff
A man of genuinely deep feelings, as his response to the murders of Duncan and his own wife and children show. Shrewdly suspects Macbeth of the murder and of planning to become a tyrant. Passionate love of his country and the monarchy. A brave and determined fighter, able to serve his country and avenge his family in the same act, by killing Macbeth.

Lady Macduff
She has the 'natural touch' – putting a deep concern for her family and home above all else and criticising her husband, in conversation with Ross, for having fled the country and left her and the children exposed. She mistakes Macduff's motives in doing so, but even if she knew them she would probably still disagree with his decision. A tender mother, appreciative of her child's talents.

The Porter
A memorable comic figure, the drunken Porter also has a serious purpose in Shakespeare's scheme. He is based upon a familiar Morality figure, the Porter of Hell Gate, and Macbeth's castle is indeed a kind of hell. His jokes all centre on the contrast between expectation and reality, which is also at the centre of the play itself.
The Witches
The witches are not at all intended to be comic, and modern productions have to take care not to make them so. They are physically and morally loathsome – although women, they have hairs sprouting on their chins; they are wrinkled and have thin lips and roughened fingers; they delight in hurting, hindering, or fooling people, and where possible, in killing them; they mix together bits and pieces of various animals and therefore represent a perversion and fragmentation of the order of nature. In the deepest sense they stand for something evil in Macbeth himself – and notice that Lady Macbeth herself seems to become a witch at times.

Questions for discussion
1. Show that the murder of Duncan by Macbeth was influenced partly by the witches, partly by Lady Macbeth, and partly by Macbeth’s own ambition.
2. Give an account of the sleep-walking scene, showing that Lady Macbeth was haunted by her memories of past events.
3. What is meant by Banquo’s ‘royalty of nature’, and why does this make Macbeth fear him?
4. What are the virtues of a good king as shown in the play
   a) in Duncan, and
   b) in Malcolm?
5. What is the significance of the following groups of images in the play –
   a) clothes
   b) disease and health
   c) animals?
   Give as many examples of each as you can think of.
6. Describe the relationship between Macbeth and his wife, showing how it changes in the course of the play.
7. Is Macbeth corrupted by power?
8. What reasons does Macbeth give for not killing Duncan, and why does he then go ahead with the murder?
9. What makes the play a tragedy?