Characters in the play

Banquo

The loyal and honourable Banquo is with Macbeth when he first meets the Witches, but their reactions are entirely different. He is deeply suspicious of their powers, and although their prophecy to him disturbs his dreams, he looks to divine help to fight their evil. After Duncan’s death, Macbeth cannot bear the presence of this wise and moral man; but, after his own death, Banquo haunts Macbeth for the rest of his life, with the constant reminder that the descendants of this virtuous man will eventually be rightful kings.

Duncan

Duncan is shown as deeply appreciative of loyalty, full of dignity and virtue. Macbeth understands this well. He is perhaps too generous; his ‘More is thy due’ to Macbeth is taken too literally by Macbeth! He is perhaps also too trusting—of both the Thanes of Cawdor—but his kingly qualities show up Macbeth’s dismal pretence for what it is; and at the end of the play the thoughtful Malcolm is encouraged to add the quality of caution to his already admirable character.

Fleance

This is a character whom we see only briefly, but whose existence haunts Macbeth, since it is through his line that the succession to the throne has been prophesied. His relationship with his father seems to be an affectionate one (like that of Lady Macduff and her son) and highlights the humanity of Banquo compared with Macbeth. Even as he is dying, Banquo’s only thought is for the safety of his son.

Lennox and Ross

Lennox and Ross are not just the message-bearers and narrators they may appear at first glance. A little study shows us Shakespeare’s skill in portraying them as examples of the trusting, uncomplicated, non-political majority of people. They transfer their allegiance from the murdered Duncan to Macbeth because he appears to be the legitimate king, and they appear to believe the lies told about Duncan’s death, although they seem vaguely aware that something is wrong. They reflect the growing unease at Macbeth’s court, and finally defect when his crimes become too bad. They will not serve a tyrant.

Macbeth

Macbeth’s character develops as the play progresses. In the beginning he is a successful general, a man of action, described as noble, valiant, and worthy. We learn that he is ambitious, and prepared to accept ill-gotten gains as long as his own conscience is clear. His fatal weakness, then, is that he thinks ends and means can be separated. Lady Macbeth plays on his weakness and persuades him to murder Duncan. But as a villain, he has a fatal weakness—too much imagination. Fear and suspicion drive him into a tyrannous blood-bath. ‘Noble Macbeth’ becomes ‘this dead butcher’.

Lady Macbeth

It is tempting to dismiss Lady Macbeth as Macbeth’s evil inspiration: Adam’s Eve, a traditional villainess. But Shakespeare did not insult his audience with cardboard characters. True, she is ambitious, single-minded and apparently unscrupulous, but one must have some pity for her ultimately damning failings—a lack both of
imagination and of knowledge of human nature. She tries to deny her own conscience, but when her suppressed feelings burst out they completely overwhelm her and she is punished with madness.

**Macduff**

Macduff is the first character, apart from Banquo (who has better evidence), to have suspicions about Duncan’s murder and of Macbeth’s fitness to be king. He is a shrewd man, yet he has not foreseen the web of intrigue woven by Macbeth and is perhaps too honest and chivalrous himself to imagine the possibility of the callous murder of his wife and children after he has gone to England for help. In his conversation with Malcolm we come to appreciate his honourable and loyal nature; the terrible anguish he feels at his family’s massacre is Macbeth’s doom, exactly as the Witches prophesied.

**Lady Macduff**

We only meet Lady Macduff a short time before her murder but her character is quickly outlined: she is a loving wife and mother, loyal to her husband, although shrewd enough to see the danger he has left her in, and defiant towards the thugs who are about to murder her. Her dramatic importance is in the contrast of her character with Lady Macbeth’s, and in the sympathy she arouses so that we appreciate the full horror of Macbeth’s callousness. It is her death which finally unhinges Lady Macbeth and leads to the killing of Macbeth.

**Malcolm**

Malcolm, like his father, values the loyalty and bravery of Banquo and Macbeth, but is much more than a mirror image of Duncan. He is quick to sense the danger after his father’s death, and has become shrewd and self-possessed by the time we meet him next, in conversation with Macduff in London. It is he who has the intelligence to use the trees of Birnam Wood as camouflage, who organizes the final assault on Dunsinane, and whose last speech in the play, of gratitude, hope and faith, convinces the audience that Scotland once again has a virtuous king.

**Porter**

The porter-at-the-gate-of-hell routine was an old favourite in the theatre, but Shakespeare used it cleverly for his own dramatic purpose. His Porter is a welcome relief from the heavy drama of the previous scenes; his allusions to candidates for hell not only mirror contemporary scapegoats but cunningly parallel themes of the play itself. The vulgar, music-hall humour of his dialogue with Macduff would be sure to amuse and keep the attention of the more down-to-earth members of the audience.

**Witches**

The Witches are the embodiment of disorder, darkness and chaos, in fact ‘living’ images of the evil that may tempt men’s minds. Banquo senses that they are evil but Macbeth is tempted because they seem to voice his own thoughts, and Lady Macbeth is only too ready to add her voice to theirs. The Witches never lie, but in the paradoxical statements of their Apparitions, Macbeth only hears what he wants to hear. Too late he realizes that they are not interested in him but only in the triumph of evil over goodness. His final ‘confusion’ is what they wanted.