Macbeth

*Macbeth* is the last of Shakespeare's four great tragedies (*Hamlet, Othello, and King Lear*), and many readers find it the most powerful. In *Life of Mrs. Siddons* (1834), the poet Thomas Campbell called *Macbeth* "the greatest treasure of our dramatic literature" (volume II, 6), comparing it to the works of Aeschylus. The contemporary critic Harold Bloom has said that *Macbeth* "surpasses" the other three great Shakespearean tragedies "in maintaining a continuous pitch of tragic intensity, in making everything overwhelmingly dark with meaning" (*Modern Critical 2*).

As in all great tragedies, the struggle in *Macbeth* is played out within the mind of the protagonist. This conflict begins in Act I, Scene 3, when Macbeth first appears, and persists until his death. Even more than *Hamlet, Macbeth* is a play about the struggle between conscience and desire. Like Raskolnikov in Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment* (1865), Macbeth gains sympathy through the author's revelation of the tormented mind that rebels against the horrible actions the character commits. Malcolm dismisses Macbeth as a "butcher" (5.9.35) because the young king sees only the cruelty the tyrant has perpetrated against others. The audience, however, sees a complex, suffering human being who "on the torture of the mind [lies] / In restless ecstasy" (3. 2. 21–22). When Raskolnikov, in *Crime and Punishment*, confesses his killings to Sonya, she exclaims, "What have you done to yourself?" The same could be asked of Macbeth. Perhaps his worst crime is the violation of his own nature. *Macbeth* might take as its epigraph Ophelia's lament for the seemingly mad prince of Denmark: "O, what a noble mind is here o'erthrown!" (*Hamlet*, 3. 1. 150). Too late, Macbeth discovers that he has gained a small portion of the world in exchange for his soul, that for "a barren scepter" he has given his "eternal jewel / ... to the common enemy of man" (3. 1. 61, 67–68). That common enemy turns out to be himself. Banquo asks the witches to "look into the seeds of time, / And say which grain will grow" (1. 3. 58–59). For Macbeth, these prove to be the seeds of his own destruction. As Albert Camus observed in *The Rebel*, "Rebellion, when it gets out of hand, swings from the annihilation of others to the destruction of the self."

Background

Although *Macbeth* appears among the tragedies in the First Folio (1623), it could also be considered a kind of history play. Shakespeare's chief source for *Macbeth* was Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland* (1577; second edition, 1587), which also supplied material for his historical plays. In *Macbeth*, however, Shakespeare played even faster and looser with Holinshed than he customarily did in his other plays. *Macbeth* fuses many incidents from Holinshed. Perhaps the most obvious is Holinshed's story of Natholocus (242–280), who sends a follower to consult a witch about the outcome of a revolt. The witch tells this man he will kill the king, so that for "a barren scepter" he has given his "eternal jewel / ... to the common enemy of man" (3. 1. 61, 67–68). That common enemy turns out to be himself. Banquo asks the witches to "look into the seeds of time, / And say which grain will grow" (1. 3. 58–59). For Macbeth, these prove to be the seeds of his own destruction. As Albert Camus observed in *The Rebel*, "Rebellion, when it gets out of hand, swings from the annihilation of others to the destruction of the self."

Shakespeare also drew on Holinshed's account of the reign of King Duff (952–967). Duff kills rebels related to Donwald despite Donwald's plea to spare their lives. Goaded by his desire for revenge and by his wife, Donwald kills Duff when the king is visiting Donwald's castle at Forres, much as Macbeth kills the visiting king, Duncan. But Donwald does not commit the murder himself; he engages four servants to undertake the crime. When the king is found dead the next morning, Donwald feigns ignorance and later kills the chamberlains who were supposed to be guarding Duff and who are suspected of being the murderers, just as Macbeth executes the chamberlains who are blamed for Duncan's death. Though some suspect Donwald, he is too powerful to be accused. Holinshed records that "for the space of six moneths together, after this heinous murther thus committed, there appeered no sunne by day, nor moone by night in anie part of the realme, ... and sometimes such outrageous windes arose, with lightenings and tempests, that people were in great feare of present destruction". The *Chronicles* add that the horses in Lothian become cannibalistic and an owl kills a hawk; similar events are recounted in *Macbeth* in Act II, Scene 4, after Duncan's death. Donwald, his wife, and the four murderers are captured and executed. The sun then shines, and flowers bloom "clear contrarie to the time and season of the yeere". This reference may have influenced Shakespeare's linking images of fertility to Duncan and Malcolm.

Yet another episode from Holinshed that Shakespeare uses derives from the reign of Kenneth III, who kills his nephew, Duff's son, so that Kenneth's own offspring will rule. Afterward, Holinshed relates, "a voice was heard as he [Kenneth] was in bed in the night time to take his rest, uttering unto him these or the like woords in effect, 'Thinke not Kenneth that the wicked slaughter of
The historical Duncan became king in 1034. Though Shakespeare makes Duncan an ideal monarch, Holinshed describes him as "soft and gentle," whereas his cousin Macbeth is "somewhat cruel of nature"; his excessive leniency leads to a rebellion by Macdonwald, who is joined by Irish kerns, light foot soldiers. (Interestingly, Skene's Scots Acts [1597] describes Duncan as "a good and modest Prince," thus contradicting Holinshed and perhaps explaining Shakespeare's favorable view of the slain monarch.) This is the revolt described in Act I, Scene 2. Macbeth defeats the king's enemies, and Macdonwald kills himself. To add luster to Macbeth's military success, Shakespeare has his hero kill the rebel in hand-to-hand combat. Shakespeare fuses a separate Norwegian invasion with the rebellion; the payment for burial that Norway's king Sweno offers in the play (1. 2. 60–62) was, in Holinshed, paid by King Canute of England after his unsuccessful attack on Scotland.

After these wars, Holinshed recounts, "It fortuned as Makbeth and Banquho journied towards Fores, where the king then laie, ... suddenlie in the middest of a laund, there met them three women in strange and wild apparel, resembling creatures of elder world." Shakespeare describes the famous meeting between the women, Macbeth, and Banquo in Act I, Scene 3. Banquo asks about his future and is told, as in the play, that "thou in deed shalt not reigne at all, but of thee those shall be borne which shall govern the Scottish kingdome by long order of continuall descent." Banquo was first described in print by Hector Boece, whose 1527 Scotorum Historiae is the source for Holinshed's Scottish history. At the time, the Stuarts who were then reigning in Scotland, and who ruled England from 1603 to 1714, traced their lineage to Banquo. According to Boece, the women are "weird sisters or wiches," making them perhaps instruments of fate. In the First Folio they are called "weyward" or "weyard"; modern editions tend to follow Lewis Theobald's 1733 alteration to "weird," but Shakespeare may not have intended them to be as powerful as Boece imagined.

For Holinshed, the women's prophecy first plants the idea of monarchy in Macbeth's mind. But, Shakespeare indicates, through Macbeth's reaction to their words and by Lady Macbeth's comment (1. 7. 47–52), that he had been thinking about seizing the throne and had spoken to his wife on this topic before he first heard the prediction. According to Holinshed, despite the prophecy of his kingship, Macbeth "thought with himselfe that he must tarie a time, which should advance him thereto (by the divine providence) as it had come to passe in his former preferment" to Thane of Cawdor, which the women had predicted. So, in the play, he meditates, "If chance will have me king, why, chance may crowne me / Without my stir" (1. 3. 143–144). Then Duncan names his own son Malcolm as his successor. In Holinshed's account, Macbeth has a better claim to the throne, and since Scotland had an elected monarchy at the time, Duncan had no right to name the next king. Shakespeare denies Macbeth any legitimate claim to rule Scotland.

Macbeth now plots to seize the crown. Holinshed writes that the women's prediction encourages him, "but speciallie his wife lay sone upon him to attempt the thing, as she that was verie ambitious, burning in unquenchable desire to beare the name of a queene." According to Boece, she "calland him oft tymes febill cowart and nocht desirous of honouris, sen he durst nocht assailie the thing with manhood and corage quhilk is offert to him be [by] benevolence of fortoun." Shakespeare obscures Lady Macbeth's motivation, but in Act I, Scene 5 and 7 she gives him "gret artacioun [prompting] to persewe" Duncan's murder, as Boece writes, and assails his manhood. In 1046, the historical Macbeth, together with other nobles, including Banquo, killed Duncan, and Macbeth became king. Shakespeare exonerates Banquo; it is obviously significant that in Shakespeare's time, Banquo's descendant James was reigning in Scotland and England and was the patron of Shakespeare's acting company.

The sources give Macbeth 10 years of good rule before he becomes a tyrant and 17 years overall. Shakespeare's chronology is unclear, but the play's brevity and fast pace suggest that his reign was brief, and Macbeth moves from crime to crime without interruption. Fearing Banquo, Macbeth invites him to dinner and has him killed outside the palace. Banquo's son, Fleance, whom Macbeth also wanted dead, flees (3. 1, 3. 3). These details appear in Holinshed. Macbeth is warned against Macduff. In Boece, the warning comes from witches; in Holinshed, from wizards. Shakespeare simplifies his casting by using the same women who predicted his kingship.

Learning of Macduff's flight to England, Macbeth, in Holinshed, besieges Macduff's castle and is admitted by the unsuspecting
Malcolm invites Scotland with 10,000 men and leads his uncle Old Siward. Both Holinshed and Boece call Siward Malcolm's grandfather, but Shakespeare actually gets the genealogy correct. In *The Royal Play of Macbeth* (1595), Henry N. Paul notes that Lawrence Fletcher, an English actor who had gone to Scotland to serve James and had returned south when James assumed the English throne, was a member of Shakespeare's company when the playwright was composing *Macbeth*. Fletcher may have explained the Siward-Malcolm relationship and that the Seytons were traditional armor-bearers to the Scottish kings (5.3, 5.5); he may even have told Shakespeare that Lady Macbeth had been previously married and had had a child by her first husband, which is cryptically alluded to in the play (1.7.54–58). According to Holinshed, when Macbeth sees Birnam Wood coming to Dunsinane (5.4, 5.5), he flees. Shakespeare gives him more resolution. In both play and Holinshed, Macduff confronts Macbeth. In the play, Macbeth initially refuses to fight because "my soul is too much charg'd / With blood of thine already" (5.8.5–6). He retains a sense of guilt as well as bravery to the end. Macduff insists on battle and declares he was not born of woman. Macbeth has no words in Holinshed; Macduff decapitates him forthwith. In the play, Macbeth refuses to yield and dies fighting. In both play and history, Malcolm succeeds to the throne and for the first time in Scottish history creates earls (5.9).

Holinshed, unlike Shakespeare, does not concentrate on Macbeth's mental state. He does observe, however, "[T]he prick of conscience (as it changeth euer in tyrants, and such as attaine to anie estate by vnrighteous means) caused him euer to feare, least [lest] he should be serued of the same cup, as he had ministred to his predecessor." This image of the cup and the fear of retribution may underlie Macbeth's lines "This even-handed justice / Commends th' ingredience of our poison'd chalice / To our own lips" (1.7.10–12).

Shakespeare may have supplemented Holinshed with other histories. George Buchanan's *Rerum Scoticarum Historia* (1582) records that Donaldus (Donwald in Holinshed) is goaded by his wife's "bitter words" to kill Duff. Buchanan tells of Donaldus's making the king's attendants drunk before killing the ruler. These incidents appear in the play. Buchanan rejected the supernatural elements in Holinshed, claiming that Macbeth dreams of three beautiful women who promise him the kingship. Andrew of Wyntoun's *Orygynale Cronykil of Scotland* (ca. 1420) treats the three weird sisters as a fantasy of Macbeth's imagination, too. Shakespeare almost certainly did not see Andrew's account, since it was still in manuscript during Shakespeare's life, but Buchanan might have read it. Shakespeare leaves ambiguous the question of the witches' reality. Buchanan, unlike Holinshed, claims Macbeth was thinking of kingship even before his dream of the prophecy. For Buchanan, guilt rather than fear turns Macbeth into a tyrant. Shakespeare's Macbeth suffers from both.

Shakespeare turned to Scottish history for a play because in 1603 James VI of Scotland assumed the English throne, as well, becoming King James I. The story of Macbeth seemed especially likely to please James for a variety of reasons. James traced his lineage to Banquo. James had, like Duncan, been the subject of assassination plots: In 1600, John Ruthven, earl of Gowrie, invited James to his castle and tried to kill him there. In 1604, the King's Men, Shakespeare's company, twice performed a play based on this event (*The Tragedy of Gowrie*, now lost), but the Privy Council forbid further productions because it dealt with a living monarch and addressed contemporary political issues too overtly. Another, even more recent attempt on James's life was the Gunpowder Plot, in which a group of disaffected Catholics sought to blow up the houses of Parliament and the king when he addressed the opening session on November 5, 1605. In July 1606, a plot by Captain William Neuce to kill James was uncovered.

James also had a deep interest in witches. In 1597, he published *Daemonologie* on this subject. He credited them with the ability to predict the future and warned that the devil can make himself "so to be trusted in these little things, that he may have the better
commoditie therafter to deceive them in the end with a tricke once for all." Banquo echoes this sentiment: "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" (1. 3. 123–126). James also wrote that witches can raise storms, which they do in Act I, Scene 1 and threaten to do in Act I, Scene 3. He claimed that witches prefer solitary places; in the play, all four of their scenes are set in such terrain. He also asserted that the devil can "thicken and obscure the air … that the beams of any other man's eye cannot pierce through the same to see them." The word thickren appears repeatedly in the play, and in Act I, Scene 5, Lady Macbeth calls upon night to hide the murder of Duncan. For all his concern with the power of evil, James wrote that the devil can deceive "only such, as first willfully deceive themselves, by running unto him." The witches in the play predict but do not compel.

As he always did, Shakespeare drew on classical authors in composing this play. Thomas Newton had translated Seneca's tragedies in 1581, and Shakespeare might have read them in Latin as well. Banquo's avenging ghost derives from a stock feature in Senecan drama. Seneca's Medea prepares a brew resembling the witches' concoction in Act IV, Scene 1, and in book 7 of Ovid's Metamorphoses, she does so as well. Shakespeare knew this Ovidian passage; he adapts part of it in The Tempest (5. 1. 33–57). In Seneca's Agamemnon, Cassandra sees "The gobs of bloode downe dropping on the wynde," just as Macbeth sees "gouts of blood" on the mind-drawn dagger (2.1.46). In John Studley's 1566 translation of Agamemnon, the Chorus in Act 1 observes that rulers are never secure enough to say "To morrow shall we rule, as we have don to daye. / One clod of crooked [crooked] care another bryngeth in, / One hurlye burlye done, another doth begin." These lines may have inspired Macbeth's famous soliloquy in Act V, Scene 5 as well as the second witch's statement that they will meet again "When the hurly-burly's done" (1.1.3). Seneca, in that speech, refers to " Slepe that doth overcome and breake the bondes of greefe (2. 1. 38–41). In Hercules Furens, the title character kills his wife and children. Afterward, he laments that rivers and the North Sea cannot "my right hande now wash from gylt." A similar passage appears in Seneca's Phaedra. Macbeth (2. 2. 57–60) and Lady Macbeth (5. 1. 50–51) both express a similar sentiment.

Shakespeare used Plutarch as a source for Julius Caesar, written just before Macbeth, and he would turn to that historian again for Antony and Cleopatra, the tragedy he wrote after Macbeth. Macbeth's refusal to "play the Roman fool and die / On mine own sword" (5. 8. 1–2) refers to either Brutus or Antony, both of whom killed themselves this way. Like Cleopatra, Macbeth refuses to yield to become a spectacle for his conquerors. Macbeth observes that his "Genius is rebuk'd" by Banquo's, just as Mark Antony's was by Octavius (3. 1. 55–56)—another allusion to Plutarch's Lives.

Macbeth also draws on the Bible. According to the Geneva Bible's gloss of Genesis 3:6, by Adam's eating the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, he sinned, "not so muche to please his wife, as moued by ambition at her persuasion." Macbeth may kill Duncan for the same reason. Both Macbeth and his wife invoke darkness: "Come, thick night" (1.5.50); "Stars, hide your fires" (1.4.50). They thus reverse God's "Let there be light." They choose uncreation, as when Macbeth tells the witches he will be answered "though the treasure / Of nature's germains [seeds] tumble all together, / Even till destruction sicken" (4. 1. 58–60). Later, he declares, "I gin to be a-warey of the sun, / And wish th' estate o' th' world were now undone" (5. 5. 48–49). Such inverted echoes of the story of creation link them with the demonic. In his soliloquy in Act 1, Scene 7, Macbeth speaks of "heaven's cherubin, hors'd / Upon the sightless couriers of the air" (1. 7. 22–23). This image derives from Psalm 18:10: "And he rode upon Cherub and did flie, and he came flying upon the wings of the wind."

Thinking of killing Duncan, Macbeth says in as aside, "The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be / Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see" (1. 4. 52–53). This line recalls Matthew 13:15: "With their eyes they have winked, lest they should see with their eyes." The famous "To-morrow, and to-morrow, and to-morrow" speech in Act V, Scene 5, about the brevity and vanity of life and the judgment that "Life's but a walking shadow" (5.5.24), repeats sentiments from the Bible. Psalm 144:4 in the Geneva Bible translation declares, "Man is like to vanitie: his daies are like a shadowe, that vanisheth." Job 8:9 similarly states, "For our days
The play also draws on topical references. In Act II, Scene 3, the Porter welcomes an equivocator to hell. On March 28, 1606, Father Henry Garnet, superior of the Jesuits in England, was tried for his role in the Gunpowder Plot. He had learned through the confessional of the plan to blow up the king and Parliament but had kept silent and denied knowledge of it. He defended his behavior by invoking the doctrine of equivocation, which allows for telling "lies like truth" (5.5.43) through mental reservation. The published account of the trial explains this procedure, "wherein under the pretext of the lawfulness of a mixt proposition to expresse one part of a mans mind, and retaine another." This principle was so odious to Parliament that its 1606 Oath of Allegiance barred "any equivocation or mental evasion or secret reservation whatsoever." The witches in Act IV, Scene 1 equivocate, seeming to promise Macbeth security but in fact, pronouncing his doom.

Malcolm's account in Act I, Scene 4 of the noble death of the thane of Cawdor was a Shakespearean invention. Shakespeare may have been thinking of the execution of Robert Devereux, earl of Essex in 1601. He might also have had in mind a more recent death, that of Everard Digby, whom James I had knighted in 1603. James had trusted Digby, just as Duncan had Cawdor. Digby joined the Gunpowder Plot and was executed on January 30, 1606, after apologizing for his actions. Like Cawdor, he "very frankly … confess'd his treasons, / Implor'd … pardon, and set forth / A deep repentance" (1. 4. 5–7).

Shakespeare had no historical source for the confrontation between Macbeth and Banquo's ghost in Act III, Scene 4. The idea for this scene may have derived from A Treatsie of Spectres (1605) by Pierre de Loyer and translated into English by Z. Jones. Here, Shakespeare could have read: "How often have they [tyrants] supposed and imagined, that they have seen sundry visions and apparitions of those whom they have murdered, or of some others whom they have feared?" The book refers to Theodoric the Great (455–526), who had Simmachus killed. Afterward, "on an evening as he sat at supper [Theodoric saw] the face of Simmachus in a most horrible shape and fashion, with great mustachioes, knitting his brows, frowning with his eyes, biting his lippes for very anger, and looking awry upon him," as Banquo's ghost glowers at Macbeth.

Macbeth's overactive imagination, one of Shakespeare's own additions, perhaps results from his melancholy disposition. Samuel Harsnett writes in his Declaration of Egregious Popish Impositions (1603): "Why men of a melancholie constitution be more subject to fears, fancies and imaginations of devils, and witches, than others tempers be? … because from their black & sooty blood, gloomie fuliginous spirits do fume into their brains which bring black, gloomy, and frightful images, representations, and similitudes in them." Shakespeare had drawn on Harsnett's book for King Lear, (written circa 1605).

Robert Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy (1621) observes that melancholy is called "the Devil's Bath" because "melancholy persons are most subject to diabolical temptations and illusions, and most apt to entertain them, and the Devil best able to work upon them." Reginald Scot's The Discoverie of Witchcraft (1584) notes, "Many thorough [through] melancholie do imagine that they see or heare visions, spirits, ghosts, strange noises, &c," a perfect description of Macbeth. Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking was another of Shakespeare's inventions. Burton's Anatomy of Melancholy sets forth the popular view that this behavior results from fantasy overriding reason.

**Date and Text of the Play**

The contemporary allusions noted above suggest that *Macbeth* was written in 1606. William Warner's A Continuation of Albion's England (1606) and William Camden's Britannia (1607 edition) refer to *Macbeth* in ways that suggest the authors had seen Shakespeare's play. The Puritan (1607) and Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher's Knight of the Burning Pestle, produced in 1607, also allude to *Macbeth*. Paul, in The Royal Play of Macbeth, argues that the play was first performed at
Hampton Court on August 7, 1606, before James and his brother-in-law, King Christian IV of Denmark, who visited England between July 17 and August 10 of that year. The King's Men performed three plays for the monarchs, two at Greenwich, one at Hampton Court; the titles of these works are not recorded. James disliked long plays. During his 1605 visit to Oxford, he was "entertained" with three lengthy productions. He tried to leave in the middle of one, fell asleep during another, and "spoke many words of dislike" against the third. Macbeth is Shakespeare's fifth shortest play; it may well have been intended for a royal spectator with a short attention span.

The play was first printed in the First Folio (1623). No earlier quarto publications have been discovered. The First Folio text was probably based on a promptbook or transcript thereof. Its stage directions and speaker designations are detailed, and the play is divided into acts and scenes. Modern editions further separate the First Folio's Act V, Scene 7 into two or three scenes. The portions of the play involving Hecate (3. 5 and 4. 1. 39–43, 125–132) are usually attributed to another writer, Thomas Middleton. The songs called for in stage directions (3. 5. 33 and 4. 1. 43) certainly are Middleton's.

The First Folio text contains some contradictions. While these may result from hasty composition to meet a deadline, more likely the typesetters could not decipher changes in the manuscript. For example, Ross says that Macbeth fought against the thane of Cawdor "rebellious arm 'gainst arm" (1.2.56), yet in Act I, Scene 3, Macbeth is unaware that Cawdor joined Sweno's invasion. The bleeding sergeant in Act I, Scene 2 was initially a captain. Shakespeare demoted him in the text but not in the speech headings and stage directions. In Act III, Scene 6, a lord reports that Macbeth is exasperated by Macduff's flight to England, but in Act IV, Scene 1 Macbeth is shocked to learn of this development.

**Synopsis**

**Brief Synopsis**

The play opens with a thunderstorm. Three witches resolve to meet again that evening to speak with Macbeth, a leader of the Scottish forces confronting the rebellious Macdonwald and the invading Norwegians, led by Sweno. The scene then shifts to the camp of King Duncan, who learns of Macbeth's success and of the treachery of the thane (lord) of Cawdor. Duncan orders Cawdor's execution; that thane's title will be given to Macbeth.

On a heath, Macbeth and his fellow military leader, Banquo, meet the witches, who proclaim Macbeth Thane of Glamis, his present title; Thane of Cawdor, an honor he does not yet know is his; and Scotland's future king. To Banquo, they promise that his descendants will rule the country. As soon as they leave, Ross arrives to tell Macbeth he is now thane of Cawdor.

When Macbeth and Banquo rejoin Duncan, the king names his son Malcolm as his successor, thus raising an obstacle to Macbeth's royal aspirations. The king says he will spend the night at Macbeth's castle at Inverness. When Lady Macbeth learns from her husband's letter of the witches' prophecies and the imminent arrival of Duncan, she plots the king's murder. Macbeth initially refuses to kill Duncan, but Lady Macbeth persuades him to do so. The two make the crime appear to be the work of Duncan's chamberlains, whom Macbeth also kills. When Duncan's two sons flee, fearing for their lives, suspicion falls on them. Macbeth becomes king.

Fearing Banquo and hoping to thwart the witches' prediction that Banquo's heirs will reign, Macbeth hires men to kill Banquo and Banquo's son, Fleance. Banquo is murdered, but Fleance escapes. That night, Macbeth gives a feast at the palace. When he says he misses Banquo, Banquo's bloody ghost appears and disrupts the festivities. Macbeth resolves to revisit the witches to learn his fate.

The witches tell him to fear Macduff, but no one born of woman will harm Macbeth, whose reign is secure until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane. Discovering that Macduff has fled to England, Macbeth orders the execution of Macduff's family. In England, Macduff tries to persuade Malcolm to return and topple Macbeth. Malcolm at first demurs but then announces that he is preparing to invade Scotland with 10,000 English soldiers.

To disguise their numbers, the English cut boughs from Birnam Wood as they advance on Macbeth's castle at Dunsinane. Macbeth, preparing for a siege, learns that his wife has died, probably by her own hand. Hearing that Birnam Wood is coming to Dunsinane, Macbeth resolves to confront his enemies. In the battle, he encounters Macduff. Macbeth does not want to fight him, having spilled so much of Macduff's family's blood already. Macbeth warns Macduff that no man born of woman can harm him.
Macduff responds that he was born by cesarean section. Again, Macbeth wants to avoid combat, but Macduff offers the choice of surrender or battle. Macbeth chooses the latter. Offstage, Macduff kills Macbeth and cuts off his head. Malcolm is declared king of Scotland.

**Act I, Scene 1**

Amid thunder and lightning, Three Witches meet on a plain in Scotland. They have just concluded a witches' sabbath and discuss when they will gather again. The Second Witch says they will assemble at the conclusion of the battle, which will soon be over. They plan to reconvene that evening on the heath to meet with Macbeth. Hearing the call of their familiars (spirits who serve them), they depart.

**Act I, Scene 2**

A wounded Sergeant enters the camp of Duncan, the Scottish king. Duncan's older son, Malcolm, asks the soldier how the battle is proceeding. The Sergeant replies that Macbeth has killed the rebel Macdonwald and, together with Banquo, is valiantly fighting the Norwegian invaders led by Sweno. Ross arrives to report Sweno's defeat; the Norwegians are suing for peace. Duncan orders the execution of the traitorous thane of Cawdor, whose title and lands he will give to Macbeth.

**Act I, Scene 3**

The Three Witches unite on the heath. The First Witch declares her anger against a sailor's wife who refused to share chestnuts with her. All three agree to raise a storm to torment that woman's husband. Macbeth and Banquo enter. The First Witch greets Macbeth with his present title, thane of Glamis. The second hails him as thane of Cawdor, an honor he does not yet know he has. The last of the witches hails him as Scotland's future king.

Banquo asks about his future and is told that although he will not be a king, his descendants will rule the country. Macbeth wants to speak further with the witches, but they vanish. Ross and Angus appear to tell Macbeth that he is now thane of Cawdor. He asks Banquo whether this fulfillment of the witches' prophecy gives him hope his children will be kings. Banquo replies with the warning that the forces of evil sometimes reveal small truths to betray their victims with great lies. As Banquo speaks with Ross and Angus, Macbeth, in a soliloquy, ponders the witches' words. Eventually, Banquo recalls Macbeth from his reverie. The men set off to join Duncan; as the scene ends, Macbeth tells Banquo he wants to talk more about the prophecies.

**Act I, Scene 4**

At the king's palace at Forres, Malcolm and Duncan discuss Cawdor's execution. Macbeth, Banquo, Ross, and Angus join them. Duncan praises Macbeth, who replies that he has done only his duty. Duncan then declares Malcolm as successor to the throne. In a brief soliloquy, Macbeth ponders this impediment to the fulfillment of the witches' words. The king and his entourage set off to spend the night as Macbeth's guest.

**Act I, Scene 5**

At Macbeth's castle, Inverness, Lady Macbeth reads a letter from her husband informing her of his encounter with the witches. Lady Macbeth recognizes her spouse's ambition but fears he lacks the ruthlessness necessary to achieve his desires. When he arrives, she will goad him to gain the crown he wants. A messenger announces the imminent arrival of the king. When the man leaves, Lady Macbeth plots Duncan's death. She is joined by her husband. She tells him to give a hearty welcome to Duncan, who never will leave the castle alive.

**Act I, Scene 6**

Duncan, with his sons and attendants, reaches Inverness. Lady Macbeth receives him warmly.

**Act I, Scene 7**

That evening as everyone is feasting, Macbeth, alone, expresses reservations about killing Duncan. When Lady Macbeth joins
Act II, Scene 1

As Banquo and his son, Fleance, are preparing for bed, Macbeth enters. Banquo hands him a diamond from Duncan for Lady Macbeth, a token of the king's appreciation for her hospitality. Banquo and Macbeth talk about the witches; then Banquo and Fleance exit. Alone, Macbeth sees a dagger like the one he will soon use to murder Duncan. Even as he stares at this mind-forged weapon, it becomes covered with blood before it disappears. A bell rings, and Macbeth goes to kill the king.

Act II, Scene 2

Lady Macbeth awaits her husband in the inner court of the castle. He soon enters to report that he has done the deed. He adds that when the king's chamberlains awoke, frightened, and prayed, he could not say amen. He also has heard a voice saying he will never sleep again. She tells him to stop worrying and wash his bloodstained hands. Seeing that he is carrying the murder weapons, she instructs him to return the daggers to the chamberlains' room, since it must appear that these attendants committed the crime. Macbeth refuses to revisit the scene of the murder. Dismissing his weakness, Lady Macbeth takes the daggers back. In her absence, Macduff and Lennox begin knocking on the castle gate. Lady Macbeth returns to urge her husband to pretend to go to bed so no one will suspect they are awake. They exit to the sound of more knocking.

Act II, Scene 3

In the play's only comic scene, the drunken Porter imagines himself the keeper of the gate of hell. He responds to the sounds of knocking by welcoming an imaginary suicide, a liar, and a thief. At length, he recovers his senses enough to feel too cold to be in hell and admits Macduff and Lennox. Macbeth joins them. While Macduff goes off to wake Duncan, Lennox and Macbeth discuss the stormy night just past. Macduff reenters, horrified, to announce the king's murder. Macbeth and Lennox rush away to look, as Macduff orders the ringing of the castle's bell to rouse everyone. Lady Macbeth and Banquo are the first to appear. Soon, Macbeth, Lennox, Ross, and the king's two sons, Malcolm and Donalbain, all are standing in the inner court. Told of their father's death, the young men ask who committed the murder. Lennox replies that the chamberlains appear to be guilty. Macbeth says he has killed these attendants, thus arousing Macduff's suspicion. Macbeth tries to justify his action, but Lady Macbeth cuts short the discussion by fainting. The men agree to meet shortly in the hall to discuss what to do. Malcolm and Donalbain, fearing for their lives, decide to flee, Donalbain to Ireland, Malcolm to England.

Act II, Scene 4

Ross and an Old Man discuss recent bad weather and unnatural occurrences. When Macduff joins them, they speak of Duncan's recent murder, which appears to be the work of Malcolm and Donalbain, since they have so guiltily fled. Macduff says he will not attend Macbeth's coronation at Scone and worries about the new king's reign.

Act III, Scene 1

In the royal palace at Forres, Banquo, alone, reveals his suspicion that Macbeth killed Duncan to get the throne the witches promised. His musings are interrupted by the arrival of the new king and queen, who invite him to a feast that evening. Macbeth tries to learn where Banquo will be until then and whether Banquo's son, Fleance, will accompany him. Once everyone else leaves, Macbeth, in a soliloquy, expresses his fear of Banquo and declares his intention of thwarting the witches' prophecy that Banquo's heirs will reign in Scotland. To achieve his goal, Macbeth speaks with two poor men, whom he has convinced that Banquo is the cause of their misery. They agree to kill Banquo and Fleance.

Act III, Scene 2

Lady Macbeth summons her husband and asks him why he remains solitary and worried. He replies that danger lurks. She tells him that he should appear cheerful among his guests that night. He promises to do so and urges her to pay particular attention to Banquo, though Macbeth says he fears the man. To Lady Macbeth's observation that Banquo and Fleance are not immortal, he responds that they may soon die but offers no details.
Act III, Scene 3

In a grove near the palace, the two men engaged to kill Banquo and Fleance are surprised to be joined by an unidentified third person. As the Three Murderers talk, Banquo and Fleance approach. The men attack and kill Banquo, but Fleance escapes.

Act III, Scene 4

Back in the hall of the palace, Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, and their guests are about to enjoy a feast. Macbeth glimpses one of Banquo's murderers at the door and speaks to him. The murderer reports the death of Banquo and the flight of Fleance. Once the killer leaves, Lady Macbeth reminds her husband to give a welcoming toast, which he does. He adds that he misses Banquo. Ross invites Macbeth to sit, but the king finds no empty chair. When Lennox points to one, Macbeth starts back in horror because in it, he sees the bloody specter of Banquo.

Addressing this ghost, which is visible to Macbeth alone, the king denies responsibility for his murder. Lady Macbeth tries to explain her husband's reaction, which is as puzzling to her as to everyone else, telling the company to ignore him. In an aside to Macbeth, she urges him to regain his composure. He responds that he is acting bravely under the circumstances; she retorts that whatever appalls him is a figment of his imagination. While he tries to make her see the ghost, she attempts to convince him there is nothing to see.

The ghost departs. Macbeth glosses over his odd behavior and gives another toast to his guests and to Banquo, whose absence he regrets. His words once more conjure up the specter, which Macbeth again addresses. Lady Macbeth tries to cover for him. After the ghost leaves, Macbeth urges everyone to sit and eat, but he also expresses amazement that others can look calmly on such horror. Ross, who has witnessed no bloody vision, asks Macbeth to explain. To avoid any further disclosure, Lady Macbeth dismisses the guests. After the company departs, Macbeth tells his wife he intends to consult the witches. She replies that he needs sleep, and the two go off to bed.

Act III, Scene 5

On the heath, Hecate rebukes the Three Witches for trafficking with Macbeth. She instructs them to meet her the next morning at the pit of Acheron, where Macbeth will come to learn his fate. She will go to the Moon to secure a drop that will produce visions that will lead Macbeth to his doom.

Act III, Scene 6

Somewhere in Scotland, Lennox and an unnamed Lord meet. Lennox comments on the deaths of Duncan and Banquo and on Macduff's fall from Macbeth's favor. The Lord replies that Macduff is going to England to urge Malcolm to invade his homeland and topple Macbeth. The Lord adds that Macbeth, aware of Macduff's intentions, is preparing for war. Both men wish Macduff success.

Act IV, Scene 1

In a cave, the Three Witches prepare a brew. Hecate and three other witches join them; Hecate commends the witches' efforts. After a song and dance, Hecate leaves, and Macbeth enters. He orders the witches to answer his questions, but before he can speak, an armed head appears to warn him against Macduff. When this vision vanishes, a bloody child rises and declares that no one born of woman can harm Macbeth. This apparition is succeeded by a third, a crowned child holding a tree, who says that Macbeth will be safe until Birnam Wood moves to his castle at Dunsinane.

Reassured, Macbeth asks whether Banquo's children will rule Scotland. The witches try to dissuade him from learning the truth, but he insists. His answer comes in a vision of a procession of eight kings, the last of whom holds a mirror showing an unending parade of monarchs; Banquo appears and points at them as his descendants. To cheer Macbeth, the witches conjure up music and perform a dance before they vanish.

Lennox enters. Macbeth asks whether he saw the witches; Lennox has not. Lennox informs Macbeth of Macduff's flight to
Act IV, Scene 2

At Macduff’s castle in Fife, Lady Macduff asks Ross why her husband has abandoned his family. Ross urges patience and maintains that Macduff has acted wisely. Lady Macduff retorts that even a wren will remain in the nest to defend its young against predators. She attributes her husband's flight to fear. Ross again tries to pacify her.

After he leaves, Lady Macduff tells her son that his father is dead. The Boy refuses to believe her. As they talk, a messenger arrives to warn Lady Macduff to flee with her family. Before she can do so, murderers enter. Now, she says, she is glad her husband has escaped. Her son is killed, and she flees, pursued by the villains and is killed.

Act IV, Scene 3

In London, Macduff urges Malcolm to return to Scotland to depose Macbeth. Malcolm, suspecting Macduff to be in league with the tyrant, tests his visitor by claiming he would prove a ruler even worse than the present king. Despairing, Macduff prepares to leave; Malcolm now reassures Macduff of his fitness to rule. Malcolm intends to lead an invasion, and Old Siward has already assembled an army of 10,000 to assist.

As Malcolm and Macduff discuss the English king (Edward the Confessor), Ross joins them. Macduff asks about his family. Ross tries to avoid the subject and notes that rebellion is brewing in Scotland. He adds that Malcolm's presence would encourage Macbeth's opponents. Malcolm replies that he is coming with an English army. Ross then reveals the murder of Macduff's family. As Macduff grieves, Malcolm tells him that these deaths should strengthen his resolve to topple Macbeth, and Macduff vows to confront the tyrant.

Act V, Scene 1

At Macbeth's castle in Dunsinane, one of Lady Macbeth's ladies-in-waiting tells a doctor that her mistress has been sleepwalking. He is skeptical, but as they talk, Lady Macbeth appears with a candle. They watch her rub her hands as if washing them and overhear her speak about the deaths of Duncan, Lady Macduff, and Banquo. After Lady Macbeth departs, the Scots Doctor instructs the Gentlewoman to watch the queen carefully.

Act V, Scene 2

Near Dunsinane, Scottish forces opposing Macbeth await the arrival of the English army led by Malcolm, Old Siward, and Macduff. Caithness reports that Macbeth has fortified his castle to withstand a siege. The men march off to meet the English near Birnam Wood.

Act V, Scene 3

In his castle, Macbeth receives reports of desertions among his troops. Macbeth does not fear, however, because he recalls the witches' prophecies. When a servant announces the arrival of the English army, Macbeth calls for his armor. He asks the doctor about Lady Macbeth; the physician replies that her imagination troubles her. Cure her, the king instructs him, and then asks whether the doctor knows of any remedy for an afflicted mind. The doctor says that in such cases, the patient must cure himself. Macbeth now wonders whether the doctor can purge the English from Scotland. After Macbeth and his attendants leave, the doctor wishes he were far away from Dunsinane.

Act V, Scene 4

Near Birnam Wood, Malcolm orders the Scottish and English forces to camouflage their ranks by cutting down branches and carrying these in front of them.

Act V, Scene 5
As Macbeth prepares for a siege, he hears a scream. Seyton, Macbeth's armor-bearer, goes off to learn what has happened; he returns with the news that Lady Macbeth is dead. Macbeth delivers a soliloquy on life's meaninglessness.

A Messenger reports that as he looked toward Birnam Wood, he thought the grove was coming to Dunsinane. Macbeth begins to recognize that the witches gave him a false sense of security. He decides to confront the invaders rather than remain within the safety of his castle.

**Act V, Scene 6**

In front of Macbeth's castle, Malcolm sets forth the order of battle. The invaders discard their leafy camouflage and prepare to attack.

**Act V, Scene 7**

Amid the fighting, Macbeth encounters Young Siward and kills him in hand-to-hand combat. Macduff enters seeking Macbeth. After he leaves to continue his pursuit, Malcolm and Old Siward appear to report that Macbeth's forces have defected and surrendered the castle.

**Act V, Scene 8**

Macduff and Macbeth meet. Macbeth refuses to fight Macduff, having already shed so much of Macduff's family's blood. Macduff assails the king, who declares he cannot be harmed by anyone born of woman. Macduff informs Macbeth of his birth by cesarean section. Again, Macbeth refuses to fight; Macduff says the king must then surrender. Rather than yield, Macbeth resumes the battle, and they exit fighting.

**Act V, Scene 9**

The victorious English enter. Malcolm reports that Young Siward and Macduff are missing. Ross announces the death of the former. Macduff arrives, carrying Macbeth's severed head. All hail Malcolm as Scotland's king. Malcolm declares that Scotland's thanes will now be earls, and he promises to restore peace to the kingdom. The play ends with Malcolm inviting all to witness his coronation at Scone.

**Character List**

**Macbeth**  Military leader under King Duncan, whom he kills. Macbeth then becomes a tyrannical ruler.

**Lady Macbeth**  Macbeth's intelligent, ruthless, scheming wife.

**Duncan**  King of Scotland.

**Malcolm**  Duncan's older son, whom the king names as his successor. He eventually assumes the Scottish throne.

**Donalbain**  Duncan's younger son.

**Banquo**  Macbeth's fellow leader of the Scottish forces.

**Fleance**  Banquo's son.

**Macduff**  A powerful Scottish lord opposed to Macbeth. He allies himself with Malcolm.

**Lady Macduff**  Devoted wife to Macduff, killed by Macbeth's henchmen.

**Boy**  Clever, charming son of Macduff, killed by Macbeth's hired assassins.
Lennox  A Scottish aristocrat.

Ross  A Scottish aristocrat.

Angus  A Scottish nobleman.

Menteith  A Scottish nobleman.

Caithness  A Scottish aristocrat.

Old Siward  Earl of Northumberland, leader of the English forces that invade Scotland to depose Macbeth.

Young Siward  Old Siward's son, killed by Macbeth in the battle to depose the tyrant.

English Doctor  He serves in the court of Edward the Confessor.

Scots Doctor  He attends on Lady Macbeth.

Sergeant  Wounded in the battle against the rebels fighting Duncan's forces, he fought successfully to save Malcolm from being captured. He brings news of the fighting to the king.

Porter  A hard-drinking, witty servant of Macbeth.

Old Man  He converses with Ross in Act 2, Scene 4 and serves as a commentator on developments to that point in the play.

Three Murderers  Hired by Macbeth to kill Banquo and Fleance.

Three Witches  Ambiguous figures who foretell Macbeth's kingship and later enigmatically warn him of his doom. They also predict that Banquo's descendants will rule Scotland.

Hecate  Queen of the witches.

Further Information


Crane, R. S. *The Languages of Criticism and the Structure of Poetry*. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1953.


**Film and Video Productions**


