

## CHARACTERS

**DUNCAN**, King of Scotland

**MALCOLM**, Duncan's elder 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

**MACDUFF**, Thane of Fife  
Three **WITCHES**

## PLOT

On a lonely heath in Scotland, three witches sing their riddling runes and say that soon they will meet Macbeth. Macbeth is the noble thane of Glamis, recently victorious in a great battle against Vikings and Scottish rebels. For his brave deeds, King Duncan intends to confer upon him the lands of the rebellious thane of Cawdor. But before Macbeth sees the king, he and his friend Banquo meet the three weird witches upon the dark moor. The wild and frightful women greet Macbeth by first calling him thane of Glamis, then thane of Cawdor, and finally, King of Scotland. Too, they prophesy that Banquo's heirs will reign in Scotland in years to come.

When Macbeth tries to question the three hags, they vanish. Macbeth thinks very little about the strange prophecy until he meets one of Duncan's messengers, who tells him that he is now thane of Cawdor. This piece of news stuns Macbeth, and he turns to Banquo to confirm the witches' prophecy. But Banquo, who is more cautious, suspects the witches are evil enough to betray Macbeth by whetting his ambition and tricking him into fulfilling the prophecy. Macbeth does not heed Banquo's warning; the words of the witches as they call him king go deep into his soul. He ponders over the possibility of becoming a monarch; if he can be thane of Cawdor, perhaps he can rule all of Scotland as well. Macbeth shakes off his ambitious dreams to go with Banquo to greet Duncan.

Duncan is kind and majestic. Macbeth is fond of him, but when Duncan names his son Malcolm to succeed to the throne, Macbeth sees the boy as an obstacle on his own path, and he hardly dares to admit to himself how this impediment disturbs him. Duncan then announces that he will spend one night at Macbeth's castle. Lady Macbeth, who knows of the witches' prophecy through a letter from her husband, is even more ambitious than Macbeth, and she sees Duncan's visit as a perfect opportunity for Macbeth to murder Duncan and usurp the throne.

When Duncan arrives, there is much feasting in the castle. During the celebration, Lady Macbeth tells her husband of her plan for the king's murder. At first, Macbeth hesitates to do the deed, but on being accused of cowardice by his wife, Macbeth finally succumbs to her demands. While Duncan is asleep, Macbeth stabs him, despite his doubts and several supernatural portents, including a hallucination of a bloody dagger. He is so shaken that Lady Macbeth has to take charge.

The murder is blamed on two grooms whom Lady Macbeth smears with Duncan's blood while they drunkenly sleep. But the deed is hardly without suspicion in the castle, and when the murder is revealed, the dead king's sons flee-- Malcolm to England, Donalbain to Ireland. Macbeth is proclaimed king. But Macduff, a nobleman who had been Duncan's close friend, suspects Macbeth of the bloody killing.

Macbeth begins to have horrible dreams; his mind is never free from fear. Often he thinks of the witches' second prophecy, that Banquo's heirs will hold the throne, and the prediction torments him. Macbeth is so determined that Banquo will never share in his own hard-earned glory that he resolves to murder Banquo and his son, Fleance.

Lady Macbeth and her husband give a great banquet for the noble thanes of Scotland. At the same time, Macbeth sends murderers to waylay Banquo and his son before they can reach the palace. Banquo is slain in the scuffle, but Fleance escapes. Meanwhile in the large banquet hall Macbeth pretends great sorrow that Banquo is not present. But Banquo is present in spirit, and his ghost appears in Macbeth's own seat. 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 ill. 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.

Macbeth is so troubled that he is determined to seek solace from the witches on the dismal heath. They assure Macbeth that he will not be overcome by man born of woman, nor until the forest of Birnam comes to Dunsinane Hill. They warn him to beware of Macduff. When Macbeth asks if Banquo's children will reign over the kingdom, the witches reluctantly confirm the prophecy and disappear. However, their news mostly brings him cheer.

Macbeth feels he need fear no man, since all are born of women, and certainly the great Birnam forest cannot be moved by human power.

Macbeth hears that Macduff is gathering a hostile army in England, an army to be led by Malcolm, Duncan's son, who is determined to avenge his father's murder. Macbeth orders Macduff's castle be seized and sends murderers to slaughter Macduff and his family. Although Macduff is no longer in the castle, everyone in Macduff's castle is put to death, including Lady Macduff and their young son. After this slaughter, however, Macbeth is only more tormented by fear. Lady Macbeth's will also begins to break, as dark dreams of murder and violence increasingly drive her to madness.

On the eve of Macduff's attack on Macbeth's castle, Lady Macbeth kills herself, causing Macbeth to sink into a deep and pessimistic despair. Rallying, Macbeth summons his strength to meet his enemy. Meanwhile, Birnam Wood has moved, for Malcolm's soldiers are hidden behind cut green boughs to camouflage their numbers, which from a distance appear to be a moving forest. Macduff, enraged by the slaughter of his family, is determined to meet Macbeth in hand-to-hand conflict.

Macbeth goes to battle filled with the false courage given him by the witches' prophecy that no man born of woman will overthrow him. Meeting Macduff, Macbeth begins to fight, taunting Macduff about having been born of woman, but Macduff had been ripped alive from his mother's womb through Caesarean section. The prophecy is fulfilled, and Macbeth realizes too late that he has misinterpreted the witches' words. Though he understands that he is doomed, Macbeth continues to fight until Macduff kills and beheads him-- thus fulfilling the remaining prophecy. Malcolm, now the King of Scotland, declares his benevolent intentions for the country and invites all to see him crowned at Scone.

### MAJOR THEMATIC CONCERNS

#### Ambition

- If unchecked by moral constraints, ambition wreaks destruction. It both infects the body politic through its effects, and it destroys people from within.
- In compromising one's moral compass to achieve selfish goals, one creates both the rationale and imperative for future transgressions.
- In the play, this manifests in Macbeth and Lady Macbeth transforming from reluctant Machiavellians to sociopathic monsters.

#### Equivocation

- The witch's observation that "fair is foul, and foul is fair" echoes throughout the play.
- On a literal level, it suggests caution at accepting something that seems too good to be true at face value.
- On a personal level, it is suggestive of the lies we tell ourselves to excuse bad behavior-- such as how Macbeth uses the prophecy as an excuse to succumb to the temptation to commit evil.
- Upon first encountering the witches, Banquo observes that evil cloaks itself in a mantle of "honest trifles" while withholding the greater truth.

#### The Corrupting Power of Evil

- Evil begets further evil. Macbeth literally expresses this sentiment when he notes, "I am in

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

- Actions committed through evil *means* cannot end in good. Lady Macbeth tries to wash the blood off in vain, and neither Macbeth nor Lady Macbeth can sleep (i.e., achieve peace). Macbeth muses at several points in the play that his crimes have been for nothing-- both because his heirs will not benefit from them and the way that they have only brought him paranoia, isolation, and unhappiness.
- Thus, one cannot return to innocence once one chooses evil, as the stain of sin taints one's future actions proportional to the nature of the transgression.
- A Christian cultural framework suggests the possibility of redemption, but Macbeth is not willing to give up what he has gained-- instead choosing to embrace what he is becoming.

#### The Nature of Evil

- There is evil in the world, tempting us to compromise our moral values.
- At the same time, the true evil is within. One *chooses* to behave badly.
- Attempts to deny agency are lies and equivocations. One is always responsible for the moral choices one makes.