

MACBETH

AT THE MILL



STUDENT GUIDE 2018

INTRODUCTION

One of Shakespeare's shortest plays and his shortest tragedy by far, *Macbeth* presents the audience with a nightmarish vision of societal strife and psychological torment. It is perhaps his darkest work, the tale of how a man with a capacity for goodness becomes corrupt and then proceeds to spread corruption through the body politic of his kingdom. But it also a kind of anti-*Romeo and Juliet*, in which a love partnership is a poisonous, malevolent force and an exploration of politics that is endlessly relevant. While the various killings, swordfights and supernatural events make it a compelling visual experience, the most captivating moments of drama take place within the minds of the central characters. Macbeth's reign as king holds up a mirror to political systems throughout the world. In every country, individuals are constantly jockeying for positions, plotting against rivals and making ruthless decisions in order to advance themselves and Macbeth himself is the archetypal 'pure' politician who has no vision for the future of his kingdom: his sole aim is to gain and maintain power. **'I have no spur to prick the sides of my intent, only / Vaulting ambition'** (1.7.25-26) Like many real-life dictators, King Macbeth appears to be entirely preoccupied with clinging onto power and thwarting perceived enemies, but many moderate leaders have also been guilty of wishing to remain in power for the sake of it rather than in the interests of the people.

Though regicide is of course a rare and extraordinary occurrence, politicians everywhere will recognise something of their own experience in Macbeth's tortured musings on whether or when to proceed with the killing of Duncan, an act that will profoundly shape his future career. With the prophecy weighing on his mind, Macbeth has to decide whether to be content with his recent promotion and bide his time until other opportunities for further advancement become available, or risk everything by striking quickly. Like all politicians, the Macbeths recognise the vital importance of timing. **'I feel now the future in the instant,'** enthuses Lady Macbeth, who sees that they must seize the moment while Duncan is a guest in their castle, while Macbeth ponders the pace at which it will be possible to proceed with the murder plot: **'If it were done, when 'tis done, 'twere well / It were done quickly.'** Many contemporary politicians will attest to the importance to their careers of being at the right place in the right time, or making the right decision in pressurised circumstances.

Macbeth's medieval Scotland also presents the audience with a bloodier version of the ruthless world of all politics at local, national and international levels. While Macbeth's network of spies is reminiscent of the practices of totalitarian regimes of the 20th century, and of the state-sponsored hacking of emails in the present day, underhanded skulduggery is a feature of politics everywhere. Because the electorate can suddenly eject its sitting representatives at election times, and because politicians are typically

some of the most driven individuals in any society, politics itself can often be brutal and unforgiving. Public officials everywhere will be familiar with events in *Macbeth*: former friends and acolytes are double-crossed; alliances are created and then suddenly broken; those in high positions are unable, or unwilling, to challenge an erratic, unstable leader; the leader in turn becomes an increasingly paranoid and isolated figure; the concerns of the ruling individual, or party, override those of the people they represent.

While its exploration of politics is central, what perhaps makes *Macbeth* resonate with modern audiences more than anything else is its depiction of people driven to distraction by anxiety and regret. Though the Macbeths could hardly be considered ordinary people, many of their predicaments are not far removed from the experience of the audience. Here is a list of problems they face. He is presented with a golden opportunity and is then gripped with fears of the possible consequences; he is momentarily paralysed by guilt; he struggles to maintain his composure while lying; he is unsure whether he can trust a friend; he feels alone despite being surrounded by others; his mood swings from confident to despondent; she is exhilarated by the thought of achieving a long-held dream; despite getting what she thought she always wanted, she feels dissatisfied; she suffers from the pressure of having to maintain a façade in public; they both refuse to reveal their true feelings to the people closest to them. Do any of those seem familiar? For all the physical action on stage, it is the exploration of the psychological warfare taking place inside the heads of these characters that gives *Macbeth* its enduring power.

The real horror of this violent play is that which occupies the minds of Macbeth, Lady Macbeth (and Banquo), the thoughts that disturb their sleep or prevent them from sleeping at all. **'O full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife.'** (3.2.37) In the soliloquies and asides, we can see something of our own hopes, worries and regrets in the tortured thoughts of these extraordinary people. While few of us will ever be involved in national power struggles or in combat on a corpse-strewn battlefield, the type of inner turmoil experienced by these characters is a daily reality for many. In an era where stress-related illnesses take up an increasing amount of news headlines, Shakespeare's exploration of the deep-rooted, and often unspoken, suffering of the Macbeths feels especially timely.

Modern directors have been drawn to the psychological elements of the play. Trevor Nunn's 1976 production, set in a small, darkened circle at Stratford's intimate Other Place theatre, magnified the panicky, claustrophobic atmosphere of the play, while Justin Kurzel's 2016 adaptation made links between Macbeth's distressed state and what we now identify as the post-traumatic stress disorder commonly suffered by soldiers.



GEOFF O'KEEFFE

DIRECTOR'S NOTE

In its relative brevity, Shakespeare has fashioned a play that is packed with the most beautiful use of language: pithy, concise and so keenly observed. It is extraordinary play to perform. It moves towards its shocking ending with full force. It hurtles an audience through a dangerous and savage minefield of naked ambition, where the lust for power becomes the driving force in a couple, who for me, are desperately seeking to fill the huge gulf that has been left since the unexplained loss of their child. In doing this, Shakespeare allows us perhaps to empathise, to recognise and to understand that they were not always monsters.

Macbeth is a celebrated soldier who we must presume has clarity of thought, deadly precision and decisiveness when on the battlefield, yet becomes haunted by demons of the mind and spirals out of control, when the psychological scars of murder drive him beyond redemption. He is a multi-layered and complex character, both ferocious and fragile, dangerous and distraught. We bear witness to the disintegration of the Macbeths' relationship. Ambition, grief and madness rips them apart.

It's a huge privilege to come back to a script you have previously directed. It has been five years since I first worked on this play. Revisiting it means that perhaps there is more clarity in my vision. I have a deeper understanding of what is at stake in the play. I'm still very much attracted to the supernatural aspects of the play and we have found ourselves exploring the 'fizz of the underworld'. *Macbeth* is a scary play. It has been wonderful to explore this. Directing for the second time allows you to dig a little deeper to unlock the many layers. It also allows you to be braver.

That Shakespeare's work is ever enduring and ever relevant points clearly to his genius as a writer. His fusion of language and a visionary approach to characters that are full of complex psychologies, never fails to excite. But a play is meant to be performed. To experience its full richness, you need to take the words off the page. You need to find the jeopardy at the heart of the play. That has been our journey in the rehearsal room.

It is my hope that the production resonates with you. That it excites, provokes, scares and surprises. Directing for theatre is a collaborative process. I have been lucky to be surrounded by a creative team and company who focused their energies on bringing a unity to this production. There are many, many ways to present *Macbeth*. This is our way.



SET DESIGN

GERARD BOURKE

How important to a play is the set and what should a successful set do?

People often think “a play” is the book on their desk – it isn’t. A play is something that must be heard and seen by an audience to be more than just an idea by an author. So how the set looks is a hugely important element of any production. I find that a well-designed set, from the moment the lights go up, can lift your experience in the theatre onto an exciting level. Before the action even starts it can predispose the audience into accepting a particular view of the play, one they weren’t necessarily expecting, but one that is intriguing nonetheless. I always hope that it has literally “set” the action in a context that helps the audience make sense of all that happens. I think that is the point of a set. To help the play. To help the actors tell the story, to help the audience understand the story, and enjoy the story

Can you describe the set for this production of Macbeth?

It’s really important that the first thing you see is a strong image that sets out our vision for this particular production. In this case, the image is a stark charred blackened forest, as though there has been a terrible fire recently. It’s an almost abstract composition of distorted black forms. It is deliberately not realistic or literal in the way a TV or film set would be – no medieval castles or chambers. The idea was that we should not try to represent any particular place or time or era, but try to bring out the universal, timelessness of the play’s themes. So we have a timeless semi-abstract image, evoking a feeling of disorder, threat, and dark times.

How do you come up with your ideas for sets?

You could say I always start with the text. But it’s not a simple as that - because before there even was the text, there was, as Peter Brooke says, the impulse that led the author to write the text. So the designer’s first job then, like the director’s first job, is to start with the words, yes, but work back to that buried impulse; then to start working forward again. But, whereas the director works forward with the actors to finding the right actions to express the impulse clearly, the designer works forward towards finding the right images to express the author’s impulse. Obviously, it helps greatly if the director and the designer are working forward in the same direction. This has always seemed to be the case with Geoff and me.

Was there anything different about the process for this one? What influenced your design?

I’ve done a lot of Shakespeare with Geoff, and we have a sort of routine. I do a lot of visual research, looking for images that might encapsulate the essence of the play – the colours, shapes, symbols, the feeling of the play. Long before the play is even cast, we sit down over a coffee somewhere, and chat about our views of the play. Sometimes we play a game to see if we’re thinking along the same lines – “if the play were...”. If the play were an animal, what animal would it be? If it were a musical instrument? If it were a colour? If it were a shape? A texture? For me the joy of working with Shakespeare pieces like Macbeth is that they are like great piece of sculpture - so well made and so robust that no matter what viewpoint you try to take of them, no matter where you

stand, they will always look interesting. The ideas, and the characters and actions that embody them, stand up to all sorts of scrutiny. For the director or designer, I don't think there are any right or wrong views of the play so long as they are supported by the text.

What was your intention with this set?

Mainly to evoke a dark threatening world, with lots of lurking spaces. "Something wicked this way comes." From a practical point of view, I wanted as many levels as possible raised up off the floor for the actors to use - so that someone could feel they were being spied on from anywhere, could be pounced on from anywhere. A ramp, disguised as sloping rocks, gives an infinite number of levels on the stage right; two platforms hidden by tree trunks give high acting spaces on stage left. The black tree trunks and burnt branches create screens and skulking places, perfect for harbouring evil forces or assassins. To achieve the sense of some scenes taking place indoors, we rely on a change in the lighting and on the placing of indoor furniture to suggest a banqueting hall, or a royal chamber. By focusing on the miniature castle before an indoor scene, we prepare the audience for this transition, inviting them into the room they see in the model.

What kind of atmosphere are you trying to create with this set?

Something slightly off-kilter, suggesting "Fair is foul, and foul is fair, hover through fog and filthy air.", using rolling fog, sharp angles and tilting structures to suggest things are not so stable in the Macbeths' world. I wanted to create a setting that was dark and ravaged - "Stars, hide your fires; Let not light see my black and deep desires." Also by using the height and scale of the charred trees, towering over the characters, I hoped to create an atmosphere of forces bigger than the Macbeths at work, that they cannot rule or control - "Confusion now hath made his masterpiece" "Double, double, toil and trouble; Fire burn..." The idea of having the witches manipulate a miniature model of the castle emphasises the scale of their powers over the puny Macbeths.

Are you making any changes with this production?

While it is the same director working with the same creative team as last time, the design is very different. We have the same sense of the immediate aftermath of a war, but last time we set it in the ruins of a palace - a man-made structure that needed restoration following the triumph of legitimate order in the land. But this time it is the whole land that is ravaged and in need of restitution. There is less refuge, more danger.

What is the most enjoyable aspect of set design, for you?

I love the discovery - researching, discovering things I hadn't noticed before even in familiar texts; exploring the model and when for example I accidentally knock over bits of cardboard and I find I've got great new shapes and spaces. But the biggest thrill of all must be seeing the set actually built, standing there twenty-five times bigger than the model box, lit in all sorts of exciting ways, transforming from one scene to another magically. And of course finally seeing the actors on it, using the spaces and the levels and the structures in all sorts of ways to enhance their performance. It's amazing when something that was once just imaginings in your head becomes a physical reality, and yet everything that happens on it afterwards is still just an illusion, a wonderful play

THE WORLD OF MACBETH

The Scotland of *Macbeth* is a kingdom in turmoil, its people suffering intensely under the bloodthirsty rule of a usurper king. But even before *Macbeth* becomes king, there is evidence that this is a harsh and unforgiving world. It is a culture in which martial courage is glorified above everything else, where a man's character is measured by fierceness in face to face combat. '**Brave Macbeth,**' reports the blood-soaked captain, '**carved out his passage**' through the masses of rebel soldiers before confronting MacDonwald and then,

**'...unseamed him from the nave to the chops
And fixed his head upon our battlements.'** (1.2.23-24)

On hearing of his son's death at the hands of Macbeth, Old Siward's main concern is that he had '**his hurts before**' – on the front of his body – and thus died a glorious death, facing his foe, while Lady Macbeth scolds her husband for his lack of resolution by questioning this most essential part of his character:

**'When you durst do it, then you were a man;
And to be much more than what you were, you would
Be so much more the man.'** (1.7.49-51)

Macbeth uses a similar method to Lady Macbeth when persuading the 'murderers' to kill Banquo to prove that they are true men - '**Now if you have a station in the file / Not i' th' worst rank of manhood, say't**' – and when Macduff learns that Macbeth has had his family killed, Malcolm urges him to fight against his feelings of distress in warrior fashion and replace his sorrow with vengeful fury. '**Dispute it like a man**', he says,

**'let grief
Convert to anger; blunt not the heart,
enrage it'.** (4.6.228-230)

In an environment where masculinity is associated with fortitude and bravery, it is little wonder that in seeking to strengthen her resolve, Lady Macbeth calls on the evil spirits to divest her of the so-called 'feminine' qualities of kindness and nurturing:

**'unsex me here,
And fill me from the crown to toe top-full
Of direst cruelty.'** (1.5.40-42)



There is a series of deceitful, treacherous actions in the play, beginning with the Thane of Cawdor's decision to rebel against Duncan, which appears to shock the king:

**'He was a gentleman on whom I built
An absolute trust.'** (1.4.13-14)

This is followed by the Macbeths' warm welcoming of Duncan to their castle prior to his assassination, and the killing of Banquo, who Macbeth invites to the banquet as the 'chief guest'. Later in the play, Malcolm is so wary of Macbeth's trickery that he subjects Macduff to a loyalty test to see whether he can truly trust him. Under the rule of a paranoid tyrant, Scotland becomes a vicious surveillance state, a 'suffering country under a hand accursed' (Lennox, 3.6.48). Macbeth plants spies in the household of every thane and enacts swift retribution on anyone suspected of disloyalty:

**'Alas, poor country!
Almost afraid to know itself...
Where sighs, and groans, and shrieks that rent the air,
Are made not marked.'** (Ross, 4.3.166-172)

At this time, monarchs were widely considered to be living symbols of their own kingdoms, and the fearful atmosphere Macbeth creates mirrors his own tortured psyche. The feelings of dark anxiety that overwhelm Macbeth (**'I am cabined, cribb'd, confined, bound in to saucy doubts and fears.'** 3.4.24-25) begin to consume his subjects. Like the king himself, the people are sleepless with dread and uncertainty. The unnamed lord in 3.6, hopes that with the help of the English army,

**'we may again
Give to our tables meat, sleep to our nights,
Free from our feats and banquets bloody knives,'** (3.6.33-35).

The victory of the rebel forces over Macbeth appears to herald better times ahead for Scotland as Malcolm has shown himself to be a shrewd tactician who is unlikely to be as naively trustworthy as his father, Duncan. However, his decision to change the title of 'thane' to the English 'earl' is an indication that he intends to formally align Scotland to the southern neighbours who were instrumental in the ousting of Macbeth. Macduff expresses mixed feelings about having to attack his countrymen with the assistance of Scotland's greatest enemy,

**'Such welcome and unwelcome things at once
'Tis hard to reconcile.'** (4.3.138-139)

In this world of barbarity, duplicity and hard-headed pragmatism, there is little sense of undiluted goodness except perhaps in Act 4, scene 2, where Lady Macduff and her son have a witty and affectionate conversation prior to their savage and entirely unwarranted deaths. In her defence, Lady Macduff claims she has **'done no harm'** but she recognises that honesty and virtue are worthless in Macbeth's twisted kingdom.

**'I am in this earthly world, where to do harm
Is often laudable, to do good sometime
Accounted dangerous folly.'** (4.2.73-75)

The play ends with the new king Malcolm's vision of a kingdom where a sense of equilibrium has been restored with friends rewarded and enemies punished but it is hard to believe that this harsh place, so prone to instability, will enjoy a smooth transition to peaceful times.



CHARACTERS

MACBETH

In the final scene of the play, Malcolm describes the freshly-decapitated Macbeth as a **'dead butcher'**. It is a brutal assessment of his life and one with which many of the gathered thanes would agree. Macbeth is an illegitimate usurper of the throne, **'an untitled tyrant, bloody-sceptred'** (Macduff, 4.3.105), a universally despised figure who can only command through fear (**'none serve with him but constrained things, / Whose hearts are absent too'** (Malcolm, 5.4.13-14), a ruthless dictator who uses a network of spies to control his kingdom.

Beyond these observations, there is also plenty of first-hand evidence of Macbeth's cruelty and deceitfulness. He assassinates the sleeping Duncan and successfully lays the blame on Duncan's sons, Malcolm and Donalbain; he orders the secret killing of his friend and confidante Banquo; and finally, and most unforgivably, he has Macduff's wife and children put to the sword.

'Not in the legions

Of horrid hell can come a devil more damned

In evils, to top Macbeth.' (Malcolm, 4.3.55-57)

Yet despite this catalogue of vicious and duplicitous actions, Macbeth is far from the monstrous psychopath of Malcolm's description. At the beginning of the play, he is lauded as the captain who fights with tremendous courage in leading Duncan's forces to victory over MacDonwald and the treacherous thane of Cawdor. We also see his devotion to his wife, Lady Macbeth, whom he sees as an equal: **'my dearest partner of greatness'** (1.5.11).

But the key factor in our understanding of Macbeth as a complex human being is provided by his soliloquies. These interior monologues afford the audience a perspective on him that is denied to all of the other characters as they reveal his genuine feelings, and the extent of his hopes and fears. Despite the long list of his atrocities, it is through the soliloquies that we see a sensitive and often nerve-wracked human being, shaken by pressures internal and external. By the end of the play, we feel as though we know him better than even his wife, from whom he appears to become increasingly detached.

An aside in his first scene reveals his ambivalent reaction to the witches' prophecy that he shall be king:

'This supernatural soliciting

Cannot be ill, cannot be good.' (1.3.130-131)

We learn that he has harboured the ambition of succeeding Duncan, even by foul means, but that the idea of assassinating the king horrifies him:

'why do I yield to that suggestion,....' (1.3.135-137)

Though he is an indomitable soldier on the battlefield, this aside suggests that Macbeth fully realises the gravity of regicide and also that he is peculiarly sensitive to the products of his own imagination. **'Present fears,'** he observes, **'are less than horrible imaginings.'** (1.3.137-38).

This preoccupation with the possible consequences of his actions dominates his soliloquy in 1.7, when he appears to conclude that the

virtuous king does not deserve to be assassinated - **‘this Duncan / Hath borne his faculties so meek, hath been / So clear in his great office’**(1.7.16-18) – and that such an act would result in a deep disturbance in heaven – **‘heaven’s cherubim...shall blow the horrid deed in every eye’** (1.7.22-24) He also admits that his reason for wishing to become king is to satisfy his **‘vaulting ambition’** (1.7.28): he is motivated by an form of empty self-gratification. This is a reasonable, and self-aware, character who is wisely wary of killing Duncan.

When he returns from Duncan’s chamber following the assassination, he is in a deeply disturbed state, obsessed with what he has seen and heard in the chamber. He proceeds to express feelings of deep remorse and feels certain that the horror of his action will never leave him:

**‘Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? (2.2.57-60)**

From this point on, the newly-elected Macbeth’s sense of horror and regret appears to curdle into an extreme paranoia, beginning with his worries about the prophecy that Banquo’s heirs will become kings, then his suspicion of Macduff and finally his inability to trust virtually anyone in his entire kingdom. Apparently suffering from insomnia, he is so plagued by fears that self-preservation becomes his sole concern.

The ambivalence and careful self-analysis that characterised the early soliloquies is replaced by a fatalistic certainty that he can only proceed in one deadly direction from now on:

**‘I am in blood
Stepped in so far, that should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o’er.’ (3.4.136-138)**

At this point in the play, the ‘butcher’ Macbeth is in the ascendant, and in the final act we see a king who berates, and threatens with hanging, servants who bring him unwelcome news. On hearing of Lady Macbeth’s death, his meditations on life in his final soliloquy are informed by his isolated state as a friendless usurper, wracked by fears and doubts:

**‘Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more.’ (5.5.24-26)**

His hopes now depend entirely on the misleading prophecies of the witches and the apparitions and it is only when he is staring defeat in the face that we see a glimmer of the tenacious warrior of old.

**‘Ring the alarum bell! Blow wind, come wrack,
At least we’ll die with harness on our back.’ (5.5.51-52)**

At this point in the play, we finally see the soldier Macbeth in his true element, fighting in hand-to-hand combat with Young Siward and then with Macduff. Though he knows that the odds are stacked against him, he refuses to contemplate suicide or surrender and instead chooses to fight to the end.

**Yet I will fight to the last. Before my body
I throw my warlike shield. Lay on, Macduff.’ (5.8.33-34)**

Malcolm and Macduff successfully purge Scotland of the tyrant king but the audience are left with an impression of Macbeth as a flawed but complex human being who at least had the potential to be good.



LADY MACBETH

Few figures in Shakespeare are as instantly compelling as Lady Macbeth, a character who at first appears so unabashedly and almost gleefully evil. Though she eventually descends into a pathetic state of madness, for much of the play she seems extravagantly cruel, controlling and deceitful, very much the **'fiend-like queen'** Malcolm describes in the final scene. Beneath the harsh exterior however, it is possible to detect evidence of a vulnerable human being who, like her husband, is suffering from enormous pressure. It becomes apparent that much of Lady Macbeth's strength is derived from her partnership with Macbeth and from her power as a performer. Her first words in the play, a response to Macbeth's letter, are a simple expression of utter certainty:

**'Glamis thou art, and Cawdor, and shalt be /
What thou art promised;'** (1.5.15-16)

Like her husband, when she learns of the witches' prophecy, her thoughts immediately turn to murder. But while Macbeth is disturbed by the thought of assassinating Duncan (**'why do I yield to that suggestion, / Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair'** 1.3.134-135), Lady Macbeth is excited by the prospect and begins to calculate how she will ensure Macbeth will actually kill the king. She worries that Macbeth is insufficiently cruel, as in her view, 'kindness' is not a virtue but an obstacle that will stop them from achieving their goals.

**'yet do I fear thy nature, / It is too full o' th' milk of human
kindness/ To catch the nearest way.'** (1.5.16)

She believes it will be necessary to practise deceit (**'play falsely'**) and to literally 'be evil' to achieve their goals – **'Thou wouldst be great, / Art not without ambition, but without / The illness should attend it,'** (1.5.18-20) and she instructs Macbeth to hide his murderous intentions behind smiles when Duncan arrives at their castle – **'look like th'innocent / flower, / But be the serpent under't.'** (1.5.64-65).

After Macbeth expresses his doubts about the murder plot, Lady Macbeth skilfully attacks his weak points by questioning his love for her – her claim that she would go through with a promise to break open a baby's head is shocking – but it is perhaps her absolute conviction that her plan will be a success that persuades Macbeth to change his mind again:

**'We fail? /But screw your courage to the sticking-place/
And we'll not fail.'** (1.7.59-61)

There is further evidence of her iron will in later scenes. When Macbeth returns from killing Duncan in a state of dazed anguish, she dismisses his regrets – **'A foolish thought to say a sorry sight'** (2.2.19) – and is brutally practical. Instructing him not to think about the deed, she returns the daggers to Duncan's chamber herself, and orders her husband to wash his hands.

'A little water clears us of this deed/ How easy it is then!'
(2.2.65-66)

When Macbeth begins to show signs of mental instability, in the above scene and at the banquet, it is Lady Macbeth who attempts to control the situation by pretending to faint and by criticising her husband.

But this is no pantomime villain. Like Macbeth, Lady Macbeth's sense of achievement at gaining the throne is marred by feelings of discontent, but she reaches a point of fatalistic hopelessness much more quickly than her husband. While Macbeth is preoccupied with eliminating potential rivals, she appears to have given up on ever achieving peace of mind. **'Nought's had, all's spent, / When our desire is got without content'** (3.2.6-7) she privately laments and in her infrequent appearances in later parts of the play, her chief concern is her husband's welfare as the insomniac king's behaviour becomes increasingly erratic. **'You lack the season of all natures, sleep'** (3.4.141) she advises Macbeth, an observation she could probably apply to herself. There is also a suggestion that she is lonely and suffering from a decline in Macbeth's spousal attention.

'How now, my lord? Why do you keep alone' (3.2.8)

From this point, Lady Macbeth begins to drift towards the margins of the story. Though she does intervene to make excuses for her husband's wild behaviour at the feast, it is notable that Macbeth plots the death of Banquo and orders the killing of Lady Macduff and her family without seeking any assistance from his wife.

But what is it that finally drives her mad? Her obsessive hand-washing and unconscious confessions suggest that her illness may be linked to a struggle to suppress the memory of seeing the murdered Duncan in the chamber.

'Yet/ who would have thought the old man to have had/ so much blood in him?' (5.1.38-40)

Behind Lady Macbeth's extreme motivational rhetoric and sometimes savagely violent language is a character who is just as terrified by the magnitude of regicide as her husband, but who is infinitely more skilled at hiding her true feelings. But maintaining that rigid façade creates the pressure that eventually overwhelms her.

There is a certain pathos in witnessing this strong woman being reduced to a state of abject misery but there are moments in earlier parts of the play where traces of this fragility are evident. The soliloquy in Act 1, scene 5, in which she appeals to evil spirits to divest her of tender feelings and replace them with dissembling viciousness - **'fill me from the crown to the toe top-full / Of direst cruelty'** (1.5.42-43) – is sometimes used as a supreme example of Lady Macbeth's evil, as she affiliates herself with the **'murd'ring ministers'** of hell. But the fact that she feels the need to appeal to external elements to harden her resolve suggests that she is not as self-assured as she initially appears. There are more examples of her hidden humanity in Act 2, scene 2. While she awaits her husband's return from Duncan's chamber, she reveals that she has drunk alcohol to give her courage, and that she would have killed Duncan herself had he not reminded her of her father. She is also momentarily wracked by fears and doubts.

'Alack, I am afraid they have awaked, / And 'tis not done. Th'attempt and not the deed/ Confounds us.'
(1.5.10-12)

This sounds nothing like the calculating figure of previous scenes and it suggests that her domineering persona is a performance she uses to motivate and protect her hesitant and sometimes unstable husband, rather than a reflection of her true self.

BANQUO

Because he is murdered on the orders of his former friend, it can be tempting to see Banquo as another innocent victim whose principal function is to illustrate Macbeth's obsessive ruthlessness. But he is strikingly different from other casualties like Duncan and Lady Macduff. This is a character who knows Macbeth well and whose experience closely parallels that of the main protagonist. Banquo helps Macbeth lead Duncan's forces to victory over the rebels and he too is hailed by the witches with a prophecy for his future; he also has private conversations with Macbeth and is aware of his nervous, highly emotional side. The fact that he is privy to so much information leaves him in a good position to have a major influence on events once Duncan is assassinated. The fact that he ultimately does so little is one of the most intriguing aspects of the play. There is a pronounced difference between the public and private sides of Banquo. He initially seems to be a level-headed and forthrightly virtuous character. When they meet the witches, he claims to be sceptical of the sisters and questions their motives:



**'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)**

But, as is the case with Macbeth, the encounter has a disturbing impact on him. In Act 2, scene 1, he prays for divine assistance to drive away the nightmares that plague him – **'Merciful powers, / Restrain in me the cursed thoughts that nature / Gives way to in repose.'** (2.1.8-10)

There is evidence of further contradictions following the assassination of Duncan, when he appears to take control of the situation, demanding a proper investigation into the murder. **'Let us meet / And question this most bloody piece of work, / To know it further,'** (2.3.123-124) he says to the gathered thanes, taking the opportunity to promote himself as a loyal follower of Duncan, fighting for justice for the dead king: **'Against the undivulged pretence I fight / Of treasonous malice.'** (2.3.126-127)

But we are shown nothing of the investigation itself and in the following scene, it is revealed that the blame for the deed has been placed on Duncan's absent sons, Malcolm and Donalbain. Though we learn from his soliloquy in Act 3, scene 1 that he suspects Macbeth killed Duncan – **'I fear / Thou play'st most foully for't,'** (3.1.1-3) – Banquo makes no official accusation, perhaps because he does not wish to disturb the course of the prophecies that are set to bring glory to his descendants. As he reasons in the same scene, if the prophecies regarding Macbeth's upwardly mobile status have come true, why shouldn't those that relate to his family?

**'Why by the verities on thee made good/ May they not be my oracles as well, /
And set me up in hope?'** (3.1.8-10)

Had there been a thorough investigation, how might Macbeth have fared? Banquo could have offered as evidence against him Macbeth's spellbound reaction to the witches' prophecies, his sudden killing of Duncan's grooms, and his overwrought behaviour in the castle once the thanes had discovered Duncan's body.

In Act 1, scene 3, after he has been informed of his new title, Thane of Cawdor, Macbeth briefly considers allowing fate take its course – **'If chance will have me King, why chance / May crown me / Without my stir.'** (1.3.141-143) – and this is the approach Banquo takes. Though he claims to be loyal and irreproachably honest – Banquo's decision to withhold vital information relating to Macbeth shows him to be a pragmatic individual, with an eye on long-term personal goals, a character who is content to watch events unfold from a distance.

This approach enables Macbeth to quickly assume power as the new king of Scotland and then to abuse that position, and it is perhaps unsurprising that Banquo himself should pay a heavy price for compromising his principles and putting his own desires before the good of the kingdom.

THE WITCHES

With their spells, incantations and ability to vanish, the witches are relics from a world where science was in its infancy and where the unknown was a cause for fear rather than enquiry. As a result, they can appear anachronistic and even ridiculous. But they play a key role as the **'juggling fiends...that palter with us in a double sense'** (5.8.19-20), providing Macbeth with supernatural justification for pursuing his path of destruction. They also serve as incarnations of evil, personifications of the darkness that pervades the play.

In the twelve incantatory lines of the opening moment of the play, the sisters arrange to meet again once the battle between Duncan's army and the rebel forces is over. This short scene suggests that they can predict the future, that they can influence the weather (they ask whether they will meet **'In thunder, lightning, or in rain?'**) that they are aligned with creatures traditionally associated with evil ('Greymalkin' the cat, 'Paddock' the poisonous toad) and that they are agents of chaos and confusion (**'Fair is foul, and foul is fair; / Hover through the fog and filthy air.'** 1.1.11-12).

These ideas are reinforced at the start of 1.3, when the witches relate how they exacted an extreme form of revenge on a sailor's wife (for refusing to share her chestnuts) by drowning her husband. We learn that the witches are able to change shape – the first witch tells of how she sailed in a sieve – and to control the elements so that the sailor's ship was storm-tossed for over sixty days. Both scenes clearly indicate that the witches are powerful but vindictive creatures who are utterly devoid of humanity.

There is further evidence of the witches' unnatural and anarchic behaviour in Act 4, scene 1, when they fill their cauldron with a hideous concoction of human and animal body parts and entrails – **'Like a hell-broth, boil and bubble.'** (4.1.19). The sick confusion of this mixture is an apt symbol for the inversion of the natural order of law under Macbeth, **'where to do harm / Is often laudable, to do good sometime / Accounted dangerous folly.'** (Lady Macduff, 4.2.72-74)

When they first encounter Macbeth, the witches' words act as a catalyst that sets Macbeth on the course of regicide. When the sisters hail Macbeth and Banquo with greetings that prophesise their future states, they articulate Macbeth's hitherto hidden thoughts. This would explain his spellbound reaction (**'Good sir,'** asks Banquo, **'why do you start, and seem to fear / Things that do sound so fair?'** 1.3.51-52) and his desperation to know more. (**'Stay you imperfect speakers, tell me more.'** 1.3.70).

When they next appear, in Act 4, scene 1, it is Macbeth who actively seeks them out to provide him with further prophecies. This is the moment where Macbeth, hailing the witches as **'secret, black and midnight hags'** (4.1.48), explicitly links himself to evil. His demand that they reveal his fortune even at the expense of the world and of the human race – **'though the treasure / Of nature's germens tumble all together, / Even till destruction sicken'** (4.1.59-60) – shows that he is now entirely dependent on their words, even though he realises that their motives are ultimately malign:

Banquo is also infected by the witches' words, tormented by **'cursed thoughts'** that are probably related to the prophecies and wonders whether he, like Macbeth, will be rewarded.

The witches suddenly disappear after both of their meetings with Macbeth, vanishing **'into the air; and what seem'd corporal melted / As breath into the wind'** (Macbeth, 1.3.81-82). These are fitting exits as they are unreliable creatures whose words, like their own bodies it appears, are hollow and lacking in substance. Elusive, impalpable and perhaps indestructible, the nameless witches are enduring embodiments of the worst aspects of human nature. They are a reminder of the essential mystery of evil.



KINGSHIP

Many of Shakespeare's plays are at least partly concerned with the manner in which kings govern their lands. This was an issue of immense importance at a time when so many aspects of the lives of ordinary people depended on the character of the head of state and Malcolm's list of the qualities expected in a monarch - '**the king-becoming graces**' such as '**justice, temp'rance, stableness, bounty, perseverance, mercy...**' - would have been familiar to many audience members in 1606. In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare presents us with four kings - Duncan, Macbeth, Malcolm and England's King Edward - and invites us to compare them as rulers.

Though the monarch in the Scotland of *Macbeth* is usually elected by the thanes, he is an autocrat with the power to make immense changes in the kingdom. According to Macbeth, Duncan has been an exemplary king, free of corruption and popular with the people. But in spite of this, Scotland is plagued by civil war at the start of the play and Duncan freely admits to having been entirely deceived by the Thane of Cawdor's seemingly virtuous manner. '**He was a gentleman on whom / I built an absolute trust,**' (1.4.14-15) he says of the rebel thane though he acknowledges that it is impossible to judge a person's character from their appearance:

'There's no art / To find the mind's construction in the face.' (1.4.12-13)

While there is obvious truth in this statement, it also signals a possible naivety in Duncan as he repeats the very same mistake in promoting to the vacant role of Thane of Cawdor, the man who will shortly murder him. He is perhaps also foolish to decide to bypass the traditional election of his successor and instead name his son Malcolm as the future king. While he probably does this to prevent future rivalry, in an elective system such a decision is sure to breed enmity among the thanes.

Malcolm quickly learns from the mistakes of his father. Fearing that he and Donalbain will be chief suspects for the murder of Duncan, he flees Scotland for England. He is extremely cautious and unwilling to trust anyone. Subjecting Macduff to a loyalty test in Act 4, scene 6, in order to ascertain whether or not he is in league with Macbeth, Malcolm pretends to be a worse candidate for the throne than the current incumbent. When he is fully convinced that Macduff is not an agent of the enemy, Malcolm pledges to join him in the fight to free Scotland from tyranny. He has learned that neither words nor appearances can be fully trusted and that a deeper investigation of the loyalties of individual thanes is required before he can put his faith in them.

There are some indications that Malcolm's rule will be very different from that of his two predecessors. In a final speech, he condemns Macbeth and Lady Macbeth as monsters and though, like his father, he promises that his supporters will be rewarded and his enemies punished, his decision to re-name the thanes with the English name 'earls' indicates a new strategy for improved rule. While the patriotic Macduff has mixed feelings about Scotland requesting help from the traditional enemy south of the border in ousting a Scottish king, Malcolm has no such qualms. He heaps praise on King Edward and the English general Siward and his decision to anglicise the ruling class may be a deliberate ploy to align Scotland more closely to England. Mindful of the volatile state of his kingdom, Malcolm perhaps feels a need to recognise his larger neighbour's role in defeating Macbeth. He is also aware that he may need more outside assistance at a later date. This is a shrewdly pragmatic king who is unlikely to make the same mistakes as his father.

In a play almost entirely composed of short and increasingly manic scenes, Act 4, scene 3 stands out as being utterly different in terms of pace and atmosphere. We are no longer in the jagged, nightmare world of Macbeth's Scotland, but in relatively peaceful England. This long scene transports us from hellish Scotland and inserts a pause in which Malcolm reflects on King Edward's rule. Unlike Macbeth, who is frequently described as a poison or a sickness in the body of Scotland, Edward is a miracle worker whose touch can cure scrofula and

Malcolm describes him in terms of a saint. '**Sundry blessings hang about his throne, / That speak him full of grace.**' (4.3.158-159) in this depiction of Edward, we come closest to the idea of a king being God's representative on Earth, the divinely-chosen protector of his people.

Macbeth himself is the anti-Edward, the illegitimate usurper whose presence on the throne is like an infection in the body politic of Scotland. While Edward cures, Macbeth makes his subjects sick with fear and doubts or kills them outright. In Act 5, scene 2, Caithness describes the rebel forces as pouring their medicinal blood into battle to purge the '**sickly weal**' of the diseased country. Because he seized the crown in unnatural circumstances, much is made of Macbeth's unsuitability for the role. The crown is on his head is '**like a giant's robe / Upon a dwarfish thief**' (5.2.21-22) and the fact that one of his few remaining servants is punningly named 'Seyton' acts as a direct contrast to the Christ-like Edward.

As in many of Shakespeare's plays, once an unauthorised figure seizes power, chaos ensues, while the maintenance of the status quo, as endorsed by God, ensures stability.

IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM IN MACBETH

DARKNESS

In 1606, when rooms could not be instantly brightened by electric light, but only dully illuminated by candles, fear of the dark was of a different order than what we are used to today. Shakespeare uses darkness and inclement weather to create a threatening atmosphere and to suggest the disturbed mood of war-torn Scotland. The weather, as described by various characters, is alternately murky or pitch-black. The opaque mists that hang over the landscape, the ‘fog and filthy air’ the witches mention, suggest ambiguity and confusion, and hint at the importance of concealment in the play.

The Macbeths themselves actively court darkness. On the night he kills Duncan, the skies appear to answer Macbeth’s request for a starless blanket so he can conceal his murderous intentions – ‘**Stars hide your fires, / Let not light see my black and deep desires.**’ (1.4.50-51) – and he later calls on the night to cover up kind daylight and thus cloak the murder of Banquo and Fleance: ‘**Come seeling night, / Scarf up the tender eye of pitiful day.**’ Lady Macbeth also pleads for the aid of darkness so that she and her husband can carry out their murder plot. ‘**Come thick night, / And pall thee in the dunnest smoke of hell, / That my keen knife sees not the wound it makes.**’ (1.5.49-52)

Her willingness to invoke the darkness forms part of Lady Macbeth’s ultimate destruction when she retreats into a state of sleepwalking madness and must have candlelight with her at all times. ‘**Hell is murky**’ (5.1.35) she realises. By pursuing and welcoming darkness, Lady Macbeth and her husband unleash forces they are unable to control and which ultimately overwhelm them. As she learns later on in the play, but too late to save her from torment, ‘**What’s done cannot be undone.**’ (5.1.68)

It is no coincidence that the night of Duncan’s murder should be accompanied by disturbances in nature. Lennox’s description of ‘**an unruly night**’ of tremendous storms would have made sense to an audience who believed that a monarch was God’s representative on earth:

‘our chimneys were blown down, and as they say, /
Lamentings heard i’th’air, strange screams of death,
And prophesying with accents terrible,
Of dire combustion, and confused events,
New hatched to the woeful time.’ (2.3.54-57)

And the strange darkness that cloaks Scotland the following morning is, for Ross, a clear indicator of the impact of this ‘**most sacrilegious murder**’ on the heavens themselves:

‘by the clock ‘tis day,
And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp...
...darkness doth the face of earth entomb.’ (2.4.6-9)

His use of the words ‘**strangle**’ and ‘**entomb**’ to describe the effect of the darkness on the landscape gives the lines a sense of menace that foreshadows the grisly period in which the kingdom is in the grip of Macbeth’s savage paranoid rule.

BLOOD

The word 'blood' or 'bloody' appears over forty times in Macbeth and some of the most memorable moments in the play feature its literal presence - several characters are at some point stained or soaked in blood: Macbeth, Lady Macbeth, the murderers, Banquo's ghost. In Act 1, scene 2, the blood-soaked captain reports on a horrific battle between Duncan's forces and the rebels. His language is startlingly violent as he re-creates a scene of steaming injuries and decapitations. Later on, the battle scene is partially recreated in the domestic setting of Macbeth's castle and then within the minds and the language of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.


When she petitions evil spirits to harden her resolve, Lady Macbeth says **'make thick my blood'** and her murder plot is messy with blood, intentionally and otherwise. Macbeth stabs Duncan and then Lady Macbeth smears the blood on the sleeping grooms in an effort to incriminate them. Though we do not see these events on-stage, there are indications that it is a particularly gruesome sight: Macbeth returns from Duncan's chamber carrying the daggers, his hands wet with blood, and in her sleep-walking scene, Lady Macbeth expresses her horror at the extent of Duncan's bleeding that night. **'Yet who would have thought the old man to have so much blood in him?'** (5.1.35-36)

In a soliloquy in 1.7, where he reveals his doubts about the plan to murder Duncan, Macbeth correctly predicts that the shedding of royal blood will return to haunt him -

'we but teach/ Bloody instructions, which being taught return' To plague th'inventor.' (1.7.8-10)

- and there is further suggestion of a preoccupation with blood when he imagines a bloody dagger pointing him in the direction of Duncan's chamber.

From the murder scene onwards, the image of blood replaces the literal blood of Duncan, making a permanent stain on the minds of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Staring at his gory hands, Macbeth is overwhelmed by the vast consequences of his actions and immediately recognises that the stain of guilt will never be removed but rather infect the water in which it is bathed: **'Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood**



The idea of bloodshed leaving a permanent mark returns in 5.2 when the confident invasion force approaches Dunsinane. **'Now does he, feel / His secret murders sticking on his hands,'** says Angus.

Macbeth's obsession with Duncan's blood continues into the following scene when he describes the murder of the king to the gathered thanes in terms of a sacrilegious act of vandalism on the body of a precious saint - **'his silver skin laced with his golden blood'** (2.3.110).

Though she is publicly dismissive of Macbeth's qualms and rounds on him for his admissions of terror on the night of the assassination, we later learn that Lady Macbeth is also plagued by remorse for her part in the killing of Duncan. In the latter part of the play, she spends her nights trying to wash imaginary bloodstains from her hands. **'What, will these hands ne'er be clean?'** (5.1.44) Both characters are psychologically branded by the blood of their unwitting victim but Lady Macbeth is ultimately shattered by the experience.

Unlike Lady Macbeth, Macbeth accepts that further bloodshed is an inevitability following the unjust murder of Duncan. **'Blood will have blood,'** he concludes in Act 3, scene 4, after a hallucinatory encounter with the blood-covered ghost of Banquo, before deciding his course must continue in a violent vein.

Other characters describe the new king's tyrannical regime in blood-soaked terms that suggest that his violent rise to power has unleashed further mayhem. The unnamed Lord in Act 3, scene 6 prays for a time when they can **'free from our feasts and banquets bloody knives'** (3.6.35) and **'Bleed, bleed, poor country, bleed,'** Macduff laments in Act 4, scene 3, **'each new day a gash / Is added to her wounds'.** (4.3.31-41)

ANIMALS

There are various references in the play to predators and their prey, which Shakespeare chiefly uses to suggest the brutality of the Macbeths and the vulnerability of their victims but also to show the inversion of the natural order caused by a usurper gaining the crown. After she reads her husband's letter in 1.5, Lady Macbeth invokes the raven, a traditional symbol of death.

'The raven itself is hoarse,

**That croaks the fatal entrance of Duncan
under my battlements.'** (1.5.38-40)

Macbeth takes up the theme when he refers to the personified Murder being awoken by the howls of the wolf in 2.1 and another predator, the owl, alarms Lady Macbeth with its symbolic shrieking at the moment when Macbeth murders Duncan in his chamber. The owl reappears in 2.1, when the old man remarks on the unnatural occurrences in nature that presaged the murder of Duncan: **'A falcon towering in her pride of place / Was by a mousing owl, hawked at, and killed.'** (2.4.11-12). This could be read as a portent of the unnatural killing of the rightful king Duncan (the falcon) by the usurper Macbeth (the relatively lowly owl).

Once he becomes king, Macbeth begins to personify his feelings of anxiety and paranoia in terms of vicious creatures – **'O, full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife.'** (3.2.36) In 3.2, he describes Banquo, the main obstacle to the security of his reign, as a snake that he has only injured but not destroyed:

**'We have but scorched the snake, not killed it
(3.2.12-14)**

His increasing brutality is reflected in his tendency to dehumanise his subjects and his enemies. He goads the murderers into taking revenge on Banquo by comparing them with dogs, an approach that leads them to become his willing lap-dogs, chasing down and killing his former friend. When they fail to kill Banquo's son, Fleance, the prophesised heir to the throne, Macbeth describes the boy as a young snake that will in time become poisonous: **'the worm that's fled / Hath nature that in time will venom breed'** (3.4.29-30). In 5.3, he describes the terrified servant who is loathe to bring the king bad news as a **'cream-faced loon'** with a **'goose look'** and even his former **'partner in greatness'**, Lady Macbeth, is reduced in 3.2 to his **'dearest chuck'**. His ruthlessness is further emphasised in Act 4, scene 3, where Ross describes Macduff's family as **'murdered deer'**. Macduff uses similar imagery as he bewails their defencelessness in the face of Macbeth's brutality.

**'Did you say all? O hell-kite! All? / What? all my
pretty chickens and their dam**

At one fell swoop?' (4.3.213-215)

As the rebel and English forces breach the castle at Dunsinane, the final animal image used in the play is related to the entrapment and goading of a savage creature. Macbeth compares his embattled state to the popular contemporary entertainment of bear-baiting and while he recognises that all is lost - **'They have tied me to the stake; I cannot fly'** - he is defiant to the end: **'bear-like I must fight the course.'** (5.7.11-12)



ADDENDUM

STRATEGIES FOR STUDYING MACBETH

Thanks to the internet, there is a wealth of study material available on all of Shakespeare's plays and included in this guide are analyses of some of the central aspects of the play. However, before you start reading other people's ideas about *Macbeth*, it is important that you think about the play for yourself. The more you do this, the better you will be able to remember it and respond to questions on it.

Here are some strategies you might use to strengthen your memory of what happens in the play and to develop your own views on it.

RECALLING THE PLAY, MOMENT BY MOMENT.

This play contains a lot of action. Try to re-tell the plot (without looking at the text) in a series of short bullet point statements in which you write down the characters' actions (not their thoughts).

For example:

1. The witches meet upon the heath.
2. The bloody captain tells Duncan about Macbeth's role in winning the battle.
3. The witches hail Macbeth and Banquo and prophesise their futures.

IMPROVISED MINI-PLAY

See how well you can remember the essentials of the play by improvising the main events in each act in ten minutes (in modern-day English).

KEY QUOTATIONS MINI-PLAY.

Select and write down key short quotations from the most important scenes of the play. Place them in the order in which they appear in the play and then practise and act out your condensed version of the play.

Example: A. Fair is foul and foul is fair.

B. Brave Macbeth – well, he deserves that name.

C. All hail Macbeth that shalt be King hereafter!

D. Thou shalt get kings, though thou be none.

E. This supernatural soliciting cannot be ill, cannot be good.

THINKING IN PICTURES.

Think about an object you remember from reading or watching the play. It could be something that actually appears on the stage like the bloody daggers or something a character only mentions, like a scorpion or the stars. Take your chosen object and think about its importance to the play, and how it relates to any of the major themes.

Example: Robes are part of the trappings that symbolise the king's power as a representative of God on earth. Because Macbeth is a usurper who broke the natural law of succession by committing regicide, there are several references to his robes being ill-fitting or unsuitable. 'Now does he feel his title / Hang loose about him, like a giant's robe / Upon a dwarfish thief,' says Angus, as power slips from Macbeth's grasp. Instead of wearing a robe to show his power and prestige, Macbeth has hidden behind it in order to commit secret murders.

COLLAGE

Give yourself fifteen minutes to leaf through a magazine and clip out any pictures that bring to mind characters, events, images and themes that appear in the play. Glue them to a large piece of paper and then think discuss the resulting collage and how it relates to the play as a whole – try to make connections between the pictures.

TRACKING MACBETH'S JOURNEY.

Think about the journey Macbeth goes on over the course of the play from the battlefield in Act 1 to his final confrontation with Macduff in Dunsinane. Draw a line across the middle of a large piece of paper. Use that line to chart Macbeth's actions from his response to the witches' prophecies in Act 1 to his duel with Macduff and to think about the inner journey of the character and the changes he undergoes. Pay close attention to his major monologues and soliloquies. You could also use the same approach when considering Lady Macbeth.

MACBETH'S MAJOR ASIDES, SOLILOQUIES AND MONOLOGUES:

- 1.3: 'Two truths are told / As happy prologues to the swelling act...' (1.3.128-142) [aside]
- 1.7: 'If it were done, when 'tis done...' (1.3.1-28) [soliloquy]
- 2.1: 'Is this a dagger which I see before me...' (2.1.34-64) [soliloquy]
- 3.1: 'To be thus is nothing, / But to be safely thus...' (3.1.48-72) [soliloquy]
- 4.1: 'Time, thou anticipat'st my dread exploits...' (4.1.144-156) [monologue]
- 5.3: 'Seyton! – I am sick at heart...' (5.3.19-28) [mini-soliloquy]
- 5.5: 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow...' (5.3.19-29) [monologue]
-

SOME QUESTIONS ABOUT MACBETH.

Here are some questions you might consider on your own or in discussion with a partner:

Is Macbeth a sympathetic character? What about Lady Macbeth?
Do your impressions of them change over the course of the play?

How would you describe the relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth?

Why is the play a tragedy?

There are many references to animals in this play.
How many can you remember?
What is the significance of this to the play as a whole?

In this play, there is evidence of goodness but it is completely overshadowed by evil.
Would you agree with this statement?

To what extent is Lady Macbeth responsible for Macbeth becoming king of Scotland?

Macbeth is a good man gone wrong. Would you agree?
Does he have any admirable qualities?

What is Macbeth's tragic flaw?

Does the play have any moral lessons for the audience?

Is it possible to have sympathy with Macbeth and Lady Macbeth?

The supernatural plays an important role in this play. Would you agree?

In what ways are Duncan, Macbeth and Malcolm very different kings?

There are no real heroes in *Macbeth*. Would you agree?

PAST LEAVING CERTIFICATE QUESTIONS ON *MACBETH* AT HIGHER LEVEL.

2014

(i) “Macbeth’s relationships with other characters can be seen primarily as power struggles which prove crucial to the outcome of the play.” Discuss the above statement in relation to at least two of

Macbeth’s relationships with other characters. Support your answer with suitable reference to the play, *Macbeth*.

OR

(ii) “Throughout the play, *Macbeth*, Shakespeare makes effective use of a variety of dramatic techniques that evoke a wide range of responses from the audience.”

Discuss this view with reference to at least two dramatic techniques used by Shakespeare in the play. Support your answer with suitable reference to the text.

2013

(i) “The variety of significant insights that we gain into Macbeth’s mind proves critical in shaping our understanding of his complex character.”

Discuss this view, supporting your answer with suitable reference to the play, *Macbeth*.

OR

(ii) “Shakespeare makes effective use of disturbing imagery in the play, *Macbeth*.”

Discuss this statement, supporting your answer with suitable reference to the text.

2009

(i) “Macbeth’s murder of Duncan has horrible consequences both for Macbeth himself and for Scotland.” Write a response to this statement. You should refer to the play in your answer.

OR

(ii) “*Macbeth* has all the ingredients of compelling drama.”

Write a response to this statement, commenting on one or more of the ingredients which, in your opinion, make *Macbeth* a compelling drama.

2007

‘The relationship between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth undergoes significant change during the course of the play.’ Discuss this statement, supporting your answer by suitable reference to the text.

or

‘Essentially the play *Macbeth* is about power, its uses and abuses.’ Discuss this view of the play, supporting your answer with the aid of suitable reference to the text.

2004

‘Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* invites us to look into the world of a man driven on by ruthless ambition and tortured by regret.’ Write a response to this view of the play *Macbeth*, supporting the points you make by reference to the text.

or

‘The play *Macbeth* has many scenes of compelling drama.’ Choose one scene that you found compelling and say why you found it to be so. Support your answer by reference to the play.

2003

‘We feel very little pity for the central characters of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in Shakespeare’s play.’ To what extent would you agree with the above view? Support your answer by reference to the play.

or

‘In *Macbeth*, Shakespeare presents us with a powerful vision of evil.’ Write your response to the above statement. Textual support may include reference to a particular performance of the play you have seen.