



*The Plays of William Shakespeare*



# Macbeth

## Study Guide

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## A Special Note on Shakespeare's Plays

A first encounter with Shakespeare can be a challenging experience for high school students. The spelling is often nonstandard, the vocabulary is difficult and archaic, and the cadence and structure are unfamiliar. These barriers to understanding the story could cause a student to become frustrated with the literature and give up. To enhance the student's appreciation and understanding of *Macbeth*, we urge instructors to carefully consider the edition your students will read. We suggest selecting an annotated edition that uses standard spelling but retains the original sentence structure. We recommend *The New Folger Library Shakespeare* editions.

In addition, since Shakespeare wrote his plays to be performed and not merely read, we recommend the use of video or audio recordings of *Macbeth* as part of the learning process. These may be available through your local library. We advise letting students watch or listen to the play before actually reading it. This helps familiarize the students with the story and the language and makes in-depth study of the text easier. Note that every performance is an interpretation, however, and so may not match perfectly with the text.

## Synopsis

A day of storm and battle is coming to a close, and Duncan, king of Scotland awaits news of the conflict. A bloody man appears and tells him that against all odds, the rebel Macdonwald, the traitor Thane of Cawdor, and the king of Norway have been defeated by Duncan's captains, Macbeth and Banquo. Duncan orders the Thane of Cawdor executed and tells his men to go bestow the title on Macbeth.

Macbeth and Banquo, returning from the battle, come upon three witches who greet Macbeth as thane of Glamis, thane of Cawdor, and king to be. Banquo asks whether they have such complimentary greetings for him. They call him "Lesser than Macbeth and greater," and tell him that he will father kings. Then the witches vanish.

Not certain what to make of this, Macbeth and Banquo are soon joined by Ross, who greets them in the king's name and names Macbeth Thane of Cawdor. This news, in fulfillment of the witches' statement seems to awaken within Macbeth a long-dead desire for the throne. Hardly daring to admit his own thoughts to himself, he writes to tell his wife of these events.

Lady Macbeth has fewer qualms than her husband and goes into near-ecstasy at the thought of taking the throne. When she learns the king is coming to their castle for a night, she and Macbeth plot Duncan's death.

In the dead of night Macbeth and his wife stab the king and leave the bloody daggers with his attendants. When the king is discovered the next morning, Macbeth kills the attendants in a "fit of rage." Realizing that they no longer know who to trust, and that whoever killed their father may well be after them next, Duncan's sons Malcolm and Donalbain flee to England and Ireland. Immediately, the lords assume they were behind the king's death and name Macbeth king.

Not all are convinced of the wisdom of this, however. Banquo is keenly aware that the king has died in Macbeth's home shortly after Macbeth heard a prediction that he will be king. Macduff also doubts the innocence of Macbeth and, though he does not voice his thoughts, he refuses to attend Macbeth's coronation.

Now that Macbeth is king, however, he remembers the prediction of the witches: Banquo's son will reign, not his. He hires men to kill Banquo and his son



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Fleance, but they achieve only partial success—Fleance escapes. At the banquet held in his honor that evening, Macbeth sees the ghost of Banquo, and in shouting at it perhaps reveals more than he intends to the gathered lords. He also begins to fear Macduff and determines to visit the witches again.

The witches call forth three apparitions, who tell Macbeth that he must beware Macduff, but “no one of woman born” can harm him, and he will never be defeated until Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane. Heartened by these predictions, Macbeth demands to know whether Banquo’s descendants will, indeed, rule after him. The witches show him a seemingly endless line of kings descending from Banquo. Angry, Macbeth decides to remove his last available irritant by killing Macduff. As he departs, however, he is told Macduff has fled to Malcolm in England. Now enraged, Macbeth vows from this point forward to immediately follow his first impulses, and he vents his fury by slaughtering everyone he can find in Macduff’s castle—Macduff’s wife, children, and servants.

In England, Macduff has found Malcolm, but Malcolm is distrustful of him. As they form a tentative alliance, word arrives of the slaughter of Macduff’s family. Macduff vows vengeance on Macbeth. Heartened by reports of rebellion against Macbeth and the offer of support and troops from England, Malcolm and Macduff make plans to return to Scotland and reclaim the throne.

Things have not been going well for Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. The rebellions are taking their toll, and Lady Macbeth is restless in her mind. Her gentlewoman and a doctor observe her sleepwalking, speaking of the murders and clearly disturbed. Macbeth appears manic, thrown this way and that by his whims, alternating between supreme self-confidence in the predictions of the witches and fury that things are not as he wishes them. The death of Lady Macbeth seems to affect him little beyond a morose discussion about the meaning of life.

Things really begin to fall apart as Malcolm’s troops advance to Dunsinane and are joined by the lords of Scotland. When the troops pause at Birnam Wood, Malcolm orders his men to cut down and carry branches of the wood to confuse reports of their numbers. As this movement of the Wood pours toward Dunsinane, Macbeth realizes that the predictions he relied on have become a two-edged sword. Maddened by the desertion of his subjects and faced with an apparent trap, he clings to, almost revels in, the prediction that no one born of woman can harm him. But in the end, even this fails Macbeth.

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6. In scene iv, Duncan says of the former Thane of Cawdor, “There’s no art/ To find the mind’s construction in the face./ He was a gentleman on whom I built/ An absolute trust.” Immediately after this statement, Macbeth enters. What is ironic about Macbeth appearing after Duncan says this?
7. This play makes much of contrasting what is natural with what is unnatural. Banquo calls attention to this in the case of the three Weird Sisters:

*Banquo* What are these,  
So withered, and so wild in their attire,  
That look not like th’ inhabitants o’ th’ earth  
And yet are on ’t?—Live you? Or are you aught  
That man may question? You seem to understand me  
By each at once her choppy finger laying  
Upon her skinny lips. You should be women,  
And yet your beards forbid me to interpret  
That you are so.  
(scene iii, lines 40–49)

The witches are not quite human, not quite spirit; they are female, but not really women—they are distinctly unnatural. Find another instance of someone acting unnaturally in Act I and describe it. Does the unnaturalness appear good or bad?

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### *Character Study:*

8. Pick one or two of the following characters from the play and describe their qualities, using examples from Act I. What kind of people are they? What are their strengths and weaknesses?

Macbeth  
Duncan

Lady Macbeth  
Banquo

9. An *aside* is when a sentence or two is spoken in an undertone by one character to the audience or to another character. It is understood that the other characters on stage do not hear the aside. Asides help the audience know a character better by allowing that character to privately express feelings, opinions, and reactions. In all of Act I, who is the only character to speak in asides or to instigate aside exchanges between two characters? Act I, scene iii, has more asides than the rest of the play combined. Considering that asides are, in essence, secrets or whispers kept from the rest of the characters, and considering who is speaking the asides, what does this imply about that character?

### *Foreshadowing:*

10. *Foreshadowing* is a literary device by which the author hints at events to come later in the play. At the end of scene i, the three witches chant together “Fair is foul, and foul is fair.” As you look at Act I, what are the witches foreshadowing? What do you think this foreshadows for the rest of the play?

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11. The pacing of *Macbeth* is rapid-fire—there are many drastic scene changes, and events move very quickly. How do you think this rapid change of circumstances affects Macbeth’s ability to sort through events and come to decisions? Consider Proverbs 19:2.
12. A *soliloquy* is a speech a character makes when alone on stage, generally to provide background information or express what she is thinking. In Lady Macbeth’s soliloquy at the start of scene v, from what “weaknesses” does she say Macbeth suffers? To what “illness” do you think Lady Macbeth refers when she says Macbeth is “not without ambition, but without/ The illness should attend it”?
13. When does Macbeth first consider murdering the king? What does this tell us about Macbeth?
14. *Contrast* is a stylistic device in which different things are held up in opposition to each other. For example, a rural setting may be contrasted with, or held up as an opposing image to, an urban setting. An author may also create stylistic contrast by using long and short sentences or short-worded, staccato passages next to longer, more fluid passages.

Explain the contrast in scene vi between Duncan’s and Banquo’s description of the castle and the plans being laid within the castle, or the contrast between Duncan’s statements to Lady Macbeth and her plans for him.



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19. Read Galatians 5:7–8 and Colossians 2:6–8. How do these verses relate to what Macbeth is doing in this Act? Why do you think it is so easy for people to discard what they know is right? How can you avoid this?

#### **Extra Activities:**

- In Act I, scene iii, Banquo warns Macbeth, “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.” Write a one-page essay discussing the meaning of these statements and how they explain and warn against temptation.
- Research King James I of England and write a one- or two-page paper summarizing James’ life. Examine whether Shakespeare wrote actions or events into Act I of *Macbeth* to particularly appeal to the king or to reflect events in his life.
- Paint a watercolor or draw a colored pencil rendition of Macbeth’s castle at Inverness, drawing inspiration from the descriptions of Duncan and Banquo from Act I, scene vi.
- Have one person act out a portion or all of the dialogue between Macbeth and Lady Macbeth in Act I, scene vii. Note how voice, tone, and pacing must change to depict the character and communicate him or her to the audience. If possible, have several students do this exercise. Other scenes may be chosen.
- Have two students act out the above dialogue or another, each taking the part of a character. Then have the students act out the same scene but exchange characters.

## *Macbeth Study Guide Answer Key*

20. Answers will vary. Regret can occur for a number of reasons: believing an action is wrong, finding events do not turn out as planned, wishing circumstances were different. Repentance recognizes that something was wrong and that correction has to take place. The original meaning of the word was to turn around and go the other direction.

### *Act III*

#### *Vocabulary:*

1. indestructible; 2. supreme; 3. numerous; 4. correction; 5. evil; 6. honor; 7. mix; 8. merriment; 9. nature; 10. holy

#### *Scrambled Quotation:*

Naught's had, all's spent, where our desire is got without content.—Lady Macbeth, Act III, scene ii.

#### *General Questions:*

1. Answers will vary. It appears that the two will be polite to each other, but neither trusts the other anymore. Note that Macbeth keeps asking one more question about what Banquo will be doing that day and Banquo is careful to answer without any detail.
2. Macbeth hires some desperate peasants to kill Banquo and Fleance.
3. He tells the peasant men that he could not openly deal with Banquo himself because it would destroy the loyalty of mutual friends and subjects. If his cause was just, this would not be so.
4. Fleance's escape is significant because Fleance is alive to fulfill the witches' prophecy to Banquo.
5. Macbeth sees the dead Banquo sitting in his chair.

#### *Analysis:*

6. Macbeth murdered Duncan and gained the crown because of the prophecy of the three witches. Now, however, he is angry that all that he "sacrificed" for will be given over to Banquo's descendants—again, as prophesied by the witches'—and he determines to challenge and fight "fate" to the death. He is willing to "accept" fate when it is in his favor, but he challenges fate when it seems against him.

7. The quotation from Act III could be paraphrased: "Only for Banquo's sons have I sold my eternal soul to the devil." The quotation from Act I could be paraphrased: "If there could be no consequences to the assassination in this life, I wouldn't care about my soul in the next life." Macbeth seems to be more concerned about his legacy than he was in Act I, and he seems to regret "selling" his soul, committing such great evil, for the temporary crown of king. He now wishes that he could at least pass it on to his descendants. He seems to be valuing his soul more highly, but already counting it as lost.

8. The men initially believed that Macbeth was the cause of their loss and degradation, but Macbeth convinces them Banquo was at fault. The men's earlier conviction that Macbeth was behind their downfall, if correct (and Macbeth certainly has reason to lie about Banquo), could mean that Macbeth was not the pinnacle of virtue he seemed before the witches' prophecy. It implies that he was always willing to take what he could when he was able to get away with it. For an example of this type of behavior, see 1 Kings 21:1–15.

9. First he tells them that Banquo was the cause of all their hardships. Then he taunts them about their patience, "Do you find/ Your patience so predominant in your nature/ That you can let this go? Are you so gospelled/ To pray for this good man and for his issue,/ Whose heavy hand hath bowed